

Loose Id



SHERIFF IN HER STOCKING



CHER GORMAN

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Cher Gorman

Loose Id.[®]
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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-365-0

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown
Cover Artist: April Martinez

Dedication

For Mike, my own personal protector.

Thank you to L2, my editor for believing in me and this story.

Thank you to the “quad.”

Chapter One

Delaney Moore grabbed another double-chocolate chip cookie from the bag sitting on the passenger seat of her Mini Cooper. Suddenly, the compact car fish-tailed wildly over the dark, icy Montana highway and slid toward the snow-packed shoulder of the road. A spurt of fear fueled with adrenaline zipped through Delaney's body. Her eyes widened and her heart lurched into her throat. Breath huffed from her lungs in short, ragged gasps. "Okay ... just ... don't panic."

She popped the cookie between her teeth and tightened both hands on the steering wheel before easing her foot off the accelerator. Though she gently pumped the brake pedal, the car continued skidding toward the side of the highway. "No, nooo."

As if in slow motion, the car plowed into the snow bank with a muffled crunch. Snow sailed upward into the air and landed with a soft plop onto the hood of her car. Delaney jerked in the seat but avoided hitting her head on the steering wheel. The cookie flew from her mouth, hit the windscreen and broke into several pieces before falling to the dashboard. The engine sputtered once and died. Quickly, Delaney turned the key in the ignition. *Click*. "Please start ..." She tried again. *Click*. There wasn't even the slightest whine from the engine. "I can't believe this is happening," she murmured to herself.

Unsnapping her seatbelt, she slumped back in the seat and heaved a deep breath, thankful the airbag hadn't deployed. The windscreen wipers futilely beat in a steady thump, thump against the rapidly building snow. "Great. It's almost Christmas, you've been dumped by your two-timing boyfriend, and now you're stuck in the middle of this frozen wasteland." She spied the pieces of broken cookie on the dash and shrugged. "Might as well eat."

Resigned to her situation, she grabbed one, popped it into her mouth and angrily chewed. "To hell with what's-his-name; he can just get screwed." She shook her head. The rat fink bastard was probably doing just that right now with his skinny new girlfriend.

Delaney wiped some crumbs from around her mouth, leaned over, and reached into her large, hobo-style purse sitting on the floor on the passenger's side. She pulled out her cell phone. Pushing the power button, she waited, but the small screen flashed a message indicating no service. She turned off the phone and tossed the useless piece of metal and plastic back into her bag. Gazing through the windscreen, she could see snow sifting down in dense, white sheets through the beams of the car's headlights. What the hell was she going to do?

A flicker of light in the rearview mirror snagged her attention. Relief washed through her. Thank goodness. The police. The strobe light on the roof flashed bright red and blue in the steadily falling snow. The Jeep pulled to the side of the road and stopped. She watched as the officer climbed out. He looked huge, kind of like Batman emerging from the fog. Seeing him walking toward her comforted her until she remembered an episode from a crime show she'd seen recently. Her sense of ease morphed into trepidation. The episode was about a crazed killer impersonating a police officer in order to lure unsuspecting women into his sinister web.

The officer stepped beside the driver's door, shined a flashlight's beam into her face, and tapped on the window. For a moment, she considered not opening it. *Get a grip, Delaney. Crazed killers don't lurk in snowstorms. Or do they?* Taking a deep breath to calm

her rising nerves, Delaney rolled the window down an inch. Icy wind and snowflakes dashed against her face, nearly taking her breath away.

“You okay?” His voice was deep and concerned even as he shouted the words above the howling wind.

She wished she could see his face clearly but between the darkness and his plastic-covered hat, it was impossible to get a good look at him. “I am, but my car isn’t.”

“I’m Sheriff Rick Cruz from Avery. You won’t be able to get a tow this late because of the storm. I’d be glad to give you a lift into town.”

Delaney thought about her cell phone sitting in her purse. If only she could call the town and verify his identity. “Could I see your badge, please?”

He reached inside the lapel of his coat, withdrew his badge, and slipped it through the crack in the window.

Delaney studied it for a moment before handing it back to him. It looked real enough. “Thank you. I just needed to make sure.”

“No problem. It’s a smart thing to do.”

Delaney put on her coat, grabbed her purse from the floorboard, stuffed the bag of cookies inside, and flipped the lock switch. She glanced down at her clothes. *Why did I wear a skirt today?* At least she had on boots. As Delaney started to climb out of the car with her hand gripping the handle for balance, Officer Cruz swung the door open.

He stepped around the door until he faced her and held it open with one hand. “Be careful, it’s icy.”

Just as her boot-clad feet touched the ground, a gust of wind slammed into her. Her feet slipped on the ice. “Oh, no!”

She jerked her head toward the officer, kept one hand on the door handle, and grabbed the lapel of his coat with the other in an attempt to steady herself. Her mid-length skirt billowed up in the wind, exposing the lower half of her body, chilling her to the bone.

The officer let go of the door and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her toward him, but trapping the skirt between them. “Easy, I’ve got you.”

Unable to get her feet back under her, Delaney started to fall, pulling the officer with her. Her purse flew up into the air, dislodging the bag of cookies. Double chocolate chip cookies scattered in all directions as they fell in a tangle of arms and legs into a snowdrift.

Dazed from the fall, Delaney didn’t move for a moment with her skirt twisted around her upper body. The officer lay half on top of her with one of his knees pressed against her femininity, his right arm wrapped firmly around her waist, his left palm lying on her right breast. Every inch of him touching her felt firm and corded with muscle. His face pressed into the side of her neck while his warm, ragged breath wafted over her skin.

Despite the blessed heat from his body, Delaney felt immersed in ice water and as if the air had been suctioned from her lungs. Snow pushed into places snow wasn’t meant to go. She inhaled a deep breath of frigid air as a shudder racked her body. Snow covered her left arm while the other was sandwiched beneath the officer’s body. She moved her fingers and they closed around a warm, hard bulge. Delaney’s eyes widened.

At that moment, Officer Cruz shifted his hand from her breast, lifted his head and propped himself up with one arm.

Delaney pulled her hand from his crotch and attempted a smile. “Sorry.”

The headlights from his vehicle illuminated the officer’s face. His hat had been knocked off during the fall. Snowflakes coated his long, thick lashes and black, wavy hair. A corner of his firm, sensual mouth kicked up. One word popped into her mind. Gorgeous.

His chocolate-brown gaze skimmed her face. “Are you okay, Miss ...?”

“Delaney Moore.” She nodded. “I think so.”

The officer rolled off her and climbed to his feet. He leaned over and held his glove-covered hands out toward her. “Grab hold, I’ll help you up.”

Shoving down her skirt, Delaney reached up and gripped his hands. She attempted to plant her feet firmly under her, but as she struggled to regain her balance, she fell against him. She let go of his hands and placed her palms on his chest. Pushing back a little, she lifted her chin. Her gaze collided with his. "I'm really sorry. I'm usually not this clumsy."

He threw her another half-smile and she nearly melted into the snow. "Don't worry about it."

* * * * *

Delaney settled back into the leather seat of the truck, leaned her head against the headrest, and sighed. She smelled food. She wasn't sure if it was her imagination or the fact that she had another urge for a cookie. She looked through the windscreen and watched the sheriff lifting her suitcase from the trunk of her car. He was a long, tall drink of a man with broad shoulders and strong arms that she bet could protect a woman from anything that came down the pike.

Cookies were scattered at his feet. Hoping one had fallen out of the bag into her purse she rummaged through it but found nothing. Sheriff Cruz said not to worry about being clumsy. Usually she didn't give such things a second thought but for some odd reason he made her feel like an idiot.

She supposed it was because of the effect he had on her. He was so solid and male and well ... hot. The man radiated strength and vitality. She'd heard that Latino men were very passionate though she'd never dated one. If the way he looked and the sound of his voice were any indication, that was most definitely true.

Warm air pumped from the heater into the interior, relaxing her. She closed her eyes and listened to the music with a salsa beat wafting from a CD player sitting on the bench seat. She found herself tapping her foot in time to the music. She'd never really listened to that particular kind of music and supposed it was because she didn't have any Hispanic friends. Most of her friends she'd met in college or she'd known since childhood. They

shared the same white Protestant background. Her parents expected her to eventually settle down with that same kind of man, and she supposed she would one day, if the right man ever came along.

Then why was she so instantly attracted to Sheriff Cruz? She shook her head and chalked it up to exhaustion and her love life swirling down the toilet.

The driver's door suddenly swung open. Delaney straightened in her seat and watched all six foot something inches of Sheriff Cruz climb in. He raked his fingers through his ebony hair, scattering snowflakes before turning toward her. His eyes, the color of rich, dark chocolate, caressed her face, making her want to move closer to him. "The storm's picking up. The road's bad now, but soon it'll be impassable."

Delaney thought about being stranded on the side of the road with the sheriff. How bad could it be stuck in close quarters with a hottie like him? Wait a minute; she didn't even know him. Living in Seattle, they didn't get snow often. In fact, with all the white stuff falling outside she imagined the possibility of being snowbound with the sheriff was entirely possible. "Do you think we might not make it into town?"

He smiled reassuringly, calming her anxiety. "No, don't worry, this truck will go anywhere. Better fasten your seatbelt."

She reached for the seatbelt and pulled but it wouldn't budge. She yanked again but the darn thing didn't release. "It seems to be stuck."

He huffed. "Sorry about that." He slid across the seat and reached around her. His scent of soap and light aftershave surrounded her, making her skin tingle. He grabbed the belt and pulled. His arm brushed over her breasts. Heat from his touch suffused her chest, engorging her nipples. She felt them pucker beneath her blouse and was thankful she still wore her coat.

Delaney studied his face, barely an inch from hers. Olive skin, defined cheekbones, well-shaped lips. He bumped against her and turned his head. "Sorry." Her breath caught as

his gaze slid from her eyes to her mouth. They were like two deer caught in headlights. Suddenly she wanted to touch him, hold him, kiss him. Mesmerized, she moved slightly toward him, nearly drowning in the mahogany depths of his eyes. He moved closer to her, his breath wafting over her lips. She licked them, hoping to somehow experience his flavor on her tongue.

A freight truck rolled past scattering snow onto the side of the police cruiser with soft, indistinct thuds. For a moment, the truck's engine hummed through the snow-laden air before fading into the distance. The sheriff jerked his attention toward the seatbelt, pulled once more and snapped it into the buckle.

Her stomach growled.

He smiled and raised one brow. "Hungry?"

Oh, she was hungry all right. "A little. It's just that it smells like food in here."

He moved to the driver's side, checked his rearview mirror and pulled the truck onto the snow-covered highway. "I delivered some food to a lady who lives outside of town. You were lucky I happened to come along."

She was surprised. "You deliver food too?"

"Avery's a small town." He turned off the CD player. "The citizens depend on me for a lot of things in addition to upholding the law."

"Does that include rescuing stranded women during snowstorms?"

He chuckled, and his laughter washed through her down to her toes. Did he have a sense of humor in bed? She shook herself inwardly. Why would she think such a thing?

"Actually, you're my first. Mostly it's traffic complaints, domestic disturbances, drunks or trouble with some of the local teenagers."

There was no way she could pursue this man. As soon as the storm cleared, she was moving on. Good thing too. Her family probably wouldn't like it if she became involved with a man like him. He was the dark, sultry Latin type. Even though she wasn't particularly close

to her parents, she was aware of what they expected of her and had never bucked their wishes or opinions. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, letting her gaze travel from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. Well ... it couldn't hurt to dream.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, he maneuvered the truck through the town. Avery appeared picture perfect covered in a thick blanket of snow. Christmas wreaths strung with twinkle lights swung in the wind where they hung on the light posts. The streets were empty, the stores locked up tight.

Rick pulled the truck into a space in front of a building and cut the engine. Delaney blinked when she saw the sign on the door. "Why are we stopping here?"

He turned and looked at her. Beams from a streetlight flowed in and illuminated his head in a halo so she couldn't see his features clearly. "The bed and breakfast is full with the Lawson family in town for the holidays visiting their grandparents. The best I can offer you is a jail cell."

Startled by his suggestion, her mouth popped open. "A jail cell?"

He shrugged. "It's clean. There's even a bathroom with a shower at the end of the hall." He made it sound like a hotel. "Until the storm passes ..."

She'd never been inside a jail, now she was going to have to spend the night in a cell or perhaps two nights or more. What choice did she have? "I'll take it."

He swung his office door open, flipped a switch and the space flooded with light. Delaney stepped inside and looked around. The room was small with a wood floor and walls painted a stark white. A file cabinet occupied the back wall. An oak desk of average size sat under a small window and contained a phone and a Rolodex with file folders neatly stacked in the center. A calendar advertising Griffin's Hardware store hung over the file cabinet.

Rick closed the door at her back, stepped around her with her suitcase in one hand, and headed toward a door in the back that led to a darkened hallway. "Cell's through here. We only have one." His voice was polite and matter-of-fact. "It's not used very often except by the occasional drunk."

She thought of an old television show she'd seen recently. "Like Otis."

He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "Otis?"

"From the Andy Griffith show."

"Not quite." He walked through the door and flipped another switch. An overhead light dispelled the darkness. "Most drunks I lock up are belligerent. They aren't happy drunks like Otis." He walked over to the jail cell, grasped the door, and swung it open. There was a simple lock on the door, no fancy electronics for security. He set her suitcase inside the cell and turned. "You'll be safe here." He smiled at her again and she felt the inevitable meltdown. "No one's ever broken into the sheriff's office, not even to spring a prisoner."

There was a cot against the wall with white sheets, a pillow, and a coarse blanket folded neatly on one end. A sink and toilet sat against one wall. There was no rocking chair with doilies Aunt Bea had made, no pictures on the walls, or a side table with a lamp and books to read. She looked up at the tiny window situated high up the wall over the cot. Iron bars assured the prisoner there was no escape.

The cell contained not the slightest sign of Christmas -- not even a sprig of holly. Delaney thought about the cozy apartment she'd left behind in Seattle, the same apartment where she'd planned to share Christmas with her boyfriend. She'd left town hoping to start a new chapter in her life in New York City. Only, she never bargained on a jail cell in small town America, no matter how temporary. She forced a smile. "Home sweet home."

* * * * *

Rick climbed into the cab of his truck and slammed the door. He huffed out a breath. "Shit." He leaned his head back and stared at the falling snow through the windscreen. He

was headed toward home sweet home, not her. He'd told her the cell was the best he could do, but that was a damn lie. He had a perfectly comfortable fold-out sofa in the den at his house that anyone of his family members used when they came to visit. So why hadn't he invited her to come home with him? The answer was simple.

He didn't trust himself to keep his hands off her.

He smiled. Discovering her hand on his crotch after they'd tumbled into the snow was a surprise and a delight. Especially when her fingers closed around him, right before she pulled her hand away. Both those actions made him hard in an instant.

Besides, there was something about her, the way she talked and moved, the expressions he watched flicker in her cobalt eyes. She was sexy as all hell and he didn't have a clue why. She wasn't even his type. He usually went for slim brunettes, women who worked out and watched what they ate. Delaney Moore, with her fair complexion and silvery blonde hair, was far from his normal kind of woman. She had sensuous curves and she traveled with an open bag of chocolate chip cookies in her car. No woman he'd ever dated did that.

Why was he so attracted to her? Her silky voice had a slight purr that did strange things to his insides and made him feel as though he'd been waiting to hear her voice his entire life. The thought scared him senseless. When she'd first spoken, the sound of her voice touched a need deep inside him, a need he couldn't quite identify. Something his mother said to him right before he moved from Chicago to Avery drifted through his mind. *When you meet the right woman, everything about her will hit you like a brick. You'll wonder where she's been all your life. Just like when I met your father.*

He shook his head. Not him. No way. Besides, he'd been dating Lenore Shaw, the owner of the local bed and breakfast. The brunette kept herself in shape. She'd also brought him food when he first moved to Avery and even offered him free room and board in the B&B until he could get settled in. They'd had a date last night and here he was thinking about another woman, a virtual stranger. He exhaled a heavy breath. However, he and Lenore had never made any kind of verbal or emotional commitment not to see other people.

They had only been out together a few times. He found her attractive and had considered going to bed with her, but he was afraid she might take it as some kind of commitment.

Why did cuddling up with Delaney Moore hold so much appeal? Damned if he knew. An image of Delaney's pale face and wide blue eyes flashed into his mind. She never said she was afraid to stay in the jail, but she looked scared out of her wits. Was it because of the jail, the car accident she'd been in earlier, or a combination of the two? Why did it bother him so much to head home to a warm house and bed, leaving her to cozy up on a jail cell cot? He didn't even know the woman.

"Damn it." Rick heaved a deep sigh, opened the driver's door, and climbed out into the snow-filled night.

When he stepped into the lighted hallway just off his office, he heard Delaney mutter a curse. He looked down at the hallway floor. Wet footprints and small puddles of water led in the direction of the jail cell. He heard the shower running. Rick looked toward the cell that Delaney occupied and nearly swallowed his tongue. She stood facing the cell door with one hand grasping a bar and the other gripping the towel wrapped around her body. She pulled on the bar of the cell door, pressed her mouth into a firm line and softly cursed again.

She'd locked herself in. Unable to help himself, Rick grinned as a lusty thought drifted through his mind. He'd like to see her locked up but only as a slave to his ardor, a woman willing to let him reign over her body.

Water dripped from her hair. Light glistened off the water droplets on the slopes of her milky-white breasts showing above the towel. The bottom of the towel only reached the extreme top of her thighs. Her curvy bottom and the sweet delight lying between her legs were barely covered. He watched in rapt fascination as water trickled down the inside of her thighs much as her own womanly honey would flow for him if he slipped his hand beneath that towel and caressed her. For a moment, he stood glued to the floor as a sexy scenario played like a wet dream through his mind.

Slowly, she lifted her head. Her blue gaze locked onto his and glowed with an inner desire that beckoned him to her side. Her lips parted on a sigh, her light pink tongue licked her upper lip, making it glimmer. He grew hard, his penis nudging his pants, needing to be free of restraint and penetrate her sensuous body. He walked toward her cell where she stood by the door. The hallway light streamed over her, the water droplets on her skin tempting him to rub his tongue over every inch of her. As he neared the door, she let go of the bar on the jail cell door. He took the cell key from his pocket, slipped it into the lock in much the same way he wanted to slip inside her. He pushed and the door banged against the cell's bars, the sound reverberating through his body like the want for her filling his blood. They looked at each other while the sexual attraction arced like electricity between them. He stepped forward until they were barely an inch apart. Raising one hand, he grasped the edge of the towel in his fist and pulled it roughly from her body.

She gasped, but her eyes filled with hunger. She dropped her arms to her sides and stared at him. He reached out and held one of her breasts in his palm rubbing his thumb over the nipple until it hardened. He laid his other hand on the nest of blonde curls between her thighs and nudged her back until her legs met with the edge of the cot. He leaned down, put one arm behind her knees and the other around her waist. He picked her up and laid her on the cot. After removing the handcuffs from his back pocket, he gently positioned her hands above her head and fastened the cuffs around her wrists. She lay there like a temptress with a sexy smile on her lips. Her eyes were warm, inviting him to touch her, take her, pursue sexual dominion over every inch of her delectable body.

She shifted on the cot, pushing her chest forward, giving him a good, long look at her breasts. Then she moved her hips, rubbing her bottom into the cot. He braced his hands on either side of her upper body, leaned over, and took one of her nipples into his mouth, laving it with his tongue. A little whimper of pleasure escaped her throat, the sound zipping like a hot current to settle between his legs, almost making him come. Straddling her on the cot, he

spread her beautiful, ivory thighs wide until he could see the soft folds of her womanhood and her plump, aroused clit. Lowering his head, he opened his mouth and --

“Thank God!”

The sound of Delaney’s voice startled Rick from his libidinous thoughts.

“I came back to the cell because I’d forgotten my shampoo and accidentally shut the door.” A blush burned over her neck and cheeks. “You must think I’m an idiot.” Her voice was soft with embarrassment.

Rick glanced down at the hard-on tenting his slacks, pulled the sides of his jacket together, and hoped she didn’t notice. He walked to the cell and opened the door. Seeing the upper slopes of her breasts gleaming with water, he had a sudden almost irresistible urge to lick the water droplets from her skin as he’d done in his daydream. “No, it could happen to anybody.”

She stepped beside him. The smell of soap and her warm, wet feminine skin assailed him. He skimmed his gaze over her face, washed free of makeup, her lips naked and full, smiling up at him, and nearly pounced.

“Why did you come back anyway? Did you forget something?” She brushed a strand of damp hair away from her cheek.

The action made the towel gape open, giving him an even better view of her breasts. Desire streaked to his groin. He swallowed against the exquisite pain. “Not exactly. I just thought it wasn’t such a great idea for you to spend the night here ... in a jail cell ... alone when I have a perfectly comfortable fold-out sofa bed at my house.” He motioned in the direction of the bathroom at the end of the hall. He could hear the shower running. “I’ll be glad to wait while you finish your shower and get dressed. What do you say?”

She smiled, glanced at the cell then back at him. “Thank you for your offer. That’s really nice of you, but I think I’ll stay here.”

“Are you sure?”

Delaney nodded.

“Okay.” He held out the keys to the cell. “Just in case.”

She laughed and reached for them. “Thanks.”

Her fingers brushed over his. God, her skin felt soft. “Goodnight.”

He walked back into his office and over to the door. He grasped the knob and turned to see her tiptoe past the doorway on her way back to the bathroom. Rick heaved a deep breath. He felt relieved she’d said no, but disappointed as well. He opened the office door and stepped outside into the frigid, snow-filled night.

Deep inside he would like nothing better than to fulfill his secret jailhouse fantasy and dominate Delaney Moore body and soul.

Chapter Two

She creamed just looking at him.

Rick climbed onto the cot. Her eyes devoured every inch of his naked, male body. His skin, right down to his penis, was the color of coffee lightened with thick cream. He sat on his knees, his hard male flesh rising from between his legs in blatant sexual invitation from a nest of dark curls. She looked at the plump head, the rigid length of him beckoning her to sample his flavor. Unable to resist, she leaned forward, wrapped her lips around him, and rubbed the tip against the roof of her mouth, laving his cock with her tongue. His groan let her know her busy exploration pleased him. When she had thoroughly tasted him, Delaney sat back and licked his fluid from her lips. He smiled at her, a smile that made her ache between her legs. Reaching out, he drew her to him, devouring her in a hot, wet kiss.

Delaney sighed and rolled onto her back.

“Delaney.”

The soft, male voice barely penetrated her sleep-fogged brain.

She felt his touch on her femininity, gloried in the feel of his warm fingers sliding over her. Instinctively, she lifted her hips to move closer to his caress as need spiraled through her. He glided a finger into her while his thumb massaged her clit. He tore his hungry mouth

from hers and planted fervent kisses on the side of her neck. She turned her head, giving him better access. He continued his sensual assault on her skin as he kissed his way toward her breasts. Instinctively, Delaney pulled the covers down exposing her breasts. “Yes, right there,” she murmured.

She heard the same male voice only it sounded sharper this time. “Delaney, wake up.”

Her eyes popped open. She stared up into the sheriff’s amused brown gaze. Realizing her breasts were on display, she jerked the covers up to her chin. A hot blush burned over her skin as the blood pounded at her temples. “Sheriff ... uh ... how long have you been standing there?”

He grinned at her. “Long enough.”

His voice held a husky note as though he had actually been in her dream. Oh, God! She must have been moaning in pleasure as she slept and he was the star attraction! Mortified, she had a sudden urge to pull the covers over her head.

She was completely nude under the bedclothes. Delaney slept in the buff winter or summer. There was just something about the restriction of clothing when she was trying to sleep that she didn’t like. She had tossed her panties and robe on the end of the cot. Rick glanced at them then back at her. A dark emotion flickered in his eyes, then it was gone.

