

**ANYWHERE, ANYTIME,
ANYWAY BOOK 2:
FANTASY ROAD**

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.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 1-59374-584-2

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT
ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY
BOOK 2: FANTASY ROAD

“*Fantasy Road: Anywhere, Anytime, Anyway Book 2* is an outstanding story, riddled with emotions, passion, suspense, and above all else amazing characters. This is a story this reader will remember for quite some time and will definitely read again and again. I look forward to the day that I have the last installment, Travis’ story, in my hands: I only hope that I don’t have to wait long. Barbara Baldwin has reinforced why this reader is a true fan, willing to grab anything with her name on it, and also earned herself 5 Angels and a Recommended Read!”

Fallen Angel Reviews—reviewed by Jessica
5 Angels and a RECOMMENDED READ

“Barbara Baldwin will grab the reader from the very first page when Chase discovers Katie Jo digging through his limo. Both Katie Jo and Chase are wonderfully believable characters with their share of flaws and strengths. ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY series just keeps getting better and this reviewer highly recommends it to any lover of either contemporary romance or romantic suspense.”

LoveRomances—reviewed by Shaiha
4.5 Hearts

Dedication

Thanks to the girls at the office for all those
wonderful times on break.

Also thanks to Jan and Chere at Whiskey Creek
for their enthusiasm and help.

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 as 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 at 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' 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' 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' 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 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?”

Chapter 2

“Holy shit,” Larry said and Chase watched as the color drained from his face.

“Come on.” He reached for her arm but she jerked back. He waved at the door, not wanting to go back out in the heat, but seeing no other option. “We need to go somewhere we can talk.”

Although she walked outside with him, she wouldn’t venture further than the edge of the step. “Why should I go anywhere with you?”

It had been a long day; hell, it had been a long month, and for the life of him, Chase couldn’t figure out why he was wasting time on this woman when a cold beer was only as far away as his refrigerator. His gaze traveled up her curves and took in her glorious red hair and he knew why.

“Lady, you have less than a hundred dollars and no credit cards. You have a cell phone you’re afraid to answer. From the looks of that car, you’re not going to get very far without trusting someone.”

She burst into tears—not loud, racking sobs, but silent, heartbreaking tears that spiked her lashes and ran down her cheeks. Chase gave a huge sigh and gathered her in his arms. This time, she didn’t flinch or try to pull away. Instead, she clutched her hands in his shirtfront and held on for dear life.

Chase awkwardly patted her back. He had grown up in a houseful of brothers and as an adult, his affairs never lasted long enough for the women to cry about anything. In fact, they usually parted as friends. Now, he didn’t know how to react.

“Sh, darlin’, don’t cry. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

She hiccupped. "You didn't yell."

"Well, I didn't mean to make you sad."

She shook her head but kept her face hidden against his chest. "I'm not crying because I'm sad."

Now he was totally lost. He had tried to take the blame and she wasn't letting him. Not knowing what else to do, he just continued to hold her. Within seconds, his body made him very aware of the luscious curves tight against his chest. Where he had reached for her first to comfort, now he wanted something more.

A breeze blew a curl of her hair against his face, tickling his nose. He reached up and tucked it behind her ear. Her hair was rich and soft with the scent of lemon clinging to it and it cascaded halfway down her back. He wanted to take the clip out that held it up and let the whole mass tumble down around her shoulders and his arms. He wanted to kiss her tears away and coax a smile from her pink lips with his caresses. And then he remembered her panic.

Chase had spent a few years breaking horses when he first moved to Texas, and he could still remember the lessons he had learned. Heaven knew he wasn't comparing Katie Jo to a horse, but she was just as skittish as an unbroken filly, and he instinctively felt the same principles would apply. He needed to find the source of her panic and reassure her that he would never hurt her.

He hadn't put a lot of time into his personal life over the years, trying instead to build up his businesses. Women came and went and it never bothered him. But for some reason, the thought of this woman walking out of his life before he discovered her secrets caused him to grit his teeth.

Then he remembered she was married to a guy with possible mob connections. But what was she running from if that guy treated her right? Chase instinctively knew she was running, otherwise, she wouldn't have traveled clear to Texas alone.

Damn, what was he getting himself into?

Katie Jo pushed away from his chest, but kept her hands flat against his vest. He looked down at her.

“Better?” he asked, not knowing what else to say.

She shrugged.

“Tell you what. A cold beer and a good steak always make me feel better. Are you old enough to drink?”

That earned him a watery smile. “That depends on the drinking age in Texas,” she countered.

“You’re not that young, are you?” He sure as hell hoped not.

“I really should go.” She took a step away from him, sliding her purse strap onto her shoulder.

“Look, you have to eat, and if you think there’s keys in one of my vehicles, then I’ll help you find them.” He looked around, not realizing how dark it had become. “But it’s too late tonight to do anything. Besides, as a Texas gentleman, I really can’t let a lady wander around on her own.”

She looked like she would refuse him again. She glanced up and down the street, then back at him. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

“I promise to behave.” Chase didn’t know why he was saying that, except to get her to go to dinner with him.

“Just dinner,” she said, and Chase grinned.

His business in San Antonio was out near the airport and there were a number of restaurants and hotels within easy walking distance. The best steaks in town were at the *Tall Tex Grill*, so he steered Katie Jo across the street in that direction.

The owner knew him and immediately ushered them to a booth in the back. Once they had their beers and had ordered, Chase lost no time in asking questions.

“Are you married?”

“No,” she answered him immediately.

Chase glanced pointedly at the gold band on her left hand.

She jerked her hands down to her lap. Chase had to grab for her beer bottle before it tipped over. He didn’t say anything, just looked at her.

"I was, but now I'm not." She squirmed on the booth seat, a sure indication that she was either nervous or lying.

Chase shook his head. "I don't take to liars. You've got a problem that somehow involves me, but trust is a very important factor here. If you can't trust me enough to tell me the truth, well, I just can't help you. I've got to be able to trust you, too."

She took a long pull on her beer, set the bottle carefully down on the table, and finally looked at him. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You want a reference from my mom?"

His comment broke the tension. She laughed at him just as the waitress brought their meals. She didn't say anything more but cut into her steak and began to eat. Chase ordered them both another beer.

"This is heavenly," she murmured and rolled her eyes. "You can't get a good steak in Detour."

"That where you're from?" he asked, as though he didn't already know that from Travis.

She stopped chewing and looked across the table at him. He returned her stare, willing her silently to trust him, even though he really hadn't given her a reason to do so. Whereas he had grown up in an atmosphere of trust and love, she apparently had a background that urged caution.

"Marsha told me there were guys like you out there, but I never believed her."

"Guys like me?"

"Nice guys," she said and went back to her meal.

Chase figured he'd have to live with that for the time being. They ate their meal with only the jukebox to break the silence.

* * * *

Katie really did feel guilty eating a huge steak and baked potato and drinking her second beer, knowing full well that Chase McVicker would pay for it. At least, every indication said he would. She studied him as they ate, trying to decide how much to tell him. The past year had taught her not to trust

anyone, especially the male of the species. The last month had reinforced that with brutal examples.

By nature, Katie was a caring, giving person and it had taken a lot before she drew within herself. But Jeff had managed to teach her the error of caring for the wrong person, and when she had refused to do his bidding...she shivered, telling herself not to think about him. It was all behind her now.

"Are you cold?" Chase asked.

She shook her head, making up her mind at that moment that if she was going to find her father's killer, she had to trust this man. He owned the company that bought limousines and that was where she needed to start. Besides, any man who would tell her to call his mom couldn't be all bad, could he?

"I left him," she said, putting her fork and knife on her plate and pushing it away.

"Have you filed for divorce?" It seemed remarkable that he followed the thread of their conversation, even through a huge steak, salad and potato. Jeff had never even listened to her.

She sighed. "Yes. I called a friend last night who said my lawyer got it through the courts, but Jeff is already challenging it."

"Jeff?"

"My hus—my ex—Jeff Mansfield."

"So you really are Katie Jo Mansfield?"

"Hawthorne. I took my maiden name back."

Chase wasn't sure whether to pursue the divorce, or the comment she made about a murder in his limo. He knew by her reactions to him that she had been hurt in the past and he automatically blamed her ex-husband. He was curiously happy that the man was out of the picture. As for her claim of murder, he was certain that it didn't involve his business. He didn't operate that way.

He ran a hand down his face and covered his mouth as he yawned. Man, he was tired.

"You done?" he asked as the waitress came to take their plates.

“Yes, thank you.” Katie Jo gave him a tentative smile.

Chase wondered how long it had been since this beautiful woman had been happy. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was already thinking of ways to make that happen as he walked her back to her car. He knew there were definitely ways of getting to her that would also be very enjoyable for him. But he knew he would have to proceed slowly.

When they got to her car, she hesitated before unlocking it.

“You don’t have a room, do you?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, but looked away.

He held out his hand and watched a look of concern briefly cross her face. “There’s a hotel right across the street,” he said. “Let’s just get your bag.”

She handed him the keys. When he opened the trunk, she reached in for the smaller of two bags. He frowned, thinking she sure traveled light and again wondered how desperate she had been when she left her husband.

He took the bag from her, closed the trunk and handed her back the keys. They walked across the street in silence.

“Hey, Morrie, give the lady your best room,” he greeted the clerk when they walked into the lobby of the *Airport Inn*.

“I don’t need—”

“It’s okay,” he interrupted. “Morrie and I promote each other all the time and he owes me.” He gave Morrie a look.

The clerk filled out a ticket and when she tried to pay for it, he said she could take care of it in the morning. Chase knew Morrie would send him the bill.

“Get a good night’s sleep,” he said as he walked her to the door of her room. “Tomorrow, we’ll try to solve your problem.” He turned to leave, wanting to kiss her but afraid that one taste of her sweet lips and he wouldn’t leave her alone.

“Mr. McVicker?” Her soft voice called him back and his heart began to pound. She put her hands on his chest and stood on tiptoe, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”

It took quite a bit of control for him to act nonchalant, touching his forehead in salute and walking out into the night.

Sexual energy vibrated between them and Chase knew from past experience how combustible that could be. The trouble as he saw it was keeping himself in control until Miss Katie Jo Hawthorne was ready to share the heat right along with him.

* * * *

Chase ended up oversleeping the next morning. He had driven out to his ranch, gone through a month's worth of mail and listened to his messages while he soaked in the hot tub to ease the soreness in his leg. He should have just stayed up, because when he finally fell into bed, he had dreamed of Katie Jo.

Her green eyes had haunted his sleep. She had looked frightened and Chase had woken in a cold sweat, recalling that he had been unable to help her.

He had always been the kid bringing home stray animals and hurt birds. His mom usually didn't mind, until at seven, he tried to convince her to adopt the Grant triplets, who Chase said weren't getting treated right by their parents. When his mom had called Mrs. Grant and found out the only problem was that the kids hadn't gotten dessert, Chase had really been in trouble. It wasn't that his mom punished him. She talked to him, which sometimes was worse than a spanking, but she never stopped him from trying to help, both animals and people. She just asked that he exercise a little judgment.

As Chase drove into town, he considered his current dilemma. He had a feeling that if he didn't proceed cautiously, he could easily fall for the petite redhead. That in itself wouldn't be a problem, if he could get past her defenses. She had responded to his kiss, even if she didn't want to admit it at the time, and Chase was already daydreaming about having hot, consuming sex.

She didn't answer his knock at the door of her hotel room. The blinds were pulled across the windows and Chase couldn't hear any noise from within. He frowned. So much for the idea of catching her naked and wet from the shower.

He couldn't believe she would run out on him. He climbed into his truck, thinking he had fed her, gotten her a room, promised to help her. The fact that she had left without a word only increased his curiosity.

He pulled across the street into his parking lot. One of the limos was gone, so he assumed Larry was out on a job. Then he noticed the blue Nissan at the back of the lot. So, she hadn't left.

That didn't explain why his breathing calmed but his heartbeat accelerated. No woman had ever had this effect on him. If not for his limited knowledge of her background, Chase might have considered locking the office door and having a very intimate, very long, very satisfying sexual encounter to start the day off right.

His gaze found her the minute he opened the office door. She was just as beautiful in the morning light as he remembered. She had pulled her hair to the top of her head and it tumbled around her face. The beige top she wore set off her freckles, and definitely accented the curve of her breasts. She was standing behind his desk looking at paperwork.

"Good morning," she said, turning to the filing cabinet behind her. Chase took a moment to admire her slim form, covered from waist to ankle in a denim skirt. *Something was different*, he thought, pouring himself a cup of coffee and hanging his Stetson on a peg.

Then he realized what it was.

"What the hell have you done to my office?" He stalked over to the desk, which he could see the surface of for the first time in months. He watched her put another file in the drawer. He started to grab her wrist but remembered how she had flinched when he touched her. "Stop doing that," he said instead.

"Doing what?" She looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Cleaning, putting stuff away." He waved a hand helplessly at the neat stack of folders she was filing.

Her brow furrowed. "Why? Do you realize how easy you can find things if you file them alphabetically?"

He narrowed his gaze at her. “You’re pretty sassy this morning.”

“A good night’s sleep can do wonders.”

“Easy for you to say,” he mumbled, recalling how he had spent the night. He sat in the chair across from his desk, sipped his coffee and watched her work.

“How’d you get in here?”

“Larry and another man were here earlier. I told them I would just wait for you.”

Chase knew Larry wouldn’t have left her alone if he knew she was going to snoop through his office.

“Have you found what you were looking for?” He allowed a hint of sarcasm to enter his voice as she studied a form before putting it in a folder already in the file cabinet.

“No, but then you have months worth of invoices, memos, accounting faxes and gas tickets left for me to go through.” She answered in kind, giving him a tight-lipped smile.

“Well, maybe if I knew what it was, I could help.” He got up and refilled his cup before returning to the desk where he propped his booted feet up, crossing them at the ankles. “Sit down and talk to me, Katie Jo.”

She sat down behind his huge desk, looking small and vulnerable with her fingers laced together, staring at her hands. All Chase’s protective instincts rose to the surface.

“Does this involve your husband?”

“I’d rather not talk about him.” She glanced away.

“Will he be looking for you?” Chase felt he had to pursue the topic anyway.

“No,” she stated emphatically. “He has no right,” she added and then her voice fell to a whisper, “but he probably will.”

Great, Chase thought, one pissed-off husband added to the list. “If this problem of yours doesn’t involve him, exactly what does it include?”

“I told you—murder,” she said with conviction, looking him straight in the eyes.

He had a sudden vision of a misused wife who finally got fed up and hacked her ex-husband to bits. Was she trying to establish an alibi? She didn't appear to be nuts. He rubbed a hand down his face. He had to stop watching those cheap hotel thriller movies.

"So you've said before. Just who are we talking about?" he asked.

"My father."

Chase then recalled what Travis had told him. At the time, he had only been interested in her name.

"Have you gone to the police?"

"They said it was heart failure; that there was no evidence to prove he was murdered."

"And..." Chase knew she thought there was more to it than that.

Katie's hands trembled and she clutched them together on the desk. Chase watched as she straightened her shoulders.

"I was at his place that night, doing some housecleaning. They dumped him outside in the yard, probably thinking he was already dead. I called 911 but he," she took a breath, "he died in my arms."

"Did you actually see anyone drop his body off?"

She hesitated, blinking back tears, glancing off to the side.

"Katie Jo?"

She whipped her head around, anger glinting through her tears. "There was noise—a car, shuffling, doors slamming. I went outside to find him on the sidewalk. His last words to me were *keys—limo*. I know he was out with some men that night. I thought it was about funding for his latest archeological venture. They murdered him!" Her voice raised on the final words.

Chase had to shake his head, wondering how she jumped to such a conclusion. "Did you get a license number on the vehicle?"

"It was a limousine, but there wasn't enough light to see all the numbers. The police said what I gave them wasn't enough to trace it."

"I think we need to go back to the beginning."

"I just told you what happened." She pushed away from the desk, standing and then pacing back and forth behind it.

"No, I mean back to where it happened."

She whirled to face him, a frightened look on her face. "No, I can't!"

"Look, Katie Jo, I don't know how you got from your father's death to a murder in one of my limos, but—"

"I have the VIN number," she said, reaching for her purse and pulling out a single piece of paper.

Chase wrinkled his brow, looking at the line of numbers she handed him. "You didn't get the license tag, but you have the VIN number?"

Katie plopped back down in the chair. "I have a friend who works for the DMV. After the funeral, I called and asked her if she could trace the partial I had. Detour is a small town, and I figured there couldn't be more than a couple limousines in the entire county. And if it wasn't registered there, I suggested she check Chicago, which is only about an hour away. Unfortunately, she said the tags had been surrendered the day after my father's death."

"So, who owned it?"

"That's just it. Apparently it was sold or transferred out of state. When that happens, there's no record of the buyer, and the old records are sealed so she can't get into them."

"But you have the VIN number?" She wasn't making sense to Chase.

"My friend wrote that down, thinking I wanted to trace the car, not the owner. By the time she and I talked, it was too late to go back into the records."

"That still doesn't explain how you connected any of this to my company."

"Marsha is dating the owner of a car dealership. Do you know they can trace any car and find out where it is, what work has been done on it, and if there's been any factory recalls?"

Having heard Travis talk about the information network available at the touch of a computer key, Chase didn't doubt her, but still—

"Has this story got a conclusion, or do I need to send out for lunch?" She was talking in circles and Chase wanted her to get to the point.

She huffed. "Marsha's friend found out *C bar M* had bought this particular vehicle. But, my gosh, you have fifteen businesses, so I had no idea where to start looking for it. I just figured I'd start at the home office."

"How do you know how many businesses I have or where my home office is?" Chase was having a hard time tracking her train of thought.

"The internet, of course. You're listed as one of the largest personal transportation companies in the country."

Chase raised a brow. One of these days, he would have to enter the twenty-first century, he figured, and find out what else was out there. "It still doesn't tie everything together."

"Last week, the department chair from St. Geneva College called and asked about donating my father's books and research materials to their library. When I went to move his car out of the garage to pack up his things, I couldn't find his keys. I asked my hus—Jeff—about them and he got really angry. He said nothing was to be moved out of Father's house without his permission."

Chase could hear the strain in her voice when she mentioned her husband.

She cleared her voice. "At first, I didn't connect everything. But Jeff kept going through Dad's things and asking about the keys. I finally remembered what Dad had said right before he died. *Keys—limo*. He was telling me that his keys were in the limo."

"That doesn't make any sense," Chase stated, half angry with himself for not being able to solve what should be an easy problem. "Why would he worry about his keys with his dying breath? And why is your ex so interested?"

“Exactly. However strange it seems, Dad left me a clue to what happened to him. I find his keys, I find out who murdered him.”

Chapter 3

Chase looked through the papers left on his desk, assuming Katie Jo had already gone over everything in the cabinet.

“We need to go to Houston,” he said finally. “It’s not here.”

“What’s not?”

“The paperwork on the new vehicles. I must have given it to Arnie, my accountant.”

“You don’t know?”

“I know my business...it’s just up here,” he said, pointing to his head. “I know how many limos I have, where they are located and how much money each service brought in last month. I also know the newest purchases went to Denver, Las Vegas and Boston, but I don’t have the VIN numbers to know which one went where.”

“I didn’t mean to question you,” she said. “It’s just that I’m used to being a little more...” she hesitated.

He raised a brow in question. “Organized?”

“Organized,” she said at the same time. “I used to work for an accounting firm. It’s common practice to keep your paperwork in files.” She smiled to take the sting out of her words.

He screwed his mouth up at the side. “That’s what happens when you want to be a cowboy and you turn into a businessman.” He looked at his clean desk, where his calendar said it was still August instead of October, then over to the cabinet where he knew all the files were now neatly labeled.

“How would you like a job?” The question came out before he could stop it. He rationalized that he needed an office

manager who knew what was going on, but he really just wanted to keep her around.

“Why would you do that?” she asked.

“You don’t need a job?”

She blushed. “I don’t need a handout.”

He nodded in acquiescence. “Granted. But I really do need someone to help out here, and you did a good job in just a few hours.”

“Despite the fact you didn’t want it done?” She tilted her head and looked at him sideways.

He grinned. “Okay, thank you for cleaning up my office. Now, as I was saying, you’re going to have to hang around long enough to find the right limousine. As long as you’re here, you might as well get paid for your time.”

He watched as various emotions flitted across her features and he knew she couldn’t deny him.

She appeared independent enough that she wouldn’t let him continue to pay for her hotel and her meals. Yet she needed to find out what happened to her father and apparently, his limo service was the only clue she had.

“All right,” she agreed with a sigh. She rose to continue her filing.

“Let’s go.” Chase grabbed his hat from the peg and set his coffee cup back on the cabinet.

“Where? I thought you wanted me to work.”

“Houston, to talk to Arnie.” In actuality, he could call Arnie, or go to Houston himself, but he wanted Katie Jo with him. Part of the reason he hadn’t slept last night was because he couldn’t get her out of his mind.

“Okay, but you’re not paying me if I’m not working.” She walked past him, her head held high, and Chase grinned.

“Have you always been so independent?” He held the office door for her and locked it behind them. Larry had a key and the answering machine would pick up any messages.

She didn't answer as they walked to his truck. He watched as she buckled herself in, her lips pinched in a tight line. It wasn't until they were on the road that she finally talked to him.

"I suppose if I'm dragging you into the middle of my trouble, you should know something about it."

"Well, now, you told me your theory about your father, although we don't know for sure that he was—" He hated to keep bringing up the word *murder*.

"But you must also be wondering why I left my husband."

"Does one have something to do with the other?"

"I honestly don't know anymore, but you still have a right—"

"Darlin', you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he interrupted, grinning. "I really don't care why you divorced him; I'm just glad you did." He gave her a wink.

* * * *

Katie gave him a shy smile. She should tell him she had no interest in any kind of relationship with a man. But, truth be told, she found him extremely handsome. He spoke with a soft drawl and looked at her as if he thought her the most beautiful woman in the world. He made her hot inside, and tingly, and at times, she wished he would kiss her again. She knew that was wrong; that she shouldn't lust after a man, but Chase McVicker had quickly pulled her within the aura surrounding him, and she liked being there. It was safe and warm—and exciting.

The three hours it took to drive to Houston went by fast. Chase chatted away, apparently realizing she wasn't going to talk about anything personal.

"But I don't understand. If you're from Boston, how did you end up in Texas?" She felt much more comfortable back east in her little town of Detour than in the wide-open spaces of Texas.

"Well, some boys want to be lawyers or astronauts, or doctors or computer whizzes like my brothers, but I just wanted to be a cowboy."

"You have a brother who's an astronaut?"

He laughed. “No, just the doctor, lawyer and computer wizard. That’s hard to compete with when your mother thinks you’ve thrown away your education to get your brains jarred out on the back of a wild horse.”

“You don’t do that now, do you?” She was alarmed that anyone would willingly get on a bucking horse.

“Naw,” he said as he turned off the freeway into the business area of Houston. “A horse and I had a slight difference of opinion over my ability to break him.” He smoothly slid into a parking slot.

“Is that why you have a limp?” She asked the question out of curiosity, not because she found it offensive in any way. In fact, she thought it made him just a little vulnerable, and therefore, safer.

He turned toward her, sliding his arm along the back of the seat, his fingers brushing her neck. She automatically stiffened, waiting to be pinched or jerked cruelly toward him because she had pointed out a flaw. Instead, his thumb drew lazy circles right below her ear and his breath tickled the fine hair on her temple. She took a chance and glanced his way.

His brown eyes glittered with wicked humor, the laugh lines fanning out from the corners.

“Believe me, darlin’, my limp doesn’t affect any other parts of my body, all of which are in perfect working order.”

She gasped at the clear implication even as heat sizzled down her neck from his touch. “Are you always so bold?” She tried to sound detached, but her voice wavered and she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Only when it’s something I want badly enough,” he whispered, bending his head toward her. Even though she had begun to think she wanted him to kiss her again, she panicked at his closeness.

The spell was broken when a horn honked nearby. She jerked back, her heart pounding against her ribs, fearing discovery. She decided she wasn’t brave at all, and reached for the door handle to get out of the truck.

“Katie Jo.” Her name was just a breath of sound, the touch on her neck like some invisible hold that kept her from bolting. She took a breath and then another, trying to ease the tightness in her chest.

“Look at me.” His voice was low and mesmerizing, the sweet Texas drawl turning her insides to mush. Jeff had pushed and prodded and yelled and slapped. She was familiar with that treatment, even though she had never gotten used to it.

Now, with the barest touch and soft, gentle words, Chase had her longing for something she hadn’t known existed. In her heart, she knew she could leave the truck cab and he wouldn’t stop her. And for that reason, she stayed.

She turned to face him.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, his lips brushing her brow. “I swear to God I won’t let anyone hurt you ever again.”

* * * *

Chase was very aware that with the slightest wrong move, Katie Jo would bolt. But he just couldn’t seem to stop himself from kissing her. He placed butterfly light kisses on her temple, her brow, the shell of her ear, trying to coax her into relaxing; wanting to reassure her of his noble intentions.

He felt rather than heard the slight catch in her breath. His heart pounded in rhythm with hers. As much as he wanted to wrap his arms around her and crush her lush body against his, he knew better than to restrict her in such a way. Instead, he touched her only with his lips.

She was pliant to his wishes, and didn’t resist when he finally covered her lips with his. But neither did she participate.

“Sweetheart, you can kiss me back.” He punctuated his words with light touches at the corners of her mouth, and then traced her lips with his tongue. “I won’t bite.”

He realized immediately that was the wrong thing to say. She sucked in a breath, pushing against his chest. Chase instantly put both hands up in a gesture of surrender, wanting her to know he wouldn’t force her. The noise of the city gradually filtered into his brain.

“I’m sorry. This isn’t exactly the place for a romantic interlude, is it?”

She gave him a curious look, and Chase couldn’t tell if she was angry or scared. He quickly decided it would be better to move on. Grabbing the keys out of the ignition, he hopped out of the cab and came around the front to open her door. She didn’t move, but just kept staring at him.

“I promise not to do that again,” he said by way of apology, although he wasn’t in the least bit sorry that he had kissed her. Had it not been for their surroundings, he probably would have done a lot more.

She slid out of the truck and looked up at him. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she said and turned away to walk into the accountant’s office. She hadn’t said it with arrogance, as though she knew she was beautiful enough that he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her. Chase tried to analyze her voice as he followed her. If he had to guess, it almost sounded like regret. The question was, did she regret kissing him, or was she regretting his promise not to do it again?

* * * *

Katie Jo waited quietly while Chase chatted with the receptionist at the accounting office. She had finally gotten her breathing back to normal, but her pulse continued to pound. Nothing in her experience prepared her for her reaction to Chase McVicker. She said she wasn’t interested in men but longed for him to kiss her. Even as she pulled away from him, she had asked him not to make a rash promise not to kiss her again.

She felt like her body was betraying her. As her gaze strayed over his buttocks and down his muscular legs, an achy, heavy sensation took up residence at the juncture of her thighs and wouldn’t leave. She crossed her legs and squirmed in her seat, and it still wouldn’t leave her alone. She forced her gaze to the pictures on the wall, but his voice invaded her consciousness. It wasn’t the words he spoke to the woman, but the tone of his voice—soft and sexy and wonderfully masculine. She could

almost feel his hands on her neck again, the tickle of his breath at her ear speaking of unthinkably erotic—

“Darlin?” This time, the voice was directed at her, bringing her abruptly out of her daydream. She jerked, feeling heat flood her cheeks and neck. Chase bent close to her, that wickedly sexy grin in place. “I wouldn’t presume to know what you were thinking, but from the look on your face, I can only hope that I was there with you.”

She couldn’t speak, she was so embarrassed, feeling he knew her every thought, even if he denied it. What kind of power did he wield? As she followed him into the accountant’s office, Katie wondered if, in coming to Texas, she might not have jumped from the frying pan right into the fire.

She found Arnold Smalley a knowledgeable man. In addition to his conversation with Chase, she could see from the certificates on his walls that he was very up-to-date on the latest accounting procedures and tax laws. She focused on their conversation when Chase’s voice rose.

“What the hell do you mean you don’t know where they are? You’re supposed to keep track of them.”

The small man didn’t seem the least intimidated by Chase’s height. He looked at Chase over the rims of his glasses, shaking his head. “You gave me the registration papers for all the vehicles you purchased last month, but you neglected to tell me where they had all gone.”

“I did, too,” Chase countered.

His accountant shook his head. “You breezed in here and dropped a stack of paper on Beth’s desk and expected us to figure out what you’d done. I may be a CPA, but I can’t read your mind and I’ve told you that on more than one occasion.”

Katie watched Chase slump in a chair. “I’m that bad?” He cocked a brow in question.

Mr. Smalley snorted. “You’re a brilliant businessman. You have the intuition and foresight to know exactly where to start another business. All your companies are making money. But some days, I can’t help but think it’s going to come tumbling

down because of the lack of a single important piece of paper that's probably wedged in between the seat of that pickup you drive."

"But that's why I hired you," Chased countered.

"I can't keep your books without all the paperwork."

"Amen," Katie breathed in agreement, having seen how Chase kept his desk. Both men looked at her and she realized she must have spoken out loud.

"Hello, I don't believe I know you." Mr. Smalley came around his desk to shake her hand.

"Sorry, Arnie. This is Katie Jo Hawthorne. I just hired her to work in the office." Chase did the introductions.

"Are you by any chance an accountant?" the man asked in a weary voice.

Katie had to smile. "I'm not a CPA, but I do have a business degree."

He put a hand to his heart. "Thank the stars!"

Chase frowned at both of them. "You two would think I lost cars every day of the week." A sharp streak of lightning outside the window and a clap of thunder loud enough to shake the building punctuated his words.

"Damn!" The look on his face was comical, and Katie laughed.

"Someone must know something we don't," she said.

Arnie pushed the intercom button. "Beth, find Chase and Miss Hawthorne rooms here in town. They're not going to be able to get back to San Antonio tonight."

"Wait, we can't stay here. We—" she started.

"Appears we're going to get the aftermath of hurricane Jennifer a day ahead of time. They predicted high winds and a chance of torrential downpours with flash flooding."

As though to confirm his prediction, thunder rumbled again and the rain began a steady beat against the office windows.

Chase didn't seem concerned. "That'll work. I had to move five limos up here last week to cover a number of conventions,

and some extra time will give me the chance to check in at the office and see if they have everything under control.”

“Could we get back to the problem at hand?” Katie wanted to get the information they had come for. Her funds were limited and the sooner she found her father’s keys, the better off she would be.

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Smalley agreed, resuming his seat. He looked through a file on his desk. “I show five vehicles purchased within the last month.”

Chase agreed. “Three to Las Vegas to start up the business, one more to Denver and one to Boston.”

“That much you told me. But since you put thirty day tags on them for transport, which are about to expire, by the way, the vehicles haven’t been registered with DMV at those sites and you didn’t give me the corresponding VINs on your placements.”

“Well, hell, just call the offices and get someone to go out and read them.” Chase now seemed determined to get the mess straightened out.

“We can do that, although you’re still going to have to get out to each site and get the regular tags within the next week or so.”

Katie knew she would somehow have to get to at least one site—whichever had the correct limo—to retrieve the keys, and could only hope it was Denver, which was closer than either Las Vegas or Boston. She crossed her fingers as Mr. Smalley picked up the phone to start calling.

He frowned, tapped the receiver button several times and listened again. “Too late,” he said, “the weather must have taken the lines out. Maybe we can check in the morning.”

Katie felt everything, including the weather, was conspiring against her finding out what happened to her father. Feeling dejected, she waited inside the reception area as Chase took a piece of paper from Beth, then ran to the truck, promising to pull it close enough to the door so she wouldn’t get soaked in the downpour.

She got drenched anyway. Chase had to flip the defrost up on high and hot to try and keep the windows clear enough to see in front of them. She still shivered. She hadn't brought her bag, so had no dry clothes. She didn't even have a toothbrush. *Could things get any worse?*

Her question was answered when they walked up to the reception desk at the hotel where Beth had booked them rooms.

“You’re lucky,” the clerk said, nodding at them. “Between the convention and this weather, you get the only room we have left.”

Chapter 4

“Room?” Katie Jo squeaked the singular word and Chase silently swore.

He quickly flipped his credit card to the clerk and turned his back to the counter to face her. When he reached up to touch her shoulder, she stepped back, her eyes wide.

“Listen to me,” he said softly. “It’s a suite. You’ll be perfectly safe with me.” He watched her survey the hotel lobby, seeking escape.

“Beth called all over trying to find us some rooms,” he explained. “This was about all that was left. There’s no place to go in the rain, darlin’.” He used his most seductive voice to soothe her fears, but wondered if he had the patience to gentle Katie Jo and bring back her spirit. Whatever her lousy ex-husband had done, he had come close to breaking her. And perhaps that was why Chase had to try.

“Why does everything have to be so difficult?” she whispered.

Chase accepted her question as confirmation that she wouldn’t run. He turned back to sign the registration. “I don’t know, but things will look up in the morning.” He turned with the suite key in hand. “I guarantee it.”

Their room was on the top floor and under normal circumstances, Chase would have appreciated the view. Today, the rain not only obscured the lights of the city, but the sound of the wind made him feel like the entire building was swaying. While Katie Jo climbed into a hot shower in her room, he

settled in the living room that joined the two bedrooms and called room service and the hotel gift shop.

He rapped on the door to her bedroom once he heard the shower stop. At first, he wondered if she would open it for him, or whether she planned to lock herself inside for the night.

“What?” He barely heard her whisper through the wood panel.

“I got some things from the gift shop to tide us over.”

He heard the lock click and she opened the door to him. She was swathed in a huge white terry robe, the cuffs turned back but still hanging down past her wrists. She had it belted up so it wouldn’t drag on the floor but in so doing, it gapped at the neck, revealing golden skin and the swell of her breasts. Chase had to swallow before he could speak again.

“I, uh, think these will fit.” He held out a pair of sweats and a tee shirt, the pile topped with a comb and a kit with toothbrush and paste.

A smile lit her face. “Thank you. I wondered what I was going to do with my hair.”

He looked up at the mass of wet ringlets that surrounded her face and cascaded down her back. Without thinking, he reached out to touch her glorious red hair.

She flinched, startled, and her eyes widened.

Chase frowned. “I’ve promised never to hurt you.”

She flushed. “I’m...I’m not used to being touched,” she said, then hesitatingly added, “unless it’s for sex.”

That made Chase’s frown deepen. “No gentle teasing?”

She blushed, but shook her head.

“No foreplay?”

Again, she answered in the negative.

He cautiously reached out and slid his index finger down her cheek. “I think we need to work on changing that.”

She stood still, but Chase could see the wariness in her gaze. He figured he’d just let her think about that for a spell, even though his body was demanding satisfaction. He turned away, hoping she hadn’t seen the evidence of his arousal.

“I’ve ordered room service. They should be up here in about half an hour.” He didn’t wait for a reply but headed to the other side of the living room to his bedroom. Despite his wet clothes, his body was steaming.

Cold water running over his head and down his body didn’t cool his arousal at all. He couldn’t close his eyes without seeing the way Katie Jo looked after her shower. His hands still twitched as he recalled how desperately he had wanted to peel off that terry robe and count the freckles he knew were on her breasts and belly. He was infuriated by her comments, wondering what kind of sick bastard her husband was, and yet knowing no matter what he had put her through, she was still an innocent. He could see it in her look; feel it in the tentative response to his kisses.

Even as he dressed, his body demanded release and his mind reviewed and discarded several plans to get her to bed. He knew he could change her mind about what she had called sex. Sex was the reason he had an enormous erection that was killing him. What he planned to show Katie Jo had a lot more erotic names.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of dinner just as Chase came out of the bedroom. He cracked open a beer while the attendant set the plates on the table, and then closed the door behind him.

“Dinner is served.” He grinned, bowing with a flourish as he held a chair out for Katie Jo.

She gave him a quizzical look as she sat. “Are you always so—together?”

He scooped potatoes and beans onto a plate, forked some barbequed ribs beside them, and placed it in front of her.

“Beer?”

She nodded and he opened a bottle for her.

He fixed his own plate. “I guess it comes from living on my own, but even when we were all at home, Mom never let us sit on our butts while she did all the work. I know how to cook and sew and clean house, even though I don’t like to cook and sew and clean.” He finished with a grin.

Katie Jo shook her head. “You are one of the strangest men I have ever met.”

“Good strange, or bad?” Considering the little he had surmised about her ex-husband, Chase could only guess how she viewed the male species.

“Good, I think,” she answered as she licked sauce off her fingers, her tongue swirling around the tip before she sucked it into her mouth.

Chase wondered how he was supposed to last through the night.

* * * *

Katie tried to concentrate on her meal, but even when she wasn’t looking at Chase, she could feel his eyes on her. She didn’t know if the butterflies in her stomach were caused by hunger, or by the idea of being alone with a strange man.

When he had come out of the bedroom, he was just pulling a tee shirt over his head and she had caught a glimpse of smooth chest and rippling muscles. His hair was wet and spiky, and the shadow of a beard edged his cheeks and jaw. He was darkly handsome, taking her breath away, and she didn’t know how to deal with that.

As she glanced at Chase across the table, she almost wished he would kiss her again, because she felt sure, if she let him, he could erase the bad experiences she’d had. Afraid those thoughts could only lead to trouble, she tried to think of a safe topic of conversation.

“Tell me about your father.” Chase interrupted her thoughts as they got up from the table.

She moved to the couch, settling at one end and curling her legs beneath her. Chase sat down with her, but she noticed he gave her some space—not quite the entire couch, but he wasn’t right on top of her either.

“Dad was a professor at St. Geneva College. It’s a very small private school in the southeast corner of Wisconsin. He began by teaching history but his love was archeology, and he eventually got enough foundation support to begin an archeology

department. He would take groups of students on digs during summer term, usually to Africa.”

“What about your mother?”

“She died when I was only ten. I took care of Dad from that time until...until I got married.”

Chase stretched his arm across the back of the couch. He didn’t touch her, but Katie felt like he was reaching out, offering a bridge of some kind that she longed to cross. Did she dare?

“How long were you married, Katie Jo?” His voice was soft and seductive even when he asked a question she didn’t want to answer. She loved the way he said her name, always adding the ‘Jo’, even though Katie had always thought she preferred just her first name. When she glanced at him, his eyes were sympathetic, his mouth relaxed in a sensual smile. She tilted her head just slightly toward the back of the couch and he raised a finger to brush across her cheek. Could she risk it?

