



## Close Enough to Touch: A Romance Novel (Jackson Hole)

By Victoria Dahl

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Cole Rawlins is a rugged Wyoming cowboy born and bred. Yet he can't help but be drawn to the fascinating big-city girl who moves in across from him. He wants to get close enough to Grace to see past her tough facade, but if he does, she might see the real Cole. The one with a Hollywood history gone bad. As they discover a sizzling attraction, it becomes harder for him to keep his demons at bay—and those fires from long ago may burn them both.

They'll need more than scorching-hot passion to make this opposites-attract affair work. But if they can learn to trust one another enough to reveal their secrets, they just might have a chance at forever.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Sassy and smokingly sexy, Talk Me Down is one delicious joyride of a book." --New York Times bestselling author Connie Brockway

"A hot and funny story about a woman many of us can relate to...."  
--Salon.com on Crazy for Love

"[A] hands-down winner, a sensual story filled with memorable characters."  
-Booklist on Start Me Up

"Dahl smartly wraps up a winning tale full of endearing oddballs, light mustery and plenty of innuendo and passion."

-Publishers Weekly on Talk Me Down

"Sparkling, special and oh so sexy-Victoria Dahl is a special treat!"  
-New York Times bestselling author Carly Phillips on Talk Me Down

#### About the Author

Victoria Dahl lives with her family in a small town high in the mountains. Her first novel debuted in 2007, and she's gone on to write seventeen books and novellas in historical, contemporary, and paranormal romance. Victoria's contemporary romance, Talk Me Down, was nominated for both a RWA Rita Award and the National Readers' Choice Award. Since then, her books have been nominated for two more Rita Awards, and she hit the USA Today Bestseller list with the anthology Midnight Kiss.

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### Chapter One

This made it official: Grace Barrett's life was over. Or, at the very least, it was so irrevocably screwed up that a quick death would be a blessing at this point.

She was twenty-eight, in debt to an angry ex-boyfriend, she had exactly \$37.40, and she was *here*.

In Wyoming.

Well, she'd been in Wyoming for hours, actually. hours of endless beige hills and barren mountains. Hours of cows. And sheep. And some strange creature she'd thought was a deer until she'd gotten a better look. Deer didn't look as if they had exotic black masks painted on their little faces. What the heck were those things?

Grace shuddered a little as she stepped out of the bus. Her feet touched the ground and there was no taking it

back now. She really was in Wyoming. She was standing on it.

"Damn," she muttered.

The elderly man in front of her turned with a concerned smile. "Sorry, ma'am?"

Grace crossed her arms in defense. "Sorry about that. I was just..."

He smiled and put a hand to his balding head as if he meant to tip a hat. "Beg pardon."

No one had ever begged her pardon before. Grace crossed her arms more tightly, unsure how to handle this situation. Thankfully, the man moved away before she was forced to respond.

Grace glanced warily around. After her years in L.A., she knew to keep her guard up against anyone who approached her on the street, no matter how kind and polite the people here might seem. Nobody did, so she edged toward the driver as he unlocked the luggage compartments of the bus. She was used to being alone, but she'd been surrounded by people on this bus for nearly two days. She felt almost panicked with the need to be free.

The driver began unloading the bags, laying them out in neat rows. Grace kept a sharp eye on his hands, waiting for her ancient camouflage duffel bag to appear.

No one else seemed to be watching as closely. The other passengers were hugging friends and family or idly chatting with each other as their eyes traveled along the horizon. She spared only the barest of glances toward the view of the mountains. Someone could walk up and grab a bag and be gone before anybody even noticed.

These folks were obviously not from L.A. Or...maybe their bags didn't contain every ridiculous, precious thing in the world that belonged to them. Maybe their bags were just filled with dirty clothes and cheap souvenirs from a beach vacation. But when Grace's bag appeared and was set on the ground, she jumped forward and dragged it away like a feral animal with a piece of precious meat. It was nearly too heavy for her to lift, but she'd have to find a way. She had no car, no spare money for a taxi—if they had such things here—and she hadn't told her great-aunt when she'd be arriving. So she was hoofing it.

"Hoofing it," she breathed, managing a laugh as she glanced around to see if there were any cows standing next to her. Unlike the rest of Wyoming, the town of Jackson seemed to be blessedly cow-free. It was also slightly larger than she'd expected, dashing her hope that she could simply wander down the main street until she spotted the address she was looking for. She'd have to ask for help. The idea made her grimace as she took a deep breath and looked around. Maybe she could just find a free map.

"Bingo," she muttered as her eye fell on a big sign that spelled out *Jackson Hole Information!* in old-timey wooden letters. Grace had lived in Hollywood a long time. If there was one thing she knew, it was how to work a tourist trap.

She dragged her bag across the asphalt and onto the wooden...sidewalk? Grace blinked and looked down the street, then turned to look in the other direction. Yes, as far as the eye could see, the sidewalks were wooden, like an Old West town.

"Wow," she muttered. These people were really trying hard, even if she had to admit that it was cute.

Shaking her head, she pulled her bag down the sidewalk until she got to the brochure stand.

"Do you have a free map of the area?" she asked the matronly woman who'd turned away to straighten papers.

"Oh, hello!" the woman called as she spun around. "Good afternoon!"

"Hi. Um. I just need a map of the town. Something simple."

The woman's eyes flicked up to Grace's hair for a moment, and Grace wondered what she must think of a purple-haired girl in combat boots asking about Jackson, but the woman's smile didn't waver. "Well, I won't lie. There are a lot of choices. Here's the official town map." She laid out a folded brochure. "But—and don't tell anyone I said this—I actually like the one the restaurant association puts out a little better."

"Thanks." Grace took both the brochures and opened the one the woman had recommended.

"What are you looking for, sweetheart?"

Sweetheart? Grace glanced down at her T-shirt. Yep. It still advertised an old L.A. burlesque club. "Just a street," she said softly, hoping not to invite more questions.

"Which street?"

Grace cleared her throat and shifted, her gaze desperately boring into the map, hoping she could just find it herself. "Um, Sagebrush."

"Sagebrush. That's a long one. What's the address?" The woman's pink fingernail pointed toward the map, but it moved before Grace could register which street she was pointing to.

"Six-O-five West Sagebrush," she said, sighing.

"Oh, that's way over here!" The woman pointed again, and this time Grace saw it. A long line that meandered all the way through town and then followed the curve of a stream before it ended. It looked like quite a haul.

"Thank you," Grace said. She folded the map and hefted her bag up, biting back a grunt as she worked the strap over her shoulder. "This way?" She tilted her head in the direction she thought she needed to go. She'd always been pretty good with that sort of thing.

"Yep!"

Grace took a deep breath and started walking. Her boots clomped on the wood.

"Oh, honey!"

Grace pretended she didn't hear.

"Sweetie, stop! You can't walk all that way."

"I'm fine," she called.

"But there's a free bus!"

