

Backwards to Oregon

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE



JAE



INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI, JUNE 1846

Tess Swenson inwardly cursed the smoke-filled, dimly lit room and the tinny clanking of the piano. She strained to keep a watchful eye and ear on her girls and their customers lounging in secluded alcoves, sitting on sofas, or leaning against the long mahogany bar.

“Damn.” Charlie, her bartender, narrowed his eyes at the stream of soldiers filtering in. “And here I thought we’d get some peace and quiet once all the trappers and emigrants headed west.”

“It’s the war,” Tess said. She leaned her back against the bar and scanned each customer for signs of trouble. “They all want to spend one last night with a woman before they go off to war.”

All around her, soldiers were laughing, fighting for the attention of the girls, and gulping down whiskey as if there were no tomorrow. *For some of them, there might not be.* Tomorrow they would march south, with orders to conquer New Mexico. The fear generated by the upcoming war was a powerful stimulant for Tess’s business, but it also made their work more dangerous. Charlie poured a whiskey for a customer and a glass of cold tea for the girl hanging on the customer’s arm. “Some of them are barely more than boys. Look at him.” He pointed at a young soldier whose comrades pushed and pulled him into the parlor. The other men were eager to enter the brothel, but he dragged his feet and stalled by stopping at the door to knock the mud off his boots. He waved his friends away and leaned against the bar, facing the rest of the room.

One of Tess’s girls wandered over and seductively trailed one hand over the young soldier’s shoulder.

He gazed at her without returning her smile. Under the pretense of reaching for his shot of whiskey, he broke the physical contact between them.

The girl stepped closer, but he shook his head and said something that made the girl shrug and walk away.

Tess had seen the skittish behavior of first-time visitors before, but something about the young man told her that he wasn’t merely shy. She stepped away from the bar to study him without him noticing.

Neither his stature nor his worn uniform or scuffed boots set him apart from his comrades. He wasn't unusually tall, and compared to the burly build of his friends, his lean frame didn't seem impressive, but something about him made her take notice nonetheless.

The insignia on the sleeve of his navy-blue uniform coat told her he was a sergeant. He was young to hold that rank, but in times of war, it wasn't that unusual.

What set the young man apart was the way he carried himself. When he crossed the room and settled down at one of the corner tables, he moved with the smooth stride of a cat, a combination of strength and unconscious grace where Tess had expected the gangly awkwardness of someone barely out of puberty.

He leaned back in his chair, nursing his whiskey, and watched the other men with a stoic expression. Everything about him showed calm confidence—everything but the way he worried the forage cap on his lap between his long, slender fingers.

Angry voices from the bar made Tess turn around. A red-faced soldier grabbed one of her girls by the throat and shook her.

"Let go of her! Now!" Tess rushed back to the bar.

The angry soldier let go of the girl. Roaring like a grizzly bear, he whirled around and backhanded Tess.

Pain exploded in her face. She crashed into the bar. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Charlie reach for the revolver he kept behind the bar.

Before the situation could escalate further, someone grabbed the soldier by his uniform lapel, whirled him around, and forced him away from Tess and the gasping girl.

The drunken soldier swung up his fists.

A jab threw back his opponent's head.

Tess's eyes widened. Her savior was none other than the young man from the corner table. He was half a head shorter and weighed considerably less than his drunken foe, but he didn't back down. He stepped forward and threw a punch.

The bigger man lowered his head and charged him like a furious bull.

One of her girls cried out. A few of the men shouted encouragements at the fighters, hastily betting money on how long the smaller man would last under the iron fists of his opponent.

Tess reached for the small revolver hidden in one of her garters. She swung up the weapon, but the big soldier was already standing still, looking down the barrel of the boy's revolver.

"You better sober up real quick, Corporal, before I spare the Mexicans the work and shoot you right here, right now." The boy's voice was low and quiet, yet left no doubt about his determination.