Delaney was acutely aware of her naked state. The dream had been so vivid she could still feel his hands roaming over her skin. Just to make sure he wasn’t naked, she darted a glance from his neck to his feet. Nope. He was clothed from head to foot in his police uniform. Having him clothed and her wearing nothing more than a spritz of perfume made her feel vulnerable and sexy.

“Must have been some dream.” He folded his arms over his broad chest, dipped his chin, and looked at her. His lips twitched. “Want to tell me about it?”

She swallowed. “Maybe later.”

He dropped his arms to his side. “I look forward to it.”

She sniffed the air and her stomach growled. "Something smells wonderful."

"I picked up some food from the diner down the street. It's in my office when you're ready."

"Thank you." Delaney watched him leave the cell and walk to the door leading into his office. He stopped, looked at her over his shoulder with dark, unfathomable eyes then stepped through the doorway, closing the door behind him.

Delaney slumped back on the lumpy pillow and closed her eyes. She couldn't remember ever having such a vivid, sexy dream. None of the men she'd dated in the past, including her last boyfriend, had ever inspired that kind of sexual fervor. What was it about Rick Cruz that tempted her so much even in sleep?

That wasn't good. Delaney frowned. She had never been lucky in love. So why should luscious Rick Cruz be any different from the other men who had drifted in and out of her life? They had all considered her a friend, a pal to take to the movies and occasionally sleep with until someone thinner came along. If she were sensible, she would get her libido under control and concentrate on getting out of Avery. But she'd never been wise where her love life was concerned. She sighed.

She would be out of here in a few days as soon as the storm let up and would probably never see Rick again. Her spirits sank at the thought. What was wrong with her? She hardly knew the man.

Besides, she had just broken up with her boyfriend, and getting involved with someone so soon would be a mistake. Why couldn't she find a man who appreciated her for who she was and how she looked? Why did the deepest, most sensual part of her womanly desires want to throw caution to the wind and take Rick in one big, sexy gulp?

Not wishing to uncover the answer, Delaney pushed the thought from her head and grabbed her panties from the foot of the narrow bed. She threw back the covers and slipped on the hot pink thong. Shivering, she donned her robe and rose stiffly from the cot.

Every muscle in her body ached. Was it from sleeping on that sorry excuse for a bed or yesterday's car accident? The first thing she intended to do was get her car towed into town and have the damage assessed. She hoped it was minor because she had her budget planned down to the last penny.

After her morning ablutions, Delaney dressed in a clean pair of jeans, pink sweater, and boots. She walked out of the cell and over to the closed door leading into the sheriff's office. She put her hand on the knob and paused for a moment.

What was she supposed to say to him after he'd seen her practically have an orgasm right before his eyes? Would he ask her again to tell him about her dream? If he did, what would she say? She inhaled a deep breath and exhaled. Only one way to find out.

* * * * *

When he heard the door open, Rick looked up from the list of complaints the mayor had phoned in earlier. He shifted in his chair. The hard-on he'd acquired after watching Delaney in the throes of an erotic dream had yet to leave him. He feared it might stay with him for the rest of the day, the pain exquisitely sweet.

Seeing Delaney standing in the doorway brought the memory of her naked breasts to life in graphic detail in his mind. They were full and round with dusky rose nipples that begged a man to suckle them into hard, aroused tips. Only now, they were covered in a pink sweater. Too bad.

She threw him a quick smile then walked into the room. "I'm starved."

"Me too." *Only it isn't for food.* "Have a seat."

She strolled over to a vacant chair in front of his desk and sat down. Her jeans hugged her curvy hips and thighs. She'd pulled her hair up into a ponytail, exposing her beautiful neck. He wondered how her neck would feel beneath his lips. Rick fought the urge to move to her side of the desk and find out. What was wrong with him? Why did he react this way to Delaney? A sheriff bound by his oath as an officer of the law never took advantage of a

civilian entrusted to his care. He never considered breaking that oath. Many cops he knew in the past weren't constrained by morals or unethical behavior, but he sure as hell was.

One dirty cop stood out in his mind, Jake DeSalvo, his former partner. He shook himself inwardly, refusing to allow the memory of Jake's betrayal to crawl out into the light from the dark corner of his mind he'd resigned it to.

He handed Delaney a Styrofoam container along with some plastic eating utensils and a napkin. She lifted the lid, speared some of the omelet and, forked it between her full, pink lips. Delaney chewed, softly moaning. "This is delicious."

At the sound of her moan, heat arched into his groin. He forced his gaze away from her mouth and tore into his own food, eating his omelet like a man possessed. The eggs tasted savory and delectable as he imagined Delaney would taste if he gave in to his attraction and kissed her.

Being with Delaney infused his body and mind with sexual fantasies he had to resist. Between the smells of the food and the yum-yum sounds that Delaney made, he wasn't sure how much more he could take. What was it about food and sex that fit together? In an effort to get his mind off sex, he slid a container of crisp bacon over the surface of his desk in her direction. "Help yourself."

Rick reached for his cup of hot coffee. As he did, Delaney leaned forward and took a piece of bacon from the plate. The neckline of her sweater gapped open, revealing the creamy slopes of her breasts and making his breath hitch.

She bit into a crisp slice, then looked at Rick. "Thank you for the food. How much do I owe you?"

Plenty, if I die from this boner. "My treat." He handed her an insulated cup. "I got you tea instead of coffee. I hope that's okay."

Her gaze flicked to his; her eyes warmed. She took a sip of the tea, leaving behind a stray drop, and then her tongue darted to lick it away. "How did you know I was a tea drinker?"

Her low, soft voice eased under his skin as he challenged the desire that leapt higher when he watched her lick the tea drop from her lip. He shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. Lucky guess. You just don't look like a coffee kind of girl."

He stirred some sugar and cream into his coffee and sipped. Rick studied Delaney as the hot liquid flowed down his throat into his belly. He imagined her hand moving across his abdomen, grasping his length and gently pulling the skin over the head. He grew harder than he thought possible.

Delaney finished her food, licked her lips, and patted them with her napkin. She glanced up to find Rick watching her. "Something wrong?"

Oh, yeah. He shook his head slowly and gave her a smile. "No ... I was just thinking you look like a warm chick, fresh from its nest."

A cute little blush colored her cheeks. "Oh." Nervously, she crumpled up her napkin and tossed it into the empty container sitting in her lap before throwing everything into the trash.

The office door swung open and the mayor's nephew hurried in wearing heavy boots, jeans, and a thick gray parka. He looked like the abominable snowman covered in ice crystals from head to foot. He stomped his feet a couple of times on the mat in front of the door. Snow fell in clumps to the floor. Pulling off a green stocking cap, he shook his head. His curly brown hair sprang over his skull. "Rick, there's a --" His hazel gaze landed on Delaney and a smile creased his mouth. "Oh sorry, I didn't see you there."

Yanking off his gloves, he walked over and held out a hand to Delaney. "I'm Mark Griffin. I own the hardware store."

Delaney shook his hand and smiled. "I'm Delaney. It's nice to meet you."

Mark nodded, sat on the edge of the desk and turned his head toward Delaney. "I haven't seen you around. Did you just move here?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Actually I'm just passing through on my way to New York."

She had mentioned her travel plans briefly last night on the drive into Avery. Rick hadn't questioned her further because of the intense attraction he'd felt. It was always best for a police officer to remain objective. Only, with every waking minute he spent with Delaney, he wished down to his balls that he could toss objectivity out the proverbial window, start nibbling on Delaney's toes, and work his way up to the sweet temptation between her legs.

"The Big Apple, huh?" Mark bumped a ceramic container of pens, which fell over and hit Rick's near-empty cup of coffee, spilling the remaining liquid on his desk. He stood up and gave Rick a wry smile. "Sorry."

Quickly, Rick moved a stack of files away from the rapidly spreading coffee. Mark was accident-prone around women. His fingers got slammed in doors; he tripped on stairs. Rick wasn't sure if Mark's clumsy tendencies were a natural part of his personality or an act. "Don't worry about it." He welcomed the distraction. Maybe it would help cool his overheated libido. He picked up the extra napkins left over from his breakfast and began mopping up the spilled coffee.

Being the mayor's nephew, Mark had been one of the first people Rick met when he arrived in town. They went fishing together occasionally and Mark had been instrumental in helping him earn the respect of the town's citizens. Rick had appreciated Mark's help and resented it at the same time. After what happened in Chicago, he'd wanted to earn the trust of Avery's citizens through his integrity and strength of character, not because Mark told everyone he was an okay guy.

Rick tossed the napkins into the trash can and looked at Mark. Mark had befriended him, then, when Rick had shown interest in the owner of the bed and breakfast, so had Mark. If Mark discovered his attraction for Delaney, would he make a play for her as well? Would she welcome Mark's attentions? Rick clenched a fist in annoyance at the thought. Did he trust Mark? Would he be willing to give Mark his loyalty if he asked him to? The twist of uncertainty in his gut told him no, but in his heart he wanted to believe in the value of loyalty again. However, loyalty always came with a price. He had learned that particular lesson well from Jake.

"You were on your way last night in this storm?" Mark folded his arms over his chest. "I hope you got here before it hit."

Delaney's face brightened and her eyes glinted as if recalling a very pleasant memory. "No, Rick rescued me when my car skidded off the road." Warmth colored her words along with a hint of hero-worship. His heart swelled in his chest and he suddenly had an insane urge to stand, beat his chest and yell like Tarzan.

Rick glanced at Delaney and her gaze locked onto his. He remembered their tumble in the snow, the feel of her warm, womanly body beneath his, the light squeeze of her fingers on his package. His relentlessly stiff penis twitched inside his pants. Unwelcome heat spread up his neck. He shifted in his seat and looked away; mortified she might be able to read the direction of his thoughts.

"Glad you're okay."

Mark's comment brought Rick from his carnal thoughts back to the present.

"What's in New York?" Mark asked.

She smiled. "A job as a window designer for Taylor's Department Store." Pride rang in her voice.

Mark whistled. "Good for you. Taylor's is pretty hoity-toity. The best thing we have around here is the Glamour Box over on Third." Mark stood up from the desk. "I need to go

open the store in case anyone needs something to get through the storm. Nice to meet you, Delaney.”

“Nice to meet you.”

He slipped on his gloves and headed toward the door. Suddenly, he stopped and spun on his heels. “I almost forgot why I came by.” He looked at Rick. “Some signs have blown down on Willis Road and a streetlight is out on Seventh.”

Rick nodded. “The mayor already called about the streetlight. Thanks, I’ll take care of it.”

With a quick wave, Mark opened the door and was gone.

* * * * *

The phone rang and Rick picked up the receiver. “Sheriff’s office.”

He listened for a moment then smiled. “Hi, gorgeous.” He switched the conversation to a rapid stream of Spanish.

Delaney’s heart sank as she busied herself cleaning up the remainder of Rick’s mess. He had a girlfriend. Of course he did. So what? Or maybe even a wife. She looked at his ring finger once more as she threw away the trash from their breakfast. No ring and no tan line either. However, some men didn’t wear a wedding ring. Maybe Rick was one of them. If she ever got married, she wanted her husband to wear a ring so every woman he met would know he was taken.

With a deep sigh, she left Rick alone while she freshened up. When she returned, she heard him say, “*Te amo también.*” She remembered enough from her high school Spanish class to know that he said I love you. Would a man ever say those tender words to her?

Rick replaced the receiver in the cradle and looked up as she walked into the room. His gaze gave her a quick once over and her skin tingled.

“That was my mother.”

A flood of relief washed through her. Why was she relieved? She would be on her way to New York in a couple of days and would never see Rick Cruz again.

Delaney nodded, walked over to a window to the left of the office door, and looked out at the steadily falling snow. A man shuffled past holding tight to his little girl's hand. She was dressed in a pink snowsuit with matching boots and mittens. Red curls had escaped the hood of her jacket and waved sporadically in the wind. The child laughed at something her father said as they hurried along the snow-swept sidewalk. Seeing them caused an ache to nudge a tender spot in her heart, but she pushed the feeling away. "Are you close to your family?"

Rick laughed, a warm sexy sound that seeped into her blood. "Yeah, whether I want to be or not. What about you?"

Delaney thought about her own family. Her parents were fine people and had provided a good life for her, but she'd never felt she could share the secrets of her soul with them or that they would be open to listening to her. "We have an okay relationship I guess, but we're not all that close."

"That's too bad. Family is important." His voice rang with sincerity.

She turned and looked at him. "Yes, I suppose it is." She walked back to her chair in front of his desk and sat down. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He leaned back in his chair. "I have a younger sister who just got married. So naturally, my mother thinks I should do the same. She calls at least once a week with advice concerning my love life. Do you have any siblings?"

Why isn't he married? A guy like him should have been taken a long time ago. "No, I'm an only child." She suddenly remembered her car. No doubt it was completely buried in snow by now. "About my car, is there someone I can call to have it towed?"

"I already took care of it for you."

A warm, liquid sensation pulsed through her veins. The man took care of many things. He gave her a place to stay, he bought her food and he had her car towed. Even in her

dream, he'd taken sexual care of her, at least with his lips and hands. Unfortunately, he'd woken her up before her little dream/fantasy could continue with him shoving deep inside her. Arousal gathered between her legs and she shifted in her seat.

No man she'd ever been romantically involved with had ever done those things for her. She wasn't involved with Rick, romantically or otherwise. Still, it felt nice. "Thank you. Where was it towed?"

"Your car's at Linc's Service Station, but he won't be able to take a look at it until tomorrow."

The taut pull of desire eased inside her. Thank God, he'd thrown her a lifeline. With her libido sliding recklessly out of control she had to put some much needed distance between her and Rick. She popped up from her seat. "He won't have to. My dad's a great mechanic and he taught me everything he knows. I can fix anything from a flat to a busted radiator hose." At least in that area she felt confident. She glanced toward the window at the snow still falling at a steady rate then turned back toward Rick.

He raised his brows in question. "Problem?"

There was most definitely a problem. If she tried walking to the garage in this storm she'd freeze to death. "Could you give me a ride?"

* * * * *

Rick leaned against the side of the red car and watched Delaney. She was clad in a heavy jacket, but the hem lifted up from where she leaned under the hood, giving him a nice view of her luscious bottom covered in faded jeans. A few tools lay at her feet. He heard a soft curse.

"Got a phantom in your manifold?"

Delaney straightened from beneath the hood with a wrench in her right hand. The florescent light inside the garage highlighted her bright, blue eyes and shone down on her

blonde hair she'd gathered into a messy ponytail. She smiled and he fought the urge to touch her. "Not exactly but the engine does have a couple of problems."

Rick folded his arms over his chest. "Such as?"

She lifted her right hand and brushed a strand of blonde hair from her eyes. She raked her top teeth over her bottom lip then rubbed it with her tongue. A long, slow curl of lust arrowed from his gut to his groin. God, the woman made him hot. He wished to hell he could figure out why so that he could stop it.

Delaney cocked her head to the side and raised her right brow. "Are you curious about engines?"

Not about engines, about her. He'd never known a woman who was interested in the inner workings of a car. As long as the vehicle started when they turned the key, they didn't care. "Let me put it this way. I can change the oil, battery and spark plugs but beyond that I rely on the experts. You seem to know a lot more. I was wondering why."

She laid the crescent wrench on the roof of the car and looked at him. "I was the son my father never had."

Her eyes clouded briefly with an emotion he couldn't read then it was gone.

"He taught me about cars so I wouldn't be taken advantage of by a mechanic who figured I was a dumb blonde who didn't know anything about engines."

"So what's wrong with your car?"

She sighed. "The radiator has a leak and there could be a problem with the crankshaft."

"What's in the crankshaft?" He knew but he wanted her to tell him.

"It contains pistons that basically move up and down ... in and out." Her voice was matter-of-fact as if she was teaching an automotive class, but for him a sensual image formed in his mind. *He clasped his palms around Delaney's bare buttocks and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pressed her against the side of the car, moved his hips forward, and plunged deep within her.*

“Are you okay?”

Delaney’s question snapped Rick out of his sexual haze. Damn it, he was acting like a teenager caught up in the confusing excitement of male hormones. He was a police officer who needed to get his brains out of his pants. “Yeah, I’m fine. How do the pistons work? Show me.”

She touched the smooth, pale column of her throat as her eyes sent him a silent message of lust and longing. He suddenly had an irresistible urge to lick her neck plus a whole lot more. “The pistons are tubular in shape and they fit inside the cylinder.”

Heat bloomed in his belly and slid lower. She was killing him and didn’t even know it. Well, damn it, he didn’t want to be the only one to suffer. “Is it a tight fit?”

A gleam of sensual interest filled her gaze. She stepped closer to him.

Oh, yeah, come to daddy.

“It isn’t ... tight, exactly.” Her silky voice stroked his male desire with a seductive touch. Quiet filled the garage in a thick blanket of hopeful expectation. Rick stared at Delaney, the tawny glow of her hair under the light, her blue eyes gleaming with a curious, unresolved longing. Her full, pink lips beckoned him to slide his tongue inside her mouth and satisfy them both.

With the tip of his finger, Rick touched the indentation above her top lip then stroked his finger down over her lips. She parted her lips and closed them around the end of his finger. He felt the tip of her tongue flick over his skin. He kept his finger there hoping she would do it again and she didn’t disappoint him. What the hell was he doing? He knew it was wrong but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. “Snug? Close?”

Her gaze lowered to his mouth. “Uh-huh.”

Oh yeah. It would definitely be snug. Her tongue nudged against his finger again. He felt the blood leave his brain and gush in a torrent to his groin. “What happens next?”

Her eyes locked onto his. “Next?”

Rick slid his finger from between her lips and trailed a damp path down her neck to the hollow of her throat. "Once the piston gets inside the cylinder, does it lie still?" No way. "Or does it move?"

Her breath shuddered out. "It moves back and forth."

Damn right. He wanted to slip his hand inside her coat beneath her sweater and bra, if she was wearing one, until he cupped the warm, soft flesh of her breasts. "What makes it move, Delaney?"

Hot, nervy tension formed a thread between them. She swallowed and tilted her head as if she were going to kiss him. "Force." Her voice was husky and soft.

Yes, it would be a force of pure, sexual lust and energy, the kind generated between a man and a woman. His gaze skimmed her face. Dreamy eyes, nice nose, and a mouth that promised untold pleasures. He wanted to stroke his hands over every inch of her body. Was she as soft and pampered between her thighs as the rest of her skin looked? Would her breath hitch and a moan glide from her throat when he slipped inside her? Would she react to him the way she did during her dream? "Does it move fast or slow?"

"It starts sort of slow then it pumps more rapidly."

Hmm. Hard, fast and deep. Oh, God. "All that pumping's bound to cause some friction."

Her eyes darkened slightly. "Friction?"

"You know, heat, Delaney."

She nodded. "There's a lot of heat."

There would be fire, hot licks of it drenched with sweat. "With all that heat being generated, a piston probably needs some kind of lubrication."

He could imagine the lubrication involved. "Tell me, Delaney, about the lubrication. Is it slick and hot, coating everything to insure smooth, deep penetration?"

Her lips parted on a sigh and her eyes glazed as if in passion. "Uh-huh."

Rick dipped his head, until his mouth was a fraction away from hers and their breath mingled. One taste. All he needed was one taste and he could handcuff his insane desire where Delaney was concerned.

When his lips barely touched Delaney's, he heard footsteps.

"Need any help?"

Chapter Three

Delaney read the same page for the third time not comprehending a single word. This was a romance novel by her favorite author and yet the words barely registered in her brain. She closed the book with a snap and tossed it onto the end of the cot in the jail cell. On the way back to the sheriff's office, Rick had been quiet and had avoided even looking at her, much less talking to her. All she'd seen of his face was his profile and the clenching and unclenching of his jaw. She couldn't imagine what she'd done to make him so angry.

Back at the garage, he'd sent her the same supercharged signals that he wanted to kiss her as much as she wanted to kiss him. When they'd arrived at the office, he'd practically pushed her out of the truck then driven away as though the hounds of hell were after him.

Despite his anger, all she could think about was Rick and the kiss they'd almost shared. Every time she thought about his tempting mouth her heart raced, her skin tingled with invisible warmth, and she grew wet between her legs. If only Linc hadn't interrupted them, she would know the exact taste and texture of Rick's lips and how his tongue felt rubbing over hers.

Upon her return to Rick's office, she'd taken a shower and scrubbed as much grease from her hands and nails as possible. With a sigh, Delaney took off her jeans, lay down on

the cot, and settled her head on the pillow. She closed her eyes and didn't resist this time when the daytime fantasy she'd denied herself for the past hour filled her mind.

Even though her eyes were closed, she knew Rick stood in the doorway of the cell. She'd deliberately shifted the cot so the foot faced the open cell's door. She wanted Rick to have a clear view of everything she was about to show him, every nuance of her femininity, every detail of her body, down to the exact shape and fullness of her clit. It was all for him, just for him and him only. She pulled up the hem of the nightshirt she wore, exposing the lower half of her naked body to his view. With a slight smile on her lips, she moaned softly as she raised her knees and opened her thighs. Cool air wafted against her, but she knew that very soon her own arousal would warm her from the inside out.

Easing her hand down between her legs, she rubbed her middle finger over her clit, then she rubbed and rubbed and rubbed until she felt the fluid of her own body begin to trickle out and coat her skin. The force of her self-induced fiery response began to build inside her like a warm wave. She opened her eyes to slits and saw him standing in the doorway, his gaze riveted to her hand moving in sensual motion as she pleased herself. Having him watch made her feel hotter and sexier than she'd ever felt in her life. As she stroked her clit, he took off his belt, unzipped his pants, and lowered them to his ankles.

He stepped out of his slacks and kicked them aside. The sharp tent of his arousal inside his briefs urged her to caress her clit more vigorously, to allow the orgasm to take her. With a quick jerk, Rick lowered his briefs. The plump, glistening head of his cock sprang free to taunt her. She smiled, knowing her actions had made him want her, want her like she'd never been wanted before. Slowly he walked to the cot and kneeled on it so that his penis jutted proudly between his legs. He moved the tip closer and closer and closer to her opening until the head nudged gently inside her ...

"Anybody home?"

Delaney's eyes popped open at the sound of Mark Griffin's voice. Adrenalin pumped through her aroused body. Panting, she sprang from the cot and shrugged into her panties.

The fluid still clinging to her body dampened the crotch, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Her breasts tingled, her skin felt tight, and unfulfilled sexual need pounded through her. As she pulled on her jeans in record time, Delaney glanced up at the window above the cot. Snowflakes tapped against the pane. She tried desperately to think of snow and icy wind in an attempt to cool her body's erotic pique, but the fantasy of having Rick naked, on his knees ready to push inside her, filled her mind instead. Delaney shook her head to clear the vision. Footsteps moved in her direction. "I'll be with you in a second."

Mark's footsteps halted. "Okay, take your time."

She breathed a sigh of relief and chuckled at his choice of words. She had definitely been taking her time enjoying every minute of her hot, carnal illusion. Realizing her fingers were still damp, she wiped them against her jean-covered thigh.

Quickly, she brushed her hair and applied some lip gloss before heading toward Rick's office. Pasting a smile on her face, she stepped inside. "Hi, Mark. Sorry, but Rick isn't here."

He turned from where he stood facing the window. The cold had left a flush on his face and snowflakes were scattered over his heavy jacket and knitted cap. "Actually I wasn't here to see Rick. I'm here to see you." He took off his coat and hat and flung them on a bench that sat beneath the window.

"Oh, okay." She walked to one of the chairs in front of Rick's desk and sat down.

Mark strolled over and perched on the edge of the desk. Once again, he spilled the container of pens and pencils. He straightened them then turned his attention toward Delaney. A darker blush stained his cheeks. "Sorry." He raked a hand through his curly hair then rested his palms on his thighs.