Her boots stopped clomping. "free?"

"Totally free. In fact, it'll stop right here in a few minutes. comes every half hour."

Grace turned back and eyed the woman suspiciously. "Will I have to go tour a new condo complex or something?"

"What? Oh, heavens no. It's the town bus. It'll stop just a few blocks from where you're going. Six-O-five West Sagebrush. That's the Stud Farm, isn't it?"

"The what?" She dropped the bag. She'd heard tales that her great-aunt was a crazy old lady, but.. "*What?*"

"Oh, never mind me." The woman laughed. "That's just a silly local nickname."

"For *what?*"

"The building."

Just as Grace was opening her mouth to demand a real answer, a hiss of brakes sounded from the curb. The bus had arrived, and she didn't have time to get more information. She hauled up her bag, wrestled it onto her shoulder and jogged for the bus. As promised, there didn't seem to be a fee. The driver glanced at her impatiently, and she felt a small jolt of comfort at that. The bus might be free, but the driver was just as jaded as every bus driver in L.A.

Slightly less suspicious, Grace took a seat close to the front so she wouldn't have to haul the bag any farther, then dug the map back out to see which intersection she was looking for.

A few blocks later, the wooden walkways were replaced with cement, and the two-story buildings with front porches became less common. By the time they reached the right intersection, they'd passed a strip mall and a big grocery store. She felt slightly less disoriented as she grabbed the bellpull and hauled her bag down the steps.

She didn't dare stop and look around as the bus pulled away. Her shoulders were already aching and the bag wasn't getting any lighter, so she set off down the side street with her head down. Sagebrush was only four blocks down. No problem.

By the time she reached the next street, she was gasping for air. "Good Lord," she muttered, stopping to take a few deep breaths. It didn't help. Altitude, she reminded herself, finally giving in and setting the bag down. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on oxygen, and without the weight of the bag, she was breathing normally within a few moments.

Had she really thought she was going to walk all the way from the bus station to the apartment? Laughing at the image of herself crawling down the street with the bag balanced on her back, Grace opened her eyes and took a deeper breath.

"Mmm," she hummed. The air smelled...nice. Really nice. Crisp and fresh and clean. Maybe she could live with less oxygen. Just for a little while. It wasn't like she was going to stay in this ridiculous little town.

It was cute, though. The Old West part of town had morphed into a slightly Victorian feel. Little gingerbread houses, separated by the occasional 1960s ranch house. Grace had never lived in a small town before. Maybe it would be okay, temporarily.

As if to show her just how wrong she was, the jingle of a bike bell interrupted her thoughts. A bicycle passed by. An honest-to-goodness bicycle built for two. Both riders waved as they rode away. Grace grimaced at what looked like an advertisement for happiness. This town was going to rub her own misery in her face.

Once the bike had passed, she lifted the bag and trudged on. Another bike appeared, this one with only one rider, but with an old-fashioned bike horn that the rider honked before he waved. Yeah, L.A. was bad enough with all the sunshine, but this town was just too much.

Vancouver would be better, hopefully. There was a big enough movie industry there. She had a job waiting for her if she could get there in six weeks. And if she did a good job, maybe she could get steady work as a makeup artist up there where nobody knew she was difficult to work with. *Difficult*, as in she wouldn't put up with handsy actors or abusive bosses. That seemed totally reasonable to her, but in L.A., ass kissing was a way of life.

Grace turned onto Sagebrush and started watching the addresses.

When she finally spotted number 605, she was pleasantly surprised. The Victorian building didn't look like it had anything to do with a farm. Or studs. It wasn't the prettiest house on the block, but the paint was fresh and bright royal-blue. The trim around the windows and the porch was vivid white. The place looked perfectly respectable.

Then her eyes slid to the building next door.

The *saloon* next door.

She knew it was a saloon because of the wide plank of wood over the door that screamed SALOON in big black letters. Barstools lined the ancient porch and, unlike the building Grace was standing in front of, this place looked as though it hadn't been painted since 1902. In fact, it looked like a *barn* that hadn't been painted since 1902. She was pretty sure that was some sort of hayloft door near the roof.

Grace's shoulders were protesting the delay, so she adjusted the bag's strap and walked up the sidewalk to the house. As soon as she stepped in, she saw two doors marked A and B. The only other possible route was a wide staircase that led to the second floor. Grace dropped the bag and dug out the letter from her great-aunt, praying that her apartment was on the ground floor. She wasn't sure she could make it up the stairs without passing out.

"Apartment A," she breathed. "Thank God."

She was reaching for the door when she realized the mistake and paused. She didn't have a key. And—she looked at the letter again—her aunt hadn't given a phone number.

Feeling stupid for even trying, she reached for the knob and tested it. It didn't budge, of course. Who would

leave a vacant apartment unlocked?

"Crap."

Grace stood on her tiptoes and ran her fingers above the door frame. Nothing.

"Shit."

When she looked down, she saw that her black boots were planted right in the middle of a doormat that said Howdy! inside a circled lasso. Her last hope was this rectangle of Western kitsch. Holding her breath, she stepped off and picked it up. Nothing.

"Damn it," she groaned, letting her lungs empty on a growl of frustration as she glared down at the envelope in her hand. Her aunt's return address was a P.O. box. She'd communicated only via letter to the friend's address that Grace had used for return mail. And Grandma Rose never answered her cell phone.

On the off chance that it was the one time of day that her grandmother turned her cell on to check messages, Grace pulled out her crappy pay-as-you-go phone and dialed Grandma's number. A few seconds later, Grace heard the beep of the voice-mail message starting, and her heart dropped. However Grandma eventually went, it wasn't going to be from "radio wave brain cancer," at least according to her.

Grace looked back to the letter in her hand, feeling hopeless. What was she going to do? Wander around town asking everyone if they knew her aunt? She'd been on a bus for two days. She'd thought she was about to get a break. Just a few hours to rest and let her guard down.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" She hauled back one boot and kicked her bag as hard as she could. It wasn't hard enough. She pulled back her foot to do it again. The bag held everything she owned in the world, but right now, that seemed like the perfect reason to kick it. This was her life. Right here. Her whole crappy life in this beat-up, dirty camouflage bag.

"Damn it!" she screamed one more time as she kicked it hard enough to slide it six inches across the floor.

"That bag must've done something really shitty to get a little thing like you all riled up."

Grace stomped her foot onto the floor and spun to face the low drawl, her heart slamming into a crazed beat. A man stood in the doorway of the other apartment. He leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed and mouth turned up in an amused smile.

"Excuse me?" she snapped.

"Just wondering why you're kicking the tar out of that bag, darlin'."

"First of all, I'm not your darlin'. Second, it's none of your business."

His smile widened, revealing dimples in his tanned face. His tanned, granite-jawed, handsome face. "Really? None of my business? When a crazed banshee of a woman stands on my doorstep cursing her heart out on a beautiful Friday afternoon? Tends to pique my interest."

