



CATTLE VALLEY



Fool's **Gold**

JENNA BYRNES

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Cattle Valley

FOOL'S GOLD

Jenna Byrnes

Dedication

To the wonderful Cattle Valley readers who support the ladies as well as the men!

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Chapter One

Adeline Murphy squinted at the bright sunlight shining in on her and yawned. She fumbled around the backseat of her ancient Pontiac Le Mans before clutching the passenger headrest, attempting to sit up. "Is it morning?" She glanced around.

"Hmm?" The woman sleeping in the front seat mumbled something unintelligible and rolled over, away from Addie.

"Hey, Chloe." Addie reached over and nudged her shoulder. "It's morning. Want to grab a shower before we leave Casper?"

"Don't want to be in Casper," Chloe muttered, trying to bury her face in the pillow.

Addie yawned again. "Tough. You didn't have to come with me, you know. I'm sure you can catch a bus back to Colorado Springs."

Chloe opened one eye. "Maybe I will. What's the name of this town we're going to, again?"

"Cattle Valley." Addie grabbed the badly refolded map of Wyoming and peered at it. "Somewhere near Sheridan which, in that state, is about as far north as you get."

"Great." Chloe threw an arm over her face. "Okay, whatever. I got nothing left in Colorado, I'll tell you that much. Might as well see what Cow Village has to offer."

"*Cattle Valley*." Addie bopped her companion with the map then tossed it on the wide front dashboard. "Come on, grab your stuff. They have showers in the back part of this truck stop. Then we can get some breakfast."

Shoving her pillow and blanket aside, Chloe sat up. "How about a little nookie? That's how I like to wake up in the morning."

Addie smiled at Chloe's dishevelled, spiked blonde hair and smeared makeup. She ran her thumb under Chloe's left eye, wiping away a black mascara smudge. "Let's check out the showers, see if there's any privacy."

Chloe's face lit up, and they both crawled out of the car.

Addie unlocked the large trunk and rummaged around in one of her suitcases for clean clothes and a couple of towels. She watched Chloe dig through an old military-style duffle

bag and pull out two equally rumpled shirts. Chloe sniffed one and shrugged, throwing it over her shoulder. She shoved the other one back into the duffle.

"I have shampoo in here somewhere." Addie dug deeper. She found soap and the other necessary supplies then looked at Chloe. "Anything else?"

"Oh, yeah." Chloe grabbed a small make-up kit.

Addie slammed the trunk, and they headed inside. Most of the actual truck drivers had left before dawn. She'd heard their diesel engines rumble to life, one by one, but tried to ignore them and sleep as long as she could. They only had a couple of hours left of their eight hour trek, but she'd been too exhausted the night before to attempt going the whole way.

A large crowd had gathered in the dining area for breakfast. Addie's father used to tell her, if she wanted a good meal when travelling, eat at a truck stop. Over-the-road drivers, who went back and forth regularly, always knew the best places to eat.

She did some quick mental calculations and knew they couldn't spend much on their meal. They'd splurged on a big dinner when they'd arrived the previous night then spent the rest of the evening fending off truckers who didn't realise they were gay. Chloe didn't help matters – she had a habit of letting men buy her drinks before eventually dropping the bomb. Most were pissed that they'd wasted their time and money, a few got downright angry. They'd met a couple of nice ones, though, who'd given them the free shower coupons most drivers accumulated with a tank fill-up.

After following the signs to the shower area, Addie turned in their coupons and was given two towels and two paper floor mats. She and Chloe glanced at each other – the towels were dingy and stiff. "I think we'll take a pass on these." She set them on a bench and entered the showers.

"Not bad." Chloe peeled out of her clothes.

"I'm leaving my flip-flops on, just in case." Addie motioned to her rubber sandals.

"What the hell. I've probably been exposed to everything possible, anyway." Her friend kicked her shoes across the room and stepped into a stall. "Care to join me?"

Chuckling, Addie chose the shower next to Chloe, pulling the plastic curtain closed. "I don't think so. Let's get in and get out. We'll have time to relax when we arrive at Cattle Valley."

"No fun." Chloe's voice sounded pouty, but her water turned on.

"Here." Addie passed the soap and shampoo over when she was done with them then hurried to towel off. She wasn't sure about the privacy level, and didn't want to get caught naked in a truck stop shower.

She dressed in a T-shirt and cut-off jeans. There was a hair dryer attached to the wall, and she was able to dry her short, black hair. There was no way to actually style it, but she was going to be driving for crissakes. *Who cares?*

Chloe was still in the shower, and Addie was completely dressed and ready to go. "Come on, girl!" She finally called. "What are you doing in there?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" A teasing voice came back.

"Actually, I'd like to get the hell out of here. Think you'll be done anytime soon?"

The water stopped, and Chloe threw the curtain back. "Bitch, bitch, bitch. All right, I'm done. Shall we go?" She held up her hands.

Addie gazed over Chloe's naked body. She had firm, perky tits with perfectly shaped round nipples. They were deep brown in contrast to her fair skin. The left one was pierced, and the small, silver hoop matched the ring that hung from her totally shaved labia. Addie glanced at the tempting flesh then looked away quickly. Chloe didn't need any encouragement. A suggestive glance might have them groping each other right then and there. Addie was anxious to get going. She handed over one of her clean, dry towels. "Come on."

"Yes, ma'am." Chloe sounded cooperative but she dried off as slowly as possible. She stood naked in front of the worn, scarred mirror and dried her hair then paused to examine her face up close. "I need makeup."

"You look fine. Maybe you could do your makeup in the car." Addie looked at Chloe's reflection in the mirror. A shiny stud punctuated the end of one eyebrow, and eight earrings adorned each ear. She knew the exact number. She couldn't help counting them when kissing in that vicinity on the sexy blonde.

Chloe snorted in disgust but moved away from the mirror. She wandered around the small, steamy room, apparently unconcerned that someone might come in at any time. Moving at a snail's pace, she gathered her things and finally began to dress.

It didn't take long. A small blue thong, tiny cut-off shorts and a sheer white top were all she had. Addie bit her lip. Luscious brown nipples poked right through the thin shirt. *I'm*

going to have to look at those all day? Sex might not be able to wait until they got to Cattle Valley.

"All right, I'm ready." Chloe slipped into her sandals and picked up her stuff. "I look like shit, but I guess I can do my makeup later."

"Sure you can. We have two more hours, at least. That's if I don't get lost." Addie couldn't resist and placed a light kiss on Chloe's mouth.

Taking full advantage, Chloe clutched the back of Addie's head and drove her tongue forward. They kissed passionately for a minute, sucking tongues like there was no tomorrow. The delicious tingles running down Addie's spine were almost enough to make her give in and shove Chloe up against the wall, but she held firm. They had somewhere to be.

She broke the kiss regretfully. "Come on, babe. Let's grab something to eat and go."

Chloe rubbed the back of Addie's neck and stared deep into her eyes before releasing her. "I'm not hungry."

Addie knew she didn't have any money. "I'll cover it. Get whatever you want that we can take with us."

At the counter by the cash register, she chose a granola bar and a small carton of milk. Chloe opted for cheese crisps and a can of soda. Without comment, Addie paid, and they returned to her car. "A couple of more hours." She patted the chipped paint on the dark green bonnet. "Get us to Cattle Valley is all I ask."

"Think this tub might not make it?" Chloe tossed her things in the back seat and climbed in front.

"It's been a good car. It's just really old. Some day, I expect it simply won't start."

"Not today, I hope." Chloe kicked off her shoes and propped her feet on the dashboard. She grabbed her sunglasses from the visor and put them on.

Addie smiled to herself. Her friend certainly made herself comfortable wherever she went. Personally, she never felt that laid back. Her upbringing—or something—kept Addie from really feeling at ease anywhere.

She shoved her clothes and the wet towels into the back seat, figuring to deal with them later. Then she climbed behind the wheel and drove, following the signs that would again take her north on I-25 to Buffalo. From there it was I-90 to Sheridan and the Big Horn Mountains.

Chloe crunched her crisps as she spoke. "You've really never been here? You bought the place sight unseen?"

"That's right." Addie ate her granola bar and polished off the small carton of milk. "I know, it sounds weird." *It sounds fucking nuts, even to me.* All Addie knew was that she'd been floundering in Colorado. If she hadn't invested the money she'd inherited upon her father's death, it easily would have been squandered away.

"It's a bed and breakfast, right? How big is it?" Chloe wiggled her toes, the small painted nails catching Addie's eye.

She tried to keep her attention on the road. Thinking about the place she'd recently purchased would keep her mind off the sexy toes on the dash next to her. "Yeah. It's, um, called the Apple Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast. It looks big from the outside. There are six rooms to rent, not including the attic. The owner said she was always planning to convert that space to another room but never got around to it."

"Six rooms, wow. Must be a big place. Where will you stay?"

"I'll have a room on the main floor." Addie motioned to the glove box in front of Chloe. "There's a picture in there. Pull it out if you want."

Chloe lowered her feet and rummaged around until she found the photo. She looked at it and gave a low whistle. "Nice. That must have cost a bundle."

Addie glanced at the large, white house with red trim. It was Victorian style with a huge front porch and a round turret with a window. Her heart lurched with pride each time she looked at the picture. It already felt like home. "It was reasonable. The owner was motivated to sell. I understand she was from Jamaica. Her mother got sick, and she needed to go home and take care of her."

"Jamaica, cool." Chloe shoved the picture back and closed the small compartment door. She crumpled up her empty crisp bag and rolled down her window enough to toss it out.

"Hey!" Addie muttered, surprised. "There are fines for littering, you know. I think they're expensive. So watch it."

With a small grin, Chloe leaned in close and cupped one of Addie's breasts. "If you have to pay a fine, I'll make it up to you. I promise." She kneaded the flesh through the T-shirt.

"Stop!" Addie shrugged the advances off but couldn't help smiling. "Let's just get there. The closer we are, the more excited I become."

"I'm excited, too." Chloe nibbled Addie's earlobe quickly then pulled away. "But I guess I can wait." She twisted towards the back seat and rummaged through stuff. When she turned around, she had a cigarette and lighter. "Do you mind?"

Addie did mind but would never say it. "Crack your window, okay?"

"You got it, babe." Chloe lit up and leaned back, adjusting the pane to suck the smoke out.

"Did I ever tell you my father died of lung cancer?" Addie tossed her a sideways glance.

"Nope." Chloe took a few more puffs then apparently got the message. She tossed the butt out the window and raised the glass.

"Quit littering!" Addie's nerves were getting the best of her.

"Sor-ry." Chloe settled back and remained quiet for a while. Finally, she said, "I have to pee."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" They were halfway between Casper and Sheridan. Addie just wanted to *get* there.

"Sign said there's a rest stop up ahead." Chloe fidgeted.

"Okay, fine." Addie followed the arrows and pulled into the large car park and picnic area. She was glad the worst of the trip was behind them. Chloe had slept most of the previous day.

"Thank you." Giving her a quick kiss, Chloe trotted into the building and came back shortly. "Much better."

"I hope you can make it, now."

"I don't think I can." The woman looked at her seriously. "I've got to have you." She reached for Addie and dragged her across the big front seat.

"Chloe, stop!" Addie protested, but the minute she felt teeth grazing her nipple, even through her clothes, she was lost.

"Don't want to stop." Chloe pulled up the T-shirt and yanked down the bra. "I want to come. And I want you to come, hard. Help you work off some of that nervous energy." Her hand slid down Addie's shorts, unsnapping them as she went.

"Christ!" Addie rested her head against the back of the seat. Strong suction on her tit, combined with fingers dragging through her folds, felt fantastic. Suddenly, she wanted to come, too. *Had to come.* "Oh, yeah. That's good." She bucked her hips, encouraging the hand.

"Mmm, my horny little bitch." Chloe nipped at the puckered bud she'd been sucking.

Addie bristled at the words but tried to ignore them and focus on feelings. Chloe's touch felt good. *Damned good.*

"I wish I had a dildo to fuck you properly. I know you like it deep. Hard and fast, right, babe?" Chloe sank three fingers into Addie's wet pussy, thrusting them in and out.

"This feels wonderful. You've got a talented hand."

"My hand loves to fuck your tight, hot pussy." Her thumb circled Addie's clit and applied pressure. Her other hand tugged Addie's other breast free, and Chloe switched sides, sucking the dry nipple into her mouth then releasing it. "I love how you can come with just a few little strokes."

"I don't know about that..." Addie's body tensed as Chloe bit her sensitive nipple. She relaxed as Chloe's tongue laved over it, a smooth, wet, sort-of-apology.

"I know," Chloe mumbled, her mouth firmly against Addie's breast. "Come on, baby. Come for me. You come so pretty."

Fuck! Addie gave in to the sensations and rode the wave of pleasure sweeping through her. Orgasms at Chloe's mouth and hands never failed to startle her. Intense and satisfying, somehow they made Addie forget all the little things that nagged at her when they weren't having sex. Ripples of delight ebbed like waves against the shore as Addie closed her eyes and gave in to the imminent climax. She tensed then shuddered, letting go as wonderful shockwaves caressed her body. When they subsided, Addie sighed with contentment.

"Mmm, that was nice." Chloe dragged her hand out of the shorts and rubbed her sticky fingers over Addie's lips. "Kiss me."

Addie obliged, kissing her hungrily after Chloe let the fingers dip in and out of each of their mouths. She enjoyed the taste of her own musk but enjoyed the taste of Chloe better. Too bad there wasn't time for that.

Her hand dove into Chloe's tight shorts, shoving the small thong out of the way. She'd reciprocate with a hand job and save the rest for a housewarming party, later that night at the

inn. "There it is." Past the silver hoop that pierced flesh, she found the small button of Chloe's clit and rubbed it.

"Oh, yeah. Keep kissing me." Chloe opened her legs for more attention, and they kissed passionately as Addie stroked her.

Addie's other hand slid inside Chloe's flimsy blouse, tugging the buttons open along the way. She kneaded the flesh of one breast then the other. She twisted the ring in Chloe's left nipple, and her lover squirmed. Her body twitched with each touch, and Addie knew she hit the right pleasure spots.

Her fingers zeroed in on Chloe's pussy and drove in and out, within the confines of the woman's tight shorts. "Come on, sugar. Ah, you feel so good. I know you taste good, too. Later, I'm going to eat you up."

"I'm coming!" Chloe shrieked. Her shudders rocked the car, loud panting cries shattering the silence of the rest stop. She gasped as her body twitched, and her knees closed tightly, as if trying to capture Addie's hand and keep it right where it was.

Fighting back a chuckle, Addie saw her through the climax then drew back. "Shh." She touched the other woman's mouth gently. "Damn, girl! Trucks passing on the highway could hear that."

"Who cares?" Chloe batted her eyelashes drowsily. "That was fucking beautiful. I don't care who knows it."

Pressing one last kiss to Chloe's mouth, Addie smiled and moved back to her side of the seat. She adjusted her clothes, putting everything back to rights, and started the engine. "Can we go now?"

Chloe didn't move, just lay there with her breasts hanging out and her shorts askew. She waved a hand in the air. "Drive on. Anywhere you want to go."

Resisting the urge to pinch one of the exposed nipples, Addie pulled from the lay-by and merged back onto the highway. They'd have time to stop later and clean up, maybe even apply some makeup. *Cattle Valley, here we come.*

Chapter Two

Melissa Danes wadded up a cheeseburger wrapper and shot it across the counter into a trash can. "Two points," she said out loud, though no one was around to hear. At midday during the week, the bookstore was as quiet as a mortuary. Sometimes she wondered how Naomi, her employer and friend, managed to keep *Booklovers* open.

She went behind the sales counter. Sipping diet soda from a paper cup, Mel inwardly blessed Deb's Diner for their delivery service. Most days she brought a sandwich and fruit from home, but some days, nothing but a thick, greasy cheeseburger would do. *And one of the world's best chocolate chip cookies.* She spread out a napkin and set the large cookie on it, inhaling the aroma.

The front door jingled open, announcing a customer. Mel looked up as a large, bald-headed black man entered the store. "Hey, Gill! What's going on?"

His legs were so long, he strode to the counter in just a few steps. "Hey, Mel. Kyle said Naomi called him yesterday about some cookbook he special ordered. I told him I'd swing by and pick it up then I forgot."

"Ah, okay. Lemme check here." She punched some buttons on the computer which sat next to the counter. "Wouldn't want to send you home with the wrong thing, since you're a day late and all that."

"No shit. I'd catch hell."

She smiled, thinking of the handsome hunk Gill had been married to for less than a year. It was hard to envision Kyle Brynn giving anyone a bad time. He seemed as sweet as the goodies he whipped up in his bakery. "Don't tell me, the honeymoon is over."

Gill grinned. "Not hardly. But that's another story, and I'd hate to make you blush."

"Stop it." Mel waved a hand at him good-naturedly. Her friends in Cattle Valley were some of the best people she'd ever known, but none of them was shy about discussing their sex lives. Sometimes, it appeared the big, masculine, gay guys were the worst when it came to embarrassing her. She was so petite compared to most of them, and they loved to tease her about that and just about everything else. She focused on the computer screen. "Here we go.

Confectionery, the Encyclopaedia of Sweets. Dang, as if that man doesn't know enough about sweets already."

Gill raised his hands. "Don't ask me. I just do what he tells me. Speaking of sweets..." He leaned over the counter and inhaled the fragrance of her cookie. "Smells familiar."

She nodded. "I'm glad Kyle started providing the diner with baked goods. Seeing as how he doesn't deliver, and they do."

"Oh, he delivers." Gill grinned. "You just have to know how to ask."

"You are horrible!" Mel came out from behind the counter. "I'll get that book. Naomi probably stuck it in back."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mel went to the stockroom and scoured the shelves before she spotted the cookbook. She carried it to the register and rang up the sale.

Gill handed her a credit card, and she processed it.

"How's Kyle getting along, anyway? I see him out of his wheelchair some days, but back in it other times."

He nodded. "It gets tiring. He still does a lot of baking in the chair because the kitchen is set up for it. After his accident years ago, no one knew if he'd walk again. But his physical therapy is going well. Once it's complete, and he's ready to get rid of the wheels, I'll probably raise the counter tops."

"You're so handy. It must be nice to be able to do stuff like that. I can't swing a hammer to save me."

Gill chuckled. "When I said I'd do it, I meant I'll make the call to Hal Kuckleman. He's a damn fine contractor and a good friend. I know he'll fix the kitchen however Kyle needs it."

"I gotcha." Mel slipped the book and receipt into a paper bag. "Here you go, Gill. I hope Kyle enjoys it."

"I'm sure he will, thank you. So, how goes the real estate agent job? Anyone new or interesting moving into town?"

She shrugged. "So far, I'm not making enough serious money to allow me to do it full time. I'm working with a couple of people who want to move here. Nobody as famous as you." She grinned at him.

"Shit." Gill waved a hand. "That seems like a lifetime ago. Funny, playing pro football used to mean everything to me. Now, I can honestly say I haven't thought about it in ages."

"You found something more important."

"Yeah. I sure did."

The look on Gill's face made Mel's stomach tingle. *Will I ever find someone who talks about me that way?* Even in the openly gay community of Cattle Valley, it seemed unlikely. A good man—or in her case, woman—was still hard to come by. "That's so wonderful," she mused aloud.

"Before you get all mushy on me, I'm out of here. " He turned and held up the bag. "Thank Naomi for Kyle. And enjoy that cookie." Gil winked and left.

"See ya." Mel watched him go, feeling wistful. It was nice to see people around her so happy, but sometimes jealousy niggled at the back of her mind. Especially when Naomi struck up a relationship with an author *Booklovers* brought in for a signing. Courtney Cross had apparently fallen as hard for Naomi as her boss had for the cute, blonde woman. Courtney had pulled up stakes and moved to Cattle Valley, and was supposedly working on a novel based on their little town.

Mel was extremely happy for them, even when she trudged to the grocery store to buy replacement batteries for her vibrator. It had been her only companion for far too long, and sometimes she couldn't help feeling irritated about it.

The front door jingled again, and several people walked in. Mel glanced at her cookie with a sigh before wrapping it up and setting it aside. *There'll be time for that later.* There always was.

* * * *

Late in the afternoon, Mel was changing out the front window display when she heard a noisy rumble from the street. She glanced out and saw an ugly car with flaking, dark green paint cruising slowly down Main Street. The noise, the grating sound of metal scraping asphalt, seemed to be coming from something dragging in the back.

The car slowed in front of the store then made an awkward turn and pulled in to park.

Mel peered through the dirty windshield, but it was impossible to see the driver. *Nobody from around here.* She was sure of that.

