

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Enchanted



Anna J. Evans

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Enchanted

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ENCHANTED

Anna J. Evans

For M. All my love.

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Prologue

The Kingdom of Ravendell, 1726

Their clothes were strewn about, scattered haphazardly across the rich furnishings that filled the most desirable suite in the castle. There were few candles lit, but a roaring fire illuminated the space, warming the skin of the unlikely lovers and throwing their shadows to dance across the heavy draperies on the wall.

In the small tunnel concealed behind the drapes, however, the cold February air had frozen the stone floor of the ancient keep, making it painful to the touch. There Princess Wren gritted her teeth and curled her bare toes against the unyielding rock of her hiding place, hoping that the cold would numb her heart as well as her flesh.

In the prince's chamber, the woman pulled back from the tangle on the bed, lifting her simple gray robe over her head in one smooth motion, revealing the perfection of her olive skin. Her long mane of ebony hair spilled down over her shoulders, flowing past her spectacular bare breasts, her narrow waist, and curling to an end just beneath her perfectly rounded bottom.

She was beautiful, sensual, perfect. Wren hated her immediately.

"Oh god, Melonia, you will be the death of me," Prince Carlisle, Wren's betrothed, groaned from the pallet where he lay sprawled naked in front of the temptress, his pale northern skin looking nearly sickly when compared to the bronze goddess before him.

Wren struggled to conceal the gasp of surprise that rose in her throat. No one had heard from Melonia for over a century. Wren had assumed the witch was a legend, a fairy tale used to keep little girls and boys from wandering into the thick, dark forest that surrounded the village. Apparently, however, she was real, alive and well—and looking amazingly youthful for a witch of more than a hundred years.

"The French call it the little death, my prince, but I promise you, you will not die, you will only feel as if you have arrived in heaven," Melonia whispered, her husky voice making her promises completely convincing, even to a virgin princess who wanted nothing more than to believe that Melonia would fail in pleasuring her betrothed.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. *She* was the one who should be making her prince moan with pleasure and anticipation. That had been her plan for the night, to surprise the prince with her body on the night before their wedding, rather than the night after. The last thing Wren had expected to see when she'd finally gathered the courage to sneak into her betrothed's bedchamber was the sight of her prince already swollen and ready for another woman.

She forced herself to swallow her cry of outrage as she watched Melonia slowly crawl up the bed, brushing the peaks of her nipples against *her* prince's thighs, *her*

prince's hardened manhood, *her* prince's pebbled nipples, until she arrived at his mouth where she proceeded to taunt him with the taste of her.

"Is this what you want, my prince?" Melonia cooed, gently brushing the cheeks of his face with the sides of her generous, dusky breasts.

"Oh please, please," the prince nearly whined as he strained towards the witch who perched upon his body like a sensuous cat ready to lap into a particularly tasty bowl of cream.

Watching his feeble efforts to claim the witch's nipple with his mouth, Wren realized for the first time that her betrothed's hands and ankles were bound to the bed. She would have called for the castle guards immediately, but it seemed that the prince was a more than willing captive.

"There you are, my sweet," Melonia said, finally allowing the prince to capture her breast in his hungry mouth. As he greedily suckled first one nipple and then the other, she moaned and arched her back, reminding Wren of an animal aching to be claimed from behind. And that seemed to be exactly what the witch had in mind.

Pulling her breast from the prince's mouth, Melonia quickly turned around, straddling his thighs.

"Now, now, do it now," he gasped, closing his eyes as sweat broke out on his brow, his whole body seeming to fight some fever that threatened to burn him alive.

"As you wish, my prince," Melonia said, but only Wren saw the look of pure female satisfaction on her face as she guided the prince to her opening and quickly sheathed him inside her with one swift thrust of her rounded hips.

"Oh god, oh god," the prince screamed, bucking against her as she slammed her ass against his belly again and again, taking him deep inside her as she reached underneath her body to scratch long, catlike nails across the skin of his tightened balls.

By the sound of the prince's moans, he was near some breaking point, and Wren watched in wonder as Melonia transferred her hands from his balls to her own body. One hand busied itself at her breast, plucking roughly at one swollen, dark nipple as the other hand found its way to her glistening clit, coaxing out her own pleasure so that her head tossed back in release at the same moment the prince shot himself deep inside her, filling her with his seed.

"Oh, my prince, my prince," Melonia moaned, seemingly more for his benefit than her own.

Even as a virgin, Wren could tell that Prince Carlisle had contributed little to his lover's pleasure, and for a moment she nearly felt grateful to this woman who had provided her with the perfect escape from the marriage contract her parents had signed. When she had made the decision to visit her betrothed this night, surely she had imagined a man with more skill in his hands, his mouth and his...other parts.

Now she was safe to pursue another match, because surely her father, a devout king of a country much larger than her betrothed's, would not consent to the marriage

now. After all, he wouldn't want the same cock that had been buried shaft-deep in a witch to be plowing between his daughter's virgin thighs in a mere day's time.

In fact, Wren suspected that her father would allow her to do as she saw fit with them both.

Shifting her eyes once more to the sated couple before her, Wren felt the anger within her multiply. She'd been made to play the fool by her own betrothed and a whorish witch who no doubt had her own wicked plans. Melonia had probably thought to put her bastard on the throne. Perhaps she would even have cursed Wren's womb to make sure that a little warlock stood to rule the kingdom.

Wren's eyes narrowed in hatred as she watched the witch slip back into her robe and lean over to tenderly untie her captive. The woman might have his son in her belly at this very moment! That thought was all it took for Wren's mouth to open wide and a scream loud enough to wake the entire keep to burst from her prettily pouted lips.

No one made a fool of her and got away with it. She'd make the witch pay. With her life.

Chapter One

*Take my life, take my head
But never will you as virgin wed.
Your actions this night revealed your heart
Colder and crueller than a witch's art.
So let each morn greet you, sad and sullen
Never to be loved, ever the other woman.
--Curse of Melonia, the Ravendell witch*

New York City, 2006

Every time she remembered the exact wording of the curse, Wren had to fight the urge to vomit. It was bad enough being cursed, but did it have to rhyme? It was demeaning, it was ridiculous, and at times she had to admit that she even thought it was a little funny.

But not today. Today nothing was funny, especially anything that had to do with her cursed existence. She was finally nearing the edge. She was exhausted, she was demoralized and she was soaked from head to toe.

She had been forced to quit yet another job, and then in a cruel twist of fate, a sudden cloudburst had ruined her favorite outfit. The cream silk chemise and matching skirt would never be the same after a thorough soaking of rain and splashed mud from the city streets.

Of course, the college boys and local bums of the West Village more than enjoyed the view her now transparent clothing afforded, a fact that had her gritting her teeth by the ninth catcall in three blocks. She wasn't shy about her body by any means, but giving over a hundred strange men a clear view of her cold, puckered nipples made her cranky.

But she didn't bother talking back. With her luck, she'd probably rub some psycho pervert the wrong way and he'd want to wrestle her in the middle of Avenue B. Stranger things had happened, so she just kept trudging homeward, trying not to indulge in the urge to lament her sorry fate.

If there was one thing Wren had learned in her three hundred years, it was that luck was fickle and fate anything but kind, and it sure as hell didn't give a damn how much "lamenting" you did. Today, of course, was a perfect example.

She hadn't loved the bartending gig, but it had paid the rent and the regular barflies had come to feel like a surrogate family. A drunk, often-belligerent family, but a family nonetheless. She'd been there twelve years, probably five years too long.

People had started to comment about her “amazing youthfulness” and the fact that she “never seemed to age”. The old good genes excuse just wasn’t working anymore and Wren knew it was time to move on. She had to find a different job, a different identity and maybe even a different city. She loved New York, but she’d lived there for nearly a hundred years, and though the city was huge, she was starting to run across some old flames.

She always tried to alter her appearance after a few decades, but former lovers had a way of seeing past a new hair color or way of dressing. Many of them, now old men, would give her hard stares in the subway or on the street, some even stopping dead in their tracks and dropping their jaws, cartoon fashion. They would openly gawk, their faces growing pale, as if they’d seen a ghost.

“No, I’m not a ghost, I’m actually a cursed princess who never ages,” Wren muttered to herself, imagining the heart attacks she would cause with that line.

Against her will, she found her thoughts returning to that horrible day nearly three hundred years ago, the day the curse had taken effect and her life had changed forever.

Wren didn’t know if she’d ever truly understand why she’d done what she’d done, but at the time she hadn’t struggled with her conscience. It had been fairly easy to order Melonia’s head cut off in the public square. Sure, it wasn’t *really* her fault, the prince was the one who had promised to be her one and only. But Wren couldn’t get away with cutting off his head, so she’d settled for the second best choice.

It wasn’t the nicest thing to do, but she’d been a princess. She’d had the power, and at the time hadn’t thought twice about using it. Melonia had wronged her future monarch and in Wren’s mind, she’d deserved the ultimate penalty.

If only I hadn’t let her have her final words, Wren thought to herself for the thousandth time. Then maybe the witch wouldn’t have uttered that wretched curse and Wren wouldn’t have had to live the last two-hundred-and-seventy-odd years as a beautiful twenty-one-year-old woman who could never find someone to love her for more than one night.

Or you could have shown some mercy, another voice in her head piped up.

“Or I could have shown some mercy,” Wren repeated aloud, trying not to think about the spoiled brat she had been or the fact that she’d had someone killed just for sleeping with her boyfriend, a prince she hadn’t even really liked that much.

He’d been terribly pale, had abnormally long nose hair and a laugh that would shame a donkey. Not to mention that now that she’d enjoyed centuries of fabulous sex with men from every country and every ethnic origin, she knew enough to realize that Prince Carlisle would have been a very bad lay anywhere in the world.

But it was futile to be dwelling on past mistakes. The entire experience seemed as if it had happened to a different person. It was hundreds of years in the past, worlds away from the here and now and the woman she had become. Of course, the past never seemed to stay put, and was never more likely to creep up on her than on days like today.

With a sigh, Wren shoved her key into the rusty lock at the bottom of her West Village apartment building. The lobby that greeted her was beyond depressing, filled with old newspapers, trash and, Wren suspected, a rodent or two. With a shiver that had nothing to do with the warm summer evening and everything to do with the idea of living with rodents, Wren scurried up the stairs, running up the three flights that led to her studio apartment.