"It's my doorstep," she corrected, hoping she was right. Hoping her aunt hadn't decided to lease the



apartment to somebody else in the week since she'd written.

His eyebrows shot up, and the man pushed up to his full height. "*Your* doorstep? Are you sure?"

Grace went for bravado and snorted. "Of course I'm sure."

He shrugged one wide shoulder, and Grace was suddenly very aware that his plaid button-down shirt wasn't actually buttoned down. It looked as though he'd just shrugged it on to come investigate the commotion in the hall, and when he moved, a long strip of skin showed from his neck all the way down to his waist. And then there were his jeans and the affectionate way they clung to strong thighs.

The Stud Farm, she suddenly remembered. What kind of place was this?

She shook off her thoughts. The man was wearing cowboy boots, for godssake. He was wholesome and homey. His thighs were none of her concern. But the sight of his boots reminded her that she was in Wyoming, which reminded her why she was in Wyoming and what a mess she'd made of her life. "Anyway," she said with a scowl, "still none of your business."

She grabbed the handle of her duffel bag and pulled it up with shaky arms. She couldn't leave her bag here, but she didn't know what she was going to do with it. She didn't know what she was going to do with *herself*.

A surge of anger gave her the strength to bounce the bag higher in her grip, but she wasn't going to make it to the curb, much less walk to... Where, exactly?

"Let me get that." A large hand closed over the handle and lifted the weight from her grasp.

"Hey—" she started, but he'd already transferred the bag to his possession. He held it with one hand as if it were a pocketbook. Even more skin showed past his shirt now. Skin and muscle and golden hair.

While she was staring, he reached past her and opened the door.

He just opened the door.

"What the hell?" she bit out.

He shot her a puzzled look. "You did say it was your place, right?"

"Yes, but." She felt like smoke was about to come out her ears, and wanted to snatch her bag away and tell him to get lost. But her arms were so tired. "The door was locked," she said past clenched teeth.

"It sticks a little. You have to pull back on it before you turn the knob."

"So it was just open? Unlocked?"

"Nothing to steal here," he said, gesturing with his free hand. "Where do you want this?"

Where, indeed? Now that they were inside, the apartment looked like an old converted place she'd once rented in L.A. White walls, scuffed wooden floors, a nondescript kitchen. But with little touches from the past, like a fireplace and built-in bookshelves. And not one single piece of furniture.

Somehow that hadn't occurred to her.

"Right there is fine," she murmured. "Thanks." It didn't really matter, after all. Living room, bedroom. They were equally empty rooms to her.

"Here?" the guy asked doubtfully.

"Yes, there. Thank you. I appreciate the help."

"Yeah?" He smiled wide enough to show his dimples again. "Then why did you look like those words hurt coming out?"

She tried frowning at him, but he just stuck out his hand.

"I'm Cole, by the way. Cole Rawlins."

"Grace Barrett," she said. His wide hand engulfed hers, and though he didn't squeeze hard, there was no mistaking the strength in those rugged hands. His calluses rasped against her fingers.

"Grace," he murmured, his gaze rising momentarily to her hair.

"Yes. Grace." She enjoyed the contradiction of her traditional, gentle name and her physical appearance.

This man recovered more quickly than most. "A pleasure," he said simply. Then added, "Grace."

She pulled her hand away at the intimacy of hearing him say her name as if it truly were a pleasure.

*Cowboy freak.* Though her hand tingled and she tried not to smile.

"You're not from around here." The understatement of the year.

"Look, I really do appreciate the help, but I need to find my aunt, so.. " *Give me some space?*

He didn't seem to hear that last, unspoken part of the conversation. "Your aunt?"

"I'm renting the apartment from her."

"Wait a minute. Old Rayleen is your aunt?"

"My great-aunt, actually."

"Ah. I get it, then."

"Get what?" she asked.

"Why she'd rent this place to you."

Grace straightened her shoulders and scowled. "Why exactly wouldn't she rent this place to me, huh? Real nice, cowboy."

She assumed he would stammer and shift and try to find some excuse, when what he really meant was that she didn't look like a girl who belonged here. But instead of clearing his throat or changing the subject, he just grinned again.

"Let's just say you're a little smaller than the other renters here."

Grace glanced around as if those other renters had just joined them. "I thought you Wyoming folk were supposed to be plainspoken. How about you try saying what you mean?"

"Talk about plainspoken. They don't make 'em timid where you come from, do they? All right, here's the deal. Your aunt has a reputation for renting only to men. Says that they're easier to deal with." The wry tone of his voice implied something different.

"Uh, is there something going on here I should know about?" When she shot an obvious look down his body, his eyes widened in horror.

"No! Absolutely not. But, hey, if she likes my face enough to give me a hundred-dollar discount on rent, I won't argue with her. But that's the extent of her quirkiness. I swear."

Even the most cynical person could tell he was offering the truth. And his face? Hell, that was enough to inspire generosity. It was lovely in a very masculine way. A jaw like steel. Strong nose. And blue eyes that crinkled with warmth fairly often, if the laugh lines were any indication. And his short brown hair had just enough wave to make it look unruly and disheveled. He was gorgeous, and his body called for further attention, too, but Grace kept her eyes on his face.

"Isn't it illegal to rent only to men?"

"Beats me. But I guess she gets away with it."

"Regardless," she finally said, "I need to find my aunt. Get a key. Let her know I'm here."

"Well, that's easy. She's probably next door."

"At your place?"

"No! Come on. I meant next door at the saloon."

"Is she a big drinker?"

"She runs the place," he corrected. "And she's a big drinker."

"Got it. Thanks. I'll just go see her then." She was clearly implying he should leave. She even raised an impatient eyebrow and glanced toward the door. But Cole didn't notice because he was pointedly looking around her apartment.

"You got some furniture coming?"

"Sure. Of course. Thanks for the help."

He turned his grin on her again. "All right, then, Grace Barrett. Even cowboys can take a hint when you're bashing them over the head with it. But let me know if you need any more help. I'm only a few feet away."

"Great. Thanks."

The sound of his boots on the wood floor of the apartment was softer than Grace would've expected, but his steps still echoed against the bare walls. If she were the kind of person who had ever planned to stay in one place more than six months, Grace knew what she would be thinking at this moment. *I'll need to find something to put on these walls.* Or at the very least, she would've been painting them some warm and inviting color in her mind, and wondering where she could find some rugs. Instead, she just took pleasure in the fact that the white paint was still white and was marred by only a few nail holes.

At least she'd learned to appreciate the small things in life. And the big things, like the sound of the door closing behind Cole Rawlins as he finally left her alone.

"Whew," Grace breathed, letting the air ease out of her lungs. The place felt a lot bigger without him taking up all her space.

Okay, maybe a little too big. But without him here, she could see the small ways that the apartment wasn't quite like an old place in L.A. The beautiful, dark wood window frame hadn't been painted over, and instead of miniblinds, there were white curtains. It also didn't smell like roach spray.