When the woman climbed out, stretching after what had apparently been quite a drive, she was hard to miss. Her shapely, tanned legs led up to a pair of short, jean cut-offs, with a T-shirt over them. Mel tried not to notice the pleasant way the shirt was filled out, instead skipping up to the woman's face. *Zoing.* Her heartstrings lurched.

The stranger was definitely attractive. Her cheeks were as gaunt as a model's, but her lips were full and a pretty shade of pink. Dark eyes were heavily lined with a makeup pencil, and long lashes were coated thick with mascara. Short black hair with tips of red framed her face. *Wowza.* Mel hadn't seen anyone that cute in town for ages.

They didn't get a lot of strangers through Cattle Valley. Most visitors were friends or relatives of town residents. In the summer, they had tourists, especially during Rodeo Days, but that was several months off.

Mel watched the woman adjust her clothes then lean down to check her face in the mirror on her car door. When she straightened and looked towards the bookstore, Mel hurried away from the window.

She tried to act nonchalant, leafing through a stack of paperwork, when the door jingled. She looked up as casually as she could and offered a smile. "Hi there. Help you?"

The woman strode towards her. If Mel hadn't seen the car, she might have believed the casually dressed bombshell to be an actress or a model. But nobody, not even a famous person going incognito, would choose that big, green boat to drive.

She gave Mel the once-over before replying. "I'm looking for a guy named Mel. Tia Brooks told me he'd have the keys to the bed and breakfast I purchased."

"*You* purchased?" Mel blinked, attempting to hide her surprise.

"Yes. I'm Adeline Murphy. I'm the new owner of the Apple Valley Inn." She stared at Mel for a moment then asked, "So, is he around? Mel?"

Mel's heartbeat drummed so loudly, she thought the other woman would surely hear it. She cleared her throat and tried to remain cool. "I'm him. I mean, I'm Mel! Melissa. Melissa Danes." *Now I'm babbling.* She closed her mouth.

The woman's pouty expression changed to a smile for the first time. "You're Mel? Oops, sorry about that. I guess Tia never specified. She just said Mel would have the keys, and I assumed...well, anyway, sorry."

"No problem. I do have the keys. I wasn't expecting you. Tia said you'd call."

"She never told me that. Or if she did, I forgot. She was in kind of a hurry the last time we talked."

Mel nodded. "Her mother was sick. I guess she told you that. Tia was anxious to get back home. She's from Jamaica, you know."

Adeline chuckled. "I could tell by her accent when we talked on the phone. Not much doubt about it. So..." She glanced around the store then let her eyes settle back on Mel.

The dark pupils seemed to gaze right though her. Mel shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. She normally wasn't shy around people. *I work retail, for crissakes! I'm around people all day long.* Something about this woman made her squirm, though.

"Nice bookstore." Adeline looked around again.

"Thanks. My friend owns it, I just work here." Mel touched a display of the latest best seller sitting on the counter. "Do you like to read?"

"When I—" The front door opened, the sound of the bell interrupting her words.

"I thought you were getting the keys. You decide to stop and shop or something?" A blonde-haired woman in even skimpier clothes than Adeline wore walked towards them. She looked around as she passed shelves of books, an expression of distaste on her face. "Doesn't seem to be much to shop for in here."

Mel studied the newcomer. Her breasts were barely concealed by the sheer blouse she wore, but even with the blatant sexuality, Mel didn't find her attractive. Where Adeline was made up nicely, her acquaintance had used the eyeliner to the point of overkill. Thick black lines circled her blue eyes, giving her a racoonish appearance.

"I haven't been in here that long," Adeline murmured. "Just making conversation."

"Oh, yeah?" The woman stared at Mel with distrust in her eyes. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Mel watched in disbelief as she lit one up, blowing a puff of grey wisps towards the ceiling. Frowning, Mel jiggled the small '*no smoking*' sign on the counter. "You can't smoke that in here."

"Why does that not surprise me?" The newcomer rolled her eyes, batting the lashes for effect. "I'll take it outside, then. I assume it's okay to smoke outside in Cow Village?"

"Cattle Valley," Adeline corrected in a hushed voice. "Go out, I'll be right there."

"I'll be waiting for you." She gave Mel another scathing once-over before turning slowly and leaving the store, a trail of smoke above her.

Adeline waved at the grey cloud in front of her face. "Sorry. It's been a long, tiring trip."

"That's okay." Mel reached under the counter for her purse and dug out a big key ring. "Here you go. You've been to the inn, right?"

"No. Actually, I've never seen it. Just pictures."

"Oh." Mel raised her eyebrows. Generally not much surprised her, but this woman continued to do just that. "You bought something that expensive sight unseen?"

Adeline shrugged. "The timing didn't work out to come see it. I really should go. If you could just direct me to the place..."

"Sure. It's on the corner of Walnut and Bower, near Beauregard Park." She pointed. "Go up to the stoplight and take a right. It's just a couple of blocks. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." Adeline snatched the key ring and hurried to the front door. When she got there she muttered, "Uh oh."

"What's wrong?" Mel followed her, looking out the window. Ryan Blackfeather was crouched behind the big, green car, examining it.

"Is he a cop?" Adeline asked with a tired sigh.

He wore a uniform shirt, but with his faded jeans and long, black ponytail, Mel agreed it was kind of hard to tell. "Ryan? Well, yeah, he's the sheriff. But he's cool. Come on."

She pushed open the front door and glanced around. There was no other foot traffic on the street. She could leave the store for just a moment. "Hey, Ryan," she called.

He straightened and glanced at her. "Hey, Mel. How's the book business today?"

"Pretty good. How's the sheriffing business?" she tossed back their standard greeting.

"Just got a sight more interesting." He smiled at Adeline then turned his gaze on the other woman who stood watching him, puffing her cigarette with irritation.

Adeline smiled nervously. "Anything wrong?"

He scratched his head and looked down at the car. "This wasn't making a horrible noise when you drove in?"

"Well, sort of." She blushed.

The cutest shade of pink. Mel tamped down the tingling in her stomach and tried to speak coherently. "It *was* a touch noisy. Ryan, this is Adeline Murphy, the new owner of the Apple Valley Inn. Adeline, Sheriff Ryan Blackfeather."

"Hey, Sheriff." She stepped forward and shook hands with the tall Native American. He was all of six-two, and even with her long legs, he dwarfed her.

Mel smiled. Ryan was strictly gay with not one, but two, partners at home. Yet he charmed women better than any man she knew.

"Pleased to meet you, Adeline." He nodded at her as they shook.

"It's Addie. And this is Chloe." Addie motioned to her companion.

"Chloe," he acknowledged.

The blonde smoked and glared.

He looked away, tossing Mel an amused glance before turning back to Addie. "Your muffler is shot. Next bump you hit, it'll be lying in the middle of the road. I'd recommend taking it to Gill's Garage just down the block. He does a good job at a reasonable price."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind, Sheriff. Right now, I just want to get to the inn. We've had a long trip, and we're both exhausted." Addie went to Chloe's side and shook her arm. "Come on, let's go."

"Yep." Chloe dropped her cigarette, snuffing out the butt with the toe of her sandal. She walked around to her side of the car and got in.

Addie started the engine and her car roared to life. She nodded to Mel and Ryan then backed out, muffler scraping as she drove off.

The sheriff passed by the cigarette butt slowly and glanced at it before stopping next to Mel. "That muffler will be off before she hits Ash Street."

"Not sure I've ever seen a car quite that old."

He grinned. "I used to have a fifty-seven Nash Rambler. But it was cherry, not like that piece of shi—" He coughed politely. "Car."

Mel grinned. "Gill's a magician. Keeps my little Mazda running perfectly. He can fix her up, I'm sure."

Ryan watched the old car turn off a few blocks down Main Street. He shook his head.
“The sooner the better.”

Chapter Three

Addie followed directions and ended up directly in front of the most beautiful house she'd ever seen, The Apple Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast. *My home*. She pulled into the driveway and stopped, gazing up in awe. "Isn't that something?"

"It's big." Chloe got out of the car.

"It's beautiful!" Addie followed, grabbing her purse and the new ring of keys. The large front porch was welcoming, with patio chairs and small tables grouped in several spots.

"They left the furniture?" Chloe touched the back of one of the wooden seats.

"Yes, Tia agreed to leave it all. She took her decorations and wall art, but the furniture, including linens and table service, stayed." Addie fiddled until she found the right key to unlock the front door. It was dark inside, and she fumbled for a light switch. Finally touching one, she flipped it, and a lamp in the corner came on. "Good, the power is on. I called, but you never know. All the drapes and blinds are closed. Let's get some light in here so we can see what we've got." She went from one window to the next, drawing the curtains and raising the vinyl blinds.

"Oh, my," Chloe murmured.

At the last set of windows, Addie spun around to see her new home properly for the first time. Her heart sank. Trash, beer cans and food wrappers littered the floor.

"Those last owners were fucking slobs." Chloe kicked a pile of garbage, and something scurried out from it. "Oh, my God!" she shrieked.

"What the hell was that?" Addie moved closer. "It wasn't a rat, was it?"

"No, just a fucking big cockroach, I think. This place is disgusting. I can't believe anyone would leave it like this for the new owner."

Addie walked over to one of the two sofas in the front reception and sitting area. Their cushions were askew, and she straightened one. Cigarette burns covered the top of the first foam pad. "I don't think Tia left it in this condition. Look at this." She held the pillow up. "One little spot, okay, accidents happen. But nobody would allow *this* to stay on the sofa.

She'd have had it recovered or replaced, whatever. No, I don't think she left the place like this."

"Let's look around some more." Chloe walked further into the house. She flipped on another light. "Hopefully, the kitchen's in better shape —"

Addie froze in her footsteps behind Chloe. "Fuck me," she murmured.

The kitchen was worse than the front room. Food and trash littered every corner. Insects had obviously taken over. Skirting piles of broken dishes, she went and stood in front of the state-of-the-art appliances. The fridge was open and basically empty. It looked like it *had been* clean at one point. Someone had spilled things all over inside, and it didn't look like an accident. The once-beautiful chrome stove was no longer silver. Addie's heart sank. Someone had created a fire on top. The whole thing was charred black.

"This sucks." Chloe glanced around.

"The rest of the house!" Addie ran from room to room, racing up the stairs and throwing open every guestroom door. She was crying by the time she saw the last of them. Pillows had been slit open, their feathers covering every surface. Curse words, carved with a knife, decorated the wooden dressers and headboards, and the mattresses were gutted, their coils and stuffing tossed around the floor. Not one room was untouched.

A faint odour of urine hung in the air. "Did they pee on the mattresses?" Chloe sniffed with distaste.

Addie held her head for a moment, then turned and marched down the stairs. She was shaking by the time she got to the main floor, tears turning to anger. Chloe stayed two steps behind her and thankfully didn't speak. Addie wasn't prepared to make small talk. She needed to call someone, but was so angry she had to take a minute and calm down.

There was a telephone at the reception desk. She picked up the receiver, not expecting it to work, but she got a dial tone. Punching in the universal number for information, she asked the operator for the number to *Booklovers* then let the woman automatically connect her for a small fee. *What the hell difference does a small fee make now?* She looked around her inn in utter shock and disbelief.

"*Booklovers*, this is Melissa," a soft voice answered.

It threw Addie for a moment. Melissa. The brunette with deep brown eyes and a beautiful smile. She'd never expected to find someone who looked like that when she got to

Cattle Valley. Addie shook her head, clearing the image from her mind. This wasn't the time. She glanced around. *I never expected this, either.* "Melissa, this is Addie Murphy. The inn is messed up." Her voice cracked with frustration.

"I'm sorry, Addie. I know Tia left in a hurry. She probably could have cleaned it better, but what I saw looked decent enough. Of course, I didn't dig around or look too closely."

"Did you camp out in here, maybe have a wild party or three, leave your trash and beer cans everywhere and piss on my mattresses? Oh, and bugs. Now we have bugs, too. But no furniture or pillows, because those have all been ruined." Anger bubbled just under the surface, and Addie wasn't sure she could hold it back much longer.

"Addie, what are you talking about?" Mel asked slowly.

"The place has been trashed!" she hollered. "It's awful! Oh my God, it's fucking awful." Tears choked her voice. She pulled the phone away from her ear.

She heard Mel talking on the other end of the line, but whatever the woman said didn't matter. She shouldn't have called her. The amazing, dark-haired woman had nothing to do with the inn, other than holding the keys. Someone had obviously broken in. She needed to call the police.

Addie put the phone back up to her ear.

"Addie, do you hear me? Let me hang up and call the sheriff's office. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"You don't have to come," Addie protested. *I don't need that distraction.* "I just didn't know who else to call."

"I'm on my way. I'll call Ryan, first. Hang tight, we'll be right there." The line went dead.

Addie hung up the receiver. She felt better knowing Melissa was coming, although she wasn't sure why. The whole thing was just so upsetting, she was reaching out to anyone she could.

"What's going on?" Chloe sat on one of the few remaining unbroken chairs, nibbling a candy bar.

Blinking at her in disbelief, Addie frowned. "How can you eat after seeing this?"

Chloe shrugged. "I'm hungry. We haven't had much to eat today. Breakfast and lunch were both quick snacks in the car. I hope we get something better for dinner."

Holding her stomach, Addie looked around. "I couldn't eat if I tried. I hope I don't get sick."

"Me, too." Chloe made a disgusted face. "That would be gross." She finished the candy and lit up a cigarette.

"Would you take that outside, please?" Addie snapped.

"What the hell difference does it make?" Chloe barked back. "This place is toast. A cigarette butt or two isn't going to make it worse." She flicked her ashes into a pile of trash.

Addie watched in horror, thinking her head might explode. She strode out to the porch and grabbed the railing to steady herself. If she'd been standing on a bridge right then, her first impulse would have been to jump.

She tried to put herself in Chloe's place for a moment. The other woman didn't have every penny she ever had to her name invested in this ramshackle dump. No one could possibly feel as awful as she did. It was her burden to bear.

Two vehicles pulled into the driveway, one beside the other. A black SUV with police lights on top was first, but the driver of the little blue Mazda exited before the officer. Melissa didn't even close her car door, just sprinted to the front porch in a full-out run.

"Addie!" Her voice was breathy. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Addie replied bitterly. "It's my house that needs life-support."

Mel peeked inside the open front door. "Oh, my God! Oh, no!"

Addie watched her with surprise. What was she so upset about? Maybe watching the place had been her responsibility. Tia had never said so, but perhaps she'd left Mel in charge of the inn.

"Afternoon, ma'am." A young, dark-haired officer, dressed in a uniform shirt and jeans, stepped onto the porch.

Mel looked back over her shoulder. "Addie, this is Roy Jenkins, one of our deputies. Roy, look at this!"

He tipped his hat to Addie and walked past, stopping in the doorway next to Mel. "Holy shit." He blushed a faint shade of pink. "Excuse me, ma'am. This is bad."

Addie moved behind them. "It gets worse. The kitchen is trashed. Dishes are broken, the appliances are ruined. There's not a piece of furniture that's usable." She looked in to where Chloe sat on the single chair, puffing on her smoke. "Well, except that chair."

"Damn." Roy brushed past Mel and went inside. He surveyed the damage with Mel just a few steps behind him.

Addie couldn't bear to go upstairs again. She waited in the front room, looking out the open door.

"Obviously the work of vandals," Roy announced when they came back downstairs. "Probably some kids from Sheridan. We have a couple of teenagers around here that might be talked into going along with this shit. One of them must have mentioned the place was empty, and the others took it from there."

"Vernie Adams," Mel announced, shaking with indignation. "He's a no-good little twerp. He's banned from the store because Naomi's caught him shoplifting three times. Not that he knows how to read, mind you. The little Neanderthal probably just looks at the pictures."

Addie gazed at her. "You really think he might be involved in this?"

"I wouldn't put it past him. He drag races his car up and down Main Street when he knows there's no law around."

"Now, just hang on." Roy held up his hands. "We'll talk to Vernie and a whole lot of other people. But you leave that to us."

"It just makes me so—so—angry!" Mel's voice exploded, tears streaming down her face. "This beautiful place in shambles. It's not right. It's not fair! Addie shouldn't have to deal with this her first day in town." She spun around to face the wall, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

Addie stared at her. She didn't think much could surprise her anymore, after the things she'd been through in her life. The vandalising of the inn had shocked the hell out of her. Yet, Melissa—the sexy, dark-haired woman she'd never expected to find—continued to surprise her.

A large, hulking figure filled the doorway. "Roy, what we got here?"

Addie glanced up at the sheriff she'd met earlier. *Ryan something*. His skin was slightly tinted, and she remembered he had a Native American name.

"Howdy, Chief Blackhorse." Chloe smiled, an annoying smirk on her face.

Ryan stepped into the inn. "It's Sheriff Blackfeather, ma'am." He dragged his gaze from her and looked around, giving a low whistle.

"Well, Sheriff." Chloe stood, hands on her hips. "Doesn't look like you or Barney Fife here managed to do your job very well. How could you let this happen? We've come all this way only to discover our home is in ruins. How are we supposed to stay here? Seems to me your department ought to take some responsibility. Put us up in a nice hotel for awhile until we get this mess taken care of."

Addie watched and could almost see him reining in his temper. What the hell was Chloe thinking? *We have to live in this town. Why alienate the sheriff, for crying out loud?* She stepped forward. "I'm not going anywhere. This place was my dream—is my home. It's going to take awhile, but I'll clean it up." She stared at Chloe. "We don't need a hotel."

"You've got to be kidding me." Her friend rolled her eyes and blew a breath upwards, causing her bangs to flutter.

"Listen." Ryan addressed himself to Addie. "Roy's going to take some pictures. Then I'm calling in a cleaning crew to shovel out the worst of this mess. We should be able to get the trash out, at least."

"And the bugs." Mel shuddered.

Ryan kicked a mouldy pizza box, and insects crawled in every direction. "Christ on a crutch! That's fucking disgusting. I'll call Joe Knapp over in Sheridan. He's the best exterminator I know. I'm sure he can be over here later today and spray real good, once the crap is out."

He turned to Roy. "Photograph everything. Dust for fingerprints."

"You got it." Roy went to work.

Addie stepped closer to Ryan. "I appreciate this, but I really can't afford much right now. I've got a cheque coming from my father's estate, and once I get it, I'll be fine. But at the moment—"

He raised a hand. "No problem. We'll just do what needs to be done, and worry about settling up later. You should check on your insurance, too. There'll be a deductible, but this should all be covered."

"Insurance!" Addie's mind raced. *I'd forgotten about that.* Had the policy already gone into effect? *Please let the inn be covered by insurance.* That might save her.

He touched her arm. "You have insurance, right?"

Addie laughed, waving him off. "Of course, I do. I'll just need to call my agent." *Whoever the hell that is.* She remembered someone insisting she needed coverage, but not much more than that.

"All right." He looked at her one more time. "Roy, let me know when you're finished. I'll round up a crew to send in here with shovels. It won't be perfect, but hopefully by tonight it'll be more liveable."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Addie told him sincerely.

"Call me Ryan." He smiled.

The corners of his eyes crinkled, and she realised how nice he looked. She'd never been too friendly with cops, but this one seemed okay. Addie nodded at him.

"See you later, Ryan." Chloe said loudly.

"You can call me Sheriff," Ryan muttered under his breath, barely loud enough for Addie and Mel to hear. He winked at them and walked out.

Addie grinned as she watched him go. For the first time since she'd arrived, she actually felt better. It might have been the offer of help or the reminder of her insurance policy. She couldn't shake the feeling it had something to do with the woman standing next to her. Mel's emotion had touched her deeply. It was entirely out of the blue, and way more feeling than Chloe seemed to have for the situation.

"I'm going to run home and change," Mel told her. "I should check in with Naomi at the bookstore, but I'll be back to help clean up."

"You don't have to do that," Addie insisted.

"I know I don't have to." Mel squeezed her arm. "I want to."

"Well, thanks." She wanted to say more, but Mel had already turned and gone.

"Snippy little bitch." Chloe lit another cigarette as they watched Mel drive off. "This is all her fault."

"How could it be? She was just supposed to hold the keys, not mount a round-the-clock guard on the place." Addie rubbed her hands over her upper arms. "She's being really nice."

Chloe cupped Addie's chin and pulled her face close for a kiss. "I'll show you nice, once we're finally alone in this dump. I can't wait to get my hands on you." She caressed one of Addie's breasts through her T-shirt.

Sex was the last thing on Addie's mind. *Or is it?* An image of Mel floated through her head, and she blinked. Maybe sex with the increasingly annoying Chloe wasn't what she wanted. Melissa Danes, now *she* was another story.