A frown creased his brow as he studied her. "Are you all right? You look kind of flushed."

Damn her fair skin. Delaney forced a smile to hide her embarrassment. "I'm fine. I was ... lying down."

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I was reading and had started to nod off.” Yeah, right. She had nodded off into an intimate world of need. “What’s up?”

“I told my uncle about you.”

She raised her brows. “Your uncle?”

Mark smiled. “Yeah, he’s the mayor. He and the town council want to make some improvements in the look of Avery to make it more desirable to tourists.”

Delaney lifted her hands palms up. “What does that have to do with me?”

He cleared his throat. “Montana is sponsoring a statewide contest for the best Montana vacation destination. There are some hot springs outside of town and a hotel being built near them. I told my uncle about you being a window display designer and he was wondering if you could attend the council meeting tonight and offer suggestions on a couple things. We need not only a window display set up at the mayor’s office but brochures as well. Food is brought in from the diner.” He paused for a moment. “What do you think?”

She hadn’t planned to stay longer than it took to get her car repaired. Linc had to order the part from Billings and he said it would take a day or two maybe longer. At least helping the town council would give her something to do with her time other than sit around and fantasize about Rick. “Sure, why not.”

Mark grinned. “Great, I --”

The sheriff’s office door swung open and an attractive woman walked in. “Hi.”

Mark jerked his head in the woman’s direction so fast Delaney imagined he nearly gave himself whiplash.

She was dressed in tight jeans, leather boots with a fur cuff around the top, and a hooded, navy parka. The woman pushed back the hood and revealed straight, red-gold, chin-length hair. Her eyes were bright green, her makeup perfectly applied.

The woman had former beauty queen written all over her. Delaney remembered her type from high school. Beauty queens shunned anyone who didn't fawn over them, feed their ego with compliments, and practically beg for membership in their sacred circle of admirers. These social empresses donned a glossy but false pretense of friendship only for personal gain.

Delaney gave friendship and loyalty to her circle of friends without reservation, down to the checker at the supermarket.

The empress glanced around the office with regal disdain.

Mark popped up from the desk and somehow got his foot caught on a leg of one of the chairs sitting in front of Rick's desk. He teetered on his feet and started to fall.

Delaney jumped up from her chair and grabbed his upper arms to steady him. The chair crashed to the floor.

He glanced at the woman then back at Delaney, his face and neck turning scarlet right down to the tops of his ears. "Thanks, I'm okay now," he murmured.

Delaney let him go. He straightened, smoothing down the front of his shirt with the palms of his hands. He turned toward the woman and looked at her as though she'd just floated down from heaven. "Hi, Lenore."

The woman barely glanced at Mark. "Oh, hi, Mark." She fixed her gaze on Delaney and gave her a quick once-over.

Slipping off her right glove, Lenore stepped forward until she stood directly in front of her. "You must be the stranded traveler Rick rescued up last night."

Her rapid scrutiny made Delaney feel like a slug. Word got around in a small town.

She held out her hand. "I'm Lenore Shaw. I own the local bed and breakfast."

Delaney clasped her hand with a brief glance at the woman's nails. They were perfect, of course, just like the rest of her. No chipped polish or ragged cuticles. They looked as though they'd been pampered in a salon all day. "Nice to meet you. I'm Delaney Moore."

Suddenly Delaney noticed the traces of grease still lodged under her nails. Mortified, she dropped Lenore's hand and held her own hands behind her back. If only she'd had a nail brush to scrub them while she'd been in the shower. She made a mental note to pick one up at the drugstore.

Lenore gave her a cool smile. "I was hoping to see Rick."

Typical frosty attitude for an empress.

Lenore brushed a stray tendril of hair away from her cheek. "Do you know where he is or when he might return?" Her voice was courteous but patronizing.

"I'm not sure exactly. He's checking on some downed street signs and arranging repairs for a broken streetlight."

She pursed her full lips, lifted her left hand, and lightly slapped the glove she'd removed into the palm. "Hmm, that's too bad. I can come back, I suppose."

Mark started to move toward Lenore and tripped on the chair still lying on its side on the floor. He looked at Lenore, his eyes widening marginally, then stooped and picked up the chair. He cleared his throat and threw her a sheepish smile, then looked at Delaney. "Lenore is also Avery's only reporter for the Gazette. She can probably help you design the brochures for the beautification project."

A brief expression of discomfort swept over Lenore's face. She glanced at Mark with a glint of irritation in her eyes then looked Delaney. "Is that why you're here in Avery? To help *beautify* the town?"

Lenore's emphasis on the word beautify crawled under Delaney's skin like a piercing splinter. She said it with distinct mockery as though Delaney wouldn't understand the meaning of the word. Delaney flicked an imaginary speck of lint from her sweater to give herself time to sooth her irritation before turning her attention back to Lenore. "No, I got caught in the storm and my car needs to be repaired. Mark found out I'm a window display

designer and the mayor asked if I'd attend the council meeting to offer any suggestions I might have."

Mark stepped forward until he stood beside Lenore, gazing at her with a wistful expression. "The meeting is tonight. I hope you can make it. I'm sure Uncle Benjamin and the council would like to hear your ideas as well."

Poor Mark, Delaney thought. The man was toes over ears for Ms. Shaw and she could care less.

Lenore gave Mark the sort of smile a queen might bestow like a crust of bread on a peasant vying for her attention. She started pulling on her gloves. "Well, actually I --"

The door to the sheriff's office swung open and Rick walked in covered from head to toe in snowflakes. His gaze locked on Delaney for a millisecond, a gaze she felt to the center of her core before shifting to Lenore and Mark.

Lenore spun on her heels and beamed. "Rick, I'm so glad you got here before I left." She practically strutted to his side and laid a gloved hand in the middle of his chest. Leaning slightly forward, she bent her right leg, lifted her left foot off the floor and kissed him on the cheek.

For some ridiculous reason, seeing her kiss Rick annoyed Delaney more that Lenore's blatant sarcasm of a moment ago.

Rick cleared his throat. "Oh, hi, Lenore." He shut the door at his back, stepped away from her, and nodded at Mark. "Are you here to see me?"

"No, I came to see Delaney." Even as Mark said the words, he gazed at Lenore in admiration.

Rick walked to his desk, shrugged out of his jacket, and tossed it over the back of the chair. Raking both hands through his hair, he sat down. Once again, his gaze found Delaney. Warmth spread over her skin.

Lenore strolled over to Rick sitting in the chair and laid a proprietary hand on his shoulder. She glanced at Delaney out of the corner of her eyes sending her a clear signal.

This man is mine so don't get any ideas. Bitch.

Did Rick know that?

Lenore focused her attention on Rick. "I was wondering if you could come over for supper tonight. I'm making your favorite, beef stew, with apple cobbler for dessert."

The way she said dessert made Delaney think Lenore was hoping for a different kind of after dinner treat.

Rick casually leaned back in his chair, subtly dislodging Lenore's hand from his shoulder. He fixed his eyes on Delaney. "Delaney would be alone if I --"

"Not at all. I'm going to the town council meeting tonight. Mark tells me they always have food." She shrugged even as her stomach churned with disturbing bewilderment.

Why should she care if Rick spent the evening with Lenore? So what if Rick had almost kissed her in the garage? Nearly locking lips didn't mean anything. *To hell it didn't.* "Go ahead and have dinner with Lenore. But first I was wondering if you could drive me around this afternoon so I can get a look at the town before the meeting tonight." Delaney cut her gaze to Lenore, whose green eyes speared her with jealousy. Delaney raised her right brow and smiled. *Never underestimate the power of the working class, empress.*

* * * * *

Delaney had never wanted a man's penis inside her more than she did at this moment. Together she and Rick tumbled onto the seat of his truck. They had both stripped off their clothes in a heated frenzy, desperate to be skin to skin without any barriers. His mouth crushed hers in a kiss that stole her breath and ignited her blood. She moaned when he traced kisses over her jaw and down her neck to her bare, aroused breasts. Taking a nipple into his mouth, he sucked hard, sending ribbons of silky, hot need through her belly and into

her clit. He grasped her calves, lifted her legs, and locked them around his waist. Looming over her, his stiff cock rose between his legs ready to take her. "Now, Rick. Please!"

Pushing his hips forward he filled her to the hilt, searing her intimate passage with vital male heat.

"Folks, if you'll take a seat we'll get this meeting underway."

At the sound of Mayor Jonas Griffin's voice, Delaney snapped out of her sex-filled reverie. She swallowed. Delaney couldn't believe she'd been fantasizing about having sex with Rick in the middle of the council meeting.

I have to get out of this town before my sex drive implodes.

She re-filled her cup with hot chocolate and walked to the oval table in the center of the room. Sliding into a chair, she set her cup on the table's surface. The council members gravitated toward the table and sat down. A sheaf of papers lay on the table in front of each chair.

After a hot meal, everyone had stood around and chatted for a few minutes. Delaney had been delighted to find everyone so friendly. She'd received a much warmer reception than the chilly encounter she'd experienced with Lenore. She sipped her drink and wondered for the fiftieth time what Rick was up to with Lenore. Delaney hoped *up to* meant they were having dinner and didn't involve his penis in the *up* position. Earlier, Rick had taken Delaney on a tour of the town. She couldn't believe it when Lenore insisted she ride along. Of course, Lenore sat in the middle snuggled against Rick while Delaney hugged the passenger door. She sighed. At least she'd gotten a good look at the town. It was nice, as small towns go, with several fine old homes, a lovely square, and quite a few quaint local businesses. Seeing it had given her some ideas for improvement.

The mayor, a mustached, attractive older man dressed in a dark suit that highlighted his salt-and-pepper hair, gave everyone a few moments to read through the papers, then opened the floor for discussion. Everyone had an opinion, and they all wanted theirs heard at

the same time. In an attempt to gain order, His Honor pulled himself up to his full, average height and Delaney smiled at the glint of light reflected off the gold band on his left hand when he used the gavel. A glance in her direction once he gained control of the meeting reminded her of his nephew, who bore the same hazel eyes. "Ms. Moore --"

She smiled. "Call me Delaney, please."

"All right, Delaney, I want to officially welcome you to Avery and our council meeting."

Despite the mayor's smile and welcoming words, a kind of sadness lurked behind his eyes. She wondered why. "Thank you, Mayor. I'm glad to be here."

"Now that you've had a chance to read over our plans to beautify the town and listen to everyone's suggestions, you have a good idea of what we're looking for. Do you think you can help us?"

"Yes, I think I can. As I listened to everyone chat, ideas swirled through my head."

The mayor motioned for her to continue.

Delaney smiled and continued. "I definitely think you should advertise in newspapers not only in Montana but other states as well."

The door opened a second before Rick stuck his head in. "Sorry I'm late."

Delaney jerked her head around at the sound of Rick's voice. She couldn't believe her eyes and ears.

The mayor and several other council members greeted him as he stepped into the room.

"I didn't know you were attending," the mayor said. "We would have ordered food for you."

"That's okay, I grabbed something at home."

His gaze pierced Delaney when he said the words and a silent message passed between them. A little bubble of satisfaction grew inside Delaney's chest. So, he didn't dine with Lenore after all. *I wonder why?*

"Have a seat," the mayor said.

Rick whisked off his hat and coat and hung them on a rack beside the door. He sat down in the seat the mayor gestured toward, and Delaney couldn't help but inhale a slow, deep breath. Rick smelled of soap and man.

"So what did I miss?" he asked. He turned his chair a little to the side, leaned back, and looked at Delaney. His eyes were warm, expressive and seemed to drink her in. His gaze shifted momentarily to her mouth then back to her eyes.

A curl of heat tightened in her stomach. She wished with every pheromone-enriched cell in her body that they had kissed earlier in the garage. Delaney pushed her feelings aside determined to gain control of her libido. As soon as her car was repaired, she would high-tail it to New York.

"Delaney had just started giving us some of her ideas." The mayor motioned toward Delaney.

She cleared her throat and tried not to look at Rick. She felt his gaze on her. Her pulse quickened under his stare as if he had stripped her clothes off right down to her --

"Go ahead, Delaney, continue."

The mayor's words snapped her out of her sensual reverie. "Oh, right. A website could prove invaluable and increase exposure for the town." She paused for a moment, sipped her hot chocolate, licked her lips. Rick watched her with his elbows propped on the arms of his chair and his fingers steepled beneath his chin. A slight smile curved his lips and amusement glimmered in his eyes. Her toes curled inside her cowboy boots.

She tore her attention away from Rick's intriguing gaze. "I think you should make a few cosmetic changes, especially to Main Street, like fresh paint for the storefronts and

awnings, perhaps new lampposts, to revitalize the appearance of Main Street. Some of the sidewalks need repairing because of the cracked concrete. Making these changes would give the town a fresh, more updated look.”

A few council members nodded and murmured in agreement. That was a good sign. She got excited about the ideas as well. It would be something she could add to her resumé if the job in New York didn’t work out.

Unable to stop herself she looked back at Rick and wished he would stop looking at her like that. It made her hot all over. “I think one of the most important things you can do is utilize local talent to help draw visitors. Are there any musicians, artists, or singers in town?”

A tiny woman with sharp features and the voice of a habitual smoker spoke up. “I’m Sara Farley and I do china painting.”

Delaney smiled. “Oh, that’s great. I’d love to watch you work.”

The woman smiled. “Of course, my dear, stop by my house anytime. I’m at the corner of Maple and Third. The old Victorian. You can’t miss it.”

Delaney remembered seeing the lovely old home this afternoon when Rick showed her around town.

“My grandson,” she continued, “is in a band and some of the church deacons have a barber shop quartet. They’ve even competed at the state level,” she said with pride.

“These ideas are really good,” commented one of the members.

“Yes, I think you’ve definitely come up with some great suggestions,” another said.

“Delaney,” the mayor began, “would you consider staying on for a while to help us make these things happen? I know you were planning to leave once the storm abated.” He motioned toward the window where only flurries now fell. “The storm has moved on, but I hope you might consider it.”

Several of the council members chimed in agreeing with the mayor.

No way did she want to make her home in a small town like Avery. She was headed for the excitement and bright lights of New York. Now how could she say that without insulting them? “Well, I --”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said one of the council members, shaking his ruddy-head in disagreement. “No offense, Ms. Moore, but I believe if we implement your suggestions, it might attract the wrong sort of people to Avery. I’m Oliver Harden.” His beak of a nose and full lips made his attempt at sticking out the chest on his whip-thin body laughable, but he continued with a challenge in his voice. “I own Harden’s Mini Mart out by the highway. I get a lot of traffic with people stopping for gas or snacks. Not everybody who stops is clean-cut or polite and educated. I’ve even been robbed once.”

There were a series of moans from the other members, but only Rick spoke up. “Oliver, you’re right. Personally, I think Avery is just fine the way it is.” Rick turned his head and looked directly at Delaney. “Our streets are clean, inviting, and radiate friendliness along with our citizens.”

Why were people so resistant to change, especially men? Delaney tilted her head and gave him an indulgent smile. “Fine is the optimum word, Sheriff Cruz. But fine isn’t going to help the town win that contest no matter how *clean, inviting or friendly* Avery happens to be. Just like a rather dowdy woman when she’s trying to attract a potential mate, Avery needs a makeover. She needs a new hair style, wardrobe, and the right makeup.”

Challenge glinted in Rick’s eyes along with a vaguely seductive light. “As I was saying, there’s nothing wrong with our town and I don’t think we need to make it look fancy to attract tourists. We have the hot springs outside of town and the hotel being built. I think that alone will help bring people here. That’s my two cents.”

Irritation snapped along Delaney’s nerve endings like the pop of a rubber band stretched too tight. He made her feel like a fool. She fought to keep her annoyance from showing in front of the mayor and the other council members. She kept her gaze firmly fixed

on his and arched a brow. "Well ... thank you, Sheriff Cruz, for your crucial insight. You obviously know your town better than I. After all, I only just arrived."

The mayor firmly laid his hands palm down on the table's surface drawing everyone's attention. "Okay," the mayor said with a forced lilt in his voice, "would anyone care to add anything to the comments that have been made?"

When no one spoke up the mayor turned to Delaney. "Thank you very much for coming, young lady, and giving us your ideas." He looked at the other members. "We'll take a ten-minute break, then vote."

"Thank you, Mayor."

Delaney said goodnight to the other members and started to slip on her coat when she felt someone helping her. She turned and stared into Rick's brown eyes. "I may not know much about your town, Sheriff Cruz, but I do know how to put on a coat." She jerked the front lapels together and zipped them closed. "If you'll excuse me -- my cell is waiting."

* * * * *

Rick followed Delaney down the stairs. When they stepped through the mayor's office, he grasped her arm before she could walk away from him. "Hey, I didn't mean to make you look bad in there."

She widened her eyes in phony surprise and pulled her arm from his grip. "Oh, really, then what were you trying to do?"

He propped his hands on his hips. "Make a point."

"Congratulations. You made it." She turned to leave but he stepped in her path.

He held his hands out to his side. "I went too far. I apologize. Obviously you're a good designer. I just ... really like this town and feel that anyone would be lucky to live here, that's all."

Rick watched the tension in Delaney's face melt away and her shoulders relax. "Okay."

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

She fought back a smile. “Yes. Apology accepted.”

“Thank you.”

The night sky was clear, only a few clouds remained. Stars like a million tiny lights filled the black void. Delaney’s breath hung for a moment in the cold air. “Wow, the sky is gorgeous.”

That’s not all. “Yeah, it’s always like this after a storm. Come on, I’ll give you a ride.” He lightly grasped her upper arm. They trudged through the snow to the passenger door of his truck and he helped her inside. He walked around the rear of the truck and stopped for a moment. The snow crunched under his boots and the frigid air stung his lungs. He glanced through the windscreen at Delaney waiting for him in the truck. What would it feel like to have a woman -- not just any woman, *Delaney*-- waiting for him every night when he headed home?

He shook his head. What was he thinking? She would be leaving town soon, and getting romantically involved with her was a bad idea. A woman like her could have any man she wanted. Once she arrived in New York, she’d have them beating down her door.

He clenched his teeth together. Why did the thought of her with another man bother him so much? Why couldn’t he stop the memory of those sexually charged minutes they’d spent together in the garage from popping into his head every second since he’d dropped her off at his office? He’d struggled to erase the image of Delaney’s face, her desire-filled eyes and sexy lips, from his mind, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t. What would it be like to take her in his arms, slide his tongue past her sexy lips, and steep himself in her flavor? God help him, he hungered to give in to the need and arousal riding him and put the ever present hard-on tormenting him to good use.

Rick continued around the truck and climbed in on the driver's side. He turned the key and the engine roared to life, but he didn't engage the gear. Instead, he slumped back in his seat and looked at her. He just had to know. "Why don't you ask me?"

Delaney looked at him, her eyes clear and blue in the dim light of the truck. Her lips parted on a sigh.

He hoped to hell she wouldn't pretend she didn't know what he was talking about.

She turned away and stared through the passenger window. "It's really none of my business." Her voice was matter-of-fact like she didn't care. Her attitude irked him to no end. Wasn't that what he wanted? He'd already decided getting involved with her was a lousy idea.

Unable to stop himself, Rick leaned toward her, lifted his hand and rested two fingers under her chin. Gently he nudged her head around until she faced him once again. The warm, silky feel of her skin sent skitters of desire down his arm and into his chest. For a moment, longing filled her cobalt eyes, but then it was gone. "Are you sure?"

She straightened in her seat dislodging his fingers from beneath her chin. Delaney cocked her head to the side. "What do you mean?" Her tone was light with a hint of surprise.

Exasperation filled him. He inhaled a deep breath to sooth his annoyance. "I *mean* we nearly kissed in the garage this afternoon. You don't have a problem with a guy almost kissing you then going off to an intimate dinner with another woman?"

An indefinable emotion flashed in her eyes. "We hardly know each other." She shrugged. "I'll admit there's a little chemistry between us."

"A little?"

Delaney smiled. "Okay, a lot, but that doesn't mean we need to act on it. Besides, I get the impression you and Lenore have been seeing each other for a while."

He shrugged and looked away. "We've dated a few times, that's all." Lenore was a lot more interested in him than he was in her. She was lonely and he didn't want to hurt her,

but he never planned to have any kind of long-term relationship with her. Getting involved with Delaney would definitely hurt her. He should have ended it before now. He exhaled a heavy breath. "You're probably right. It isn't a good idea for us to give in to the chemistry. You'll be leaving the dust of this small town behind you as soon as your car is repaired and we'll never see each other again."

The thought of never seeing Delaney again made an empty space open up inside him.

"That's true." Her voice was soft, pensive. "Lenore really has nothing to worry about."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Lenore isn't the one who is worried."

Delaney turned her head and looked at him. She arched a brow but remained silent.

He gazed at her pretty face, the way her hair fell around her shoulders. His fingers itched to touch her. "The truth is I'm attracted to you and I'd like to spend some time with you while you're here, but I can't until I end things with Lenore. It wouldn't be fair to her or to you." Now for the kicker. His pulse raced and apprehension filled him. *What if she says no?* "Would you consider the mayor's suggestion of staying on in town to help with the project?"

Delaney folded her arms over her chest. "Will you consider the changes I suggested?"

Chapter Four

By the next morning, Delaney still didn't have an answer for Rick. Standing in the small bathroom down the hall from her jail cell, she applied gloss to her lips and wondered what she should do. Respect for Rick raised several notches when he told her he wouldn't consider seeing her until he severed his relationship with Lenore. He cared about Lenore's feelings even though they had only been out a few times.

As far as staying in town, she had considered it because of Rick. She zipped up the small cosmetic bag and headed back toward her cell. After all, what wasn't to like? He was gorgeous, sexy, and honorable, at least where women were concerned. However, the only money she had was slated for a deposit on an apartment and the first month's rent. Beyond that, she needed a steady flow of income. Delaney sat on the edge of the cot and pulled on a pair of thick socks. She had dreamed of finding a man who truly appreciated her not only for the woman she was but for her generous curves as well. Could Rick be that man? What if he turned out to be like her former two-timing boyfriend?

She reached for her boots and tugged them on. She had planned to be in New York before Christmas. If she didn't leave soon, she wouldn't make it.

Delaney heard the door to the sheriff's office open and someone step inside. Rick. Maybe she should just be honest and tell him her fears. Satisfied, she'd made a decision, Delaney headed up front. Suddenly, she stopped. Lenore stood in front of Rick's desk. She was dressed in much the same way she had been the day before, only this time she wore a gorgeous suede jacket with expensive-looking leather boots. "Oh ... hi, Lenore."

Lenore gave her a practiced, phony smile. "I thought we could talk before Rick arrived."

Her tone was tolerant and friendly which immediately put Delaney on edge. "Okay." Delaney walked to one of the chairs in front of Rick's desk and sat down.

Lenore sat in the other one with her gloved hands folded in her lap. She moved gracefully like a beautiful swan gliding over a placid lake.

Delaney's mother used to tell her she lumbered like a farmer walking between rows of corn. She constantly admonished her to hold her shoulders straight and not slump. Sitting here next to the empress made her feel even more inadequate. "What do you want to talk about?"

Lenore dropped her chin and gazed at Delaney with a wide, innocent look in her green eyes. "I feel I need to be honest with you." Her voice lowered to almost a whisper. "Woman to woman."

Uh-oh.

She glanced down at her hands, bit her lower lip, then looked back up at Delaney. "When I graduated from high school, my boyfriend Hank and I got married." She leaned back in the chair and sighed, her eyes taking on a far away look. "We had the biggest, splashiest wedding Avery has ever seen." Lenore cut her gaze to Delaney. "We honeymooned in Europe ... Italy, Greece and France. We were blissfully happy until ..." A somber expression stole over her face and tears pooled in her eyes. She withdrew a tissue from her purse and dabbed the corners of her eyes. "Hank joined the army and fought in Desert Storm.