She closed her eyes in reflection. “It was a whirlwind courtship and marriage. I knew him less than a month, but at the time, it felt so right.” She hesitated, not sure she could actually say out loud the things Jeff had made her do. She took a breath.

“He was very demanding during the year we were married, but in the past month since Dad died, he became totally controlling. He went through my things and refused to let me see my friends. Then he became...abusive.”

“He beat you?”

She started at the angry sound of Chase’s voice, opening her eyes to realize he had moved closer. He still didn’t touch her except for the simple caress of her cheek.

Embarrassed, she looked away, not wanting to reveal her sordid past.

“Sweetheart?” His soft Texas drawl called her back, and she slowly forced her gaze to meet his.

“He didn’t hit me, but during—” She swallowed, feeling hot tears course down her cheeks. “Abuse isn’t always physical. It can be verbal, or mental, or...sexual,” she finished, squeezing her eyes shut tightly again.

“Oh, baby,” Chase crooned, and she felt him lean forward, lifting her to his lap and then wrapping his arms around her to hold her gently. She rested her head on his chest and let the tears come.

* * * *

It was no wonder she flinched every time he reached for her, Chase thought as he rubbed her back. Even though she had allowed him to kiss her, she had probably wondered if a simple kiss would lead to his forcing her. Her reactions now made sense to him.

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” he whispered the words in her hair. He felt her still beneath his hands. “There’s a huge difference between fucking and making love.”

She raised her head to look at him. Her green eyes shimmered in the light; her expression doubtful. He slid his fingers into her hair, ever so slowly leaning down until his lips lightly brushed hers.

“I can show you.” His voice sounded tight to his ears, and Chase wondered if he was asking the impossible. Given her past experience, would she take a chance that he was different? His erection pulsed hotly against her soft bottom and when she squirmed in indecision, he thought he would explode. He slanted his mouth across hers, holding her head in place as his tongue begged entrance.

He felt her tense, her lips pressing together in a tight line, her back stiffening. He forced himself to relax and release her. When his gaze met hers, it wasn’t fear he saw but wariness.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to rush you,” he said. “It’s just that you drive me nuts. You have the most kissable mouth and delectable body. I want to count every freckle on you, and then I want to kiss them all. I want to make you so hot for me, that the only thing you can think about is taking me inside you so I can make you come.”

He watched her eyes widen. She swallowed, not saying anything. But she didn’t bolt.

He kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, making his way down her chin to her neck. "I promise not to hurt you, Katie Jo. We won't do anything you don't want. If you don't like what I do, tell me to stop."

"But you won't be able to," she whispered on a gasp as he tickled her ear with his tongue.

"I swear I will stop, if you ask," Chase vowed, knowing that he had to keep a tight rein on his control until she could trust him not to hurt her. He only hoped he wasn't overestimating his ability.

As he gradually kissed his way back to her lips, he slid one hand under her shirt to caress her belly. He felt her muscles tighten, then relax and he moved slowly, trying not to scare her. His fingers brushed the underside of her breast; his mind registering the fact she didn't wear a bra just as her arms circled his neck and she turned her head to meet his kiss.

Heat exploded as she gave herself over to his kiss. This time there was no forcing as his tongue traced the ridge of her teeth. When she met his thrust with one of her own, he groaned.

He cupped her breast and the nipple instantly pebbled as she arched her back to push into his hand.

Chase eased her down on the couch, following her with hard kisses. He kneaded her breast, rolling her nipple between thumb and finger, tugging gently. He hated to leave her delectable mouth, but he knew he had to taste her. He lifted his mouth from hers.

"No," she groaned, tugging his head back toward her. "Kiss me again. Your kisses make me ache and tingle. They make me hot and shivery at the same time."

Her words zinged straight through Chase's body to his groin, where it felt like a hand clutched him tight. "Darlin', there are other ways to make you hot, believe me."

"Oh," she gasped as he licked her nipple, then sucked on it. He drew her further into his mouth and she cried out in pleasure, which only served to send Chase's control to the breaking point.

Her legs were still draped over his lap and he slid a hand down her ribs, across her belly, and beneath the waist of her sweats. Tonight was all about her; getting her to trust him and not be afraid.

But even as he thought that, Chase ached more with every touch, and couldn't wait to sink within her. Every little breath and sigh from her lips shot fire through his body and urged him on. He had always known that giving pleasure would increase his own, but hadn't experienced it very often. Right now, all he could think about was making her cry out in ecstasy as she climaxed.

She was hot and wet when he slid a finger through her curls and into her depths. Her muscles contracted around him with each pull of his lips on her nipple. He loved the feel of a woman's heat; could get drugged on her scent and the taste of her. Tonight, he wanted that high.

Reluctantly, he released her breast and kissed a heated path down her belly. He turned to kneel between her legs on the couch, pulling her sweats down past her knees. His kissing foray continued across her hips, stopping to lick her belly button. She did have freckles on her breasts and belly, lighter than her arms and legs. The hair at her apex was a deep auburn, and he quickly slid lower on the sofa to reach her.

"No!" Katie jerked at the touch of Chase's lips on her inner thigh. His head came up and she felt bereft. Conflicting emotions caused her heart to palpitate and her skin to tingle.

"Do you want me to stop?" His throaty voice urged her to let him continue. He kissed one knee, then the other, which did nothing to alleviate the euphoria she floated in.

She looked down to where he knelt between her bent legs. His eyes were smoky and heavy-lidded with passion. His lips burned on her skin and then he would lick where he nipped and it cooled, only to be heated somewhere else. Could she take the exquisite ache his touch caused? Could she stand the torture if he stopped?

“Katie Jo?” Her name sounded as though it rumbled from deep in his chest.

She rolled her head from side to side. “You make me ache like I’ve never ached. It’s such an incredible pleasure, it’s almost on the brink of pain. Yet when you stop, even for an instant, I feel incomplete.” She caught his gaze. “Why?”

He leaned forward, bracing his arms on either side of her. The kiss he gave her was as completely opposite of his earlier caresses as it could be—gentle, tender, but just as full of hunger as what she felt when he touched her.

He tipped his head back, searching her face, but she didn’t know how to describe what he made her feel.

“Haven’t you ever climaxed?” He shook his head ever so slightly in wonder.

She blushed at his intimate question. “If it’s this exquisite torture you’re putting me through, then no.”

“Oh, baby, it’s way beyond where we’ve gone.” He punctuated his words with kisses, feathering her face with his light touch. “Let me show you.”

Katie gave him her answer by reaching up and caressing his face, pulling his head down so their lips met. She opened her mouth to accept his invading tongue, and tentatively explored him in the same way. His hips rocked against hers and she could feel his pulsing erection. She pushed against him, wanting something she felt just beyond her knowledge. Her heart thundered in her chest, knowing she was taking a tremendous emotional and physical risk, yet somehow, she innately felt that Chase wouldn’t hurt her.

Chase moved down her body again. If his hips remained wedged between her thighs, he would take her in an instant, and he knew this first time, he had to go slowly. He went on instinct alone, soothing her with nonsense words when she squirmed beneath his knowing touch.

He lifted her hips as he kissed a heated trail down the sensitive skin of her thigh. When his lips touched her auburn

curls, she jerked and reached for him. But instead of pushing him away, she pulled him closer, spreading her thighs.

Chase groaned as his tongue sank into her velvety heat. She smelled of sex and woman and her gasps of pleasure only served to send Chase's blood pounding through his veins. He slid two fingers into her, his tongue flicked back and forth across the nub of her sex. He could feel her tighten around his fingers and in the next instant, she cried out, her hips gyrating against his mouth as he drove her even higher.

He waited until her convulsions subsided, caressed her one more time, and then reached up to jerk off his clothes. He wanted to feel her, skin to skin, as he slid into her body. She reached out, her fingernails lightly scraping his nipples. He was so ready to explode, he didn't need the extra stimulation and he grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands over her head, pinning them to the arm of the couch. His chest pressed down against her breasts as he settled his hips into the cradle of her thighs.

He took her lips in a hungry kiss, the adrenaline rushing through his body causing a roaring in his ears. She bucked against him and he lifted his hips slightly, positioning himself to slide into her sheath. He could feel her arms straining against his hold. Her chest rubbed against him as she squirmed. And then, she bit his lip.

"Get off!" she cried, shaking her head frantically from side to side.

"What?" Chase reared back, bracing himself on his arms, his hands still clutching her wrists. His action pressed him more intimately against her mound.

"No, don't!" she moaned, then whimpered, "Please don't."

Chase's brain was scrambling to understand what was happening, but the minute he released her and rocked back on his heels, he knew it was a mistake. She kicked out, catching him in the balls as she scrambled off the couch. The last thing he heard as he doubled over in pain was the lock clicking on her bedroom door.

Chapter 5

“Christ,” Chase wheezed as he slumped onto the couch. When he could breathe, he glanced over at the door where Katie Jo had disappeared. Even though she had effectively cooled his ardor, he had to grin. The little redhead was a spitfire. She hadn’t really hurt him, considering the damage she could have done if she’d had more leverage.

He recalled her gasps of pleasure when she climaxed. Unfortunately, there was a gap between her orgasm and the one he didn’t have. It wasn’t that he was selfish, but *damn*...

He jiggled the handle of the door—locked.

“Katie Jo, I’m sorry.” In the time it took for him to walk to her door, he had realized what had gone wrong—the exact moment she had panicked. He had bound her hands above her head and trapped her body beneath his. He hadn’t meant it as a restrictive movement; it had just been a reflexive action.

“I hope to God I never cross paths with her ex, or he’s a dead man,” he muttered against the door. Whatever the bastard had done, it had made her afraid of the most beautiful, intimate experience a woman and man could share.

He held his breath, listening. He couldn’t hear her crying, which he supposed was a good thing. *Shit, how could something so wonderful go sour so fast?* He had felt her respond to him; had urged her over the peak as her cries of ecstasy washed over him.

Just remembering her taste sent heat shooting to his groin again. He wanted Katie Jo. Her innocence fired his protective instincts and her response to him awoke all his primitive mating urges. The problem, as Chase saw it, was getting her to that mindless state of euphoria where she wouldn’t think of anything

except what he was doing to her. His body throbbed with unfulfilled passion.

He knocked on the door again, but she didn't answer him.

He dropped onto the couch, flipping through the channels on the TV, knowing sleep was as remote a possibility as sexual gratification.

A constant fizz of noise woke Chase and it took him a minute to recall where he was. He switched the TV off as he rubbed his face, trying to focus on the subconscious feeling of urgency that slowly made its way to the surface.

He headed for his bed, thinking he must have been dreaming. Then he heard it.

Hurtful cries echoed through the darkness, the painful sounds tugging at his heart. He turned back, bumping his shin on the coffee table as he rushed across the living room. He reached the door just as it banged against the wall and his arms were filled with a warm, soft, trembling woman.

"Help me, please," she sobbed against his chest. Chase didn't think twice but scooped her up in his arms and with long strides, took her into his room, laying down on the bed and cuddling her close.

"Sh, darlin', you're safe now," he whispered. He gently brushed her hair back from her face, the mass of curls tangled from her nightmare. It spread across the pillow in glorious disarray. He continued his caresses, speaking softly as her sobs slowly subsided.

She lay on her side, one hand clenching and unclenching against his bare chest. He felt her gradually relax, her breathing slowed, and her hand spread flat, feeling warm against his skin.

"Were you dreaming about your father?" he asked.

She shook her head but didn't speak. Chase scooted down so his face was even with hers. Tears streaked her cheeks and still glistened in her eyes. She stared at him with such a look of trust, that Chase felt guilty for his earlier thoughts of unfulfilled sex.

"What was it?"

Again she shook her head, and then burrowed against his neck, her breath warm on his chest. He sighed and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. She either didn't remember, or didn't want to talk about it. Either way, Chase was going to enjoy the fact that she was nestled next to him. He closed his eyes as he realized this was the first time ever he had a woman in his bed without sex being the main motive.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered just as he was drifting off to sleep.

"Hmmm?"

She didn't move from against his chest, and he had to strain to hear her. "About what happened; and me running away. I, uh, have never felt so out of control and it scared me."

"Sh," he said as he rubbed her back. "Anything that happens between us is because we both want it, and anything that doesn't happen doesn't need an apology." He grinned at the thought that he had made her lose control. "But that doesn't mean I'll stop trying."

She brushed her hand lightly across his chest and Chase felt his breath catch.

"Well, if I can't apologize, can I thank you?"

"For?" Even though he thought he knew, he wanted to hear her say it. She was quiet for so long, he wondered if she would.

The hand on his chest stilled. "For making me...for giving me...I never knew." The last was said so low, Chase almost missed it.

"Anytime, darlin'." His grin got bigger. "Anytime, anywhere, anyway."

* * * *

Katie woke the next morning disoriented. She looked around the room, hoping she wasn't where she thought she was. Groaning, she buried her head in the pillow. She was in Chase's bed. Luckily, he wasn't, so she could die of mortification without him being witness to it.

When the floor didn't open and swallow her whole, she knew she would have to eventually get up and face him. She sat

on the side of the bed. Nothing of his was left in the room. If not for the sounds on the other side of the door, she would have thought he had left her.

She shook her head at that idea. No, Chase McVicker wouldn't leave her. There was still a lot she didn't know about the man, but she innately felt that once he took on a project, he wouldn't let go until it was complete. And for the time being, she had apparently become the focus of his attention.

She turned and looked at herself in the mirror, amazed at what she discovered. She had changed, albeit certainly not much and not in the physical sense. Her hair was still as flyaway as always and the freckles she tolerated only because there was no help for them were still on her face. But there was something. She closed her eyes and let her mind and body relax. Deep within her, she could feel the first buds of trust and the first tentative reach toward freedom. She opened her eyes to find her reflection smiling at her.

"Katie Jo Hawthorne, I think you're going to make it," she told herself, giving a firm nod of her head.

Her positive attitude wavered when she walked into the living room and saw Chase sitting at the table reading the paper. She didn't know what to say and knew for sure she couldn't walk across the width of the room without him noticing her, even though she decided to try.

She had a hand on her doorknob when his voice erupted right behind her.

"Good morning, Katie Jo. Are you avoiding me?"

She jumped, startled, and spun around. He stood not more than a foot from her. She could feel her face heat with embarrassment as she tried to look anywhere but at him. Unfortunately, because of his size, he filled her view.

"Hey," he said, reaching out to tilt her chin up. Katie made a conscious effort not to flinch. Chase had given her no reason to think he would hurt her; in fact, just the opposite. He was tender and gentle and she knew he had exercised extreme control last night to stay within the limits she had set.

She tilted her head to look him right in the eyes. Something jolted inside her with the realization that a man as handsome and intriguing as he was could possibly be interested in her.

"I've always invested most of my time and interest in horses and in getting my businesses started," he said and she was surprised to hear the hesitancy in his voice. "I'm not very good at relationships."

He was giving her an out, but she knew she could be no less honest than he had been.

She gave him a smile. "Me, either. I'm afraid I'm out of practice."

He took a step forward and kissed her brow. "Well, practice makes perfect, so I guess that gives me something to look forward to."

She stood with her mouth gaping as he turned around and walked back to the table.

* * * *

Katie felt wrinkled and somewhat grubby in yesterday's clothes and she made the mistake of commenting on it to Chase.

"I have just the solution," he said as they pulled out of the *C bar M Limo* lot in Houston, where he had checked with his people while she waited in the truck.

He made several turns, weaving his way through town before finally pulling into a strip mall. She looked up to see he had stopped in front of a western clothing store.

"I don't wear jeans," she said.

He looked at her as though she had two heads. "Everyone wears jeans."

She shook her head, but he ignored her and got out of the truck. "Didn't you ever go on digs with your father?" He opened her door.

"Yes, but I didn't wear—"

He stopped her protest with a kiss—light, lingering, but nonetheless, persuasive. "Then this will be your second new experience." His smile was sexy and devastating, and Katie

forgot to be embarrassed by his reference to her climax last night.

Instead, she sat there sideways on the seat and squirmed, remembering what he had done to her and how it had made her feel, hoping he would do it again.

As though reading her mind, Chase circled her waist with his large hands, his thumbs brushing the underside of her breasts. His hips pushed against her knees, forcing them open, and he stepped closer. "Do you know what I would do to you if we were alone?"

She rapidly shook her head; not speaking for fear of begging him to do whatever he wanted, as long as it ended in the explosive sensations she had experienced last night.

He leaned forward, his body blocking the movement of his hands on her breasts, his lips whispering at her ear. "We would work on practicing that relationship thing we discussed." He nibbled on her ear lobe. "Lots and lots of practice," he repeated and then groaned. "God, I want you so bad. How the hell do you do that?"

She froze, fear skittering down her spine. He sounded mad. "I didn't do anything, I promise."

She heard him sigh as he removed his hands from her. He kissed her brow, and then took her wrist in a light grip. "Come on, before I get myself in trouble."

She hopped out of the truck, but tugged him to a stop. "Chase, I can't let you keep buying me things, honest."

"Consider it an advance on your salary then."

Katie knew he wasn't going to take no for an answer, and she didn't want to make him mad. She didn't know how he would react, and she'd had enough of the raging male to last her a lifetime. She would work for him until she could get on with her life, although at this point, she wasn't exactly sure what that entailed.

* * * *

Chase waited outside the dressing room while the assistant handed Katie Jo the blouses and jeans they had picked out. He

was just about at his wits' end, not knowing from one moment to the next how she would react to what he said and did. He decided as he picked out a pair of boots for her that he would just have to work harder at convincing her that they were good together.

He laughed to himself. *Good* was hardly the word he would use for the rampant lust he had felt last night, again this morning, and yet once more, a few minutes ago outside. *Damn*, everything about her turned him on and wound him up so tight, he thought he would explode. He couldn't wait to get her alone again. He wanted to taste her and make her come so many times, she couldn't look at him without wanting him. And all that didn't even take into account what he wanted her to do to him.

"Chase?" He jerked upright at the sound of her voice, covering his crotch with his hat to keep her from seeing the erection straining his jeans. He peeked around the corner, but she was standing behind a door, only her head showing.

"I don't think these are the right size," she said. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her eyebrows dipped together in a frown.

"Let's see," he coaxed her out of the dressing room.

His heart slammed against his ribs when she took a tentative step forward. The jeans clung to her hips and legs like a second skin, hugging her mound and outlining the curves of her butt. The top was white, but sheer enough for him to catch glimpses and shadows of her breasts and her small waist.

"Oh, yeah!" He whistled.

"Very nice," said the girl who had been helping them. She reached out and smoothed down the sleeves of the blouse, turning Katie Jo around and sliding her hands across the shoulders. "You wouldn't want them any smaller," she added.

Katie Jo looked over her shoulder at the woman. "I was thinking larger."

Chase pursed his lips and shook his head. "Nope, you look gorgeous. Here, put these on." He handed her the boots, shiny black and plain, except for the white stitching up the side.

Simple, but elegant, just like the lady bending over to pull them on. He

had the feeling Katie Jo didn't realize how truly beautiful she was, and that innocence only enhanced her allure.

He paid for their purchases, insisting that she keep the new clothes on since her others were stiff and scratchy from getting soaked the day before. "Besides, you're all ready to go out dancing when we get back to town."

"I don't dance," she said, sipping on her soft drink.

He glanced her way to see if she was joking before turning back to the highway. "Everybody dances," he said as he slid an arm along the back of the seat.

She opened her mouth but he had pulled her close and kissed her before she had a chance to deny it again. When he released her, she stared at him for a minute, and then laughed.

"Do you intend to kiss me every time I disagree with you?" she asked, and Chase thought he detected a hint of seduction in her voice, although he was sure she didn't even realize it.

"I just might," he answered. "Are you going to disagree with me a lot?"

Again, she laughed. "I just might," she mimicked his drawl.

* * * *

Chase made some phone calls as they drove back toward San Antonio. His travel agent doubted she could get him on any flights today, so he told her to book him as soon as she could to Boston, Denver and Las Vegas, in whichever order could be done the quickest, allowing him time for business at each stop.

"I should just borrow Steve's plane," he muttered, flipping the phone shut.

"Who's Steve?"

"Big brother. He owns a computer company and deals with countries all over the world. Owns two homes, a cabin, three cars and a jet."

"You don't sound jealous."

Chase shrugged. "Why should I be? I'm very happy doing what I do, and I have the ranch and my horses to go home to at night. Not near the hassle he has. Poor Steve had a midlife crisis and ended up taking off cross-country for about eight months."

He's worth millions, and he walked away from his company to work for minimum wage." He shook his head; still in awe that Steve had the guts to take off.

"Is he okay now?"

"Yeah. He ended up in New York where he met Keva. They got married in January and are expecting their first child. I'd say he's settled down now."

"Your family sounds interesting," Katie Jo said.

Chase could hear the wistfulness in her voice.

Remembering she was an only child, and now an orphan, he reached over and playfully tugged a curl. "Maybe one of these days, you can meet them. They're quite the crew, I'll grant you that."

His cell phone rang and he punched the button, using the hands-free mic.

"This is Larry," a voice boomed. "Uh, where you at?"

Chase frowned at the question. "On the way back to town. Why?"

"Are you alone?"

Chase grabbed the phone and punched it off speaker. It wasn't like Larry to question him about anything. "What the hell's going on, Larry?"

"Someone's been snooping around, asking questions, that's what, and I don't particularly want to be in the middle of a murder."

"There's no—" Chase stopped, looking over at Katie Jo. She was looking out the window, but he knew she would hear anything he said. "Why would you say that?" he asked instead.

"Because they're asking about that woman who was here who said your limo was involved in a murder."

"And what did you tell them?" Chase's heart pounded. He could think of only one person who might be after Katie Jo, and he had no idea how her ex could have tracked her to Texas.

"Didn't tell them anything," Larry answered. "I haven't seen either of you since that one day, and I have no idea where the girl went. Besides, I didn't like the looks of them."

“Good.” Christ, what was he up against? “We won’t be in for a few days. Can you and Joey keep things moving there?”

“Sure, boss. We’re booked the next two weeks, but not too busy. If need be, I’ll give Molly a call. She likes taking charge.”

Chase snapped the phone shut.

“Why won’t we be in? I thought you wanted me to work for you?” Katie Jo asked. He caught her look out of his side vision as he opened his phone again. “Where are we going, Chase?” This time, he heard a trace of fear in her voice.

Chase didn’t answer as he scrolled his address book and hit send. “Add another seat to my itinerary. Yeah. Katie Jo, damn, make that Kelly Jo Heart.” He had forgotten about her fake driver’s license. He waited for the agent to confirm the spelling and then hung up.

“Chase, what’s going on? Why are you making plans for me without asking?” The panic was there and Chase cursed silently, wishing he had talked to her first.

He reached a hand over to stroke her cheek and she jerked back, sliding over as close to the door as she could.

“I thought you were different.”

“Don’t go comparing me to your husband, damn it! I am different!” He growled, realizing they were back where they started and she was afraid he would force her to do something unpleasant.

“Stop the truck,” she said in a low voice. “I want out.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere. You can’t get out here, even if I’d let you, which I won’t,” he stated firmly.

She pulled on the handle, shoving her shoulder against the door. Chase slammed on the brakes, swerving over to the side of the road, dust flying. Luckily, the truck had automatic door locks when it was in gear, but by the time he had it stopped, she had pulled up the lock button, pushing the door open. She tumbled out before he could reach her.

Swearing, he jumped out and followed her. Fifty feet off the side of the road, she stopped, looking around her. They were literally in the middle of nowhere, the vast openness of Texas all

around them. There were no barbed wire fences, no cattle guards, houses or trees. Just a lonely highway stretching as far as one could see into the distance.

When he tried to step close, she put up a hand. “Why have you been teasing me with delicious feelings,” she stopped and took a breath, “taunting me; making me think I was special, just so you can take me back to Jeff?” Her voice rose until she was shouting at him.

“Take you—why the hell would I do that?” It was no wonder Chase never had a long-term relationship. He couldn’t understand a woman’s thinking.

“You added me to your itinerary for your flight. You’re going to try to take me back to Chicago, aren’t you?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that.” He deliberately softened his voice.

“Are you working for Jeff?” Her emerald gaze captured his, refusing to let go until she got the answer she wanted.

“No,” he stated softly, shaking his head.

He watched her take that in, filtering it to determine whether she could believe him or not. She relaxed her shoulders, her gaze flickering away from his. She didn’t seem to realize that if he wanted to, he would have no trouble overpowering her. He was giving her the room she needed because he wanted her to trust him.

“Then why the secrecy on the phone? Why are you taking me with you when I’m supposed to be working in your office?”

At that moment, Chase wished he were a few steps closer to her because when he told her his reasons, he had no idea what she would do. He glanced around. With a sigh, he figured if she ran, he wouldn’t have trouble spotting her. The trouble was it was probably ninety degrees out and his boots weren’t the ideal running shoes.

She crossed her arms over her chest, stood with legs braced straight, which jutted her hips out, and glared at him. She was a foot shorter and probably seventy pounds lighter than him and she stood there like she would punch his lights out if he didn’t

answer her. Chase would have laughed, but didn't think she would appreciate the joke.

"There's been some people asking questions—about you," he said, watching cautiously for her reaction.

She shook her head and frowned. "I don't understand. No one knows where I am. Not even Marsha."

"Well, someone's traced you, maybe through credit cards."

"No, I knew they could be traced, so I threw them away."

Chase began to understand how desperately she had wanted to get away. "I don't know, then, maybe he has friends who can track your car tags."

Her eyes widened, suddenly realizing who was hunting her. She glanced wildly around as though expecting him to jump out from behind a sagebrush. She wrapped her arms around herself and began to rock back and forth.

"Oh, God, oh God," she moaned. "I can't go back. I'll die if he forces me to...he'll kill me!" She ended on a wail.

Chase reached her in two strides, taking her in his arms and holding her tight. She was shivering despite the heat. He had never seen such fear before, and he knew no person had a right to that kind of power over another.

"I'll take care of you, sweetheart," he said, rubbing her back. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"You don't know him; what he's capable of," she cried, clutching fistfuls of his shirt.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't know what I'm capable of either," Chase said fiercely. "Nobody messes with what's mine."

Chapter 6

When Chase tucked Katie Jo into the truck this time, it was from his side and he climbed in right behind her, putting an arm around her shoulders so she couldn't slide away from him. Not that she seemed so inclined.

They drove in silence for some time and he couldn't begin to discern her thoughts. His were focused on the revelation of his statement.

Nobody messes with what's mine.

With that sentence, he had laid claim to her. Perhaps it had happened when she had trusted him enough to fall apart in his arms last night. He glanced down where her head lay against his shoulder. She might unconsciously trust him, but he knew it was a fragile web that bound them, and he would have to treat her gently.

He pulled into the ranch by late afternoon, having bypassed town and the office. Until he found out who was asking questions and whether they were still around, he didn't want Katie Jo put in a vulnerable position.

"Hey, sweetheart, we're here." He nudged her awake.

She sat up and stretched and Chase sighed as she arched her back, her breasts pushing against the fabric of her blouse.

"Where are we?" She looked around.

"The *C bar M Ranch*, home of one broken-down cowboy and the finest quarter horses in Texas." He got out and she slid past him.

"Oh, Chase, it's beautiful," she said, spinning in a circle. He tried to see it through her eyes.

The house was a sprawling ranch style with a wide veranda around three sides. Scraggly flowers bent over in the shade of the porch and Chase figured they hadn't been watered in awhile. He had tried to dress up the place, but he was gone too much, and his housekeeper didn't come that often if she knew he was out of town. The ranch hands had more than enough to do with the horses and cattle. They sure as hell wouldn't have worried about some pansies.

Just as they stepped up to the porch, fat raindrops splattered the dirt. Within seconds, the ground was soaked, the rain falling hard enough to obscure the outbuildings.

"Got here just in time," he said as he opened the door for her. He tossed his hat on the hall tree and dropped his keys on the side table. The entryway smelled of lemon wax and he figured Bonita had been there recently.

If she knew he was on the way home, there would be spicy Mexican food in the fridge. Considering he had been gone a month and they hadn't stopped at the store, he certainly hoped so. Just as he picked up the stack of mail, his cell phone rang. The travel agent confirmed flights, the first leaving at noon tomorrow. She promised to fax his itinerary to the office.

Chase clicked the phone shut and dropped it on the stack of mail. He'd deal with all that later.

"Your home is wonderful," Katie Jo said. She wandered across the hardwood floor, her hand sliding across the back of the couch. He watched her lightly touch the pictures on the mantel.

"My brothers and their families," he said by way of explanation.

She tilted her head to look at him. "This home is you."

He shrugged. "I'm not much for decorating. I just bought some things to take up space."

She smiled at him. "That's what I mean. It's comfortable, and lived in. Dad's house was like that." She glanced over to the bookcase. "You must like sports."

Chase looked at where he had skis and fly rods stashed in one corner and a gun cabinet against the far wall. He walked over and snagged the baseball from the mitt on the shelf, tossing it from hand to hand. "I played baseball in school. Steve has a cabin in Colorado so we all ski—well, I used to until I bummed up my leg. But I still go out there to fish and hunt."

"I envy you. I was never much of an outdoors person."

"By choice?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I was always studying, and then in the summer, Dad was on his digs..." Her voice trailed off.

"Didn't you ever go with him?" Chase loved to travel and couldn't imagine staying home if there was a chance to go somewhere new.

"I did, several times, but I was more interested in the people, especially the children, than I was in digging around in some ruins. So I usually spent my time in the village teaching the children to read."

Chase's stomach growled, reminding him it had been a while since breakfast. "Let's see if Bonita left us anything to eat."

He held out his hand.

Katie Jo hesitated and he knew she remained leery of trusting him. She looked from his hand up to his face and he gave her his best, mischievous little boy smile. She glanced toward the window where he could hear the rain beat against the house.

"What choice do I have?" she asked.

"There are always choices," he answered, his hand still outstretched toward her. His patience was rewarded when she gave him a smile before placing her hand in his.

* * * *

"I have never eaten so much in my life. Surely your housekeeper didn't expect you to eat all that?" Katie almost groaned as they walked out onto the veranda after supper, mugs of coffee in hand.

She and Chase had raided his refrigerator, pulling out plates of enchiladas, beans, spicy rice and fixings for tacos. There had also been fresh guacamole and chips. As they had eaten, the rain

continued, but they ignored it as Chase told her stories of his brothers and she had laughed until her sides hurt.

“Bonita thinks I’m still a growing boy. She usually knows my schedule, and if she’s out here on the day I’m expected, she’ll whip something up. I didn’t even notice the night I came home.”

Katie stopped at the railing, looking out into the night. The rain had almost stopped, and the air felt fresh and clean. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. She sensed Chase beside her, not touching, but close enough so she could feel his heat. She reached a hand out to catch the sprinkles still falling from the sky.

“I love walking in the rain. It’s like washing away all your sins.”

Chase loved the sound of her voice. Low and musical, so different from the Texans he heard daily. He just didn’t like what she said.

“I can’t imagine that you have any sins that need washed away.”

“Oh, but I do.”

Chase had to assume she was talking about her relationship with her ex. “Darlin’, when you’re taken against your will, or made to do things you don’t want, it’s not your fault. The evil lies with that bastard you were married to.”

She shook her head, smiling sadly. “No, I provoked him. I shouldn’t have resisted him. A wife’s duty is to her hus—”

“Damn it all, Katie Jo! Your duty was to love and honor him, not to obey him when he—” Chase couldn’t finish. He didn’t know the particulars of what had happened between the two of them, but he couldn’t vocalize the evil images his mind conjectured.

She stood very still beside him, staring out into the night. Her lower lip trembled and his heart melted.

“How can I explain?” he asked. “Making love involves two people with mutual feelings. It’s not one controlling the other.

It's—" He shook his head in frustration. "I can't explain it very well, I guess."

She turned toward him and touched a hand tentatively to his cheek. "Then show me," she whispered.

At her words, Chase froze, not daring to move for fear of scaring her off. Of course, keeping his hands clenched at his side didn't mean the rest of him wasn't wide-awake and stirring strong. His mouth went dry and his blood pounded through his body straight to his crotch.

All the while, Katie Jo just stood there, one hand caressing his jaw, then sliding down his chest. She took a step closer and reached up, kissing his chin. Her eyes were luminous, reflecting the light like stars in the night.

"Are you sure, Katie Jo?" His voice cracked when he spoke.

She didn't answer him, but pulled on his shirt, her hot lips kissing a path down his chest as the snaps popped open. He could feel her hesitate when her hands reached his waist.

"I'm not very good at this," she said. "You'll have to tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Chase shivered in anticipation. He scooped her up and headed inside. "You're doing everything right, darlin', but I think we'll be more comfortable inside where it's dry and there's a big bed."

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her down the hall to his bedroom. When he tried to put her down on the bed, she clung to him, pulling him down with her.

"I'm scared."

He brushed her hair back from her forehead, kissing her nose. "Nobody can get you here, sweetheart, you're safe."

She shook her head. "No, I mean—" She bit her lip and turned her head to the side. It took Chase a minute to figure out what she didn't want to say. He cupped her cheek and turned her back to face him.

"Remember what I told you?" He raised a brow in question. When she didn't answer right away, he reiterated his promise. "I

may lose control and go too fast because I ache for your sweet, hot body, but I'll never hurt you. Do you believe me?"

Instead of answering, she reached up and slowly unbuttoned her blouse, revealing a lacy bra that pushed her breasts up and barely covered her nipples. Before she had even finished, Chase bent forward, licking along the edge of lace, sliding a finger beneath the material and pulling it down. Her nipple was already pebbled with desire and he sucked it into his mouth, kneading her.

Katie closed her eyes and absorbed the erotic feelings that spiraled through her body. With each tug on her breast, she ached more until she began to squirm beneath him.

"I need to touch you," she gasped.

Chase immediately lay out beside her, resting a hot palm on her belly. "You're in control, babe. You set the pace."

She rolled to her side, studying him. "Do you mean that?"

He threw his hands over his head. "My body is yours." His grin told her he sincerely hoped she would take advantage of the situation.

Katie had never been in control like this, and a surge of power shook her. She reached out and brushed a hand across his chest before she bent to kiss his hard muscles. He quivered beneath her touch and she smiled, liking the idea. She licked a path to one flat, brown nipple and was surprised when it pebbled beneath her tongue. She wondered if he experienced the same sort of sensation she did if she sucked on it and found out when he groaned as she applied a little pressure.

"I think I like this," she whispered against his skin as she gave equal attention to his other nipple. She felt him quiver in response.

"More," he groaned, sliding a hand into her hair and removing the clip that held it back.

Curls tumbled around her face, and she flipped her head to the side. "I thought I was in charge."

"Just a suggestion, that's all." He grinned at her, taking a curl and twisting it around his finger, slowly pulling her toward

him. She rubbed her chest against his as she moved upward. The friction ignited fires in her that she didn't recognize. She scrambled across his middle, straddling him as she bent to receive his kiss.

Her snug jeans pressed inward against her mound as she spread her thighs. Chase took her hips, pushing her back along his length until she rubbed against his erection, all the while, sucking gently on her lower lip until she opened her mouth to him.

The instant his tongue touched hers, she was lost. She no longer cared who was in control. She wanted what he had given her last night. She ground her hips against him.

"You're killing me," he groaned.

"Do something, please. I can't stand this torment," she cried against his mouth.

Chase tore at his jeans, fumbling with the buttons, trying to get loose without moving her from him. He didn't want to end the exquisite pressure of her spread thighs against him, but had to lever her up so he could get his pants off.

"Move, just a little," he rasped, pulling her hips toward him. He reached behind her and kicked his pants down, allowing his penis to spring free. He pushed her back against him. He could feel her heat through her pants.

With her sitting directly against him, he tugged the zipper of her jeans down, reached a finger inside and found her hot and wet. The minute he fingered her clitoris, she jerked upright, arching her back, pressing her butt down against him.

She cried out, moving against his hand.

"Come for me, baby," he growled, rubbing her harder.

He reached the other hand up and caught her breast, tugging her nipple in rhythm with her hips. She lifted her arms to her neck, piling her auburn curls on the top of her head in a wanton display of passion. Her hips gyrated against his and he clenched his teeth, fighting for control. He wanted to be in her hot little sheath when he came.

Katie felt it coming, stronger and faster than before. She looked down at Chase's heaving chest, then to where his fingers caressed her most private parts. The erotic picture was burned into her brain as she burst apart, the electric sensations spiraling from the center outward. She had never felt this total abandonment. She had never had anyone focus entirely on her pleasure.

Chase eased his hand out of her panties and reached up behind him to the nightstand. "Get those jeans off, darlin', so I can take you for a ride." He watched as her eyes widened.

"There's more?" she asked in awe, scrambling to the side on her knees and wiggling her hips as she tugged her pants down.

Chase almost lost it right then. Her skin was smooth and fair, freckles lightly sprinkled everywhere. As he rolled a condom on, he promised himself he would kiss every one of them—later.

"Come here." His voice was gruff with passion as he pulled her back on top of his legs, his erection standing stiff against her belly.

She looked down and he saw a flush start at her neck and rise to her cheeks. "I don't think...that is, you're so big," she breathed.

"That's what you do to me, baby." He ran his hands up the inside of her thighs, feeling her quiver beneath his touch. He caressed her buttocks; his fingers meeting at the center and sliding down her crease.

"How will it...how can we..." She seemed at a loss for words, and Chase was well beyond wanting to talk.

"Have you ever been on top?"

She rapidly shook her head.

"You're still in control, Katie Jo." Even as he said it, he only hoped that he could let her. When she didn't seem inclined to move, he lifted her hips and positioned her over him, sliding into her one cautious inch at a time. He gritted his teeth and tried to take it slow.

He was no more than halfway in, when she put her hands over his on her hips. “Wait,” she gasped, squeezing her thighs against his hips. Her actions only increased the pressure he felt.

“I don’t think I can, sweetheart.”

“No, I can do this.” She slid his hands down her thighs. Very slowly, she moved her hips up and then back down, accustoming herself to his size. With each downward stroke, she took a little more of him inside her heat.

Chase was in agony. She was hot and tight and each time she moved, he came closer to exploding. When he moved his hands back toward her hips, she caught them, entwining their fingers and holding his hands away from her. She captured his gaze in hers. Her tongue peeked out between her lips as she hesitated for just a second, then relaxed her hips and came down on him all the way, burying his shaft deep.

Their groans mingled in the still air. She stopped, breathing hard, her nipples distended as they jiggled above the lace of her bra. Chase told himself to breathe, but all he could do was feel. He throbbed heavily as she clutched around him. Never had he felt this incredible—he couldn’t even think of a word to describe the sensations flooding his senses. And then all thought ceased as she began to move.