* * * *

Roy finished with the front room and moved on to the kitchen. Unsure where to start, Addie grabbed a trash bag and began shoving things into it. The task seemed overwhelming, but she forced herself not to think that way and kept working. Chloe was nowhere to be found, which was almost a blessing. The last time Addie had seen her, she'd had her feet propped up on the front porch railing, chain smoking and bitching.

Addie heard traffic in front of the house but tried to ignore it. If she stopped to look every time someone drove by, she'd never get anything done.

"Addie, you in here?" Mel's voice rang out.

"In the dining room," she called back and wiped beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Hey!" Mel walked in with a group of people behind her. "Addie Murphy, this is Rance Benning, Jeremy Lovell and Bo Lawson from the Back Breaker Ranch."

A tall, dark-haired cowboy removed the trash bag from Addie's hand and said, "How do, ma'am."

She raised her eyebrows, unsure what to say. More people filed in.

"This is Nate Gills and Rio Adegá." Mel leaned in to her. "They're Ryan's partners. Cute, huh?" Louder, she added, "This is my boss, Naomi Rivers, and her girlfriend, Courtney Cross. Naomi closed the store early to come and help."

Addie looked from the handsome man with short hair to the equally handsome one with long, flowing tresses. *Ryan's partners?* Cattle Valley was definitely going to be interesting. The two women smiled at her, one blonde, one red-headed, and Addie had no idea which was which. But they seemed friendly, and they were *here*. That meant a lot—at least, she thought it did. She turned to Mel and whispered, "Why are all these people here?"

Mel smiled. "This is Cattle Valley. This is what we do. Don't question it, just step aside, and let us get to work."

"I'm not going to step aside. Where did that guy go with my trash bag?"

The short-haired man stepped up behind her. "He's already filled it and is working on another one. I'm Nate, by the way, in case you missed it in that flurry of introductions. When all this is said and done, I'd love to help you redecorate this place. Now that Tia and her Jamaican voodoo dolls are gone, this house has real potential."

Addie managed an uncertain grin. "I think so, too. Thanks, Nate."

His eyes twinkled, and he moved next to his partner. *Rio*, Addie recalled. Nate seemed to be giving instructions more than working, and Rio appeared to be giving him crap about it. The look in their eyes when they gazed at one another was one of the most incredible things she'd ever seen. Addie could already tell they had something special, no matter how much they teased each other.

She wandered to the front room and saw at least six more people working in there. The place looked vastly improved, and Addie felt a surge of joy in her heart. "This is so nice of all of you," she said to no one in particular.

"It was a rotten thing that happened to you." Yet another handsome, dark-haired man smiled at her. "I'm Matt Jeffries, the physical therapist at the clinic. I had an hour between appointments and thought I'd lend a hand."

"That's so kind." She was amazed at the support she was getting from people she didn't even know. *A guy with an hour between appointments came to help me out?* Astounding. No other word seemed to fit.

* * * *

Addie strolled through the cleaned and polished rooms of her inn. The furniture was still ruined, but what was left sparkled and shone. The cowboys had dragged all the mattresses out to a truck, and someone had hauled them off. She'd seen a couple of people bring a different mattress in, along with an armload of linens, to make her room usable. After Mel and two other women finished in the owner's suite, Addie walked in and found the bed made up with fresh sheets and a pretty blue comforter she knew hadn't been there before. There were even two fluffy pillows, a pleasant sight given how tired she suddenly was.

"That was good pizza." Chloe followed her, a bottle of beer in her hand.

"Where'd you get that?" Addie sat on the edge of the mattress.

Chloe shrugged. "Whoever brought the pizza brought beer, too. There's a bunch of other food in the fridge. No idea where it came from."

Addie tried to remember whom she'd seen carrying bags. Mel. *Of course*. When the cleaning had been complete, the group had moved out to the porch so the exterminator could do his thing. He'd sprayed thoroughly and promised Addie he'd return, twice a week, until they were sure the problem was under control.

While they were outside, Ryan had returned with an armful of pizza boxes and drinks. Addie was so grateful he'd fed everyone. It was exactly what she'd have done if she'd been able. Somehow, she'd figure a way to repay the people of Cattle Valley. Once she got the inn open, and money was regular. She smiled at the pleasant thought.

"They brought chocolate chip cookies, too." Chloe munched into one, and crumbs sprinkled to the floor.

"Hey! They just cleaned in here." Addie grabbed the cookie from her hand and scooped up the crumbs. "Go eat in the kitchen, please. Use a napkin or a plate or something."

"Look who's Miss Snotty Pants tonight." Chloe snatched her cookie back and stomped off in the direction of the kitchen.

Addie sighed. She peeled out of her clothes and headed for the bathroom. She hadn't entirely unpacked, but her suitcases were open, and she easily found what she needed. Soap, shampoo and a towel would do it for tonight. She wanted to get cleaned up and go to bed.

She stepped into the shower-tub combo and drew the plastic curtain. There was good pressure, and the water felt nice and warm. Tonight, she was thankful for small favours. She was standing with her face upturned to the spray when something moved behind her.

Terrified, Addie spun around and saw a naked Chloe climb into the shower. "What are you doing?"

"Just what I promised. Remember what I said about getting you alone?"

"Chloe, I—" Addie's protest was cut off with a kiss. The tongue that stabbed into her mouth tasted like beer and chocolate, not entirely unpleasant flavours. She tried to pull away, but two hands clutched her firmly, kneading her breasts and running over her slick, wet skin.

"No arguments," Chloe murmured, their mouths still touching. "I'm going to make love to you. *Need* to make love to you."

Addie squirmed as a hand groped her crotch, working its way between her legs. Fingers parted her lips and worked upwards, spearing her pussy. *Okay, maybe.* She wasn't that interested, but it was suddenly too late to turn back. Leaning against the tile wall, Addie spread her legs to allow better access.

Chloe took advantage. Her fingers melded into the shape of a cone, she fucked in and out aggressively. She lowered her lips to Addie's breast and suckled one wet, wrinkled nub. "That's my girl." Her teeth grazed the nipple. "You like it rough. You like to be fucked hard and fast."

Addie groaned, a tingle forming in her lower region. Chloe always told her that she liked it hard and fast. *That's what Chloe likes.* It didn't feel bad, just intense. It would definitely get her off very quickly. She bucked her hips so the thrusting hand would hit her clit.

Chloe switched nipples, drawing the second one deep into her mouth. She sucked it firmly, with heavy pressure.

The feeling became uncomfortable, and Addie grimaced. "Ouch!"

"You love it. Don't be such a tease. You're my horny bitch, and you like things rough."

The nasty talk was a bit overbearing, but at that moment, the sensations were enough to send Addie over the edge anyway. She spiralled into a climax that, for a few moments, allowed her to forget the troubles of the day. She leaned against the shower wall, gasping and panting to retrieve her breath.

Chloe grinned up at her, still licking a nipple seductively. "See how nice that was?"

"It was nice," Addie admitted. "You have a filthy mouth, but it was good."

Rising to face her, Chloe pressed their bodies together. "Come and kiss my filthy mouth. Then tell me what you're going to do to me. I need it bad, babe. Need you to make me come."

"I can do that." Addie smiled at her. Chloe was pretty cute when she wasn't being obnoxious. "Let's get out of the shower and get to bed. I'm going to spread your legs wide and lick every inch of you."

"Ooh, on my way!" Chloe snapped off the water and reached for two towels. She dried off and made her way to the bed.

Addie moved slower, trying to rationalise things in her mind. *I need to be here with Chloe.* They'd come all this way together. This was the right thing to do. But as she crawled between the eagerly spread thighs, Addie closed her eyes. Maybe if she didn't look, she could pretend it was Melissa.

Chapter Four

Mel slid a hand down her flat stomach and circled her neatly trimmed pubes. She thought about lounging in bed since she was off work but didn't really want to do that. Images of Addie ran through her mind. The gorgeous woman had Mel hotter and more bothered than she had been in ages.

Spreading her warm, lightly furred lips, Mel focused on her clit. Her fingers rubbed small loops around it, teasing, not yet touching. With her other hand, she drove two fingers into her pussy, closing her eyes so her imagination could soar.

Addie rose above her, eyes teeming with lust. Naked breasts bobbed as she straddled Mel seductively. Dark brown nipples stood out from the pale, untanned flesh of her breasts. Addie's dark coloured thatch was shaved into a thin strip, barely covering the treasures hidden there.

She squirmed down Mel's body, grinding her pussy into Mel's leg and rubbing their skin together as she went. When she reached the apex, she settled in between, spreading the thighs wide. She blew warm breath across Mel's most sensitive area before opening the folds and dipping her tongue in for a taste.

The image, coupled with the manipulation of her hands, sent Mel skyrocketing into a delightful orgasm. Her body shivered and quaked before easing back to some semblance of normal. The climax had been sharp and intense, but it peaked and dissipated far too quickly. *They never last long enough when I'm alone.* The thought of Addie's face buried in her pussy would probably allow her another lovely little orgasm, but Mel relaxed. When she was thinking clearly, fantasising about the sexy brunette made her feel guilty.

Addie had a girlfriend, and despite the fact Chloe was brash and downright rude, they were together. Mel was many things, but a home-wrecker was not one of them.

She climbed out of bed and rushed through her shower. If she lingered, Mel was certain, given the thoughts she had about Addie, she'd wind up back in bed, vibrator in hand—or *someplace like that*. Smiling at the thought, she finished her shower with little fanfare. She really didn't feel like pleasuring herself again. She wanted to see Addie.

Dressed in jeans and a pink blouse, she applied just a touch of makeup to her lightly tanned face. Pulling her shoulder-length hair back while it was still wet, Mel wove it into the French braid she normally wore for work. Her bangs were long but didn't reach the braid, so she brushed them to the side. She sprayed a light mist of cologne over her chest then strolled out to her living room.

It wasn't a long walk. Her apartment was small, but it had suited her fine since moving to Cattle Valley a few years ago. Two years of college and partying at Iowa State University had left her with few credits and a lot of confusion about what she wanted to do with her life. Her parents were both pharmacists, and her brother was following their path. He was midway through the gruelling course of study. Mel knew she'd never survive six years of college nor all the math and science the degree required. She wasn't sure she wanted to spend her days dispensing pills behind the counter of some big box store pharmacy, anyway.

When she'd heard about Cattle Valley from some friends who'd passed through on vacation, she and Sarah, her girlfriend at the time, had decided to visit. Mel had fallen in love with the town and jumped at the opportunity when she'd spotted a *'help wanted'* sign in the bookstore. Sarah, more focused, had returned to school to finish her accounting degree. They still kept in touch, cards at Christmas, mainly. Mel knew her former best friend was happy with her job and a new lover back in their hometown of Ames.

Mel made some toast and ate, standing at the sink, thinking. There was really no reason to pop in on Addie at the inn, other than concern about how she was doing after the previous traumatic day. *And my need to see her.* Mel couldn't explain it and didn't really want to figure it out. She just wanted another glimpse of Addie Murphy.

Mel had left their fridge decently stocked the night before, so she knew they weren't desperate for food. But cinnamon rolls from Brynn's Bakery – they weren't food, they were a guilty pleasure. She'd pick up some and use them as an excuse to stop by the inn.

The bakery was crowded on Saturday mornings, so she waited patiently in line. Just as she reached the front, Gill came in from the kitchen. "Hey, Mel." He nodded at her then leaned down to plant a kiss on the cheek of the man in a wheelchair behind the counter. "And hey to you, too, good looking."

Kyle, Gill's handsome husband, looked up at him and smiled. "Hey, babe."

Mel thought they made a romantic couple. She gave them a moment then said, "Hi, Gill, Kyle. I thought I'd take some cinnamon rolls over to the new owner of Apple Valley Inn. Four ought to do it. No, make it six." She waggled her eyebrows.

"You got it. I heard about what happened over there. Sorry we weren't around." Kyle boxed up the rolls.

"No problem. Shep sent a bunch of guys from the Back Breaker Ranch, and with a few other people, we got the place cleaned up pretty quickly." She looked at Gill. "There might be something you *can* do, though. Addie's car is old, and her muffler is dragging on the ground, literally. Think you could help her out?"

"Haven't met a muffler I couldn't wrangle yet. Might have to run over to Sheridan for parts if the car's old, but I can do that."

"It's old." Mel nodded, remembering the ancient green beast. "Real old. I'll tell her to look you up. Actually, Ryan already did, but I'll remind her." She paid her bill and picked up the box. "Thanks, guys. See you later."

"Sure thing, thanks." Kyle nodded to her.

"Later, 'gator." Gill winked.

Mel grinned and walked out. Back in her car, she headed for the inn and hoped Addie was awake. She really wouldn't enjoy catching the two women still in bed—sleeping or otherwise engaged. Mel frowned at the image and put it out of her mind.

She approached the front door and knocked loudly. To her dismay, Chloe answered immediately. *At least she's dressed.* A cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth.

"Good morning," Mel said cautiously. She hadn't noticed the number of piercings the woman wore yesterday, but now she saw Chloe's ears were lined with lots of different jewellery. The stud in her eyebrow looked painful. She tried not to stare, remembering why she was there. "Is Addie around?"

"She's busy right now." Chloe squinted. "Need something?"

"I, uh..." Mel thought about offering the box of rolls, but Chloe didn't make her feel particularly welcome.

"Who is it?" Addie's voice wafted from the back of the house.

"Nobody," Chloe called back, staring at Mel as she took a drag from her cigarette.

That does it. Not welcoming was one thing, but rude was quite another. She raised her voice and called over Chloe's shoulder, "It's me, Mel. I brought you some breakfast."

"Really?" Addie entered the room, wearing jeans and a white blouse. Her hair had been moussed and spiked stylishly. It looked different than it had the previous day, when it had simply hung straight. Her makeup was still pretty heavy on the eyeliner, but nothing compared to Chloe's racoon eyes.

Mel smiled at Addie. *She looks damn hot.* Earlier, the thought had made her feel guilty. Now, given Chloe's uncalled for attitude, she didn't care. "Yeah. Cinnamon rolls from the local bakery. They're really good."

"I love cinnamon rolls!" Addie's eyes lit up. "Get in here." She reached for Mel's arm and pulled her around Chloe.

"I hoped you would." Mel let Addie drag her into the kitchen.

"You didn't have to do this, you know." Addie looked at her. "The food last night, either. It's too much. I can't repay you right now, but maybe when my cheque comes in..."

Mel sat gingerly on one of the repaired chairs. "I don't expect to be repaid. I'm just trying to be neighbourly."

Chloe spoke from behind her. "Never had neighbours like that before. People don't do things for no reason. They always want something."

Mel didn't bother to look at the cynical woman. She gazed at Addie. "Not everyone is like that. People are different here in Cattle Valley. More tolerant for one thing, and more laid back. The living is easier, and it makes a person want to do things for another person, especially when they need it."

Addie sank into the chair across from her. "I've never been much for needing other people. My father taught me to be self-reliant. He said life was hard enough, and it was worse if you were always waiting on someone else."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Mel thought Addie's father sounded bitter. She felt more fortunate than ever to have two parents who loved and accepted her unconditionally.

"But yesterday..." Addie shook her head. "I needed help. When I got here and saw the inn, I almost lost it."

"I thought we ought to turn around and hightail it out of here." Chloe stepped up to the table and picked at the icing of a cinnamon roll. "Still think we ought to."

Addie rolled her eyes. She told Mel, "I've sunk everything I have into this place. Right now, I've got nowhere else to go. Whether we stay or not remains to be seen. But I'll have to figure out the insurance stuff and get the place fixed up, even if I decide to sell it."

Mel quickly blinked back tears of disappointment, amazed to feel them forming. She barely knew the woman, for goodness sake. What difference would it make if she left? She searched Addie's face for the answer that wasn't there—it was in Mel's heart. *It makes a difference.* "You might sell the inn?"

"I haven't decided." Addie tore off a chunk of her roll and nibbled on it. "Damn, these are good!"

"That should be something to stay for." Mel smiled hopefully.

Addie grinned. "I think there might be lots of reasons to stay. I'll just have to see how it goes."

* * * *

Mel sat with Addie as she ate, and they talked. Chloe eventually sat and was social, if not friendly.

"I could help you figure out the insurance paperwork, if you like," Mel offered.

"I can do that." Chloe stared at her.

"I was only offering," Mel said to Addie, "because I deal with that in my other job all the time. I'm a leasing agent for Cattle Valley and the James Beauregard Trust, which owns all the land around here for miles."

"All the land?" Chloe made a face at Mel then turned to Addie. "But you just bought the inn. You must own this land."

Mel shook her head. "Actually, no. People purchase buildings, and make yearly payments to the trust. The money is used for community improvements, as decided by the trustees."

"That sucks." Chloe scowled.

"I knew that." Addie nodded. "I'd kind of forgotten, but that was in the papers I signed. It doesn't matter, the house is mine."

"House with no ground underneath it," Chloe muttered.

Mel ignored her and looked at Addie. "So I'm pretty familiar with insurance stuff, if you'd like some help."

Before she could answer, Chloe stood up. "I told you, *I'll help her*. We're not complete idiots, you know. We can do a few things for ourselves."

Recoiling in shock, Mel stood. "I never meant to imply —"

"Ignore her." Addie got to her feet, waving a hand. "Thanks so much for the cinnamon rolls, and everything you did yesterday. We really appreciate it."

"Sure." Mel gazed at her one more time. There was something so sweet and vulnerable about Addie, she just wanted to wrap her arms around her and hang on.

A phone rang from somewhere in the front room, and Addie moved towards it. "I'll get it."

"I'll see you out," Chloe told Mel.

"All right." She walked past the reception desk where Addie carried on a conversation. The woman waved at her and smiled then turned to the wall to continue speaking.

Mel stepped onto the front porch and didn't plan to pause, but Chloe grabbed her arm.

"I think you can help us best by staying away, bitch." Chloe squeezed her nails into Mel's bicep.

She tried to yank free, but the grip was tight. "Did I do something to you?" Mel looked at Chloe. "Say something wrong that I don't know about? Because if I did, I'm sorry."

"You know what you did. I see you making eyes at Addie like you'd be all over her in a second if I wasn't here. Well Addie is *mine*. We came here together, and we're going to be together. I'd appreciate it if you'd just stay the fuck away."

Mel's eyes widened in shock, but she tried to control her emotions. "I was only being neighbourly."

"Yeah, well we don't need neighbours like you. Take the hint, or I might have to give you a more permanent one." She dug her nails into Mel's arm and held tight before shoving her away.

Angry and embarrassed, Mel rushed from the porch and into her car. She drove as quickly as she could to get home, and sat panting in her parking space, attempting to control her breathing. She looked down at the reddened nail impressions on her arm. Chloe hadn't broken the skin, but ugly marks were already forming.

She grabbed her purse and realised her hands were shaking. She sat there a moment, regaining her composure.

Chloe was partially right. *I probably did look at Addie the wrong way.* No spouse would appreciate that, male or female. Addie was involved with someone, and Mel had no business worming herself into their relationship. She was ashamed she'd even thought about it.

She'd stay away from Addie. Not because Chloe threatened her, she'd dealt with bigger bullies in high school when people found out she was gay. Defending herself wasn't the problem. Doing the right thing was more important.

Glancing down at her arm, Mel shook her head. *Yep, there'll be bruising.* She touched one hand to her heart. *Here, too.*

Chapter Five

Addie glanced around the inn, which looked in worse disrepair than ever. She'd gotten the bright idea she could refinish the scarred wood furniture herself. She'd helped her father do it one time, and didn't recall it being so difficult. After moving the damaged pieces into the dining and front rooms, Addie had gone to the local hardware store and bought a bunch of supplies. She'd paid for them with her already overburdened credit card, and held her breath that the transaction would process.

Part way through the sanding of the first headboard, a lovely walnut piece with the words 'fuck you' carved across the front, Addie had made a discovery. The knife marks were deep. A simple refinishing wouldn't do the job. She had to find a way to get rid of the writing, fill it in with putty or something, before she could go on. But the putty idea didn't seem to be working.

She flopped onto the battered sofa and sighed. They'd been in Cattle Valley a week. She hadn't seen Mel since Saturday, when the woman had brought cinnamon rolls. It surprised Addie a bit. For some reason, she'd thought Mel was interested in a friendship.

The people of the town also continued to surprise her. Wherever she went, they seemed to know she was the new owner of the inn and about what had happened. Everyone offered sympathies and support if there was anything Addie needed. Deep inside, she felt like she needed a lot of things. Help from well-meaning strangers just wasn't on the list.

Addie picked up her gloves and stood, going back to work. *Some help from Chloe would be nice.* The woman spent her days tanning and doing her nails, reading tabloid magazines and watching the small TV Addie had brought from Colorado. She'd made a big show in front of Mel that *she* would be the one to support Addie. Yet she hadn't offered to help once.