One night his platoon was on patrol. They were ambushed ... and Hank was killed.” Her voice broke.

Delaney’s soft, compassionate heart squeezed inside her chest as a lump rose into her throat. She’d never seen an empress display such sincere emotion. Maybe Lenore wasn’t so bad after all. She reached out and laid her hand over Lenore’s. “I’m really sorry for your loss.”

Lenore inhaled a deep breath and exhaled. “Thank you, I knew you would understand.” She said the words like two close friends who had just shared a secret.

Delaney squeezed her hand. “Is there anything I can do?”

Suddenly, Lenore’s tears dried up. She put the tissue back in her purse and closed it with a snap. She sat up straight and focused on Delaney. “Actually there is ... You see, I’ve been so lonely since Hank died, sometimes it even hurt to breathe. I started the bed and breakfast after Hank’s death to keep a roof over my head, and to tell you the truth, I never gave another man a second thought ... until Rick came to town. He’s been so sweet and kind helping me to deal with my loneliness.”

Removing her hand, Delaney sat back. “You feel threatened.”

Lenore lifted her chin and her eyes widened slightly. She laid a hand in the middle of her chest and straightened. “Not me! It’s poor Rick I’m worried about.”

Delaney raised a brow. “Why are you worried about Rick? He’s a grown man; he can take care of himself.”

Her expression softened. “Yes, but men have very fragile egos. It’s important that a woman be careful how she treads so she doesn’t bruise his poor, defenseless heart.”

Delaney bristled at Lenore’s indulgent tone as if she were speaking to a child. “I don’t think that Rick Cruz has ever been defenseless in his entire life.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Cut to the chase, Lenore. What are you trying to say?”

Lenore’s concerned demeanor morphed back into royal disdain. She rose from her chair and gazed down her nose at Delaney. “Stay out of Rick’s life.” Her tone was firm and

slightly sharp. "It's in his best interest. You're leaving town soon and I don't want him to get hurt. I hope I've made myself crystal clear." She turned and strutted over to the door. In a moment, she was gone.

* * * * *

When Rick stepped inside his office, he heard Delaney stomping around in the back followed by loud muttering and a couple of expletives. He strolled to the door leading into the areas where the jail cells were located. He saw Delaney pacing from one side of her cell to the other, a frown creasing her pretty face, her hands bunched into fists at her sides. "Something stuck in your craw?"

At the sound of his voice, she stopped and jerked her head in his direction. She pressed her kissable mouth into a firm line. "Yeah. Lenore!"

Rick frowned. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Maybe later." She shrugged into her jacket, pulled her cell phone from her purse, and shoved it into one of the pockets of her jacket. "Right now I need a brisk walk in the snow."

He didn't like the idea of her going out alone when she was so angry. "Would you mind some company?"

She sighed and a flicker of resignation briefly crossed her face. "Okay ... but please no questions."

A couple of minutes later, Rick and Delaney were headed north on Main Street. Delaney stomped through the snow, her breath escaping in rapid puffs of white condensation before dissipating in the air. Her hands, bunched into fists at her sides, swung slightly as she walked. Looking straight ahead she never glanced his way, just kept muttering to herself. Whatever Lenore had done, it sure had Delaney steamed.

Being much taller than Delaney, Rick didn't need to expend much effort to keep up with her. He grasped her arm bringing her to a halt. "You'd feel better if you got it off your chest."

Delaney propped her fists on her hips, raised her chin and glared at him. "Fine. Lenore Shaw is some piece of work you hooked up with." She ground out the words, her eyes flashed with irritation. "She had the gall to come by your office and tell me in no uncertain terms to stay away from you. Can you believe it?" Delaney threw her hands up in the air then took off marching again.

Rick watched her walk away and exhaled a deep breath. Great. He caught up with Delaney just as she reached the corner of Fourth and Main. "Look, I'm sorry. Lenore may come on like a spoiled bitch, but she actually has a soft heart. It's just hard for her to show it because she's been through some really tough times."

Delaney stopped in her tracks and folded her arms over her chest. Her eyes widened with surprise and accusation sparked in their depths. "You're defending her."

"You make it sound like I just kicked a puppy."

She shook her head in a short, jerky motion and held her hands up, palms facing outward. "Forget the chemistry that's between us. I don't need this. All I need is my car and a tank of gas so I can get the heck out of Dodge."

The thought of never seeing Delaney again caused a twist of panic to squeeze his heart. What was that about? "I meant what I said last night. I want the chance to get to know you better." He paused for a moment and gathered his thoughts. "I should have ended my relationship with Lenore months ago. Rest assured I will before this day is out."

She smirked. "Yeah, right, like that's going to happen. Lenore has her claws sunk so deep in you they're buried in your bone marrow. She'll never let you go."

Rick waved a hand through the air. "That's ridiculous."

Delaney turned to walk away when she slipped on a patch of ice. Rick reached for her just as she started to fall and pulled her against him, chest to chest, thigh to thigh, crotch to ... A fiery heat licked its way into his groin as he nudged between her legs. Delaney's hands rested on his chest as she stared up at him, the warmth of her body surrounding him. Her cheeks, reddened by the cold, highlighted her sexy blue eyes. Her breath blew over his mouth and he licked his lips as if he could taste her.

He stood with Delaney in the middle of a meadow surrounded by evergreens, their branches laden with snow. A fire crackled nearby, sending a wave of heat over them while a cold moon sailed through the sky. Rick was naked, hard, ready.

Delaney was cloaked from head to toe in a heavy coat. She skimmed her gaze down his body, lingering on his penis.

Yeah, she definitely wants it. "Take off your coat."

She flicked her gaze up to his, smiled slightly and shook her head. "No. I'll freeze."

"I'll warm you, every inch of you from your nipples to your clit." He placed a finger beneath her chin lifting her head slightly. "Give me sexual control. Let me dominate you. I promise you'll like it." He reached up and undid a button of her coat followed by another and another.

She raised her hand grasping his. "Someone might see us."

"Trust me. The trees will shelter us." He finished loosening the buttons of her coat then pushed it from her shoulders where it fell with a soft plop in the snow. His breath caught at the sight of her voluptuous, nude body. He growled deep in his throat, reached out and pulled her against him. "You little minx."

She giggled draping her arms around his neck and pushing her breasts against his chest. He slammed his lips over hers; stroking the interior of her hot, wet mouth with his tongue. Rick moved his hips forward nudging her tender opening. She lifted her legs wrapping them around his waist. With one hard thrust, he claimed her sweet body to the hilt.

“Rick ... are you okay?”

The sound of Delaney’s voice jerked him from the carnal illusion. He stared at her even as the fantasy of being inside her still shook him to his toes. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said that you can see whomever you want, including Lenore, because there’s nothing between --”

Rick laid two fingers against Delaney’s lips, effectively stopping her speech. Her warm breath blew over his fingers and palm. He stroked the pad of his thumb over her lower lip and gazed into her eyes. “Whenever we’re together attraction arcs between us like an electrical current and I think we owe it to ourselves to explore it. But first you need to answer my question from last night.”

She glanced away for a moment as a couple of trucks rolled past. Snow scattered from beneath their tires. When she looked back at him, her eyes were clouded with confusion. “I don’t know if I’ll stay or not. I’m still thinking about it.”

A brisk wind blew around them. Delaney shivered and Rick grasped her hand. “It’s freezing out here. I know a great place for lunch.”

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Rick pulled his truck into the plowed driveway leading to his log home. “White Christmas” sung in Spanish played over the radio. Luminarias lined the walkway leading up to his front door and Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus huddled in the snow in front of his house. He cut the engine.

Delaney looked at him. “I thought we were going to lunch.”

He smiled. “We are. Come on.”

Once inside, Delaney followed Rick down a long hallway and into a cozy kitchen with slate floors, a butcher block island, and maple cabinets. She leaned against the counter and gazed out of the window over the sink. The sun hung high in the sky over a ridge of

mountains in the distance. She glanced at Rick who reached into the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle filled with orange liquid. He snapped off the stopper with an opener mounted on the side of a cabinet, walked over to Delaney and held out the bottle.

“What’s this?”

“*Jarritos Mandarin*.” He rolled his r’s and to Delaney’s ear it sounded incredibly sexy. “It’s a Mexican soft drink.”

Delaney took the frosty bottle and sipped. Rick stood close to her. She watched his eyes following the movement of her mouth against the lip of the bottle. She swallowed. The drink tasted refreshing and tangy. “It’s good, thanks. So what’s for lunch?”

“Beef fajitas. Hope you’re ready to turn up the heat.” His voice was husky and desire glinted in his chocolate eyes.

Her pulse leapt in her veins and her skin tingled with the promise of sex she heard in his voice. Would she make love to him if he made the first move? How could she resist? They were alone in his house miles from town and it had been ages since she’d gotten laid. “Turn up the heat?”

He shifted closer until the warmth from his body surrounded her. Just looking at his mouth, so close to hers, tempting her, it was all she could do not to jump into his arms. However, she stood her ground, determined that he had to make the first move.

He took the bottle from her hand and set it on the counter before planting his hands on either side of her body blocking her in. “Yeah ... in my family we never do anything half way.” His gaze snapped to hers. “When I cook, I put in an infusion of spice followed by a hard kiss of heat guaranteed to make your taste buds sit up and beg.” His gaze roamed over her face. “Do you like a hint of spice, Delaney?”

“Depends on the spice.”

He smiled slightly, a gentle lift of one corner of his mouth. “I hope you like mine.”

“I’m sure I will ... as soon as I wrap my tongue around it.”

Rick grinned. "Good, let's get started."

Soon the kitchen filled with the delicious aroma of sizzling meat, onions, and peppers. Delaney's mouth watered.

Rick measured some flour and other ingredients into a bowl and set it on top of the kitchen island. He looked at Delaney sitting at the table. He curved his fingers in a come-hither motion. "Come here. I'll teach you how to make tortillas." The tone of his voice hinted that he wanted to teach her about something else.

She rose from the chair and moved toward him as though he were the Pied Piper, his voice luring her like a drug. Was she ready for what might happen next? Damn right she was. "You make your own?"

"Yeah, it would be sacrilege to buy them readymade in a plastic bag."

He guided her to the far side of the island and Rick shifted behind her. He slid his arms around her waist, gently grasped her hands and lowered them into the bowl. His strong, masculine fingers reminded her how much she missed a man's caress.

"The trick is merging the ingredients and ... manipulating the dough." He might as well have said masturbating. If he would just slip his hand inside her jeans, he could slide his fingers over her clit and put an end to her craving. She sighed, her eyelids drifting closed.

Wrapping his fingers around hers, he pushed her hands into the soft dough. Rick's breath blew over her neck, sending streaks of arousal into her breasts, pebbling her nipples into tight peaks. He pressed his hard male body against her back. She felt his erection prod her bottom. A hot stream of liquid engulfed her core. Her breath dragged raggedly from her lungs. God, if he didn't rub his fingers between her legs in the next few seconds and end the delicious torment, she might die.

Before she could voice her desires, the phone rang. Rick huffed out a breath and grabbed a dishcloth to wipe off his hands. He crossed the room and snatched the receiver from the cradle. "Sheriff Cruz."

He listened for a moment then told the caller he was on his way and hung up. He looked at Delaney with disappointment and unresolved need in his eyes. "I have to go. Domestic disturbance call."

Delaney walked to the sink and washed her hands. "Would it be okay if I came with you on a ride along?"

He paused for a moment. "Okay, but you have to promise to stay in the car and do exactly what I tell you."

Delaney nodded. "I promise."

* * * * *

As soon as he climbed in the car, he radioed the sheriff's department dispatcher and apprised them of the situation. He also asked them to run a check on Betty Verner. A few minutes later, Rick smiled as he pulled the cruiser to the curb across the street from the Verners' house. The dispatcher had called back quickly with good news. Betty Verner had an outstanding warrant on file in Billings for writing bad checks. This wasn't the first time he'd been called to the Verners' house because of a domestic disturbance. However, today would be different. No matter how much Lester begged him, the county would take Betty to lock-up.

Rick turned to Delaney, grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger to make sure he had her attention. "Remember to stay in the car. Domestic disturbances can sometimes take an unexpected and dangerous turn. Understand?"

Delaney nodded. "Yes."

Rick climbed out of the car and started across the narrow, snow-packed street. A frigid wind curled around him with icy fingers. He looked at Betty and Lester Verner standing on opposite sides of their car like two mortal enemies rather than husband and wife. He shivered and zipped up his jacket. He wasn't sure if he was cold because of the weather or the domestic disaster before him.

He glanced down the block. Most of the houses on the street were decked out in holiday cheer with lights strung over bare tree branches, evergreens, and eaves. Wreaths graced a few front doors. A Santa and reindeer with chipped brown and white paint leaned at an awkward angle in the Verners' front yard. Only five more days until Christmas.

Usually people were wishing one another happy holidays, only there was nothing happy about Betty and Lester Verner.

Betty Verner was taller than her husband, Lester, by at least eight inches. Her bleached blonde hair twisted over her skull in tight, sausage-shaped curls. She wore baggy white sweats, black rubber fishing boots, and a red, hooded pullover with a large white snowflake emblazoned on the front. She stood like a linebacker on one side of their car, an old blue Cadillac.

Lester, a thin, painfully short man dressed in slacks and a white shirt, watched his wife warily from the opposite side. When Rick reached the end of the Verners' short driveway, he stopped. From his vantage point, he saw blood dripping from Lester's nose and an angry red welt marring his left cheek. Every so often, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and a few more drops of blood dribbled into the snow at Lester's feet.

Rick noticed a trail of footprints scattered all around the car. Obviously, Betty had tried to run Lester to ground and got in some good licks before he put some distance between them. She yelled at poor Lester, her face scrunched in fury, her hands bunched in fists at her sides. "Lester, you know it makes me madder than hell when you run from me. Git over here. Now!"

Rick stepped up to the rear of the car. "Evening, Betty ... Lester."

Betty turned her large head. She curved her small mouth in a brief smile between her florid, puffy cheeks. "Evening, Sheriff." She said the words in a friendly, casual tone before turning her beady black eyes back to Lester.

Lester shifted nervously, pulled the tail of his shirt from his pants and wiped at his oozing nose.

Rick propped his hands on his hips. "Want to tell me how the fight started *this* time?"

Suddenly, Betty turned her big body, lumbered toward the front of the car, her movements slow and encumbered by the heavy rubber boots on her feet. "I have to kill him first. Then we'll talk."

The only advantage poor Lester had against his wife was that he could move faster. He darted like a frightened rabbit away from her toward the rear of the car.

At that moment, Betty slipped and nearly went down before the long fingers of her left hand grabbed the hood ornament on the car for balance. She straightened, her breath heaving, her lips curled in a sneer. "Lester went for lunch at McCrary's over on Lincoln with two women from his office." Her voice was rough and grating with an undertone of hurt.

"Now, sugarlump," Lester whined from his position by the back right tire, "there was another man in the group and we went as friends. You know I never look twice at other women."

Betty glared at Lester. "I wouldn't have even known about it if I hadn't driven by on my way to the cleaners to pick up *your* shirts. You two-timing, good-for-nothing little weasel!" In a couple of steps, she rounded the hood of the car.

Lester's eyes widened with fear. He turned to run, slipped in the snow, and fell flat on his face. He scrambled to his hands and knees and tried to stand but Betty reared back with her right foot and kicked him squarely in the butt. He grunted in pain, rolled to his back, and held his hands up. "Don't, Betty, please!"

Betty gripped a butcher knife tightly in her hand and held it over her head, ready to plunge the blade into Lester's small chest.

Rick lunged toward Betty, ramming his body into hers. She rocked slightly on her feet, like a tall tree swaying in the breeze. The knife fell from her fingers, sailed downward, and stuck upright in the snow about two inches from Lester's head.

Sirens rang shrilly through the afternoon air. It took Rick and two other police officers to subdue Betty.

Just before they put her in the car, she turned toward Lester, who sat huddled in the back of an ambulance with a blanket around his shoulders while an EMT treated his injuries.

Tears streamed from her small eyes; her thin lips twisted in remorse. "I'm sorry, honey bunch; you know I didn't mean it. I love you."

Lester leaped from the back of the ambulance and ran to his wife; his fingers like bare twigs caressed her face. "I know you didn't." He turned pleading eyes on the officers. "I don't want to press charges. You heard her; she just gets angry sometimes, that's all. She can't help it."

Rick laid a hand on Lester's shoulder and told him about the outstanding warrant against his wife.

Lester was still begging the officers to let her go as they helped her into the back of the squad car.

* * * * *

A couple of hours later, Rick waited for Delaney at a table in the Cozy Corner Diner. He lifted a cup of hot chocolate to his lips and sipped just as Delaney breezed through the door with Sara Farley by her side. The first section of the diner contained two rows of booths, a bar, and a bakery case filled with assorted pastries. A glass and wood partition separated the front from the larger dining area. Rick watched Delaney glance around the room. He waved to snag her attention. She smiled and his heart skipped a beat. She touched Sara's arm and they started across the diner. He admired Delaney's lush curves as she moved toward him. The more time he spent with her the more she attracted him and slid deeper

beneath his skin. No woman had ever made him feel hot, cold, excited, and panic stricken all at the same time. What was he going to do?

Delaney and Sara settled at the table with Rick. Sara cocked her head and glanced at Rick. "I hope you don't mind me joining the two of you."

Rick waved a hand casually through the air. "Of course not. How was your day?"

"It's been nice," Sara began. She reached over and patted Delaney's arm. "I was thrilled when Delaney dropped in earlier. I've been working on a new china pattern and I wanted to get an objective opinion. When she invited me to dinner, I couldn't say no. I just hate eating alone ... nothing's been the same since my Carl died."

Delaney reached out and laid her hand on Rick's arm. He fought not to cover her hand with his own and entwine their fingers. "You should see the new pattern, Rick. It's a gorgeous holiday design with red birds, greenery, and ribbon."

She looked at Sara and smiled. "When it goes on display, it's going to sell like crazy."

Sara beamed. "Thank you, Delaney. I'm so glad you like it. Artists always need positive feedback and encouragement, you know."

Rick studied Delaney as they waited for their food to arrive. Flushed from the cold, with bright eyes, she inspired tender lust. She'd pulled her hair into a ponytail and a few loose strands teased her neck. He wanted to brush his lips there, but he pushed the impulse away.

Delaney was so supportive of the people she befriended, and her loyalty appeared genuine. He certainly respected her for being so kind to Sara. But was he seeing only surface? Was the real Delaney hidden from him?

Once, he had believed in friendship and loyalty with every cell in his body. However, Jake, his partner, had deceived him in the cruelest possible way.

Delaney laughed. The girlish sound made lust quiver through his veins. Delaney shifted her gaze and looked at him. He wanted to touch her, hold her, kiss her -- right now; but could he trust her?

Several people stopped by their table, spoke to him, and eyed Delaney before they stuck their hands out for a shake. She smiled and conversed with them for a few minutes before they moved on. They sat by a picture window. Rick glanced out at the flurries falling from a sky quilted with clouds. When a large black Mercedes SUV pulled into a space in front of the diner, Oliver Harden climbed out and Rick's eyebrows shot up his forehead. In a moment, Oliver had helped his wife from the vehicle. She took his arm, beamed at him as if he were a god descended from Mount Olympus, and together they headed for the diner's door.

As they passed the booth where Rick, Delaney and Sara were sitting, Oliver and his wife stopped. Oliver's wife waved her left hand beneath Sara's nose. A person would have to be blind to miss the sparkle and flash from the large diamond on her ring finger.

Sara gasped, her eyes widened and she smiled in awe. "My goodness, Roberta, what's this?"

"Oh," she gushed. "Ollie bought me a new wedding set in Billings. Isn't it just ..." She put her hand to her cheek. "I'm at a loss for words."

Sara nodded. "Me, too."

Delaney leaned forward to have a look as well. "Wow, it's gorgeous."

Roberta shrugged one shoulder. "Oh, thank you. I have to agree." She giggled.

Oliver squared his shoulders and preened beside her. Curiouser and curiouser.

The diamond was huge. "It's a beautiful ring for sure." Rick wondered where he got the cash for a Mercedes and a huge rock like that for his wife.

Oliver puffed out his chest and grinned. "Thanks. Did you see our new ride too?"

Rick leaned back in his chair and looked at Oliver. "How could I miss it?"

Roberta tugged on Oliver's arm. "Come on, honey, I see a couple of ladies from my bridge club. I'm dying to show them my ring. They'll be green with envy."

Rick watched them walk away and head toward the back of the diner.

Sara looked at Rick and Delaney and smiled. "Who knew Oliver made that kind of money?" She sipped her coffee and patted her mouth with the napkin. "Will you two excuse me for a few minutes? I see someone I need to talk to about an order of china." Sara grabbed her purse and headed toward a young couple seated at a table on the far side of the diner.

Rick looked at the SUV then toward the direction of the Hardens. He frowned.

"Is there a problem?" Delaney asked.

"Yeah, I'm wondering how Oliver Harden can afford a vehicle like that --" He nodded toward the car in question. "-- and an expensive ring on income from a convenience store."

Their waitress walked over, set their food on the table, asked if they needed anything else, then left them alone. Delaney bit into one of her chicken tenders and ate a French fry. "Maybe he makes more than you think or maybe he inherited from a relative."

Rick shook his head. "Maybe, but Avery's a small town and it's hard to keep a secret around here. If Oliver had come into some money, everybody in town would have known about it by now. He and Roberta have always lived comfortably but modestly. He's never been the kind of man to buy expensive things then flash them around town." He exhaled a breath. "Seems odd, that's all."

Delaney's hand covered Rick's, his heart picked up rhythm and arousal stirred in his groin. He looked at her.

She gave him a small smile. "I was really impressed with the way you handled the situation earlier with the Verners."

Rick shrugged as if it was no big deal but a sense of pride swelled inside him. Even a cop needed his ego stroked now and then. His penis twitched inside his pants. Maybe he should take Delaney on ride-alongs more often. Normally, he had no one cheering him on or

patting him on the back for a job well done. The only comments he ever received were from the mayor who only complained if there was a problem. "Standard procedure, that's all."

Delaney looked at him with respect and a flash of distress in her eyes. "No, it was more than that. I've never seen a man abused by his wife before." Her voice dropped to a murmur. "The important thing is you didn't let her walk away without paying the consequences."

Chapter Five

Delaney watched the expression warm in Rick's eyes. She was truly impressed and respected him as well. He was a man of integrity who stood his ground and did the right thing. Did he do the right thing in his relationship with women as well? Did he speak to Lenore and break up with her as he said he would?

"Physical or emotional abuse can't be tolerated in any situation."

She smiled. "You're a good man."

After they left the Verners' house, Rick had dropped her off at the garage to pick up her car. She had tentative plans to leave Avery tomorrow, but she had a question she needed to ask Rick first. "I was wondering if you had a chance to talk to Lenore today."

Rick nodded. A sensual expression glinted in his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I did." His deep, raspy answer caressed her nerve endings. He took a fry from her plate and slipped it between his lips.

His action was erotic, warming her from head to toe. She would like nothing better than to take every inch of him deep inside her.

He reached out and took her hand, closing his warm fingers firmly around hers. "I broke things off with her."

A feeling of relief rushed through Delaney. Now, her relationship with Rick could move forward if she didn't leave tomorrow ... "How did she take it?"

Rick leaned closer and gazed into her eyes. His tangy, male scent consumed her senses. The ambient sounds of conversations and the clang of dishes faded to the background. Delaney felt her nipples tighten and a blissful heat fill her core.

"She took it fine. Only one question needs to be answered. Are you interested in seeing where this attraction takes us?"