Katie instinctively moved her hips up and down, loving the full feeling that Chase caused deep inside her. She squeezed her muscles and the tingling increased. Her gaze swept over him, devouring the hungry look in his eyes, the adoring set of his mouth. She had never known it could be like this, so sweet, so consuming. She closed her eyes, letting her body take over, moving in rhythm with his strokes.

“Look at me, Katie Jo.” His command reached her through the sensual fog that surrounded her. “I want you to know who is making love to you.” His voice was harsh with passion as his hands dug into her hips, moving her faster and faster.

She didn’t need to look, for he was already branded on her heart and soul, his touch the stuff of dreams. But she opened her eyes, focusing on his beautiful face, knowing that whatever

tomorrow brought, Chase had given her back her life, her spirit. In that moment, she became truly free for the first time in over a year.

She spread her arms wide, feeling as though she were flying. She smiled down at him, loving the look on his face, wanting to give him the same passionate release he had given her.

He bucked against her and she met him, thrust for thrust.

“Who...am...I?” Each word he spoke was punctuated with a thrust, deeper and deeper until she thought she would faint.

She was spiraling out of control, free falling from the highest perch on the side of a mountain. But she didn’t fear the landing, for she knew she was safe in his embrace.

“Look at me!” he commanded again, then gasped. She could feel him come, each pulse and throb sending her higher. He jerked upward and stopped, holding her hips so tightly against his, that they were one. The pressure on her sex sent her over the edge.

“Chase!” she screamed his name as she climaxed, caught in a sensual ecstasy that felt so right, it scared her to death.

Long minutes later, Chase lay still, staring at the ceiling as he contemplated what had just happened. Katie Jo lay across his chest, her breathing just as frantic as his own. He swore, if he lived to be a hundred, he would never forget the incredible climax she had given him. In fact, he doubted he would even live past his next birthday if he experienced many more of them. He smiled, deciding that a few dozen orgasms in a row with Katie Jo would be well worth dying for.

He had wanted to brand her as his own; to erase any lingering thoughts she may have about her ex-husband. The way she had screamed his name as she climaxed left no doubt in his mind that she knew it was Chase Adam McVicker making her come.

She stirred. “What have I done?” He heard her whisper against his chest, but there was more irony in her voice than panic. “I swore I wouldn’t get involved with another man.”

He reached down and pulled the comforter up over them, rolling over and tucking her into his side.

“Sh, darlin’, it’s going to be all right.” But Chase didn’t know how, because now that he had made love to her, he knew he wasn’t about to let her go.

Chapter 7

Chase woke Katie Jo twice during the night, taking her slow and gentle as they lay facing each other, then later from behind in a fast, screaming orgasm that left them both panting for breath. He couldn't help himself. She wiggled in her sleep, and every time her sweet little ass brushed him, he came to life, wanting her again, regardless of how short a time it had been since he had made love to her.

Now, his dreams were as vivid as the real thing. He could feel her hand slide across his chest, a finger circling his nipple before trailing lower. He was turned away from her but could feel her breasts pushed against his back. Her hand stopped at his hip, even though his mind urged her on. He smiled in his sleep. Katie Jo was just as hesitant in his dreams as she had been when they were making love, although the last time, some of her inhibitions had certainly slipped away.

Her hand was on the move again, sliding lower, lower until her fingers tangled in the hair at his groin. Chase moaned in his sleep, aching for the feather light touch to continue, or better yet, for her to clasp him tight and pump.

He'd had erotic dreams before, but none this dramatic. When her hand finally circled him, the pleasure shot through him with such intensity, he woke up. The room was dark, the clock on the nightstand blinking a neon four fifty. He lay very still, realizing he hadn't been dreaming at all. Katie Jo's arm curved over his hip, her hand very tentatively sliding up and down on him. With each stroke, he grew until he was throbbing for release.

He didn't know whether to make her aware he was awake or not, although he didn't know how long he could stand the torture without groaning out loud. He was afraid she might stop if he spoke and he was thoroughly enjoying this new, bolder side of her.

While he lay there contemplating the joys of a hand job, he heard a muffled grunt behind him, and her jaw came down against his upper arm. He tried to determine what she was up to without giving himself away. Another wiggle and grumble and he had to smile. He was so much bigger than her that she seemed to be having trouble getting around him to where she wanted to be. He decided to help her out.

With a soft snore and twitch, he rolled to his back, keeping his eyes tightly closed. Regulating his breathing was the hardest part. The minute he flung his arm above his head, she burrowed closer, licking a hot trail from his side to his nipple. Her hand still caressed him, and gentle or not, his body was reacting to her touch, his penis jerking upright. He wished now he hadn't moved his arm because he ached to reach down between her legs and play with her.

It seemed that Katie Jo had decided she could be herself around him without fear of reprisal. Her natural spontaneity was showing, and Chase couldn't wait to see her blossom. If he had his way, he'd show her all the delights to be found in a relationship based on equality. He was definitely for equality of the sexes if it meant she showed an aggressive side as she was doing now.

"Sweet heavens," he groaned, finally giving in to the need to touch her. He reached down and circled her arms, dragging her up his length. While he loved what she had been doing to his body with her lips and hands, he couldn't stand being a passive participant. He took her mouth in a hungry kiss, plundering her, seeking her sweetness like a starving man.

She was no longer hesitant in her response, matching him thrust for thrust, their tongues dueling, tasting, teasing. She braced her hands on the bed, lifting herself up. Her hair cascaded

around them like a veil, the contrast between it and her fair skin seductive. She arched her back, her body begging him to taste her.

Chase levered himself up, kissing the valley between her breasts, up the gentle slope of one pale orb, and then sucking her nipple into his mouth. She moaned when his lips closed around her and Chase felt himself jerk in response. She was so sweet; he couldn't get enough of her. His hands skimmed up her sides, over her ribs to her breasts.

"Chase?" His name was a caress from her lips, reaching him through a haze of passion. When he didn't answer her, she spread her thighs wider, pushing against his belly with her hot sex. She wiggled; he groaned. She slid up and back.

"Augh." His head fell back against the pillow, his gaze going to hers. The impish smile she gave him had him narrowing his eyes. "You are a witch." He threaded his fingers through her hair, wrapping the long strands around his hands.

She immediately frowned. Worse yet, she quit moving against him and he knew exactly what she was thinking.

"I—"

He shook his head. "Sh, don't. I love what you're doing to me."

"You don't mind—me being in control?"

Every time they had made love, Chase had asked her what she wanted, questioned her if he thought he was going too fast, ever conscious of her fragile spirit. And the wonder of it was that in giving so much power over to her, he had experienced orgasms like he never had before.

"Baby, if you keep doing what you're doing to me, you can have the key to my soul!"

She appeared to think about that, then slowly began rocking back and forth again. Sweet torture!

"I think I'd rather have the keys to your truck. It's in better shape than my car."

He laughed, thoroughly enjoying her humor even in the midst of passion. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled,

pinning her beneath him on the mattress, settling his hips between her thighs, stretching out so they were skin to skin from shoulder to toes.

“Stop!” There was instant panic in her voice. He reared back to find her eyes wide, her chest rising and falling as she gasped for breath.

Damn, he swore under his breath. He thought they had gotten past her fears, but realized this was the first time he had been over her. In her mind, this put him in a position to dominate her.

“Katie Jo, look at me.” He kept his voice low, coaxing, instead of commanding. “Baby, it’s me, Chase.” As he spoke, he rocked his hips against hers, gently.

“Do you want me?” he asked when she focused on his face. “I can give you pleasure; make you come again and again.” He rubbed harder, his shaft sliding against her wetness. He wanted so badly to be inside her, but refused to take her against her will. Even if he knew she would let him. There was a difference in *letting* him and *wanting* him.

He knelt between her legs, bending her knees so she opened wider for him. Taking himself in hand, he rubbed the tip of his penis along her cleft, all the while watching her face. She made little whimpering sounds that fired his passion and made him hotter.

“We can do this any way you want, upside down or backwards, but, baby, I gotta be inside you!” He groaned, reaching for the packet on the nightstand, knowing he couldn’t wait much longer.

She actually giggled. “You can’t do it upside down.”

He raised a brow, giving her a ravenous look. “Wanna bet?”

The last of her reservations seemed to fall away as he watched. Her face went from wariness to hunger. She lifted her legs as her hands slid up his arms.

“Anyway you want,” she breathed as he bent to kiss her. He hooked her legs over his arms and slid into her in one smooth motion. With her hips tilted up, his penetration was deeper than

ever, and he stopped when she gasped, letting her get used to him. But he kept her gaze captured with his, willing her to trust him as he took her on a trip to the stars and beyond.

* * * *

Katie snuggled deeper into the pillows, not wanting to open her eyes, even though she could feel the sun crossing the bed with its warm rays. She already knew Chase wasn't there. His presence was such a strong force, that his absence left a huge hole.

She rolled over and stretched, groaning at the pull of muscles that had gotten an unusual workout last night. She smiled and shook her head, not believing what she had done. She, who had come to hate sex because of the crude and sadistic things Jeff had forced upon her, had turned into a ravenous woman. The unbelievable thing was, Chase had let her do what she wanted, and that sense of power had liberated her to where she could relax and enjoy the incredible things Chase did to her.

She wondered if Chase would take away that power, expecting her to do other things after awhile. She promised herself she wouldn't stay around that long, because she wasn't about to let a man have that kind of control over her again.

Even as she made that oath, she wondered how hard it would be to leave when the time came. Chase had found a side to her that she wasn't aware existed—a wanton, craving side that longed to explore the erotic physical planes that he kept assuring her she had. The explosive climaxes were just part of it, he had said, and she couldn't imagine anything more.

She had just climbed out of the shower when she heard him in the bedroom. Wrapping a towel around herself, she peeked out, a little shy about seeing him in the daylight.

"Come on out, I know you're there," he called to her from the closet and as she looked, shirts came flying out to land haphazard on the bed and on the floor nearby.

"What in the world?" She shook her head, walking over to pick up the dark sports coat that hung half out of a suitcase.

"Oh, yeah, that's what I like to see in my bedroom first thing in the morning." Chase's arms came around her from behind, one hand sliding beneath the towel where it overlapped, the other crossing over her breast to caress a bare shoulder.

Her knees immediately went weak. How did he do that to her?

“You smell great.” He nibbled her skin from ear to shoulder and with a flick of his wrist, the towel disappeared. Hot hands cupped her breasts and she moaned, wondering how he could be so ready to take her again, but knowing she would let him because she was beginning to crave what he offered so willingly.

He slid a hand down her bare stomach to her hips, pushing her back against him. She could feel his erection against her fanny.

“If we only had an extra hour...or two or three,” he groaned, releasing her. He bent to pick up her towel, nipping her bottom and then nibbling his way back up her spine. With a heartfelt sigh, he wrapped the towel around her. Katie felt bereft, aching for his touch.

“That wasn’t exactly fair.” She pouted.

He snorted. “You’re telling me.” He tugged on his jeans and she saw that he still had quite a bulge. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have started something we didn’t have time to finish. Guess you’ll just have to think about it until we get to Boston.” He gave her a wicked grin.

“Boston?” Katie looked back at the suitcase.

“Since we don’t know where your keys are, we’ll check out all the limos I bought last month, starting with the one in Boston. Besides, Arnie said the tags were due, and I have to sign the papers. We’re booked there first, then it’s on to Denver and Las Vegas.”

She shook her head. “Chase, I can’t afford to fly all over.” She sighed, not knowing what to do. She had thought she would be able to retrieve her father’s keys here and return to Detour. She didn’t exactly want to run into Jeff, but knew at the moment, her life was there.

He turned her around to face him, his hands warm and calloused on her bare skin. “I thought you heard me when I made the reservations last night.”

“I did, but still—”

“You can’t stay here by yourself, Katie Jo. Not with someone looking for you. Besides, we’re in this together.”

She hadn’t known Chase that long and didn’t quite understand why she trusted him like she did. And probably the most important thing, she couldn’t figure out why he would put her needs ahead of his own like he had since she first met him.

“Why?” The single word held all her insecurities; all her doubts and worries.

He tugged gently on a curl, bent forward and kissed her nose. “Just maybe because I like redheads.”

* * * *

Chase stopped at the office, grabbed the faxed itinerary and Katie Jo’s bags and had Larry run them over to the airport. He gave Steve a call while they waited for their flight, but not finding him home, he called his mom, letting her know that he would be home in time for supper and that he had a guest. He didn’t mention Katie Jo’s name, because his mom would have an engagement announcement in the paper by the time they arrived. She was hell-bent on getting all her boys married with babies.

The flight to Boston was uneventful, and Chase had one of his drivers ready with a limo when they exited the airport.

“Do you always travel in your own limousine?” Katie asked as the driver held open the door.

Chase slid in beside her, after speaking briefly with the driver.

“No, actually, I have motorcycles at all my business locations except San Antonio. They’re easier maintenance and less expensive upkeep than a car. I never ride in the limos because they’re usually out on business. That is, unless I’m with very special company.” He reached across the length of the seat where she sat and pulled her toward him, angling himself so his feet were braced on the seat along the side.

“But as long as we’re riding in luxury, I can show you ways to use a limo you’ve probably never thought of.”

Katie blushed, still not used to Chase's outspoken sexual banter. But before she could protest, not that she probably would have, Chase had her skirt up around her waist and his hand inside her silk panties.

"The driver," she gasped with her last logical thought.

"Dark, very dark windows," Chase replied as he slid off the seat onto his knees. He tugged her panties down and kissed her hip.

Soon, Katie couldn't have cared less, for Chase was making love to her in the middle of Boston, first with his mouth and then with his whole body. And when she started to scream out his name, as she had begun doing whenever she climaxed, his mouth covered hers in a kiss that should have set the seats on fire.

Chase didn't know how he was going to get through a night without Katie Jo, but since they were staying at his mom's house, he knew sleeping with her wasn't an option. His mom might know that her sons weren't saints, but she still expected them to behave in her house.

As usual for a Sunday, the driveway was full of cars by the time they arrived. Chase had to have the driver circle the block when he announced on the intercom that they had arrived because Katie wasn't quite put back together.

"What will your mother think?" she asked as she combed her hair and pulled it back in a clip.

"She'll wonder where I found such a beautiful woman to put up with me," he answered, giving her one last kiss as they exited the limo. "Don't be surprised if she asks some very blunt questions."

Katie hesitated on the walk. "Like what?"

"Like whether you like babies and if you want a dozen or more when you get married." He grabbed her hand and tugged her up the walk.

Despite what Chase had said, his mother was very warm and welcoming, and she didn't ask Katie any personal questions. She met two of his brothers, Steve and Michael, and their wives.

"Your baby is precious," Katie cooed at the infant in the cradle. "How old is she?"

"Two weeks," Penny answered. Just then, her twin boys came roaring through the living room. "Hey, I thought you were outside playing on the jungle gym."

"Looking for Unca Steve and Unca Chase," one of them said. Katie couldn't tell one from the other.

"I'm sure they're outside, now scat."

Hooting like Indians, they ran off.

"I certainly hope we only have one at a time," Keva said as she joined them, patting her very pregnant stomach. "I don't think I can take two of Gage."

"Gage?" Katie hadn't heard that name before, and knew from what Chase had said that Keva was married to Steve.

Penny laughed. "It's a long story, but basically, Keva's husband is Stephen Gage, who we all know as Steve. However, he all but married Keva as Gage before she found out his real name."

The girls walked out to the back porch where the men had the grill going. It was a warm day for October, especially in Boston, and they had decided to take advantage of the weather.

Katie liked Chase's family. They were warm and friendly, and seemed so content with their lives.

Keva groaned as she lowered herself into a chair on the deck. She looked like she was ready to have her baby anytime.

"Can I get you anything, sweetheart?" her husband asked.

"Wimp," Chase said.

"Weenie," Michael added.

Immediately, the three men were on their feet. Steve grabbed Chase in a neck hold and apparently, Michael thought he needed rescuing. Together, they stumbled down the steps into the grass. The twins saw them and converged on the group. Before long, all Katie could see were arms and legs as bodies rolled around.

"Do they do this often?" she asked.

“Only when they’re together,” Keva answered and Penny laughed.

“Do you ever get used to it?” Katie wondered how no one got hurt.

“No, isn’t it great?” Keva answered, her face all smiles as she watched her husband, absently rubbing a hand over her enlarged belly.

Katie had to agree that the McVickers were a great family to know, and felt a moment of envy that Chase had so many brothers, all of whom seemed to share an equal affection with wives, children, and each other.

Katie asked Chase’s mom if she could help with the dishes after the meal was over. She had noticed how everyone pitched in—the men cooking, the women setting the table. Even the twins settled down enough to put glasses of water at each place setting.

“Heavens, no,” Chase’s mom answered. “You’re company. Besides, it’s Sunday and the boys do all the work.” As if on cue, Chase and Michael, Steve and the twins got up and began gathering plates.

Before long, Chase’s brothers and their families left, but not before telling Katie they enjoyed meeting her and stating how they hoped to see her again. Chase opened the door for his mom, but when Katie went to follow her back into the house, he grabbed her hand.

“Be there in a bit,” he told his mom.

“That’s fine. I put Katie in Gordon’s old room, right next to the bathroom. Good night, dear.”

“Night, Mom, love you,” Chase called and started chuckling when the door closed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Gordon’s room is on the second floor, next to Mom’s. My room is in the basement.”

“Oh.” Katie realized the implication and blushed. “I like your family,” she added.

“They take some getting used to, I suppose, especially if you’ve grown up as an only child.”

That wasn’t the only reason Katie had fallen so quickly for his family. She was finding that not all men were like her ex-husband.

“It’s more than just the number of them,” she said. “You guys aren’t afraid to pitch in and help. Everyone’s so warm and giving, not like—”

“Sh,” Chase tried to hush her. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her into the shelter of his embrace.

Perhaps it was better this way, where she wasn’t facing him, Katie thought. “Chase, there’s some things you should know.”

“There’s nothing I need to know about you that I don’t already.”

“It’s about why I am the way I am,” she continued before she lost her nerve. “Jeff was into pornography—on the internet, videos, that kind of thing. I found...things.”

“Did you ever confront him?” She felt his arms tighten as he asked the question.

“Yes, and he...forced me to watch...he tied me up and—”

Chase spun her around, not letting her finish, but covering her mouth with his. The kiss was hot and devouring, as if with his lips alone, he could make her forget her past.

“God, I want you so bad.” He groaned into her hair. “You know it can be different, don’t you, Katie Jo?”

“Yes, with you, it’s wonderful.” She pressed against him, unknowingly causing his temperature to rise, along with one particular body part.

“No way in hell am I going to make it through the night,” he mumbled as he slid his hands around her ribs and covered her breasts. “There’s got to be someplace—”

Katie was having a hard time following his thoughts because his hands were doing incredible things to her system. Whenever he touched her, every sense heightened.

“Come on.” He suddenly released her. “I have an idea.”

Like two thieves in the night, they circled the front yard and he quietly opened the gate to the back. The streetlights didn't reach this far, and he whispered in caution as they made their way across the yard.

"In here." He opened the door to the playhouse, crouching down so his six foot five frame could enter.

"Chase, we can't do anything in here. It's made for the kids." Katie Jo protested, even as she followed him into the miniature house. She got the giggles and he told her to be quiet. When she couldn't stop, he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her down with him. He was sitting, his back against the wall, his legs outstretched.

He quieted her with a kiss, his mouth stealing her breath and firing the passion that was so close to the surface now. This time, there was nothing slow about his touch as he urgently kneaded her breasts and slid a hand down her front.

"Baby, I'm so hot already, I'm afraid I can't go slow. Can you handle that?"

Katie's heart squeezed. Even in the midst of combustible passion, he asked her and gave her a choice.

"I think I need fast and furious tonight," she answered.

Clothes flew as they undressed each other, even as they tried to continue kissing. Chase touched her everywhere, his hands igniting fires that were never entirely squelched where he was concerned.

"There's not enough room to lay down," she whispered between scorching kisses.

"No need. Come here." He guided her onto his lap and promptly filled her with one sure stroke. With each thrust of his hips, Katie felt him grow until he filled her so completely, she didn't think she could take anymore. Because he was sitting up, the friction against her clitoris was sharper and her orgasm overcame her within seconds. She cried out Chase's name, muffled against his chest. As her contractions subsided, she realized that he wasn't moving, and yet she knew he hadn't

come. She managed to lift her head, although in the dark, she couldn't see very well at all.

"Are you okay?" she managed to ask.

"Oh, yeah, better than okay. It's just that the minute you sank down on me and I felt your hot sheath wrap around me, I didn't want it to end so soon." Even as he spoke, she could feel him throb within her.

"So I shouldn't have been in a hurry?"

He slid his hands from her hips up to her breasts, tugging on her nipples. "Don't worry, we'll just have to make sure it comes nice and slow this time."

"This time? But I already—"

He tugged her nipples and she gasped, feeling the pressure build like before.

"Again?"

"Yeah," he drawled, "again, and again."

Chapter 8

First thing in the morning, even though it had been a short night, Katie and Chase took his mother's car and drove out to *Car M Limo*, located near Fenway Park off the Green Line. Since they were early, all the vehicles were still in the lot, which was what Chase had planned.

He got the keys for the newest from the office and while Katie searched the interior, he checked the VIN number. It didn't match the one she had written down, and she didn't find anything inside. They had just finished when her cell phone rang. He watched as she looked at the screen before answering it.

He wondered why she had taken this call when she hadn't wanted to talk to whomever had called the other night. He heard her say hello to someone named Marsha, and was thankful that she wasn't talking to her ex-husband.

Shit, he thought, suddenly realizing the possibility that whoever was asking questions in San Antonio may have tracked her through the cell phone.

"Hang up!" He paced in front of her, pulling his own phone out and punching Steve's number.

She swiveled the phone away from her mouth. "It's Marsha," she said.

"I don't care; get off the phone." He could feel his heart thud. He heard his phone connect. "Steve, this is urgent."

"You haven't messed up your relationship with that pretty little redhead already, have you? Crap, Chase—"

"Just listen, damn it. Is it possible to track a person through calls to and from a cell phone?"

“Man, you’ve got to get into the twenty-first century, kid. Your monthly bill has all your calls listed.”

“I’m not an idiot, you goon. Would someone have the capability of pinpointing where a phone is, based on either the calls made to or from that phone?”

Chase heard Steve whistle. “Are you in trouble?” his brother asked.

“Just give me a straight answer.” Chase knew with Steve’s computer background, he would know.

“The basic answer is yes. It takes some special equipment, a contact with the phone service, and some computer knowledge, but with the way signals bounce from tower to tower, it is possible for a phone to be tracked, at least to the nearest tower it uses to get a signal.”

“How fast?” Chase asked.

“To the tower—instantly. If a person stays on the phone long enough, they can be traced to an exact location.”

“*Fuck.*” The word slipped out as Chase looked over to see Katie Jo still on the phone. In a heartbeat, he was at her side, grabbing her phone and punching the stop button.

“Hey!” She scowled at him.

“What’s going on?” Steve hollered in his ear.

“I’ll let you know when I do,” Chase told him and hung up, jabbing his phone in his pocket.

Katie Jo opened her mouth, but he put his hand up. “Don’t even start. Your ex has been tracking you through your phone.”

Her mouth snapped shut and all the color drained from her face, making her freckles stand out. “I don’t answer the phone when it’s him,” she said in a strangled whisper.

Chase shook his head. “According to Steve, it doesn’t matter. Did you talk to anyone while you were en route, or when you got to San Antonio?”

“Just Marsha, but I know she wouldn’t tell Jeff where I was. In fact, I was careful not to tell her what direction I was going.”

“Apparently, it doesn’t make any difference,” Chase said, frowning at the phone he held in his hand.

“Hello there, Mr. McVicker.” Hutch, one of his drivers, walked across the lot at that moment.

“Hey, Hutch.” He looked up at the old guy who should have retired years ago, but liked to get out, knew Boston like the back of his hand, and talked a blue streak. Chase’s frown cleared.

“Here,” he said, handing him Katie Jo’s cell phone. “Use this. Call your friends. Give it to your friends to call their friends. Just don’t say where it came from.”

“Gee, thanks, Mr. McVicker. You know, I remember when there weren’t even that many phones in town, and now, even the youngsters have these things glued to their ears.”

“Chase, you can’t give away my phone,” Katie Jo protested, but he ignored her.

“Hutch, you didn’t happen to find a set of keys in that newest limo, did you?”

“No, but that reminds me of the time in ’48 when I—”

“Sorry, old boy, I don’t have time for a story today. Gotta go get this baby tagged before you end up with a ticket.” He turned Katie Jo around and they headed for the car.

“Chase, that wasn’t very polite.”

He chuckled. “You don’t know Hutch. He’s a World War II vet, still spry and really with it, even though he’s got to be pushing eighty. He loves to tell stories about the war, but once he gets started, he doesn’t quit.”

“And he still drives?”

“I only let him have the jobs when there’s either people his age, or foreigners who don’t speak English. They think he’s just being friendly.”

She had to shake her head at his excuse. She was discovering that Chase had a soft heart, and that was probably the reason he had hired Hutch. But that didn’t explain why she no longer had a cell phone.

“Chase, about my phone,” she began as they drove downtown.

“Look, I’m sorry, but according to Steve, even if you don’t take your ex’s calls, he can trace those you do and find out exactly where you are.”

Katie’s stomach sank to her toes. “Is that why someone’s asking about me?”

“As near as I can figure. I’m not about to walk right up and ask anybody, but just to be on the safe side, having Hutch use your phone will make whoever’s tracing you think you’re staying in Boston.”

Katie thought when she drove away from Detour, she was ending that part of her life. Apparently, Jeff had other ideas. She could feel her lower lip tremble and she sucked it in between her teeth. She would not let him take her down again, she told herself. She looked over at Chase. She was discovering something far too precious to go back to where she had been a month ago.

As though reading her mind, and Katie was beginning to think he could, Chase reached an arm over and pulled her close.

“You’re divorced, Katie Jo, and nothing he can do about it will matter.”

“But if he comes after me—”

“I’m sticking to you like glue, baby, so you might as well get used to it.” He slowed the car to a stop at a red light and turned to kiss her. They didn’t come up for air until the cars behind them began honking their horns.

They drove through downtown Boston, got the tags and returned to the shop, where Chase made sure there was a copy of the registration on file. He kept the original to give to Arnie.

“You do have some business sense,” Katie teased.

He gave her a peck on the cheek. “I have a lot of business sense. It’s the ‘paper sense’ that drives me nuts.”

“Then you should computerize.”

“Don’t you start. Between Arnie and my brother, Steve, I already get hounded.”

“Speaking of which, isn’t it rather strange that Keva calls her husband Gage if his name is really Steve?”

“Actually, his name is Stephen Gage. When he met Keva, he was using his middle name so nobody would know he was the owner of *SGM*, a multi-million dollar computer company. Believe me, Travis and I got him in plenty of trouble over that.”

“Do the rest of you do that—change your names, I mean?”

He nodded. “It seems to be a trait in our family. I used to use my initials when I was working on the ranch—thought it sounded more like a cowboy.”

“What is that?”

“Cam—for Chase Adam McVicker. Some people even call me Mac.”

“Mac?” She wrinkled her nose. “That’s definitely not you. Cam—maybe. But I think I like Chase.”

He pulled her close and gave her a quick kiss. “I think I like you, too.”

She blushed, still not used to his overt signs of affection any place they happened to be.

“What about the rest of your brothers?”

“Well, Travis goes by TJ half the time, if he’s not using some stupid undercover name like Rambo.”

“I heard you talking to him the other day. What does he do that he has access to personal information?”

He gave her a look. “Sorry, I probably shouldn’t have told him to look you up.”

She shrugged. “That’s okay. I wasn’t being truthful. I was just overcautious.”

“With good reason, I’ve come to find out. Anyway, Travis works for the *Boston Chronicle*, but he only likes to investigate stories where he can get in the middle of trouble.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yeah, sometimes, but he thrives on it.” He put the car in park and Katie looked around, having been more interested in him than where they were going.

“Have you ever been to Boston?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then let’s look at it from the harbor.”

Chase bought tickets on the ferry and soon, they were cruising out on the water. It was a brisk day, and Katie hadn't worn a jacket, but Chase wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm as they stood at the railing. As they headed for Georges Island, he pointed out the sights, telling her some of the history of the battlements from the time of the American Revolution.

They arrived back at his mother's house to find she had fixed a scrumptious lunch. Katie tried unsuccessfully to turn it down but the older woman would have none of it.

"You have to eat before you leave. I know Chase and he won't feed you properly. Besides, I hear the airlines don't even give you a snack."

"Mom doesn't fly, but she thinks she knows all about modern travel," Chase teased. "They have convenience stores now, Mom."

"Don't you get sassy with me, Chase Adam."

Too soon, it was time to leave. Chase said they'd catch the train so his mom wouldn't have to drive across town to the airport.

When they said good-bye, she gave Katie a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm so glad I had the chance to meet you," she said, squeezing Katie's hand. "I hope you'll come back again soon."

"Mom," Chase dragged the word out.

"Well, you could visit more often, too. After all, you do have a business here."

"Yeah, along with fourteen other cities." He gave her a kiss and whispered, "Love ya," and then took Katie Jo's hand. They walked a block down the street to the Red Line stop where they caught the train, transferred to the Blue Line at Downtown Crossing and were soon at the airport.

Once they had boarded the plane, Katie Jo immediately fell asleep against his shoulder. He shouldn't have kept her up so late last night, he thought, but after he had stripped her in the playhouse, he wasn't about to let her go until he had thoroughly loved her. And that had taken awhile.

He listened to her breathe softly and wondered how she had become so important to him so fast. It had never happened that way before; in fact, most of the women he had known were clingy and needed more than Chase had wanted to give. But with Katie Jo, he wanted her to know everything about him; wanted to give her everything he had and then some.

He had stacked grief on Steve when he had fallen so fast for Keva, but now Chase was beginning to understand what it was like to want a woman so badly. The trouble was, Katie Jo had issues that needed to be resolved before she would ever think about another commitment. He felt they were definitely making progress on a personal level, and he would help her put closure to her father's death, however long it took and wherever the chase led them.

By the time they arrived at the office in Denver, the limo he needed was out on a run. He told his office manager they would be back in the morning, because they had an early evening flight into Vegas. The paperwork was in the vehicle so they couldn't even check the VIN number.

Chase grabbed a motorcycle helmet from the back closet and held the door open for Katie Jo.

"Ever ride one of these?" he asked, strapping their bags on the back of a Harley.

"No, and I don't think I want to."

He glanced over at her. She did look a little frightened.

"Haven't I told you I would take care of you?"

"Yes, but—"

He pulled her close and kissed her, then put the helmet on her and buckled it under her chin.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this now," she said.

"Hang of what?"

"You say yes and I say no and then you kiss me. What happens if I agree with you?"

"Then I kiss you twice as hard and long."

"So it really doesn't matter—I get kissed anyway."

“You got that right, babe. Climb on and hold tight.” The cycle roared to life.

* * * *

Somewhat nervous, Katie did as she was told, following his instructions to lean with him as they went around the curves. Before they had gotten downtown, Katie found she really liked the freedom of being on the back of a bike. Or maybe it was the sensuous feel of having her thighs spread wide behind Chase’s hips, and snuggling her chest tight against his back.

“Man, we’re going to have to do that more often,” he said when they were parked in a lot off the Sixteenth Street Mall.

When Katie noticed the rather nice bulge in his jeans, she had to agree.

“I like it,” she told him.

“The ride, or the effect?” he questioned.

“Both...maybe.” She didn’t want him to think she was ready to tie the knot or anything, and since he had told her a little about his past relationships, she knew he was leery of getting serious. Of course, she had no intention of doing that either.

“Hi, George,” he said to the man behind the counter of the hotel. “Got a suite for the night?”

Katie wondered why he was requesting two rooms but she didn’t dare ask and embarrass them both in front of someone he apparently knew.

As they rode up the elevator, she couldn’t contain her curiosity about another matter. “Do you know everybody?”

“I’m a creature of habit. I always fly the same airline and stay in the same place.” He shrugged. “You get to know the people once you’ve been here a few times.”

“Do they, by any chance, recommend limo services when someone asks?”

This time, he grinned. “You’re getting the hang of this business stuff, Katie Jo.”

The room was as well appointed as where they had stayed in Houston, but Katie wondered again why he had requested two rooms, even if they were adjoining. As hot as his kisses were, she didn't think he had tired of her.

"Where would you like the bags, sir?" the bellman asked.

"I'll take mine; put the lady's in there." He nodded to the far room.

Once the bellman had left, Katie asked the question weighing on her mind.

"This suite must cost a fortune, Chase. Why did you request two rooms? I mean, after all, we..." Her voice trailed off. Making love and talking so openly about it were two entirely different things to her.

He came over to her and lifted her chin, capturing her gaze with his beautiful brown eyes.

"We've been racing away on a runaway stallion, and I just thought you might need a little space, that's all."

Chase hoped she would deny it. He would have preferred one room and one narrow bed where they had to curl up, touching through the night. He just wasn't sure she was ready for that commitment. When she didn't say anything, he decided not to pursue it. "Why don't you jump in the shower and we'll get a bite to eat? We need to be up early tomorrow to get the paperwork, tags, and still make our flight to Vegas."

"Do you do this all the time?" she asked. "You're wearing me out."

"I usually stay a week or so in town, going over the maintenance records on the vehicles and doing some marketing if business is slow. That doesn't appear to be a problem right now. Once in a while, I even drive, just to keep my finger on the pulse, so to speak."

"I bet the ladies all love it when you do. Your drawl certainly fulfills the image of *C bar M*."

He stepped close, his chest practically touching her breasts. "Y'all want to take a ride?" he said in a deep, sexy voice.

She ran her fingers through her tangled hair. “Can I have a rain check? I really do need a shower.”

“Honey, you can have anything you want, as long as it involves a part of my body.”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his chin, then turned quickly and went into the bedroom.

Well, that was a start, thought Chase. She never denied his kisses or her body, but up until now, she seldom initiated it. Things were looking up.

* * * *

Later, Chase had to revise his opinion as he flipped through the TV channels. He looked toward Katie Jo’s bedroom door with a sigh. She had yawned through dinner, and nobody was supposed to yawn when they were at a *Hard Rock Café*. So they had walked back to the room and he had given her a good night kiss and sent her off to bed. She hadn’t even protested, so he knew she must be exhausted.

He stripped to his briefs, brushed his teeth and crawled into bed—alone. After several minutes of contemplating the thin strip of light that ran across the ceiling from the part in the curtains, he gave up his efforts to be noble.

She was soft and warm when he crawled into her bed, trying not to disturb her. He just wanted her beside him. She wore a thin-strapped nightie that was tucked up around her hips, so Chase was able to go skin to skin with her legs.

He decided that would have to do, but then she turned toward him and he could see where the strap on one shoulder had slipped slightly. *Maybe just a taste*, he thought, stealthily sliding the strap down further until one creamy breast came into view. He promised himself to be gentle so she didn’t wake. And he kept his promise, even when she moaned and slid a leg up his until her knee pushed against his groin.

* * * *

Katie woke rested but with a peculiar feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had dreamed about Chase coming to her bed but not making love to her. It confused her, but she shook off the

feeling, knowing if he had come into her room, he would have awakened her. She rolled over to see the sunlight streaming in through the space she had left open in the curtains.

And that's when she smelled his aftershave on the pillow beside her and saw that the covers were mused over the entire queen-sized bed. She smiled to herself. He had come in, but was apparently holding to his promise to give her space by not forcing his attentions on her.

That made her feel instantly guilty. There was so much about her that he still didn't know because she just couldn't bring herself to tell him. The longer she was around him, the more hesitant she was becoming, because she was beginning to like him—a lot. It wasn't fair to him not to know what type of person she was.

She washed and dressed, deciding that she needed to let him get back to his business once they found her father's keys. She didn't know what Jeff would do; hadn't ever thought he would find her, but she didn't want Chase hurt.

* * * *

"Morning, sleepyhead. Did you get enough sleep?" Chase glanced up, taking in the mint green outfit she wore that hugged her curves and accented her small frame. She didn't look particularly happy, a frown marring the beautiful planes of her face.

"What's up, sweetheart?"

"I'm divorced, but if Jeff is trying to find me, he will and I don't want you involved in my troubles, Chase. I'm trying to get past what Jeff did—" Her words tumbled over each other and Chase had a hard time following her.

"Hey, we weren't going to talk about that anymore, remember?" Chase got up and came around the table to give her a hug before pulling out the chair for her.

"I'm not who you think I am. I can be very vindictive."

Chase smiled behind her back. Katie Jo was baring her soul, perhaps feeling guilty for denying him last night, he didn't know. He was sure she was confused, and she could definitely be

stubborn, but she was not vindictive. She was an angel—his angel, whether she knew it or not.

“Katie Jo, you’re not—”

“I snuck away in the middle of the night, but before I went, I took all his dirty tapes and his porn books and put them in a pile in the driveway, soaked them with gas and set them on fire. Then I drove away.” Her small shoulders slumped as she looked up at him with a guilty expression.

He would have liked to tell her he loved her spunk, her determination, and her loyalty. Hell, he loved her, but he didn’t think she was ready to hear it.

“Serves the asshole right,” Chase muttered instead. “You don’t have to feel guilty, Katie Jo,” he said, seating her at the table and pouring her some coffee. “Okay?” He kissed the top of her head.

She tilted back her head, tugging on his shirtfront to pull him down toward her. “Okay,” she said, giving him a kiss before releasing him.

They had finished breakfast when Chase noticed her worrying her bottom lip again. *What now?* he wondered.

“Chase?” She hesitated, drawing little doodles on the tablecloth with a fingernail.

He knelt down beside her, putting his taller frame closer to her level. He loved looking at her. The haunted look was gradually fading from her eyes. He lifted a hand to her hair, brushing it back from her cheek.

She turned her face, kissing his palm, her eyes capturing his.

“The next time you come to my room in the middle of the night—” Again she hesitated, a blush rising to her cheeks. Chase’s heart thundered, hoping she wouldn’t tell him to stay away from her.

“The next time, would you please stay?”

Chase picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. “If that’s the way you feel,” he said, lowering her to the bed, “let me show you what I would have done if I had stayed.”

Chapter 9

As usual, they were late getting to the business office. That seemed to be the norm now that Chase had introduced Katie Jo to the art of making love. She was so responsive and he was constantly hungry for her.

