

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VICTORIA DAHL

"[A] hands-down winner, a sensual story
filled with memorable characters."

—*Booklist on Start Me Up*

Too Hot to Handle



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Аннотация

Merry Kade has always been the good girl. The best friend. The one who patiently waits for the guy to notice her. Well, no more. Merry has just scored her dream job, and it's time for her life to change. As the new curator of a museum in Wyoming, she'll supervise some—ok, a lot—of restoration work. Luckily, she's found the perfect contractor for the job, and even better, he lives right next door. Shane Harcourt can't believe that someone wants to turn a beat-up ghost town into a museum attraction. After all, the last thing he needs is the site of his dream ranch turning into a tourist trap. He'll work on the project, if only to hasten its failure...until the beautiful, quirky woman in charge starts to change his mind. For the first time ever, Merry has a gorgeous stud hot on her heels. But can she trust this strong, silent man, even if he is a force of nature in bed? When Shane's ulterior motives come out, he'll need to prove to Merry that a love like theirs may be too hot to handle, but it's impossible to resist.

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Praise for the novels of
USA TODAY bestselling author
Victoria Dahl

"Hits the emotional high notes. Rising romance star Dahl delivers with this sizzling contemporary romance."

—Kirkus Reviews on *Close Enough to Touch*

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“This is one hot romance.”

—RT Book Reviews on *Good Girls Don't*

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—Salon.com on *Crazy for Love*

“[A] hands-down winner, a sensual story filled with memorable characters.”

—Booklist on *Start Me Up*

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“Sassy and smokingly sexy, *Talk Me Down* is one delicious joyride of a book.”

—New York Times bestselling author Connie Brockway

“Sparkling, special and oh so sexy—Victoria Dahl is a special treat!”

—New York Times bestselling author Carly Phillips on *Talk Me Down*

Too Hot to Handle

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is for my girlfriends.

Jif, Jodi, Jami and Jess, to name a few. Thank you.

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

THE NOW FAMILIAR sound of the toaster popping up woke Merry from a dead sleep. She opened her eyes and immediately flinched from the brutal sunlight spearing between a gap in the curtains of the living room window.

“Are you sick of me yet?” she groaned, her voice muffled by the pillow. It was the same question she asked every morning. At some point the answer would be yes. But not today, thank God.

“Are you kidding?” Grace called from the kitchen. “If I kick you out, I lose more than half of the furniture in this place.”

“And one very intrusive sofa bed.”

“Not to mention my best friend.” Grace appeared next to the fold-out couch and held out a mug. “Coffee?”

“God, I love you,” Merry groaned.

“You’re using me for my coffee.”

“And your apartment.”

“Would you drop that?” Grace complained. “Anyway, you’re supposed to say you’re using me for my hot bod. It makes me feel beautiful.”

Merry sat up and dared a sip from the steaming mug before she shook her head. “No way. I don’t take sloppy seconds. And from what I can tell, Cole’s been using you up.”

Grace snorted. “Maybe. Or maybe I’ve been using him up.”

“Here I thought that limp of his was still left over from

surgery.”

Grace had turned to walk away, but she spun back and leaned down to kiss Merry’s head. “All kidding aside, I’m glad you’re here. I mean that. I’ve missed you. Stay as long as you want. Six months. A year. It doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, I want to sleep in your living room for a year,” Merry scoffed. But it was just a front. She’d happily sleep on the floor, just to have her friend back. They’d lived fifteen hundred miles apart for three years, and Merry had missed having her near. The living room was fine by her. She had no need for a big bed and a locking door. There were no men hanging around waiting for a shot at her. Hell, she’d given up masturbating half a year ago. Even her imagination had gone celibate, completely defeated by the unending dry spell. So she’d given in with a sigh and moved on to solving crossword puzzles on her phone.

“I’ll make breakfast,” she volunteered once she’d gotten a few more sips of coffee in her.

“I’ve got it already. Hand-toasted bagels. My specialty.”

Half an hour later, they were out the door. Merry dropped Grace off at the photography studio where she worked setting up location shoots and scouting for film companies. Then Merry drove out of Jackson and into the valley beyond.

She’d been here a week now, but the mountains still surprised her. No, surprised wasn’t the word. They overwhelmed her. Awed her. They made her feel tiny, and she liked that. Though she wasn’t model tall at five-seven, she felt too noticeable all

the time. She wished she were little like Grace. Wished she could hide in a crowd instead of feeling big and awkward all the time. Mostly awkward. Her body was fine, but she didn't know anything about clothes. She didn't wear heels. Didn't know what to do with makeup unless Grace was there to help. She was just the girl in jeans and a funny T-shirt who was hyperaware of the easy cuteness of the other women around her.

But none of that mattered anymore. This wasn't Texas, where girls were born with perfectly coiffed hair and polished nails and the ability to walk in heels before they could crawl. This was Wyoming. And she worked in a ghost town.

Smiling, she turned her old sedan onto a ranch road and gravel pinged against the undercarriage. She couldn't wear anything but jeans and T-shirts out here. Maybe that would change when she got the actual museum up and running, but for now her workplace was a ghost town. Literally. Her personal collection of broken-down, graying wood houses, waiting for her like an adventure every day.

Okay, the town didn't belong to her, per se, but she still grinned when she briefly spotted the peak of the church steeple rising above a hill far ahead. The car dipped down into a valley again and the steeple disappeared.

The town didn't belong to her, and she'd only been working there for a week, but she already loved it like mad. It was lonely. Some people might even call it sad. Just a scattered little group of eighteen buildings, half of them collapsing in on themselves,

but Merry breathed a sigh of relief as she rounded the final curve and the town came into sight.

Providence, it had been called. And it was that and more for Merry.

It was providence that she'd found this job, here in this part of Wyoming when her best friend had moved here not nine months before. And it was amazing luck that she'd been hired after only a year of experience working in a small-town museum. She was a newbie, but the Providence Historical Trust had believed in her, and Merry was going to make them proud. She was going to make herself proud.

She pulled into one of the patches of bare, hardened ground at the edge of the narrow dirt road and stepped out of her car. The sound of her car door closing echoed across the meadow that stretched behind her. In front of her stood Providence, the buildings spaced along either side of a wide road that had been overtaken by grass and the occasional clump of sagebrush. Beyond the town, the hills rose up into patches of rustling green aspen.

Merry took a deep breath, inhaling air that was cleaner than any she'd ever breathed before. This was a good place to make a life for herself. She couldn't fail here. She knew it. This tiny little dot of land in the middle of Wyoming was the most beautiful spot she'd ever seen. How could it be anything but good?

She shifted the bag she'd slung over her shoulder and started along the trail that cut through the grass.

Regardless of how much she loved Providence, failure wasn't an option at this point, anyway. She was thirty years old. She'd been floating through life like a bit of dandelion fluff on the wind. Oh, she'd touched down occasionally. Held jobs for a year or two. Bank teller, sales support, blackjack dealer, dog walker. She'd even gone to school to learn to do hair, but the only thing good that had come out of that had been her friendship with Grace.

She was a jack of all trades, and while she hadn't mastered anything, she was a hard worker. She wasn't lazy. She wasn't dumb. Even if her cousins had given her the nickname The Merry Slacker a few years before. Even if, when her mom had bought a new condo, she'd cautiously explained to Merry that it only had one bedroom, so she wouldn't be able to take Merry in again.

That had hurt. Merry had moved in with her mom for a few months once, but that had been four years before. "What are you talking about?" she'd huffed, trying to hide her injury with irritation. "Why would you even say that?"

"I just thought you should know, sweetie. I won't be much of a safety net anymore." A safety net. As if Merry were a circus performer with a terrible track record.

Okay, maybe she'd also moved home a few times after college, but those had been short stays. And yes, she lived life one day at a time, unlike her cousins who were both attractive, driven and financially successful. Family gatherings were a little painful, but Merry could deal with it. What she couldn't deal with was her

newly hatched self-doubt. Hell, her mom had always been a free spirit, and now it seemed even she was expressing concern.

Squinting against the bright morning sun, Merry stepped over a tall purple wildflower she could never bring herself to step on, despite that it was smack in the middle of the trail.

Over the past year, what had started as a niggling worry had steadily grown into an irritation. A grain of sand beneath her skin. Slowly the minerals of anxiety and fear had begun to accumulate around it, just above her breastbone. Pressing. Displacing. Now it was like a stone she could feel every time she swallowed.

She'd always been happy. And she'd always assumed that someday she'd stumble onto that one good thing. The job that made work into a passion. The love that transformed her single life into something bursting with joy.

It hadn't happened. Because things like that didn't happen. She'd decided that attitude would only buy her more years of floating over life, mindless and untethered, tossed about, content to be lost.

Not anymore. Not this time. Not in Providence.

Merry walked confidently up the wooden steps that led to the surprisingly sturdy porch of the first little house. She opened the door and pretended she wasn't doing a quick scan of the doorway for spiders before she stepped in.

Providence might look like eighteen dying buildings surrounded by weeds and harsh mountains, but she was going to make it into a destination. A fascinating tourist stop. A quaint

little museum. She would do that. This town would be her triumph.

* * *

THIS TOWN WAS going to be her Waterloo.

Another week had passed, and Merry was losing her mind. The board of the Providence Historical Trust was made up of five lovely people who all happened to be over sixty years old. And two of them had been married to the benefactor of the trust, Gideon Bishop. Not at the same time, of course. One woman had been married to him for forty years, though there was a first wife before her somewhere. The third wife had only spent five years with him, but she'd been his wife when he'd died, which seemed to give her pride of place at the table. At least in her mind. The other three were men who each claimed to have been Gideon's best friend at some point.

It could have been like a lovely family reunion when they met every other week. Instead it was like an episode of Passive Aggressive Theater. None of them could agree on anything, or even seem to remember the same event the same way.

"Please," Merry begged for the third time that day. "I need to do something. Anything."

Ex-Wife Jeanine nodded. "Well, there are those files."

"Yes, I finished organizing them a week ago."

"Ah," Harry said, "You know what could be helpful? The Jackson Historical Society. I bet they'd have all sorts of pictures and stories and—"

“Yes,” Merry ground out, feeling guilty for cutting the old man off even before he finished his sentence. “I mean, of course. You pointed me in that direction last week. I already spent hours there, but it seems Gideon had finished up there. I couldn’t find anything new.”

“The library?” Third Wife Kristen suggested.

“That, too.” Merry tried to smile. “I’m working through all the books I could find on the history of the area, but—”

Levi Cannon slapped his hand down on the table so hard that Merry squeaked. “I’ve got it! Teton County Historical Society!”