"Hi, Delaney."

The sound of the mayor's voice sliced into her private, sensual cocoon. She looked up and saw him walking toward them. He stopped beside the table and smiled. "I'm glad you're here." He motioned to an empty chair and when Rick nodded he sat down. The mayor turned and looked at Delaney. "The majority voted for your ideas about sprucing up the town despite Harden's objections. I was wondering if you'd thought anymore about staying on to help us implement the ideas."

Delaney glanced around the diner at the people eating a meal with friends and family. Their voices melded into a soft murmur and poured over her. She gazed out of the window at the snow-covered town. Funny, she'd only been here a few days and already Avery felt like home. Inside, a tug of war ensued. One side lured her to leave tomorrow, head for New York and an exciting new life and the other, a more visceral feeling inched its way toward her heart. She looked at Rick and then the mayor. "I'd love to help you, but I'll need to leave in time to reach New York by January third."

The mayor beamed. "Great. That won't be a problem. Stop by my office first thing in the morning and we'll get started." He stood up and shook Delaney's hand. "Glad to have you on board."

As he walked away, Rick smiled at her. His grin sent a current of awareness to her toes. "Ever been ice fishing?"

Delaney raised her brows. That was the last thing she expected Rick to say. "Ice fishing? No, why?"

He grasped her hand. "I was planning to go this afternoon. Want to tag along?"

She shrugged. "Why not?"

* * * * *

Before they left the diner, Rick retrieved a thermos from the cruiser and had it filled with hot chocolate. Then he took Delaney by a sports shop and purchased some warmer clothes for her.

A half-hour or so later, they sat inside a portable fishing shack on camping chairs side by side. Harsh winds blew around the walls of the shack. A portable propane heater made the air inside the shack just this side of bearable.

They each held a fishing pole. The floor was made of wood with an open square in the center. Rick had cut a fresh hole in the ice when they arrived. Their baited hooks floated several inches below the surface of the frigid water.

Rick had thought for sure Delaney would be squeamish about handling tackle and bait but she'd surprised him. Despite the cold and the primitive conditions, she appeared to be enjoying herself.

He couldn't keep his eyes off her. She'd taken off her parka, sweater, and gloves. The thermal top she wore had a round neckline and gave him no tantalizing glimpse of cleavage, yet she looked so damn sexy. He wanted to peel away her top and jeans, nibbling as he went.

The lush roundness of her breasts, the rosy glow of her skin enticed him to touch her. She caught him looking at her and curved her tempting lips in a half-smile. His penis hardened. Shifting in his chair, he leaned down, picked up the thermos, and poured two cups of hot chocolate. When he handed one to her, her fingers brushed his and need gripped him in the balls.

When Delaney sipped her hot chocolate and licked her lips, Rick knew he was a dead man. Without taking his eyes from her face, he set their cups on top of a small wooden table. He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her into his lap. A small gasp escaped her lips when she landed in his lap. "I've wanted to kiss you from the moment I saw you."

He possessed her mouth, tonguing her lips, sucking and licking, memorizing their texture, letting their flavor seep into his soul and consume him like a raging fire. She moaned and squirmed in his arms as he plunged his tongue into her mouth. He wanted to dominate her body and soul, and he hoped to God that she would let him.

Rick moved his mouth over her cheek down to her neck. "Let me touch you wherever and however I want to." He lifted his head and looked at her. "Allow me free access. Don't say no."

Her eyes gleamed with need and excitement. Good. He wanted her to be excited at the prospect. "You will feel only pleasure, I promise." He thrust his tongue into her mouth repeatedly, caressing every part of her. She tasted of chocolate and want. Rick opened his eyes and found her watching him. Arousal had darkened the blue of her eyes. Silently, he told her how much he wanted her.

While his mouth plundered hers, her bottom pressed against his erection, his hard length prodding the front of his pants as if begging to be set free so he could slip inside her. He jerked the hem of her thermal top from the waistband of her jeans and laid his palm on her warm, silky skin. Sliding his palm upward, he found to his delight she wasn't wearing a bra.

Rick released the pressure on her mouth enough so he could speak, but kept their lips touching, their breath mingling. "What a surprise."

She smiled against his lips. "I felt ... I don't know, really sexy today. I needed to feel free under my clothes."

He flicked his gaze to her crotch then back again. "Don't tell me you went commando too?"

She grinned. "Almost."

With his gaze boring into hers, he unfastened her jeans, yanked them to the upper part of her thighs. He flicked his gaze to her crotch and focused on the skimpiest pair of panties he'd ever seen. The triangle covering her femininity was no larger than a postage stamp and thin straps like dental floss held it on. He knew without a doubt her buttocks were bare. Rick tucked the ends of his fingers over the edge of the panties and pulled them down. A thatch of blonde curls hid her pink folds from his gaze.

He raised his hand, licked his fingers -- and with his eyes on hers -- parted her folds and fondled her clit. Her eyes glazed and her breath grew husky as he manipulated the tight bud of her womanhood. She grew slick under his touch, her feminine juices ran like honey over his skin. Her clit swelled and prodded against his fingers. Each time he knew she was near climax he backed off.

"Press harder, Rick." Her voice, ripe with intense sensual appetite, rasped from her throat. "I'm almost there. Let me come ... please."

Satisfaction washed through him. "In a minute. I want you thoroughly wet and ready so you'll come like you never have before in your life."

He moved his fingers just a little and pressed dead center. He knew the moment the orgasm gripped her. Her head fell back against his arm. She raised her knees and tugged against the restriction of her jeans. He jerked her pants down to her ankles, allowing her to open her legs wider for his ministrations. Shoving two fingers inside her tight passage, he ruthlessly made love to her with his hand.

Crying out, she arched her back and he felt her clench repeatedly, grasping his fingers slicked deep within her. When he started to pull his fingers from her body, she laid her hand

on his, stopping him. She opened her eyes and looked at him with a salacious light gleaming in their depths. "I need you inside me, Rick."

He smiled, filling with anticipation. Finally, he would possess her body. "I know a better, much warmer place."

* * * * *

Once they were in his truck, they traveled down the highway headed out of town.

In a few minutes, Rick pointed to a thick, white mist rising from a copse of trees. "The hot springs sit in the middle of those trees. It's completely private so there will be no interruptions." He would steep himself in her, every sweet delectable inch.

When they arrived at the cluster of trees, Rick pulled the truck to a stop. They got out and walked through the trees until they saw several steaming pools of water. Rick walked to the edge of the largest pool, turned, and took off his clothes, not bothering to hide his arousal from her gaze. After he finished undressing he lowered himself into the water. A full moon like cold marble sailed overhead through a velvet sky crammed with stars. Bubbles tickled and caressed his penis, arousing him further. He stared at Delaney, held out his right arm, and curved his fingers in a come-hither motion. "Come here."

Her lips parted and he saw her chest move with a deep inhalation. "Are you going to do anything kinky?"

He arched a brow. "Maybe. Does that frighten you?"

She paused for a moment as if she were thinking it over. "No."

"Good. Strip for me ... slowly."

First, she took off her jacket and tossed it to the ground. She reached for the zipper of her jeans and pulled, the sound raspy in the quiet evening air. Next, she removed her sweater and thermal top. Her breasts looked full and round, the nipples puckering in the cold air. Her

panties were the last to go. He licked his lips when he saw her exposed femininity. She stepped out of her clothes and kicked them aside.

“You’re gorgeous,” he murmured in a husky voice. “Don’t cover yourself,” he said when she tried to hide her full breasts.

“You don’t mind my body being so curvy?”

He chuckled in a deep sexy way. “Why would I mind? Only a fool would. You’re all woman and nothing but woman.”

Delaney walked to the edge of the pool and slid into the heated water. Rick patted the smooth surface of a shelf of rock jutting into the water just below the surface. “Sit down, lie back, and bend your knees. I want to see all of you.”

He watched her walk through the water, admired the luscious, feminine curves of her body, her breasts bobbing slightly as she moved toward him. She turned, slid her buttocks onto the rock, and lay back with her knees bent and her thighs spread. He moved in front of her, put his hands on her knees, and nudged them a little so her legs shifted further apart.

Her most private part opened like a flower, teasing him with the plump, aroused button of her clit. He lowered his head between her legs and closed his mouth over her. Greedy now with a burning need to take, he ate at her with ravenous demand, licking with his tongue, lightly scraping the sensitive inner folds of her sex with his teeth and pushing his tongue inside her. He wanted complete surrender and would accept nothing less.

The primal need to mate consumed him as her body convulsed against his mouth. Delaney started to reach for him, but he gently lowered her hands to her sides. “Let me lead you, dominate you.” He wanted her to do this for him, no, needed her to submit to him. “I won’t do anything you don’t like and we can stop at any time. Don’t be afraid to experience something new.” There was something incredibly sexy about a woman giving herself over to a man. It wasn’t demeaning; it was liberating for her and for him. “Let me take you in a way you’ve never experienced before.”

She was excited and a bit frightened by his invitation, but she wanted to steep herself in sex with Rick as long as her naked curves didn't turn him off. Delaney nodded, looking into Rick's eyes, his deep chocolate gaze filled with desire. He urged her to trust him. She did trust him. She didn't think he would ever harm her physically but he could emotionally. Since she had never been lucky at love, why not give herself to him physically and experience the carnal delights he promised?

"Lift one of your breasts as if you're offering me a piece of fruit."

She felt unsure and a little strange but she did as he asked. He leaned over her, took her nipple into his mouth, and sucked. Hard. His tongue massaged her nipple, making it bead and swell. After fully loving and arousing her breast, he licked his way around the globe, nibbling at the sides and underneath. Then he kissed his way over to her other breast and gave it the same avid attention. When he was done, her breasts were sensitive and needy and an extreme heaviness had settled between her legs, saturating her core.

Rick grasped her thighs and lifted her legs so they lay on his shoulders. With a slight tug, he nudged her buttocks to the edge of the rock. She felt his fingers part her wet curls and then his hot mouth descended once more. He drove her up and dangled her just over the peak but not enough for her to come. She was delirious with need. "Please Rick." She heard the hoarse tone of her own voice and found it foreign. No man had ever made her want this much.

He lifted his head and laid his palm over her. "I know you want it. But you've given me control, remember. I promise when you come it will be worth the wait." He pulled her down into the water. Bubbles caressed her tender breasts, her buttocks, and her mound. She'd never needed to come this badly in her life. Rick took her mouth in a soul-stirring kiss while one hand covered her mound. He kneaded the heel of his hand over her while his tongue toyed with hers.

Breathless, Rick tore his mouth from hers, turned her gently toward the side of the rock wall of the springs so her back faced him. "Lay your hands on the sides, take your feet off the bottom, bend your knees, and open your legs. Rest your knees against the wall."

She had no idea what he had planned until she felt him move up behind her, his hard cock prodding gently at first between her legs until the head found her opening. Her breath caught when she felt the tip of his large penis push inside her, then with one hard thrust he filled her to the brim. Before she could take her next breath, he withdrew slightly, then pushed hard again, filling her. He was so big. Her sensitive inner passage stretched to take him. She would never have believed she could hold this much man inside her.

"God, you're tight, you're so incredibly tight." With an easy cadence he slid back and forth inside her.

His rhythm increased, faster, harder. The water in the rocky grotto spilled over the sides with each thrust of his hips. His penis felt hard like steel yet pliable as if wrapped in velvet. His breathing grew rougher; his hands held her breasts one minute then her hips the next. Suddenly, he stopped, pulled out of her and turned her body to the side. He bent her knee lifting her leg high, exposing her tender entrance. Then he shoved inside her again.

From this angle his penis drove even deeper, his balls slapped softly against her buttocks. Without mercy, he stroked her swollen, aroused clit. The craving and want increased, her mind and body grasping toward orgasm. "I don't think I can take much more. Let me come."

Again he brought her to the sweet peak, but denied her fulfillment. He pumped inside her, his eager mouth working on her neck and shell of her ear as he made love to her thoroughly. Once again he pulled, turning her so she faced him, lifted her legs and spread her knees. Open and vulnerable and shaking with lust, she was helpless in his hands. He was larger, stronger, and could overpower her. Would she let him? Her mind screamed *yes*.

Holding his arms under her knees, he opened her thighs and drove into her so far she thought she could almost feel the tip of him in the back of her throat. She let her head fall back and looked at the stars overhead. This time he didn't stop, he continued to lunge until her body squeezed, squeezed, squeezed around him. Like a fiery comet, she spun up into the stars even as her heart gloried in the euphoria of making love with Rick.

Inside her, his penis turned rigid and his thrusts blended into one. Delaney clasped her hands on his buttocks and felt the muscles contract as he came inside her. He groaned, lifting his chin with his eyes closed. When the last of his spasms finally died, he took his arms from beneath her legs and let them fall into the water. Curving his arms around her waist, he rested his head between her breasts, his hard length still buried within her.

* * * * *

The next morning, Delaney sat at the island in Rick's kitchen and watched him cook omelets. She wore his police uniform shirt and nothing else. She glanced at Rick cooking their meal. He wore boxers, socks, and no shirt. The man made her mouth water plus one other significant body part. Her feminine core was nicely tender from their frenzied lovemaking the night before and that morning as well. Still a bit sleepy, she took a sip of her tea and thought about the blissful night she'd spent wrapped in Rick's arms.

Her phone rang. She reached inside her purse sitting on the chair beside her and flipped the phone open. "Hello."

"Ms. Moore, this is Ron Blake at Taylor's Department Store in New York."

He was the man who had offered her the job. She hoped he hadn't changed his mind. "Yes, hi, Mr. Blake."

They exchanged pleasantries before he got to the point.

"I had originally told you your first day on the job would be January third, but we need you to report much sooner."

Uh-oh, this doesn't sound good. "How much sooner?"

"We need you in New York tomorrow."

Her eyes widened. Any remnants of sleep were swept away. "Tomorrow!"

"Yes. You see, the woman you're replacing had to leave before the end of her notice due to a family emergency. Even though the store windows are done for the season and on display, there are always unexpected problems that come up and we need someone to cover for her. Most of our staff has taken time off for the holidays, and we need you here A.S.A.P. The company will, of course, put you in a hotel until your living arrangements are settled. There's a ticket waiting for you at the Seattle airport."

Disappointment and regret flowed with equal measure through Delaney. Her new, exciting life in New York was within her reach. All she had to do was say yes. But what about her promise to the town? She looked at Rick. What about her relationship with Rick? If she left now it would be over before it had barely begun. "I'm no longer in Seattle. I left early to drive to New York, but on the way I got stranded by a snowstorm in Avery, Montana."

"No problem. I'll order you a ticket for the first flight out of Billings. You'll probably have to change planes in Chicago because I doubt I'll be able to get a direct flight this close to Christmas."

"What I'm trying to say, Mr. Blake, is that even though the storm has left Avery, it's moving east. O'Hare already has flight delays and the brunt of the storm hasn't even arrived yet."

He huffed out a breath. "Ms. Moore, I hired you because you impressed me as a woman who was capable, took the bull by the horns, someone Taylor's could depend on to get the job done. It's crunch time, and your presence here is desperately needed. If you can't be here tomorrow, I'll have to give the job to my second choice." He paused for a moment as if letting his words sink in. "Now, which will it be?"

Delaney's back stiffened and she pressed her lips firmly together. She hated ultimatums. Besides, there was definitely something between her and Rick other than amazing sex, and she wanted to continue to explore not just his delectable body joined with hers, but Rick as a man. She needed money, no doubt about it. She had just enough to put a deposit on an apartment, pay a month's rent. The mayor would be paying for her help with the town. After she finished the project, she should have no trouble finding another one, especially if one of the top stores in the country had already offered her a job. "Is there any way this could wait for at least two or three more days?"

"No, it can't wait. Now what's your answer?"

"I'm in the middle of a project here in Avery." A delicious male project standing just a few feet away and another she had given her word to complete. "Thank you for your time and your offer, but I can't be in New York by tomorrow."

Rick turned from where he stood at the stove with a frown creasing his forehead.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ms. Moore. Good luck." He rang off. Delaney hung up the phone and stared at it for a moment. So much for the bright lights of the Big Apple.

"What's going on, Delaney? Who was that on the phone?"

Delaney looked at Rick and told him about the call.

A range of indefinable emotions flickered over Rick's face. "Does this mean you're staying?"

"At least until I can find another job and the project is completed."

Rick put down the spatula and walked over to Delaney with a look of profound admiration on his face. He held her face between his hands and lightly kissed her on the lips. Just a brush of lips. Then he looked at her and smiled. "That was a very honorable thing you just did. I really respect you for that."

His words touched a deep place inside her heart but when she tried to speak, she couldn't talk. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his chest. She

listened to the thump of his heart until she was able to speak. "Thank you, but my actions weren't totally honorable. If the mayor wasn't paying me, I would have no choice but to leave."

Rick brushed a hand over her hair. "The important thing is that you're staying."

* * * * *

After a particularly long, cold day, Rick sat at the kitchen table with Delaney as they ate a late supper he'd picked up from the diner on his way home. She told him about her day. She met with the committee members at the awning company in Billings to approve a sample before the rest were made.

The kitchen grew quiet. He listened to the wind whistle around the eaves of the house. He wanted this, he realized, more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. Time spent after a long day with a woman he cared about, someone he could talk to about his day. He wanted to know more about Delaney, about her family, where she came from. He closed his fingers over her hand. "You grew up in Seattle didn't you?"

She smiled briefly. "Yeah, my parents are good people, but we were never that close. No sibs. I went to design school and after graduation I was planning to stay there, but when I was offered the job in New York, I jumped at the chance. I intended to stay in Seattle through the holidays, but when everything went south with my boyfriend, I decided to leave early and drive." She glanced away, looked toward the window over the kitchen sink, and toyed with her food without really eating any of it.

He placed two fingers beneath her chin and turned her face toward his. "What happened with your boyfriend? I can't believe any guy would willingly walk away from you."

She chuckled without humor. "Believe it. He found a skinny model type who probably lives on nothing but breath mints and cigarettes."

Rick brought her hand up and held it between his. "He was a fool to walk away from a gorgeous woman like you."

Delaney shrugged. "Thanks."

He leaned forward and lightly kissed her. "I mean it."

She took a sip of wine. "I caught him in bed with someone else who weighed a lot less than I do." She paused for a moment then looked at him. "So what about you? How did you find your way here to Avery from Chicago? Why leave the big city for a small town?"

He slumped back in his chair but kept his hand resting lightly on Delaney's. He rubbed the tip of his index finger absently over the top of her hand. "My mother is Peruvian and my dad is from Cuba. I have one sister. We're a loud bunch but a loving family. It's too bad you weren't closer to your parents or had siblings. Dad drove a cab. He's retired now, stays home and drives Mom nuts." He smiled and Delaney smiled back.

"I was a cop for twelve years in Chicago. Growing up, my best friend Jake and I were a bit wild."

Delaney threw him a teasing smile. "I can't imagine you being wild."

Her tone was sarcastic, the glint in her eyes sexy. "Better not tease me or I'll never finish telling you my life story. Mom did the best she could. Dad was in the cab all the time trying to make ends meet and keep a roof over our heads. He worked double shifts. My sister was a bit spoiled, just a typical girl always wanting new clothes, new shoes, new everything. Anyway, Jake and I used to hang out a few blocks from our apartment house on the corner in front of a drugstore. Old man Cavanaugh was the owner. When we first started hanging out there he would walk out with his pork pie hat, his hands stuck into the pockets of his slacks, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had a twinkle in his eyes. Mr. C., we used to call him. He'd had a hard life, came over an orphan from Ireland. But he was always happy, always smiling. He loved to talk to people, especially kids. He would always show up when he saw

bad kids hanging with us and run them off. He talked to us constantly about staying away from drugs and urged us not to drink.”

A memory washed through him like a warm breeze on a summer day. He couldn’t help but smile as the images unfolded in his mind like the pages of a book. “One day, we must have been about twelve, he caught us smoking in the alley behind the store. He promptly marched us inside, sat us down and made us smoke an entire pack of cigarettes *each* in one sitting.” He laughed. “I’ve never been so sick in my life; I thought I was going to die.” He exhaled a deep breath.

“I never smoked again. He was a mentor to us. My dad was a good man, but he was working all the time. Mom waited tables at a diner. Jake and I didn’t become thugs, mainly because of Mr. C., but also because I knew it would break my mother’s heart. One day some cops came to our school and talked about the police force. Since college wasn’t an option, we decided to go to the police academy. After the academy, Jake and I joined Chicago PD. He was my partner, my best friend. We’d been working a case for a few months trying to nail a drug dealer.

“Over time, I noticed Jake always had extra money in his pockets. He bought himself an expensive car; during his off hours he dressed like a fashion plate -- silk ties and cashmere coats. I couldn’t figure out how he could buy those things on a cop’s salary. When I asked him about it, he joked and reminded me about Mr. C. always telling us to put some money aside for a rainy day. Since he didn’t know when or if that rainy day was coming, he thought he’d enjoy it right now.”

Rick sipped his beer. “I believed him. What’s more, I trusted him. One day, Mr. C. had closed up the store and was walking home. He lived only a couple of blocks from the store, but I guess he was in a hurry that day because he cut through an alley on his way home.” The memory of that horrible day felt cold and hard. “When he entered the alley, he walked into the middle of a drug deal between Jake and this goon. Jake was selling him a kilo of crack cocaine. Mr. C. yelled at Jake, asking him what the hell he was doing. Then he grabbed

a pipe lying on the ground and came at them to break them apart. The goon pulled a gun and shot Mr. C. clear through the head. Jake and the guy ran, leaving him to bleed to death.”

Tears burned Rick’s eyes, and a lump of old grief pushed into his throat. He inhaled and exhaled a ragged breath trying to grasp hold of his emotions. Delaney stood up from her chair and sat in Rick’s lap. She laid her head on his shoulder, put her arms around him. He closed his eyes and let the warm comfort of her body ease away the pain of the past.

“I’m so sorry, Rick. You must have been devastated.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “Yeah, to this day I still can’t believe what Jake did. You think you know someone and then you discover you don’t know them at all.”

“I guess that’s why you left. It would have been hard to stay.”

“I stayed until the guy Jake was doing business with was caught.”

Delaney laid her palm on his chest over his heart. “How did you find out what really happened?”

Anger replaced his grief and sadness over the loss of his friend. He felt the emotion burn through him once more. “Jake banged on my door that night so scared he puked. He was wild-eyed, shaking all over. Put on quite a show with tears streaming down his face. He confessed the whole thing. He said he just couldn’t resist all that money. Cop’s salary isn’t much. I knew that. Most of the guys on the force worked another job to support their families. A beat cop makes next to nothing. Then he told me Mr. C. was dead. He begged me not to rat on him. He had a wife and kids. His wife, Gail, was pregnant with their next child. He swore the whole thing was an accident.

“When Internal Affairs questioned me, I told them nothing. I wanted to, for Mr. C.’s sake, for that sweet old man who never hurt anybody. I had to be satisfied with getting the other guy instead. I.A. was relentless. Eventually they found out Jake was dealing drugs. He turned state’s evidence and they didn’t prosecute him. I could never convince them I wasn’t involved, probably because I felt guilty for not turning Jake in to begin with. They really did

a number making everyone suspicious of me. No one wanted to believe that I didn't know what was going on, that I wasn't part of it. I was suspended for a while; then they took me off the street and stuck me on desk duty. I pushed paper for two months until I couldn't take it any more. Then I put out some feelers and heard about this job in Avery. Even though they could never prove I was a dirty cop, the suspicion stuck. I gave Jake my friendship and my loyalty. Taught me a hard lesson. Loyalty to a friend got me in big trouble. I needed to get out of Chicago and find respect again."