But in this case, it didn't make any difference because although they thoroughly searched the vehicle, they didn't come across a set of keys.

"Damn. Too bad my travel agent didn't book us the other way around," Chase said as he set the screw on the license tag for the vehicle. "It would have saved us some time."

"You know I appreciate what you're doing," Katie Jo told him.

"My pleasure, darlin'. It's been my pleasure since that first day I saw your delicious bottom sticking out of my limo."

She blushed and he laughed.

"I love making you blush."

"Well, I've certainly done enough of it since meeting you," she answered.

Chase rebooked their flight to Vegas, getting them on an earlier plane. "No sense wasting any more time," he said when they boarded. "It's a short flight. Do you think you can stay awake and talk to me?"

She gave him one of her looks. "If you would quit keeping me up all hours of the night, maybe I wouldn't be so tired."

"That's not going to happen and you know it," he whispered as he pulled down their lap trays before sliding a hand up her thigh, hiding his movements from view in case anyone walked by.

“Chase, stop that,” she admonished him.

“Can’t help it. You make me hotter than Texas in July and as horny as a high school sophomore.”

“Oh, is that when you came of age?”

“I was saving myself for marriage,” he sighed, “but Rebecca Walburn just wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Poor Chase.” She patted his cheek, and then removed his hand from where he was trying to get under her skirt.

* * * *

Katie watched him sigh before he reclined his seat and closed his eyes. She loved the laugh lines around his eyes, his straight nose and his sensual mouth. She was finding she enjoyed the sexual banter they exchanged because she knew he would allow her to set the limits, just like he did in the bedroom. She wished she still had her cell phone because she would have liked to talk to Marsha about him—maybe to ease her lingering uncertainties, or maybe to brag a little about how wonderful he was. She wasn’t sure.

They landed in Las Vegas, hopped on his Harley and cruised down to the *MGM* where Chase said he could always get a room. He called his office and all the limos were out.

“That’s good for business, but it makes my job harder, and it makes you wait another day to see what we can find,” he told her when he hung up the phone.

Katie started to turn back from the window when Chase slid his arms around her waist, pulling her close to his chest. He rested his chin on her shoulder.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Not really anything at all. Just looking at the lights.” The sun had set and all the strip lights were on, making it look like a fairyland. “Do you know, in the short time I’ve known you, I’ve practically flown coast to coast, but this is the first time I’ve been in Las Vegas.”

“Is that a subtle way of saying you want me to take you out on the town instead of staying in this room and having

passionate,” he paused to kiss her neck, “consuming,” another kiss behind her ear, “awesome sex?”

She turned in his arms, placing a finger to her lips in contemplation. “Hmmm. That really is a tough choice.” She watched his eyes narrow. She tried not to smile, but couldn’t help it. “Can’t I have my cake and eat it, too?” She squealed as he scooped her up and tossed her on the bed.

“Darlin’, you can have whatever you want from me, but first, I’ve got to take a shower.” He grabbed his dop kit from the dresser, and then bent to give her a scorching kiss. “Vegas is awake all night, so we have plenty of time to enjoy it—later.”

Katie watched him walk away, appreciating the way his jeans clung tightly to his butt and muscular thighs. She noticed his limp was a little more pronounced, and wondered if they shouldn’t stay in the room instead of walking the streets. Chase probably wouldn’t admit it if his leg was hurting, so she just might have to take the initiative.

She had already decided that she didn’t have to be in Vegas to realize how lucky she was. Fate or karma—whatever a person wanted to call it—had led her to *C bar M* and Chase, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

She heard the water run on and off and decided Chase must be shaving. *Did he have his shirt off?* She closed her eyes and visualized his arm muscles bunching as he reached up to his face, scraping the stubble away. She knew his jeans rode below his navel; that his stomach muscles were tight and his nipples were flat against the brown aureoles. Unless she was licking them, that is. Then they pebbled hard and he groaned.

She was off the bed in an instant, stripping her clothes as she walked to the bathroom door. She wasn’t aggressive. In fact, although she loved what Chase did to her body, she wasn’t the one who initiated the action. But tonight, her body was strumming and her heart was pounding, and she ached for what he could do to her.

When the shower came on, she made up her mind, knowing she either had to go in, or she would lose the

opportunity. She dropped her bra and panties on the carpet, silently opened the door to welcoming steam and then closed it behind her. She sucked in her bottom lip, chewing on it nervously. Her courage was failing.

The shower curtain was opaque and she could only see a shadow behind it. Chase was facing away from the spigot, both hands propped against the shower wall, feet braced wide apart. His head hung down as the water beat against his back.

Without making a sound, she stepped into the shower, diverting the water onto her back as she slid her arms around his lean waist. She thought he would have been surprised but he remained where he was, saying only, "What took you so long?"

* * * *

Chase groaned when the light hit him in the eyes early the next morning.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Katie Jo said from across the room. He managed to get one eye open and he could see her outlined against the sunshine.

"Come here."

She laughed lightly. "No way, Mister. I know what will happen if I come anywhere close to you."

He flopped over onto his back, wondering briefly if he was even sober. He figured they had visited almost every casino on the strip, and he'd had a beer at most of them, watching Katie Jo as she played the slots and tried her hand at Black Jack with his help. They certainly hadn't broken the bank, but she had won a couple hundred dollars and had thought she was in seventh heaven.

"You must be a lot older than you look," Katie Jo's voice came from a different section of the room now. "I wouldn't have thought you would be so worn out from just a few hours on the town."

He knew she was just egging him on, but truth be told, he was feeling twice his age and then some. His leg hurt abominably and his head pounded. Even his penis laid still and that was usually at full alert first thing in the morning. Of course, that

was the other thing they had indulged in last night, both before and after going out on the town. He shouldn't be ravenous, but still...

He cracked open his other eye and found Katie Jo standing in front of the mirror brushing her hair. The red fire crackled in the sun and Chase thought he could get very used to waking up every morning with her in his sights. Or better yet, with her in his bed.

He groaned to get her attention.

"I'm not listening," came her singsong voice.

He rolled over, making sure the sheet went with him so his backside was bare, then groaned again.

Silence.

He had her now, he thought.

"Chase?" Her voice was closer.

One more groan should do it. Within seconds, he felt her hand on his shoulder.

"Gotcha!" He rolled quickly, grabbing her by the upper arms and hauling her into bed with him. She squealed and swatted at him, her legs flailing, but the minute his lips found hers, she quieted.

When he came up for air, he found her gazing at him, a perplexed look on her face.

"What?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I've just never had this kind of experience before. I think I'm sated, and then all you have to do is touch me, and I want you all over again."

"Is that a problem?" Chase didn't think so, but Katie Jo looked worried.

"It's just confusing, that's all."

Chase wasn't confused at all. He was just as determined to have Katie Jo as he had been to become a cowboy back in his youth. But given her background, he understood her reluctance and knew he would have to be patient with her.

He kissed her brow. "Do you enjoy our lovemaking?"

She blushed, but didn't divert her gaze. "You know I do."

"Well, then, darlin', let's just leave it at that and see what happens, shall we?" Again, he gave her the choice, just as he had from the beginning, although it was gently guided.

She nodded, even though she still looked somewhat perplexed. Chase decided the best thing for their relationship was for her to dispense with the skeletons in her closet, so he levered himself up from the bed and headed for the bathroom. The sooner they solved any mystery surrounding her father's death, the sooner he could concentrate on making her totally and irrevocably his.

* * * *

"I found them!" Katie wiggled a finger deeper into the tiny space between the cushions. She could feel metal; knew they were the keys, but couldn't get enough of a grip on them to pull them out.

Chase tugged her aside and pushed the lever that released the seat. It popped up with a groan of the springs, and he reached down for the keys. He pushed the seat back in place, turned and sat on it, dangling the keys by one finger. She grabbed for them, her eyes watering at this tangible reminder of her father.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Chase nodded, and then asked, "Now what?"

"Now I can return to Detour and try to figure out why Dad hid his keys in this limo."

"Is that going to tell you who murdered him?"

She looked at him. "Do you believe me now that someone did?"

Chase shrugged. "Seeing those keys makes your theory a lot more plausible."

"When is our flight back to San Antonio?" Katie squeezed the keys, the metal teeth biting into her hand but she didn't care. She felt as if her life was finally moving forward, and she couldn't wait to get on with it.

Chase looked at his watch. "In about eight hours. I need to get the registration finished and do some bookwork, anyway. This is one of my latest business openings, and I want to make sure everything's working smoothly."

"Oh." Katie felt disappointed that they weren't leaving earlier. The faster they returned to Texas, the quicker she could be on the road to Detour.

"I can book us a straight flight to Chicago if you want," Chase offered, but Katie immediately shook her head.

He had already done too much for her and she would never be able to repay him. She needed to take charge of her life now and see it through. As Chase stepped out of the limo and offered her his hand, she wondered how easy it was going to be to return to Detour without him. She couldn't recall being this happy since she was a young girl living with her father, but Chase couldn't continue to follow her around the country. He had businesses to run.

No, she would do this on her own.

* * * *

They landed right on time and Chase tossed their bags into the back of his pickup. He was glad to be home. Even though he liked to travel—otherwise he certainly wouldn't have started businesses all over the place—he always enjoyed getting back to the relaxing atmosphere of Texas and the work on his ranch. He would still rather be on a horse than in a vehicle, but knew he had to make a living in order to indulge his horse-raising habit.

"Where you going?" He turned from the truck to see Katie Jo walking toward her car.

"To my car. I really don't want to leave it here any longer. We don't know if anyone is still looking for me."

He hadn't thought about that for the past few days. He had been way too wrapped up in the sexual euphoria he and Katie Jo created whenever they came close. In fact, he couldn't wait to get her home and into his bed.

"We'll park it at the ranch, then. Stay close behind me. You don't know the way." At her nod, he climbed into the truck and

turned out of the parking lot, checking his rearview mirror every few minutes to make sure she was still behind him. He couldn't explain the feeling he had that something just wasn't right. Katie Jo had been too quiet on the return flight. Even though he might credit that to thinking about her father now that she had the keys, or her comment about them being followed, there was something going on that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He flipped open his phone and called the office in Boston.

"Hey, Hutch, how's that phone working we gave you?"

"Boss, you know I like to talk, but I sure don't like it when people call me just to cuss me out."

"What's going on?" Chase's eyes strayed to the rearview mirror again, watching the close-set headlights of Katie Jo's car follow him as he turned off the main road onto the long gravel lane leading to his house.

"Some man called twice, asking for Kathleen. When I told him I didn't know anyone by that name, that's when he started cussing at me. So I just hung up and then he called right back and said he knew where to find me and he would beat the information out of me if necessary."

Shit. There was no doubt in his mind that it was Mansfield doing the calling, trying to track down Katie Jo. "Do you still have the phone?"

"Well, yeah, but the battery's pretty well gone and you didn't leave me the charger. I thought about going out and buying one, but I wasn't sure if you were going to let me keep—"

"Hutch, listen close and do exactly as I say," Chase interrupted. He hadn't thought that Mansfield would come after Hutch. The idea had just been to deflect notice from Katie Jo. "I want you to take the cell phone and throw it in the bay immediately."

For once, the old man was silent.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't see—"

“The man who called wants to hurt Katie Jo, the woman who was with me. He can track the phone when calls are made and he—”

“Who would want to hurt that pretty little thing?” Hutch sounded indignant. “Why, if he shows up, I’ll have a thing or two to say to him.”

“Damn it, Hutch! We’re talking about men with guns here. Now get rid of the phone. That’s an order.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Hutch answered automatically and Chase wondered if he had saluted the phone. Whatever else Hutch might be, he was still a soldier at heart and would always obey a direct order.

Chase flipped his phone shut as he came to a stop in front of the house. Even though he would rather not mention the calls to Katie Jo, he figured she should know what she was getting into when they got back to Detour.

Dinner was a microwaved frozen pizza and cold beer, but she didn’t seem to mind. They sat in companionable silence at the small table in the kitchen. She read the paper as he went through his mail, tossing the junk mail in the trash, the bills in a basket on the counter, and reading the one or two business letters that had arrived.

The Chamber of Commerce wanted him to speak to the Jaycee’s about entrepreneurship and one of the high school’s SADD chapters was asking if he would donate the use of one of his limos for prom night as a prize in their annual writing contest. Every year since he started his business, all of his companies offered a special rate to seniors who wanted to rent a limo for prom. For one, he figured it kept them from drinking and driving. Second, he wasn’t too old to remember how important it had been to impress a prom date. Hell, he had borrowed Steve’s Mustang convertible and polished it until it shined.

“Problems?” Katie Jo asked and Chase realized he must have been frowning.

He shook his head. “Not with business.” Now was probably as good a time as any to broach the subject of her ex and what they could expect in Detour. He cleared his throat.

“Oh, dear.” Katie Jo’s eyes widened.

“What?” Chase looked rapidly around the kitchen, wondering what had spooked her.

“Every time you do that, something is wrong.”

“Not exactly wrong, but...” How could he tell her without frightening her?

“Chase, just say it. Haven’t we always been able to say what we think?” She reached across the table and laced her fingers in his. He looked down at the contrast—light against dark, large versus small and delicate.

“Apparently your ex has been calling Hutch asking for you—well, actually, asking for Kathleen.”

She shook her head ruefully. “I was named after my parents—Katie for my mother, Kathleen and Jo after my father, Joseph. Jeff thought that was too ordinary and he used to call me Kathleen, even though it isn’t my name.”

Chase decided not to tell her about the threats. “I told Hutch to toss the phone in the bay. It’s served its purpose in keeping Mansfield off our trail, but it doesn’t sound like he’s given up on getting you back.”

Katie Jo pursed her lips, looking off to the side and Chase wondered at her thoughts. He watched in awe as she straightened her spine, threw her shoulders back and a look of determination settled across her face.

“That’s all the more reason why I have to get back to Detour and finish this. Jeff has no claim on me anymore and he never had one on anything of my father’s. He needs to understand that we’re through.”

“*We* have to get there,” Chase emphasized the plural.

She shook her head at him. “Chase, you’ve already done so much. I can’t ask you to take more time away from your business to tag after me.”

He could feel his brow wrinkle into a frown. He put a hand up to stop her ramblings. “Whoa, there, darlin’. First off, I’m going with you, no two ways about it because I’m not about to let you face him alone. Second, you think you can just walk away from what we have?” Although he had tried to stay calm, his voice had risen almost to a shout by the end.

Her face paled and her hands began to tremble. She looked at him with frightened eyes. Her chair clattered to the floor as she jumped up, scooting backwards away from him.

“D...do not-t...try to tell me what to do,” she stammered, putting a hand up as though to ward him off as he took a step closer.

“*Shit*,” Chase swore under his breath. They had come so far and in a single instant, she was back comparing him to her ex-husband.

“Katie Jo, look at me.” He deliberately stepped closer and cradled her cheeks in his palms, forcing her to face him. Her bottom lip trembled and he could see tears seeping from the corners of her closed eyes. He steeled himself against it. They had to get this over and done with.

“Look at me,” he repeated, shaking her slightly. When her eyes popped open, he stated between gritted teeth, “I’m Chase, not your damned ex-husband.” Although he tried to keep the anger out of his voice, he knew he failed when she began trembling from head to toe. The problem was, his anger wasn’t even directed at her, although she apparently thought it was.

His lips descended to hers, wanting to tell her with his body what he couldn’t say in words. As he nibbled and licked and then plunged his tongue into her hot depths, his arms kept her captive. He would make her see she belonged to him; that they were great together.

Her surrender was swift. As Chase’s hands cupped her bottom and pulled her against him, she moaned softly. The hands that had been pushing against his chest now slid up to circle his neck, but it wasn’t enough for Chase.

He lifted her against him, turning and sitting her on the table. Without taking his mouth from hers, he slid her skirt up around her waist, tugged down her panties and released himself from his jeans.

Mindless now, Katie jerked at the buttons of her blouse, opening it to Chase's kisses. She ached to have his touch on her breasts as much as she needed him to be inside her.

"Touch me," she begged, bracing her hands behind her and arching her back so her breasts jutted upward.

Oh, how he complied. As he sucked, drawing her nipple taut, he slid his fingers into her and rubbed his thumb against her sex.

Katie couldn't wait any longer. She wrapped her legs around him and tried to tug him closer.

"Who am I, Katie Jo?" he whispered against her throat, holding himself back from her, even as he tortured her with his fingers.

"Chase. Oh, God, please!" She whimpered and begged, but she didn't care. She just wanted him to appease the ache so deep inside her.

"What do you want, darlin'?" He continued to torture her.

"I want you, Chase. I *need* you."

He removed his fingers and she cried out at the loss, but she quickly felt the thick, hot head of his penis at her opening. She held her breath in anticipation.

"You are the air I need to breathe, Katie Jo. You belong to me." With those words, Chase plunged into her, cupping her hips with his large hands to hold her tight against him. Again and again, he thrust, taking all she had to give.

Katie clung to him, letting him ravage her body and take her to the heavens and beyond as he always did. She loved him, she knew, though she wasn't sure when that had happened. But she would never again belong to any man. She had to become her own woman.

And that was why she wept.

Chapter 10

Katie cried through the entire state of Texas. By the middle of Oklahoma, she was reduced to sniffles. When she could drive no more because of her weary eyes, she crawled into a hotel bed and started crying all over again because she couldn't smell Chase on her pillow.

On all the levels that mattered, she knew he wasn't anywhere close to being like Jeff, and she didn't know why her brain sometimes thought otherwise. She should have listened to her heart. Chase was kind and responsible and he had a great sense of humor. His masculinity wasn't threatened when he gave control over to her and for that alone, she loved him. But loving him had meant she had to leave him.

In the last days of her marriage, she had come to realize that Jeff worked for the mob, or mafia, or whatever it was called nowadays. She didn't know how she could have been so naïve as not to realize it earlier because all the signs were there. The mean, muscle-bound men who followed him around; the amount of money he constantly had on his person, and his questioning of her, not to mention his total control over just about everything she did.

It was when she had realized all this that she also became aware of the tail he had put on her. Wherever she went, one of his goons had always followed her.

She had managed to get away only because she acted so innocent, chatting with the man outside their house as she inconspicuously dropped a small packet of Jeff's drugs onto the car floor behind him. Once she was on the road, she had given

the police an anonymous tip and she had watched almost gleefully as he got pulled over.

Now, she was going back into the lion's den and she didn't want Chase to get hurt by trying to protect her against the formidable forces her ex-husband controlled. She hoped since she had left Detour after her father had died, that Jeff had moved to Chicago for good since that seemed to be where he conducted business anyway. But she couldn't take the chance.

As she drove north through Illinois, she tried to come up with a plan. First, she would see what the car could tell her about her father's death. Then she would clean out his library like she had intended to do, giving all his research to Saint Geneva College, where he had so loved to teach. Since she had quit her job and had no family left in the area, she decided she might as well sell the house and car and start over somewhere new.

Somewhere warm, she thought as she cranked up the heat. It was decidedly cold here, and there was even snow in the fields that bordered the highway. *Yes, definitely warm.*

Texas was warm, the thought came to her. *Chase was warm, and muscular, and gentle. Oh, so gentle.* The tears started again and she had to pull to the side of the road, wondering how she would ever survive without him.

* * * *

Chase paced in front of the brick house on Canary Street, clenching and unclenching his fists, hoping he could work off his anger before Katie Jo showed up. It had been three days—three fucking days—since she had stolen out of his bed in the middle of the night and disappeared. And he hadn't heard a word from her. Not one.

He noticed the lace curtains flutter in the house across the street. He gave a grimace of a smile and the face disappeared. He had told the neighbors he was a real estate agent and was awaiting Katie Jo's return to put her father's house on the market. Everyone in the small community of Detour knew that Dr. Joseph Hawthorne had died. In fact, the neighbor who was

so recently spying on him had been a wealth of information about the family.

The first day he showed up, she came over, all bundled up in a coat and floppy hat. She asked in no uncertain terms who he was and what he wanted. After Chase told her, she introduced herself as Mrs. Bertha Cranberry and said she had been keeping an eye on the professor's house for Katie. She went on to tell him she didn't like the looks of the men who had been in and out of the house over a week ago. Big, mean-looking men, she had said. No, they hadn't taken anything out of the house, she didn't think, unless it was hidden in a pocket.

She must have felt she could trust him when he showed up again today, because she had invited him over for coffee to get out of the cold. That was when she let him know that for the past four days, those thugs, as she called them, hadn't been back. She then tried to pry information out of him as to what he thought the house was going to bring, if he could make sure nice people bought it, and whether Katie was going to have a public auction because there was a table the professor had that Mrs. Cranberry had coveted for years.

Chase climbed back into his rental car and cranked up the heat, trying to get warm. He now remembered why he had made Texas his home base. While he tolerated the snow and cold if he was skiing or hunting elk in Colorado, he sure as hell didn't like to sit around doing nothing in it. He looked at the dash clock.

It was over seventy-two hours since he had last seen Katie Jo. Although he had caught the first available flight to Chicago and then had driven to Detour, he knew without a doubt that Katie Jo was driving her little Nissan all the way back. He could guarantee this is where she would come, if her car didn't break down on the way. It was over twelve hundred miles from San Antonio to Chicago, another seventy or so up to Detour, just across the border into Wisconsin. That was almost twenty-four straight hours driving time. If she drove eight hours a day, as close as he could calculate, she should be arriving anytime now.

He stopped at the convenience store, grabbed a cup of coffee, and stood staring out the window as he drank it. Snow was beginning to fall. *Damn*, he hoped she didn't get caught out in it when he wasn't there to protect her and keep her warm. She should have let him drive her back; she should have trusted him. He had told her they belonged together; that she was his, so why was she acting like this?

The wind was picking up and the snow fell heavier in large, wet flakes. Because he couldn't stand inactivity, he got back into the car and drove slowly around the small town for the umpteenth time. It was laid out simply with the college pretty much in the center. The business district was off to one side, dorms on the other, and residential areas scattered around the perimeter. On the outskirts of town was a lake, frozen now with a few ice fishing huts scattered across its surface.

The snow was coming down harder now and Chase wondered if he should go back to his hotel room. It didn't appear that Katie Jo would get home today. He thought again about her driving in a snowstorm.

"I'll beat her butt if she does show up now," he muttered as he turned the corner away from the lake. "She has no business driving in a goddamn blizzard." He turned another corner and the car slid sideways before straightening out. Chase tried to concentrate on the road.

Two blocks further down, his gaze strayed from the road as he passed the cemetery. He thought of Joseph Hawthorne and the daughter who mourned his passing. He had only been in high school when his dad had died and there were times he still missed the quiet, steady presence of the man who had worked so hard for his family.

He blinked, just about missing it. Through the swirl of snowflakes, he could see car lights in the cemetery, not far from the entrance. He slowed the car, lowering his window to get a better look. Cursing, he slammed on the brakes, sliding almost completely around. He managed to straighten it out and make

the turn into the narrow drive without hitting either of the stone pillars bracketing the entrance.

As he pulled up behind the other car, he could barely make out the hooded figure standing before a headstone just out of the line of the car's headlights. He left the car running, got out and jammed his Stetson on his head, pulling the collar of his coat up around his ears.

"Katie Jo—"

She screamed, spinning around and swinging at him with her fists before she realized who it was. Chase saw recognition hit and then she was in his arms, crying and laughing at the same time, damn near choking him in her efforts to burrow closer.

"Oh, God, Chase, where did you come from? What are you doing here? How could you have gotten here first? I drove and drove until I was just so tired—"

He cut off her words with his lips, savoring the delicious taste of her as he crushed her to him. He had been going nuts worrying about her—where she was and whether her ex-husband had found her. He peppered her face with kisses, tasting the salty wetness of tears on her cheeks. He lifted his head slightly as her mittened hands caressed his cheeks.

"Oh, Chase, I have missed you." She blinked as snowflakes settled on her lashes, his hat brim not wide enough to keep all the snow away.

"Can we have this conversation somewhere warm and out of the snow?" he asked. "Besides, I'm afraid it's going to involve a lot of bare skin and I don't particularly want to freeze my...well, you know what, off."

"Come on," she said, taking him by the hand. "You can follow me to Dad's house."

He pulled her back and kissed her again. "No way, lady. I'm not letting you out of my sight again. Lock your car, you're riding with me." He grabbed her bags and tossed them into the back seat of his rental.

By the time he pulled into the Hawthorne driveway, the snow was blowing so hard, he couldn't see the house. He and

Katie Jo carefully felt their way along the front walk and up the steps. She quickly inserted a key in the lock and pushed open the door. The minute Chase closed it behind him, he had her back in his arms.

He flung her mittens and hat to the floor and tore at her coat, wanting to feel her against him, needing to know she was all right. Her cheeks were rosy with cold and he planted open-mouthed kisses all over, blowing little puffs of hot air on them to warm her. His coat dropped to the floor and she slid her hands up under his sweater. Though slightly chilly, her fingers warmed up fast as she rubbed his chest, stopping to skim a fingernail across his nipples.

“God, woman, you’re making me crazy,” he breathed into her hair. “Why did you leave? I told you I would bring you back to Detour.”

She stilled in his arms. When he lifted his head to look at her, he didn’t like what he saw. Her lips were pinched in a straight line, her eyes hooded. He could actually feel her spine stiffen.

“What?” he asked in bewilderment.

* * * *

“Would you like something to eat? I’m sure there’s some canned soup or something in the cupboards.” She turned away from him.

Katie took exactly one step before Chase had her in his arms, walking with long strides down the hall before turning into the living room. He didn’t release her as he sat on the couch and she knew by the look on his face that she was in trouble.

She squirmed to get loose. Not only couldn’t she think straight when he was so close, but his strength was overpowering and it frightened her. While she told herself that no man was ever going to push her around again, she still knew that because of his size alone, he could do with her what he wanted.

“Please, let me go.”

“No.” His arms tightened around her. “Look at me, Katie Jo.”

She refused. Because she loved him, she knew her will would weaken if she looked into those soulful brown eyes of his. Her feelings were so conflicted at that moment, she wanted to cry, but she had shed enough tears in the last three days.

He sighed, opening his arms and letting them drop to the sofa beside him. She was free to get off his lap. She could run out the door and never look back and she knew he wouldn't stop her. Yet she suddenly felt bereft without his warmth and strength surrounding her.

"I've always let you be in control, Katie Jo, and I won't take that away from you now." His voice was soft, almost sad, and Katie realized that by running away, she had, in effect, told Chase she didn't trust him. Nothing could be further from the truth, she knew now, but how was she supposed to make him understand? She wasn't sure she understood herself.

The first thing, she decided, was to stay right where she was and talk to him. Maybe in saying the words out loud, she could make some sense out of this mess she had gotten herself into.

She turned on his lap, putting a hand on his cheek. She could feel the stubble of his beard and for the first time, she really took in his appearance in the dim light from the table lamp. His eyes were red-rimmed and he didn't look like he had shaved in more than just one day. His hair was sticking up on end and she wondered if it was entirely from the hat he wore, or from him running his fingers through it like he was in the habit of doing when he got frustrated. Usually with her. She pulled her hand back.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, looking at her lap instead of the accusation she saw in his gaze.

"For what?" he asked. "Because you ran away; because you didn't even bother leaving a note; or because I found you anyway?"

She could hear the anger in his voice and she didn't blame him. "Because I didn't trust you." Her lip began to tremble and she tried not to cry.

“Ah, darlin’.” With a sigh, his arms came around her and he pulled her back against his chest. For long moments, they just sat there, and then Katie heard a rumble and his chest began to shake.

She arched away and discovered him laughing. She narrowed her eyes. She had bared her soul and he was laughing?

He must have seen something in her expression because he shook his head, grinning. “I had decided that *when* you showed up, I was going to spank your butt for running away. Then when it started snowing, I decided you’d better *not* show up, or I was going to beat your bottom for driving in a blizzard.”

Katie’s mouth dropped open. “You wouldn’t?”

“For once, I’m glad my mother taught me patience,” he answered. “I don’t think you would let me stay if I had done that, would you?”

“You’ve got that right, Mister.” She tried to sound indignant because she certainly wouldn’t allow anyone to hurt her again, but at the same time, she knew Chase would never lay a hand on her in anger.

“So I get to stay?” He nuzzled her neck. “With you?” His hot breath and nipping kisses gave her goose bumps. “In your bed?” He sucked her earlobe gently.

“Aren’t there things we need to discuss?” Katie could hardly get the question out because his hands were now up under her sweater, caressing her belly and a finger was sliding under her bra.

“We can do that later. Right now, I’m starved.” One hand slid down her stomach and tried to insinuate itself beneath the waistband of her pants. Katie contracted her muscles in an effort to help.

It was extremely hard to concentrate on anything except the exquisite sensation of his hands on her skin. Already, she ached for his touch in more private areas and longed to get out of her clothes as well as getting him naked.

"I told you I would fix you some supper," she said. Or at least that's what she tried to say. She had no more thought it, than he stood with her in his arms.

"Katie Jo, I'm not talking about food here," he growled. "Where's your bedroom?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck, laughing for the first time in days. "Up the stairs at the end of the hall. But it's only a twin bed."

His boots clattered loudly on the stairs, but Katie had no trouble hearing his soft whisper as he kissed her ear.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to be over you, under you and inside you so tight, you're going to think there's only one of us lying there."

"Are you bragging, Mr. McVicker?" She giggled.

"Woman, have I ever not delivered?"

She must have hesitated a beat too long, because Chase growled, dropped her to the bed and rolled in beside her.

Passion ignited the moment his lips touched hers. How had she ever thought she could live without him? His lust consumed her and he had helped her understand and accept her sexuality as a natural part of who she was, rather than some perverted sense of domination and control. But she knew that wasn't the only reason she loved him. He had honor and integrity, not to mention, his sense of responsibility. He had decided early on to help her, and he wasn't giving up, even when she ran away from him, essentially releasing him from any commitment. How had she managed to be so fortunate?

"What was that sigh about?" Chase tugged on a curl of her hair.

She turned, crossing her arms on his chest and propping her chin on her hand. She captured his gaze.

"I love you," she spoke softly, almost afraid of telling him but not able to keep it inside. His reaction was worth it. A wide grin split his face.

"Of course you do, darlin', what's not to love?"

Her mouth dropped open. "I take it back."

In a heartbeat, he rolled her beneath him. She tried to look severe but the grin was still on his face and she found herself smiling in return.

“You can’t take it back.” He kissed her nose.

“Well, maybe I didn’t mean it. I’m delirious from lack of food.”

Chase arched away from her, his gaze scanning her body, covered in a snug tee shirt and her tight jeans. “Ma’am,” he drawled in a deep, Texas baritone, “there ain’t nothing on your luscious body that lacks one single thing. Why, you’re the prettiest little filly I ever did see.”

She ruefully shook her head at him. “I would suggest that you quit while you’re only in a six foot hole. Any more compliments like that, and you won’t be able to get out of the pit you’ve dug yourself into.”

Chase’s smile disappeared. His eyes searched her face, one hand brushing her hair back from her cheek. She watched as he swallowed, opened his mouth as though he were going to say something, then swallowed again. A slight frown marred his forehead, and Katie wanted to reach up and smooth his brow. She told herself that it didn’t matter if he didn’t return her love. She hadn’t told him to get a similar declaration.

“Look, I didn’t—” she started.

“Do you mean it?” Chase asked at the same time.

She didn’t have to ask what he was referring to. Even though she knew she was laying her heart on the line and taking a great risk, she realized it was too late for anything but the truth.

“Yes,” she said, softly but without hesitation.

His smile was back instantly, its sensual brilliance making her heart beat faster. With hands so light she would have thought it a dream, he undressed her, kissing every newly bared patch of skin. Katie didn’t even notice the cool air in the room as his hands and mouth touched and caressed.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered as his lips kissed a heated path to her breast.

“Why?”

“You said you trusted me.”

And she knew she did—with her sexual pleasure, her future, her life. She took one last look at him—the erotic image of his lips on her breast, the sensual feel of him tonguing her nipple to a stiff peak—and she closed her eyes, the image still clearly in her mind.

All the pieces had fallen into place for Chase the minute Katie Jo had said the word *trust*. Hell, looking back, he couldn’t blame her for taking off when he told her she belonged to him. After what she had been through, he was surprised she hadn’t been tainted toward all men. But then she had told him she loved him. It was almost beyond his comprehension.

He lifted his mouth, replacing his tongue with his hand on her breast. He nuzzled the valley between her breasts, savoring the sweet smell of her. His hands then roamed freely over her body, mapping her curves so the image was burned into his brain forever.

He could feel her suck in her breath, her stomach muscles tightening when he kissed her navel. Sliding down the bed, he dropped to the floor on his knees. He tugged her with him, lifting her legs so they rested on his shoulders. His hands still caressed her smooth skin as he kissed the inside of one knee. He tickled the sensitive skin at the back with his tongue, then moved upward, ever aware of her quickened breathing as he reached his goal. Her hair was darker here, the curls tight and close, hiding the treasure he sought. As he opened her to his touch, he knew he could spend a lifetime loving Katie Jo and never get enough of her. She loved him, the thought echoed in his head, and he wanted to show her how much he loved her in return.

Katie could hardly stand the jolt of sensation as Chase’s mouth closed on her. Her hips automatically arched from the bed and she released a cry of pleasure. She wanted to touch him to make sure he was realizing the same erotic pleasure she was, but she could do nothing except lie there, reveling in the feel of his touch and the spiraling vortex of feeling that was pulling her down into its depths.

She screamed out his name as her orgasm overcame her. She writhed and squirmed, trying to get away from his piercing tongue because the sensations were so sharp, they almost bordered on pain, but he held her tight.

“Let yourself go,” she heard him whisper against her before he licked again. She could feel him press his fingers into her and she hit another crest, the feelings unending as she clutched around him. Nothing in her life had ever made her feel the way Chase did.

“I need you inside me.” She reached down to tug on his hair. It wasn’t a request, it was a command, and Chase responded instantly, standing at the end of the bed and taking her hips in his large hands. His hot length slid easily into her wetness, filling her completely.

Katie Jo’s response to his mouth had Chase so hot, he didn’t think he could hold off his climax for more than a minute, and when he slid into her, he revised that to seconds. He stopped, buried deep, and tried to control his wayward body. He could feel the last remnants of her climax, her muscles squeezing around him in gradually diminishing pulses.

“More.” Her throaty demand, along with her legs tugging him closer as her heels dug into his butt, had him gritting his teeth. He wanted this to last, wanted to savor her and these feelings forever. He took in the erotic picture she made. Her skin glistened in the light, each freckle golden against her pale skin. Her breasts quivered with each breath she took. His gaze traveled down her body to where they were joined and as he began to slowly move, he was mesmerized by the graphic image of him sliding in and out, his penis wet and rock hard from its contact with her.

And then she touched him, her fingernails lightly scraping across his nipples. He didn’t need the extra stimulation, but he couldn’t make himself back away. Instead, he leaned into her hands as he slammed into her body, wanting to fuse himself to her, making them one entity. In seconds, he was spiraling out of control, moving faster and faster, unable to stop the climax that

took him out of his body to a place he had never been before.
And he didn't care, because Katie Jo was there with him.

Chapter 11

Much later, Chase stood at the window of Katie Jo's room, looking out at the snow that blanketed the world in brilliant white. He turned back to where she was stretching, gloriously naked on the bed.

"Can I ask a favor?" he said.

She looked confused for a moment.

Chase knew that although she was getting over the damage her ex had done, she was still cautious and didn't understand how he could just hand over control to her or why he continually asked her opinion. She was so sweet, he knew he would never have trouble doing that, or splitting the decision making. In fact, he longed to share every aspect of his life with her. That's why he asked, instead of demanding.

He watched as she gracefully left the bed, pulled the comforter off and wrapped it around herself, and slowly walked the short distance to where he stood. He clutched a handful of blanket and tugged her closer.

"You finally want something to eat?" She looked up and her eyes glittered with humor.

He shook his head. "Once we finish here, will you move to Texas where it's warm?"

"You don't like snow?"

"I love snow, if I can ski. But it's damn cold up here and I'd prefer not being out in it." He took one look at her pouting lips and sighed. "You're going to make me freeze my butt to go buy food, aren't you?"

She took a step back, gave him a seductive smile and opened the blanket, standing naked in front of him. “But I’ll be here to warm you up when you return.”

He closed the distance between them, wrapping her in his embrace and rubbing his naked body against hers. As he laid her back on the bed, he prayed there was something worthwhile in the cupboard because he wasn’t about to leave the house, or Katie Jo, anytime in the near future.

* * * *

The next morning, Chase had just finished brushing his teeth when he heard Katie Jo cry out. He bolted from the small bathroom into the hall. Looking both ways, he ran toward the light coming from one of the rooms, skidding to a stop in the open doorway.

Katie Jo was on her knees in the center of what had to be her father’s library. Clutching a book to her chest, she was crying. Chase didn’t know if his brothers were suckers for tears, but they did him in quicker than a stick of dynamite would have.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, only then noticing the destruction around him. Books were scattered over the floor, some open, some on end, and it appeared that some had pages torn out. Papers and folders hung out of an open file cabinet, cushions were askew on the small sofa against one wall, and the desk had pencils, pens and more paper littered across the surface.

Christ, had someone been in the house while he was brainlessly making love to Katie Jo right down the hall? But no, he knew he would have heard anyone who had done this. The two of them hadn’t looked at anything except each other when they came upstairs, and this could have been done anytime after she had left town on the trail of the keys.

“Why would anyone do this?” she asked, her tear-streaked face turned upwards, her eyes pleading for an answer he didn’t have.

He shook his head. It didn't look like simple vandalism, or the perpetrators would have destroyed more than just the library.

"Someone was looking for something." Although he hadn't totally bought Katie Jo's story of her father being murdered, it now appeared there was more to it than he had first thought. He could only thank God that he had followed her to Detour, because if the vandals hadn't found what they were looking for, they'd be back. And he had a feeling he knew who *they* were.

"Look, baby, let's go down to the kitchen and I'll rustle you up something to eat while we try to figure out what's going on." He tugged the book gently out of her arms and carefully closed it, setting it on the desk.

"I have to clean this up," she said as he helped her to her feet. "I have to—" He could hear hysteria creeping into her voice.

"Katie Jo, listen to me. We'll do it; I'll help, but first, come downstairs." He wanted to get her away from the graphic reminder that someone had violated her father's home. He knew she couldn't think clearly while looking at this mess.