"I'm bored." Chloe leaned up against the door she'd just entered. "What are you doing?"

The voice startled Addie, and she jumped. She glanced down. Bending over the headboard with bulky yellow rubber gloves on, a turpentine odour in the air, she assumed it

was pretty obvious she was stripping furniture. "I'm having tea with the queen," she retorted sourly.

"Whatever." Chloe shrugged. "I was going to see if you wanted to fool around. My favourite thing to do when I'm bored is eat pussy."

That's the last thing I want right now. Chloe's sex drive was high, and they made love every night. But even the thought of that talented tongue working over her didn't appeal at that moment. She was frustrated, and nothing seemed to be going right. "I'm busy." She brushed hair from her forehead with the back of her arm.

"You're always busy. You're no fun anymore." Chloe stomped around the room, digging through stacks of magazines. "Damn! I've read all these!"

Addie sighed. She looked down at the headboard, which still shouted 'fuck you'. She wasn't making much progress. Unfortunately, she'd bitten off more than she could chew with this job. "Let's get out of here," she decided.

"And go where?" Chloe looked suspicious.

"I saw a bar on Main Street. Brewster's, I think it was. We could get something to eat and have a few drinks."

"Really?" The blonde's eyes lit up.

Addie tossed her hands in the air. It had been a horrible day, topping off a lousy week. She didn't want to think about money or insurance or crappy furniture any more that night. "Really." She nodded. "I need a shower." When she saw Chloe's eyes sparkle again, she raised a hand. "Alone. It'll go faster that way. Why don't you go find something nice to wear?"

"It'll have to be something of yours. I didn't bring that much."

"I know." Addie peeled off her gloves and tossed them aside. Everything else could wait. It'd all be there for her the next day. She started for the bathroom, only to stop. "Shit! I forgot, my car's in the garage, getting a new muffler." The sheriff had given her looks every time he saw her in town, so she'd finally taken it to the mechanic he'd recommended—the only mechanic in town, probably.

"We can walk." Chloe offered. "I've walked to town before, it's not far."

"Okay, sure." Addie nodded. Walking sounded like a fine idea. She intended to have a drink or ten, and figured the ever-present sheriff would probably have something to say about that if she tried to drive afterwards. "Walking it is." She headed for the shower.

* * * *

Brewster's Bar and Grill was crowded for a small town, even if it was a Friday night. There were no tables, so Addie and Chloe drank at the bar, munching nachos and running a tab on Addie's one and only credit card. If it didn't get denied, she'd be shocked. The big black guy at the garage had a surprise coming, too, when he tried to bill her. She didn't know how many of these small charges it would allow, but Addie felt sure the car repair would be too much.

What can I do? She'd stick to her story about having a cheque coming in, and hopefully some money would turn up somewhere. She'd originally thought the inn would be her source of income. She'd had no idea it would be uninhabitable when she showed up. And the insurance everyone kept saying would bail her out—she didn't even want to think about it. She was so naïve when it came to business.

"I'll have another vanilla vodka and cola," she told the bartender, shaking her ice at him as he walked past.

He stopped and smiled at her. "You driving tonight?"

"No, I am not. We walked here, and we'll walk home."

A man with long, black hair and a full beard put his arm on the bar behind her, touching Addie's back. "I could give you a lift."

She'd noticed him when he sat on the barstool next to Chloe, and the two had struck up a conversation. Addie tried to focus and decide if she recognised him. She'd met so many people in the past week, it had been one handsome male face after another. This guy looked stragglier than the others had, and definitely not familiar. "We can walk, it's no problem. We're not ready to go, yet." She picked up her fresh drink and sipped.

He leaned in, running a finger over her forearm. "When you are ready, just say the word."

Addie had lost count of the number of drinks she'd ordered and was feeling no pain. She looked the man in the eye. "You do realise we're gay, don't you? We don't do guys."

"Aw, that's not very much fun. I have a woman with me. See Gina over there?" He pointed down a couple of barstools, where a redhead with a hippie hairstyle and a flowered dress sat. "Your friend tells me a little group action might not be out of the question." He ran his hand up Addie's back.

His touch disgusted her. "My friend couldn't be more wrong." Addie pulled away. She grabbed Chloe's shoulder and whispered harshly, "What are you doing? We are *not* taking these people home with us."

"Chill out." Chloe moved from her grasp. "We were just talking. Come 'ere, Del." She nodded to the man.

With a disparaging glance at Addie, he returned to his spot between Chloe and the redhead.

Addie breathed in and out for a moment, composing herself. Perhaps she'd had enough to drink. Chloe certainly had, if she'd actually considered what Del offered. Before she'd decided if they should leave, Chloe turned back to her.

"Listen," she announced breathily. "Del and Rita are headed to San Francisco. They've been telling me about this street thing that's coming up, called the 'How Weird Street Faire'. I guess it's on Howard Street, isn't that funny? Anyway, there'll be music, food and vendors, all that jazz. Del says people wear costumes, and there's dancing in the streets from morning to night. Doesn't that sound cool?"

"I don't know." Addie shrugged with irritation. "California is like a thousand miles from here. Do you realise how long of a trip that would be? You griped about the drive from Colorado Springs."

Chloe made a stern face. "I know I bitched. Honestly, if I'd known what was waiting for me, I never would have come. This town sucks. There's no night life, and the people are nosy as hell."

"Friendly," Addie corrected. "Neighbourly."

"Who needs neighbours? I want to have fun! I'm going to the street faire, Ad. You can come with me or not, but I'm going."

Addie blinked in disbelief. "You're just going to take off? Pick up and leave with strangers?"

Chloe shrugged. "I've done it before."

The statement hit Addie like a ton of bricks. At that moment, she didn't care if Chloe stayed or went. "Have fun." She shook her head.

The woman looked uncertain. "You sure you don't want to come with us?"

"I'm positive. You go, and have a great time. Have a great life. It was nice knowing you." Anger rose in Addie's voice.

"We're leaving pretty soon. I need to get my stuff."

Addie glanced from Chloe to Del and Rita, who stood with artificial smiles next to her. She had no intention of getting in a car with those people, and wasn't sure she could walk home at that point.

Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out her keys, prying one of several to the inn off the ring. "Here." She pressed the key into Chloe's hand. "Just take *your* stuff, okay, Chloe? Do me that one courtesy. I've been straight with you on this trip, and I've paid for everything without saying a word." She leaned in so no one else could hear. "And we both know I don't have a frigging dime. So don't go back there and let your '*friends*' clean me out. Show me that much respect, could you, please?"

Chloe snatched the key, an offended look on her face. "I would never do such a thing. You know me better than that." She placed a light kiss on Addie's lips.

Addie pulled back and smiled sadly. "I'm not sure I know you at all, Chloe. Oh, and leave the key on the table."

With another insulted roll of her eyes, Chloe swept from the bar, Del and Rita on her heels.

Addie thought she might be making a very big mistake by letting them go into her house alone. But going with them, in her condition, seemed like a bigger mistake. Now, she just wanted to forget. "One more, barkeep!" she hollered.

The man behind the bar gazed at her sceptically but provided the drink. Addie chugged it, and the liquid splashed her face, a convenient way to hide the tears that suddenly couldn't be stopped.

* * * *

The friendly bartender offered to call someone to drive her home, but Addie declined. She had no money, not that Cattle Valley had cab service, anyway. He'd probably call Ryan Blackfeather, and she'd have to listen to a 'big brother' scolding for four blocks. She could do without that. Scribbling a tip on the bottom of her charge slip, Addie held her breath as the man processed it.

He handed her a receipt. *Whew*. She shoved the piece of paper into her purse.

"You sure about that ride? Cattle Valley is a quiet town, but as you could tell by some of our patrons tonight, we do get our share of strange ones."

"I'll be fine. Really." Addie smiled at him. She'd always heard bartenders were easy to talk to. Some night, when the hurt wasn't so fresh, she might have to come back and spill her guts to this guy. Clutching her purse, she got unsteadily to her feet. "Good night."

"Night. Take care, now."

Addie staggered into the cool evening air. It smelled fresh and good. She inhaled deeply and started walking. *This was a good decision*. It was nice to enjoy the quiet solitude of her new town—as long as she could stay on the sidewalk. She wobbled and straightened herself.

Two blocks from home, a small, blue car pulled over to the side of the road next to her. The window went down, and a voice said, "Would you like a lift?"

Addie stooped over and gazed inside. "Melissa Danes! Well, what do you know! What are you doing out at this time of night?"

"I could ask you the same question. I'm out because Brewster from the bar called and told me you were walking home alone. He didn't feel good about it, but said you wouldn't accept a ride."

"I'm fine." Addie waved her hand. She was secretly thrilled that Mel had shown up, but had to remind herself the woman had been absent all week. She shouldn't read too much into Mel's appearance.

"Get in." Mel nodded to the passenger side of her car.

A wave of dizziness swept over Addie, and she decided riding sounded like a fine idea. She made her way around the car and slid inside. "Thanks."

"No problem." Mel leaned over her, reaching for the seatbelt and fastening it across her chest. She paused to look into Addie's eyes for a moment, then straightened up and drove.

"I am a little tired." Addie let her head fall back against the headrest. "Been a long night. Long day. Ah, hell, long week!"

"I'm sure it has." Mel pulled into the driveway of the inn and parked. She glanced up at the dark house. "Is, uh, Chloe in there, or would you like me to help you in?"

"Nope, Chloe is not in there." Addie opened her door and fell halfway out before something caught her.

"Wait." Mel dragged her back into the car and released the seat belt. "There you go. I'll walk you in."

"You don't have to." Addie stumbled up the stairs onto the porch. She patted her pockets, wondering where her keys were.

"Keys?" Mel said from behind her, holding out her purse.

"Oh." Addie laughed and grabbed the bag. After finding the keys, she unlocked the door and went inside.

Mel followed, flipping on a light. "Ah, furniture refinishing. Looks like a big job."

"Too big. I can't do it." Addie tossed her purse on the counter and went straight to the kitchen for something to drink. In the fridge, she noticed the six pack of beer they'd purchased was gone, but one bottle remained hidden towards the back. She popped the beer open and stumbled back out to the front room. "Sorry, it's my last one. I can share." She held the bottle out.

Mel waved a hand. "I'm good. You should sit down."

Addie dropped onto the sofa. "I'm good, too. Fucking peachy good." She took a draw on her beer.

Sitting next to her, Mel asked softly, "Where's Chloe?"

Raising her wrist to look at an imaginary watch, Addie murmured, "Probably about Utah, by now. Unless she has to stop and pee every hour like she did with me."

"Utah? What's in Utah?"

Silly thoughts whirled in Addie's vodka-addled brain, and she said the first thing that came to mind. "The Mormon Tabernacle Choir." She laughed at the hilariously funny joke.

Mel sat back with a confused look on her face. "I never got the impression Chloe was Mormon. So is there another reason she's going to Utah?"

Addie took a swig of her beer and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "She's going to San Franshishko. San Franshih-ka-bob." She laughed again, holding her stomach.

"Okay." Mel brushed hair from Addie's forehead. "We can talk about this tomorrow. If you're okay, I'll just go."

"No!" Fear knifed through Addie's heart. She clutched Mel's hand. "Please, don't go. I don't want to be alone."

A strange look crossed Mel's face, as if she were trying to decide. "I guess I could stay. I don't have to work tomorrow."

"Good!" Addie breathed a sigh of relief. She tossed back the last of her beer and set the bottle on the floor. "Because I really want you to stay." She turned back to Mel. Before she had time to think about what she was doing, she tossed a leg over and straddled Mel's lap, facing her.

"Whoa!" Mel pulled back, surprise on her face.

"Don't worry. I'll be gentle." Addie leaned forward and kissed her.

Chapter Six

Mel's eyes widened when Addie's mouth touched hers. She thought about returning the kiss and bringing to life the fantasy she'd harboured for over a week. But the sexy, dishevelled woman tasted like beer and something stronger, and Mel was not about to take advantage.

"Whoa, slow down, there." She pressed Addie back gently.

Addie raised her hips and ground herself into Mel's lap. "Don't you want me? I want you very much."

"Um, yeah." Mel didn't know how to answer that one. *Hell yes, I want you. But it's not going to happen like this.* She gripped Addie's shoulders. "Not tonight, honey. Not in the mood you're in."

"I'm in the perfect mood." Addie smiled at her, a lopsided try at seductive.

"Yes, I see that. Come on, now." Mel moved the delightful body off hers and set her back on the sofa.

"Aw, hell!" Addie began to cry. Big drops trailed down her cheeks, smudging her mascara.

Mel gazed at her and realised, judging by the makeup, it wasn't the first time she'd cried that night. She reached out and pushed a lock of hair away from Addie's face. "Don't cry, sweetie. Maybe we just need to talk. Seems like you have a lot on your shoulders right now."

"I can't talk about it." Addie shook her head. "Can't think about it. Too much. Way too much."

"What's too much? Come on, Adeline. Tell me what's going on with you."

Addie opened her eyes and looked at Mel. She sniffled, wiped her face and smiled. "Okay, Melissa. I'll tell you. Nothing is turning out right. My father wasn't supposed to die, my mother wasn't supposed to disown me..."

"Slow down." Mel could see Addie had a lot to get off her chest. "Start at the beginning, please. When did your dad die?"

Addie's slurred speech seemed to clear up as she reached into the past. "A few months ago. He had lung cancer. Smoked all his life. They tried to operate, but the doctors discovered it was too far advanced. He lived one year from the diagnosis, but he was pretty miserable."

"I'm sorry." Mel saw Addie relax, leaning back on the sofa, and she did the same. "What about your mom? You said she disowned you?"

"Several years ago. I was fresh out of high school. She'd always suspected I was different, but when I turned eighteen and joined a gay rights activist group, she blew up. Kicked me out of the house and all that. I was happy to go, but I didn't have any money."

"Were you going to college?"

"Nope. Never quite figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up. Still haven't, I guess. Anyway, my father set me up in an apartment, which annoyed my mother no end. I got a job waiting tables, and he got booted out of the house just like me."

"You're kidding!" Mel had never heard of such a thing. Her parents were fun-loving, easy-going types. Better than that, they were best friends. They'd been married twenty-five years, and their relationship showed no signs of aging.

"Not kidding. Dad was okay. He was a plumber with his own little business. There was never a shortage of work. Truthfully, I don't think he was ever good enough for my mom. She thought she was hot stuff—some big shot banker's administrative assistant. That's a fancy-ass word for secretary. I heard people say that might not have been all she was to the guy, but I didn't want to get into that. Colorado Springs is a big place. She lived her life. Dad and I lived ours."

"At least you were close to your dad." Mel tried to see the positive.

"Yeah, he was great. Towards the end, when he knew he couldn't work anymore, he sold his business and got enough money to keep us going. I quit working to take care of him the last three months of his life. Then I spent the next three trying to straighten things out. He had a will, and not that much stuff, so it shouldn't have been that complicated."

"But?" Mel could tell by the sound of her voice there was more.

"But my mother went nuts when she found out I inherited his money. She sued me for his estate."

"Oh my God!" Mel shook her head. *No wonder Addie is depressed.* If anyone had a reason to be, it was her. "What happened?"

Addie shrugged. "I paid a lawyer up front to handle things for me then I spent the rest of the money as fast as I could. On this place." She glanced around. "Such as it is. My very own iron pyrite."

"Excuse me?" Mel wasn't following.

Addie waved a hand around the room. "Fool's gold. My father used to tell me about miners who gave up everything they had and moved west, looking for gold. Some of them found iron pyrite, which looks pretty on the outside but isn't worth much on the inside. They lost everything chasing fool's gold. Just like I did with this inn."

"It is *not* just like that!" Mel insisted. "This inn was a beautiful place with a great business. It will be again, you wait and see."

Addie shrugged. "I'll wait if I can. Have to see how the lawsuit comes out."

"The lawsuit—you mean your mother's pursuing that?"

"Yep. Isn't settled yet, far as I know. I assume the lawyer will contact me."

Mel blinked. "But you spent the money."

"Yep." Addie smiled. "So if she wins, I'll be forced to sell this place and pay her back."

"You don't think you could scrape together enough—"

"Melissa, right now I couldn't scrape together milk money. I'm running on fumes. Not literally, because when that big guy at the garage finds out I can't pay for my car, he'll have to keep it."

Mel thought about Gill driving the old green Pontiac and bit back a chuckle.

"What?" Addie looked at her.

She couldn't resist speaking her thought, hoping it would lighten the mood rather than piss Addie off. "You think Gill will want that car?"

Addie stared at her then started to laugh. "Hey, it'll have a new muffler!"

Mel laughed until her stomach hurt. She nudged her arm against Addie. "See, there's always a bright spot. You just have to know where to find it."

"Oh, yeah?" Addie's mirth faded away. "Find me the bright spot in this, Little Mary Sunshine. Thanks to my lawyer's advice, I did take out insurance on the inn. But he told me

since it was a business, I should go with a higher deductible to lower my payments. In order to have this place fixed up, I'll have to come up with thousands of dollars."

Mel gazed at her sincerely. "I'm sorry. So I guess you don't really have a cheque coming in?"

"Uh, no. Not proud to say it, but I lied."

Mel sighed. "No wonder you were trying to forget your worries."

"I was." Addie nodded. "I offered to take Chloe to the bar and relax for an evening. *At* the bar, she met some guy named Del and his girlfriend Rita, who wanted to have three-way sex with us. No wait! That would be four-way, wouldn't it? Anyhoo, I declined, and Chloe left with them. Headed to some street faire in San Fran—wherever." She shook her head. "You know where I mean."

"Chloe's gone?" Mel couldn't believe her ears.

"Yep. I haven't checked to see how much of my stuff she took with her. The house and crappy furniture are still here, so I have that."

"Chloe is gone." Mel repeated quietly. The words were too good to be true. But Addie had to be suffering, and Mel's first thoughts should be for her and her well-being. "I'm so sorry, Addie. That's just awful."

"Yes, it is." Addie closed her eyes drowsily.

"How long were you two together?"

"Hmm?" Addie murmured.

Mel couldn't tell if she were thinking or had fallen asleep. She waited.

"Almost three weeks, I guess."

"Three weeks?" Mel nearly shouted with excitement. *Why did I think they'd been together so much longer?*

Addie's eyes popped open. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Mel gripped Addie's shoulders, pulling the woman's head into her lap. She stroked her hair. "Not a blessed thing."

Addie gazed up at her. The look in her eyes was accusing. "You never came back. You dropped by that first morning, but I never saw you again."

"Chloe." Mel touched Addie's face. "She warned me to stay away. I wasn't afraid of her—hell, I could take her out—but I felt guilty because of the thoughts I had about you. I assumed you were in a committed relationship, and I didn't want to come between you."

"One of us should have been committed, all right." Addie scowled. "I can't believe Chloe threatened you."

"She was, let's just say, an interesting person. But sadly, she's gone now."

"Sadly?" Addie batted her eyelashes.

"Okay, not so sadly." Mel smiled.

* * * *

Mel woke up and glanced around, getting her bearings. She remembered talking with Addie late into the night, and at some point, they'd moved to the only useable bedroom in the inn. They'd continued to talk softly, not looking at each other but staring up at the ceiling. It hadn't taken long for Addie to fall asleep, her rhythmic breathing a comforting sound. Mel had rolled over and watched her for awhile before finally dozing off herself.

Shards of daylight filtered in through slits between the blinds, illuminating the empty bed. Mel heard the sound of water running in the adjoining bathroom. She stretched comfortably and waited.

The shower stopped, and footsteps padded around in the bathroom. A hair dryer came on briefly, then off again.

Addie appeared in the doorway, wearing a large, white towel. "Hey. You're awake."

"Yeah. Sorry I slept so long." Mel rubbed her face.

"Nah, it's early. I felt grubby when I woke up and wanted to hop in the shower. Besides, I'm the one who should apologise. I'm sorry about last night."

Mel tried to ignore the fact Addie wore nothing but a towel. It was becoming increasingly difficult. She glanced away quickly and waved a hand. "No big deal. You had a lot on your mind. I understand completely."

Addie took a step closer to the bed. "I seem to recall you being very chivalrous. I remember throwing myself at you."

Mel grinned. "It wasn't easy. But you were pretty..." she searched for the right word, "*groggy*. I wasn't going to take advantage."

"I was flat on my ass drunk. You were very kind. I didn't know if it was because you weren't interested —"

"Hell, no!" Mel's face heated, the warmth slowly spreading lower. "Just the opposite."

"Really?" Addie dropped her towel.