Rick looked into her eyes. "Delaney, I've never told anyone this story, not even my family. All the mayor knows is that I wanted a break from being a big city cop. I'd appreciate it if you didn't --"

She pressed two fingers against his lips. "I'll never tell anyone."

He wasn't so sure he'd done the right thing but then he thought about Jake behind bars and he shuddered. A cop going to jail was a death sentence. He didn't even know if Jake was still alive.

"Rick, loyalty is important, it's a virtue. Don't give up on it just because of the actions of one person. What you did was right. Not ratting on a friend is commendable."

"You're an incredible woman, Delaney Moore." He lowered his head and kissed her. Her lips parted beneath his and he slid his tongue inside her mouth. Her taste, her scent clouded his brain. She was the sexiest woman he'd ever known, but more important she made him want to believe in the value of loyalty again and allow himself to trust again. But, he knew once the town's project was complete she would get another job and leave town. Unable to stop it from happening, he felt another piece of his heart surrender to her.

Chapter Six

Lenore drove her SUV down the highway just outside of Avery. She tapped a freshly manicured nail against the steering wheel and hummed along to “Santa Baby” blaring from the radio. She was on her way home from Christmas shopping and a beauty salon appointment in Billings. Some gaily wrapped packages sat in the back, but a special one she’d purchased just for Rick was next to her on the passenger seat.

As she neared the road to Rick’s house, she flipped on the turn signal and slowed a bit, intending to stop and place the gift on his front porch. Afterward, she’d go by the sheriff’s office and drop a few hints about her gift waiting for him at home. Lenore smiled to herself. She fully expected him to give her a nice present as well, despite what he said about ending their relationship. He didn’t mean it. He’d grow tired of Delaney Moore and her rather earthy inelegance, she was sure of it.

Just as she turned onto the unpaved road leading up to Rick’s house, a wave of shock hit her in the chest, compressing her heart in a cruel vise as she watched Rick and Delaney step out of his house arm in arm and head toward the squad car.

Lenore slammed on the brakes, hard, sending packages into the rear floorboard of the car. Her mouth opened and her eyes widened as jealousy oozed in a green flood through her

veins. She couldn't see Rick's face because he had his head turned toward Delaney who smiled up at him. Lenore's fingers tightened around the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. She stared in hurt and anger as Rick leaned toward Delaney and gave her a lingering kiss.

Unable to bear watching them another moment, she checked for oncoming traffic on the highway before slamming the gear into reverse and pointing the front of her vehicle toward Avery. Anger and jealousy melded together, making her blood boil. Furious tears stung her eyes and a sob burned the back of her throat, making it feel tight and sore. She swiped at her tears with the back of her right hand and heaved a ragged breath, determined not to allow Delaney Moore, a woman not worthy to wipe the dust from her shoes, humiliate her.

She slammed her palm against the steering wheel. "Damn Delaney," she said aloud. Damn her for coming to Avery. Lenore had just gotten Rick where she wanted him. It had taken her some time, but she was certain if Delaney hadn't waltzed into town, they would have been sleeping together by now. She had let Rick know she was definitely interested in sex, but for some odd reason he kept holding her off.

He told her it was because he wasn't sure if she was truly over her husband's death and he didn't want to take advantage of her or the situation. She did her best to assure him she was ready, but he never gave her more than a kiss or two. Finally, just as she was certain she'd convinced him to take their relationship to the next level, Delaney arrived in town blowing a big hole in her well-conceived plan.

When Lenore reached Avery, she followed the main road through the middle of town until she pulled up in front of the diner. With a snap, she shoved the gear into park and cut the engine.

"Time to teach Delaney a lesson," she murmured to herself as she checked her hair and makeup in the vanity mirror on the back of the driver's side visor. She'd had her hair done and made a special trip to the cosmetic counter at Dillard's to pick up a new eye shadow. Her

eyes appeared sultry and sexy, not to mention the new outfit she wore. How could Rick even want to look at Delaney?

She climbed from the truck, slammed the door, and headed inside the diner. It was high time little miss thunder thighs lost favor in Rick's eyes and the best way to do that was with the citizens of Avery. Lenore smiled as a satisfying thought filled her head. She had a distinct advantage over Delaney because she had lived in Avery since she was four. Everyone knew her and respected her. Delaney was a stranger and it wouldn't take much to discredit her reputation.

Lenore had coffee in a corner booth and dropped a few derogatory statements about Delaney. She made sure everyone believed Delaney considered Avery a hick town, unworthy of living in, and the only reason she was helping the town was for the money and a temporary itch for Rick. By the time Lenore headed back to the B&B, there was a big smile on her face and a lilt of satisfaction in her heart. Yes, Delaney Moore's days in Avery were numbered. Everyone had been properly shocked, appalled and even hurt, which Lenore of course soothed as best she could.

* * * * *

The next morning, Delaney rose early, stretched and winced at the slight tenderness between her legs. Rick was an ardent lover. She had never been so well loved in her life. After taking a shower, she dressed and made a beeline for the diner. A brilliant blue sky soared overhead while the sun drenched the town in golden rays. The temperature had risen into the low fifties, bringing much-needed relief from the bitter cold of the last few days. Everyone had better enjoy it because tomorrow more snow was expected.

Delaney pushed open the door of the diner and stepped inside. She threw a smile and friendly hello to Louie, the manager, sitting beside the cash register. He spared her a sharp glance and barely nodded at her cheerful greeting. Instead, he picked up a copy of the *Avery Gazette* and pretended to read.

Dismayed and confused by his cool reception, she grabbed a menu from the stack sitting on the counter and found an empty booth. She took off her jacket, sat down and tried to concentrate on the menu. Despite her best efforts, her gaze kept shifting to the manager who continued to ignore her. After a moment, the head waitress, Nadine, strolled over.

“Hi, Nadine, how are you today?”

Nadine threw her a frosty glare. “Fine.” She rapidly tapped the end of her pen on her pad. “I’m waiting.”

Delaney put down the menu and looked up at Nadine. “Is something wrong?”

Nadine pursed her lips as a flash of icy contempt gleamed in her brown eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you. Did you say you wanted coffee?”

Delaney exhaled a deep breath. “No, I asked if something was wrong.”

Nadine arched a brow and stared at Delaney. “Why would anything be wrong?”

Delaney lifted her right hand palm up. “I have no idea. It’s just that --”

“I’m really busy, so if you’d like to order something, please do.”

Delaney looked around the diner at the empty booths and tables yet to be filled, and wondered what she had done to cause this sudden shift in attitude toward her. Could her relationship with Rick have something to do with it? Was everyone hoping he and Lenore would end up together? Well, she’d be damned if she was going to get permission from Avery’s citizens regarding her love life. Delaney slid the menu across the table toward Nadine. “Tea with cream, French toast and a side of bacon.”

Without a word, Nadine strode away with her nose scraping the ceiling. In a few minutes, she came back with a pot of hot water and a basket of tea bags. Nadine stood beside Delaney holding the pot in her hand and glancing surreptitiously at Delaney’s lap. For a long, anxious moment, Delaney was afraid Nadine might dump the hot water in her lap. To Delaney’s relief, she filled her cup instead. Then without so much as a glance in her direction, she walked away.

Delaney poured a generous amount of cream in her tea and stirred in two heaping spoonfuls of sugar, the spoon clanking against the sides of the cup. She frowned, her gaze moving from Louie at the front of the diner to Nadine in the back chatting and smiling at an older couple seated in a booth. What the heck was going on? What had she done to offend them?

Everyone had been so nice to her up until now. A feeling of disappointment mixed with sadness filled her. Maybe Avery wasn't the place for her after all. Never one to dwell on the negative, she decided to enjoy the time she had with Rick and then move on. Just because she didn't have a job waiting for her in New York didn't mean she couldn't go. She could always find a job however temporary until the one she really wanted came along. In the meantime, the mayor had agreed to pay her for helping them beautify the town. Glad that she'd made a decision to head for New York, she rested her hands on the table's surface and waited for Nadine to serve her food.

The door of the diner swung open and Sara Farley shuffled in. Louie laid down the newspaper and greeted her warmly. "Sit anywhere you like," Delaney heard him tell Sara.

Sara's gaze locked on Delaney for maybe two seconds before she looked away. Obviously not wishing to speak to her, Sara stared straight ahead as she passed by Delaney's booth. Delaney reached out and caught her arm. "Please, Sara, sit down. Tell me what's going on."

Sara exhaled a deep breath, her normally cheerful face pinched with annoyance and hurt. She hesitated a moment, then stiffly sat across from Delaney. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and her tiny frame clothed in a pink velour jogging suit.

Delaney folded her arms on top of the table and leaned toward Sara. "Why is every treating me as though I just contracted the clap?"

An expression of pained tolerance settled over Sara's face. "Well ... we heard from a reliable source that you don't think very much of us or our town." Her voice was cool and harsh.

Delaney's mouth popped open. She blinked in utter dismay and slumped against the back of her seat while shock rolled through her. "What! Who is this reliable source?"

By the time Sara finished telling her about Lenore's comments and vicious lies, she was steaming.

She looked Sara right in the eye. "They are bald-faced lies, Sara." She reached across the table and grasped Sara's hand. "You have to believe me. I'm not that kind of person. Lenore is jealous because Rick and I have been seeing one another on a personal level. I know that you and everyone in this town have known Lenore Shaw a heck of a lot longer than you have me, but I swear to you I never, ever said or thought any of those things."

Sara's face relaxed, the pinched expression smoothed away. She actually smiled. "Lenore has been in this town a long time. I watched her grow up, went to her wedding, and mourned with her when her husband was killed in Desert Storm. I'm not saying Lenore doesn't have faults, because she does, and nearly everybody in this town knows what they are. But she worked hard to start the B&B, to keep it going, and she has contributed a lot to the town. However, that doesn't excuse the way we've chosen to treat you. I'm sorry I fell for Lenore's lines like a hungry carp." She patted Delaney's hand. "I believe you, dear, and so will everybody else in this town by the time I'm done with them."

Delaney watched Nadine walk toward her table with the breakfast she'd ordered. Suddenly she had completely lost her appetite. She turned to Sara. "Please, enjoy my breakfast. I need to go have a chat with Lenore." She dug some bills out of her purse and put them on the table plus a generous tip and stood up to leave.

Sara looked up at her. "Don't be too hard on her."

Interesting that Rick said nearly the exact same thing. Nevertheless, it was high time somebody was hard on Lenore Shaw. Since everybody else in this town treated her with kid gloves, she was going to have to get tough. Delaney smiled. "Don't worry. I'm just going to rip her lungs out."

* * * * *

Delaney climbed into her Mini Cooper and cranked the engine. She listened to the engine hum. Linc had done a great job repairing her car, but at the moment she found it hard to appreciate his good work. She backed the compact car out of the parking space and tore over to the bed and breakfast while her anger simmered just below the boiling point.

In a few minutes, she pulled up in front of Shaw House, a white brick house with a wraparound porch and smoke curling lazily out of the chimney. Little hills of snow dotted either side of the shoveled walkway. She shoved the gear into park, cut the engine, and exhaled a breath as she gazed at the charming snowman some kids had built in the front yard. "Okay, I'm going to be calm ... firm, but calm." She pressed her lips together and seethed inside. "To hell with calm."

Delaney threw open the car door, climbed out, and marched up the walkway. She opened the front door, stepped inside, and closed it at her back. The entryway was furnished with a southwestern flair. There was a pair of old spurs adorning the wall beneath a print of snowcapped mountains. A desk was situated at the base of the stairs.

Lenore sat behind it with a phone to her ear while she typed on a computer keyboard as she booked a reservation for New Year's Eve. She flicked a glance in Delaney's direction as she hung up. Her auburn hair looked perfect, her makeup fresh as though she'd just put it on. With a slight smile, she leaned back in her chair and raised a brow. "Well ... what brings you here?"

Delaney was furious. She couldn't believe Lenore's smug, innocent attitude. She strode up to the desk and folded her arms over her chest. "You've been wagging your royal tongue

around town, spreading lies about me and I don't like it. Slander is against the law. You should know that, Lenore. Are you hoping Rick will come and arrest you?"

An icy smile curved Lenore's coral painted lips. "Wouldn't that be something?"

Scalding anger rushed through Delaney's veins. She wanted to wipe the self-satisfied expression from Lenore's face. Moreover, she knew just how to do it. She placed her palms on the surface of the desk and moved in close to Lenore. "You're so jealous you can't see straight. There's nothing sadder than a woman sniffing after a man who doesn't want her."

Lenore's eyes turned hard and flat with indignation.

Bingo.

Lenore pressed her perfectly shaped lips into a thin line and slowly stood. She leaned toward Delaney until they were nose to nose. "Jealous? Of you?" She chuckled in a derisive manner. "Not hardly. I can handle you just like I can handle Rick. Men are easily manipulated. They can't help themselves, especially when a woman looks like a million bucks and turns on the charm." She rapidly skimmed her gaze over Delaney. "Unlike some women I know."

Lenore's contempt had hurt Delaney when she'd first met her, but now after the red-hot lovemaking she and Rick had shared, she knew without a doubt who was the better woman. "I've gotten rid of other women who tried to insinuate themselves into Rick's life. He'll be back in my arms as soon as you leave town." Lenore snapped her fingers for emphasis.

Delaney smirked. "Who said I was leaving town?"

The self-assured look on Lenore's face vanished. "You're staying?"

"For the time being." Delaney straightened and looked at Lenore. "Lenore, you should really open your eyes. Mark Griffin is so in love with you the man all but drops to his knees to lick your toes whenever you're around."

Lenore stared at her as if she'd grown another head. Her lips parted and she blinked a couple of times but she remained silent.

"Why would a smart woman like you run after a man who isn't interested in her when there is a man waiting and willing with his arms open wide?" Delaney walked to the front door and stopped. She looked at Lenore over her shoulder. "By the way, Sara is undoing your little lies even as we speak."

* * * * *

After a quick meal at the diner, Delaney patted her mouth with her napkin, looked at Rick. "I drove up to Billings today, picked up a few things." Her voice was low and sexy. She stroked the tip of her finger over the back of his hand and gave him a greedy, female look. "Meet me in my jail cell in five minutes." She kept her gaze pinned to his and licked her lips. "Don't be late."

He imagined her naked and moaning as he pounded into her the other night at the hot springs. He grew hard in an instant. "What happens if I'm late?"

Delaney smiled and rose from her chair. "I'll have to punish you."

Lust and want glided through him, settling warm and heavy in his groin. Rick watched the tantalizing sway of her hips as she left the diner. He took his time finishing his coffee and paying the check, making sure he would be late. Wondering what kind of punishment she had planned made his skin tight. He would have made her wait a bit longer but the enormous hard-on pressing against his pants needed relief -- now. He made sure his coat was zipped and covering his crotch as he left the diner. Quickly, he walked to the sheriff's office.

As soon as he stepped inside, he removed his coat, hung it on the coat rack, and locked the door. Turning off the main lights in the office, he strolled to the doorway leading to the back of the office and Delaney's cell. He stood quietly in the doorway watching her.

She wore nothing but a red silk thong and red spike heels on her feet. In her right hand she held a black, velvet whip. She paced from one side of the cell to the other like a lioness

on the prowl, her bare ass and hips rocking seductively. As she paced, she slapped the soft whip against the cell floor. Her hair lay in a silken drape about her shoulders, her breasts were full and round, the nipples erect as if he'd had his mouth on them. If he shoved inside her at this very moment, would she be wet and ready to take him? The thought of her pussy creaming for him made his erection slide toward pain.

Candlelight glowed from several fat candles sitting on a small table that normally sat in the bathroom. Soft light filled the cell and danced over Delaney's body illuminating her like a voluptuous goddess. His penis hardened more and his blood beat in a wild, ancient rhythm, the rhythm of a man who desperately needed to mate.

Rick moved slowly toward the cell, unbuttoning his shirt and unzipping his pants. At the sound of his footsteps, Delaney's chin snapped up; she stopped and swept her gaze over him. He moved to the cell door, stepping out of his pants and underwear. His cock sprang free and the cool air wafted over it. He removed his shirt and kicked his clothes across the cell floor. They slid past Delaney's feet.

She glanced briefly at them as they glided past. Her light pink tongue touched her upper lip before she gave his hard-on a come-and-screw-me smile. Her gaze shifted from his penis up to his eyes. "You're late."

He smiled slightly. "On purpose."

She pursed her lips and a smile played around her mouth. "Oh, you've been a very bad boy."

Her husky, sensuous voice sparked a surge of sexual need inside him.

"Whatever am I going to do with you?" She slapped the whip against the floor.

He stepped inside the cell and walked to her side. He stood close, close enough for his penis to nudge against the tiny silk triangle covering her pussy. "It's not what you're going to do with me, but what I'm going to do *to* you, *in* you, *with* you."

An eager expression glinted in her eyes. "Oh, yeah, what's that?"

He wanted to tame her, dominate her even more than he had the other night in the hot springs. He wanted her pliant legs spread, the essence of her open and ready to receive every solid, aroused inch of him. He dug his fingers under the straps barely holding the thong in place and tugged, hard. They snapped in two. The remainder of the thong floated to the floor leaving her naked and vulnerable. "Take off your shoes."

Delaney raised a brow. "Make me."

Her softly whispered challenge brushed over his nerve endings, urging him to shove inside her. He put his right hand over her mound, parted the labia, and ruthlessly rubbed his thumb over her clit once then stopped. With his other hand, he gave her buttocks a firm slap. Her breath caught in her throat. "Either you take off your shoes or that one little stroke over your clit is all you're going to get until I'm good and ready to give you more."

One corner of her mouth kicked up in a smile. She lifted her right leg, bringing her foot about level with his hip. He took off the shoe, tossed it aside. She lowered her foot and did the same with her left leg.

He threw her shoe over his shoulder. "Better, much better. Now put your arms around my neck and wrap your legs around my waist. Oh, and don't let go of that whip."

She did as he asked and he pushed between her thighs but didn't enter her. He felt his cock rub over her clit, coating him with the essence of her body. He walked to the cot and laid her down. Climbing to his knees on the cot, he straddled her with his hard cock jutting between his legs. He gripped her ankles and bent her knees. Then he nudged the inside of her knees outward so that she opened for him even more. Her pussy appeared deep pink, wet and ready in the candlelight. She lay with her chest rising softly and her eyes fixed on his cock. "Lift your hands and lay them under your breasts, holding them up as if offering them to me."

She raised her breasts to him and rubbed her thumbs over her nipples so they hardened further, the dusky pink nipples just begging for his lips and tongue. He shifted forward,

placing the palms of his hands on either side of her upper arms, and looked at the delight waiting for him. “Don’t move your hands, don’t try to reach for me or touch me until I give you permission. I want to watch you fall apart; I want to see the passion and need rise in your eyes.” He stroked his thumb over her when she didn’t say anything. “Answer me.”

“Okay.” Blue eyes glazed with desire, her husky voice resonated with need. Good, that’s just where he wanted her. He leaned forward and licked first her left nipple then the right. He sampled them like ice cream in a cone. Then he took the hard tip between his lips and nibbled. He heard her breath catch as he kissed his way over her breasts, tasting, arousing. When he felt her breasts begin to relax he knew she was loosening her hands, wanting to reach for him. “Keep holding up your breasts, I’m not done yet. Every time you obey me, I’ll reward you.”

She tossed her head over the pillow. “Rick, please ... I ...”

“I know what you need and what you want. But I need and want, too. Let me take you at my leisure, let me reign over your body tonight.” He lowered his head, took the nipple of her left breast into his mouth, and suckled hard. He created suction with his lips; he used his tongue on her until she whimpered. He removed his mouth looked down at her wet breasts, her beautiful face and eyes. “You can let go now.”

She dropped the whip and her hands fell to her sides. He knelt between her legs and placed his palms on her upraised knees. Sliding his hands over her thighs, he splayed his fingers and parted her with his thumbs. Then he took a long, slow lick over her, relishing her flavor on his tongue. He rubbed her clit softly at first, as lightly as possible, then he gradually increased the pressure. When she swelled against his mouth, he pushed his tongue inside her as far as he could go.

She lifted her pelvis upward, placing her hands on the back of his head to hold him in. Slowly she moved her hips working his tongue deeper, deeper, deeper inside her. Soft cries escaped her throat as he felt her tighten and grip him in the hot throes of orgasm.

He withdrew his tongue, gave her pussy a satisfied lick, then shoved his penis inside her. Rick covered her lips, thrusting his tongue into her wet mouth even as he pushed deep within her. He increased the rhythm, lunging hard, feeling his body slap repeatedly against hers. If he could, he would have put his balls inside her as well, but he had to content himself with feeling them spank her buttocks, making his arousal soar even higher.

Lifting her legs, he laid them over his shoulders opening her further. He picked up the whip lying on the bed beside her head, wrapped it around her wrists, and raised her hands over her head. "If you can't behave, I'll have to make you. I didn't give you permission to touch me." He wrapped the end of the whip around the top of the bed frame and held it taut as he shoved into her over and over. Her head tossed from side to side, fervent moans filled the small room. His breath caught when he felt the orgasm hit her, and then just as quickly, she yanked him over the edge with her.

When the last of his fluid spurted inside her, he slid her legs from his shoulders, rolled off of her, and propped himself up on one elbow to look down at her. He moved his gaze over her body, lingering between her legs. "The candlelight dances over your skin, your pussy. My semen coats your inner thighs; the hair on your pussy is drenched. I've never seen anything so sexy in my life." He drew her into his arms, cradled her next to him. Rick lowered his left hand between her legs letting it rest there. "In a few minutes I'm going to make love to you all over again."

* * * * *

He was as good as his word.

"Get on your knees with your back to me and your ass tilted upward."

Delaney had never felt so sensual and wanton in her life. He could have asked her to hang from the ceiling while he fucked her and she would have done it. She rolled over on her knees, placed her hands palms down on the cot.

"Spread your legs just a bit more."

She did as he asked and felt his warm breath first, followed by his lips and tongue. Delaney looked down between her legs. Rick lay on his back with his head between her legs, his mouth amorous and determined as he worked on her. She didn't think it was possible to have another orgasm but it came quickly, like the flash of heat lightning. After her orgasm faded, he kissed her softly, slid back a little, and rose to his knees. "Now, tip your ass up just a bit more and give me a glimpse of what I've just had. Yeah, that's a good girl. Stay just like that."

She felt his hands grip her hips, then the head of his cock pushed inside her. She tried to move, demanding more of him.

"No, don't move. Let me take you in my own sweet time."

He pushed further inside her, withdrew completely, shoved all the way in again, then just as quickly withdrew. "Talk to me." His cock filled her to the hilt. "Tell me what you're feeling and what you want. If you continue to obey me, I'll give it to you."

How could she explain to him the glorious feeling of having his penis buried inside her, the craving she felt whenever he touched her, the tremble of her heart when he called her name? "I want you inside me, all of you. I want you to make love to me until neither of us can think anymore, until the world narrows down to your cock and my pussy, nothing more."

He increased his rhythm, pushing harder, faster. Delaney closed her eyes, listening to the sound of their bodies coming together in that delicious wet slap of skin on skin until the rush of her orgasm consumed her like a raging fire. His thrusts grew shorter. She felt him plastered to her buttocks, his lower body helplessly moving against her, the muscles clenching in the throes of his orgasm. He gave a hoarse cry of utter release when his semen spilled inside her.

* * * * *

Later, Delaney snuggled in Rick's arms, their bodies still coated with sweat from the hot sex they'd shared. Rick stared up at the ceiling then down at Delaney's body draped over his, her head resting gently on his shoulder. He had his hand on her ass. Her breasts pressed into his chest. His penis lay flaccid against his thigh but he knew with little effort she could have him hard and wanting to take her again in no time. First, he needed to talk to her, to tell her what her submission did to him, how it made him feel. "Delaney?"

She sighed, sliding her arm over his waist. "Yeah ..."

