

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



SINFULLY
PERFECTLY WICKED
SWEET
ANNA J. EVANS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Sinfully Sweet

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SINFULLY SWEET

Anna J. Evans

Prologue

The Kingdom Times, August 3421

The Parish of Deepweeds, Kingdom Sector Four

Annabella Quinn, the latest in a long line of renowned candy makers, was acquitted today in the case of Quinn vs. the Parish of Deepweeds. Despite the media frenzy surrounding the charges of kidnapping and attempted child boiling, the jury found there was insufficient evidence to support the claims of the two Procter children. The defendant was released from custody this afternoon.

Ms. Quinn refused to comment as to why the children would fabricate such an elaborate story, saying only, "I'm just so glad it's all over. I want to go home." The father of the two alleged victims also refused to comment, insisting that "Sometimes the truth doesn't win out. I just hope she gets what's coming to her, one way or another."

Mr. Procter seems to be getting his wish at the moment. The profit margins of the Incredible Edible Quinn Candy Company have dropped to the lowest in their three-hundred-year history and it remains to be seen whether sales will improve. Annabella Quinn may have been cleared by a jury of her peers, but the verdict is still out in the court of public opinion.

* * * * *

Heath Miller stood on his head in the center of his office, surrounded by the products that had made him an overnight success. He was rich, he was powerful, he was having a hell of a good time, and refreshing blood was flowing down to his brain, feeding the synapses and enhancing the function of his pineal and pituitary glands.

He should have been on top of the world. He should have been laughing all the way to the bank, where he had an obscenely large safety deposit box to hold his patents.

"Mr. Miller, the new flavors are here," his assistant Mary announced, sticking her head in the door.

"I hate them already!"

"Don't yell, sir, you haven't even tried them yet."

"I've read the list. I don't have to torture myself."

"Sir, you can't read how something will taste."

"Mary, how many times have I told you that I hate watermelon?" he sighed, twisting his legs around each other but staying on his head. What was the use in turning right side up? He knew he wouldn't be able to stomach the new flavors any better than he had the old.

They were all disgusting, imperfect, downright puke inducing. Each attempt fell far short of the explosively sensual taste experience that he longed to deliver to his customers and claim for himself. After all, it was his own dream of experiencing the ultimate marriage of carnal and oral pleasure that had been responsible for the creation of Melt Me Enterprises in the first place. No amount of rising profit shares or commercial success could satisfy him when he knew that his products were so far from being the best that they could be.

"Several times, sir." Mary eased her way into the office and walked toward him carrying a brown cardboard box, no doubt filled to the brim with edible underwear and flavored condoms.

"Both watermelon flavor, and watermelon flavoring flavor."

"Aren't they the same?"

"Don't toy with me."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir."

"We both know better. And whoever thought it would be a good idea to mix watermelon with strawberry and grape should be dragged out into the street and shot."

"You're right as usual, sir."

"How many times have I told you I hate being called sir?"

"Several times, sir."

"I hate you, Mary." Heath laughed, and finally rolled forward to lie on his back, looking up at the woman who kept his business running like a well-oiled machine.

"I doubt that, sir, especially when you see what I've brought you," Mary said, a small, satisfied smile on her usually "all business" face.

"Is it a motorcycle?" he asked.

"Better."

"Better than a motorcycle?" he asked, wondering if such a thing were even possible.

"I finished analyzing the profit reports on Incredible Edible this morning, and double-checked a few things with our accounting staff. We all agree that without a miracle, the company will be bankrupt by the end of the year." She set the box on the floor, giving Heath a clear view of the overstuffed file folders within, most of which bore her telltale color coding. When he'd said he wanted all the dirt on the Incredible Edible Quinn Candy Company yesterday, he'd assumed it would take at least a week for Mary to gather the information.

He'd underestimated her once again, and made a mental note to double the raise he planned to give her at the end of the year.

"You're right, Mary. This *is* better than a motorcycle." A huge smile spread across his face, and he clapped his hands together loudly enough to make Mary jump.

"I thought you'd think so. Your bags are packed and if you leave right now you can just make the next train."

"I love you, Mary." Heath laughed and vaulted to his feet, enveloping his assistant in a bear hug.

"Let me go, you big dork," Mary laughed.

"Yes! Dork. Much better than *sir*." Heath released her and all but skipped toward the door. This was it, the moment he'd been waiting for. Nothing, but *nothing*, was going to keep him from getting Annabella Quinn to sign on the dotted line.

"Don't scare her, Heath," Mary called after him. "She's had a rough year."

"Me? Scary?" Heath asked, genuinely shocked that Mary would consider such a warning necessary. Almost as shocked as he was by the fact that she'd used his first name. They'd known each other since they were kids, but she insisted on calling him sir while at work, keeping their professional relationship professional.

"You know what I mean, sir," Mary said, resorting to her usual moniker. But the damage was already done.

"You don't think she'll like me, do you, Mary?" Heath asked.

"That's not what I'm worried about, sir."

"I'm not going to take no for an answer this time, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be mean to the poor woman." Heath shrugged on his overcoat and tried not to feel hurt that his own right-hand woman seemed to think he had no more finesse than a bull in a china shop.

"I know you won't, sir."

"She's going to like me, Mary. Hell, she's going to *love* me," Heath said, feeling his confidence level recover when Mary smiled and rolled her eyes.

Opening the door, he let out a battle cry that was echoed by the rest of his staff, hard at work on the preproduction floor outside his office. They made such a racket that he didn't hear the quiet words that slipped out of his assistant's lips just seconds before he grabbed his bags and the door slammed shut behind him.

"I know, sir," Mary sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Chapter One

“Unbelievable. You have some nerve.” Bella shook her head in disgust and gave the obscenely beautiful man on her front steps her sternest look.

She would normally be too shy to even speak to a strange man, let alone one so handsome. But at this point it didn’t matter that this “Heath Miller” character was by far the most stunning male specimen she had ever gazed upon, or that something low in her body began to sing the second her eyes met his. She hated his long sandy-blond hair, golden eyes and sparkly white teeth at first sight.

She’d had more than enough of the “generous” offers creeps like him had been sending her for the past three months. Neither she nor her company were up for sale or rent. She’d made it abundantly clear she wasn’t interested in what Miller was selling. Still, he’d had the guts to travel all the way out to her cabin to try to force her to see things his way.

Bella lived in the middle of nowhere, as far back in the Deepweeds Parish as you could get and not be a resident of Outer Kartolia. Her nearest neighbor was a twenty-minute carriage ride to the south and she liked it that way. She liked being alone, in a part of the Kingdom where cars weren’t allowed and life moved at a slower pace. She’d known everyone in the Parish for years, and it was common knowledge that she guarded her privacy fiercely. It was shocking that anyone had told this man how to find the hidden trail to her home, and even more shocking that he had been bold enough to violate the solitude that had made her family almost as famous as their candy.

It was nearly enough to make her lose her temper, the one thing she never did and the only thing she had left to lose.

“Listen, Bella, I—”

"Don't say another word," she warned, barely managing to keep her voice quiet and controlled.

"Another word." His entire face lit up as he smiled widely, his slightly crooked front teeth somehow making him even more charming. The singing between her legs turned into a full-blown chorus of desire, and a gasp escaped her lips as a rush of heat dampened her sensible panties.

"Goodbye, Mr. Miller." Bella started to shut the door in his face. She'd never been so rude, but the response she was having to this man was enough to terrify the good manners right out of her.

He wanted to profit off her misfortune, wanted to further besmear the good name that the women of her family had carefully cultivated for generations. He was a predator, a vulture come to nourish itself on the remains of her dreams. Still, she couldn't stop her heart from pounding as his eyes raked over her body.

"Please, Bella," he pleaded, all humor leaving his face as he stuck a boot into her door to keep it from closing. He reached a hand through the crack to grasp her fingertips like a lover praying for a second chance.

"That's Ms. Quinn to you, sir." Bella took a deep breath, struggling to ignore the fact that her nipples had tightened against her sweater simply from the feel of his long, tapered fingers twining around her own.

God, it had been so long since she'd felt the touch of another human being, especially a male human being. She was dizzy, a little nauseous, and her sex throbbed with a fierce hunger she knew would never be assuaged by the fudge she'd just taken off the stove.

"Please don't call me sir. I'm Heath, just plain old Heath, and I really wish you'd give me a chance. I can promise you, whatever reasons you have for refusing me aren't the right ones." The intensity of his feelings transmitted clearly as she looked into his honey-colored gaze, and a part of her wondered if he was always this passionate.

Would he be just as fervent if they were wearing fewer clothes, falling onto her bed in a tangle of —

“You don’t know anything about me or my reasons.” Bella pulled herself away from the amazing depths of his eyes, and the dangerous thoughts they inspired. Those eyes might promise salvation, but his mouth was trying to convince her to sell her very soul.

His mouth. My, he had a beautiful mouth. Such full lips, soft and plump and —

“Let me go, Mr. Miller. You need to leave.”

“I can’t, not until I’ve said my piece. I do know you, Bella, better than you think. I know that you’re the best, I know you can create taste sensations that bring me to my knees. I know that you have a passion for your work that goes beyond the bottom line and that you’ll never be satisfied with mediocrity. You would never put forward any product that you weren’t positive would pleasure your consumer within an inch of their lives.” His grasp tightened on her fingers when she tried to pull away, making her heart race even faster.

“Let me go,” she pleaded, overwhelmed by the strange fear that she would soon be lost if she didn’t get this man out of her life.

“I’ll do whatever it takes, Bella.” He fell to his knees and bowed his head until it thudded against the wooden door, yet somehow managed to retain his claim on her hand. “Anything you want, anything. You name the price and I’ll pay it.”

“I don’t want your money. How many times do I have to tell you?” Bella’s voice rose as the panic within her doubled. She was afraid, so afraid, but couldn’t for the life of her figure out why. He wasn’t going to hurt her, she knew that instinctively. He was a bit overzealous, but completely harmless, even a little funny. If she hadn’t been so busy lusting after him, she knew she would have laughed out loud when he fell to his knees.

So why did she have the disturbing feeling that she was about to lose the biggest battle of her life, far bigger than the fiasco in the courtroom or the failure of the company that was her whole reason for being?

"I don't mean money, goddamn it!" He bounced back to his feet and leaned forward until his face filled the crack in the doorway. "I mean whatever it takes, whatever I have to do to make you see that your talent wouldn't be wasted. You would be the most treasured asset to my company, and you would be making a real and positive impact on the lives of thousands of people."

"You're crazy," Bella heard herself squeak even as she fought the urge to laugh. This man was nearly as loony as he was gorgeous. She'd never thought she'd be attracted to someone so over the top, but there was no denying the way he said "whatever it takes" had her thinking thoughts of the carnal variety.

"Crazy for you and your incredibly edibly talented hands." He smiled, and she couldn't help but return the grin. "Come on, Bella, let me in. Let's sit down and talk about this like reasonable crazy people."

"Who said *I* was crazy?"

"I did. You'd have to be crazy to refuse me and my generous and wonderful and fun and sexy offer," he said with another big grin.

"Come in then," Bella mumbled, trying to get a hold of herself after the way he'd said *sexy*. Just the sound of it made her long for him to whisper the word against her mouth, to let her tongue reach out and taste it as it rolled off his lips.

Annabella Quinn! Get a grip!

"But we're just going to talk. It doesn't mean I'm seriously considering anything you have to offer."

"I would hope not. I can't stand to have anyone seriously consider anything. That's no fun at all." Heath trotted into her small cabin like he had lived there all his life. Immediately his presence flooded the room, his rampant masculinity filling every corner of her entirely feminine space.

"Nice place, really nice." He looked around appreciatively. "I love the pictures."

"They're old ads from when my great-grandmother took over the company. She had them framed." Bella moved toward the small stove in the corner of the room. She hoped a bit of tea would calm her nerves, though she sensed nothing about her would be calm as long as the man behind her was within a ten-mile radius.

"Delicious. They make my mouth water just looking at them." He followed her over to the stove, and stood uncomfortably close as she lit the burner and put on the pot. "Very sexy."

Sweet god, did he have to keep saying that word?

"I don't drink tea," he said when she took down two cups.

"I didn't offer."

"But you were going to. Unless you're in the habit of double fisting."

"Double fisting?"

"That's what my bartender calls it when I get an amber for one hand and a lager for the other. I think the term can also describe some kinky business when one shoves a fist into—"

"What do you want, Mr. Miller?" Bella asked, starting to tremble as her body imagined Heath's hands, Heath's fists, doing kinky things to her.

"What do I want?" He leaned in close, took the teacups from her hands, set them down and spun her gently around to face him.

Now she was pinned between his athletic body and the counter, her heart beating triple time as she pressed as far away from him as possible. Breathless, she willed her body to merge with the granite behind her, anything to keep from brushing against the heated, masculine skin that was now way too close for comfort.

"You know what I want, Big B. I want *you*." The desire in his eyes was unmistakable as he leaned even closer, his mouth so near that she could smell the butterscotch candy he had no doubt been eating on the way to her door.

"Big B?" she asked, barely resisting the urge to lean into his chest until her sweater-clad nipples grazed the crisp starch of his white button-down shirt. She shivered a bit at the imagined contact, and her nipples tightened to the point of pain.

"How about Little B?" he asked with another thousand-watt grin. Her sex swelled in response and the slickness between her legs grew even hotter, wetter. Her body was betraying her at every turn, and damned if she wasn't starting not to care in the slightest.

"I'm not very little."

"No, you're not."

"Is that an insult?"

"Are you insane? God, you look..."

He let his words trail off, but the look in his eyes told her exactly how he thought she looked. Yummy. Very yummy. Maybe even as yummy as she thought he looked, smelled and was almost certain he would *taste* if she tipped her head back and closed the distance between their lips.

She felt her fear dying a slow death as the hunger within her took control.

Why shouldn't she take a little human comfort? She had put aside her own needs for too long, striving to keep from making the same stupid mistakes that her mother and her grandmother and the rest of her ancestors had made before her. But now it truly didn't matter. The company was beyond redemption, her legacy destroyed. There was no more reason for caution, nothing to keep her from seizing what she so desperately wanted.

Nothing, of course, except thirty years of loneliness and a lifetime of telling herself what she could never have.

"You're the perfect size," Heath said, pulling her thoughts back to him. "I like a woman with curves. There's so much more to explore. Call me a pig, but the idea of

getting to touch breasts like yours makes me absolutely crazy. I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Why should that bother me?" Bella asked, feeling the pulse between her thighs grow into a horrible ache as she imagined Heath pulling off her sweater and nestling his face in between her breasts. He'd kiss and lick, bite and tease her through her thin camisole before finally pulled away the fabric, baring her nipples to the reckless onslaught of his mouth.

"I don't know. Because I hardly know you?" His expression was unsure for the first time since he'd shown up at her door. "Because I never think before I talk, and always say the wrong thing? I don't mean to be rude. I promise you, Bella, I don't want to do anything to hurt you or make your life any harder. I want to help. I really do. I've admired you for longer than I can tell you."

"You admire me?" Bella asked, her lips already tingling with the anticipation of what she knew she had to do, whether or not it was the smartest course of action for a woman whose entire life was falling apart.

"Hell, yes." He smiled again, and let one hand trace up the curve of her arm until it rested on her shoulder, the heat of his touch burning her skin even through her heavy sweater.

"Heath?" She relished the feel of his name on her lips, loving the way his smile grew even wider as she said the word. It was so beautiful, she almost regretted that she was going to have to disappoint him.

"Yes, Bella?"

"You still want me to help you out at Melt Me Enterprises, right?"

"Yes, and I think if you'll just —"

"Save your breath. I'm not going to say yes. My family's good name means more to me than that."

"My company isn't dirty, Bella. There's nothing wrong with enjoying yourself, with making products that help other people enjoy themselves." He actually looked a little angry as he spoke, and that darker emotion swirling in his eyes made Bella even hotter, and more than a little desperate to be finished with this talk.

"I'm sorry, but I don't like the idea of making sex toys. I'm just not comfortable with—"

"I know you don't, but that's because you don't understand. They're not toys, they're instruments of pleasure, aids created to help lovers recapture the sensuality of lovemaking."

Oh my god, did he really just say lovemaking?

"Wouldn't you like someone to savor you like the first bite of a triple chocolate cake?"

Oh my god.

"Lick you like the cream-filled center of an éclair?"

Oh...my...

"Relish each second of contact with your skin like it's the final bite of the best—"

Heath's words dissolved into a low moan as Bella pulled his lips down to hers. He hesitated only the briefest of seconds before he attacked her personally with the same passion he'd used to attack her professionally. Before she could think twice about what she'd done, his hands were buried in her hair, fingertips digging deliciously into her scalp as he pulled her closer. His tongue slipped past her lips and swept through her mouth, tasting her, devouring her.

He tasted of melted caramel and coffee with an overtone of baked cloves that made her mouth water. He was delicious and she wanted to do all the things he'd said, all of them and more. She wanted to savor the sweep of his tongue in her mouth like the last sip of a dark chocolate latte, wanting to feel him ravishing her center, opening her, penetrating her, fulfilling her in a way she'd never been fulfilled before.