She strolled over to the window and pulled aside the curtains. Here was another difference. Instead of a view of a parking lot or traffic or a million other apartments, Grace was looking at a huge pine tree. Past that, she had a view of the small street, and a green house with a yellow porch on the other side of it. A snowmobile sat in the open garage.

Grace crinkled her nose at the strangeness of the sight. That was something she'd never seen in L.A. Jet Skis, sure. But the snowmobile looked like a real machine. It looked dangerous and powerful, gleaming black and red in the sunlight. It looked fun.

Too bad she'd be long gone by winter. She had to get to Vancouver in six weeks and make some money, or she was going to be in even bigger trouble than she was now. Way bigger.

Cole grabbed a Coke and leaned against the kitchen counter, eyes on his front door. That had been a surprise. Opening his door to find a raging tornado of a city girl assaulting a stuffed duffel bag. Not at all what he'd expected during his quick run home to shower and grab a sandwich after his half day at the ranch.

The female voice in the hallway had caught his attention. The female herself, spewing curses and kicking things? Whew.

That girl was going to be trouble. If the purple layers in her dark, choppy hair didn't make that clear, the hard glint in her eyes certainly did. He knew that look. He'd seen it before. And despite his image as the wholesome and friendly good ol' cowboy, that look stirred something in him. It was like a dare. A challenge.

And he did love a challenge.

Speaking of... She'd basically pushed him out the door, claiming that she needed to find her aunt right away. But five minutes had passed and he still hadn't heard her leave. Rude little witch. It seemed like she'd taken

his attempts to help as some sort of insult.

He should've let her stand out in that hallway all afternoon, trying to figure out how to get into an open apartment.

Cole imagined her increasing anger and frustration. That look of hot rage he'd glimpsed when he'd opened his door to find out what the noise was about. She hadn't even been embarrassed. She'd just glared at him as if he was intruding.

"Trouble," he murmured as he finally gave up his vigil and stood. Shane was waiting at the saloon to grab a beer, and Cole had nothing to do until physical therapy the next day. He managed not to linger in the entryway, but only because he figured he might see her at the Crooked R soon.

He'd forgotten about this type of girl during the past decade. But he was remembering everything now. The way they made his heart beat faster. The way they seemed to dare him to act on his impulses. He'd once had a thing for dangerous city girls. And he'd ended up in a bad way because of it.

He shoved the thought away as he walked into the saloon and spotted Shane setting up a game of eight ball. "Hey," he said as he grabbed a cue.

"Hey. When are you getting your lazy ass back to work?"

Despite the rude words, Cole noticed the look of concern that Shane shot him. He ignored it. "I'm part-time at the ranch now. It won't be long."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely."

Shane watched him for another long moment. "Good," he finally said. "Because I want my first-floor apartment back."

"The stairs too much for you, old man?"

"You're one to talk." He gestured toward the table. "You want to break?"

"Was that a joke about my leg?" Cole asked, but he was immediately distracted by the door of the saloon opening. The flash of daylight obscured the person, but as soon as it closed, he saw it was a blonde. No black-and-purple hair in sight.

"You ready to play?" Shane asked.

Yeah, he was ready to play, but he wasn't thinking about pool. Instead he was thinking about his new neighbor.

"Hey, did you hear the news?"

Assuming Shane was talking about Grace, Cole just raised an eyebrow and leaned over the table to break.

"There's a big film production coming to town."

Cole forced himself to pull the cue back as if those words didn't affect him. In fact, he managed to sink two balls with a perfect break.

"You know anything about it?" Shane asked.

"Why would I?"

"I thought maybe you were going to go Hollywood again."

Cole forced himself to smile, even though his mind was spinning. That couldn't be why Grace was here, could it? "That was a long time ago," he said calmly.

"Not that long ago," Shane countered. "Ten years?"

"Thirteen," Cole said. Thirteen long years, but not even close to long enough. Thirteen years since Hollywood had come to town and he'd jumped in feetfirst. If Grace was part of that crowd.

But no. She was renting an apartment, not staying at one of the fancy resorts. Grace wasn't part of the film team. No way. But maybe this was a warning that should be heeded. A reminder that city girls had led him astray before. And he'd followed willingly.

This chick was bad news. And she was living across the hall. And he wasn't the least bit inclined to avoid her.

She should've scared the hell out of him, and instead, he was smiling in anticipation.

Somehow that only made him smile harder.

Bad news, indeed.

## ***Chapter Two***

The fresh air struck Grace as soon as she stepped out, the cleanness of it startling though she'd been outside just a few minutes before. Almost against her will, she took a deep breath, drawing in the beauty of it. Even if she'd been surrounded by stucco buildings and ten lanes of traffic, there'd be no mistaking that she wasn't in L.A. anymore. The air was too crisp, and when she moved, it hardly even touched her skin. She felt lighter as she headed for the faint sounds of music leaking from the saloon next door.

"The saloon next door," she murmured. That was something she'd never said before. *Bar*, yes. *Liquor store*, sure. And on one occasion even a strip club. But never a saloon.

The strip club had actually made a pretty good neighbor. Unlike bars and liquor stores, no one wanted to hang around outside a strip club. The interesting parts were inside, behind blacked-out windows and plain cement walls. And once the place shut down for the night, the girls dropped everything and left as if the building made their skin crawl.

Grace had always told herself she couldn't imagine doing that. Pretending to like a man for money. Using her body to win favors. But in the end, she'd done the same thing, hadn't she?

As she opened the heavy saloon door, she shook that thought from her head. What the hell did it matter? She'd done what she'd done, and now she was just as miserable as she deserved to be.

Old country music filled the saloon, though it wasn't particularly loud. A friendly buzz of conversation overlaid the music. Even at 3:00 p.m., several of the tables were filled, though not with the usual miserable types she associated with afternoon drinking. Two of the groups looked like young and scruffy college kids that you'd see in any other town. But at the closest table, all five of the men wore cowboy hats. Each man touched the brim of his hat as she passed. Grace felt her face flush at the unexpected courtesy and hurried past them to the long bar that ran along the side of the building.

She hadn't seen her great-aunt in almost twenty years, but the blonde woman behind the bar was clearly not Aunt Rayleen. This woman was somewhere in her thirties, probably, though her skin was fresh and so pretty she could pass for a younger woman.

"Hi," Grace said, catching her attention. "I'm looking for Rayleen. Rayleen Kisler?"

The woman kept polishing a glass, but offered a wide smile. "Of course, sweetie. She's right over there. Usual table."

Grace followed the gesture to a table at the far corner of the bar. An old woman sat there playing solitaire, an unlit cigarette gripped tightly between two thin lips. Yeah. That was Aunt Rayleen. She looked as mean as ever.