The corporal brought up a trembling hand and wiped blood off his lip without looking away from the boy. The silent battle of wills went on for a few seconds before he lowered his gaze and let out a breath. "All right, all right, I'm sober."

The boy put away his revolver, but his sharp gaze remained fixed on his opponent. "I think you owe these ladies an apology, Corporal."

"What?" The soldier stared at him. "But they ain't no la—"

"Was that a 'Yes, sir'?" the boy asked, his eyes narrowed.

The corporal's teeth ground against each other. "Yes, sir."

The boy gestured toward Tess.

After hesitating for a few more seconds, the corporal turned around and faced her. "I... apologize."

"An apology won't pay for the glasses you broke when you threw me against the bar," Tess said, the small revolver still in her hand. As the brothel's madam, she had learned to be a charming hostess, a motherly figure for her girls, and most of all a tough businesswoman.

"Pay her," the boy said, his gray eyes like steel.

Grumbling, the soldier threw some coins on the bar and stormed out of the brothel.

The boy watched him leave, then laid another coin on the bar and turned to follow him.

"Wait!" Tess hurried after him.

The young man reluctantly turned back around. His gaze flickered to the door as if he wanted to disappear through it as quickly as possible. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Your nose." Tess pointed. "It's bleeding. Come with me to my room, and let me tend to it." She extended her hand.

The boy didn't take it. "That's not necessary, ma'am. It'll stop soon enough."

"It'll stop sooner if I tend to it. I have a lot of experience with patching up victims of a brawl."

"Come on, Luke," one of the boy's comrades shouted. "No man in his right mind says no when Miss Tess invites him up to her room. Be a man and go with her."

The corner of the boy's mouth twitched, hinting at an almost smile, the first Tess had seen from him. Before he could refuse once more, Tess took his hand and led him upstairs, ignoring the cheers from the rest of his company.

"Sit down." Tess patted the bed that took up most of her room. "It doesn't bite—and neither do I."

He cautiously sank down on the very edge of the bed, holding on to his forage cap with both hands. He looked like a schoolboy on a detention bench. It was hard to believe that this was the fearless fighter who had stood toe to toe with a much bigger man just minutes ago.

Tess turned to her crystal decanter and poured him a shot of whiskey.

He shook his head. "No, thank you, ma'am."

"It's on the house," she said.

He took the glass from her but held it without drinking.

"Drink up." Tess searched for a clean cloth. "This ain't gonna be pleasant." The cloth in hand, she stepped between his legs and bent to take a closer look at his nose. She dabbed at it with the cloth, wiping away the blood, and laid a gentle hand on his neck to guide his head to one side. "I think it's broken."

He trembled against her.

For a second, she attributed it to the pain of a broken nose, but then she saw the look in his eyes. Tess smiled. She had been in this job long enough to know that it was not the pain that darkened his gray eyes; it was her physical closeness, her half-bared bosom pressing against his shoulder. She slid the hand resting on his neck around and touched his still smooth cheek. "How old are you, soldier?"

The boy turned his face away from her touch and scrambled back until the headrest stopped him. "Old enough to go to war."

Tess looked down at him. He was very young, but the weary look in his eyes told her he had seen more things in his life than most men twice his age. This was not a naïve boy, but something about him made her believe he had never been with a woman.

This is gonna be a nice change. He was so different from most of her other customers—polite, clean, and sober. "Old enough for this?" She stepped close again, pressed him down on the bed, and lowered her lips to his.

Slender but strong hands closing around her wrists stopped her. "No."

"No?" Tess couldn't remember the last time she had heard that word from a man. "If you're worried about money, I don't intend to take any from you. This is my way of saying thank you for your help with that drunken bastard."

The boy still held her roaming hands captive. "No, no. I... This is not what you think. I...I'm..."

Tess smiled at him. "Relax, I know what you are." It wasn't difficult to guess the boy was a virgin.

His eyes widened. "You...you know? How...?"

"I have enough experience with men to know these things."