Once they were seated at the kitchen table, mugs of hot coffee in hand, he watched as her eyes kept straying upward, and he knew she was still thinking about the library. He closed a hand over hers, and when she finally allowed her gaze to meet his, Chase began the questions he knew were going to be difficult for her to answer.

"You need to tell me what happened before your father died." He watched her lip immediately start trembling. He squeezed her hand. "There's no doubt something is going on, but we won't be able to figure it out unless we go back to that time. I know this can't be easy, but there's no other way."

* * * *

Katie knew he was right. In her mind, she kept seeing the library. Her father scribbled notes on any available scrap of paper, and now it lay in complete disarray on the desk and floor.

Who would do something like this? His work was only valuable to another scholar, and no one in that field would desecrate another man's life work.

"I told you about the day my father died. We lived across town, but I would come over and help out. You know, clean house and make him a good meal once in a while." She smiled sadly. "He would get so caught up in his research, sometimes he forgot to eat." At Chase's encouraging nod, she continued.

"That night, I was in the kitchen when I heard a noise. By the time I got to the door, he was lying on the sidewalk and a car was speeding away."

"So you called the police and ambulance, but the police didn't believe your story about him being dumped off." Chase interjected. "Did anyone else see anything?"

"Mrs. Cranberry from across the street was actually the one who said it was a limousine. I got a partial tag, but it wasn't enough."

She saw Chase smile. "I've met Mrs. Cranberry. She's been keeping an eye on the place for you." Then his face sobered. "And she said there had been some men here last week, going into the house and garage."

Katie gasped. "Who?"

"She called them *thugs*," Chase replied. "She didn't seem to think they took anything, especially not the table she has her eye on."

"She is quite the character, isn't she?" Katie appreciated Chase's efforts to lighten the mood. "How come you know so much about my neighbor, anyway?"

"Told her I was a real estate agent, waiting to talk to you." Chase grinned sheepishly. "What was I supposed to do for three days while I waited for you to get here?"

She looked at him. He had followed her, true, but it was to try and help her, not to coerce her, as Jeff would do.

"Jeff," she said the name under her breath, a shiver immediately running down her back.

"What about him?" Chase's voice was hard.

“All of this has to do with him, I just know it. If only I could figure out how.”

“Okay, let’s go back before that night. What was your dad studying; what had he talked to you about?”

Katie thought for a minute. “After Jeff and I married, he wouldn’t let me . . . I didn’t see my father as much as I used to. I didn’t travel with him at all the last two summers, but I’m sure he went to the same dig site in South Africa.”

“Africa?”

“He was studying a little known indigenous tribe in a remote corner of the province of Mpumalanga.” She was stumped. “I honestly can’t think of a reason why someone would want to hurt him. He was a kind, generous man. In fact, more than once since I moved out, he had students living in the house with him.” She smiled softly in remembrance.

“Saint Geneva College isn’t very large and hardly known in the academic world at all, except for a few areas of expertise. The department my father helped start in archeology and anthropology was one such field of research. For whatever reason, the students most enthused about studying that field are also the ones who need financial help. And, because it is a small department within a small college, there aren’t scholarships available.”

“So your father took them in—free room and board in exchange for . . . research?”

“I suppose.”

“Would any of these students have a grudge against your father?”

She shook her head adamantly. “No. It’s hard to understand, but this is a very close-knit community and college. It’s as though all the students and faculty are kindred spirits.”

“Okay, so your father is studying some tribe in Africa and he takes students with him in the summer. Where does he get the funding?”

“That’s just it. There were no large amounts of money put into his account for months before he died. And there were no

large withdrawals either. So I assumed, at the time, that he was talking to investors or possible philanthropists—you know, someone with enough money to rent a limo and come to see him. But then why would they kill him?”

“It has to be someone else.” Chase said as he picked up their empty mugs and placed them in the sink. “Someone who had something to gain, or who wanted something from your father.”

Katie sighed. “I just can’t think of what it could be. And now his library has been ransacked, and I don’t even know if anything was taken.”

“Well, if they didn’t find what they were looking for, they’ll be back. Which means you can’t be here.”

She looked up at him sharply. “I can’t leave, Chase. I have to put the library back together and get his research to the college; put the house on the market and decide where I’m going once it sells.” The last she said softly, because she didn’t want to think of what lie ahead of her. She didn’t have a job, very little money, and absolutely no prospects.

* * * *

Chase knew exactly where she would be going once this was all done, but he decided Katie Jo had enough on her mind at the moment, so he wasn’t going to add to it. Besides, he knew he had to come up with a way to get her to decide to go with him, rather than him telling her that was what she was going to do. Telling Miss Katie Jo Hawthorne anything wasn’t going to work now that she had her newfound independence.

“So what else do we have?” Chase asked.

“Only his keys,” she answered, and then lifted her head. “But that’s what this is all about! How could I have forgotten?” She jumped up and ran into the front room. Chase followed.

“May I be of assistance?” he asked, putting his chin on her shoulder and wrapping his arms around her from behind. She gave an exasperated sigh as she dug deeper into her purse, so he stepped closer until his hips were perfectly aligned with hers. While keeping one hand splayed across her middle, he reached into her bag with the other, feeling around for the set of keys.

“Ah-ha!” He stretched a hand overhead, keys dangling from one finger. Predictably, Katie Jo immediately turned in his arm and reached upward after the prize. In doing so, her breasts brushed his chest and her lips were close enough that Chase dipped his head for a kiss.

“You are the reason I can’t keep a single thought in my head long enough to follow through with it.” She eyed him evilly when he still wouldn’t give her the keys.

“So I’m constantly in your thoughts?” He couldn’t resist teasing her, even though he knew how important all this was to her. It was his sole intent—well, apart from helping her solve her father’s murder—to have her so madly in love with him by the time this was all over, that she would follow him to the ends of the earth. That being the *C bar M Ranch* in Texas, of course.

He should have realized something was up when her face went from frustrated to seductive in the blink of an eye. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaned close and gave him a kiss that damn near melted his socks. His arm bent at the shoulder.

She nibbled on his lower lip until he opened his mouth and he began doing a little nibbling of his own. He loved the way she seduced him; wanton seductress and naive woman in the same glorious package. She was hesitant, then bold, and he never knew which one she would be, which kept the game exciting.

He felt her move and thought she was giving up the game when she stepped back. While he just stood there, one petite hand slid up under his shirt to caress his chest and the other went lower, caressing his already stiff shaft.

“Chase,” she whispered his name against his lips. “Give me the keys.”

He chuckled. “Hell, no, I’m having way too much fun here.”

“Chase.” He had never heard his name spoken with quite that inflection, and especially not with a hand squeezing him and rubbing against him. His arm began to droop dramatically.

In the next instant, she grabbed the keys out of his hand and spun away from him. Chase couldn't move; stunned by the loss of her touch and left with only a whiff of her perfume.

She opened the cheval glass door and Chase heard her groan. The porch was piled high with snow, and for as far as Chase could see, the world outside the archway was entirely white.

"Serves you right," he said directly behind her.

She turned and gave him one of her prettiest pouts. "The garage is detached, and the only way to get to it is to walk over to the driveway. Please," she practically whined.

"Oh, no, that's not going to work again."

"But you know how important this is to me. Why do you keep distracting me?"

Perhaps it was one of those man-woman things his brothers kept talking about, but Chase sort of had it figured that she distracted him, not the other way around. In the end, however, he could deny her nothing.

"Your father have a shovel?" he asked, turning around to look for his boots.

"In the garage." Her voice was hesitant.

He shook his head. "Well, find some warm clothes to cover your butt, because if I have to go out in this, so do you." He plopped his Stetson on his head and waded out into the snowdrift. Luckily, there was no wind today, because the cowboy hat that was pretty much his trademark, didn't keep his ears warm or the cold off his neck.

He had managed to wade to the garage, find the shovel, and was hefting the wet, cold stuff into mounds, making a path back toward the house by the time Katie Jo appeared.

"You're not staying on the sidewalk," she said when she stopped in front of him, snow up to her knees.

"Hell, you can't see the sidewalk," he grumbled.

"You really don't like the snow, do you?" she asked playfully.

"I'd rather be shoveling manure in my horse barn."

“Wow, that really is dislike.” She reached for the shovel, stuck it down in a snow bank and took his gloved hand. “Come on, you can do that later.” She dangled the set of keys in front of his face.

* * * *

More than an hour later, they had gone through her dad’s car with a fine-toothed comb and could find nothing out of the ordinary. The glove compartment held only the owner’s manual and some receipts for gas. The trunk had the spare and jack—nothing else—even though Chase pulled the cloth interior back to search beneath it.

“I don’t understand,” she said as Chase closed the driver’s door. “Why were these keys so important if there was nothing in the car?” She pushed the door lock button on the key chain and nothing happened.

She had automatically used the key to open the car when they came into the garage since she didn’t have an alarm button on her own keys. She wasn’t used to using one.

Now, she tried again.

“Must be the batteries,” she said as she opened the door and pushed the lock from the inside.

“Why does your father lock the car when it’s in a garage?”

She shrugged. “There was some trouble several months ago. A lot of cars were being vandalized. Father didn’t think it was college kids, because they had too much to lose if they were caught. He figured it was some high schoolers. But regardless, after his car and several others on this block were broken into, he had this alarm installed and began locking it, even in the garage.”

Chase took the keys from her, turning the alarm device over in his hands. “Doesn’t do much good if the alarm doesn’t work.” He walked to the front of the garage where her father kept an old toolbox. Rummaging around inside, he found a screwdriver and loosened the screws to the back of the alarm.

She watched as he fumbled, the thick leather gloves he wore making it difficult to hold onto the alarm button and dangling

keys. Just as he took the back off, the entire thing tumbled from his hand onto the garage floor.

She and Chase stooped at the same time to try and collect it. She picked up the keys and he grabbed the back of the alarm.

“Damn tiny screws,” he muttered as he pulled one glove off with his teeth, and then reached down to retrieve a screw between thumb and fingernail. Katie found another at the foot of the workbench, but two more were missing.

“What’s this?” She picked up another key from the floor of the garage. She looked at the ring, but it hadn’t broken. “Where did this come from?”

Chase took the key from her and turned it over. “It’s a safety-deposit box key,” he said and Katie sucked in her breath.

“How could Dad not have remembered if he dropped it on the floor out here?”

Chase looked thoughtful, turning the key over and over between his fingers. She watched as he tried to fit it inside the alarm button device. Once he turned it upside-down, he could wedge it into the bottom of the case. She was amazed.

“Do you suppose it fell out when you dropped the keys?”

“It’s too clean to have been laying around on a garage floor, but let’s test your theory.” He handed her the key and put the back on the alarm, setting and tightening the tiny screws. He aimed the device at the car and pushed the button. Immediately, a piercing *beep-beep-beep* filled the small space. He punched another button to shut it off.

“But why hide it there?” Katie still didn’t understand what her father was thinking. She knew he had a safety-deposit box at the bank, but had never been in it. In fact, she didn’t even have a key, though her father had listed her as an authorized user when he had first gotten the security box.

Chase tossed the screwdriver back into the toolbox, closed the lid and motioned for her to precede him out of the garage. “Since everybody knows what a safety-deposit box key looks like, he couldn’t put it on his key ring without it being

recognized. Apparently, he didn't want anyone to know he had it."

"But I knew."

"Yeah, you did." Chase steered her to the house where they could at least talk in warmth. As they shed their coats, she noticed that his brow was again furrowed.

"Maybe that was why he gave you that message with his dying breath. Maybe it isn't the car that holds a secret for you, but rather, the box at the bank."

Katie left Chase standing in the hallway wrestling with his boots and ran down the hall to the kitchen. She pulled open a drawer, grabbed the phone book and opened it to banks. Rapidly, she dialed the number of her father's bank, located down in the business district of Detour. He had never believed in large multi-state banking institutes and preferred the hometown services of *Security State*.

She listened to a recording and hung up.

"It'll be tough getting the car shoveled out, but we can try if you want to get down there today," Chase said, coming into the kitchen behind her and leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb.

"We can't." Katie knew the disappointment she felt echoed in her voice. "They're closed due to the snow."

Chapter 12

Chase was more frustrated than Katie Jo that the bank wasn't open. He wanted her to find out what was in the safety-deposit box, close up the house and get out of town. He had the feeling that the longer they stayed, the more chances they had of running into Jeff Mansfield. He had no doubt that the man was responsible for the mess in the library. From everything Katie Jo had told him, he was not to be messed with and would do anything to get his way. Chase didn't know if that included murder, but he didn't want to stay around and find out.

As he helped her clean up the library and pack her father's books carefully in boxes, he thought about all that had happened. He didn't voice his theory out loud, but everything pointed to the fact that Katie Jo's problems had begun in the last month before her father had died. She had said that her husband had become more brutal in his treatment of her; her father had been having clandestine meetings; his car had been vandalized. And then he had been murdered, or so it appeared.

At this point, Katie Jo was the only connecting factor and he wanted her out of Detour and away from all the reminders of what had taken place. He didn't know how else to protect her.

"Oh, look," Katie Jo called to him from across the room. He walked to the desk where she stood looking at a photograph.

"Who are they?"

"This is my father." She pointed to a distinguished looking man at the back of the group. Her finger lingered on his face and Chase knew she was thinking of all the things she missed because he was no longer there.

"Who are the rest?" he asked to draw her out.

“This is Mkatka.” She pointed to a tall, thin, dark-skinned man standing next to her father. “He was our guide. I don’t remember the others now, but they were helping Dad that summer in Mpumalanga Province. They wanted to earn money so they could buy back mineral rights.”

“Oil?” Being from Texas, when someone said mineral rights, Chase thought oil.

“No, actually they wanted to reclaim some old mines and look for gold. If I remember right, Mkatka said that many of the mines owned by white corporations had discontinued operations because of falling gold prices and lack of production. The black miners felt there was probably still enough gold in the mines to make their work worthwhile. Dad hired them to work at the archeological excavation site so they could earn enough to petition the government to support their fight to claim mineral rights. They would never become rich, but perhaps they could at least make a living since so many were put out of work when the mines originally shut down.”

“Did they succeed?”

She looked thoughtful. “You know, I’m not sure. This picture was taken three summers ago—the last time I traveled with him—and he never mentioned them after that.”

“Where are you standing in this picture, in front of one of their mines?”

She squinted, looking closely at the picture. “No,” she hesitated. “This was in front of the cave that Dad was excavating. He couldn’t purchase the land so he could protect it, but he did get the government to declare it a national site so it was protected from development. An ancient tribe—gosh, I can’t remember that name—was said to have buried their kings there.” She looked around the room at the remainder of the papers and folders yet to be reorganized. “I suppose somewhere in all this is Dad’s research on the tribe and what he had found out.”

“Was anyone continuing his work while he was gone during the academic year?”

“Mkatka maybe, but I don’t know that for sure.” She looked around the room. “I’ll have to sort through all this and put his papers on the tribe together so perhaps someone can carry on his research.”

Chase eyed the dishevelment. No way were they going to stay that long. He had heard the snowplows go by on the street already and he hoped to get Katie Jo moved out within the next couple days. As soon as they contacted a real estate agent and got to the bank and the college.

“How would anyone else know where in South Africa your father was doing his research?” He looked around again. “I just realized your father doesn’t have a computer up here. Did he put all his research on one at the college?”

She smiled at him. “My father didn’t believe in computers. He studied ancient civilizations, remember? So he did things the old-fashioned way himself.”

“A man after my own heart.” Chase smiled.

She quickly reached up and kissed his cheek. “I think Dad would have liked you.”

Chase thought about sweeping the desk clear and laying Katie Jo across it so he could worship her like some ancient tribe might have. She was innocent and seductive; beautiful and beguiling and he wanted to kiss every inch of her. For a moment, he was caught up in the daydream, seeing her in some long, flowing robe, perhaps one shoulder bare, and her petite feet in golden sandals. Her hair flowed around her in fiery abundance, and people came from miles around to worship the goddess whose smile would melt the hardest heart, and whose touch healed the lonely. In his mind, though, her body belonged to only one—a strong warrior who swore to protect her from evil. And of course, he was that warrior.

“Chase?” He felt her hand pat his cheek.

“Hmmm? Oh, just daydreaming.”

She raised a brow as she scrutinized him. “It must have been some daydream.” Her gaze lingered below his belt and he knew

what she saw. Just thinking about Katie Jo in any way, shape or form had him hard as a rock.

“Isn’t it time for a break?” he asked hopefully.

She shook her head and made a *tsking* sound. “We’ve only been up here an hour.”

“No union rules?” he teased.

“Nope. But you do get benefits—later,” she added when he grinned. “If you don’t want to do this, why don’t you go to the store and get us something more substantial than soup? I think they have the roads cleared by now.”

Chase didn’t want to voice his concern about leaving her alone. Not being able to think of an excuse without lying, he sighed and went back to packing the books from the top shelves.

Several hours later, they had the library set to rights, with the boxes stacked at the bottom of the stairs near the entryway so they could be put in the car tomorrow. Chase couldn’t see trying to wade through the snow to do it now. They were just getting ready to head to the store when the phone rang. It had been so quiet that the sound startled both of them.

Chase stayed Katie Jo’s hand just as she reached for the hall extension. “Maybe I should answer it. It might not be a good idea for—”

“You’re thinking it could be Jeff?” she asked, and Chase realized she was too astute not to have some idea of what might be going on, and he had no right to keep his concerns from her.

Still, he shrugged. “We don’t know what’s going on, do we? Your father had something that must be of special value, or he wouldn’t have put it in a safety-deposit box. He would have just given it to you.”

The phone quit ringing.

“Well, I guess that answers that,” Katie Jo said.

Almost immediately, it rang again. This time, Chase didn’t even hesitate, but picked up the receiver and barked a hello. Then he smiled, putting his hand over the mouthpiece as he held it out.

“It’s Mrs. Cranberry. She is very concerned for your welfare.”

Katie Jo rolled her eyes, returned his smile and took the phone. “Hello, Mrs. Cranberry. How are you?” She listened for a few minutes, opening her mouth to speak, but apparently, the woman wasn’t giving her a chance.

“He did?” Katie finally said and gave Chase an appraising look. “Yes, he’s still here, but—”

Chase could hear the woman’s voice but couldn’t distinguish the words. However, from the twinkle in Katie Jo’s eyes, he had a feeling he was the subject being discussed.

“Yes, I do understand how valuable a girl’s reputation is, but well, with the snow and all—”

Oh, Lord, surely the woman wasn’t discussing—

“I most certainly will, Mrs. Cranberry. Yes, good-bye.”

* * * *

Katie hung up the phone and started giggling.

“Let me guess. She thinks I’m some sex-crazed madman, right?”

She nodded, still laughing. “A very good-looking one, though. She’s not at all sure you are who you claimed to be, and she made me promise to lock my bedroom door at night.”

Katie stepped close, sliding her hands up his chest and around his neck. “I promised, but I didn’t tell her what side of the door you would be on.”

She pushed her hips forward, sliding them across Chase’s, feeling him swell against her. She loved the way he reacted to her; the fact that with a glance or a touch, he wanted her as desperately as she had come to want him.

She still had a hard time believing the change in her attitude since meeting Chase. Sometimes she felt so lustful, it might have embarrassed her, except that he seemed to like her that way. And for him, because she loved him, she did things she never would have thought she would do in the bedroom. Or elsewhere, she amended, thinking of all the places besides a bed where they had made love.

As always, the instant they touched, Chase's mouth was all over, kissing her neck, sucking on her earlobe, nibbling his way down the opening in her shirt. Before he could capture her mouth, she slid her hands under his sweater, pushing it up so she could feel his bare chest. She kissed a spot right in the middle, and then licked a flat brown nipple. When he groaned, she smiled. She wasn't done with him yet, she decided, sliding down his body to her knees.

Chase was ready to collapse against the wall when Katie Jo's hands unbuckled his belt and dropped his jeans around his knees, cupping him gently in her soft hands. He sucked in a breath when she kissed him, her fingers trailing up the underside of his hard length. He closed his eyes, not thinking of anything except the erotic feel of her fondling him. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he reached down and pulled her up, turning so her back was against the wall.

His hands jerked at her slacks, cursing as his fingers fumbled with the zipper.

"I'll do it," she said softly, her hands brushing his naked hips as she reached between them. He twitched in response to her touch, aching to be inside her.

The minute she stepped out of her slacks, he lifted one leg to his hip, shoving into her as he slanted his mouth across hers to swallow her moans. God, she felt so good. He withdrew to the very edge of her and then thrust again, aching for her muscles to clamp around him. This time he stilled deep inside her, as his tongue plundered her mouth, thrusting and dueling with hers, increasing the sensations spiraling downward to where they were joined.

She dropped her head back against the wall, her eyes glazed with passion.

"You're driving me crazy," she panted.

"You've already made me nuts," he replied, kissing a path down her neck. He didn't think he would even have to move his hips in order to climax. Deciding to test his theory, he pushed his hips tightly against her, pinning her to the wall. With his free

hand, he quickly unbuttoned her blouse, his mouth following with hot little kisses. He slid his hand into her bra, cupping her fullness. When the strap slid down her shoulder, freeing her, he bent and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

Oh, yeah. Her muscles involuntarily squeezed around him. He nipped and then rolled his tongue over the nub and with each gesture, she clutched him tighter. He could feel himself surge within her, even though he hadn't moved his hips.

Her hands moved restlessly, circling his ears, and then her fingers dug into his back. He heard her breath catch, felt her muscles tighten and that was all it took. He cupped both breasts as his mouth sought hers again. As he kissed her deeply, her leg wrapped tighter around the back of his thigh and they both climaxed. Standing stock still, nothing moving except his mouth on hers and her inner muscles, he experienced a climax like he would never have thought possible.

"Don't you dare back up, or I'll melt right into the floor," Katie gasped when Chase finally ended the kiss that had felt like it rocked the world. She could not believe what had just happened to her. The explosive sensations still throbbing through her made her gasp for breath while her body turned to liquid. The leg Chase still held at his hip quivered in the aftershocks of passion.

"I..." Chase's voice trailed off and he just shook his head as he looked at her. She knew exactly how he felt. All she could do was smile.

He cleared his throat, his eyes burning into hers. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" he asked, his voice husky and...did he sound hesitant?

She moved her leg and he released her but as she got both feet back on the ground, he slid out of her and she felt at once cold and alone. "You don't have to say that just because—"

"Damn it, Katie Jo, if I just wanted to echo your sentiments to make you feel good, I would have told you I loved you days ago when you first mentioned it."

She felt her cheeks heat in anger. Feeling ridiculous standing in the front hall arguing with him while she was half naked, she looked around for her slacks as she buttoned her blouse.

“Well, that’s certainly a romantic declaration,” she huffed, bending over to snatch up her panties. She heard him groan before she felt his hands on her bare backside.

In an instant, she was wrapped in his arms from behind, his naked hips wedged tightly against her butt. “Baby, you have to know by now I do love you, but you’re making me loco,” he growled roughly in her ear.

Her anger melted away and she smiled, keeping it carefully hidden. “Is that a bad thing, you being from Texas and all?” she mimicked his drawl.

“It is if you don’t tell me you love me, too.” He had one hand splayed across her belly, his fingers gently caressing and Katie felt her passion for this man flair to life again.

“Okay,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant, even though she was a quivering mass of jelly inside.

“Okay what?” Chase’s voice sounded agitated and she decided she had teased him enough. She turned in his arms and looked up at him.

“Okay, I love you, Mr. McVicker, with every fiber of my being and with every beat of my heart.” She didn’t smile, she didn’t laugh. She wanted him to know how important this was for her. “You’re a good man and a wonderful lover, and I don’t know that I deserve either.”

“Ah, darlin’.” His Texas drawl was thick, as she had come to expect from him whenever he was truly moved. He rocked her gently in his arms and Katie blinked back tears. She had never felt like this in her life, and she knew she would have a happily ever after from here on out with Chase.

Chapter 13

Chase shoveled the driveway down to the street. Additional mounds of snow from the plows blocked the end of the drive, which meant more shoveling. Katie Jo came out of the house just as he was putting the shovel back into the garage.

"I called the store. Mr. Banner is there, bless his heart, but he says he wants to close early because I guess there's another blizzard on the way. We'd better get down there while we can."

Chase opened the car door for her, happy the store was open because he needed something more substantial than soup. His stomach had been growling all morning, except for when he was making love to Katie Jo. She made him forget everything.

At that thought, his gaze went up and down the street, even if he wasn't sure what he was looking for. He doubted that Mansfield would get into town in this weather, but a person could never tell. One last sweep of the area and he got into the car and started the engine.

"Do you want to see if Mrs. Cranberry needs anything? I just saw her curtains waving over there." He gave her a wink.

"She really is a sweet old lady, even if she is rather nosy. I remember running over to her house on occasion when Dad just didn't understand," Katie Jo replied. "We'll just pick her up a few staples. If we stop now, she'll talk our ear off and we'll never get away before Mr. Banner closes."

Chase knew where the store was from his three days of roaming around town before Katie Jo had arrived, and he soon had the car parked before the small grocery store. He had just closed the car door when a woman came screaming up to Katie Jo, hugging her around the neck.

“Oh my God, where have you been? I’ve been worried sick about you and then late yesterday when Al was driving me home, I saw your car at the cemetery but you weren’t there and then our electricity went out at home and I couldn’t call you.”

Even with three sisters-in-law, Chase was still amazed that women could talk for that long without stopping to take a breath. He shook his head in wonder, standing to the side as the two women hugged and chatted like a couple of magpies, completely ignoring him.

Well, not completely ignoring him. Once the woman’s initial verbal outburst was over, she released Katie Jo and seemed to realize he was with her. Her gaze continued to look him over, even as she spoke to Katie Jo.

“Where in the world did you find *him*?”

Chase scowled at the way she said “him.” It sounded like he was naked on an auction block, or ready to be sold like a slab of beef. *Did women feel this way when men ogled them?* The thought was a little disconcerting.

“Oh, dear,” Katie Jo said, tucking her arm in his and tugging him closer. “I’m sorry, Chase. This is Marsha.”

Chase recognized the name as the friend Katie Jo had been calling until the time they realized her ex was using her cell to track her. He touched the brim of his hat, nodding at the introduction. “Ma’am,” he said politely.

“Oh.” The woman’s eyes widened as she looked him over again before turning back to Katie Jo. “Not only is he handsome, but he speaks and acts like a southern gentleman. Kay, you’ve got some explaining to do.” She tucked her arm in Katie Jo’s and together, they walked into the grocery store, Chase trailing behind wondering if he lived up to the speculative gleam in Marsha’s eye.

Katie listened to Marsha chatter as they walked from aisle to aisle, each pushing a basket, picking up groceries to wait out the storm. Several times since she had met Chase, she had longed to talk to her best friend, wanting her advice and seeking to share her relationship with Chase. But now, as she glanced back

to see Chase casually reading a magazine at the news rack, she knew there was a lot she wasn't going to share with Marsha.

"You quit calling and I was so worried, but I didn't dare call your house," Marsha was saying.

"I'm sorry. Chase discovered Jeff was tracing my movements through my cell phone, so we had to leave it in Boston."

"Is that why some old man answered when I did call? He nearly talked my ear off."

Katie smiled. "That would be Hutch." They came to the checkout and Chase caught up with them. "Marsha, you're a dear friend, and I do appreciate all you did for me when I was going through," she looked at Chase before continuing, "my divorce." That single word didn't come close to what she had experienced, but now was not the time to think about it. "But I have to ask you not to mention seeing me."

Her friend gasped. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Katie glanced at Mr. Banner, who was scanning her groceries as she put them on the conveyor belt. She didn't want to lie to Marsha, but then again, she really didn't know what was going on. In a low voice, she confided, "I just don't want him to know I'm here. We're closing up the house as soon as we can and going back to—"

Chase's cough interrupted her. "Sweetheart, do you want to separate Mrs. Cranberry's items for sacking?"

She realized Chase didn't want her to tell Marsha anything more.

"You got Bertha some groceries?" Mr. Banner asked.

"That's real nice of you, Miss Hawthorne. She called down and I told her I would try to get by her house on my way home." He shook his head. "A storm like this one catches a body unaware and I sure wouldn't want her to be without something to eat."

Katie hadn't thought Mr. Banner recognized her, but then she had been buying groceries from him for as long as she could remember. "We'll see that she gets these," she told the kind, older man.

“Will I see you again?” Marsha asked as Chase picked up two sacks and she reached for the other.

Katie looked at Chase before answering, but his eyes gave nothing away. “I’ll call you,” Katie replied, giving her a noncommittal answer that could be left open to interpretation.

They drove by the bank on the off chance they had opened later in the afternoon, but upon seeing no lights, Chase turned the car back toward Canary Street. Perhaps the projected storm would pass them by and they could get to the bank tomorrow. Katie was aching with curiosity to find out what secret her father had thought was worth dying for.

“Where are you going?” Katie asked when Chase headed for the garage after parking the car.

“Well, you have groceries for Mrs. Cranberry, so I thought while you delivered them, I would shovel her walk and driveway. Even if it does snow again tonight, at least it will be that much less to do tomorrow.”

Katie gave him a look and he didn’t quite meet her gaze. “And you figure that’s a good excuse not to have to go inside and have her grill you about your intentions?” She knew she had guessed right when the corner of his mouth quirked.

She reached up and kissed him and decided if that was what he wanted to use as an excuse so he could keep a close eye on her, she wouldn’t contradict him. But in her heart, she gave him yet another gold star; not only for his kind thoughts and actions toward the widow next door, but for his protective instincts with her.

As either of them could have predicted, Mrs. Cranberry chatted with Katie long after she would rather have been gone. And through it all, Katie managed not to tell the woman where she had been or where she would be going after she closed up the house. By the time Chase knocked on the door to let her know he was done shoveling the walk, she had promised to deliver her father’s drop-leaf oak table tomorrow. She had no need for it and couldn’t even say for sure when an auction would be held. The table might as well be in Bertha Cranberry’s house.

“Why, you darling young man,” Bertha said when she opened the door to Chase and saw that her walks were shoveled clean. “Do come in so I can pay you.” She turned for her purse, which hung on the doorknob of the hall closet.

“No, ma’am.” Chase remained on the porch, hat in hand. “I mean, I appreciate the invitation to come in, but we’ve got our own groceries to get home. Besides, you don’t need to pay me.”

Katie quickly donned her coat and mittens, happy that Chase was done because she had exhausted most of the topics of conversation she could think of.

“But the groceries, and the shoveling,” the woman stammered.

Katie gave her a kiss on the cheek. She had known Bertha Cranberry forever. She had been the one Katie had gone to when she had questions she was too embarrassed to ask her father.

“We didn’t want you to venture out in this weather. If you do need anything, you will call, won’t you?”

“Of course, dear.” Her friend then looked at Chase. “You are not a real estate agent, young man, and I don’t think I appreciate you lying to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chase looked contrite.

“But, perhaps under the circumstances, I think I understand. You will take good care of Katie, won’t you?”

“Ma’am, I’m not letting her out of my sight.” Chase gave Bertha the same smile that had first melted Katie’s heart, and she realized that was who Chase was. He didn’t put on artificial airs around people. What a person saw was what they got.

And oh, how she liked what she saw.

The fact that Chase could cook, although he professed not to like it, was yet another point in his favor. Katie was a pretty fair cook herself, but grilling steak was not one of her fortes. Her father had a small gas grill on the closed-in back porch, and Chase figured if he propped the door open, the smoke would clear out and he could manage. Or so he told Katie.

By the time they put the steaks on, however, the wind had changed directions, bringing the snow and all the smoke directly

into the porch. Katie managed to close the door to the kitchen before the smoke detectors went off, but she and Chase had to stand on the porch, shivering in the cold since it wasn't heated, waiting for the meat to cook. Thankfully, they both liked their steak rare, so it wasn't long before Chase declared them done and brought them inside, shutting off the propane tank.

They fixed their plates and went into the living room where Katie had started a fire earlier. It was toasty warm and inviting, and they sat side by side on the couch, plates and wine glasses on the coffee table.

"Well, it's not dinner at the Ritz, but there's nothing like a beef steak," Chase said as he leaned back against the couch at the end of the meal. Katie turned to look at him.

"And do you dine there often, sir?" she teased.

He shook his head briefly. "Nope. Don't take to those fish eggs they give you on tiny crackers." His drawl was more pronounced, as though he wanted her to believe him an illiterate cowhand. She knew better. And the fact of the matter was, she thought she would have fallen in love with him even if he owned no more than a broken-down horse and saddle.

"Come here, pretty lady." He held an arm out, and she snuggled up against him, content to sit and watch the fire.

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow?" As he talked, he wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger.

Katie had never been particularly fond of her red hair and freckles, but Chase made her feel beautiful and said the freckles were part of that beauty. He still teased her about counting them all, and more than once had begun, but somehow, they always got sidetracked when he peeled off her clothes to count the ones on her stomach. She snuggled deeper against his side.

"Katie Jo?"

"Hmmm?" His voice was indistinct, blending in with the dream that had started the moment she fell asleep in his arms.

* * * *

Chase looked down at Katie Jo as he carried her upstairs to bed. A romantic fire, a great meal, a man ready to see to her

every sexual desire, and she fell asleep? Under normal circumstances, Chase might have taken that as a blow to his ego—that he wasn’t interesting enough to keep a woman awake.

But this was Katie Jo. The very fact that she felt safe and secure enough to fall asleep in his arms spoke volumes, given her background. The trust she placed in him humbled Chase. Crawling into bed beside her, he kissed the top of her head, promising her in his heart that he would never let her down. Chase then wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. Even sleeping, she reached down and entwined her fingers in Chase’s and he fell asleep, content.

He dreamed of taking her back to Texas, to his ranch, where they would have a dozen children, ride horses across the pastures, and make love under the stars.

His dream turned to a nightmare when he came home one day and couldn’t find her in the house. He searched and searched, calling her name, but she didn’t answer. When he ran out onto the porch, he heard her scream, the sound tearing at his gut. He jumped onto his horse and spurred it into a run, racing down the road in the direction of the sound. Tears blurred his vision but he didn’t slow his pace, his heart pounding in rhythm with the horse’s hooves on the hard-packed earth.

He had told her he would take care of her always and protect her from harm. Then why was she screaming and why couldn’t he reach her? Suddenly, he wasn’t on his horse, but instead, somewhere dark. He struggled, unable to free himself from whatever bound him, trying to call out to her, but his words seemed to be blown away before they reached her.

Another scream, this one, loud and terrified.

Chase jerked awake, bolting upright in bed, struggling to get out from under the covers. He looked beside him; she was gone. A shriek from below turned his blood cold. He jerked on his pants and raced from the room, stubbing his toe on the doorjamb.

“Get out of here!” He heard Katie Jo cry from below.

“Like hell,” came a male voice and Chase froze.

It was morning. The light streamed into the hall below from the cheval glass door. Someone had broken in and held Katie Jo captive. He took a moment to look around for a weapon. Seeing nothing he could use, he inched his way to the top of the stairs.

“You have no business being here,” Katie Jo’s voice sounded defiant and Chase mentally cautioned her not to provoke whoever was down there. And then he suddenly knew who it was—Jeff Mansfield.

The only hope he had was to surprise the man, but he hadn’t counted on the hulk standing just inside the front door, arms crossed over his massive chest. *One of the thugs*, Chase thought, as he backed up against the wall, out of the man’s line of sight.

“Ouch, you bitch!” The man’s voice, full of hate and venom, cut through the air. Then Chase heard a sharp sound, flesh against flesh, followed by a whimper.

He saw red.

Bellowing, he flew down the stairs. The man by the door turned in surprise and Chase knew he had to disable him. As he neared the bottom step, the man came toward him, an evil grin on his ugly face. At the last possible moment, Chase grabbed the banister with both hands and jumped, his forward momentum and the strength of his legs kicking out, catching the man square in the chest.

The thug stumbled backward, his foot catching on a throw rug. With arms flailing, he crashed through the cheval glass door and onto the porch.

When Chase had leaped up to kick the man, he had intended to swing across the banister, land in the hallway below and race to find Katie Jo. Unfortunately, his bum leg caught the edge of the entry table and a shaft of pain shot up his thigh. When he put his weight on it, the muscle quivered and Chase had to pause to recover.

Sucking in a breath and steeling himself against the pain, he crept down the hall, knowing he couldn’t surprise Mansfield

after the crash at the front door, but hoping he had a few seconds to see what was occurring.

Before he reached the living room, he glanced at the opposite wall and saw a movement in the reflection of the mirror hanging there. Katie Jo was on her knees on the floor, hair in wild array. A man he assumed was Mansfield held one of her arms at an awkward angle. Her tee shirt was torn, and Chase could see angry welts across her chest and right breast. But it was her face that almost sent him to his knees. Tears streaked her cheeks and her eyes were full of terror as she looked up at the man who held her captive.

In that moment, Chase knew he was going to kill Jeff Mansfield. He stepped into the doorway.

“Get your filthy hands off her, you bastard.” Chase could hardly control the fury in his voice.

“Well, well. My mousy little wife has gotten herself a new friend.” Mansfield’s voice was mocking. “Has she learned yet to go down on you? She never was a very good fuck.” Katie Jo struggled against him and he jerked her arm upward, eliciting a shriek of pain.

I’m castrating him before I kill him, Chase thought, taking a step forward. Mansfield looked as though he would pull her arm out of the socket if Chase rushed him.

“Let her go, or I swear to God—” Chase started, but the man smirked at him.

“What do you think he’ll do to us, Morris?” Mansfield asked, his eyes focused somewhere over Chase’s left shoulder.

“Don’t think I’ll fall for that,” Chase said. He started toward Katie Jo, figuring if he rushed the man, he wouldn’t have time to hurt her any further before Chase took him to the ground.

He saw Katie Jo’s eyes widen in horror, her mouth opened as though to scream, but he never heard her. Pain burst across the back of his head and he never felt the hard floor slam into the side of his face.

Chapter 14

Katie tried to hide her horror as Morris dragged Chase into the room and dumped his unconscious body in front of the fireplace. If Jeff knew how much Chase meant to her, he would have Morris kill her lover on the spot.

She looked at Jeff, for the first time fully understanding the evil she saw in his eyes and wondering why she had never seen it before they married. She had been so naive, so dumb, she thought. And now she had dragged Chase into the middle of it.

“Okay, bitch, now it’s just you and me again,” Jeff sneered as she watched Morris tie Chase hand and foot, being none too gentle with him. She had heard the glass in the front door shatter and since Kevin hadn’t appeared with Chase, could only hope he lay hurt and unconscious on the front porch. Even now, she couldn’t bring herself to wish him dead.