"I really like the way you submitted to me. It's incredibly sexy and makes me harder and want to fuck harder than I ever have in my life. When you do everything I ask of you, it turns me on in a way I'm not sure I can explain. I hope I wasn't too rough or hurt you in any way." He placed two fingers beneath her chin and lifted her face to his. "I never want you to feel that submission is wrong. I want you to enjoy it. I --"

She laid her fingers over his lips. Her eyes held a glint of amusement but also the memory of how they had just shared their bodies. "I do enjoy it. In fact, I love it. It makes me feel sexy and wanted, but safe at the same time. I can express my sexuality with you in a way I never could with another man."

He relaxed, pulled her close, and kissed the top of her head. "I've always known I preferred dominating a woman sexually. I fully admit I get off on it. I like having a woman open her pussy to me and let me use her body not just for my pleasure but for hers as well. I liked giving you that pleasure, liked watching you come, liked feeling you come. I'd pushed domination to the back of my mind for fear I might hurt my partner. In the past, I've dated women who I didn't think could handle my dominating style."

Maybe that was why he'd never felt the urge to settle down. However, Delaney was just the kind of woman he'd been searching for. Maybe they did have a future together. "But you handled it fine."

She propped her chin on her folded hands on his chest and gazed at him. "Any woman who didn't enjoy masterful sex with you doesn't know what she's missing. It makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world, like I alone can satisfy you."

Her words whispered over his skin. He looked down at her gorgeous face and the expression of female satisfaction in her eyes. "I'm beginning to think you are."

* * * * *

The next morning, Delaney awoke, sated and drowsy. She rolled over and stretched out her arm to find Rick's side of the bed empty. The scent of coffee brewing tickled her nose. Delaney looked at the clock. Just a little past seven. She wrapped the sheet around her naked body and went to find him.

Rick stood in the kitchen with his back to her, sipping a cup of coffee and gazing out of the kitchen window. He was stark naked. She admired his tight butt. Grinning, Delaney leaned against the door jamb. "Morning."

He turned, slid his gaze over her and set his cup of coffee down on the counter. Resting his hands on either side, he gripped the countertop. His penis stood at attention. "Morning."

She looked at his hard cock then back up at his eyes. "Is there something you want?"

Chuckling, he nodded. "Oh, yeah." He pointed to the breakfast table. "Drop that sheet and lie down on the table. Spread your legs and show me what's mine. Now."

His words sent a tingle of arousal through her body. Her nipples ached with the memory of his mouth and tongue on them, she creamed between her legs, her body preparing to take him inside her once again. Delaney couldn't believe she was ready for more sex. Without another word, she dropped the sheet, walked to the table, and lay down on the surface. She bent her legs, opened her thighs.

"Put your hands over your head." His words held a demanding but sexually arousing tone. Slowly she raised her hands over her head.

“Now put the bottoms of your feet together and let your legs fall open.”

He pulled two clean dishcloths out of a drawer and walked toward her. He took one of the cloths and tied it around her wrists. The other he tied around her ankles. Touching her only with his mouth, he leisurely kissed her. From her lips he nibbled his way down her body to her breasts where he licked and suckled until she writhed. He lifted his mouth barely an inch from her skin and breathed his way to the part of her he knew so well. He didn't kiss or fondle her with his tongue he just let his warm breath blow over her.

“I like the smell of you. It's musky with your own essence but with my semen as well. God, that's sexy. It makes me crazy to fuck you.”

He'd never used such blatant language with her but she found it turned her on even more.

“But first I have a little treat planned.”

She watched him walk to the refrigerator. When he returned to her side, he held a can of whipped cream in one hand and a bottle of chocolate syrup in the other. He used the whipped cream on her breasts, creating little mounds on her nipples before licking them away. Between the cold of the whipped cream and the heat of his mouth, arousal made her dizzy.

After he finished with her breasts, he decorated her with whipped cream, taking her clit between his lips nibbling, coaxing until she felt herself swell against his mouth. When he poured the syrup on her, she nearly came unglued. He ate at her as though she were a delectable dessert. Shoving his tongue inside her, he massaged and loved every inch of her until she was breathless.

Delaney pulled at the ties to loosen them.

“No, lie still. Keep your hands and feet tied until I give you permission to take them off.”

When he finished, he grasped her hips and pulled her lower body to the edge of the table so she was open to him. He stared between her legs.

Throwing his head back, he shoved deep inside her, thrusting his hips hard. She listened to the sweet wet sounds of flesh slapping against flesh, her pleasure weakening her limbs, tossing her into a honeyed world of surrender. Being unable to touch him, to wrap her legs around him because of the restraints, made her hotter, his rough skin an erotic tonic against hers.

The table shook and danced across the floor with each thrust of his body. Pistoning her hips she answered each one. Sweat beaded her body; her blood flowed through her veins like lava ... When the table bumped against the wall, she pressed her hands against the wall to hold herself steady while he pounded into her.

She clenched around him as the rush of heat, the scorching tremor of climax filled her, taking her to a place that wasn't real. A groan escaped his lips as he spilled semen inside her.

* * * * *

In his truck, they traveled down the highway headed out of town.

She licked his ear. "Are we going back to your house?"

Rick's breath grew ragged. His erection tented the pants of his police uniform. Dusk had fallen fast and soon it would be pitch dark. He'd seen clouds on the horizon earlier and knew that more snow was on the way, but for now, the sky was clear. He felt Delaney's hands at the waistband of his pants. "What are you doing?"

"You'll find out."

In no time, her clever fingers closed around his hard length. He sucked in a sharp breath as she kneaded his cock pushing the skin up around the head. "God, woman if you don't stop, we might have a wreck and die before we get home."

She squeezed slightly and did it again. Quick as a flash she replaced her hand with her mouth. He swerved the truck onto the side of the road and stopped. The head of his penis rubbed against the roof of her mouth repeatedly until he felt the hot surge of orgasm grip him. She sat up and licked her lips. "Mmm."

His mind was wiped clean. "You're going to pay for that."

"I'm counting on it."

* * * * *

Rick watched Delaney as she picked up her glass of wine and sipped. "This was a great idea. Thank you for bringing me here."

"You're welcome."

Delaney laid her hand on his thigh. Tendrils of erotic need streamed into his groin. He looked into her sexy eyes and let the fantasy fill his mind as he watched her indulge in a chocolate-covered strawberry.

He shifted closer to her on the banquette in the corner of the restaurant. Candlelight flickered over her face. She lifted a chocolate dipped strawberry to her lips, bit into the fruit, and savored it. A tablecloth hung down several inches over the side of the table, completely hiding the lower part of their bodies from view. He laid one hand over the top of the banquette behind her shoulders and toyed with the ends of her hair. Caressing her back, he admired the low cut dress exposing her cleavage.

He slid his left hand under the hem of her short, black dress. He stared at her glistening red lips. "I'm about to find out if you were a good girl this evening and followed my instructions." He smoothed his palm up her thigh, the skin warm and silky against his. The farther he moved his hand the more she opened her thighs, giving him better, easier access. He felt the brush of her soft curls against his fingers and grinned. "You were a very good girl and I'm going to reward you."

Rick slid his gaze to the neckline of her dress. The dress barely covered her nipples giving him an unrestricted view of her breasts. He watched her breathe; the gentle rise and fall of each exhalation. "I'd like nothing better than to pull the front of your dress down and look fully at your tits, but I'll have to satisfy myself with the view ... and with this." His fingers parted her folds. Her eyes nearly closed. "Keep looking right at me."

She opened her eyes. "Rick, if you make me come, I won't be able to hide it. Everyone will know what we're doing." Her words were barely a whisper.

"Whatever I do, just keep looking at me."

He caressed her clit, her wetness coating his skin. She creamed more and more as he manipulated her. "You're so responsive. Spread your legs a little more." She moved them apart. "There, good, I can knead the inner folds of your pussy as well."

He heard the breath catch in her throat. "Oh, God, I can't believe we're doing this." He moved his finger, massaging her clit harder. "Yes, right there."

"Can I get you anything else?"

Rick glanced briefly at the waiter. "No, we have all we need."

The waiter took the leather case with the signed bill inside. "I hope you'll come back and visit us soon."

"Yes, we'll definitely come again." He caressed harder, more ruthless, feeling her pussy swell, her fluid washing over his finger. At just the right moment, he slid two fingers inside her pushing them as far as they would go. "Bite your lower lip."

She squeezed around his finger, her inner muscles contracting hard, hard, hard. Rick watched her bite her lip until she drew blood then flicked it away with her tongue. Her eyes glowed with passion, her lips parted on a sigh. He withdrew his fingers and licked them.

He felt Delaney's hand squeeze his package, bringing him back to the present. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if you're paying attention."

“I’m definitely at attention.”

* * * * *

Once they cleared the city limits the sky seemed to open up, the stars filled Delaney’s gaze. She sighed and looked over at Rick. “Thanks again. It was nice to indulge.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Rick held out his arm motioning for her to move closer to him. She snuggled in and laid her hand at his waist. Slowly, she worked the buckle of his belt loose. “We nearly had a wreck the last time you did that.”

“Relax. Don’t think, just feel.” She unbuttoned his pants, unzipped them, then yanked down his underwear. His hard cock greeted her, the head plump and aroused. “Just keep watching the road.” She lowered her head and took him into her mouth. She pulled the skin up over the head with her mouth.

His hips juttet. “God, Delaney that feels incredible.” He slowed the truck, pulled over onto the side of the road, and shoved the gear into park. She licked and suckled him, feeling him jerk inside her mouth.

“I want to get these pants off. I need more. I want all of your mouth on me.”

“My pleasure.” She helped him shuck out of his pants so the lower half of his body was naked, all for her. She licked his balls, the base of his penis, all the way to the tip. She abraded the head on the roof of her mouth. He held her head in place while she loved him with her lips and tongue. His penis grew even more rigid just before she felt his release pump hot and salty into the back of her throat.

When it was over, she lifted her head and smiled.

Feeling more emboldened, more empowered and more sexual than she ever had in her life, she pulled her dress up to her waist.

Rick looked at her pussy. “You bad girl.”

She giggled and straddled him on the seat. Pushing down on his cock, she moved her hips back and forth, glorying in the feel of him deep inside her. He pulled the front of her dress down, exposing her breasts, and feasted. His hands wrapped around her buttocks, pulling her closer and closer against him until she threw her head back, spreading her legs as wide as she could. Delaney rapidly humped his cock as the orgasm spread through her pussy and inner thighs. The throb seemed to last forever. When the surge of pleasure finally faded, she collapsed in Rick's arms. Her heart tumbled in her chest and she knew she had fallen in love with him. No man had ever made her feel so safe, so womanly, so completely sexual. Maybe Rick saw beyond her full figure and liked her for herself.

Chapter Seven

Rick sat in his office finishing some paperwork on a drunk and disorderly at a local bar in town. A couple of guys had gotten smashed, a few punches were thrown, then some tables and chairs were broken. He shook his head. The office was quiet otherwise.

Delaney was with the beautification committee working on the town project. The awnings were going up today and the new streetlamps were due to be installed. The town had been given quite a facelift. Rick was proud of her. She was quite a woman. He felt such an urge to settle down, to have a wife to come home to every evening. He wanted to hear a child's voice call him Daddy when he opened the door. He never thought he would see the day when he started thinking about walking down the aisle but that day had finally come, however unexpectedly.

A knock sounded at the door. He looked up. A knock was unusual because if someone needed to see the sheriff in this town they just walked in. "It's open."

When his old partner, Jake DeSalvo, strolled in, you could have knocked him over with a feather. He couldn't believe it.

Jake stepped in wearing jeans, a long-sleeved gray shirt, and worn boots. He wore a thick parka and no hat. His light brown hair, streaked with blond highlights, brushed his

collar. He stood an inch and a half shorter than Rick. He appeared lankier now; his face looked thinner, his eyes harder, more jaded.

Rick sneered. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Jake stood for a moment by the door. Snow had begun to fall outside and a few flakes dotted his hair and jacket. He gave Rick a quick nod and a fleeting smile. "Rick. Good to see you too."

He made it sound like they were two old friends who had nothing but good memories between them instead of a past filled with lies and betrayal. Rick smirked, leaned back in his chair and stared at Jake. "What do you want?"

"Thought we could talk. Mind if I sit down?"

Rick straightened in his chair and looked at the unfinished paperwork before him. "I don't have a goddamn thing to say to you. Get out. I'm busy."

Jake walked to a chair in front of Rick's desk, took off his coat, tossed it over the back of another chair, and sat. "You always were one to hold a grudge."

Rick's head snapped up. He glared at Jake and threw down his pen. "Fuck you. I didn't get Mr. C. killed."

"Look, Rick, I --"

"How are Gail and the kids?"

Jake straightened in his chair. "Kids are fine. We had a boy the third time around. Named him Rick."

Rick suppressed the warm feeling he got when Jake told him he named his son after him. "Really. Is that supposed to make everything okay?"

Jake exhaled a deep breath, stood and walked leisurely around the office.

Rick watched him, his jaw clenching as he worked to hold back his anger. He wished he could just let it out. He was more than ready for a fight.

"This is quite a difference from Chicago." Jake placed his hands on his hips, turned, and looked at Rick. "How do you like it here? Can't be much crime in a town like Avery. Or women either, for that matter." He smiled slightly. "You always did have women fawning at your feet."

Rick focused his eyes on the papers on his desk but the words blurred in a current of rage. "Like I said, I'm busy."

Jake raked a hand through his hair. "You know I never meant for anything to happen to Mr. C. I loved that old man. If I could have stopped what happened, I would have. The truth is, I came to ask you to forgive me."

Rick shot from his chair and folded his arms over his chest. "You wouldn't know the truth if it sank teeth into your balls. God, I wanted to rat you out, see you rot in prison. The inmates would have passed you around like a dish of candy until some sweaty lowlife called Snake claimed you as his private bitch."

He paused as he felt the anger coil higher, tighter inside him. "If it hadn't been for Gail being pregnant and those two little girls, I would have. Instead I kept my mouth shut because I thought your family needed you ... even if you are a miserable piece of shit." Wiping a hand over his mouth, he exhaled a deep breath. "Internal Affairs shined a bright light of suspicion on me, picked apart every detail of my life. They interrogated me until I thought I'd go mad, asking their questions, hoping I'd break. Instead I protected your sorry, good-for-nothing ass. Now you've come crawling back asking for forgiveness. You want me to say it's okay you dealt drugs and cost Mr. C. his life. Well, I won't do that for you. I won't ease your conscience."

Jake marched over to him until they stood nose to nose. "You sanctimonious bastard!" He jabbed a finger into the middle of Rick's chest. "You've made plenty of mistakes, and in the line of duty too. But I was there to watch your six."

Rick knocked Jake's hand away. "Yeah, but I never got a friend killed, and I was never dirty!"

Jake grimaced and made a sound like a growl deep in his throat. He shoved Rick with both hands.

Rick stumbled slightly, then lowered his head and charged at Jake's midsection. They fell to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Jake caught Rick on the jaw with a right hook. Rick followed up with a punch of his own to Jake's kidneys.

Rick was vaguely aware of the office door opening.

"What's going on?" he heard Delaney say. "Stop it. Stop, right this minute!"

Blinded by fury, Rick ignored Delaney's pleas. Suddenly, cold water splashed over their faces. They pulled apart briefly. Rick stumbled to his feet, swiped at the water on his face and prepared to go after Jake again but Delaney stepped between them.

She put one hand in the middle of Rick's chest and the other on Jake's. She gave Rick a slight shove. "You! Go sit behind your desk. And you," she said, giving Jake a hard shove, "go stand on the other side of the room."

They both hesitated but did as she demanded. The cold water had seeped into Rick's shirt, chilling his skin. Angrily, he unbuttoned his shirt then reached in a drawer of his desk for a clean one.

Delaney stood with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot and looking like an angry but very sexy angel. "Well, which one of you wants to tell me what happened? Why were you fighting like a couple of school kids?" She turned and stared at Jake. "Jake DeSalvo?"

The anger that still clung to Jake's face receded, replaced with a friendly expression. "Delaney Moore. What are you doing here?"

Rick glanced from one to the other. "You know each other?"

Delaney smiled. "Yeah, I dated a friend of Jake's a couple of years ago. He came into Seattle for a long weekend with his girlfriend and we all went out together."

Rick frowned and looked at Jake. "Girlfriend? What about Gail?"

Jake stood and wiped his hands over his face and hair. "Gail and I split up right after our son was born. She said I changed; nothing was ever the same between us after Mr. C. died and you left town."

Jake walked over to Rick's desk. "I was never disloyal to you or to Mr. C. I didn't pull the trigger. Granted, I shouldn't have been dealing drugs. It was wrong. But with two kids and another on the way I was desperate for more cash. When Gail got pregnant, we were both surprised. We never planned on it. Then she was all over me to make more money. Please understand, when I saw the guy pull out his gun and point it toward Mr. C., I tried to stop him but I was too late. It all happened so fast. Mr. C. was the last person I ever expected to step into that alley --"

"You and that creep ran and left him to bleed to death! You --"

Jake slapped his palms on top of the desk and leaned in. "I didn't run." He ground the words out between clenched teeth. "The other guy did, but I stayed. I tried to help Mr. C."

Desperation shone in Jake's eyes. Rick could see how much he wanted him to believe his story but how could he?

"I called for an ambulance but they were too late." Jake straightened. Tears glistened in his hazel eyes. "He died in my arms, Rick. He died staring up into my face. He died believing the worst of me."

His voice broke on a hoarse whisper laced with grief. Rick steeled his heart against Jake's raw emotions.

"How do you think I felt? Don't you think I would have done anything to save him?"

"I don't know what to believe." Rick turned and stared out of one of the office windows at the snow growing thicker, steadier. He watched Betty and Lester Verner walk by on the other side of the street hand in hand. He couldn't help but smile. God, he loved small towns.

“Rick, you have to believe I loved Mr. C.,” Jake said drawing his attention back inside the office. “He was the only real father I ever had. You remember when my old man walked out on Mom and me. She had to work extra hard just to keep a roof over our heads. But, I had to act like a little punk and get into trouble. If it hadn’t been for Mr. C. and you, I don’t know what would have happened to me.”

Rick felt Delaney’s hands grip his shoulders and her head rest in the middle of his upper back. “Rick, remember when we talked the other day about loyalty,” she said softly. “Well, being loyal isn’t just about showing it in the good times but the bad times, especially the bad times. I’d say what happened between you and Jake qualifies as a bad time.”

She lifted her head and pulled on his shoulders, turning him around to face her. “You’ve been friends since you were kids. Don’t throw away a lifetime of friendship because of something someone else did. Jake didn’t pull the trigger. You said yourself you didn’t have any idea why Mr. C. walked into that alley that night. He could have --”

“I know why.”

Rick and Delaney looked at Jake.

Jake slumped into a chair. “He told me right before he died. He walked through the alley to take a shortcut home. He’d finally gotten up the courage to ask Ms. Shively -- you know the lady who worked in the bakery down the street -- for a date. He was running late. Last minute prescription needed to be filled before he closed. He wanted to shower and put on some new aftershave before he went over to pick her up. Otherwise he would never have been there.” He pinned his gaze on Rick. “I’m sorry, I’m so goddamn sorry.” His voice was low and filled with torment. “I should have been the one to take that bullet ... not Mr. C.”

There had been so much hurt, so much anger over the years and an ocean of grief under the bridge. Rick felt the hurt and anger he’d held for so long ease in his chest and soothe the bitterness in his heart. He looked across the room at the man he’d grown up with,

the kid who'd slept over at his house countless times, eaten God knows how many meals at his family's table.

His mother had taken care of him when he was sick because his own mother had to work nights. For the first time in years, he saw past his own anger and hurt to the misery in Jake's eyes, a burden of sadness Rick had never bothered to see before.

All he ever thought about was his own. The loss of Mr. C. and the shadow of suspicion cast over him, the distrust that cost him his career with Chicago P.D. He never would have moved to Avery, made the life he'd made, a better life with people who cared about him and people he cared about in return.

Rick caressed Delaney's cheek with his finger. She smiled. He never would have met Delaney, the other half of his soul.

He walked over to his friend and held out his hand.

Jake exhaled a deep breath, blinked back tears and ignoring his outstretched hand, drew him roughly against his chest.

Rick slapped Jake's back hard a couple of times as Jake hugged him. They drew apart and Rick smiled at him. "You've still got a hell of a punch."

Jake chuckled. "You too, buddy." He rubbed his chin. "My jaw will never be the same."

* * * * *

The next day Rick saw Oliver Harden's new Mercedes parked outside the convenience store. Rick had overheard Oliver's wife talking about an expensive remodel of their house that would start in the spring. Again, he wondered where he got the money. He made a U-turn and headed for the bank. It wouldn't hurt to stop in and ask a few questions.

A few minutes later, he strolled toward the bank. He felt relaxed and loose more than he had in years. He supposed it was because of Delaney. This feeling was more than the awesome sex he'd shared with her, it was the woman he had come to know and respect.

After she helped him and Jake heal their past and make things right again between them, he could definitely say he trusted her. No amount of forgiveness could ever bring back Mr. C., but at least he and Jake could begin to recover the foundation of friendship that began in their childhood and continued through all of their shared memories and experiences.

Rick opened the bank's glass door and stepped inside. The lobby was quite large with marble floors, brass railings. There was an area crowded with desks, where customers could apply for loans and open new accounts. He waved to a couple of people he knew then made his way over to Amy Larimer's desk. She had helped him secure the loan for his house. She hung up the phone as he approached. Amy was in her late forties to early fifties with a June Cleaver hairstyle and conservative suit. Her husband was the only electrician in town.

"Hi, Rick, how are you today?" She motioned to a chair in front of her desk. "Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?"

Rick smiled. "Hi, Amy. No, I just finished a cup before I left the office." He sat down and they exchanged a few minutes of idle chit chat.

Amy sipped from a mug sitting on her desk. "How can I help you today?"

Rick leaned forward and rested his arms on his thighs. "I need some information about Oliver Harden."

Amy sat back in her chair. "Rick, you know I can't discuss details about a customer's bank account. Not without their permission or a court order anyway."

Rick held up a hand. "I understand. I'm not asking for specifics, just generalities. I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important. I'm just trying to get my mind around how a man who runs a convenience store can afford to drive a Mercedes and buy his wife expensive jewelry at the same time."

Amy smiled and nodded, tiny lines fanned around her green eyes. "Everybody in town is wondering the same thing. Roberta flashes that ring every chance she gets. I must admit

anyone who sees it needs a pair of sunglasses to shield their eyes from the glare.” Her smile faded and she frowned. “Do you suspect Oliver of criminal activity?”

Rick shook his head. “No, I’m not suggesting anything like that.”

“Okay, what would you like to know?”

“Has he made any large deposits over the past couple of months?”

“Let me bring up his account.” She keyed in some data on her computer then looked at Rick. “He came in back in September to ask if he could expand his credit line. At the same time, he asked about the notification limit on cash deposits to the IRS. I explained that any amount over ten thousand had to be reported.” She looked back at the screen. “Over the past couple of months his deposits haven’t been over ten thousand. They range from five to nine thousand.”

Interesting. “Have they all been in cash?”

“Yes, all cash, no checks.”

Rick sat back and thought for a minute. “Does he have a credit card through the bank?” He knew the Mercedes and the jewelry couldn’t have been paid for with just a few thousand. The Mercedes cost a bundle and the ring cost God knows how much. “Amy, can you check his account and see if he wrote checks to a dealership or jeweler and the amount of the checks?”

Amy tapped a finger on her computer mouse. “I’m sorry, Rick, I can’t do that without a court order.”

“Okay, can you tell me if he has a personal credit card through the bank?”

“No, he doesn’t use our services.”

