

**ANYWHERE, ANYTIME,
ANYWAY
BOOK 1:
FANTASIES DELIVERED**

by

Barbara Baldwin

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpresstorrid.com

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ISBN 1-59374-580-X

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

**WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT
ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY
BOOK 1: FANTASIES DELIVERED**

“Fantasies Delivered is a wonderful tale of romance, hot passion, and one’s belief in love worth fighting for... The instantaneous chemistry between [Gage and Keva] is hot and explosive and only gets better as the pages turn. The additional characters of Chase and Travis show readers a side of Gage that will make him more realistic and loveable as well as show a glimpse of the man that will conclude this trilogy... Readers cannot go wrong with this story. It is a tremendous start to what is sure to be an amazing trilogy... With a touching contemporary love story and the witty word play between the characters, Fantasies Delivered was a pleasure to read The emotions and passion that Barbara Baldwin has weaved into this story will leave a breathtaking, heartfelt experience upon completion... *Anywhere, Anytime, Anyway Book 1: Fantasies Delivered* is an outstanding story and I only hope I have the patience to wait for the next story in this trilogy. Barbara Baldwin has earned herself a new fan as well as 5 Angels and a Recommended Read!”
Jessica, Fallen Angel Reviews

Four Flowers, Excellent

“...The characters were very believable, and there are some slight twists in the middle of this that catch the reader off guard. When you meet Gage's brothers, you will hope that a sequel is in the works... But the best part about this story has got to be the sizzling hot sex. It is well written and often!”

—Char@mayreviews.com

“I adore the well crafted romance between the two main characters and the supporting cast in this book are a merry band that a great deal of readers can relate to. This is a wonderfully written story filled with good laughs, incredible sex and fantasies that do come true.”

Charissa

Coffee Time Romance

4 Cups

“Fantasies Delivered delivers big time! From the moment Keva and Gage meet, the heat and sparking sexual chemistry explodes from the pages... This satisfying and just plain wonderful romance is truly the stuff of dreams. Barbara Baldwin has hooked this reader and I can't wait for the other McVicker brother stories. You'll laugh, you'll tear up, and you'll smile for the many wonderful moments that Keva and Gage share...”

5 Hearts—The Romance Studio

Dedication

To my sisters—

We may not be as numerous as the McVicker
brothers, but like they do, we look out for each other.

I love you.

Chapter 1

Gage McVicker jogged up the stairs to his apartment, figuring he had just enough time for a shower before catching the eight fifteen subway to work. As he was toweling dry, he noticed the light blinking on his answering machine. When he heard the message, he grinned, picked up the phone and punched in the number.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice.

“Baby, when you going to let me in your pants?” the woman on the other end of the line challenged him.

“I might consider it, but I don’t have any on at the moment.”

“Well, hell, I’ll be right over!” The woman’s voice held a laugh.

“Ah, Ginger, you’re too much woman for me to handle.”

“I doubt that, sugar, but we can find out any time you want.” Ginger Jacobson was the office manager of the temporary employment agency where he was registered and had taken an instant liking to Gage when he had filled out his application papers. She was black, from the Bronx and the sexual banter they exchanged was just that.

She had done a thorough background check on him and was probably the only one at the agency who knew who Gage really was. She had sat him down and asked him point-blank what the hell he was up to. Once Gage told her his reasons for working menial jobs, she had become his best friend in New York City.

“What’s up, Ging?” Gage dressed as he spoke, glancing at the clock. He needed to get to work.

“Have you had enough pecking at the keyboard for now?” she asked, referring to Gage’s secretarial job with a large insurance company. “I’ve got a gig I think is right up your alley.”

“Yeah?”

“How’d you like to sell women’s shoes at Saks?”

“Christ, Ginger, I know I said I’d do just about anything, but women’s shoes?”

“Just think of all those lovely ladies’ ankles you can caress, sugar.” Ginger thought with his looks, he must have been a gigolo in another life, and she felt duty-bound to try and help him out with the ladies.

“Forget it,” said Gage.

“Well, there’s still that male stripper job.” He could hear the laughter in her voice.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Oh, wait, something’s popping up on e-mail.” There was a pause and Gage could hear her humming as she read through the listing.

“Oh, yes, this is just right for you.”

Gage wasn’t sure he liked the sounds of that. “What are you up to, Ginger?”

“*Voyager Publishing*. Ever hear of them?”

“Who hasn’t? They’re one of the biggest conglomerates in New York.” Even if Gage wasn’t immersed in the business world at present, he read voraciously and kept up with the business market.

“They publish all those hot, hot romance books.”

Gage could almost hear Ginger smack her lips.

“They also have a large sporting division, as well as publishing general fiction.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know about that, but this job might be just what you need for your change of pace.”

Over the past months, Gage had had a dozen or so jobs all over the United States. In changing jobs and locations often, Gage had hoped to find that elusive spark that would get him fired up again. It had been too long since he had known

enthusiasm or excitement. It felt like forever since he had glimpsed a challenge tough enough for him to sit up and take notice.

“Okay,” he admitted. “I’m game.”

“Report to personnel Monday morning, sweetie pie,” she said. “I think this is just the ticket for you.”

* * * *

The mailroom!

Gage was going to have a talk with Ginger. Corporate mailrooms belonged to corporate presidents’ sons who had to learn the business from the ground up. Gage certainly didn’t fall into that category.

It had been eight months since he walked out of *SGM Enterprises*, the company he had founded when his computer game business took off. He had been egotistical and damn proud of his accomplishment, using the initials SGM to name the company after himself—Stephen Gage McVicker. After ten years of creating games of intrigue and violence, he finally realized he had lost some part of himself in the process.

The millions *SGM* netted every year couldn’t make up for the feelings of isolation and depression Gage had felt. He had friends, partied with a fast-moving group in Boston, and owned a home there, along with a cabin in Colorado. But something was terribly wrong with his life.

He shrugged off his musings over the past as he tossed yet another priority mail envelope into the overflowing cart for someone named Keva Monroe. It had only taken him part of the morning to memorize all the different departments and the names of most of the people who worked in the twenty-story building.

His brain just worked like that, he had told Campbell, his supervisor. It wasn’t until later that he overheard Campbell tell another employee that “according to his placement officer, McVicker has a brain disorder and is slow sometimes.”

No, Gage decided, he wouldn’t talk to Ginger. He would beat her butt!

After lunch, he began deliveries to the upper floors. Gage didn't consider himself claustrophobic, but he couldn't wait to get out of the confines of the basement. As he moved from floor to floor in the mammoth granite and glass building, he was impressed with what he saw of *Voyager Publishing*. The offices were tastefully decorated and everyone appeared busy and knowledgeable. As a former businessman, he knew that a pleasant environment meant productive employees and it appeared people liked working here.

He walked out of the elevator into the foyer of the tenth floor suite of offices with the last of his deliveries. *Keva Monroe certainly got the most mail*, he thought, as he pushed the heavy cart through the double glass doors. That's as far as his thinking went as he looked toward the receptionist's desk.

Legs of an unimaginable length rose from black high heels up to a red miniskirt that covered a lushly curved bottom. He sucked in a breath. The woman was bent over the desk, her back to him, and all Gage could do was stare. He couldn't see her face or breasts, but her waist curved in sharply from her hips and he couldn't imagine the rest of her not looking just as spectacular. Without thinking, he gave a low whistle.

Highlighted brown hair slid over her shoulder as she turned to look at him. *Oh, yeah*, Gage thought, the rest of her definitely went with the long legs—baby blue eyes, finely arched eyebrows, petite nose and skin that could only be called peaches and cream.

She frowned at his whistle, but then gave him the once over in turn. As he watched her gaze move up his body, he could see a change in her expression. If he wasn't mistaken, the lady was interested. She slowly straightened and turned more fully toward him.

"Do you know anything about computers?" she asked in a voice full of frustration but nevertheless, deep and sultry.

Was his cover blown? It took Gage a minute to realize she wasn't challenging him; she was simply asking a question.

"I'm just the mail boy," he answered, not exactly lying.

A slight smile quirked the corner of her mouth. “Boy, you are not. Male—definitely.”

The room suddenly seemed charged with an electrical current, leaving Gage with no time to figure out what had sucked the oxygen out of it. He began to think he would be content to be a temp the rest of his life if he could run into secretaries who looked and acted like her. He wondered if she could take it as well as dish it out, and hoped he wouldn’t be calling Ginger for another job before the day was done.

“Wow, do you know what I’d like to do with those legs?”

He was pleasantly surprised when she smiled, a light blush staining her cheeks.

“I have found they are very useful for supporting the rest of me. Is that what you had in mind?”

“No, I had in mind me being between them,” Gage replied.

She took a step back and a small frown creased her brow. “I could have your job for that comment, you know.”

“You don’t want it. A woman as beautiful as you, doesn’t belong in the basement.”

She shook her head, laughing lightly. “You don’t know when to quit, do you?”

“Sweetheart, I’d quit this job in a heartbeat, but quit looking at you—never. Tell me it’s not against company policy for a secretary to have dinner with a guy from the mailroom?”

The smile disappeared but Gage swore she looked disappointed, not angry. “I’m sorry, that’s just not possible.”

Gage moved closer, using the mail cart as a pretense. She looked as though she couldn’t believe he would be so bold. Then, almost as if she wanted to prove she wasn’t afraid of the sexual energy darting between them, she stood her ground as he started taking the mail from the cart.

Gage couldn’t help but inhale her fragrance as he stacked another pile of envelopes on the desk corner. With the next group he grabbed, he stepped deliberately close to her. His arm brushed her breast; she didn’t move. He dropped the envelopes

and stepped back, this time deliberately bumping into her. He almost groaned out loud as her soft breasts pressed into his back.

"Excuse me," he mumbled, bending to get the last of the mail from the cart.

"I think you're deliberately trying to provoke me, Mr.—"

"McVicker," he replied. "Gage McVicker."

"Well, Mr. McVicker, I think you had better return to the mailroom before my secretary comes back and catches you trying to seduce me. Even though she works in the romance department, Gloria can be rather strait-laced."

Her secretary? Gage groaned. That meant this gorgeous woman he had been hitting on was actually Keva Monroe, senior editor of the romance division. Gage suddenly felt thirteen and gauche, like the time he'd tried to make out with Mary Jo Novotny in the back row of the movie theatre.

He knew when it was time to tactfully retreat, but something had happened when he walked into the tenth floor suite and he wasn't about to let it die without pursuing it. Even if she was a senior editor and he worked in the basement mailroom.

* * * *

"That man is gorgeous," Keva said to herself, leaning against her secretary's desk as Gage McVicker walked out the door.

What the hell is he doing in the mailroom? The instant he walked into the office, she had experienced an awareness she couldn't ever recall having.

His hair was a bit long, curling about his ears and nape, but it had been his eyes that really captured her attention. They had undressed her on the spot, making her feel like his hand caressed her as his gaze moved from her legs, clear to the top of her head.

He could be a cover model with those eyes, she had thought at the time. They were dark brown and hungry—not what she would call bedroom eyes at all—and yet, they had so easily pulled her into the sensual web he had woven.

Probably the strangest part of the whole encounter was that she hadn't been the least put off by his forwardness. In fact, she

had enjoyed the sexual banter far more than most of her recent conversations with Jason.

Keva returned to her own desk and looked at the remaining queries she had yet to go through before the end of the workday. Gloria, her personal assistant, had opened them all and stapled each envelope to the back of the letter before making a pile on Keva's desk. A nice *big* pile. With a sigh, she began reading.

*Megan and Jerome spend four straight days in bed
before Megan decides she's not satisfied with him as a lover,
so she goes back to Casey, whom she had never quit seeing.*

Keva tossed the poorly written query letter into the reject basket on her desk, shaking her head. Even though she edited erotica, the stories still had to contain romance because of the relationship between hero and heroine, not because of the sex act.

As one of the senior editors at *Voyager Publishing*, she was trying to maintain an open submissions policy because she knew how tight the market was and she wanted aspiring authors to have access to a big publishing house. But from the volume of mail she was receiving, and the number of really bad plot treatments, she wondered if it were time to accept material only from agents.

"How about an orgy of monstrous proportions?" She laughed as she read the first line of the next letter. The author probably thought she was cleverly disguising the innuendo. She had even enclosed a condom in a florescent purple foil packet. *There goes another one*, she thought as she put the letter in her out-basket, but the purple packet slid off. She flipped it over between her fingers, wondering if Jason would find it funny.

"Ms. Monroe, Mr. Stamford is on line one."

Speak of the devil. She sighed, picking up the phone.

"Hello."

"Keva, where are you? We were supposed to meet the Hamiltons at the club for lunch and tennis at two. You know how important this deal is to me." Jason's voice sounded pissed, which seemed to be the case more times than not lately.

"I told you I wouldn't be able to make it. I'm backlogged with manuscripts and deadlines."

"You've got five assistant editors working for you. Get them to take over your crap pile or whatever you call it. You have more important things to do."

"Slush pile," Keva replied in a tight voice when she heard the condescension in his voice. She loved her job; loved the challenge of finding that one luminous writer in a pile of nondescript novels. The stress of deadlines, editorial meetings, even breaking in new authors to the world of publishing was what kept her going.

"Jason, we'll talk tonight. I can't get away right now."

"Right. We'll talk, if I can fit you into my schedule." The phone clicked in her ear.

Keva glanced at the foil packet she had been fiddling with during her conversation. *So much for that idea*, she thought, dropping it into her desk drawer as she stood. It was time to put an end to Jason's controlling macho attitude. Why couldn't she find a man who thought of her first? Someone who liked what she did and who was proud of her?

"I'll be back in a few," she told Gloria as she walked past her desk. She needed a breath of fresh air, so she walked across the street for an iced cappuccino. As she sat contemplating the fountain in the small park by her office building, Jason's curt comments floated back to mind. She had been dating him for six months, and had thought they could be happy—well, maybe comfortable—together.

Jason was a rising star in the stock market and worked for a brokerage firm dealing only with the largest companies in the world. When had the focus of her world narrowed so much that "who was who" in the best circles and "who had the most money" were the criteria for a relationship? At least that seemed to be the one thing Jason considered important.

For the most part, he refused to talk about her work. He didn't want to know what she was reading, how many books she'd put on the market that month, and he especially didn't

want to hear about the sometimes kinky sex games her authors wrote into their plots. Oh, he wasn't a prude, but their lovemaking was just your ordinary in-bed-with-the-lights-out sex and Keva had come to the conclusion that something was missing.

Where was the sizzling awareness in just seeing him from across the room? Where was the heart stopping anticipation when he reached for her? Had they ever been so caught up in each other that they literally tore off their clothes and screwed on the floor, the couch, or against the wall, without worrying about protection or whether they were sweaty and smelling of sex afterward?

Normally, Keva wasn't given to daydreaming since she read about make-believe lives every day, but lately, she wondered what it would be like to have her fantasy fulfilled. She glanced around her, scanning the pedestrians. Maybe it was time to do a little real-life fantasizing.

She spied a man walking away from the park. *Nice butt*, she thought, but when he turned sideways to stop at the newsstand, she grimaced. Thick-rimmed glasses, receding hairline, and a paunchy stomach. Geez, how could someone look so different from front to rear?

She took a sip of her cappuccino, eyeing the crowd. *There*, she thought, picking out a good-looking guy who stood to one side of the fountain, hands in pockets. He had wavy blonde hair and broad shoulders. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes, but Keva thought it gave him an air of mystery. Now there was a man to start a woman's juices flowing. What would it be like to just grab someone and have a night of hot sex? Did everything have to be preplanned, negotiated, and scheduled?

Maybe a one-night stand was too risky, but perhaps she could find someone who didn't need to see her pedigree before having an affair. She glanced back at the blonde. *Mmmm, maybe*.

Just then, another man, this one dark-haired with a beard, walked briskly up to the blonde. Before Keva could blink, the

two embraced and kissed before linking arms and wandering off in the opposite direction from where she sat.

She shook her head. It would appear she had been out of the dating scene long enough that her instincts were rusty. She would never have guessed. She finished her cappuccino, stood and tossed the cup in the waste receptacle.

“Ah, New York,” she muttered. “You’ve got to love it.”

* * * *

Gage took some money from the small pocket of his running shorts to pay for the paper. He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his T-shirt as he opened the door to *Simon's* just as it started to rain.

"Good morning, Simon," he called across the space to the owner. "The usual."

In the time Gage had lived in New York City, he had developed a routine of sorts. After an early morning run, he stopped at *Simon's* for coffee and a bagel before heading back to his apartment to shower and change for work. On the mornings when the coffee shop wasn't busy, Simon would sometimes sit and visit with Gage.

Simon Lockhart was a friendly man who had lived his entire life in New York. He had told Gage the only time he had left was for his stint in the service, and after going through boot camp down south, decided he'd never leave the city again.

Gage had found in his travels that places like this existed everywhere. Cozy, out-of-the-way cafés and diners, where the people were friendly and chatty. Since he had begun his quest, he had spent a lot of time in just such places, trying to find that elusive something missing from his life.

"How's that daughter of yours?" he asked as he paid for his breakfast.

"She's doing fine. I expect her young man will be coming to talk to me one of these days." Simon grinned as he handed Gage his change. "I just have to decide whether to make him squirm before I say yes."

Gage laughed, shook his head, and walked over to his favorite booth. He propped his feet on the seat across from him. He read the funnies, slowly drinking the strong black coffee he loved. After the funnies, he turned to the financial news. Even if he wasn't involved in business at the moment, he kept up with the latest market trends.

He thought back to the day when he had decided to leave *SGM Enterprises*. He had thrown a duffle bag of clothes in the

trunk of his car, and left his cell phone, corporate credit cards and Rolex watch in his safe deposit box at his bank. But while he intended to take off on a road trip of discovery, he didn't intend to starve or live out of his car. He had plenty of money in his personal account and an ATM card.

In the time since he had left Boston, he'd been a fry cook at a little café in the middle of nowhere in Texas, dealt blackjack at a casino in Vegas, and even did a stint on road construction in Kansas before finding his way to New York City.

He'd faked his resume, only including the jobs he'd had since leaving his company. Although he used his real Social Security number, he'd started using his middle name, Gage. He didn't have any business cards, he took the subway to work, and he lived in a modest apartment in midtown Manhattan—if anything in midtown could be considered modest.

"Just once, I'd like to have an orgasm when he does." A woman sighed.

Gage instantly quit reminiscing as the conversation in the booth next to him captured his attention.

"You mean, you never have?" a sultry voice asked.

"Well, have you? I mean, guys seem to think they're doing you a favor by screwing you at all, much less seeing to your pleasure."

Gage figured the two women either didn't notice him sitting directly behind them, or they didn't care who overheard their conversation. On the pretense of shuffling his paper, he peered around it to catch a glimpse of them—a blonde and a brunette.

"I mean, even when we do it more than once a night, it's always at his insistence." The blonde spoke this time.

"If you don't like it, tell him to leave. After all, it's your apartment."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I like the sex. It's just that I never feel quite satisfied afterward." There was another sigh. "Now, if I could find a man who could fulfill *my* fantasies, well, guaranteed I'd have shares in the Trojan[®] market."

Gage choked on his coffee. He was getting hard just listening to the two women talk, and that hadn't happened in quite some time. In fact, he hadn't even had a date since he left Boston. The quest he was on didn't include screwing any woman who tried to catch his eye, and there had been plenty. After all, even if he was living by his wits, with a little help from the local ATMs, he did still have some standards.

The one regret he'd had in leaving was Tiffany. Sex with Tiffany had been great, but she hadn't understood his need for something more than golf at the country club and dinners at *Julien's*.

Gage didn't think she would have felt the way these two women did. After all, if he had learned anything in his thirty-five years of living, it was that making a woman scream in the throes of a climax was a real turn-on.

The women giggled at something one of them said, and Gage tuned in again to their conversation, not feeling the least bit guilty about eavesdropping. After all, they were in a public place, and the women weren't exactly whispering.

"What would be your fantasy? I mean, if you could have or do whatever you wanted without anyone knowing or criticizing you for it?" The blonde had asked the question, her voice slightly higher than the brunette's.

"Hmmm, let's see. He wouldn't have to be really big. Well, at least not in height," the brunette murmured. "I think I'd like someone with muscles, but with a lean waist and hips so he fits between my thighs just right."

A sigh.

Gage was getting harder by the minute.

"What would this fantasy man do?"

"Everything." The brunette drew out the word, her voice low and full of longing. Sexual vibrations reached across the café booth and shimmered down Gage's spine.

"Oh, geez, look at the time," the blonde said. "I've gotta get to the office, or I'm in trouble. Quick, what's one thing you

would have in your fantasy—something to keep me awake today while I’m transcribing old Mr. Grimble’s boring dictation.”

There was a pause and Gage wondered what exactly the brunette was thinking if she only had one shot at this fantasy thing. He was thinking a little ménage a trois, but then he hadn’t been invited to play their game. He tried to calm his racing pulse.

She chuckled before she spoke. “Okay, Francine, here’s something to think about instead of old Mr. Grimble. Lock me in a cabin for the weekend with fantasy-man and he can have me anywhere, anytime, anyway.”

The two women walked by his booth to the cashier. Gage sat perfectly still, his flimsy running shorts tented quite gloriously, the blood pounding through his veins. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to stand up for some time, he signaled Simon to bring over the coffee pot, even though he didn’t need the caffeine to be wired.

The brunette’s words kept racing back and forth across his brain like a marathon ping-pong tournament.

Anywhere, anytime, anyway.

Shit! He should have asked for her phone number. Even as he thought that, a vision of long legs and a red miniskirt covering a lush bottom came to mind. Ms. Keva Monroe, with her baby blue eyes and sharp wit, took up residence in Gage’s brain and refused to leave. He could recall her scent; the way her eyes flashed and the soft, tempting feel of her.

In the past eight months, he hadn’t thought too much about sex. He was looking for something more elusive. But now that it had been brought into the realm of his consciousness, he wondered how long it would take him to forget it. From the throb in his groin, he suspected quite a while. He signaled Simon for yet another refill.

* * * *

Keva padded barefoot through her plush Manhattan apartment, wine glass in hand. She realized how happy she was now that Jason was no longer in the picture. She had gotten so

tired of making excuses as to why she couldn't go with him to evening events with clients. She loved her job, but Jason always acted like it interfered with his life.

She walked out onto the balcony, scanning the skyline. Sometimes, she wondered what it would be like just to be some regular guy's girlfriend. A vision of brown hair and mysterious eyes instantly came to mind. What did Gage McVicker do on a Friday night after a hectic week in the mailroom? Go out for a beer with his cronies; date a high school sweetheart? She wondered if he liked to dance.

He looked like a country music fan. She tried to envision him dressed in tux and tails attending the opera, but just couldn't see it. She pegged Gage McVicker for a down-to-earth, blue-collar worker who had gotten through high school only because he played football.

But that didn't mean she couldn't fantasize about him. The sparks had flown the other day when he had delivered mail to her office. She couldn't get his broad shoulders and lean waist out of her mind. She had seen the obvious interest in his eyes, had heard it in the sexy, deep timbre of his voice, and had felt it in the shimmering electricity that had leapt between them when he had deliberately backed into her. Since that day, she had dreamed about him and found herself checking the outer office several times a day trying to catch a glimpse of him as he delivered mail.

Now, what should she do about this craving she had developed? She took another sip of wine, stretching her long legs out in front of her. As though providence was looking out for her, this mailman had been dropped handily in Keva's own backyard.

It would be a pity to waste him, and she decided to give herself a chance at some real fun. She wasn't sure exactly how to go about doing that, since her adult life had been spent with an always politically proper crowd, but she intended to find out. Perhaps a discussion with Mr. McVicker was in order. She was

sure he had some ideas about how she could have a good time without being in danger.

* * * *

Gage punched the intercom button when he heard his name called.

“Report to the tenth floor, Ms. Monroe’s office.”

It was probably a good thing he really didn’t need this job, Gage thought as he stepped off the elevator and walked toward the double glass doors. Regardless of Ms. Monroe’s initial reaction the other day, he had wondered if she would end up calling Campbell and getting him fired for sexual harassment. When nothing happened, he began wondering if maybe she was more interested than she had appeared.

He had spent the last several nights thinking about her and the incredible number of manuscripts she received. A very large number of people seemed to write romance. Romance meant sex, and that made him recall the overheard conversation by the two women in the diner—*anywhere, anytime, anyway*. He groaned just thinking about it.

But he didn’t even recall what the two women looked like. Instead, he had fantasized about making love to Keva Monroe. While that had made his nights pleasurable and hurried his steps to the *Voyager* building in the morning, he now worried that her summons meant he would no longer be delivering her mail.

Her secretary wasn’t at her desk, but then it was noon, so Gage tapped lightly on the door to her office. At her command, he opened the door and walked in.

Again, he was struck by her long legs, this time barelegged beneath a gauzy, midcalf skirt that looked to be almost transparent. Strappy sandals and a sleeveless sweater completed her casual attire, but she still gave the appearance of someone in command of her surroundings.

“Ms. Monroe?” he asked to catch her attention.

“Hello, Mr. McVicker. Please close the door behind you.”

She turned from the window, her gaze raking him from head to toe.

“Is that wise?” He wasn’t sure what game she was playing, and it wasn’t that he didn’t want to play, too. He just couldn’t figure out where she was going with her request.

“Could you deliver...I mean, are you allowed to leave the mailroom to deliver documents across town?” She glanced nervously between him and her desk. Gage frowned, wondering why she would be nervous if what she intended was business. Perhaps it really wasn’t.

“They quit chaining us to the walls a couple centuries ago,” he replied dryly.

She laughed, the sound light and musical. “I’m sorry, that did sound rather rude. It’s just that...well...” Again she paused, fingering an envelope on her desk.

Gage moved closer, catching a whiff of her spicy perfume. “What is it you really want?”

She cocked her head as she looked at him. “How do you know?” The question was breathy and Gage was close enough to notice her dilated pupils, the pulse beating rapidly at her throat and how her nipples peaked beneath her sweater.

He was standing right in front of her now, not more than a foot away. “It’s an ancient hunting instinct man has managed to retain through all efforts to civilize him.”

“Oh, well, I...” She couldn’t seem to collect her thoughts and Gage decided to take control of the situation. If she didn’t actually want what he offered, she would have to tell him.

He took the last step that brought them chest-to-chest. Wrapping one arm around her back, he slipped a hand beneath her hair to the base of her skull. With a light massaging touch, he gently pulled her toward him.

“You have a secretary to deliver your mail, Ms. Monroe. I somehow doubt that was what you really wanted me for, was it?” He kissed the corner of her mouth, the tip of her ear, down her throat.

“No, you’re right.” She gasped at his advances, but she didn’t fight him at all. “I thought perhaps you might consider modeling for a book cover.” She managed to get the words out as

Gage continued his kissing forays across the scoop neck of the sweater she wore.

“Model, for a romance?” He paused, sliding both hands down to her luscious bottom and pulling her tight against him. Then he added, “Maybe we should see how well I do between the pages where the action is.”

Chapter 2

With a tiny groan of surrender, Keva wrapped her arms around his neck and just hung on. It was nuts—beyond crazy—asking him up here, but ever since she had first seen him, she hadn't been able to get him out of her mind. Or maybe it was because she and Jason had broken up last weekend and she was feeling a little insecure about her appeal. It was irrelevant, anyway, because Mr. McVicker seemed more than willing to oblige her.

The instant his lips touched hers, electricity shot through her and she began to tingle all over. She opened her mouth at the slight pressure of his tongue and was swept away by sensations she had forgotten even existed. He reached up under her sweater and scooped her breast out of her bra. When he gently rolled her nipple between his fingers, her legs just about buckled. And still he devoured her mouth, using his tongue in a way she wanted him to use the hard male body part she could feel pressing against her stomach.

"Oh, baby," he whispered as he bent his head to suck her nipple. Keva came unglued. She reached between them and grabbed the buckle of his belt, jerking it open, then quickly unbuttoning his pants and sliding the zipper down. She had to touch him.

Gage lost all control when she reached inside his pants and her warm fingers encircled him. He couldn't think about anything except sinking into her as quickly as he could. Still sucking her breast, he scooped up her skirt and slid his hand between her legs. She was hot and already damp. He slipped the

miniscule scrap of silk covering her down her hips. He lifted her to the edge of the desk, sliding her panties the rest of the way down her long legs, kissing her golden skin every inch of the way. When he stood, she reached for him and he froze.

“Damn it to hell!” he swore.

Keva looked up at him, still panting. “What?”

“I don’t have any protection.” He didn’t make a habit of carrying condoms around with him.

“Oh, God, you can’t stop. Not now.” She stroked his length and Gage was damned close to coming without ever getting inside her.

“Shit. Wait.” He grabbed her wrists to still the caresses that were driving him wild. He was breathing hard, his body not allowing his mind to come up with any alternatives.

“I can’t wait,” Keva groaned, twisting her wrist out of his grip and leaning back across her desk. Her skirt was hiked up around her waist, her legs spread wantonly. Gage wondered if this was his punishment for running out on his obligations. He rarely had unprotected sex, but Keva was tempting him beyond what any mortal could handle.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he heard a desk drawer slam, a soft *damn*, and Keva turned back toward him, sucking an index finger. In her other hand was a florescent purple foil packet. She smiled around her wounded finger as he grabbed the packet and tore it open. He raised a brow in question.

“Don’t ask,” she replied, raising her legs to slide them around his waist.

Gage hooked his hands behind her knees and pulled her forward to the very edge of the desk. With one sure stroke, he was deep inside her. She was tight and hot and wet and he pushed in all the way.

She braced herself with her arms behind her, head thrown back, breasts jutting forward. He watched her face as he withdrew just to the edge of her and then slid back in again.

Her eyes were closed, her bottom lip sucked in slightly. Gage wanted to see her lose control and scream out in ecstasy. He pushed into her again and again, grinding against her until he thought he would explode.

Her eyes opened wide to lock with his. She started to sit up, but Gage held her in place with a hand to her breast. He tweaked her nipple through the sweater and she gasped, then pushed against his pulsing shaft faster and faster until he couldn't stand it.

"You gotta come with me, baby, I can't hold on." He groaned. He was aggressive when it came to making love, but was still a considerate lover. He never left his partner unsatisfied, but Keva was making him lose all control.

"Oh, my, God," she gasped out the words with each jerk of his hips. Then she went stiff, her legs squeezing him in wanton pleasure and he felt the first grip of her orgasm.

Once, twice, he pumped into her, his control snapping in an unbelievably hot climax.

Slowly, Gage came back to his senses. Christ, he couldn't believe he had just fucked one of the top executives of *Voyager Publishing*, on her desk, no less, and with the door unlocked. But damn, she was hot, and her soulful blue eyes had practically begged him. He could only hope she remembered that when she came back to earth. He opened his eyes and found her staring up at him.

A slow, sensuous smile curved her pouty lips. Lips he hadn't bothered to shower much attention on. He'd make up for that oversight the next time. Along with having a whole box of condoms stuffed in his pockets, he reminded himself.

"Damn, Mr. McVicker, you're as good as any book I've read," she said, trailing a fingernail down his chest, clear down to where their bodies were still locked together.

He grinned, happy there would be no recriminations. "I think you can call me Gage now."

"Hmm, perhaps given your employment here, I should keep it Mister." She slowly lowered her legs to the side of the desk.

Gage slid out of her with a soft plop, even though he was still in a state of semi-arousal.

“About that letter you wanted delivered.” He figured he’d better not linger over what had just happened since she appeared to be slipping back into her professional demeanor as she righted

her clothes. The tale-tell peaks of her nipples through her sweater told Gage she wasn't exactly dismissing the chemistry between them.

"Don't worry about it. Gloria will take care of it when she gets back from lunch." She slid off the desk, coming toe-to-toe with him since he didn't back up.

"You really should think about modeling for us," she said, her gaze still soft as she ran a finger gently down his cheek.

Gage laughed. "Thanks, but I think I'll stick to the mailroom." He deliberately paused before adding, "And any other deliveries that need made around here."

"I doubt—"

"Ms. Monroe, you have a one fifteen meeting." Her secretary's voice on the intercom interrupted whatever she might have said. Gage was glad he had his pants zipped.

As he made his way back downstairs, he decided that Ms. Keva Monroe wasn't done with him, regardless of what she thought. And he most definitely had plans for her. For the first time in eight months, he felt alive and revitalized, and had found something worth pursuing. From the wanton way she responded to him, he didn't think it would be hard to persuade her to date him, though she seemed disinclined at the moment.

When he opened the door to the mailroom and saw the pile of manuscripts waiting to be sorted, a plan began to form. So, he was only as good as a fiction book, huh? Well, maybe Ms. Monroe needed to spice up her reading material.

* * * *

*Do you have a secret sexual fantasy? What would you
want your man to do to you if nobody would know?
Anything?*

Keva Monroe read the words and had an instant vision of hot, devouring sex—like the kind she had experienced last week with Gage McVicker. The minute she thought of him, she turned hot all over. More than once, she had been tempted to call down to the mailroom and ask for him on some pretense or other. She had refrained only because of the idea that if anyone found out,

there might be sexual harassment charges filed. There had definitely been sex, but she doubted that Mr. McVicker from the mailroom would consider himself harassed.

Regardless of how she thought about him, and how often, she couldn't bring herself to call him. Now, here was a query letter that instantly brought his image to mind. Her gaze returned to the letter to finish reading about this author's interpretation of sexual fantasy.

For Keva, the books she sent through the publishing process had to be more than sex manuals. Not only must they have a plot, but the relationships needed to be real. Yes, the sex was paramount, otherwise it wouldn't be erotica, and it had to be the kind of lovemaking every woman dreamed of but few ever attained.

She read the entire letter, not scanning it as she did so many other queries. The words pulled her into the author's fantasy world and made her wonder "what if?" The plot outline this author had included wove through Keva's head, flowed down to make her breasts tingle, and continued to her sex, which began to throb.

*Driven by a desire to make her every fantasy come true,
Jordan hatches a scheme to become Tabitha's love slave. He
drives her to a secluded cabin in the woods on the pretense of
brainstorming an advertising campaign. For that week,
Jordan takes her on a sexual exploration that will reveal
naked truths about both their fantasies, but will he find that
Tabitha is too hot for even him to handle?*

Keva groaned. A week in the woods for unbridled sex and recreation? Ah, what she wouldn't give...

Her gaze swept to the signature on the letter. Priscilla McVee. She punched a few keys on her computer and scanned the list that popped up on the screen. There were currently no authors in any market by that name. Had she discovered a new talent?

Of course, a query letter didn't necessarily mean the woman could write a complete story. In fact, the letter didn't

indicate she even had a completed manuscript. But the words she had used and her eye-catching style had piqued Keva's interest. She tapped the intercom with a manicured nail.

"Gloria?"

Gloria immediately came in, notepad in hand.

"Write Ms. McVee and request a partial." Keva handed her assistant the letter. "Tell her to print 'requested material' on the envelope and give her the code." Whether she talked to authors at a convention, or responded to a written query from an author or agent, she had a set of codes she used.

These codes were entered in the computer and it helped remind her where the material had come from and why. Because of the tight market and the number of editors at the various conventions during the year, she knew that several enterprising authors had found out the words 'requested materials' might get their manuscript onto a desk rather than in the slush pile. She wasn't the only editor who used the code system. It kept her reading manageable.