Mel blinked. The naked body before her was more beautiful than anything she'd imagined. Addie's breasts were full and round, with perfect, brown nipples accenting the paler flesh. Her stomach was flat, leading down to the small patch of neatly trimmed pubic hair. "I, uh...Jesus. I need to go pee."

Addie laughed and motioned to the bathroom. "Help yourself. I'll be right here."

Her heart racing, Mel hurried into the pretty, peach lavatory and used the toilet. She glanced at the shower longingly and decided a few more minutes wouldn't kill her. "I'm going to shower real quick, okay?" she called.

"You bet. Clean towels on the shelf."

"Thanks." Mel saw the decorative wicker shelving unit and took one towel, setting it within reach. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and climbed into the stall, cleaning up faster than ever before. She hurried to dry off, but kept the towel around her when she returned to the bedroom.

Addie had thrown back the covers neatly and was lying across the bed on her side. "Ah, no fair. I lost my towel. Your turn."

Mel smiled, letting the fluffy cotton fall away.

"Damn." The look on Addie's face was one of pure lust. "You're hot, girl. Get over here, now." She patted the mattress.

Mel moved to the side of the bed and lowered herself slowly. She remembered her ponytail and dragged the elastic band from her hair.

Reaching up, Addie ran a hand through Mel's dark tresses before letting it travel lower. She cupped one cheek gently. "You're so beautiful. I almost can't believe you're here."

"Why would you say that?" Mel turned her face into the hand. "You're absolutely gorgeous. I'm the one in disbelief."

Addie grinned. "Then we've got a mutual admiration society. Come closer, so I can admire you some more."

Mel lay next to her and inhaled as Addie's hands began to explore.

With a light touch, the seductive woman teased every inch of skin she could reach. Fingertips barely met flesh as Addie moved deliberately, avoiding the usual erogenous zones. Her lips took the same journey, and Mel groaned.

"Feel good?" Addie whispered.

"That's putting it mildly." Mel writhed on the bed.

Addie continued her exploration, leaving no spot untouched. When she'd kissed a trail down Mel's legs and back up again, she paused at the apex, allowing the tension to build and then settled in. With the lightest of contact, she spread Mel's nether lips and blew warm breath on them. "Beautiful," she murmured.

"Touch me." Mel could barely stand the torment. Every nerve ending tingled from the feathery caresses, and her loins felt like they might explode. "Please."

Addie chuckled and dragged her tongue along the tender flesh. She used long, languorous strokes over Mel's folds and clit. The sensations were arousing and maddening at the same time.

"You're evil," Mel whispered, her body twitching wantonly with desire.

"Yep." Addie grasped each of Mel's thighs firmly and spread them wide. "But I can be nice, too. Just wanted to make sure you were ready."

"I'm ready!" Mel gasped at the strong grip. Addie's touch wasn't gentle anymore. It was aggressive, insistent, as if the woman knew what she wanted and was determined to take it. Mel couldn't think of anything better.

Addie drove her tongue into Mel's pussy and forced it deep. Pulling back, she lapped at the flesh, not gingerly as before. Her movements were purposeful, determined.

"Oh, yeah!" Mel's insides tumbled as the first quivering of an orgasm niggled at her. In one way, she wanted to prolong the glorious sensations, yet in another, she couldn't wait to feel the release. She allowed the waves of pleasure to wash over her, sweeping her into a climax so sweet she wanted to cry.

"Mmm," Addie worked her fingers in and out of Mel's pussy. "So nice," she murmured, lips still pressed against flesh.

"Better than nice," Mel agreed. "Not sure I've ever felt this good."

"Well, I'm not finished, yet. So hang on, sweet thing." Addie leaned back and grabbed Mel's legs, forcing her to roll on to her stomach. She repositioned the legs wide apart, and got back in between them.

Mel felt hands kneading her ass cheeks and spreading them apart. She buried her face in her pillow, anxious for whatever her new lover had in mind.

"You're beautiful from this angle, too." Addie bit one of the fleshy cheeks just hard enough for Mel to feel it. She dragged her tongue down the crease of Mel's butt and circled her anus. Addie paused. "Is this okay?"

"Whatever you want to do." Mel turned her head to speak then buried her face again. She'd never been opposed to a little anal play, though her last girlfriend hadn't enjoyed it. She inhaled as Addie's tongue drove into the tight hole, and she squeezed her pillow tight. Her next climax was going to be soon – and intense.

"Mmm," Addie murmured, tongue still buried. She worked her fingers into Mel's pussy and pumped them in and out, flicking her clit as she moved.

"Oh lord!" Mel gasped as her orgasm hit full force, sending shudders through her body. It ended quickly, but she could tell it wasn't really over. Each nerve ending was on high alert, ready for whatever new sensation her lover had to offer.

Addie moved forward, allowing her breasts to swing against Mel's back. Her fingers, slick with natural lubrication, worked their way into her anus one at a time. "So hot and tight." She pushed them past the knuckle, pulled back then added a third.

Mel thrust her ass backwards into the hand. The reaming felt fabulous, and she remained on the precipice of another climax. The next one would blow her mind, she could tell already.

"That's it, baby. Fuck my fingers." Addie pressed in and out, allowing her pinky to drag across Mel's pussy. She leaned forward, smashing her breasts into Mel's back and nipping her shoulder blade.

Mel shattered. Her body quivered and shook with sensations hitting her from all directions. This orgasm didn't want to end and kept her shuddering and panting for precious, long moments. Ripples of delight sparked through her, sending Mel into orbit before dragging her back to reality.

When she could finally speak, a hoarse, "Oh my god," was all she could manage.

"That was nice." Addie eased her fingers out and cleaned up quickly with a towel from the nightstand.

Mel rolled onto her back and watched the gorgeous brunette's every move. "Get back over here. I need kisses. Lots and lots of kisses."

Crawling on top, Addie wrapped Mel in her arms, and they settled into the bed. "I can do that." She nibbled Mel's bottom lip with her teeth then kissed her hungrily.

Mel saw deep-seated desire in her lover's eyes. A thrill ran down her spine from knowing that look was for her—because of her. She was experiencing a heavy case of lust, herself. Now she had Addie in her arms, she never wanted to let her go.

They wrapped their legs around each other, compressing their pussies together. Holding one another tightly, they rolled on the bed, sharing long, wet kisses. Mel was in heaven.

She felt the urgency in Addie's body as it ground into hers. Mel was sated, Addie wasn't yet. She'd take care of that. She dragged her mouth away long enough to murmur, "Your turn. I'm going to make you come like you never have before."

"I want that more than anything." Addie replied, squashing their mouths together for one last, soul-wrenching kiss.

"On your back, my beauty." Mel pressed Addie onto the bed. She positioned herself in front of the lovely round breasts that had been tempting her. "Mmm, I've wanted to taste these forever." She drew one nipple into her mouth.

"Yeah, oh yeah!" Addie caught the back of Mel's head in her hand and urged her on.

When the nipple was moist and cone-shaped, Mel switched sides, rolling the first between her thumb and forefinger.

Addie jerked at her touch, yet a moment later was sighing small moans of pleasure. Her hips bucked higher and higher off the bed in anticipation.

Mel squeezed the luscious tits one last time before sliding down between Addie's legs. A trickle of nectar glistened on one thigh, and she lapped it up eagerly. It was musky yet delightfully sweet, and Mel knew, at that moment, she craved more. Another taste, another hour, another week, whatever she could get.

Parting the fine hair at the apex, Mel dove in first with her tongue, then her whole mouth. The taste, along with the sensual way Addie writhed beneath her, was almost enough to make her come again. But it was Addie's time, and Mel wanted it to be perfect for her.

She dipped a finger into the drenched pussy and thrust it in and out while nibbling Addie's engorged clit. She could tell by the way her lover squirmed that she was close, and kept up her ministrations.

"I'm coming!" Addie gasped, and her body shook.

Mel held her legs and continued to tease and torment the pink flesh.

Before Addie stopped shuddering from her first orgasm, another one hit. "Yes!" she sobbed, her voice raspy.

After a few minutes, Mel relented and pulled back. She rubbed her hands over silken thighs and blew on Addie's sensitive area.

"You're killing me." Addie reached down for Mel's hands and drew her into her arms. "I need a minute. Maybe two. God, that was amazing. And I don't use that word lightly. The only time I remember using it recently was thinking about you."

Mel snuggled close and dragged a sheet over them. "I'm so happy to hear it. Because I was just thinking, this one day won't be enough. I want more time with you. *Need* more time."

Addie kissed the top of her head. "We have time."

Chapter Seven

Addie attempted to make a list of items that needed to be replaced at the inn. The bedroom furniture was negotiable – either replace or refinish – but every room needed a new mattress, hers included. The borrowed bed had been a lifesaver, but Addie understood why it had been freely given. Coils poked her back every time she tried to get comfortable.

The guest rooms would all need new linens, pillows and comforters. The front room would require a sofa, loveseat and chair, plus new coffee and end tables. The dining room tables were scarred, but she could get by with them, since they'd be covered with cloths. She'd definitely need new chairs.

A stove would be the major kitchen purchase. The other appliances were fine once they'd been cleaned. She'd need to buy more plates and glasses, but the silverware seemed all right.

The walls were intact, which was a blessing. Painting had always been one of her least favourite chores. All she'd have to worry about there were decorative touches. But the beautiful hardwood floors needed major work, and most of the area rugs were ruined.

Addie pushed the list away and sighed. She'd thought writing everything down would help her get organised. Instead, it only made her more depressed.

"Hey, Addie? Do you have a key to the attic?" Mel called from the second floor landing.

"Yeah," Addie answered absently. She'd looked in the attic once and found it full of boxes and junk. Since it hadn't been affected by the break-in, she hadn't given the space much thought. She grabbed her key ring and headed up the stairs. "Why?"

"I was looking through all the rooms, figuring out what needed to be done. I've never seen the attic space."

Addie wiggled the keys in front of Mel and led her up the rest of the stairs to the locked door. "Not much to see. Dust, boxes and more dust." Addie threw the door open.

"Did you ever look inside the boxes?" Mel stepped in, gazing around. She tugged the chain in the centre of the room, and a light bulb came on. "Look at this place! It's beautiful!"

"No, I didn't," Addie said, answering the question about the boxes. "And what's beautiful?" She tried to see what Mel envisioned, but it looked like a filthy, old attic to her.

"Open beam ceilings and that turret window! This room is gorgeous! It's full of possibilities."

"Well, maybe." Addie was sceptical. "The walls aren't even finished. It needs major construction before it'd be usable."

"I suppose." Mel continued to scope it out. "But it sure is great."

"I've got bigger concerns at the moment." Addie put her hands on her hips. "I've got to figure out how to get this place up and running so I can get some money coming in." *Without a dime to spend.* She left that thought unspoken.

"I was thinking about that." Mel headed back out to the stairway.

Addie followed her, shutting off the light and pulling the attic door shut.

On the way downstairs, Mel commented, "If I helped you pay the deductible, then you could get the work done —"

"No." Addie cut her off. She and Mel had spent three nights together. Three of the best nights of her life, no question, but it was far too soon to start talking about mingling money. "I won't let you do that. I'll find a way to make this work on my own."

Mel stopped on the ground floor and turned to face her. "What if I *want* to help you? You don't have to do it all alone, you know. Sometimes it's okay to lean on other people." She slipped her arms around Addie's waist.

Addie rested her forehead against Mel's. "I do want your help. I couldn't begin to manage this all alone. But I refuse to take your money. That's no way to begin a relationship."

Grasping Addie by the hips, Mel drew her even closer. "The relationship has already begun, baby. There's no denying that. I want to help you. It seems to me, until you can get some of these rooms back in shape, you won't be able to open."

Addie kissed her lips tenderly then pulled back. "The perfect Catch 22. Can't make money until I fix up the rooms. Can't fix up the rooms without money."

"But if you'd let me —"

"No." She pressed two fingers against Mel's mouth. "Please don't bring it up again. I'll find another way."

Mel rolled her eyes, giving an exasperated look in response.

The phone rang, and Addie smiled. "Saved by the bell." She removed her fingers and put a small kiss in their place before going to answer it. "Apple Valley Inn, such as it is."

A deep chuckle came across the line. "Good morning, Addie. It's Gill. I finished your car. Thought you might be ready to have some wheels again."

"Oh, hi, Gill. Yeah, sure, thanks." She knew her voice sounded hesitant and tried to project gratefulness. "I appreciate it. I've got a lot going on here right now but I'll be by to pick it up sometime."

"I could have someone drop it off, if that would be easier."

"Heavens, no. Please, don't bother. I'm getting along just fine. I'll be by as soon as I can."

"All right, then. Talk to you soon."

"Bye." She hung up the phone and glanced at Mel, who had joined her in the front room.

"Your car is ready?"

"Yes." Addie waved a hand nonchalantly, or at least that was the impression she hoped for. Inside, her heart pounded wildly because of the deception. "Like I told Gill, I'll get it sometime. No rush."

"We can pick it up on my way to work. I'll drop you off."

Addie stared at her. She was so cute, so innocent about problems outside the little hamlet of Cattle Valley. Addie absolutely loved Mel's naiveté. Chloe had been pessimistic and jaded from the first day they'd met. "Sweetie, listen. I can't get my car right now because I don't have the money. Gill's going to have to wait."

Mel's eyes lit up. "Let me do that much for you. I can—"

"No." Addie moved closer, slipping her arms around Mel. "I guess the only way to shut you up is to kiss you." She forced their mouths together, her tongue tracing the seam of Mel's lips. When they parted, she drove deeper, enjoying the taste of her lover more each time.

Mel returned the kiss and groaned, leaning back. "I have to get to work. Wish I could stay here and neck a little longer."

Addie reached around and cupped Mel's ass. "We wouldn't be necking for long. In another minute, I'd strip those clothes right off you and bury my face between your legs."

"Mmm." Mel squirmed against her. "Maybe I should be late."

Chuckling, Addie released her. "Or maybe you should go to work and come back here as soon as you're through. Better yet, stop by your place and pack some clothes so you can stay awhile."

Mel's dark eyes twinkled. "I will, thanks. I've got a short shift today, so I won't be late. We'll get some dinner."

"Sounds good." After leaning in for one last kiss, Addie watched her go. She walked around, thinking about the inn. It was eerily quiet being there by herself. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to that.

She locked both front and back doors securely and headed upstairs. Mel's inquisitiveness had gotten her wondering what *was* in the boxes in the attic. No time like the present to find out. Returning to the dark, closed-up room, she pulled the chain, and the bulb lit up.

Addie knelt by the first stack and opened the top one. A cloud of dust rose, causing her to sneeze. She dug into the box and hauled out a covered piece that looked like it might be a dish of some sort. Removing the paper and cardboard wrapping, she found a lovely, ivory plate with a rose pattern. It appeared to be old, fine china.

She set it aside and picked up another piece. It was similar to the first, and several more lay beneath it. The other boxes held plenty of the same—cups, saucers and bowls, all intact. Addie unpacked them all to check their condition, then rewrapped each piece carefully and put them all back where she'd found them. She kept the first plate out, deciding to take it downstairs with her.

The other boxes were half-filled with junk or empty, pretty much what she'd expected to find in all of them. The china was a real surprise. Maybe she wouldn't need to buy new dishes after all. Addie closed up the attic and strolled down to the dining room.

She'd found twenty-four place settings of china, plus two of each of the serving bowls and plates. *Will that be enough?* If the inn were full, she could have up to twelve occupants. The china might just do it.

That thought buoyed her spirits through the rest of the morning, and she decided to tackle the furniture refinishing again. She was elbow deep in paint stripper when Mel returned. "What are you doing back so soon?"

"Whew! Can I get some air? That stuff is strong." Mel opened two windows in the front room.

"Yeah, and it's not going well, either. Look at this headboard. It looks like crap." She pointed to the piece she'd tried to strip.

Mel bit her lip. "That doesn't look right. Are you sure you're using the right stuff?"

"No," Addie admitted and dropped onto the sofa. She peeled off her rubber gloves and exhaled a breath that ruffled her bangs.

"I brought you a sandwich from the diner. Naomi was at the store, so I decided to leave for my lunch hour today."

Addie glanced at her accusingly. "I have food, Melissa. I'm not going to starve."

"I know. So what if I just wanted to see you?" Mel sat next to her and nudged their knees together. She handed one sandwich over and unwrapped the other for herself.

"You're up to something. I recognise that look in your eyes."

Mel grinned. "Uh oh. Am I that transparent? Okay, maybe I am. Listen, Gill has this friend, Hal Kuckleman. He's a contractor and, from what I've heard, a good one. I'd like to call him to come look at the inn. You know, doing the floors is too big a job for you to handle."

Addie chewed and thought. Perhaps the man would work with her on the payment, until the insurance and her finances were settled. The only way to get money coming in was somehow to fix up the inn. She had to start somewhere. "You're right." She nodded as she ate. "I can't do the floors. Hell, I can't even do the furniture. I need professional help."

"So I can call Hal?" Mel asked excitedly.

"Might as well. Thanks for thinking of it."

"You bet." Mel picked over her sandwich. "I had another idea. Maybe, while Hal is here, he can take a look at the attic. I'd love to see about getting it turned into another room to rent."

"Mel." Addie shook her head dejectedly. "I can't afford that right now, and you know it. I hate that I'm starting to sound like a broken record."

Mel squeezed her arm. "Just let Hal shoot us a price. That way, we'll know. For the future, I mean."

Addie gazed at the sweet expression on her face. *Why do I know it's going to be hard to tell her 'no' about anything?* She was getting entirely too comfortable in their relationship and knew, with her future so uncertain, she should back away or at least slow down. She found Melissa Danes too enticing to do either. She sighed. "Do you always get your way, or is it just me you have wrapped around your little finger?"

"It's just you." Mel smiled and leaned in for a kiss. "Thank you. I'll call Hal when I get back to work."

Addie stole another quick kiss before they finished their sandwiches. In the kitchen washing up, she noticed the piece of china on the counter. "Oh! You'll never believe what I found in the attic!" She unwrapped the plate and held it up.

"Hey, that's nice." Mel took it and inspected it. "Are there more?"

"A *lot* more. Twenty-four place settings plus serving pieces. I couldn't believe it! I guess I won't need dishes after all."

"Yeah, looks like it." Mel studied the plate intently.

"What?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. Can I take this? Naomi likes old dishes. She'd love to see it."

"I suppose." Addie shrugged and rewrapped it.

Mel clutched it to her chest with one arm and hugged Addie's waist with the other. "Have a nice afternoon. I'll see you later, you sexy thing."

"Come 'ere, you tease." Addie kissed Mel, a thrill of excitement zipping down her spine. Just hearing the words 'I'll see you later' was enough to get her motor running. Perhaps she'd be waiting for Mel in the bedroom after work, wearing nothing but a smile. She cupped Mel's ass and squeezed. "Later."

Mel wiggled her butt, smiled sweetly and hurried off.

Chapter Eight

Mel stopped at Bronwyn Antiques before going back to the bookstore. The small shop was a block down Main Street, and she knew the owner, Ryan Bronwyn, did a good business because he was fair and reputable. She took the plate inside, where a small bell on the door announced her arrival.

"Hello, Ryan." She smiled at her business neighbour. She'd always been particularly fond of him. His light brown hair, glasses and tall, lean, frame reminded Mel of her father. While Ryan was younger, probably mid-thirties, he still carried that same air of wisdom and confidence that she loved about her dad.

"Hi, Mel. How's it going today?"

"Not bad. I have a plate I wondered if you could check out. It looks old to me, but I'm no judge of antiques." She set it on the counter.

"Let's have a look." He unwrapped the china and studied the back carefully. "I haven't seen this mark before, which surprises me. I'd like to investigate this further. Could you leave it with me? I'll write you a receipt."

"Sure. I don't need a receipt."

"I insist." He wrote out the slip and handed it to her. "Can I call you when I know something? It might take a day or so."

"No problem. Thanks, Ryan." She left his store and went back to *Booklovers*.

Naomi was stocking a new title when Mel rushed in, speaking breathlessly. "Hi, sorry I'm late."

"Not a problem." Her pretty, red haired employer glanced back at Mel, an amused expression on her face. "I remember those days, hurrying home for a quickie at lunchtime."

Mel feigned shock. "We did not have a quickie! We ate sandwiches and talked about china. Addie found a whole set of it in the attic. It's real nice stuff."

Naomi placed the last of the books on the shelf. "Why would Tia leave a set of china? That sounds odd. If she couldn't take it, wouldn't she have sold it?"

Shrugging, Mel shoved her purse under the counter. "Maybe she forgot about it. The attic is dusty as hell. Doesn't look like anyone's been up there in a coon's age."

"I've always wondered exactly how long 'a coon's age' was. I should get on the internet and look that up." Naomi made a funny expression at Mel as she passed, carrying an empty box to the back room.