"Thank you," Grace murmured, thinking those weren't quite the right words as she headed across the bar. What she should have said was "Never mind" or "Pretend you never saw me." She should have turned around and grabbed her stuff and kept moving. Grace hadn't even wanted to ask for help from her grandmother, much less this sour-faced woman who'd never had a kind word for anyone, even when Grace had been a child.

And her face had only gotten more sour in the meantime. Though her hair was still beautiful. Pure white and flowing past her shoulders in a gorgeous wave. Ray-leen's one and only vanity, according to Grandma Rose.

Grace finally stood before the table, but the old lady didn't look up. She just scowled down at her cards, flipping over three at a time in a slow rhythm. Her pale chambray shirt looked about three sizes too big for her.

"Aunt Rayleen?" Grace finally ventured.

The old lady grunted.

"I'm Grace. Grace Barrett." Still no response. "Your niece?"

Her silver eyebrows rose and she finally looked up. A sharp green gaze took Grace in with one flick of her eyes. "Thought you'd be knocked up."

"Pardon me?"

Her gaze fell back to the table and she resumed her card flipping. "A grown woman who can't keep a job or support herself and has to write to her grandmother to ask for money? I figured you were out of commission. But you look perfectly fine to me."

Grace's skin prickled with violent anger. "If you—"

"Aside from the hair."

Grace stiffened and cleared her throat. She didn't have the right to tell this lady off. God, she wanted to, but maybe a free apartment gave Rayleen the right to get in a few insults. Which was exactly why Grace hated asking for help.

"I was living with someone and it didn't work out. With the economy—"

"Who told you you could ever depend on a man for anything?"

"I... No one told me that."

"You probably learned that from your idiot mama. That woman doesn't have the sense God gave a dog. And dogs ain't exactly nature's Einsteins, are they?"

A strange, hot wash of emotion trickled along Grace's skin. Fury, certainly, but it was mixed up with shame and the awful burn of truth spoken bluntly.

"Listen," she pushed out past clenched teeth. "If you don't want me here, say so and I'll leave right now."

"Yeah? Where are you going to go?"

"Anywhere. I'll find a place. I don't need your charity."

"Sure you do, or you wouldn't have taken it in the first place. Your grandma is living in that old folk's home in Florida, and you can't stay there, can you?"

No, she couldn't stay there. Though she'd rather have stayed there than have asked Grandma Rose for money. Unfortunately, her grandmother hadn't had any money to spare, but she'd called in a favor from Rayleen. If Grace hadn't been so utterly desperate, she'd never have hopped on that bus.

"I can see you've got a spine in you. Must've skipped a generation. You want the place or not?"

The burn sank deeper into her skin. She'd always hated that her paleness showed her emotions so clearly. Not that she often tried to hide her anger, but she wanted it under her control. She wanted to be in charge of who saw it and who didn't. And what she wanted right now was to show this woman nothing. To be calm as she turned around and walked out with her chin held high. Sure, she had nowhere to go, but a city park bench would be better than politely asking this bitch for a key.

"Listen, honey," Rayleen said, finally setting down the cards. "It's not a question of me *wanting* you here. I don't know you from Adam. But I'm willing to have you here because I have an empty apartment and Rose asked me for a favor. You pay the utilities and you can stay. But just through ski season. August is one thing, but come December? I've got my eye on a handsome snowboarding instructor I had to turn away last year."



That broke through Grace's fury. A handsome snow-boarding instructor? For what? The apartment or an affair? Jeez, this woman really was crazy. But that didn't mean Grace wanted to accept her grudging handout.

She was opening her mouth to tell Aunt Rayleen to do something foul to herself, but the old woman grinned, showing off perfectly white teeth past the cigarette dangling from her lips.

"You're pissed, ain't ya? I like that. Pride's a beautiful thing, but you've got to ask yourself where your pride has gotten you up to this point. Because as far as I can tell, it's gotten you homeless and bitter. You enjoying the taste of that?"

Good Lord, the things she wanted to do to this woman would constitute elder abuse, but Aunt Rayleen was just so rude. And mean. And *right*.

That was the worst part. The hardest to swallow. She was right. Grace had too much pride. Hell, sometimes it was all she had. But pride didn't fill your stomach or keep the cold out. So she swallowed hard. And swallowed again, tasting every bitter molecule of it. And then she nodded.

"Thank you for the place to stay," she managed to growl. "I'll be out in a month."

Rayleen laughed. "Oh, big words. We'll see. For now, just don't knock out any walls or leave a window open when it rains. No smoking. No pets. The key's in the cash register. Jenny over there will give it to you."

"Thank you," Grace managed one more time. The words tasted just as bitter the second time around, and she wished she had the money to spare for a beer as she approached the bar. Wished her life was as simple as sitting down and washing the day away with a cold one. Better yet, a double of whiskey. God, yes.

"Hi, again," the bartender offered.

Grace made herself smile back. This woman gave off a good vibe. She probably made a lot of money as a bartender. It was a skill. Grace knew that because she'd tried her hand at it and failed. People just didn't like her. But this woman... She was comforting. "Are you Jenny?"

"I am."

"Rayleen told me to ask you for a key to apartment

A?"

"You?" Jenny asked. Her eyes nearly disappeared when she laughed. "You'll be quite a change."

"Do I need to check the place for hidden cameras?" she asked, only half joking.

"You're probably safe. She just likes to collect them, I think, not spy on them. Nothing too creepy." Jenny hit a button on the register and the drawer popped open.

"It seems plenty creepy," Grace muttered.

"She's pretty harmless. They like to come over here and tease her, but she calls them puppies and tells them to leave her the hell alone." Jenny held out the key and dropped it into Grace's hand. "Welcome to Jackson."

"Thank you." That was it. No paperwork. No contracts or legal indemnification. "Do you know anyone who's hiring?"

"Summer's a little tight and we're getting to the end of it. What do you do?"

Grace shrugged. "Waitressing. Busing tables. I've done some cleaning."

"Anything else? You look like a woman who might have other skills."

For a moment, Grace's blood froze. What did that mean? Other skills? Stripping? Turning tricks? She knew she looked a little harder than people in Wyoming, but she hadn't expected to be confronted with the same shit she'd lived with on the streets of L.A.

"Have you worked in clothing stores?" Jenny continued, as friendly as before.

Grace blinked. Is that what she'd meant? Something so innocuous? "Uh, sure. I worked in a vintage place when I was young. And I do makeup."

"Makeup?"

"I work as a makeup artist. In L.A."

"Oh." Jenny's eyes widened. "That's really cool."

"But not very useful in Wyoming."

"Maybe, but it's got to pay better than waitressing in a tourist town."

"That depends," Grace said. "On what?"

"On whether you can avoid pissing off the fifty different people on a movie set who can get you fired."

Jenny laughed. "Well, maybe you should go see Eve Hill. She's a photographer and she's pretty nice. She might have work for you."

