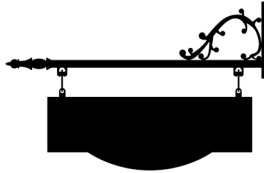


*Coastal*  
Christmas  
*Charade*

A Novella by

Shannon Taylor Vannatter

*To my dear friends, Vicki Harris & Jeannine Wallace for always listening  
to my stories and getting me out of my office for fun days.*



“This will never do.” Lark scanned the massive great room. The week after Thanksgiving and no Christmas decorations, with a winter wonderland wedding scheduled for next week. How had Gran and Gramps had any guests with the Shell House Inn in such a state of indifference? They’d obviously lost interest long before they officially retired. Though they slept soundly in their private quarters, their hearts were already in Dallas.

“Yip.” Peaches’ ears perked as she paced at the front door.

“Shh, you’ll wake up the old folks.” Lark nabbed her leash.

Peaches went into Pomeranian orbit, bouncing around her feet.

“You have to be still if you want to walk. Sit.”

The little orange powder puff sat.

“Good girl.” Lark snapped the leash in place and scratched behind Peaches’ ears. “I need somebody to cover this place in lights before the bride, who’s more high-strung than you are, arrives. But a walk comes first.” She opened the door, and Peaches shot out at warp speed, pulling the slack tight. Straight toward the water.

“At least we think alike.” Lark sighed, breathing in the ocean

air as the gentle swish of the tide rolled in. Even though Christmas was right around the corner, here at Surfside Beach, Texas, the sunny, seventy-degree day tempted her to kick off her shoes and wade the coastline. A breeze off the water whipped her hair about her face, soothing her stress level.

But being here also reminded her of the last summer she'd spent here as a teen. The dark-haired boy with thick glasses. And their kiss. Surprisingly sweet and promising. Until he'd learned the truth about her. Her cheeks heated. If only she could find him and apologize, explain her shallow teen reasoning for going along with the dare.

A racket sounded behind her. Like the steady rumbling thud of horse hooves? Lark turned around. A pale golden horse with a lone rider thundered toward her. Her pulse spiked. Should she stand still or dodge?

"Yip, yip, yip." Peaches launched into incessant barking.

The horse reared up with a panicked neigh.

"Whoa, girl." A man's voice soothed. Just before he sprawled into the sand.

Free of her rider, the horse pawed the ground, stopped long enough to drop foul-smelling-fertilizer, then bolted on along the shore.

"Nice." The man sat up, spitting sand.

"What are you doing?" Lark stooped to pick up a still-agitated Peaches.

"Testing a horse."

"This is a public beach. You can't do that here." She pointed at the manure.

"No worries." He stood, dusted himself off. "I'll take care of it."

A younger man caught up with them, used a contraption with a blue bag on the end to scoop up the stench and tie it off.

"Thanks Wesley, if you'll catch her, I'll handle that."

"Sorry, ma'am." Wesley winced, handed over the gadget, and hurried after the horse.

Her jaw gaped and she forced it closed. “Isn’t riding a horse on the beach against some law or something?”

“Not at all. In fact, I’m assessing a new mare for *Romantic Beach Rides*.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Peaches squirmed and Lark set her back down.

“I assure you, I’m not. Our services are quite popular.”

“She could have run me down.” A complaint would be launched first thing in the morning. The beach was no place for horses.

“Horses try not to step on people.” He adjusted his Stetson. “But I apologize for startling you. She’s feisty and got away from me. Normally, our horses don’t run and are quite tame. We won’t be buying her.” He pointed at her feet. “What about you? Are you prepared for that?”

A pungent odor warned her before she ever glanced down, where Peaches hunched in a most unladylike position. Heat warmed Lark’s face.

“No worries. I can take care of that.” He held up his scooper as if it were a prized possession. “There is an ordinance against leaving waste, whether dog or horse.”

“Thanks.” She mumbled as she turned Peaches back toward the inn.

“You’re welcome. And again, I’m sorry for startling you. I can assure you *Romantic Beach Rides* only purchases safe, tame horses if you ever feel the need for our services.”