"Oh, hush," Mel teased her right back. "You're such a smart aleck. I'd hoped Courtney would cure you of it, but I think it's only gotten worse."

Naomi poked her head out of the back. "Speaking of our one true loves, does Addie plan to hire some people to work at the inn? It'd be a pretty big job for one person. Tia had a front desk assistant and a morning cook."

Mel shook her head. "She hasn't got that far, yet. The inn needs a lot more work before it can open. It's rough, because Addie's a little strapped. She thought she'd come here to a money-making operation. So far, it's only been a money-eater."

"I hope they catch the little bastards who did it. They should be made to pay. They should have had to clean it up, too, but I guess it couldn't wait that long."

"Nope, she needs to get things going *now*. Speaking of which, I offered to call that contractor friend of Gill's to see what he could do about the floors." She reached for the phone book.

"Hal? He's a good guy." Naomi walked back to the counter. "I just wanted to mention—if you're thinking about quitting here to go work at the inn, try to give me some notice, will you? I don't relish the idea of working long days by myself. When summer gets here, Sally Meadows will be back from college, and she's already asked me about getting some hours. But until then —"

"I'm not going anywhere." Mel nudged Naomi's arm lightly. The idea of her working at the inn had never occurred to her. It was a tempting thought, but she could hear Addie going ballistic if she mentioned it. It was too early for those kinds of plans.

"You say that now," Naomi nodded her head knowingly. "But just in case, somewhere down the line..." She raised her eyebrows. "I'm not being nosy. I have reasons, and I need to know."

"I heard you. Don't worry about me. I love my job, and I *need* it. Now go away so I can make my call." She proceeded to look up the contractor's number.

"Sure, go ahead." Naomi headed to the front of the store, muttering jokingly, "For someone who loves her job, she sure doesn't get much work done."

"Five more minutes, that's all I need. I promise."

Naomi laughed and waved a hand.

* * * *

Hal Kuckleman lived with the Reverend Casey Sharp near the church in Cattle Valley. That was the extent of Mel's knowledge about the man, other than he was a friend of Gill's. Hal seemed very accommodating on the phone, agreeing to stop by the inn after work to check out what needed to be done.

Mel hurried to her apartment and gathered a few more clothes to take with her, arriving at the inn at the same time Hal did in his white pickup truck. She left her things in the car and got out, approaching him. "Hi, Hal. I'm Melissa Danes. I think I've seen you around town." She extended her hand.

He shook it and smiled pleasantly. "Yeah, at Gill's wedding, maybe. I don't get into the bookstore much. Wish I had more time to read, but there's always something going on."

"I understand that. Well, come on in. My friend just bought this place, and we're trying to figure out what needs to be done after the break-in." She led him inside. "Addie? I'm here with the contractor."

Addie came from the kitchen, drying her hands. "Hello."

"Addie Murphy, Hal Kuckleman." Mel introduced them and stepped back. It was Addie's inn, she should take it from here.

They shook hands, and Hal glanced at the room full of marked up wooden furniture. "This is lovely," he said sarcastically, shaking his head.

"Isn't it? They didn't miss a piece. Oh, except one chair. I have one dining room chair, and a few those cowboys put back together for me. We're careful when we sit on those."

He smiled, still looking around. "I hate to tell you this, but you're using the wrong stuff on this furniture. You don't need paint stripper." He pointed to the piece Addie had worked on. "That one there is ruined. The rest might be salvageable, but it's pretty labour-intensive

work. Not sure you'd think the price was worth it. You might be able to buy new stuff for not much more."

"That's what I was afraid of." Addie nodded. "Forget about the furniture. The floors are my biggest concern. They did a number on the beautiful, wood finish."

He scuffed his boot across a board. "Yeah, but nothing permanent. These can be buffed out and will look as good as new. I might be able to spare you a man to do that."

"I'd be grateful." Addie looked at him. "I'm trying to get the place usable. Money's a little tight, because I'd counted on the income from the inn when I got here."

Hal scratched his head. "We oughta be able to work something out. Let me look upstairs, see how much area we're talking about, before I shoot you a price."

"Of course." Addie led him up the staircase.

Mel followed along behind. "When you're done, there's one more thing I'd like to show you, Hal. The attic."

"That can wait," Addie spoke up.

"I'd just like to get an idea," Mel insisted. "It's not finished, but it's a beautiful space. I wondered how much it would cost to finish it off."

"I'll take a look."

Mel grinned at Addie.

Addie rolled her eyes but couldn't resist smiling back.

* * * *

Hal and Addie settled on a price for refinishing the floors. He agreed to send someone to start work the following day. After examining the attic, he offered to write up a quote and get it to her soon.

Mel was satisfied and thought Addie appeared relieved, as well. "It's a start," Mel commented after showing Hal out.

"Yeah, it's good. I'm still worried about where the money will come from. But I needed to do this. Thanks for setting it up."

"You're welcome." Mel moved closer, giving Addie a kiss. "I believe I promised you dinner, too."

"Not too hungry." Addie ran her hands over Mel's shoulders. "For food, anyway. I've been thinking about you all afternoon. It's a damn good thing you called and warned me the contractor was coming over. He'd have gotten quite a surprise." Her eyes sparkled.

"Oh yeah?" Mel licked her lips, a tingling of lust rising in her. "What were you thinking?"

"Actually..." Addie reached for the hem of Mel's shirt, pulled it over her head and tossed it aside. "I thought about waiting for you, lying naked across the bed." She unfastened Mel's bra and sent it flying. "Then I thought about running a nice, warm bath in one of the big ol' tubs upstairs. I think I'd enjoy seeing you surrounded by bubbles."

Mel kicked off her shoes, as Addie dragged her slacks and panties off. "A bubble bath sounds fun."

Addie pressed her up against the wall in the hallway outside her bedroom. "I just decided I'm too impatient for any of that. I need to taste you *now*." She dropped to her knees and spread Mel's legs, hoisting one calf over her shoulder.

Holding onto the wall behind her, Mel gasped as Addie moved swiftly and purposefully.

Spreading Mel's pussy lips, Addie drove her tongue forward. No gentle caresses, no skirting around the edges this time. She appeared to know what she wanted and went for it.

"Oh lord." Mel cradled the back of Addie's head with one hand. "I won't last long with this treatment."

"Good." Addie's voice sounded muffled and breathy, but she didn't stop what she was doing. "I want to feel you come. Want to *taste* you come."

Mel groaned as Addie drove deeper, stroked faster. She gasped and tried to remain standing, accidentally tugging Addie's hair. "Sorry."

"No problem," Addie chuckled. "Maybe we should move to the bedroom." She released Mel's leg and stood, pulling her by the hand to the bed and settling her back.

Mel reached for Addie's head and encouraged her to return to the job at hand. Her arousal seemed to urge Addie on. The persistent woman nibbled and licked with abandon until Mel finally groaned and shuddered. An intense climax spiralled through her, igniting every fibre of her being. She collapsed into the mattress as Addie sucked the last of the juices she'd coaxed out.

Addie crawled up over Mel, staring into her eyes. "That was fucking awesome."

They kissed, and Mel slid her arms around Addie's neck. "I totally agree. Now lie back. I want to make love to you, and it might take some time."

Addie kissed her again, their tongues battling each other for dominance. At last, she leaned back and grinned. "Promise?"

* * * *

Mel lay with her head on Addie's belly, one hand tracing the curves of her breast. She was totally at ease, more comfortable than she'd ever felt with anyone. If she never had to move again, it'd be too soon.

Addie fingered the small silver hoop in Mel's ear. "Oh! I forgot to tell you, my lawyer called today."

"Really?" Mel gazed at her. "Any news?"

"Just that my mother isn't backing down. We have a court date in two weeks."

"No!" Mel frowned. "Have you tried talking to her?"

"I tried once. She wouldn't speak to me." Addie touched her hand to Mel's cheek. "I guess a judge will decide my fate."

"Addie, no!" Mel tried to rise but Addie grabbed her shoulder.

"Don't get up. This feels too good to move."

I think so, too. Mel remained where she was, but a feeling of unease spread over her. The lawsuit between Addie and her mother was troubling. "The whole thing is just awful. I can't believe your mom would sue you."

"I know." Addie sighed and closed her eyes. "Just do what I do, try not to think about it."

Easier said than done. Mel wanted Addie to decide her own fate, not some judge. A shiver ran down her spine, and she hugged her lover close.

Chapter Nine

Addie had moved all the damaged furniture to the porch by the time Hal's employee showed up to start the floors the next day. *Jason*. He was another Cattle Valley hunk with short dark hair, brooding eyes and a handsome, muscular physique. As he started to work, he casually mentioned his partner, and it dawned on her he was gay. She still wasn't used to the majority of people in the town leaning in that direction. This guy, like most of the others, was hotter than a firecracker. If she were straight, she'd find the place annoying as hell.

She settled into a chair on the porch. Jason had stirred up a cloud of dust in the front room, and she wanted to steer clear. While she was deciding what to do, Mel pulled into the driveway.

Addie strolled down to meet her. "What are you doing? If you're home for a noontime quickie, I hate to break it to you, but the floor guy is here. Jason somebody."

Mel didn't get out of her car. "I wish I could, but no time today. I've only got thirty minutes, because Naomi has a doctor's appointment. But I want to take you somewhere. Hop in."

"I can't just leave," Addie protested, glancing back at the inn.

"We won't be gone long. Tell Jason you'll be right back and come on," Mel insisted.

Addie debated then jogged into the house and relayed the message. She grabbed her purse and hurried back out to Mel's car. "Okay." She buckled in. "Where're we going?"

"You'll see." Mel smiled mysteriously.

Addie watched her drive, realising more and more, each day, how attached she was becoming. It felt wonderful and scary at the same time. Mel stopped in front of an antique store and Addie looked at her. "What's going on?"

"Come on." Mel motioned towards the store, and they both got out, heading inside.

The front door tinkled, and a man poked his head out from the back room. "Hi, Mel."

"Hi, Ryan. I'd like you to meet Addie Murphy, the new proprietor of the Apple Valley Inn. Addie, this is Ryan Bronwyn. He owns this place."

"Hi," Addie nodded to him.

He set a plate on the counter in front of him, and she realised it was the one from her newly-discovered attic collection.

"Mel brought this in yesterday, and I've been going crazy trying to track it down. I finally did. It's fairly rare and produced by a fine, French company."

"Really?" Addie blinked in surprise. "That's nice. I guess it'll make the inn look good, then. I'm going to bring the boxes down and start washing everything before we use it."

Ryan smiled at her. "I don't think you understand. This is rare, old, French china. It's not the most expensive stuff I've ever seen, but it's up there. I don't think you'll want to use it at the inn."

She glanced from him to Mel and back. Both of them wore huge grins. His words were just sinking in when Mel said, "Don't you get it? Ryan can sell this for big bucks. You can buy practical dishes, something that can go in the dishwasher. Something you won't mind getting broken."

"Ah. That makes sense." She didn't plan on spending her time hand-washing dishes every day. She looked at the plate then back at Ryan. "How much do you think they're worth?"

"Therein lies the problem. What they're worth, and what I can get for them, are two different things. I'm sure they're worth thousands, but there's not much call for fine china in rural Wyoming. If I took my time and found a buyer, I could probably get a better price for you, less a modest commission, of course."

Addie's heart sank. "Time and money, two things I'm short on, Mr. Bronwyn. Could you give me anything for the china?"

Mel touched her arm. "I had a better idea. Ryan has a warehouse full of furniture. I'll let him tell you."

He nodded. "I acquire all kinds of stuff at auctions and flea markets. Sometimes it comes in lots, and I get more than what I really wanted. I only put the antiques in here. I store the other stuff until I can barter it off sometime."

Addie's interest was piqued. "What kind of stuff?"

"Beds, dressers, night stands, everything except mattresses. I probably have six or eight of each."

She smiled. "I only need six."

Squeezing her arm, Mel agreed. "That's what I thought!"

Ryan raised a hand. "I'll tell you up front, they won't match. But they're in good condition. I don't have room to store junk. I toss it. I also have some sofas and living room furniture."

"Any dining room chairs?" Addie crossed her fingers hopefully.

"Yeah, a bunch. I can't promise they'll match, either, but I might have several groups of four that do."

"Her dining room tables seat four," Mel said excitedly and looked at Addie. "You could have similar chairs at each table. The whole room doesn't have to match."

Addie shrugged. "Eclectic isn't bad."

"Eclectic is in, right now." Ryan patted the counter. "If you're interested, I'll give you whatever furniture you want from my warehouse in exchange for the china. We'll go over there together some evening after I've closed, and you can take your pick. We'll mark it, and I'll have it delivered."

"Oh my god!" Addie couldn't believe what he offered. "That's incredible! Thank you so much." She hugged Mel, laughing, then reached across the counter and hugged Ryan. "Thank you," she murmured in his ear.

He returned the hug affably, and they parted. "It's a great deal for me, too. I'll be glad to free up some storage space."

Mel touched her shoulder. "I need to get back to work. Why don't you take my car and pick me up later?"

"I can walk. It's a beautiful day. Not sure my feet will touch the ground the whole way home."

With a grin and a quick kiss on the cheek, Mel returned to work.

Ryan rewrapped the plate and set it aside. "I understand Jason is redoing your floors. Why don't you call me when they're done, and we'll get together then? I know you want the stuff as soon as you can get it."

Addie chuckled. *Small town. Everyone knows everything.* At that moment, she wouldn't have chosen to be anywhere else.

Restoring the floors took the rest of the week. Addie spent several nights at Mel's apartment to get away from the sanding dust. But when Jason had finished, she was amazed at how clean he left the place and was thrilled with the job he'd done.

Ryan Bronwyn had been true to his word. As soon as she'd called him, he'd arranged to meet her at his warehouse, so she could choose her furniture. Addie debated, but finally mustered up the nerve to call Mel's friend, Nate, to ask if he'd go with them to pick out the stuff. He'd offered to help her decorate, but she'd secretly wondered if he'd just been being polite.

Nate set those worries aside at once. He sounded genuinely pleased to help out and changed his plans for that evening to meet them at Ryan's.

The furniture was better than Addie had hoped. It took Mel, Nate and her very little time to select what they wanted. Ryan promised to have it delivered.

The next afternoon, standing in the front room as two men carried things in, Addie was excited. Each bedroom received a queen-sized bed, a nightstand and a nice-sized dresser and mirror. She'd also chosen a comfortable armchair for each room, a small writing table and a straight-back chair to sit at it. It was more furniture than the rooms had previously had, but it all fit nicely, and she thought it would be perfect.

"That bedroom stuff looks great." Nate followed the deliverymen down the stairs for the last time and saw them out. "Thanks," he said.

"Yes, thank you!" Addie called to them.

They nodded and left, then Nate closed the door. "The rooms already feel more comfortable than they did. The drapes and blinds are fine, so you'll want to keep their colours in mind when you're choosing linens and a spread. A couple of the rooms are blue, two are mauve and two have interesting, mustard-coloured drapes." He made a face.

Addie grinned. "They'll be fine. I've seen some beautiful fabric using that colour as an accent woven through. If I can find something like that, it'll look fantastic. I'm going with comforters instead of bedspreads."

He nodded. "And mattresses. You'll want some of them, of course."

"Thanks." She screwed up her face at him. "Really, I thought I'd just let people sleep on the floor within the bed frame. Nice and firm for the back, you know."

"You might get a few guests, though I'm not sure they'd be the type of folks you were after." He wandered into the dining room. "These chairs look fine!"

"Hardly any of them are the same." She followed his gaze and chewed her lip nervously.

"Who cares? For all anyone knows, you planned it that way! They're attractive and sturdy. I'd mix them all up. Instead of having two tables with matching chairs, and the others unmatched, just move them all around. It'll look more natural that way."

"If you say so." Addie and Nate dragged chairs around until all four tables were full.

He touched the carved swear words in the top of one table and shook his head. "Do you have cloths or do you need to get some?"

"I have all those. Apparently, my little houseguests didn't get into the linen closet."

He ran his hand over the top. "Put down a table pad first then the cloth. No one will ever know what's under here."

"That's what I thought," she agreed. "They'll be fine."

He walked into the front room. "This stuff is better than fine. I love the deep-red brocade sofa and the white brocade easy chair. But the red and white striped loveseat really ties it all together."

"Different fabric." She touched the cotton loveseat cushion. It was modern, while the other two were older and more classic. But he was right, they looked incredible together.

He started to reply, when a knock sounded on the front door. They glanced up and saw his partner, Ryan, with another man. "Must be official sheriffing business." Nate crossed the room and opened the door. "Hey, there." He smiled at his man.

"Hey, Nate." Ryan Blackfeather looked past him to Addie and nodded. "Addie. This is Taylor Adams. Could we come in for a minute, please?"

"Of course." She moved closer as the men entered.

Nate looked Adams up and down. "You're Vernie's father, aren't you?"

"Yes," the man replied.

He was portly and appeared tightly stuffed into his business suit. Not the typical Cattle Valley resident, as far as Addie could tell. She watched and waited for Ryan to speak.

"Mr. Adams is gone on business several nights a week. His wife passed away a while back, which leaves Vernie alone more than is probably prudent."

The man took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. "I assumed, since the boy was seventeen, he could look out for himself. I wasn't aware of the type of people he socialised with in Sheridan. Everyone in Cattle Valley is so pleasant and open-minded. It's hard to realise, just a few miles down the road, there are people who still don't like gays and think causing them trouble is a fun evening's activity."

Addie blinked. "This was a hate crime?"

Ryan shrugged. "Mainly, this was a group of kids with too much time on their hands and not enough supervision."

"I'd say it was pretty hateful," Nate spoke up.

Ryan raised a hand. "I agree, but I don't think the kids were out to hurt anyone. Apparently, they hung out here a few nights, and the last time, they filmed themselves trashing the place. Still have the video, right here on Vernie's confiscated cell phone." He held it up.

"Let me see that!" Nate stood next to Ryan as he played the short video.

Addie looked over Nate's shoulder for a second, but when the action started, she realised she didn't want to see it. The whole thing turned her stomach, and she looked away.

"Fool kids!" Nate exclaimed. "I can't believe they filmed it. Makes denying it tough."

Ryan snapped the phone shut. "Vernie isn't naming anyone else, yet. But I suspect he will be after his father is through with him. You see, Mr. Adams has offered to pay for the damages. And Vernie is going to work this summer to pay it back. So, if he doesn't want to be the only one paying, it'd be in his best interest to spill some names."

Addie saw Adams pull out his chequebook.

Ryan looked at her. "He'll cover your insurance deductible, plus a few thousand for lost income and inconvenience. So, if you'll come up with a number, please..."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I, uh, gee. I don't know."

Nate leaned over and whispered, "The kid's going to pay for it. Make it a high enough number to teach him a lesson."

She did some quick figuring in her head.

"Ten thousand?" Nate suggested.

The number shocked her. A chunk of it would be eaten up by her insurance deductible, but she hadn't expected to get anything, let alone that much, extra. "Oh, I couldn't. Seven or eight, maybe?"

"Eight thousand," Ryan said firmly, nodding.

Adams wrote the cheque while Addie stared. "Payable to?" he asked without looking up.

"Addie Murphy. Adeline Murphy," she corrected quickly.

"Sweet Adeline." Nate sang quietly to the tune of the old barbershop quartet melody.

She rolled her eyes at him then glanced back at Adams. He tore off the cheque and handed it to her. "I assume this brings us square? I don't want to hear later that more money is due."

"Of course not." She frowned, accepting the payment. As she looked at the paper, her frown slowly faded. *Eight thousand dollars*. She finally had money again. Better yet, now that she had the deductible, she could collect the insurance payment and replace the stove and mattresses. "Thank you, Mr. Adams. I appreciate your taking responsibility for this matter."

He muttered something incomprehensible and turned to leave.

Ryan smiled and gave her a quick wink. He looked at Nate and shook one finger, which Nate immediately grabbed. Ryan tugged it loose good-naturedly and with another wink — this one aimed at his partner — he left.

Addie and Nate stared at each other quietly until they heard Ryan drive off with Adams. "Oh my god," she whispered.

"Oh my god!" he yelled loudly, and they both burst into laughter. He hugged her, and they swung around in a circle.

"I can't believe this! A couple of days ago, I didn't have a dime or any hopes of restoring this inn. Now today..." She wiped a tear from her eye.

"You're loaded!" Nate whooped.

She chuckled. "Not exactly loaded. But it does mean I can finish furnishing this place."

"And pick up your car." Nate nodded.

She squinted at him. "What do you know about my car?"