Although it was hard to put Ms. McVee's words from her mind, she turned her attention to the other manuscripts stacked neatly on the credenza. Glancing at her watch, she knew she only had an hour before her meeting, but it was enough time to read several partials. Most would have to be returned with apologies, but there was always the hope she could uncover another star. Well, perhaps another one along with Priscilla McVee, who Keva felt certain would be a winner if her manuscript was half as good as her query.

* * * *

"Holy shit," Gage swore when he walked into work. Box after box of envelopes were stacked on the worktable high enough to where he couldn't see over them. "What's up, Campbell?"

Campbell shook his head. "Forgot you haven't been here long. Every year, they have some kind of fancy-yancy party for all the people who work and write for *Voyager* and a whole batch of the public. Guess everybody dresses up and does weird dances

and eats even weirder food. That's about all I know, except it's always more work for us because all the invites need to go out and then there's the RSVPs coming back in."

He gave a rusty chuckle. "Seeing as how you're the new kid on the block, I think this will be your job for the day." He nodded to the boxes of addressed invitations. "They all have to go out at the same time. Heaven forbid if the governor doesn't get his invitation at the same time as the mayor gets his."

"Governor?" Gage questioned.

"Hell, yes. I think everyone in the whole damn state has been invited. And that doesn't include the authors. They come from all over the country."

As Gage ran the vellum envelopes through the postage meter, he wondered if Keva was going to the party. He hadn't seen her in the last week, even though he had delivered full carts of manuscripts to the office on the tenth floor nearly every day.

He had met her secretary, Gloria, a pinched-mouth, middle-aged woman who Gage decided needed a good fuck to give her a more pleasant outlook on life. He thought about suggesting it to Campbell since he was single, but even Campbell didn't deserve Gloria.

He managed to get the three thousand invitations metered, sorted and bagged for bulk mail by late afternoon while another mail clerk delivered all the office mail. He was just getting ready to call it a day, when the intercom beeped. He looked around for Campbell, but it appeared he was the only one left.

"Mailroom," he said into the small square box on the wall.

"Mr. McVicker," a raspy voice requested.

"You got him." Gage didn't think the voice was familiar and wondered who even knew his name in the short time he'd been in the mailroom. His gut tightened as he thought of the one person who definitely knew where he worked.

"Please come to Ms. Monroe's office as soon as possible," the voice said.

"There's no more delivery or pickup available for today. The mailroom is closed."

Gage realized it was Gloria with her next comment. “Ms. Monroe isn’t used to having her requests questioned. You will report here immediately.”

The intercom clicked before Gage could form a reply.

No one entered or exited the elevator in the ten floors up to the romance division, and Gage figured the building was pretty well empty. He only hoped Gloria had also left, because he really didn’t feel like dealing with her sour disposition this late in the day. Now Ms. Monroe, on the other hand, he would thoroughly enjoy seeing again.

He had thought about her constantly since that last encounter in her office. He had even thought about asking her out. But when he had delivered mail for over a week and she had not asked for him, he began to wonder. Maybe he had just been some kind of sex rush for her and the encounter had meant nothing.

He walked into the office, saw that Gloria’s desk was empty and her computer screen blank, and immediately knocked on the inner door.

“Come.” The quiet, sultry voice he remembered called to him through the wood panel.

Oh, yeah, he thought, *I would love to.*

He closed the door behind him and he was again hit by Keva’s beauty. Today, she wore her hair in some kind of knot on the top of her head, but curls had escaped to frame her face in the fading light. She wore a peach colored suit, tailored to fit her figure to perfection, the skirt just at the top of her knees to show off her legs. *Damn,* Gage thought; those legs of hers got him every time.

He let his gaze leisurely course over her legs again, before slowly moving up the rest of her body. When he finally got to her face, he found her returning his gaze with an equal intensity.

“Do you dance, Mr. McVicker?” she asked, but to Gage, her gaze asked *would you make slow, sweet love to me?*

“Yes,” he instantly answered.

“Really? Ballroom, shag, swing?”

“What?” He must have missed something.

She smiled, as if she could somehow read his mind and knew exactly where his thoughts had been. She walked over to the bookcase, flipped a switch on the stereo system and approached him.

Yanni’s *Reflections* filled the room with a soft mixture of sound. Her hips swayed to the rhythm and Gage found he was having trouble breathing.

When she stood right in front of him, she placed her hands on his chest and slowly slid them upward.

“Do you dance?” she repeated.

“I can hold my own,” Gage managed to respond, still enthralled by her nearness and the sensuous way her hands were playing with the hair at his nape.

She smiled again. “Are we talking about dancing now?”

She wasn’t close enough, Gage thought.

“Babe, as the song says—‘a little less talk and a lot more action’.” He slid one hand around her waist. The other slid up her arm to enclose her hand in his. With a quick backward step, he moved her into the rhythm of the song on the CD.

His eyes never left hers as they maneuvered the limited space in her office. Gage used that as an excuse to pull her even closer. He wanted to kiss her. Hell, he wanted to make love to her until he couldn’t walk. And here they were, dancing.

Her hand caressed his shoulder. He could feel her fingernails lightly scratch through his shirt. He wondered if she would consider putting that hand somewhere else.

“Do you also waltz?” she asked.

“Is this a test?”

She shrugged slightly. Another song began and Gage smoothly adjusted his steps to show her that he could, indeed, waltz.

He had forgotten how much he liked to dance. He enjoyed holding a woman almost as close as when making love to her, but on a crowded dance floor where the *thought* was the erotic fantasy, rather than the act itself.

His body responded to just those thoughts and he pulled her closer still, slowing his steps until they were barely moving, making sure she was aware of his arousal.

“I want you,” he whispered against her lips before sealing them with his. The kiss was magic, and Gage regretted not having experienced it more fully the first time he had been in this position. He would not make that mistake again, he thought, as he deepened the kiss.

He felt he could not get enough of her. His hands moved restlessly on her back, sliding beneath her jacket to touch bare skin. Meanwhile, his lips moved from hers to her throat, kissing his way to her ear. Their feet were stationery now, but their bodies continued to sway, rubbing sensuously against each other.

He reached up, removing the pins from her hair and dropping them on the carpet. He combed her hair with his fingers, enjoying the feel of the silky strands gliding across his palms.

“Gage,” she spoke his name softly.

He nibbled her earlobe; slid his tongue in and out of her ear in an imitation of what he wanted to be doing to her.

Keva’s reaction was instantaneous and hot. Her hands reached between them, one working his belt buckle while the other caressed him through his trousers. As soon as she had his pants opened, both her hands were inside his boxers, stroking the length of him and gently massaging his balls.

Gage had mistakenly thought that if he ever got the chance at Keva Monroe again, he would take it nice and slow, savoring the experience of having those long, sleek legs wrapped around him. So much for stupid ideas, he said to himself. She wasn’t letting go of him and Gage’s control was slipping fast.

He jerked her jacket open and hurriedly unhooked her bra. Normally, he was a leg man, but Keva’s breasts were just as tempting. Just the right size for his hands, their nipples tipped upward, tightening into hard pebbles as he caressed her. He pushed them together and nuzzled the cleft between them before latching onto one pert tip and sucking it into his mouth.

He could barely stand; the fever caused by her caress was making his legs as weak as his brain. He vaguely recalled seeing a couch against one wall of her office, and thought to maneuver her in that direction.

“Keva, sweetheart, let’s move to the couch. It’ll be more comfortable.” He hated to stop kissing her for even the short amount of time it took to say those few words. He hated it worse when she let go of him and slid her hands up his belly to his chest.

“Take me here, now,” she commanded, her hands finding his nipples and tweaking them. Gage groaned.

“Babe, I’ll take you anywhere, anytime, anyway, but you gotta let me get my pants off before I trip and take you down with me.” Gage couldn’t even believe his brain was still functioning enough for him to realize his pants were down around his ankles, but it only took a second to strip them off, along with his shoes.

When he turned to reach for Keva again, she put up a hand to stop him. He raised one brow in question and she simply smiled.

“Sit,” she commanded, pointing to the couch.

“I want to undress you.” The sight of her half naked, breasts jiggling gloriously, made Gage’s prick jerk upwards.

She shook her head.

Gage sat.

Keva stood directly in front of him, placing one foot to the outside of each of his. Her actions stretched her short skirt taut across her flat abdomen. Gage reached forward and slid his hands up the outside of her legs, lifting her skirt as he went. He raised a brow in question.

“I had plans for you today,” she replied with a smile.

Ms. Monroe wasn’t wearing any panties.

Gage moved one hand to the front of her, his fingers slipping through the folds of her femininity and finding the nub of her sex. She quivered beneath his invading fingers, jutting her hips forward slightly. He used his thumb to circle the nubbin as

his fingers slid into her. Damn, she was hot and oh, so ready for him.

“I’ve got to have you—now.” His voice rasped, his gaze going from her hips to her face. Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed, but he could see the pleasure written on her features. “Lay down.”

She shook her head. “Lean back.”

Before Gage could react, she stepped forward, took a condom out of her jacket pocket and quickly rolled it on him. She put one knee on the couch beside his thigh and then the other. Her breasts were right at mouth level and Gage latched onto one. His hands slid around her back, and down her spine to caress her buttocks. She put her hands on his shoulders and began to lower herself onto him.

“You’re killing me,” Gage groaned as she took only another inch of him inside her.

“Sh, I’m getting there.” She kissed his lips gently, moving another fraction.

Under other circumstances, Gage might have been willing to let the woman take the lead in bed. It didn’t happen often because he liked to be in control and he loved to take a woman to the heights of orgasm, sometimes more than once, before he climaxed. This time, it was almost more than he could bear to let Keva take her own sweet time sheathing him.

“Are you ready, McVicker?” Gage had never heard his name pronounced in what sounded like a curse and a caress at the same time. Keva had her palms flat on his chest, her thumbnails lightly scratched across his nipples.

“Babe, I’ve been ready for days!” Gage’s voice went up at the end as Keva slid down completely on him.

“Oh, yes,” she breathed, wiggling her hips to gain the last fraction of penetration from him.

Gage gripped her hips. “You’ve had your fun,” he ground out as he bucked against her. “Now you’re going to get the ride of your life.” He lifted her hips, then pulled her down on him again. *God, it felt good to be inside her.*

Time stood still as Gage taught Keva the fine art of multiple orgasms. A little pressure just so; a change of rhythm; a caress. He couldn't believe the myriad expressions that crossed her face as she clutched around him again and yet again.

And with each orgasm, Gage felt his own temperature rising until finally, he exploded—the roar in his ears deafening, the light behind his eyelids a brilliant cascade of color.

Keva collapsed against his chest and his arms encircled her, both of them breathing hard. She kissed the base of his throat.

"That was...nice," she said.

"Nice?" Gage reared his head back to look at her. "Nice is a teddy bear, or a walk in the park. What we did was not *nice*."

"It wasn't?"

He caught the teasing tone in her voice. "You know what I mean. Making love to you is—" He was suddenly at a loss for words. "Actually, it defies description."

"An honest man. I like that." She gave him another quick kiss as she stood up. Her skirt slid back down over her hips and Gage was disappointed to see the thatch of brown curls disappear.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked, buttoning her jacket as she walked barefoot over to the cabinet beside the stereo.

Gage slid his trousers up over his hips and zipped them. It had been eight months since he had stopped drinking. He had been as close to becoming an alcoholic as he had been a workaholic. He hadn't tried having a drink since then—not even a beer—and he didn't think tonight would be a good time to start.

"A glass of water would be great."

She walked over to him, a bottle of Evian in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. He chuckled, reaching out to unbutton her jacket and button it correctly.

"You missed a button," he said in way of comment when she looked down and then back at him. He took the water and gulped down half of it before setting it on the end table and reaching for his shirt.

“I actually did ask you up here for a reason,” she said.

He arched a brow. “As in having me up here to fuck you isn’t?” Her words put him on edge.

She frowned and pouted her lips. “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out exactly right.”

He took in her mussed hair and the soft gaze and he wanted her all over again. He had known what the game was; in fact, he had started it the last time. There was no reason to be angry with her for taking what he so freely offered. Still, there was an edge to his voice as he spoke.

“What; you need a dance partner?” He recalled the original question when he had gotten here, what seemed like hours ago.

“Every year, *Voyager Publishing* has a party for the staff, its authors, and many dignitaries from around the state.” Her answer seemed rather vague to Gage, but he wasn’t going to question her until he saw where she was going with it.

“Yeah, over three thousand invitations.” Gage should know, he had seen every one of the little vellum envelopes.

“Yes, well, it does seem to grow every year, but it’s for a good cause. We use the event not only as publicity for our authors, but also to raise money for charity.”

She rolled her wine glass between her palms as she spoke, and Gage could almost see her in the corporate boardroom, pleading her case for some aspiring author.

“The romance division is in charge of the event this year, and it has been decided we’ll have an historic ball—costumes, waltzes, midnight supper, everything.”

“And why are you telling me this?”

She did a little thing with her lips that made Gage think she didn’t want to tell him something. Looking at him almost shyly, she said, “I need a date.”

Chapter 3

Tabitha Jones had been interviewing for assistants all day and none had lived up to her expectations, some not even to the resumes they had presented. As the owner of a small advertising and public relations agency, she had acquired a large enough clientele to afford an assistant, if she could find someone qualified.

The last applicant walked into the office. "Have a seat," Tabitha said without looking up.

"Ma'am." A deep southern drawl caused her head to jerk up. Green eyes twinkled above the sexiest grin Tabby had ever seen. The man towered above her, six foot six if he was an inch. Her gaze slid down the rest of him—broad shoulders, slim hips encased in khakis that clung to muscular thighs. The air suddenly seemed charged with electricity; vibes zinging back and forth between the two of them as her gaze met his. Maybe Tabby had been too long without a man in her life, but this guy was hot!

"Please, sit down, Mr. . . ." she glanced at his resume, "Smith." He sat, gracefully folding his tall frame into a chair that Tabby suddenly realized was very small.

Keva thought the story started out a little slow, and wondered if Priscilla McVee would use too much narrative and not enough dialogue to tell her story. The query letter had indicated a lot of action—love slave type action—Keva recalled, her body tingling at the thought. She had anxiously opened Priscilla's manuscript envelope when it arrived, hoping that reading her story would take her mind off Gage McVicker.

But even the author's last name, McVee, was close enough to Gage's that his image jumped to mind. He had agreed to be her escort to the *Voyager Ball* after their last encounter, and Keva would be a fool if she denied the pleasure she felt at the thought of being in his arms again. Dancing with him had been an erotic experience all its own, but when he had made love to her...ah, that had been an out of this world experience.

It was funny that Keva didn't consider what they did in her office as just sex, or screwing, or any of the other synonyms used nowadays. When Gage touched her, she felt as though she were the most special person in the whole world and she was the only one who mattered to him. The fact he always—well, at least in the two encounters they'd had—saw to her pleasure before his own was a unique and exquisite experience. To tell the truth, she had felt a little guilty at the number of times she had climaxed before he even came once.

She wiggled uncomfortably in her chair. If her thoughts kept drifting to Gage McVicker, she never would get any work done. While she wasn't directly responsible for any of the party preparations going on for the ball, she did have her continued workload she couldn't afford to let slip.

She turned back to McVee's manuscript, quickly reading through the first couple pages and making a mental note that if the story was good, she would have some serious edits to make at the beginning. It was important to start with action, otherwise, the reader would put it down. This didn't stop Keva, who read beyond the somewhat slow beginning, perhaps because of the original query and the suggestion of hot, uninhibited sex.

Jordan had worked for Tabitha almost a month now and he usually did it in a state of semi-arousal. She was not only the most gorgeous creature he had known, but her wit, business savvy and humor kept him enthralled. He wanted her with a desperation that kept him awake at night and gave him a hunger for something other than food. It was time he flat out asked her.

He entered her office without knocking just at quitting time, catching her in the middle of changing from her suit into running clothes. She turned quickly at the groan Jordan couldn't suppress, the t-shirt she was about to pull over her head clutched in both hands.

Jordan didn't say a word. He walked over to her, grabbed the shirt from her hands, and pulled her into his arms. She didn't resist and he knew she wanted it as much as he did.

In less than a heartbeat, his lips were on hers, kissing her deep, while his hands slid the shorts down her hips. Just as frantically, she clawed at his shirt, jerking it open and popping a few buttons in the process. His pants were down around his ankles in the next minute and she latched onto him with two strong hands, sliding them up and down and almost making Jordan come.

Without hesitation, he lifted her to the edge of her desk and rammed into her, groaning as she squeezed around him.

"Faster," she moaned, "harder." Her nails dug into his shoulders, urging him on.

"Babe, you gotta come with me." He groaned because he knew he couldn't hold on any longer.

"Yes," she gasped, and then let out a very feminine scream as her orgasm broke over her, pushing Jordan over the edge at the same time.

Keva fanned herself with the manuscript pages. The beginning might have been slow, but Priscilla made up for it within pages. She continued reading. The story was a great mix of humor, business and sex. The small ad agency Tabitha ran gave the story the plot elements it needed as she and Jordan referred with clients and discussed strategies, but the plot always came back to the extreme sexual connection between the two. At the end of chapter three, they were at Tabitha's apartment and when she asked Jordan if he would consider doing anything she wanted in the bedroom, he replied with, *"I will take you anywhere, anytime, anyway you want it, sweetheart."*

Keva frowned. Where had she heard that before? It must be the newest catch phrase traveling through the authors' loops. Every once in a while, something caught one editor's eye and soon, everyone was inundated with manuscripts all using the same scenario. Like civil war stories, secret babies and cowboys.

Keva read back through the chapters one more time. She looked through the synopsis. Did the story revolve around more than sex? Was there enough plot to carry it? She thought so, but wanted someone else to read it. One of her assistant editors and friend, Beth Franklin, had a good eye for detail and plot holes, and Keva trusted her judgment. Before she offered Priscilla McVee a contract, she'd see what Beth had to say.

* * * *

Gage took a breath and blew it out. He moved his gaze from the yellow tablet on the table in front of him to the window and the early morning light as he took another sip of coffee.

"Problems?" Simon Lockhart slid into the booth across the table from him, mug of tea in hand.

"No coffee?" Gage asked.

Simon made a face. "Can't stand the stuff."

Gage laughed. "You run a coffee house and you don't like coffee?"

Simon shrugged. "What can I say? I'm from Puerto Rico and all I ever heard growing up was coffee, coffee, and coffee. I know everything there is to know about the subject, but that doesn't mean I have to drink it."

Gage nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean. I thought I had a pretty good understanding of things, too, but boy, I don't."

"Thought you looked a bit preoccupied when you came in. You even got cream cheese for your bagel."

Gage looked down, surprised. His partially eaten bagel lay on a plate, a half empty mini-cup of cream cheese next to it. He never ate cream cheese, at least not on his breakfast bagel.

“Want to talk about it?” Simon looked around. “You got here early enough this morning so most of the regulars aren’t even out of their beds.”

Another sigh escaped Gage. How did one go about explaining Keva Monroe?

“I met the lady at work,” he began.

Simon grinned. “Well, there you go. Anytime you start talking about women, you might as well forget the understanding part. Are you worried about harassment?”

“Hell, no. It’s mutual desire, and besides, I don’t need the job so if push came to shove, I’d quit before I let her get into trouble.” Gage knew he would protect Keva that way.

“I don’t know,” he continued, shaking his head. “It started out innocent enough with great sex.”

Simon interrupted him. “Sex is never innocent. I don’t care what this younger generation says about casual encounters, if you’re attracted enough to someone to have sex, there’s more to it than might meet the eye.”

“That’s just it. I think there *is* more to it than the sex. I can’t get her out of my mind.”

“Well, then, if it’s that serious, take it to the next level.”

“That’s a problem. I haven’t exactly represented myself truthfully to her.”

“Ah, geez, you lied?” Simon’s look of incredulity almost made Gage laugh.

“More of an omission about my background.”

“I haven’t known you that long,” Simon said, “and granted, our conversations have been mostly about general things, but you don’t strike me as a criminal.”

“No, nothing like that. But the lady in question thinks I’m just a mail clerk when in actuality, I probably have enough money in the bank to buy her company.”

Simon whistled softly, then grinned. “Look at it this way. That’s probably better than actually being a mail clerk and pretending you’re a millionaire. I can’t see any woman walking away when she finds out you’re rich.”

Gage shook his head. "I don't know. She's an honest, straightforward woman. I don't know how she's going to react when she finds out." And that didn't even take into account the additional fraud he had begun perpetrating, Gage thought, and then dismissed that from his mind. Better to concentrate on one thing at a time.

"Any advice?" he asked Simon.

The older man clicked his tongue. "I've been married to the same woman thirty-five years, and I don't understand her all the time. But I have learned one thing. Women are much more likely to forgive your faults if you tell them, than if they accidentally find out on their own."

"I don't see how she could find out," Gage said.

This time, Simon laughed. "Then you're in more trouble than you think, son."

Early that afternoon, Gage decided to take Simon's advice, at least as far as advancing their relationship went. He called Keva's office from a pay-phone so Gloria wouldn't know the call originated from the mailroom. He asked her out, and although at first, she hesitated, he finally convinced her to let him take her to dinner. She gave him her address and he promised to be there at seven.

As he dressed for his first date in months, Gage still had misgivings about telling Keva the whole truth. Perhaps he would wait and see how the evening progressed. He tried to smooth down his unruly hair, decided it was time to get a haircut, and splashed on some cologne. Shrugging into a sports coat, he grabbed his keys and locked the apartment door behind him.

He knocked on her door promptly at seven, and was surprised when she only opened it a crack, the security chain still in place.

"Am I early?" he asked, even though he knew he wasn't. He could tell from the peek he got of her that she wasn't ready. In fact, she looked kind of—

"I'm sick," she said, then sneezed. "I'm sorry. It came on at work after we talked. I thought at first," another sneeze followed by a cough, "it was just my allergies."

"Let me in," Gage said.

"No," she replied, hiding further behind the door. "I'm sorry, but I definitely can't go out tonight." She sneezed again.

"Keva, open this door, or I'll have to knock it down and I don't think your manager will appreciate that." Gage had been impressed when he drove up to the gated community. The condos were new and very stylish.

"Go away," she said. "Please?"

"Nope."

Gage heard a sigh on the other side of the door, then she closed it to slide open the chain.

She did look the worse for wear, Gage thought as he stepped into the apartment, but he knew better than to say anything. Her hair was mussed; her nose red, and she had dark shadows under her eyes. She was wrapped in a terrycloth robe that Gage thought had seen better days. Somehow, it made her look even more vulnerable not to be dressed in a sleek silk peignoir.

"Did you see a doctor?" Gage asked, closing the door behind him.

"No, I'll be fine tomorrow." Another sneeze.

"And I thought only the male species was stubborn." Gage led her over to the couch, where she sat down with a plop. He put a hand to her forehead. She didn't appear to have a fever.

She frowned at him. "Are you a doctor in some other life?"

His heart skipped a beat. For all his vows to tell her the truth about who he really was, he didn't think tonight was the time for it.

"Just concerned is all," he said instead, walking toward the kitchen. He liked the layout of the place. Her living room and dining area were large and open, the kitchen separated by a breakfast bar. He opened the refrigerator door, then swore. "You don't have anything to eat in here."

"I just went to the store yesterday," came a muffled answer.

Gage snorted. Yogurt, skim milk, and salad fixings weren't what he considered grocery shopping.

"I'll be back in half an hour," he said, making a beeline for the door.

Keva stared blankly at the door when Gage left. Maybe it was the cold, or the medicine she had taken, but she couldn't figure out what he was up to. He barged in when she didn't want him to be here, and then left just as abruptly.

Shaking her head, she got up to slip the chain on the door, passing the small wall mirror that hung over the entry table.

"Oh, my God," she groaned, "it's no wonder he left." She ran her fingers through her hair, which did nothing but tangle it more. She hadn't even washed her makeup off when she had gotten home, and had mascara smeared beneath her eyes.

He had said half an hour. She glanced at the kitchen clock; ten minutes had already gone by.

She shuffled into the bathroom and managed to wash her face and get a comb through her hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. She thought about going into the bedroom and putting on some clothes, but before she could make a decision, the doorbell rang.

She gave herself a last glance in the mirror. Well, he hadn't actually left screaming in horror, and he had come back, she thought. Besides, she really did not feel well, so it was his own fault if he didn't like the way she looked.

That convoluted thinking always resulted when she had a cold, and Keva knew better than to make any decisions during the few days it would take for her to feel better. But that didn't save her from Gage McVicker, she thought as the doorbell rang again.

"These groceries aren't light, woman," said Gage, the minute she opened the door. He only held one bag, and as he walked past her to the kitchen, Keva seriously doubted his muscular arms couldn't handle it.

"You should be lying down," he commented as he started taking eggs, hotdogs, cheese and a host of other things out of the paper sack.

She looked at him and scowled. "You are the reason I'm not married."

"Me?" He paused in midturn.

Keva waved a hand negligently, sitting wearily down on a bar stool on the opposite side of the breakfast bar from where he stood. "I mean men in general. You all like to boss people around, especially women."

"Don't you think that's a little harsh, grouping us all together?" he asked over his shoulder as he opened her cupboards and drawers, pulling out whatever he seemed to think he needed.

Keva propped her head on both hands, elbows on the counter. "You're right. It's the medicine talking."

He grinned at her as he set a glass of orange juice in front of her. "Here. Drink this; you need vitamin C. And I'd change medicines if I were you. Whatever you're on is making you hallucinate if you think all men want to be bossy."

"Do you have a medical degree I don't know about?"

He stopped in the middle of beating some eggs in a bowl. "If I say yes, will you let me play doctor?"

She grinned at him, his teasing manner making her feel better. There was more to Gage McVicker than met the eye, and if not for the cold medicine, she would probably be asking him a lot of questions about his background, ambitions and career goals. She usually had a pretty good feel for people, and she innately knew Gage didn't belong in a mailroom. But it was just too much to think about at the moment, so she concentrated on the delicious smells coming from her kitchen.

"What are you making?"

"A gourmet delight," he answered as he sprinkled cheese, onion and hotdogs into the egg mixture.

"Hot dogs?" Keva made a face. "Do you know what's in those things?"

“From the looks of your ’fridge, I’m surprised you even know what a hot dog is.”

She shrugged. “Just because I don’t cook doesn’t mean I don’t eat.”

“Well, for your peace of mind, they’re all beef hot dogs.” Toast popped up at that moment and he turned to grab the slices, slather butter on them, and put them on the two plates he had found and placed on the counter. He looked quite at home in her kitchen, Keva thought, which scared her to even think about. She didn’t need a man in her life, or in her kitchen, and yet, every day found her thinking about Gage more and more.

“Eat,” he said, putting a plate in front of her. The concoction smelled heavenly and Keva dug in, realizing she was hungry, despite her cold.

Gage sat down on the stool beside her, taking the lid off a Styrofoam coffee cup. When he saw her eying it, he said, “Do you want some? I didn’t see a coffee pot and figured you didn’t drink it, so I just bought a cup at the convenience store on the corner.”

Keva shook her head. “I’m an iced cappuccino person myself.”

Gage made a face and shook his head. “Strong and straight. That’s the only way to drink coffee. Anything else is for sissies.” He dug into his gourmet scrambled eggs.

Keva ate, but not with the healthy appetite Gage appeared to have. As she sipped her orange juice, she took the time to study him. He looked different; more relaxed than she could remember from the times she had seen him before. Maybe it was just being away from the office. Whatever it was, it looked good on him. She put her fork on her plate. Gage stopped in midchew, raising an eyebrow in question. She wondered idly how he did that because both her eyebrows always seemed to go up and down together.

“I’m full,” she replied to his unspoken question.

“Eat it all. You’ll need it.” He pointed to her plate with his fork.

“Excuse me?”

“While damsels from the nineteenth century seemed to make a habit of fainting—swooning if you will,” he rolled his eyes as he continued, “I do not intend for my date to pass out in my arms.”

“You’ve been studying,” she said, amazed he would take the time to research the historic period that would be the focus of the *Voyager Ball* to be held in a week.

Gage nodded in response to her comment. “If you swoon on me, Ms. Monroe, it had better be from passion.”

* * * *

Keva felt much better Monday morning when the editorial meeting convened at nine o’clock. She had rested most of the weekend and had eaten like a royal pig, she thought, thanks to Gage. He had cooked for her, pampered her, massaged her back and tucked her in bed every night.

And not once had he crawled into bed with her. Keva considered that a “Catch 22.” She really hadn’t wanted sex because she didn’t feel well, but yet she wondered why he hadn’t initiated it, given the fireworks they created every time they were in the same room.

When she thought about it, she realized the entire weekend had been about her, and not just because she was sick. Gage hadn’t had to fetch and carry for her. He could have just quietly gone back to his own apartment after fixing her supper Friday night. Instead, he had held her while she slept off and on as they watched TV. He had tucked her into bed and then been back at her apartment the next morning with bagels and iced cappuccino and his strong black coffee.

When he found out she was a John Wayne fan, he had gone out and rented every one of his movies and they had spent an entire day watching westerns and war movies. At one point, she had found herself comparing him to Jason and then realized there really was no comparison. Gage had been content to do or not to do something simply based on her wishes, whereas Jason didn’t

know how to “veg out” and had never once in all the time they had dated asked, “What do you want to do?”

“Keva?” Elroy Maxwell’s voice brought her out of her daydream.

“Sorry, Max, I’m still a little spacey,” Keva hedged when the director of the fiction division gave her a look. “The cold medicine I’m on...” she let the sentence trail off, hoping her boss would think that was the reason for her lack of attention.

“Any last minute details for the party we need to discuss?”

Keva shook her head. “Everything is ready to go. The *Helmsley Park Lane Hotel* has been wonderful to work with. Has everybody gotten their costumes?” She looked around at the other people at the table. Everyone nodded.

“I think an historic ball is great,” Beth Franklin said with a grin. “I’ve tried on my dress and love the way the corset makes me look very busty.” Beth was a small-breasted woman and everyone laughed at her comment.

The meeting was adjourned and Keva visited with a few of the other editors as she walked to the elevators. She really enjoyed all the people she worked with at *Voyager*. They were a bright, energetic and enthusiastic bunch.

“Keva, I think you have a winner,” Beth stated emphatically after the editorial meeting. The assistant editor handed a manuscript back to Keva and she saw that it was Priscilla McVee’s partial.

“Are you going to offer McVee a contract?” Beth asked as they rode up to the tenth floor together.

Keva nodded. “There’s some revisions to be made, but I like her style, and the plot is steamy.”

“Oh, yeah,” Beth agreed. “A week in a cabin for a no-holds-barred sex romp? I could go for that. In fact, I’d take just a weekend of lust and lascivious behavior.”

Keva laughed. “Me, too,” she agreed as she turned to go into her office. And yet, when she thought about it, she had really enjoyed last weekend with Gage where, except for a few good night kisses, there hadn’t been anything remotely

resembling the mind-boggling sex she had experienced in his arms before.

“You want to hitch a ride together to the ball?” Beth continued. “It’s not like we have a life outside this place.”

She and Beth had become friends when Beth started a year ago. They occasionally ate dinner together or took off on a weekend jaunt when either or both were between relationships. It seemed Keva wasn’t the only one holding out for Mr. Wonderful.

“Actually, I have a date,” she said in answer to Beth’s question.

“A date? You’re not seeing Jason again, are you?” She and Beth had gone through quite a bit of *Ben & Jerry’s* ice cream when Keva broke up with Jason.

“No,” she hedged.

“Keva, spill it.”

Keva wasn’t about to tell Beth or anyone where Gage worked. Luckily, the intercom interrupted their conversation.

“Gotta go,” she said, slipping into her office.

* * * *

Gage wondered if he had lost his mind, dressed as he was in clothing from the 1800’s. He didn’t doubt if it had been anyone but Keva, he would have politely turned down her request for a date. But here he stood, decked out like a dandy.

Keva had told him to call in his measurements to a costume shop down on Broadway and that she would pick out his costume so they complimented each other. And of all things, Gage had let her. She really seemed excited about this charity ball and Gage had enjoyed seeing the sparkle in her eyes when she had explained the annual event.

The sporting division had sponsored it last year, she had told him, and had laughed as she described some of the costumes people had come up with—everything from human-sized rainbow trout to hunters wearing more greenery than a forest.

She had been in meetings every day this week and he hadn’t seen her once while delivering mail. He worried about her

pushing herself when she was still getting over her cold, but when he had finally gotten through Gloria to talk to her on the phone one day, she had assured him she was fine.

Tonight was the first time he'd see her in almost a week, and the anticipation was killing him. Keva Monroe was fast becoming the excitement he had needed in his life. He tucked the invitation in his coat pocket, put the top hat on at a jaunty angle, and whistled as he walked out the door.

* * * *

Keva waited anxiously in the lobby of the *Helmsley*, looking at the arriving guests, greeting them as they entered, but always keeping an eye toward the door. Her staff had made arrangements for all the guests to be picked up at *Grand Central Station* and brought to the hotel by carriage. It added a very romantic flair to the event, and she had heard many favorable comments as the ladies had alighted and were escorted in by liveried footmen.

She had just finished wishing a good evening to Elroy Maxwell and his wife when she felt a tingle go down her spine. She turned toward the giant double doors of the lobby as a new wave of guests arrived. Her breath caught in her throat when Gage made his entrance.

She had wondered how he would look in evening attire, but she had vastly underestimated his appeal. The black cut-away coat and trousers, pristine white shirt with high collar, and silver waistcoat fit his body to perfection. His slightly long hair was in perfect keeping with the style of the period, and as he approached, Keva saw more than one woman turn and stare.

"My dear Miss Monroe." He actually executed a very courtly bow in front of her, reaching for her hand and bringing it to his lips. Keva was struck speechless.

"I believe you're supposed to curtsy in return," he whispered, his twinkling brown eyes and wolfish grin telling her he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Keva had read enough romance, even if she hadn't lived it, to know how to respond. Back straight, she gave him a curtsy

and inclined her head ever so slightly. “Mr. McVicker, so kind of you to join us.” When he winked at her theatrics, she almost burst out laughing, but seeing as they had an audience, she bit her lip and gave him a dazzling smile instead.

“Might I escort you inside?” Gage continued in the role-playing and Keva found she liked not only the fantasy of believing they were in the nineteenth century, but she was particularly enjoying Gage’s very gentlemanly mannerisms. When he held out his arm, she placed her gloved hand very properly on his forearm and they began to walk.

“You are ravishing,” Gage said when they were out of earshot of the other guests.

His comment surprised her and she quickly glanced at him. His face was completely serious and he was staring at her quite intently. He was not role-playing. She blushed.

“Thank you,” she replied, slightly self-conscious over the abundant display of breast her royal blue silk gown revealed. She knew it was completely appropriate for the costume, but she wasn’t normally given to such exposure.

“The dictates of fashion for the time period are amazing to me,” Gage commented as they continued their walk into the ballroom.

“What do you mean?”

“Take a look around. Women bared their breasts almost to the point of spilling out of their bodices, and yet their skirts were long and extremely full to hide the curve of their hips and the length of their legs.”