As she reached her door, she felt a little smile twitch at the corner of her lips. Despite the day she'd had, she couldn't deny that she looked forward to coming home. No one who knew her from her princess days would believe that she could be so happy in such humble surroundings, but she'd learned to love the comfortable little nest she'd created for herself.

It was tidy and bright and filled with all of her favorite things. Sure, it was only one room and the kitchen wasn't big enough to boil water in, but she wasn't big into cooking anyway. She'd rather have a large closet and more space for the big, cushy queen-sized bed that she'd covered in designer bedding.

A bit of a splurge, but Wren found it helped to be surrounded by luxury when she woke up alone for what felt like the millionth time. It was part of the curse. Even if a man seemed to be falling in love with her, their encounter always ended up as a one-night stand. He always went back to his wife or girlfriend and she was always "the other woman".

The worst part was that every lover she'd had left her before morning. No matter how passionate their lovemaking, no matter how tenderly they touched her in the dark, Wren always woke up by herself. It was that reminder of her ultimate isolation that hurt the most. Sometimes she thought she would be able to deal with never having the husband and family she longed for if only she could wake up in the morning with someone there beside her, and not feel so terribly alone.

"Meow," came the voice of Eden, Wren's kitten. Even before she put the key in the door, her latest adopted pet always seemed to know when she was about to arrive home.

Wren had nicknamed the pretty little black cat "psychic kitty" and right now she was grateful for the reminder that not all forms of companionship were denied her. She might have been forced to watch her entire family line die out and endure a life of solitude, but at least she could find comfort in the strays that she took in every few years.

She'd always bonded with homeless animals, feeling that she and the lonely, abandoned creatures understood each other. Besides, a cat or dog never seemed to care that she was a cursed princess who didn't age, moved a lot, and tended to sleep around. It was only Wren who had to deal with the sadness of burying one dear companion after another.

"Welcome home," came a taunting masculine voice from across the hall, shocking Wren out of her thoughts and inspiring a roll of her eyes. Just what she needed to top off this hell of a day.

"In awfully early tonight, aren't you?" the voice continued, the teasing tone transforming into a full-blown chortle. God, she *hated* chortling, especially Joe's. He sounded like a cross between a weed eater and an aquarium pump.

Wren turned around, ready to give her neighbor the usual brush-off. Joe was a fairly decent looking Italian stallion type, but his grating personality far outweighed any possible attraction. She'd outgrown his kind before electricity had been invented, and would rather have watched paint dry than consider allowing him into her bed.

Besides, she had a strict rule—no screwing around with the neighbors. She'd made that mistake before and had to deal with the painful consequences. There was nothing quite like a daily reminder of her "one-night stand" status to ruin an otherwise perfectly decent apartment. It was beyond difficult to watch a man with whom you'd had mind-blowing sex completely ignore you the next day while he carried on with other women right under your nose.

"Don't tell me you struck out looking like *that*?" Joe said, the innuendo clear in his voice as his dark brown eyes roved brazenly over her breasts, clearly enjoying the view of her pale pink nipples through her soaked chemise.

"No, Joe, I actually just got screwed on the street outside. He was hung like a horse and I couldn't wait," Wren said dryly, enjoying the shock in Joe's eyes as he struggled to discern if she was really serious.

Her entire building knew her reputation for never bringing home the same guy twice, and for most of them her slut status was firmly established. She figured Joe would be willing to believe just about anything she told him, except, of course, the fact that he was never going to get lucky with her.

"Really?" Joe asked, clearly torn between dubiousness and excitement as he imagined her pressed against the brick wall of the apartment building, skirt up around her waist as some guy banged her until she screamed out across the rainy village streets.

"No, Joe," Wren said, not in the mood to continue toying with his mind. She was tired and would rather be inside her apartment snuggling with her new kitten than out in the hall teasing Joe the Idiot.

"Well, you never know," Joe said defensively.

"Right," Wren answered, rolling her eyes again and turning back to her door, searching for the key to her apartment.

"Why do you do that all the time?" Joe asked roughly, drawing a gasp of surprise from Wren as he grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him.

"Do what?" Wren snapped, wrenching her arm away and giving Joe a glare that told him he had overreached his boundaries. No one touched her without permission, *no one*. She'd become a modern woman in almost every way, but when it came to her

personal space, she remained unabashedly old-fashioned. No matter how many men she decided to screw, she was a lady, and would not tolerate being treated as anything less.

"You're always rolling your eyes at me, like I ain't good enough for you, when everybody in this building knows you're a whore," Joe nearly yelled, crowding her back against her door as she attempted to keep space between them.

"I am not a whore, Joe, I'm a woman who does what I want and *who* I want and that doesn't happen to include you. So fuck off," Wren said, keeping her voice smooth and her tone low, showing him who was in control.

It wouldn't serve any purpose to get into a shouting match. She had to stand her ground, despite the hint of fear that caused her heart to beat faster as adrenaline poured into her bloodstream. Letting him know she was afraid would only encourage him to keep acting like an absolute ass. Dealing with an angry man was a lot like dealing with an angry dog, you had to play tough, show no fear and be ready to pop them in the nose with your fist when the time came.

"Fuck off?" Joe whispered, his eyes narrowing in anger.

"Yeah, *fuck off*," Wren whispered back, hating the fact that her voice quavered slightly. So much for the tough girl act.

"Okay." Joe took her upper arms in a bruising grip and pulled her into his chest. He smelled of old pizza and more than a touch of bourbon and Wren felt her anxiety level skyrocket as his body heat invaded her space, warming her skin through her soaked clothes. This wasn't the harmless Joe she'd put up with since she'd moved into the building last winter. He was obviously drunk and more than a little angry. Whether that anger was for her, some other woman who had pissed him off, or just the result of his own bad day, there was no way in hell she wanted to bear the brunt of his frustration.

"Let me go!" Wren screamed, hoping that someone in the building would hear and give enough of a damn to at least stick their head out the door. This being New York City, however, she wasn't going to hold her breath and wait for a knight in shining armor.

Angrily, she shoved her hands against Joe's chest, kicking and biting as his hands fumbled with her rain-soaked skirt. If rape was really what he had in mind, he'd picked the wrong girl. It just wasn't going to happen, she'd kill him first. Or die trying.

Suddenly, Wren felt Joe being wrenched away from her and she gasped as her legs gave and her bottom hit the wooden floor with a solid thud. She'd been kicking so hard that she hadn't been able to react swiftly enough to keep her feet underneath her. Of course, a bruised bottom was nothing compared to what Joe had obviously had in mind and Wren felt a rush of gratitude as she looked up to see who had come to her rescue.

It was *him*.

Oh my god, it was him. Wren felt it become even harder to breathe as her eyes landed on all six-foot-something of the man who had completely obsessed her for the

past six months. He was looking especially fantastic tonight, even better than usual if such a thing were possible. Of course, she'd never been lucky enough to catch the object of her fascination in quite such a state of undress, so that might have something to do with it. Okay, it might have a lot to do with it. The man was damn good looking when he was covered up, but undressed he was ridiculously, amazingly hot, hot, *hot*.

It seemed that her screams had interrupted Austin fresh out of the shower because he was wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his narrow hips. Water beaded on his perfectly fuzzy—not too much, not too little—chest and rolled down the most perfect set of abs she had ever seen. His thick, wavy brown hair was wet, tousled and beyond sexy, falling down into hazel eyes that blazed with anger. Wren had never seen him angry before, and for some reason the powerful emotion only made him more attractive, made her wonder if she'd be able to wait until he took care of Joe before she stripped off her wet clothes and pounced on him right there in the hall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Austin asked, giving Joe a rough shake before pushing him away as if he weighed no more than a rag doll. God, he was strong. Wren liked to think she wasn't the type of woman to get giddy over a nice set of muscles, but she would be lying if she denied that his raw, powerful masculinity didn't do something for her, didn't make her pussy wet or her already pebbled nipples tighten into aching nubs that jabbed against the wet fabric of her top.

Wren felt her breath speed and actually had to fight back a moan as she continued to take in the most amazing view she'd seen in ages. The man was beautiful, perfectly proportioned and sculpted with lean muscle from head to toe. And she could tell that it wasn't gym-rat muscle, it was the real thing, the kind a man earned from a life spent working with his hands. An ache began between her legs and spread up into her belly as she imagined the things he could do to her with those hands—those large, calloused, strong and sexy hands.

He would move first one, then two, of those long, thick fingers into her heat, spread the cream from her pussy up to her clit with his thumb and make her come. He would demand her pleasure, coaxing her body into violent release as his fingers speared through her, stretched her, pumped in and out of her body, ruthlessly preparing her slick channel for his cock. Then he'd pull away, take his fingers to his mouth and—

Get a grip, girl, the voice in her head admonished and Wren had the decency to blush just a little. This man had just saved her from being sexually molested. She should be thanking him, not taking advantage of the opportunity to ogle him like a piece of meat, or indulge in an X-rated fantasy starring his hand and her pussy.

"Get your hands off me," Joe shouted, despite the fact that Austin had already shoved him away, confirming once again that he was indeed dumber than your average batch of dishwater.

"My hands *are* off you, Joe. Make sure you keep your hands off the lady," Austin returned, the look in his eyes making it clear that there would be hell to pay if Joe decided to ignore his advice.

"She's not a lady, she's a *whore*. You know that, man. She's got a different guy in there every night fucking his brains out," Joe whined, beginning to cower before Austin despite the fact that the larger man was nearly naked and much more vulnerable. Joe could probably stomp Austin's bare foot with one of his shit-kicker boots and be out of the hall before he recovered. But there was an air about Austin, a confident, commanding aura that Wren knew banished the thought of fighting back from Joe's mind. She knew she certainly wouldn't fight back, *whatever* Austin ordered her to do.

"Joe," Austin whispered, his voice filled with menace, "apologize to your neighbor and get out of this hallway before I call the police and help Wren press charges."

"But—" Joe protested.

"Now!" Austin barked.

"Sorry," Joe mumbled in Wren's direction, avoiding eye contact as he slunk back into his apartment three doors down. He looked so much like a dog with his tail between his legs that she might have laughed if he hadn't just helped her lose what was left of her sense of humor. What he would have done to her if Austin hadn't showed up wasn't funny, not in the slightest.

Wren felt herself release a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding as the door shut behind him. The Joe situation was under control for the moment, and probably for the foreseeable future. She couldn't imagine him getting up the nerve to bother her again when he knew Austin lived right across the hall. Besides, he'd never crossed the line before, and Wren suspected the amount of drink he'd had tonight had as much to do with his behavior as anything she had or hadn't done to provoke him. She'd just been at the wrong place at the wrong time—story of her life.

"Thanks," Wren whispered from where she sat on the floor, feeling grateful that she was still seated when Austin finally turned those amazing eyes in her direction. She wasn't sure her knees could stand up to a direct gaze from those eyes at the moment.

Sex eyes—that was the only thing she could think to call them. The man had given her sex eyes from the first day she'd moved in, looking at her as if he'd like to devour her whole. No, scratch that, not devour her—taste her thoroughly, enjoy her, savor her, maybe even ravage her, but only as roughly as she'd like to be ravaged.

Those eyes seemed to promise that Austin Taylor was a man who knew how to make love. Not fuck, not have amazing sex, but use his body to make a woman feel like she was the only person on earth who mattered. He was the kind who would communicate something deeper than lust with every slow, sensual thrust of his hips, the kind who would break down every barrier between him and his lover until they were one throbbing, floating, ecstatic person with the potential to come so hard they lost track of where one person ended and the other began.

As her thoughts wandered, once again, into decidedly dangerous territory, Wren felt the familiar clench of desire low in her belly become almost painful, and fought the urge to rub her legs together as her clit tingled and her thighs grew damp with a wetness that had nothing to do with the rain. Her reaction was more than a little

unsettling. What was it about this man that made her feel like a raging nymphomaniac who had been locked away for years without even a vibrator to keep her company? It hadn't been *that* long since she'd gotten laid, and she couldn't ever remember being so hot for a man that she got dizzy just thinking about him.

"Here, let me help," Austin said kindly, his voice as soft and sexy as his eyes as he reached down and helped her to her feet.

Oh, how I'd like to let you help, Wren thought to herself as his hands gently touched her, making her pussy clamp down around its own horrible emptiness. Sweet god in heaven. If pussies were stomachs, hers would be growling loud enough to wake the girl down the hall who worked the graveyard shift.

"Thanks." Nearly shaking with desire, she fought the absurd urge to throw herself into Austin's arms and run her hands over that beautiful chest. She could not, would not, lick the water beads off his naked torso, or allow her pink tongue to give special attention to the hardened nipples that graced his perfectly shaped pectoral muscles. Never in a million years would she trace her way down to his navel, finding the trail of soft brown hair that would lead her down to his cock, down to where she could put her lips, tongue and hot, eager mouth to even better use.

What in the hell was wrong with her? This man might be gorgeous, he might give her the sex eyes, and he might presently be her knight in shining armor, but the kind of reaction she was having was completely unreasonable. Hell, it went beyond unreasonable – she was acting like a certifiable sex maniac.

She was particularly crazy because she knew for a fact Austin wasn't available, even if she were to be foolish enough to break her "no neighbors" rule. He had a girlfriend, a long distance girlfriend judging from the letters that came with a foreign post mark every week, but a definite commitment of the romantic kind, nonetheless. Wren had never seen him so much as shake hands with another woman, so she doubted she could convince him that it would be a good idea to drop that towel and ram his cock inside her until they both collapsed on the floor of the hallway in complete ecstasy. They *would* find complete ecstasy – she had no doubt about that.

It was time to get control of her libido. The no neighbors rule went without exception, not even for amazingly sexy, sweet, heroic neighbors who happened to be wearing nothing more than a towel. *Especially* them, in fact, since a man like Austin was just the type who could tempt more than her body, who might be able to get her heart involved – and that was a risk she would never be willing to take.

"Thanks," Wren said again, her voice shaking as she struggled to regain her composure.

"Are you all right? He didn't hurt you, did he?" Austin asked, staring into her eyes with a look that seemed to say that she could tell him anything and he'd be there. He wouldn't judge her, he wouldn't berate her, he would just take care of anyone who dared to hurt her. For her part, all Wren could do was stare back and quickly get lost in that hazel gaze.

For the first time in about a century, she felt the stirrings of something more than lust. She couldn't remember the last time someone had looked at her with that much caring, especially a member of the opposite sex. It was overwhelming, especially considering she already wanted to screw him into the next century. Without her consent she felt the walls around her heart start to soften. What woman could keep herself from falling for a man like the one in front of her?

You can and you must because you're cursed, you idiot! Do you want to spend an eternity walking around with a broken heart?

"Wren?"

"What?"

"I asked if you were hurt."

"No, not hurt. I'm fine, just a little shook up," Wren said, heeding her inner warning and trying her best to withdraw from the situation. The voices in her head were one hundred percent right. She had to get out of this hallway before she did something really stupid, something way more idiotic than sleeping with a neighbor, something like falling in love.

"Well, let me know if you have any problems with him. I'd be more than happy to give a statement if you want to contact the police," Austin said, adjusting the towel around his waist, suddenly seeming to realize that he was dressed a little inappropriately for the hallway.

As he shifted the towel a bit to the right, giving her a tantalizing glimpse of his upper thigh, Wren swore she saw a slight flush of red sweep across his tanned skin. Despite her desperate need to get the hell away from her all-too-tempting neighbor, she couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up inside of her.

"Are you laughing at me?" Austin asked, a killer smile spreading across his face. Damn it, she'd thought he couldn't get any sexier.

"No, I wouldn't dare. You're obviously a serious man," Wren teased, trying to force herself not to flirt and failing miserably. Some three-hundred-year-old habits were hard to break.

"Damn straight," Austin agreed, straightening to his full height.

"Very serious."

"Extremely serious," he said, narrowing his eyes with mock severity.

"And you're wearing a seriously small towel," Wren said, letting laughter overtake her.

"I was in a hurry, I grabbed the first thing available. Besides, it's covering all the necessary bits and pieces," Austin laughed, joining in her banter. She loved a man who could banter. It was a conversational art that was all too often lacking in modern men. She didn't miss the days when guys wore wigs or shoes with heels higher than her own, but there were many days when she feared verbal foreplay was also a thing of the past.

But Austin obviously had an appreciation for the practice. The realization was so pleasing that Wren couldn't keep herself from carrying the game a bit further.

"Bits and pieces, eh?" she said, wrinkling her brow in mock confusion. "I hope it's much larger than a bit."

"How big is a bit, exactly?" he asked, playing along.

"I'm not sure, but it certainly doesn't sound very large or impressive," she replied, knowing she was treading on dangerous ground, but starting not to care. He was gorgeous, he was kind and he actually had a sense of humor! How could she resist indulging in this tiny bit of purely verbal interaction?

"Oh, I see," Austin said, some of the humor fading from his eyes as more than a hint of heat took its place. "And I look like I'd be large and impressive?"

"Yes, you do," Wren said, feeling her own body temperature skyrocket and a furious blush sweep over her entire body.

Why was she doing this to herself? Did she want to risk being shot down by her secret crush on the same day that she quit her job and was nearly raped in her own hallway? Or worse, did she want him to give in to her attempts at seduction and then have to deal with the consequences? As fabulous as sex with Austin would no doubt be, having him be just another one-night stand would make her feel ten times worse. She had to stop this, now.

"But that's another story, I'm sure," Wren added quickly, backing away from Austin and banging her hip on her own doorknob in the process. Wincing, she continued to babble inately, "Another story that will be told to someone you care for. Someone other than me.

"Not that I'm saying that you care for me," she continued, realizing what she'd said. "Though it was nice of you to help out with the Joe thing. I mean, I'm sure you do care about me in the way that people care about other people and humanity and so on. You do seem like a very nice guy and all, so, um..."

Dear god, could this get any worse?

"So anyway, goodnight. And, I'll be seeing you around," Wren said, her key finally finding its way into her lock. With a wiggle of her fingers, she promptly slammed the door in Austin's handsome yet confused face and collapsed with a sigh on her bed, covering her face with her hands.

Could you be more of a complete weirdo? her inner voice shrieked, once again doing its job to make her feel even worse.

"Oh shut up," she mumbled out loud. She'd had enough to deal with today. The damned inner voice was just going to have to take a number.

"Meow," Eden cried as she leapt onto the bed, rubbing her head against Wren's thigh in an attempt to encourage an afternoon petting session. Not the kind of petting that Wren had in mind, but probably much more practical and definitely much less likely to turn her world upside down.

"Hey, psychic kitty," Wren said, pulling the kitten into her lap and scratching her behind the ears. "I've had a rough day," she continued as silent tears began to roll down her cheeks.

The tears surprised her so much that she started to cry a little harder. She never cried, at least hardly ever, and her present sobbing state only served to emphasize how truly horrible the past twelve hours had been.

"Meow," Eden replied, sounding to Wren's ears like she truly understood and empathized with her mistress' lousy day before she began to purr loudly, snuggling more deeply into Wren's lap.

Wren felt the ghost of a smile creep across her face at the sound. There was nothing like a purring kitten to help you get your thoughts in order. Nothing so very terrible had happened. She had her cat and a roof over her head, which was a lot more than many people could say and much better off than she herself had been at various times in her own personal history. Besides, if there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was people feeling sorry for themselves, herself included. She'd indulged in enough of that already, time to pick herself up and dust herself off and contemplate a huge, spirit-lifting meal.

She'd take a shower, order too much Chinese and plan out her strategy. She'd find a new job, of course, but the first item on the list was to start an apartment search. Between Joe's attack and the equal violence of her attraction to Austin Taylor, she couldn't get out of here soon enough. Her cozy apartment had ceased to be a haven as of ten seconds ago, when she'd realized that Austin Taylor could quite possibly be the key to undoing almost three hundred years of holding herself together.

She'd made it this far by not letting herself be vulnerable, not letting a man get under her skin, and most importantly, not letting love enter the picture. It was a strategy that had worked and Wren wasn't about to mess with success. In her situation, she didn't have the luxury of letting herself be vulnerable to the devastating effects of love. It was hard enough being a cursed princess without adding a broken heart to her list of troubles.

Maybe your heart wouldn't be broken. A voice suddenly rang in her head, a voice that made Wren jump to her feet and quickly look around the room.

"Meow!" Eden howled in protest as she slid from Wren's lap.

"Sorry, kitty," Wren said, trying to laugh off the voice as her own inner critic, but knowing that something was different. The thought had come out of nowhere, actually sounding in her mind as if someone had whispered in her ear. The voice was clearly not her own.

"Maybe I'm *actually* going crazy," Wren said aloud, feeling a little jump of panic in her heart. She'd gone so long without anyone to confide in, without any family or friends who knew the truth about her situation. Maybe she was finally starting to lose her grip on reality.

“All the more reason for a change,” Wren said, forcing herself to stay positive. She’d survived war, plague and the 1980s, there was no way she’d let a little thing like a voice in her head send her into a downward spiral.

Tomorrow she’d find a new place to live and get as far away from Austin Taylor as possible. With the reminder of what she could never have safely out of sight, hopefully he would also get out of her mind. And take the voices with him.

Chapter Two

Austin listened to Wren cry through the door for a few moments, debating whether or not he should knock on the door and apologize.

“Apologize for what, jumping out of the shower to save her from some thug?” he muttered to himself, adjusting his stupidly small towel.

He knew it was ridiculous to feel guilty, but for some reason he felt he had wronged the girl and he wanted to make it right. She always seemed so alone, despite her string of lovers, and Austin didn’t want to be responsible for making her cry. He didn’t want to make anyone cry, and that, of course, was part of his problem.

Slowly the sounds of her sobs faded and Austin could hear his neighbor moving about her apartment, talking to her cat, ordering food to be delivered and starting the water for her own shower.

Austin felt himself grow embarrassingly hard as he thought about Wren naked in the shower, water pouring over the amazing breasts he had glimpsed through the damp fabric of her tank top. He’d stared at her, practically ogled her like the asshole who had attacked her in the hall.

It was hellishly awkward, but he hadn’t been able to help himself, despite the fact that he’d just saved her from being manhandled by a complete Neanderthal. There was something about that woman that drove him crazy, made him behave in ways that just weren’t logical.

He’d never before jumped out of the shower at the sound of a woman’s scream. Hell, women screamed all the time in New York, it wasn’t something that rang alarm bells in his brain. He shouldn’t have been able to hear her over the running water, or through his apartment walls. But it was as if he’d been called to her, something deep inside of him responding to her distress on a level he couldn’t begin to understand. He’d been certain Wren was in trouble from the moment the faint sound met his ears. He’d known that he couldn’t let anything bad happen to her and had acted on pure instinct, barely taking the time to throw his towel around his waist before bursting out into the hall ready to slay dragons on her behalf.

For some reason he’d known instinctively that he was the only one who could save her from whatever situation she’d gotten herself into. He had felt the same strange protective urge towards Wren ever since she’d moved into the building six months ago. Well, protective if one could be both protective and filled with an insane lust at the same time.

Even now, he was torn between wanting to comfort her and thinking about how erotic her skin would look soaking wet. The second urge won out, and he couldn’t help closing his eyes and imagining his hands slowly trailing over her slick skin, finding

those pale pink nipples he'd glimpsed through her shirt and rolling the peaks in his hands until they hardened and she began to moan.

For some reason, Austin was sure she'd be a breast girl, would love having her nipples licked and sucked as she took him deep inside her, as he tunneled his cock deep into the slick, welcoming heat of her pussy. He imagined that she'd only be able to come if he took those beautifully shaped breasts in both hands and pressed her nipples close together so that he could taste all of her at once, love her with his mouth while she gripped him tightly with her most intimate muscles, pulling him into her hot, wet core.

His groin ached and the towel around his waist was insufficient coverage for his straining erection. God, it would be so easy to knock on her door, to charm his way inside and to have her naked and willing before him in a matter of moments. It was clear that she wanted him, and Austin couldn't imagine anything more tempting than the sight of her laid out on her bed, legs spread wide in clear invitation, arms reaching for him in a silent plea for him to fuck her until they both forgot their own names. He could almost see the pink lips of her pussy glistening as she opened for him, could almost taste the feminine musk of her center as he let his tongue trace the folds of her sex.

But that vision was not going to become reality, it just couldn't fucking happen.

"Not. Going. To. Happen," Austin repeated through gritted teeth, just to help his body get the picture.

Without allowing his thoughts to go further, Austin spun on his heel and stormed back into his own apartment, slamming the door behind him for reasons that had nothing to do with anger and everything to do with sexual frustration.

That was the only reason he couldn't stop thinking about the woman across the hall. It wasn't any karmic connection, it wasn't true love, it wasn't fate, it was a simple matter of lust. He hadn't had sex in months and his libido was in overdrive. He'd fantasize about any pretty woman who lived next door—it didn't have to be her.

Of course, only Wren had that strange mix of strength and vulnerability that drove him wild. She was independent and sexy as hell, but she loved her cat and cried when she thought she was alone. She was sweet and willing, yet feisty and unattainable, just as he'd thought Ella had been when he first met her.

Ella's eyes stared at him now, even her picture seeming to condemn him from its position at the edge of his chest of drawers. Her almond-shaped eyes looked sad, even though her full lips were spread in a wide smile as she pressed herself against him in the photo. They'd been on vacation at the time, perched on a cliff above the Adriatic Sea. But that had been before they started fighting all the time, before the fire had irrevocably altered the course of both of their lives.

Austin sat heavily on his bed, dropping his head into his hands and rubbing his eyes as if he could erase the sight of Ella's burns from his memory. He hadn't stayed over that night. They'd had yet another nasty fight, he'd stormed out of her apartment,

and spent the better part of the night drinking beer at the bar around the corner from his house.

He'd drunkenly declared to anyone who would listen that he was finally through with "that woman". He was tired of her reluctance to take their relationship to the next level, sick of trying to convince her that what they had together was more important than her parents' approval and beginning to think that what he had mistaken for strength was really just Ella's unwillingness to let anyone too close.

If the woman couldn't handle the idea of living with him, how would they ever have the marriage and children that he had always known he wanted? Austin had honestly thought that night was the end, that they were beyond any hopes of reconciliation. He'd been angry and sad, but a part of him had secretly been relieved. Deep down, hadn't he always doubted that they were right for each other? Hadn't he hoped for more from a woman than a halfhearted, begrudging commitment?

Then he'd come home to the message on his machine.

By the time he'd arrived at the emergency room they'd already dressed Ella's wounds, so he had been spared the worst of the experience, but he'd been there in plenty of time to see her writhing in agony as she waited for the morphine drip to take effect. Austin had never felt so powerless as when he'd had to watch the woman he cared for beg for someone, anyone, to ease the pain that had eclipsed everything else in her world. It was his most horrific memory on record, and he could only imagine how nightmarish the experience had been for Ella.

Her apartment had caught fire only hours after he had left. Smoke inhalation had caused her to pass out as she struggled to get out of her bedroom, leaving her unconscious as the flames licked at her beautiful body. The burns had been gruesome, marking her severely on her back and down both legs.

Austin had been a metal worker since he was in his teens. He made furniture, light fixtures, even swords for genre films. It was an odd way to earn a living in the twenty-first century, but it was what he loved. It was also a pastime that afforded him a unique knowledge of the dangers of fire.

He'd seen bad burns, had been burned himself and had the scars to prove it, but the marks that covered Ella from her waist to her toes had shocked him, nauseated him, made him want to destroy whatever it was that had harmed her. The fact that a candle in her own apartment had caused the fire made it all the more tragic. There was no one to blame, no one except himself.

If he'd stayed with her, if they hadn't drunk an entire bottle of wine, if they hadn't argued, if he hadn't left in a rage, would she still have forgotten to blow out that candle, still ended up in that emergency room, her beautiful skin marred for the rest of her life? Austin didn't know, but the question haunted him more than he wanted to admit.

He knew that night haunted Ella as well. She wrote him every week, but her letters grew more and more distant, and he wondered if she was starting to blame him, maybe

even to hate him. He knew they were growing apart and sometimes even thought that it would be best to end the relationship, give them each a fresh start.

But he didn't have the courage to ask her to let him go. He felt responsible for her physical scars—he couldn't allow himself to be responsible for any emotional ones. What if she thought he was ending the relationships because she was disfigured? How would she ever have the confidence to love again with a wound like that in her past?

If she wanted to end their relationship, it was her choice. In the meantime, he would concentrate on his work and reply promptly to her letters. He'd never imagined that he'd be the type of man who could make a long distance relationship work, he liked to touch and taste and hold too much, but he wasn't doing so badly. It had been nearly a year since she'd left and he had been faithful and celibate.

It had been easy at first. He'd still felt so guilty he hadn't even thought about sex. Then Wren had moved in and changed all that, but he'd still managed to keep his hands off her, keeping their exchanges to neighborly chitchat in the hall or at the mailboxes. Only in his imagination had he let their contact go further...a hell of a lot further.

But it didn't matter what he or his libido wanted right now, he had to do what was best for Ella. He sensed that she needed to know he was here in New York waiting for her. It seemed to give her a sense of stability, a continuity from her life before and after the fire. It also helped her feel free to explore whatever was waiting for her in her parent's homeland.

Of course, her parents had loved the chance to journey to India with their only daughter, finally spiriting her away from that nasty American boy she had fallen in love with. Austin had always known that Ella's parents thought she could have done better than a man who worked with his hands for a living. Or, if she was going to choose such a man, he should at least be one of Indian descent. It was too much to ask that they put up with a white boy who came home smelling of sweat at the end of the day. Their attitude would have pissed him off more if he hadn't known his own mom and dad weren't winning any awards for open-mindedness.

His parents had never relished the idea that he was seriously involved with an Indian girl. They were from Texas—they'd named him Austin, for god's sake—they weren't partial to having a daughter-in-law who was a Hindu and cooked eggplant curry instead of fried chicken.

No doubt his parents would be thrilled to learn that he was having second thoughts about his relationship with Ella. They'd probably congratulate him on his secret infatuation with the girl across the hall, despite the fact that she slept around and worked in a bar. After all, a colorful past was easier to forgive than the sin of being from a culture so drastically opposed to small town Texas. Besides, Wren was the type of woman who drew people in and won them over. She made you want to like her, to know her, to have her in your life, and he knew his parents would fall under her spell.

She was probably the most stunning woman he'd ever seen, a classic beauty with dark reddish-brown hair to her waist and blue eyes that blazed out from clear, milky skin. She had a square jaw that imparted a sense of power, and full pouting lips that made her seem soft and sweet. He'd imagined she would taste the same way, had even gone so far as to fantasize about their first kiss.

She wouldn't be tentative, would take his bottom lip in her mouth, sucking hard and ending the contact with a swift nip of her teeth. Then he'd return the favor, biting down hard enough to draw a needy sound from the back of her throat before he parted her lips with his tongue, urging her to explore him as thoroughly as he wanted to explore her.

"Get it together, man," Austin whispered to himself, rising from the bed and ambling over to the bathroom to start the water in the shower. He had shampoo to rinse out of his hair and there was only one way to end the string of thoughts that were running through his mind.

Since the day she'd moved in, fantasizing about Wren had become a daily obsession. In his mind, he'd had her in every position in every corner of his apartment, her apartment, the hallway, and even once or twice in the elevator that always seemed to be broken.

A few months back, he'd tried to stop the fantasies—had refused to let himself relieve the terrible ache in his cock that was the inevitable result of his thoughts. He'd punished himself for three days until he'd seriously thought he'd die if he didn't relieve the pressure. When he'd finally allowed himself release, the orgasm had been so powerful it had nearly frightened him. If just fantasizing about the girl made him come that hard, what would it be like to really have her?

Stepping into the shower, Austin closed his eyes and let the hot water stream over him, relaxing every inch of his body except the nine inches of hard flesh that he held in his hand. Slowly he began to stroke himself, imagining Wren's tight, wet body closing around his erection instead of his own hand.

As he slid inside her, she would reach up and pull his face down for an openmouthed kiss and he'd pause inside of her slick pussy for a moment, relishing the feel of her heat pulsing around him as their tongues sparred gently with each other. But then she'd moan and lift her hips, urging him deeper, letting him know that she wanted him to fuck her hard and fast.

Instead, he'd pull back, teasing her with the head of his cock, already glistening with the wetness of her body. Then he'd use his hand to guide the tip of his shaft from her wet lips to her clit. Back and forth, back and forth, stimulating her just enough to make her crazy, but not enough to send her over the edge. He didn't want her to come without him inside her; he liked to feel her contracting around him as she came, gripping him with every inch of her pussy as she screamed out his name.

"Austin, please," she'd moan with an undercurrent of laughter in her voice. She liked it when he played with her, but he could tell that her need was as great as his

own. Her sex had become a swollen, aching place that needed the kind of release that they only found with each other.

"Is this what you want?" he'd ask, quickly sinking himself up to his balls, letting his cock strain towards her womb, as if he could reach inside and touch her soul, the center of the woman that made him crazy like no other.

"Oh yes," she'd moan, reaching around to dig her fingernails into his buttocks, pulling him even deeper inside her as she tilted her hips and arched her back. Her head would fall back, exposing the pale column of her throat, urging her gorgeous breasts closer to his mouth.

God, he wanted to bend down and take her nipple in his mouth, suck her hard until she bucked into his cock, consumed by the strength of her release. But he knew better. Instead, he'd have to hold still and try not to breathe. If he let himself move even enough to take a sip of air, he knew he'd lose control and spend himself inside of her. She made him feel like a teenager, like it was the first time he'd ever been inside a woman.

Instead, he'd move the pad of his thumb to her clit, circling her with a firm pressure that would soon have her panting, eyes half closed as she writhed beneath him. Then slowly, she'd move one hand around to cup his balls, knowing that it drove him crazy when she rolled him in her hands as she clenched her most intimate muscles around his length. She knew exactly how to make him come, could manipulate his body like they'd been lovers for years.

"No you don't," he'd whisper, grabbing her hands away from his heavy sac and pressing them into the sheets above her head, lengthening her beneath him and claiming her mouth with his own as he started to thrust inside of her.

And then they'd both be beyond speech, pounding into each other as the tension between them grew to the breaking point. The sounds of their slick flesh coming together would fill the room, making his balls ache—burn—for release. But he'd keep thrusting, filling her, determined to fuck her until her pussy began to milk his cock with the violent spasms of her orgasm.

"Oh god. Yes!" she'd scream, arching even more deeply into him as she started to come, triggering his own explosion, making his body clench and spasm, his eyes close against his will, though he wanted nothing more than to watch Wren's pleasure twist her features into something more darkly beautiful than anything he'd ever known.

"Oh god, oh god," Wren whispered, sliding down the wall of the shower, her fingers trembling between her thighs as her sex throbbed with the aftereffects of one of the most amazing orgasms of her life.

She panted on the shower floor, letting her fingers slide slowly up and down the plump, engorged lips of her pussy, imagining that her hand was actually the tip of Austin's tongue as he lowered himself between her legs, licking at her wetness, moaning as if he'd never tasted anything so sweet.

He'd be talented with his tongue, there was no doubt in her mind. He'd bring her to the edge again in seconds and then reach up and roll her nipples in his fingers as he opened his lips and completely covered her clit with his warm mouth, sucking at her, devouring the cream from her sex until she came again, harder than the first time.

The sounds she made with her second orgasm sounded foreign even to Wren's own ears. She sounded like an animal, so primal, her pleasure so complete that she couldn't control the noises that burst from her throat, couldn't stop bucking into her hand with a wild abandon that left her completely spent.

Slowly she came back to her own body, gradually becoming aware of the sound of the water hitting the glass enclosure, the feel of the cold tile under her. She opened her eyes, letting the water from the shower stream down into them without bothering to blink the wetness away. Her entire body felt limp and exhausted and she had the strangest feeling of being almost outside herself, the pleasure of her fantasy had been so intense. A part of her wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and be in that place again, able to feel the pure erotic freedom of Austin's body against her own.

He'd pull her close and she'd rest her face on his chest, letting sleep claim her as she listened to his heartbeat slow to its normal speed. They would fit together perfectly; there would be no need to roll away, to find her own side of the bed. And this time, she knew she'd wake up exactly where she'd gone to sleep, safe in the arms of a man who wasn't going to leave.

"Right," Wren whispered to herself, slowly rising to her feet on still shaky legs. "And then we're going to ride off into the sunset on a fucking white horse."

The despair that colored her words was enough to kill the last of the sensual energy coursing through her system. She sounded so hollow, so lacking in anything resembling hope, that the echo of her own voice through the bathroom frightened her. What happened when hope was truly gone, when a life without love or companionship finally killed the last part of her spirit, the part she'd once thought immortal?

Wren knew deep within herself that she hadn't survived, even thrived, in the world for so long without hope. She had always secretly clung to the belief that somehow, someday, the enchantment would be broken. Now, she wasn't so sure...

She quickly finished her shower, washing the conditioner out of her hair without any further distractions. She scrubbed her face clean and then turned off the water, angry with herself for letting her own mind turn against her. She should know better than to fantasize about something that she could never have.

But, oh god...it had felt so good to finally let herself imagine what it would be like to be with Austin. She'd wanted to do that since the moment she'd seen him. He'd opened his door and the moving box she had been holding in her hands had hit the floor. She was pretty sure it had been marked fragile, but at the moment she hadn't cared, her response to him had been so intense.

He'd hurried over to pick up the box and proceeded to help her move into her apartment for the rest of the afternoon. By the end of the day, she had known she would

have trouble resisting her neighbor. She should have done the sensible thing and moved house immediately, screw her deposit and six-month contract with the landlord.

But she'd thought she could maintain control of herself, had thought she would know how to discipline her libido and her heart after three hundred years. By the strength of her orgasms in the shower, and the melancholy longing in her heart, however, she was wrong. Dead wrong. It was time to do what she should have done from the first moment she'd met Austin Taylor.

Tomorrow she'd start walking away and wouldn't stop until she'd gone far enough to make sure she'd never have to see that man again. Maybe then she'd be safe from his unique temptation, the kind that could completely ruin what life she had left.

Chapter Three

"Are you positive it's rented? The date on the listing says that it was only posted yesterday," Wren asked, finally starting to lose her temper when her fiftieth call of the morning resulted in another dead end.

"Right, I understand," she sighed. "Of course the man on the second floor decided to open a tattoo parlor. Thanks anyway." Wren slammed down the phone and rose to pace about the tiny corner of her apartment that passed for a kitchen.

Apparently today was not going to be any luckier than yesterday. Sure, the sun was shining and from the sounds outside the window, everyone else in New York was having a fabulous day, enjoying the early summer weather before the city succumbed to the sweltering heat of July and August, but inside her apartment frustration reigned.

How could every single apartment in the San Francisco area be rented? She'd never been there, but she knew it wasn't a tiny city by any means, and she'd called all the ads for studios in every corner of the bay area. It seemed that she'd at least be able to find some nasty basement apartment in a bad part of the city that no one else wanted.

But no, there was nothing available and she'd wasted an entire morning on long distance calls and was still no closer to her goal of getting out of New York City. She knew she should just pick another city and start calling, but she had her heart set on San Francisco.

Wren had actually meant to move there when she'd immigrated to the United States from Paris back in the early 1900s. But when she'd gotten off the ship in New York's harbor, she'd fallen instantly in love and had been here ever since, watching the metropolis grow and evolve like no other.

If she were honest with herself, she didn't really want to leave even now, but there was no longer any choice. First, she'd been in New York too long. One hundred years in the same place was pushing things and she knew it. Second, and even more importantly in her mind, her irresistible next-door neighbor had to be resisted at all costs – and that meant getting out of Dodge.

So unless Austin Taylor decided to up and move to the opposite side of the country, she was going to have to be the one to do it. There was no other way out of the situation, despite the fact that her heart ached at the thought of leaving the city that had come to feel like home and the neighbor who had definitely gotten under her skin.

"Don't think about him," Wren admonished herself aloud. After her sexual fantasy in the shower, Wren had proceeded to dream about a life with Austin for the rest of the night. It seemed that even in her REM phase she couldn't stop thinking about the man. This morning, however, she'd managed to keep her mind in line and her actions on task. She couldn't let herself slip now.

"Meow," Eden called, rubbing up against the door, signaling that she was ready to go out for a little walk.

Eden was the only cat Wren had ever had who seemed to like to go for a walk with her. Most cats were much too independent for such organized activity, but the little black cat was different.

They walked just about every morning, Eden trotting along beside Wren as she wound her way through the village streets. They'd window-shop, get groceries, or sometimes stop at one of her favorite java joints for a double espresso for Wren and a little cup of cream for Eden. Their time together was always one of the high points of Wren's day.

Call her crazy, but her cat was her best girlfriend at the moment. She was a great listener, supportive and affectionate and always on her side. Not to mention that she had fabulous taste in men. Any man who earned the privilege of stroking Eden's shiny coat was guaranteed to be absolutely brilliant in bed.

"Sex," Wren said, a naughty smile coming across her face. Why hadn't she thought of it before?

What better way to protect herself from Austin than to make sure she never had the opportunity to give in to temptation? Until she had her plan for leaving New York in place, she'd make sure she had a different man in her bed every night. Not only would she eliminate the opportunity for weakness and hopefully have a little fun in the process, but she'd also be sure to scare Austin away. He'd probably be thoroughly disgusted by her after watching her drag in a string of strange men.

The thought made her pause for a moment. Why did the idea of Austin being disgusted by her hurt so much? It made her sick just thinking about the way he would look at her after a week of "a different man every night". It had been over a century since she'd been bothered by other people's opinions of her sex life, what made him so different?

Wren pushed the questions away. It was probably only her own reluctance that she was feeling. After all, it wasn't necessarily a pleasant idea, screwing all those men in such a short span of time. Despite her sluttish reputation, Wren didn't actually bring home that many men, maybe one a week on a particularly active month.

She enjoyed sex, craved it even after all these years, but she'd come to hate the feeling of waking up alone even more than she loved a night of passionate lovemaking. It was starting to wear on her heart, and the truth of the matter was that she hadn't brought anyone back to her apartment for well over a month.

Wren had told herself she was just going through a little dry patch, but she knew that Austin had something to do with her recent chastity. With him living next door, she didn't want to bring home anyone else. She only wanted to bang on his door, climb through his window, hell, even smash through the thin wall that separated their bedrooms if it meant that she could spend the night with him nestled between her

thighs, pumping into her until he made her believe that she wasn't cursed and that a future for them might be possible.

"Stop it," Wren said, reprimanding herself like a wayward child.

She couldn't let herself start thinking about him. No sex fantasies, no future fantasies, no fantasies of any sort. She was going to go out and find a man to bring home for tonight, and tomorrow night and as many nights as it took for her to figure out who and where she needed to be in order to be safe from Austin's inexplicable lure.

He'll never finish falling in love with you if you do that, spoke that strange voice in her head. It was the "other" voice, the scary one that didn't seem to come from her subconscious, but from some outside source. It was spooky and startling enough to make Wren jump and clasp her hands to her ears.

"Who's there?" she asked the empty apartment, feeling beyond foolish when only Eden responded to her frightened voice by trotting over and rubbing against her leg.

"Right, nobody there, I'm just crazy," Wren muttered shakily, bending down and scooping up her cat, somehow feeling safer with the feline in her arms.

"Well then, kitty, let's get out of here," Wren said, grabbing her purse and throwing a ball cap on top of her tousled hair. She was dressed in simple jeans and an old white t-shirt. Not the sexiest garb, but she'd never had trouble finding a man to bring home. If one thing hadn't changed in three hundred years, it was the fact that a woman who wanted to get laid could always find a man ready to service her needs.

Dashing out of the door with Eden fast on her heels, Wren forced herself to look away from Austin's door, concentrating on the stairwell until she curved around the first flight of stairs and was out of sight. Then, she let herself pound down the stairs, enjoying the racing of her heart at the slight exercise.

Exercise! What a fabulous idea. She'd work off some tension, enjoy the day in the sun and pick up a handsome stud before sundown. Jogging was an amazing way to pick up men. If you could look past the sweaty t-shirt, you could usually find a cutie who was able to go the distance in the bedroom as well as on the track.

As soon as she hit the pavement, Wren started trotting towards the subway, eager to get to the train that would take her to Central Park. It might be a little further away than her local park, but a larger park meant a larger pool of potential lovers to choose from, and Wren wasn't in the mood to settle for just any old Tom, Dick or Harry. If she couldn't have Austin, at least she could find a proper distraction.

And what about me? I can't ride the train, sounded the voice in her head, surprising her so much that she tripped on a crack in the concrete and went flying. Somehow she managed to break her fall without scratching up her palms, but the mental damage was done. Me? Me who? Oh no, it couldn't be...

The *cat* was talking to her.

The cat *couldn't* be talking to her! That was impossible, right? Cats didn't talk, especially not in strange telepathic voices in your head. It was craziness, it just couldn't happen.

Like a princess couldn't be cursed and live for three hundred years trapped in her twenty-one-year-old body, came the voice again as Wren turned slowly around to look at Eden. Come on, Wren, you know better than that.

Still seated in the middle of the sidewalk, gawking openly at the small black feline in front of her, Wren was sure she must have looked as insane as she felt. But for the moment, she really didn't care. If she was really going crazy, she had bigger things to worry about. If her cat was really talking to her... No, she wasn't ready to go there.

You're incredibly closed-minded for an enchanted person.

"You aren't really talking. This is impossible," Wren whispered, carefully coming to her feet and moving towards the wall of the closest building. She felt she needed something solid to lean on, something more solid than her faith in her own mental stability.

You understand me, don't you?

"Did you just ask if I understood you?" Wren asked.

Yes.

"Then I'm understanding you," Wren confirmed and was answered by what she thought was a sigh of frustration. Now her talking cat was expressing her displeasure with telepathic sighs of irritation. Her life had officially gotten even weirder.

"What do you want from me?" Wren asked, fearing the worst. In her experience, there was no such thing as a good enchantment. Whatever spell was at work here, she wanted no part of it. There was bound to be trouble involved if a talking cat had sought her out among all the possible cat owners in New York City.

I always thought owner was a ridiculous term. Cats are much too independent to be owned. It's insulting to both parties involved.

"I agree," Wren said cautiously, partly because she did agree and partly because she was experiencing a healthy dose of wariness where Eden was concerned. The cat had obviously felt comfortable living with her for six months before she let on that she was a mind-reading telepath. Who knew what else she was hiding?

God, this was insane, she was feeling betrayed by a talking cat.

I didn't think you were ready to know the truth.

"The truth about..." Wren prodded, wondering what other secrets the cat wasn't letting out of the bag.

That I could communicate with you, that I might have some advice that could be helpful. I was afraid you wouldn't let me in if you knew. You're very standoffish with other life forms that talk.

"You mean people," Wren replied, beginning to appreciate that the cat was teasing her.

Unless the African violet has been chatting you up while I've been napping.

"Well you do nap a lot," Wren said, doing her best to treat this conversation as she would any other. Sure, it was a telepathic conversation in which a cat seemed to be

reading both her spoken and unspoken thoughts, but what the hell. She was a cursed princess — she could go with the flow when she had to. Right?

I'm a cat. It's my nature to nap. And to meddle in your affairs.

"Ahh, I see," Wren said. "So you don't think I should go find Mr. Right in the park?"

Mr. Right Now is more like it.

"In case you haven't noticed, cat, they're *all* Mr. Right Now where I'm concerned. I'm cursed. I'll never be with a man for more than one night, I'll always be the other woman, blah, blah, blah, and that's the end of it."

I expected more, Wren, I really did.

"What the hell are you talking about? Quit trying to make me feel bad."

I'm not making you feel bad, you're making you feel bad.

"Oh please, don't psycho-babble me. It's bad enough coming from a person, but from a cat it's just ridiculous," Wren sighed, turning to walk back towards her apartment. If she was going to continue this conversation it might be a good idea to get indoors. It would severely hinder her plans for an escape from New York if she were committed to the local psych ward for talking to animals on the street. Not that such a thing was likely. She could probably strip down, dance naked and juggle a few eggplants while talking to the cat and no one would bother her. You had to be pretty nuts for anyone in the city to notice. But at least she'd feel better back at the apartment, in a private place to finish chatting up her enchanted cat.

I'm not babbling, I'm saying that you could break this curse if you wanted to. You have the power to end the enchantment. It's been your choice all along.

The words stopped Wren dead in her tracks. She felt her stomach clench and the air rush from her lungs. As she turned to the cat, it suddenly seemed as if the whole world were shifting on its axis, tilting back and forth like the deck of the ship that had carried her to New York so long ago.

Could it be true? Could she really break the spell? She'd searched for years for a cure, a counter-spell, anything that would break Melonia's curse. Her father had offered untold wealth to anyone in the known world who could help his daughter. When that hadn't worked, he'd sent emissaries to every corner of the earth, but all had come back empty-handed. Finally, he had set out himself, determined to save his only child from the enchantment.

He had never returned, and finally Wren had to admit to herself that he was gone, that the only person who wanted to help her fight for her life had lost his own life in the process. She'd left the castle, vowing never to return to her homeland or live as a princess until she had broken the curse.

It was then that she had started her own search, tracking down every witch in every village, town or city she came across in her travels until all the real witches had been forced into hiding and she'd begun to despair that she'd ever find anyone with the

power to help her. In time, she'd started to lose the hope of ever living a normal life. Experience had taught her that there was no cure, no counter-spell, no antidote. Though something deep within her clung to the belief that her story might yet have a happy ending, common sense said it was a done deal, she was cursed forever, end of story.

"No, it can't be true. You're lying," Wren whispered out loud, staring at the cat as tears began to well in her eyes and her stomach threatened to empty itself onto the sidewalk.

It is true. The spell can be broken.

"How?" Wren squeaked, the world still spinning as her heart started pounding triple time. She was about to hear words that could potentially change the course of her life, alter her fate and simultaneously make her feel like the biggest fool in the universe.

Could she have wasted three hundred years living half a life, lonely and transient? Could she have been responsible for her father's death? Could she maybe have had the normal human life that she longed for more than she could express?

"Tell me," she demanded, feeling herself start to sway.

I think maybe you should sit down.

"Tell me!" Wren screamed, ready to wring the cat's neck if it kept toying with her. She was not a mouse on a string, damn it, and she had lost all patience with the animal's self-important tone.

You have to calm down, you're going to do damage to yourself. Besides, people are starting to stare.

"Just, please...tell me," Wren whispered, starting to see dark spots dance before her eyes as it became even harder to take a breath. "Tell me how to break the curse."

I'm sorry. I can't.

"What?" she breathed.

I can't. I really, truly can't.

The words and the note of finality in the cat's tone were too much for Wren. Remaining conscious started to hold very little appeal, so she gave in to the physiological reactions happening in her body, allowing her eyes to close and her body to crumple to the pavement as darkness closed in around her.

Chapter Four

Austin started running before Wren hit the pavement, the bag of groceries falling from his hands as he broke into a sprint, hoping that there might be some way to run fast enough to break her fall. But she was already on the ground by the time he reached the corner where she had stood.

"Wren!" Austin knelt beside her, gently bringing his hand to her cheek. Carefully he began to scan her body for injuries. There was no blood or wounds readily apparent, but she was cold to the touch despite the heat of the day. Her face was pale and tears trailed from her closed eyes.

The protective instinct that hit him was more powerful than anything he had ever experienced, strong enough to take his breath away. He wanted nothing more than to scoop her up and carry her home, tuck her into bed and hold her, stay with her until she was herself again, until he somehow made everything better.

But it was a ridiculous impulse. He didn't even know her. He had no right to take her anywhere, especially his bed. Besides, how would she feel if she woke up in bed with a man who was basically a stranger?

Thrilled beyond belief, a voice spoke in his head and Austin jerked his eyes up to look around him, but no one was there. Not a single other soul had felt compelled to stop and inquire about the girl who had passed out in the middle of the street, no one except a small black cat who Austin assumed must belong to Wren.

Jesus, his ego was getting out of hand. Even in his college days when he'd had more than his fair share of women, he'd never been quite so cocksure about the reaction a female would have to being in bed with him. Thrilled beyond belief? What was *wrong* with him? The woman was hurt, couldn't he stop thinking about getting in her pants for ten minutes?

Besides, no matter how compelling the thought of sweeping her up in his arms, he knew better than to move her. If she had a head or spine injury, he would only make things worse by shifting her position. He had to try to get through to her, let her tell him what had happened. Otherwise, he'd have to call the paramedics.

"Wren, talk to me, can you hear me?" he asked as he smoothed her hair gently away from her face, noticing it was as soft as he'd dreamed it would be.

"Oh...crap..." she moaned softly and moved her head to one side. Austin's heart leapt with hope for a moment, but then she lay still once more.

"Wren, can you hear me? Wren?" he asked one more time before searching for his cell phone. He'd call 911. He hadn't seen anything hit her, hadn't seen what made her fall, but she was obviously hurt.

Hell, for all he knew she could have a heart condition or be a diabetic or any other number of things. Austin had to remind himself that he didn't know this woman as intimately as he liked to think. He was shocked to realize that he didn't even know what her last name was to tell emergency services. Outside of their few conversations, their contact had been mostly imaginary.

"Austin?" Wren asked from the pavement, sounding surprised to see him and looking around her as if she wasn't certain exactly where she was or how she came to be there. It was a completely normal reaction, assuming she didn't make a habit of passing out in the middle of street.

"Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?" he asked, his fingers still poised to dial the emergency number, though he was more than relieved to see her clear blue eyes open and lucid. She seemed to be all right, if a bit confused.

"No, no, I'm fine," she replied, struggling to sit up. "My head just hurts a little."

"Wait, take it easy, you might have hurt yourself," Austin cautioned.

"I'm fine, really, just a complete idiot. Losing consciousness wasn't nearly as much of a relief as I thought it would be."

"At least sit still for a few minutes," he said.

Wren ignored him and continued to work her way towards standing. He reached out to help her, but she waved him away, coming to her feet easily and brushing off her clothes before tucking her hair behind her ears.

"I think someone stole my ball cap," she said, scanning the sidewalk and edge of the street.

"I saw you hit the ground, it must be around here somewhere," Austin said. He remembered seeing a faded blue hat on her head, now that she mentioned it, but it was nowhere to be found. New York...sometimes it made him want to scream.

"New York. You take the good, you take the bad," she said with a sigh.

"I'll go buy you another one right now, let's just make sure there's nothing broken before we do," Austin said, the idea of taking Wren shopping for a new hat ridiculously exciting. He was hopeless where she was concerned, completely hopeless.

"No, you're not going to buy me anything, and no, there's nothing broken," she tried to joke, moving her legs and arms in demonstration and giving a halfhearted smile. "I just had a little shocking news."

"Must have been some news," Austin said, raising his eyebrows in disbelief. She certainly didn't seem like the type of person who would faint in the face of a little troubling information.

"Yeah, probably the worst news I've ever heard," Wren said, looking straight into his eyes with that vulnerability that drew him to her every time he passed her in the hallway.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Austin asked, not understanding the urge, but knowing that he wanted to be the shoulder she leaned on. What was with him and the white knight syndrome where she was concerned?

"No!" she nearly shouted, then added with a nervous laugh, "No, I don't think that would be a good idea. You'd probably think I was crazier than you do already."

"I don't think you're crazy," Austin said truthfully, thinking to himself, *A little odd, perhaps, way sexier than the average female, but definitely not crazy.*

"Really?" she asked, looking both hopeful and a little dubious. "You've had to rush to my rescue twice in two days and you don't think I might be a little strange?"

"A little unlucky, maybe," Austin said with a laugh.

"Unlucky," Wren said, tears appearing in her eyes despite the smile that stretched across her face. "Yes, that's one word for it."

"Listen, let's go get a cup of coffee. We don't have to talk about anything, we can just sit quietly and I'll make sure that nothing else unlucky happens to you for the next hour or so at least," Austin said, trying to coax another smile from Wren, surprised that he didn't have the urge to run from a tearful female. He might have been raised a Southern gentleman, but he still had the typical male fear of a crying woman. But with Wren, he wanted to stick around, to do whatever it took to banish the tears from her big blue eyes.

"Thanks, but I don't think I need any caffeine right now. I'm already on edge. I'm just—"

"Meow."

"Shit!" Wren jumped nervously at the sound before shooting a wary gaze at the black cat that sat patiently nearby.

Austin turned to look at the animal. It seemed amazingly docile for a feline, simply sitting there calmly at the edge of the street, staring up at them. Still, he felt an uncomfortable shiver run down his spine when its green gaze shifted in his direction. He didn't know why, but this particular cat gave him a slight case of the creeps.

"Is that your cat?" he asked.

"Sort of," Wren said cryptically, before adding in a tight voice, "but I'd really rather not talk about her right now."

"All right. Well then, how about that coffee?" Austin asked lightly, trying not to let his thoughts show on his face. Was she upset with the cat? Slightly creepy or not, that made no sense. Maybe she had hit her head a little harder than she thought. He definitely shouldn't leave her alone.

"How about something a little stronger? I know a great little bar around the corner, no animals allowed," Wren said, her tone suddenly upbeat as she adjusted the purse strap draped across her chest. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was trying to escape from the cat. But that wasn't something that could be explained away by a light

concussion. Austin couldn't claim to be an expert on mental instability, but it would be just his luck with women to be falling for a woman with —

Falling for. Shit. He was falling for her, hard and fast, and he was in for a lot more trouble than a bump on the head.

"I'm not sure a drink's a good idea —" he began, but then all thoughts of what was smart or sane flew from his mind when she smiled and looped her arm through his. The shock of even that simple contact was enough to stop them both dead in their tracks. Austin drew in a sharp breath as a wave of sexual awareness swept over him, making his cock surge to a state of maximum, immediate arousal.

Wren nearly stumbled as she turned to stare at the place where their arms touched, clearly as affected as he was. Her lips parted and her breath came in shallow pants as her fingers curled tighter into his arm, as if even her fingertips craved a deepening of their contact.

Austin helped steady her, but fought the urge to pull her a little closer. He knew a little closer would never be close enough. He'd want to haul her body against him, allow his lips to ravage her full mouth as his hands swept down her backside to finally mold that amazing ass in his palms. In seconds, he'd be urging her hips forward to grind against the erection that strained the fly of his jeans. From there, it wouldn't take long for him to forget the reasons why they shouldn't be doing what they were doing. They were only a few blocks away from their apartment building. He could have her naked in his bed in no time, his cock buried in her pussy, making all those hot, sticky fantasies he'd been having a blissful reality.

From the heat in her blue eyes as she looked up at him, he intuitively knew she would allow it, maybe even right here in the middle of the street. The mental image of him and Wren, naked on this corner, fucking their brains out for anyone to see was strangely arousing. He suddenly knew he wouldn't mind performing for a crowd with her, to know other people could see his cock sliding in out and of her cleft, emerging glistening with her juices. He'd never had any fantasies like that before, but he sensed that Wren could bring to the surface a previously undiscovered side of him. She'd introduce him to world of sensual pleasure that he'd never known before, but was more than eager to discover.

Shit, this gave a new meaning to the phrase playing with fire.

Austin tried to pull away from her, but her small sound of protest was enough to make him lose the will to move even a breath further. She was as affected by the energy between them as he was. The overwhelming sexual desire that had been haunting him since the first moment he saw her sizzled in the air around them. Except now she was really in his arms, so close that he could smell the light salty-sweet scent of her, could hear her breathe, could reach down and touch her lips with his by simply moving a few inches.

God, he wanted nothing more than to feel her arms twining around him, to use his own arms to pull her close and finally know what it would be like to claim that mouth

he'd dreamed about more times than he could remember. He knew she would taste better than he'd imagined, that the explosion of passion that would follow the first meeting of their tongues would rival orgasms he'd had with other women. A kiss with Wren would be as erotic as seeing another woman's lips sliding down his cock. He couldn't even let his mind imagine Wren's mouth on him like that, or he knew he'd lose control right then and there.

Instinctively, he knew this woman could change his life. If he let himself cross that line, let himself touch her, taste her, love her, he'd never be the same. If he went to bed with her, there would be no going back, no other woman would ever be enough. Any chance for his and Ella's relationship would be out the window the second he let himself wrap his arms around Wren.

"I have to get my groceries," Austin said through a clenched jaw, his whole body tense from the effort of fighting the raw desire pumping through his veins. He couldn't let himself do this. He had made a promise.

He owed Ella that much. There was no way he could let his attraction go any further, despite the fact that he wanted the woman in front of him so badly that he'd gladly take her up against the wall of the building behind them, in broad daylight, in clear view of god, the creepy cat and a street full of people.

"Right," Wren breathed, wincing slightly as he pulled away from her as if the loss of contact between them was as painful for her as it was for him.

Slowly he walked back to his spilled bag of groceries, taking his time putting the items back in the bag, struggling to get control of his body. It would be difficult enough to walk away from this woman without his rock-hard erection making itself annoyingly obvious to the world in general, and Wren in particular.

He had to get control of himself. She was an experienced woman. She might not look much older than a teenager, but her every move, every look, said she knew just about everything there was to know about how men reacted to her body. She'd notice his physical response and he'd feel like a bigger fool than he did already.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you had groceries," Wren said, her voice wavering a bit as she began to back away from him. "You should get home with those, wouldn't want your yogurt to go bad."

"I don't eat yogurt," Austin said, standing up with his bag and staring back at Wren, feeling strangely forlorn. How could a woman look so unbelievably sexy in jeans and a t-shirt? And how could he leave her with that abandoned look in her eyes?

"Right, yogurt isn't very manly is it?" she said, her words teasing, but her eyes full of more pain than he'd seen in a long time. She looked scared and alone, or maybe just scared of being alone. He knew the feeling. He sure as hell didn't want to be alone right now, didn't want to be anywhere but with Wren, by her side, in her body, held in her arms.

"No, it isn't," Austin replied, fighting the urge to go to her, to follow her wherever she wanted to lead him or to invite her back to his place to help him unpack the

groceries, water his houseplants, iron his goddamned underpants, anything to get her to stay with him.

"See you around," she whispered, giving Austin a tiny glimpse of the tears that once again filled her eyes before spinning on her heel and starting to jog away down the street. He watched as the jog turned into a run and then a full-blown sprint. The woman was running from him as if she were fleeing for her life.

Are you just going to let her go? Like that? She's clearly devastated. What kind of man are you?

"Not that kind," Austin said aloud to himself, dropping his groceries and racing off after Wren without taking the time to wonder where that strange voice in his head had come from. Right now, he had more important things to worry about, like what the hell he was going to do with Wren once he caught her.

Chapter Five

Stupid, stupid, stupid, Wren mentally chanted to herself as her feet flew along the sidewalk, her breath rasping in and out of her chest as tears flowed freely down her face.

She'd almost let her guard down, had almost thought she could have one night with Austin. It had just been too much of a coincidence that his was the first face she'd seen when she came to. Of all the people who could have seen her pass out on the street, it had been him, the only one she'd have wanted to catch her.

And the reaction when they had touched had blown her away, the attraction literally knocking her off her feet. In three hundred years, not a single man had ever made her feel that off balance, that consumed by physical need. She had thought it was a sign, a sign that it might be okay to let herself live out the fantasy of holding him, touching him, feeling his naked body move against hers.

Even now, running down the street, feeling as if her world had crumbled around her and her heart was breaking, her body still came alive at the thought of him. Her pussy started to throb and her thighs grew slick with moisture as her body prepared to take every bit of his thickness inside her. She'd seen the way he'd responded to her, he'd been hard in seconds, as ready as she was to take each other right there on the sidewalk. They were perfect for each other, she just knew it. She knew that his touch would banish the despair that had slowly been creeping into her mind, his cock would fill up every aching, empty part of her, and maybe even fuck away a little of the coldness that had taken up residence in her heart.

But he'd pulled away. He didn't want her. Or his cock wanted her, but his heart was obviously engaged elsewhere. Austin Taylor was just like every other man who had ever entered her life. He might be kind to her, might even flirt with her, but he didn't want anything more than a one-night stand. And apparently he was too much of a gentleman to even want that.

She started to sob harder, hating the way her whole body ached from his rejection. She should be glad that he had spared her the heartache of tomorrow morning, of waking up alone in bed and knowing that he was right next door, that he'd left her alone like all the others. But somehow she couldn't take comfort in the idea that she'd never know what it was like to hold him. Or maybe he would just hold her.

Finally she had to stop running, dropping her hands to her knees and struggling to regain her breath. Between running and crying, she was in a ridiculous state. She had snot running down her nose, tears dripping down her face, and was panting so hard that her throat hurt. She'd be in for another fainting spell for sure if she didn't at least try to get control of herself.

Thankfully she had run far enough that she was in a relatively quiet part of the city, as far east as you could go without running into water, which was fine with her. She was tired of making a public spectacle of herself. At least here there was no one to watch her faint or fall to pieces or whatever the hell she was going to do next. There were a few apartment buildings nearby, but she was surrounded on three sides by abandoned warehouses. The usual bustle of the city seemed far away and best of all, there wasn't another soul in sight.

She'd just started to relax a bit when footsteps sounded behind her. Wren barely had time to swipe her sleeve across her nose before two strong arms were around her, pulling her into a muscled chest that was, for some reason, more familiar to her than her own name.

"God, you run fast," Austin rasped before taking her face tenderly in his hands, one of his thumbs gently wiping at the tears still wet on her cheek. Looking up into his eyes, Wren would have sworn for a moment that he was as torn as she was, but then something broke inside him and his decision was made.

Wren nearly sobbed as he lowered his mouth to her, feeling as if she just might start crying again, this time from the unbelievable pleasure coursing through her body. She'd wanted this, wanted it more than anything in the world. His lips were full and warm and his tongue hot perfection as it slid into her mouth, exploring her in a way that made her feel like he was touching every erogenous zone in her body at once. She responded in kind, mating her tongue with his before claiming his bottom lip, sucking hard and dragging her teeth over the sensitive flesh.

"You're just like I imagined," he breathed before he ran his hands swiftly down her back, roughly grabbing her ass, hauling her body to his as he guided her back towards the wall nearby. His hand moved behind her head, protecting her from the bricks even as he pressed his hips forward, pinning her to the wall.

Wren moaned as she felt the heat of his swollen cock pressing against her through their jeans. He was as long and thick as she'd thought he'd be, and she knew the instant he groaned and pressed more tightly to her that she was finally going to discover what it felt like to have all that hot masculine need shoved between her legs.

"I've wanted you from the first second we met." Wren rocked her hips against him, grinding her clit against his cock. He made a hungry sound against her lips and thrust forward, making a fresh wave of desire sweep over her as she imagined what it would feel like to have him inside her, tunneling into her, fucking her with all the passion she'd felt buried inside him.

And then his hand was sliding further around her ass, fingers gliding over her opening before coming to press lightly against her clit through her jeans. She gasped at the electricity that shot through her body, inches away from coming hard into his hand, despite the fact that they were both still completely clothed.

"Austin," she moaned, arching against him as he tasted her neck, his mouth gently biting at her jaw in a way that made her dig her fingers into his back and growl low in

her throat. She wanted him. She wanted him now, here, against this wall. She wanted him pounding inside her until her skin was scratched and bruised from the bricks behind her. She needed it that way right now, needed to know that she was still alive.

"Fuck me, Austin, fuck me," she gasped, taking his face in her hands and pulling his mouth to hers once more. The primal sound he made as their kiss became frenzied told her that he wanted her in the same desperate way that she wanted him, that he was more than willing to give her what she needed, what they both needed.

Frantic to remove all barriers to having him inside her, Wren reached down to his jeans, roughly tugging at the closure until she freed his cock, moaning again as she found him with her hands. The pleasure as she stroked him for the first time was so intense that it felt almost as if she were touching herself. He was long and thick, his girth too large for her to completely close her hand around his tip. She would have wanted him if he'd been less endowed, but god... She'd learned long ago that size did matter, oh yes, it did, and he was the *perfect* size. Thick enough to hurt a little going in, to give them both that delicious friction that made the first few moments of penetration truly exquisite.

She moaned as she stroked him hard, up and down, nearly losing her mind from the anticipation of having him inside her. His cock jumped in her hand, the choked sound he made low in his throat letting her know that he was as near the edge as she was.

"I want you so much," he growled into her ear as his teeth nipped at her lobe and his hands worked at the opening of her jeans. He unzipped her fly and shoved his hand down the front of her pants, down to her aching pussy, his fingers gliding over her clit and teasing her swollen, weeping slit.

"Please," Wren begged, trembling from his touch and straining against him, feeling as if she would truly lose her mind if he didn't fuck her in the next two seconds. He could use his fingers, his mouth, his cock—she just needed something, anything, to fill her, fuck her, bring her over the edge, take away this frenzied need that was more intense than any sexual craving she'd ever known.

Suddenly, the sound of an engine rounding the corner somehow penetrated her lust-fogged senses. Someone was coming. They had to stop. She wasn't really an exhibitionist. Sure, she had fantasies about someone watching while Austin fucked her, but she didn't truly want to share this moment with whoever happened to be driving down the street. She had to pull his hand out of her pants, gather her wits about her, and at least make it look like she wasn't seconds away from coating the thick fingers thrusting inside her with the evidence of her pleasure.

But god, right now she just couldn't seem to make herself do what had to be done, couldn't seem to force herself to care.

She couldn't stop this, she needed him, felt as if she would disintegrate into nothingness if she couldn't have him right now. The fingers spearing through her slick, aching folds, the lips at her throat, the cock pressing against her thigh, she wouldn't,

couldn't do anything to mar the perfection of this moment. Damn the car and the people in it. The scope of her world had narrowed to the overwhelming craving to have this man inside her, to fuck him until the mad need within her subsided.

"We have to stop," he whispered, his tone strained as he withdrew his wicked hand and quickly tucked himself back inside his pants.

"No," she pleaded, shoving his hands away and reaching for his cock again, knowing she must seem crazy, but not caring. She would be fine, as long as he touched her again, kissed her again, let her hold him in her hand, let her be intoxicated by the scent of his aroused body, the taste of his kiss-swollen lips.

"Shhh," he said softly, taking her hands firmly in his own and bringing them to his lips, softly kissing the tip of each of her fingers.

Shocked by the intimate gesture, Wren lifted her gaze to his eyes, only inches away from her own and felt a sense of peace wash over her. She'd experienced a wide range of emotions in three hundred years—joy, rage, desire, sorrow, despair—but never had she experienced peace. Her eyes widened with the wonder of it. She truly felt as if a weight on her heart had been lifted, as if she'd been told the most amazing secret.

Wren was reminded of the way she'd felt as a small girl, before her mother had passed away giving birth to her little brother, before her father had become king and no longer had time for his only child. And of course, way before she'd been a spoiled, petulant princess who had condemned a witch to death and been forced to suffer the consequences of her actions for centuries.

She continued to stare deep into Austin's eyes as the truck rumbled past, her breath gradually slowing to something resembling its normal rate. Wren felt herself calming, the physical need for Austin still there, but simmering at a lower level. Now the longing that filled her was of an entirely different sort. She wanted it all.

She wanted to feel this way forever, wanted to come home to him every day for the rest of her life. And she wanted that life to be a normal human life. She wanted to have children, grandchildren. She wanted to grow older. She even wanted to die, as long as she had this man beside her, or already waiting for her on the other side. Wren knew that it was too late to fight what she felt for Austin any longer. Whether it was rational, logical or feasible, she was in love.

Austin's lips stilled on her hands as they listened to the sound of the engine fade in the distance, neither of them seeming to want to end the moment they had shared. Wren forced herself to take a deep breath, glancing quickly at the ground and then back up at the man in front of her as a small smile spread across her face.

Austin Taylor didn't think she was pathetic, or crazy, or some sort of sex-starved maniac. Instinctively she could feel that he understood her, not only her need for him, but something more. As he returned her smile, