

A Willow Creek Series Novella

the **Angel  
Tree**



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LILY GRAISON**

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Cover design: Clarise Tan

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# Chapter One

*Willow Creek Montana, October 1885*

Miranda Talbert nearly jumped out of her skin, a startled scream flying from her mouth when something clanged loudly on the floor the next aisle over. She scowled a moment later when two young boys ran around the corner of the shelf she was standing in front of, then sucked in a harsh gasp when both of them slammed into her so hard, all three of them tumbled to the floor. Their shocked expressions must have matched her own. When the boys turned to look at each other before scrambling to their feet, Miranda wondered who they were. She'd never seen either of them before.

They darted around her and her mouth flew open. Were they so ill mannered they'd knock a lady down then leave her laying on the floor?

*Apparently so.*

Miranda climbed to her feet, dusting off her skirts as she saw them dart around the next shelf over. She hurried to the other end, intercepting them as they came racing out of the aisle. She braced herself this time and instead of falling when they ran into her, she grabbed them both by the back of their coats and yanked them to a stop. "Have you no manners?"

The boys looked at each other before tilting their heads up to her.

"Well?" she said when neither of them answered her.

The tallest of the two boys lifted a hand and wiped his runny nose on his coat sleeve. Miranda raised an eyebrow at him. "Where are your mother and father?"

They still never said a word. Scowling, she turned them and marched to the front of the store.

Mrs. Jenkins, the owner of the Willow Creek mercantile, stepped through the curtained doorway that led to the back rooms as she reached the counter. The store proprietor eyed the boys and frowned. “You two again? What have you done this time? Was that big crash I heard your doings?”

When neither of them spoke, Miranda wondered if they were deaf and mute. “Yes, it was them. They knocked me over trying to get away.” She met her gaze. “I’ve never seen them before. Do you know who they belong to?”

The bell above the door rang. They all turned to the front of the store as the man who stepped inside looked at all four of them before locking eyes with the boys. “What have ya done now?”

Like the boys, Miranda had never seen him before. He had a heavy southern accent and was so tall Miranda had to crane her head back to see him. He met her gaze, and she stilled. His eyes were the lightest green she’d ever seen. The color didn’t shock her as much as what she saw in them. Overwhelming sadness. She saw it in her own reflection enough to recognize it. He blinked and looked away, back down at the boys. “Explain yourselves.”

The tallest of the boys went limp and if Miranda hadn’t been holding on the collar of his coat, he would have slumped into the floor.

“James fell into one of the tables and a jar of buttons spilled.” He paused and glanced up at her. “We ran before anyone saw it was us but we knocked the lady down.” He fidgeted and shrugged his shoulders. Miranda let go of them as he said, “We didn’t mean to, pa. We just weren’t careful about what we was doing.”

The man met her gaze again. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, suddenly feeling embarrassed for reasons she couldn't name. She raised a hand and smoothed her hair, then straightened her cloak. "Yes. They just startled me more than anything."

"I'm sorry they troubled you any." He stared at her for a long moment before looking at the boys and gave both of them a stern look. "Apologize to the lady and go sit outside on the bench where I told you to go."

"Yes, pa." The tallest boy stepped away from her and mumbled out a quiet, "sorry." The other boy had yet to speak but gave her a soft apology of, "sorry," as well. They headed for the door, both of them running to it, then fighting over who was going to open it. Miranda shook her head. Were all boys so rambunctious?

Their father, or the man she assumed was their father, blew out a breath. "My apologies again, ma'am, if they caused you any trouble. They're wild as bucks and I have my hands full most days." He lifted a handled basket she just now noticed. The blanket covering the contents inside of it moved. Mrs. Jenkins chose that moment to say, "Mr. Thompson, your order came in." He nodded his head at her, then gave her a smile before tipping his hat. "Good day, ma'am."

He headed for the counter and Miranda glanced into the basket as he walked by. The blanket was pulled down enough she was able to see a baby inside, the same light green eyes she'd just been looking into staring up at her.

Her heart ached at the sight of the baby's chubby cheeks. She wasn't sure of its age but it was small enough to still need to be carried in a basket.

He set it on the counter before pulling something from his coat pocket. She realized she was staring a moment later and headed outside.

A brisk wind blew through town and right into her face when she opened the door. She shivered and looked at the sky. It was heavy with clouds and if she had to guess, she'd say more snow was on the way. This late in the year, it was a weekly occurrence.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her neck as she stepped onto the sidewalk and scanned the crowd on the other side of the street. Evan Reid was the first person she saw. She sighed as he turned and went into Marshall Avery's office. Something painful pinched inside her chest. In all the years he'd lived in Willow Creek, not once had he ever noticed her and she'd done everything she could to put herself in his path. And after all this time, he still only saw her as nothing more than an occasional patient.

The boys were on the bench where their father had told them to sit but both of them were kicking their feet back and forth, their heels slamming into the legs hard enough to make a loud pop every time they hit. She didn't have to be told those two were a handful.

They looked up at her when she turned and started down the sidewalk. They both stilled, watching her pass by them and the moment she'd stepped past the bench they sat on, they started kicking their legs again.

She'd wanted nothing more than a house full of kids since she was old enough to learn about what went on behind a man and woman's closed bedroom door but she never thought she'd find herself Willow Creek's resident spinster at the age of thirty-two. The fault was all her own, though. She'd waited patiently for Evan Reid to notice her and now life had passed her by, her dreams of a husband and children fading right before her eyes. Now everyone she knew and had grown up with was married with families of their own and here she was, still living with her mother on the outskirts of town.

The house was quiet when she stepped inside. It usually was. Since her father's death five years earlier, there wasn't much chatter filling the big house. Miranda found her mother in the sitting room. As usual, she was in the chair by the window, embroidering something. She smiled when she noticed her in the doorway. "I didn't hear you come in."

Miranda hung her cloak and headed to the sofa, exhaling loudly while falling onto it. Her mother laughed. "It can't be that bad, can it?"

"No. Well, yes, actually."

"Well, which is it?"

"The walk into town was nice, but I forgot to get what I even went to the mercantile for."

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "And how did that happen?"

The scene inside the mercantile filled her head again. "Two young boys knocked me over in the store and after dealing with them, I sort of just forgot."

"Knocked you down?" Her mother laid her embroidery on her lap and sat up. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry yourself." She straightened her shirtwaist and crossed her feet at the ankles. "I'd never seen the boys before, nor their father when he came in to fetch them."

"Another new family in town?"

"Looks like."

"Well, it'll be nice to have another woman at the sewing circle."

That's all her mother lived for now. Sewing circles, tea parties, and gossip. She bit back a smile and stood. "I'm going to fix a pot of tea. Would you like some?"

"I would, thank you, dear."

Miranda walked through the house, the silence she encountered the same as it was every day. She wasn't sure how her mother endured it. After spending so many years with her father and now finding herself alone? The loneliness she felt most days was all consuming. She couldn't imagine having half your heart ripped away. Maybe it was a good thing she'd never married. At least she had no reason to mourn the loss of a beloved husband or child.

*And you'll never get to experience the joys of having them either.*

She sighed. Why it still hurt to think no one wanted her, she didn't know. She'd spent the last twelve years waiting for a man to come courting and no one ever has. She tried to tell herself it was because there were so few marriageable men in town but she knew it was a lie. The men outnumbered women four to one. She was just too plain.

*Or they all know you're carrying a torch for Evan Reid.*

The thought comforted her. It was better than thinking she was undesirable. If that were the case, she'd spend the rest of her life a spinster. The very idea of it was disheartening. She couldn't think of a worse fate than dying alone, neglected, and unloved.

Snowflakes fluttered past the kitchen window. Miranda watched them fall. Something had to change or all her fears would come true and she'd made too many wishes to settle for such a disappointing life.

She filled the tea pot with water and set it on the stove, the overwhelming sadness she lived with most days gripping her so hard she felt sick at heart. Was this all her life was meant for? She hoped not because this wasn't living. It was existing and surely she was destined for more than that. She had to be. The alternative was too depressing to consider.

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“Sorry for any trouble they gave you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

Eva kicked until her blankets slipped from the basket and fell onto the floor. Whatever reprimand the store's proprietor was going to make about the boys died when she looked down at his daughter and smiled.

He sighed in relief as he bent to pick up the blanket. With any luck, the boys hadn't broken anything this time. He was still paying off the bill from their last trek into town.

The wooden crate Mrs. Jenkins loaded the things he'd ordered into would take two hands to carry. He covered Eva's legs with the blanket. "Would you mind watching her until I can get this to the wagon, Mrs. Jenkins?"

Her smile widened. "Not at all. Take your time."

Patrick lifted the box and hurried outside. The boys were where he told them to go but they were making so much noise, every person who walked past them frowned in their direction. "Get up, both of you, and head to the wagon."

They jumped and ran down the sidewalk, their footfalls loud as they hit the wooden walkway. He shook his head and hurried after them. By the time he got them settled, and the box of dry goods stored in the back of the buckboard, snow flurries were beginning to fall. "Sit tight. I'm going to go grab Eva and we'll head home."

Mrs. Jenkins had Eva in her arms when he stepped back into the store. The woman's cheeks turned pink. "I'm sorry. She started to fuss, and I was trying to soothe her."