"Bella." He hummed her name into her mouth, and every inch of that hard male body pressed into tighter contact with hers. Her breasts smashed into his chest and the solid ridge of his arousal nudged her belly, reminding her that this wasn't a fantasy, this wasn't a dream, this was the real thing.

There was a man in her house, in her arms, in her mouth, and if she didn't put a stop to this pretty soon, there was little doubt that soon he'd be sliding himself somewhere else. He'd push himself into the slick, swollen, aching place between her thighs that she'd guarded more closely than the top secret Quinn family candy recipes. And once she let that happen, there would be no going back, not even a ghost of a chance for a happy ending.

"Stop!" She wrenched her mouth away from his, shoving at his solid chest.

"Okay." He promptly stepped away and crossed his arms, looking like a boy who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"I'm sorry," Bella said, fighting the urge to cry. She had told him to stop, why should she be so hurt that he had done as she asked? He was just being a gentleman, for god's sake. What did she want, a man who wouldn't take no for an answer?

"I'm not."

"You're not what?"

"I'm not sorry. Hell, I can be sorry for *not* being sorry if you want me to be. I just... I mean—"

"You have to go." Bella slipped past him and made a beeline for the door.

This wasn't safe—he was too tempting. Her peace of mind was the only thing that had kept her going through the past year, the living hell of seeing the two children she had once made so happy turn against her. That one bit of comfort had allowed her to hold her head up high when all the world believed the horrible lies their father had made them tell, rather than the simple truth.

"What?" he asked, looking appropriately confused by the mixed signals she had been throwing his way from the second he'd shown up on her doorstep.

She almost felt sorry for him, but forced herself to remember why he was really here. Though he'd seemed to enjoy that kiss as much as she had, he was loaded with ulterior motives. She'd already made a fool of herself, and he had to be sent on his way before she did something she would truly regret.

"I want you to go," she insisted, opening the door wide and indicating the way out into the crisp autumn evening.

"You don't want me to go. You just kissed me like I was the last man on earth."

"Hardly," Bella muttered, knowing he hadn't even glimpsed the depths of her need. If he really knew how badly she wanted him, how long she had waited to know what it would feel like to give in to the kind of passion she'd just had a taste of, he would run screaming from her cottage. No man could stand up to that kind of pressure, or so she'd always assumed.

But looking into his eyes, right now, she began to wonder. If there was ever a man who was up for the job, Heath Miller sure seemed to be it. He was intense, driven, unswerving and—if the erection tenting his pants were any sign—still "up for it" in every sense of the word. She wanted to hold that hard length in her hand more than she wanted her next breath, and that was enough to scare her into action once more.

"Go. Now." Bella let her eyes do the pleading for her, not trusting her mouth with anything more than the basics.

Please go, before it's too late.

"We're going to discuss my reasons for coming here before you shove me out into the cold."

"I already told you I'm not interested in helping you make edible underwear!"

“Not just edible underwear, the most amazing tasting edible underwear the industry has ever known. Together, we could make edible underwear that will make people come with their mouths at the same time they’re coming with their —”

“Please!” Bella snapped, unable to handle whatever he was going to say next.

She was shocked by her body’s traitorous reaction to his words. If someone had told her this morning that she’d be this wildly turned on by hearing a man talk about edible panties she would have called them a liar and probably laughed in their face. At the moment, however, laughter was not the response she was considering. Wrestling him to the floor like a rabid spider monkey on the other hand...

“Please what? You’re the one who took this to a different level. I was being completely professional,” he shouted, raking an angry hand through his shaggy dark-blond hair.

“You had me backed up against the kitchen counter!” Bella yelled back, knowing that she hadn’t imagined the hungry look in his eyes.

“Backed up against the — What a load of crap! I’m just a close talker.”

“Did you just say I was full of shit?” she asked, completely mortified and starting to get angry. Who the hell did this guy think he was, and why did she still want to kiss him?

“No, I said that what you just *said* was a load of crap. There’s a big difference. Besides, I don’t cuss at beautiful women.” Then he had the nerve to cross his arms over his chest and glare at her as if he were the wounded party. She would have laughed if she weren’t so damned confused.

“You also said...other stuff...before,” Bella said, knowing her blush was probably deep maroon from the combination of her remembered fantasies about his mouth and her breasts, and the fact that he’d just called her beautiful. Never in her entire life had anyone called her beautiful.

“You mean about your breasts? I told you I was sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. I just didn’t think...”

"What?" Bella finally said, starting to squirm under his gaze.

"You're blushing. Really blushing, like...dark red."

"So what?" Bella felt her face flame even brighter, if such a thing were humanly possible.

"It's really, really cute." He smiled and his amber eyes did crazy flashing things above his incredibly white teeth. He reminded her of a lion, a very silly, charming, sexy lion that was in the mood to pounce.

"I thought I was beautiful," she whispered.

"Wow, that was really sexy the way you said that." The humor left his eyes as he moved a step closer.

"Will you quit saying that word?" Bella asked, her pussy clenching as she caught a whiff of his distinct scent despite the fact that he was still a good three feet away. The man had to have some powerful pheromones. There was no other explanation for the painful, irresistible desire that he inspired. She'd been around handsome men before, but never had she reacted like this, not once in her entire adult life.

"What word?"

"Sexy." The way she breathed the syllables was an invitation, she realized, as the look in his eyes went from playful to predatory.

"Why? Don't you think you're sexy, Bella?" He stepped even closer until she could feel his body heat stroking the front of her body like a living thing.

"I don't know." She blushed again, but no longer cared.

"How could you not know? You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen. If I didn't want to do business with you as badly as I do, there's no way I'd be able to stop myself."

"Stop yourself from what?"

"From kissing you again, from taking you to that bed in the corner and tasting every inch of you." His tongue swept his full bottom lip as if he were imagining exactly what flavor he'd find underneath her clothes.

"Then don't stop." Bella swallowed hard, and forced away the last of her doubt.

"Don't stop?"

"If you want to do business with me, Mr. Miller, then I suggest you don't stop," Bella said, her whole body tingling with the combined excitement of his nearness and her own bold words.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"This is what I'm saying." Before logic or fear could intrude, she gripped the bottom of her green wool sweater, pulling it over her head in one smooth motion, knowing that the cream camisole underneath was completely see-through. Her tight, aching nipples would be clearly displayed for his viewing pleasure, and he'd know for certain the maddening effect he had upon her.

"Sweet. Mary. Jane." Heath slowly sank to his knees before her, reaching out to slam the door closed behind them. Then his hands were cupping the sides of her breasts, his eyes full of hunger as he dropped his face between them, just as she'd been fantasizing only a few minutes past. Bella let out a sound that was foreign to her own ears, a sound of abandon that nearly brought her to the edge of climax.

Reality was so much better than fantasy.

So. Very. Much. Better.

Chapter Two

Heath was lost in Bella, helpless to resist the siren call of what could possibly be the most beautiful breasts in the entire world. They were perfectly generous, perfectly full and weighty in his hand, and the dusky nipples that puckered hungrily toward him were the sexiest color, the perfect sweet, pebbled size. He was floored, completely infatuated. They were without a doubt the most gorgeous pair of tits he'd ever seen.

And he'd seen a lot of tits.

He'd kissed a lot of breasts, suckled a lot of breasts, licked a lot of flavored body syrup off a lot of breasts. Probably too many if he were to be honest with himself. Wasn't that why he was obsessed with adding other stimulus to the already thrilling stimulus of sexual pleasure? Because maybe he had gorged himself a bit too much, causing the thrill of conquest to fade because it was so easy? Because for some reason he'd never had the slightest bit of trouble making women fall into his bed without much more encouragement than a wink and his signature grin?

"Heath," she breathed above him, her hands tangling in his hair, pulling him closer to her skin, her milky-white, soft, hungry, responsive skin.

Her breath came faster as he trailed his tongue along the top of her breasts, darting now and then below the lace of her shirt. His hands fondled her fullness from below, but he steered clear of her already stiffened nipples. He wanted to torture her a bit, make her beg for it, just like he'd begged her a hundred times to give his company a chance. He wasn't the malicious type, but turnabout was fair play, especially when it was so sinfully delicious.

"What, Big B?" Slowly, slowly he pulled the thin fabric of her undershirt down until her breasts sprang free, wrenching a sharp gasp from her throat as the lacy fabric scraped over her swollen tips.

"Please," she begged, her head thrown back, her breath coming in little pants that made his cock twitch painfully in response. God, this was torture and he loved it, couldn't remember the last time he'd been this wild to possess a woman.

"Please what?" he teased, licking ever so slowly, ever so lightly around the darker skin of her areolas, inhaling deeply the delicious scent of aroused female. It was a scent made even more perfect by the sugary candy smell that clung to her clothes, enveloping him in a peppermint cloud.

"Touch me," she begged, opening her eyes to gaze down at him, her lips parted and face flushed with pure, unadulterated lust.

"Touch you where?" Shit, he was losing it, losing his will to tease as he got lost in the hunger in her eyes. She wanted him, badly, very badly, and the knowledge made him wild to give her everything she wanted, everything and more.

"Everywhere," she whispered, cupping his face in her hands before she dropped to her knees, bringing her mouth a breath away from his. Softly, she let her tongue trail over the crease of his mouth. He parted for her immediately, but she kept her pressure light, teasing, meeting the tip of his tongue, but never coming inside, never allowing him to mate his mouth with hers in the fierce way that he longed for.

"Give it to me, Bella," he demanded, capturing her face and pulling her mouth closer, moaning with satisfaction as she finally slanted her mouth against his, even suckling at his tongue when he plundered her mouth deeply, almost viciously.

"Take it from me, Mr. Miller." Bella suddenly wrenched her mouth from his and rose to her feet, walking swiftly toward the bed. She unbuttoned her long brown skirt as she went, stepping free of it as it pooled around her feet. By the time she reached the bed, she'd pulled her filmy top off as well, leaving her nude but for simple white briefs that stretched temptingly over her full hips, barely concealing the dark thatch of curls between her legs.

Heath lost the ability to speak as she sat on the edge of the bed, hands primly on her knees, long black hair spilling over her bare breasts and an almost frightened smile

tugging at the edges of her Gibson girl mouth. She was beautiful, exactly his type with her full curves and wide, intelligent blue eyes. But there was something else about her that brought his excitement to a fevered pitch, something that made him just the tiniest bit nervous.

Maybe it was because he had respected her for so long, had truly wished for nothing more than the addition of her magic touch to his products. Maybe it was because he had thought her so absolutely unattainable that he hadn't even allowed himself to imagine this moment, no matter how desirable she was. She was famous for never lowering her defenses, for turning away every man who had every tried to form an intimate relationship.

Maybe that was what had him thinking a second and even a third time before hurling himself across the room and resuming his worship of her incomparable breasts. Whatever it was, he suddenly found himself shaking, nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot, wondering how stupid he was to even be contemplating refusing her offer.

Shit!

Damn it, he wished he had time to do a quick headstand. He really needed a little extra blood to the brain at the moment, especially considering most of his blood supply was surging toward his furiously swollen cock. He hadn't had such a raging a hard-on for a woman in years, and that should have been enough to make up his mind for him. So what the fuck was wrong?

"What's wrong?" She echoed his thoughts with a slight tremble in her voice. Slowly, her arms rose to cover her chest in a gesture that was painfully vulnerable. It was clear that she thought he didn't want her, that maybe he didn't like what he saw. The doubt in her eyes made him physically ill.

Screw second thoughts. He wanted this woman and she wanted him. There was no way he'd let a case of performance anxiety—or whatever the hell this weird feeling was—make him pass up what would no doubt prove to be an amazing experience.

He would have Bella in every way that he wanted her. In bed, and as a member of his staff. He would just have to find a middle ground, find a way to claim her as his lover while still winning her as a colleague. He could walk the line. He was a line dancer from way back. Besides, his heart and his cock refused to settle for less, so his brain was just going to have to figure something out as he went along.

As he moved toward the bed, the kitchen table saved his life.

Or rather, what was *on* the kitchen table.

He grabbed the bowl, not even bothering to ask what was inside. It smelled great, looked like it tasted even better, and what better way to prove to her he was for real than to show her exactly how he'd like to use her unique gifts?

"What are you —"

"Shh. I have something to show you." He dipped his fingers into the slightly warm, gooey white mixture and slowly reached out to her lips. She laughed as she realized what he had in mind, a sweet sound that made him want to laugh right along with her. But then she opened her mouth and reached out with the tip of her tongue, banishing his sense of humor.

God, she was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen. He was seconds away from coming in his pants, and quickly changed his mind about how tame he wanted to begin her tutoring session.

Stopping inches short of her already kiss-swollen lips, he dropped his hand, keeping his eyes glued to hers so he could watch her response when he slowly circled her nipple with the sticky peppermint cream. She didn't disappoint him, jumping slightly and emitting the softest hint of a moan when his hand made contact with her swollen tip.

Even that quiet, hungry sound, however, was enough to ramp up his own excitement another impossible notch. Heath had to fight for control, struggling to keep his pressure gentle, his fingers whisper-soft on her skin. There was a time for ripping off panties and fucking like wild animals, and there was a time for foreplay and a little

erotic torture. This encounter was of the second variety, no matter how much his cock might try to persuade him otherwise.

“What is this stuff?” he asked. Talking was good, talking helped to keep his mind off how badly he wanted to taste something a lot more intimate than Bella’s latest batch of candy.

“Fudge.” Her lips trembled slightly and her eyes grew an even darker shade of blue as he flicked his thumb back and forth over her nipple, coating every inch of her.

Heath was so unbelievably turned on that he swore he could feel the same thrill of excitement that coursed through Bella as he touched her, feel when his teasing touch started to drive her over the edge.

“I like fudge,” he said, gently pushing her back onto the bed and lengthening himself above her. Deliberately he pressed his hips against hers, knowing she could feel the hard length of his erection against her thigh. His cock was seeking her center as if it would rip through his pants in its eagerness to merge with her completely. There shouldn’t be a shred of doubt left in her mind that he wanted her. Urgently. Painfully even.

“Fudge hardens quickly,” she whispered with a fantastically naughty smile, shifting her hips against his. A groan escaped his throat even as he smiled down at her.

“Then I’d better hurry up.” He held her gaze as he lowered his mouth to her breast and began licking her clean.

His breath soon grew as shallow as hers when she began to squirm beneath him, arching her breast toward his teasing tongue. With each slow lick, his desire to possess her grew even more fierce. The way she met his eyes—hiding nothing, showing him the full power of her desire—was an aphrodisiac ten times more powerful than any fudge.

Something in that thought tried to penetrate his lust, but then Bella moaned and fisted her hands in his hair, pulling him so close to her that merely licking her breast was no longer possible.

“Oh yes, Heath, yes.” She closed her eyes as he took her nipple inside his mouth, suckling on her breast with deep, hungry pulls before he dragged his teeth lightly over her swollen flesh. She cried out and scratched her nails almost painfully into his scalp, eliciting a sound from him that was pure animal need.

He was going to be out of his mind by the time he finished with her, but at least he’d be able to say his sanity was lost for a worthy cause.

Eagerly, he dipped a finger back into the still-creamy fudge. He was a firm believer that anything worth doing was worth doing right. And Bella was more than worth doing right. She was worth every single painful surge of desire that throbbed through his cock as he licked her, sucked her, working her into a fit of writhing need beneath his mouth.

“Heath, I need...oh god, I need...I don’t know what I need.” Her voice was close to a sob, and it looked like tears were beginning to tease the edges of her eyes. He hadn’t meant to torture her quite this thoroughly, but he couldn’t deny the force of her lust made him wild.

“You need to come, baby?” Heath’s hands actually shook as he finally allowed himself to pull at her panties. His will to take this slowly was at the breaking point, and he finally ripped the filmy fabric in half in his hurry to free that hot, wet pussy for his mouth.

He’d buy her another pair, another hundred pair, but right now he needed to taste the feminine heat that he could smell mixing wonderfully with the scent of peppermint. It was driving him wild, making his touch less than gentle as he spread her thighs wide to make room for his more than eager mouth.

“You’re beautiful.” His voice sounded almost scary. He was choking out words, panting like he’d been fucking her for hours, not teasing her for twenty minutes. He was uncharacteristically out of control, and as he smeared the last bit of the drying fudge onto the sides of her pink, glistening folds, he knew that everything he had dreamed of was possible.

He was going to rock the adult toy industry with the help of this luscious woman. He would have every man in the Kingdom begging to go down on their wives, girlfriends and mistresses, and he would have every woman in the kingdom thanking him for the best head of their lives.

"Oh no, don't, I..." Bella protested, her thighs attempting to close, attempting to bar him from his prize once she realized where he was headed.

Heath made an animal sound of warning and forced her legs open again with the firm pressure of his thumbs on her inner thighs. When his way was clear, he swiftly brought his tongue directly into contact with the engorged clit that lifted toward his mouth, begging him to lick it for all he was worth. She stopped fighting him immediately, and lifted toward his mouth in a desperate way that let him know how close she was, how deliciously, terribly close.

