

Flirting with Disaster (Girls' Night Out)

By Victoria Dahl

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There's no hiding from sizzling chemistry…

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Tom Duncan lives by the letter of the law. But no one has tempted him—or confused him—more than free-spirited Isabelle, who arouses his suspicion and his desire. As their connection grows, and their nights get hotter, they find their wild attraction might shake everything he stands for—and expose everything she has to hide.

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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

"Victoria Dahl never fails to bring the heat."-RT Book Reviews on Too Hot To Handle

"Dahl adds her signature hot sex scenes and quirky
characters to this lively mix of romance in the high country." -Booklist on Too Hot to Handle

"A delightful romance between two people who struggle to discover their own self-worth."
-RT Book Reviews on Bad Boys Do

"This is one hot romance."
-RT Book Reviews on Good Girls Don't

"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 mystery 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

"Hits the emotional high notes.... Rising romance star Dahl delivers with this sizzling contemporary romance."
-Kirkus Reviews on Close Enough to Touch

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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Isabelle West edged her SUV up the steep driveway and winced as she heard a grocery bag tip over. She tried to identify the dull rolling sound that followed. Probably the cantaloupe. But maybe just a can of soup. It'd be a little surprise for her when she opened the hatch and saw what sprang out and tumbled through the snow toward the trees.

She was getting tired of that particular surprise and promised herself she'd order the cargo net as soon as she got inside. She'd been meaning to do it for…maybe two years now. But today she'd remember. She was trying to teach herself to be proactive. Or at least to manage the small things that every other adult seemed to have no problem with.

As she rounded the last curve of the drive and spied her little cabin, she wrinkled her nose. Not because of the cabin. She loved that. It was perfect for her in every way with its dark log walls and big windows and front porch. What made her wince was the sight of the manual garage door past the haze of snow sifting from the sky, a reminder that she'd also been meaning to call about getting a garage-door opener installed. That one had been on her mental to-do list for at least four years. Definitely not five.

"I'll do that, too," she said to herself as she pulled close to the garage door and tugged up the hood of her coat. "As a matter of fact… " She dug her phone from her pocket and held down the button. "Phone, remind me to order a cargo net and call a garage guy."

The phone beeped and said, "I'm sorry—I didn't catch that."

Gritting her teeth, Isabelle hit the button again. "Remind me to buy a cargo net and call the garage guy."

"I'm sorry—did you need me to find a mechanic?"

"Fuck you," Isabelle growled. She ducked out of her car, thankful that the giant, wet flakes of this morning had given way to the dry Wyoming snow she was more used to. The snow sounded like sand as it bounced off her jacket and slid to the ground.

She wrenched up the garage door and got back to her car without getting wet at all. But she couldn't say the same about her cantaloupe. As soon as she opened the gate of her SUV, it rolled past her outstretched hand and straight into a snowbank.

"Fuck you, too," she said to the cantaloupe, then felt immediately guilty. It took her only a minute to rescue the melon and dust off as much snow as she could. It hadn't really caused that much trouble. It took a lot more time to repack the bag that had tipped over and haul it inside.

Next time, she'd remember to put the boxes of art supplies she'd picked up from the post office into the back; then she'd have room to store the groceries on the floor of her backseat, where they'd be less likely to—

"Art supplies!" she gasped and rushed back out to the truck to haul in the boxes of goodies.

She grinned as she set the first box on the kitchen table and slit the tape to reveal the treasures inside. She'd been out of yellow ocher for three days now, and even though she hadn't needed it, the lack had hovered at the back of her mind like a foreshadowing of tragedy to come. She snatched up the tube and breathed a sigh of relief. Disaster averted. She was whole again.

After unpacking the box and carefully laying out each precious item on the kitchen table, she retrieved the other two boxes from the backseat and went through the same routine. She beamed at the sight of the bounty spread over the table. Seven more tubes of color, a new studio light to get her through the winter, a dozen pre-stretched canvases and her favorite brush conditioner that smelled like something close to sandalwood. It made the task of looking after her brushes almost soothing. Discovering it last year had been a treat.

Satisfied with her unveiling of the goods, she made five trips to the room she used as her studio, shelving the paints she didn't need yet and getting the new lamp set up at her current workstation. She played with the LED settings for a while, still dubious about the idea that she could get good color temperatures, but the settings seemed sufficient. Nice, even.

"Hmm." Isabelle crossed her arms and stared at the unfinished painting, trying to decide if the daylight setting was pure enough. There weren't new technological advancements in the world of oil painting very often, so she'd be happy if she could get excited about this one. Still, she'd have to work under the light for a couple of hours and see how it felt.

