

It was so ugly, I had to have it.

I shaded my eyes against the sun and peeked through the chain links at the chocolate hulk claiming a high-grass mound. I'd only met two other vehicles in the last fifty miles; still, I swiveled my head in both directions before scaling the fence and dropping down on the other side. High above me, a sign resting atop twin cement stanchions read, "The Mon-Tel". The name, for sure, would need to go.

I feigned nonchalance—just a local woman taking a leisurely evening stroll—as I ascended the overgrown hillock. Paint-peeled pillars framed each of the motel's ten doors and boxy air conditioners jutted through the walls. I brushed my hand through the cobwebs on one of them and a long-legged spider ziplined down the netting, came to rest on my wrist, then, terrified, nosedived off and into a sidewalk crevice.

I tried to peer through one of the room's windows, but all I saw was my reflection in the glass.

A sudden fluttering startled me and I ducked. It was just a little yellow goldfinch and I'd encroached on his secluded home. He alighted a branch of the lone ash tree and I swore he glared at me. Couldn't blame him, really.

At the end of the row I paused and searched the landscape for a second. I didn't need to be hauled off in a county patrol car. What kind of new business owner introduction would that be? The abandoned motel was situated only two miles outside Monroe's city limits, but the only other structure my eyes could make out across the rippling grasses was what looked to be a tavern about a quarter mile away. Just one car

was parked in front of it, but the hour was early for thirsty laborers, I assured myself. Surely this stretch of road couldn't always be this deserted. Could it?

I rounded the corner and spied a pond bereft of water except for a dribble that lazed beneath fudgesicle cattails that poked out of the soggy ground. A collapsed lawn chair scraped the tall grass near what appeared to be the crumbling remains of a circular concrete path. Despite its ragged appearance, this must have been the relaxing evening respite for road-blind voyagers.

When I made my way around to the office, I yanked on its door as a lark, knowing it would be locked up tight; wishing it wasn't. Through the window an ungainly check-in desk came into focus, so oversized that even the sundown glare couldn't hide it.

I was in love.

I'd been on the road for almost two weeks, driving a wide circle from my home in Minnesota and up through northernmost North Dakota, before stopping at a roadside café outside Watford City, disconsolate; knowing I had to get back for work on Monday and I was empty-handed. I hadn't located my singular gem—at least a singular gem my newly-bequeathed inheritance could afford.

"Anything I can help you find?" the waitress asked as she glugged coffee into my cup and puzzled at my map splayed across the table.

"Oh, no, thanks," I said. "Just was hoping to find a property for sale. An inn—a motel, really."

The waitress chuckled. “I watch those shows, too. I don’t think they’re too realistic. Ever notice they only ever remodel two rooms? What about the rest of the place?”

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Oh, I agree,” I nodded.

“But if you’re serious—”

I cocked my head.

“I know a place. It’s across the border a bit—a little town in Montana. My mom’s hairdresser’s aunt owned a motel there for, I don’t know, fifty years, maybe. When she passed away everyone was sure all the in-laws would fight over the place. Turned out nobody wanted it.”

My heart leapt as I skated right past the “nobody wanted it” part. “Do you know if it’s still for sale?”

“Pretty sure. Here, let me show you on the map.” She sat down across from me and grabbed my marker. The line she drew ended at the map’s edge, and she hastily yanked a napkin out of her apron pocket and scrubbed the red mark she’d left on the table. “Well,” she shrugged, “just follow 200 to Glendive, then veer off onto 7. It’s maybe another hundred and fifty miles from there. Monroe is the town.”

I stepped back, pulled out my phone, and snapped the “property for sale” sign flapping against the office door. I’d need to find somewhere down the road to stay for the night before I called the real estate office in the morning and gave them all my money.

Toiling as an HR professional for the past ten years hardly prepared me to renovate a broken-down motel in the middle of apparently nowhere, but clasping my future in my hands sure beat endless conference room meetings alongside Ambassador Industries’ VP’s, trying my best to maintain consciousness as they droned on and on about margins and KPI’s. I’d find myself staring out the window at the lone sycamore bathing its leaves in the morning rays and I keened to prop my back against its trunk and watch the world go by.

I blamed my dad for my obsession. He didn’t make much money as a driver for the local lumber yard, but it was enough to take Mom and me on weeklong summer vacations to parts nearby and he insisted on finding an independent motel, eschewing the Holiday Inn Expresses and the Ramada’s. I marveled at those auto courts—every single one was different; unique. No beige anything. The rooms were bright and kitschy, with framed local artwork and mismatched curios, although I spent most of my days lazing by the outdoor swimming pools furnished with canvas umbrella tables and water that wasn’t necessarily crystal-clear. I met fellow kid travelers and together we’d stroll down the block to where a candy store inevitably resided while Mom and Dad rested their bones in the July sun.