Merry felt a little twinge of excitement. That was one place she hadn’t visited. But the excitement died like an ember swept up into the cool sky. “I’ll check it out. But...you brought me here to start a museum. To draw people to Providence. That’s what Gideon wanted, right? And that’s what I want, too. I can make copies of pictures and gather more information about the founders of the town and the flood that led to its destruction, but that’s not going to get people out there. I need to get the buildings restored. Grade the road. Build a parking area. We need to come up with plans. Hire workers. Do something.”

Third Wife Kristen cleared her throat and shot a look at Harry who looked at Levi.

“Well...” Levi said, then paused to pull a handkerchief from his pocket to swipe over his nape. “You see, there’s a bit of a problem.”

“Problem?” Merry felt a quick crawl of anxiety over her skin.

It slipped down her arms and made her fingers tingle with the guilty suspicion that she wasn't good enough. "What problem?" she asked. "Is it my résumé? I know I've only got two years of experience, but I promise you won't find anyone more dedicated. I already love Providence like it was my own. If—"

"No, no," Jeanine interrupted. "You were quite the bargain. We couldn't possibly have afforded someone with more experience, what with the— Ouch!" Jeanine jumped and glared at Third Wife Kristen. "Did you kick me?"

"You're being rude!"

But Merry didn't mind. She was a bargain. Or a cheap knockoff of someone who really knew what they were doing. But she was too damn happy about being here to care.

"It was Levi's idea!" Jeanine said on a rush.

"What was?" Merry asked as the others tried to shush the woman.

But Levi just sighed and scrubbed at his neck again before tucking the handkerchief away. "There's a bit of a lawsuit."

"A bit of one?"

"Well." He folded his hands on the table. "Aside from the Providence town plot, Gideon left all the land to his grandson. The boy doesn't want the town, but he's fighting the trust, so the money is a little...tied up for a time."

"How long of a time?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

They all shifted in their seats and traded looks again. "We're not exactly sure," Jeanine finally admitted.

“But I don’t understand! You brought me out here to work!”

“Well, yes...” Jeanine offered a sympathetic smile. “Of course, but... We decided to hire you as more of a strategic move.”

Kristen snorted. “You decided!”

Jeanine glared at her. “The judge freed up a small amount of the trust for administrative costs. We decided our best move would be to go forward with Gideon’s plans, or at least give the appearance of doing so. It gives us a position of power. Possession is nine-tenths of the law and all that.”

“The appearance,” Merry murmured, too shocked to say more. The appearance. They hadn’t wanted her at all. This wasn’t her big chance to succeed. This was just a move in a legal battle.

Marvin, who up to this point hadn’t said a word to Merry, sat forward and cleared his throat. “None of this nonsense is your concern. You’re being paid. Let these idiots spin their wheels and you keep your head down and do what you can.”

“With what?” she snapped. “Tumbleweeds?”

“You’re the idiot, Marvin Black!” Kristen screeched. “You’re the one who planted this whole damn nonsense in Gideon’s head in the first place. All your big ideas about history and heritage!”

“Bah! If you can’t live on what he left you, then you’re nothing but a spendthrift floozy, anyway. Gideon wanted to build a legacy.”

“A legacy,” she scoffed. “More like a fool’s errand.”

“Well, if that’s the way you feel about it, what are you even

doing here?”

Merry listened to them snipe at each other, but she didn't really hear them. She was reeling. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked no one.

Levi answered. “We'll try to get more funds released for you next month. In the meantime, you should definitely visit the county historical society. See what you find.” He patted her hand in dismissal, and Merry let herself be dismissed.

She stood and wandered out onto the front porch of the home where Gideon Bishop had lived his whole life. He'd died here, in Kristen's loving arms, according to her, and he'd left behind a legacy that nobody much cared about. Gideon had only had one child. A son from his first marriage who had run off decades before. And then two grandsons he hadn't spoken to in years. Gideon had ended up with more money than any one person could need, and he'd sunk everything into a stupid ghost town. Just like Merry.

But she'd misunderstood. She'd thought the trust had brought her here because they'd believed in her. She'd been surprised at the call. Overwhelmed, actually. And overjoyed. But in that moment she'd known that her passion had shown through and eclipsed the wild inconsistencies in her résumé. The letter she'd written had moved them, and they'd chosen her to bring Providence to life.

Or...they'd chosen her because she was the cheapest clearance item they could get away with passing off as legitimate in court.

They hadn't believed in her at all. She was a placeholder. And this would be another failure in her life.

Merry raced down the steps of the wide front porch and jumped into her car, wanting to escape before the tears fell. She almost made it, but the first fat drops slipped off her cheeks before she'd slammed the car door.

They hadn't meant for her to succeed here. They hadn't meant for her to do anything. "Those shitty old...coots." God, she couldn't even bring herself to call them something they really deserved. She wasn't tough that way. She wasn't hard enough. She was dandelion fluff, floating in the wind.

Angry at her own self-assessment, Merry threw the car into Reverse and hit the gas pedal. This was a good place to get her emotions out with a wild ride. After all, she was out in the middle of nowhere at the end of the dirt road. There was nothing out here except sagebrush and—

A hard clunk interrupted her daring thoughts and sent her stomach tumbling. She slammed on the brakes as her mind raced through all the possibilities. That hadn't been sagebrush, but it had been solid. Not a sweet sheepdog or a barn cat or... She pulled forward a few feet and then scrambled out, her eyes flying over the dried-out grass at the edge of the yard.

The mailbox. The mailbox. Oh, shit. It was a white wooden number with the name Bishop spelled out in custom black letters across the top of the box. And now it was lying on the ground like the victim of an assassination.

Oh, God. She glanced toward the house. She couldn't just leave it there. It would look as if she'd done it deliberately because they'd insulted her. And she couldn't go back in and confess, because she'd left in a huff and their only apparent attachment to her was her cheap price tag.

"Oh, God!" The tears flowed freely now, inspired by panic and anger and the awful knowledge that she could feel as humiliated as she wanted but she couldn't lose this job. She couldn't.

Merry looked helplessly down at the mailbox, feeling as if she'd murdered some precious icon. The thick white post wasn't broken. Maybe she could just stick it back in the ground. A glance at the house confirmed that no one else had left yet. They were probably still bickering over whether it had been dishonest to hire her for a job that didn't exist.

A job that didn't exist. The perfect job for a bit of fluff like her.

Rage pushed her past her guilt over the mailbox, and Merry bent down and wrapped her arms around the box, lifting it with a grunt of impatience. She slid it a few inches and fit the tip of the post into the hole. It dropped right in.

"Thank God." After pressing down a little, she let it go...and watched the mailbox tilt toward the left. Crap. Merry wrapped her arms around it and straightened it again, then pulled down as hard as she could. She lifted her feet and let her body weight hang for just a second. This time, when she stepped back, it only tipped a tiny bit. Like the erection of a man just registering that

you'd made a Star Wars joke in the middle of foreplay.

Not that that had ever happened to her.

Merry took a few more steps back, hands raised as if she could catch the mailbox if it fell. But it held steady, and with one last look at the house, she darted to her car and drove away.

But as she drove down the gravel road, watching dust billow behind her like a plume of guilt, Merry set her jaw and steered her heart.

It didn't matter why they'd hired her. It didn't matter who they thought she was. She'd come here to make a place for herself, and that was what she was going to do.

* * *

SHANE HARCOURT WAS so damn tired he wasn't sure he could make it up the front steps of the Stud Farm. Two weeks of carpentry work on a ranch in Lander, followed up by a week of fencing on the high plateau outside Big Piney, and he was dead on his feet and nearly weaving side to side as he opened the door and headed for his apartment.

Not for the first time, he thanked God that Cole had finally gotten back on his feet and out of Shane's ground floor place. Shane couldn't have trudged up to the second floor today. Not in this state. He watched his key disappear into the lock like he was watching the perfect porn movie. A beer. A hot shower. Bed. Then he planned to sleep for two days straight. Sheer pleasure.

He turned the key.

"Shane!"

Shane blinked at the idea of his neighbor Grace greeting him with such unbridled excitement. Frowning, he slowly turned around, hand still hopefully clasped to the doorknob.

“Hi!” a woman who was definitely not Grace said.

He took in the tall brunette in the Oscar the Grouch T-shirt and automatically touched the brim of his hat in greeting. “Morning,” he said.

“It’s afternoon now,” she answered.

“Is it?” He realized he was just standing there staring while she grinned at him. Her long dark hair framed a harmless round face and an open smile. “Do I know you?”

“Seriously? Wow. I’m kind of insulted.”

Shane’s brain scanned quickly through the past few sexual encounters he’d had, just in case. But there weren’t that many, and he was almost immediately sure he hadn’t slept with this girl. “Sorry?”

“Shane, I’m Merry.”

Mary? He stared.

“Merry Kade. Grace’s friend?”

“Oh,” he said. Then “Oh! Merry. Right. Hi.”

Her wide smile had faltered at some point, so Shane tried again. “It’s good to see you. Are you visiting?”

“No, I moved here. I’m living with Grace for a little while.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Good.” His eyes nearly crossed with exhaustion.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re finally back. You’re a carpenter

cowboy, right?”

“I’m just a carpenter, not a cowboy.”

“Sure you are.” She waved a hand up and down his body.

“Look at those boots. And the hat.”

“Being a cowboy is a job. It’s got nothing to do with the boots.”

She looked pointedly at his Stetson.

“Or the hat,” he said wearily.

“Okay, but you are a carpenter.” When he nodded, her smile returned, lighting up her fresh face. “You’re just what I need!”

Too tired to bother with a sly reply, Shane just nodded. “Need some help with a bookshelf or something?”

She laughed so loudly that her voice rang through the entry.

“Sure, something like that.”

He forced a smile. “Okay, I’ll come by later. Right now—” He held up a hand to stop the words forming on her lips. “Listen, I’ve been working twelve-hour days for two weeks. I would normally come over straightaway and assemble your shelf, but I’m swaying on my feet and my eyes can’t focus. All I can even consider is a microwave burrito, a quick shower and then ten hours of sleep. Actually scratch the shower. That’ll wait.”

Her eyes flickered down before she blinked a few times. “Sure. It’s no problem. The shelf can wait. You sleep. And eat. And shower.”

“Thanks, um...Merry. I’ll come over later.” He pushed through the door and nearly stumbled over a thick envelope that must have been slipped through the old mail slot that no one used

anymore. When he spotted his lawyer's name printed across the top, Shane picked it up and set it on a table to open later. He didn't need to think about that bullshit right now. The only thing worse would be trying to navigate a conversation with his mother. He couldn't think coherently about even the simplest thing, such as being polite to an acquaintance.