“Have you become a connoisseur of women’s fashions, sir?” she teased him, feeling wonderfully playful under the magic light of the chandeliers.

He turned and caught up her hand, circling her waist with his other arm. In the same way he had begun dancing with her once before, he effortlessly led her into the flow of dancers as he answered her question.

“Not a connoisseur of fashions, my Lady, but definitely, a connoisseur of women.” He spun her in a graceful circle, pulling

her closer until her chest was against his own. “Or I should say, of one woman.”

Keva had no time to respond to Gage’s comments before a gentleman tapped Gage on the shoulder, politely interrupting to dance with her. And so the night progressed.

She danced with any number of men, mingled with the authors she knew who were present, and made sure the flow of champagne never ended. After the midnight buffet, there would be an auction of special, autographed copies of books and then more dancing.

Beth caught up with her as she was checking the auction table.

“*Where* did you get him?” her friend asked, latching onto her arm.

Keva had to turn around and look, for a minute forgetting. “Who?”

“Mr. Straight-out-of-an-historic-novel, that’s who. I swear, he could be a cover model.”

“I asked him. He declined.” Keva tried to keep her voice nonchalant so she didn’t pique Beth’s interest. She looked up and found Gage across the room, her gaze tracking his progress through the crowd. He seemed perfectly at home with the mix of people in attendance. She forced her gaze away, turning back to the book table.

“Well, if you’re not any more interested in him than that, you can just introduce me and I’ll take him off your hands.” Beth knew how to get her attention.

“I don’t think so. This one is—”

“Am I on your dance card, my Lady?” the deep masculine voice whispered in her ear, suggesting something other than a waltz was on his mind. Keva hadn’t even seen him approach, but Beth certainly had.

“If you’re not on hers, you can certainly fill up mine.” Beth slid neatly up to Gage’s side. Keva gave her a pointed look. Gage smiled wickedly.

Keva decided to leave Beth questioning her mysterious date, at least for now. She put her hand on Gage's arm and politely curtsied.

"I shall simply swoon if you are not," she replied to his earlier question.

He raised an eyebrow at her. She had come to enjoy that expression of his. "I told you, swooning was not an option tonight."

She gently maneuvered them toward the dance floor, leaving an open-mouthed Beth standing alone.

"No, you said it could only be with passion," Keva said when they were out of earshot. She watched as an array of expressions crossed his face. Hunger was the most heated and the longest lasting, and that was exactly what she had hoped to see.

As he danced her along the edges of the crowd, she couldn't get over the tingling feeling of his hands on her back, his leg brushing hers just so. She could feel his breath on her temple, and when he turned her, he pulled her just close enough so her breasts brushed his chest ever so slightly. The tantalizing feel was almost more erotic than making love naked; maybe because of the fear of discovery if anyone should glimpse the passion she was sure was evident in her eyes.

"Tell me, Miss Monroe, just how authentic is your costume?" Gage questioned her as they twirled to the music.

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. McVicker?" She was having too much fun not to continue the role-playing he seemed to enjoy.

He leaned closer to whisper just above her ear. "Do your pantalets have a slit in the crotch?"

She missed a step and his arm tightened around her waist.

"How did you—"

Gage smiled at her, his eyes glittering mischievously. "A man bent on seduction always does his homework." He pulled her tight and whirled her around just as the music ended.

“You looked flushed, Miss Monroe.” He spoke loud enough for some of the nearby guests to overhear. “Perhaps a walk in the gardens while we wait for the supper line to lessen is just what you need.” Without waiting for her to reply, he pulled her hand through the crook in his elbow and led her off the dance floor and out through the double doors to the gardens.

The minute they got beyond the lights of the ballroom, Gage turned and pulled her into his arms, ravishing her mouth as his hands caressed her body. Keva responded with a hot hunger that matched his, her arms sliding under his coat to bring him tight against her.

“Too many clothes,” Gage murmured as his lips traveled the curve of her bodice, kissing the tops of her breasts. He slid the sleeve of her dress off her shoulder, loosening the bodice enough for him to reach in and cup her breast.

“Oh,” was all Keva could manage as he sucked her into his mouth. She felt herself grow damp and didn’t think she could stand it if Gage didn’t touch her all over.

“Damn,” Gage whispered as voices from the doorway interrupted their rendezvous. He quickly righted Keva’s costume before anyone came close enough to see anything, but Keva felt her cheeks grow warm nonetheless.

She groaned as more people appeared, muttering a few swear words of her own at the interruption. Gage laughed and she playfully poked him in the stomach.

“It’s not funny,” she moaned, putting her forehead on his chest. “I ache.”

“Sweetheart, believe me, I know.” Gage took her hand and pulled it down to his crotch, the act hidden from wandering eyes by her voluminous skirts. She could feel the evidence of his arousal. “How long do you have to stay at this wing-ding?”

Keva sighed. “At least until after the auction is over.” She tilted her head up and kissed him lightly on the lips. “But the good thing is, I have a room here at the hotel.” Her heart thudded, knowing she was about to commit to a huge step in her

relationship with Gage. She didn't think she could bear it if he gave her the wrong answer to the question she was about to ask.

"Will you spend the night with me?"

Chapter 4

Gage was ready to write a check to the auction committee that would more than buy every damn book they had for sale, just to get the frigging thing over. As it was, he stood in the corner and sulked, drinking coffee and watching Keva help the auctioneer by holding up the latest prize to be purchased by the rich celebrities and citizens in attendance.

What the crowd didn't realize was he had the key to the most coveted prize of all. He slid his hand into the pocket of his trousers, fingering the old-fashioned brass key to Keva's hotel room. She had given it to him in case he got bored with the proceedings, she had said. He had looked on it as something much more. She was offering herself to him, not for a romp in the office after-hours, but for the night.

As he watched her, he fantasized about what he was going to do to her when he got her upstairs. By the time the last book was auctioned and Keva made her way toward him, he was so hard, he wondered if he could get upstairs without ravishing her. She must have seen something in his eyes, because she paused to speak to someone, caught his gaze on her, and quickly gave her apologies to the couple.

"Are you alright?" she asked when she stopped in front of him.

"Hell, no, I'm not. I've been watching you flaunt yourself on stage for the past two hours." He didn't know where the edginess had come from, but he couldn't seem to control his tongue. Maybe he should have had a drink to smooth his rough edges.

Keva opened her mouth to speak, then seemed to think better of it. She gave him a quizzical look before her lips turned up into one of her dazzling smiles. “Why, Mr. McVicker, I think you’re jealous,” she commented, taking his arm and steering him toward the elevators.

“Damn right. You’re *my* date,” he answered. *And a whole lot more.*

The minute the hotel door closed behind them, Gage roughly pulled Keva into his embrace, kissing her with an almost savage intensity. Panting, he rained kisses across her brow and down her neck.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he whispered huskily as his hands tried to find the fasteners that would rid her of the cumbersome gown she wore.

“How the hell do you get this thing off?” He had to turn her around to find the buttons. In his haste, his fingers trembled and he cursed again.

Keva turned back around despite his efforts and cradled his face in her hands. “Gage, we have all night.” And she kissed him.

Unlike Gage’s ravishment, Keva kissed him tenderly and slow. The silky texture of her lips and the gentle exploration of her hands were Gage’s undoing. Somehow, he managed to stand relatively still as she divested him of jacket and waistcoat, unbuttoned the tiny studs of his shirt and peeled it off his shoulders. He toed off his half boots.

With only his trousers left on, and those riding low on his hips, he began to undress Keva. Once he found the fasteners to the bodice of her gown, the rest was easy. As he peeled away each layer of clothing, he kissed any newly exposed skin. He covered her back, her shoulders and her arms with butterfly light kisses, nibbling bites, and soothing licks. Her skin was like silk but hot to the touch.

He turned her around so he could untie the string to her corset. He glanced over her shoulder to the mirror and watched her as he slowly removed the corset, releasing her breasts to their natural curves. He pulled her underslip down to her waist

before covering her breasts with his hands, gently massaging them. She laid her head back on his shoulder, closing her eyes.

“That feels heavenly,” she crooned.

Watching her expression in the mirror turned Gage on and he could feel his erection pushing against his trousers. No matter how many times he told himself to go slow and love Keva tenderly, whenever he got his hands on her, his control snapped.

He untied the waist of her dress, then the petticoats beneath until it all fell in a puddle at her feet. The white frilly-edged pantalets were the only thing covering her and Gage thought it made her even sexier. He turned her to face him and sank to his knees. He kissed the underside of her breasts, her belly. He dipped his tongue into her navel, all the while, his hands caressed and massaged the muscles of her back and buttocks.

Inch by tantalizing inch, he lowered the old-fashioned underwear, kissing the skin exposed along the way. When the drawers dropped to the floor, he buried his face in her curls, his tongue seeking the nub of her sex.

He heard Keva gasp, her hands clutching fistfuls of his hair, but he couldn't quit tasting her. She was beyond tempting. She was sinful and Gage wanted to devour every inch of her.

Her climax came quickly and without warning. One minute, she was moaning and the next, she shouted out his name in ecstasy. Gage refused to release her from his hold until he had wrung the last quiver from her body, then he turned her around and slowly kissed his way up her spine until he was standing behind her.

He crossed her chest with one hand to cover her breast, while the other slid across her belly to the triangle of curls between her legs. His gaze locked with hers in the mirror. He wanted her to see his possession; his branding of her body so she would know she was his and no one else's.

“Look,” he whispered.

Keva languidly opened her eyes and gazed at their reflection in the full-length mirror. Gage's hands possessed the most private parts of her body, just as his mouth had earlier. And for

some reason, his possession didn't bother her as it did with some of her boyfriends in the past. Gage had proven himself the gentlest of lovers.

"You are a fantasy come true, do you know that?" she said as she turned her face away from the erotic picture they made to kiss the side of his neck.

"Why?" His single word was accompanied with a slight tightening of his hands on her body. She could feel herself responding. Her nipples grew hard and the heat spiraled down her body to where one of his fingers slid into her.

"Every woman dreams of a man who pleasures her and thinks of her first."

His finger circled almost lazily around the nub of her sex. His other hand stroked her breast, his thumb and forefinger gently pulling her nipple to a hard peak. He watched her face respond to his caresses as he answered.

"A person can derive just as much pleasure, if not more, from giving as from receiving it. Do you think that when you climax, it doesn't please me and turn me on even more?"

"Really?" She made it sound as though she didn't believe him.

"I guess I'll have to show you," Gage said, swinging her up in his arms and carrying her to the bed. He settled himself between her thighs, his hands on either side of her.

"This time, concentrate on my pleasure. Watch me." His deep velvet voice mesmerized her.

Keva watched his concerted effort at control as he slowly slid into her. His face transposed to ecstasy as he sank deep, his hips meshing with hers. And while she tried to keep her focus on him, the pleasure building in her own body was rapidly taking over her thought patterns. But she found that her delight did increase with each of his sighs and the quiver of his muscles beneath her roaming hands.

And when he climaxed, Keva rode the torrent right along with him, her gasps echoing his shouts of bliss. She never would have thought that by creating pleasure for another, it was

returned to her tenfold. She had a feeling if Gage ever decided to write a book on the subject, it would sell a million copies easy.

* * * *

Dear Ms. Monroe,

My present job doesn't allow me any time off to meet you in person, but I was delighted to receive your offer to buy my manuscript, Love Slave. What I have sent you previously is a work in progress, and I will be happy to send you chapters as I complete them. I hope this is satisfactory.

Sincerely,

Priscilla McVee

Damn, Keva thought, when she read the letter from Ms. McVee. She had been afraid of that. Authors often wrote partials—three chapters and a synopsis—and if they were offered a contract, they finished the book. That worked well for established authors, but this woman was new to the field and Keva couldn't take the chance that she might not be able to deliver the completed book.

At the same time, there was something about the woman's writing that pulled Keva in and she didn't want to lose the opportunity to market her if she did complete her current work. Keva decided to take on this particular project as a personal one and so she typed the letter herself.

Ms. McVee,

Buying a first time author's incomplete manuscript is a risky endeavor for our company. However, I am intrigued enough with your work that I would like to offer you a contract for your manuscript, Love Slave, with the stipulation that the advance for the book be withheld until such time as you submit the completed work. By the way, the title, Love Slave, seems a trifle archaic and will probably be changed somewhere in the edit process.

Keva was delighted when Ms. McVee's reply came by the end of the week, because along with accepting her contract with no advance, the author had sent her additional chapters. Since this particular manuscript wouldn't run through the editorial

committee until it was complete, Keva tucked it into her briefcase to read when she got home and spent the rest of the day concentrating on the upcoming June releases.

* * * *

“Hey, sweet cheeks, how you doing?” Ginger said when Gage picked up the phone at his apartment. It had been a trying day at work, boring most of all, and Gage was tired of not seeing Keva when he delivered mail to the tenth floor suite. He didn’t think she was avoiding him, but sometimes, it was difficult to read the woman’s mind.

Ginger’s call was a welcome respite.

“Hello, yourself, darling. Are you ready to have my baby?”

“Oh, damn,” Ginger sounded really disappointed. “You called two days too late. I already told George I’d have his.”

“Well, congratulations. Have you set a date for the wedding?”

“Pretty quick, I reckon. I told him I was tired of doing his laundry and not getting anything but sex in exchange.” She laughed at her joke. “But that’s not why I called.”

“Oh?” Gage could think of only one reason Ginger would be calling him.

“Your stint at *Voyager* is up the end of the week. Their regular guy is coming back from his surgery.”

“Damn, Ginger, I like it there. Find the other guy another job.” Gage needed time to think of a new strategy if he wasn’t working in the same building as Keva.

“What’s her name, buddy-boy?” Ginger’s perception amazed him.

“It wouldn’t be gentlemanly of me to say. But I need more time, Ging.”

“You’re asking for trouble working for a company and screwing some woman executive.”

“It’s not like that. What do you say?”

"I can't help you this time, Gage, even if I wanted to. This case is tied to workman's comp and they're sticklers for the rules. Besides, I have something else lined up for you."

"It's not the job, Ginger, you know that. In this case, it's the woman." Gage sighed, thinking it was probably for the best anyway. He hadn't seen Keva all that much at work after the first few times, so would it really matter if he wasn't working in the same building? Maybe he could up the stakes and put on the pressure to see her more often if his schedule was more flexible.

"I think I'll take a hiatus," Gage said.

"A what?" Ginger replied.

"A vacation. Take me off your 'to do' list, Ginger. I'll call when I want back on." Gage hung up the phone and sat back down at his laptop, more determined than ever to see this latest endeavor through.

Ever since they had spent the night at the *Helmsley*, Gage hadn't seen Keva. She wouldn't return his phone calls, and she was never in her office when he delivered the mail. At least that was what Gloria told him. He wasn't sure if she just didn't want him anymore, or if she had decided a mail clerk was beneath her notice. Gage couldn't have been that wrong in reading her, he thought, but until he confronted her, he wouldn't know.

* * * *

Keva changed to a comfy shorts outfit when she got home and fixed herself a TV dinner. She tried not to think of Gage, but he kept intruding in her thoughts, especially as she ate a rather tasteless microwave meal. *The man could cook*, she thought, recalling the way he had looked so at ease in her kitchen.

She moved to the living room, hoping to dislodge his image, but everywhere she looked, she had a memory of him being there, filling the empty spaces and taking care of her.

She felt terribly guilty for her behavior this week. After their night of wondrous lovemaking in her hotel room, Keva was more confused than ever about her feelings toward Gage. Everything about him turned her on and kept her mesmerized. He was very good-looking, that was for sure, but he made her

laugh, treated her with the utmost respect, and seemed to go out of his way to see that she had a good time.

His gallant behavior at the *Voyager* party was just an example. He had truly seemed to enjoy himself dancing, visiting with authors and businessmen and role-playing like a grand gentleman from a bygone era.

And therein lay the problem, Keva thought, staring out the window to the starlit night. Gage McVicker seemed too good to be true. What possessed a man with his obvious intelligence and presence to be satisfied in the mailroom of a large corporation? Where originally, she had envisioned him as a down-to-earth country boy, she now sensed there was much more to Gage than met the eye. She could easily see him in a corporate boardroom, giving orders he expected to be promptly obeyed, negotiating business deals, and even having three martini lunches as he wined and dined clients.

Keva had decided she needed a little distance to sort out her feelings, and had, therefore, hidden behind her closed door all week. She couldn't think straight when she was around him. Now she contemplated the questions that had nagged her.

Did she want to continue seeing him? Was it more than sex? She knew the answer to that was a definite yes. The sex was great, but she actually enjoyed just being around Gage. He had a keen wit and a ready smile.

The question was whether he could handle her status in the publishing industry and the type of books she edited. At present, he didn't appear to mind her job, or the long hours. He seemed to have no aspirations about joining the elite clubs she used to frequent with Jason. At least he hadn't asked her about going to any of them.

As Keva thought over the past several weeks, she realized she didn't miss that part of her life either. Whenever she and Jason had gone out to dinner at the club, there was always someone who had to pull one-upmanship, either by the guests they invited, clothes they wore, or awards they had achieved.

Keva was very tired of trying to “keep up with the Jones” and the more she thought about it, the more she wanted a normal life.

She laughed at that thought, wondering exactly what normal even meant today. Deciding her one-sided dialogue would get her nowhere, she flipped through the channels on the TV, but nothing caught her interest. She thought about calling Gage, but hesitated. What would she say?

She spied the manuscript envelope she had brought home and decided a little reading was what she needed. Maybe Ms. McVee’s writing would take her mind off Gage McVicker.

An hour later, Keva knew better. If anything, McVee’s writing made Keva ache for what she knew Gage could give her; what he could do to her and what she would like to do to him.

She read the last section again.

Tabitha had wracked her brain for days trying to come up with an idea for the aromatherapy company that wanted to give her small business the chance to do their ad campaign. Deciding it wouldn’t do her any good to stay late at the office and stare at the uninspiring walls, she left for home.

When she opened her apartment door, she heard a noise. “Jordan?” she called.

“In here.” The reply came from her bedroom. Tabby frowned. She and Jordan had great sex together, but had maintained separate residences because Tabby wasn’t ready to commit to a serious relationship. She didn’t remember giving him a key.

She dropped her purse on the bed and walked toward the bathroom, where she could hear water running. She stopped on the threshold and stared, her body instantly tingling and her heart rate increasing.

Jordan stood beside the bathtub, a very small white towel wrapped around his hips. He had knotted the ends at his waist, but the bottom edges didn’t quite meet, leaving the front of his thigh entirely bare. If the towel gaped just a little bit more, Tabby could see his sex. As it was, there was a very nice bulge in the front of the towel.

“Your bath awaits, madam.” Jordan gave her a sexy smile. It was only then that Tabby noticed the smell of lavender in the air and the warmth coming from the tub. Small votives were placed around the edge of the bath, their soft light lending the room a romantic ambiance.

With his eyes saying more than words, Jordan slowly stripped her clothes off her, pulled her hair atop her head with a twist and a clip, and lifted her into his strong arms. The feel of his hard muscles against Tabby’s softer skin ignited fires in her that she knew she would need him to douse. But not quite yet.

Together, they sank into the steaming water. Jordan held her on his lap, sponging fragrantly scented water over her breasts, her stomach, her arms. When she reached for the sponge to return the favor, he murmured in her ear.

“Let me pleasure you. It turns me on to see you so soft and seductive.”

And Tabby let him, feeling him sink into her from behind, filling her and making her throb while his large hands continued to caress her breasts until she practically swooned with passion.

“Swooning with passion,” Keva murmured, then jerked awake when the phone rang. She wasn’t sure if she had been reading Priscilla’s manuscript, or if she had been dreaming about her night with Gage. The continuous ringing of the phone brought her more fully awake and she shook her head to clear it as she picked up the receiver.

“Hello?” She glanced at the clock. *Who would be calling at eleven o’clock?*

“Are you avoiding me?” Gage’s voice rumbled over the cordless.

Keva hesitated before answering. “No, why?”

“I haven’t seen you since the party.” There was a pause. “Since the night we spent together.”

“Gage, can we talk about this tomorrow? I’ve had a very stressful week with all the books being released this month.”

"I can help you with that." His voice had dropped an octave to a deep, velvety growl.

"With my releases?"

"Well, that too," he twisted her words around. "But I meant with your stress. I'm very good at stress relief."

Even in her confused state over her feelings for this man, she couldn't get him out of her mind and she really would like to see him. Still, Keva hesitated.

"I'm coming over." The phone clicked on the other end.

* * * *

Keva was still trying to decide whether to be angry about Gage's highhanded manner with her on the phone when the doorbell rang. She frowned, thinking he had made awfully quick time, but then she didn't know exactly where he lived. He could be right around the corner.

"Keva, open up." He rapped on the door with his knuckles.

Keva sighed. She could tell herself whatever she wished, but the truth of the matter was that she wanted Gage. Beside her, inside her, over and under her. *Anywhere, anytime and anyway*, she thought, recalling a line from Priscilla's manuscript.

She pulled open the door just as he lifted his fist to knock again. "You're going to wake the neighbors," she said.

"It's only eleven o'clock," he answered as he walked in.

"Midnight," she corrected, looking at her watch. "Besides, it's a quiet neighborhood."

Gage grinned at her. "Then I can't make you scream in ecstasy tonight?"

Even as tired as Keva was, the very thought of him had the achiness leaving her shoulders and a totally different kind of ache starting much lower in her body.

"I told you I was here to help you feel better," Gage said as he circled her wrist with his large hand and tugged her toward the bedroom. "I have a surprise that is guaranteed to please." It was then she noticed the small paper sack he carried.

Gage sat her down on the bed, touched a finger to her lips when she started to ask him a question, and then disappeared

into her bathroom. She could hear water running and tilted her head to the side trying to see past the door, but then Gage stepped through the opening and she couldn't think past what he was wearing; or more to the point, not wearing.

He had shucked his clothes, except for a rather brief pair of black underwear. His muscles glowed in the soft light that surrounded him. It hadn't been often that they had even managed to get completely naked before they were madly making love, and Keva didn't think she would ever tire of looking at him. His body was sleek and lean with no extra fat she could see. Although his arms and legs were sprinkled with light colored hair, his chest was smooth and brown.

He ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it back from his forehead. His chest and arm muscles bulged. "Your bath awaits." He pulled her to her feet and very slowly, undressed her. He didn't touch her breasts, or between her legs, but concentrated on gently massaging her muscles as he uncovered them. The very fact that he was avoiding her e-zones made her even more acutely aware of them and of his hands on her body.

"Tonight, I am your love slave," he whispered in her ear, lifting her in his arms and carrying her into the bathroom. The room was lit with small candles ringed the tub and a fragrant aroma wafted up from the steaming water.

"What is—" she began.

"Lavender," he replied, setting her on her feet so he could peel off his bikini briefs.

"Lavender and lace," she murmured, thinking the soap bubbles floating on top reminded her of frothy lace. "How could you possibly know?"

He stepped into the tub and offered her his hand. She joined him and together, they settled into the steamy water, her on his lap, their legs entwined. His hands slid up her back and began a gentle massage of her shoulders. He kissed her neck, her ear. He lifted one hand out of the water and kissed each of her fingers.

She thought of the manuscript lying on her coffee table. Jordan had used lavender with Tabby. What were the odds of two events occurring almost exactly alike?

“Gage.” She tried to twist around to see him, but he anchored her hips against his groin. When she felt his erection against her buttocks, she almost forgot what she intended to ask him.

“How did you know lavender relieves stress?”

Gage kissed a path across her shoulders as his hands slid around her sides to cradle her breasts. She could feel him shrug against her back. “I overheard two women talking in the breakroom. One said lavender was good for stress and the other said rosehips. I decided on the lavender, because your hips are very fine just the way they are.” His hands slipped lower, lifting her hips just enough so he could slide into her, filling her, making her forget everything except him.

After all, it was a very logical explanation.

* * * *

Gage tugged Keva closer to his side, her warm body fitting his perfectly. He had tried to keep his life separate from his feelings for her, but the two had become entwined to the point where sometimes, he didn’t think he could live without her. That was dangerous territory given the fact he really knew very little about her, and because he had secrets of his own.

“Tell me about yourself,” he prompted her, because he knew she wasn’t asleep. She had been drawing doodles on his chest with one finger and regardless of the fact they had just made love, he could feel himself responding to her again.

She shrugged slightly. “You already know about me. What about you?”

Gage chuckled. “Oh, no, I asked first. Spill it, lady.”

“There’s really not much to tell. I grew up in a small southern town where a lot of people don’t believe *The War* ever happened and they cling to tradition. My parents were ‘old money’ as they call it there, so I had a debutante ball and all the things society dictated. But I really wanted a career. I didn’t

want to just grow up and marry some 'good old boy' whose pedigree went back more generations than mine."

"You don't care about money?" Gage had plenty and could afford to keep her in style, but he needed to know how important that was.

"Oh, I like money," she said and Gage felt a twinge of disappointment. "But I wanted to earn it myself, not marry it."

"What about you?" she asked. "I know practically nothing about who you are."

Gage wasn't ready to uncover any truths about himself yet. "Do you play golf?" he asked instead of answering her.

"No."

"Play tennis?"

She shrugged. "Not very well."

"What then?" Gage was truly curious as to what took up her time.

"Well, I learned to dance, play the piano and sing."

"Really?" Gage was impressed. "Are you any good?"

She lifted her head to look at him and grinned. "No."

He laughed, rolling her beneath him and settling between her thighs. "We definitely need to broaden your horizons."

* * * *

Keva stretched luxuriously the next morning, surprised at how well she felt considering how little sleep she had gotten. She thought that probably had more to do with Gage's lovemaking than the lavender bath they had shared. Still, it had been very nice, and very thoughtful, and very sensuous.

She rolled to her side, her mind lingering over the sensuous part. Gage lay on his back, gloriously naked with sunlight softly highlighting his flat abdomen. She couldn't believe that this man could take her to such heights of ecstasy time and time again and never appear to wear out. There had been nothing soft and gentle about their lovemaking. Gage was a vigorous man and she had displayed just as much energy when it came to something she liked as much as she did him.

“What are you thinking, hellion?” Gage asked, and Keva knew by the sound of his voice that her face had given her away.

She gave him a seductive smile. “I was wondering if we set any kind of record.” She traced a path with her finger from his chin, down his throat to circle first one nipple and then the other. They peaked instantly and she leaned over to lick the one closest to her.

“Are you talking most screams, or most orgasms?”

“Either or both.” Her hand trailed down his belly, then criss-crossed his hips. She watched, fascinated, as he slowly came to life. She didn’t even need to touch him for his penis to elongate and begin the dance that so turned her on.

“Are you wanting breakfast this morning, Keva?” Gage asked.

She turned to stare at him. “How on earth can you ask a question like that at a time like this?”

“Because,” he drew the word out as he rolled on top of her. He kissed her nose, then her eyelids before settling his lips across her mouth, delving deep to her very soul. He paused to catch her gaze, his look more intent than Keva could remember in the weeks she had known him. “Because I don’t plan on letting you out of this bed anytime soon, so you’d better not be hungry.”

Chapter 5

“Oh, how I like a man who takes charge.” Keva came right back at him, her arms circling his neck. She ran her foot up and down his leg.

Gage nibbled his way from Keva’s luscious mouth to her delicious breasts. He kept his hands braced on either side of her body, touching her only with his mouth. He licked and sucked lightly on the tender sides, right where they began to mound from her ribs, then tugged playfully on her nipples with his teeth. When she tried to corral his head, he captured her wrists and anchored them to the mattress with his hands. The more he teased, the more she squirmed.

“Gage, I want to touch you,” she moaned.

“Sweetheart, you touch me, and I’ll explode. Just let me have my fun right now.” His lips grazed the underside of her breast, gradually working his way down her pale, flat belly. She was a work of art, his Keva, and no matter how many times he made love to her, the craving wouldn’t go away.

“Open for me, love,” he whispered against her hips as he slid even lower on the bed. Keva had mentioned the last time that this was far too personal as far as sex went. And Gage agreed—for sex. But he was making love, not having sex, and the very intimacy of the act should communicate how he felt about her.

Curving his hands over her inner thighs, he opened her to his kiss. Slowly, with infinite care, he caressed her with his mouth, his tongue. Her scent was musky and primitive—all woman—put on earth to procreate in order for the species to

survive. And in the suspension of time when Keva cried out his name, Gage knew in his heart that he had found the other half of himself, the one he was meant to mate with for life.

* * * *

Much later in the day, after Keva had soaped him down in the shower and he, in turn, had washed her all over, they decided to take a drive. Gage had his old Mustang convertible parked behind Keva's BMW.

"We can take the Beemer," she said, fishing in her purse for her keys.

Gage shook his head. "If you're my date, you go in my car. Besides, it's a gorgeous day and I'll put the top down." He waited to see her reaction. His car wasn't exactly a jalopy, but it wasn't a BMW either. He wasn't disappointed when a brilliant smile lit up her entire face.

"Wonderful! Do I need a scarf for my hair?" She hurried around to the passenger side and had slid onto the seat before Gage finished putting the top down.

"Check the glove box. There might be a rubber band in there someplace." He climbed in and revved the engine. He had left his Porsche back in Boston and had driven the car he had bought when he got his first job. He had put two engines in it over the years, but just couldn't part with it. Besides, Mustangs were classics.

"Where shall we go?" he asked as he turned away from the gate and onto the side street.

"Do you know where the Manhattan Bridge is?"

He nodded.

"Cross the bridge and you'll hit Flatbush Avenue. Drive south until you smell salt spray in the air and hear the crash of the ocean waves."

He glanced over at her. Her hair flew around her face from the breeze. He couldn't see her blue eyes behind the sunglasses she wore, but her smile was enough to make him ache all over. Maybe taking a ride wasn't the best idea. Everything about Keva Monroe made him want to carry her to bed and love her all day

long. Wherever they were going, he knew it was public enough that he would have to be on his best behavior.

He popped a Dave Matthews's Band CD into the player and turned up the volume.

"I love Dave Matthews," Keva said over the music, "but I had you pegged for country."

Gage made a face. "Never! But how do you go from Yanni and a John Wayne fetish to alternative rock?" He glanced her way.

She gave him a mischievous smile. "I am a very complex and multi-faceted person."

"That you are, lady, that you are."

The traffic was relatively light, given the size of the metropolis, and half an hour later, they parked in the public parking by Rockaway Beach. Gage hadn't had a lot of time to explore since he had moved here, and the city itself didn't interest him as much as the surrounding area. After all, he had grown up in Boston, and though not as large, it held much the same attraction.

It was a fascinating day for Gage. As they walked from the boardwalk down to the beach, Keva kicked off her shoes and ran to the edge of the water. The knee-length sundress she wore swayed around her legs, and she grabbed it with both hands as the waves came into shore. When she kicked up her dainty foot and sprayed him with water, he took off his shoes, rolled up his pant legs and chased her down the beach.

Catching her around the waist from behind, he swung her high and threatened to toss her to the sharks. She squealed in delight and Gage was struck by her playfulness. Their bouts in bed were always intense, and he hadn't had the chance to see this side of her.

"I'm hungry," she stated as they continued their barefoot walk.

"For?" Gage knew where his hunger lay.

"A Coney dog and cola," she stated emphatically.

"I thought you could only get those on Coney Island."

She rolled her eyes at his pun. "And cotton candy."

"What's that?"

She stopped in midstride. "You can't be serious. You've never had cotton candy?"

He shook his head. "We were so poor growing up, we were lucky if we had a cup of oatmeal in the morning." He was teasing, though it wasn't far from the truth. Money had always been tight, yet he had never really considered himself poor.

She slid her hand into his. "I'm coming to realize I know very little about you, Gage McVicker. Like where you're from and your family."

Gage shrugged, knowing he had to watch what he said but not wanting to lie to her. "I was born and raised in Boston. My dad worked in a factory. I have five brothers, no sisters, and a mother who could make even oatmeal taste good."

"Five brothers? My goodness, if they're anything like you, your parents had their hands full."

He stopped on the boardwalk, turning to face her. "What do you mean, like me?"

She twined her arms around his neck. "I mean handsome and athletic and," she brushed a stray curl from his forehead, "probably so full of mischief, they had to constantly take a switch to your behind."

He pulled her close to him. "I was handsome, but it was my brothers who were full of mischief."

She grinned at him. "Yeah, right." And then she kissed him; a playful, light kiss that nevertheless, was sinful in its capacity to make Gage ache.

"Come on," she said, breaking his hold, "you have a lot to experience today."

They indulged in hot dogs, piled high with mustard and relish, and drank large sodas.

"I thought you didn't eat hot dogs?" Gage asked.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "A Coney is different."

They topped their meal off with pink cotton candy. Gage wasn't given to eating a lot of sweets, but the cotton candy tasted heavenly when he sampled it by licking Keva's lips.

The shops along the Boardwalk were full of touristy things, but they would stop and look every so often as they walked. Gage was continually surprised when Keva would exclaim over something trivial. Her professional office persona was completely gone, and in its place was a very happy, relaxed, and gorgeous woman.

"Wait, stop." She pulled on his arm as they walked past an arcade. "If you truly are my date, you have to win me a prize."

She grinned, then reached out and circled his bicep with both hands. "How's your pitching arm today?"

Gage groaned. "My brother, Chase, was the baseball player. Gordon played hockey, Michael and John liked basketball, and Travis was the football player."

Even so, he gamely handed the carnie some money and threw three baseballs at cement milk cans set just far enough apart to make it impossible to knock all three down at once. The best he did was two, which only earned her a four inch pink teddy bear.

Keva clutched it to her chest as they walked away. "With five brothers, you had to have played something. What was your sport?"

Gage rolled his eyes. "When I was young, I was pretty small for my age. I didn't want to wrestle—with boys—so I was a coxswain."

"Cock what?" She burst out laughing.

He swatted her butt. "A coxswain. It's the cadence caller on a rowing team. It was one team sport I could participate in because it didn't require owning any equipment. Even if we were poor, the school we attended offered a lot of sports and activities."

They had gradually walked back toward the car as the day ended. "Well, Mr. Cox-son, get your engine revved because

there's something else I want you to see." Gage opened her door for her and silently admired her legs as she slid onto the seat.

"I'm at your disposal," he said, getting behind the wheel. "Every single part of me." He gave her a wolfish grin as he backed out of the parking spot.

Keva thought how different her life had been from Gage's while growing up. She was an only child and she had wanted for nothing. She sometimes thought it would have been better if she hadn't been given everything on a silver platter. She knew that was one reason she had broken away from home to have a career. She needed to feel she had accomplished something on her own.

Even given the differences in their backgrounds, she was finding that she cared for Gage very much. Today had been wonderful—full of fun and laughter. She honestly hadn't thought of work at all, which was a total surprise, given her propensity for being a workaholic.

She pointed him in the right direction and they drove clear to the end of the highway. She hopped out of the car before he could assist her.

"Come on, you're going to miss it." She grabbed his hand and led him to the edge of the beach at Rockaway Point. For as far as the eye could see, the setting sun glittered off the blue ocean. Waves crashed against the rocks that jutted out of the water just offshore.

She turned to him and asked, "Is that not the most beautiful sight you have ever seen?"