He covered his mouth with one hand. "Oops, sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But you have to keep in mind, Adeline, this is a small town. Everyone pretty much knows everyone

else's business. We sort of knew you didn't have the money to pay Gill. Personally, I would have let Mel pay him, but that's just me. I'm all about staying fit, but I'd rather not use walking as my method of transportation if I don't have to."

She screwed up her face. "Have you seen my car? If anything could make you prefer hoofing it, that might be it."

"Well, yeah," he grinned. "You have a point, Adeline. I just would never have said it first."

"You're too kind, Nate. But if you keep calling me *Adeline*, I might deck you. So, tell me, do you know a good place to buy a stove?"

Chapter Ten

Mel rolled over and stared at Addie, still fast asleep beside her. It was early, and there was no reason to wake her friend. Since she'd replaced the mattresses at the inn, Addie slept like a log. Mel wasn't sure if it was due to the lack of lumps in the new bed or, more likely, the decrease in stress. Things were finally going Addie's way.

Nate had driven them into Sheridan in Ryan's SUV, with Addie's long shopping list of items she needed for the inn. Between the three of them, they managed to find everything and arranged to have the large items delivered. Mel couldn't remember seeing Addie happier than she'd been that night.

Now, with everything in place, the inn was ready for business. They simply needed guests. Mel's parents were coming to stay the following weekend, and she suspected they might be Addie's first customers.

She watched Addie's chest rise and fall slowly with each breath. In the matter of a few short weeks, Mel had become totally enamoured with the proud, beautiful woman. Addie had her quirks, namely the unconventional spiked, red-streaked hair and heavily lined eyes, but Mel thought she was cute. True beauty came from within, and Addie had the warmest heart and soul Mel had ever encountered, especially considering everything she'd been through in her life.

Thinking about it made Mel anxious to see her parents again. She'd always known she was lucky to have such a wonderful support system. Addie's familial situation confirmed it. Mel's folks would love Addie, she just knew it, *because I love Addie*.

The thought came out of the blue and surprised her, at first. But as it settled over her consciousness, she knew it was true, good and right. "I love you," she whispered to the sleeping form next to her.

Addie mumbled something and flopped over onto her stomach.

Mel looked at the smooth lines of Addie's shoulder blades and naked back, and a stirring rose inside her. Addie'd slept long enough. *It's time to wake up.*

She pulled the covers off and piled them near the foot of the bed. Starting with one shapely calf, Mel placed tiny kisses on Addie's flesh, working her way higher. She nuzzled each round butt cheek, and Addie stirred but didn't waken. Mel smiled and kept going.

She kissed a trail up the straight line of Addie's spine, moving to one side and then the other to nuzzle her shoulders and neck. By the time Mel was completely prone on top of her, Addie opened her eyes.

"I was having a lovely dream," she murmured. "The most beautiful woman in the world was making love to me so softly and gently, I thought I was in heaven, lying on a puff of clouds."

Mel leaned up to speak into her ear. "Not heaven, exactly, but your very own charming bed and breakfast inn. And as for the other part, will I do?"

Addie turned her head to smile. "I was right! It is you. The most beautiful woman in the world. Kiss me, beauty, and prove to me I'm awake."

Mel reached down and placed a gentle kiss on Addie's lips. "Need to pee or anything? 'Cause I'm not done with you, yet."

"I'm good." Addie settled back into her pillow.

"Yes, you are. Close your eyes, go back to sleep. I'm just going to play here for awhile." She scooted lower on Addie's body.

"Yes, ma'am. Like I could really go back to sleep..."

Mel chuckled and moved lower, spreading Addie's thighs and climbing between them. Her smooth, round ass looked pale and perfect in the early morning light. Mel was going to savour it, driving Addie to the very edge of euphoria, before reaching for the double ended dildo she'd stashed under the mattress and fucking the sweet girl's brains out.

She widened the fleshy cheeks and nestled her face between them. The dark, puckered hole between was too tempting to ignore, and Mel circled it with her tongue. Addie squirmed, and Mel smiled. Her torment was only just beginning.

She slid her tongue to the opening and wiggled it in. The tight outer ring resisted, but Mel pushed past it. The sphincter relented and sucked her tongue in with a force that drove Mel wild. She wished her tongue was longer and could go deeper.

When she'd gone as far as she could, Mel leaned back and watched the muscles tighten and close as she withdrew. *Hold on. Not quite done there yet.* She dragged one finger through

Addie's pussy, lubricating it with the juices pooling there. With just the right amount of pressure, she inserted the finger where her tongue had been and pushed it forward.

Addie moaned and bucked her hips.

Mel recognised it as a groan of pleasure and kept going until her finger was fully seated. "Nice," she murmured.

"Feels so good."

"Yes, it does." She pulled it out slowly and pressed it back in, working into a seesawing rhythm. Quickly wetting a second finger with the juices trailing down Addie's thigh, Mel added it to the hole and reamed her lover with deep, thrusting strokes.

"Ah, god. So fucking good. I'm coming."

"Come on," Mel encouraged.

Addie buried her face in her pillow and cried out loudly, her body shaking and quivering its release.

Mel leaned forward and grabbed a mouthful of ass cheek, sucking it firmly to leave a red, love bite.

"Damn!" Addie lifted her head, speaking over her shoulder. "That was fucking incredible. I wouldn't have thought sex with you could get any better, but somehow, each time, it does."

"Sweet talker." Mel eased her fingers from the clutching anus and cleaned up with a nearby towel, before grasping Addie's thighs and flipping her over. "On your back, woman. You're about to be royally fucked."

"Oh, yeah?" Addie's eyes lit up.

Mel grinned and reached under the mattress, pulling out the two-ended rubber dong. "Oh, yeah. You and me both." Pushing Addie's legs wider apart, she eased one cock into her lover's wet pussy.

Mel's was just as wet, and she had no trouble rising up to impale herself on the other end. Their pussies came together in the middle, and both of them groaned.

"My lord," Addie's eyes rolled back in her head. "Nothing ever felt better than this."

"I thought you'd like it." Mel ground her hips down. "We've just used fingers and tongues up until now. I probably should have asked, some women might not—"

"I'm not 'some women'," Addie cut her off. "I don't care for men, but I love being fucked by a woman and her thick, gorgeous cock."

Mel chuckled. "Good. I have a strap-on that's sexy as hell. We'll try that, next time. It allows for a hard, fast fuck. But I thought this first time, we both might enjoy this."

"Hard and fast isn't everything," Addie looked into her eyes. "That's one thing I love about having sex with another woman. There's not the whole macho 'I'm going to take you now' bullshit. It's soft and gentle...until we don't want it soft and gentle anymore." She reached for Mel's arms and dragged herself up so they faced each other. "Kiss me."

Mel's mouth captured hers, and their kiss was soul-wrenching and passionate. Four hands explored four breasts as they slowly rocked their pelvises together. When the build-up was too intense, Mel released her and grinned. "I'm going to take you now."

Addie ran her hands through her hair and stretched her arms over her head. "Go ahead, baby, and next time, I'll take you."

"Sounds perfect." Mel maintained eye contact as she drove her body down on Addie's. The rubber dildos were positioned to rub both of their clits, and Mel knew her side was doing a fine job. "I'm close."

"Me, too." Addie stared at her. "Fuck me again, and we'll come together."

Mel rose, thrust a final time and saw Addie's face contort with pleasure. *She's there.* Letting go of her own control, she threw her head back as waves of sensation roared through her. Her nerve endings prickled delightfully, and an intense orgasm rocked her system. *Each time different and always better.* Emotions got the better of her, and when she could breathe, she reached for Addie and kissed her firmly. "I love you," she repeated over and over between kisses.

Addie grappled for her face and held her cheeks as they kissed, then kissed some more. Mel was in no hurry to be finished. She ran her hands over Addie's back, touching and caressing everywhere she could reach.

Eventually, she had to shift her body. She released Addie, rose up carefully and set the rubber contraption aside. She dropped on the bed next to her lover and placed her head on the woman's shoulder.

Addie wrapped her arms around Mel. She hadn't spoken, and the silence was growing deafening.

"I love you, Addie." Mel repeated her words, forcing the woman to confront them.

"Thank you." Addie kissed her forehead. "I have very strong feelings for you, too, Melissa. I'm just not sure we should be talking about love. My life is so uncertain right now."

"Why does it have to be?" Mel stared at the wall, which seemed easier than facing Addie. "If you're talking about the lawsuit, you have a good chance of winning. But if for some reason you don't, you still have options. You could take a mortgage on the inn—"

"And pay it how, exactly? The guests haven't been clambering in since I opened the doors. I know I need to advertise, and business will get better in the summer. But a mortgage is a year-round thing. Without one, I can survive the lean months. If I'm in debt up to my ears, I'll worry about it every day."

"So, worst case scenario, you have to sell the inn. Move in with me and find another job here in Cattle Valley. We'd be together, Addie, and I think that's the most important thing."

"I'm not sure I could do that," Addie replied softly. "My energy and focus have been on the inn for a while, now. If I lose it, I'll need to figure out what's next for me. It's not a step I could take lightly."

"You're so stubborn," Mel spouted. She tried to blink back her tears, but it wasn't working.

"Hey," Addie gazed down at her, wiping them away with her thumb. "Don't cry. We aren't sure what's going to happen. We just need more time."

Mel sat up. "I know what I'd like to happen. I'd like to get rid of my apartment and move in here. If I'm paying rent, it might as well be to the inn. And maybe my contribution would be enough to finish the attic space. I'd love to make that my room, a place for all my stuff, and a sanctuary you and I could retreat to whenever we wanted."

"Whoa!" Addie sat and turned towards her. "That's why you wanted Hal to look at the attic?"

"It is." Mel nodded. "I'd even thought about coming to work for you here. But Naomi told me yesterday she's pregnant. She's going to have to cut back her hours and needs me more than ever at the bookstore."

Addie blinked, an expression of disbelief crossing her face. "You want to work here? And live here? Holy smokes, girl, you've taken a leap off a mountain I haven't even climbed yet. And Naomi is pregnant? I thought she lived with that Courtney woman."

Mel felt the tears welling in her eyes again. She sniffled and nodded. "She does. They used a donor and invitro fertilisation. I think the sperm might have come from someone we know, someone around here, but she won't tell me. She just smiles."

"Wow, that's really something. I've never thought about anything like that. Have you?"

"I don't know. Naomi and Courtney talked about it from the beginning. They told me next time Courtney wants to carry the baby. So I guess they want more than one." Mel stood and started gathering her clothes.

"What are you doing?" Addie watched her.

"I need to get out of here. I've made a fool of myself, and I feel humiliated. I need to go."

"Oh, stop it." Addie stood up and grabbed her hand. "You've done no such thing. You were thinking ahead, and I haven't been able to do that, yet. With this lawsuit hanging over me—"

"It's more than the lawsuit." Mel jerked her arm away. "I told you I loved you and wanted to be with you. You couldn't say the same to me so apparently, I've really gone off the deep end." She quickly dressed and headed out of the room.

Addie folded her arms across her chest. "I said I have strong feelings for you, Melissa. I wish I could say more, but I'm not going to lie."

Mel shot her an irritated glance. "Oh, no, you couldn't do that. You'd never lie." She turned and walked out.

* * * *

The rest of the weekend crawled for Mel. Her phone never rang, and she was too humiliated to return and admit she might have been hasty. They'd only known each other a few weeks. So what if Addie failed to jump head first into love with every woman she dated? *That's a good thing.* But Mel had felt the deep connection they shared and couldn't understand how Addie didn't. They'd become great friends and had fun together. There was so much more to their relationship than just a dynamite time in bed. *But there was that.*

She dragged herself through the workday Monday and, by evening, had determined that no matter how much crow she had to eat, Addie was worth it. She would go to the inn

and apologise for getting carried away. She drove there straightaway and paused at the front door. It felt awkward walking in unannounced, so she rang the bell and waited, her heart pounding.

The door opened, and Mel's heart thudded to the pit of her stomach.

Chloe stood there wearing sheer baby doll pyjamas and a sneer on her face. "What do *you* want?"

Chapter Eleven

Addie washed her hands in the kitchen and hurried to dry them. "I'll be right there," she called loudly, but when she got to the front room, she found Chloe had already answered the door.

"It's nobody," Chloe told her.

"Oh, good grief." Addie rolled her eyes at the aggravating blonde woman and bumped her aside with one hip. "Come in, Mel. Chloe, I told you the inn is open, now. You can't go parading around like that."

"Too much clothing?" Chloe peeled off her top and wiggled her breasts at them. "You're right. You'd probably get more business if I answered the door like this."

Mel's eyes were as big as saucers. She stammered for a moment then fell silent.

Addie grabbed the pyjama shirt from Chloe's hand and shoved it at her. "Put this on, for christ's sake. Can't you find something to do for a bit? I have some business to discuss with Mel."

"I'll stay." Chloe made a show of raising her hands and allowing the silky top to slide over her. "I'd like to learn more about the inn business since I'm here."

Frustrated, Addie grabbed Mel's arm and tugged her towards the kitchen. "It's not inn business, it's something else. We'll be right back. Please stay here." She dragged Mel off before Chloe could respond.

In the kitchen, Addie made sure the swinging door closed before turning to face Mel. She looked as if her head might explode, but Addie couldn't tell if the expression were one of anger or hurt. "I was going to call you."

"To tell me what? That Chloe is back?" Mel blinked rapidly.

Please don't cry. Addie hated seeing Mel cry. "No, of course not. I wanted to call you yesterday, but she showed up out of the blue. Somebody dropped her off, and she has no money and no place to stay."

"So she came here."

Addie shook her head disgustedly. "God knows why. We've been apart almost as long as we were together. I don't pretend to understand how her mind works. All I know for sure is she got bored in San Francisco and hitched a ride back this way."

"Do you want her here?" Mel asked with trepidation.

"Of course not!" Addie pulled Mel into her arms and hugged her. "She's staying in one of the guest rooms. I want *you* here. I missed you like crazy."

Mel collapsed against her. "I missed you, too. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Addie kissed her temple. "You were right. I need to make some decisions in my life. Maybe I'm too deliberate and over-think things, I don't know. That's just who I am. Please, can I have a little more time to figure this out? Don't give up on me."

"Get her out of here," Mel whispered.

"I want to. But if I offer to buy her a ticket somewhere, she'll know I have money. I was trying to avoid that, because if she finds out I have anything..."

Mel nodded. "She'll drain you dry. I understand. I just want her out. Tell her you borrowed some from me or something."

Addie rocked Mel back and forth. "I guess I'll have to. The crappy thing is, I know she really doesn't want to stay. She told me Cattle Valley is too small a town for her. But unless I pay her way out, she'll hang around here until something better comes along."

"Paying her to leave is preferable to letting her stay. I'll give you the damn money if you want." Mel held her tight.

"I'll take care of it." Addie cupped Mel's face and kissed her lips. She was happier than she had been for the past few days, and even dealing with Chloe didn't seem like such a chore. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I am, too." Mel kissed her deeply then pulled back. "And now I'm leaving. Chloe doesn't like me. I think you'll get along better without me. That is, as long as you're sure you can keep her in the guest room."

"I'm absolutely sure. When she took off with Del and Rita, it sealed it for me. I want nothing more to do with her."

"I believe you and I trust you." Mel laid one hand on her shoulder. "Good luck. Call me tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. Hopefully, I'll have something figured out by then." She gave Mel one more quick kiss.

"I'll just slip out the back door and walk around to my car." Mel wiggled her nose.

"Chicken." Addie grinned at her.

"You really don't want me to punch her. She might bleed all over your new furniture."

"True. See ya." Addie watched her go. She could slap herself for not committing to the beautiful woman and taking Mel's worries away. It wouldn't be so hard to say 'I love you', and she'd mean it. But something didn't feel right. A worry niggled at Addie. She was sure she hadn't heard the last of her mother and the lawsuit.

Returning to the front room, she found Chloe curled up on the sofa reading a magazine. *There's a familiar sight.* If she stayed here, Chloe would become a permanent fixture in that spot, reading, smacking gum and chain smoking instead of helping out.

Of course she isn't staying! What was I thinking? Addie just didn't know how to make her leave. "I'm going to eat a sandwich and turn in early. You want anything?"

Chloe looked up at her and batted her lashes. "What are you offering?"

"A sandwich, Chloe. Nothing more."

Chloe got to her feet and moved closer to Addie. "Are you sure? It used to be so nice between us. It can be again."

All Addie could see when she looked at the wild, blonde hair and excessive makeup was an image of Del and Rita smirking at her. It'd probably been *nice* between Chloe and a *lot* of people since she'd left here. Addie shivered. Maybe she should get a check-up at the clinic now she could afford it. She could only pray the woman hadn't given her some disease that she unwittingly passed on to Mel.

"On second thought, I'm not hungry. Clean up after yourself if you make a mess, okay?" Addie went to her bedroom and locked the door, in case her guest decided to take a middle of the night stroll. She wasn't taking any chances.

* * * *

Chloe was still sleeping when Addie fixed herself a huge breakfast the next morning. She phoned Mel and touched base, then set about vacuuming and dusting in the front room.

She'd made a schedule for herself and was determined to stick to it, guests or not. She had to keep busy.

Just as she finished and put the vacuum back into the closet, the front door opened.

"Anybody home?" a familiar masculine voice called.

Addie smiled and strolled around the corner. "Hi, Nate! What brings you here?"

He held up a small painting of a child playing in a field of yellow flowers. "I found this and thought it would go perfectly in the front mustard bedroom. You know that one bare wall."

She stepped closer and examined the picture. "I prefer 'gold', if you don't mind. But this is beautiful and it's perfect. Want to help me hang it?"

He raised his eyebrows. "As long as no one is sleeping in that room."

Addie shook her head. "So you've heard Chloe is back. No, she's in the back bedroom, farthest away from me."

He lowered his voice. "You've got to get rid of her. What are you going to do?"

"Not sure." She shrugged. "I'm working on it."

"Throw her ass out. You don't owe her anything."

"I couldn't do that. Besides, I don't want her hanging around Cattle Valley. I'd like to buy her a plane ticket to somewhere."

"Bus," Nate corrected. "All she needs is a bus ticket."

"And a way to get to Sheridan to catch the plane...or bus."

He seemed to think about it.

Addie grinned. "While those little wheels are a-turnin', I'll get a hammer and nail."

"I beg your pardon," Nate followed her. "Nothing of mine could be considered 'little'."

"Oh. Sor-ry. Here we go." She found what she'd been looking for, and they climbed the stairs to the gold bedroom. She positioned the painting, he gave his approval, and Addie drove the nail.

They stood back and admired it. "It's just lovely," Addie murmured.

"The minute I saw it, I knew it'd be perfect."

She squeezed his arm and placed a small kiss on his cheek. "You've been such a help to me. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"I had an idea about that." His eyebrows rose again.

Addie chuckled then stopped as Chloe strolled into the room wearing nothing but the same baby doll pyjamas. "Hey, Chloe."

"Good morning." She yawned and inspected Nate top to bottom. "I've seen you before."

"Lucky girl." He turned to Addie. "So all of your rooms will be available tomorrow night when the ladies come to town? There'll be at least a dozen people. They'll need every bed you've got."

She looked at him with surprise, having no idea what he was talking about.

Nate winked. "The Tulip Festival is always such fun. Mrs. Cavendish is a hoot. She's about seventy and feisty as can be. Her friends are, too. Be careful, or they'll keep you up late at night playing canasta. The inn will be rocking, I assure you."

"The Tulip Festival," Addie repeated, going along with his obviously contrived tale.

He nodded. "A huge draw for the senior set. The town will be crawling with them this weekend."

"Oh my god," Chloe drawled. "They're staying here? Somebody kill me, now."

Nate smiled at her pleasantly. "I could probably arrange that. Or—I could get you a room at the new lodge on the edge of town. It's much more your style. I'm sure you'd be very comfortable there. You'd only need a few hundred to stay through the weekend."

"I'm not moving to some lodge." Chloe looked at Addie. "I'll stay in the room with you. You need me here to help take care of all the guests. Cooking, cleaning—"

"None of which I've ever seen you do." Addie stared at her. "Besides, this is a *bed and breakfast*, remember? There'll one be one meal a day to cook, and I can handle that. What I can't handle is the thought of you sleeping in my bed again. And I can't keep up the nice act any longer, Chloe. I'm sorry, but you're not welcome here. You need to leave."

The blonde woman's mouth dropped open.

"You go, girl!" Nate nudged Addie.

She rolled her eyes at him and continued, "I don't have much money, but I can scrape together enough for a bus ticket. I'm willing to do that for you."

Chloe blinked her eyes thoughtfully. "If I wait until after the old biddy convention pays, you'll have more money. Then you can buy me a plane ticket."