He turned, meaning to apologize to Merry before he closed the door, but she was gone, the only evidence she'd been there the sound of Grace's door clicking shut.

"Shit." He'd go over to Grace's as soon as he'd showered tonight. But first... He locked the door, shucked off his boots, forgot about lunch and headed for bed to collapse.

CHAPTER TWO

GRACE FROZE IN THE ACT of sliding a perfect smudge of black liner across her lash line and aimed a hot glare in Merry's direction. "What do you mean Shane's coming over?"

Merry stared in wonder. "How do you do that?" she asked for the hundredth time since she'd met her best friend. "I don't get it. When I put eyeliner on, I look like a five-year-old playing dress up. Or an eighty-year-old alcoholic trying to recapture her glory days."

"Close your eyes." Grace scooted Merry around and swiped the pencil quickly over her lids. "There. I've shown you a million times. Now tell me why Shane's coming over."

When she opened her eyes, Merry sighed at the sight that greeted her. Her plain brown irises now looked large and

whiskey-colored. At least she was living with Grace right now. She could use her friend like a personal makeup artist whenever she wanted. Of course, that didn't change the fact that Merry's liner would be smudged and smeared within an hour. Her body rejected any transplants of prettiness.

"I need a carpenter," she said as she fluttered her lashes at herself. Then she looked from Grace's hair—gorgeous, choppy and recently brightened with chunks of Crayola red color—to her own. Plain brown and slightly dented from the ponytail she'd worn that morning. God.

"So?" Grace asked.

"Shane's a carpenter. I'm hoping he'll give me the Stud Farm discount."

"The Stud Farm discount," Grace muttered. "I don't like the sound of that at all. I think I should hang around."

"Thanks, Mom, but I promise not to get into your vodka stash."

"I'll call Cole and tell him to pick me up later."

"You will not. First of all, Cole's going to die when he sees that red in your hair. And by die, I mean he's going to jump on you like a cowboy riding a stubborn bronco."

"Nice."

"Secondly, what's your problem with Shane?"

Grace shrugged and leaned forward to finish her makeup. "I don't know. He's slick. Too removed. I can't read him."

"I think he's nice."

“Yeah, that’s why I’m hanging around. You think everyone is nice.”

“I do not,” Merry denied. “And even if I did, you have nothing to worry about. He didn’t even remember who I was. I doubt he’s currently concocting a plan to seduce me and steal my virginity as a trophy.”

Grace snorted. “What virginity?”

“The one I regrew after two years of celibacy.”

“A good sex toy should take care of that.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Merry groaned. “I’m pitiful.”

“No, you’re not. You’re safe and picky which is exactly how I want you to be.”

“I’m not picky. I’m just not on the radar. Anyone’s radar. I’m the government’s top-secret stealth snatch project.”

Grace burst into an uncharacteristically hearty laugh. Merry just stuck her tongue out and flounced out of the bathroom.

“I’m serious about Shane,” Grace said, following her to the living room. She pulled on a pair of black boots that would have looked clunky and mannish on Merry, but somehow looked both tough and adorable on Grace. “Watch out for him. He can be charming.” She drew the word out like it was a smear. “And take off that eyeliner. You look too cute.”

“You can scrub this liner off my cold, dead body. Actually that won’t be necessary, because it’ll melt off within the hour.”

“Use that primer I gave you.”

“Sure,” Merry said, instead of telling her friend that she’d tried

the primer and somehow she couldn't get it blended right and ended up looking like she was wearing sparkly white goggles.

"Don't get charmed," Grace warned, pointing a finger at Merry's chest. "I'm serious. I don't want to have to murder my boyfriend's best friend. Okay?"

A knock interrupted their conversation. Merry went out to say hello to Cole, but for a moment he was overwhelmingly distracted by Grace's hair.

"Hi, Merry," he said, his gaze locked on his girlfriend with an intensity no man had ever had for Merry.

"Hi, Cole. Grace's hair looks great, huh?"

"Hell, yeah, it does." Grace kicked him, and for a moment his gaze only got more intense. Then he blinked and visibly shook it off. His easy smile appeared and he turned to Merry. "How's the ghost town, darlin'?" he asked, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "I still don't like you out there on your own."

"I studied all the wildlife guides you gave me. If a rattlesnake comes near, I can identify it in less than two seconds, I swear."

He winked. "Good."

"You know, you two are actually worse than having parents. My mom was never this overprotective."

Cole patted her arm. "I've never had a little sister."

"I'm not your sister! Jeez. Now go show your girlfriend how much you like the new red hair. I'll see you later."

Cole dragged his woman out the door, but Grace leaned back in for one last warning. "Watch out for that guy."

"I promise it won't be a problem!" she huffed.

It never was. Men were always disappointingly respectful of her. She locked the door behind Grace and then wandered back to the bathroom to put on some lip gloss and brush out her hair. Thanks to Grace's professional skills with the eye makeup, Merry looked almost nice. And the Oscar the Grouch T-shirt really set off her complexion.

Just as she was thinking of changing, there was another knock on the door, which helpfully saved her from the decision of which Darth Vader T-shirt she was going to choose.

She opened the door with a wide smile that she felt freeze on her face when she saw Shane Harcourt.

He'd definitely taken that shower. The thick stubble that had shadowed his face had been shaved off to reveal his hard jaw, and his dark hair was still pressed to his nape in damp strands.

"Hi, Merry," he said, and she had the distinct feeling he was proving that he remembered her name this time. Not very flattering. When she'd visited Jackson last fall, they'd spent three hours together at Grace's birthday party. Not enough time to make an impression on him, apparently.

"You look like you're feeling a lot better," she said, waving him in.

"I am, thanks. And sorry about earlier." He flashed that charming smile she'd heard about. "I was dead on my feet."

"Yeah, you looked like a cattle rustler who'd been on the run for weeks."

His smile wavered. She had a way of doing that to men. “So where’s the bookshelf?”

“Ha. There is no bookshelf.”

“What?” He turned in a slow circle, looking over the apartment. “You said you wanted help with a bookshelf.”

She let her eyes wander down to his ass while he wasn’t looking. Cowboys were so sweet, the way they never wore those awful baggy jeans. And Shane was especially sweet, generously showing off his tight, muscular ass in a dark pair of Levi’s.

She cleared her throat. “No, you said I wanted help with a bookshelf.”

“All right. So what’s going on?” He sounded suspicious, probably worried she was going to try to make a move. It was so uncomfortable when you had to fight off the girl next door.

“Why don’t we sit down?”

Still looking wary, he took a seat on the couch. He’d look even warier if he knew he was sitting on her bed. Merry smothered a grin as she sat next to him. “I need a carpenter for a bigger job than a few shelves.”

“Yeah? You might want to rethink any remodeling. I doubt Rayleen would approve. She’s a pretty strict landlord.”

“I wouldn’t dare cross Rayleen,” Merry answered, shuddering a little at the idea of pissing off Grace’s crazy great-aunt. “I actually do need you to remodel something, but it’s not an apartment. It’s a ghost town.”

“A ghost town?” Shane sat straight and blinked several times.

“Excuse me?”

She couldn't help but laugh at the disbelief on his face. “I know it sounds crazy. But it really is a ghost town. It's called Providence. Have you heard of it?”

“I...I think so.”

“It's north of the Gros Ventre. I was hired to get it ready to be a public exhibit.”

“You?”

Was the whole town conspiring to destroy her confidence? “Yes, me. Listen, it's going to be spectacular! Really. It may sound strange to say a ghost town is exciting, but I'm so excited!”

“Yeah, I see that.”

Merry realized she'd clasped her hands together and leaned closer to him. “It's an amazing place. Truly. The most beautiful place you've ever seen. If you take the job, you'll see—”

“Take what job?”

“I want to hire you to start the restoration.”

Shane sat back. He stared at her for a long moment before he let his head fall to rest on the couch. His gaze bore into the ceiling. “You want to hire me.”

“Well, I don't know a lot of carpenters in Jackson.” Or anywhere else. “And!” She rushed on, not wanting to offend him, “You're Cole's best friend, so that's all the recommendation I need.”

“Merry...” His eyes squeezed shut for a moment, and she wondered if he was still too tired to think. “I'm sorry, but I'm a

little lost here. What exactly are you doing here and why are you working in Providence?”

“Oh! Right. You missed the first few weeks of this. Well, I’ve been keeping an eye on jobs in Jackson for a while now. I loved it when I came out to visit Grace, and I wanted to be closer to her, of course.” And my mom bought a one-bedroom condo and hung out a Do Not Disturb sign. “Unfortunately I don’t ski. Or know anything about skiing. Or even know enough to pretend to know something about skiing. So that career route was closed.”

“Okay. Got it.”

“But when I saw this job pop up... It was serendipity. I’d been working at a local historical museum for a year, remember?” Of course he didn’t remember, but he made an affirmative sound. “So I applied and...” She didn’t want to finish the story this time. It no longer made her happy. Her pulse still sped, but it wasn’t with excitement and pride. It was anger fueling her now. And embarrassment. And just a tiny pinch of desperation. She hoped he couldn’t hear that part of it. “Here I am!” she finished with a bright smile.

“Here you are. And you want me to help get your ghost town ready for display.”

He didn’t sound excited. In fact, he looked downright weary. His eyes were closed again, and she was sure she could already see stubble forming beneath the skin of his jaw. “Are you okay, Shane?” She reached out to put her palm to his forehead, only registering that she might be invading his personal space when

he jumped and looked at her with wide eyes.

“Sorry. You just seem out of sorts.”

“I’m fine,” he said in a clipped voice that made her wonder about this slick charm Grace was worried about. Apparently Merry didn’t merit charm. Or slickness. But that wasn’t what she needed. What she needed was a man with a hammer.

“So will you do it?”

He shook his head. “You have no idea what you’re asking.” Before she could figure out what he meant, he cleared his throat and leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees. “Summer is my busy season. I only have a few months to get all the outdoor work in, and there’s a lot of it.”

“Oh. Right. I didn’t think of that.” Her heart sank. She’d had a very clever idea to pay a carpenter out of her own salary, only it suddenly didn’t seem quite so clever. Shane was booked up for the summer. That was why he’d looked like he’d been riding the trail for a month. Everybody else was probably overworked, too. Which meant they’d have no reason to go for her half now/half later payment proposal. “Shit,” she whispered, falling back to collapse into the fat cushions of the couch.

“Plus, I don’t know anything about restoration. That sounds like a specialty job.”

“This part is pretty straightforward,” she murmured. “I need the porch on the saloon fixed. It’s not safe right now, and it’s my favorite building. I think it’ll be a real draw. There weren’t a lot of saloons around here back then, since a lot of the settlers were

Mormon. I've read some great stories about that place."