“No, thank you.” She scurried away. Maybe she and Peaches could walk down the street. Avoid horses. And cowboys.

Every house along the shore was lit up. Except the Shell House. A woman sat on a porch immersed in the newspaper.

“Ma’am,” Lark cupped her hands around her mouth. “Could I ask who did your Christmas lights?”

The woman looked up, smiled. “A young man flipping a house, across the street, three doors down. I think he does most everyone’s décor every year.”

“Thank you.” Lark tried to steer Peaches in the direction the woman pointed, but the stubborn Pomeranian stopped to sniff every bush, every clump of seagrass. “At this rate, Christmas will be over before we get there.”



WITH A GRIMACE, Jace trudged after Wesley, his ranch foreman. The mare stopped, blew a burst of air out her nostrils. Wesley caught her reins and cut across between two houses.

She didn't remember him. Lark Pendleton in the flesh. The blond of his dreams with are-they-blue-or-green eyes. Every summer, she'd arrived in May to spend three months at her grandparents'. And every time, he'd fallen a little more in love, though he never summoned the courage to speak to her. She was summer folk, with family ties to Surfside Beach. Rich and snobby.

As the handyman's son, Jace Wilder was nowhere near her league. Or class. Not even on her radar screen. She'd never even acknowledged him. Not once. Except for that lone kiss. And she obviously didn't remember it or his existence.

Rather than take the chance of looping back and running into Lark again, he followed Wesley's trail and crossed the street.

At his flip project, Wesley waited by the horse trailer with his shoulders slumped. “Sorry 'bout that.”

“It's okay. You didn't buy her.”

“I should have known.” Wesley blew out a sigh. “The seller wouldn't ever come clean on why he wanted rid of her.”

“No worries. You'll get better at reading people. And horses. Comes with experience.”

Jace set a soothing hand on the mare's shoulder. “There now. Nothing to get worked up about. Just a yappy little poof of a dog. Probably as snobby as her owner.”

Wesley tugged the mare's bridle. “I'll get her back to her ranch and find you a more suitable horse.”

“I appreciate it.” Jace stood aside while Wesley loaded the mare, helped secure the door, waved them off, and then went inside.

Sunlight shone through the windows, spotlighting the mixture of drywall and sawdust floating through the air, puddled in the floor, coating everything in the front room. With the rest of the house walled off by plastic, the kitchen was almost done. Then he'd complete the living room and move upstairs.

He went back to his table saw and cut the two by four. As he carried the beam to the kitchen, the air compressor buzzed into action, and he secured the board in place. With his brace level, he lifted the upper cabinet until it sat on top of the two by four. He stuck his head and left shoulder inside the cabinet and reached for his nail gun as the compressor stopped.

“Do you need help?” Lark asked.

“What are you doing here?” His voice echoed surprise inside the wooden cage.

“I knocked, but you didn't hear me. Here, I've got the gun.”

“Thanks.” The tool slid into his right hand. The thwack of the nail gun filled the silence as he attached the cabinet to the studs.

“I took my grandmother's dog for a walk and saw how great all the Christmas lights look. And since I need to get my grandparents' inn in shape for a wedding before I sell it, I asked who did them.”

He bumped his head as he tried to extract himself from the tight space.

“Sorry.” Her cringe sounded in her tone. “I guess this is a bad time. I'll leave my card and you can call me.”

“Don't run off yet.” He managed to free himself, hopefully with a bit of grace, and turned to face her. “Still want to hire me?”

Her color-defying eyes went wide. “It's you?”

“I guess you'll want to retract.”

“No.” Her face went crimson. “Maybe we should start over.”

She offered her hand. “Hi, I’m Lark Pendleton, and I’m in desperate need of a light guy.”

He stared at her hand as if it might bite, then forced himself to clasp it. “Jace Wilder. I do a few lights on the side, flip houses, and own *Romantic Beach Rides*.” Why did he tell her all that? Was he still trying to impress her?

“You own the business?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Well.” She bit her lip. “Actually. Yes. Since you were testing your horse, I assumed you were a guide or ranch hand.”