An involuntary cry escaped her lips when Jeff jerked on her hair. He hadn’t tied her up. He probably figured she was weak and small and wouldn’t cause any trouble. But Katie had changed and she wasn’t going to let Jeff push her around anymore. She reached up and held her hair, close to the roots, fighting back to lessen the pain when he pulled it again.

“Where are the goddamn keys?”

“What keys?” Katie panicked but tried to keep it from her voice. *How did Jeff know about the keys?*

“The keys you kept telling the police your old man told you about with his dying breath.” There was no sympathy in his voice and with a clarity born out of desperation, Katie realized it had been Jeff who killed her father. Even as tears welled in her eyes,

she told herself sternly that she couldn't dwell on that now, not when Chase depended on her to get them out of trouble.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He slapped her. She jerked her head back enough so it was more a glancing blow, but her cheek still stung.

"Here's her purse, boss." Morris came into the room carrying Katie's bag.

"No!" She tried to rise, but Jeff shoved her down again.

He dumped the bag upside down on the carpet and kicked through the contents. He held up two sets of keys. Hers had a silver 'K' hanging from the ring; her father's had the alarm button.

Jeff dropped one set back on the floor, tossing the other set to Morris. "Check it out," he said.

"You have no right," Katie cried, struggling to her feet while Jeff was occupied. She heard a groan and cautiously let her eyes drift over to where Chase moved, unable to do more than jerk his arms and legs because of the way he was bound. *Thank God he's still alive.*

"So, your boyfriend is coming to. Let's see how he likes it when your husband fucks you."

Katie tried to back away but he grabbed her arm, fingers biting into her skin. He yanked his zipper down with the other hand as he dragged her toward the couch in full view of Chase.

She kicked and clawed with her free hand, but Jeff just laughed. "You are not my husband. I hate you." She didn't know where she got the nerve to shout at him, but at this point, she knew there was nothing to lose. She had no doubt Jeff would kill both her and Chase before he left if they couldn't find a way to stop him.

She could see Chase out of the corner of her eye, straining against the ropes that bound him, his face a mask of anger. She loved him so much. Had she told him that before she drifted off to sleep last night?

Jeff shoved her down on the couch and straddled her, reaching again to his pants.

“Boss, I hear sirens.” Morris came running back into the room. “I think they’re coming this way.”

“*Shit*,” Jeff swore. He took Katie’s chin in a bruising grip and jerked her face up so she had to look at him. “You’d better not say a word, or I swear, I’ll kill you. And those keys better get me what I want, or I’ll be back. You’re in over your head and there’s nowhere you can hide that I won’t find you.” He rolled off her and was gone.

Katie could hear the sirens now, not more than a block away. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to lie very still, afraid to move for fear Jeff would come back.

“Katie Jo?” Chase whispered her name. “Sweetheart?”

With a cry, she raced across the room and fell to her knees beside him. She was crying too hard to see the ropes to untie him. All she could do was caress his face and kiss his forehead, pleading with him to forgive her.

* * * *

Chase could at last breathe, now that the danger had passed. He strained against his bindings, but he didn’t ask Katie Jo to untie him. He knew she couldn’t.

“Sh, baby, it’s all right. Lie down here beside me. The police will be here in a minute.” He didn’t want anyone to see her like this. She didn’t seem to be aware that she was half naked, her torn shirt leaving her chest bare.

She looked at him through her tears and it nearly broke his heart. He worried about shock; about her fragile mental state from Mansfield’s brutality. But right now, all he could do was talk to her to ease her fear and hope the warmth of his body would soothe her.

“Come on, baby, lie down beside me.”

Still crying, she complied, snuggling close. Her sobs were muffled as she buried her face against his chest. He desperately wanted to wrap his arms around her and absorb her pain, but it would have to wait.

He heard the sirens stop directly outside and he hoped like hell they caught Mansfield and his goons before they got away.

“Police.” A deep male voice called from the doorway.

“In here!” Chase shouted.

Two uniformed officers came cautiously into the room, guns drawn. Once they were sure the room was safe, they hurried over to where Chase and Katie lay. One of the officers reached down and put his hands on Katie’s upper arms to lift her away.

“No!” she screamed, clutching Chase tighter.

“Leave her,” he told the officer. “Just untie me.”

The other policeman already had his arms free and Chase immediately closed them around Katie Jo. Once his legs were untied, he scooted up to a sitting position, back against the fireplace hearth. He held Katie Jo in his arms, her face and nakedness hidden from the officers’ view. He was dizzy and his head felt like it was cracked wide open, but considering the alternative, he would settle for a headache.

“Did you catch them?” he asked one of the patrolmen.

“Who? There was more than the man on the porch?”

Damn, Chase swore under his breath.

“There’s tracks in the drive and the garage door is up, but we didn’t see anything suspicious when we drove up.”

They were gone. Chase should be grateful because it meant Katie Jo was safe, but at the same time, it meant the threat was still there. Besides, he had hoped the police had Mansfield in handcuffs so he could beat the shit out of Katie Jo’s ex.

“Ma’am, would you—” The policeman again reached for Katie Jo, but without looking at him, she shrunk from his touch, burrowing closer to Chase. He shook his head very slightly, in effect telling the officer to back off. He silently mouthed the word ‘shirt,’ and dropped his eyes to Katie Jo. The man nodded in understanding and Chase heard his steps on the stairs.

“Sweetheart, you’re going to be all right.” He used his most soothing voice, rubbing her back until her shivering ceased.

When the policeman came back into the room, Chase helped Katie Jo slip one of his shirts on. He had to move her

away from him in order to button it, but she wouldn't look at him. When she mumbled, he had to bend low to hear her.

"I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?"

He reared back in surprise. He was the one who should be asking forgiveness. He had failed to protect her.

"Darlin'," he began.

"I should never have allowed you to help," she interrupted, lifting her head to look at him. "It's my fault."

Chase's fingers shook as he gently swiped at the tears coursing down her bruised cheek. "Sweetheart, you're not to blame."

The police captain who had come into the house later than the other two officers interrupted them. "We need to ask you some questions, Miss."

Katie Jo never took her gaze off Chase and he could see her panic as she clutched her hands into fists against his chest.

"Let me take you upstairs to rest," he whispered. "I'll answer the questions." He stood up first—just to make sure his legs would support him—then reached down and lifted her in his arms. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he told the police. Not waiting for their approval or permission, he took Katie Jo upstairs, made her take two Tylenol PM so she would sleep, then grabbed a shirt and returned to the living room.

After two hours with the police, Chase came to the realization that Mansfield and his goon could be anywhere and the police probably wouldn't be able to find them. The man he had kicked through the front door had been taken into custody and transported to the hospital, but Chase knew he wouldn't talk. Katie Jo's father's car was gone—they had simply driven it off when they didn't have time to search it in the garage.

"We've got an APB out on their green SUV," the one officer said. "We even have a partial tag, but it's probably a rental and hard telling where it will end up."

"How did you know all that?" Chase asked.

For the first time, the officer smiled. "Your neighbor across the street. She said she wished she had seen you throw that man through the door."

Chase snorted. *Mrs. Cranberry.*

"She said the first time she looked out, there was a green vehicle in the driveway, and she just thought you had called the real estate people. But the next time, she said she saw a man lying on the porch and the front glass was broken. That's when she called us."

Chase gave the police his cell number and made sure they knew he would be taking Katie Jo out of Detour as soon as possible. If they needed anything from either of them, they'd have to call him.

After the officers left, Chase went to the garage and found some boards to use on the front door. He then called the first real estate agent listed in the phone book, took Katie Jo's drop-leaf table over to Mrs. Cranberry, giving her a kiss on the cheek for calling the police, and then went back to look in on Katie Jo.

Every time he thought about what Mansfield had done to her, the degradation and humiliation, he wanted to track Mansfield down like a varmint and shoot him. He knelt beside the bed, groaning at the strain on his sore leg. *Damn*, he felt like an old man.

"I love you, Katie Jo," he whispered and she stirred in her sleep. He softly brushed her hair away from her face. "I don't think I deserve you, but I love you anyway."

He didn't leave her side until he heard the knock on the downstairs door. He stopped in her father's library and grabbed some papers before he went to the front door, carefully seeing who was there before opening it.

In less than an hour, he had everything lined up. The agent would get the front door repaired, list the house and get someone to sell Katie Jo's car. Chase assured her the car would be left in the garage and the keys left with the lady across the street.

He gave the woman Arnie's address and phone number, knowing his accountant could take care of the details and any questions that arose. Chase wanted Katie Jo to have as little contact with the business of selling her father's house as possible. It wasn't that he didn't think she was capable; after all, she was an accountant. He just didn't want to give Mansfield any way to trace them.

Katie Jo came down the stairs just as they were finishing up. Looking slightly the worse for wear, she still gave him a tentative smile when she found him in the kitchen. He introduced her to the real estate agent, and she agreed that this was the best course of action. Quickly, she signed the real estate contract, the car title, and even got the woman to agree to take all the boxes of books up to the college.

As soon as she walked out of the door, Chase turned to Katie Jo. "How do you feel, babe?"

"Battered and bruised," she said, but gave him a small smile.

"You know I would give my soul for none of this to have happened, but I can't undo it."

She looked away, fumbling with the real estate contract.

"Katie Jo, I know how important your independence is to you. I probably should have waited and let you call someone, but—"

She put her fingers to his lips. "It's okay, Chase. I wasn't capable of handling it and I'm glad you were here." She straightened her spine and set her lips in a firm line. "If I didn't have your love, I never could have stood up to Jeff."

He wished again that he could have landed a few blows to Mansfield's balls, but refrained from speaking his thoughts out loud. Instead, he captured her hand and kissed her fingers. "You were magnificent and brave and I love you very much."

That seemed to be what she needed to hear. She sighed and leaned against him.

Chase looked at the clock on the wall. "If you're feeling up to it, we could go to the cemetery and bring your car back here, get to the bank and be on the road before dark."

She agreed readily enough and Chase assumed she was no more eager than he to spend another night in the house after the horror of this morning.

They entered the bank and friends immediately surrounded Katie. She had somehow forgotten over the last year how many such friends she had in Detour. The town was small enough that people knew each other by their first names, and it had only been in the last year after her marriage, that she had lost those contacts. Isolating her was one of the many ways Jeff had controlled her.

Mr. Christian immediately escorted her and Chase to his office, expressing sympathy over her father's passing. He seemed surprised that she wasn't there to close out his accounts.

"I only need the contents of the safety-deposit box." She handed him the key, glad now she had hidden it in the picture on her father's desk.

"Well, certainly, if you're sure."

"I'm sure you will take good care of father's accounts until...later," Katie assured him. She didn't know when she'd be back, or even if she would.

She signed the signature card and was taken into the vault. Chase had to wait outside, but when she came out carrying the box, he did follow her into the private cubicles that were reserved for customers.

She opened the box, somewhat disappointed to see only a small canvas bag inside, even if she didn't have any idea of what she had expected.

She started to open the bag, when Chase stilled her hand. "Let's just take it and leave. I have a creepy feeling that even with the police looking for him, Mansfield isn't going to take defeat lightly and will be back."

"You're right, of course." She handed him the bag, surprised at how heavy it was, and closed the box. She quickly walked back into the vault, slid it into the proper position, and closed the door. She left the key in the lock. She no longer needed it.

Thanking Mr. Christian for his help, she allowed Chase to escort her out of the bank and into his car. He pulled out of the parking lot and headed north.

“We aren’t going to Chicago?” She had assumed they would catch a flight from there.

Chase shook his head. “They’ll probably be watching for us. We’ll head up to Madison and fly out from there.”

“Well then, while you drive, let’s see what all the trouble has been about,” she said, lifting the canvas bag onto her lap.

Chapter 15

"I don't understand," Katie Jo said as she pulled items out of the canvas bag. "His passport and a rock?"

"Nothing else?" Chase cut his gaze from the road to the bag.

"Wait." She pulled out a photograph. "It's a copy of the photo Dad had on his desk." She turned it over and he could see some writing. "Mkatka's name is here, along with what looks like a phone number."

"Check his passport," Chase instructed as he bypassed Interstate 43 and turned onto Highway 12 to Madison.

Katie Jo thumbed through the small book. "It shows he took trips to South Africa each of the past several years. But I already knew that because of his research. So where does that leave us?"

Chase had reached over and hefted the rock out of the bag as Katie Jo talked. The sun reflected off metallic fragments and he immediately swerved the car to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes.

"Holy shit!" He turned the rock this way and that. "I don't know anything about mining or precious metals, but if that's gold ore reflecting the light, there's more gold here than rock."

"But why would Dad have a piece of ore?"

"There's nobody to answer that except perhaps his friend—what was his name?"

"Mkatka."

Chase set the rock back into the canvas bag. "If that's a sample of what the miners were getting out of a *deserted* mine, I would imagine that it's worth fighting over. And just maybe," he arched a brow and looked at her, "Mansfield knows about this."

He watched Katie Jo's mouth drop open in surprise. "That would certainly give him a motive for searching my father's house." Her face fell. "Oh, God, Jeff *was* the one who ki..."

"Sh." Chase grabbed her by the back of the neck and tugged her to him. He knew what she was thinking—that Mansfield killed her father. Even if that were true, he understood how devastated she would be to learn that she had been married to a murderer. He kissed her trembling lips.

When she seemed to pull herself together, he curled an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to him on the seat. Reaching across the steering wheel with his left hand, he put the car in gear and began driving again. She settled her head on his shoulder with a sigh.

"I don't know what to do now," she said. "I suppose the next step is to go to South Africa to the original excavation site."

Chase thought about that, too, as he drove. Once they got to the airport, he would make a few phone calls, but for the time being, he needed to reassure Katie Jo.

"Tell you what. Let's catch a plane back to San Antonio, and I'll call Steve about using his jet."

"Chase, I can't let you continue to look after me. I'm supposed to be an independent woman now and I have to do this on my own."

He heard her words but refused to be deterred. "Do you have enough money for a ticket to Johannesburg?"

"No, but I—"

"Damn it, Katie Jo." Once again, he pulled the car over to the side of the road. When she looked at him in surprise, he didn't even bother talking. He pulled her tight against him and kissed her as though his life depended on it. And perhaps, in some ways, it did. He knew he couldn't live without her and if it was the last thing he did, he would make her see that.

His heart rate accelerated and he ached with unfulfilled lust as he cupped a hand over her breast. He felt her tense for an instant and then willingly surrender to the passion that sparked

to life with the slightest touch or look. He cursed the fact they had been in such a hurry to leave town.

Gasping for breath, he finally released her lips, but his hand continued to caress the softness of her breast, feeling her nipple pebble beneath his touch. He kissed a path to her ear, where he lightly tongued, imitating what he would like to be doing to another part of her body.

“Do you love me?” he whispered raggedly.

“Yes, you know I do.”

“Do you trust me?”

He could sense her hesitation. He gently sucked her earlobe. He knew that question was even more telling because of the hurt the men in her life had caused her. But if they were to make a life together, he had to know she was one hundred percent his, just as he was hers.

Katie Jo backed away from his caress, but not entirely out of his arms. When she raised her gaze to his, she lifted a hand to the side of his face. Her gaze was solemn and Chase looked deep into her eyes for the answer he sought. He had almost given up when she finally smiled.

“Yes, Chase McVicker, I do trust you—with my life and my love.” Then she leaned toward him, sealing her vow with a kiss and Chase knew her commitment wasn’t just until they figured out the current trouble—it was forever.

As they drove the rest of the way to the airport, Chase called Travis and Steve, but neither answered, so he left messages for both.

“We don’t have much choice, sweetheart, but to head home. We can’t stay around here in case Mansfield catches wind of it. I’d feel better, anyway, on my own ranch where I have some control.” He gave her a meaningful glance, letting her know he’d brook no argument.

“Besides, I need my passport to go with you.” He was happy to note that this time, she didn’t argue.

He wanted to put Katie Jo up in a fancy hotel in Madison for the night, treating them both to a good meal and a decent

bed, but when they stopped at the airport, there was space available on a flight from Madison to Denver. That would at least get them out of the state, Chase thought, and the clerk said they'd be able to connect with a flight into Houston and then San Antonio. While he groaned at the idea of being up for over twenty-four hours by the time they got home, he took one look at Katie Jo's forlorn face and he purchased the two available seats.

* * * *

Now, too tired to even contemplate their next move, Chase unlocked the door to his ranch house, tossed their bags in the corner and tugged Katie Jo by the hand down the hall to his bedroom.

"I need my suitcase," she said, resisting.

"Not tonight."

"But my nightgown..."

"Sweetheart, you can sleep in your clothes or naked, but right now, all I want is my own bed and you tucked in close beside me."

"Naked?" The word came out a squeak.

He had to grin. As far as she had come, there was still a little of the naive girl inside. "Don't worry, my peter is as petered out as the rest of me."

He didn't even bother turning on the lights as he stripped and fell into the large bed. He could barely hold his eyes open waiting for Katie Jo to crawl in beside him, but when she did, he sighed as her bare skin touched his in all the right places.

* * * *

"Why do you call if you turn your phone off instead of answering it?" Steve asked when Chase called him for a second time the next day.

"Maybe I was busy," Chase answered, not about to tell his older brother that he had a beautiful woman in his bed and all they had done was sleep.

He changed the subject instead. "Does Keva have you back to work?"

"I don't spend much time at *SGM* anymore when we live half the year in New York," Steve replied. "Are you in town? I think Mom's still got wedding cake in the freezer and thinks it's time for another family reunion."

Chase's brother, Steve, had married a book editor from New York back in January and they spent their time divided between his computer company in Boston and her work in New York City. It's no wonder Steve had a jet.

"Have you decided what state you want that baby born in yet?" he asked instead of answering Steve's question.

"I figure somewhere between the two." Steve laughed. "What nationality would he be if he's born in the plane?"

"You can't tell me Keva would agree to that one." Chase laughed, too. He knew Keva, and she had his brother wrapped around her little finger. "Tell you what, I'll take the decision out of your hands. I need to borrow the jet."

"Your limos don't get you there as fast as you need?"

"My limos don't float. I need to go to South Africa."

"What's up, Chase?" Chase could hear the concern in Steve's voice.

"I'd tell you if I knew. You remember meeting Katie Jo?"

"Oh, Christ, I should have known it was a woman. That's how it happened with Keva. Just don't lie to her."

Before Chase could reply, Steve went on. "I'll get Bob Taggart to fly you. If you're going out of the country, you're going to need some support." Chase knew Bob was an ex-SEAL who now worked at his brother's computer company. He was sure Bob had skills nobody knew about, which just might come in handy.

"You'll have to hold off a few days," Steve continued.

"Bob's out west doing some damage control with one of our subcontractors and he's the only one certified in the Gulfstream G5. You'll need that for the distance you plan to go."

"I guess we'll have to," Chase said, knowing Katie Jo wouldn't be too happy with the wait.

“Great. Bob’ll file a flight plan and get the logistics figured out.”

“Thanks, brother.” Chase hung up the phone and started digging through his desk for his passport.

The phone rang again.

“Hey, TJ, what’s up?” Chase slammed the desk drawer with a frown and walked over to the wall safe.

“You tell me; you’re the one who called.”

“Sorry, after being up for a couple days straight, my brain is still fuzzy.” *Ah*, he snatched his passport out of the safe and dropped it into the bag with the stuff they had taken from the safety-deposit box.

“Hello, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” Chase sat down at his desk and ran a hand through his hair. “I need you to do some digging for me, but I don’t even know where to start.” It was definitely nice having brothers in the type of work where they had resources at their disposal. TJ worked for the *Boston Chronicle* and had his finger on the pulse of just about everything in the world that might be newsworthy.

“Is this still about Mansfield?” TJ asked. Chase had forgotten about his brother’s incredible brain. Anything he read or heard seemed to be filed in neat little compartments in his head, accessible at a moment’s notice, even if years had gone by. That memory had cost Chase and his other brothers plenty in their youth because TJ was great at sibling blackmail.

He quickly ran through the events of the past weeks, filling Travis in on everything he knew about Katie Jo, her father and his work in South Africa, and the most recent trouble in Detour.

“Damn, Chase, you could have gotten yourself killed!” TJ echoed his own thoughts.

“Yeah, well, *could have* didn’t happen and I’m going to hang the son of a bitch by his balls before this is all over.” Just the thought of Mansfield running around loose made Chase’s temper flare. “He hurt Katie Jo.”

“What do you need me to do?”

He knew he could count on TJ, just as he could on Steve, or Mike, or any member of his family. “There’s a man in Mpumalanga by the name of Mkatka and a phone number. That’s about all I have on that end of it. Steve’s sending the jet and Katie Jo and I will be leaving for Johannesburg in a few days. I need something to go on before that.”

“Gotcha,” his brother replied as Chase read him the number. “I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Any Pulitzer stories in the works?” Chase knew his brother’s dream of writing *The* story that would win him the coveted award.

“The cannery’s at it again, but I doubt that shutting down a local business that employs hundreds of people will win me a prize.”

“Well, keep after it, little brother. One of these days, you’ll hit the big time and I’ll see you on CNN.” He hung up, called his travel agent to tell her where they’d be landing so she could line up a vehicle and rooms. Katie Jo came into his office just as he finished.

“Yeah, I love you, too,” he laughed, hanging up the phone and opening his arms to her.

“Come here,” he said, his voice sounding more like a plea than a command. He couldn’t be in the same room with her without wanting to touch her every way he could.

She just stood by the door and frowned at him. “Who was that?”

“Jealous?”

When she didn’t answer him but instead, crossed her arms over her chest and looked even madder, he decided she definitely didn’t have a sense of humor when it came to him using the ‘L’ word with anyone but her.

“It was my travel agent.”

“You tell a travel agent you love her?” Katie Jo’s voice couldn’t get any colder.

Chase shrugged. “Actually, she said it first.”

Her brow lifted in suspicion. “She tells you she loves you?”

“She loves my business, Katie Jo. Even if I don’t book flights, she gets the same commission every time I call.” She had uncrossed her arms and Chase thought she was softening. “Steve is sending a jet down to pick us up in two days, and TJ is looking into the mine situation in Mpumalanga. So I was booking us rooms for once we get there.”

“Rooms?” Apparently having forgiven him, she crossed the room to finally sit on his lap where he could cuddle her.

“Yes, two rooms. I have no desire to share my bed or my woman with the pilot.”

She gave him a kiss of apology. “Where’s your computer? We could book rooms ourselves on the internet.”

He swatted her butt as she stood. “You know damn good and well where my computer is. Or rather, isn’t.”

“One of these days, Chase, you really need—”

“I know what I need, and it isn’t being dragged into the computer world.” He circled her waist and pulled her close. “Instead, let’s take a few steps back in time and go riding on old-fashioned horses.” He nibbled at her neck. “I can show you the ranch and we can have a picnic by the pond.”

“I haven’t ridden in years.”

“It’s like good sex,” he said with a wolfish grin. “You never forget how to mount and ride.”

She gave him a naughty look. “And that’s only if you have a great stallion beneath you, right?”

He laughed outright. “Damn straight, woman. Come on.”

They spent the day riding the range, taking frequent breaks under a solitary tree, at a pond, and even out in the middle of nowhere. Chase seemed to find it a great excuse to put his hands on Katie as he helped her mount and dismount.

“I can do it myself,” Katie commented as they dismounted by the river that ran through his property.

“But that wouldn’t be near as much fun,” he replied in his slow, Texan drawl as he let her slide down his chest.

The afternoon sun, warm for this time of year, added to the wide-open spaces and her newly found sense of freedom made

Katie feel playful. She reached up and grabbed his hat, spinning around and taking off. She plopped his hat on her head, holding it with one hand as she ran down the slope toward the river.

Dodging behind a tree, she turned to see him close by. Giggling, she tried to keep the tree between them as he stealthily circled the trunk. His hat slipped down over her forehead and she quickly pushed it back, trying to keep her eyes on him.

“Don’t you know that stealing a man’s hat is just a notch above stealing his horse?” He took a step to the left and when Katie countered, he quickly stepped the other way. She danced out of his reach.

“But a gentleman would surely offer a lady his hat to keep the sun off her delicate features,” she parried. “You wouldn’t want me to get freckles, would you?”

His eyes narrowed dangerously and she felt that delicious surge of lust deep in her abdomen.

“You already have freckles; sixty-four of them to be exact.”

She was so surprised, she stopped circling the tree to gawk at him. In the next instant, he pounced, capturing her as she squealed. He scooped the hat off and lowered his head, skimming her lips with a kiss.

“I don’t have that many,” she pouted. She wondered if he saw her as one giant freckle.

His lips began doing incredible things to her ear and his breath was a warm caress along the side of her neck.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” he whispered and she could hear his voice waver as the passion rose between them. His hands went to the front of her blouse, slowly unbuttoning one button after the other. “Perhaps I need to count them again.” His lips slid down the curve of her throat and across the swell of her breasts. “I don’t remember if I counted the cute little one right on the side of your nipple.”

“I don’t have—” she started, but couldn’t finish as his wet mouth closed over her breast. Even through her bra, she could feel his heat. His hands slid her blouse off her shoulders, and then his thumbs hooked beneath her bra straps to slide them

down her arms. The lacy edge rubbed across her nipples, bringing them to peaks as it stopped right at that most sensitive point.

“Can you prove it?” he whispered the erotic suggestion.

Katie stood in indecision, the heat within her throbbing a mixture of arousal and embarrassment. She had always allowed Chase to be the aggressor, even as he gave her control over the limits to their lovemaking. If she tried to analyze it, she knew she couldn’t explain their relationship, but it worked for them. Now he was asking—not telling—her to take the initiative and strip for him. Did she dare?

Chapter 16

Chase didn't move as Katie slowly reached behind her to unhook her bra, but his eyes glittered with passion and she could hear his breath catch. Her hands shook and she willed them to stop. She loved Chase with her whole heart and wanted to do this for him. In fact, she realized that she would do anything he asked. Not because of coercion as Jeff had done, but because he loved her.

She let her bra drop to the ground and stood before him naked from the waist up. The sun beat down warm on her skin but gooseflesh still rose as she held her breath in expectation of his reaction.

"You are so beautiful," he rasped. "No matter how many times I see you this way, you take my breath away." He slowly raised one hand and traced the curve of her breast with his fingers. Ever so slowly, his path tightened until he circled only her nipple, which was puckered and achy.

His gaze rose to meet hers. "Will you make love to me?"

She knew what he was asking and she nodded. As though in slow motion, she undressed him, caressing each new patch of bared skin with her fingers and lips. His back was broad and rippled with muscles and she could have spent the entire day rubbing the hard planes of it. But as she laved his nipple and dipped her hands into the waist of his jeans, he groaned low in his throat and she wondered how long either of them could hold on.

"Sh." She gentled him with a kiss. As she unbuckled his belt and opened his jean buttons, she could feel him toeing off his boots.

“Lay down,” she commanded and he complied immediately. The lush grass by the river framed his brown skin as he stretched out on the ground, his jeans open to reveal the curling hair at his groin. She nibbled on her lower lip, trying to decide what to do next. His eyes glittered and his mouth curved up in a sexy grin as he crossed his arms behind his head and just watched her.

He thinks I can't do this. Well, I'll show him, her new sensual side retorted as she kicked off her boots and stepped forward, straddling his hips. As she reached up to pull the clip from her hair, she knew he had an unobstructed view of her breasts, albeit from below. She shook her head so her hair cascaded down around her, partially covering them.

“Hey,” he objected, starting to rise.

“Hush,” she said, planting her foot on his chest and gently pushing him back down. His mouth opened in surprise.

As slow as she could manage, she skimmed her hands down her sides and along the waist of her jeans. She could tell she was turning Chase on with her motions, but she could feel herself surrendering to the lust that surrounded them, too. She unbuttoned her jeans and started to slide them down her hips. Just as they got to the edge of her panties, she stopped.

Chase groaned.

She swung around and straddled him with her fanny to him, bending over provocatively as she reached for the cuff of his pants, pulling one, then the other, until his jeans slid down his long legs. Wiggling her butt suggestively, she reached down and touched him, stroking the underside of his long shaft with her fingers before taking him in her hand and squeezing.

“That’s not...” he groaned when her hand began a slow slide upward, “...fair.”

“Do you want me to stop?” She purred the question.

“Hell, no.” Even as he answered, he reached up and slid her jeans down her hips. She had to lift one foot and then the other to get them off and he quickly followed with her panties, leaving her totally exposed to his sight. When she would have sat down

next to him, he locked her knees with his large hands, sitting up to kiss her buttocks.

“Chase, I...” She didn’t know what she was going to say because his hot mouth was doing incredible things to her skin as his hands slid up her legs to their juncture. He parted her curls and dipped a finger inside and she thought she would collapse.

“Turn around,” he said, helping her as she once again straddled his hips. He kissed her belly, and then her hips as his hands moved up her body to palm her breasts. “I told myself I would let you do this, but I can’t. I have to touch you, taste you.” His hands cupped her bottom as he pulled her forward, taking her with his mouth.

Their foreplay had been too much for Chase to handle, and he realized it was for Katie Jo, too, because the moment he touched her, she jerked, then cried out his name in her climax. He held her as her hips gyrated against him, loving the musky, sexy scent of her. Knowing he couldn’t wait any longer, he tugged on her hips and she opened for him as she knelt, taking him completely inside her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he began to rock.

Needing to be deeper yet, he held her away from him as he lay back down. As he pushed upward, he moved her hips, showing her how to ride him for deeper penetration. Almost immediately, he could feel the tension in her as her muscles clamped down on him with every stroke. He kneaded a breast with one hand and let the other slide down her silky stomach to where they joined. His thumb slid between her moist folds to find her swollen, throbbing clit.

“I’ve watched you all day,” he gasped out even as he thrust into her. “Your gorgeous legs spread wide over that horse’s back.” His hands slid up her body to cup her breasts. “God, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“And you didn’t like all the attention a horse got?” she teased, squeezing her thighs against his sides.

He growled as he surged up, touching her womb and she cried out.

"I want your attention, all of it." Once again, he thrust deep and felt Katie Jo go over the edge, her muscles squeezing around him and taking him with her. The spasms started in his groin, tightening his sac, and then spread like prairie fire through his veins to engulf him. Heat flashed from head to toe, his ears rang, all the while he pulsed deep within her. She collapsed against his chest, and he brought his arms around her. She kissed his neck, damp with exertion.

"You are the center of my attention." She kissed him again. "You are my love, my life, my heart."

Her words were murmured against his skin, but Chase had no trouble hearing, even over the pounding of his own heart.

"I wish..." he started.

She lifted her head. "What?"

He tenderly brushed her glorious red hair away from her face. "I wish we could stay here forever."

"Soon," she said. "I promise."

* * * *

After supper, Katie Jo disappeared and Chase thought she had gone to take a bath. At least that's what he thought she had said as she left the study. He had been in the middle of a stack of mail and had simply mumbled that he would be there in a bit. Knowing they would be out of the country for who knows how long, Chase had reluctantly settled into his office to get some work done.

He talked to his accountant, Arnie, for over an hour, making sure the payroll would be met at each city and faxing him a power of attorney for anything else that might come up.

Even while he shuffled papers, he thought of Katie Jo, soaking in a tub of scented bubbles. He wondered if she was sore since she hadn't ridden a horse in years. And then he had probably added to it, dragging her to the ground by the river. He sighed, feeling heat suffuse him as he remembered her wanton behavior.

He sorted through the rest of his mail, thought about calling TJ again, but decided his brother would call when he had

something. Thinking of Katie Jo waiting in his bed made him lightheaded as he stood quickly, flicking the light off, and then trotting down the hall.

He was surprised to find the bedroom dark, and it took a minute for his eyes to adjust. He could see Katie Jo in bed, blankets bundled up around her neck. He took a step toward her when he heard her groan.

"Katie Jo." He spoke her name as he sat down on the side of the bed closest to her.

"Go away," she moaned into the pillow.

"Sweetheart, what's the matter?" He reached a hand out to her shoulder, only to have her roll away from him with another groan.

"Don't touch me. Just leave me alone." She sniffed and Chase knew he was in trouble. He wasn't sure what he had done, but he figured it was his fault.

"I'm sorry," he said, unable to stand seeing her cry. "We shouldn't have ridden so far."

"It wasn't the ride," she mumbled.

He frowned. "Was I too rough? Ah, baby, I'm so sorry—"

"You didn't do anything. I'm sick, now just go away."

"Do I need to call a doctor? Where do you hurt? I have aspirin and Alka-Seltzer and—"

"Chase!" She sat up, clutching a pillow to her stomach. "There is nothing you can do. It's...it's—" With an angry sound of frustration, she burst into tears again, even as she clutched at her stomach. "Please," she whispered, "just let me be."

Chase stood helplessly by the bed as Katie Jo curled into a tight ball, her face red and splotchy. He started to tell her he was calling the doctor anyway, but something in her demeanor made him hesitate.

Instead, he went back to his study and called his brother, Michael. "Hey, is Dr. Mike there?" he asked when his sister-in-law answered the phone.

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Mike is not on call tonight."

"Hey, wait, it's Chase," he said before she could hang up.

“Oh, Chase,” Penny said with a sigh. “It’s just been an extremely long day. Besides, it’s our anniversary and Mike missed our dinner date.”

“Whoops.” Chase wondered what that was going to cost his brother.

“Yeah, whoops. Sometimes I wonder about you McVicker boys. You all can remember millions of bits of inconsequential information, but not the important things.”

“I wouldn’t call knowing every disease on the face of the earth exactly inconsequential.” Chase felt the need to defend his brother.

“And why do you always stick up for each other?” Penny replied. “Never mind, that’s a stupid question. Here’s Mike, but keep it short, okay, so I can still salvage some of the night with my husband?”

“Do you need any suggestions on what to do with that time?” Chase said.

“Don’t be giving my wife any ideas. She comes up with plenty on her own.” Mike’s voice came on the phone. “What’s up, Chase? Are you in town?”

“Why is it everybody thinks I only call when I’m in Boston?” Chase asked irritably.

“Whoa, who bit you in the butt?”

“I need a medical doctor, not a psychologist.”

Mike must have heard something in Chase’s voice because he immediately dropped the chatter. “What’s the matter?”

Chase described Katie Jo’s symptoms, concluding with, “She’s hurting bad, Mike, and I don’t know what to do. Should I take her to the hospital? Could it be appendicitis?”

Mike laughed. “Slow down. It sounds like a bad case of menstrual cramps.”

“What? Oh,” Chase said. “I guess I’ve never had to deal with anything like that.”

“And why are you now?” Mike asked. “You usually never stay around as long as a month.”

“So what do I do?” Chase asked, ignoring his brother’s reference to the short duration of his past affairs.

“Don’t mention it outright, and for God’s sake, don’t ask to have sex. Women are aware that men know about menstruation, but they don’t want us to realize when it’s happening to them.”

“Crap, it’s one of *those* things?” Chase groaned, thinking of all those man-woman relationship things that had always been his downfall.

“Do you understand?” Mike asked after he’d given Chase more information.

“Yeah.” He sighed. Thanking his brother for the advice, he hung up the phone.

Chase was extra quiet as he entered the bedroom, closing the bathroom door before turning on the light to undress. Mike had said that sometimes women were ultra sensitive to sound and light, and he wanted to take no chances.

He slid beneath the sheets and ever so gently looped his arm over Katie Jo’s waist. She stiffened immediately.

“Sh, I just want to hold you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Chase.”

“Do you need an aspirin—for the cramps?” His hand had settled low on her abdomen, over the top of her cotton gown.

“Oh, God,” she groaned, “you know?” She tried to roll away from him but he refused to let her. So what if he hadn’t taken his brother’s advice?

“Darlin’, come here.” He cuddled up next to her back, his warm hand gently kneading her lower abdomen. He felt her gradually soften her spine and relax against him.

“Better?”

“Mmmm.”

He tucked her head under his chin and just held her against him spoon fashion.

“I am sorry,” he finally said into the darkness.

“Chase, this is not exactly something you have any control over.”

“No, I meant I’m sorry if I embarrassed you. It’s just that after everything we’ve been through; after I’ve made love to you in every way possible, I don’t want you to think there’s anything you can’t tell me.”

“Chase, just shut up and hold me.”

He chuckled and did what she asked. Mike said crankiness was part of a woman’s cycle, but at least she hadn’t kicked him out of his bed and made him sleep on the couch.

* * * *

The next morning, Katie felt well enough to get out of bed, but was very glad they had another day at the ranch before they left for South Africa. Her flow was always so much worse when she was late. She had always been irregular and even being on the pill for a while hadn’t really helped. She was just glad she hadn’t gotten pregnant with Jeff’s child.

As she entered the kitchen and saw Chase with an apron around his waist, she thought how wonderful it would be if she could have his baby. Any child with his delicious brown eyes and devilish smile would capture his mother’s heart from the moment he was born.

“Hi.” His face lit up when he saw her. He looked at the skillet, then back to her, his brow wrinkling in confusion. She laughed, walking over to him and hugging him from behind.

“Better?” he asked as he flipped French toast on the griddle.

Katie could feel her cheeks warm with embarrassment.

“Does it always hurt like that?” His questions continued and she didn’t think it was possible for her cheeks to get any redder.

“I really don’t want to discuss this.” She turned away from him and poured herself a cup of coffee.

She heard him sigh behind her, heard the clink of the spatula and a thunk as he moved the griddle off the burner. Before she could turn around, his arms were around her and he was tucking her against his chest.

“Remember what I told you last night?”

“Yes, but in this instance, it does not apply.”

He kissed the side of her neck. “Katie Jo, you don’t understand. You were hurting and I wanted to fix it, but I couldn’t.”

She did understand. It was part of his nature to be the protector, the guardian, the fixer. And she knew what it cost him to admit what he considered failure. She decided men could be such pains sometimes.

She turned in his arms and placed a kiss on his chest, right above his heart, then leaned back to catch his gaze.

“You did fix it, Chase. Knowing you were there for me, just holding me, was all I needed.”

His brow smoothed and he hugged her closer.

They chatted through breakfast and then Katie shooed him out of the kitchen while she washed the dishes. Chase said he’d be out with the ranch foreman most of the day, looking after his prize horses. Thankfully, he didn’t ask her to ride again.

She put a load of clothes in the washer, and then decided to relax on the couch. In seconds, she was fast asleep.

An incessant ringing woke Katie hours later. Half asleep, she followed the sound into Chase’s study, picking up the phone without thinking.

“lo,” she mumbled, stifling a yawn.

“Whore.” The all-too-familiar voice, so evil and full of hate, froze Katie at the side of the desk.