He brushed a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. His hand caressed the side of her face and she leaned into it. She never could get enough of his touch. When he didn't immediately answer her question, but continued to stare at her, she wondered what he was thinking.

"What?"

"It's the second most beautiful sight I have ever seen."

She could feel herself blush at his compliment.

Gage wrapped both arms around her and pulled her back against his chest and together, they watched the sun go down. When the last vestiges of color were fading, Gage kissed the side of her neck just below her ear. She shivered, even though his lips were warm, his breath moist.

“How heavy is your schedule in the next week or two? Will there be a break between your June and July releases when you can get away for a week?” he asked.

“We’re just about done with June, and of course, there’s little time in between. Why?”

“I thought we could take off and go exploring.”

“Exploring what?” she asked, but had a feeling she already knew because Gage’s hands had been mapping the terrain of her midriff and now slowly slid over her breasts, capturing one in each hand and kneading gently.

“Don’t you have to work?” she managed to ask. “You haven’t been employed long enough to earn any vacation.”

She could feel him shake his head. “My job was only temporary and I guess the regular guy is ready to come back. I have access to a cabin in Colorado, and I want to take you there.”

She began to ache in places that should have been well satisfied from the thorough loving Gage had given her last night and again this morning. *A week in a cabin*. Instantly, she conjured images from Priscilla McVee’s synopsis when Jordan promised Tabitha a week in a cabin where he would make her every fantasy come true.

* * * *

It took Keva another week to clear her schedule so she could take off. Gage was patient and didn’t question her. She thought how different and thoughtful that was. Most men she knew would naturally assume she could change her schedule at their beck and call.

Gage had insisted on buying the airline tickets, and though she wanted to protest, she felt it would be an affront to his male pride, so she kept her mouth shut. Because she was working long hours to get everything done, she didn’t see him at all, but he

called her every day. One such call had her wishing they were leaving that day instead of three days hence.

“What do I need to pack for this trip?” she asked. He had told her he would plan the itinerary and she didn’t know if they would eat out, do any sightseeing, or go to any clubs. There was still a lot about Gage he hadn’t told her, but she had decided if they spent a week together, she would have time to find out his entire life’s story.

“Nothing.”

She had been woolgathering and hadn’t understood. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You don’t have to pack anything except a toothbrush. I don’t plan on letting you out of bed for the whole week, so why bother with clothes?” His voice was dark and deep and Keva went weak in the knees.

“Surely we have to eat?” She thought to question.

“Uh-huh,” was his noncommittal answer.

“And we have to get there. We can’t go waltzing through the airport in the nude.” She could play his game, she decided. She was satisfied when she heard a groan on the other end of the line.

“It would save time at the security checkpoints,” he said.

She laughed. “Well, what about—”

“Okay, I give. If I don’t quit thinking about you not having clothes on, I’ll go crazy before we ever get on the plane. Pack some jeans and sweaters; it gets cool at night in the mountains.”

“Do I need anything to go out for the evening?”

“Hell, no. I don’t plan on sharing you with anyone.”

Alone in a cabin for a week. Keva shivered in delight.

* * * *

Gage had scheduled their flight so they arrived in Denver in time to rent a car and get to his cabin before dark. He had checked with his brothers and Charlie, his office manager, to make sure none of them were using it for the week. Even though the cabin belonged to Gage, all the boys and Charlie had keys

and equal access to use it. All Gage asked in return was that they let the others know their plans.

In this case, his younger brothers, Chase and Travis, had asked him a hundred questions about who he was taking and why they couldn't come out and visit as long as he was there.

Charlie, on the other hand, was so happy to hear from Gage, that he could have cared less if the cabin burned to the ground. It had taken Gage two hours on the phone to get all his questions answered, and most of that time was simply confirming that he had made the right decisions for the company. Gage even promised Charlie a bonus if he would leave him alone, but Charlie warned him that now he had his number, thanks to caller ID, he would know where to find him if something else arose.

"You haven't been accessing the checking account," Charlie had commented in the course of their discussion. Charlie held Gage's power of attorney and had authority to sign on the company account. When Gage had left Boston, he had left everything behind.

"Charlie, I have actually been working for a living. You know, with my hands and everything."

"You're kidding? You didn't let your brain get fried down in Texas, did you?"

"How did you know I was in Texas?" Gage hadn't been in contact with Charlie for months.

"Your mom told me."

Gage closed his eyes. The hardest thing he'd had to do when he left town was say good-bye to his mom. Dad had died ten years ago and although Mom still lived in the small house they had grown up in, he and his brothers made sure she wanted for nothing. Regardless of where he had traveled these past eight months, he had made sure he wrote her every week, and called her on Sundays. He told her about his travels and the interesting people and places he had seen. She had never been out of the state of Massachusetts, and though they had tried, she had

insisted there was no place she wanted to go, as long as her boys and the grandchildren were in Boston.

Gage shook off the memories, not normally given to melancholy. "Charlie," he interrupted his partner's rehash of first quarter revenues. "You're doing great. Take some time off. Just don't show up at the cabin."

"You know, maybe I need to talk to the boys and—"

"Don't even think about it unless you want to lose more than your job," Gage countered, issuing the threat in his sternest voice. Charlie might be a childhood friend and he was just as much a brother as the other five who belonged to his family through blood, but on this, Gage would tolerate no interference.

"It must be serious," Charlie had said in a somewhat awed voice.

"It is, Charlie. It's my life." Gage had hung up the phone.

Now, he glanced over at Keva as he rounded the last curve of the highway before he turned off onto gravel. She had been fairly quiet during the flight and had only asked a few questions on the drive out here. Gage wasn't sure if that was good or not. She had agreed to come with him, knowing full well they were going to a cabin in the woods of Colorado. He had told her it was rustic, not primitive, but was she more of a city girl than he had imagined?

A mile down the gravel, they came to a small grocery and gas station near the edge of the lake. Gage pulled in and stopped.

"We'll buy some groceries here, unless you want to plan on catching our supper every night."

"Catching?" Her voice sounded a trifle high.

"You don't know how to fish, Ms. Monroe?" He cocked a brow in question as he opened her door for her. She had worn Capri pants and a crop top and Gage wanted to touch the bare skin of her midriff.

"I'm afraid I don't," she said, but then added, much to Gage's delight, "but I guess I could learn."

He gave her a quick kiss. "We'll put that on the agenda for first thing tomorrow," he said, and then quickly revised, "No, better make that later in the week."

A bell over the door tinkled when they walked through. Gage was amazed when old man Mackelroy coughed from behind the old-fashioned cash register. Gage thought he had probably been here before the mountains, he was so old.

"Do I know you, Sonny?" the old man asked.

Gage figured he should, given the times he had stopped in on the way to the cabin over the years, but he didn't want Keva to know that, so he quickly put out his hand to introduce himself.

"Name's Gage, sir, and this is my friend, Keva." He figured if he only used his first name, maybe Mackelroy wouldn't recognize it.

"Ma'am," he nodded in acknowledgement to Keva. "What can I help you with?" He started to get up from his stool, and Gage wondered if he would make it. He looked frail enough that a good breeze would blow him over.

"We'll just wander around and pick up what we need. How's the fishing?"

"Been getting some fair-sized trout and large mouth. Need some worms?"

Gage nodded. "Better give me two dozen. My friend, here, has never fished and she might drown more of those critters than she manages to entice a fish with."

"Worms?" Keva asked as the old man chuckled and shuffled off to get the fish bait. Gage just grinned.

When he returned, Gage had picked up enough groceries to last them. If they ran out, they could always come back down to the store. As he was paying, careful not to let Keva see how much cash he carried in his wallet, he had another thought.

"How's the snipe hunting this year?" He winked at the old man as he asked the question.

Mackelroy coughed and wheezed, looking between Gage and Keva. He grinned, revealing a gap where his front teeth

were missing. “Well, now, funny you should ask. I heard tell just the other day that the snipe are in fine fiddle this year and there’s plenty of them.”

“What are snipe?” Keva broke into the conversation.

“You never hunted snipe, young lady?” the old man asked.

Gage added his own question. “Where have you been all your life?”

She playfully punched his arm as Mackelroy laughed.

Out by the car as Gage loaded the groceries, Keva asked seriously, “Are we really going to fish and hunt snipe?”

Gage had to turn his head away until he could control the laughter threatening to erupt. When he could get his smile under control, he turned to her. “Don’t you want to fish?”

“Oh, yes, I do. I told you about my years growing up. All I ever got to do was what my mother called the ‘art of being a lady’ and that didn’t include anything that was fun.”

“Well, I told you we’d have to broaden your horizons. But fishing and snipe hunting aren’t first on the list of things to do.”

“What is?” she asked.

Gage took another step closer until their chests almost touched. He cupped her face with his hands and kissed her deeply, knowing they were practically alone. If old man Mackelroy witnessed the kiss, he would probably cheer Gage on. He felt himself get hard and he thrust his hips toward her.

“Do you have to ask?”

* * * *

The road continued to weave back and forth and Keva hoped Gage knew where he was going because she sure didn’t. She never did have a good sense of direction, and after his completely devastating kiss at the grocery store, she couldn’t have told him up from down, much less left from right.

She had decided on the trip out here that there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to and for Gage. She wanted to find all his secret buttons and push every single one, more than once. She had hoped to receive more chapters from Priscilla McVee before she had left New York, just in case she needed some

ideas. Nothing had come in the mail, but the more she thought about it, Keva had the feeling that she and Gage could get pretty inventive on their own.

The car slowed and Gage turned to the left onto what looked more like a wagon trail than a road. “Good thing you rented a four-wheel drive vehicle,” she commented.

“The roads are usually in good shape around here, but the cabin does sit back pretty far.”

“You seem to know your way around here fairly well,” Keva said, remembering the look from the old man at the grocery store. It was almost as if he knew Gage, even if he couldn’t recall his name.

Gage shrugged at her comment. “I can come here as often as I like. It doesn’t cost me anything and I like the outdoors.”

No, Keva thought, it didn’t cost anything except two airline tickets, car rental and groceries at a time when Gage wasn’t even employed. It struck her again that there was more to Gage than she knew and she was more determined than ever to find out just exactly what that was.

Gage stopped the car and Keva instantly revised her definition of “cabin.” The beautiful log structure in front of her had a wraparound porch on two sides and she could see a screened-in porch toward the back. Within thirty yards of the front steps, a dock ran out onto the water. From here, Keva noticed that the property sat on the edge of a cove with a narrow channel that led to the larger lake. There was a motorboat under a covered portion of the dock, suspended above the water.

“What a beautiful view.”

She helped Gage get the groceries and they walked up to the porch. When he inserted the key and pushed open the door, it squeaked slightly on the hinges. “I need to get the oil can out,” Gage commented.

The interior was everything Keva would have thought a cabin should be, if she were the one drawing the floor plan. The great room was two stories high with a huge stone fireplace on one side. A couch and easy chairs were positioned in a

comfortable grouping around the open hearth. There was a wooden table and chairs, and the kitchen was to the right, also open to the main room. Without thinking, she allowed Gage to take the sack of groceries she held so she could soak in the quiet strength of the structure.

A set of stairs ran up the opposite wall from the front door. When Keva moved closer to the fireplace, she could see that an open loft ran the entire length of the upstairs. A low railing fronted it, and across it hung colorful Mexican blankets.

"This is awesome," she exclaimed when she walked over to where Gage was stocking the cupboards with their purchases.

"Awesome, huh?" he asked, giving her the eggs, cheese, sausage and milk. He nodded toward the refrigerator.

Keva juggled the groceries and got the door opened. She noted that the fridge was already stocked with several kinds of beer, a few bottles of wine, soft drinks and various staples. She bent down to put the eggs on the lower shelf. Before she could rise back up, Gage had come up behind her, planted his hands at her waist, and rubbed his hips against her bottom.

"You make a delicious looking appetizer," he said, tantalizing her with another slide from side to side. She could feel his erection through the layers of clothes they wore and she began to think that Gage's idea of not bringing any clothes had merit after all.

She pushed her fanny back against him. "We're letting out all the cold air," she said.

"Can't have that," he replied, grabbing her around the waist and lifting her aside to close the refrigerator door. He swung her up in his arms and carried her with long strides over to the couch.

"Aren't you going to show me the bedroom?" she asked, then she nipped his ear and ran her tongue along the shell of it.

"Later," he groaned as he lowered her to the soft cushions and came down on top of her. "Much later." His lips found hers and Keva couldn't believe how fast the fireworks started. As the kiss deepened, she jerked his shirt out of his jeans as his hands

slid beneath her crop top. His skin felt smooth and hot to the touch, but it wasn't enough for her. She was on fire and only Gage could extinguish the flames he had lit.

"Roll over," she commanded, pushing on his chest. She scooted out from under him, turning to kneel on the floor by the couch. She unfastened his belt, opened his jeans, and reached inside. The hot, velvety texture of his shaft drew an excited moan from her. She bent over and kissed his belly as he managed to jerk his shirt off over his head. When he reached for her, she waved his hands away.

"Your jeans," she managed to whisper as she continued kissing her way up his chest, one hand still tucked inside his pants. She licked his nipple, felt it pebble beneath her tongue, then sucked on it. The minute she felt Gage kick his shoes off and shove his jeans down his hips, she was on the move again.

"I can't let you have all the fun." Gage gasped, reaching for her bottom as she kissed his side, nipped the brown skin at his waist. Keva used one hand to help him pull her pants down around her knees, but refused to let go of the prize she held in the other. He tried to get her top off.

"Keva, I'm begging you." His voice was low and ragged. She relinquished him only long enough to get the shirt over her head, and then she let him worry about her bra as she kissed him.

Gage's hips bucked off the couch of their own free will when Keva's lips touched him. He wanted to touch her everywhere, be inside her, but she refused to let him. As she continued to place butterfly light kisses along his length, Gage sizzled.

His hand slid over her bare bottom and between her legs from behind, searching out and finding her center. He slid two fingers into her and felt her squeeze around them. She couldn't spread her legs because her pants were down around her knees, and it only made her tighter as Gage began to move his fingers in and out.

She pushed her hips against his hand, her moans vibrating against his shaft as she slid her tongue up his length before taking

him into her mouth. Gage held his breath for fear she would stop and afraid he would lose all control way before he was done with her.

Abruptly, Keva released him and stood, shoving her pants off with her feet. "I want you inside me," she panted, straddling him, tucking one knee between him and the couch. "I need you, right now." She sounded panicky and Gage caught her gaze with his. Her blue eyes were glazed with passion, her lips wet from her tongue and from him.

She impaled herself deeply with a single downward thrust. They groaned at the same time and Gage felt himself swell within her. She began to move, sliding up and down, her hands on his chest. Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed, but passion played across her face and it turned Gage on even more.

He reached up and cupped her breasts, rolling the nipples between thumb and forefinger. She began to ride him faster.

"Gage?" she cried out his name in request and pleasure.

"I'm with you, babe," he groaned as his climax broke over him. He could feel Keva squeeze around him as she came and together, they rode out the storm of passion that overtook them whenever they were together.

Later, Keva murmured something, and then shivered. Gage flipped the blanket from the back of the couch over them and wrapped his arms around her.

"You are incredible," he said when she raised her head just enough to give him a soft kiss. She smiled at him and then laid her head back down on his chest, mumbling again.

"What did you say?" he shook her playfully.

She sighed before answering him. "I said that if this was higher on the list of activities than fishing, then we might never get to the fishing part."

Gage laughed, but even as he did, he could feel himself getting hard inside her again. He turned with her in his arms until she was under him. He very slowly and gently began to move his hips in and out.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and met him thrust for thrust. She gave him one of her seductive, siren smiles and Gage figured if they spent all their time like this, their groceries would last without tossing out a single worm on a hook.

Chapter 6

When Keva woke up, the cabin was dark, but she was instantly aware of the strong arms wrapped around her and the feel of Gage's long body next to hers. She wondered what it would be like to go to sleep beside him and wake up next to him every morning. It was something she had not allowed herself to dwell on, and yet she couldn't conceive of him being a transitory part of her life as he had been a temporary employee at the publishing company.

"Hello," his drowsy voice beckoned her.

"Mmmm." She didn't think she could lift her head from his chest, much less answer with even the barest of comments.

"Hungry?" he asked, rolling from her side to sit on the edge of the couch.

She ran her hand down the length of his bare back.

"Maybe," she dragged the word out, letting him put whatever connotation to it he wanted.

He turned to grin, his white teeth flashing in the gloom.

"If we're going to make love all week, I think we need to fortify ourselves." He reached down and grabbed his jeans, pulling them up as he stood. He did only the bottom two buttons, and the low riding fabric made him look incredibly sexy.

Making love. Keva wondered when they had gone from having sex to making love. But then she thought perhaps it had been that way with Gage and her from the beginning. He had the ability to make her heart jump with only a look. The first time he touched her, she knew there was more to their connection than

merely sex. She thought of him everyday all day, and fell asleep at night wishing she were in his arms.

Now, she watched as he bent to strike a match and light the lamps that were placed around the cabin. She loved everything about the man—his too-long hair, his grins, his sense of humor, and his tight buttocks. More than any physical attributes though, he made her feel good whenever he was around and very often, catered to her needs rather than the other way around. For Keva, that put several points in his favor.

A curl of heat spiraled downward to her womb. The fact of the matter was, she was falling in love with Gage McVicker. The thought really didn't surprise her, although she did have to fleetingly wonder how it could have happened so fast and without any warning.

For the time being, she thought it would be a good idea to keep her newly discovered secret just that—secret. While she knew Gage enjoyed her physically and they got along well intellectually, she really didn't know how he felt about her. Did he think about her constantly? Did he envision living out his life with her; having a family; going home to Boston for the holidays? A small sigh escaped and Keva knew there was a lot more at stake this week than just a lovemaking marathon.

Gage wondered at Keva's pensive expression when he bent to give her a kiss before he went to the kitchen to fix them some supper. He hoped she didn't already regret coming up here with him. Although they hadn't been here five minutes before he had her on the couch indulging in mind-boggling sex, he really hadn't intended for the entire week to be spent in bed, regardless of what he had told her. He wanted to show her the lake, the forest surrounding the cabin, the sunset over the mountains. He longed to share this part of his world with her and take the time to find out all about her.

He knew she was an only child and her parents had died in an accident. From what she had told him about her family, there was probably a trust fund with her name on it, but he had the feeling she didn't, or wouldn't, access it. One of the things he

liked about her was her independence and willingness to work for a living because he was of a similar bent. Even after he had made his first million.

All of his previous relationships had been based first on sex, and then on the woman's knowledge of his personal net worth. That had made it extremely difficult to get rid of a few of them, because while they professed to love him, he always wondered if it was his bank account and the social circles he was a part of that they loved more. He figured having Keva alone for a week would give him plenty of time to find out how she felt.

He turned the gas on and set a pot of water on the burner. In another pan, he dumped a jar of spaghetti sauce to warm. He watched across the breakfast bar as Keva rose from the couch and then bent to pick up her clothes. The loaf of French bread he was holding fell to the floor as her pale fanny flashed into view.

Instead of putting her clothes on, she turned to him with everything bunched in her arms, not even trying to cover her assets. The bundle of cloth covered her midriff, but her glorious breasts and sexy hips and legs were wonderfully bare.

"Bathroom?" The word managed to soak into his sex-crazed brain.

He opened his mouth, closed it, and then shook his head to clear it. Damn, he began to rethink his reasons for being here. Maybe a week of uninhibited sex was all he had been subconsciously planning.

"Gage, I think the water is boiling." She had come to stand just the other side of the breakfast bar.

He took a step to the left and felt something squish beneath his foot. Looking down, he saw he was standing in the middle of the foil-covered loaf of bread.

"Damn, woman, if you don't put some clothes on, I'm liable to ruin all our meals." He moved the pot off the burner, dropped the spaghetti into it and put the lid on.

She laughed when he picked up the smashed bread and he grinned along with her.

“Uh, you do have bathroom facilities inside, don’t you?” she asked again.

“Yeah, sorry. Upstairs. The water comes directly from a well and will be icy cold. There should be hot water in the tank, but I’d better make sure the burner is turned up. Sometimes, I...it’s turned down when nobody’s here.” He silently cursed at his slip of the tongue.

“Dinner will be ready in ten minutes, so if you want to jump in the shower, I’ll bring your bag up.” He watched her bare backside as she walked to the stairs. The glow of the soft lantern light made her look soft and kissable.

“There’s no electricity?” she asked.

“There’s a generator for lights and propane for cooking and heat, but I really prefer the old-fashioned lanterns and fireplace.”

She looked over her shoulder halfway up the stairs. “Me, too.”

When Keva came downstairs in just under ten minutes, Gage had candles lit on the table, tin plates and silverware in their places, and a fire going in the hearth.

“I can’t believe you actually came down in ten minutes,” he said, handing her a glass of wine. “Dinner has another ten minutes to go. I just figured...” He let the sentence trail off.

She made a face. “I am not one of your takes-five-hours-to-get-ready females, I’ll have you know.” She held up her hairbrush. “But I did need just a few more minutes.” She walked over to the fireplace, set her wineglass on the table by the couch, and began to work the tangles out of her wet hair.

Gage gently took the brush from her, motioning her to sit on the coffee table and he sat behind her on the couch. Beginning at the bottom of her hair, he slowly began brushing it.

“I would wait five hours to see you walk down those stairs,” he said as he brushed the hair off her nape and placed a kiss softly on her neck.

She turned to give him a look.

“Well, okay, so maybe I’d come and get you after the first thirty minutes.”

She laughed. "I doubt that you've ever had to wait for a female in your life. They probably come running, salivating at your feet."

There was a moment of silence and Keva thought she had put her foot in her mouth. Gage continued brushing her hair, his hands massaging her scalp as he worked out the tangles.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No, you didn't say anything wrong. I was just thinking how to answer. I've had my share of women, Keva; I won't deny that. But for the most part, I don't think they were really interested in me for myself."

"Ah, they were after your money, huh?" she asked, laughing.

Gage laughed with her, but somehow, Keva felt it was forced.

"More for my abilities in the kitchen," he said and she thought he had deliberately changed the subject. He handed her the brush and rose. She took the band from her wrist and flipped it around her hair to keep it back and followed him to the kitchen.

With efficient movements, he strained the spaghetti, poured it into a bowl and handed it to her. He grabbed the sauce and the plate of buttered, slightly smashed bread slices, and they sat down at the table.

He poured her a little more wine and then poured himself half a glass. He held her chair out for her to be seated.

"You know, I don't think I've seen you drink before."

He served her up some pasta, covered it with sauce and topped it off with Parmesan cheese. His brow furrowed in concentration, and Keva was afraid she had done it again.

"Look," she said, "I can't go through the whole week afraid to say whatever pops into my head for fear of stepping on your toes."

He served himself, picked up his wineglass and tilted it towards her. "You're right. Here's to learning each other's secrets," he said in salute before taking a small sip of the rich

burgundy. “And I guess I’ll start. I used to have a job that was quite stressful. Before I knew it, I was drinking too much, spending too much time at the office, and in other words, running as fast as I could toward a heart attack.”

Keva put a hand over his on the table. “We don’t need the wine, Gage. In fact, we don’t have to drink at all. I can take it or leave it. I just noticed that you didn’t drink, or haven’t, but I see your friend has a well-stocked liquor cabinet.” She nodded to the open-faced cabinet to one side of the kitchen where the bar was.

“It’s fine,” Gage said between bites of spaghetti. “I was a three martini lunch kind of guy, but as soon as I left that job, I found I didn’t really need or want to drink.”

“What was it you did that was so stressful?”

“Computers,” was all he said and Keva decided that was enough, for the moment.

“I know what you mean by stress. With deadlines, authors, cover artists, publicity, and everything else that goes with getting even a single title released, sometimes, I wonder what I’m doing.”

“But you’re good at what you do,” Gage said simply.

“That’s kind of you to say, but how do you know that?”

He hesitated, then shrugged. “People talk. I’ve heard a lot of good comments about you.” He went back to his meal.

They ate in silence for a few minutes more, until Keva couldn’t stand it anymore. “You know, getting information out of you is like playing Twenty Questions.”

He actually laughed at her. “I wondered how long it would take before you just couldn’t stand it anymore and had to ask more personal questions.” He shook his head and made a “tsking” sound. “What else would you like to know about me, Miss Nosey Muffin?”

“Miss... How do you know about little girls’ toys?”

Gage shrugged as he cleared their plates. “Nieces and nephews and playing Santa for the past few years necessitates knowing the latest toys. I always thought I should have invested in the toy market with what things cost nowadays and the

number of gadgets that have to be under the tree Christmas morning.”

Keva got up and followed him to the kitchen area, where she dried the dishes as he washed. “You amaze and confound me, Mr. McVicker. I never would have thought you the Santa type. What else have you been doing with your life?”

“After I quit the computer techno world, I decided I needed something less stressful, so I packed my car and took off for parts unknown. I traveled down south and west, doing odd jobs to make ends meet.”

“And then you ended up working for a temp service. Don’t you want something more out of your life?”

Keva realized she had crossed some invisible line the minute she asked the question. Gage clamped his lips shut, pretending to concentrate on scrubbing a pot, but she somehow knew he was shutting her out.

“To answer your question, I don’t know that I care to go back to the rat race just to make money. Does that bother you?”

Keva didn’t know how to answer him. She had worked for *Voyager Publishing* right out of college, couldn’t imagine not doing the job she loved, but knew it probably wasn’t the same for everyone. From the look in Gage’s eyes, she was half afraid to answer, fearing that no matter what she said, it would be the wrong thing. She could only be honest.

“I don’t know.”

* * * *

Gage knew he wasn’t being fair to Keva, pinning her in a corner with questions about money and career goals and whether it bothered her that he didn’t appear to have either. He just didn’t want to get involved with a woman who wanted to change him and whose sights were set on his money. In his heart, he felt Keva wasn’t that way, but unless he told her what he was worth, how could he find out whether it mattered? As far as getting involved, he knew it was too late for that.

He decided their first night in Colorado was getting far too weighty. After he tossed another log on the fire, he pulled a box of checkers and a board out of the cupboard by the hearth.

“Do you play?” He turned to find Keva on the couch, her legs curled beneath her.

“Actually, I do. Even though I was an only child, I did manage to turn renegade when I was about ten or eleven. I used to hide out at the neighbors, playing with their kids and learning how to climb trees.”

Gage set up the board, turning it so she had the black checkers.

“I want red,” she said, spinning the board.

“You can’t. Red always goes first.” Gage tried to turn the board again, but she held firm to her corners.

“Exactly.” Her eyes glowed and Gage decided to add a little extra challenge to the game.

“Okay, I’ll let you go first, but I get to name the forfeiture for jumping checkers.”

“What forfeiture? You jump a checker, you take it. Don’t try to bamboozle me, Mister, I know how to play this game.”

“I know the regular rules, but this is my...vacation idea, so we play by my rules.” He took a sip of wine to cover the slip of almost saying ‘my house, my rules.’

She slid a red checker forward to start the game. “Alright, let’s hear it. It won’t make any difference, because I’m going to beat your butt.”

Gage thought how lovely she looked, her face glowing from the light of the fire. When she had showered, she hadn’t put on any makeup, or if she had, he couldn’t tell. He was glad she felt secure enough in their relationship to be herself. Before the end of the week, he promised himself that she would also be his, heart and soul.

“The rule is,” he said, watching her as he moved a checker forward, “if your checker is jumped, you have to take off a piece of your clothing.” He waited for her reaction, impatient for her to start peeling layers off so he could see her sexy body.

She gave him a smile that fanned the flames of the fire that never really died when it came to her.

“Well then, Mister Hot Shot, strip off those jeans because I just jumped you.”

* * * *

It was the fastest game of checkers in history, neither of them caring who got jumped as long as clothes went flying. But it was well after midnight before they finally fell asleep in each other's arms. Gage woke just before dawn, and for a minute, didn't move.

He was glad he remembered to throw the comforter on the bed because the temperature had dropped overnight and he hadn't kicked the furnace on. The fire they had last night had died long before he was ready to move away from the warmth at his side. He liked the feeling of a woman's warm body next to his. Correction—he liked the feel of Keva next to him.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” he said, wiggling her as he got out of bed.

“Go away, it's the middle of the night,” she mumbled, pulling the comforter up higher and burying her head in the pillow.

“It's almost dawn and the best time for fishing.”

“You haven't seen me in the morning, Gage. I'm crabby, and my hair's mussed, and—”

“I saw you when you were sick, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” she halfheartedly agreed, but still didn't move.

“Keva, you'd better get up.”

“Or what, you'll come back to bed and ravish me?”

Gage groaned. The woman didn't play fair. He had promised himself last night that they would make the most of their time at the cabin to learn about each other. Not that mapping her body with his hands and lips couldn't be defined as learning on a very personal level, but he wanted something more for himself, and from Keva.

“You asked for it,” he said dramatically and jerked the covers off the bed.

She squealed, automatically sitting up to reach for the covers. Gage promptly rethought the idea of fishing when he saw her bare skin gleaming in the rosy light of dawn.

“Gage!”

Getting himself firmly under control, he turned away, knowing if he let his gaze linger on her, they would never leave the bedroom.

“You made it in ten minutes yesterday. This morning, you have five.”

“Five?” she squawked and threw a pillow at him.

“Dress warm.” He ducked. “The air will be cold when we get on the water.” He left before she could convince him to stay. “Meet me on the dock.”

By the time Keva arrived at the dock, which was more like thirty minutes later, Gage had lowered the boat into the water, checked the fuel and oil, and had the motor purring quietly in idle.

“The lake is so clear,” she commented.

“It’s fed from mountain streams and has a rock bottom,” he told her as he reached up and helped her in, tossing her a life jacket.

“I didn’t even get my morning cappuccino.” She pouted prettily as she sat in the seat across from him.

He handed her a travel mug and a breakfast bar. “The fish wait for no man...or woman.” He grinned, gunning the engine and standing behind the wheel as the boat took off before leveling out. Once it was skimming across the crystal smooth lake, he watched as Keva cautiously took the lid off the cup he had handed her.

A smile lit her face. “How did you manage that?” she asked, taking a sip of the cappuccino.

He just shrugged, happy she was pleased that he’d remembered what she liked. The fact was, he remembered everything about every minute he had spent with her.

“I like taking care of you.”

She looked up from her drink. “Do I need a lot of ‘taking care of’?”

“Constantly,” he replied, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

She took his teasing in stride. “Mmmm, it’s even better than what I get at *Simon’s*.”

He looked her way. “I’ve never seen you at *Simon’s*.”

“I stop when I have the chance. It’s not as close as *Topper’s*, but I love his pastries.”

Gage slowed the boat along the edge of the cove. “Well, drink up because this is where we catch dinner.”

He shut off the motor and let the boat drift. Moving to the back, he took a fishing pole and deftly baited the hook, tossing it over the side with an easy cast. Putting it in one of the holders that were hooked to the back, he reached for another pole, when he heard a sigh behind him. He turned to find Keva staring at him.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me with those tight jeans and the sun glinting off that hair of yours?” She had swiveled her seat around and had her legs stretched out in front of her, sipping her drink and munching her breakfast bar. Gage thought she looked quite at home on his boat.

He came toward her, straddling her legs and placing his hands on the arms of her chair. He leaned close, smelling the sweet aroma of cream and coffee on her breath.

“Lady, if you hope to eat tonight, you’d better quit gawking at me and smacking your lips or we’ll never catch anything.”

She laughed, putting her cup in a holder and then kissing him lightly on the lips, teasing him just enough to make him hard.

“Aye, aye, Captain Bly,” she said, pushing at his chest so he had to release her.

Although she made a face at the container of wiggling worms, she gamely took one in hand and he demonstrated how to bait her hook. He put his hand over hers on the pole, showing her how to place her thumb on the release button, swing back,

and cast the bait into the water. Her first attempt hardly made it off the back of the boat. Moving behind her, he wrapped one arm around her waist from behind, keeping the other hand on hers.

"It's all in the wrist," he said, moving her hand to show her what he meant.

"Hmmm," was all she said as she followed his instructions, adding a little movement of her own as she pushed her bottom back against his groin.

"Damn, woman," he growled close to her ear. "Do you have to turn everything into a sex game?"

She turned to give him an innocent look. "Me? What about that checkers game?"

She had him there, Gage thought. Before he could comment further, the pole jerked beneath their hands.

Keva turned to look, an expression of surprise on her face.

"You've got a bite."

"What do I do?" she squealed.

He talked her through the technique as he showed her, helping her reel in the fish. Once it was close, he grabbed the net and scooped it into the boat.

"Wow, look at that." He reached into the net, careful of the hook still protruding from the fish's mouth. Within minutes, he had it free and dropped it into the live well.

"Ha, that's not so hard," Keva said, a wide grin on her face. "I caught the first fish, so I win."

Gage thought he would let her win at everything and do anything she wanted if she would only keep smiling at him like that. Her whole face lit up.

"We'll see by the end of the day," he replied. "One fish isn't enough to feed the hunger I feel."

Once she had baited her hook again and managed a respectable cast, they settled back against the wide rear seat, Gage positioning her between his legs, her back against his chest. They drank their coffee in companionable silence.

“Tell me about Keva Monroe,” he finally said. “Did you really never get to be a kid?”

She gave a little shrug. “It really wasn’t as bad as I make it sound. My parents were very loving. I wasn’t supposed to be an only child, but my mother couldn’t carry a baby to term.” She sighed. “I still remember when I was about seven and she miscarried. She cried and cried and I thought I had done something wrong; that I was bad and that was the reason she couldn’t have anymore children.”

Gage hugged her tighter, feeling her pain.

“It was after that last miscarriage that she started devoting all her time and energy to me, almost to the point of smothering me. I know she meant well, but there were times I felt so suffocated. I think that’s why I went far away to school and decided to have a career.”

“Where did you go to college?”

“Berkeley.”

He whistled softly. “That’s far away, alright.”

“Did you go to college?” She turned to look at him.

“I went to Boston College on an academic scholarship.”

“Really?” She sounded like she didn’t believe him.

“Yes, really. I told you I haven’t always been a mail clerk.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Look out!” Gage jumped up, keeping Keva firmly anchored until he could move her to the side. He grabbed the rod as the line zinged through the rings.

“We’ve got a big one here,” he shouted, caught up in the thrill of pulling in a large fish. He realized how much he had missed coming to the cabin with his brothers; fishing, getting shit-faced drunk and trying to solve the world’s problems but never managing.

He netted the Brown Trout and turned to Keva, proudly holding up his catch. She shook her head, even though she was smiling.

“You are so...so male,” she said.

He grinned back. “And you love every inch of my macho male bod, don’t you, baby?”

“Oh, yeah,” Keva answered him in the same joking manner, but inwardly, she acknowledged that she truly did love him, and not just for his body. She had fallen in love with Gage, the man who took care of her when she was sick, dressed in historical costume just to please her, and fixed her iced cappuccino. And that scared her because she didn’t know what to do about it.

They spent another hour or so fishing before Gage decided they had enough for supper. The sun had risen higher in the sky, warming the air. Keva pulled her sweatshirt off revealing the white tank top she had put on beneath it. Gage’s eyes followed her movements, his gaze coming to rest on her breasts. Keva felt her nipples tighten. He could turn her on with just a look. When he turned the boat back toward the dock, she hoped his thoughts were on the same track as hers. She could think of better things to do than fish.