Grace made an effort not to look doubtful, but she'd almost rather be a waitress than do bridal makeup for wedding shoots. "What kind of photography?" she asked warily.

"I'm not sure. She does some landscape stuff on her own. Sells it in town here, but she does other things, too. Photo shoots for magazines."

"Here?"

The doubt must've been showing clearly now, because Jenny shook her head and offered a look of friendly patience. "We might be in the middle of nowhere, but there's money here. Lots of money and lots of those people you know from L.A. They like to come and ski and play dress-up, and they like to have a reason to be here. Film shoots and fashion campaigns provide that."

"Right. Yeah. Okay, I'll look her up."

"Do that. And if that doesn't work out, I'll let you know the good places to be a server here, and the places you want to avoid."

"Thank you so much."

Jenny winked with the natural friendliness of a really great bartender, then moved on to serve the two men who'd just pulled up to the bar.

"Eve Hill," Grace murmured. It probably wouldn't work out. The woman likely had no need for a makeup artist. But if there was any chance Grace could avoid working tables again, she'd suck up her pride. Maybe she'd even volunteer for bride duty. After all, there was a common denominator among all these people Grace wasn't very good with. Customers, bosses, lovers, brides. The common denominator was Grace. She was the problem.

She clutched the key tight in her hand and walked out of the bar without meeting the eyes of any of the patrons.

People didn't like her.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. She had friends. She even had really good friends, like Merry Kade, who'd been her best friend for ten years. So some people liked her. Just not the ones who controlled her pay. Although up until a few months ago, that hadn't been a problem. She was good enough with makeup that she didn't have to kiss butt to keep her job. She'd done just fine. She hadn't had to ask anyone for help.

But that was before.

It didn't matter. She'd asked for help this time, hadn't she? And she hated it. She hated it like she'd never hated anything else. Somehow it was worse than the time she'd spent on the streets as a kid, accepting food from soup kitchens and charities. It was worse than crashing on a friend's couch for a few days, because she could say she'd done the same for them at some point. This was out-and-out asking for help, and it stung.

But it was better than going to jail.

She stood in front of the pretty blue house and opened up her fist. Her skin showed the exact shape of the key. Every ridge and angle pressed red into her palm.

"Just a few weeks," she whispered. "Just a month." And if she didn't like the feeling of begging for scraps, then she'd better get used to the idea of keeping her mouth shut around people who controlled her paycheck. Because it was one or the other, and she'd be damned if she'd ever ask for charity again.

### ***Chapter Three***

Cole glared at the top of his physical therapist's head, cursing her for an ogre and a devil and a nasty, power-abusing son of a bitch. Farrah looked up and smiled. "You doing okay, Cole?" She pressed his knee tighter to his ribs, resting all her weight against it. Not much heft considering she had the size and appearance of a benevolent fairy. Just another of her evil tricks.

"I'm great," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Easy says you're bugging the tar out of him again."

"I need to get back to work."

"You want this to heal right or not?" She finally released his knee, but his hip joint screamed as she slowly lowered his leg to the ground.

"It's healing fine," he said.

Her eyes slid away. "You're strong and healthy. You were in excellent shape before the accident, but there's still a chance."

"Sure."

"When are you going back to the orthopedist?"

"Two weeks."

"Okay." She stood up, dusting her hands as if Cole were a pet project. "I bet a new CT scan will have more answers. But I can definitely tell you've been doing the exercises."

He stood and stretched his back. "Thanks for coming by this morning. I know you don't have to do that."

"You're a special case." She rolled her eyes, but then smiled brightly. "Really, Cole. I want to help you get back in the saddle as much as Easy does."

"Oh, yeah? Your uncle isn't offering much help."

"You mean he's following doctor's orders because you won't?"

"Jesus, I haven't ridden, have I?" Cole grimaced as he realized he'd snapped at this girl who was like a little cousin to him. "Sorry, Farrah."

"Please. You wouldn't believe the things I hear from my clients. Combinations of words that I shouldn't even know." She grabbed her bag. "Take a hot shower. Loosen everything up. And you're making progress."

"Sure," he murmured as he gave her a farewell hug and let her out the door.

He was doing great. Of course he was. Despite what the experts were saying, he was sure he'd be fine.

As fine as could be expected for a cowboy who might never ride again.

Cole shook his head and ran a hand over his sore thigh. He'd be okay. The doctors were hopeful. The shattered femur was healing and the pelvic fracture would mend. Just in time for him to get back out there to round up the stock for fall.

It would be his last roundup for Easy. Oh, he loved Easy like a father, but Cole was ready to own his own

ranch. And Easy was ready to sell. Next year, Cole would be rounding up his own cattle, and Easy would be sipping pina coladas on a Mexican beach.

Chuckling at the thought of Easy relaxing on a beach in his Stetson, Cole headed for the shower.

He made the water as hot as he could stand it, hoping no one else in the building had put too much of a strain on the water heater. One of these days he'd do his exercises, take a hot shower and suddenly feel good. Great. Back to normal. He knew it. But for now, the ache hadn't left. Sometimes it faded to something bearable. Sometimes it swelled into a giant thumping heart in his thigh. The pain was normal, his doctors said. Nothing to be concerned about.

Half an hour later, the ache beaten back to a dull roar, Cole found himself sipping his morning coffee and staring at his door again, waiting for some sign of life from the apartment across the hall.

He hadn't seen her since he'd watched her talk to Rayleen at the saloon. Grace hadn't even noticed him over in the alcove that housed the pool tables. He'd been half irritated by that, and half thankful that he'd gotten the chance to watch her openly.

She was a small woman, with delicate bones, but she held her body as though she was coiled to flee at any moment. Or pounce, maybe. He hoped it was the latter.

But as intriguing as she was, she seemed to have disappeared. He hadn't heard her even once, and they shared a common wall along the hall and bathroom. Jackson was pretty quiet at night, and he'd often heard his previous neighbor moving around, but Grace was silent as a mouse.

Of course, the previous tenant was a drunken college dropout whose number one hobby had been juggling three different girlfriends. At least it had given Cole a soap opera to listen to on sleepless nights.

But where was his new neighbor?

Maybe the deal had fallen through. Maybe Old Rayleen had somehow been under the impression that she was renting the place to a hot nephew. Though... Cole shook his head at the wrongness of that thought.

The old woman was harmless. Eccentric, but harmless. Even the jokes in town meant nothing, which was why everyone thought they were funny. Obviously nothing was going on between Rayleen and her young renters, but with the house being part of the old Studd homestead, the jokes were too easy. Too damn perfect.

And she really never did seem to rent to women.

Cole heard a car door close outside and cocked his head, waiting to see if it was Grace returning from... Where? A boyfriend's house? A very, very late night with a new acquaintance? He found himself slightly irritated at the thought, and couldn't help but smile at his own stupidity. That woman was all passion and attitude. If she wanted to sleep with a different guy every night, she damn sure would, and there'd be no apologies either. He'd be a fool to let it get to him.