The boy stared at her. "And you invited me up to your room anyway?"

"Sure." What was so surprising about that? Every whore knew that virginal customers were easily earned money.

"And you tried to kiss me even though you knew what I am?"

Tess studied him. *Does he really think he's the first virgin in my bed? A whore doesn't go to bed with the men who can give her the most pleasure, but the ones with the most money.* "And I would kiss you if you let go of my hands."

The grip around her wrists wavered for a moment. "You...you like...women?"
"What?"

For a second, they stared at each other, then the boy—the girl, Tess realized—jumped up with a curse and fled to the door.

"Wait!" Tess hurried after her mysterious visitor and laid a hand against the door to prevent it from opening. "Wait a minute. What's going on here? Who are you?"

The girl slowly turned back around. She looked at Tess without answering. The muscles in her jaw clenched.

Tess studied the slender, yet muscular body and the boyishly handsome face. The girl was taller than most women. Even now that Tess knew, she couldn't detect any signs of feminine curves. "Who are you?"

"Luke Hamilton." Her guest extended his—her—hand.

Tess took her hand, noticing the strong grip of the calloused fingers. Everything she saw, heard, and felt made her believe she was dealing with a young man. She couldn't stop staring at her guest. "That's not the name your parents gave you, though, is it?"

The girl hesitated. "No," she finally said, "it's not."

For a second, Tess wanted to ask her real name but then thought better of it. The girl had no reason to trust her with her biggest secret, and she already looked as if she wanted to bolt. "Come back and sit." Tess patted the bed.

The girl remained right next to the door. "I need to go."

"Your friends in the parlor wouldn't be very impressed if your visit up here only lasted for three minutes," Tess said with a smile. "So come sit and tell me how a girl ended up becoming a dragoon sergeant."

The girl shuffled her feet. "That's a long story. And I would appreciate it if you wouldn't refer to me as a girl. The life I live is that of a man."

Tess leaned back on the bed with a seductive grin. "Every aspect of it?"

A hint of a blush spread across the tan face. "Almost."

"So you don't want me to thank you, huh?" Tess nodded down at her low-cut bodice.

Luke blinked. "I'm... You know what I am. It's not possible to... Is it?"

"Oh, it's very possible, I assure you, sweetheart." Tess stood and circled her visitor with seductive sways of her hips. "Do you want me to demonstrate?"

She had expected another blush, but this time, the young woman looked her straight in the eyes. "I don't approve of prostitution. No man—or woman—should take advantage of women who have been forced to sell their bodies to survive."

Tess stared into the young woman's eyes. There was no judgment, no contempt, only a simple honesty. Tess was charmed. "You don't believe in prostitution. Do you believe in friendship?"

Dark lashes blinked rapidly. Obviously, it was the last thing Luke had expected from her.

"Do you?" Tess asked when Luke remained silent.

"I don't know. I don't have many friends."

"Well, if you want, you've got one now." Tess paused. "Unless you don't want to be seen in the company of a lady of negotiable affections."

A small grin flitted across Luke's reserved face. "I guess to be seen with you could only help my reputation."

With a laugh, Tess lifted up on her tiptoes and kissed the smooth cheek. "All right, friend. Then let's get that nose taken care of. We wouldn't want it to mar that handsome face of yours." She laughed at Luke's blush and pulled her back to the bed.

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI, APRIL 27TH, 1851

Rough laughter and the thumping of booted feet across the boardwalk made Tess look up.

“Soldiers.” Fleur groaned next to her before the first of them had even entered. In the three years that the young woman had worked for Tess, she had learned a lot about men—even identifying their profession by their footfalls.

“Don’t sound so snide, girl,” Tess said. “Last time, they left you a nice tip.”

“Last time, they also left me a nice black eye.”

True. After long months of living in the shabby barracks of a secluded fort, with no break from their monotonous duties and bad food, soldiers tended to go a little wild on payday. “I’ll keep an eye on them,” Tess said.