When Keva hopped out of the boat and tied the bow to the mooring, she turned to walk up the dock.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Gage asked. “We have fish to clean.”

Keva grimaced. Fishing was one thing, cleaning them was something else entirely.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, not wanting to tell Gage that she needed to visit the bathroom before she did anything else.

Luckily, he didn’t comment as she hurried up the dock. By the time she returned, he had their catch filleted and lying in a tray on the small wooden shelf that ran partway along one side of the dock. He was hosing down the shelf, but when he saw her, he turned the hose on her.

“Stop!” she squealed, putting her hands up to ward off the water. After the first initial spray, it actually felt good on her sun-heated skin.

“That’s what you get for running out on the work,” Gage said.

Keva decided turnabout was fair play, and she rushed him, grabbing the hose and turning it back on him. Because he refused to let go, the water squirted up between them, drenching them both.

“Enough!” Gage said, wrenching the hose from her hands and tossing it back behind him. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled their wet bodies together. His lips found hers and Keva wondered if they turned the water into steam. She opened her mouth to accept his kiss, tasting fresh air and sunshine and just a hint of coffee on his lips. She slid her hands up his arms, around his neck and just hung on.

As if his kisses weren’t drugging enough, his hands slid up her back beneath her tank top, unhooking her bra and continuing to move around her ribs to her breasts. His calloused palms grazed her nipples and the contact caused Keva to suck in her breath.

“Every time we make love and I think I’m satisfied, my body screams for more.” Gage breathed the words into her mouth as he kissed her yet again.

“Does it matter that we’re standing in wide open spaces in sight of everyone?” Keva teased.

Gage sighed. “I suppose you’re right, although I doubt anyone without binoculars could see us.” He let her go and reached down to turn off the hose.

“You’re just lucky I have some sense of decorum left.” But she didn’t.

She couldn’t seem to help herself. She put her foot on his butt and pushed. Gage pitched headfirst into the water. Keva turned and ran up the dock, sure he would come after her. When she got to the edge of the grass and didn’t hear Gage yelling behind her, she slowed and cautiously turned around. He was nowhere to be seen—not on the dock, in the boat, or in the water.

“Gage!” she shouted, running back down the dock. She had only meant it as a joke; she hadn’t wanted him hurt. What could

he have hit when she pushed him? He had been on the opposite side of the dock from the boat.

She ran along the length of the dock, scanning the water as she went. She got to the end when suddenly a huge body sprang up from the water, roaring fiercely. Before she could back up from her bent position at the very edge of the dock, the lake creature had grabbed her around the legs and pulled her into the water with him. She screamed all the way, swallowing water and coming up coughing.

"You monster! I thought you had drowned," Keva sputtered as Gage held her and patted her back.

"I could have," he countered, "if the water weren't just chest high." To emphasize his point, he stood with her in his arms. The water only came to his nipples, which Keva could see through his soaked t-shirt.

She idly ran a finger across the darker spot. "Gage?" She spoke his name in a husky voice, wondering at her boldness in what she was about to ask.

"Mmmm?" Gage was busy kissing her neck, his hands sliding down to cup her bottom and pull her up against him.

She slid her hands down his chest and into his pants. He was already hard and long, and he pulsed beneath her hand when she circled him. "Have you ever made love in the lake?"

"I thought I was the one who was supposed to take you anywhere, anytime, anyway," he hissed, then sucked in his breath when she squeezed him.

"Does it matter who starts it, if we both enjoy it?" she asked.

He was pulling her pants down her legs, the buoyancy of the water making it easy to undress as she hung onto his neck and allowed herself to float. He flipped the soaked material up onto the dock as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"You drive me nuts, you know that?" Gage asked as he jerked down his jeans, grabbed her bottom and slid into her, impaling her deeply with the first stroke.

"Yeah," Keva answered just as his lips sealed hers.

Chapter 7

Keva hadn't meant to fall asleep after her shower, but she wasn't used to getting up at dawn, and she thought only to rest while Gage was still in the bathroom. She stretched, feeling the coolness of the sheets slide across her naked body, shaking her head as she recalled how she and Gage had run for the house half naked after their swim in the lake. Somehow, he made her do the most outrageous things—not just the fulfillment of her secret sexual fantasies, but things like fishing and making love in a lake and thinking about a life with him. That was the most dangerous of all.

Deciding their week at the cabin wasn't the time to think about that, she got up and dressed in capri pants with a sleeveless sweater top. She brushed her hair, which had dried into soft curls, and decided not to pull it back.

The sun had slanted low in the sky and Keva figured it must be about six or seven.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she asked Gage when she found him in the kitchen. He looked remarkable in khaki shorts and navy polo, his hair curling over his ears and a shadow of a beard darkening his cheeks and jaw. He wore an apron that had a yellow warning sign on it—men at work—and she thought he looked very at home in the kitchen.

"Ego." His one word answer confused her.

"Whose ego? I don't have an ego problem."

"Not you, me. It was a boost to my ego to think that I absolutely wore you out." He raised an eyebrow at her, defying her to contradict him.

Keva could have easily denied his preposterous claim, but decided it didn't hurt anything to let the sentence remain. She changed the subject instead.

"What's for dinner? It smells good."

"We serve the catch of the day, of course," Gage broke off a small piece of the fish he was frying and popped it into her mouth.

"Delicious." Keva looked across the counter. "Where are the hushpuppies?"

"What?"

"Oh, come on. You can't have fish without hushpuppies. Where were you born, Mister?" She got up and moved around the counter.

"I'm a northern boy." He emphasized each word. "Want to make something of it, reb?"

She bumped him with her hip, making him scoot over. "I don't want another Civil War; I just want hushpuppies with my fish. Now move over so I can show you I really do know how to cook."

Within minutes, Keva had measured the cornmeal and added baking powder, onion, a little milk and an egg. When she saw a jar of jalapenos in the fridge, she chopped a few of those and added them to the mixture.

Side by side, they cooked dinner. Once they had everything on the table, Gage pulled her chair back, then sat next to her.

With his first bite into a hushpuppy, he closed his eyes in awe.

"These are heavenly. Where did you learn to do that?"

Keva shrugged. "I think all babies born south of the Mason-Dixon Line come with instructions directly from God for hushpuppies and pecan pie."

Gage grabbed two more from the plate. "Well, these are great and pecan pie is my favorite, even if I am from Boston. I guess I'm going to have to keep you around."

* * * *

Gage and Keva spent the next couple days exploring the area, but never ventured far from the secluded cabin. He got one of the four-wheelers out of the shed and they rode to an old abandoned mine on the side of the mountain. They hiked the lake trail and made love in the moonlight down by the shore.

He let her sleep in one day and took the SUV back down to the grocery store, stocking up on snacks, meat and another box of condoms. He even had a momentary thought about buying two boxes.

All the while, in the back of his mind, he wondered what was going to happen when they got back to civilization. He knew there wouldn't be a problem seeing her, even if he didn't work at *Voyager* anymore. The real dilemma was how to tell her what he felt and who he really was.

He was in love—deeply—for the first time in his adult life, and he wasn't exactly sure how to go about it. The woman had snared him the first time he saw her with those long legs of hers. While their initial relationship had been based purely on sex, it hadn't taken long for it to grow into something much more profound.

He was sure Keva had the same feelings for him, and it really wouldn't matter what he did for a living. He felt he had enough insight reading and understanding people that he could predict how she would react. Perhaps Simon was right in that she wouldn't mind he was rich. Why then, his conscience asked, didn't he go ahead and tell her?

He recalled the time he had gotten mad at his dad for not wanting something more than a factory job. It was at a point in Gage's life when he felt appearances were everything, and he was embarrassed that they lived in a small house and his dad always had grease under his nails. They had argued and Gage had stormed out of the house.

Much later that night, he came home to find the house dark, except for a small light in the kitchen, where he found his mom. She had his supper warming in the oven and set it down on the table, sitting in the chair next to him. For the next hour, they

had talked, as they had always been able to do, and Gage would never forget the lesson he learned that night.

His mom had explained how much she loved Dad, and that it would never matter what he did for a living because he was an honest, good man and would always take care of her and him and his brothers. She made him understand that appearances were only that, and what a person was on the inside was what really mattered—how he treated others, whether he was God-fearing and put family first.

Keva found him pondering his own life in regard to those values when she brought him a cup of coffee. He had been fiddling with the boat engine, adjusting the timing.

“Problems?” she asked, climbing in and sitting cross-legged on the rear seat near him. She wore a snug yellow T-shirt and nylon shorts, setting off her tan and those long legs Gage loved. She had pulled her hair through the back of one of his ball caps. He thought she looked just as sexy as in that red miniskirt she had worn the first day he had seen her.

Gage sipped the dark brew, raising a brow.

“Well, just because I don’t drink it doesn’t mean I haven’t watched how you make it,” she said in response to his unspoken question.

“It’s good.”

“I like taking care of you, too,” she replied, looking at him almost shyly.

“Well, now, we may have a problem,” Gage responded. “I’ve pretty well learned how to take care of myself.”

“I noticed you know your way around the kitchen pretty well. Was that because you worked as a cook in Texas?”

He shook his head. “No. Mom made sure every one of us boys knew how to cook, clean and sew. We never got by with watching television while she put supper on the table. We all pitched in and helped.”

“I think that’s quite an admirable trait. Personally, we had maid service and a cook, but I did sneak in the kitchen and help

Matilda out, so it's not that I can't cook." She grinned. "I just prefer not to."

"You know how to make delicious hushpuppies."

"That's an inborn trait; not something I learned."

Gage scoffed.

"I swear!" She crossed her heart and raised her hand in the air.

"Well, since we're expanding your education this week, how would you like to row me around the corner of the cove to the marina? This needs a quart of oil." He pointed to the engine he had been working on.

"Row?" She looked around. He cocked his head toward the shore.

"That?" she asked.

"You expected a four man scull? Come on." He grabbed her hand and pulled her along to where a small aluminum boat was beached on shore.

"Lift up on your side and push," he said as he walked around to the far side of the boat.

"You're really intent on making me do everything there is to do out here, aren't you?" she asked, even as she grabbed the side of the boat and lifted.

"You don't have to if you don't want to." He nodded for her to climb in while he held the boat steady. "Move to the front while I get in." After she was seated, he pushed off, easily hopping into the boat as it floated away from shore. He set the oars in the oar locks.

"That's the trouble," Keva said. "I like it all. I'm finding it very difficult to think about going back to work in a few days."

For Gage, returning to New York presented more problems than just going back to work. But for now, he refused to think about that. He sat down in the stern.

"Now you can move to the middle, facing me."

She deftly stepped over the bench seat.

"Okay, wench, row."

“Wench?” she sputtered. She narrowed her gaze at him. “You don’t think I can do this, do you?”

Gage shrugged, egging her on. She grabbed the oars and started rowing. Her hands didn’t move in sync and half the time, both oars didn’t even dip into the water. They began going in a circle and Gage couldn’t help but laugh.

Keva looked at him and jerked the oars back against her chest. Water splashed the side of the boat. Her face suddenly brightened and Gage knew he was in trouble. She let go of one oar and grabbed the other with both hands. This time, the oar dipped just right and when she pulled, water came over the side in a wave, drenching Gage.

She sat there smirking, then calmly set both oars in the water and began rowing with a perfectly coordinated stroke.

Gage braced his hands on either side of the small boat. “You lied.”

She shook her head and *tsked*, never breaking her rhythm. “You didn’t ask; you assumed. I may have been brought up sheltered, but I did go to summer camp every year.”

“So why am I leading the hikes and building the fires and doing the cooking?”

She leaned forward; the oars momentarily suspended in the air, and said in a conspiratory tone, “Because you like taking care of me, remember?”

Gage laughed out loud. “Move over,” he said, getting up and turning to sit beside her. “Let’s see how compatible we are. If we don’t want to row in circles, our strokes have to match.” He took hold of the oar on his right. “You start and I’ll get into rhythm with you.”

It only took two strokes for them to be in perfect balance. As they glided across the cove, shoulder to shoulder, arms and bodies moving in harmony, Gage closed his eyes for a moment and just absorbed the feeling.

“It’s like making love, isn’t it?” Keva voiced his thoughts. “Rhythm and balance and moving as one.” Gage turned to gaze into the clear blue of her eyes. “Becoming one,” she added, and

Gage thought he couldn't possible love her anymore than he did at that moment.

Gage took over rowing as they rounded the cove and cut across to the marina. He expertly slid them up to the dock and hopped out, grabbing the edge of the boat to keep it from drifting. He tossed Keva a rope from the dock.

"Here, hang on to this. I'll just be a minute. Do you want anything?"

She shook her head. "What happens if I decide not to wait for you?" she teased.

He gave her a scowl, all bluff. "Then I'll have to either swim or walk back. Either way, I'll find you and spank your bare ass." He watched her blush at his words, but he felt a stirring in his groin at the thought. He squatted down next to her. "In fact, I just might do it anyway." He let her stew about that as he went to get the oil, and to give himself time to cool off.

* * * *

If Gage thought making suggestive comments would turn her on, he was wrong, Keva thought, as she watched him walk away. She was in a constant state of arousal around him. Every look; every touch; every word made her want him more and more. She had decided last night that she should tell him how she felt and let him know that it didn't matter to her if he was only a mail clerk, she loved him.

She gave a sigh as she contemplated that state of mind. After all the relationships she had had, she had begun to wonder if love was just some made up fantasy, like the works she read and edited. It all sounded so wonderful in a book, but she had never experienced even an iota of what her authors wrote about. Until now.

Gage was so perfect, it was scary. She loved him, she knew, but she was realistic enough to realize that at her age, Gage could easily find someone younger one day. Someone young and already liking all the outdoor activities that were so much a part of his life. Not that she didn't enjoy fishing and hiking, but she hadn't been brought up that way and it was a learning

experience. She could only hope Gage didn't easily tire of teaching her.

"Hey, I told you what would happen if you left without me," Gage shouted at her from the dock.

Keva focused and realized that she had let the rope slip through her fingers while she was daydreaming and she now floated a good twenty yards away from the marina. It was a good thing she knew how to row after all.

Gage took the oars for the return trip and Keva unabashedly watched his muscles ripple as he pulled against the water, swiftly moving them across the distance. He had braced his feet on either side of hers and she kicked off a flip-flop and slid her foot up his bare leg to his shorts.

His rhythmic strokes never faltered as she scooted forward a little on her seat so she could wiggle her toes under the hem. She caught his gaze and held it as her foot came in contact with his penis, unencumbered by undershorts. It moved against her arch, hot and throbbing. His gaze seared her, the only indication that he was bothered was the longer pull on the oars.

He would bend clear forward, which caused her foot to press harder against his heat, and then he dipped the oars into the water and pulled until he was leaning back far enough that his shorts loosened and she could move her foot at will.

Press, release; press, release. Keva's breath came faster and faster with each stroke of the oars. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she tossed the throw cushion on the floor of the boat and knelt between Gage's legs. She jerked off the ball cap she wore, letting her hair cascade around her shoulders. Deftly, she unbuttoned and unzipped his shorts, releasing the object of her desire. When she kissed the tip, Gage's strokes finally faltered.

"Ah," she heard him groan, releasing the oars and cradling her head with his hands. With every stroke of her tongue, he grew longer, pulsing hot and hard. Luckily, he had managed to guide the boat close to the shore in the cove. Overhanging branches from trees almost uprooted by the wash of the waves

protected them from the sun's rays and curious eyes of boaters passing in the early morning.

Keva lifted her head only enough for Gage to jerk her shirt up and off. She wanted to give him this special gift, and refused to release him even when he begged. One hand cupped his sac, massaging gently while she stroked him with the other, planting kisses all along the underside and on the very tip. When she took him in her mouth and he moaned, the electric current shot straight to her womb and she thought for sure, she would come right then. The pleasure increased even more when Gage reached down to capture her breasts, squeezing her nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

* * * *

Gage knew they weren't going to make it back to the cabin, but that was his last coherent thought as Keva worked her magic. He rubbed her bare back; let his hands slide around her ribs to her breasts, but it still wasn't enough. He threaded his fingers through her hair, gently raising her head even as he groaned when her mouth left him. He bent to kiss her, thrusting his tongue into her hot mouth, letting her feel the depth of his desire. She straightened up, scooting closer, until her breasts rubbed against his chest and his length pushed into her soft stomach.

He finally released her mouth, glancing frantically around the small aluminum boat. "How in the hell—" he let the sentence fade. There wasn't room to lay down with the bench—

"Switch places with me," he rasped. He carefully stood and turned, holding Keva's arms as she switched to the bench. Before she sat, he pulled down her running shorts, thankful they had an elastic waist because his hands were shaking too hard to handle buttons. He knelt in front of her on the cushion and immediately sucked a nipple into his mouth, wanting that rapid rise of lust back in his loins. He slid a hand between her legs, his thumb massaging the nub of her sex as he pushed two fingers inside her. This time, it was Keva who cried out in ecstasy and her moans pushed Gage closer to the edge.

“Turn around and lean over the seat.” He could barely talk and it was all he could do to let go of her long enough to pull his shirt off over his head and lay it across the metal bench for her to rest on.

She didn’t question him as she turned, kneeling on the other cushion he had placed near her. She turned her head to look at him, her hair falling seductively over her shoulder.

“Like this?” She wiggled her lush bare bottom at him.

Gage swore one of these days he would make love to her slowly, letting the heat of desire raise slowly before they burst into flames. He had thought that on more than one occasion, but it never happened. He and Keva were too combustible.

As Keva propped herself on her forearms, he reached around her to fondle her breasts. The action brought his hips flush with her bottom, and he rubbed himself along her cleft. He laid his chest on her back, covering her completely. He bit her shoulder lightly, nibbled up the curve of her neck to her ear, and imitated loving her with his tongue.

“Gage?” His name was more a pant than speech.

He couldn’t answer her as he continued to rub and fondle and kiss. He could see her hands clenching the edge of the bench, her head was thrown back and her eyes were closed. Her chest rose and fell rapidly beneath his palms.

She moved her fanny against him, but he refused to relent. He liked being in control—being the master of desire and making her tremble.

He whispered in her ear. “What do you want, Ms. Monroe? What’s your secret fantasy?”

“Damn you,” she hissed, pushing more insistently against him. Gage bit back a groan.

“I’ll tell you what *I* want,” he continued to torment her. He rolled her nipples between his fingers and pulled ever so slightly. He bit her earlobe. Sliding one hand down her stomach, he rubbed her sex. “I want you so hot and so ready that the minute I enter you, you’ll explode and squeeze around me like a fist.”

He could feel her breath catch. “I am!” she cried out.

“Not yet,” he replied, gliding his hands down her sides, feeling her shiver beneath his touch. He caressed the smooth round globes of her bottom; slid a finger down the cleft and pushed it up inside her.

“Oh, God. I’m going to get you for this.” She groaned.

Gage continued to play her, feeling her tighten around his finger and then he would withdraw again. Each little thing he did to her made him lengthen and harden to the point where he began to wonder who would break first. But he wanted her to want him as desperately as he did her.

Twice more, he brought her to the brink of climax, only to withdraw his touch. He laced his fingers with hers on the bench, bending over to kiss a heated path down her spine. By the time he had reached her buttocks, he knew he had to end the game and take her.

He straightened, putting his hands on her hips and allowing his shaft to slide down her cleft toward the heat he knew waited within. When just the tip entered the very edge of her wetness, he paused for a split second, then buried himself completely. She whimpered and he bent over, wrapping his arms around her, letting her chest rest on his forearms.

Somewhere in the back corner of his mind, he realized he wasn’t using a condom, but it was too late. His hips moved of their own accord, and in two strokes, Keva cried out. She sank her teeth into his arm as though hoping to hold off the inevitable.

“Let it come, baby, let it come.” He pumped again, pressing his hips tightly against her bottom as his own climax overwhelmed him. Over and over the pleasure coursed through him. Just when he thought he was done, she gave a shiver and climaxed again, causing him to swell and ejaculate even more.

* * * *

Long minutes passed but Keva couldn’t move. She felt weighted down by Gage’s body, but it was a welcome weight. Every time they made love, she thought it couldn’t possibly get any better, but then it did. Gage knew her body better than she

did, taking her to heights she never thought existed. She had never had simultaneous orgasms until she met him.

With a groan, Gage lifted himself off her, but because he kept his arms tightly around her chest, she straightened with him. He rocked back on his heels so she was somehow sitting on his lap, but he was still deeply imbedded in her. She squeezed around him.

“I have never—” his voice trailed off, but Keva knew what he was thinking.

“It was incredible.” She was tempted to reach down and take him in hand, but didn’t think she could live through another orgasm right this minute.

“Keva,” his voice was hesitant. “I didn’t use a condom.”

“I know, but it’s all right. I’m protected.”

“Thank you.” His soft declaration somewhat stunned her because she thought she should be the one offering the accolades.

She tipped her head back, turning to brush a kiss to his cheek. “For what?” she couldn’t help but ask.

Gage shrugged. “For trusting me, I guess. For letting me love you anyway I want; for being here with me.”

Keva laid against his chest, knowing there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

* * * *

Keva relaxed in a lounge chair on shore while Gage finished the motor work. When she woke up, she didn’t see him anywhere in sight and the boat was gone. She wondered how she could have slept through the sound of the motor. Then she stretched and realized how sore she was from their strenuous but terrific lovemaking in the rowboat and considered the possibility that she had been unconscious instead of asleep.

Gage had that effect on her. He took her so far out of the realm of reality, that she sometimes had trouble reestablishing herself.

By the time she had showered, Gage still hadn’t returned, so she decided to take the car to the grocery. Her feminine side

was in full evidence this week and she wanted to make him a pecan pie.

Once she started down the dirt road from the cabin, she wondered if she could remember the way. She figured if she drove a couple miles and didn't see anything, she would turn around and go back.

The small grocery store wasn't hard to find and Keva quickly got the ingredients she needed. Luckily, they had some premixed piecrusts because she didn't think she could remember Matilda's recipe for tearoom pastry.

The same old man was sitting behind the counter who had been there the other night. Keva thought hard to remember his name.

"Hello, Mr. Mackelroy."

"Thought maybe the bears got you and your fellow," he said when she set her items on the counter.

"Bears?"

He chuckled. "I like to tell the tourists there's bears in the mountains, but truth is, we haven't seen one now for several years. I think the tourists were what drove them away." He began ringing up her purchases.

"What's the name of that fellow you were with, anyway? He looks familiar but I can't place him."

"Gage McVicker," she replied.

"Oh, yes. Those boys have been coming here six or seven years now as I recall. They bought the old Benson place."

"Boys?" Keva questioned. She was curious about anything to do with Gage and here was the chance to find out. Apparently, he came here with his friends more often than she originally thought.

"Yeah, there's a whole batch of them come up to ski and fish. Some of them even do some hunting, though I haven't seen them so much anymore. Heard tell a couple of them got married."

"Gage said the cabin belonged to his friend."

“No, I’m sure the name was McVicker, but then my memory isn’t what it used to be.”

Keva thanked Mr. Mackelroy and took her sack of groceries to the car, more curious than ever. Of course, since there were five brothers, any one of them could own the cabin, although if that were the case, why would Gage say it belonged to a friend?

Her pie was in the oven by the time Gage finally arrived, a tray of filleted fish in his hands.

“I began to think you left for New York without me.”

He kissed her cheek before replying. “You can’t get there by boat from here. Besides, I could never forget you long enough to leave you anywhere. What smells so good?”

“Pie.”

He looked at her in shock. “Not pecan pie?”

“Yes. That’s the only kind I know how to make. You said you liked it.”

“Yeah, but between you and me, I’ll eat the whole thing. Maybe I should save the fish for tomorrow and just have pie for supper.”

Keva followed him over to the kitchen as he washed off the fillets.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but we’ve already had fish three times this week. I mean, I love fish, but...could we have something else?”

Gage slapped a hand to his heart, trying to give her a wounded expression, but Keva saw the twinkle in his eyes.

“I slaved in the hot sun for these fish and you don’t want them?”

She laughed. “Slaved—right. You love to fish and I know it.”

Gage turned and opened the freezer. “We’re running low on groceries,” he said. “Since we’re going home in a few days, I didn’t buy much meat.”

“Well, what do snipe taste like? You said we could hunt them.”

Chapter 8

It was a good thing he was facing the freezer, because Gage couldn't keep his face straight. As it was, he choked when he tried to swallow his laughter.

"Gage, are you all right?" Keva came around the corner and patted him on the back.

"Fine," he squawked, leaning against the counter for support.

"Fine? Then scoot. My pie is done." She grabbed some hot pads out of the drawer and removed the pie from the oven. Gage forgot about the snipe hunting when the aroma of pecan pie hit his nostrils. He reached for a knife.

"No, you don't, Mister. It has to cool." She turned to look at him, waving a hot pad in his face. "As for your smirk—"

He looked at her innocently.

"Don't deny it, I saw you. I know you love to fish, but I just thought we could have something different."

For a moment, Gage had thought she had caught onto the snipe hunting. He wrapped his arms around her, giving her a hug.

"I don't care if we have fish or not, but we can't hunt snipe until it gets dark. They only come out at night."

She gave him a worried look. "We're not going to actually shoot anything, are we? I don't think I want to do that."

Gage felt a bit guilty about deceiving her. "No, it's really hunting *for* snipe. You try to catch them in a paper sack."

"Good, I got one of those at the grocery store."

"We're set then," Gage replied, smiling at her enthusiasm. He only hoped that later tonight, she would take his joke in stride.

"If we can't go until dark, what will we do in the meantime?"

Gage gave her a wolfish grin. "If I can't eat your pie, I guess I'll have to think of something else to occupy our time."

"Oh, any ideas on that score?" She stepped closer, rubbing a hand along his whiskery cheek.

"How about a shower?" he asked.

She pursed her lips as though in heavy thought. "I've already had one."

Gage circled her waist, pulling her closer so their hips joined. As usual, he was in a state of arousal and by the look on her face, she recognized all the signs—the biggest of which pressed against her mound.

"How about another one?"

* * * *

By the time she had washed him and he had cleaned and massaged every part of her and had made love to her slick, wet body, the sun had begun to set and Gage decided they could go out.

"Wear your jeans and a sweatshirt and spray with bug spray." He handed her the can.

"I haven't noticed any mosquitoes around here."

"It will help cover up your scent," he said, striving to keep his face straight. He seriously doubted he could get through this adventure without dying from silent laughter or without Keva belting him. But he knew, even if she got mad, she'd forgive him. With every new thing he had introduced her to this week, she had proven herself a good sport.

Gage decided not to take her too far into the woods, so they stopped just at the edge of the grassy yard.

"What do I have to do?" she whispered.

"You don't have to whisper. Snipe are hard of hearing," he replied.

“Oh.” She whispered anyway.

“Take your sack and open it, placing the side on the ground, like this.” He bent down and showed her. “It makes a trap the snipe will run into.”

“Where’s your sack?” she asked.

Gage had to think quick, making it up as he went. “Snipe are rather large, so if you catch one, that will be plenty for both of us.” He bit the inside of his cheek when she nodded in understanding.

“They are also very curious creatures, so you can either rattle the sack a little, or get a twig and tap it on the top. They’ll come to find out what’s making the noise.”

“I thought you said they were hard of hearing?”

Damn, she didn’t miss a trick. “They, uh, only hear certain pitches,” he concocted. “Anyway, when it runs into the bag, you grab the front and scoop it up, shutting the sack quickly so it doesn’t get out.”

He could see her grimace in the gloom. “I’m not sure if I like this.”

“It’s okay, they don’t bite. Now, just crouch down here and wait quietly. It shouldn’t take long.” He positioned her and turned to walk away.

“Where are you going?” she asked, her voice sounding slightly frightened.

Gage began to have second thoughts, but decided everyone should experience snipe hunting once in their lives.

“I’ll be right over there.” He waved vaguely. “We have to be separated, or they’ll smell us.”

“Why would they smell us together, but not separately?”

God, he loved her!

“It’s a hormone thing—you know, male and female together give off a mating scent if they’re in close proximity.”

She squinted her eyes. “Are you kidding me?”

“Would I do that?”

Her eyes narrowed, but instead of saying anything, she squatted down by her sack.

Gage moved out of her line of sight but not far enough away that he couldn't keep an eye on her. He wondered how long he should leave her out there.

Keva's legs began to cramp after just a few minutes, so she quietly stood, then bent at the waist to rattle the sack once more. She looked around but could not see Gage and hoped he hadn't gone too far away.

After what seemed like forever, but was probably no more than ten minutes, she began to think this was some kind of hoax. Since Gage had said that snipe couldn't hear voices, she called his name in a whisper.

No answer. She waited a few more minutes and called again, louder this time. She was thinking she had just about had enough of this business, when she heard a twig snap.

"Gage?" This time, her heart began to beat faster as she stared into the darkness, trying to make out any movement in the trees ahead of her.

Another snap of a twig.

"Gage!" This time, she didn't try to keep her voice down. Staring at the trees, she slowly backed up, straight into something very hard and unmoving.

"Boo!" the object shouted.

Keva screamed, turning in fright and swinging her arms in defense.

"Ouch, ouch," Gage said between his laughter as she swatted at him. "Stop!"

But Keva didn't stop. She kept slapping at his arms, all the while, her heart pounded furiously. And Gage just kept laughing.

"You idiot! You scared me to death!"

He grabbed her wrists to keep her from pummeling him and pulled her close, wrapping her arms around his waist.

She buried her face in his chest.

"I'm sorry," he said into her hair, but she could still feel the laughter in his chest.

He rubbed her back in a soothing motion and Keva calmed.

“There’s no such thing as snipe, is there?” She had begun to realize that it was all a practical joke.

“Actually, there are.”

She gave an ineffectual push against his chest. “I don’t think I believe you.”

He bent his head to look into her eyes. “You aren’t mad, are you?”

Keva decided she could give as good as she got. She backed out of his arms, thrust back her shoulders and put her hands on her hips. “You’ll find out when you have to sleep on the couch tonight.” With a defiant toss of her head, she stomped off toward the cabin, leaving Gage to wonder if she would really kick him out of their bed.

But even as she made her dramatic exit, she already knew she couldn’t stay mad at him for long. And Gage had probably known that when he perpetrated the snipe-hunting joke on her. It was too close to the end of their time in Colorado and she didn’t want to waste it. Besides, she would have a story to tell Beth when she got back to New York. It was unfortunate she didn’t know of a place to take her friend snipe hunting, not that she intended to tell Gage she thought it would be a great joke to pull on someone else.

* * * *

They had forgone dinner, instead eating large slices of pecan pie and drinking coffee and Gage was now content to sit and watch the fire he had built. He couldn’t remember ever feeling this peaceful, and credited it all to Keva’s presence. He had found her a warm and open person, and not afraid of giving herself completely when it came to sex.

She was also willing to try new things. Gage loved the outdoors and lived for those times when he could get away from his work and spend time here in the Colorado Mountains. Even though Keva had been raised in the city, she seemed to thrive on the mountain air just as he did.

"Tell me about your family," Keva said as she settled herself next to him on the couch. Her voice brought him out of his musings.

"Hmmm?" He kissed the top of her head.

"Your family. I've told you about my life, now I want to hear about yours."

"I have five brothers. What more do I need to say?"

"Which one took you snipe hunting?" She poked him in the ribs with her elbow as she asked the question.

Gage chuckled. It had only taken him a dozen or so kisses and a plea for forgiveness to get Keva to let him have any pie. He still wasn't sure about the couch threat, but figured he could persuade her not to make him sleep there.

"Gordon initiated Chase and me at about the same time."

"Is he older?"

"Gordon, Michael and John are the oldest of the group. Travis and Chase are younger than me."

"Ah, sort of the middle child." She nodded her head sagely.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that maybe that's why you are the way you are. You know, trying to find yourself; struggling to have an identity that's not in the shadow of your brothers. Maybe that's why you took up the sport of crewing. It was something your other brothers didn't do, so you didn't have to compete with anyone; you didn't have to prove anything."

"Are you now a psychiatrist as well as a book editor, Ms. Monroe?" He looked down at her. She immediately gave him a sexy smile.

"If I say yes, can we practice a little sex therapy?"

He laughed. "You're wearing me out."

She slid her hand up his chest and circled his neck, drawing his head down to meet her. "I seriously doubt that," she said huskily as she kissed him. Before Gage had time to deepen the kiss, she broke away. "Now, on with your story."

Gage sighed, knowing there would be time later to do all the things he wanted to do to Keva. Of course, he had already

done most of them, but he knew when the lights were out, they would again explore the sexual realms they both seemed to crave.

“Gordon is the oldest. He’s married and has four kids, much to my mom’s delight. Plus, it’s taken the pressure off the rest of us.”

“Wow, four kids.”

“Then come Michael and John, who are twins. Michael’s married with twins of his own, and another baby on the way. John is single.”

“I’ll bet the holidays are something else at your mom’s house. Do all your brothers live in Boston?”

“For the most part. Chase has a business there, although he has operations all over the country.”

“Where does he come in the lineup?”

“After me. I’m after the twins, unmarried at thirty-five, so somewhat of a disappointment to my mother.”

Keva turned and kissed his chin. “I have no doubt your mother is very proud of all of you.” She kissed him again.

“Think so?” He grinned down at her. “My mother thinks all of us should be married with kids by now, even though Travis is only twenty-five.”

“Travis must be the youngest. What does he do?”

“He’s an investigative reporter for the *Boston Chronicle*. Usually, though, he just gets into lots of trouble trying to uncover corruption.”

“Did all of you go to college?”

“Yeah, my dad thought education was the most important thing in the world. Between scholarships and him working two jobs, he managed to get Gordon through. We all made a pact that each of us would help the next one through. That became especially important after dad died. Chase and Travis hadn’t even finished high school, and Mom never worked outside the home.”

Keva hugged him. “I took my life for granted—all the parties, clothes, cars. I wish I had known you back then; it would

have given me a different perspective. What a wonderful way to grow up.”

Gage snorted. “I wouldn’t say that. My brothers and I fought constantly. It’s only now that we’re adults that we get along reasonably well.”

“I still think it would have been wonderful to have brothers and sisters.” Keva turned, stretching out on top of him and sliding her hands up his chest to circle his neck. “After all, I had no one to teach me how to fish, or to ride a four-wheeler.”

She wiggled her hips against Gage’s groin and he instantly came to attention, straining against his jeans. He looked up into Keva’s mysterious smile and wondered what she was up to.

“But then again, I suppose brothers would do mean things like squirt me with the hose, throw me in the lake, and take me out in the middle of the night snipe hunting.”

Gage grinned at her, sliding his palms up her derriere and pushing her hips down tighter against his own. “You loved every minute of it and you know it.”

“Of course I did, and to show you just how much, I have something totally different in mind for us tonight.”

“Yeah?” Several scenarios flashed through Gage’s mind. He was perfectly willing to let her pick the method to their madness, as long as he got to make love to her as many times as he wanted.