Chapter 17

“Did you think I would let you go that easily?” Jeff asked, but Katie couldn’t make sense of the words. All she heard was the threat in his voice. She shouldn’t wonder how he knew where she had gone; how he had found out Chase’s identity, but those thoughts darted through her mind.

“You tricked me, Kathleen. You made me think those keys were what I needed, but they weren’t, were they?”

Katie gasped for air, realizing she had been holding her breath from the moment she heard his voice. The oxygen made her dizzy and she automatically grabbed the corner of the desk, but at least it cut through the haze and got her thinking. She had to get away. She—

“I think it will be much more effective if I focus my attention on McVicker instead of you.”

She heard the suave, oily sound of his voice, shivering in terror at all the remembered times when he used it right before he did something terrible to her. She swallowed hard; her eyes squeezed shut trying to conjure Chase’s image to keep the terror at bay.

“After all, you still have something I want, but McVicker has you. Eliminate him and you’ll come back to me. There’s no other place for you to go. But you will have to beg.” She could hear the deliberate pause, as though he were waiting for her to fall apart. “You do remember begging, don’t you?”

Katie slammed the phone down and ran from the room, down the hall and out the door, the whole time screaming Chase’s name. When he didn’t immediately materialize, she raced for the barn. He had to be here; he had to leave and hide.

She stumbled through the barn doors. Oh, God, she loved him so much and Jeff knew it. That was why he threatened to hurt Chase.

“Chase!” She was crying too hard to clearly see the man coming toward her and she crashed into him before she instinctively knew it wasn’t Chase.

“Where is he?” She grabbed the cowboy’s shirtfront.

“Whoa, there, Miss. Chase is clear out on the north forty looking at horses.”

“Take me to him, now!” She jerked on the shirt, trying to drag the young man forward.

“He’s been gone all morning, Miss, and I’m not exactly sure where he is. We could drive over a hill one way and miss him completely.”

“Oh God, oh God.” Katie moaned, running her hands through her hair as she paced the straw-littered barn. “Does he have his phone with him?”

“Well, yeah, I reckon he does, but sometimes you can’t get a sig—”

“Call him, right now.”

It was a good thing the man obeyed her commands because he was a head taller and much heavier than Katie, and she didn’t know what she would have done if he had said no.

“He wants to talk to you,” the cowboy said, holding out the receiver from the black phone mounted on the wall of the barn. She took the phone with shaking hands.

The line was full of static and about every other word cut out, not that it made any difference because the minute she heard his voice, she started crying again and couldn’t say anything. She thought he asked her a question and she shook her head, but of course, he couldn’t see it over the phone.

The phone was taken away from her and she covered her face with her hands.

“Boss, I don’t know what’s going on. She came barreling out of the house and is just standing here crying.” There was a

pause and then he added, "Yeah, I know the place. I'll start right way." Another pause. "Cripes, are you sure? Yeah, I'll get it."

The man hung up the phone and looked at her as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of her. "Boss says I'm to bring you out to him; we'll meet him 'bout halfway as he heads back in." He ushered her outside to a ramshackle pickup and even held the door while she climbed into the cab. Instead of going to the other side to climb in, he looked at her.

"Miss, I gotta go into the house for just a minute and then we'll get you to the boss, okay?"

"No, we have to hurry." Katie felt as though the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels and didn't want to delay even a minute.

"The boss will have my hide if I don't follow his orders. I'll just be a minute." He left before she could argue further.

She sat shivering in the truck, realizing as the tears dried that the sky was overcast and the wind was picking up. She kept looking down the road, expecting to see Jeff drive up any minute. She didn't know if he was already in Texas, or if he was trying to locate her before he took off to capture her.

She scooted over toward the driver's seat, determined to go find Chase herself, just as the cowboy returned. She gave him a guilty look when he opened the door.

"I'll get you there," he said, sliding the seat up to put something behind it, "but you'd better buckle up because it's going to be a rough ride."

* * * *

Chase kept an eye peeled for the other truck as he drove like a maniac back toward the ranch house. Why had he gotten so far away from Katie Jo?

He cursed as he hit another rut, bouncing high enough that his head hit the roof of the cab. His ranch foreman cursed along with him from the passenger seat.

When Joey had called and explained Katie Jo's hysteria, Chase knew without thinking that it had to do with Mansfield. He just didn't know what. At least Katie Jo was heading this way

with Joey, and Joey was coming prepared, having gotten a shotgun from the house.

Twenty minutes further down the dirt road, Chase saw the green Chevy coming at him from the opposite direction. He slammed on the brakes and hopped out of the cab, coming around the front just as Joey hit the brakes. Chase could see him grab for Katie Jo, who had opened the door even as he had started slowing down. *Damn*, what had gotten into her?

She stumbled and almost fell as she raced toward him. Chase cursed a blue streak when he saw she was barefoot.

“What in the hell were you thinking, Joey?” he growled at his ranch hand as Katie Jo fell into his arms, crying and babbling at the same time.

“Boss, she gave me no choice and even less time.”

Chase only half heard him as he gathered Katie Jo up in his arms and took her to the pickup. He tried to set her down in the cab but she refused to let him go, so he ended up scooting onto the seat right beside her. He flipped the heat up on high as she shivered against his chest.

Checking outside, he was aware that Joey had stationed himself to the front and right of the pickup, shotgun in hand, and now Riley, his foreman, had slipped to the left, the revolver he always wore while out on the range now in his hand instead of in his holster.

He brushed Katie Jo’s hair away from her face, cooing soft assurances against her forehead as she continued to cry. “Baby, I can’t help unless you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Jeff,” she stammered between hiccups as she tried to catch her breath.

Damn, he knew it had something to do with him.

He took Katie Jo by the shoulders, shaking her slightly to catch her attention. Something had happened and he needed to know what.

“Tell me right now.” Chase cursed the edge he heard in his voice when her eyes rounded and she pulled away from him, but at least it got her attention.

“He called...the house,” she finally got out.

“Shit.” Mansfield knew where they were, but Chase didn’t know where he was. “Stay here.” He climbed out of the cab and quickly told Riley and Joey what they needed to do. Joey hopped in the other truck and took off while Riley climbed into the back of the Ranger. As Chase got in behind the wheel, he glanced behind him, making sure Riley was braced against the back window. He knew he’d keep a look out from there.

As he drove back toward the ranch, he called Steve.

“How long will it take Bob to get your plane down to Corpus Christi?”

“Damn, Chase, what the hell is going on? Travis called and said you were asking questions about Jeff Mansfield. I mean, even if I am a computer geek, I’ve heard of him and you’re way out of your league if you’re thinking of messing with him.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Chase growled at his brother, even though he knew Steve was right. And the only way he could hope to deal with Mansfield was to get Katie Jo out of the country. “Are you going to help, or not?”

“Yeah,” his brother answered and Chase could hear computer keys clicking in the background. “Corpus Christi is closer to you but you’d end up having to go up to Houston anyway to clear customs, so you might as well head there. It’ll take Bob about four hours to fly it and you three to drive. In route, he can file his flight plan to Johannesburg and radio ahead to have them ready to clear customs.”

“Get him on it then.” Chase swerved to miss a rut. He backed his foot off the gas, figuring it wouldn’t do any good if he got in a wreck before he could even get back to the house. “Oh, and Steve, use that fancy equipment of yours to see who made the last call to my house and where it came from.”

He pulled the truck into the driveway in a cloud of dust. When he came around to open Katie Jo’s door, she just sat there.

He wondered how many more times she could be traumatized and not have it permanently scar her.

She turned to him. "You can't go with me, Chase. Jeff said he was going to kill you." There was absolutely no inflection in her voice, no traces of the hysteria of earlier. If he could afford the time, he knew he should worry.

"Sweetheart, we haven't said any vows yet, but if I recall, they have something to do with 'for better or for worse.'" Chase also knew there was a line about 'until death do us part' but he wasn't about to recite that. "I love you and we're going to see this through together, all right?"

Her bottom lip trembled but she didn't cry. She slowly nodded. Chase swore he was going to make Mansfield pay for the pain he had put Katie Jo through. He took her hand and led her into the house. Together, they packed as fast as they could.

Joey was standing nonchalantly at the edge of the porch when they exited the house but Chase knew the shotgun was within reach. Riley waited for them by his Blazer. He took Katie Jo's bags from her and tossed them into the back. "I figure if someone's looking for you, they don't have this car tagged. I'll drive you where you need to go."

"Thanks." Chase handed Katie Jo up into the backseat and she immediately laid down, curling up in a tight ball using Chase's jacket for a pillow. He doubted she would sleep but at least she could rest. He climbed in front with Riley.

"Got your phone on you?" Chase asked and the foreman handed it over. Chase might not be much into computers, but he thanked the heavens for the rapid communication provided by wireless phones. He punched in his brother's number.

"Did this number come up on your caller ID?" he asked when Steve answered.

"Yeah, where are you?"

"Riley's driving us to Houston. This'll be the number where you can reach me. I'll have Riley use my phone; hopefully to sidetrack the bastard since that's the way he seems to track us."

"Speaking of which," Steve said. "The call to your house was made from a cell phone, but I can't locate the user."

Chase swore. He wanted to know where the bastard was.

“Bob is in route,” his brother continued. “The Houston airport has a separate area for general aviation. You’ll see the signs when you get there. You’ll have to clear customs and then wait for Bob. Once he arrives, he’ll have to refuel but you should be airborne within half an hour.”

“Thanks, Steve, I owe you.”

“Yeah, well, I sure as shit hope you know what you’re doing, because this has got to be the most harebrained—”

“Later,” Chase said and hung up. He glanced over the seat to see if Katie Jo was sleeping. He worried about her. She acted near exhaustion, but then they hadn’t exactly been getting their sleep in any kind of a regular pattern lately.

“Riley, I want you and Joey to stay away from the house,” he said to his foreman in low tones so Katie Jo wouldn’t overhear. “Get some supplies and stay out at the shack with the horses. Don’t go near the house.”

* * * *

The trip to Houston was mercifully uneventful. Riley dropped them off at the general aviation terminal. Chase had a moment of panic when Katie Jo couldn’t locate her passport. She tore through all of her suitcases, twice, before finally finding it in the bottom of her makeup bag.

“That’s an important document. Why would you keep it with your toothpaste, for God’s sake?” Chase started stuffing her clothes back into the suitcase.

“Give me that.” She yanked her silk underwear out of his hands. He hadn’t noticed that he was balling them in his fists.

“Where should I have put my passport, Chase? In the wall safe in my home; in the safety-deposit box at my bank? Or maybe tucked neatly under my panties in my dresser?” She shouted at him over the top of her suitcase, shaking those self-named panties in his face.

If she weren’t so mad, he would have laughed, but if there was one thing he had learned from his short-lived relationships, it was that a man should never, never laugh at a woman in a

temper. And then her next statement made him forget all about laughing.

"In case it skipped your notice, I have no home anymore. I don't even have a dresser." She finished on a whisper and as always, it completely did him in.

"Hey, is this your first fight?" A jovial voice had Chase spinning around just as Travis slammed into him with a huge hug.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Chase couldn't have been more surprised.

"You didn't answer your cell so I hopped a ride with Bob to tell you what I found out."

"You could have sent it with him." Chase stuck out his hand in greeting to the pilot, who had walked in behind Travis.

Travis tossed a duffle bag onto the custom's table and reached in a pocket for his passport. "Haven't been to Houston in awhile. Too bad we're not staying."

"Travis, can it. What are you doing here?"

"Come on, Chase. I busted my butt getting here. This could be the story of a lifetime."

Chase snorted. "Oh, so it's not me you're worried about. You're just out for a story."

"What can I say?" Travis grinned and shrugged.

Chase doubted his brother's reasons for being here, but at the same time, it did make him feel better. The McVicker men took care of each other and he was really glad to have TJ with him.

Bob waved them over. "This is Leroy Dean, a pilot friend of mine we're taking along. It's a nineteen hour flight into Johannesburg and I don't want to fly it without relief. Even on autopilot."

Chase shook the man's hand. "I guess I hadn't thought of the distance in terms of flight time. Glad to have you along." He waved Katie Jo in front of him as they walked down the stairs and out to the jet. Once Chase stored their bags, he settled into the seat beside her.

Travis plopped into a facing seat. “Hey, I’m Travis, Chase’s little brother.” He stuck out his hand.

Chase snorted. Travis was at least as tall as he was.

“You’ll have to excuse Chase. He has no sense of humor.”

Katie Jo gave Travis a radiant smile as she shook his hand and Chase scowled. She hadn’t said a word, much less looked at him, since he’d yelled at her in the customs office.

“Go find us some drinks, TJ,” he told his brother.

He scrunched down in his seat. “No thanks, I’m not thirsty.” He gave Chase a smirk just to irritate him. There wasn’t a time of day that Travis wasn’t eating or drinking something. The guy had a hollow leg.

“Travis, go see if Bob needs anything. Now.”

Travis looked from Katie Jo to him. She was staring out the window and he knew he wore a scowl that used to scare his younger brother. Travis raised a brow in question. Chase’s frown deepened and Travis got up to leave, but not before bending close to whisper.

“Don’t screw this one up. I like her; she stands up to you.”

Whistling tunelessly, he walked to the front of the plane, banged on the pilot’s door and disappeared. Chase shook his head. Let Bob deal with him for a while.

Chase immediately turned to Katie Jo. “I’m sorry, darlin’.”

She whipped her head around so fast, Chase had to duck to keep from getting hit by the ponytail that swished around at the back of her head.

“Damn it, quit saying that just because I get mad at you.”

Her eyes were snapping fire and Chase thought she looked beautiful. She also looked dangerous; not at all like the Katie Jo he knew. And on top of that, he had never heard her swear.

“You don’t want me to tell you I’m sorry?”

“Not when you’re only saying it to get out of trouble.”

Maybe I should have let TJ stay. He certainly didn’t understand a woman’s thinking, especially not this particular woman.

“I’m not just saying it.”

“Okay, then what are you sorry for?” She turned to level her gaze at him and Chase knew what he said next could be the death of him.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” he started, taking her hand in his. He watched as her brow smoothed and her frown disappeared. “And I’m sorry that you feel like you have no home, no bank and,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “no dresser for your sexy silk panties.”

He watched as a blush tinted her cheeks a becoming pink. With a sigh, she laid her head on his shoulder.

“And I’m sorry I dragged you into this mess I call my life.”

“Darlin’, there’s no where else I’d rather be.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’ve got to ask you, though. Are you always going to be so cranky at this time of the month?”

Her head snapped up nearly cracking him on the chin.

“Just kidding,” he said quickly, gathering her in his arms and covering her mouth with his. It was the only thing he could think of that would keep him out of trouble.

Chapter 18

Katie woke up sometime in the night and for a minute, was completely disoriented. There was noise and a constant vibration; she had a blanket over her and Chase was snuggled up against her back.

It all came back to her in a rush. The call, the mad drive to Houston, the flight. They were somewhere over the Atlantic now. She shivered.

“You cold?” Chase’s drowsy voice sounded behind her.

“No, but I do need to get up.” The facing seats in the plane slid down and together to form beds and his body blocked her in.

“Hurry back.”

Katie made her way to the bathroom, and then stopped by the galley to get a bottle of water. After they were airborne, Bob had come back to inform them they were their own flight attendants, but there was plenty of food on board. So they had eaten microwaved dinners and later snacked on popcorn and beer before calling it a night.

Chase was propped up against the side of the plane when she returned. She handed him her water and he took a swig before giving it back. She sat down on the edge of the seat.

“What time is it? I feel like we’ve been flying for days,” she whispered, not wanting to wake Travis, who was sprawled across the seats on the opposite side of the plane.

“Somewhere close to morning. Leroy says we’ll stop to refuel in Cape Town.”

Katie stifled a yawn. She plucked at her tee shirt, hating the feel of having slept in her clothes.

“Come here, sweetheart.” Chase held up an arm and Katie crawled across the seats to snuggle down next to him.

“Ever hear of the mile high club?” He tucked her hair behind her ear and kissed it.

“Don’t even think it,” Katie said, although without much heat.

He chuckled. “Maybe on the return flight.”

She snorted.

He sighed. “Well, a guy can dream, can’t he?”

Katie murmured, her eyes drifting closed as Chase gently stroked her arm.

The next thing Katie knew, light streamed through the window above her head and she was aware of male laughter filtering back into the cabin from the galley. She stretched, and then stood to dig through one of her bags for her hairbrush.

“We’re about two hours from landing,” Travis said as he brought her a cup of coffee. “How’d you sleep?”

“I can’t believe I slept that long.”

“You needed it,” Chase added as he flipped the levers to bring the seats upright. “Besides, it makes the flight go faster.”

“So what’s the plan when we land in Johannesburg?” Travis slumped in a seat, hanging one leg over the armrest.

“That depends on what you found out.” Chase answered.

Travis got a totally blank look on his face, and Katie giggled.

Chase kicked his foot. “You know, the information that you just had to bring in person?”

“Oh. Yeah. Actually there’s not much to tell. I called that number you gave me and it was that Mkatka fellow.”

“You talked to him?” Katie interrupted.

Travis shrugged. “Yeah, but he didn’t want to say too much over the phone. He’s supposed to meet us at the airport with a Jeep and he’ll fill us in on the way to Mpumalanga.”

Katie’s stomach lurched with a dip of the plane and she put a hand to her abdomen. Chase opened his mouth and she quickly

scowled. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing worse than a man thinking he knew all about a woman's body.

Anyway, her fluttering stomach had nothing to do with her anatomy, but rather with the idea of actually finding out what the mystery was all about and putting some closure to her father's death.

* * * *

By the time they cleared customs and walked out of the airport, it was late afternoon. The air was warm and very dry.

"Miss Katie, is that you?" A rich, deep voice with a slight British accent hailed her from the curb. She turned toward a dark-skinned man wearing khaki slacks and a white shirt, but she didn't recognize him. She felt Chase's hand tighten slightly on her elbow and Travis took a step closer to her other side.

The man came forward eagerly, holding out a photograph that she immediately recognized as the same one on her father's desk. "Here, this is me and your father." The man pointed to each person in the photo as he named them.

"Mkatka," she said in recognition.

"Yes, I have not changed, but you have grown even more beautiful." He gave her a little bow, then began picking up their suitcases and stowing them in a small trailer attached to the back of a Jeep.

"All in," he said as he rounded the vehicle to climb in behind the wheel. "It is three hours to Mpumalanga and I will tell you what I know as we drive."

Katie groaned, hating the thought of sitting for another three hours. Only the prospect of a hot bath at the end of the journey made her climb in the front seat as Chase and Travis hopped in the back.

They had left Bob and Leroy with the plane. Bob was going to check it over carefully and have it refueled and they said they would follow in the rental vehicle later. She envied them the possibility of getting to a shower before she could.

Mkatka wasted no time once they cleared the airport traffic. The rhythm of his words as he spoke took Katie back to the years

when she had traveled with her father. While some of the native people in South Africa spoke English, she recalled there were eleven official languages and several local dialects, each with its own particular rhythm.

"I did not know about your father, Miss Katie, until your Mister Travis called. I was very sorry to hear of his death."

"Thank you," Katie replied, and then added, "Do you know why we are here, Mkatka?"

He nodded once. "Mister Travis said that perhaps your father died because of what was happening here when he traveled here in the summer." When Katie acknowledged that, he shook his head. "I do not know how that could be, but I will tell you what I know and perhaps, we can solve the mystery."

Katie looked to the backseat where both Travis and Chase were leaning forward to hear what their guide had to say.

"In order to understand, perhaps I need to go back several years. Many of the men of Mpumalanga worked in the gold mines. Large white corporations owned these mines. Then in 1998 when the gold prices dropped, it was no longer profitable to keep some of the mines open. They were not producing enough to make it worthwhile. Many, many men were out of work."

Katie and Chase nodded since Katie had been with her father three years ago when he had hired the miners.

"How do you know all this?" Travis asked, not having the background the others did.

"I have lived in the Mpumalanga Province all of my life, as did my whole family for many generations. My father was a miner. Even though the mines shut down, some men, like my father, knew there was still gold to mine, if not in the large quantities the corporations wanted. So they began to mine in secret."

"Isn't that illegal?" Katie couldn't help but interrupt.

"Yes, it is, although the government is trying to pass laws to give the miners the mineral rights to the mines the corporations

no longer want. In the meantime, they mine in secret, and then bribe the whites to take it to the separators and sell it.”

Katie had a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach but Chase voiced what she had only begun to suspect.

“Did Katie Jo’s father help the miners?”

Mkatka nodded. “My father knew that I worked with the professor when he was here during the summer. The rest of the year, I attended university. The second summer Professor Hawthorne came, I took my father and the other miners out to meet him at the dig site.” He gave Katie a look of apology. “We never wanted anything to happen to the professor. He would never take anything for his help. All he wanted was to be able to record the history of our people.”

Katie put a hand on his arm. “I know.”

“The professor not only hired the men to help at the dig site, but he agreed to sell the gold that the miners brought to him. They would bring it at night when the professor and the team were sleeping so no one knew. They hid it in one particular corner of the cave they had agreed upon. Several times during the summer, he would take the ore to the separator and it could not be traced to my father and his friends.”

“Why wouldn’t anyone question where the gold came from?” Travis asked.

“You have to understand,” Mkatka replied, “it was not a lot of gold. In one summer, there might be no more than twenty to thirty ounces. While that might not be very much money in your country, it is enough for many families to live for a year here.

“Also, it is not illegal to pan the streams and rivers, so it was not unusual for someone to find small quantities and sell it.”

As Mkatka told them the story, they had driven further away from the semiarid valley toward the Lowveld that were surrounded by the Transvaal Drakensberg highlands. Katie began to remember how varied the land of South Africa was, and especially here in the Mpumalanga Province. They crossed a bridge over the Blyde River, which cut through the temperate

rain forest and meandered on through the tropical bush of the plain.

It hadn't seemed like three hours before they began seeing some of the resorts that Mpumalanga was becoming famous for.

"Do you have reservations?" Mkatka asked her. She glanced back at Chase.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. "The *Badplaas Resort*?" He questioned, badly mispronouncing the word. But Mkatka nodded, apparently knowing where it was.

"You will be right at the foot of the Hlumuhlumu Mountains and have a grand view of the Nature Reserve. It is also only about fifty kilometers from where your father worked."

"Where do you work now, Mkatka?" Katie asked. They had been talking for so long about her father, she really didn't know much about him.

"Once I finished at university, I began to teach there. Like your father, I am an anthropologist. I want to preserve our people's heritage." He pulled up in front of the resort.

"You will find the *Badplaas* meets all your needs. Our Province has become somewhat of a tourist attraction, and there are those who would capitalize on that with their restaurants and resorts."

Katie was more than ready to get out of the Jeep and stretch her legs. She let the guys handle the luggage as she looked around with interest. She had loved traveling with her father. Though foreigners, the people of Mpumalanga had welcomed them and the children she used to visit in the outlying villages were delightful.

Once they were checked in, Mkatka bid them farewell. "I will return in the morning if you will be ready to go out to the excavation site. What we are looking for is still a mystery, but I will help."

"What about your classes?" Katie didn't want to take him away from his work.

He smiled. "Even we do not have to work on Saturday, Miss Katie."

She had completely forgotten what day of the week it was. So much had happened so fast, she was at a loss.

"That will work great," Chase replied. "We'll meet you here in the morning."

He tossed Travis a key and took her hand. "You get to stay with the guys. For tonight, you have the room to yourself," he told his brother. "Want to meet in an hour for drinks and dinner?"

"Got ya," Travis replied, heading for the elevator.

"Come on, sweetheart, let's get you into a nice, warm shower." Chase put his arm around her shoulders and guided her down the hall. "We get the suite overlooking the garden."

When Katie got out of the shower, she saw Chase standing on the small patio just beyond the sliding glass doors. She tied the belt to her robe as she joined him.

He had a beer from the small fridge in one hand, his face pensive as he looked out at the magnificent landscape. Even though she didn't say a word, he sensed her presence and reached an arm back to pull her up next to him.

"Are you sorry you came with me?" she asked, kissing the arm that he tucked under her chin when he pulled her back against him.

"Of course not," he immediately replied, but somehow, it didn't sound convincing.

"You don't think we'll find anything more than we already know, do you?" Katie asked him the same question she had been asking herself since they left Houston.

He sighed, the sound a breath of air against her ear. "I just don't know, sweetheart. But one way or the other, we're seeing this through to the end. I already promised you that."

Katie shivered, even though the evening air was warm. After what they had been through, she only hoped the end would be a happy one.

Chapter 19

Chase met Travis for a beer at the bar next to the restaurant while Katie Jo finished getting ready for dinner. He still hadn't figured out why it took women so long to dress, but knew it was probably one of those mysticisms men were never supposed to understand. He did know enough not to ask about it.

"You clean up good," Travis said when Chase got to the table.

He certainly felt better after showering and shaving. "I think I'm getting too old for all this traveling."

His brother snorted. "Gordy's old. Hell, he's over forty. You and I are *Forever Young*, remember?"

Chase and Travis, being the youngest of the six McVicker men, had always taunted their brothers about being as old and feeble as Mr. Painter from next door.

Recalling the movie TJ had mentioned, Chase added, "Yeah, but remember what happened to that guy at the end of the movie? He aged about fifty years in minutes. That's how I feel." Chase took a swallow of beer, savoring the cool brew.

"Well, I gotta admit," TJ stroked his chin as he contemplated Chase, "you are looking a little ragged around the edges." He grinned. "So I guess I'm the only *Forever Young* one."

Chase shook his head at his brother. "You wait. One of these days, when you least expect it, some woman's going to come into your life and ring your bell. Then you talk to me about getting old."

His brother sobered. "This is serious stuff, isn't it?"

Chase nodded. "I'd say the 'forever and ever' type serious."

Men didn't say the word 'love' in each other's company, but the meaning was still conveyed.

TJ held up his beer. "Here's to you, then, brother. And I get the pot!"

Five of the McVicker brothers had put a hundred dollars each in a savings account when Gordon, the oldest, had gotten married. Like fools, each of his brothers thought they would be the last to tie the knot. But like dominoes, they had each fallen under a woman's spell in the same order as they had been born. Chase had always thought for sure he would be last, if he ever married at all. TJ, on the other hand, should have married years ago because Chase knew he had a legendary black book and he should have settled on one of those women by now.

"What about John?" Chase asked, referring to one of the twins.

"He's out," TJ replied. "Can't help it if he's divorced now. First time is all that counts."

Chase took another swig of beer. He really didn't care because he wanted to marry Katie Jo and spend the rest of his life with her, and it didn't matter if he was the first or last to get married. But he couldn't resist taunting his brother.

"Well, I guess the money is yours; but only *after* I tie the knot."

"Speaking of which, here's your lovely lady." Travis stood and Chase followed suit, turning to search out Katie Jo, who had just entered the restaurant. Damn, she was gorgeous. Her red hair was pulled to the top of her head, curls cascading down to frame her face. The freckles that so many might find detracting, only enhanced her beauty.

She wore a knee-length sheath of mint green, slinky material, and Chase held his breath as he watched the way it slithered over her hips and breasts as she walked toward them. God, for the chance to trade places with that material.

"Hi, sweetheart. The wait was worth it," Chase said.

She frowned at him and Travis cuffed him on the upper arm. "You don't tell a woman you've been waiting for her," he said.

Chase was confused. "Why not?"

Katie Jo and Travis both laughed and Katie Jo just shook her head. "Forget it, Travis, he's not well versed yet on the ways of women."

Chase scowled. "Like Travis is?"

His brother smirked at him. "At least I know when to keep my mouth shut." He leaned over and kissed Katie Jo on the cheek. "You look ravishing, sweetheart."

"Hey, that's my line." Chase didn't like his brother flirting with Katie Jo, even if he knew TJ would never step out of line. But when he looked, she was smiling at him, not his brother.

Bob and Leroy joined them for dinner. Bob told them, given his experience flying all over the world, they would be better off not going to sleep until their regular bedtime to help prevent jet lag. They spent a relaxing evening at the restaurant and bar, drinking a good number of beers, but finally, the long flight and drive caught up with them. Katie Jo began yawning before dessert and her eyes drooped as she gave him a lopsided smile. He told the rest of the crew goodnight and walked her back to their room, where she immediately crashed for the night before he could even get his teeth brushed.

* * * *

The phone rang before dawn the next morning, and Chase rolled sleepily over to grab the receiver.

"We cannot go out to the excavation site today," Mkatka's soft British voice came over the line. "It is raining heavily and the road will be flooded."

Chase looked toward the patio doors, but it was still dark. Just at that moment, lightning flashed and he could see rain sheeting the glass doors. Why was he not surprised? It seemed that he and Katie Jo were destined to run into obstacle after obstacle in this quest they were on.

“Try for tomorrow?” he asked around a yawn. Agreeing, Mkatka promised to pick them up in the morning.

He contemplated going back to sleep until Katie Jo’s hand slipped over his chest, lightly caressing.

“We get to sleep in?” she murmured against his shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s raining.”

“Good.” She sighed, and Chase felt her warm breath on his chest and a very wet tongue licking his nipple to a peak. Katie Jo moved half across his chest, her hair tickling his chin. One hand was sliding ever so slowly down his stomach, and he automatically tightened his muscles. She kissed her way up his neck and across his cheek.

“I love waking up next to you,” she said.

He sucked in his breath when her hand slid beneath his boxers and circled his growing erection. “Honey, every part of me loves being woken up by you.”

“It’s been so long.” She moaned when he returned the favor by caressing her breast.

Chase had had morning erections before, but for some reason, with Katie Jo, he wanted immediate satisfaction and he quickly pulled her nightgown over her head. Her pert nipples beckoned him and he greedily sucked one into his mouth as he caressed the other. He rolled over so she was under him. She spread her legs to welcome him and he sighed as though he had just come home from being away a long, long time.

“Now,” she urged, sliding her hands down his back to caress his butt. “We have all day but I need you now.”

Chase needed no encouragement. He lifted her hips and slid in all the way, their hips meshing as though they were made for each other. She was tight and wet and he groaned in satisfaction as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Chase let Katie set the rhythm, and she wasn’t gentle this morning. She wanted it all, the aching hunger deep in her womb, the tingling sensations running from her breasts downward, and the delicious taste of his tongue as he kissed her. Most of all, she wanted the explosive orgasm that only he could

give her. She moved her hips faster, contracting her inner muscles with each upward movement and Chase followed, pumping into her until she was sure he touched her womb.

With a cry, she arched her back as he slid faster and harder until he exploded along with her. Her climax erupted deep in her womb, moving outward with frightening speed, the electrifying rapture sweeter and longer than ever before.

“Oh, baby,” Chase breathed against her neck and she felt a tremor go through him. “If I died tomorrow, it would be as a happy man.”

A shiver raced down Katie’s spine. “Don’t say that,” she whispered as she hugged him close.

He kissed her neck. “It’s only a saying, sweetheart. It doesn’t mean anything bad.”

“Intellectually, I know that; emotionally, I am scared to death something is going to happen to end the dream world I’ve been living in.”

He kissed her quickly on the lips and then bounded out of bed. “Nothing is going to happen. Now call down and get us some room service while I shower.” His gaze slowly slid down her body, lingering in the vicinity of her hips. “On second thought, call down but tell them not to deliver it for an hour.”

He reached down and grabbed her by the ankle as she lifted the phone and punched the number for room service. She could barely get a word out as he tickled her toes with his tongue, then began nibbling her arch and up her ankle. With a giggle, she hung up the phone.

“We may be eating snake,” she said as Chase pulled her slowly toward the end of the bed. “I’m not at all sure what I answered yes to.”

“Do I totally annihilate your brain cells?” Chase grinned as he lifted her in his arms and headed for the bathroom.

“Always,” she replied as he stepped into the shower stall, letting her slide down his body. The spray quickly enveloped them in warmth, and even if the water had been cold, Chase and Katie would soon have been turning it to steam.

* * * *

The alarm rang at five the next morning and Chase banged around on the side table trying to find the snooze button, groaning at the thought that he had to get up. Yesterday, he had visited with Travis, Bob and Leroy while Katie Jo browsed through the boutiques and shops in the vicinity of the *Badplaas Resort*.

She had come back to the room with her hands full of glass bead necklaces and little flutes for the children of the village, she said, and a safari hat for him. She had informed him that his Stetson was just too out of place and if the village chief saw it, he would want it and Chase would lose it anyway.

She had then plunked the safari hat on his head, declared that he looked somewhat authentic, and kissed him. One kiss had turned into several, and before long, Chase had her backed against the wall with her skirt up around her waist. It had been only one of several times they had made love. After starting with the bed, then the shower, they had continued in like fashion throughout the day taking turns trying to see how many different places in the suite and how many different positions they could manage.

Now, he thought, as he rolled out of bed, *it was time to get to the bottom of whatever mystery surrounded the excavation and gold*. He groaned as he stretched. He was beginning to think he couldn't keep up with Katie Jo now that he had unleashed her sensuality. Damn, but he loved her to distraction, he thought as he looked down to see her naked bottom and back. If he thought he could get by with leaving her in the safety of the resort to protect her, he certainly would.

Knowing that wasn't going to happen, he smacked her lightly on the bottom. "Wake up, sleepyhead. Time to get this show on the road."

"Isn't it raining?" she asked hopefully.

"You wish. Let's go," he said over his shoulder as he headed for the bathroom. If he kept her beautifully freckled, naked skin

in his sights, they wouldn't get anywhere and Mkatka would be left waiting in the lobby.

They grabbed breakfast to go and ate in the jeep as Mkatka drove them out of town and toward the mountains. Chase had also prearranged lunch for them to take, not knowing how long they would be away from the resort.

An orange sun soon made its appearance and the shadows of night fell away to reveal the lush flora and bush of the foothills. Chase couldn't see any openings wide enough to drive a jeep through and he wondered if the road itself became overgrown from lack of use. Mkatka, however, turned at just the right spot and they bounced along a rutted, narrow trail.

An hour out, they came across a village. The huts that circled the clearing were small with some type of grass roofs, but they appeared well cared for. Many people were already out and about, smoke coming from a number of small fires.

"This is the village Mkatka is from," Katie Jo told him as they stopped. "He wants only a moment or two with some of the men who mined and then worked for my father. Come on," she added, climbing out of the Jeep and beckoning him. Small children immediately surrounded her, all chattering in a language Chase couldn't decipher.

Whether Katie Jo understood the words the children said or not, she understood their smiles as she distributed the glass necklaces and wood flutes she had brought. They pushed Chase and her together and formed a ring around them, singing and laughing as they danced in a circle. Chase kept an eye on the kids, but he was more riveted by Katie Jo. Her eyes glowed, her face flushed, and she laughed as though she had not a care in the world.

"Come on, we have to dance, too." She grabbed his hands.

"This doesn't sound like a two-step," Chase replied, hesitant.

She laughed, shaking her head. "Silly, just pretend." As they began to move, the children sang louder, and Chase was soon caught up in their frivolity.

When Mkatka returned, he had two men with him. "This is Mhanga and Mketé," he introduced them. "They will go with us."

The two climbed into the back of the Jeep and they drove slowly from the village, all the children waving and yelling behind them.

"You have made some new friends," Mkatka said to him.

"It's Katie Jo they adore," Chase offered. "I think they would have taken her off and adopted her if I had let them."

"They remember you from the summer you spent here with your father," Mkatka said to Katie Jo, who sat in the front seat of the jeep with him. "The fire angel, they call you."

Katie Jo blushed, but as Chase looked at her, he couldn't have thought of a more appropriate name.

The road they followed wound back and forth and Chase could tell they were on a gradual ascent, even though he could hardly see the sky for the dense canopy of trees. Within half an hour, they came to another clearing, this one with a wood pole fence enclosing the area in front of what looked like a cave.

"This is it," Katie Jo said softly, her eyes growing wider. He knew it had to be spooky being back at the excavation site without her father. She reached for Chase's hand as she climbed out of the Jeep. "I can't believe you made Travis wait back at the resort," she said. "He complained adamantly about missing out on a story."

"He'll catch up with us," Chase replied. He had given his brother and the two pilots strict instructions to follow at a distance, and to keep a sharp eye out for any other foreigners.

As good a reporter as Travis was, he hadn't brought a picture of Mansfield with him and they were just going to have to rely on Chase's description. He had no doubts that Mansfield would find a way to follow them. It was just a matter of time, and he could only hope they would be back in the safety of the resort before any confrontation took place. He was totally out of his element here, and would have to rely on Mkatka's knowledge of the surroundings.

Since Mkatka was continuing the work, he had a key to the padlock on the gate and he opened it for them.

“The fall and winter are not the best for doing this work,” Mkatka said. “Besides, I teach my classes and then I will bring my students here in the summer.” He lit the lanterns and handed one to Chase and then one to each of the other two men before taking one himself. Holding it high, he led them into the cave where ancient kings had been buried.

Chase didn’t know what he had expected, but the area inside the cave was relatively bare and looked just about like any other cave he had ever been in. The difference here was that string had been stretched between wood pegs to form a grid work across the floor. Some quadrants were deeper than others, indicating more digging had been done there.

“We have found pottery fragments, a few pieces of jewelry, and cooking utensils, along with one skeleton,” Mkatka said as he hung his lantern on a peg already set into the wall. Chase followed suit. “We believe the king’s tomb is still sealed further back in the cave. When royalty died, they were buried in a cave and their trusted servants were sealed in the tomb with them.

“They believed that the king would rise again and he must have his men here to serve him when he did. The servants actually continued to cook and live toward the front of the cave here,” he pointed to the cordoned off part, “until they died. They were then buried. That’s why only one skeleton was found laying on top of the ground.”

“It could take years, then, to excavate the entire cave and find the actual tomb,” Chase said, fascinated in spite of the fact he had no background in this type of work.

Mkatka nodded. “I am working with people at the University to find funds to allow us to do more. It would be better if we could work year round, or at least as much as the weather permits. If we had enough people, we could work both here and further back in the cave. But we have to be able to dig a tunnel around this area and to the outside. Otherwise, we must traipse directly across this first site.”

Mhanga and Mketete motioned them to one side of the cave where the rock formed a natural shelf higher than Chase was tall. "The shelf...this big." Mketete spread his hands a couple of feet apart. "Good place to leave gold."

"Ah, gold. Did you hear that, Morris? I thought perhaps we might not get here in time."

Chase and Katie Jo spun around at the same time.

"How did you find us?" Katie Jo whispered and Chase hated like hell to hear the fear in her voice.

"How hard did you think that would be?" Mansfield retorted. "You have always been so predictable. I knew you'd come after the gold." Mansfield stepped further into the cave.