“What about any electronic deposits from another bank?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing like that. He has a personal and a business account but no unusual activity, just normal transactions and deposits. Nothing exorbitant or out of the ordinary.”

Rick knew most retail businesses processed checks and credit card purchases. The money had to come from somewhere. He remembered noticing when he drove by the store that Oliver's new SUV had been purchased from Trent Mercedes up in Great Falls.

He thanked Amy and left.

Rick went back to the office and made a call. When he hung up, he had an answer to his question, but still no idea where the money had come from. Oliver had paid sixty thousand in cash for his truck. Sixty grand was quite a chunk of change, even for a man whose store did a good business. But was business good enough to afford a luxury vehicle like a Mercedes?

He received a call from an elderly woman who lived on Tenth Street, asking him to come by and rescue her cat. After Rick pulled her overweight cat from one of the gutters on her house, he headed back to the office. On the way he saw a news van from KTVQ in Billings. The words "Montana's News Station -- Always On" were painted in large letters on the side of the van.

Earlier, the sun had been shining but the temperature had dropped as snow clouds bunched in the sky. Rick parked the cruiser and climbed out. Icy wind swept around him. He zipped up his coat and shoved his hands into the pockets of his uniform. A reporter interviewed the mayor and Delaney on the sidewalk with the other board members standing in the background. A cameraman was busy taking pictures of the newly installed awnings and lampposts.

Delaney wore a skirt and boots with a sweater and jacket. Rick remembered the skirt from the night they met. The same one that flew up when she fell and her hand ended up on his package. His penis twitched inside his pants at the thought. He caught her eye and her gaze warmed when she saw him.

He waited and watched. She sure had come a long way from being stranded on the side of the road in a snowstorm to helping the town, and now she was on television.

Her hair hung in silky waves past her shoulders. He knew firsthand the texture and taste of her lips and tongue, the feel of her breasts and how they looked, not to mention the sweet pussy between her thighs. His blood warmed, his skin grew tight just thinking about it.

As soon as the interview was finished, Delaney excused herself and walked to Rick's side. "Hi, what do you think of the awnings?"

"They're beautiful."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"But I have other things on my mind besides awnings at the moment."

Delaney arched a brow. "Like what?"

He grasped her hand and leaned close to her ear. "I need to fuck you. Now."

A few minutes later, they stepped inside the sheriff's office. Rick locked the door, swung Delaney up into his arms, walked quickly through the doorway leading into the back, and kicked the panel shut.

Delaney giggled. "What brought this on?"

He put her down with her back against the wall, clasped her head between his hands, and kissed her until he was breathless. Rick trailed his lips over her jaw and down her neck letting the taste of her seep into him.

She turned her head giving him better access. "I had no idea this sweater and skirt was so sexy."

He jerked up the hem of the sweater and unsnapped her bra. "It's you that's sexy." Quickly, he pushed her bra aside and clamped his mouth to her breast, sucking hard. "You were wearing this the night we met, remember?"

"Yes." Her voice was breathless and raspy.

Her skin smelled and tasted like honeyed nectar, the same flavor of her pussy. He yanked up the skirt, tugged down her panties, and found her wet, aroused, ready to receive

his cock. While his mouth worked greedily at her breasts, he firmly massaged her clit. She cried out as the orgasm consumed her. She convulsed against his fingers and her honey coated his skin. Next, he ripped off her panties. Absently, he noticed they were bikinis, not a thong this time. "Just for general information," he said on a ragged breath. "I prefer thongs. I like the thought of your ass and most of your pussy being naked under your clothes."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good." He grasped her thighs, lifted her legs. "Put your legs around my waist." He unzipped his pants, pulled down his underwear to free himself. With one hard thrust, he pushed inside her filling her completely. Her wet passage closed tightly around him. His balls slapped against the lower cheeks of her ass. In a steady rhythm, he pumped in and out. "God, I love your pussy. It squeezes me, milks me exquisitely."

Grasping her bare ass, he held her tightly against him while he pounded into her. He closed his eyes and let the exquisite cradle of her body sweep his mind clean of everything except her. Rabid heat started low in his abdomen, then swirled faster and faster until the fire entered his penis, engorging it. He felt his cock stiffen even harder and swell, the head rubbing against her cervix, wanting more, needing more, taking more. When the orgasm hit him, the pleasure was blinding. He felt his sperm squirt inside her. Even after the heat of their passion passed, he continued lifting his hips, slowly pumping against her. He lowered his head to a spot between her neck and shoulders and kissed her. "That was incredible. I can't seem to get enough of you."

After a few minutes, he pulled out of her and lowered her legs and feet to the ground. She stood before him with mussed hair, swollen lips, and sexy eyes. "You definitely look like a woman who has just had sex. Did you like me ripping off your panties?"

She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Oh, yeah. That made me so hot."

"Good."

"Next time it will be my turn to rip yours."

Rick grinned. "You've got a date."

* * * * *

The next morning, Rick stepped outside his house and took a deep lungful of cold air. The storm was clearing out. A patch of blue sky peeked through the cloud cover. He smiled as he climbed into the cruiser. His body was still partially aroused after the vigorous sex he and Delaney had together in the shower. He'd taken her from the back, her pussy wet with cum and water.

He cranked the car, pushed the heater up to high, and drove down his driveway. When he reached the end, instead of turning left and heading to town he decided to drive past Oliver Harden's house. He'd heard some people talking in the diner about Oliver having a lot of company lately. They'd seen strange cars parked in front of his barn. Since it was only a couple of miles out of his way, he called the dispatcher and told her he would be in the office shortly after he made just one quick detour.

Rick turned off the highway onto the recently plowed road leading up to Oliver's house. When he saw a couple of strange cars parked in front of the barn, he pulled over at a safe, discreet distance so no one could see him. Oliver didn't keep farm animals, just a couple of horses because Roberta liked to ride. He took his field glasses out of the case and trained them on the barn. Who would be out there this early except Oliver to feed the horses? Maybe he was selling one of them. At least he could give him the benefit of the doubt.

Training the binoculars on the car's license plates, he noticed both cars were from Cook County, Chicago. A strange, unwelcome feeling settled in his gut when he realized one of the vehicles looked exactly like Jake's car.

Suddenly, the barn door opened a crack. He saw Harden stick his head out and look toward his house before opening the door wider. Three men stepped outside.

One of them was Jake DeSalvo.

He handed Oliver an envelope. Stunned, Rick watched as Oliver opened the envelope, removed a wad of cash and fanned through it. Jake and the strange man headed for their cars. Quickly, Rick backed the squad car further off the road and into a thicket of trees. Hidden from view, he waited until the cars passed and Harden went back inside his house.

Betrayal rocketed through him. He clenched the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. His body still hummed from making love with Delaney. Her unique scent clung to his skin. He leaned his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. Hell, she was in his blood.

He straightened in the seat and cranked the engine. Why didn't he see this coming? Because he hadn't been able to see past his dick, that's why!

The entire situation was obvious. She and Jake had set him up. The night of the storm, had she really been stuck? He had watched her car swerve and hit the snow bank. But had her car accident been planned from the beginning? Had she been on her way to Avery to soften him up?

How long had Oliver been involved in drugs? Had Jake been in town before and he just didn't know it?

Rick shoved the gear into drive, executed a wide turn, and headed toward the highway. What about the phone call from New York? Was the call concerning a job or was Jake phoning to find out how things were progressing?

He slammed his palm against the steering wheel. Damn it, she had played him for a fool. She hadn't enjoyed the sex they'd shared. She hadn't wanted him to dominate her. She hadn't relished submitting to him as he made her come until she could barely speak. She should get a fucking academy award for her performance. She really had him snowed. The whole thing was meant to distract him so a drug deal could go down.

The worst cut of all was her phony speech about loyalty.

Turning into the highway, he jammed his foot on the gas. No, the worst wasn't her phony speech about loyalty, the severest blow was to his heart because damn it, he was in love with her.

He'd never been in love before and it scared him to death, making him feel weak-kneed, shaky, and vulnerable. He'd never been emotionally vulnerable to a woman in his life. He raked his fingers through his hair. Why Delaney? Why couldn't his life go back to the way it was before he ever met her? Even as he asked himself the question, his mother's words rang in his brain. *When you meet the right woman, everything about her will hit you like a brick. You'll wonder where she's been all your life. Just like when I met your father.*

* * * * *

When Rick returned to the office, he phoned the police department in Great Falls and asked for help from the head of the narcotics unit. He gave him a description of the men, the cars, and the license plate numbers. He told them about Jake and gave them Oliver's name.

In a few minutes, an officer called back and told him good old Oliver had a record with a conviction for drugs in his former state of Arizona. Rick thanked him, got a warrant, then called the phone company and had them fax over a copy of Oliver's phone records. The records showed frequent calls from Jake. They had been speaking for weeks.

By the time he hung up, Rick felt sick to his stomach. A movement outside the window caught his eye. Delaney climbed from her car, looking gorgeous. She'd curled her hair and wore the new jacket he'd bought her the day they went ice fishing. He pasted on his friendly cop face as she started toward the office door. He'd be damned if he'd give her the benefit of knowing how much she'd hurt him. He'd act as if everything was fine, as if nothing had happened, nothing at all but a shit load of betrayal.

She smiled at him through the window and for the life of him he couldn't see one trace of her lies in her gaze. If he hadn't seen Jake and Oliver this morning exchanging money and drugs with his own eyes, she'd still be playing him for a dupe.

* * * * *

The door swung open and Delaney walked in. "Hi." She stomped the snow from her boots, took off her coat, and hung it on the coat rack.

"Hi, yourself." He gave her a sexy knowing smile, the same one he gave her right after they'd made love in the shower that morning. He sat back in his chair with his hands behind his head and looked at her. "Want to go get some lunch?"

"Sure, I'm starved."

He walked around the desk, took her in his arms, and kissed her softly then brushed a hand over her hair and looked at her.

There was a hint of goodbye in his eyes and Delaney's heart squeezed with uneasiness inside her chest. Was he planning to dump her after all? "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No, nothing at all. I've just really enjoyed the time we've spent together. It's meant a lot to me."

"It's meant a lot to me too."

Just as they were about to walk out the door, Delaney's cell phone rang. She recognized the area code as New York. A tingle of excitement started in her belly and raced up her spine. Maybe it was Taylor's. Maybe they changed their mind. "Hello."

"Ms. Moore, this is Alison Wright at Lilly's On Fifth in New York. How are you?"

Delaney's heart fluttered and anticipation zipped through her veins. Lilly's On Fifth was one of the best stores in New York, even more prestigious than Taylor's. "Fine and you?"

"I'll get right to the point, Ms. Moore. I saw you on the news yesterday and the improvements currently being made to the town of Avery, Montana. I also saw the gorgeous display you designed for the mayor's office window. Needless to say, I was quite impressed.

I'd like to offer you a job as head window designer for our store. You would not only cover our flagship store in New York but our second location in San Francisco."

The woman quoted a salary that had Delaney's eyes widening and her pulse leaping through her veins. She never believed she would ever make that much money in her life.

"If possible, I'd like an answer before the first of the year."

"Of course. I'll think it over and get back to you."

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Rick and Delaney sat in the diner and ordered lunch. Delaney positively beamed. She practically had rays of sunlight streaming out of her ears and the ends of her hair.

"Well, are you going to tell me about the phone call?" She was really the best actress he had ever seen. The woman had missed her calling.

Bubbling over with excitement, Delaney told him about the call, the job offer, and the salary. She and Jake really set this whole thing up well. Now she would kiss him goodbye and drive away as if she really did have a job waiting for her. Fine. The sooner she left the better off he'd be and the sooner he could get on with his life ... or at least try to. She had used him body and soul. He was nothing more than a toy for sex. Did she fake her orgasms too? No, no way. He had given her as good as she gave him.

She reached over and took his hand. "This couldn't have come at a worse time. If I take the job it will mean leaving Avery and you. Keeping a relationship going while I fly back and forth across the country will be nearly impossible. But I've waited so long for this kind of opportunity. I don't know what to do."

Rick lifted her hand, kissed her knuckles, and stared into her gorgeous, deceitful eyes. "Take the job. I would never try to hold you back."

* * * * *

Delaney called the lady back at Lilly's on Fifth and accepted the job. She snapped her cell phone shut. She should be ecstatic; it's what she'd always wanted. Instead, misery permeated every cell in her body. What a jerk! How could Rick have done this to her? Her heart felt shattered into a thousand, jagged pieces.

A lump threatened to rise into her throat, tears stung the back of her eyes. She wiped them away. No damn it, she wouldn't cry, she wouldn't. Delaney gathered her cosmetics from the jail's bathroom and stuffed them into her bag.

She walked back into her cell and looked around the small room. Her heart throbbed with a dull ache. She couldn't let herself think about Rick and the time they'd spent together; instead she focused on gathering her clothes. She was glad she'd gone to the Laundromat the day before and done some wash. At least she could leave town with the dignity of clean clothes. Delaney crammed her jeans into her bag then zipped it closed. Lifting the bag from the cot where she and Rick had made amazing love that cold, snowy night, she knew that no matter how long she lived she would never forget it. She'd been apprehensive at first about staying in a cell but she would miss every inch with all her heart. There would be no repeat of that night she'd shared not just her body, but her heart with Rick.

She'd gotten through breakups before. She'd get through this one. But how, she wondered, as she made her way to the front.

Jake DeSalvo was the last person she expected to see walk in the office door as she was walking out. She blinked back her tears and gave him a watery smile. "Hi, I was just on my way out."

He frowned and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hey, are you all right?"

She nodded rapidly. "I'm fine. Take care."

Scooting around him, she smothered a sob and walked out the door.

* * * * *

Rick felt like ten miles of bad road. His heart throbbed in his chest like an old wound, a wound from which he was afraid he might never recover. He drove through the center of town, glancing at the Christmas decorations that seemed to mock him.

It had been one hell of an afternoon. Oliver Harden had been arrested and taken into custody. Poor Roberta. He'd never forget the look on her face. She'd looked at Oliver, stared at the diamond on her hand, then burst into tears. The news would spread through Avery like a prairie fire via Roberta's sister, who happened to be there at the time. She was the biggest gossip in town.

Rick pulled up in front of his office alongside one of the cop cars from Great Falls. When he stepped inside, he was shocked to find Jake and one of the officers laughing. They glanced his way before shaking hands.

"If you ever get tired of being a big city cop, Jake, Great Falls could use a good man like you," the officer said. He put on his hat and coat before walking over to Rick, who stood beside the door, dumbfounded. He gave Rick a light cuff on the arm. "Good job, Sheriff. If you ever come up to Great Falls, drop in. I'll buy you dinner." He threw Jake a quick wave and walked out.

Rick stared at Jake. "You're still a cop? How? I told them about seeing you at Harden's place; I watched you put cash in his hand. What the hell is going on?"

Jake managed a smile and motioned to a chair. "Sit down."

Rick settled into the chair behind his desk and laid his hands on the surface.

Jake sat on the edge of his desk. "I've been working undercover for the past few years. The last six months, we've been tracking Oliver Harden. The chemicals to make meth were brought into Montana and Oliver had a little lab in his barn. He made the chemical, then shipped it across the country." He folded his arms over his chest and gave Rick a rueful smile. "Montana State Police informed me about Harden only recently. I never dealt drugs, Rick. I'm sorry for all the hurt that lie caused you -- hell, caused both of us. Nevertheless, I was

sworn not to tell anyone. Even Gail didn't know." Regret covered his face and sadness clouded his eyes. "Mr. C.'s death was a terrible accident."

The truth of Jake's words resonated through Rick's body. Suddenly, his anger and feelings of betrayal drained out of him.

Mr. C.'s death wasn't Jake's fault.

Good God, his loyalty had never been misplaced. Which meant Delaney and Jake had never been working together as he had stupidly thought. Suddenly, a profound emptiness permeated the office. He smelled Delaney's scent on the air, but he hadn't seen her car out front. "Where's Delaney? Have you seen her?"

"You just missed her. What happened between you two, anyway? She looked pretty upset when she left."

Fearing he'd lost her, he rose from his chair. "Where is she?"

"Gone, Rick. I thought you knew."

He grabbed Jake's upper arm. "What time did she leave?"

"About ten minutes ago."

He snatched his coat from the rack as he raced out the door. She hadn't betrayed him after all. She really liked submitting to him. All of her tender words, the hot sex, the intense pleasure of having her in his arms was true, not false. Did she love him? Oh, God, if she told him she loved him, it would be the ultimate gift. She'd given him her body, every sweet inch, but would she give him her heart?

Despite wanting to speed through town, Avery was small and the citizens didn't need him to go racing through it with sirens blaring. As soon as he hit the highway, he headed northeast and floored it. She couldn't have gotten very far. He would bring her back and convince her what they had was meant to be.

If none of that worked, he'd use his handcuffs. Just the thought of handcuffing Delaney made him hot. Hurtling down the road he saw her Mini Cooper in the distance. He flipped on his siren and flashing lights, then pulled close to her bumper.

When he saw her glance in her rearview mirror, he signaled for her to pull over. She did almost immediately. No sooner had she stopped than the driver's door flew open. Delaney quickly climbed from the car not bothering to close the door. She planted her feet and stood with her hands fisted on her hips and fury blanketing her face.

Rick got out of the squad car. He wanted to grin from ear to ear, run over, pick her up, and twirl her in a circle but he didn't. He fought to keep a serious expression on his face as he walked to her side.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

He held up a hand, interrupting her. "I'm afraid you're wanted back in Avery."

She raised her brows and looked at him as if he'd just said he planned to fly to the moon. "Excuse me? For what? By who?"

"By me."

A little of the anger slid from her face and uncertainty flickered in her eyes. "For what? You don't want me. You made that real clear when you urged me to take the new job. Well, I did and now I'm leaving. I don't have to listen to anything you say. In fact, I'm tired of listening to you. I'm leaving and getting on with my life. I suggest you do the same."

She jerked her body around and climbed back into her car.

Rick stepped between the door and the car. "Exit your vehicle, please."

"No."

"I'm going to ask you once again, Ms. Moore, and if you refuse, I'm going to have to arrest you."

She snapped her head around and glared at him. "You'll have to catch me first." The car's motor was still humming; she put the car into gear.

He had no choice.

Rick pulled out his service revolver and shot one of her tires. It deflated and the left rear side of the car slumped.

Delaney's mouth popped open. She turned and stared at him as if he were nuts. She climbed from the car and stood nose to nose with him. "Are you insane?"

He grinned. "In a manner of speaking, yes. Ms. Moore, I'm charging you with resisting arrest." He withdrew his handcuffs from his pocket, brought her wrists to the small of her back, and snapped the cuffs into place.

An inexplicable look of astonishment covered her face. "You are insane! What do you want, Rick? Haven't you hurt me enough?"

He crowded her next to the side of her car, moving in close until his crotch touched her lower belly. Leaning forward, he kissed her gently on the cheek. "Please, just listen to me for two minutes. If, after you hear what I have to say, you still want to leave, I'll change the tire on your car myself and you can go on your merry way to New York or wherever. But you have to listen first."

She pressed her lips into a thin line and gazed out toward the horizon. "These handcuffs hurt."

"I know. I'm sorry, but you gave me no choice."

"Make it quick." Her voice was tense and clipped.

"First of all, I'm an idiot, a pinheaded son of a bitch."

She swung her head around and looked at him. "At least we agree on something."

He pressed two fingers against her lips. "I'm not finished. I was stupid. When I saw Jake at Harden's, I put two and two together and came up with ten. I thought you and Jake had been working together from the beginning."

She opened her mouth to speak.

“I have at least another minute left. I thought you used me, that submitting sexually to me was part of the act. Even your anger at Lenore. I thought everything was a charade, that Jake was still dealing drugs and you were his accomplice. I was stupid and wrong.” He looked at her, at her beautiful eyes, her gorgeous face and sexy body. “Please forgive me, Delaney. I never thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with one woman, or to make a home, have a family ... until I met you. What I’m trying to say is I love you. I love you with all of my heart. I love the way you treat people with respect and kindness. I love the way you gave up the job in New York to stay here and help the town. I love the way you look when you wake up in the morning and that little snore when you sleep.”

A look of outrage and surprise covered her face. “I do not snore!”

He smiled. “And I love the expression on your face, the one you get when you feel insulted, like now. I also love you, all of you, your body, and your soul. I can’t live without you, Delaney.”

She turned and shook her handcuffed hands at him as best she could. “Take these off.”

“Do you forgive me?”

A smile played around her lips and a gleam lit her eyes. “How can I not? A man practically runs me off the road, shoots out a tire on my car, handcuffs me, asks my forgiveness, and tells me he’s in love with me. What choice does a girl have?”

Rick removed the cuffs and tossed them onto the front seat of Delaney’s car. She leaped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. They kissed, his tongue dancing with hers, her sweet crotch pressing against his, making him hard. He grasped her ass and pulled her firmly against him as they kissed. He backed up until she rested against the car and slid his lips to her neck.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she said breathlessly. A car and a truck sped by. The trucker blew his horn and they both laughed. “I thought you didn’t care -- that you wanted me to leave.”

“I love you, Delaney. Will you marry me?”

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she looked at him, grinning from ear to ear. “Yes, Rick Mateo Cruz I will marry you.”

He started to kiss her again but she pressed her fingers over his mouth, stopping him. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You promise never to shoot out my tires ever again.”

He laughed. “Deal.”

* * * * *

A few days later, Rick and Delaney stood together among the town’s people and looked at the huge lighted tree in the square while carolers sang “Jingle Bells.” Rick’s arms were wrapped around her waist with the front of his body pressed to the back of hers, warming her from head to foot. The diner had provided hot drinks to keep everyone warm on the snowy Christmas Eve night. She breathed in his scent and looked over at Lenore with Mark Griffin’s arms around her. They sipped from the same drink and gazed into each other’s eyes.

A couple of days ago, Lenore and Mark had stopped by the sheriff’s office. Lenore had actually apologized for her actions. Sort of. True to royal form, she hadn’t apologized so much as suggested that perhaps, just maybe, she’d been hasty in going after Rick when the best man for her was right before her eyes.

Avery had won the best vacation spot contest and the whole town was excited. The mayor made a special announcement and thanked Delaney for all her help. Since her designs had caught the attention of other businesses around the state, she had decided to freelance, stay in Avery, and of course marry Rick. There was a vacant shop in town where she planned to open up Delaney’s Designs. She turned her head and laid her ear on his chest just over his heart. “I love you, Rick.”

“I love you too, baby.”

She turned and stared at the tree, listened to the carolers and breathed a contented sigh. Their future was as bright as the lights on that tree. She never would have believed that this Christmas she would find a sheriff in her stocking.

 THE END 

Cher Gorman

Okay ... here's the thing. I don't live an adventurous life filled with intrigue and excitement. My days are quiet and normal and I love it that way. I'd much rather experience an adventure filled life through my characters. I've been married to my soul mate for seventeen years and we have one daughter. I write while she is in school each day and my writing day ends when she gets home.

I have a B.A in Art and worked a series of clerical jobs for several years mostly in hospitals and doctor's offices. My best subject in school was English composition and of course I always loved to read. However, I didn't actually start writing until 1987 when I pulled up stakes from my home in Augusta, Georgia and headed west to Colorado. You see when I was in high school I saw this John Denver special and fell in love -- not with John Denver -- but with the gorgeous backdrop of snow-covered mountains and spruce trees. I knew in that moment my real home was waiting for me in the Rocky Mountains. Corny, but true. Since I began writing -- nineteen years ago -- my dream has been to craft well-written stories that someone besides my mother or my husband would want to read.

Thanks to the wonderful editorial staffs at Loose-Id and Wings ePress, I finally realized my dream. I hope you enjoy reading my stories as much as I enjoyed the journey of creating them for you.

Visit Cher on the Web at <http://www.chergorman.com>.