Patrick gave her a tired smile. "Thank you for trying. Not much pleases her these days." He took his daughter from her and bounced her in his arms. "Doc Reid said she might not be taking to the cow's milk. Guess we'll have to get a goat and see if that works. Know anyone I might be able to buy one from?"

She pursed her lips and nodded as if thinking. "I may. Let me ask around. I'm sure someone has one they'll be willing to part with." Mrs. Jenkins opened her mouth but closed it with a snap, her cheeks staining a darker red.

"What were you going to say?"

"It's rude of me to ask, Mr. Thompson."

He knew what she wanted to say without another word spoken. They'd lived in Willow Creek less than a year and in that time, he'd gotten to know very few people. Evelyn had made it impossible to do so. She'd been so bitter when he moved them out west and didn't take her back home that she'd spent years screaming and yelling and demanding they go back to Savannah. That bitterness she spewed at him on a daily basis turned to resentment when he found a small land parcel for sale. They found out Eva was on the way right after they settled in Willow Creek and seven months later, his wife was dead and he was a single father of three. As miserable as they'd been together, Evelyn's death still left him filled with so much guilt over her unhappiness, he wasn't sure how he rose every morning and kept on going.

Mrs. Jenkins was watching him. He laid Eva back into the basket and covered her, tucking the blankets around her legs. "My wife died in childbirth, Mrs. Jenkins."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I'm sorry. I knew I'd never seen her come to town with you but had no idea she—" She sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have intruded on your personal life."

"No harm done. From the way I hear it, it's hard to keep things from folks when you live in a small town so everyone would have found out, eventually. To be honest, I'm surprised most don't already know."

She looked at Eva in her basket, a frown on her face. "Poor thing. I can't imagine living without a mother's love." Her hand flew to her chest a moment later. "My goodness, I don't know what's wrong with me today. That was insensitive as well. Forgive me, Mr. Thompson."

"It's fine, Mrs. Jenkins." She was right. It would be hard on Eva later on. Right now, she was too young to even know the difference.

“You know, Mr. Thompson, I heard talk Harland Bruce, he’s a farmer who lives several miles from town, got himself a mail-order bride. Rafe Samuels did as well, now that I think about it. He’s been married to Grace for so many years now I tend to forget how she came to be here. If things get hard, you can always send off for a wife to mother those kids.”

Marry again? The thought made him want to run screaming. “That’s an option, I guess.” He smiled to be polite but marrying again would be the last thing he ever did.

The bell above the door rang as someone stepped inside. Patrick noticed the snow falling harder now. He needed to get home. He picked Eva’s basket up and hooked the handle over his arm. “I need to be going, Mrs. Jenkins. Have a nice evening.”

“You as well, Mr. Thompson.”

Patrick found the boys roughhousing in the wagon when he made it back down the sidewalk. “Cut it out, you two.”

“He started it!” James pointed at John, who rolled his eyes.

“I don’t care who started it, just stop.” He set Eva’s basket in the back between them and covered all three of them with more blankets. “Stay covered up and be quiet until we get home.” He looked to the sky before taking the horse’s reins. If he was lucky, he’d get there before the snow storm got too bad.

The trip back across the prairie was made more miserable by the cold and he was in a foul mood by the time he pulled the wagon up next to the barn. The boys fought nonstop since leaving town and bumping into Eva’s basket had startled her enough she started squalling. The entire ordeal had him on the verge of hysterics. His nerves were shot and if he were a drinking man, he’d be willing to drown his troubles in a bottle of whiskey and forget the world around him even existed.

He set the brake on the wagon and looped the horse's reins around the lever and jumped down, then reached in for Eva's basket. She stopped crying when he lifted it, only to start wailing again a moment later.

The boys were still shoving each other. He shook his head before yelling at them to stop. "You two unhitch the horse from the wagon and see that he's bedded down for the night. I'll have supper waiting by the time you get the rest of your chores done."

He headed into the house, lifting Eva from her basket the moment he got her inside. She was wet, the blankets and her gown soaked clean through and the smell that accompanied her out of the basket made him hold her at arm's length. He snarled his nose. "Mrs. Jenkins may be right, little one. You need a mother."

It took him longer to get her cleaned up than it should have. The boys were inside, making enough noise to shake the rafters loose by the time he made it into the main part of the house. "You two quiet down." He carried Eva across the room and handed her to John. "Watch her."

He rolled his shirt sleeves up on the way to the kitchen, then washed his hands while trying to think of something to fix for their supper.

*If you had a wife, she could help you with all of this.*

The thought made him cringe. His marriage to Evelyn had been unbearable at the best of times. Willingly going through that again was insanity, but as the kids kept yelling, and Eva kept crying, he stared at the cold stove while the list of chores he had to do yet before dark came at him so fast, the anxiety was enough to make him want to crawl into bed and just—forget about it all.