Raising his cup to his lips, he realized it was empty. He wanted to have another one, but somehow one cup of coffee made his leg feel better and two made it feel worse. And it was already primed for feeling sore as hell today, between working the day before and physical therapy this morning.

Even during the worst of it, just after surgery, he hadn't been expecting that. That the pain would be so overwhelming. That the injury might be so bad he'd never ride again. He'd been on a horse since he was three. It felt more natural to him than walking. And now, now it felt as though his muscles couldn't quite remember the way to walk naturally, much less direct a horse with the barest of tension. But his muscles weren't really the problem. The problem was the crack that went from his hip joint and halfway up his pelvis. With the shattered femur and the metal holding all that together.

"We're going to have to see," they'd said. "You could do permanent damage in a saddle."

But Cole couldn't accept that. He didn't know how to accept it.

He'd been completely out of work for eight months, and he'd been cleared to work half days only a month before. But for a cowboy, a half day should've been eight hours, with no such thing as a weekend. Cole didn't know what the hell to do with himself.

It was worse now that he was up and around. He was at the ranch most days, watching his old friends do the things he couldn't do. Cole was relegated to the yard and corrals, limping from job to job until Easy told him his four hours were up and he had to leave.

Four hours a day, five days a week. It was shameful.

And how was he supposed to be ready for the roundup when he wasn't allowed to push himself?

He wasn't supposed to go in today, but if he snuck into the tack house and worked a few hours on repairs while everyone else was out checking cattle, he could sneak out before lunchtime. Hell, Easy wouldn't know anything about it. Cole wouldn't get paid, but this wasn't about the money. It was about being where he belonged, doing something useful. And getting his body ready to get back to work full-time.

The front door hadn't opened yet, so Cole assumed the car had been stopping at another house. Which still left the mystery of his new next-door neighbor. He eyed the coffeepot, then the clock. He still had two hours to waste before he could safely sneak onto the ranch.

So, what the hell? A little curiosity never hurt anyone.

He laughed at that. Curiosity had nearly ruined him once. But he'd been a boy then. Stupid and easily controlled by his sense of adventure. And his dick. One and the same, sometimes, and not exactly a moot point when it came to curiosity either.

After all, Grace was beautiful.

Well, not beautiful. That wasn't the word. Not pretty either. Or cute. Not with that wild, choppy hair in chunks of brown and black and purple. And those dark eyes that looked like they absorbed everything and let nothing show through. And her pale, flawless skin. She wasn't pretty—she was striking. Like a kick to the gut. And he hadn't felt that since...

Hell, he hadn't felt that since he was an idiot boy getting his first taste of a girl from the big city. So maybe he hadn't grown up so much after all.

But regardless of where she was from, this wasn't L.A. and he wasn't signing up for a life of debauchery. He

was just checking on a neighbor.

So, Cole stood up—purposefully not pressing a hand to his thigh as it screamed—and walked out to knock on her door.

The silence that followed wasn't a good sign. Eight o'clock was late by his standards, but too early for a girl like her, maybe. But the more likely truth was that she wasn't there. She'd disappeared as quickly as she'd shown up. Seemed about right. Rayleen had sent Grace on her way. Those two would probably get along like a couple of feral cats.

Convinced that the place was just as empty as it had been two days before, Cole started to leave, only to swing back around when a muffled voice interrupted the silence. "Who is it?"

"It's Cole," he said, a smile springing so quickly to his face that it startled him. When she didn't respond, he added, "Your neighbor."

The door opened. Not all the way, of course, just enough to reveal Grace standing there glaring at him.

"Good morning," he offered, his eyes dipping to take her in. She was dressed in jeans and a black hoodie, but her feet were bare, aside from the deep blue polish on her toenails.

"Somebody painted over the peephole," she muttered, running a hand through her crazy hair. It stood up in wild layers that somehow made her look younger. Or maybe that was the faded, smeared makeup. But he noticed that her lips were still a deep pink color, even first thing in the morning. That wasn't lipstick. That was just the sweet shade of her mouth.

"The what?" he finally remembered to ask.

"The peephole," she gestured at the door.

"Oh." He looked over his shoulder at his own door. "I guess I never noticed."

"I guess you wouldn't. Did you need something?"

"No. I just wanted to check on you."

"Me?" Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Well, we're neighbors. And I hadn't heard so much as a door shut since I saw you yesterday. I thought maybe Old Rayleen had sent you on your way."

She started to shake her head, and then seemed to be caught by surprise by a huge yawn. Her hand clutched the edge of the door and swung it farther open. The place looked the same as yesterday. Not one piece of furniture or sign of life. The kitchen was dark and quiet.

Cole was craning his neck to look around her when Grace seemed to realize what he was doing and narrowed the opening. But he'd seen enough. None of her stuff was here yet.

"Want a cup of coffee?"

For a second, her dark, fathomless eyes flared with emotion. Something close to lust. "It's already brewed," he coaxed. "Mmm." She glanced toward his door, and he knew she was hoping he'd offer to bring her a cup and leave her alone. Fat chance.

"Come on. We can leave my front door open, since I make you nervous."

"Ha!" Her laugh was rusty and gorgeous. "Why would *you* make me nervous?"

Cole wasn't sure he liked the emphasis she'd put on *you*, but he just smiled. "No idea. But I obviously do."

"That's not nervousness, cowboy. It's called being smart enough not to get behind closed doors with a strange man."

"Strange, huh? I hope you haven't been listening to the stories about me. Half of them aren't even true."

"You wouldn't know strange if it bit you on the ass," she said, but she waved him back and stepped into the hall with a small smile. "Are you going to give me coffee or not?"

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled, tipping an imaginary hat before he moved across the hall to open his door. "I was just about to have breakfast," he lied. He'd eaten almost two hours before, but she didn't seem to have done much shopping yet. "Will you eat bacon and eggs? If you're a vegetarian, I can whip up some toast."

She didn't answer for a few seconds. Cole heard her close the door softly as he headed for the coffeepot.

"Bacon and eggs would be great," she finally said. "And toast, too, if you're offering."

"Sure." He poured her coffee and refilled his own cup. What the hell. A little aching in his thigh was worth spending some time with her. He didn't have anything else interesting going on. And it wouldn't be the first time he'd endured aching for an attractive woman.

Cole put sugar and milk out on the counter, tossed a pan on a burner and grabbed the bacon and eggs. He felt her gaze on his back as he worked. "Over easy okay?" he asked as he laid bacon on the cast iron.

"Great," she answered. "You look like you know what you're doing."

He glanced back to find her seated on a stool, hunched over her coffee as if she was cold. Mornings were chilly up here if you weren't from the mountains. He reached past the fridge to turn up the thermostat. "We all take turns cooking in the bunkhouse."

"Oh, the bunkhouse," she said, making the word sound mysterious. There was nothing mysterious about it, unless you thought cooking and sleeping in what was essentially a live-in locker room was mysterious.