During the summer, she wouldn't need it much at all. This room was meant to be the great room of the cabin, and windows climbed up the two-story wall to the peak of the roof. The windows faced south, and during the summer, she had good light here for nearly twelve hours of every day. But during the winter, there were only a few decent hours of sunlight, and that was assuming the sky was clear.

As a matter of fact… She glanced out, hoping to spot an approaching break in the clouds, but it was solid white out there. A good time to try the lamp, then. It was almost two, so she should force herself to grab lunch first, but then she'd have hours to work.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the heavy slide of fur against her ankle. "Hey, Bear," she said to the cat, surprised by his affection. He was an ornery twenty-pound stray who'd wandered into her cabin three years before, and he didn't cuddle often.

He meowed loudly for attention, but when she leaned down to scratch his chin, he sidestepped and eyed her scornfully. "I suppose you just want food?" she asked. She'd run out of wet food yesterday, which was why—

"The groceries!" she gasped, but her heart barely managed a quick leap before she calmed it down. The bags in the SUV were fine. It was cold enough that she could leave them overnight and not lose anything. Except bananas, maybe. Those weren't as hardy as people thought, not in the cold. If it were summer, though… Yeah. She'd lost hundreds of dollars of food that way over the years. But this time the only bag in danger was the one on her kitchen counter.

She rushed to the kitchen and unpacked that bag, happy to find that, aside from that damp cantaloupe, everything else was perfect. She shoved a frozen meal into the microwave, opened a can of food for Bear and went to haul in the rest of the bags. Half an hour later, she was organized, full of chicken piccata and happily planted in front of her canvas, adding a glistening highlight to a long stretch of a man's triceps.

Glancing from the canvas to a spread of photos hung on a board next to it, she nodded. "Perfect." Her eyes swept down the triceps muscle to the hard knot of elbow beneath it. What a beautiful line.

Her attention twitched for a moment, and Isabelle glared at the gleam of the light on wet paint, but then she shook off the random irritation and dipped her brush in white again. Just the tiniest drag of paint, just—

Her hand jerked, nearly touching the canvas before she pulled back. "What the hell?" she snapped as she finally registered that a sound had interrupted her. A loud sound. The staccato knock of some stranger come to screw up her workday.

She wanted to ignore it. It definitely wasn't Jill, her neighbor and the only person who dropped by

unannounced. Jill didn't knock like that. She rarely knocked at all, because she knew Isabelle wouldn't hear it. But it could be one of Isabelle's other friends. Lauren. Or maybe even Sophie, who was supposed to be back in town soon.

Had Isabelle forgotten another meetup? It was possible. She vaguely remembered Lauren mentioning something about a new girl they might be able to bring into their little group of friends since Sophie was usually on the road these days.

Isabelle set down the brush, wiped her hands on a rag and decided she'd have to answer the door, just in case.

Whoever it was knocked one more time, just as Isabelle reached for the door. She yanked it open, ready to apologize to Lauren, but it wasn't Lauren. Or Sophie. Or any other girlfriend. It was a man, taller than she was, snow dusting his short, dark hair and drifting in on the breeze as she frowned.

"Sorry to disturb you, Ms….?"

Really? He was going to start this off by asking for *her* name? "Yes?" she responded, tempted to close the door on his face and march right back to her studio. Whatever he was selling, she didn't want it.

His gaze sharpened a bit, but his chin dipped in acknowledgment, and he reached into the pocket of the nondescript navy blue parka he wore. "I'm Deputy US Marshal Tom Duncan."

Her hand tightened on the doorknob, and something went wrong with her ears. His lips kept moving, but she couldn't hear the words. Then he paused, watching her as if waiting for a response.

Isabelle cleared her throat, hoping the noise would force her ears back into working condition. "I'm sorry," she said with more calm than she could believe. "I wasn't paying attention. Who are you?"

His brow tightened with irritation. "I'm Deputy Marshal Tom Duncan."

"I got that part," she bit out, her veins too flooded with fightor-flight to keep her voice even now.

"I'm in the neighborhood as part of a protection detail, and—"

"This isn't a neighborhood," she interrupted, angry that he couldn't come up with a better excuse. Did he think she was an idiot?

"All right," he said carefully, his jaw clenching around the words. She'd made him mad. Good. She hoped he was cold, too. Because he was ruining more than her day. He was ruining something much larger than that.

He tried again. "I'm in the immediate area with a protection team, and I wanted to make contact with each of the residents. First—"

"What immediate area?" She glanced pointedly toward the one other house on her road, knowing damn well that Jill didn't need the sort of protection a US marshal provided. This was ridiculous. Why was he even pretending?

"Ma'am," he snapped, the word crisp with impatience. "We're on Judge Anthony Chandler's property. I understand that he may not live on your road, but his residence is only a half mile through those trees. I'm

informing you and all of your neighbors in case you see anyone from the marshal service near your property or on the road. If you see anyone you don't recognize, please give me a call."