Keva slid down Gage’s body, kissing a sizzling path from his chin to his chest and on down to his belly. He sucked in his breath as she slid to the floor on her knees, her mouth moving across the ridge of his zipper. She kissed him through the denim and the heat from her mouth made him grow even harder. He reached down to undo his jeans but realized she had moved. He opened his eyes to see her standing by the couch, her hand held out.

“Come on. My choice, remember?”

Gage grabbed her hand and tried to pull her back down on top of him. “Why don’t we start here?”

She resisted, shaking her head.

Because he really didn't care as long as they got to the business of loving pretty quick, Gage allowed her to pull him up, but the minute he was standing, he reached for her top, pulling it over her head. She allowed him to undress her as she slowly backed toward the stairs.

"So where is your place of preference for your debauchery?" he asked, reaching around her to unhook her bra, then dropping it on the stair railing.

"Somewhere totally unique to our experience." She held on to the railing as he slid her jeans down her legs. She stepped out of them, one leg at a time, moving backward up the stairs, which put her mound right at mouth level. Gage bent forward to kiss her.

"Here, on the stairs?" he questioned.

Keva took another step up. "No, we've already done that."

"You're a tease, you know that?"

She took two more steps up, taunting him unmercifully with her beautiful naked body. He took the steps two at a time, catching her around the waist and sucking a nipple into his mouth. He could feel her soften against him.

"Just a few more steps, Gage. Just a few—" Keva ended her sentence with a groan as he sucked harder.

"Where? I can't take the torture anymore."

"The bed," she whispered as she nipped his ear.

Gage scooped her up in his arms, turning at the top of the stairs to his bedroom. Considering some of the places they had made love over the past week, his bed was indeed unique.

* * * *

Somewhere close to dawn, Gage decided that Keva had a sixth sense that had made her take him to the bedroom instead of making love on the rug in front of the fireplace. The sounds that had initially awakened him grew louder. He heard footsteps and male voices downstairs.

He rolled over, shaking Keva gently and whispering in her ear. "Sh, someone's downstairs. I'm going to see but I want you to stay put."

She grabbed his arm. “No, just stay here. Maybe whoever it is will take what they want and leave.”

Gage had a feeling he knew who was downstairs. “We couldn’t be that lucky,” he muttered, sitting on the side of the bed and slipping his legs into his jeans. “Just stay here, okay?”

Keva tensed, holding her breath as she tried to hear Gage’s progress and whatever had caused him to awaken. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she looked around for a weapon. A yelp echoed up and across the open loft and she jumped from the bed, throwing her short silk robe on as she hurried to the stairs. She couldn’t let Gage face the intruders alone, whether she had a weapon or not.

A series of grunts and curses followed the initial yell as Keva silently slid down the stairs, keeping her back to the wall. The glow from the fireplace showed two forms wrestling on the floor between the couch and the dining room table. In the dim light, she couldn’t make out which one was Gage.

She shrank back into the shadows as one of the hulks surged to his feet, throwing the weight of the other off his back. A body landed with a thud and a grunt.

“Had enough?” The voice was Gage’s and Keva could only assume he was the one left standing, although his back was to her.

She took a step down, ready to fly into his arms when suddenly, another man came out of the shadows from her left, inching along past the stair railing.

He raised his arms to strike.

“Gage, look out!” She shouted as she launched herself at the man, grabbing him around the neck and wrapping her legs around his waist from behind.

“Leave him alone!” she cried, putting a chokehold on him with one arm and grabbing an ear with her hand, twisting with all her might.

“Jesus Christ!” the man swore, spinning in a circle as he tried to dislodge her.

Keva was so intent on her attack, it took her a minute to realize all the noise had stopped. The man she clung to like a monkey quit spinning, and it was then that she heard laughter.

Hands clamped down on her wrists, trying to pry her loose. She tightened her hold.

“Whoa, kitten. Let go of him.” Gage’s voice was close to her ear. It took her senses long seconds to assimilate his scent and his touch; even longer for the adrenaline rush of fear to subside.

When she let her legs slide back to the floor, Gage pinned her close to his body, her back to his chest, his arms wrapped protectively around her.

“What do you want?” She tried to make her voice strong so they wouldn’t know she was scared.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I know these goons.”

By this time, one of the two men had lit several of the lamps in the living room and Keva got a better look at them. There was no mistaking them in the light; they looked like younger copies of Gage. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks at the thought that she had attacked one of his brothers.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

Gage laughed. “Don’t be. They deserve everything they got for sneaking in here in the middle of the night.”

“Never thought I’d see the day when you hid behind a woman’s skirts,” the man she had attacked said with a soft drawl, eying her appreciatively. “And a very short skirt at that.”

“Back off, Chase,” Gage growled from behind her. It was only then that Keva remembered what she had put on. Her blush grew hotter.

“Why don’t I make some coffee while you get dressed?” he whispered.

“You’re actually going to let them stay?” Keva questioned. “After they beat you up?”

Chase and the other one snickered.

Gage frowned. “They didn’t exactly beat me up.”

“But—”

“Go,” he interrupted and Keva realized she had somehow tilted the balance on the one-upmanship between Gage and his brothers. Without another word, she flew up the stairs.

Gage ran a hand through his hair as he headed for the kitchen.

“What the hell are you two doing here, anyway?” He stopped in midstride, his heart hammering. “Did something happen to Mom?”

“Naw,” Travis replied. “We just had a hankering to get away.” He grinned devilishly. Of all the McVicker boys, Travis was the one always pulling the stunts.

“I thought I told you to stay away from here.”

“What’s the matter, big brother? Afraid Chase might take away your sweetie?” Travis taunted him.

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.” Gage growled. He scooped coffee into the filter and turned the automatic brewer on.

“Sounds serious,” Chase said, eyeing Gage intently. Chase was next youngest to Gage, and the two of them had probably been the closest of all his brothers. That is, until Chase moved to Texas to train horses and stayed to start his business. Chase was also the one in the family with all the looks. His hair and eyes were the same color as all his brothers, but for some reason, on Chase, his sun-lightened hair and dark brown eyes always caught the girls’ attention.

“You remember that’s a loft,” Gage pointed directly above them, keeping his voice low. “Keva can hear everything you two buffoons are saying.”

Both brothers glanced upward and Gage regretted mentioning anything about Keva. They could hear the water running and that brought images of her naked in the shower. *Damn.* But even as he thought that, his eyes traveled down the stairs and across the floor where clothes were strewn carelessly as he and Keva had undressed last night.

Although he didn’t mind—after all, he was an adult—he didn’t want Keva embarrassed anymore when she came

downstairs. While Chase went outside to bring in their gear and Travis was raiding the fridge, Gage quickly gathered the evidence of their lovemaking and tossed everything in the closet.

“Too late,” Travis said as he closed the door to the icebox, shifting his gaze to the closet. He gave Gage a grin. “Is this more than a weekend fling?” He leaned a hip against the counter, munching on an apple.

Gage finally knew what he wanted, but it was too early in his relationship with Keva for him to be voicing his desires out loud. Especially to Travis, and in particular, when he and Keva hadn’t talked about it.

“Let’s just say I wish you two hadn’t shown up. And second, keep your mouth shut for a change.” Travis made a living asking questions, and whether he was investigating crime for the newspaper or trying to pry out family secrets, he not only asked, but he had rattled them all out at one time or another.

“Why does he have to keep his mouth shut?” Keva asked, coming up behind him.

Gage wondered how much she had overheard. Seeing no way around introducing them, he sighed. “This is my brother Travis.” He heard the door slam. “And that one’s Chase, but stay away from him.”

“Why?” Keva asked.

Chase sauntered over to where Keva stood and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Gage growled.

“Because I’m the handsome one of all the McVicker men, darlin’, and he’s afraid I’ll sweep you off your feet and take you away from him.” He gave her the grin that Gage knew had made many a woman pant after him. Gage pulled on his arm, trying to loosen his hold. When he didn’t immediately let go, Gage grabbed him around the neck.

“Hey.” Chase elbowed him in the ribs and Gage stumbled backward, taking his brother with him. Luckily, he had let go of Keva.

“Do they always act like five year olds?” Keva asked Travis, who stood in the kitchen, but looked as though he wanted to join in.

“Only when they’re together,” he replied, grinning. Keva was instantly aware of the sensual aura that seemed to surround these McVicker men.

“Hello, I’m Keva Monroe,” she said, extending her hand. “Shall we go out on the deck and leave these two boys alone?”

Travis seemed reluctant to leave, but apparently, her voice had gotten through to Gage, because with one more punch, he got off his brother and stood. His hair was disheveled and his chest rose and fell rapidly with his breathing. He took two steps to close the distance to her side, slinging an arm around her shoulders in a show of ownership.

Jealousy? Keva wondered. They hadn’t been in public all that often and she had never witnessed Gage’s possessive nature. While she considered herself an independent, liberated woman, she kind of liked his chauvinistic attitude.

“What’s to eat?” Travis asked. “We drove all night to get here and I’m starved.” He lifted the foil on the pie plate and Keva saw his eyes light up. “Pecan?”

Gage released her and walked around the breakfast bar, taking the pie out of Travis’ hands. “We’re only two hours from the airport. You could have eaten in Denver.”

“Yeah, but Chase here, wouldn’t leave Denver until he closed up shop at the limo service, so we didn’t get out of town ’til after three and everything’s closed.”

Keva wondered how they had the same free access to the cabin as Gage did, but since he was clanking pans and a cast iron skillet around on the stove, she figured he was still in a temper over his brothers showing up and decided to ignore him.

“You have a limo service in Denver?” she asked Chase.

“Hell, he has fifteen companies scattered around the country,” Travis answered her.

Keva knew she looked surprised. “Wow. That’s good to know. Maybe I’ll use your services the next time we have a convention.”

“What kind of convention?”

“I work for *Voyager Publishing* in New York City. We’re always involved in some kind of conference or the other, if not for my department, then for one of the others.”

“Publishing? Then how did you and Steve meet? It’s not like a book publishing company would have anything to do with *SGM*—”

“Chase, get the toast going,” Gage cut him off.

“Steve who?” Keva asked, suddenly confused.

Gage looked at her, his eyes requesting understanding. “Gage is my middle name.” She watched as he threw his brother a meaningful look.

Keva thought she had come to know Gage very well in the past several weeks, but now wondered if she knew him at all.

Before she had time to question him, he turned to Travis. “I thought Charlie told me I’d have the cabin to myself this week.”

“Charlie? What does he have to do with it?” Chase asked.

Gage’s eyes narrowed, some unspoken sign between him and his brother.

“Oh, yeah.” Chase said. “We, uh, forgot to talk to him.”

“Breakfast is ready, after which you are leaving the same way you got here,” Gage said as he tossed scrambled eggs into a bowl, forked the bacon onto a plate, and shoved them across the breakfast bar.

He turned back to the counter, poured a drink from the blender and set it in front of Keva. Her cappuccino. In the midst of chaos, he still remembered.

While his brothers carried the breakfast to the table and got out some plates at Gage’s direction, Keva pulled him aside. “May I have a word with you, please?”

Gage’s breath blew out from between clenched teeth, but he followed her past the sliding glass doors onto the deck.

“What’s wrong?”

"They're not supposed to be here," he said, pouting like a little boy. Keva thought he looked quite endearing.

"But they're your brothers."

"Look, I know you probably don't understand, being an only child, but I don't like to share."

"Share?" She shook her head. "You're right, I don't understand."

He put his hands on her shoulders, resting his forehead against hers. "I wanted this time, and you, all to myself. I don't need Chase coming here with his winning smile and Travis with his boyish humor—"

Keva stopped his ramblings with a kiss. She put her hands on the sides of his face and lifted his head so he had to look at her. "That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me." She gave him a smile. "But you don't need to worry. I have the only McVicker man I want."

She watched as the frown left his face. His hands circled her waist to pull her closer. His hips slid sensuously against hers, immediately igniting her passion. She could tell by the hard ridge pushing gently into her that he felt the same. She glanced over his shoulder and saw both Chase and Travis studiously eating breakfast, but they no doubt knew exactly what was going on. She took a step back.

"Besides, we're leaving tomorrow. What can it hurt for them to stay?" She studied his face. "Please?"

Gage sighed, and she knew he would do whatever she wanted. "Okay, but only for a few hours." He turned and left her.

"Gage." She tried to call him back, but realized that was the end of the conversation, for now.

* * * *

Gage decided if he couldn't have Keva to himself, he'd better get them out of the cabin, so he suggested taking the four-wheelers up the mountain and trying their hand at panning for gold. While Keva went upstairs for his shirt and shoes, he and his brothers cleared the table and washed up the breakfast dishes.

“You guys are heading back to the city by dark, you hear?”

“What’s the problem?” Travis asked.

Gage checked the stairway before he answered, keeping his voice low. “I already told you. Keva doesn’t know exactly who I am.”

“What are you hiding from? I mean, I know you walked out on *SGM* to take a break, but shit, Steve, you’ve been gone eight months,” Travis said, always cutting to the heart of the matter.

“I wouldn’t have a business left if I took off that long.”

Chase snorted.

“It’s *Gage*,” he retorted, then added to Chase, “You would if you had decent managers. Look, I haven’t lied to her. You know the drill, Chase. You’ve been there. How many women are after you for your money and not yourself?”

“You think she’s after your money?” Travis perked up, immediately interested in anything smacking of undercover investigation.

“No, I don’t, because she doesn’t think I have any,” Gage replied.

Travis let out a low whistle. “She doesn’t know you’re worth millions?”

Keva came into the room and handed Gage his shirt and tennis shoes. “What’s worth millions?” she asked.

Chapter 9

Chase and Travis looked at Gage, who, in turn, tried to decide what to say.

“These mountains are worth millions. The gold in them has yet to be fully excavated. You guys ready? We probably need to gas up the four-wheelers before we go.” He rapidly changed the subject, and all three men turned and headed for the door.

Gage wondered at Keva’s quiet attitude as they got the ATVs ready for the trip up the mountain. Although there were four vehicles in the shed, Gage insisted Keva ride with him since she had never driven one before.

“Where we going?” Travis asked, revving the engine.

“Up to Lightning Pass. The water shouldn’t be too swift this time of year.” Gage scooted forward on the seat to make room for Keva behind him. His brothers flew out of the yard, yelling at each other as they vied for first place on the trail.

“Climb aboard,” he said.

She didn’t move. When he turned, she was giving him a look that told him he was in deep shit.

“Why do I get the feeling I really don’t know you, *Steve*?” She emphasized his name.

“I’ve already told you who I am. I got tired of my job and decided to see the country.”

“Why did you change your name?”

“I didn’t.” At her snort, he amended, “I just decided to use my middle name, that’s all. Look, I’ve never lied to you. I wouldn’t do that. But I would prefer not having this discussion with my brothers here.” He gave her what he hoped was a

winning smile. “Besides, they’re both so taken with you, they’ll be back here in a flash if we don’t get moving.”

She reluctantly climbed aboard, circling his waist with her arms. “Then who is Charlie?”

“A friend,” Gage shouted as he opened the throttle, taking off at a high speed. He hoped the noise and activity would put an end to Keva’s questions.

* * * *

The ride on the four-wheeler was exhilarating in the early morning mountain air and Keva was glad she had put on a jacket. When she and Gage finally got to what he had called Lightning Pass, Travis and Chase were pulling fishing gear from the bag strapped on the back of one of the ATVs.

“Thought as long as we were intruding, we could at least catch lunch,” Travis said as he put together a fishing pole.

Keva must have unconsciously made a face because Gage began laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Travis asked. “I’m the fly fishing expert in this family,” he told Keva, “and these two are just jealous.”

Chase and Gage both snorted and Chase immediately chimed in. “Okay, little brother, let’s make this worthwhile. Five dollars says I catch more fish than you in the next hour. You in, Ste—Gage?” he corrected himself, looking at Keva as he did so.

She wasn’t sure exactly how to react to Gage’s brothers, and to the idea that Gage’s real name was Steve. Well, his first name was, anyway. He would always be Gage to her.

“Nope, you two braggarts have at it. Keva and I are going to make our fortunes panning for gold.” Gage appeared more relaxed now that they were out of the cabin’s confines. He dug through the bag and pulled out a couple of large, shallow metal pans.

“Right, like you need any more money,” Travis shot back.

Keva saw Gage throw his brother a dark look and wondered about the undercurrent between them. There was something she was missing here and she just couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Besides,” Gage continued, “Keva is tired of fish. In fact,” he paused dramatically, grinning at her and she knew what was coming. She gave him a look that clearly meant *shut up*. It didn’t stop him. “She suggested having snipe for dinner last night, so we had to go hunt for some.”

Both Chase and Travis stopped dead in their tracks and looked at her with their mouths open before bursting into loud guffaws of laughter. Travis dropped his pole on the ground, holding his stomach as he bent over double. Chase fell against the side of the four-wheeler, seeking support as he continued to roar.

Keva could feel her face turn red hot. In a voice pitched low and threatening, she said to Gage, “Oh, Mister, if you only knew how much trouble you’re in.”

Apparently, Chase and Travis heard her, because it only made them laugh harder.

Chase nudged Travis. “Looks like we have to go back to Denver tonight after all. Our poor brother is going to be sleeping on the couch.”

“If she even lets him in the cabin!” Travis added.

“Come on, guys, you both got caught at one time, too.” Gage finally came to her defense, although Keva thought he was probably trying to save his own butt.

“You’re right. We apologize for laughing,” Chase told her, even as he kept chuckling. “I’m surprised you didn’t give him a black eye.”

“Oh, I paid him back, all right,” Keva said, remembering what had happened in the bedroom last night. She had made Gage hang onto the headboard as she had her way with him. And, as he had done to her on previous occasions, she had brought him to the brink of climax more than once, not letting him crest, even when he begged her. She wasn’t sure if it was just retribution for playing such a practical joke on her, or if the sense of power she had over him gave her a feeling of justice.

Travis and Chase were full of good humor and appeared obsessed with getting Gage’s dander up. The great part of all this

was they didn't seem to think Keva was intruding. As they waded into the shallow stream and cast their lines into the water, they began telling her stories of him, everything from peeing in the backyard when he was ten, to pranks he pulled in high school.

Keva thought of how wonderful it would have been to have brothers and sisters growing up. Regardless of the grumbling Gage had done when his brothers had first shown up, Keva could feel the love they had for each other. The good-natured ribbing and the one-upmanship as they challenged each other were all part of the bond they shared.

"And then there was the time he took Mary Jo Novotny to the movies," Chase drawled during a lull in the conversation.

Keva heard Gage groan beside her. They had tried their hand at panning for gold, but the water was far too cold to stand in it for long. Now, they sat side by side on the bank, and Keva was content to listen to the stories all three brothers told. Gage wasn't about to let his younger siblings get one up on him, so he contributed incidents about both of them.

"Tell me about this Mary Jo person," she interjected as Gage protested. He slapped a hand to his forehead and slid it down, covering his eyes. She elbowed him. "It's payback time. You told them about snipe hunting."

Keva doubted Chase would have relented, even if Gage asked him. They were having too much fun trying to embarrass him in front of her.

"Ah, Mary Jo," Chase sighed dramatically. As he talked, he cast his line into the water with a smooth, practiced flick of his wrist. It appeared to Keva that all the McVicker men were quite at home in the outdoors.

"Mary Jo was the high school beauty. She had long blonde hair, big green eyes, and a bust that the girls envied and the guys wanted to—"

Gage coughed to interrupt him.

"Oops, sorry," Chase said, not looking the least embarrassed.

"It's okay. I edit romance, you know," Keva replied.
"Besides, I have the feeling the whole point of this story will be lost without a few scintillating details."

"That's for sure," Travis piped up.

"To make a long story short," Gage took over the telling.
"These two sneaked in behind me at the movie theater and totally ruined what could have been a most entertaining evening."

"Yeah, with you losing your virginity under Mary Jo's excellent tutelage," Chase piped up.

Gage didn't appear bothered with this disclosure. Keva thought it funny how different the conversations were between guys and girls. Where girls might discuss intimate details with other females, they would never bring up something so personal in front of the opposite sex. But guys liked to brag, about anything and to anyone.

She leaned close to Gage so that only he would hear what she had to say. "Regardless of you not 'making it' with Mary Jo, I would say you still acquired a remarkable education over the last several years."

Neither of them was naive enough to think there hadn't been others before them. But where Keva felt her sex education had been stagnant, if not entirely dormant, Gage had certainly been at the head of his class.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her lightly on the mouth despite the catcalls from his brothers. He kissed a trail across her cheek and traced the outline of her ear with his tongue. His breath tickled as he whispered, "Remember when I told you how much pleasure I derived from satisfying you?" At her barest nod, he continued. "The same is true in terms of education. When two people are compatible sexually, there are no limits to their activity and learning. Everything I know about pleasuring you is because you are so responsive and willing to please me in return."

Keva knew her cheeks were flushed from Gage's whispered comments, even if Chase and Travis were busy fishing and didn't appear to be paying attention.

"I can't believe we're having this conversation with your brothers right over there."

"If anything, they're jealous. Besides, they know how special you are to me."

"They do?" Keva asked, followed quickly with, "I am?"

Gage gave her another quick kiss. "Yes, and most definitely yes."

He pulled her to her feet. "Come on, I want to show you something."

"Is this going to be another one of those learning experiences?" she asked.

"You can only hope," he replied suggestively. Out loud, he shouted to his brothers. "We're going up to Lightning Pass. Be back in an hour."

"Uh-huh. Sure," they both replied in unison, and then Chase added, "If he starts pawing you, Keva, just shout and we'll come and rescue you."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said good-naturedly, sliding her hand into Gage's.

Together, they walked through the woods, following a trail that only Gage seemed to see. He held branches out of the way for her and helped her over fallen tree trunks. Keva could tell they were making a gradual ascent from the stream, but other than that, had no idea where they were going.

Finally, Gage stopped and pulled her in front of him. He put his hands on her shoulders and said simply, "Look."

The scene before her took her breath away. For as far as they could see, the mountains rose in majestic beauty. Some of the higher peaks were still capped with snow, but every imaginable shade of green was visible in the coloring of the trees and foliage on the lower slopes. Several spots of blue were visible throughout the panoramic view and Gage named each lake and stream as he pointed them out.

“You come up here a lot, don’t you?” she asked.

She sensed some hesitation before he answered. “We all did, before Gordon and Michael married. It was a man’s retreat; no females were allowed.” He chuckled as Keva elbowed him. He slid his arms around her. “In fact, you’re the first female I have ever brought up here.”

“Well, if you promised to take them all snipe hunting, it’s no wonder you couldn’t get anyone to come with you,” she teased.

“Are you ever going to let me live that down?” He kissed the tip of her ear.

She shrugged. “Probably not.”

He released her and turned. “Look at this. Last summer, we were all up here and lightning struck this tree. Scared the shit out of us when we heard the crack, considering we were all in the creek down there fishing. I’ll never understand why there wasn’t more fire and how it kept from spreading to the whole forest. Anyway, that’s why we decided to name this area Lightning Pass.”

The charred remains of a once gigantic tree stood in sharp contrast to the green around it. The branches that had fallen at the time it was struck lay on the forest floor like so many skeletal bones, stripped of leaves and bark.

“It makes me feel very small in the scheme of things,” Keva said in awe as she tried to take it all in.

“I felt humbled,” Gage replied. “I remember thinking, why this tree? It wasn’t even the tallest one on this side of the mountain. So why did God strike it and not another?”

Keva looked at him. His expression suggested he was a million miles away.

“Gage, what are you trying to tell me?”

He seemed to resurface from wherever he had been. He shrugged. “That’s when I started thinking there had to be more to life than what I was doing. I didn’t want to just stand around until lightning struck. I wanted to see the world and find some

greater purpose to my life. Two months later, I walked away from it all.”

“You never have told me exactly what all that encompassed.” More and more discrepancies were popping up about his life and Keva wanted to find out why.

“Does it matter? If I hadn’t done it, I never would have met you.” He pulled her close and kissed her. As always when her passion for this man rose, Keva forgot everything except being in his arms. Their tryst was interrupted when a shout came from below.

“Hey, you two. We’re heading back to the cabin. Travis, here, is wasting away and his complaining is wearing me out.” Chase’s voice came clearly from the stream.

Gage stepped away from her and leaned over the trail. When Keva came up next to him, she could see his brothers below. Although they had walked for over a mile, apparently, they had meandered back and forth to get up here and weren’t really that far away from where they had started fishing.

“We’ll follow you shortly,” Gage hollered down. Within minutes, the sound of the ATVs echoed against the side of the mountain and Keva saw the two tear down the path.

“I suppose we should go down, too,” Gage said. “Maybe if we feed them, they’ll go back home.”

“Shame on you. You have to let them stay.” Keva liked both Chase and Travis, and hoped to have time to find out more about Gage through them.

“I don’t have to let them do anything.” Gage grabbed her around the waist, pulling her close. “This is our last night in the cabin, and I want you all to myself.” He captured her lips, his tongue devouring her. Passion flared instantly; hot spirals of lust swirling throughout her body. She pulled him closer; wanting the heat, needing what only Gage could give her.

“Take me now; right here.” She panted against his lips. Her fingers nimbly unbuttoned his shirt, jerking it from his pants. The button on his jeans was harder to open, but she still made

quick work of it, sliding the zipper down and moving her hands inside to rub against his sex.

“Oh, baby, what you do to me,” he murmured against her hair, and she felt his body quiver in response. He slid her shirt up, pulling her bra with it, not even bothering to unfasten it. Pushing her breasts together, he bent his head and licked first one, then the other, over and over again. Her nipples were hard and aching and Keva thought she would die if she didn’t have him inside her.

“Now,” she whispered raggedly. “Gage, I can’t stand it—I need you desperately.”

Gage backed against the trunk of a fallen tree. Keva stepped out of her pants and straddled him almost before he was seated. There were no preliminaries, no fondling. She stroked him once, then slid down on him until they were joined completely.

“Oh, God,” she groaned, moving frantically up and down.

Gage put his hands on her hips. “Slow down, sweetheart.”

“I can’t,” she rasped, sliding up his length again and then pushing down, grinding her mound against him. “You have turned me into some wild animal and made me addicted to you.”

There was no more talk. They moved as one, locked together in the most intimate way two people could be connected; exploding so fast and furiously, that Gage forgot to breathe. When she collapsed in his arms, moaning softly, he knew a lifetime of Keva would never be enough. As soon as they got back to New York, he would lay his cards on the table and ask her to marry him.

When they got back to the cabin, Keva made Gage promise he wouldn’t send his brothers packing, at least not until after dinner. She smiled at him. Somewhat pacified, Gage decided that not only did Keva own his heart, but her good humor always restored his own.

“If you guys will excuse me, I’m going to go crawl back into my bed,” Keva announced as soon as they walked in the door. “*Something* woke me up entirely too early this morning.” She

tried to give Chase and Travis the evil eye, but they just laughed at her.

Gage gave her a kiss before she started for the stairs.

“We’re going to take the boat out and see if I can drown these two on water-skis.” His comment was immediately met with denials from the other two. “Do you have enough stuff to make another batch of hushpuppies to go with the rest of the fish?” he asked her.

“I think so.”

“Hushpuppies?” Travis asked. “I hope that’s food.”

“Don’t you ever fill up?” Chase asked him, before Gage interrupted as they walked toward the deck.

“You have got to taste Keva’s hushpuppies. They’re better than the crab cakes you can get in Boston.” Their voices faded as the door closed behind them.

Keva stood, one foot on the stairs, Gage’s praise echoing in her ears. He was proud of her, she thought. Could she possibly love him any more?

* * * *

When Gage pulled the boat up to the dock, he had his brothers help him hoist it out of the water with the pulleys and lock it down. They pulled the rowboat up on shore and stowed the oars, skis and lifejackets in the shed since he and Keva had to leave in the morning and Chase and Travis were definitely leaving tonight.

They had spent more time talking out on the lake than they had skiing. Since neither Travis nor Chase had a serious relationship going at this time, it was hard for them to understand what Gage was going through, but they had agreed to leave so he could spend the last night with Keva, alone.

He followed them into the cabin from the dock to find Keva making a salad in the kitchen. He thought how right she looked there and how right it was for him to come home to her. His feet automatically took him toward her.

"Dibs on the shower," Travis said, grabbing his bag and taking the stairs two at a time. Chase took a beer from the fridge and sat on one of the barstools.

"What's up, darlin'?" he asked Keva.

"Don't you have something to do?" Gage asked.

"Nope," he answered, grinning.

"If you don't mind me asking," Keva said, "you have an accent, but not like Gage and Travis. Don't you live in Boston, too?"

"I was the maverick of the family," Chase said. "I always wanted to be a cowboy, but living in Boston sort of squelched that idea. So as soon as I got out of college, I headed for Texas. I didn't know much, but found a rancher who was willing to teach me. It was a lot harder work than I thought. John Wayne movies always make it look so glamorous."

"You like John Wayne?" Keva asked and Gage groaned.

"Yeah, do you?"

"You're looking at an addict," Gage answered for her.

Keva made a face at him. "Are you still ranching?"

"Yeah, I raise horses, but I let someone else break them. A horse had different ideas about my ability to break him and he broke my leg instead—in five places."

"Oh, my, I'm so sorry." Keva's voice was full of sympathy.

"Is this how you get all the girls?" Gage asked. "They feel sorry for you?"

His brother grinned at him. "Whatever works."

"Then what happened?" Keva interrupted.

"By that time, I had fallen in love with the wide open spaces of Texas and wanted to stay but didn't know what to do. My boss was always having buyers in for his horse auctions, and after driving his quad-cab into the city to pick them up at the airport, I decided there was money to be made doing that in style. Thus, the first *C Bar M Limo Service* was born."

"Your turn," Travis came up, toweling dry his hair. "We gotta eat and get out of here, remember?"

"Why?" Keva asked. "You can stay tonight."

"No," they both said at once and Gage was glad they remembered his talk. Until Travis ratted on him.

"Ste—Gage said we had to be out of here by dark."

"He did?" She gave him a reproachful look.

Gage was glad Chase had a little more finesse. "Actually, I have to be back for the close of business. The Denver operation has only been going for three months and there was a huge convention this week. I need to make sure my manager can finish out the books properly."

"Well, you're more than welcome to stay," she said.

"Regardless of what Gage said."

"She has this thing about family," Gage commented. "She's an only child."

"I wanted to be an only child," Travis piped up. "Being the youngest of six kids definitely had its disadvantages."

Gage grabbed his towel and snapped it, popping him on the leg. "You were spoiled rotten and you know it."

Travis kept them company talking about the latest scandals in Boston as Gage started supper and Chase showered. Regardless of how he had protested, Gage was glad to see his brothers. He realized how much he had missed his family in the time he had been gone.

Perhaps a trip back to Boston was in order. Maybe he could even talk Keva into going with him after he asked her to marry him. He wanted his mom to meet her. He already knew two of his brothers were taken with her.

Supper was the same kind of lively affair he could remember from his youth, and he watched as Keva happily kept up a running conversation with his brothers. She fit in quite well and didn't take any guff off them. When they praised her hushpuppies, she blushed shyly, leaving Gage to wonder if no one had ever told her how great she was.

Gage looked pointedly at his watch as they finished supper, but his brothers decided they had time for a drink after the dishes were cleared.

“Charlie wouldn’t mind us drinking his liquor,” Travis said, taunting him as he poured Gage’s very expensive brandy into snifters. He handed one to Chase.

“Yeah,” his brother added, “and where are those fine cigars he used to keep for when we came up here? *He* wouldn’t mind if we smoked them, either.” He went to the cabinet and pulled out the humidor.

Gage knew his brothers were mocking him because he hadn’t told Keva the cabin was his. He guessed he deserved to have them swilling his brandy and smoking his cigars. That was another habit he had left behind in Boston, and he hadn’t really missed it until he saw them in the humidor.

He lifted one from the case that Chase held out, inhaling the fragrant aroma from a smuggled Cuban. “Ah,” he sighed, “you’re right—the owner wouldn’t mind at all.”

The cigar was snatched out of his fingers and dropped back into the case.

“Smoking is bad for your health,” Keva told him.

“Oh, boy,” Travis smirked, grabbing Chase by the arm and pulling him outside.

Gage could hear their laughter through the door. He frowned at Keva, not entirely sure he liked her high-handed attitude, especially in front of his brothers, who were sure to tell his *other* brothers he was whipped.

“I think I’m old enough to decide if I want to smoke a cigar on occasion,” he said firmly to show her he was a man who could make up his own mind.

She moved directly in front of him, capturing his gaze and giving him one of her smiles. He felt her hand slide down his front to caress his crotch, her action hidden from view by her body. He responded immediately.

“I can promise you something much better than smoking a cigar,” she purred. She leaned close to kiss him, her breasts rubbing against his chest.

Gage lost the battle, giving up without a fight. “Now?”

She laughed, stepping back. "Of course not right now. Go keep your brothers company while I finish up in the kitchen."

Gage retreated to the porch, glancing again at his watch. Before he had time to tell his brothers they definitely had to leave right away, Keva came out, carrying a tray with three thin slices of pecan pie on plates.

"Sorry they're small pieces," she said, "but Gage made a pig of himself."

Gage decided sharing wasn't a bad thing, especially since Keva had promised him a whole pie at a later date. And besides, after dessert, he could get rid of these two.

Gage sat on a chaise with Keva relaxing between his legs, his body already aroused by her nearness. Although he kept giving his brothers dirty looks, it was another hour before Chase decided they needed to get on the road.

"It's about damn time," Gage muttered under his breath.

Keva elbowed him.

"I hope to see you again sometime," she said, giving each of them a kiss on the cheek. She stood on the porch beside Gage as the car drove away.

"Finally." He started unbuttoning her shirt.

"You're incorrigible."

"No, I'm just going to do what I've been promising myself since I first saw you."

"What?"

"Make slow, slow sweet love to you."

"Oh, that does sound promising."

Gage backed her through the door, kicking it shut behind him. He kept one hand clutched in her shirt, guaranteeing she didn't move away from him as he turned and locked the door.

"It's a good thing you took a nap today," he said, "because I intend to keep you up all night."

"But you didn't. You've been up since dawn."

"Don't worry, I'll be busy enough to stay awake. And besides, I can sleep on the plane."

One by one, he slid her buttons open, exposing creamy flesh and a lacy bra. He bent forward to kiss the swell of her breasts where the lace stopped. Other than that, he didn't touch her. When she reached to circle his neck, he stepped back.

"Uh-uh. Don't touch." He shook his head. "All you can do is feel."

"That's what I want to do."

"No, I mean feel what I do to you."

"I want to give you pleasure, too," she said.

"We've had this discussion before. Believe me, we'll both derive pleasure from what I have in mind."

Gage tucked his hands in his pockets, determined to take it slow. He kissed her delicate collarbone, then dragged her shirt off her shoulder with his teeth. If he used his hands, he's have her naked in a heartbeat.

His lips moved across her neck to the other shoulder, and her blouse dropped to the floor. He groaned inwardly because she sighed and it made her breasts lift, pushing against her bra. The lace was almost transparent and he could see the darker aureoles and her nipples, already tight and peaked against the lace.

"You really think you can do this?" she whispered huskily.

"No, but I'm willing to try."

He kissed her mouth, his tongue tracing the outline of her lips, tasting the sweet essence of Keva. Her tongue joined his in a dance that Gage knew was the mating of their souls. He curled his hands into fists to keep from touching her.