A glance over his shoulder to see John and James trying to tend to Eva made his heart clench tight. They were too young to have to work so hard. They didn't have time to be kids anymore. His conversation with Mrs. Jenkins whispered

inside his head as he stared at them. Maybe it was time to do the one thing he said he'd never do again.

As Eva continued to scream, and John looked as if he was going to cry right along with her, he knew he needed to get married again whether he wanted to or not. The realization made him sick at heart. How could he endure that again? Watching his children, he knew how. He'd do it for them. He had no other choice.

## Chapter Two

Her mother's sewing circle was a constant buzz of chatter. Miranda wasn't even sure how they kept the conversations sorted most times. Luckily she was spared from having to listen to most of it as she was too busy playing hostess.

She refilled her mother's tea cup, the pot rattling when she set it back down. Alma Peterson broke into the conversation with a shrill whistle. When everyone looked her way, she sat up straighter. "The Christmas party still needs planning. We're short on volunteers this year so you ladies need to help me recruit more to help out."

"Most everyone I know has small kids," Beatrice Evans said. "It's not as easy for them to get away."

Alma huffed. "Even so, I can't be expected to do everything."

The chatter that followed flew like wildfire. Apparently the idea that Alma was single-handedly doing everything didn't sit well with the others.

Miranda walked around the room, refilling tea cups, listening to them politely bicker at one another but paused when Mrs. Edwards leaned forward, whispering as if what she had to say was a secret. "I overheard Mrs. Jenkins tell Nellie Hokes that Patrick Thompson was inquiring about a wife."

“Who is Patrick Thompson?” Mrs. Johnson asked.

Beatrice looked up before saying, “He’s the man who bought the old Cruthers place. He has two boys and a baby daughter. His wife died when the baby was born a few months back.”

“Oh, right. I’ve seen him in the mercantile a few times.” Mrs. Johnson scowled. “Those boys of his need a mother, that’s for sure.”

Miranda carried the tea tray back to the kitchen as they went on about Patrick Thompson’s parenting skills. She knew all about those rowdy boys. They were the ones who ran her over inside the mercantile. She remembered their father too. Tall, nice looking, but eyes so sad she instantly wondered why he looked so forlorn. Now she knew. He was a grieving widower.

Seeing the baby he’d been carrying made her heart thump hard in her chest. She’d not had a chance to cuddle a baby in some time. Not since Betsey Hiram had stopped serving drinks at the Diamondback Saloon and no longer needed her to watch Samuel while she worked.

She set the tea service on the counter and stared out the window. He had three kids and was looking to give them a mother. What sort of woman was he looking for? She knew next to nothing about being a mother, even less about being a wife. Her face heated at the thought. She’d never been intimate with anyone. Had only shared a single kiss with someone and they had been so young, they’d probably done it all wrong.

She knew very little about the marriage bed, but surely it couldn’t be too hard to learn how to please a man. Plenty of women before her had managed with little problem.

Those kids alone were enough reason for her to contemplate it. All she’d ever wanted was a baby and a family to call her own. A husband who might someday love her.

The moment the thought popped into her head, Evan Reid's image came to mind. Her chest ached thinking about him. She'd wanted him for so long now, but it was obvious he didn't feel the same way. It was time to get her head out of the clouds. Evan didn't see her as anything special and waiting for him to finally notice her was doing nothing but wasting precious years she no longer had time to waste. If she didn't marry soon, she'd never have kids of her own.

Turning and leaning back against the counter, she pictured how different her life would be. Would Patrick Thompson want her? She looked down at herself. She wasn't very pretty. She wasn't completely unattractive, but she didn't hold the same beauty some ladies in town did. She was—plain, for the most part, but if Patrick Thompson was in need of a wife, perhaps he wouldn't be too particular about who agreed to marry him. Besides, finding a woman to marry who would want the responsibility of a ready-made family wouldn't be easy, especially after they met his boys. They were hellions and probably rotten to their core.

Her heart started thumping as she stood there thinking about it. She looked toward the sitting room. What would her mother say? How much guilt would she feel leaving her alone in this big house by herself?

*You can't think of that. Had you married right out of school and moved out, she'd still be alone now.*

"He may not even want you, Miranda." She whispered the words to herself and straightened. "There's only one way to find out."

She headed to the front door, grabbing her cloak from the hall tree and slipped it on, sneaking out of the house without a word. If anyone knew anything about what Patrick Thompson wanted in a wife, Mrs. Jenkins would. She was near to running by the time she made it into town, excited butterflies dancing erratic patterns inside her stomach by the time she reached for the mercantile door and let herself in. The moment she saw Mrs. Jenkins smile at her, she was nervous enough

to be sick. Heading to the counter, she smiled and sucked in a calming breath. “Has Patrick Thompson found a wife yet?”

*End of Excerpt...*

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