He held out a card, and Isabelle glanced at it. She didn't take it. "You want me to call you."

"Yes. If it's one of my people, I'll confirm that. However, if it's not one of my people, then it could be the fugitive who's threatened Judge Chandler's life." He held up a creased photo of an unremarkable-looking white man in his forties.

Isabelle finally took the card and examined it as she spoke. "Someone threatened Judge Chandler, so I should expect a team of marshals hanging around my property. That's what you're telling me?"

"Yes." His gaze drifted past her shoulder, looking into her house. "Are you the only one living here at this time?"

"That's not your concern."

His eyes snapped back to her. "It's very important for your safety and for ours that we be aware of any unusual activity. Trespassers, items missing from your home or property, even trash you might find on a trail. Have you seen anything unusual?"

Isabelle gave him a flat look. "Just you."

His jaw tightened again. It was a nice jaw. A nice face altogether, lean and angled and just starting to show his age around his eyes. Too bad he was a liar.

"The man who threatened the judge is a survivalist, the brother of Ephraim Stevenson, whose trial begins on Monday. I'm advising you to be aware. And please notify any other residents of your home to do the same."

She held his gaze for a long moment, trying to give nothing away while still conveying that she knew this story was bullshit. That he wasn't fooling her. That she wasn't scared.

But she was.

"Sure, Marshal," she finally said, forcing a patently pleasant smile. "I'm happy to cooperate with any reasonable lawenforcement requests. But I'd appreciate it if you stayed off my property. If I need your help, I'll let you know."

She stepped back and closed the door. Hard. The defiance dropped from her shoulders. She covered her eyes with one shaking hand. For a moment, there was silence outside. Then she heard the crunch of his boots on her snowy porch steps. Isabelle leaned her back against the door and slowly slid down until she hit the floor.

They'd found her.

The ax had always been hanging over her, waiting to drop. In this day and age, you could never truly disappear. Not for good. But she'd tried.

For a girl like her, it hadn't been easy. She'd been sheltered. Twenty-two years old, but still a child in important ways. Always taken care of, always protected.

Still, she'd managed to hide for fourteen years. She'd moved several times, assumed a new identity, built a successful career. But they'd found her.

So why hadn't Deputy Marshal Tom Duncan arrested her immediately?

Surprised to find her eyes were blurry with tears, Isabelle wiped the wetness from her face and pushed up to her feet. She slipped over to the front window and carefully peeked outside.

The only sign of him was the set of footprints that led up to her porch and the set leading back down to her drive. There wasn't quite enough fresh snow that she could track his prints down her driveway, but he hadn't sneaked off into the deep snow at the side of her house. He was gone. Which didn't make sense.

She wasn't a dangerous criminal. She hadn't even been a criminal at all until she'd purchased fake IDs and changed her identity. If he'd come here to arrest her for that, he would've just arrested her. He didn't need to retreat to assemble a backup team or call SWAT. A set of handcuffs would've done the trick. Even one of those plastic zip ties would've incapacitated her.

So they weren't here to make a simple arrest. There was only one explanation. Her father must be back in the country, and they assumed he'd be in contact with Isabelle. They were going to watch and wait.

"Asshole," she muttered as she closed the curtains and locked her door. She hadn't bothered with that kind of thing in years. She'd finally felt safe from the world up here in the mountains outside Jackson, Wyoming. What the hell was she going to do now?

She stood in her entry for a moment with no clue what her next move was. She couldn't run again. She didn't want to. This was her life. Her *real* life. The world she'd chosen for herself.

She wouldn't run.

Fuzzy with shock, she headed back to her studio, feeling like a toy that was slowly winding down.

Did that guy really think she'd fall for such a flimsy story? She'd been around cops all her life. A protection detail was a protection detail; they didn't canvass neighborhoods asking who you were hiding in your house.

Her head buzzed with the noise of a thousand memories as she stopped before her easel and took up the brush. She held it poised above the line she'd painted earlier, but the color wasn't alive anymore. It wasn't good. She looked at the photos again, trying to absorb the life captured there, but when she looked back to the canvas, her mind gave her nothing. Nothing except Chicago and her parents and her old home and friends and *Patrick.*

She set the brush down and switched off the lamp. She wouldn't be able to work this evening. And she wouldn't be able to relax. That was the reason she'd started this new life in the first place. For peace and quiet and *forgetting.* And now he'd blown it up with a casually dropped bomb. Deputy Marshal Tom Duncan, asshole extraordinaire.

Heading toward her tiny living room and the ancient laptop she kept there, Isabelle pulled his card from the pocket of her jeans and shot it a nasty look. She'd find out exactly who he was and what he wanted, and she'd figure out if there was any way to make it better. And then she'd get back to painting.

Users Review

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