He skimmed his lips down her belly, dropping to his knees before her. Still using only his teeth, he tugged her pants down until they dropped from her slim hips.

He kissed her belly, tongued her navel. He nipped the skin at her hips, then licked a path along the edge of her lace panties.

She groaned. "That's not fair. I want to touch you."

"Later." He snagged her panties and pulled them down just far enough that the light brown hair of her mound became

visible. He planted more kisses there, then let his tongue trace the line of a muscle up her inner thigh.

Her panties fell to the floor. "Open for me."

She didn't move. "Not unless I can touch you."

"Keva," he growled in warning.

"But I ache. I need to touch you; see you."

He kissed lower. "Open for me and I'll take care of that ache."

She moved her feet apart and leaned back, her hips against the couch at an angle that opened her to his sight.

"Sweet," was all he managed to get out before he had to taste her.

Keva was a trembling bundle of nerves. Not being able to touch Gage made her own sense of touch that much more sensitive and she gasped as his tongue invaded her. She clutched the edge of the couch, all her senses concentrating on the sensations he evoked. If she moved her legs just a little further apart, leaned back just a little more, there!

She groaned aloud as he sank deeper within her. She didn't know how he could manage such control because she was coming apart at the seams. Every flick of his tongue took her higher and higher until finally, she flew, crying out his name as she climaxed.

She would have collapsed on the floor in front of him if he hadn't braced her knees with his large hands. As it was, her legs shook with the after shocks of his loving.

Gage slowly kissed his way back up her body, lingering at her belly button, skimming across her hot skin. He loved hearing her cry out in passion, knowing he had taken her to the heights of ecstasy. But he knew it would be even sweeter when he was inside her tight sheath. The very thought made him ache and he strained against his jeans.

When he was standing in front of her, he rubbed his palms lightly across the lace of her bra, feeling her nipples pebble beneath his touch.

"Can I touch you now?" she asked, her voice ragged.

“No, not yet. This is my fantasy.”

Hooking a finger under each strap of her bra, he slowly slid one, then the other off her shoulders. He glided a finger across the edge of lace, pushing it down so her breasts were freed.

“You are so beautiful,” he said in awe, palming both breasts and gently pushing them together. He kissed the cleft he made, then licked a heated path to one nipple, sucking it into his mouth. He felt ready to explode and wondered at the insanity that made him think he could take her slowly.

The feel of her; the smell of her; even the look she was giving him were rapidly taking him past the point of control. He unhooked her bra and let his gaze linger on every part of her body, savoring the curve of her flesh, the dips and hollows that made her so feminine and so different from him.

He scooped her up in his arms, carrying her to the rug by the unlit fireplace. They wouldn’t need a fire tonight because Gage knew they would create enough heat to set the place ablaze. When he went to lay her down, she snagged his shirt and pulled it over his head as he let go of her. He stood beside her and peeled off his jeans, his sex jutting out hard and throbbing. When he knelt on the rug, she took him in hand, rolling to her side to place a kiss on his hip.

“You’re breaking the rules,” he said.

“To hell with the rules. There are no rules where you and I are concerned.” She squeezed, gently at first, then firmer, stroking him as he lengthened.

Gage closed his eyes and absorbed the feelings. Her finger traced a path up his length, circling the tip and coating him with his own moisture. But when she kissed him, he jerked, the shock of her tongue almost more than he could take. He let her have her way until the muscles in his legs shook so hard, he knew he had to lay down.

He stretched out beside her and cradled her in his arms. His lips found hers and he kissed her deeply, rolling on top of her so their bodies were aligned. Gage found he didn’t need to breathe; that he could take the very essence of life from her lips.

He lifted his head, gently stroked her hair back from her face and stared into eyes the color of Colorado lakes. The look she gave him was one of such adoration, Gage couldn't speak.

He spied the half empty snifter of brandy on the coffee table where he had put it after supper. Reaching for it, he slowly tipped it sideways, dribbling a small amount on Keva's breasts. She shivered at the touch of the cool liquid, and he bent to lick it from her skin, his hot tongue warming the sweet liquor before he lapped it up.

Over and over, he anointed her, following with his tongue and mouth. She wiggled beneath him and sighed as he worked his way down her body, letting not an inch of skin go without his touch.

He rocked back on his heels. "Have I ever told you how much I love your long legs?" he asked as he bent and kissed her knee.

She slid her leg up his arm, letting it rest on his shoulder. "Show me."

Chapter 10

Gage kissed each toe, the arch of her foot, her ankle. He nibbled leisurely up her leg until he got to her knee. Then he tipped the snifter and watched as the liquid trickled from her knee down her thigh to pool in the hollow of her hip. He followed the path with his mouth, nipping and kissing a heated path to where he could lick the remaining droplets.

“Your legs are so long and sleek, and when you wrap them around me, I’m in heaven.” He repeated the loving attention to her other leg, which was bent by his side. This time, he continued trickling brandy across her hips, fascinated when golden droplets shimmered from her curls. He bent to taste them.

Keva thought Gage couldn’t take her to any further heights of passion, for he had fulfilled her every fantasy already. But his imagination knew no bounds, and she quickly grew hot and moist. The smell of brandy was only half as intoxicating as what he was doing to her and Keva arched her back as her orgasm overtook her.

She hadn’t completely come back to earth before Gage began the sweet torture of her body again. He covered her completely, taking her lips with his, kissing her deeply. She could taste brandy mingled with his own unique taste and the hot, rough texture of his tongue. She rubbed her hands over his smooth back, enjoying the ripple of muscle beneath her palms. She touched him everywhere she could reach as he continued to kiss her. She brought her knees up, lifting her hips against his, trying to tell him without words what she wanted.

Gage lifted his head, his eyes dark with passion. “Look at me,” he whispered, but Keva couldn’t have looked away had she wanted. She reached up and he entwined his fingers with hers. His hips began a slow, erotic dance and Keva arched to meet him, but he didn’t enter her completely. Instead, he touched and withdrew—once, twice—teasing her to the point of madness.

“Please,” she begged, lifting her head to kiss the corners of his mouth.

His fingers curled tighter around hers. Still holding her captive with his gaze, he slowly penetrated her, tantalizing her with his thickness as she stretched to hold him. When he was no more than halfway in, he withdrew to the very edge of her and Keva cried out.

“Sh.” He silenced her with a kiss. He pushed forward, a little deeper this time. Over and over, he would enter and withdraw, never completely embedding himself in her. And yet Keva could feel the spiraling sensations begin—the sweet achiness that she knew would soon erupt in climax.

Gage had doubted he could make love to Keva slowly. But the wonder of it was that by taking her only partway, never completely meshing their hips, he found his body spinning out of control like it never had before. Each time he pushed forward, her sheath would clutch around him, trying to pull him deeper inside her. Orgasms of pleasure burst in his loins, one after the other, and yet he knew it wasn’t over. Something waited for him just beyond his reach, but Keva would take him there.

He knew her so well, that he sensed the moment she was ready to drop over the edge. Her breathing quickened and little gasps of pleasure escaped. Continuing to move within her in short, shallow strokes, he leaned down and captured a breast, sucking hard on her nipple. She cried out in pleasure.

As she clutched around him yet again in the throes of her climax, Gage wanted to sink deep within her. But he held back. He wanted to imprint himself so deeply on her soul, she would never want anything he couldn’t give her; never love anyone but him.

He held his hips perfectly still as Keva tried to move against him, to bring him deeper into her body. And when she calmed from her orgasm and her breathing became less frantic, he began his assault again. He kissed the corners of her mouth, traced the outline of her ear, and nipped her neck. And all the time, he kept himself just barely inside her; just enough so she felt his strength and he felt her heat.

Keva wrested her hands free of Gage's. She had finally determined his game—to torture her to death with pleasure—and figured that she could play it too. No matter how she tried, his strength prohibited her from moving her hips to take him deeper, so she settled for tantalizing him with her hands.

She caressed his buttocks, slid her fingers feather light around his hips and up his ribs. She found his nipples and rubbed across them with her thumbnails until they pebbled. When he lifted himself just enough, she found she could reach him with her tongue. At the first lick, he sucked in his breath and she smiled.

"You will be sorry you started this game," she whispered as she continued to nibble on him. She managed to slide her hands in between their bodies. She could just reach, and her fingers closed around his sac, massaging gently.

It was Gage's undoing. With an oath, he pushed forward, filling her completely. He was braced upward on his arms, his back arched as his hips began to slowly move—deeply until he could go no further, then out until just the tip of him touched her. Over and over again, he moved in the erotic pattern that drove him wild.

Keva gasped. "I can't!" Her body was so sensitized at this point, that the pleasure Gage was giving her bordered on pain. And yet she craved it like the air they breathed. Each time he pushed into her, she would rise to meet his thrusts, addicted and yet not sure her body could take anymore.

Gage slowed his strokes and leaned down on his elbows so his chest rubbed against hers. He cradled her head in his hands,

forcing her to look at him. He stopped moving entirely, but she could still feel him throbbing inside her.

“Sweetheart,” he sighed the word into her mouth as he kissed her. “Your pleasure is mine and I won’t come without you.”

She tried to shake her head, but he wouldn’t let her. “It’s too intense; too raw. I’m afraid I won’t come back.” She couldn’t explain the out of control spiraling of her body, and felt tears trickle down her face. Gage gently kissed them away.

“Wherever you go, I’ll be right there with you. Together, we’ll always be able to find our way because I love you, Keva Monroe.”

With that declaration still echoing through her head, Gage slowly took her to the pinnacle again, and as he had promised, they floated back to earth together.

* * * *

Keva awoke to a tickle across her breast. For a moment, she didn’t move, absorbing the feel of Gage’s warm body next to hers. He loved her, she thought.

The tickling continued, across one breast to the other, then the sensation slowly moved down her stomach. She sucked in her breath, wondering what Gage would do if she just laid there and didn’t react, even though she found that extremely hard to do.

“I know how to wake you up, sweetheart.” His words floated across her consciousness, and she wondered if she could take it. Her entire body felt like it was still drifting in that sweet aftermath of pleasure.

Still, she didn’t open her eyes.

She felt his open mouth on her breast, breathing hot, moist air onto her skin. His rough tongue lathed the tip, and it took everything she had not to cry out. Even so, she could feel her nipple tighten under his ministrations.

Gage had no problem with Keva lying there, for even though he knew she was trying not to react, her body betrayed her. He didn’t need her to do anything. He was perfectly

content to shower attention on her—to kiss and caress and love her, and then start the process all over again.

The week they had spent here in Colorado had gone way too fast and no matter how many times they had made love, it wasn't enough. He transferred his attention to her other breast, sucking it until at last, she reacted, but not in the manner he would have thought.

Her hand grabbed him, squeezing and stroking at the same time, arousing him even though it hadn't been long since he had come like he never had before.

"You're asking for trouble," he growled.

"I've been dancing with the devil since I first met you," she finally spoke, "and I think I like it."

He nipped her breast. "You think?"

She giggled. "I wouldn't want you to get a swelled head or anything." She stroked him again.

"It's not my head you have to worry about." He rolled on top of her and slid inside, showing her exactly what he meant.

This time, his climax was quick and fierce, toppling him into the realm of pleasure before he could even make sure she was with him. But her sigh of satisfaction was all the answer he needed.

He picked up the necklace that had fallen from his fingers. Supporting himself on his elbows, he opened the clasp and locked it around her neck, positioning the pendant on the side of her breast. He bent to kiss it, and in turn, savored her hot skin.

"What's that?" she asked, lifting her head to glance down.

"A remembrance of our time here."

She lifted the delicate painted columbine flower to better see it. "Oh, Gage, it's beautiful, but you didn't need to do that. I have more than enough memories of our time here."

He kissed her and got up. "It wasn't extravagant or anything. I got it at the boat dock."

"The boat dock?" She looked up at him and laughed. "I would never have thought to go shopping at the boat dock."

“Well, it’s not like there are jewelry stores on every corner out here.”

She stood beside him, the flower hanging neatly between her breasts, just as Gage had envisioned it doing.

She kissed him. “Thank you.”

They spent a lazy morning swimming, eating whatever leftovers they found in the fridge, and straightening up the cabin. Gage told her a cleaning service would come after they left, but Keva insisted on washing the dishes, cleaning out the fridge and stripping the bed. All the while, she kept thinking about what Gage had said last night.

He hadn’t repeated his declaration of love this morning, even though he had given her the necklace. She touched the delicate flower with a finger. Had he said it only because they were in the throes of passion? It had been such an incredible week that she couldn’t bring herself to question him at this point. She decided to wait and see how their relationship transpired once they went back to the working world.

* * * *

They got back to New York at dusk and Gage dropped Keva at her apartment. She hesitated at the door and he wondered if she was going to ask him to stay. After everything they had done in the past week, he thought it ridiculous to go back to his own drab apartment, but when she didn’t say anything, he decided there would be time later—all the time in the world. Besides...

“You look tired,” he said, caressing her cheek.

She gave him a smile, albeit a weak one. “You wore me out,” she teased.

He opened her door and gave her a slight push inside. “Get some rest. You have to go back to work tomorrow.”

Her eyes opened in surprise, as if she just now remembered he wouldn’t be at *Voyager* in the morning. “What are you going to do?” she asked. Gage thought he heard a little desperation in her voice, and it made his heart trip.

“Will you miss me?” he asked as he grazed her mouth with his lips.

She frowned. “That’s a stupid question. But I meant about a job?”

“It will all work out, you’ll see.” He gave her one final kiss, knowing he had to leave now, or he wouldn’t go at all. “I’ll call you.”

When he got back to his apartment, he threw his bag in a corner, too tired to unpack tonight. The light on his answering machine flashed. All the messages were from Ginger, but the last one made Gage’s ears prick up.

“Hey, baby, where you at? I got you what you wanted, but if you don’t call by Monday, I’ll have to find someone else to work at *Voyager*.”

Gage changed to his running clothes, suddenly too energized to sleep. It was going to be a lot easier convincing Keva he was the man for her if he could see her every day.

* * * *

Keva groaned when she walked into her office the next morning. Stacks upon stacks of correspondence awaited her. Even though her assistant editors were in charge of reading through manuscripts in her absence, there were still a number of things she had to handle herself. On top of that, she had an editorial meeting in less than half an hour.

She looked at her calendar, confirming she wasn’t responsible for any presentations at this particular meeting, and swiveled in her chair to stare out the window.

She took a sip of her cappuccino and made a face. She doubted she would ever be able to drink another one without thinking of the sweet, creamy drink Gage had spoiled her with all last week. And once she thought of him, she knew she wouldn’t get a thing accomplished before her meeting.

She fingered the pendant he had given her, remembering how sweet he had looked when he explained where he got it. It didn’t matter to Keva if it had come from a penny gum machine; she loved it because he had thought enough of her to buy it for her. She didn’t need diamonds and gold or memberships to the country club. She only needed Gage.

“Ms. Monroe, meeting at nine thirty.” Gloria’s voice came over the intercom.

“Thank you,” she replied, grabbing her notebook and pen. Funny, maybe it was because Keva was in love, but Gloria’s disposition appeared to have improved since last week. She had actually smiled at Keva when she came in this morning.

Beth gave her a speculative look when she slid into her seat and Keva knew her friend would follow her back to her office after the meeting to find out what had happened over the past week. Keva had gotten by without introducing Beth when her friend had seen her with Gage at the ball. Now that Gage wasn’t in the mailroom anymore, it wouldn’t make any difference if her friend knew his name. She refused to think that she hadn’t said anything before now because of Gage’s position.

Keva’s mind kept floating in and out of the business part of the meeting. Although all the editors had to be at these meetings, they were usually divided weekly by genre and imprint. She had no particular interest in the fantasy line, unless there were some overlapping publicity efforts in the case of fantasy erotica.

The minute the word fantasy came to mind, her thoughts again went to Gage. With a sigh, she wondered if she would ever get any work done.

“Keva?” Max’s voice finally got through to her.

“Sir?”

“Sir? Since when did you start calling me sir? You leave your brain on vacation?”

Keva smiled. Max was more friend than boss, and their relationship had always been casual.

“Sorry, boss, you know how it is. I just got back last night and think I have jet lag.”

“Well, if your expression is anything to judge by, you must have had one hell of a ride,” said Wesley, one of the publicists.

Keva wasn’t about to divulge details about her personal life, especially not to Todd Wesley, who made a habit of telling tales

in the breakroom. Keva had dated him, once, years ago, and rumors spread within a day that she had “put out.”

She was extremely happy when Max brought the meeting back to the business at hand. By the end of the hour, the calendar for the next month was set and he dismissed everyone with the same admonishment he always used.

“I want a Pulitzer this year.”

“So,” Beth said the minute they were out in the hall, “how was your vacation?” Keva thought there was more implied in her words than any author could write into dialogue.

Wesley walked up, standing uncomfortably close as they waited for the elevator. Keva didn’t even bother acknowledging Beth’s question with him in hearing distance. Her friend clamped her lips together, knowing exactly why Keva was mum.

However, once they were in Keva’s office, Beth couldn’t keep the questions from tumbling out.

“Who is this guy you went off and spent a week with? Was it the one at the ball? Did you have mind-blowing sex?”

“Beth, honestly. Haven’t we progressed past the mind-blowing sex age?”

“Not unless we died and nobody told us. You know as well as I do that female hormones really start raging at our age. Now spill it. Where did you go?”

Keva figured that was an easy enough question. “To a cabin in Colorado.”

“To a...*holy mother*... Don’t tell me you reenacted that story you were reading with Tabitha and Jordan?”

Keva had honestly forgotten about Priscilla McVee’s manuscript. Gage had brought all her fantasies to life and she hadn’t really thought about make-believe stories for the entire week.

“Actually, I hadn’t thought about it.” She casually flipped through some of the manuscripts on her desk, wondering if Ms. McVee had submitted any more chapters in her absence. “I was too busy.”

“Busy, huh? What is there to do in a cabin in the wilds of Colorado?”

Even though she and Beth had shared confidences in the past, Keva was hesitant to divulge the details of her and Gage’s activities. It somehow was just too personal, even to tell a friend.

Her silence, however, was incriminating. Beth exploded from the chair she had been sitting in.

“Oh, my, God. Your expression says it all. You had lots and lots and lots of sex, didn’t you?”

Keva just smiled at her friend’s inability to find the right adjective. If there was one thing Beth was good at when it came to editing, it was finding the right word to describe just about anything.

“Let’s just say there are other things to live on besides food,” was all Keva would say.

Beth sank into the chair again. “Does this guy have any brothers? I could use some good sex.”

“He has five brothers, as a matter of fact, but two are already married.”

“Well, that leaves more than enough for me to sample,” Beth said with a grin. “When do I get to meet this Romeo?”

Keva hesitated, not sure she wanted to bring Gage out in public, so to speak. Their relationship was so new and fragile, she was almost afraid it would disappear right before her eyes. Something must have shown in her expression, because Beth’s face went from animated to grim. Leaning over her desk, she took hold of Keva’s hands.

“Girl, this is serious, isn’t it?”

Keva nodded. “I’m in love with him.”

“Oh, wow.” Her eyes widened. “Are you sure it’s not just the aftermath of great sex?”

Keva shook her head.

“Oh, wow,” Beth said again.

“Ms. Monroe, ther...hey, you can’t go in there without permission.” Gloria’s voice was cut off in the middle of her

message. Keva looked toward the door as it opened and Gage walked in, followed closely by her secretary.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Monroe, I told him—”

“It’s okay, Gloria.” Keva’s heart tripped in double-time, unable to believe her eyes.

Gage had gotten his hair cut in the latest style—short with the front spiked up. She had gotten so used to seeing him in jeans and a tee shirt, she couldn’t believe it was him standing just inside her door in brown slacks, a crisp yellow dress shirt and tie.

“Excuse me, I didn’t know you had anyone here.” His voice flowed over her like honey. How could she have forgotten the sexy sound of it in less than twenty-four hours?

“Oh, wow,” Beth breathed, but Keva heard it only as a distant sound. She couldn’t take her eyes off Gage.

His brown eyes seemed to devour her as she sat there and she instantly ached for his touch. Time stood still as they stared at each other. Keva wondered what had possessed her not to invite him to spend last night with her.

Beth made a coughing sound, startling in the silence. Keva had completely forgotten she was there.

“Sorry,” Keva said, breaking eye contact with Gage. “Beth, this is Gage McVicker. Gage, my friend, Beth Franklin.” She purposely refrained from adding ‘boyfriend’ when she introduced them, not that she thought Beth would say anything.

Beth immediately jumped up and hurried over to Gage, grabbing his hand. “Are you the one with all the brothers?” she asked enthusiastically.

So much for her keeping her mouth shut.

Keva groaned, but Gage just gave her one of his winning smiles.

“I am, but they’re not all available.”

“Well, if they look like you, I’ll take any one of them who is.”

“Oh, geez,” Keva managed, shaking her head. It was definitely a good thing that Gage was a good sport, because Beth was all over him.

“Beth, don’t you have something to do?”

“No.” She didn’t even turn around, and she didn’t let go of his hand.

“Beth,” Keva said her name in a firm voice.

With a sigh, Beth finally turned. “Alright, alright. I know when I’m not wanted.” She took a step toward the door and stopped. “Treat him right, or I get him,” she said to Keva with a laugh. Gage laughed along with her.

She then turned to Gage and said in a lower voice, but still clear enough for Keva to hear. “And you treat her right, or I’ll skewer you.” She closed the door behind her.

“Sorry about that,” Keva apologized for her friend. “Beth tends to get very emotional about things. That makes her a great romance editor, but in real life...” She shrugged.

Gage walked around the corner of her desk, spinning her in her chair to face him. He braced a hand on each armrest, then bent down and kissed her.

The sweetness of his kiss went right to Keva’s heart. She loved his devouring kisses and the ones deep and drugging that sent her senses spiraling. But this tenderness was something very special.

“You don’t have to explain your friends,” Gage said, releasing her to sit, one hip on the edge of her desk. “You met Travis and Chase, remember?”

Keva laughed. “What are you doing here, anyway? Out interviewing?”

“Actually, I’m back in the mailroom, and you’ll never guess why.”

Keva really didn’t care as long as she got to see him every day. “You look so different,” she said as she tugged on his tie and pulled him close enough for another kiss.

This time, he lingered, letting her savor the sweetness of him, his spicy aftershave, the smoothness of his jaw.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. She slid a leg up his, propping it on his knee. Gage stroked her bare skin.

"How long is your break?" She could hear the longing in her voice and could tell from Gage's reaction that her face must reflect her feelings.

He slid his hand past her knee, up the inside of her thigh where one finger slipped under her panties. She sucked in her breath as he teased her sex.

"Sweetheart, after that last night in the cabin, there's no way in hell I want a quickie on the desktop." He slid his hand back down, releasing her from the sensual fog. "From now on, it's long and slow for you and me."

Keva sighed.

He got up, moving toward the door, then turned. "You made me forget what I came to tell you in the first place."

She grinned at him. "Blame it on me, you lecherous man."

He returned the grin. "Speaking of lecherous, I guess Campbell, the supervisor in the mailroom, had a heart attack last week." He started chuckling.

"Gage, that's not funny."

"Hell, no, the heart attack isn't. But you'll never believe how it happened." He came back to the front of her desk, bent his head and whispered in a low voice as though imparting a CIA secret.

"He was screwing your secretary, old sourpuss Gloria."

"No way! Gloria?" Keva slapped her hand across her mouth to quiet her giggles. "Are you sure?"

He shrugged. "That's the word in the mailroom."

"I did notice that Gloria seemed in a better mood this morning." She thought of Gloria and Campbell doing some of the things she and Gage had done.

"No. Oh, God." She started giggling again, unable to conceive of such an idea in regard to her secretary.

Gage bent across her desk and kissed her. "Run away with me tonight."

“Oh, Gage, I would like nothing better, but I just can’t. I have publicity events every night this week.”

“I would have to fall for a career woman.” With a sigh, he stood. “I may have to settle for a quickie after all.”

“You could go with me,” she suggested. “In fact, I could probably get you a job in the publicity department. You can be very persuasive.”

Although he smiled, she saw something flash briefly in his eyes. He shook his head. She frowned.

“We need to talk, babe, but not here. There are things we have to get settled between us.”

“Things?” Keva couldn’t tell from the sound of his voice exactly how he meant that. “Is that good things, or bad things?”

This time he gave her a genuine smile. “The best.”

“Call me,” she said and he waved in the affirmative as he exited her office.

* * * *

Damn, he should have told her last week, Gage chastised himself as he rode the elevator back down to the mailroom. She didn't seem at all happy that he didn't want to go with her or move up in the company. He shook his head. He should have told her.

It wasn't that he had anything to do in the evenings, but in the business world, there was often co-mingling of crowds at public events. He couldn't take a chance that one of his business associates might just happen to be at a *Voyager* social gathering and would recognize him. He recalled Simon's admonishment that Keva had better not find out before he told her, and so Gage had declined to go with her, even though he ached from not being around her.

Now, because he didn't want to have a scene in her office, he would have to wait all week to get her alone. Then he would explain why he hadn't told her about his true background and would tell her again that he loved her.

She hadn't replied in kind when he had said he loved her in Colorado, even though he was pretty sure she felt the same way. He had refrained from saying it again, hoping she would bring it up. Self-doubt churned his stomach.

Gage had never been hesitant in his life. He had always taken life by the horns and wrestled it to the ground, coming out the victor. He had started his company at the early age of twenty-two, right out of college. Within two years, they had gone public, and a year after that, he had netted his first million. He had taken on the major software dealers and won.

So why was he afraid of a petite, brown-haired woman with eyes the color of a Colorado sky?

* * * *

Keva managed to get through the next couple days at work, catching up on correspondence and meetings. Her evenings were spent with various authors at publicity events. It was important to have *Voyager* authors in view, to get the best reviewers to read

their work, and to try and make the bestseller list. It was what could make or break a publishing company.

But Gage was constantly on her mind, no matter what she did. She compared the hero to him in every book she read, the love scenes to making love to Gage before the fire, or on the beach. At every event she attended, she found herself scanning the crowd, hoping he would show up.

By Wednesday, she was debating whether to tell Max she was sick so she wouldn't have to attend the party at the Hilton. But in addition to the evening events, she had two meetings and wanted to look in on a cover model shoot.

With a sigh, she picked up another manuscript from the pile on her credenza. Even with Beth and two other editors reading partials, the stack never seemed to diminish.

"Requested material; code 9107." She glanced at the return address. "Priscilla McVee." Keva had been so wrapped up in her own fantasy, that her reading had been the last thing on her mind—even Priscilla's, which had been her pet project.

She opened the envelope and scanned the letter.

I have almost completed LOVE SLAVE. I'm just waiting to be inspired to write the conclusion. I hope this meets with your approval.

Keva began reading about Tabby and Jordan.

When Tabby asked, Jordan had been tempted to tell her that she didn't need any clothes for their week at the cabin, but thought she would see through his ruse. Now, as he watched her in the glow of firelight, he knew he wanted to spend little time brainstorming an ad campaign and all his time making love to her. Being a city girl, he had promised to teach her how to fish, ski and ride a four-wheeler, but now, all he could think about was loving her.

He stripped her slowly, kissing every inch of exposed skin, up her beautiful, long legs to the tantalizing curls at their juncture. They lay together on the fur rug in front of the fire, sipping wine. He watched her swallow, and he bent to taste the wine from her lips. He poured droplets on her skin,

licking each spot, warming the wine with his mouth, sharing it with her in a kiss of hunger.

He had promised himself he would take her slowly, but her body beckoned him and he knew he could not wait.

In growing horror, Keva skimmed the next few pages. Words tumbled around in her mind—the lavender bath, Jordan and Gage both saying no clothes were necessary for a week in a cabin. She thought of the phrase that kept coming up—*anywhere, anytime, anyway*.

Were the similarities just uncanny coincidences between the content of McVee’s book and her vacation? As an editor, she’d seen a lot of similarities before, but this time, it involved her personal life.

Oh, God, the sex. For Tabby, it had been wine; Gage had used brandy. What were the chances... She had thought Gage was different. He had made her feel so special, and he had just been using her to write a novel under a woman’s name? It didn’t make sense, and yet what about all the inconsistencies in his life—using a different name, working odd jobs but always having money? Who was he really and why hadn’t she questioned him before? She was embarrassed to realize she had been content to take him at face value and enjoy his company—and the great sex.

Now, she turned to her computer and typed “Stephen Gage McVicker” in a search engine. Over a thousand hits came up. She frantically thought of other things—hints his brothers had dropped.

She typed in “SGM” and hit return. Only one entry appeared. She went to the page and began reading, mortified by what she discovered. Stephen Gage McVicker was CEO and President of *SGM Enterprises*, the largest creator of war and combat computer games in the world. Net worth, ten million dollars.

What did a multi-millionaire want with a simple editor of erotica?

She thought back to the first time they had made love—right here in her office. She had been so easy to seduce, wanting a man to desire her for who she was and not be embarrassed by what she did. Well, she had certainly fallen into that trap. Gage—correction—Stephen McVicker definitely hadn't been embarrassed by what she did. In fact, since he worked in the mailroom, he had probably known beforehand and figured she was an easy mark for his sexual advances.

She was horrified to realize she had been. She had been swept away by his sexy brown eyes, his ready smile, and his seductive caresses. As she thought about it, her anger built. When would she ever learn not to trust the male species? They were liars, egotists, and only wanted a woman for one thing.

She furiously punched the intercom. "Get Mr. McVicker up here, ASAP." She listened to her voice quiver as she practically shouted into the phone. She took a deep breath, then another. She would not cry.

Ten minutes later, she heard him enter the office.

"Hey, sweetheart, what's up?"

She turned from the window, steeling herself against the smile he gave her. "Who are you?"

He looked surprised at the question. "What?"

"Stephen? Gage? I don't even know your real name." Her heart hurt, thinking he had deceived her all this time.

"Actually, it's Stephen Gage McVicker. I prefer Gage."

"You lied. How can I trust you?"

He looked at her, his brow furrowing in question. "It's just a name, it's not who I am. And I didn't lie—it *is* my name," he answered her curtly and she could see the anger beginning to build by the tight lines around his mouth. "What's up, Keva?"

She glanced again at the manuscript on her desk, confusion giving her a headache. "Do you know Priscilla McVee?"

He hesitated and she had her answer.

"Get out," she commanded.

Chapter 11

“Keva,” Gage’s voice pleaded, low, husky and as sexy as always.

She put up a hand to stop him when he moved toward her.

“I can explain. Why are you blowing me off?”

“You’ve been pretending to be a clerk in the mailroom when you’re actually a millionaire!” He should have acted surprised at her disclosure, but he didn’t. “You lied to me and you used me.” She sucked in a breath to keep from crying. “Are you trying to take over this company?”

“You think I’m fucking a senior editor to make way for a takeover?”

“Don’t use that word,” she said. “That’s not what we did.”

“You’re right. We made slow, sweet love. I gave you pleasure and you pleased me in return. So why are you doing this? I thought we had something special. I...” Now he hesitated and she could see the anger drain from his face. “I love you, Keva Monroe. You have become the reason I wake up with a smile in the morning, and go to bed at night dreaming sweet dreams. You are the elusive something I’ve been looking for all my life.”

Was this just another lie? She didn’t know how to respond, so she said nothing.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I thought you accepted me for who I was, not for my status. If you can’t do that, then there’s nothing I can say.”

“I don’t *know* who you are. I don’t know you at all,” Keva said. “Please leave me alone.” She turned back to the window.

“Think about it. Do you want the love of a hardworking man, or some superficial shell of a relationship for looks but without love? When you come to your senses, you know where to find me.”

She watched his reflection in the glass as he turned and walked out of her office and out of her life.

She held her emotions in check long enough to tell Gloria she was going home sick, and then she left the office and climbed into her car in the underground parking lot. But the tears started flowing before she could put the key in the ignition.

She hadn’t cried in five years; not since her parents had died in a car accident. Not on all the lonely nights when relationships had disintegrated and she had nothing but her work to console her. So why was she crying now?

* * * *

Beth was pounding on her door by six o’clock that night. Keva really didn’t know whether she could talk to her friend or not. She had spent the entire afternoon weeping into her pillow like some lovesick heroine, giving herself a headache.

“Keva, open up. I know you’re in there.”

Keva peered through the peephole and all she could see was the front of a *Ben & Jerry’s* ice cream carton—double chocolate fudge, no less. She almost laughed.

“Are you alone?” She wouldn’t put it past Beth, the eternally optimistic Cupid, to drag Gage over with her. On the other hand, she wouldn’t put it past Gage to coerce her friend into fronting for him so he could get at her again.

“The ice cream’s melting.” Beth knew just what would get past Keva’s defenses. Reluctantly, she opened the door, quickly scanning the hallway. As soon as her friend stepped inside, she shut and locked the door, throwing the security chain for good measure.

“He didn’t come with me,” Beth said, walking past Keva and heading for the kitchen.

“Who?” Keva didn’t think Beth could possibly know what she was thinking.

“Gage. Who else would you be looking like a lovesick puppy over?” Beth clattered two bowls on the counter, scooping ice cream into both.

“He would be the last person I would be looking for.” Keva tried to sound indignant.

“Right.” Beth handed her the bowl, piled high with double chocolate fudge. “That’s why you ran out on two meetings this afternoon and are hiding in your apartment.” She finally looked at Keva. “Cripes! You look terrible. And you say you’re not mooning over him?”

Keva curled up on the sofa, taking a bite of ice cream. “What do you know?”

Her friend sat at the other end, slouched down with her feet propped on the coffee table. “He came to see me,” she said, intently studying the ice cream on her spoon.

Keva’s heart pounded against her ribs. *Why would Gage go see Beth, unless...*

“What did he want—a date?”

That stopped Beth. She looked at Keva with her mouth open, disbelief clearly written on her face. “Are you loco? Why would he want to date me when he’s in love with you?”

“Love. Ha! Do you know what he did?” Keva’s anger at Gage’s duplicity surfaced again.

“No, I don’t. And apparently neither does he, or he wouldn’t have come begging me to find out what’s wrong.”

Keva felt a moment’s guilt before she shook her head, mentally chastising herself not to let her heart melt again.

“He used me, Beth, in the most degrading way. All the time we were making love, he was writing it down and sending it to me as Priscilla McVee.”

“The *Love Slave* author? How do you know?”

Keva nodded. “It was all there—the lavender, the words, the week in a cabin,” she finished on a wail. The tears she thought were finished started up anew.

Beth took another bite of ice cream, sucking on the spoon as her face creased in concentration. “Which came first—the manuscript or making love to him?”

“What makes the difference? It’s over.”

“Well, the difference is, you ninny, whether it is even Gage doing the writing. Maybe he knows this Priscilla McVee and read her work and decided to put it into practice. Boy, what I wouldn’t do to have some man experiment on *me* after he’s read a sex manual.”

Keva hadn’t thought about that. “But that doesn’t explain why he uses a different name, or why he didn’t tell me he was worth millions of dollars.”

Beth didn’t seem the least surprised by this statement and Keva wondered how much Gage had told her. “If he’s worth so much money, why would he be writing an erotic novel?” She shook her head, setting her empty bowl on the table and turning to face Keva as she continued.