The door swung open. Loud voices and fresh air drifted into the brothel’s parlor, and for a moment, the smoke dispersed.

Tess stepped forward to extend a flirtatious greeting, but her well-practiced business smile gave way to a delighted laugh when she saw the last man being dragged in by his comrades.

Luke Hamilton was no longer the girl she had been five years ago. She had returned from Mexico after fighting for more than a year, wounded, commissioned on the battlefield to the rank of lieutenant, and more reserved than ever. The war had changed her. Tess had fought hard to break through that shield of bitter aloofness, and though Luke had shared her bed in the aftermath of the war, she had never really shared her thoughts and emotions.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Lieutenant Luke Hamilton, visiting a house of ill repute,” Tess said. “Finally gotten lonely, soldier?”

Her visitor took off a wide-brimmed hat and smiled down at Tess. “I’m no longer a soldier.”

“What?” For the first time, Tess noticed that Luke’s navy-blue uniform had been replaced by worn civilian clothes.

“I’ve resigned my commission,” Luke said. “My soldiering days are over.”

Tess blinked. “How long have you been planning that?”

Luke looked down, studying the tips of her scuffed boots. "A while."

She hadn't mentioned anything on her last payday, and for a moment, that hurt, but then Tess reminded herself of her role. She was Luke's friend and occasional lover, nothing more.

"So what are you gonna do now?" Tess asked. "You got a position in town somewhere?"

Luke shook her head. "I'm gonna be my own man now."

It was no longer strange for Tess to hear Luke refer to herself as a man.

"I'll head west in a few days," Luke said.

"West? Don't tell me you've contracted that gold fever?"

Luke smiled. "Lord, no. I prefer working with horses to digging in the mud. The Donation Land Claim Act grants one hundred and sixty acres of land to every male citizen," she grinned at Tess, "and I hear the Oregon Territory would be a good place for a horse ranch."

"So you're leaving for good?" Tess bit her lip. She was sad to see Luke go because she was a friend and one of very few people who had always treated her like a respectable woman.

"Yes. As soon as the grass grows long enough that the oxen won't starve on the way. Some of the boys dragged me in here for a memorable good-bye. I was wondering if you might be free tonight." Luke looked up at her through dark lashes. A rare shy smile appeared on Luke's lips.

Tess rubbed her forehead and sighed. "No, I'm not."

"Oh. All right." Luke was fast to hide her disappointment, as reluctant as ever to show her feelings.

Tess touched her hand to establish some kind of contact and prevent her younger friend from pulling away. "I'm sorry. If I could somehow—"

"No." Luke squeezed her hand for a second. "You've got nothing to apologize for. You need to make a living. I know that."

Suppressing another sigh, Tess signaled Charlie to pour Luke a whiskey. "I have to go and play the charming hostess now, but I'll make sure to see you before you leave, all right?" Tess made her way to the back of the room, greeting customers left and right. She stopped when she felt some gold dollars being shoved into her hand. "I'm sorry, but I'm already otherwise engaged tonight. Why don't you—?"

The bearded soldier laughed. "I wasn't asking for myself. I want the services of your best girl for my friend over there." He pointed to the bar. "He's leaving town in a few days, and I want him to have a memorable send-off."

Tess looked down at the money in her hand. "Must be some friend," she said with her well-practiced flirtatious smile.

“He saved my life twice. So, you’ll arrange it?”

Tess nodded. “Just point him out, and I’ll see to it.”

The soldier turned and indicated—Luke Hamilton.

Great. Tess mentally rolled her eyes. *How do I get you out of this one, my friend?* She was the only one Luke had ever trusted with her body and her secret, so she couldn’t very well send her off with one of her girls. But she also couldn’t ignore the bearded soldier’s request. Every unmarried man in town would jump at the chance to spend a few hours with a working girl for free, especially if it would be months until he saw another available woman. Refusing the generous offer would make Luke’s friends suspicious and could blow her cover. *And I want to give her a memorable send-off too.* She nodded at the bearded soldier. “I’ll make sure he has a good time.”