Chase instinctively stepped in front of Katie Jo. He could feel her trembling fingers dig into his arm. He kept his gaze on Mansfield, but noticed Mkatka and the other two men stepped toward the back of the cave.

Damn, where was his brother? He was supposed to have intercepted these two.

Another shadow crossed the mouth of the cave, and Chase relaxed slightly. But then an unknown voice spoke. "I told you there was a gold mine, Mr. Mansfield." The voice was male and young.

Chase couldn't see his face because the light from the cave entrance shadowed his features. And then the others didn't matter because Mansfield spoke to Katie Jo.

"I've had it with you, Kathleen," he snarled.

Chase thought how odd it sounded for him to be addressing Katie Jo with a name not even her own. He was beginning to believe her assertion that Mansfield was insane.

"I've chased you halfway around the world and you're going to pay. Now where the hell is the deed to this gold mine?"

Chase felt Katie Jo's hand go still on his arm, and then she actually laughed. "There is no gold mine, Jeff. There never was."

"She's lying," the younger man immediately chimed in. "I was here with the professor for the past two summers. I even watched the miners late one night and when they left the cave, I

checked and found gold ore in sacks on the ledge. I would have taken it all, but I didn't have any way to get it back to the States. Besides, I was stuck out here for the whole summer. That's why I just took the one rock," he finished, "the rock I gave you."

Katie sucked in her breath. "You've known for the past two years?" she asked Jeff. "That was before you married me."

"I had to prove my worth to the men I work for," he said. "I figured marrying you was the easy way to get my hands on the gold." He laughed then. "Why do you think I married you? Certainly not for the sex."

Katie had to grab Chase's arm to keep him by her side. She could feel the tremor of rage slice through him and she didn't want him hurt again. Besides, Jeff's words didn't bother her anymore. She wasn't too sure about Morris' fists, but Mkatka, Chase and the other men outnumbered the three hovering near the entrance. Or so she thought until Jeff motioned for Morris to step forward.

"Morris has brought something to convince you to give me the deed to the mine."

Katie watched in horror as Morris held up a stick of dynamite and flicked a lighter to life.

"There is no gold!" she shouted. "I don't care what he says." She waved a hand toward the younger man. *Why did his voice sound so familiar?*

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Mansfield? You were at your father's house several times when I stopped to see him. My name is Nathan Calhoun."

She thought, suddenly remembering the sullen, complaining youth who had to work with her father on a diversion program to keep from going to jail for vandalism on the campus. It seemed to have been her father's downfall to adopt the troubled youth of the area. And this time, his generous nature had cost him his life.

"Cram the chit-chat," Jeff said. "Nathan, see what's on the ledge," he commanded. Katie watched as the young man slid along the wall trying to keep a distance away from Chase. The

second he was past them, Chase whirled and grabbed him, putting a chokehold on the shorter man.

“Now what, Mansfield?” Chase growled.

Jeff laughed. “He’s expendable. In fact, you’ve done me a favor because now he can disappear along with the rest of you.” His voice turned ugly as he spoke to Katie. “Now, since you won’t willingly hand over the deed, I will simply declare you dead and I will inherit it, anyway. Morris, you do have enough dynamite to seal the entrance, don’t you? It seems fitting that my darling wife will be sealed in a tomb that her father worked so hard to excavate.”

“You’re crazy,” Katie hissed across the distance. “You’ll never get away with this.”

“I’m sorry, my dear wife, but I happen to have connections, you see, so I very well will get away with it.”

“Nope, I’m afraid not, dude. The lady is right.”

Katie sagged with relief at the sound of Travis’ voice, followed quickly by his fist when Jeff turned sharply around. Katie watched as Bob and Leroy each grabbed one of Morris’ arms and wrestled him to the ground before he could light the dynamite.

Nathan wrenched loose from Chase and was fleeing but Chase raced across the distance and soon a free-for-all ensued as Katie watched in horror. Mkatka and the two miners stayed out of it; Mkatka’s arm protectively around Katie’s shoulders.

“Can’t you help?” she asked, not wanting to see Chase or his brother hurt.

“It seems they have it well in hand,” Mkatka answered. In minutes, Jeff, Morris and Nathan were collared. Bob snapped handcuffs on each and Leroy kept watch, holding what looked like an assault rifle. Katie didn’t even want to think about where they had gotten the weapons.

Katie gave Jeff a wide berth as she moved away from the entrance and into Chase’s arms. He kissed her forehead, hugging her tight.

“You have nothing to hold me on,” Jeff arrogantly proclaimed as he was led from the cave.

It was suddenly too much for Katie. She stomped over in front of him, anger making her tremble.

“You killed my father.”

He made a disgusting sound. “He was a weak old man. All I did was try to convince him to give me the deed.”

“And when he told you there was no deed and no gold, you killed him,” she reiterated.

Jeff smirked. “Prove it.”

She stared him down; the love Chase gave her making her strong enough to finally shrug off her fear of this man. And then she hauled off and punched him in the jaw, followed by a knee to the groin. No one stopped her, and no one helped Jeff when he fell to the ground, moaning in agony.

“Damn!” Travis whistled. “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Katie could feel her face redden with embarrassment. She couldn’t believe she had stooped to violence, but it felt good to finally be rid of that part of her life.

Chase threw an arm over her shoulder. “I’m proud of you, babe.” He kissed her temple.

“You know he’s right about holding him.” Travis made a face. “He didn’t even have a weapon.”

“Mkatka?”

Katie could tell by Chase’s questioning tone that he wasn’t about to let Jeff go.

Her father’s friend and guide nodded. “My uncle happens to be on the police force. Unemployment is high, which causes much crime. There is also a large drug problem in our Province. There could be numerous reasons to hold him and it might be many, many,” he repeated for emphasis, “years before he is brought to trial.”

His answer seemed to satisfy Chase. As they headed back through the gate to the vehicles, Mkatka took a few minutes to speak to the other men. Katie kept her arm around Chase’s waist and wouldn’t let him leave her side.

"If Mkatka needs to talk to you, he can come over here. I'm not going over there," she stated emphatically, nodding to where Jeff was being shoved none too gently into the backseat of a van. When he started to shout something at her, Travis hit him in the jaw and he slumped forward in the seat. Katie smiled in satisfaction.

The van backed out of the entrance and turned onto the road, carrying Jeff Mansfield out of her life forever. She hugged Chase tighter and gave Travis a bright smile.

"Thank you," she said the words, even knowing they were inadequate to express her gratitude.

"At your service, my Lady." Travis gave her a mock bow and helped her into the Jeep.

"She's taken, jerk." Chase pushed Travis out of the way and climbed into the seat beside Katie Jo.

Unrepentant, Travis climbed into the front as Mkatka started the vehicle. The two men exchanged glances and Chase wondered what they were up to.

"I don't see a ring on her finger," Travis continued to taunt Chase and he was just about fed up with his younger brother.

"Mkatka, your uncle's a policeman. Does he happen to know a justice of the peace?"

Mkatka laughed. "No, I do not think so. But my brother-in-law in the village may be able to help you." Again, a glance passed between the two men.

"Do I get any say in this matter?" Katie Jo asked.

Chase looked at her. "Of course you do, darlin', but I just—"

"Yes, I will," she interrupted.

"—figured you had already—"

"Yes," she repeated.

"Would you quit interrupting me so I can say this right?" he asked her, exasperated since he knew both his brother and Mkatka could hear every word being said.

The three of them started to laugh, and Chase wondered what the joke was about. He scowled at her.

“I’m sorry, Katie, I really am,” Travis said. “I’ve been trying to teach him finesse, but he mentioned the other day how old he was and I guess you just can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

“I never said I was old,” Chase stated indignantly, reaching forward to swat at his brother. Katie Jo pulled his arm back and laced her fingers with his.

“It’s okay, Travis,” she said, but she was smiling at Chase. “I love him anyway.”

Epilogue

Mkatka stopped the Jeep back at the edge of the village.

The little girls once again surrounded Katie Jo, tugging on her hands and pulling her toward the clearing. They circled her and began to sing.

“What’s going on?” Chase asked. The little boys stood silently by the Jeep, staring up at him.

“They are waiting for you to finish the ceremony,” Mkatka said.

“What ceremony?”

“The one uniting you and Miss Katie.” He grinned widely.

“The one started before we went to the cave.”

Chase looked across the clearing to where Katie Jo smiled at him, surrounded by children in brightly colored scraps of material. He was so focused on her as he walked closer that he didn’t realize he looked like the Pied Piper, the village boys trailing along behind him.

The minute he stopped, the circle of singing girls opened for him and the boys pushed him inside. The circle closed around them, and the boys formed another circle outside the one of girls.

“Did you know about this?” Chase asked Katie Jo as he took her hands.

She shook her head. “I remember the singing ceremony from years ago, but I had forgotten what the song meant.” She gave him a shy smile. “It’s their song of fertility.”

Chase choked.

“We don’t have to do this, Chase, not if you don’t want.”

He kissed her silent and the children's singing rose in volume. "What could be more fitting than to marry Joseph Hawthorne's daughter among the people he called friends and in the land he loved?"

"But what about your family?"

"Well, unless one of these children has an official marriage certificate tucked in a pocket, we'll still have to do it again, or my mom will be rather upset. But that doesn't matter, sweetheart. I would marry you today, tomorrow and again fifty years from now."

From the look of rapture on her face, Chase knew for once, he had gotten the words exactly right.

Mkatka stepped to the edge of the circle next to a very tall, thin man in a bright robe and headdress. "This is my brother-in-law, who is the high priest for the village. He does not speak English, so I will say the words for you."

The priest began to chant and the children grew silent, standing still in the circles enclosing Katie Jo and Chase.

"Our children are pure and see the goodness in people. It is our children who have decided that you are meant to be together," Mkatka repeated after the priest. "The circles they form around you are the unending circles of life, the repetition of the growing season, the cycles of the rains. The small females are inside the circle to be protected always, cared for and surrounded by their family, which is the village. When they grow up, they will be revered as the mother of the earth is, for they are the givers of life."

As Mkatka spoke the priest's words, Chase circled Katie Jo with his arms to hold her tight. He felt strange, as though the words were created just for the two of them. He glanced over to where Travis stood; glad that his brother could be here with him, but wishing his entire family was present. He realized that his family was just like the village, and even though miles might separate them, the circle uniting them was unbroken.

He lifted Katie Jo's chin to kiss her. He didn't need the village priest to tell him to revere this woman. He knew there would never be anyone more important in his life and no one he could love more.

COMING IN OCTOBER

ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY BOOK 3: FANTASIES UNDERCOVER

It must be something about being the youngest of six brothers, or maybe it's his inquisitive nature, but Travis just couldn't stay home and mind his own business. I like the devil-may-care attitude, but I really think it's time he settled down a little, don't you?

So here I am, playing matchmaker again, which I know will make Travis' mom happy, but who in TJ's little black book is the right woman for him? Or maybe, just maybe, it should be a total surprise. After all, he tends to like popping in to surprise his brothers.

Turn the page for a sneak peek at the third book in this trilogy.

Chapter 1

Travis McVicker plunked his laptop case onto his desk at the *Boston Chronicle* and began sorting through a stack of mail. He'd just returned from Africa, where he'd gone with his brother, Chase, in the hopes of a great story. They'd been held hostage and threatened with death, and now he couldn't even write the story since it involved a small group of tribal people trying to eek out a living. If he wrote about the scavenging for gold tailings after mines were shut down, *Big Corporate* would post guards and the tribes would become even more impoverished than they were now.

He let out a sigh as he dropped into his chair. Hell, he would have written the story anyway, if not for Katie Jo, Chase's new wife, who was the basic reason for the trip in the first place. She wouldn't allow him to endanger people, who at one time had been her father's friends.

"Oh, well," he said to no one in particular, "there'll be other stories that'll get me the Prize."

Travis only took the toughest stories Ned Chancy dished out at the weekly assignment meetings in the editorial office of the *Boston Chronicle*. The reason? There was nothing Travis wanted more than to win the Pulitzer Prize for journalism.

Nothing, that is, until he looked across the newsroom when the elevator dinged and Morgan Gentry walked back into his life.

Flashback to his senior year in high school. He had the hots for her so bad, he had almost gotten kicked off the football team because he spent his time watching her at cheerleading practice,

instead of paying attention to the coach. But she had never seen past the fact that he was a whiz at algebra and could help her pass.

Now here he was, nine years later, staring at her again as she walked into Chancy's office; again fantasizing about what he'd like to do with those long legs and voluptuous breasts. She looked better than he remembered, even in his dreams. *What had she been doing since high school?* he wondered, trying to see past a potted palm in the editor's office so he could read their lips. *And what was she doing here?*

It wasn't long before he found out. Chancy, news editor at the *Chronicle* for the past hundred years or so, walked Morgan out of his office and directly toward Travis. For once, he wished he had worn something other than a ratty tee shirt and holey jeans. If his current story didn't depend—

"McVicker, Morgan Gentry," Chancy boomed as if TJ couldn't hear. "She's new, been working at the *LA Sun*. Show her around." With that, he returned to his office. Chancy talked like the news—who, what, when, where, and why—just the basic facts in as few words as possible.

Travis rose from his chair and leaned over his desk to offer his hand. She looked at him as though she knew him, but couldn't place him. Travis decided not to remind her of the geek with glasses who all but stalked her nine years ago.

"McVicker? That name sounds familiar. Have we met?" She accepted his hand and Travis noted how soft and smooth hers was. He also felt a frisson of excitement burst inside his chest at her touch.

He watched her eyes. Yep, she felt it, too. She tilted her head, and he knew she was trying to assess him; trying to pick up the intangible information everyone gives off through their body language. It was an attribute of a good reporter, and not everybody had it.

"Hello?" Her voice brought him back to the newsroom.

“Sorry. I was contemplating your question. I’m sure I would remember if I had met you recently.” He bent the truth because he didn’t want her to know he had fantasized about her for years. “Name’s Travis, but my friends call me TJ.”

“Mr. Chancy said I was your desk mate. That’s not exactly a word I’ve heard before. Would you mind explaining?”

Travis shrugged. “Just that our desks face each other—saves space and all.” He wasn’t going to tell her that it also meant they were reporting partners. Chancy knew he preferred to work alone. He’d have to talk to the boss before he let loose with that information.

“How long have you worked here?” Morgan asked as she sat down, shifting the pencil holder, the scrap paper and the computer mouse to better suit her. She dropped her purse in the side drawer.

“Looking for a story?” Travis asked. The trouble with having her sit across from him was that he couldn’t see her legs, which he had noted were bare beneath the knee length straight denim skirt she wore. Her pink blouse was a standard oxford style, except on her, it looked sexy as hell. She had the back of the collar up and two buttons were undone so when he tilted his head to the side just right, he caught a glimpse of cleavage.

She smiled at his question, removing the clip from her hair and shaking her head to let down waves of glorious blonde hair. Her gesture was wanton and seductive and Travis immediately got a hard-on. She combed her fingers through the shoulder length strands and with an effective twist, had it reclipped in a knot. Damn, he wished she had left it down.

“Just being neighborly. I’m sure there are more interesting topics to find for stories.” She turned to the computer, flipped it on, and began typing.

Talk about a put-down. Travis sat there and looked at her, thinking nine years from high school had made her more beautiful,

but she still ignored him like he was eighteen. And he still had the hots for her body. *Damn.*

His phone rang, giving him something else to think about. It was one of his informants, trying to make money giving him information that was old news to Travis.

“Call back when you have something worthwhile, Brickman,” he said and dropped the phone back into the cradle.

“McVicker, get in here!” Chancy yelled from his door. The man never talked in a normal voice, regardless of how far a person happened to be from him.

“Christ, and it’s only Monday,” he grouched as he rolled away from his desk. His comment brought a smile to Morgan’s face and he tucked it away in his file on her, which was already overflowing with memories. He sorted and filed things in neat compartments in his brain, always having details at his fingertips. He decided as he walked away to start a new file—*Morgan in my sights.*

* * * *

Morgan sighed as she watched TJ walk to Chancy’s office. He looked so good. She had tried to pretend she didn’t know him, but there was no way she could ever forget any of the McVicker boys. There had been enough years between the six of them that not more than one or two had been in high school at any one time, but between her and four sisters, most of her family had gone to school with a McVicker. And like her, all of her sisters had panted after at least one of them during any given time of the year. Not only were they extremely good looking, but they all competed in school sports and had *very* athletic bodies.

When she had moved back to Boston last week, her mom had told her that Gordon, Michael, Steve and now Chase were all married. She hadn’t talked to her sisters so didn’t know how they felt about that, but to Morgan, it was only Travis James who mattered. When her mom mentioned that he still lived in

town and worked for the very newspaper where she had just accepted a job, she had fallen asleep dreaming about him. That dream had been vivid enough to give her a sleeping orgasm and she had awakened with a very unsettled feeling.

"Let's go," Travis said, jerking her out of her daydream. He walked past his desk without stopping, picking up his cell phone along the way. "We've got a story."

"We?" Morgan grabbed her purse and hurried after him.

"Boss says I need to show you the ropes."

Morgan huffed. "I've been a reporter for four years. I think I know how to write a story."

The elevator doors closed behind them.

Travis raised a brow, a trait Morgan remembered as part of every one of the McVicker boys' charm. "If you're so good, where's your notebook?"

Morgan tapped her forehead. "Photographic memory."

Travis shrugged. "I don't think Chancy meant anything by telling me to take you along. He just figures you need to get to know the town."

Morgan rolled her eyes. She had grown up here and Chancy knew that from her resume.

They reached the underground parking lot and Morgan followed Travis to his car. "No company cars?" she asked, sliding into the passenger side of a rather old Monte Carlo.

Travis snorted. "You kidding? Paying us twenty cents a mile is a helluva lot cheaper."

They drove to an outlying section of town and parked in front of a rundown house. Travis turned the car off and slouched down in his seat.

"Aren't we getting out?"

He shook his head. "Surveillance. There's been some high-powered men coming in and out of Boston lately and we got a tip there's a buy going down."

"Buy for what?"

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Drugs, counterfeiting, weapons. That’s the problem with informants—they don’t always have all the details.”

“Which house?”

“Third on the left. Let me know if you see anything.” With that, Travis tipped his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes.

Morgan smiled. If he thought he’d intimidate her or make her feel like she was some cub reporter, he had another think coming. She was used to undercover work. In fact, that was one of the reasons she had decided to leave the *LA Sun*. Her boss thought she was too pretty to be doing stories about dirty criminals and police brutality, so he had assigned her the society section. Talk about crap. She was after a Pulitzer, and a reporter didn’t get that by writing up wedding announcements.

Morgan kept an eye on the house, but she also took time to study Travis. His hair was longer than she remembered, swept back from his forehead and just reaching his collar. It was wavy and dark brown and she itched to run her fingers through it to see if it felt as silky as it looked. He still wore glasses, but had gone from dark frames to rimless, the round lens accenting his deep-set, brown eyes.

When she had followed him out of the office, she hadn’t missed the way his jeans fit tight across his butt, or the fact there was a rip just below the back pocket and she had seen skin, not boxers or briefs. The tee shirt he wore had some rude saying about golfers having longer shafts, but she was more interested in what it covered. Travis McVicker had filled out quite nicely over the years. His arms were muscled, but not to the obscene point of the bodybuilders on Ventura Beach. The tee shirt fit snugly across his chest, leaving little doubt that the rest of his body was just as muscular as what she could see.

She glanced out the window again, paying careful attention to the house they were watching. Nothing moved. There were

no lights on, no car in the drive. She wondered if there was really anything going on, or if this was part of some hazing she got as a new reporter.

She turned her attention back to Travis and found him staring at her. Those eyes that didn't miss a thing slowly moved from her face, down her throat, across her shoulders and then lower. It was as though his hand caressed her, and she could feel her face heat with a blush. She wanted him to touch her, wanted him to do way more than that.

"See anything going on?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

"Not outside," she answered, just to see if he would take the bait. He did.

"What about inside?"

"The house, this car, or me?" she shot right back.

He gave a low whistle. "Are all California girls as forward as you?"

She shrugged. "I didn't make a habit of checking out the girls."

He laughed. "That's good to know. I would hate to think—"

His words were cut off by the sound of gunfire. Before she had time to react, Travis grabbed her and pushed her down on the seat, his body covering hers. She found her face hidden against his crotch, his arms crisscrossed over her lower back. He grabbed his phone out of the cup holder and dialed a number.

"Shots fired, 154 East 22nd." A pause. "You got it covered? Where?"

Just then, sirens went off, but they were a few blocks away. Morgan tried to sit up but Travis held her down.

"Don't get up yet. I'm not sure what's going on. This place was apparently under surveillance by more people than us."

Morgan didn't mind her position at all, but she was sorely tempted to turn just a little so she could get a closer look at what her head was laying on. She didn't have much experience with

men, regardless of being twenty-seven years old, but she sure knew what was creating a bulge beneath the zipper of his jeans.

Even as she thought that, she felt him swell and throb. Did he know what she was thinking, or was it a natural reaction in a man to pop up whenever a woman had her head in his lap?

She did turn her head then, *accidentally* letting her teeth graze against the fabric of his jeans. She heard him groan and she grinned. She hadn't been brave enough in high school to go after what she wanted. She was definitely not going to let that happen again.

"I think you can let me up now," she said, her voice muffled by his stomach.

She couldn't hear his answer but it sounded like a moan.

"Travis?"

"Huh? No, you'd better stay down there until the police—come." He definitely groaned on the last word.

She wiggled around on the seat. Ignoring his warning, she slowly slid up his body, trying to brace her hands on him, but careful not to touch anything too sensitive. She ended up with her hands on rock-hard thighs, her face inches from his.

"Are you going in?" she asked, noting the breathlessness of her voice. She inhaled, her breasts brushing against his chest.

His eyes dilated. "I would love to get in. You wanna come?"

She just about climaxed, the emphasis he placed on his words giving them a double meaning she couldn't mistake. And suddenly, she didn't know how to answer him. She had wanted Travis McVicker desperately in high school, but now, nine years later, was he the same? Was she? If she gave in to her desires, would he be disappointed?

She tried to push away from him, but he grabbed her upper arms and held her still. His liquid gaze went from her eyes to her lips and she knew he was going to kiss her. She also knew she wouldn't stop him.

Travis' lips were firm and hot, his breath minty fresh. He traced the outline of her lips with his tongue, wanting inside and she opened for him. He deepened the kiss, his tongue mating with hers in an age-old dance. *God, he tasted good.*

His hand covered her breast and Morgan shivered in anticipation. The reality of having Travis kiss her beat her fantasies all to hell. She pushed against his palm and he gave her more, gently molding her breast like a sculptor with warm clay.

His thumb grazed her nipple, and she groaned. Her fingers dug into his thighs. If she hadn't been supporting herself on her arms, she would slide a hand closer and touch him. Even so, she could sense a throbbing pulse and feel the heat of his erection. When a cop car whizzed past, sirens blaring, Travis finally released her but she couldn't move. Hands still braced on his thighs, thumbs dangerously close to his erection, she stared into dreamy eyes.

"I don't remember the girls in high school bragging about how well you kissed."

"So, you do know who I am."

She smiled at him. "I remember. I wouldn't have passed algebra without your help."

Travis frowned. "That's it?"

"What else was there?" Morgan asked. She wasn't ready to tell him how she had really felt. Even without her photographic memory, she would never have forgotten his mesmerizing brown eyes or his hands. Hands that she had longed to have caress her, instead of jotting algebraic equations on their homework.

"Now that you mention it," Travis said, "I remember you, too. You were the cheerleader with the snug sweater and the tight-ass panties under your skirt."

"That's what you remember about me?" She let go of him and plopped down on the seat, scooting toward the door. "My short skirt and boobs?" She felt somewhat indignant. She was a

product of the new generation where women wanted to be considered equal and viewed for more than their bodies, even if the first thing she had noticed about Travis was his body. The sexist standard had become reversed.

Travis just chuckled at her indignation. "Honey, at eighteen, there's not a boy alive who prefers a girl with brains over one with boobs." With that remark, he got out of the car and started walking. Morgan scurried to catch up with him.

The house they had been watching was being emptied, the police bringing out several men in handcuffs. Travis stopped a police officer. "What's up, Tanner?" he asked.

"Thought we had the ringleader of this outfit, but all of them," he nodded to the captured men, "are just middlemen. No big suitcases of money, no cache of cocaine. Just some small stuff and a meth lab."

"That's enough to bust them," Morgan put in.

"Who are you?" The lieutenant looked at her and she could feel his gaze slide down her length, stopping at the points where men always stop when assessing a woman. For some reason, Morgan felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny, whereas when Travis had looked at her, well, it was different.

She saw Travis straighten. "Morgan Gentry. She's new at the *Chronicle*, Tanner, so back off and give her a break. I haven't had a chance to tell her yet what a scumbag you are."

The lieutenant just grinned. He was handsome, in a slick, almost too perfect kind of way and he reminded her of some actor playing at being a cop. Even so, he was on the police force, and she knew it was important to have contacts. So she gave him her most gracious smile and held out her hand.

"It's nice to meet a member of law enforcement. I'll feel safer knowing you're *on top* of things." She said the words, knowing he would read a different meaning into them than she intended. Travis certainly did, for she heard him snort beside her.

Another policeman came up and spoke quietly to the lieutenant. He turned back to them. "If you would like the story on this, Miss Gentry, come down to the station and I'll be happy to visit with you." He gave her his card, touched his finger to his forehead in salute and left with the other officer.

Travis turned and headed back to his car. "What the hell was that? Is that how you get your stories, handing out favors?" She heard the anger in his voice but couldn't figure out where it came from. It wasn't like they had any kind of history that prevented her from playing the field. Where did he get off saying something like that?

She jerked him around by the arm. "Just wait a minute, blockhead." She was suddenly mad at his highhanded attitude. She poked him in the chest, emphasizing her words. "Don't ever—ever—think that I get stories any way but through hard work. I've earned every award I've gotten and I will not—"

His lips cut off her words. A quick, hard kiss, certainly effective in shutting her up. Morgan stood on the sidewalk and stared at him.

"What was that for?"

"You're cute when you're mad," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Cute?" She didn't want to be cute for Travis, she wanted to be seductive and hot and impossible to ignore.

"Come on. There's really nothing here we can't get from the police blotter tomorrow. The big fish is still out there, and chances are, the police will withhold facts in hopes of ferreting out someone higher up the crime ladder."

Morgan's emotions were on a roller coaster ride and she didn't understand how Travis could be so cool about kissing her. A mere touch from him and she fell apart, and here he was, walking back to his car as if nothing had happened between them. She began to think going to work for the *Chronicle* might not have been the best of ideas.

* * * *

A week later, Travis sat at his desk thinking that having Morgan work at the *Chronicle* wasn't the best of ideas. Chancy had already ripped him twice for sloppy reporting, something he never did. But his concentration was gone and he blamed it on her.

Every waking minute was either filled with her presence or thoughts of her. Remembering the one kiss they had shared her first day on the job was enough to make him hard. At night, he dreamed of taking her to bed, not to sleep but to plunder her sweetness and explore the passion he knew she had inside. If he could just find a way of unleashing it.

While he would have liked to rapidly advance their relationship, she had tended to shy away from him. She made it a point not to go on any more assignments with him, explaining to Chancy that she had a great city map and they could cover more stories if they worked independently. Chancy had readily agreed since he knew it would also save the paper money. And where once Travis liked working alone, he now would rather go on stories with Morgan.

His senses came to full alert. He could usually tell the instant she came into the newsroom, even without looking up at the elevator doors. A part of him was constantly aware of her. Always before, that part had been his sense for a good story and knowing exactly where and when to get the information he wanted. Now that sixth sense was totally tuned to Morgan.

"Morning, TJ, what's up?" She asked the question casually as she dropped into her chair and tossed her purse in her drawer.

He wanted to say *his dick*, since that was in a constant state of arousal whenever she was around. He decided that using the direct approach—like kissing her in the car—wouldn't work on Morgan. He needed to use finesse.

"Morning, Morgan, you look cute." He eyed the tailored suit she wore, noticing how it rucked up her thighs when she

crossed her legs. Damn, he was glad miniskirts were again replacing the ankle-length peasant style of a few years ago. As far as he was concerned, any woman with legs like hers should be showing them off.

“Cute? What is it with you and that word? Do I look twelve years old?” She actually thrust out her chest as she spoke, as if he wasn’t already totally aware of her breasts.

“Sorry. How’s sophisticated, charming, attractive—”

“Quit while you’re only behind by a mile, McVicker,” Morgan cut him off as she turned to her computer screen.

Travis had decided over the last week that Morgan was ignoring him because she was afraid of the combustible—what? *Damn*, he hated it when he couldn’t think of just the right word for what he wanted to say. Combustible emotions, feelings? Neither word seemed right for the chemistry between them.

He scowled at his watch, noting there was only fifteen minutes until their editorial meeting. Not enough time to get anything written, so he might as well finish reading the paper. Most of the newspapers he read were on-line, but he took time every morning to read the *Chronicle* from front page to back. It wasn’t as if he didn’t already know the news and who was reporting what, but he avidly devoured anything of a literary nature, and that included the advertisements for groceries. Besides, one way he had found to improve his own work was to read others. Except when it came to Matthew Dugan.

“That’s the worst piece of bull I’ve read. Where does Dugan get off writing like that and getting paid for it, no less?” Travis threw the paper across his desk. The sheets of newsprint scattered in every direction by the time the section came to a stop when Morgan slapped a hand on it.

She looked up, screwing her face into a frown. “You expect me to read it now?”

“Hell, no, you don’t have to read it. It’s not worth reading.”

“Travis, you say that every day. Why bother reading Dugan’s column if you never agree with him?”

“Because I read the books he’s reviewing and just once, I’d like to see him tell the truth about them.”

Morgan watched Travis rock back in his swivel chair and prop his feet on his desk. She knew he was the best investigative reporter in Boston, probably one of the best on the eastern seaboard. She had often seen his name on the AP wire service even before she came to work for the *Chronicle*. He could ferret out details and come up with angles that no other reporter in her experience could come close to mirroring. But he did tend to be rather rude at times.

Professionally, he had the patience of Job while working on an assignment, but with Matt Dugan and his book reviews, Travis usually wanted to strangle the man. Morgan thought he went a little overboard at times, and after listening to him rant and rave every other morning, today she had just about had it.

She supposed part of her ire this morning came not from his comments but from her long and emotionally draining weekend. She had spent Saturday and Sunday dealing with her family again. It was a five hour drive to Wind Gap, Maine and the weekend, as usual, had ended up in arguments with her sisters. Just the thought of Carolyn’s continuous jabbering set Morgan’s teeth on edge. And now here was Travis, whining about a book review.

She quickly scanned the article in question. “What’s wrong with this? It says Harrison’s new book, *Stonemason’s Clock*, is an artfully crafted suspense thriller.”

“What he should have said was the book was full of bullshit and a ten year old could write a better—”

“Okay, buster,” she stopped him in mid-criticism, tossing him a yellow tablet. “Let’s see you do better.”

Travis caught the pad of paper against his chest, raising an eyebrow as he looked at her. “Hormonal imbalance? PMS?”

Morgan was discovering sarcasm was his answer to just about everything.

She tried to skewer him with a cutting look but he just grinned. That was the trouble with TJ—his grin could always make her forget she was mad.

“FSM,” she finally replied with a sigh, propping her elbows on her desk and running her fingers through her hair.

Travis nodded in understanding. “Family stress to the max, huh? I can sympathize. When my brothers—”

“Come on, hotshot, let’s see you write a novel.” She didn’t want to talk about her family, so she waved a hand toward the notepad.

“Novel?” Travis sounded like he was choking. “I thought you meant a review of that sorry piece of trash Harrison calls a literary masterpiece.”

Morgan shrugged. “Why waste your talent writing a review? Go straight to the big time and do the book.”

Travis gave her an assessing look. “Why so testy? You dating Harrison or something?” Before she could answer, he gave a hoot of laughter. “Christ, you’re not dating Matt Dugan, are you?”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “Get real, McVicker. Just write the damn book.” She turned away and started checking her e-mail, but her thoughts were on Travis. After kissing her like he wanted to devour her the very first day on the job, he hadn’t pursued her since. Oh, he made sexual comments, like her dating Dugan, but she wanted *him*.

She had finally asked Chancy to work separately because being in close proximity to TJ revived all her adolescent daydreams. She didn’t have a wealth of experience with men, but she did know what her body was screaming for. Frustrated, she just didn’t know how to get TJ to give it to her.

* * * *

After the editorial meeting, TJ settled down to work and by midafternoon, he had put his latest story to bed. He’d argued

with Chancy over the cannery exposé because they both knew taking potshots at the largest industry on the bay could have some far-reaching repercussions, but Travis had the facts and wouldn't back down.

Now, as he tried to find his Rolodex in the clutter that claimed his desk, he spied the yellow tablet Morgan had thrown at him that morning. Could he do it? Morgan had inadvertently tapped a hidden desire of Travis'—one that he had tried to forget because he usually didn't take on things unless he knew he could win.

"*The Rooster Crows at Midnight?*" Morgan read over his shoulder. "What kind of stupid title is that?"

Travis groaned, not having heard her approach. She walked around his chair and sat on the corner of his desk. He wished she wouldn't do that—hips canted, her skirt up above her knees and with a faint scent of perfume that sent all the blood rushing to his boxers.

He didn't know why she was trying to avoid working with him, but he couldn't take much more. The air crackled with tension whenever she was around and his body ached just to touch her. He had given her a week to adjust to work. He'd only allow her another week, or less, before he got her into his bed.

He leaned back in his chair to distance himself from her scent, if not from the view of her long, sexy legs.

"It's a code."

Her lips quirked.

He went on to explain. "See, there's these two detectives and when they get in trouble, they use that as a code."

She shook her head. "That's dumb. Roosters don't crow at midnight."

"What's the difference? It's just a code."

"A code has to make sense, otherwise your bad guys will *know* it's a code."

Travis stared at her lips, glistening with just a little color. He always wondered how women made their lips moist and inviting all the time and Morgan's were more inviting than most. They always curved up slightly at the corners, as though she knew a secret others didn't. Her bottom lip was fuller—pouty—except if she nibbled on it like she did when she was writing a news story.

“TJ.”

“Huh?”

“Meet me at O'Malley's.”

“Okay, but it's a little early for a beer.” He leaned forward, ready to get out of the newsroom.

“Where were you? That was an example of a code.”

Travis shrugged into his Sox jacket. “You wouldn't make a very good mystery writer, Mork. There's nothing secretive about meeting at a bar.”

She didn't like the nickname he had given her and let him know it by sticking out her tongue. Boy, what he wouldn't like to do with *that*.

“It would make a great code,” she said, “when one of your detectives never drinks because he had an alcoholic father and lost his wife to a drunk driver.” She grabbed her bag and headed to the door with him.

“I haven't even written the first chapter and you're already turning my suspenseful, murder-mystery thriller into a damn soap opera.”

Morgan just laughed as she swung her purse over her shoulder, sauntering away from him to her little Honda Accord.

Travis' breath puffed into the crisp fall air like a dialogue bubble in a cartoon strip. He wasn't thinking about his novel; he was wondering if he could move up the timetable for getting Morgan into his bed. Everything about her intrigued and enticed him—her laugh, her glorious blonde hair, her sense of humor, and her long legs, which he desperately wanted wrapped tight

around his waist as he made love to her. He sighed as he watched those damn sexy legs disappear into her car before he punched the alarm button on his key ring.

It was then he saw the note from an informant under his wiper blade.

* * * *

Unable to sleep for thinking about Morgan, Travis was at the office before dawn. Now, hours later, he looked at what he had written. It had all the right elements for a novel—guy, fast car and girl.

He tossed the notepad aside and went to refill his coffee cup. By the time he returned to his desk, Morgan had arrived and was reading his story.

“You are pathetic,” she said, dropping the yellow pad back on his desk.

“Since when did you turn into Dugan?” As tough-skinned as he was, he still took exception to her comments.

“I should have figured,” she said, circling his desk to get to hers. He followed close behind her.

“Figured what?”

“Your *story*—cars and women. I suppose by chapter two, he gets her into bed?”

“Yeah, and what’s wrong with that?”

“Where’s the relationship?” She raised her brow at him just so.

“The what?”

Sagely, she nodded her head. “I thought so.”

Travis decided Morgan didn’t understand men’s fiction and changed the subject.

“I got a note from Brickman last night.”

She flipped on her computer before commenting. “Good thing he knows how to write so he doesn’t have to leave his calling card on your pretty car.”

Travis grimaced. Morgan had discovered the first day of work that the beat-up Monte Carlo he drove was for investigating only. His personal car was a red corvette. That hadn't been so bad, but when he caught her reading the little black book he had accidentally left on his desk, her attitude toward him had changed. He wasn't sure if it was disinterest or jealousy and decided to find out.

"Hassle me about my wheels if you want, but it's extremely good for picking up chicks."

"Exactly." She looked down her nose at him as she sipped her coffee.

Travis couldn't tell from that one word if it was jealousy, so he egged her on. "You know, I wouldn't be out cruising for babes if you would go out with me."

She barely raised a brow. "That's the most asinine thing I have heard out of your mouth since..." she pursed her lips in thought, "...since you were sniffing about Dugan's review."

"You know we'd be good together," Travis whispered close to her ear. He knew it just from the way his body reacted anytime she was near. He just had to get her to capitulate.

"Like oil and water, sugar and salt, arsenic and old lace?" Morgan made a face and sat down, her back to him as she propped her heels on the desk. Travis was disappointed she had worn slacks today.

Deciding to save his suit for another day, he reached across her to get the note off his desk. Her hair tickled his nose. He breathed in her scent, only too aware of what the woman did to him. Why did he have to get all hot over Morgan anyway? She had quickly learned about all his bad habits—not that *he* considered them bad—and had since been trying to ignore him. His brain said to do the same, but his body refused to listen.

"Brickman says there's something going down at the harbor tonight."

Morgan raised a brow. "Did he say exactly *what* was going down?"

While he had complete faith in his informant, he could see she was skeptical. Of course, that made a good reporter. Travis grinned, knowing if there was one way to get Morgan alone, it was the offer of a story.

"Guess you'll just have to go with me tonight and find out."

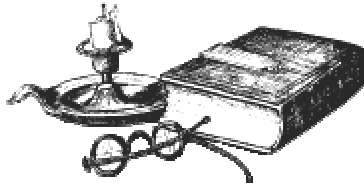
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 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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