"So what are you doing here?" she asked. "Did you get tired of bunkhouse living?"

Hell, yeah, he was tired of bunkhouse living, but that hadn't been the problem. As a matter of fact, he'd become ranch boss and moved into the boss's house less than a year before.

Cole finished frying the bacon, then set it on a plate and covered it before breaking the eggs into the hot grease. "I was hurt last year," he finally said.



"What happened?"

"A horse landed on my leg."

"Ow."

"Yeah." He wanted to reach down and rub his leg, but he concentrated on the eggs instead.

"So they made you move out?"

The whole complicated story loomed before him. Cole rolled his shoulders. "There's not enough room for guys who aren't working, so, yeah. But I'm getting back to work now. I won't be here much longer."

"Me either."

He put bread in the toaster. "You just got here."

"I'm passing through."

Cole blinked at that, tension tightening his shoulders, but he tried not to let it show. "Who could've guessed you didn't want to settle in Wyoming?"

One of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose. "You telling me I don't look like a Wyoming girl?"

"You know damn well you don't look like a Wyoming girl. And that's the way you like it."

Now both eyebrows rose as if she was surprised. Cole piled two plates high with eggs and bacon and toast. He slid the plates across the counter, added forks and knives and paper towels, and joined her at the barstools to find out exactly who she was.

The man was smarter than he looked. She'd been trying to bait him, force him to say something that she'd find insulting. Instead he'd spoken the truth as if it were obvious to him. Grace wasn't sure what to do with that.

"So how long are you staying?" he asked.

She took a bite of egg instead of answering his question. The flavor melted over her tongue and she hoped

Cole didn't hear the way her stomach growled at the sudden pleasure. "Wow. The eggs are amazing."

"Bacon grease," he said. "What are you doing out here? Working?"

Grace cleared her throat and told herself not to stuff the food into her mouth, but damn, she hadn't had a real meal in days. On the bus, it had been granola bars and chips. She took a bite of bacon and spoke past it. "I already told you. I'm passing through."

"On your way to where?"

"Vancouver."

"Oh." He smiled. "This is a strange route to Vancouver."

She shrugged and made a point of changing the subject. "Thanks so much for breakfast. And coffee. The coffee's great, too. Strong."

She felt his gaze on her, but caught the movement of his head when he finally looked away. "You should try it after it's been sitting at the edge of a campfire all day. That'll wake you up."

She was glad he'd given up the questions, because she wanted to grab her plate and run back to her place so she could shovel the food in the way she wanted to. If he pushed her anymore, that's exactly what she'd do. But he dropped the subject, so she slathered too much butter on the toast and managed to get nearly a fourth of it into her mouth in one bite.

God, she'd been really hungry. Now she wanted to groan in pleasure. Maybe he wasn't so bad. As a matter of fact, at this moment, Cole Rawlins was pretty awesome.

She didn't register how many eggs were on her plate until she dug into the third one. "How many eggs did you make?" she asked.

"Four for you, four for me."

She laughed. "Do I look like I eat as much as you do?"

"You look like you're doing okay, actually." Grace laughed so hard she almost had to stop eating for a moment. "Didn't I tell you I was a lumberjack back in L.A.?"

"Ah. Of course. You've got that look about you."

Jesus, he was funny. A funny cowboy. Who'd have thunk it. She'd thought they were all silent and brooding. Hell, they'd all definitely been silent and brooding in *Brokeback Mountain*. But she tried not to think about that when she looked at Cole.

"So, you're from L.A."

"Unfortunately."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Nothing right now."

"Did—"

"I think I'm getting full," she interrupted with an apologetic wince. "Want my last egg?"

"No, I'm full myself." He reached for the plate, but Grace couldn't quite bear to let it go, so she snatched the last piece of bacon before he could whisk it away. He put the plate back down. Full or not, her mouth still watered when she bit into the bacon. She tried not to think about how long it had been since her last hot meal. It didn't matter. She'd get a job today. Or the next day. She'd have a check within a week. She'd start paying back the money she owed so she'd never have to think about her ex again.

"You want help moving in?" Cole asked.

"No, I'm fine." Now that she was full, Grace really needed to escape. He kept asking the wrong kinds of questions. Not that there were any right questions. Not about her.

"Come on."

"I don't have much." Or anything. "Anyway, you're injured."

"I think I can handle moving a futon." He gestured as he said that, and Grace could see he was right. His hands were wide, and scars stood out white against the tan. And she was pretty sure she'd never seen such *nice* forearms. Assuming one thought thick and muscled and masculine was nice. She had a brief temptation to touch his arm, to see if the hair was crisp or soft.

"So you'll let me help?" he pressed.

Shit. She hopped off the stool and edged toward the door, away from him and his questions. "I'm good. But thank you for the breakfast. And coffee." She forced herself not to ask for another cup, but it was hard. She'd already taken too much from this man. "I'll see you around."

"Hey."

She stopped halfway out the door, but only because he'd fed her. Anybody else and she would've kept walking. When he didn't say anything, she stuck her head back in to see him writing something down.

"Here's my phone number," he said when he crossed the room.

She didn't reach for it, feeling immediately wary. "You live across the hall. I think I can find you if I need you."

"You know anybody here except Rayleen?"

She met his pale eyes and didn't answer. *Yes, I'm alone and vulnerable. Good for you to know.*

"This isn't L.A." he said. "If you get stuck somewhere at night or your car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, you might not see another car for an hour. So, take my number, all right?"

No, this definitely wasn't L.A. And if he thought she was afraid of something like being alone for an hour, then he didn't know what real fear was.

But he took one step closer and pressed the paper into her hand. When her fingers closed over it, he winked. "In case you need me," he said again, this time with a hint of amusement.

Grace nodded. "All right. I'll call you if I have any cows that need branding, stud."

"Stud? My God, you L.A. women are forward. I think I'm blushing."

She closed the door in his face, and scowled at his laughter as she crossed the hall.

Did he think she'd been flirting with him? He probably did think that. He was undeniably handsome, though totally not her type. Too clean-cut. Too chiseled and...

Okay, he was pretty fantastic-looking, but too confident for his own good. He probably thought she'd add a little exotic city-girl spice to his bed. And he probably thought he'd have no trouble getting her there. But Grace wasn't interested in being his little curiosity. Even if she had any interest in getting laid right now—and she didn't—she wasn't going to be his experiment in edginess. His walk on the wild side. He could just sit over there and wonder.

Wanting to get the coffee taste out of her mouth, Grace headed toward the bathroom, where she'd already unloaded her few supplies and one giant box of cosmetics. But when she flipped on the light and got a look at herself, she froze. She'd forgotten to take off her makeup last night, and it had smeared into a crooked mask around her eyes. She suddenly had to consider that Cole's laughter hadn't been flirtation at all. Maybe it had just been pure amusement.

Damn.

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