Addie took a step closer to her. "But you can't wait, don't you get that? I want you out of here. Tomorrow, before noon when my guests arrive."

"The only bus I've seen is in Sheridan. How am I going to get there?" Chloe's voice was suddenly whiny.

Nate spoke up. "Rio and I are driving to Sheridan tomorrow to pick up some supplies for the Gym, our fitness centre. We'll drop you off."

"Are you sure?" Addie searched his eyes, wondering if he truly had to drive into town, or if it was something else Nate was doing to help her out.

"Positive. But Rio needs to be back early, so we're leaving by nine." He looked at Chloe. "We'll pick you up. Be ready."

Chloe stared as Nate headed down the stairs.

Addie followed him to the front door and, when he paused, she threw her arms around his neck. "How can I ever thank you?"

"I was going to talk to you about that. I thought an open house here Saturday night for the residents of Cattle Valley. You could provide wine and appetisers, and they could come in and see what you've done with the place. Once everyone sees how nice it is, your business will pick up. And you'll get the chance to meet people and thank those that helped you."

"Saturday night?" She bit her lip. "Mel's parents will be here."

His eyes lit up. "The pharmacists? Mel's parents are great! They'll love helping you with a party."

"You think so? Then all right! Saturday night it is." She squeezed his arm. "Provided all my imaginary little old ladies are gone by then."

Nate grinned. "Worked, didn't it? We'll come by tomorrow at nine. Have Chloe ready and roll her out the door."

"Will do," Addie agreed, excited and breathless from all the wonderful things that had happened, and it wasn't even noon, yet. One more day with Chloe, then she could concentrate on throwing the best inn-warming party Cattle Valley had ever seen.

* * * *

Addie opened the front door precisely at nine the next morning. Nate stood on the porch, arms folded across his chest. "She'd better be ready. Rio's not pleased with me as it is."

"I'm sorry." Addie formed her lips into a pout. "Think you can make it up to him?"

He grinned. "I can probably think of something. As for you, some crab puffs on Saturday night might help."

"Crab puffs for Rio, you got it." She handed him an envelope with enough cash to buy Chloe a ticket to the moon. "Wherever she wants to go, I don't care."

He nodded then glanced up as Chloe carried her bag towards them without speaking.

A feeling of relief that the woman was finally leaving washed through Addie. "Take care of yourself."

"I will." Chloe smiled, batting her eyelashes. "I might see you again."

"Let's not plan on it. We had some laughs, but it's time to go our separate ways. Please, Chloe." Addie gazed at her intently. She did not want her turning up every few weeks like a bad penny.

Chloe flashed her an irritated glance, before Nate grabbed her arm and pointed her in the direction of Rio's truck.

"Time to go," he instructed. "See you later, Addie."

"Goodbye," she murmured to both of them and closed the door. She waited until she heard the truck drive off then collapsed onto the sofa. *It's over.* Things were finally falling into place. Now, she could focus on the party and what she planned to serve besides crab puffs.

But first... Addie stood and went to the phone. She'd written down the number of the clinic in town on a scrap of paper. She'd heard it was usually pretty easy to get an appointment. She wanted an examination, just to be safe. She'd thought Chloe had been clean but now realised she'd had no reason to assume that. It was crazy to sit and worry about it, she was going in to make sure everything was fine.

When the phone rang, Addie nearly jumped out of her skin. She grabbed the receiver and spoke breathily, her heart pounding. "Apple Valley Inn, this is Addie."

"Miss Murphy, this is Dominic Nielson. I've finally got some news about your lawsuit."

"Hi, Mr. Nielson." Addie didn't like the tone of her lawyer's voice. She chuckled nervously. "You don't sound happy."

"You neglected to tell me your parents never got divorced."

"They what?" Her heart leapt into her throat. "Of course they did. My father said —"

"I'm sorry, it really doesn't matter what your father said. It's what he did, or in this case didn't do, that counts. He never filed the papers. Your mother insists they were still married at the time of his death, and court records back her up."

"But he wrote a new will leaving his estate to me. I had it. I gave it to you."

"Unfortunately, the necessary paperwork never got filed on that, either. I don't know whose mistake it was, but the new will was never validated. His original one leaves everything to Jean, and that's what the court decreed. You have thirty days to transfer the money to her account. I can handle that for you, if you wish."

Addie leaned against the counter, struggling to remain standing. "I'll have to get back to you on that."

"I'm sorry, Miss Murphy."

"Yeah, thanks." She hung up the phone, trying to process what he'd told her.

After everything she'd been through with her father—both of them unceremoniously kicked out of their family home, his illness and ultimate death—she never in a million years would have guessed he hadn't filed the divorce papers. Addie was used to her mother letting her down. The thought that her father had been so careless cut through her like a knife.

She took a few deep breaths. *Quit blaming everyone else.* She needed to stand up and take responsibility for her own life. This mess wasn't her father's fault. It wasn't even her mother's. Jean Murphy did what was best for herself. Always had, always would. Addie should be used to that.

But at that moment, having a parent to turn to would have been so nice. Her arms, rigid against the front counter in an effort to hold herself upright, buckled. Addie dropped to her knees. Great, heaving sobs escaped, and she buried her face in her hands. When she was all cried out, she curled up into a ball and closed her eyes.

Chapter Twelve

Mel hurried in the front door of the inn. "Addie?"

She'd heard from Nate that they'd put Chloe on a bus headed west. When he'd said he'd tried to call Addie and couldn't reach her, Mel hung up and tried the number. She got no answer, either.

She'd convinced Naomi to let her take an early lunch break and headed to the inn. Addie's car was there, so unless she'd walked somewhere, she was home. "Addie?"

"In here," Addie's voice sounded from the bedroom.

Mel grinned. "Were you expecting me? I've only got an hour, but if we hurry—" She froze.

Addie lay curled up on top of the comforter, hair askew, face tear-stained.

"What happened? Are you all right?" Mel rushed to her side. "Did someone—"

Addie jerked away. "I'm okay. Nothing's happened, really, except my life is over."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Mel sat next to her.

"My lawyer called. Apparently my father never filed divorce papers, and his new will was never validated, so Mother won the case. I have thirty days to repay the money I *thought* I'd inherited."

"Oh shit." Mel stood and paced. "Okay, we can figure this out. We'll take a mortgage. I have some money."

"Mel, stop it!" Addie sat up. "This isn't something you can fix. You don't have the kind of money I need, and I'm not sure I'd take it if you did. I've told you how I feel about a mortgage. I've got no guests. *Zero*. How can I pay a monthly bill with such a wildly irregular income?"

"Sell the inn! Move in with me, and we'll figure out what you want to do next with your life. We can do this, Addie. As long as we're together, you and I can make this work."

Addie swiped a tissue from the box on her bed and wiped her nose. "I'm not worth it, Mel. The best thing I could do for you would be to leave Cattle Valley and never look back."

She walked to the bureau and looked at her reflection in the mirror. "More fool's gold. Except in this case, I don't look so hot on the outside."

Anger bubbled inside Mel. She got up and stood behind Addie, grabbing her shoulders so they both looked into the mirror.

"You are *not* worthless on the inside. And yeah, you've had better days, appearance-wise, but damn it, I've told you repeatedly, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

Mel pushed her face next to Addie's and continued looking at her through the mirror. "I'm sorry about your parents. It sucks, and it's not fair. But your life is far from over. *I love you*, Addie Murphy. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, whether we live here at the inn, or in my one-bedroom apartment or someplace totally different than Cattle Valley. I'd do that for you, because I love you."

Tears streamed down Addie's face again. "*Don't*. Please don't. This is happening too fast. I need time to figure things out."

Mel wrapped her arms around Addie's body from behind. "I understand you need time. Just please, don't shut me out. Let me help you decide what to do."

"I can't." Addie shrugged loose and moved away. "I'm sorry, Melissa. I don't know what I have to offer, right now. I need to be alone. Please take your things and go." She turned and walked from the room.

Mel stared at the empty doorway. *It isn't going to end like this.* "Addie!" she cried.

"Please, just go!" Addie's voice was choked with sobs.

Not sure whether to be hurt or angry, Mel shoved the few personal items she had in the room into a bag she'd left there and started out. Reconsidering, she glanced into the hall to make sure Addie wasn't coming. There was no sign of her, so Mel hurried to the drawer where she knew Addie kept some personal papers.

Mel rifled through them until she found what she was looking for. She copied down the address then put everything back the way it had been. Returning to the front room, she found Addie staring out the window.

"I'm going, now. You know if you need me, you can call anytime, day or night, and I'll be here."

"I know." Addie didn't look at her.

In the short time they'd known each other, Mel had come to understand Addie needed her space. She'd go for now and pray Addie didn't hate her for what she was about to do, but Mel saw no other choice.

"Bye," she said softly and slipped out the door.

* * * *

The flight from Sheridan to Colorado Springs took almost six hours, because of a long layover in Denver. Mel left Thursday morning, hoping to catch Addie's mother at home after work that evening. If she couldn't, she had Jean's work address and would go there on Friday. But finding the woman at home, alone, would be preferable.

Mel travelled light with only one carry-on bag, and she snagged a taxi right in front of the airport. She gave the driver the address, and he estimated it would take twenty minutes to get there. She glanced at her watch. The timing should be perfect, if Jean went straight home after work. *If, if, if...* Mel wondered if she were doing the right thing. In her heart, she felt like she was.

The driver pulled to a stop in front of a medium-sized brick house with tulips springing up along the front walk. *The Tulip Festival*. Mel smiled to herself, remembering what Addie told her about Nate's scam to get rid of Chloe. She missed Addie. Hell, she missed Nate. She missed Cattle Valley and, at that moment, wished desperately she was back there.

"This is it, lady. You want me to wait?"

Mel glanced at the fare box and handed him some cash with a tip. "Could you wait a couple of minutes, please? I'm not sure anyone is home."

He waved the cash. "This'll get you five minutes."

"Thanks." She hoisted her bag and climbed out, walking slowly up the sidewalk. She took a deep breath, rang the bell and waited extremely long seconds. She got dizzy then realised she'd forgotten to let out the breath. She exhaled and inhaled slowly, attempting to calm herself.

When the front door opened, the woman in front of her caught Mel by surprise. Nowhere nearly as intimidating as she'd expected, Jean Murphy was short and plump with

tired eyes and teased, dyed-black hair. There was no doubt about who she was, she had the same mascara-lined brown eyes as Addie.

"Mrs. Murphy?"

"Yes?" the woman responded pleasantly.

"I'm, uh, Melissa Danes. A friend of Addie's from Wyoming."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Wyoming? Is that where she got off to? I hadn't heard."

"Yes, it is. I hoped I could have a word with you. Please."

Jean looked uncertain but finally stepped aside and motioned Mel in.

Mel waved to the cab driver and went into the house.

"Does my daughter know you're here, Miss Danes?"

"No." Mel set her bag down on the floor. "She'd probably be pretty unhappy."

"I'd tend to agree with you. She and I never did see eye to eye, as hard as I tried." Jean motioned her to the sofa. "Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee or tea?"

"No, thank you." Mel sat, noticing the remains of a once-frozen, pre-packaged dinner on the coffee table.

A quiz show blared from the TV. Jean grabbed the remote and hit mute. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to tell you a little about Addie's life. Did you know she bought an inn? It's a beautiful bed and breakfast. Some kids vandalised it before she arrived in town, so she's had to spend weeks fixing the place up. It's finally ready to go, and it looks just lovely. Addie's done a wonderful job."

Jean stared at her. "So?"

Mel shifted uncomfortably. "I just thought if you knew how well Addie is doing, you might be happy for her."

"What Adeline does now is of little concern to me. I did the best I could for her, but she was a wilful teenager and fought me at every turn. Once she reached the age of majority, she took off, virtually cutting me out of her life. That's the way she wants it, that's the way it is."

Two sides to every story. Mel's parents always told her that. She took a breath, hoping she was doing the right thing, and said, "Addie thinks you kicked her out because you discovered she was a lesbian."

"What? Ridiculous!" Jean shuffled her fingers and glanced around nervously.

"Really?" Mel wasn't sure she believed her, but that was in the past. It was what Jean said and did now that counted. "If that isn't an issue, then maybe you and Addie could talk sometime. I'm sure she'd really enjoy that."

"I don't know." Addie's mother didn't seem convinced.

Mel had trouble understanding Jean's point of view, but how Mel felt wasn't the issue, she was there for Addie. Playing her final card, she spilled the reason for her visit. "Addie invested every dime from her father's estate into that inn. If you take the money back, she's going to lose everything."

Jean's eyebrows rose. "Ah, the heart of the matter. Are you sure my daughter didn't send you? This seems like something she'd do. She's always begged for handouts, taking whatever anyone has to give. I knew she wouldn't part with my inheritance easily."

Addie begged for handouts? Mel wondered if she truly was in the right house. Jean and Addie Murphy were apparently far apart in their views of each other. She shook her head. "Addie doesn't know I'm here. I care about her, Mrs. Murphy. I don't want to see her lose the inn. It seems like she's finally happy for the first time in who knows how long."

"And you're blaming that on me?" Jean screeched. "I did the best I could for that wilful child! Nothing was ever good enough. She left home when she was legally able, and I barely saw her after that. Worse yet, she took my husband from me."

Mel stared at her, forcing her mouth to remain closed.

Jean waved a hand. "Oh, not in that way. Horace always had a soft spot for Adeline. He couldn't stand it when she left, so he left, too. They both cut me out of their lives. I know she took care of him at the end. I suppose she wants something for that."

Mel sighed. At that moment, she knew it had been a futile trip. "Addie doesn't want anything, Mrs. Murphy. I think she could use some love, but I see it's far too late for that."

Jean hopped up, fury blazing in her eyes. "When did she ever love me? She was there for her father, but was she ever there for me? I haven't seen her since his funeral and not often before that."

"Did you ever tell her you needed anything? Because if you had, I'm sure she'd have been there for you, too."

"Don't presume to know about a relationship that spans over twenty years. You have no idea what we went through—what *I* went through. It hasn't been an easy life, I assure you."

Mel glanced around. The house was well lived in and could use some sprucing up, but it was more than Addie had. Addie had nothing. Mel set her shoulders and corrected her thoughts. *Addie has love*. In Mel's book that was everything.

She'd go back to Cattle Valley and convince Addie to stay and make a life with her. Mel's parents were due to arrive the next day. She knew they'd love Addie as much as she did, when they got to know her. Maybe, just maybe, love would be enough.

Mel stood. "I shouldn't have come here. I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy. I can see you need the inheritance more than you need a daughter. Addie understood that, but I didn't, until now. May I use your phone to call a taxi?"

* * * *

Mel's flight back home was shorter but more gruelling than her trip to Colorado. Going there, she'd been full of hope and possibilities. Now, driving the highway between Sheridan and Cattle Valley, her hopes were dashed. She dreaded going back and telling Addie where she'd been. It would only reinforce the worthless feelings her girlfriend seemed to have.

She wouldn't keep secrets from Addie, but Mel would do whatever it took to keep her one true love from feeling like she had no value. *No one should feel that way*. No one's parents should make them feel that way. The thought made Mel anxious to see her mom and dad and give them each a great, big hug.

A strange car with rental tags was parked in front of the inn. *Mom and Dad!* Mel parked and got out then darted up the steps leading to the porch. She opened the front door and spotted her parents, sitting on the sofa chatting with Addie. "Mom! Dad!"

All three of them turned, and her parents rose to catch Mel as she catapulted into their arms. "You made it!"

"Hey, sweetheart." Her father gave her a hug. "We were just talking about you. We stopped at the bookstore on the way here, but Naomi said you were off today."

"But you weren't home." Her mother touched her cheek. "Addie just tried to call you."

"I know." She nodded, squeezing her dark-haired mother tightly. Everyone said mother and daughter looked alike, which made Mel happy. She hoped to look as beautiful as her mother did when she reached that age. "I had to run an errand."

Her father held her at arm's length. "You're dog tired, young lady. Must have been some errand."

Mel smiled up at him. He looked endearingly the same as always, with sandy-greying hair and tiny, wire-rimmed glasses. "It was. I want to tell you all about it." *I don't really want to.* The idea of hurting Addie was like driving a stake through her soul.

Addie stood and joined them. "Can I say something, first?"

"Sure." Mel gazed at her. She couldn't resist and gave Addie a quick hug. "I missed you," she whispered.

Addie pulled back, a pink blush creeping over her face. She looked at her feet, embarrassed. "I missed you, too. But you have to listen to this. You'll never guess what happened today! My lawyer called again. Apparently my mother changed her mind and isn't asking for the inheritance back!"

"Really?" Mel's heart leapt. Maybe her long trip hadn't been in vain after all. She glanced at her folks, who were nodding happily.

"Addie's been telling us all about it," her mother said. "Quite a story."

"That's putting it mildly." Addie laughed.

Mel looked at her. "Did he say why your mother changed her mind?"

"No." Addie had a look of amazement on her face. "He just said she wants me to call her sometime. That was it. He couldn't understand it, either."

"Oh, wow." Mel hugged Addie, tears leaking down her face. "I'm so happy for you."

"I knew you would be." Addie spoke softly in her ear. "You've been my champion through this whole thing. From the minute you found out about the vandals, you've been here for me, Mel. I don't know why it took me so long to see what you realised before."

She pulled back and looked into Mel's eyes. "I love you. I need you in my life. I'd already figured that out before I found out about the money, I just wasn't sure what we were going to do. This makes things so much easier."

Addie batted her lashes shyly. "If you're still interested. I know I can be moody, and need an unnaturally long time to make up my mind about things, but—"

Mel planted a kiss on Addie's lips to shut her up. When they separated, she wiped a tear from Addie's cheek with her thumb. "I love you. I'm not perfect, and I don't expect you to be." She smiled. "Although you're pretty damn close."

Addie grinned, still speaking rapidly. "I want you to move in with me. Whatever you want to do to the attic bedroom, it's yours. It'll be your space."

"It's a nice room." Mel's father spoke up.

She glanced at him, surprised.

"We looked at it when we first got here, and Addie showed us around. The inn is lovelier now than the last time we stayed here. Once word gets out it's up and running again, I think business will be good."

Her mother added, "Fixing up that space is going to cost some money, though. I think you'll want a bathroom up there, so you aren't sharing with guests."

"Definitely a bathroom," he agreed.

Mel widened her eyes. "I can have a bathroom? That'd be great!"

Addie hugged her. "You can have whatever you want."

"We're going to help you pay for it," her father said. "And you've got the rest of your college money you can spend."

"Really?" Mel squealed. "I figured since I quit college, I forfeited the money."

"What 'forfeit'?" Her mother shrugged. "This is family not business. The inn seems like a good investment for you. Provided Addie wants you as a partner."

Mel looked at the woman she loved more than life itself and raised her eyebrows. "What do you think, Adeline? Want me as a partner, and that includes accepting some money from me?"

"Absolutely." Addie touched her face. "I definitely want you as a partner, money or no money."

Mel's father said, "Why don't you girls get cleaned up? I'm taking you all out to eat at the *Canoe* restaurant. We can talk more about your plans for the inn over dinner."

"That sounds wonderful." Mel rolled her eyes gratefully. "I'm starved. I do need to wash my face, though."

"I'll go with you." Addie looped her arm through Mel's, and they headed for the master bathroom.

"Oh, by the way," Mel's mother called out. "Naomi told us she's pregnant! Her mother gets grandchildren."

Mel glanced over her shoulder. "Naomi's mother is dead, Mom. I don't think she's concerned about grandchildren."

"That doesn't mean some of us aren't." Her mother smiled sweetly.

"We'll be right back." Mel grinned at her. She pushed Addie into the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

Addie pressed Mel up against the door and kissed her passionately. Their tongues batted back and forth, hands groping and exploring. When they came up for air, Addie murmured, "Your parents want grandchildren."

Mel kissed her neck. "Do you think we should mention we can't get them the natural way?"

"Nah." Addie caught Mel's mouth in another hot, wet kiss. "We're independent women. We can do whatever we want. I just got a clean bill of health from one of the local doctors, so maybe once we get on our feet financially, we'll want to talk about children."

"I love kids," Mel agreed with a smile. "How about for now, we keep practicing, and see what happens."

"Sounds good." Addie held her tight and squeezed.

About the Author

Jenna Byrnes could use more cabinet space and more hours in a day. She'd fill the kitchen with gadgets her husband purchases off TV and let him cook for her to his heart's content. She'd breeze through the days adding hours of sleep, and more time for writing the hot, erotic romance she loves to read.

Jenna thinks everyone deserves a happy ending, and loves to provide as many of those as possible to her gay, lesbian and hetero characters. Her favourite quote, from a pro-gay billboard, is "Be careful who you hate. It may be someone you love."

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