As he covered her clit with his mouth, suckling and groaning his appreciation for her sweet, salty heat, Heath was shocked to realize how much he anticipated her orgasm. He suddenly knew that the rush of making her come was going to make him almost as high as when he finally came himself. It was an amazing thing, this sense of connection that went beyond mere fucking. It was something else...something he couldn't take time to analyze when her pussy needed to be licked clean.

Slowly, with long sure strokes, he began to clean the peppermint cream away from her swollen folds.

"Heath, oh god, oh god," she cried out, her thighs shaking as he took his attention away from her clit and began sliding up and down her pussy, darting into her wet heat, tracing every fold except the lines that led back to where he knew she wanted him to go.

"You taste so fucking good, Bella," he murmured against her skin, spreading her even wider so his tongue could tunnel inside of her, fucking her vigorously even as he carefully avoiding that tiny, tender nub that he knew would send her over the edge.

"Please," she begged, hands buried in his hair, tugging him toward her even as her toes traveled up to find his crotch, rubbing against the throbbing length of his cock, now almost numb with the wonderful agony of postponed gratification.

Unfortunately, he wasn't quite numb enough.

"You have to stop." He reached down to capture her foot in his hand before she made him come in his pants, putting the passionate torture he had in mind for the two of them on hold until he could recover.

"You have to *not* stop, please don't stop, Heath. It's so much, too much, it almost hurts." She panted beneath him, her body vibrating with the strength of her need.

"I never want to hurt you." Heath meant every word.

He reached up to cup her breasts, brushing his thumbs over her nipples even as he slowly dropped his head back between her thighs, intent on making up for his mistake. He was a fucking idiot, always taking things too far. But now he would make it better, he'd make her come – screaming his name.

Tenderly, he closed his mouth over her clit, circling her with his tongue again and again and again, rolling her nipples in his hands in time with his tongue until he felt her start to bow beneath him, heard her gasp as she started to come. Then he swiftly transferred one hand down to join his mouth, plunging three fingers into her pussy, wanting her to be filled with him and dying to feel her contractions, even if it couldn't be with his cock.

"Oh god!" She inhaled sharply as he penetrated her, even though she continued to buck into his mouth, heels digging into the mattress beneath her.

She was tight on his hand, so Heath pulled back to two fingers, coaxing out her first orgasm until she collapsed back onto the bed. Gently he worked in and out of her pulsing sheath, hoping he hadn't taken things too far too fast. He didn't want to hurt her, or do anything to lessen the effect of what he planned to do next.

When she continued to lift into his mouth though the waves of her first orgasm were fading, Heath figured he was good to go. He started to hum into her, letting the

vibration of sound join in with the light pressure of his tongue. Almost imperceptibly he felt her start to tense again and increased his pressure, swirling hungrily against her faster and faster until she screamed out her second orgasm, clutching his face tight into her pussy.

He laughed and pressed closer to her salty wetness, amazed at how this woman who hadn't even wanted him to travel south a few minutes ago was now pressing him as close as two people could get without sharing the same skin.

Ah, the miracle of a fantastic orgasm.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked as her body relaxed and her hands left the tangles of his hair.

"Never." He smiled and lifted his head to gaze at her flushed, sated face.

When she smiled back, he felt a strange sensation clutch at his chest and deep down in his balls. The ball clenching he could explain since he was still hard enough to break china, but the heart clenching was a different matter, one he wasn't quite ready to explore at the moment.

At least not until he got some of the blood flowing back toward his brain.

"That was unbelievable." Despite the smile, Bella still looked more than a little awestruck.

Heath's heart lurched again when her eyes met his for a look that seemed to see straight through to the soul he hadn't always been sure he possessed. He felt his signature grin slip from his face. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the completely foreign urge to kiss her. He never kissed after he had gone down on a woman. Most women thought it was gross, and he was experienced enough to know it wasn't wise to gross out a woman before he'd gotten his rocks off.

Still, he was almost willing to risk it to have a taste of those lips, to melt into her sweet mouth, just close his eyes and disappear for a second into the warm aura that surrounded his beautiful Bella.

"Kiss me," she whispered as if she'd read his mind.

God help him, he couldn't do anything but obey.

Their kiss was sweeter this time, but even more passionate. Her mouth was softer, freer beneath his own, and he could feel the emotion that simmered beneath each stroke of her tongue in his mouth. It was unbelievable, and Heath actually felt himself getting a little choked up.

"I'm sorry." He pulled away from her, getting a tight rein on his emotions. This was ridiculous. He must be getting sick or working too hard or something. He wasn't a kid getting his first hand job, for god's sakes, he didn't have to get all emotional about an amazing fuck.

"Why?" she asked, her small smile almost making him forget what he was sorry for.

"The taste, most women don't like it." He started to roll away from her, needing a second away from her addictive skin, but she locked her legs around his back and lifted her hips to press against his erection.

"Did *you* like it?"

"I fucking loved it." He gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to grind against her mound or unzip his pants and bury himself inside of her as fast as humanly possible. He wasn't going to take things that far, not yet anyway, not until he knew he could have his cake and eat it too.

"I loved it too," she said, reaching down between their bodies to slowly drag down the zipper of his pants. The sound alone was almost enough to break him.

"Bella, I don't think we should —"

"Take off your clothes," she ordered, pushing him away and rolling to her side.

She crawled toward the pillows at the top of the bed, giving him an all too excellent view of her still wet and swollen pussy. It made him want to leap upon her and fuck

her like an animal, fast and hungry, with his teeth scraping at the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Bella, I can’t do this much longer.” He pulled back to stand at the edge of the bed and swallowed hard. His cock throbbed painfully, tenting his khaki pants and pointing straight toward Bella like a divining rod.

“Come on, Heath, you have to give me a chance to see if you’re right.” She picked up the bowl he had abandoned and brought it up between her full breasts, dragging her finger through the fudge and licking it clean with a talented swirl of her tongue.

“About what?” he managed to ask before his capacity for speech left him.

His eyes honed in on that pink swirling tongue and his aching balls pleaded for release. He’d hoped that she would want to return the favor, but now that he was faced with the offer he hesitated again.

Would he be able to stop himself? Could he be satisfied with her mouth on him or would he want to pull away, bury himself inside her, taking this to a level that he knew wasn’t wise? If they took this to the next level, he had a horrible feeling he wouldn’t be able to walk away from Bella. Whether she agreed to be his partner or not, he would be addicted to her, miserable if he couldn’t have her in his bed. He’d never before let himself get to that point with a woman, and he wasn’t about to start now. Not with a woman who had given new meaning to the word “hermit”.

He had to be smart and think with something other than his cock.

“I want to see if my fudge tastes as good on your cock as it did on my pussy.” She blushed as if she had shocked herself with her words before she patted the pillows beside her, telling him exactly where she wanted him.

“Yes ma’am,” he said, knowing he had no choice but to obey.

Who cared about being “smart” when you could be coming so hard you forgot your own name?

Chapter Three

Bella had never felt more alive. Her entire body was humming. She could breathe better, see better, smell better. The entire world was alive and throbbing with a vitality she had never noticed before. Her sense of touch was unbelievably sensitized, every nerve ending tingling with the aftermath of the magic he had worked on her body.

Each warm breath against her thighs, every stroke of his tongue, had set off a hundred different sensations, driving her toward an ecstasy she hadn't even imagined possible. She felt like a superhero, as if she would take flight if she jumped up and down on the springy mattress of her bed, as if she would actually enjoy jumping up and down on her bed, giggling like a madwoman, even if she didn't take flight.

Now she was going to return the favor, and send the man who had just shucked his clothes in record time and bounded onto the pillows beside her soaring into the stratosphere. He had been amazingly generous, but even if he hadn't been, the sight of his sculpted, golden skin spread out along her bedspread would have made her mouth water. She wanted to taste him, torture him, drive him crazy with desire before she finally blew his mind the same way he had blown hers.

Now...if she only had the slightest idea how to set about doing that.

"Bella." Her name came out as a moan. Heath's eyes closed and his Adam's apple jumped as she laid a tentative hand on his long, thick shaft.

It was so much softer than she'd thought it would be, velvety-smooth flesh stretched over all that hard need. She let her touch play over its length from base to tip, instinctively smoothing the pearl of liquid at the tip around the head again and again. From the way he groaned and the jump of his cock in her hand, she was on the right track. Now if she could figure out what to do with her mouth, she'd be in business.

Come on, Bella, it can't be that difficult. It's only a cock.

Only a cock, right. Only her *first* cock—ever. God, she couldn't think about that or she would never work up the nerve to take the lead. She was just going to have to trust her instincts and concentrate on enjoying every second she spent in bed with this man.

Gingerly, she smoothed a bit of fudge onto his shaft. Then she settled between his thighs, bracing herself on his strong, slightly furry legs before she licked slowly, firmly, up the heat of him.

"You are so beautiful," he repeated for the third or fourth time as he looked down at her. Some might say he was redundant, but Bella knew she'd never get tired of hearing him say those words, or of seeing *that* look in his eyes. It was the strangest mix of fear, longing, hunger and awe, and it made her feel like the sexiest creature on earth.

His hands cupped her face and she turned to press a quick kiss into the center of his palm before she resumed her teasing licks up and down his shaft, around and around the head, and repeat, repeat, repeat. Yum. She'd never imagined that doing this to a man would be so insanely arousing.

He tasted amazing, smelled of pure male energy, and he was right about the peppermint. It did add something to the entire experience and she knew firsthand the slight tingle the peppermint oil had caused between her thighs, both cooling and heating her skin, making her flesh even hungrier for his touch.

"Oh god, Bella, take me in your mouth, please." His hands trembled on the sides of her face, but he made no move to pull her closer. Just as he had claimed the control when he was between her thighs, now he gave her the control freely, making her drunk with more sexual power than she quite knew what to do with.

"How do you want me to do it?" she asked, throwing away her doubts and asking for the direction she needed. There was no way he would guess the truth. Thirty-year-old virgins weren't the norm anywhere in the Kingdom, not by a long shot. Besides, her pride wasn't overly invested in proving her skills as a temptress. She just wanted to do this right, wanted to transport him to the same mind-blowing state of nirvana she'd just experienced.

"Open your lips, just a little bit," he said, his breath catching when she did. "Now take me inside, slowly."

She did as he asked, letting his cock press into her mouth, keeping her lips only slightly open, giving him friction as each inch slid inside. When she was as full of him as she could manage, she brought her hands to the rest of his length, squeezing lightly. Bella took a quick glance up into his face, into eyes that were deliciously tortured with a pleasure she now completely understood.

"Do you know what you're doing to me?" he asked, beginning to lift his hips up and down.

Bella tried not to smile as she let his erection slide in and out of her mouth, starting to suckle as his gentle thrusts became quicker. She experimented with pulling him even deeper into her mouth, relaxing her throat so she could devour more of him, wishing she could take even more and wondering what he would taste like when he came.

Her nipples tightened painfully as he thrust faster and she started to ache between her legs, already wanting more of the pleasure he'd given her. The pleasure she was giving him aroused her nearly as much as when he'd tortured her nipples with his tongue.

"I'm going to come, Bella, I'm going to come."

"Mmmm," she moaned, suckling harder, taking him deeper even as her jaw began to ache.

"No, wait—God!" He pulled her away from his cock and moved his hands to her breasts, pressing her mounds together. He barely had time to slide his erection between them until he came in one long shuddering roar onto her chest.

"I wanted to taste you," she said, as she stared at the oddly erotic sight of his cum on her breasts.

"You what?" He lifted shocked eyes to meet her own.

"I wanted to taste—"

"Yeah, that's what I thought you said. Bella, I think I love you." He looked almost serious until a crooked little smile twitched at the edge of his lips.

"I think you love sex," Bella said, blushing again despite herself, and beginning to feel oddly exposed.

What they had just shared had been amazing, beyond amazing, but the truth remained that he was practically a stranger. She was in bed with a naked stranger after having just licked peppermint fudge off of the naked stranger's cock. It was nuts. This wasn't her and no matter how fabulous it had felt to play the temptress, now she was starting to feel more than a little out of her element.

"Don't go." He pulled her back into his arms when she tried to back away and she fell onto his chest. His cum smeared across their skin.

"Mr. Miller, I think we should get cleaned up." She tried to pull away again, even though it felt amazing to have her body pressed tight to all his warm, bare skin. So good, in fact, that she wanted to snuggle up and stay awhile despite the stickiness on her breasts.

"Now I'm Mr. Miller again?" Heath asked, his expression unlike any she'd seen thus far.

There was no humor, no passion, just a stark, empty second when he seemed to shut down completely. A pained look swirled in the depths of his eyes before he roared back to life like someone had hit his restart button.

"Great. Perfect. I'm Mr. Miller and you're Ms. Quinn and there's business to discuss. Great, let's get to it. I always think better after a blowjob." He rolled off the bed and hopped to his feet, striding across the room to the sink where he started the water and used one of her kitchen towels to swipe at his chest.

"Blowjob," Bella repeated softly to herself. The way he'd said it made her feel uncertain about what they'd done for the first time since she had stripped off her sweater.

She hadn't felt the slightest bit ashamed before, though she'd never done anything one-tenth as sexually daring in her entire life. It had been so wonderful, so sweet and honest. It had felt perfectly right in a strange sort of way. It wasn't as if she thought she loved him or he loved her, but there had been a spirit of mutual respect and tenderness... At least that's what she'd thought until he'd talked about what she'd done like she was just another bimbo who'd been willing to take his dick in her mouth.

"You want this, Ms. Quinn?" Heath asked, turning from the sink with a rakish smile and throwing the damp kitchen towel in her direction. "Cum can be worse than fudge, you better wipe that off your tits before you have to scrape it off."

"My *tits*?" She did her best to ignore the fact that her throat threatened to close up as the towel landed with a soft smack against her breasts.

"What? You don't like tits? Would breasts be better?" He shot her a condescending look that wasn't all friendly. His look told her she was a naïve little virgin who didn't have the brains to realize that whether he called them tits or breasts didn't make a bit of a difference. His attitude would be the same.

And his attitude was not at all what she'd felt when he had been treasuring her *tits* in his hands like he was getting a chance to cradle the holy grail. Not at all the same attitude he'd seemed to have when he'd knelt between her thighs and worshipped her pussy like it was his new religion.

She might still technically be a virgin after what they'd just done to each other, but she was by no means naïve or feeling inclined to put up with any more shit after the year she'd just had. Somewhere inside of her, Bella felt something break, finally understanding what people meant by "the last straw". His cocky little sneer was the proverbial last straw, the very, very last.

"Get the fuck out of my house," she whispered, swiping the cum from her chest before throwing the towel to the ground and walking completely nude to the door. She couldn't care less about her state of dress — or undress — at the moment. She had a son of a bitch to get out of her cottage.

"Why?" he asked, propping his hands on his hips and refusing to budge from the sink, or make any move to cover himself. Their nude battle of the wills would almost have been funny if Bella weren't so angry and hurt and confused.

"You know why. Don't play dumb, Mr. Miller, it doesn't suit you." Holding her head high, she whipped open the door and gestured out into the now dark night.

Cold autumn air rushed in and made every hair on her body stand on end and her nipples pucker painfully, but she refused to shiver. She would not acknowledge any stimulus except the infuriating man who still glared at her from across the room as if he were the one who had grounds for righteous indignation. She wanted to slap him, hard, an instinct that was a little frightening considering she had never hit anyone in her life. She rarely even used curse words, either, but now she was letting them fly like candy at a Kingdom Day parade.

"It doesn't suit you either, Ms. Quinn," he countered, finally going to the bed and retrieving the silk boxer shorts he had dropped to the floor.

"I won't even pretend to know or care what you're talking about. Just get your clothes on and get out. Or don't get your clothes and get out, it doesn't matter to me."

"It's obvious you don't care. As soon as you're done fucking me—giving me head, putting your mouth on my pee-pee or however you want to put it—you expect me to act like nothing happened. You'll have to forgive me if that's a little difficult when it feels like you've just kicked me in the nuts." Heath's cheeks flushed red as he struggled into his boxers, the black fabric looking fabulous against his golden skin.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't think I even touched your nuts." Bella offered the words grudgingly, now even more confused. Her lack of experience was showing, and she suddenly wished she'd watched more dirty movies—at least then she'd have some clue what she had or hadn't done wrong.

"I didn't mean that, I meant the— You know what? Forget about it. Forget I said anything. I should have known better than to come here. You don't like visitors, you live out in the middle of nowhere, it should have given me a clue." He pulled his white

t-shirt roughly over his head and snatched his button-down from the floor. Running a frustrated hand through his hair, he bent to search for the khaki pants Bella could see had made their way under the bed. Way under the bed. She was about to tell him where to find them when her curiosity got the better of her.

"A clue about what?"

"That you're crazy," he said, not even looking her direction.

"You're the one who just treated me like a hooker," Bella said with forced calm. "Why am I crazy to tell you to get out my house?"

"I didn't treat you like a hooker. I wouldn't even know how to treat a hooker. I've never had to pay for sex."

"Well, I've never been paid for sex, but that's how it felt. You were disrespectful and you know it."

He stopped searching for his pants and looked at her. For a second it seemed he was going to argue, but then he took a deep breath and dropped his eyes to the floor. When he spoke this time, his voice was softer. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean it. My feelings were hurt and I just reacted without thinking. That's what I do, I react. I'm reactive. Maybe not the best trait, but —"

"Your feelings were hurt? How in the world did I hurt your feelings?" Bella asked, truly dumbfounded.

"Don't worry about it," he mumbled after a moment, once again searching the floor for his pants in all the wrong places.

"No please, tell me. I'd really like to know."

"You called me *Mr. Miller*. And it hurt my feelings because I thought we were having a good time and you were warming up to me and I was more than warmed up to you and —"

"I'm sorry." Bella smiled tentatively in his direction before she let the door swing shut behind her. His feelings were hurt because *he* thought *she* didn't think what they'd

done was special. She didn't know much about men, but this didn't seem to be a typical male reaction and she liked that. She liked it a lot.

"You don't have to be sorry, I can take it. If you were just looking for a little fun and you want to call me Mr. Miller and talk about business, I can deal with that. I promise not to be a jerk about it again. I don't hold grudges. I'm not a grudge-holder." He crossed his muscled arms across his chest in what Bella assumed was an effort to appear tough and businesslike.

It was absolutely adorable, and she felt something inside her soften toward him.

"I don't know what I was looking for, but I really enjoyed the...everything." Bella shyly crossed the room to stand in front of him. "It was special to me and I'm glad it was to you too."

"Well...shit. It was." Then she thought he actually blushed, but couldn't be sure because he immediately twisted his face into a silly expression. "But can we talk about business now? I'm feeling very unmanly talking about all this *feelings* crap."

"Feelings aren't unmanly." Bella laughed and wanted to kiss him even more than she had before. Heath Miller was a bundle of surprises, and so far most of them were more than pleasant.

"Yes they are, disgustingly unmanly. Besides, if you want me out of your hair before morning we'd better get to it. The last train leaves at midnight and it took me almost an hour to get here from the station. I know you like to keep it charming and rustic out here in Deepweeds but the no cars thing is really weird."

"Oh no, I didn't even think. Do you need to feed and water your horse? I board mine with my nearest neighbor, but I have some feed in the shed out back, I could go get it if—"

"No, I brought my bike."

"You bicycled all the way here from the station?"

"No, I rode my motorcycle."

“Really? Aren’t those dangerous? Do you wear a helmet? You seem like the type that wouldn’t wear a helmet.” Bella forced her mouth closed. Geez, just the hint that he might like to stay until morning had her babbling like an idiot, and breathless with a kind of anticipation she’d never known.

Did she want him to stay? Did she want to take what they’d started even further? The part of her that still prayed for the miraculous recovery of her candy company said “no”, but the rest of her screamed “yes, yes, yes”. What would it feel like to be naked with him again, knowing this time that there was nothing to stop him from pushing his thick, beautiful cock between—

“Bella, could you put some clothes on?” He interrupted her thoughts with a tight laugh. She looked up to see his brow furrowed, as if he were fighting the beginnings of a headache.

“Why?” Bella asked, confused until he gave a pointed glance down to his boxer shorts which were doing a poor job of concealing his reawakened erection. “Oh. Right.”

“I mean, it would be better. If we’re going to talk business, which I think we should. Don’t you think we should?”

“Right, we should.” She gave a solemn nod, despite the fact that her pussy had started to ache just from looking at his cock straining toward her. Her whole body hummed with excitement. She was capable of making him want her without even trying!

Maybe this vixen business wasn’t as beyond her as she thought.

Enjoying the feel of his eyes on her as she moved, she retrieved her skirt and camisole. Once she was a bit more decent, she wiggled under the bed to fish out his khakis, grateful for the uncomfortable feeling of her knees on the hardwood floor. Anything to keep her mind off other kinds of wiggling she’d like to be doing. He was right, business first and maybe business-only for tonight. She’d already flirted with disaster and emerged safe and intact, did she really want to risk what would happen if they were to roll around in her bed a second time?

No matter that she was dying to know what it would feel like for him to be deep inside of her, it was probably best they'd stopped before it could happen. Why waste all those years of sacrifice now that she was so close? The curse could be broken. She believed that without a doubt. If she could hold on for a few more months, she'd reach her thirty-first birthday and be free. Then maybe she and Heath could pick up where they'd left off.

Now that some of the lust had faded, she knew that it really didn't matter if she had a company to leave to her future daughter. She still didn't want to be a single mother, didn't want to raise her child without a father figure around to teach her what it felt like to be loved by a member of the opposite sex. She believed it was important for a little girl to know that she could trust a man with her heart and that her daddy would always be there for her.

Bella knew firsthand what it felt like to be raised by a single mother who was the daughter of a single mother who was the daughter of a single mother and so on into infinity – or at least the last three hundred years. No matter how much she'd loved her mom and Grams, it wasn't what she wanted for her own daughter. She wanted her to have two parents from the beginning, and hopefully for the rest of her childhood.

"Here's your sweater," Heath said, pulling her back to the present.

"Thanks." Bella pulled the heavy green cotton over her head. It was getting cold in the cottage now that the sun had gone down, and from the look in Heath's eyes every time he glanced at her chest, she was entirely too naked with only her camisole on for him to keep his mind on business. The knowledge made her grin until her cheeks hurt.

"You really do have the most beautiful tits in the world." He watched with heat in his eyes as she finished pulling on her sweater.

"Tits?"

"Breasts, I mean breasts, beautiful bouncy breasts." He smiled and plopped into a chair at the table.

"Very alliterative."

"You chicks dig that, right?"

Bella laughed, surprised at how at ease she felt with this man—when he wasn't driving her half out of her mind with lust, of course.

"Hungry?" she asked as she pulled down bread and homemade peanut butter and jelly from the cabinet. Not the fanciest of meals, but they wouldn't starve. Besides, she had a feeling he wouldn't care.

"Ravenous," he answered.

Thirty minutes and two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches later, they still hadn't started talking business. Both of them seemed to want to draw out their time together as much as possible. Also, Heath, being from the city, had an abundance of gossip to share. By the time Bella wrapped her mind around the news that King Frederick had been arrested for attempting to kidnap his stepmother-in-law, the owner of an S&M parlor, in order to make her his sex slave, she was feeling far too exhausted to discuss sex toys. Especially since she still had no intention of agreeing to his proposal.

"Heath, I feel badly about keeping you here any longer without telling you that honestly...I haven't changed my mind."

"I know you haven't, but I think you will," he said with a sigh and another smile. "I can be very persuasive."

"I know you can." Bella blushed as a mental image of him kneeling between her legs flashed through her mind's eye. "But I don't think any more of that is a good —"

"I don't mean *that* way. I can talk a good game if you'll let me. Bella, you experienced firsthand what it was like to add a little something extra to what was already a great time. Didn't you enjoy yourself?"

"Of course, but —"

"And would you have enjoyed yourself as much if that batch of peppermint fudge had been made by some company with more experience making latex? Bella, the flavors these guys keep coming up with, I wish you could taste them. Then you'd know that

you have to help me. They're horrible, awful, and half of them contain watermelon ingredients, despite the fact that I've told them at least a billion times how much I hate watermelon. It makes my dick go limp just getting a whiff of it."

"Watermelon flavoring or the taste of actual watermelon?" Bella asked, trying not to laugh at how worked up he was getting. Surely he couldn't really take sex toys this seriously?

"Are you okay?" she asked a few seconds later. She was worried he might have ruptured something during his previous tirade because he had fallen completely silent, and was staring at her with the strangest look on his face.

"I don't think I'll ever be okay again. I think I'm really falling in love with you." There wasn't a trace of humor in his tone, in fact, he actually looked a little disturbed.

"I'm sure it will pass," Bella said with what she hoped was a light tone.

She couldn't let herself take him seriously. He was fun and sweet, but he was also more than a little over the top. Some might say he was downright crazy. The very fact that she was tempted to let herself think that he *wasn't* crazy was just the type of thing that showed how crazy *she'd* become in the past year. The two of them together would be a disaster waiting to happen.

"Right." Heath laughed, then choked on a sip of the milk she'd poured for him. "Did you ever notice how water tastes like milk if you drink it with peanut butter?"

"I have." Bella laughed, grateful for the opportunity to put the awkward moment behind them.

"Of course you have, because you're a taste genius. A fucking genius. So will you help me?"

"Heath, haven't you asked other candy makers? There are at least ten other very experienced people working in the Kingdom right now. I know they must have someone on staff who would be willing to help you. I'm flattered that—"

"I don't *want* anyone else. I want the best. I want you. My marketing department wants you too, to be honest, but I'd be willing to do a secret consultation thing if you wanted to. I don't want to exploit you. Unless you wanted to be exploited and in that case you'd get a lot more money."

"I told you—"

"I know, you're not about the money. I'm not about money either, in case you couldn't tell. I'm more about being a perfectionist, the best I can be and all that."

"Your marketing department actually wants me? Don't they understand what a monster I've been made out to be?" Bella asked, fighting back the tears that threatened every time she thought about her public image.

She was a monster in their minds, an aberration who had done the worst possible thing a person could ever do—hurt a child. It didn't matter that she'd been cleared of all charges, she was still guilty in the minds of the public. She'd seen it clearly every time she walked down a busy street since the whole mess had started. Not to mention, the plummeting profits of the Quinn Candy Company spoke for themselves.

"They think that your new 'bad girl' image will help sales. I don't agree, just so you know. And I don't need to help sales. I've already doubled my investment and am selling out of cherry-flavored condoms faster than I can make them." He reached out and took her hand, not saying the words but letting her know with that simple touch that he believed she was innocent.

"I'm not a bad girl, Heath. A bad girl stays out late and parties and maybe snorts a few lines of pixie dust off the top of a toilet in a dirty public bathroom. She isn't accused of trying to boil two children to death in a vat of peanut brittle." Bella pulled her hand away from Heath's and took a death grip on her cold glass of milk. For some reason, his sympathy was making her feel even worse and the last thing she wanted to do was break down and sob like a baby. She'd had enough tears in the past year to last her a lifetime.

"Bella—"

“And if you’re selling out of cotton candy condoms —”

“Cherry, but I love where your mind’s going with that.”

“If you’re selling out of them, then why do you need my help? People obviously don’t mind how they taste.”

“But *I* mind. I care. I really, really care. It’s not even because I want to have the best for myself. I mean, I do want the best. I actually have a little bit of a fetish, I think. But I don’t beat myself up about it. It’s not as bad as a shoe fetish and it’s not like King Frederick with the whips and the chains and the ladies in leather corsets. Though I bet you’d look amazing in a leather corset —”

“Heath, what are you saying?” Bella asked, starting to feel swept away in some sort of verbal tornado.

“I’m sorry, I get a little crazy when I’m excited. I usually stand on my head for a little while and it goes away. But I didn’t want to do that in your house. You already think I’m a freak for the ‘tits’ comments and the whole jumping into bed after knowing you for all of five minutes. Then there’s the writing you ten million letters way before that and —”

“Heath, please feel free to stand on your head.” Bella stood to clear their dishes.

“Really?”

“Really. Just don’t throw up your peanut butter sandwich.”

“I never throw up. Rock-solid digestion. A little off-kilter upstairs, but rock-solid below the neck,” he teased as he flipped into a headstand and proceeded to balance there with ease. Amazingly, it did seem to calm him down immediately.

“So what I’m really saying, Bella, is that I don’t want to make ‘okay’ products that sell well. I want to make *amazing* products that sell fantastically and have the potential to really enhance people’s lives.”

“Heath, do you really think a flavored condom or edible underwear can change someone’s life? I’m not trying to be mean, I promise, but —”

"What I did to you today most men wouldn't do if they had a gun to their head. I mean, how many of your lovers have made love to your pussy with their mouth like that on a regular basis?" he asked.

"Um...well...you're the first." Bella knew she was blushing like mad from the combination of what he'd said and the lie that had just slipped out of her mouth. Well, she wasn't *exactly* lying. He was her first lover, but she knew he probably wouldn't take it that way.

"See! A lot of men think it's gross, don't like the taste, or are too lazy or something. I don't know what the problem is, but I think it is a problem. The studies my people conducted show that women are more likely to report being dissatisfied with the quality of the sex in their marriage than men. Men bitch about the quantity, but women want quality. They want to come and come often, and I think they deserve to. I'm telling you, I know that a truly delicious body oil, something that made a man's mouth water, could really make a difference." His passion was contagious, even if she still wasn't sold on the idea that sex toys could save the world, or even a marriage.

"You could also try experimenting with natural circulation enhancers. Like the peppermint flavor today, there are other flavors that would increase blood flow to the um...desired areas. That would probably make it easier for a woman or a man to...you know..." Bella did her best not to feel embarrassed. If she couldn't even talk about it, how could she help him make the product? Assuming she was even considering helping him, of course.

"That's brilliant! I knew you were brilliant. Can I write that down?"

"I'll write it down for you." Bella fetched a pen and paper from her desk near the bed where the covers still looked deliciously rumpled.

Could he be right? Could something so silly, so ridiculous, really make a difference in people's lives? She'd certainly enjoyed herself today, but she hadn't needed anything but him. The peppermint fudge was fun, but completely unnecessary. She'd be satisfied tasting him *au natural*, more than satisfied. But maybe he was right, maybe other people

were different, maybe they needed a little help learning how amazing it could be to intimately taste the people they loved.

"If I agreed to work with you..." Bella trailed off as her eyes settled once more on the bed, images of him naked and propped up on her pillows flashing through her mind.

"Yes?" Heath asked, flipping right side up and walking over to where she stood, his hand smoothing down her arm as his face lit up like he was getting his Christmas presents a day early.

"If I did, and I mean *if*, could you guarantee that no one would know?"

"Absolutely."

"We'd have a nondisclosure agreement, or something?"

"Whatever you need, I'll pay your lawyer fees."

"Because I meant what I said before. My mom and my grandma and all the women in my family as far back as I can remember have marketed exclusively to children. I know that sex isn't 'dirty' per se, but making sex toys and making candy for kids aren't things that go together, at least in my mind. And some day, I hope to be able to go back to my real work."

"Of course."

"Because I really love it, Heath. I love making kids happy and those days when I visited our candy stores around the Kingdom were the best days of my life. I know it's silly, but I felt like I was Santa Claus or the Easter bunny. Something bigger and better and sweeter than myself," Bella finished with a more than slightly emotional laugh.

"I don't think there could be anything sweeter than you." Heath gazed into her eyes like a man who believed every word he said, making the corny line one of the most touching things anyone had ever said to her.

"You're biased. You have a candy fetish, for goodness' sake. I'm like a dealer to you." Bella laughed, uncomfortable under his intense gaze but refusing to drop her eyes. She loved getting lost in his eyes too much. It was becoming an addiction in itself.

"I don't have a candy fetish, I just like licking things off women's bodies. Is that so wrong?" Heath asked with a grin, moving his hand to the back of her neck where his fingers started to tangle in her hair, pulling her closer to the mouth she knew she'd never be able to resist.

"Just so you know, the fudge is as hard as a rock now." Bella leaned into his warmth, feeling a melting inside of her that had nothing to do with lust, at least mostly nothing.

"Fuck the fudge." He lowered his mouth to hers, sending a shock wave of bittersweet excitement through her body. Excitement because his tongue was already slipping into her mouth, stroking her into a state of arousal. Bittersweet because she knew that they had to stop. Not simply because of the curse, but because of the knock on her door that sounded just as his other hand slipped up the front of her sweater.

"Tell them to go away."

"I can't."

"Why not?" Heath asked as the knock came again, pulling his mouth away from her own.

"I think it's... You'll see." Bella took a deep breath, anxiety spiking through her veins as she moved out from behind the arm he had thrown in front of her, as if to protect her from the menace waiting outside her door.

Unfortunately he was too late to offer protection and the people outside were far from menacing, though they had cost her almost everything that mattered. Still, she was more than grateful that they were here. After all they'd been through, she had been afraid she would never see them again, that their budding relationship had been permanently soured by the months of lies.

But they were here, there was no one else it could be. They'd braved the night and other assorted terrors to make their way to her door one more time. At least now she could have one last hug and a formal goodbye if that was their only option. Secretly, however, she prayed that there might still be some way to save them. Even if she couldn't save herself.

Chapter Four

A few hours later, as Heath sat watching Bella, he had to admit the truth—at least to himself. He was falling for her. Of course, he'd known that since she'd slipped her mouth around his cock and gazed up at him with the eyes that told him how deeply she wanted to give him pleasure. Then there had been the whole watermelon business—which was plain eerie—and the fact that she made the best PB 'n' J in possibly the entire universe. Not to mention her kindness, her humor, her easy acceptance of his quirks and her intelligent contributions to their conversation. Basically, he had already known she was fabulous, but what he'd seen in the past hour had made him seriously reconsider his doubts about getting mixed up with this "hermit".

He wanted to do more than get mixed up with her, he wanted to come home to her, to look at those big blue eyes every day for the rest of his life. He wanted to have kids with her, for god's sake. The urge was completely foreign, but he couldn't deny that seeing her with the two Proctor kids made him think what a great mother she would be. Any kid would be lucky to have her, and he would count himself the luckiest man in the world to call her his wife.

Your wife! Are you crazy?

Was he crazy? It was a question that he'd asked himself before and probably would again. This time, however, he was pretty certain that he was thinking more clearly than he had in a long time. Bella was something special, what they could have together was something special, and he'd be fool to let this chance pass him by.

"Okay, guys, finish up, you need to get home before your dad gets back from work. The last thing we need is to start this horrible business all over again. We have to be smarter this time if we're going to win," Bella said.

"We're so sorry, Annabella," Gretel said, her blue eyes welling with tears for the fifth time in under ten minutes. The kid was a wreck, and from what he'd observed it had very little to do with her being terrified that she was going to be boiled in a vat of peanut brittle. It had a lot to do, however, with the father who had left the bruises on her arms.

"We thought you wouldn't want to see us. We thought you would hate us," Hansel said, sounding older than any twelve-year-old had any business in sounding.

"I don't hate you, I love you both. You know I do." Bella hugged Gretel—who looked awfully small for an eight-year-old—and reached out the other arm to Hansel.

"Dad made us lie. He said he'd kill you if we didn't," Hansel said, his eyes deepening to a dark, midnight blue that reminded him of Bella's.

"I figured as much." A bright flush of red spread across her cheeks, but this time Heath could tell it had nothing to do with embarrassment. "I'm just so glad you two were brave enough to come back here. I know we can still find a way to make things better."

She blushed when she was angry or embarrassed, he knew her that well already. Of course, she was easy to get to know, so sweet and open and honest. And tough, she was tough too. Tough enough to tame the likes of him? He didn't know about that, but he was more than willing to let her give it a try if she were so inclined.

"He's not going to hurt you, is he, Annabella?" Gretel asked, snuggling closer to Bella as her eyes grew even wider in her small face.

"Hell no, he's not. I'd kill the bastard first." Heath spoke without thinking, knowing it wasn't the smartest thing to say the second the words were out of his mouth. But hell, that happened to him all the time. He'd given up on controlling his outbursts a long time ago. It was easier to make apologies or jokes after the fact.

"Heath, nobody here is going to kill anybody. That makes you just like other bullies who hurt and scare people," Bella said sharply, then added more softly, "And don't cuss, please."

"You could kill him if you wanted," Hansel said to Heath, his expression dead serious. "I'd help you."

"Hansel, don't talk that way. You're better than that. We'll find a way to work this out. As soon as the new representative from Kinderservices arrives, we'll talk to her, get you in a halfway house where you'll be safe. Then you can tell everyone the truth and I will do everything I can to get custody of both of you. It's going to work out, I promise you. We just have to wait a little longer," Bella said.

"You don't have a Kinderservices office out here?" Heath asked, more than a little surprised. Deepwoods was in the middle of nowhere, but the late queen had been a huge advocate for children. He found it hard to believe that she would neglect a segment of her subjects just because they happened to live only a few miles short of Outer Kartolia.

"No, we do, but the last three reps quit in less than a year. After King Frederick took power we had a hard time finding out when a replacement would arrive. Of course that makes more sense after what you've told me. It seems he was too busy with his own...issues." Bella sighed and began to rub at her eyes, obviously exhausted.

"No one is ever going to come. They've forgotten about us," Hansel said.

"That's not true. I'm sure the new queen will –"

"I don't think she will. She's only eighteen, for god's sake," Heath said. "I think we have to take care of this ourselves."

"Heath, please. Let me handle this," Bella said, a warning in her voice though her face stayed controlled.

"Bella, I hate to say it, but it doesn't seem like you've been doing a good job of handling it. You almost got sent to prison for life and these kids are still living with a creep. There had to have been some way to let people know the truth."

"I was in the dungeon and Hansel and Gretel were with their dad and he was making them lie, watching them every second. What was I supposed to do? Make it worse for them by telling the truth? He nearly killed Hansel with the beating he gave

him after they ran away. I kept my mouth shut and let the evidence clear me," Bella said, defensive even though he could see the shadow of doubt in her eyes.

She was obviously in over her head—much too gentle a person to deal with the monster that called himself the father of these two kids. But Heath wasn't gentle and had more than a little experience dealing with evil sons of bitches.

"Listen, I know you did the best that you could. I'm just saying you guys need some help. I'll get some of my people on this and we should have Hansel and Gretel out of that house by the beginning of next week," Heath said.

"Really?" Gretel asked, looking at him like he was her new hero. He'd never had anyone look at him like that and it felt pretty damn good. Maybe he would start donating to children's charities. It would be a great way to handle the scads of extra cash that Bella's expertise was going to bring flooding into his bank account.

"Heath, don't make promises that you can't keep. They've been through enough," Bella warned, though she too was looking a little optimistic.

"I'm going to take care of it," Heath assured all three of them with a big smile, already thinking of the perfect people to send to Mr. Procter for a little visit he would never forget.

"Legally, with no one getting hurt. Even him," Bella said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Heath waved away her concern. Legal-schmegal. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. He knew as well as anyone that the law wasn't made for kids. It was made for assholes who liked to hurt kids and get away with it just because they happened to biologically be their parents. It took more to be a parent than the donation of an egg or some sperm, and sometimes it took more than what the law allowed to find justice.

"Well then, we'll keep our fingers crossed, won't we?" Bella asked the kids with a smile and was met with a huge grin from Gretel. Heath even thought he saw a ghost of hope somewhere in the depths of Hansel's eyes.

If Heath hadn't been dead set on helping them before, that hint of hope would have done it. Hansel wasn't beyond saving. He could still have a shot at being a normal kid if they got him away from the man who had already stolen most of his childhood.

By the time Hansel and Gretel had been bundled into their coats and sent on their way home, it was nearly midnight and Bella was looking even more exhausted. Little wonder, really. She had been home less than a month, her company was in the crapper, her good name was ruined, and two kids that she obviously loved were in a horrible situation and she had felt powerless to help them.

Heath smiled as she closed the door behind Hansel and Gretel's retreating forms, thinking how happy he was going to be to help all of her troubles fade away. Pretty soon she would be back in the money and the entire world would know the truth—that she was innocent and still the beloved queen of candy that the entire Kingdom had loved for years.

"And then you won't want to work with me anymore," Heath said out loud, his smile starting to slip a bit before he put it firmly back in place.

What kind of asshole was he to even think about his own selfish crap? There was no way he wanted to profit off of her misfortune, especially since it would be so easy for him to help her get back everything she'd lost.

"What?" Bella asked, running a hand through her long black hair, which looked even more delicious just the slightest bit tangled.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud," he said with a smile.

"You do that a lot?" She walked slowly toward him with a gleam in her eyes that he liked a hell of a lot.

"All the time." He smiled.

"Thank you, Heath. You don't know how much this means to me." She reached out and gently pressed his hand in a gesture that was surprisingly—and wonderfully—intimate.

"Hey, Bella, somebody should have helped you out a long time ago. I'm just doing what any decent person would do, what your lawyer should have done a year ago, if you want my opinion." He wrapped his arms around her waist and tried to resist the urge to fondle her unbelievably luscious ass.

"I fired my lawyer. She didn't know Carl, didn't know what he was capable of. I thought it would be better to go through Kinderservices, but even that would have been a risk." She sighed as she dropped her head to his chest, where his heart was doing funny things again.

"Kinderservices wouldn't be able to protect them, not if this guy is as bad as you say. If you want my opinion, they'd probably just fuck everything up even more than it is already."

"I thought you didn't cuss in front of women."

"I don't cuss *at* beautiful women, I didn't say anything about *in front* of them. I cuss when I'm feeling passionate and I can tell you, passionately, that Kinderservices won't care what the kids say when you apply for custody either. And unfortunately, I can't really help you with that. They'll place them with the next of kin and getting custody will be a long, hard battle. I'm not meaning to be a downer or anything, but that's —"

"I don't think that will be a problem. They only have two living relatives as far as I know, a distant cousin and an older half sister." She lifted her face to his and gave him a hard look, as if she were searching for the answer to an unasked question.

"How much older, because if she's not of legal age —"

"I'll be thirty-one next month," Bella said, still giving him that smile that made him feel like he was going to lose his balance and never recover.

"You're kidding me." But it made complete sense. It was the eyes, all three had the same deep blue eyes that changed colors with their mood.

"My mom had me when she was only fifteen, Carl was sixteen." The way she said the words made him almost certain he was the first person outside the family to hear this little bombshell.

"So I'm assuming they didn't live happily ever after."

"Hardly. I don't think they even saw each other more than once or twice. My mom didn't really go into detail. All I know is that he married his wife almost twenty years later and they had Hansel and Gretel. I didn't even know about it until my mom died two years ago. She left me a journal. I guess she felt I finally deserved to know the truth. I'd always asked who my father was, but she wouldn't tell me."

"Some people don't deserve to have kids. I'd say she made the right decision," Heath said, almost tempted to share his own personal history, something he'd never done in his adult life outside of his therapist's office. Damned therapists. Never told him a thing he didn't know already, and weren't one-third as therapeutic as a good headstand.

"I understand why she didn't want to tell me, but I still wish I'd known earlier, for Hansel and Gretel's sake. I wish I could have done something for them sooner, could have really helped them." Bella pulled away from him and started cleaning up the dishes left from the kids' snack.

"You *are* helping them. You can't worry about what could have happened, only what's happening now. Otherwise you'll make yourself crazy." Heath screwed the lids back on the peanut butter and jelly. Peach jelly. He'd never heard of it before. Damned good stuff. Looked homemade too. Just another reason he wanted to keep Bella around, an endless supply of her homemade peach preserves.

"Actually *you're* helping them now," Bella said with a smile.

"I'll be on it first thing tomorrow. Unless you have a phone I can use," Heath said, enjoying the feeling of closeness generated by cleaning up together. What was it called? Domesticity? Yeah, that was it. Never thought he'd be into getting domesticated, but if Bella was part of the package, then he was ready to be enlisted.

"No, we still don't have phone service past the train station," Bella said. "It was another thing that was on the royal to-do list that seems to have gotten lost in the transition between monarchs."

"Stupid monarchs."

"Amen."

"Are you religious?" Heath asked, amazed at how little he really knew about the woman he was pretty sure he was falling in love with.

"Not particularly."

"So I guess you wouldn't particularly care if I slept in your bed tonight? I mean, seeing as I'm trapped in Deepwoods until the train comes tomorrow morning."

He turned her around, trapping her between his body and the kitchen counter. He'd had a hard-on for Bella from the second he saw her, couldn't wait to get closer, deeper, to pin her against anything that would stand still and show her how crazy she made him.

"You want to sleep in my bed?" Her breathing grew faster as her breasts came into contact with his chest and her mouth tilted up toward his.

"More than I want to breathe. In fact, I'll hold my breath until you say yes." He took a deep breath in and held it.

"Very mature." She laughed. "I want to say yes, but...I can't. At least not right now."

"What if I keep holding my breath, will that change your mind?" he teased, still holding his breath. What had he expected? He'd already had more good fortune than one man could expect in a day. He shouldn't have pushed his luck, but by god, how his cock throbbed just thinking about finally getting to push himself inside her, to watch her eyes change color as he rode her until she came hard around him.

"No. Now stop." She laughed again and gave him the lightest little punch in the belly.

"Okay." Heath let the air rush out of his lungs and tried to smile like it didn't sting just a bit to be turned down. He knew she was tired, knew that things were moving a little fast, but he couldn't figure out what he had done to make her change her mind.

"Don't give up," she whispered, standing on tiptoe to press the lightest kiss on his cheek. "Just try again in a month or so."

"A month or so?" Heath asked. "This isn't one of the 'Real Life Rules to Catch a King' is it? I hate that show and I'm not a king and reality television is stupid. You don't even have phone service, so how in the hell would you be able to watch TV?"

"Well, they did have TV in the dungeon. It wasn't bad as far as dungeons go, or so I was told. But it's not anything like that. It's a...personal issue. I just want you to know that I do want to be with you, if you can wait." She looked horny and vulnerable and amused and a little bit pissed at the same time.

He loved that look. He wanted to see that look a lot, every day from here on in.

"Okay. I can wait. I can't wait *two* months if you want, or three. I could probably even wait a year if I had to—"

"Let's not go overboard, a month should be fine," she said with a laugh. "I'll go make up the trundle bed."

"I get to stay here?" Heath asked as she wiggled under his arm and started fetching sheets from one of the cupboards.

"Of course. I said you couldn't sleep in my bed, not that you couldn't sleep over. There aren't any hotels in Deepwoods. I wouldn't want you to have to sleep on a bench at the station."

"You trust me not to wake you in the night and ravish you?" He forced away the image of Bella in the moonlight, asleep until he pulled the covers away from her body and started trailing kisses up one delectable thigh.

Thoughts like that weren't going to help him get a handle on the raging hard-on already abundantly visible through his khaki pants. He should have worn jeans, stiffer fabric to hide his stiffy. Of course, he hadn't been anticipating problems of this sort when he'd dressed to make a businesslike first impression. He was just lucky he'd been wearing his fancy boxers. The underwear gods had obviously been smiling on him when he stuck his hand in the drawer this morning.

"I trust you." Her look grew serious and she paused in pulling a trundle bed out from underneath her own comfy mattress. "Maybe more than I should."

"No way," Heath said, just as serious. "You can trust me, Bella. I'd never do anything you didn't want me to do, in bed or out of it. If you say wait, we wait."

"Thanks. I feel like I can believe you. Is that weird since we've known each other less than twenty-four hours?"

Heath crossed the room and took her face in his hands.

"No, it's weirder that I think I'm falling in love with you." His heart and his cock both tightened to the strangling point as she gazed up at him with a mixture of shock and...excitement. He stood corrected, *that* was the look he wanted to see for the rest of his life.

"That's the third time you've said that," she breathed, her lips deliciously parted and soft, begging him to taste them one last time before they went to their separate beds.

"You're right. How much thinking do I really have to do? I should just be a man about it and say it straight out, right?" He pulled her closer and slid his arms down her back to cradle her ass in his hands, urging her closer to him, just to give her a little physical reminder of how much he craved her beautiful body.

"What?" Her eyes closed as she pressed against his erection and her hips tilted forward instinctively. He almost lost it then, knowing that her clit was rubbing up against his cock, that he was only a few lousy pieces of clothing away from contact with what was swiftly becoming his favorite thing in the whole wide world.

"I love you," he whispered, knowing even as his heart skipped a beat and his mouth dried up that he was telling the god's honest truth.

"You really are mad." She almost moaned the words as she looped her arms around his neck.

"Do I still get a good night kiss?"

"Hell yes." She pulled him down to her mouth, giving him another taste of her heat, her passion. The sense of urgency, of hunger he felt simmering in Bella was the most powerful he'd ever known, so powerful it might have scared a lesser man. But he had never considered himself "lesser" and her need made him hotter than any woman ever had. Especially when she did that little thing with her tongue that she was doing right now.

"Are you sure this is good night?" he asked, unable to resist slipping a hand up to tease at her nipple through her sweater. She was a breast girl, he'd known it from the start. His hands, his tongue, his teeth on her nipples drove her crazy, maybe crazy enough to reconsider making him wait a month to ease his growing hunger.

"You are a bad man." She smiled against his mouth, then surprised the hell out of him by taking a bite out of his lower lip.

"In a good way?" He somehow managed to get the words out, despite the fact that her teeth still claimed his lip and his cock was starting to ache in a way that was almost painful. God, did she know what she did to him?

"In a very good way." She pulled away, letting out the smallest of sighs before she slipped from his grip entirely and threw a lavender-scented pillow in the center of his chest.

"Good night, Mr. Miller," she teased before she blew him a kiss and slipped into the bathroom.

"Good night, Ms. Quinn," he mumbled, smiling like the idiot he was, despite the killer case of blue balls he was going to be nursing for the remainder of the night.

He was in love. He'd always suspected it would hit him hard and fast if it ever chose to hit. Now he could only bide his time, do everything in his power to make Bella the happiest camper in the Deepweeds, and hope that pretty soon she'd feel the same. If that meant keeping his cock in his pants, then so be it. He'd concentrate on other ways to show her how much pleasure he could bring her. Already visions of his favorite

purple vibrator teasing along her clit were dancing through his head as he pushed his trundle to the corner and slipped off his khakis and button-down.

He'd head home tomorrow and take care of the calls that needed to be made for the Procter children. Then he'd be back in Deepweeds come Monday morning to make sure that their transition to Bella's temporary custody went smoothly, and Mr. Procter was truly convinced not to try to cause any trouble. Heath knew the right people to pay off to make sure what he wanted was accomplished with utmost speed and discretion. And if Mr. Procter weren't bribable, he'd find other ways to make him see reason.

Then when all the dust had settled and Bella had succumbed to the inevitable love and lust growing between them, he would put his mind back on other things. Like business, all-important business. It was what he obsessed over twelve hours a day, seven days a week, his *raison d'être* and his favorite use of a more than mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Strangely, however, the real reason he'd come to Deepweeds this afternoon was starting to seem fairly unimportant. Sure, he still planned on making sex toys—the best damn sex toys in the industry. It was the business that had enabled him to have the kind of money and power it took to make things happen for Bella and the Procter children and it was damn fun.

But it suddenly didn't seem so important for Bella to work for him, for her to risk her good name to be involved with something even marginally seedy. No matter how many nondisclosures they signed, gossip had a way of spreading. There was always the chance that there would be a leak, that the truth would come out and that she'd be back to suffering the same kind of public relations disaster that she was dealing with right now.

And she was better than that. Maybe even *he* would be better than that if he were with her.

"But will she want to be with you, jackass?" He whispered the question into the darkened cottage before he closed his eyes and willed himself to fall asleep. He wanted

to be unconscious before he had to listen to Bella sliding into her bed, and more importantly, before his brain had time to figure the odds on the Queen of Sweets making a go of it with the King of Smut.

As he slipped into dreamland, however, his mind broke the news that it didn't look good. It didn't look good at all.

Chapter Five

Bella had to be dreaming. The raging fire inside of her could never burn in waking life. She would be incinerated, destroyed by its heat, eaten alive by the raw need that was quickly consuming what was left of her right mind.

But then, she could still smell the familiar scents of her cottage—lavender, baked goods and sugar—and the unfamiliar smell of Heath across the room. She could hear the night birds calling outside, the last of the summer insects humming into the darkness, and the soft snoring from the man on her trundle bed, the man responsible for this unbelievable burning.

She shifted again, throwing off her quilt, grateful that she hadn't lit the wood stove. She was already twisting, writhing against the suddenly coarse feel of her sheets. Every nerve in her body screamed for her to get out of bed, to go to the only person who could ease the horrible ache that was becoming more than she could bear. Each whisper of her nightgown across her nipples, each shift of thigh against thigh, seemed to make the burning worse. It was impossible to catch her breath, her skin was damp with sweat, and it was all she could do to keep from moaning her desire into the night.

Go to him. Go to him and take what you need.

"No." She muttered the word aloud, then closed her eyes and forced herself not to move, not to feed the itch inside of her with any more friction of sheets and fabric against her sensitized skin. She had made it so long. She was stronger than this. It was only a month. Was she such a slave to her newly awakened lust that she couldn't delay her gratification a few weeks longer?

Take what you need, Bella. He'll never come back. You'll never feel this way another day in your life. Do you want to die a virgin, alone in your cottage, never knowing the ways of love?

Damn that voice, it was evilly persuasive. Maybe Heath wouldn't come back. He'd promised to help Hansel and Gretel and she believed he would. He had said he loved her and as crazy as it seemed, she almost believed that too. She also knew without a doubt that she was falling for him.

But what if she were wrong? It had happened so fast, so quickly it made her head swim. What if this was all some crazy dream, the climax of which was her lying in her bed as her body cried out for liberation from the sexual hunger that had tormented her for most of her adult life?

He wants you. He's hard for you even in his sleep. You could mount him now, wake him as you slide his cock inside you. He'd never have to know you were a virgin, never have to know why you've waited so long to share your body with a man.

She didn't know if it was the word "mount" that did it, or the whole idea of ravishing Heath while he was still sleeping, but she was positive that the voice in her head wasn't hers.

There was something wrong, something working in her mind, under her skin that wasn't Bella. Her suspicions were confirmed when she was suddenly jerked into a sitting position by some unseen force, and her bare feet slid to the floor of their own accord.

The voice. The movements of her body. Something was definitely wrong, horribly wrong. The terror that coursed through her at the realization was almost enough to banish the painful desire that consumed her.

Almost...but not quite.

Don't fight this. You want him. You crave his touch. You crave the feel of him inside of you, reaching into your womb, giving you a child, the next in your line, the girl who will carry on your legacy.

"No." Bella tried to scream, but the sound came out a hoarse whisper. Then, as if in a dream, she watched her arms grip the bottom of her nightgown and pull at the gauzy fabric until it floated quietly over her head.

Touch yourself, Bella. Ready your body for him.

Bella moaned into the night as her hands rose to roll her nipples between her fingers and thumbs, plucking and teasing until her breasts were heavy and swollen. Her pussy became a painful, throbbing place, filled with so much need, so much hunger that she knew there would be no turning back. She would take him. Even if the voice and its accompanying power over her body were to fade at this very moment, she would still cross the room, still rip the sheets from Heath's sleeping form and claim him like a woman possessed.

"A woman possessed." The words resonated through the eerie quiet of the cottage, as did her sharp gasp as one hand left her nipple and slid down between her legs.

She felt her fingers part her curls almost as if they weren't her own. They teased her swollen flesh for a moment, sliding through her slick folds. Then her middle finger worked even further down, dipping into her pussy, bringing back wetness to coat her clit. Her fingers flew over the bundle of nerves, teasing the nub until her desire reached a peak even more wickedly beautiful than before.

"Oh god," Bella whispered, her knees threatening to buckle and her body to shatter right there in the middle of the wooden floor.

Good girl.

The voice whispered once more inside her mind with a laugh that was decidedly depraved. Then it was gone as quickly as it had come, taking its power over her body with it, leaving her so filled with frustrated desire that she shook and trembled. The night was suddenly colder than she could bear. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she clenched her hands together, bringing her fingertips to her mouth and struggling to come back to herself, to find the rational woman she knew was somewhere inside the entirely carnal creature she had become.

Unbidden, her eyes found Heath's sleeping form only a few feet away. He was on his side, his face turned toward her, his lips slightly parted in a way that made them look even more delicious. He was completely relaxed, lending an air of peacefulness to

his countenance she'd never seen when he was awake and filled with enough energy for two or three grown men. It made him seem younger, softer and even more loveable.

The innocence that sleep brings should have made her go back to her own bed and find release on her pillow, should have cleared her mind just enough to prevent what had a few seconds ago seemed inevitable.

But it didn't. She didn't.

As she crossed the last few steps to his bed and gently rolled him onto his back, Bella knew she was probably making a mistake she would regret for the rest of her life. But she didn't care, she couldn't care about anything except satisfying the sanity-stealing desire that had become her entire world. She needed to scratch the itch that raced beneath her skin like a deadly infection threatening to spread disease to everything it touched unless it was removed. She knew of only one way to remove it, satisfy it, eradicate it, one way to get back to who she really was without this unbelievably powerful hunger.

"Bella?" He was still half asleep as she parted the opening of his silk boxers and removed his cock, indeed hard, thick and ready – just as the voice had said it would be.

"Heath, wake up, please wake up," Bella half sobbed as she reached down and spread her sex, positioning the head of him against her slick, aching center. She didn't want him to be asleep, didn't want this to be something he might regret when he woke up and realized what she'd done.

"I was just dreaming about you – oh god, Bella. Yes, yes!" He woke up faster than she would have believed humanly possible. In seconds his hands were on her hips, fingers digging into her flesh as he pulled her down to meet the sharp upward thrust of his hips.

In the first instant that his thickness tunneled deep inside, there was a brief flash of pain, a sensation of being stretched past capacity. Then the pain was gone, replaced by the euphoria of feeling his cock inside of her body, of being more intimately joined than she had thought possible. She looked down into his face, seeing a hunger and need that

rivalled her own. His face contorted in a grimace of pleasure that was strangely beautiful, and she knew, right or wrong, he'd wanted this just as much as she had.

"Lean down, give me your tits," he moaned and Bella obeyed, not even caring that he'd used the word "tits" once his mouth closed around her nipple and he began to suckle her. His tongue flicked in swift circles around her puckered tip until the tension within her built to yet another level, making her forget everything but her desire.

"Fuck me." She gasped the words against his mouth as he kissed her hard enough to bruise.

She rode his cock with a frantic rhythm even faster than the steel hands on her hips were urging. In seconds, he gave up on setting their speed, his hands stealing around to cup her ass.

"No baby, I think *you're* fucking *me*." His fingers dug into her flesh, leveraging her thrusts in a new direction, a direction that had her clit rolling over his pubic bone again and again. Bella moaned as the wave of pleasure building inside of her grew as high as it could possibly become without breaking and taking her with it.

"Heath," she pleaded, not knowing what was going to happen next, but knowing she needed it more than she'd ever needed anything before. She was shaking, breathless, drunk on a kind of pleasure she still couldn't believe was real.

"Come on my cock, Bella, come on me," he demanded softly into her ear, and for some reason those words were all she needed.

She screamed as she came, hearing herself as if she were listening from across the room. Her spirit filled every corner, soared to the rafters, her essence floating out through the chimney as the pure bliss of his hands on her, his cock inside of her, made her explode past the boundaries of her skin. She knew she had become something different, a being of energy and pleasure who existed outside the constraints of time and flesh.

"I love you." She relaxed onto his chest, feeling as if every bone in her body had been broken and reformed, leaving her limp and useless and weak. "I really do."

In that moment, she didn't care if he felt the same way, she simply needed to tell him the truth in her heart.

"Bella, god, I love you too. I love fucking you, I love eating your pussy, I love watching your face get all red when you're pissed off, I love eating your peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—"

"Heath—"

"Don't interrupt me when I'm telling you how much I love you," he ordered before rolling her onto her back and positioning himself above her, slowly beginning to pump his hips.

"I love the way you love those kids and the way you talk dirty every once in awhile. I even love the way you put sheets on a bed, the way your ass tilts up when you're tucking them in. Oh god, and your pussy—god—your pussy is the best place I've ever been," he panted with a little laugh.

"Heath." Bella laughed, unable to believe that the slow, sensuous stroking of his still rigid cock inside of her was actually making her body come alive again, already building the fire she knew would consume her, destroy her and recreate her all in the space of a few mind-blowing minutes. She wouldn't have believed it was possible once, let alone twice.

"Come back to the city with me, live with me, let me fuck you like this every night." His eyes burned into hers with a fire she knew came from his heart, not only his body.

"Heath, I—I don't know, I don't know." It was suddenly impossible to think amidst the warring voices in her mind.

He was crazy. She was cursed. He couldn't be serious, but then again, maybe he was. And if he was, did she have the courage to take what she wanted, to throw curses and legacies and the work of a lifetime to the wind to claim the man who had changed her world overnight?

"Then marry me. *Marry me*. I'm not too scared to ask. I'll marry you tomorrow." His rhythm grew faster, more urgent. He leaned in to claim her lips, his tongue moving against hers in a frenzied dance as she lifted to meet his thrusts.

His hands shifted from her waist to her nipples, softly brushing the nearly raw flesh with his thumbs, building her need to the breaking point. Then he dropped his face into her neck, slamming his body into hers with a fierceness that told of his need to possess her completely.

"Bella, Bella." He chanted her name against her skin as his pace grew even faster. His thickly muscled arms shook as they wrapped around her shoulders, clinging to her, clenching her tightly to his chest as if they would be able to merge into the same skin, finally ending the terrible separateness, the loneliness that had plagued her the entire length of her life.

"Come inside me, Heath." She cried out as her pussy clenched around him in a second unbelievably pure wave of pleasure.

"Bella, I love you." He moaned and came, drenching her insides, shooting himself deep inside her center as her walls continued to pulse with the aftermath of her orgasm.

And then something was different. Bella actually felt the radical shift the second it happened. She stopped breathing for a moment, completely terrified as a tinkle of wicked laughter sounded somewhere outside her window and then floated off into the night.

She'd done it, exactly what the voice told her to do. Not only had she slept with him, she'd practically begged him to come inside her.

Now she'd just have to wait...and pray. Maybe she would be different, maybe the curse would finally end with her, with her and the man who—from the glistening in his eyes as he lifted his head and looked down at her—seemed to be as blown away by the feelings between them as she was.

"I love you too," Bella said, smoothing a lock of hair off of his forehead.

She tried not to let her heart lodge in her throat when he smiled the most beautiful smile in return, but something deep inside of her said this would probably be the last time she'd ever see that grin.

Hell, it would be one of the last times she'd ever see his face.

Chapter Six

Two months later

Mary didn't know exactly what it was that drove her to do it, that finally gave her the courage to stand up for what she'd wanted for so very, very long. But something had, some inner strength that had abandoned her decades before.

So she'd done it. She'd done it without a second thought, and then put the entire event out of her mind. She'd had to do it, had to stop him from making the biggest mistake of his life. That woman didn't love him, couldn't love him, not the way *she* did.

Mary O'Neill had loved Heath Miller for longer than she could remember, since they'd been kids playing in the back alleys of Kingdom City's grittier streets, dreaming of ways to get out of the hell they'd been born into. They'd been a pair, Mary with a mom who was always messed up on pixie dust, and Heath with a dad who beat him so hard he had convulsions until he was twelve. Until the day his dad mysteriously disappeared and he'd been free to start turning his dreams into a reality.

What did Annabella Quinn know about that little boy? How in the world would that goody-two-shoes be able to deal with the episodes Heath still sometimes had, long stretches when he'd shake so badly he couldn't come out of his office, couldn't function in the world until Mary convinced him to go back on his medication? Would she know how to calm him down, how to resurrect time and time again the strong, virile, magnetic man who knew how to turn everything he touched to gold?

She wouldn't, couldn't. She wouldn't be able to deal. The first time she woke up to find him trembling in the corner, lost in his violent past, she'd leave him. And he'd end up more broken than he was already.

"Mary, what exactly was in the Christmas candy collection sent out this afternoon?" Heath asked, sticking his head out of his office to where her desk guarded his inner sanctum.

Mary turned to look at him, her smile fading when she saw the same dark circles under his eyes that had been there for the past month, ever since he'd learned that Annabella Quinn had been granted custody of the Procter children and still wouldn't return his calls or letters.

But it would be all right. He would get over his disappointment in time. He couldn't really be in love with a woman he'd known less than twenty-four hours. It was irrational and ridiculous, two things Mary really couldn't tolerate.

"Peppermint condoms, gingerbread edibles and a sugar cookie body oil."

"No mint-chocolate condoms?" he asked, looking down at a paper in his hand in confusion.

"No, you said those tasted like flavored laxatives, sir," she reminded him, praying that his recent forgetfulness wasn't a sign of an episode to come.

He hadn't had one in nearly three years, but then it was almost Christmas and that was always a hard time for them both. It wasn't easy facing the "family" season when you didn't have much in the way of family and what you did have you wished would crawl into a hole somewhere and disappear forever. Still, they'd always managed to get by together. Their annual Christmas dinner with the other orphans on their staff had come to be one of the highlights of Mary's year.

"Right. *Shitfuckshit*." He ran a frustrated hand through his nearly shoulder length hair. He hadn't cut it in several months, hadn't shaved either, until a few days ago when a new security guard wouldn't let him in the building because he thought he was a homeless man, not the owner of the most successful adult company in the Kingdom.

"That's an interesting new cuss word, sir." Mary tried to joke, forcing herself to believe that things would soon return to normal. If she just acted as if everything were

fine, as if the man she had known her whole life hadn't changed somehow since he'd come back from the Parish of Deepweeds, he would get better. He had to get better.

"What?"

"Nothing, sir." She sighed and felt an all-too-familiar sinking in her stomach.

"I don't want any calls this afternoon, Mary. Just take a message and I'll call them back tomorrow." He shut the door behind him only to open it almost immediately. "Unless it's a personal call. I'm taking personal calls," he said, and then disappeared again.

Of course he was taking personal calls. He was still pining for her, still waiting for her to call him, to explain why she'd taken so long to make good on the plans they'd made. He still believed that there could be a happy ending to their story.

"Seems he should know better," Mary whispered to herself as her eyes started to tear behind her sensible glasses. She suddenly began to wonder if maybe she might have made a mistake.

What if she were wrong? There was only a ghost of a chance, but she believed in ghosts, they haunted her every night. What if, in her haste to protect Heath from heartbreak, she was the one responsible for shattering his heart beyond repair? There was only one way to know for sure.

She held her breath as she dialed the number, hoping that an answering machine or one of the kids would pick up the phone and she'd be spared the experience of having to hear *her* voice. No such luck of course. Not that she was surprised, Mary had never been a lucky woman. Any luck she had, she made herself.

"Incredible Edibles, Annabella speaking." There was laughter in her voice, as if she'd just finished joking with one of her newly adopted children before answering the phone.

She sounded busy, slightly breathless and happy. Very happy.

"Sorry, wrong number," Mary said and hung up quickly, her heart hammering in her ears for several seconds as she struggled to draw breath.

She was right. She'd known she was right. Annabella Quinn was happy, overjoyed with her life without Heath. She wasn't moping around crying into her chocolate-covered pretzels, she was celebrating the season with her sister and brother. She was rebuilding her candy empire and basking in the affections of a Kingdom that couldn't wait to eat humble pie and welcome her back as the cultural icon that she was.

Even if she suspected that the package Mary had sent wasn't really from Heath, Bella didn't want to risk her reputation by associating with a man from the wrong side of the tracks. Annabella Quinn had everything she wanted right in the palm of her hand and didn't give a damn about the man who was responsible for giving it all back to her. She'd used Heath for his connections and his ability to pull strings with people who operated outside the boundaries of her happy, cozy little cottage in the woods. But now that she had the kids and her good rep, she had no more use for him.

"But I do. *We* do," Mary said, staring out at the fifty-plus employees that made Melt Me Enterprises more than a business. They were family, scrappers who stuck together and made their way to the top on nothing but hard work and the refusal to stay down in the gutter where the world wanted them.

She owed it to them as much as to herself to stick with the original plan. She'd done what she had to do to get Annabella Quinn out of the picture, now she just had to wait for Heath to come to his senses. He would, she was sure of it. It was only a matter of time.

Chapter Seven

Two months later

If there was one time of the year even crazier than Christmas for the Incredible Edible Quinn Candy Company, it was Valentine's Day. It had never been Bella's favorite holiday, considering she'd spent most of the time before her thirty-first birthday avoiding men and relationships like the plague. This year, however, when she should have finally been able to enjoy flirting, dating and maybe even finding a guy with whom she'd like to share a box of Valentine's Day chocolates, she was more miserable than ever.

It stunk, especially since she really had so very much to be thankful for.

"Bella, look what I did today! I love my new school! Everyone is so nice and the popular girls let me sit at their table and told me that my hair was the prettiest hair in the entire third grade!" Gretel screamed as she burst through the elevator doors that led into their new loft apartment in the city.

Bella hadn't been able to stay in the cottage after the package came from Heath. She'd understood what he'd been telling her with the three-inch thick medical file and the hastily scribbled note confessing he was ill and had even ended the life of someone who had wronged him. What she couldn't understand was why he hadn't bothered to tell her in person why they couldn't have a future together. Not speaking with him, honoring his request not to accept any phone calls or letters that might come from him after the package arrived...had been unspeakably hard.

Her cottage had become haunted with memories of their time there, and by whatever spirit had lured them together for that one night of unforgettable passion.

Literally haunted in the second case...by a very unpleasant demon spirit.

The damn thing kept showing up for weeks after Heath left, whispering in her ear, doing its best to jade her to men, love and the world in general, until she'd finally called the village exorcist in for some spring cleaning right before their big move. The tiny little man had been thrilled to get the job, insisting that he'd been certain the Quinn family was plagued by a Bitterness demon for years. Annabella had only nodded at the guy, refusing to ask why he hadn't bothered to share his wisdom with anyone else. She was just glad he was capable of ridding her of the thing.

The horrible little beast had caused enough trouble for her family, and it was long past time to put an end to its evil mischief. She didn't need its help to make amazing candy any more than she needed a cane to walk. Her great-great-whatever-grandmother might have been insecure about her skills, but Bella most certainly was not.

It had been a nasty few days as the demon clung on, fighting destruction, but they'd finally put it to rest. Still, she couldn't bring herself to really hate the pathetic creature. So much goodness had come from the pain it had helped inflict on her heart. Besides, the spirit hadn't sent that package, Heath had, in what she supposed was his way of explaining why he never wanted to hear from her again.

"Of course you have the prettiest hair, it's exactly like mine," Bella teased, pretending good spirits as she tossed her long black hair around her shoulders and smiled. It was really amazing how much she and her half sister resembled each other, though Gretel seemed to have taken after her mother with regards to her physical build. She was still one of the most petite girls her age despite Bella's valiant efforts to put some meat on her tiny bones.

"Are you two going to start talking girl stuff? If you are, I'm going to my room." Hansel heaved a put-upon sigh, though she could see the smile tugging at his lips. He loved both of his sisters, even if he did complain regularly about the trials of being the only man in a house full of women.

"No, no girl stuff, but I could use some taste-testers if you two are in the mood." Bella motioned to the coconut truffles cooling on wax paper in the center of the island in the open kitchen.

"Blah!" Gretel, who for some strange reason hated sweets, wrinkled her nose at the truffles and ran to her room to change out of her school uniform. "Can we have pizza?"

"We had pizza two nights ago. I made curried rice." Bella still found it hard to believe her own kin dreaded her cooking when every friend she had said they would pay good money to eat a Bella-cooked meal on a regular basis.

"I want Chinese," Hansel said.

"No, pizza!" Gretel shouted.

"You're going to turn into a pizza. I know you had it at school yesterday," Hansel teased as he threw his book bag on the couch.

"Listen, you two. I know that after a lifetime in the Deepweeds, all this city takeout is very exciting, but it's bad for you. Loaded with sodium and —"

"Saturated fat," the two kids echoed together.

"Wow, you have my lectures memorized already." Bella suddenly wanted to cry for no good reason. They didn't mean to be mean. They were the sweetest kids she knew and she knew a lot of kids. She was just sensitive. Very sensitive and riding a wave of hormones that had her acting nuttier than one of her Christmas fruitcakes.

"Okay, we can have pizza or Chinese or whatever," Bella sighed. "But will one of you please try my truffles? I can't have any more caffeine today, doctor's orders."

"I will," Hansel said, his face lighting up at the knowledge that he could have his coveted moo goo gai pan for supper.

Bella couldn't help but laugh as he made a great show of bravely forcing himself to take a still-gooey truffle, pop it in his mouth whole and chew thoughtfully for nearly a minute before swallowing. The change in him was remarkable, even more so than

Gretel. He was a new kid. Still quiet and reserved, but making a few friends at his school and growing happier and more relaxed every day.

He still had bad dreams, but Bella didn't mind sitting up with him when he was scared. She was up half the night herself—cooking, knitting, cleaning the house—anything to avoid sleeping and dreaming about those golden eyes.

"Exquisite," he pronounced after he swallowed and wiped the edges of his mouth like one of the butlers they'd seen at the Castle where they'd been invited for Christmas dinner.

The kids had loved that, of course, feeling as fancy as the royals themselves. Bella had practically slept through the entire affair, so tired from the move and the emotional upheaval of the past year and a half that not even a trip to the castle could banish her exhaustion. Meeting the Queen had been nice, however. She seemed like a decent girl who would do her best to take care of the Kingdom, and her Wicked Stepmother had been a lot of fun. Totally not what Bella had expected, the woman was warm and unfailingly gracious with a husband who hovered around her like her own personal bodyguard.

"Do you really mean that? I need honest opinions, you know. Our rep is riding on every piece of candy," she said with a grin.

"Our rep is safe with the truffles," Hansel confirmed with a nod.

"Good. We did an entire coffeehouse truffle line for Valentine's Day and it's been so popular that we're doing an Easter line as well. These go into production tomorrow."

"Now that they have the Hansel seal of approval."

"Of course." Bella began clearing up the mess from her test batch. It was hard not tasting everything herself, but with as much candy and chocolate as she made on a daily basis, she just couldn't taste it all anymore. Too much caffeine and sugar was bad for the baby.

Strangely enough, however, the end result of her forced abstinence from the sweet stuff had been a weight loss of ten pounds. So here she was, four months pregnant and

actually thinner than she'd been before. She had a slightly thicker waist, but all of her old skirts still fit and no one who hadn't been told suspected the truth. Only Hansel, Gretel and her personal assistant Mia, who she'd hired to help her through the period of fatigue and morning sickness at the beginning of her pregnancy, had any idea that she was nearly halfway through growing an entirely new person.

She liked it that way. Mostly. Except when she cried about it at night, wishing she could share this experience with one certain person. The one person who had told her in no uncertain terms that he couldn't be trusted with her heart...or the job of being a father to the baby he had no clue would be born the middle of next summer.

"What are you doing tonight for Valentine's Day?" Gretel asked, coming out of her room in her favorite pink pajamas, alleged to be exact replicas of the ones Queen Cindy wore to bed every night. She was going to have to talk with Gretel about idolizing a woman who seemed to have cotton candy between her ears, but that could wait for a little while. Maybe she'd grow out of her "I want to be a Princess" phase.

"I don't have any plans." Bella loaded the last of the dishes into her new high-powered washing machine. Moving out of the cottage had a lot of upsides other than escaping evil spirits, modern kitchen appliances being at the top on her personal list.

"You don't have any plans for Valentine's Day?" Gretel asked, looking completely horrified. "But I thought that —"

"Gretel will you just give it a rest? You are so stupid sometimes," Hansel snapped.

"Hansel, don't use words like 'stupid' with your sister. Or with anyone else for that matter," Bella said gently, understanding that he was only trying to spare her feelings. He was way too perceptive for a barely teenaged boy.

"I'm sorry, Hansel." Gretel looked like she wanted to say something else, but bit her lip instead.

"You don't have to be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong," Bella said, moving to give Gretel a hug.

"I'm the jerk." Hansel sighed, a dramatic chest-heaving sound that actually made her smile.

"Geez! Nobody's a jerk." Bella laughed. "I should have plans for Valentine's Day. We should make plans. Do you guys want to go out for pizza and Chinese instead of ordering in, and then see a movie or something?"

"No!" They both shouted the words at the same time, giving Bella her first clue that they were up to something. If only they'd left a few other clues earlier in the afternoon, maybe she would have been able to stop them.

"What have you done?" Bella asked, knowing the second she said the words that they were some of the stupidest she'd ever uttered.

She knew what they'd done, or rather who they'd contacted. They'd been hinting that she should call him since they moved to Kingdom City, into a building not two miles away from the Melt Me Enterprises warehouse and production center.

"Hansel did it," Gretel said, her eyes growing wide and fearful.

"Gretel, calm down. Hansel, spill it." Bella put her hands on her hips and tried to look tough, calm and in control, despite the fact that her heart and stomach were in a race to see who could be the first to leap out of her throat.

"He really loves you," Hansel said with his ultra serious, "I'm a man" face that broke her heart because he really did seem like a little grownup most of the time. She ached for the childhood he hadn't gotten to have. "Now Gretel and I are going out for dinner."

"You are not going out into the streets of Kingdom City by yourself. No way in hell. I don't care what you have planned." Bella forgot her panic for a moment. She'd found she sometimes had to play "mean mommy" with her siblings, no matter how much she loved them. Hell, *because* she loved them. No matter how much she'd like to be nice all the time, raising kids wasn't always a "nice" job.

"I'm thirteen and can take care of us."

"Hansel Proctor, don't you dare walk out that —"

"But I knew you'd say that, so Mia is meeting us at the pizza parlor downstairs."

"Mia's in on this?" Bella asked.

"I am, but I decided not to meet you guys downstairs. I saw a certain somebody and I think he might be on the way up as we speak." Mia was panting as she pushed open the door to the stairs that led up to the loft.

"But I didn't buzz anyone in," Bella said, more than a little dizzy. This couldn't be happening. It was so wonderfully terrible that she was going to throw up the marshmallow truffle she'd sneaked earlier in the afternoon.

"I might have let him in with my key." Mia's freckled face blushed a bright red before she shooed Hansel and Gretel down the stairs in front of her.

"But Gretel's in her pajamas!" Bella wailed, her mind refusing to focus on her bigger problems.

"We're going to a pajama party showing of *The Littlest Princess* after pizza," Mia said.

"Hansel too?" Bella asked, more than a little shocked.

"He'd do anything for true love," Mia said with a smile.

"But I'm *not* wearing pajamas," Hansel called from down the stairwell before Mia's head disappeared, leaving Bella alone in the apartment with nothing but the sound of the all-too rapidly approaching elevator to keep her company.

She suddenly found it even harder to catch her breath. He was here. He was going to be in the same room in less than twenty-five seconds. Why in the world he had come, what Hansel had said to get him here, how much he knew about her "delicate condition", she had no idea.

What if Hansel had told him about the baby and he was angry with her? What if he'd come here to tell her that he was going to sue for partial custody? What would she do? What would she say?

What if this had nothing to do with the baby? What if he really loved her like Hansel had said? What if he was coming to tell her that he'd made a mistake, that he wanted to be with her? What the hell would she do when he'd told her himself that he wasn't well? Was she weak enough to risk her new family's well-being for the man that she couldn't keep out of her waking or sleeping thoughts?

Bella supposed the onslaught of questions was just too much for her mind to handle. Or maybe it was the pregnancy hormones, or the chocolate deprivation, or maybe she just hyperventilated like a big loser. Whatever the cause, she started seeing stars before the elevator door swung open and the nausea followed soon after. Before she could even see if Heath looked as delicious as he had the first time they'd met, she had to make a run for the bathroom.

Chapter Eight

"Bella?" Heath asked for what felt like the hundredth time, though he knew it had only been about a minute since he'd seen her dash for the bathroom and slam the door.

"Leave me alone."

"Bella, if you don't let me in right now I'm calling the medics. I mean it. And then you'll have a huge hospital bill and the kids will hate me forever," Heath told the closed bathroom door.

"I have medical insurance."

"Bella, please —"

"I'm sorry, I just think I might be sick," she said, her voice muffled.

"Well let me in, I'll hold back your hair."

"I don't want you to see me throw up."

"I don't care, I really don't. I just want to see you. Besides, I like vomit—heck, I've vomited tons of times myself."

"Don't make me laugh."

"Let me in and I promise not to." He felt a small lightening in his gut. If he could still make her laugh, all wasn't completely lost. Right?

"Just a second." The toilet flushed, water ran and then he heard the click of the lock and the door swung slowly open. "I think I feel better."

"Good," he mumbled.

She looked amazing and he thanked god he had shaved and gotten a haircut before he'd come. Otherwise, he might have blamed his own scuzzy appearance for Bella's funny stomach. He'd been a wreck the past four months.

"Hi," he said with a cautious smile.

"Why are you here, Heath?" she asked, her blue eyes as dark and stormy as he'd ever seen them. They were practically black, for god's sake. She hated him, she hated his guts whether he'd had a haircut or not.

He'd been nuts to come. She didn't want him here or she would have called, or written, or at least not returned every one of his letters with "return to sender" scrawled across the top in her gorgeous handwriting.

Hansel must have done a piss-poor job of breaking the news of his arrival. Either that, or she hated him so much that she was pretending to have the stomach flu in order to avoid any kind of contact.

"Heath?"

"Yeah? I mean, hi, how are you feeling? Are you okay? Shit, you said you were feeling better. Sorry."

"Yes, and I asked you what you were doing here."

"Right. Okay, so this is more awkward than I thought. I guess I shouldn't have—"

"No, it's my fault. And Hansel's. He surprised me with this." She smoothed her hair away from her face self-consciously. It was a little longer and wilder than he remembered, and made her sexier than ever.

"I know. Should I have called and warned you in advance?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. I'm just glad you're here." She swallowed hard and looked seconds away from tears.

Okay, so that was good news, but why the tears when she was the one who hadn't wanted anything to do with him? Maybe because he creeped her out in a major way and she was scared? Maybe because she felt like a shit for not thanking him for what he'd done for her and the kids? Maybe she wanted to puke again and that made her eyes water? Who knew? Not him.

"Oh good," he said, instead of any of the other things that were flying through his mind. He might have no filter, but at least his mind did him the blessed favor of

flooding him with too much information from time to time. At the moment, he had a feeling it was keeping him from making a complete fool of himself.

"Heath, I don't know what Hansel told you, but I—"

"I love you, Bella," he heard himself say.

So much for not making a fool of himself. Oh well, he might as well go for broke now that he'd gotten started.

"I've missed you like nothing I can ever try to explain. I don't know why you didn't want to talk to me, but I don't care right now, I just want—"

"What are you talking about? You sent me that package, Heath, what was I—"

"What package?"

"The package that arrived the same day as the kids came to the cottage. The one with the note that told me not to accept your calls or letters. The one with the...medical records." Bella looked at him with sad eyes that seemed to question the soundness of his mind.

Seemed to question the soundness of his mind.

"Someone sent you my medical records." Heath started to pace the floor. God, he wanted to hit things, but knew he couldn't. If he did, the woman he loved would think he was even crazier than she already did.

When he found the son of a bitch who'd done this, however, he was going to hit something, a lot of somethings. Like a head and a stomach and a spleen and anything else he could think of that would hurt. A lot.

"You didn't send them?" Hope flared in her eyes before suspicion crowded in. "Are you sure?"

"Bella, I have a little bit of a medical condition, but it doesn't make me forget things and it doesn't make me crazy. I haven't had an episode for three years. And just so you know, I never did anything horrible when I was sick no matter what those 'records' said. I was just a pathetic piece of shit who cried a lot and had a seizure every once in

awhile." He slammed his fist down on an island filled with chocolates, despite his vow to remain cool, calm and in control. When Bella jumped at the sound, he immediately regretted it. Slowly, he crossed the room to kneel next to where she had just perched on the edge of a very comfy looking couch.

"Listen, Big B, I'm not crazy, I swear to you. I'm pissed as hell right now because some asshole wanted to make you hate me, or keep us apart or something. But I'm not a crazy man. I love you. I want to be with you more than I've wanted anything in my life," he pleaded, willing her to see into his heart, to see all the pain that he'd been feeling. To see that he wanted to cry like a big loser right now, right here in front of her, because the idea that she might not give him a chance was the most horrific thing he could imagine in the entire world.

"Oh god, Heath, I love you too, so much. And I hate that someone did this. I can't believe anyone would be so cruel, but—"

"But what? There are no buts. Everything can be fine now. We can start over, or pick up where we left off, or whatever the hell people do when they're in love." He reached up to cup her face in his hands, prevented from kissing her only by the uncertainty he still saw in her midnight blue eyes.

"But, Heath, you said it was real. That there was something wrong with you," Bella said, tears starting to well up in those eyes.

"Oh god, Bella, *please*." Heath jumped to his feet and drove his hands through his newly cut hair, wanting to rip out every strand. He wanted rid himself of every single dark blond piece, dispose of everything that reminded him of his father, the evil son of a bitch who had indirectly caused this mess.

"I'm sorry, Heath. I wish this hadn't happened. I almost wish I didn't know, but I do know and I have a family now and I can't put them in danger." She started to cry in earnest now, big teardrops that rolled down her cheeks, which looked thinner than he remembered. Apparently heartbreak wasn't good for Bella's appetite either. He'd lost

ten pounds himself and the permanent dark circles under his eyes were a testament to the fact that weight loss didn't agree with him.

"My dad beat me when I was a kid," Heath heard himself say, knowing only the truth, as horrible as it was, would have a chance of making her believe that he wasn't whatever those "records" had claimed.

"I'm so sorry, Heath."

"I don't want you to be sorry. There's no need to be sorry. I'm fine. Other than the fact that the woman I love thinks I'm a violent lunatic, I'm completely at peace with my past. My father beat me until I had brain damage. The doctors thought I'd be a complete waste, but I wasn't. I just had seizures and the occasional bouts of depression. The seizures stopped when I was twelve, the last depressive episode was three years ago." He stared at the wooden floor next to her feet, the wall covered with the same candy ads he remembered from her cottage, anything to avoid the eyes that were killing him with their prediction of doom for their future.

"But the note said you killed someone, Heath," she said, her expression cautious, though her voice held a hint of hope. He prayed she'd still feel that hope when he dropped the last bomb in his arsenal.

"I killed my father when I was twelve, stabbed him in self-defense after he almost killed me. When forced to decide between the two of us, I chose myself. Then I put him in a garbage bag and threw him in the dumpster. No one ever found his body." Retelling the horrific experience caused almost no emotional response within him anymore.

He'd talked through it so many times with ten million different therapists that it was almost like it had happened to another person. He'd forgiven himself for it by now, and put the majority of the horror behind him. He was the man he was because of the cards life had dealt him and he liked himself most of the time. He tried to be a decent person, tried to harm no living thing and to bring pleasure to the world in his own small way.

"So that's the story. The whole story...and nothing but the story," he finished lamely, the anger and frustration and anxiety he'd been juggling since he walked into her apartment fading away, leaving a peaceful, quiet space in his heart. It felt good to tell her, to tell someone, but especially her.

"My family was possessed by a demon spirit for three hundred years."

"For real?" He could safely say he never would have predicted that response to his confession.

"My great-great-whatever-grandmother sold us all into the demon's service in exchange for spells that would make her candy the most delicious in the kingdom," she said, starting to cry a little again.

"That's pretty shitty." He sat beside her and slowly took her hand.

"Yeah." She laughed, sniffed a hearty sniff and swiped at her nose. "If you're going to sell your descendants to a demon it should be for something more important than candy."

"Like world domination," he agreed with a serious face that he knew would make her laugh again. It did and it felt like a million bucks.

"Or eternal youth and beauty, or all the gold in the king's treasury or something."

"So are you still demon possessed?" he asked, bringing the hand he held to his mouth for the softest of kisses. Even that slight contact of his skin upon hers made his mouth water and his heart start to do that crazy melty thing in his chest, the thing it did every time he was near her.

"No, I had it exorcised. Apparently it's not kosher for people to sell their descendants into slavery. Demon service has to be chosen by someone with free will. My mom or Gram could have had it cast out a long time ago, but...I don't know. I guess they didn't feel they had a choice."

"They weren't as strong as you are."

"I'm not strong, Heath. I gave in, like everyone else. It...was there that night." She looked at him uncertainly before she continued. "The night we were together."

"Is *that* why you pounced on me?" he asked, really not wanting to believe that she'd only made love to him because the demon made her do it. Talk about a blow to his ego.

"It's probably the reason I pounced on you then rather than a few weeks later. That's why I wanted to wait. The curse was supposed to expire on my thirty-first birthday. Every woman in my family 'lay with one man and conceived one daughter before the clock struck midnight on the eve of her thirty-first year'. So I figured I'd wait to do any laying until I was thirty-one and then the curse would be broken. But I guess the demon had other ideas." Bella stared at Heath's lips playing along her hand, and her thoughts appeared to have nothing to do with demons and everything to do with laying.

He never thought he'd be so glad to see a horny woman in his life.

"So I was your first?" He knew he shouldn't feel even more possessive of her after learning that little bit of information, but couldn't seem to help himself. He was a man for god's sake, and it felt good in a primal way to know no one had touched his Bella, no one but himself.

"You were my first, and my first, um...oral?"

"Yeah, that'll work."

"Basically my first everything, except tongue kissing. I'd done that before," she said with a nervous laugh.

"I never would have guessed. You were amazing."

"Well, I did watch a few adult films."

"You watched porn?" The news was a little shocking and erotic as hell.

"*Adult films*," she said with pink cheeks.

"Bella, I think I have to show you something," he whispered.

"What's that?" she asked with a shy smile.

"How much I've fucking missed you." He pulled her tightly to him, pressing every inch of her amazing body against his. He claimed her lips and told her with his tongue, his teeth, his heart, how much he loved her, needed her, wanted to be with her forever—or as long as she would have him.

"I think you've missed fucking me." Her voice was so thick with desire that he had to stop kissing her for a moment, pull back and take in her parted lips, her breasts lifting toward him through her red v-neck t-shirt and the love that he'd prayed to see shining in her eyes.

He'd actually prayed. For real, on his knees and everything.

"So you're going to give me a chance?"

"I don't see that I have a choice. I think we were made for each other," she said, slowing starting to work open the buttons of his black dress shirt.

"People with ancestors like ours have to stick together," he said, dipping a finger down between those lovely breasts and tracing the edge of what looked like a black lace bra. His cock did a dance of celebration in his pants, swelling to epic proportions as he imagined being inside her again.

"Absolutely." She eased his shirt off his shoulders and leaned forward to kiss his bare chest somewhere close to his heart. He'd never been so glad that he hadn't had a clean undershirt to wear in his entire life. Heath smiled and made a mental note to tell Mary never to ride his ass about wearing underclothes again.

"*Mary.*" He said her name out loud, his heart clenching so powerfully that it actually skipped a beat. The raging erection in his pants began to soften.

"No, I'm Bella," Bella said with a laugh, arching her brow as if she were trying to figure out what game he was playing. Then she seemed to read something in his face, something that made her take his face in her hands and turn him gently to look at her.

"Mary is a friend?"

"She's my vice president, my personal assistant, my best friend—just about everything except my lover," he managed to choke out past the lump in his throat. He couldn't believe it, but there was no one else, no one else who could have even suspected the truth. If he hadn't been so worried about him and Bella, he would have realized it the second she told him that the mysterious "package" had mentioned the murder.

"She's the one who sent me the medical records," Bella said, guessing the truth immediately.

She was smart, that girl, as well as beautiful and tough and sweet and all the rest of it. He nodded slowly, struggling to understand why Mary had done it, what could have caused his best friend to try to destroy his only shot at happiness.

"Do you love her?" Bella asked, waiting until he nodded. "Then you'll figure it out. *We'll* figure it out. Remember, there was a demon spirit on the loose for a few weeks after you left. It could have had something to do with it. She might also have been thinking she was doing what was best for you. You come home saying you're in love with a woman you've known for less than a day, and you're going to get married? I mean, in most normal circumstances, that would be lunacy."

"Are you always so understanding of people who try to permanently fuck up your life?" Heath asked, knowing there was some truth in her words despite the sting of betrayal that still lingered in his own mind.

"No, sometimes I have them exorcised." She gave him an evil little wink before she lifted her shirt over her head, revealing what was indeed a black bra, a very sexy black bra.

"Right now, I'm not going to let *anyone* fuck up what I've been dreaming about for the past four months," she whispered as she slowly moved to straddle him on the couch, lifting her black cotton skirt until she could see her black panties pressing against the fabric of his gray trousers.

"Have I ever told you how much I fucking love it when you curse?" Heath smoothed his hands up and down the insides of her thighs, amazed that her skin was even softer than he remembered and that his cock had sprung back to full attention in less than two seconds.

"I think you mentioned it once." Bella started to lower the straps on her bra, but he stopped her with his hands.

"Please, allow me," he said before he pulled her breasts down to his mouth. He pulled the fabric away with his teeth as his hands smoothed around the curves of her ass, urging her to rock against his erection as he flicked a welcoming lick to each of her newly exposed nipples.

"Heath." She arched into his mouth and he started suckling her, swirling his tongue against her swollen tip.

When she moaned in response and started grinding against his shaft, he knew he wasn't going to last long this first time. Four months was longer than he'd gone without sex since he was old enough to drive, but he hadn't wanted to fuck anyone but Bella. He hadn't even wanted to jerk off, he'd been so depressed. Both factors, of course, contributed to the desire that was now swiftly getting beyond his control. He needed her fast and hard and hungry. They'd get around to slow and sensual the second round.

"Bella, I need to fuck you," he growled as he moved on top of her, tearing at his belt and disposing of his pants and boxers in record time.

"Yes," she nodded, looking as desperate as he was. She'd already slid her bra the rest of the way off of her arms and was reaching for her underwear by the time he gripped the top of the skirt and panties and ripped them off in one frantic motion.

"We'll do this better the second time." He settled on top of her, crushing his lips against hers as he spread her legs and found her pussy, thankfully already drenched.

"Heath, oh god!" She moaned as he positioned his cock and slid home in one swift motion, beginning to roll his hips as soon as he was buried deep inside of her, gliding his pubic bone over her clit again and again. He might be incapable of extended

foreplay, but she was going to come on his cock. She was going to come hard, pussy milking him, fingers clawing at his back. His pride—and his love for her—wouldn't settle for less.

"Come, Bella, come, baby." He whispered the words against her lips before he kissed them again, devouring the groan she sent vibrating into his mouth.

"Heath, we're going to have a baby." She began to rotate her hips, counter to his own, giving him the most unbelievable sensation as the head of his cock pressed against the walls of her pussy.

"That's okay with me, but I'll get a condom if you want." He moved faster, deeper, praying she wouldn't want him to get a condom. This felt too unbelievable. He didn't want to stop, and if she were to get knocked up, he would be the happiest impregnator in the entire kingdom.

"No, I—"

"Oh good, baby, because I really don't want to stop. I love you. I want you to have my baby, to have ten of them if you want. God, you feel so good." He reached up to roll her nipples with his right hand, feeling her start to tense beneath him as he pinched and plucked at the tips.

"No, Heath, I mean...I'm...already...pregnant! God, oh god, I'm coming," she cried out beneath him as he started to pump into her clenching walls, her hot, wet, pussy contracting around him, making him come harder than he ever had before, even harder than that first night.

Which he honestly hadn't thought was possible—she'd been so fucking hot that night, waking him up seconds away from the main event.

"Shit!" he shouted as his spilled himself inside her. His balls, his cock, his entire being felt profoundly sated, elated and ready to take on the world.

"Shit?" she repeated softly a few seconds later when he had collapsed on top of her, relishing the feel of her nails skimming up and down his back.

"Sorry, not what I meant to say. Are you two okay under there?" He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to him, smiling as he buried his face in her neck. She smelled a little sweaty and completely sexy and just her scent was almost enough to make him hard again.

"I'm fine. *We're* fine." She laughed and kissed his neck.

"You're four months pregnant?" He pulled back to look at the face that was definitely not as plump as he remembered. "How come you look so skinny?"

"I'm not skinny, I'm still a size fourteen," she said with a smile and a roll of her eyes.

"You were perfect before," Heath said. "Is the baby okay with you being all skinny?"

"The baby's fine. He seems to be developing completely normally according to—"

"He? We're going to have a boy?" Heath asked, even more amazed that this miracle actually had a sex. A boy. Good. He didn't want to have to worry about any boys laying hands on his little girl. Though he supposed he'd have to worry about Gretel if Bella was telling the truth about wanting him for the foreseeable future.

"The first Quinn boy in over three hundred years," Bella said with a smile. "It was the last thing I needed to convince me that the curse is really broken... Um...is that—"

"Yeah, my cock is hard again. I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. You're just so fucking beautiful and you're having my baby and I guess I'm weird because it makes me hard," Heath said, feeling himself get a little teary as he started to slowly thrust in and out of his beautiful, perfect girl.

He still couldn't believe that she was his, that they and their baby and the two kids he hadn't been able to stop thinking about for months were going to be a family. Call him a sap, but he'd always wanted a family, a family just like this one with a bunch of misfits and some things that weren't planned, but were even better for being surprises.

"You don't have to be sorry." She was a little teary herself, he was glad to see. Thank god he wasn't alone or he'd feel really unmanly. "You make me hard too."

"You mean I make your cunt dripping wet." God he loved her.

"Don't call it a cunt." She slapped him on his ass, though he suspected she kind of like the word cunt more than she was letting on.

"How about slit?" he teased, laughing harder when she bit his nipple in punishment.

"You're a dirty man," she admonished, looking like she was quickly losing track of why she was supposed to be mad at him because it felt so good to be getting slowly, deliciously fucked by a man who would lick her feet if she told him to.

"Who you love to distraction." He kissed her, the sweet way he'd been wanting to since the second he'd left her cabin in the Deepweeds four months before.

"Who I love to distraction." The way she kissed him back told him everything was going to be okay. He'd finally found her, the woman who was perfectly, sinfully sweet. And his...all his.

Epilogue

The Kingdom Times, 3422

Kingdom City, Kingdom Parish One

Timothy Taylor Quinn Miller was christened today at the Church of the Unrefined in a simple ceremony attended by friends and family. Annabella Quinn, recently married to Heath Miller in a union that astonished the Kingdom at large, looked beautiful in a simple pale blue gown, while little Timothy wore traditional christening white.

Mr. Miller, newly beloved by the Kingdom for his generous donations to children's charities, was a proud new papa to both the newborn Timothy as well as his adopted children Hansel and Gretel Miller – formerly Procter of the infamous child boiling trial of the past year. When asked about the future of this unlikely family, Mr. Miller had only this to say, “We’re f–ing happier than pigs in sh-t. We really are, I could never have dreamed I’d be lucky enough to be part of something like this.”

Timothy Taylor’s godmother, Mary O’Neill, new company head for Melt Me Enterprises, put it a bit more eloquently when she said, “Between the two of them, they have the biggest hearts in the Kingdom. I feel blessed to be a part of something I could only dream about as a kid. Annabella and Heath are really something special. They’re enough to make anyone believe that miracles can happen.”

We at the Kingdom Times welcome you, little Timothy, and can’t wait to see what the world holds in store for one so deeply loved.

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“I can’t believe you clipped that out. It’s effing stupid.”

"It still counts as cussing if you say effing," Gretel said as she downed her third slice of pizza and waved the ridiculous article in front of Heath's face with a silly smile. The girl could eat like a horse, crazy for someone so scrawny. It cracked him up.

"Is that true?" Heath asked Hansel.

"Yup, effing stupid, huh?"

"Hansel!" Bella warned.

"Sorry," Heath and Hansel said at the same time.

"It's okay, I thought it was effing stupid too." Bella laid Timothy back in his stroller and reached for another slice of sausage and pepper. "I mean, calling a baby a miracle and welcoming him into the world. So effing stupid."

"Exactly what I was going to say." Mary shot Heath a hard look from the end of the table and then bent down to fuss over Tim. She loved that kid like nothing else. Mending their friendship had been one of the hardest things Heath had ever done—no matter how incredibly sorry Mary had been—but it was one of the best things he'd done as well.

They were closer than ever now, and the frank talk they'd had about their relationship had seemed to free Mary in some fundamental way. She was dating for the first time in years, and took to godmothering Tim with a maternal instinct Heath wouldn't have thought she possessed. She and Bella were also becoming good friends, though Heath knew she'd asked Mary to be a bridesmaid in their wedding mainly for him.

Just another reason that she was the best wife in the universe.

"Okay, point taken," Heath said with a smile as he kissed Bella's lips. Hmm, tastier than his extra-cheesy ravioli.

"Good." She smiled against his mouth.

"What if effing stands for 'freaking'?" Hansel asked.

"No," Bella and Heath and Mary said at the same time.

"I'm never going to kiss boys when I grow up," Gretel sniffed.

"You might change your mind, someday." Mary laughed, a light sound that made Heath wonder just how serious things were getting with that dude from accounting.

"No way. I'm not even going to allow boys on my ship." Gretel liked pirates now instead of princesses. Pink, tiaras and kisses from princes were firmly out. That was fine with Heath.

In fact everything was fine...just fine.

"I have sausage-pizza-breath, stop." Bella giggled when he went to kiss her again.

"I love sausage-pizza-breath."

"Does that mean we can have pizza again tomorrow night?" Gretel asked.

"No!" everyone else answered.

About the Author

Anna J. Evans came back to her true love of writing fiction after working Off-off-off-Broadway and in a few Hollywood C-movies. She quit the biz to become a stay at home Mom-Writer and she's loving every minute of it!

Anna lives in Arkansas with her Air Force husband, her real-life romantic hero, their three kids and all the stories still making their way from her imagination to the page.

Anna has been awarded multiple Recommended Reads for her paranormal and fantasy erotic adventures, but her favorite feedback always comes from fans. So feel free to drop her a line or join her newsletter, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/anna_j_evans_newsletter/

Anna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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