"You've got a saloon right next door," he said, waving his hand toward the Crooked R, where old Rayleen reigned like a not-quite-benevolent queen.

She shrugged. "It's not the same."

"Look, you just started. It's the busy season for everyone in construction. You're going to have to be content with taking your time. Nothing is going to happen this year. My advice is to sit tight and plan for next year."

Oh, God. The idea of spending months like this... She'd run out of things to do during the winter. She could start building a website, maybe, but that wouldn't take more than a month, and she couldn't even make it live, because Providence was currently too dangerous to have curious visitors poking around.

Maybe she could design the signs that would eventually be posted on each building. Yes, that would be fun. Then she could put them in storage for two years until the first of the buildings was restored. Maybe in five years they could have a ribbon cutting ceremony, assuming the whole thing hadn't been shut down due to a lawsuit.

No, she had to make this work, starting right now. She had to make this a success before the board realized their ploy wasn't having an effect on the lawsuit and they let her go. Or until the lawsuit was dropped and they decided to bring a real curator in.

"I have to move forward," she said. "Do you know anyone who could help, even if it's just for a few hours a week? Please?"

“What exactly are your plans? Just to nail a few boards up and start charging tourists?”

“No! It’s not like that. There won’t even be a charge, just a donation box. I just need...” Affirmation. Progress. Proof that I’m not a loser. “It’s a wonderful place and people don’t even know it’s there. I want to start sharing it with the community.” Well, that was true, too. It had been even more true yesterday. “It’s an important part of the history of this place,” she finished feebly.

She glanced over, hoping to see sympathy on his handsome face. What she found instead was frustration. Or anger. But no, it had to be frustration. He was just a little...intimidating. And still not the least bit charming about it. Cole was so damn laid-back she couldn’t imagine him being close with Shane, but maybe that was what drew them together.

Shane hadn’t been quite so gruff at Grace’s birthday party, though. She’d thought he was cute then. Really cute. Oh, hell, he was still really cute; he just made her nervous as hell. Same as every other cute guy.

“Maybe I could stop by on a few evenings,” he finally said, pronouncing each word slowly, carefully.

“Really?” Merry squealed. When he nodded, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. He seemed too startled to hug her back. “Thank you! Thank you! Do you want to check it out? We can go right now.”

“Right now?”

“Sure. We’ve still got two hours of daylight left. Let’s scoot out there so you know what you’re working with.”

His gaze drifted toward the right as if he were looking through the wall toward the Crooked R and its cold pitchers of beer.

“I’ll buy you a beer when we get back,” she offered in her most flirtatiously tempting voice.

“I’m fine,” he said flatly. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Her triumph tasted strangely like burnt pride, but she just smiled wider. “Great. I’ll grab my keys.”

* * *

HE’D INSISTED ON FOLLOWING Merry in his own truck. Or rather, she thought he was following, but he knew exactly where the Providence ghost town was. His dad had brought him out here dozens of times when Shane had been a kid. They’d spent whole days in the area, and sometimes nights in a tent next to the narrow creek that snuck through the piles of boulders at the mouth of the canyon.

As a kid, he’d thought of Providence as desolate and a little spooky. A place that people had abandoned. Walked away from. But that desolation had lent it a bit of reverence in his mind. To a kid, it had felt sacred and deliciously forgotten. Not a place to be turned into another tourist playground. Jesus, weren’t there enough of those around here?

Now, as the town came into view, with its familiar graying roof peaks and crumbling walls, he didn’t feel reverence. He felt...nothing. Nothing except irritation that it was causing him

inconvenience.

He watched Merry glance in her rearview mirror as he followed her around the last curve of the dirt road. She'd looked into her mirror a lot on the drive, as if making sure he hadn't ditched her.

Shit. He'd been gruff. He knew that. But she'd blindsided him with her news. Merry was just the out-of-town friend of Grace. She was a nice girl who smiled too much and wore goofy T-shirts and didn't seem to fit with her wild, tough friend from L.A. How had she suddenly become a next-door neighbor who was asking him to help her ruin his childhood haunt?

When she stopped, he pulled in behind her on a wide patch of dirt and got out. She was nearly bouncing on her toes when he joined her. "Isn't it amazing?" she squealed.

"It looks like a bunch of falling down shacks."

"That's because you don't know the history! What people went through to build this place, the lives they dug out from the dirt, the tragedies that drove them away. This place is alive, Shane. It's just...sleeping."

"More like mummifying," he muttered, but she ignored him and grabbed his arm.

"Come on. I'll show you the saloon. It's really in pretty good shape, aside from the porch."

Shane let her pull him along and tried to ignore a sense of déjà vu as he got closer to the first buildings. Her excitement was contagious, in the sense that it dispersed through the air

like an infection that coated his skin, contaminating him with the phantom touch of the excitement he used to feel here. The mystery of the place. The snakes and lizards that would dart out from underneath foundations. The wonder of who'd walked here before, lawmen and outlaws and all sorts of people who'd never actually set foot in Providence. Of course, he'd been a child. He wasn't sure what Merry's excuse was, but he didn't like the feel of it, and he rolled his shoulders to shake it off.

"Here it is," she said. Her words weren't necessary. Even if he hadn't known it was the saloon, there was an ancient sign propped on the porch.

"So this is pretty good shape?" he asked.

"Yeah. Look at the mercantile next door."

He moved closer to the porch and shook his head. "I can't just fix it with new wood, Merry. This is a big deal. You'll want to use old wood. Wood that's been reclaimed and—"

"I know all that! I'm not a complete amateur. I can take care of everything. I just need your help."

Shane turned and looked at her. Really looked at her for the first time since she'd asked him for help. He looked past the smile, past the sweet round face and slightly tanned cheeks flushed with pink. Her brown eyes were unremarkable...except that if you took the time to look, they showed everything she was feeling. And right now, she was feeling worried.

"What's going on here, Merry?"

"What do you mean? I'm hiring a carpenter. You. I'm doing

my job.”

“So you own this place? You can do whatever you want?” He knew damn well that wasn’t the situation, but he needed to find out her angle.

Instead of answering his question, Merry shifted, then crossed her arms and walked farther down the road. Interesting. Shane followed. When she stopped and turned around, all traces of worry were gone and she looked cool as a cucumber.

“I think we should approach this in tiers. First, I need to know if the building is safe. The floors. The ceilings. If it’s not safe, I need to know how much it would cost to make it safe. That’s step one. Second, I’d like to see the most obvious repairs made. The sagging porch. Holes in the ceiling. That sort of thing. Lastly, I need to know how much a restoration would cost.”

“A restoration? Merry, I don’t have time for—”

“I get that. But we’re not talking a full restoration. It would still need to be ghost-towny. No one wants to come to a ghost town and see a shiny saloon.”

“Ghost-towny,” he repeated wearily. “That an official term?”

“It is now. There’s a shed at the east end of the town that’s full of wood already reclaimed from collapsed buildings. No new wood, right? Just watch out for spiders.” She shivered. “I try not to go into the shed. It’s pretty chock full of spiders. It’s like... a spider anthill.”

“A...?” Realizing he was only going to be drawn deeper into her strange mind if he said any more, Shane shook his head

and dropped the subject. "Okay. I guess you have thought this through."

"Yes. It's my job." Her chin rose a little, as if daring him to dispute it. She wasn't smiling now. Strangely her mouth looked wider in repose. More full and mysterious.

Shane rocked back on his heels, put his hands in his pockets, taking a little time to look over the ragged buildings around him. "When are you planning on opening this place, Merry?"

"Next year," she answered, her chin edging higher.

Next year. Shane couldn't let that happen. He had to stop this. "All right, then," he offered with a smile. "I'll do what I can."

All her false bravado disappeared and she was hopping up and down like a kid again. "You will? Really?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Shane!" She threw herself at his chest, and Shane automatically put his arms around her. He also automatically registered how nice and feminine she smelled, a stark change from the men he'd worked with on his two weeks of ranch work. Then he very carefully set her back.

"I'm going to take a look at that spare wood. Do you want to walk over with me?"

"No! The spider anthill, remember?"

"Right." God, she was a piece of work. But she had information he needed, so Shane touched his hat brim and nodded. "I'll deal with the spiders on my own. And then I'll take a look at your saloon."

“Thank you!” she squealed, and he tried not to feel guilty as he walked away. Merry had stepped into something that she couldn’t understand, and that wasn’t Shane’s fault. He set his jaw and walked on.

CHAPTER THREE

“WHERE WERE you last night?”

Merry sat up from a dead sleep, throwing her arms out to defend against the snarling monster crouched above her. The monster jumped back, quick as a hellbeast, its flame-tipped mane framing a...pale and pretty face?

“Oh! Grace. You scared me.” Merry flopped back down onto the mattress, wincing when a spring poked her back. “What are you growling about?”

“Where were you last night? I called eight times! I tried to make Cole get up and drive me home.”

“Yeah? What did he say?”

“He...distracted me.”

Merry snorted and pulled the covers over her head, but Grace yanked them back.

“Merry! What did you do? Did you sleep with Shane? I mean...it’s okay. You can tell me. I won’t be mad.”

The not-quite-suppressed violence beneath Grace’s words sounded like static in her voice. Merry grinned at her. “You promise you won’t be mad?”

“Yes,” she said past clenched teeth and a painfully pleasant smile.

“Oh, my God.” Merry laughed. “You’re the worst liar ever. No, I did not use my super-sexy wiles to lure Shane onto my fold-out sofa bed for a night of uncomfortable passion.”

“I wasn’t worried about you doing the luring!”

“Okay. No, Shane did not butter me up with Star Wars trivia and then ‘accidentally’ fall on me with his penis out.”

“Merry, be serious! Where were you?”

Finally accepting that she wasn’t going to get any more sleep, Merry crawled out of bed and headed to the kitchen to start coffee. “I went out to Providence. My phone must have been searching for a signal for an hour or two and it ran out of power. Sometimes I get four bars out there, and sometimes I get zero. I’m not sure how that works. Is it the wind? The clouds? What—”

“Okay, what about later?”

“Grace, what is your deal? First of all, why do you hate Shane so much? Second...I haven’t had sex in two years. Two years. If I miraculously talked a man into wanting to have sex, wouldn’t you be thrilled for me? I have needs, you know.”

Actually she didn’t. Not anymore. Those needs had finally dried up and died six months ago, at the exact moment that her cheap, knock-off vibrator had buzzed into a slow death. She’d replaced it with an even cheaper knock-off model but hadn’t even bought batteries for that one. She’d just put it away, still in its tacky packaging, and never thought about it again.