When my great uncle Henry passed away at the age of eighty-eight, he conferred upon me the entirety of his small estate and I was honored. Great Uncle Henry and I always had a special bond, ever since Mom first took me with her to do his weekly housekeeping, before she became too sick. I was awestruck at his collections of marbles and bone carvings and especially his tabletop laden with antique bells. Mom admonished me not to touch anything, so I gazed at them in wonder from the doorway of the darkened bedroom, my arms crossed across my chest in case I was tempted to reach out and ring one of those bells. When Great Uncle Henry tromped through the front door, finished with his morning chores, he caught my rapture and gripped my hand; led me right up next to the heavy oak surface and said, “Now, you be sure to try out all these bells, Missy!” From that day forward, Great Uncle Henry began teaching me the history of all his treasures, delighted, no doubt, that someone had shown an interest in them. One day as I sent a pink-swirled marble smashing straight into a blue and yellow lutz and Great Uncle Henry chuckled, I turned to him and proclaimed, “I know why your name is Great Uncle Henry. ‘Cause you’re a great uncle!”

Thinking about Great Uncle Henry now invariably made me wistful, but I knew he’d approve of my decision. His written proviso instructed that I was to use the money to follow my heart’s dream.

The realty office situated smack in the middle of Monroe’s only bustling block was too silent for my jangling neurons. I’d barely slept the night before, at a Confetti Inn

I'd had to drive all the way back to Glendive to find, yet I was wide awake before daylight and stopped in the lobby only long enough to grab a cup of coffee off the self-serve counter before belting myself in and zooming down the road.

My phone read 6:55 and I berated myself for showing up far too early; showed up while the sky was still dark. The office door was locked and my eyes searched the street for an establishment with blazing lights where I could pass the next hour—or two.

A man carrying a briefcase rushed past me, then stopped, startled by my early-morning silhouette. “Uh, can I help you?” he asked. My shadowy presence had obviously unnerved him.

“Is this your office?” I asked. “Are you John Tanner?”

“Jack—Jack Tanner,” he said, looking me up and down suspiciously, as if I was a process server, there to ambush him.

I stuck out my hand and Jack Tanner flinched at the sudden movement. “Hi Jack. I’m Karen Grace. I’d like to buy The Mon-Tel.”

“Seriously?”

This was not a ringing endorsement.

“I mean, come in!”

He fumbled for the right key among his over-burdened keychain, pushed the door open for me and flipped on the overhead light.

“Sorry, my assistant doesn’t start ‘til eight. We rarely get visitors this time of the morning. Did you say The Mon-Tel?”

I tried to kid away his incredulity. “Why? It’s not haunted, is it?”

Jack Tanner emitted an awkward chuckle. “You have to excuse my—my dorkiness.”

Well, now I liked him.

“It’s just that I’ve had that property listed for a couple of years and no one has ever even inquired. Give me a sec. I’ll need to fire up the computer to get the specs.”

I looked around the room as he bent over the PC behind a desk with a nameplate that read, “Sienna James”, spied a clutch of magazines and settled into a chair, suddenly aware that my half cup of cold coffee was still glued inside my palm. If I wasn’t so hell-bent on securing The Mon-Tel’s deed I surely would have noticed Jack Tanner’s good looks. But given the computer’s apparent intransigence, I found time to look at him instead of the two-month-old edition of The Economist I’d grabbed. Anyway, what did it matter? I was here to get my ball rolling; not to admire my realtor’s sky blue eyes.

The office printer abruptly chugged and coughed out a stack of papers. Jack Tanner squared them with his hands and walked them over.

“Now, first thing, the seller is very motivated.”

“Okay, I’ll take it!”

This time Jack Tanner chuckled not self-consciously, but gently. “Do you have an attorney, Miss Grace?”

“Do I need one?”

He hesitated, bit his lip. “Can I be frank with you?”

“I hoped you would be,” I said.

“I don’t know you. You could’ve won the lottery, for all I know. That, in fact, would be ideal, because The Mon-Tel is not in good shape. Ms. Franklin passed away three years ago, and the place has been boarded up since then. And it wasn’t exactly pristine before that. Ms. Franklin didn’t have the money to make necessary repairs. I know you haven’t had a chance to inspect, but I need to take you over there. I mean, I could earn a decent commission if I just let you sign the papers, but—”

“Okay! Can we go now?” I wasn’t so stupid that I couldn’t recognize Tanner’s words as a dire warning, but I could think of nothing that would talk me out of making The Mon-Tel my own.

[INN DREAMS](#)

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REVIEWS:

Great Short Read

Such a sweet story with a twist. What is the realtor hiding? Who is the vandal? And why are they harassing Karen? Great short read for any who like to solve a simple mystery.

Unputdownable

What a fun read that's got it all: suspense, love, fun characters, and even real estate. I want a fan of the novella before reading this, but now I'm hooked because this one was done so well. You won't regret reading this title. And, if you're like me, you'll want to see a Book Two come out.

Great Ending!

This is more a cozy mystery than a suspenseful one. It is a novella so you aren't going to get the in depth character build up. The main character definitely has rose colored glasses and just wants to see the best side of everything. It makes you want to slap her. A quick enjoyable read with the best part being the ending!

OTHER BOOKS BY APRIL TOMPKINS

[Running From Herself](#) (novel)

[Shadow Song](#) (novella)

[Lies and Love](#) (novella)

[New Kaitlyn](#) (novella)

[The Diner Girl](#) (novella)

[Bad Blood](#) (novella)

Find My Way Home (novella)

The Apple (novel)