“Maybe he just got ideas from this Priscilla McVee. Maybe he did start writing a story to get close to you. What difference does it make? You started dating him when you thought he was only a mail clerk because you liked *him*. I’d say being rich was a bonus. In addition,” she hurried on when Keva tried to interrupt, “I’ve seen a change in you over the last month and I know it’s because of him. He’s a fantasy come true.”

Keva scoffed.

“How do you feel about him? Really truly?”

“I thought I loved him.” The tears started again.

“Thought?”

Keva looked at her friend. “I *do* love him. I just wish he hadn’t misrepresented himself.” She had stated to say *lie*, but when she thought about it, Gage hadn’t lied; he just hadn’t told her the whole truth.

“Well, geez, woman, tell him! I’d give my eyeteeth to have a man fulfill my every fantasy. With all the stuff we read, we usually set ourselves up for a fall expecting the men in our lives to be like the heroes in those books.”

Keva knew she had a point. She and Beth had talked more than once about the difference between real and make-believe, and how all the wishing in the world couldn't help them find a man without flaws. She recalled the number of times she had thought Gage too perfect to be true. Now that she found out he was mortal, was she going to toss him aside when all she thought about was him, even when she was madder than hell at him?

"Keva?" Beth grabbed her hands and squeezed. "You've snagged yourself a real life hero. Are you going to let him get away?"

After Beth left, Keva decided to call Gage and have a rational conversation, but realized she didn't have his phone number. When she tried directory assistance, there was no listing under Stephen or Gage McVicker.

She didn't get much sleep that night. She tossed and turned, checking the clock every fifteen minutes, wishing time would fly so she could get to work and tell Gage what she really felt.

As soon as it was light, she showered and dressed, taking care with her appearance and moaning when she saw how puffy her eyes were. She could only hope Gage would look past that to what she felt in her heart.

The minute she walked into her office, long before Gloria arrived, she buzzed the mailroom. An unfamiliar voice answered.

"Gage McVicker, please."

"Sorry, ma'am. He's not here."

"Please have him come to Ms. Monroe's office as soon as he gets in." Her heart was thumping. Would he answer her page and see her, or had she destroyed the feelings he had for her?

"Can't do that, ma'am," the voice answered. "He called in this morning. He doesn't work here anymore."

* * * *

Turning away from Keva had been the hardest thing Gage had ever done in his life. Her soft blue eyes had begged him to stay, even as she railed at him. His hands had ached to touch her, to caress her and make everything all right.

Simon's prediction had certainly come true. He didn't know how she had found out about him, but she had. And even though he knew the fault for that could be laid on him, he still felt she had to accept him for the man he was, not for what she might want to portray to the world and not for his net worth. Now, all he could do was wait and hope that he knew her as well as he thought he did.

"Why does she have to complicate things?" he asked his mom as she poured more coffee into his mug.

"Sounds to me like you're the one who did that," she answered, sitting across from him like she had so many times before when they had their late night talks.

Gage hadn't left New York until after eleven, hoping Keva would call. When she hadn't, he had taken off driving, arriving home in the middle of the night. Instead of going to his house, he had let himself in at his mom's, but he should have known he couldn't get to his old bedroom without waking her. So here they sat.

"I thought you were supposed to be on my side," he grumbled, even though he knew she was right. Simon had said almost the same thing.

She patted his hand. "Sweetie, you know I never take sides, but from what you've told me, you weren't entirely honest with her."

"But I didn't use her. You know I wouldn't do that to any woman."

"I can understand why she might have thought you had. Chase and Travis both told me about the cabin."

"Christ, isn't anything sacred around here?"

"Stephen Gage McVicker, you don't use the Lord's name in vain in this house."

Even at thirty-five years of age, he had the grace to be embarrassed. "Sorry, Mom."

"Why don't you get some sleep? I'm sure things will look brighter in the morning." She glanced at the clock on the wall

over the stove. "Well, later in the morning," she said with a smile.

"You go on to bed," he told her. "I'm sorry I woke you." He bent to kiss her cheek, then put his cup in the sink. "I'm going out back."

He turned the kitchen light off after his mom left the room, then opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. The night was clear, millions of stars twinkling in the dark sky. He thought of the night he and Keva had made love under the midnight canopy, her body soft and giving beneath his. How could he have blown it so badly?

In his anger, he had given her an ultimatum. He knew better than that, but instead of reasoning, cajoling, even getting down on his knees and begging, he had stormed out of her office and then run out of town.

What would she think? Would she even know he was gone? Would she care? He should call her, he thought, but then his stomach lurched, wondering if she would pick up the phone. Besides, it was something he had to do in person. God knows she deserved that.

And if she should decide he wasn't worth the effort, what then?

Gage knew in his heart, he wouldn't give up. All the millions he had in the bank weren't worth squat if he couldn't have Keva's heart.

* * * *

Keva was still trying to figure out how to contact Gage when Gloria came in with the mail. "I need to speak with Mr. McVicker and the mailroom says he's not working here anymore. Would you please call personnel and get his home number for me?"

"Being in love and just reading about it are two very different things, aren't they?" Gloria's comment took Keva totally off-guard. She looked up and found a different person than the one who had worked for her these past years. Her hair

was cut in a short, smart style and she was actually wearing make-up. She thought of what Gage had told her.

“How is Mr. Campbell?” she asked.

Gloria blushed. “Recovering nicely. He should get out of the hospital tomorrow and I’m moving him into my place.” Another blush. While it normally would have been more information than Keva might have wanted, today, she felt a certain camaraderie with her secretary. Luckily, Gloria hadn’t lost her love before she had told him.

“May I say something, Ms. Monroe?”

“Hmmm, what? Oh, yes,” she said, totally distracted.

“I’ve discovered love is a very fragile thing. Now that I’ve found it, I intend to hang on tight. It doesn’t matter what Otis did before or whom he did it with. From now on, we’re together, through thick and thin.” She harrumphed, as though realizing she had said too much. “I’ll see if I can find that number for you.”

While Gloria checked with personnel, Keva collected all the correspondence and manuscript pages she had from Priscilla McVee. She was still confused, not so much about her feelings, but as to why Gage might have felt compelled to weave such an elaborate deception. After scrutinizing the pages, it seemed to her that what had been sent from Priscilla arrived on her desk *before* she and Gage had done practically the same thing. Even the last group of chapters had been postmarked the day they left for Colorado.

So instead of telling all, Gage may have reenacted what Priscilla had written. Maybe it wasn’t him after all. Maybe, like Beth had said, he just knew the author and was using her ideas to enhance their lovemaking. There was one way to find out.

She looked up Priscilla McVee’s address and found they only had a post office box on record. She jotted a quick note and sealed it, writing the address on the front. It was time to confront Ms. McVee and get to the bottom of this. But she knew there was a more important phone call she had to make.

She realized she loved being with Gage no matter if they were fishing or camping or eating ribs with their fingers at some local dive. She didn't need the country club or glamorous trips and cocktail parties. She had fallen in love with him when she thought he was a poor mail clerk because she fell in love with the man, not the status. And that was what Gage had been trying to get her to see.

"Gloria, did you find that phone number?" she called to her secretary.

"Personnel doesn't keep files on temporary employees," she answered. "I also looked in the phone book but couldn't find a listing. Do you want me to contact the employment agency that sent him over?"

"No, give me the number and I'll do it," Keva replied. She pushed files out of the way to find a notepad, knowing she wouldn't get any work done until she talked to Gage. "Oh, and I have a letter that needs to be hand delivered to the post office so it gets in the box today."

"Yes, ma'am." Gloria came in and gave her the listing and took the letter. Keva immediately dialed the number.

A man answered.

"I'm looking for one of your clients by the name of—" she hesitated, not knowing if Gage had used his real name. Assuming he had not, she said, "Gage McVicker. I need a contact number."

"Did he do something wrong? Is he in trouble?" The man sounded worried.

"No, not at all. I just need to find him."

"We don't give out personal information unless we have permission," the voice grumbled. "I didn't work with him, but I don't see permission written in his file."

"Who did work with him? Let me speak to that person."

Keva could feel panic welling up inside.

"Sorry, Ginger took the day off. Besides, it wouldn't do any good to talk to her. We don't have permission."

Keva wanted to scream at the man. *Screw permission*, she thought as she slammed the phone down. She had to wait

another whole day. Hearing a woman's name, she figured she could call this Ginger person tomorrow and appeal to her feminine side. She knew from her work that not many women could resist a romantic tragedy.

* * * *

Keva was on the phone first thing in the morning. "Is this Ginger?" she asked when a woman answered at the employment agency.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"I sure hope so. I need to find Gage McVicker, and his phone number's not listed."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. *Please*, Keva prayed.

"May I ask your name?" Ginger said.

"I'm Keva Monroe, senior editor at *Voyager Publishing*. Look, all I need is a phone number."

"Well, now, we're not supposed to give out that information."

"I know, but this is important."

Another pause. "Are you the woman that honey-boy has been seeing?"

"Yes!"

"Uh-huh. So why don't you have his number?"

Keva had to laugh. "That's a good question. He was working here, and he always called me and he was always over at my apartment, and—"

"And now you've had a spat and he's up and disappeared on you? I told that man he was asking for trouble." Ginger appeared to know quite a bit about Gage's life.

"Can you help me?"

"Sure, honey, just a minute." She hummed while she looked up the number, then read it aloud. "Just as a by-your-leave, you know he has family in Boston?"

"Yes, I know. Do you think he went home?"

“Don’t know, but tell you what. When you find him, give him a big old kiss and a little sugar, and then smack him up side the head for being such a dumb ass and running out on you.”

“Why do you think it’s his fault?”

“Honey, you always make them think it’s their fault. Keeps them humble.” Ginger laughed and Keva couldn’t help but laugh along with her.

“Thank you, Ginger. It sounds like you’re a good friend.”

“You tell that man when you see him that I’m not working with him anymore and he needs to go back to his real job. I can’t be having my clients running out on jobs and giving no notice.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him,” Keva said, although there were plenty of other things she needed to say to him first.

As soon as she hung up, she dialed Gage’s apartment. She almost didn’t leave a message, afraid of saying the wrong thing, but in the end, she asked him to call her at work as soon as he got home.

The morning dragged. The afternoon was interminable. By the time Keva got home and found no messages on her machine, she was beside herself. She called him again, but there was still no answer.

When she couldn’t stand it another minute, she called directory assistance for Boston only to find almost twenty listings with the last name of McVicker. She didn’t even know if that was where Gage had gone; she didn’t know his mother’s name, and she was afraid to start calling his brothers, knowing how he felt about his privacy.

She looked at the three numbers that were all the operator would give her. On the third call—no relation but the woman knew which McVicker she wanted—Keva got lucky. The lady was nice enough to give Keva the number of Gage’s mother.

Keva held her breath as she punched in the digits.

* * * *

“If he wants her to accept him on his terms, then he should hold out for her to call,” John said.

All six McVicker men were sitting on the back porch, watching the coals burn down on the grill so they could put on the steaks. When Chase had flown into town yesterday, their mom had decided having all six sons home at the same time meant a family reunion. Gordon's and Michael's kids were playing on the swing set and the women were inside getting the potato salad and pies ready.

At John's comment, Gordon and Michael both choked on their beers.

"Boy, you can tell he's not married," Gordon laughed.

"Yeah, and with that attitude, he never will be," Michael added.

"What do you two know? You're both pretty much whipped anyway." Travis defended his older brother.

"Personally, I would be crawling back to her on my belly," Chase drawled. "You guys haven't seen this woman. Why, her eyes are the color of a Texas bluebonnet, and she's got the—"

"Shut the hell up, Chase," Gage growled, tired of his brothers hashing over his life as though he weren't there. The minute they had found out he was home, they had descended on the house like a swarm of locusts.

It was bad enough when just Gordon, Michael and John had come over last night, but the minute Chase had arrived and called Travis, all hell had broken loose. His two younger brothers had to tell all about him being in Colorado with Keva. Well, all they knew anyway, but his brothers had pretty much guessed the rest. Now, it seemed a family conclave was needed to decide his fate.

"Who's got eyes the color of a bluebonnet?" Gordon's wife, Suzy, asked as she came out the back door with a bowl of chips and salsa.

"They're more the color of the Colorado sky in summer," Gage mumbled.

All five of his brothers groaned at once. "He's got it bad," John snorted.

At that moment, his mom came out with the phone. "It's for you." She handed him the cordless.

"Who is it?" Gage asked.

"She didn't say."

His brothers hooted as Gage grabbed the phone, jumping up from his chair and quickly walking away from his family.

"Hello." His heart pounded so loud, he wondered if he would even be able to hear.

"It's Keva," she said. "I need you."

* * * *

Two days, Keva thought. Gage would be back in two days. How was she supposed to survive until then? When she had talked to him last night, he hadn't indicated whether he would forgive her or not. He had just said that they would talk as soon as he could get back.

Later in the afternoon, Gloria walked in. "This just came by special messenger." She laid a single red rose and a small envelope on her desk.

Thinking it was from Gage, she tore open the envelope.

Ms. Monroe,

I'm having trouble deciding which ending will work for Tabitha and Jordan's story. I would like to visit with you about it. Please meet me at the Helmsley Park Lane Hotel, room 423, tonight after work. I have enclosed a key.

Sincerely, Priscilla McVee.

Keva sighed in disappointment. Well, that explained one mystery anyway. Gage wasn't Priscilla McVee, since he wouldn't arrive until tomorrow. At least she would finally meet this mysterious writer and find out if the woman knew Gage. She turned the old-fashioned key over in her hand, thinking what a strange coincidence it was that Ms. McVee had chosen the *Helmsley*, which was the hotel where she and Gage had first spent a night together.

Promptly at seven, Keva slipped the key in the lock of room 423 and opened the door. The interior was dark and she wondered if she had the right room.

“Ms. McVee?” she said, stepping just inside the door.

In the next instant, a hand covered her eyes; another pulled her up against a hard chest. She heard the door close with an ominous click.

“Why, hello there.” A husky voice spoke close to her ear.

Keva stood perfectly still, trying to assess the situation. The voice sounded familiar; the scent was dear to her heart. For whatever reason, he didn’t think she would recognize him, so she decided to play along.

“I must have the wrong room. I’m looking for Priscilla McVee.”

“She wanted me to present a few ending scenarios to you.”

“I think I’d rather have Ms. McVee tell me,” Keva answered.

“Isn’t it true that a novel should show, not tell?” His arm tightened on her waist, but his thumb slid back and forth just under her breast.

“And you were sent to show me?” Her heart began to pound. She wanted him to show her.

“Close your eyes,” he commanded. When she did, he tied a bandana around her head, effectively blocking out all sight. Then he turned her around and removed his hands from her. She could sense he was close, but could feel nothing.

“In the first scenario, Tabitha won’t believe Jordan and tells him to get lost.”

Keva thought she could feel his breath on her neck. When had he moved behind her?

“No, that scenario won’t work at all. A story has to have a happy ending.” And that definitely wasn’t the ending Keva imagined.

“Okay, scenario number two. Jordan drops to his knees in abject apology for being such a fool and for lying to her.”

He had moved behind her. She shivered when he began dropping feather light kisses on her neck.

“That’s better, but it makes the hero appear weak, and he’s anything but. Besides, he never really lied.”

“Oh?” The kisses were more demanding, following the curve of her neck to her ear. She felt teeth nibble her lobe.

“In addition,” Keva practically moaned out loud as his tongue swirled about her ear, “Tabby would give him the chance to explain.”

Silence. But the kisses continued. One hand pulled her back against him. The other slid between the buttons of her dress and beneath her bra to caress her breast.

Through gasps of pleasure, she managed to speak. “There’s another scenario.”

“I can’t think of any others.” The mysterious voice had dropped another octave, dark and hungry. He had managed to unbutton her top, pulling her bra down so both hands were on her breasts, massaging, finding her nipples and gently pulling.

“Perhaps they were both a little bit wrong. Maybe she should have told him...”

“Told him what?” One hand slid down to cup her, the feel of him hot through the silk of her dress.

Keva moaned, her head dropping back on his shoulder as he gathered her skirt up and found his way into her panties. One finger delved deep.

“What would she tell him?”

Insistent voice, persistent pressure and Keva was barely coherent as waves of pleasure washed over her. “She should have told him that she loved him.”

His hand stilled.

“She should ask him to make love to her again, like he did at the cabin by the lake.”

Keva didn’t get a chance to finish. She was spun around and hot, hungry lips crushed hers. His fingers plunged through her hair, dislodging the blindfold, but she already knew.

Gage couldn’t believe he had Keva in his arms again. After he had heard her voice on the phone, he couldn’t get away from his family fast enough. Amidst his brothers’ hoots of laughter and misguided suggestions, he had whispered an explanation to his mother.

Now, he kissed Keva's eyes, her cheeks, her chin. He couldn't get enough of her. "Oh, baby, you don't know how much I missed you." He bent over, cupping her breast and sucking hard, wanting to devour her.

He heard her sob. "I'm so sorry. Gage, I'm so—" He cut her off with another kiss.

"Sh, it's all right. I love you, Keva Monroe, and everything is going to be all right."

She took his head in her hands, forcing him to meet her gaze. "How did I ever deserve you?"

"You know a good romance novel when you see it."

She laughed, the sound of it nestling in Gage's heart as he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom.

Keva didn't think it quite fair that she was practically undressed and Gage still had all his clothes on. "A game of checkers will take too long, so I'll just have to strip you," she said as she pulled off his shirt and unbuttoned his slacks.

When he kicked off his shoes, she pushed him onto the bed, climbing on top to straddle his hips. He reached up to cup her breasts and she looked down at him lovingly.

"I know you like slow and sweet, but can this first time be a quickie?" She was desperate to feel him inside her.

Gage laughed up at her. "As long as it's only the first one. All the rest belong to me."

"How many is that?"

"Hundreds," he breathed as she sank down on him.

* * * *

It could have been hours or even days before Keva emerged from the sensual web Gage had woven around them. She really didn't care, as long as he stayed by her side. She turned to lie on her back and the hand that had been resting at her waist came up to cup her breast. She turned her head to gaze into sexy brown eyes that were full of love.

"I know that look," he said. "What are you thinking, woman?"

"I want to know why you wrote that novel."

"I figured I had to compete with all those fantasy men you read about." He sounded serious but Keva could see the twinkle in his eyes even in the dim light.

"You could never compete with any of them," she responded.

He raised a brow. "No?"

She kissed his chin. "No. You're too far above their class."

He growled, pulling her on top of him and wrapping his arms around her.

"But why did you write about us?" That part still worried her.

"Darling, I didn't write about what we did. I fantasized about you and what I wanted to do to you."

She pursed her lips. "Okay, so maybe I overreacted a little."

"Let's have it. I can see by your expression you're not done with me yet."

"Where in the world did you come up with the name Priscilla McVee? I mean, I can understand the McVee part—you know, McVicker. But Priscilla?"

Gage laughed. "Since I was a man, writing as a woman, the only thing I could think of was an old movie called 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert' about some *guys* dressing up like women."

Keva dropped her head onto his chest, giggling. "I don't believe it."

Gage slid his hands down her back to her bottom, pushing her against his erection. "So, are you going to publish Priscilla?"

She raised her head. "Is this how the story ends?"

"No," he whispered as he brushed her lips with a kiss. "It's just the beginning."

COMING IN JULY

ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY BOOK 2: FANTASY ROAD

It wasn't supposed to happen. Gage had told his brothers to stay away from the cabin while he had Keva there, but they didn't listen.

And I'm so glad they didn't. I fell in love with Chase's sexy Texas drawl and smooth manners, and I knew I had to find a true love for him, just as Gage had found Keva.

The problem is, how do I find a true love for a man who's too busy traveling around the country looking after fifteen businesses? First, bring the woman to him, wrapped in a mystery that directly involves his business. That should get his attention.

But just in case he's going to be stubborn, I found a redhead, because that is Chase's downfall.

Turn the page for a sneak peek at the second book in this trilogy.

Chapter 1

Chase McVicker walked out of the office into the sweltering Texas sun. *It shouldn't be this damn hot in the middle of October.* He had just returned to San Antonio from a month in Las Vegas, where he had opened the latest *C bar M Limousine Service*, and he couldn't wait to get home, take a shower and have a cold beer.

"What the hell?" He looked over at the white limo parked just to the right of the office. The back door was open and if Chase wasn't mistaken, a very feminine ass was framed in the entrance. He leaned against the office doorjamb and admired her for a minute or three. When it came to women, Chase had an unlimited amount of time. The shorts she wore barely covered her butt and the halter-top bared her entire back. As he watched, she turned her head sideways and a mass of curly hair slid across her back. He could see freckles on her arms and legs—not the kind that detracted, but rather, the golden, all-over kind that enhanced a woman's beauty and proclaimed her a true redhead.

She appeared to be looking for something, and Chase decided perhaps she needed help. If she wanted to intrude on his property, he'd show her who was boss. He walked up behind her and grasped her around the waist just as she took a step inside the car. Her movement threw them both off balance and they went tumbling onto the floor of the limo.

Chase was unable to break his fall, except for landing on his elbows. The jar still threw his body against hers, and his hands just happened to end up on her breasts.

"Let go of me!" she hollered, wiggling against him.

“Whoa, there, sweetheart. I wouldn’t be doing that if I were you.” His hips were pressed intimately against her fanny and when she moved, well, Chase was an ordinary man. His erection throbbed against her.

“Get off!” She continued to squirm. Chase tried to lever himself up, but in doing so, accidentally squeezed her breasts.

She instantly stilled. “Please, don’t—”

Chase could hear panic in her voice. He hadn’t intended to molest her. If she would just quit wiggling beneath him, he could get control of his wayward body.

“What are you doing in my car?” he asked, but he didn’t move.

“I…” she hesitated. “Please let me go. I’ll tell you, but you’re suffocating me.” The panic made her words breathy and hesitant.

He slowly slid down her body, enjoying the feel of soft curves against his chest. He stood up at the doorway, but when she turned over and tried to scoot out, he blocked the way. Her head came up and Chase was lost.

A tumble of auburn hair framed her face. The freckles he had noticed on her limbs were the same as what were scattered across the bridge of her nose. But it was her eyes that captured him. They were green, with the glitter of a fine cut emerald and she gazed wide-eyed up at him. There was something vulnerable in that gaze—something wounded and hurting. Chase had always been a sucker for injured and stray creatures.

He watched as she swallowed, then licked her lips. He followed the movement of her pink tongue, then let his gaze travel across her face again. He wondered if she had freckles all over, and knew in that instant, that he would find out. He’d bet every one of his fifteen limousine companies on it.

“Who are you?” he asked, stepping back. He saw the panic recede. She tried to step around him and when he put up a hand, she backed away. He had to wonder how she was brave enough

to snoop around his business when she acted like a skittish filly if he got too close.

“Ka—” she started, then stopped. She took a breath. “Kelly Heart,” she said, then pinched her lips together.

Chase could feel his eyes narrow. She had started to say something else. He reached for the handbag she had slung over one shoulder and saw her flinch. *Damn*. Someone had hurt her bad.

She tried to keep hold of her purse. “You have no right.”

“Lady, if you go poking around my vehicles without my permission, I have every right. Unless you want me to call the cops and have them deal with you.”

Her face paled. “No, please don’t.” She released the bag.

Chase was never rough with women. In fact, just the opposite. He loved to look at them, dance with them, touch and caress them, and above all else, make slow, sweet love to them. And even if he hadn’t had an overactive affection for women, his mother had taught him better than to ever treat one in anything other than a reverent manner.

Chase’s eyebrow rose as he looked through her purse. A wallet, car keys, a folded piece of paper and pepper spray. That was it. He took out the wallet and opened it, finding her license. “Kelly Jo Heart—that you?” He looked at her.

“Yes,” she said, but she had hesitated a beat too long.

She only had about a hundred dollars in the wallet and no credit cards. What woman didn’t have credit cards?

“What were you doing in my car?” he asked again.

“I was looking for a set of keys.”

He looked down at the purse, which he snapped shut and handed back to her. “You have keys.”

She took the purse, being careful not to touch him. “A different set.”

“Why would a set of keys be in there?” He nodded toward the vehicle.

“I...left them last night.”

Chase knew she was lying. “Larry never said anything about a woman in the limo last night, and he would have noticed.”

Larry was one of Chase’s drivers here in San Antonio, and they had just finished going over the month’s accounts. Last night’s client had been a business exec from Houston who frequently used *C bar M* services. Larry said he had picked up his client and several other business associates for a night on the town.

The woman briefly closed her eyes and Chase wondered at her thoughts. She fidgeted with her purse and he kept a close eye on her hands, not wanting to be the recipient of a dose of pepper spray. When she looked at him again, he was surprised. Instead of the panic he had witnessed earlier, her eyes now flashed in angry defiance.

“Just let me look for the keys and then I’ll be out of your way.” She turned back toward the car.

“I don’t think so.” Chase circled her upper arm with his big hand, pulling her away from the vehicle. Although he tried to be gentle, she still tugged against him and he could see the frantic pulse in her throat.

He guided her into the office, where at least the air conditioner was cooler than having the sun continue to beat down on them. He didn’t know who this woman was, but he intended to find out. There had been a few hassles in the past with competitors and although he hated to think any one of the other men in his line of business would stoop to sabotage, he couldn’t discount it.

“Sit.” He pointed to a chair as he released her. “Larry, do you recognize her?” he asked the driver and office manager.

Larry looked up from behind a stack of files. Although his eyes widened in appreciation, he shook his head.

Chase turned back to Kelly Heart. “So?” He dragged the word out.

“You have no right to hold me,” she said, her voice tentative.

“Right. You said that before. Remember what I said?” That shut her up, although Chase wouldn’t have called the police.

Instead, he picked up the phone and dialed his brother’s number. “TJ, I need a favor.” Travis worked for the *Boston Chronicle* and had contacts in places he probably shouldn’t have. Chase rarely called for favors.

“As long as it doesn’t involve driving,” Travis answered. The last time Chase had used him as a driver for his Boston business, it had been for a ‘big and beautiful’ women’s conference. Travis had wanted the gig because he was undercover on a story, but being pawed by eight extra-large women, beautiful though they may have been, hadn’t been Travis’s idea of a fun night. Of course, he had blamed Chase, simply because he had forgotten to tell his brother about the ‘big’ part.

Chase shook his head, bringing his mind back to the present. “I just need some information. Can you track a Kelly Jo Heart from Detour, Walworth County, Wisconsin for me?”

“Sure. Is she cute?” At twenty-six, Travis’s hormones were raging. Chase felt he was a little more mellow, not that he didn’t love women. He just hadn’t found the right one to break him to saddle. At his brother’s question, he turned to glance at the woman.

“Yeah,” he answered. She was definitely cute, and then some. Even when her green eyes were shooting daggers at him. “How long will it take?”

“Hang on a minute. I’ve got Walworth DMV records up on the screen as we speak.” There was a pause.

Chase had figured Travis would get back to him later tonight with the information. His older brother, Steve, was a computer wizard who had made millions creating electronic games. Travis could find just about anything a person could

possibly need on a computer. But Chase hated them. If he used a computer at all, he could never find where the damn thing stored the document he had written, and he might as well forget the accounting programs.

“What’s this girl look like?” Travis’s voice came across the phone line. Chase told him.

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense. There’s a Kelly Jo Heart in Lake Geneva, but she’s blonde with green eyes and is only five foot two. Is her hair dyed?”

There was one sure way to know, Chase thought, but he didn’t have to see beneath her clothes to know her true hair color. “She’s a redhead,” he told his brother.

“Hmmm. Detour. That’s a little podunk town north of Chicago about an hour. Why does that ring a bell?” Travis began mumbling to himself and Chase didn’t bother listening. His brother had a photographic memory and always did his thinking out loud as he shuffled files, as he called them. Within minutes, he quit mumbling and spoke to Chase.

“There was an article on the wire service last week about a missing person named Katie Jo Mansfield from Detour. Her father was a professor at St. Geneva College.”

“Was?”

“Yeah. He died just a little over a month ago. The reason I remember the incident is because the authorities labeled it a natural death—heart attack—but the daughter kept insisting it was murder.” Any time a word even closely resembling *murder* came up, Travis was on it like a dog on a bone.

Chase cut his gaze to the woman sitting in his office. She didn’t look brave enough to call anyone a murderer.

He turned his back on her and lowered his voice. “A man’s death in a small town, regardless of whether the daughter thinks it’s murder, doesn’t seem to warrant making the national wire service.”

“Normally, that’s right. But she’s married to Jeff Mansfield, and rumor has it, he has mob connections.”

Shit, Chase swore. Why the hell was she in San Antonio going through his vehicle?

“Thanks, TJ. I owe you,” Chase told his brother.

“You’re not going to tell me why you want to know this?”

Travis cut in.

“Nope,” Chase replied and hung up the phone.

He turned and leaned forward, crossing his arms on the desk. He leveled his gaze at the woman. If there was one thing Chase couldn’t tolerate, it was dishonesty.

“Well, Katie Jo Mansfield—” The minute Chase said her name, she went pale beneath her freckles. And then she bolted.

She was out the door so quickly, that at first, Chase didn’t react. It wasn’t hard, with his longer legs, to catch up with her before she made it to a car at the back of the parking lot. This time, Chase managed to snag her without sending them both tumbling to the asphalt.

“I won’t go back!” she screamed, kicking and flailing her arms when he easily lifted her off the ground. “You work for him, don’t you? I don’t care what he said to do to me, I won’t ever go back.”

“I’m not working for anyone.” Chase had no idea who she was talking about, but if he was to find out, he had to get her calmed down. He tried not to hold her too tightly because of her earlier panic, so it was easy enough with all her wiggling and kicking and squirming for her to turn in his arms. When she kept railing at him, he could only think of one way to shut her up.

* * * *

The kiss started out gentle, and Katie quickly went still. She knew from past experience that if she struggled, it only meant rougher treatment. Yet even in her panicked state, she could sense the difference in this man. His lips were hot and firm, but infinitely tender as they caressed her own.

He had removed his arms from around her and now his hands brushed her face, his fingers sliding into her hair. She waited for the painful jerk to follow, but it didn't happen. There was just a warm, unfamiliar, tingling feeling spreading throughout her body.

Maybe there was a difference in the way men treated women as her friend Marsha had said. Maybe...but no, she couldn't let herself even think about anything except her father's death and finding the people responsible. She pushed against him, forcing herself back to reality even though, for just a few minutes, she had felt incredibly safe in his arms.

"Don't," she managed to gasp out when he released her. She threw her shoulders back, determined to be brave, promising herself she would not return to being the woman who had let Jeff trample her.

The man who had kissed her—heavens, she didn't even know his name—stood still, watching her. He had the most beautiful brown eyes, soft and sensual. His hair was cut short but hidden beneath a cowboy hat and he was dressed in what she had expected for Texas—jeans, boots, and black leather vest. It was the way he wore the clothes that captured her attention. His shirt stretched across a wide chest and the jeans fit almost indecently tight on muscular legs. He had to be a good foot taller than her own five feet five.

Even though she had accused him of working for her ex-husband, she thought different now. After all, the men she had seen hanging around Jeff were almost as afraid of him as she had come to be. Not one of them would have dared kiss his wife. Ex-wife, she mentally corrected. She would never be tied to a man again. Never.

"Darlin', you can tell me to stop, but you weren't protesting very hard a few minutes ago," the man said.

"You, you caught me by surprise," she stammered.

His eyes smoldered. "Yeah, well it surprised the hell out of me, too." His lips turned up in a grin and Katie's heart did a little flip-flop.

"I have to go," she said. "I'm sorry for inconveniencing you."

"You have a room here in town?"

She didn't want him to know anything about her. She had to decide how she could finish searching for her father's keys with the tall Texan around. "Sure, at the... *Ritz*," she lied.

* * * *

He shook his head, the grin still in place. "Honey, you don't have enough money in your purse for a room at the *Holiday Inn*. Besides, San Antonio doesn't have a *Ritz*."

A cell phone rang. Chase knew it wasn't his because he had it programmed to play *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. On the third ring, Katie Jo reluctantly pulled a phone out of the pocket of her shorts and looked at the readout. Her eyes widened and she pushed a button, but instead of answering it, the phone fell silent.

He raised a brow in question.

"Wrong number," she said.

He wondered how she knew without answering it.

"Look," he said. "You seem to think you lost a set of keys in my limo. I would be happy to help you out, but can we at least take this discussion back inside where it's cooler?" Chase would have preferred taking their discussion straight into his bedroom at the ranch if they had to discuss anything at all. Personally, he thought getting into the action was a better idea. Her kiss, reluctant though she may have been, still had him throbbing and straining the fabric of his jeans. And then he remembered she was married. *Damn*.

He watched as various expressions crossed her face—wariness, confusion, perhaps a little interest if he didn't miss his guess.

"I don't even know your name."

Chase took his hat off and brushed a hand through his short hair. "Chase McVicker, ma'am," he said in his best Texas drawl.

She stood contemplating him for a minute, as though trying to make up her mind. Finally, she marched off in front of him, shoulders back and spine straight. Considering the sway of her hips and her smooth bare back, Chase didn't mind at all walking behind her.

Larry was still in the office when they entered. He moved out from behind the desk as Chase rounded it, tossing his hat on an extra seat.

"Now, tell me why you think there's a set of keys belonging to you in my vehicle." He began shuffling through the stuff scattered all over the desktop.

"It looks like a tornado went through this office," Katie Jo said instead. "How can you find anything?"

"I know right where everything is," Chase answered as he moved stacks from one side of the desk to the other. "At least I usually do." He frowned.

"Why don't you automate your business and have your records on your computer?" she asked.

"I hate computers." Chase had an accountant in Houston who kept track of his businesses. Chase had his managers fax him account printouts weekly. He looked at the sorry mess of papers on his desk. That was probably why he couldn't find anything now.

"Just let me look at your records. I can figure out what I need." She took a tentative step toward his desk.

"You still haven't told me why this is so important," Chase countered.

“A murder was committed in one of your vehicles. Is that important enough for you?”

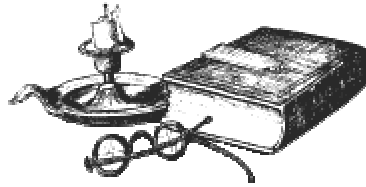
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barb was born in California, married in Iowa and now resides in Kansas. The years in-between were lived in most of the southern states and three in Japan because her father was an Air Force pilot. That probably explains why she still loves to travel and explore new places and has each of her manuscripts set in a different locale.

She has written practically all her life, beginning with journals of family vacations. She is now published in poetry, short stories, essays, magazine articles, teacher resource materials, and full-length fiction. Of course, her writing is sandwiched in-between traveling and a full time job.

Barb loves talking almost as much as she loves writing, and has been a teacher for grades K-8. While in education, she made over one hundred presentations at state and national conferences on material she had developed in the classroom. Later, during fourteen years with public television, she was on the air as a program moderator and during annual pledge drives. She has a BS in Education and an MA in Communication and has taught public speaking classes at the college level. Barb can be reached at writer0926@yahoo.com or through her website at www.authorsden.com/barbarajbaldwin.

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