Grace seemed to have deflated to her normal petite size. She always seemed four inches taller when she was pissed, but

apparently she'd gotten past it, because she sighed and opened a cupboard door to take out coffee mugs. "Why haven't you been having sex?"

"You know why."

"I don't want to hear it, Merry. You've got an amazing body, you're funny as hell and you're cute."

"I'm not like you, Grace."

"What? Slutty?"

"You know that's not what I mean! I just...I don't know what to do with men. I get nervous. I make too many jokes. I act like a kid sister instead of their fantasy sex machine."

"Come on, Merry. Men don't want a fantasy. They want something real."

Merry frowned but tried to hide it by turning back to the coffeepot, which was trickling out that last little bit of caffeine. That was easy for Grace to say. Grace, in all her reality, was a fantasy. She was edgy and strong and striking. She intimidated men in a way that turned them on.

Merry, on the other hand, was a friend. A perpetual friend. The girl who always had a good joke and a smile.

She didn't know how to be sexy. And it didn't seem to be something she could learn, damn it.

"Whatever," she finally said. "It doesn't matter. My point is you don't have to worry about Shane. Shit, I wish you did."

"Okay, I'll drop it. I'm sorry, I just... You came here because of me. I feel like I need to watch out for you."

“Bullshit, Grace. You always say the same thing.”

Grace shrugged and pushed the mugs forward for coffee. “None of those guys have been good enough for you. You know that’s true.”

“Good Lord, I’m not the Virgin Mary. If he’s got a job and a penis, he’s already halfway up my scale. And I don’t really care about the job.”

Grace choked on laughter. “Shut up. That’s not true. It’d better not be true or you’re grounded, young lady.”

Merry just shook her head. “You’re the one who let me move into a place called the Stud Farm.”

Grace rolled her eyes, but Merry laughed as hard as she ever did at the joke.

The apartment building was really the two-story house of the old Studd farmstead, converted into four identical apartments, two on the ground floor, and two upstairs. She didn’t know if it had an official name, but everyone called it the Stud Farm after Aunt Rayleen’s tendency to fill it with single young men. Young compared to her, anyway.

When Grace had blown into town last year, even Rayleen hadn’t had the heart to send her away. She’d let Grace stay for a few weeks, and even though the old battleax tried to hide it, Merry could tell the woman loved her niece. She’d let Grace keep the apartment, and she’d let Merry move in, too, but the Stud Farm name would probably never go away.

Merry elbowed Grace. “Go take a shower while I fold up the

bed. You're probably filthy from last night. Which really pisses me off. I'm leaving in an hour, whether you're ready or not."

* * *

SHANE WALKED DOWN the hard-packed dirt road that ran through the center of Providence. Merry was sitting on the porch of one of the few buildings that still looked relatively safe. The porch beams weren't canting off toward the east. The stairs were still intact. He hoped she'd chosen well. He'd hate for her to fall through the floorboards into the spider nests that undoubtedly filled the space beneath. He'd better check out that porch just to be sure.

She didn't seem to have noticed him yet, so Shane took the chance to study her while she was so untypically still. Her dark hair looked black but he knew it was lighter than that. A deep brown like stained walnut. He'd never really had a preference in women's looks, as far as blond versus brunette, but he couldn't help noticing how striking she looked sitting there. Her tan skin looked pale in contrast to the curve of hair that fell over her cheek as she read, and her wide mouth was rosy-pink and tipped up in a small smile even in solitude. Merry was the perfect name for this strange girl.

At least she was smart enough to stay out of the sun. Even with her coloring, at this altitude she'd burn like hell, and her shoulders were totally exposed in the pink tank top she was wearing. So Merry was smart enough to stay out of the sun, but not smart enough to pay any attention to her surroundings. She had earbuds

in her ears. Like every city person he'd ever met, she put more value on her electronics than the beauty that surrounded her.

He glanced toward the looming peaks of the Tetons, then back to Merry, her head bent over some sort of device. She couldn't hear the crunch of his boots against the patches of gravel and dried grass, but he could hear the tinny echo of the music that leaked from her ears.

Shane sighed as he drew within five feet of the porch. She didn't react. He stopped two feet from her and cleared his throat.

When she didn't notice, he coughed.

Still nothing. Was she this vulnerable every day? Did she think there weren't creeps and rapists in Wyoming? Hell, in addition to the residents, some of whom were pretty damn rough and mysterious, the place was crawling with strangers from all over the world.

Irritated by his own concern, Shane stepped forward and knocked on the porch rail. "Hello?"

Merry finally glanced up, and her whole body jerked in shock. "Ah!" she screeched, an iPad flying from her hands as if it were a bird startled into flight.

Her wide eyes left him to watch the thing tumble through the air and right over the railing. "Ah!" she screamed again.

She surged to her feet to stare in dismay at the cloud of dust rising up around her iPad. "Oh, my God! Oh, no!"

"Sorry. I tried to let you know I was here."

The cord of her earbuds dangled impotently against the

railing. “What?” she breathed.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. I thought I’d come out this morning and get a head start on—”

She leaped into motion so quickly that he bit back his words in shock as she took the three porch steps in one quick leap and swooped up the dropped iPad.

“Sorry,” she breathed. “It’s the only thing keeping me sane out here.” When she cradled it like an injured baby, Shane doubted her claim of sanity. “I think it’s okay,” she breathed as she swiped one finger over the screen. “I think it’s okay.”

“Great,” he said dryly.

“Yes, it is great, isn’t it?” She finally looked directly at him and a wide smile spread over her face. “Hey, Shane! I didn’t expect to see you here this early!”

“So I gathered.”

She hugged her iPad tighter, and Shane tried not to notice the way her breasts pressed up, revealing a beautiful amount of cleavage above the thin cotton of her tank. He tried not to notice, but he failed miserably. He was a man, and there were breasts right there. Her skin wasn’t quite so tan where the shirt dipped down. It was pale and soft and gently rising, like—

“You’re all cowboyed up again,” she said.

He frowned a little at the delight in her voice. Did she think this was Disneyland, where people played dress-up and tried on a drawl?

“The hat,” she clarified.

“The hat is for shade. I’m not a cowboy.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, waving a hand as her earbud cord bounced.

“What are we going to do today?”

“What are we going to do? This is so exciting!”

Oh, God. Fine. Shane took a deep breath and tried to let his grumpiness go as he followed Merry toward the saloon. He couldn’t put a finger on when it had sunk so deeply into his flesh. He used to be able to let a bad mood go. He used to be able to forget his family and the years of betrayals and stress. He could work to forget. Or hang out with friends. And if that didn’t work, there were always women. But the past year had made forgetting damned difficult.

“You should get some spurs!” she said, walking backward now. “A little jingling would really liven this place up.”

He opened his mouth to respond, then realized he had no idea what to say to that. “Right,” he finally said in defeat before closing his mouth again.

She nodded solemnly. “Yeah.”

Shane suddenly had to consider that Providence might be a ghost town in an old episode of the Twilight Zone. It had to be. There was no other explanation for this odd woman plunked down in the middle of the dustiest part of Jackson Hole. There was no way to explain why she’d stumbled into his problems this way.

“I brought the estimates,” he said, then jumped forward to

grab Merry as she tripped over her own feet and almost went down on her ass. “Hey. You okay?”

“Sure!” Her laugh tripped over itself like a broken toy.

Shane frowned, sensing there was something more there, but if her reaction was simple embarrassment at her clumsiness, he didn’t want to press further. When the warmth of her waist soaked into his fingers, Shane realized he was still holding her and stood back with an awkward pat of her ribs. “So...”

He slipped the envelope from his back pocket and handed it over. “There’s the estimate. Why don’t you take a look at that while I sort through the spare wood, then we’ll make a plan.”

Even as he spoke, Merry tore open the envelope and unfolded the papers. True fear twisted her brow into lines of tension.

Why? It wasn’t her money. Hell, he’d expect that spending the money of a trust would be damn fun, especially when you were irritatingly excited about the project in the first place. “Not what you expected?” he asked. He was experienced, and not cheap, but he didn’t think his hourly wage was exorbitant.

“Oh,” she breathed, her eyes darting over the page before she flipped to the next. “No, of course not. It’s...just...”

He kept his mouth shut, waiting for a clue as to what was going on. As he expected, Merry couldn’t bear the silence, and she jumped to fill it.

“It’s just... We’d better start with the first one. Just the porch. Then hopefully...”

Shane cocked his head.

“The thing is, can I pay you half now and half next month? I’m sorry. I don’t know how you normally do it, but I’m having a little trouble getting funds, uh, released.”

Whoa. Very interesting. So interesting that Shane finally found the strength to shove down his grumpiness and turn on the charm. This was exactly the kind of information he needed, and he needed it before Merry turned in an invoice. Shane would be fired quicker than he could say legal espionage.

So he smiled. And shifted a little closer. And turned on the Western charm that had worked before on cute tourist girls. “What’s wrong, darlin’?”

“Nothing! I can pay you! It’s not that. It’s just...” The envelope slipped from her fingers, and Shane knelt to pick it up.

When he rose, he let his eyes drag over her body. There was nothing wrong with her body, after all. She wasn’t stick-thin like the rich women who rolled through town with skis and fur boots. She was strong and tall and curvy. As his gaze dragged over the curve of her hip, he was struck with the sudden thought of what she might look like naked, and got lost in that for a moment before he remembered his charm and turned his smile up.

“It’s just what?” he pressed.

Merry was watching him with slightly parted lips, as if she’d sensed his thoughts. “It’s just... The board members are...”

He tipped his head a little closer, holding her gaze as he slid the envelope back into her grasp. His fingers brushed over hers. He let them rest there, just beneath the angle of her knuckles.

And then there was her mouth. Those slightly parted lips. A little too wide for beauty, maybe, but suddenly so soft. And inviting. And...

Merry edged back, her eyes narrowing. "It's nothing," she said firmly, the words wedging distance between them.

Shane found himself standing there alone, blinking in surprise. "Huh?"

"It's nothing. If you're okay with half now and half later, you've got a deal."

"Okay," he said. "Sure."

Merry smiled. "Perfect. Then get to work. What are you waiting for?"

Shane, charming smile still in place, found himself treated to the sight of Merry's ass as she walked away from him. Her hips swung. Her ass tipped side to side. He watched. By the time she disappeared around the corner of the little house she'd claimed, Shane found himself shaking his head and wondering what had just happened.

CHAPTER FOUR

"MS. KADE, THIS is Levi Cannon. We have a bit of a situation."