“I like taking a hands-on approach. And she’s officially not my horse. Sorry again about that.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I got so uptight. I’m a tiny bit afraid of horses.” She giggled, as if admitting it was difficult for her. “And not-my-dog made as big a mess as not-your-horse did.”

“Not nearly as big.” He chuckled.



HER LAUGH CAME OUT STILTED, forced. Why was she suddenly so nervous? And why had his handshake sent a tingle up her arm? He checked all her *hard no* boxes. Despite sea glass green eyes that seemed to look right through her, strong jaw, hair the color of the night sky, he was a local. And a cowboy. A deadly combination.

“You’re talking about the Shell House Inn, right?”

“The one and only.” Mom’s words echoed in her head, ‘Stay away from locals unless you want to live here, and never fall for a cowboy unless you want to end up on a ranch.’

She was only here to whip the inn into shape, host Hillarie’s wedding—establish the inn as *the venue* for events in the area—and sell the property. Then she could get back to her cowboy-free life in her Dallas condo.

“I’ve considered buying the property. The Pendletons said they had a realtor handling it. I guess that’s you?”



“It is. And I’ve got an offer you can’t refuse.” While she spoke, Peaches circled her ankles. “What do you say, I pay you to help me decorate the inn, and after I host my Christmas wedding, you can buy it.”

“It would be perfect if I hadn’t already bought this place. I try not to get more than one flip going at a time. I usually hire out my lighting skills, but I’m not taking any more jobs so I can focus here.”

An idea niggled, an opportunity to advertise her side career. “Have you ever worked with a professional stager?”

“A what?”

“I bring in furnishings and décor items to create mood, to make the home inviting and warm. Staged homes sell faster. So, you hang my lights and help me turn the Shell House into a winter wonderland, and once you complete your reno, I stage this house for you.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“My bride gets her Christmas wedding, you get a quicker sale, and I get a bit of advertisement for my services.” She managed to sidestep out of the lasso Peaches had created. Since the little dog had relieved herself on the beach, his hardwood floors should be safe.

“How long will your lighting project take?”

“A few days. My bride and groom arrive Friday.” Peaches circled again and Lark picked her up. “The wedding isn’t until next weekend, but I want everything in place when they arrive.”

“Friday, as in this Friday?”

“If you get behind on your flip, once the wedding is over, I’ll get the inn on the market and help you with your house. I can hold stuff for you, paint, lay tile, whatever you need along with offering my excellent taste in decorating.”

His gaze narrowed as he inspected her. “You lay tile?”

“My dad used to do some house flipping when I was a teen. When a project was on deadline, my mom and I helped wherever we could.”

Obviously skeptical, as if trying to picture her doing anything hard, he shrugged. “If you can do all that, why not do the lights yourself?”

“I could, but not in two days. And besides that, I don’t have a ladder or one of those.” She pointed to his scissor lift.

“Why not call Daddy?” A hint of sarcasm coated his tone.

Of all the nerve. Her jaw clenched. “He hurt his back, so he’s a contractor now. If I call him, he’ll insist on doing the work himself. And get hurt again.” She held her hand up, palm toward him. “Never mind. I’ll find someone else.”

“I’m sorry.” He hung his head, then dusted off his hands and offered his right one. “I’m afraid deadlines stress me. Two days won’t make or break me, but the staging thing sounds like a good deal.”

“Really?” Her voice came out too high. Why the turnaround?

“I’ll hold you to your end.”

“Not a problem. Thank you.” She clasped his hand, and despite him being on the verge of rude, another tingle worked up her arm.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Award winning author, Shannon Taylor Vannatter writes contemporary Christian cowboy romance and has over a dozen published titles. A romance reader since her teens, she hopes to entertain Christian women and plant seeds in the non-believer's heart as she demonstrates that love doesn't conquer all—Jesus does.

She gleans fodder for her fiction in rural Arkansas where she spent her teenage summers working the concession stand with her rodeo announcing dad and married a Texan who morphed into a pastor. In her spare time, she loves hanging out with her husband and son, flea marketing, and doing craft projects.