“Thank you.” The soldier walked away.

The question is just how. Deeply in thought, Tess looked up—and right into the forest green eyes of a girl passing by. *That’s it.* “Fleur,” she called.

Out of the twelve girls working for her, Fleur was the one Tess trusted the most. At twenty, Fleur was only ten years younger than Tess, but she was like a daughter nonetheless. With her flaming red hair and her pretty, innocent face, she was popular with the men and brought in a lot of money for the establishment, but Tess hoped that she’d one day leave to begin a new life. She genuinely liked the young woman.

Fleur casually disengaged herself from the man she had been leading toward the bar and stopped in front of Tess. “Yes?”

“Are you about to head upstairs?”

Fleur looked back at her customer, who had already found another girl. “Doesn’t look like it.”

Tess hesitated for another moment, gazing deeply into Fleur’s eyes. She knew that Fleur was very discreet. Unlike some of the other girls who gossiped whenever they thought Tess wasn’t listening, Fleur never talked about what she did upstairs or about the secrets her customers might have let slip in the heat of passion. She was kind enough not to laugh at Luke and experienced enough not to run from the room screaming. And Luke would surely appreciate her soft beauty and feminine curves. In some respects, her friend was not so different from the man she pretended to be. “I have a customer I want you to take care of. The fee is already covered. He’s a friend of mine, so please treat him well.”

Fleur tilted her head. “Are you sure you don’t want to entertain him yourself?”

“I would, but I have to entertain a town official tonight.” Tess exchanged a meaningful glance with Fleur. The local authorities were willing to turn their heads in exchange for a few favors. For the most part, Tess as the madam of the brothel could pick her customers

and saw only a few special guests, but she had no choice tonight. She had to ensure that town officials continued to turn a blind eye to her establishment.

“And the one you want me to take care of? Is he a regular?” Fleur asked.

Tess shook her head. “No. But he’s special, so I don’t trust any of the other girls to take care of him.”

Fleur turned to look in the same direction Tess did. “The dark-haired, slender one standing alone at the bar? He doesn’t look like one of your special customers.”

A smile played around Tess’s lips. “Oh, he is special, trust me.” She turned toward Fleur and looked her in the eyes, her smile now gone. “You still remember the first rule I taught you?”

“Don’t steal your silverware?” Fleur said with the mischievous grin she still hadn’t lost completely after three years.

Tess suppressed a smile of her own. “Discretion.”

A russet eyebrow rose, but Fleur didn’t ask what it was about this customer that required her absolute discretion. After a few seconds, she asked, “Is there anything I should be careful about?” A glimmer of fearful caution shone in her green eyes.

“No.” Tess shook her head. “You’ve got nothing to fear from him. He’s a real gentleman.”

One corner of Fleur’s lips lifted into a humorless half-smile. “That would be a first. But all right. I’ll take care of him.” She turned and made her way toward the bar.

“I hope I did the right thing,” Tess whispered as she watched her go.



Nora eyed her potential customer warily as she walked toward him.

He had nothing in common with the men who usually made arrangements for Tess’s time. The battered, wide-brimmed hat under his arm and the worn flannel shirt made it unlikely that he had a lot of money to spend on whiskey and women. His blue pants with the yellow stripe running down the leg seam had clearly been part of a uniform—he was a simple ex-soldier, not one of the rich, powerful men who shared Tess’s bed from time to time.

Even his posture was different. She saw the tension in his lean frame from across the room. While all around him the other men were laughing, chucking down whiskey, and trying to get their hands on the girls, he stood quietly sipping his drink. His gaze was alert, roving over anyone who ventured too close.

Nora grimaced. She didn’t like that type of customer. If they finally lost their rigid self-control, all hell might break loose.

She straightened her shoulders and sent a glance downward to ensure that her bodice still showed enough to arouse interest, but not enough to satisfy it. With a deep breath, she stopped next to him but didn't attempt to touch him in any way. The remoteness emanating from him discouraged any attempts at familiarity. "Hello," she said, giving her voice a seductive timbre.

The man set his glass on the bar and turned around. He was not at all what Nora had expected. Most of her customers had shaggy hair, matted beards, tobacco-stained teeth, and filthy clothes, reeking of stale drink, smoke, and sweat. This man kept his dark hair short, the ends just brushing against the collar of his faded shirt. His clothes were a bit worn, but clean, and his pants still maintained a razor-sharp military crease. There was no hint of beard stubble on the tan face—either he had shaved immaculately just before his brothel visit, or he was even younger than he appeared to be.

Nora took a half-step toward him, pleasantly surprised to smell only leather, soap, and a hint of horse on him. Maybe this customer really was a gentleman. *And he's young and probably inexperienced enough for me to pull off my virgin act.* Maybe that was why Tess had assigned her to this customer.

Whenever a visitor entered the brothel who seemed to be sufficiently naïve, usually a very young man or a soldier with his pay in his pocket, he was offered a night with a virgin at double the cost. Because virgins were not readily available in their line of work, almost every brothel had a girl still looking sweet and innocent enough to pull off the act—and Nora was the official "virgin" of Tess's establishment.

"My name is Fleur," Nora said. Nearly all girls used pseudonyms or nicknames, so there were a lot of Roses, Marys, and Daisys residing in houses of ill repute.

The customer said nothing. Not that Nora had expected or wanted him to tell her his name. Even if he had, she wouldn't remember it in a few days. He was just one of many customers.

"You look a little lonely standing here all by yourself." Nora used her big, green eyes for good measure, playing the friendly, naïve young girl she had once been. "I thought maybe I could keep you company for a while."

The young man looked at her without answering. His gaze made Nora shudder even though it was neither cruel nor leering. Something about him irritated her finely honed instincts, but she ignored it. She couldn't afford not to work tonight. She smiled sweetly at him and tucked her hand into the bend of his arm as if she were a lady and he the beau courting her.

The muscles under her fingers clenched. "I don't have the money for...this."

“Hush, don’t worry about that. It’s already taken care of.” Nora stroked the arm her fingers rested on. “Shall we retreat to my room, where it’s a little quieter, and talk for a bit?”

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I just want to finish my drink, and then I’ll be on my way.”

Nora worked hard not to stare. No man she knew had ever entered a brothel only to enjoy a quiet drink, and she didn’t believe that he had either. “Then why not enjoy the whiskey I have upstairs? It’s a much better brand than this one.”

“No, thank you,” the young man said. “I’m tired, and I should—”

“Tired?” Nora smiled and tugged on his arm, trying to get him to move closer to the staircase. “It just so happens that I have a nice, soft bed upstairs.” Nothing about that bed was nice. Not for Nora. She hated it and what she had to do in it night after night, but since she had no particular skills, no family, and no husband who cared for her, it was that or starving. And she would rather head upstairs with this strange, but polite young man than with one of the wild, drunken men leering at her from across the room.

“Hey, Lieutenant, you still down here?” A bearded soldier leaned against the bar next to Nora and her potential customer. He eyed Nora as if she were a piece of cattle. “What’s the matter? The girl not to your liking?”

Nora pressed her lips together, trying not to show her humiliation. Was that the reason for the young man’s refusal to head upstairs with her? Would he prefer one of the other girls?

But he slowly shook his head. “No. I like her just fine. But—”

“Then go and enjoy yourself.” The bearded soldier reached around Nora to clap the younger man roughly on the shoulder. “You don’t want to insult me by refusing my good-bye gift, do you?”

“No.” It sounded almost like a sigh of resignation.

Nora used the opportunity to tug him toward the stairs and led him to her room on the upper floor. She opened the door and watched him take in the gaudy rug, the paintings of nude women on the wall, and the big brass bed in the middle of the room. She closed the door behind them and listened to the muted sounds of the piano and coarse laughter from downstairs for a second before she took a deep breath and turned toward him. “If you want, I could bring up hot water and you could take a bath,” Nora said. Maybe it was the best strategy to get the probably inexperienced young man to undress first.

He fixed his gaze on her. “That’s not necessary. I’m already clean.”

Nora bowed her head in a gesture of deference. She had to take care not to arouse his anger in any way. “Yes, of course, I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise. I just wanted—”

“It’s all right,” he said.

Encouraged by his kindness, Nora stepped closer. Maybe she had to give up the virgin act and take the first step. "Do you want to undress me?"

"No."

All right. This is not going well. Not about to give up, Nora started to undress herself.

He grabbed her hand that was just about to loosen the thin straps holding up her tight silk dress. "Don't."

Nora's confusion grew. What did he expect of her? Whatever she did, it didn't seem to be what he wanted her to do. Her other customers had always found her beautiful, and most couldn't get her naked fast enough. What was it that made her so unattractive to him?

Maybe he's just a bit shy. She leaned forward, encouraging him to get a good look at her cleavage, but his gaze remained stubbornly fixed on her face. She threw back her head, baring the soft, fair skin of her throat and causing her red hair to tumble over her bare shoulders.

The movement attracted his attention. Nora felt his gaze following the path of her freckles from her shoulders to where they disappeared into the low-cut bodice of her dress. There, his gaze snapped back to rest again on her face, but the fleeting glance had been enough to assure Nora of his interest.

"You don't need to be afraid," she said. "I'm not. Not with you. I know you'll be gentle. I'm really glad that my first time—"

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"Do what?"

"You don't have to pretend with me. I know this business, so don't bother."

Nora eyed him with new interest. *So he's not as naïve and innocent as I thought.* She cocked her head and gave him a smile that was flirtatious and at the same time conveyed the innocent curiosity of the virgin she pretended to be. "So, you've been with other women?"

The young man didn't answer; he just looked at her, his gray eyes cool and sharp like steel. "I know you're not a virgin."

Nora struggled to maintain her smile. Even the men who saw through her virgin act usually played along to fulfill a fantasy of theirs. Not this man.

"And I know that you don't desire me," he said. "You don't want to go to bed with me."

No. Not naïve at all. Nora bit her lip. *Want?* She suppressed a bitter laugh. *I have to.* She had to earn money to survive, and this man was making it impossible. A look into his eyes made her give up all pretenses. "I need to make a living, and you look like a decent enough man, so..." She gestured to the bed.

He turned away from her. His clothes rustled.

With grim satisfaction, Nora began to loosen her bodice. She didn't want to waste any more time now that he was finally undressing.

But when he turned back around, he hadn't removed a single garment. He wordlessly handed her ten dollars.

Nora made no move to accept the money. "What's this?"

"You said you needed to earn money, so..." He again extended his hand with the money.

"No." Nora stepped aside. "I don't need your pity. I'll take the money I earn for my services, but not a cent more." She knew that pride was something a prostitute couldn't afford, but she was too angry, afraid, and confused to think clearly. It worried her to have this young man refuse her advances and appear entirely unimpressed by her attempts at seduction. He had obviously shared Tess's bed more than once, so it was not a dislike for prostitutes in general—he just didn't like her. Her very life depended on her ability to enchant men. Was she losing her skills?

"All right." He pocketed his money and strode to the door.

The printed sign that hung in the parlor flashed through Nora's mind: *Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded*. If he left now, there would be no money for her, maybe none at all tonight, because judging from the sounds filtering in through the thin walls, most of the customers had already headed upstairs with other girls. "Please." She didn't know what else to say.

He looked back at her over his shoulder, and for a second, she saw something in his eyes that looked almost like regret. Then he shoved his hat onto his head, and with another step, he was gone. The door closing behind him echoed loudly in Nora's ears.

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BACKWARDS TO OREGON

BY JAE

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