Merry stood so quickly that her hair blew back. Phone clenched in a suddenly sweaty fist, she looked toward the makeshift parking area of Providence, then toward the saloon. How could they have found out so quickly? Maybe she could—

"Ms. Kade?"

“Yes. Hi, Mr. Cannon. What seems to be the problem?” The distant sound of boards being dropped filled up Merry’s ears. She ducked inside the little house she used as a base, so panicked she didn’t even look for spiderwebs first. One of them clung to her arm. She shook it like mad, swallowing her panicked cries.

“Mrs. Bishop—Kristen Bishop—came outside this morning to find that her mailbox had been destroyed.”

Merry sucked in air so quickly that she choked on it and started coughing. The mailbox must’ve tipped over in last night’s wind.

“Oh, don’t worry. Destroyed was her word. A little further investigation revealed that it had only been pulled from the ground and left in the dirt. Not exactly mayhem.”

“Right. I... That is...Mr. Cannon, I—”

“Kristen thinks it’s an act of retaliation.”

Merry snapped her mouth shut. Retaliation? She hadn’t been that mad. And she’d tried not to convey any anger at all to the arguing seniors.

“Personally I think a drunk cowboy ran into it, but the Bishop house is damned isolated, so she might have a point. She thinks it’s a warning.”

Merry’s throat finally unlocked. They didn’t know it was her.

She drew in a deep breath. “I can’t imagine that,” she managed to say. “Maybe it was bored teenagers. Mailboxes. Baseball bats. It happens.”

“It’s a ways out of town for joyriding. And nothing like this ever happened before we hired you. I can’t discount her

suspicious.”

Right. Nothing like that had happened before they hired Merry. That was for damn sure. She cringed and chewed her thumbnail. “But why retaliation? I’m sure it’s nothing. I started two weeks ago, so the timing—”

“Oh, we just filed a new motion with the judge, letting her know that Providence is now actively being managed as a historic site. That was about a week ago, but it’s possible the other side just found out about it. You can’t think of anything else, can you? Maybe your work put you on their radar.”

Merry cleared her throat and darted a look at Shane’s truck. Had he told someone he was working for her? Just how pissed would the board be if she admitted that—? Wait a minute. She was buying into the conspiracy theory about mailbox destruction she’d committed.

“I can’t think of anything. But listen, Mr. Cannon, if hiring me improves the visuals of this case, wouldn’t moving forward with some of the renovations be even better?”

“Well... Yes, in theory. But we really hadn’t planned for you to...um.” His words, which had started out awkward and hesitant, died into pregnant silence. Her skin crawled with humiliation, but she forced herself to ignore that.

“I understand now that you may have hired me as more of a figurehead than a curator. I’m not saying I’m okay with that, and we’ll have to have a different conversation about it later, but I can do this, Mr. Cannon. I may have only been at my previous

position for a year, but I was a workhorse, and my superior was..." As old as you. "She was easing into retirement, so I carried a lot of responsibility." She took a breath.

"I've already sorted through the wood we have on hand here. I'm not going to go wild and head out to a lumber store for new pine and woodscrews. We'll use the original wood, and I even found a bucket of handmade nails. They're rusty, but I'll be sure that Sh—um...any contractor is up-to-date with tetanus shots, and I'm sure they use gloves, anyway, right? And when we run out of those nails, I found a place online that forges them."

When she finally stopped to catch her breath, Mr. Cannon sighed. "Merry, listen. I can tell how much you want to work, and I admire that, especially in someone your age, but we—"

"I just want a chance. Please. I need a chance. We could get this place up and running faster than you think. The house I use as a base of operations is totally safe. And the saloon only needs a little work. And the church! The church is beautiful. I'm brainstorming a brochure now and—"

"Work on the brochure," he interrupted, latching onto that idea with a sigh of relief. "Work on that, and I'll...I'll talk to the others about freeing up a little money. A little."

"Oh, my God. Thank you. Thank you!"

"I'm not promising anything! You just sit tight, okay?"

"Sure," she said, her face flushing with guilt.

"And work on a brochure. Holding something like that in their hands could help the board loosen up the purse strings a little."

“Thank you, Mr. Cannon. I’ll get right on it.”

Merry dragged her chair inside and sat at the beat-up old table Mr. Bishop must have moved in at some point. She’d found little clues like that all over the house, proof that Gideon Bishop had been using the house as an office, gathering up ideas for the ghost town. She’d only poked around gingerly before, too afraid of spiders to settle in, but the sunlight was too bright to do this kind of work outside, so Merry set her iPad on its stand, fired up her portable keyboard and got to work.

She worked so hard she nearly forgot entirely about Shane. She noticed when he stopped in that night to say he was leaving. And she vaguely noticed the next day when he came by around 5:00 p.m. to do a couple of hours of work. She even wandered out once or twice to be sure he was doing only the work they’d agreed on.

But she didn’t go out to watch him hammer, or to marvel at the wide stretch of cloth across his shoulders or the tight wonder of his jeans. She didn’t notice the way hair glinted on his strong forearms when he moved. She didn’t notice any of that until he stopped by on the second night and delivered a moment of grace that hit her like a wave of lust.

“Don’t worry about paying me for this now, all right? Catch me next month.”

“What?” she asked, visions of the brochure fading from her eyes like a clearing fog. She repeated, “What?” in a breathless voice.

"It's okay. You seemed stressed out, and I don't want my bill to add to your stress."

"Oh, I can pay it. You don't have to—"

"Really, Merry. It's no problem."

Well, that was embarrassing. Just the sound of his mouth forming her name gave her goose bumps. Or maybe it was the effect of looking up at him as he stood so close to her. Those shoulders loomed above her. Those forearms flexed as he slipped off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. And this late in the day, his jaw was rough with stubble again. As he moved, she could actually smell him. The laundry detergent on his clothes, and another more intriguing scent: his skin, hot from the sun, a touch of sweat.

Shane cocked his head in question, and she realized she'd been staring up at him as if he was a work of art she wanted to study.

"You're really sweet, Shane."

"Ah. Not so much." His cheekbones flushed a little as his eyes shifted past her. "Is that for Providence?"

"Yes! But don't look yet." She covered the screen with her hand. "I'll finish the layout tonight and then I'll show you. Okay?"

He smiled. "Sure. Are you going to be here long? I hate to leave you out here alone this late."

Merry looked out the window to see startlingly long shadows stretching across the sagebrush.

"I'd feel better if you let me walk you out."

Now Merry was the one flushing. "Thank you, Shane. And

thanks for coming out here at all. I know you already put in a full day. It means a lot that you're doing this for me."

He picked up the computer stuff as she turned it off. "It's nothing. No need to thank me."

God, he was so cute. No matter what he said about not being a real cowboy, he had that modest chivalry she associated with movie cowboys. And that steadiness. That self-possessed silence.

She snuck a look at him as they walked toward her car, noting how much taller he was than her. Four or five inches, maybe. She'd never been with a guy as tall as Shane was, but, then again, she'd never been with most types of guys. Two men did not make a control group.

Regardless, she was intrigued by him. His height and strength, the scarred hands and blunt fingers. What would it feel like to be held by him, to be taken? What would it feel like to be up against a wall with this man's body pressed against her? With those rough, strong hands sliding up her shirt? Would he—?

When he glanced at her, Merry almost melted in sheer embarrassment. They were friends. Maybe just acquaintances. If he knew she was having those kinds of thoughts about him, he'd likely recoil in horror and find a way to never be alone with her again.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Sure!" she chirped. "I'm excited." Excited. Right. "I mean... I can't wait to finish the brochure layout tonight!"

"Well, I can't wait to see it."

“Great!”

She was excited about the brochure. But she was also excited about something very different. Something she hadn't felt in a very long time. Hopefully the layout wouldn't be her best work of the night.

CHAPTER FIVE

“OH, GOD, YES!” she gasped, holding the vibrator up in triumph.

She'd decided she needed it thirty minutes ago. Those thoughts of Shane hadn't gone away on the drive home. They hadn't even gone away when she'd tried to work on the brochure. She'd finally decided she needed to indulge her rediscovered lust and go for it while she was still in the mood.

So she'd texted Grace to be sure she was gone for the night. Then Merry had taken a quick shower. Poured a glass of wine. Gulped the wine down and poured herself another. The last step had been finding the vibrator. Three boxes later, and she had that little sucker in her hand.

“Thank God.” She sighed before heading to the kitchen to dig for batteries. And finally, she was ready.

Amazingly she felt almost nervous. Had it really been that long since she'd touched herself? So long that she felt fucking nervous?

Well, now she was determined.

Merry unfolded her sofa bed, piled on the covers and slid beneath crisp sheets.

Shane was right next door. She'd heard his shower earlier, so Merry imagined him there, naked and wet. God, he must be beautiful. Long and lean and hard. Hard everywhere. She'd love to touch him. Run her hands down his slick back. Dig her nail into his naked, taut ass. Press herself into him and stretch like a cat in heat while he—

Merry started and shook her head. No, even if the man were naked and in her shower right now, she could never just climb in there and start manhandling him. Not even in a fantasy. Because what she'd really do is screw up the courage to slip into the shower naked, and then she'd stand there awkwardly while he soaped himself. She'd probably crack a joke. Then make an excuse about how crowded it was and just slip away.

"Stop it," she muttered to herself, then slid deeper under the covers and shifted the fantasy around.

He'd been in the shower, yes. All soapy and wet and hard for her. But now he was out and drying off, and when he heard her knock, he slipped on a pair of jeans and answered the door in nothing but half-buttoned Levi's.

"I was just thinking about you," he said, giving her that dark, unreadable look he did so well.

Merry's heart sped just as it would have if her fantasy were real. She slipped her hands over her breasts and down her body, feeling nerves shiver to life as she imagined Shane pulling her into his apartment and pressing her to the wall. He put his mouth to her neck and whispered how much he'd been wanting her, how

often he'd thought of her. His impatient hands slid beneath her clothes, inspiring nervous gasps that he took as agreement. His skin felt so good that she let herself fall into it. She let him touch her, kiss her, but when he started to push her shirt up and off her body, Merry hesitated.

"Shane, wait. I hardly know you. How can—"

"Please," he rasped. "I need this. I need you. Just once. Please, Merry. You've been driving me mad. I need to taste you."

Merry turned on the vibrator and gave herself up to the story, just as she gave herself up to his hands in her mind. His hands and mouth and fingers. Oh, God. Yes. His fingers teasing her, then slipping inside her. Driving her crazy until she felt just as mad as he did. Until she was murmuring yes, yes when he unbuttoned his jeans and freed his erection. He eased a hand beneath her knee and pulled her leg high as he positioned himself between her thighs.

"Please," Merry whispered into the empty room. "Please." She wanted that. Needed it. She slipped the toy farther along her body, sending delicious shivers racing to branches of nerves that hadn't stirred in so long. Oh, God, yes. This was going to feel so good, a need she'd ignored so long it had seemed extinct. But it was back now, and her hips strained forward as she eased the vibrator inside her body with a whimper of relief.

And then her world came crashing down. Or at the very least, her door sounded like it was about to crash in. Not that the knock was especially loud, but her senses were a little heightened. And

the door was only three feet from her head. And she was lying there with her legs spread and a vibrator buzzing.

Merry froze, eyes wide in panic, hoping that if she didn't move, the wolf wouldn't spot her through the tall grass.

When the knock came again, she eased her finger over to turn off the vibrator, alarmed by how loud the silence was afterward. Had that buzzing sound filled the whole room? Had it been audible from the hallway? What if it had been—

“Merry, it's Shane. Are you home?”

Shane?

No. “Yes!” she yelped in complete panic, trying to bite back the word even as her body volunteered it. Her eyes slid over the blankets, noting the shape of her body beneath the covers, knees parted wide, arm disappearing beneath the cozy bedspread at a suspicious angle. Then her gaze moved to the door.

Oh, God.

“I was hoping to see the brochure. Can I come in?”

“Uh...” Merry finally forced her body to let go of its frozen panic and move. She pulled the vibrator out of herself with a wince of shock, snapped her legs closed and sat straight. “Uh, sure. Just give me a second.” Why had she spoken? Why hadn't she just kept her mouth shut and let him leave?

Stupid blind panic. Merry shoved the vibrator under the covers and leaped out of bed to race to the bathroom where she'd left her clothes. “Idiot,” she cursed herself at another misstep. She should have just said no. No, I'm not dressed, I'll see you tomorrow.

Except not being dressed had been way too close to the truth: I'm not dressed and I'm frigging myself three feet away from you. Sorry!

She frantically pulled on her jeans and the yellow Doctor Who T-shirt she'd been wearing earlier, then raced back to the living room to yank the covers tight across the bed.

She took a deep breath, pasted a smile on her face and unlocked the door. "Hey!" she chirped as she opened it just enough to wedge herself between him and the room. "What's going on?"

"Hey." His answering smile tipped down a little at the edges. "Are you okay?"

"Sure! Yes. Absolutely. Why?"

"You just... Were you working out?"

"Yes, I was working out!" It was the perfect answer for the sweat prickling her hairline and her rapid breathing. But then his eyes traveled down her body to the jeans and bare feet. "Anyway!" She waved a hand.

"Well...I was thinking about you."

Merry flashed back to her fantasy so quickly that she felt dizzy. Was he about to grab her? Ravish her? Push her against the wall and slip off her shirt? Would she let him? "Me?" she finally breathed.

"All this work you're doing for Providence. I'll admit, it seemed silly at first. I can't say I understand it or even approve. But now that I'm working out there with you, I'm curious. May

I...?”

He gestured toward the door, and Merry automatically opened it, cursing her natural Texas friendliness for digging her even deeper. She watched his gaze focus on the unfolded bed.

“Early night?”

Guilty embarrassment leached from wherever it was the body stored it—spleen? Appendix?—and suffused every cell in her body. “I like to work in bed.” She ignored the fact that her pile of work stuff was still on the kitchen table and grabbed the end of the fold-out bed to flip it back into a couch.

Shane reached out to help, but she gave a mighty heave and it folded with a wretched groan of springs...followed immediately by an ominous rubbery thunk when she tipped the bed up for its last fold.

Oh, shit. Oh, no. She glanced into the shadowy hollow of the couch and saw her pink vibrator lying there on the hardwood like a giant finger of accusation pointing at her. You were jerking off to naked thoughts of an innocent friend. You secretly violated your nice neighbor!

A noise of horror squeaked through her throat, and she shoved the mattress down with so much force that the couch slid two inches. Even though the mattress obediently folded up, it wouldn't quite close all the way. She remembered the blankets she'd piled on and gave another desperate shove.

“I think it's stuck,” Shane volunteered as she put all her weight on it. “Here, let's pull it out again and—”

“No!” Why the hell had she picked out a fluorescent pink toy? Why hadn’t she gone with a nice tasteful...beige? Or translucent! A vibrator that could blend into its wild surroundings no matter where she was!

“It’s fine,” she grunted, bouncing her weight up on her toes.

Shane’s gaze went to her breasts and then away.

“This always happens,” she finally said, and grabbed one of the couch cushions. Shane grabbed the other, then eyed the crooked hill they’d made with suspicion as she picked up her iPad and plopped into an uncomfortable seat.

Luckily Shane’s old-fashioned chivalry must have kicked in, because he just offered a puzzled smile and took a seat next to her, probably thinking that she was one of those stereotypically unhandy women. Fine. She’d perpetuate that prejudice, as long as he didn’t realize just how handy she’d been a minute ago.

Her hands froze over the iPad screen just as he leaned closer to watch. The brochure bloomed to life in full color beneath her fingers, but all she could do was stare at her hands. Her guilty hands. The glowing screen drew Shane’s attention like a spotlight to every digit that had acted out her dirtiest thoughts about him.

“Would you like a beer?” she squeaked, jumping up and dropping the iPad to the couch where it slid down the slope of the cushion before getting caught in the corner.

She didn’t hear his answer; her heart was pounding too hard as she rushed to the sink and turned on the hot water. She tried to imagine how she’d feel if she went to a near stranger’s house

and found out he'd just been masturbating to dirty thoughts of her. Shuddering, Merry scrubbed her hands and regretted even considering getting her groove back.

This was the last straw. It was going to be the nunnery for her. Maybe she could find one in commuting distance.

* * *

SHANE KNEW THAT Merry was acting strangely. She was up to something, maybe something underhanded concerning Providence. He knew that, but he kept getting distracted by her breasts.

She'd always had breasts, obviously, but this time she wasn't wearing a bra under her T-shirt, and unfettered breasts were an entirely different distraction.

They looked fucking perfect. So perfect he had the urge to blurt it out to her, just because it needed to be said. Her yellow T-shirt was so pale he thought he could see the faint darkness of her nipples beneath the fabric, but he was left wondering because the picture of a weird telephone booth on it interfered with the play of shadow and light. It teased him with the possibility. He kept watching in hopes of being more sure.

When she brought a bottle of beer he downed half of it quickly and told himself to stop being a creep. Not that that was possible. After all, he'd come over here with the sole intent of gathering information about the ghost town. That ridiculous ghost town. He felt bad that she was so damn enthusiastic about it, but what business was it of hers? She'd come here from Texas. The town

was a lark for her. For him, it was a bad memory and now a serious nuisance. His grandfather had left him the burden of the Bishop land and none of the damned money. How was he supposed to pay tens of thousands of dollars of property tax every year? Shit, he could charge grazing fees to neighboring ranches, but the federal land higher up was a hell of a deal compared to what he'd need to charge.

All he really wanted to do was build a house on the land that had been passed to him. And he wanted to preserve that land. Not in a way that brought tourists to it, but in a way that kept them out.

Jesus, his ancestors hadn't founded Providence to attract strangers. They'd built a town in the middle of nowhere because they'd wanted it to be their own.

Not that he gave a damn about that. It was just another reminder that the men of his family ran. First, they'd run to Wyoming Territory, leaving behind whatever complications they hadn't wanted to deal with in Missouri. Then, after a little trouble with water, they'd left Providence behind, too, and moved on to greener pastures.

The habit hadn't died with the early twentieth century. His grandfather had been married three times. And Shane's father had taken running to a new level. One day, when Shane had been ten, his dad had kissed his wife goodbye, bought a trailer and disappeared with his girlfriend. Neither of them had ever been seen again, though the rumor was that they'd gone to Mexico to

live on a beach. Shane suspected his dad had probably started a cattle ranch. He couldn't picture his dad on the beach, and ranch land had been cheap in those days.

Shane's younger brother had followed the pattern on the day he'd turned eighteen. He hadn't gone to Mexico, though. He'd gone east somewhere, though he hadn't been specific about his destination. He'd just...disappeared. After that betrayal, Shane had never bothered looking for him. If Alex wanted to be gone, he could stay gone.

Shane had stayed, but it had felt like a fragile truce with his life, even before all this.

When Merry said, "Okay," under her breath, he looked over to see that she'd drained half her beer, too. Her shoulders rose on a deep breath, and then she smiled at him and grabbed the iPad. "The brochure! You have to be honest, all right?"

"I'll be happy to be honest, but I don't know anything about this kind of stuff."

The front of the brochure appeared on the screen, the background a black-and-white shot of the long street, buildings marching down on either side of it. The Town of Providence, the title read. Established 1884. Abandoned 1901.

Even to him, the words were powerful, promising angst and drama, but it was nothing romantic to him.

Still, it was nicely done, and he told her so.

The next page was titled The History of Providence. He skimmed it, not needing to know more than he already did. On

the third page was a picture of the saloon.

“Obviously I’ll take a new picture when you’re done with the work. It’s going to be amazing, Shane. That building is so perfect. People love a saloon! Look how popular the Crooked R is.”

“To be fair, that saloon still serves liquor.”

“I know, but it’s the possibility. The strangers that came through. The adventurers and outlaws.”

Shane smiled, remembering his own childhood imaginings.

“And people are fascinated that their great-great-great-grandparents hung out in bars. They drank beer and whiskey. Maybe there were even prostitutes!”

He looked at the small, inset photograph of the saloon that was taken at the turn of the century. A man in an apron stood on the porch, a towel clutched in his hand. “I don’t think my... I don’t think the women of Providence were the prostitute type.”

“I don’t know.” She stared at the far wall. “I’d bet there might have been a lonely widow or two who got tired of sleeping alone. Women have needs, too. And there were all those lonely cowboys.”

“We still talking about Providence, Merry?” he asked.

She choked on laughter and smacked his arm. He tried not to look at the bounce of her breasts under the T-shirt. She wasn’t that kind of girl. She was goofy friend Merry Kade, who didn’t even realize that the press of her hard nipples against cotton could drive a man to distraction or she’d go put on a damn sweater.

“So you started this job when I wasn’t in Jackson. When did

they bring you in?”

“I’d been watching job listings for the area. I’ve missed being near Grace and it’s so beautiful here. It just felt right when I visited, you know?”

He’d heard so many compliments about Jackson Hole over the years that he just nodded absently. It was beautiful, yes, but beneath the surface, it was no different than any other place, as far as he could tell.

“When I found this ad, I thought it was perfect. I had a little experience, and I thought I could really make a difference. I thought...”

“You thought what?”

Her brow tightened. “I thought I’d truly be needed.”

“But you are, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know, Shane. I mean, I feel like I’m needed. But it turns out...”

Shane leaned forward, his eyes never leaving her face, even though she didn’t look at him. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Come on. What is it?”

She finished her beer and set it so carefully on the table next to her that it didn’t make even the tiniest clink against the stone coaster. “Apparently there’s some sort of probate fight. Something to do with Gideon Bishop’s heir. I think they only brought me in as a symbol. Something to help fight the case. They don’t actually want me doing the work.”

Shane didn't say a word. He didn't even dare to breathe. On one hand, this was crucial information. Important news he could take to his attorney. Merry was only being used to weaken Shane's case.

On the other hand, she looked devastated, and he wasn't a monster. She blinked hard, as if she were holding back tears. "Hey," he whispered. "It's okay. I'm sure that's not true."

"I'm pretty sure it is."

"But..." He couldn't think of anything to comfort her. There certainly weren't any honest words he could give. After all, his future lay in the promise that Providence wouldn't happen. That it would continue to be nothing more than dead wood and tumbleweeds. But Merry had something to prove now.

Shit.

"I'm sorry they brought you here under false circumstances, but you're doing a good job, regardless. The brochure looks great."

"Right. And I was smart enough to hire you."

The watery smile she aimed in his direction was like a twisting knife in his gut. Hiring him could, in fact, get her fired. But only if the board found out.

"Look, I admire your enthusiasm for this. And whatever is going on with the board isn't your fault. Why don't you consider my work on the saloon a gift."

"No! I didn't tell you that to make you feel sorry for me. You deserve to be paid. I'll win them over."

Not by tossing his name around, she wouldn't. "I'll call it pro bono work. Giving something back to the community." Or just helping himself.

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask."

Now there were definitely tears in her eyes. "I can't..."

"Come on, Merry. We're neighbors. It's no big deal."

But apparently it was a big deal to her. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. Shane felt schizophrenic; half of his brain registering the soft, warm press of her breasts to his chest, the other half telling him he was a selfish, lying asshole and she was going to regret any kind feelings she had for him.

But when he settled his hands on her back, the more noble thoughts disappeared, because damn, she was warm and nice under his touch. The cotton was a smooth expanse of heat, reinforcing his knowledge that she was naked beneath this thin fabric. And fuck, she smelled delicious. Like fresh soap and some spicy, feminine scent that made him feel a little dizzy. Dizzy and...hard.

Damn.

He pulled back and cleared his throat, hoping like hell she wouldn't notice the uncomfortable tightness of his jeans.

"Thank you, Shane," she said, sniffing back tears while he tried to keep his eyes off her breasts.

"You're welcome."

"Want another beer?"

He said yes in the hopes that his dick would give up its vigil by the time she came back, but he took the beer happily enough when she returned with it.

“Did you grow up here?” she asked as she plopped back into her crooked seat. He forced his eyes to stay on her face.

“I did. Did you grow up in Texas?” he asked, changing the focus. He never liked talking about his family, but especially in this case, it was a topic best left alone.

“Kind of. My mom is a bit of a hippie. She was raised in a tiny town in Northern California. I was born there, and we lived in a few different places while I was growing up. But I spent the last ten years of my childhood in Texas.”

“And your dad?”

“Never met him,” she said cheerfully. “It was just me and my mom.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no big deal. I think I was better off than my friends who had asshole fathers, you know? I was scared of dads when I was young. They always seemed to be yelling about something.”

Shane considered her theory. His dad had been pretty decent, though obviously flawed, but maybe he and Alex would’ve been better off if their father had never even been around. Maybe it would’ve been better than thinking your dad loved you until you woke up one day to realize he didn’t give a shit after all. At least Merry could tell herself her dad’s disappearance had nothing to do with her. But Shane had been left to wonder.

“So your mom was a hippie. That’s how you got the name Merry?”

“Of course. When I was born, she looked into my eyes and said she could tell I was a happy soul.”

“You are.”

“I suppose I am,” she said so cheerfully that Shane chuckled. “It would’ve been so awkward if I wasn’t.”

Shane thought of Grace and the way she fought hard against her moniker, but he didn’t point that out to Merry. “So you had a happy life.”

“Oh, you know. You make the best of things.”

“What things?”

She waved her beer dismissively. “Tough times. Bad neighborhoods. But you learn to make friends with everyone, and any place can be a home. My mom is great, though. She worked so hard to make our life better.”

Suddenly Shane had a completely different take on this girl. She seemed carefree and goofy and sheltered. But now he couldn’t help but read between the lines. No dad around. A single mom who probably had to work one or two jobs at a time to put food on the table. And Merry trying to find her way.

“I’ve never lived anywhere but here,” he said. “I can’t imagine.”

“It’s different, living in a big city. I can’t deny that. But people are all the same, really. There’s good and bad everywhere. But considering that people are all the same, I have to say that the

scenery is pretty damn awesome here. There's really no reason for you to go anywhere else."

"That's a relief. I can't say I'm inclined to."

"How did you become a carpenter? Was your dad a carpenter?"

"No, my uncle was. I started working with him when I was twelve." His dad had been a horse trainer and rancher, but Shane left that off.

"Hey, I got my first job at twelve, too! A taco joint."

"You can work in a restaurant at twelve?"

"You can if you've just hit a growth spurt and they pay you cash under the table. I was so excited to have spending money, I don't even think I kept track of how much they paid me. Three dollars an hour, probably. One of the perks of hiring child laborers."

"Well, you were smarter than I was. My uncle figured I was earning an education. I didn't get paid anything. But that's typical for rural kids. You work the farm or ranch for the privilege of learning the life."

"That's so cool."

Shane smiled. "It's pretty damn boring, actually. Hanging around leathery old men all day. It can be torturous when you're a teenager and there are never any girls around. The ones that are nearby are all mooning for the guys on the junior rodeo circuit."

Merry gasped. "You did that, didn't you?"

"Did what?"

She pointed a finger at his chest. “You did rodeo stuff. You saw all the girls paying attention to those boys and you joined the rodeo, didn’t you?”

Shane laughed. Hard. “First off, you don’t join the rodeo like you join the circus. But...yes, I may have tried a little calf roping in my day.”

“See, you are a cowboy!” She poked him, then her gaze drifted down to his chest, and she poked him one more time as if she were testing his give. She drew her hand back slowly.

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw how badly I lost to the real cowhands. And I discovered that it wasn’t just being a rodeo cowboy that got you attention from girls, but actually doing well at it. Rodeo losers are no different than other losers. Although...if you get injured, there are some girls who like playing nurse.”

“Oh, my God! Dirty!”

Something about her saying the word dirty was sexy as all hell. It didn’t help that his brain had flashed through a quick and happy dance down memory lane of his first kisses and teenage groping. Now he imagined making out with her, right here on her uncomfortable couch. Daring to move closer. Hoping she wouldn’t stop him.

He was staring at her, tempted as all hell to taste her, when he heard the faint trill of his phone ringing across the hall. He knew immediately who it was: his mother. Only one person called there. Everyone else called on his cell, but Shane had refused to give her that number. When she got a bug up her ass, she’d call

incessantly, and she must have one now, because this was the third call since this afternoon.

Merry was watching him. He liked her eyes, always slightly turned up at the edges in a smile. And her mouth, wide and pink and tempting even when he shouldn't be tempted.

He leaned back into the sofa and finished his beer.

He didn't want to go home. He didn't want to leave. But he shouldn't want to kiss her, regardless. Merry was a nice girl. And he was a man no one needed to be around. Not for longer than a night. He'd learned that lesson. He knew who he was.

Merry Kade was not the kind of girl he could sleep with and then make a polite and permanent exit from her life. First of all, because she very obviously wasn't the one-night-stand type. In fact, she seemed inclined to make friends with anyone who came within earshot, as far as he could tell. Second, because Grace would likely castrate him if he used her friend for sex, and Cole might happily hold him down to help his girlfriend out. Third, and perhaps most important, was the fact that she lived next door. Not exactly a comfortable situation even with the most open-minded of women. He'd had long-term "friends" who were happy with nothing more than casual sex, but neither he nor they had ever flaunted other lovers in each other's faces. Not cool.

Close proximity had never come up as a problem in the past, since no women had lived in the building. He was going to have to add it to his off-limit list.

"So are you saying you never did anything stupid to get

attention from boys?" he finally asked.

Merry yelped with laughter. "Me? Boys never noticed me! I was tall and awkward and into Star Wars and video games."

"But boys love Star Wars."

"Strangely, that love isn't transferrable. Unless you're the kind of girl who likes to dress up as the Jabba the Hut slave version of Princess Leia."

Oh, yeah. He'd never been that into Star Wars, but he sure remembered that scene.

"So...just to be clear...you never dressed up like that?"

"Shane!"

"Maybe just once? For a Halloween party when you were eighteen? Work with me here."

"Good God, it even infected cowboys in the wilds of Wyoming."

"Hey, we had satellite dishes and VCRs. And active fantasy lives."

Merry groaned. "No, I only dressed up as Princess Leia once, and that was the kick-ass rebel fighter Leia."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Figures," she sighed, then shook her head in disgust. "Wait a minute. Have you ever seen Firefly?"

"No. Is that a Star Trek thing?"

"Star Wars," she muttered. "And no. It's a completely awesome sci-fi series that's like an epic space Western. You have to watch it. Have to!"

“Okay.”

“Seriously. We’ll rent the first episode one night, okay? Please?”

Shane found himself grinning wildly at her, but told himself it was probably just the beer. “Let’s do that.”

He liked this girl. Really liked her, which settled the issue. He couldn’t touch her. And he definitely couldn’t sleep with her. Not unless he wanted to live with the sure chance that at some point in the future she’d hate his guts. Even without the complication of the lawsuit, it always ended the same for him.

He couldn’t commit. Women tried to accept that, but eventually they left and made clear that he was an asshole and an immature prick. He was. There was no denying his genes.

Shane dropped his head. “Next time, let’s do that.”

Reluctantly he stood and set his empty beer bottle down. “I’d better go. I’ve got an early start tomorrow, but I’ll try to get to Providence in the evening.”

“Don’t wear yourself out. I feel guilty enough as it is.”

“It’s not a problem,” he said. And the strange thing was... it wasn’t. His goal was to make sure that Providence was never anything more than its current state: a forgotten ghost town remembered only by a few old-timers. But somehow being out there with Merry was the most relaxing thing he did all day. Knowing she was close by, even when he couldn’t see her...he liked that. He’d like it even more if she came by and bothered him as much as he’d expected her to.

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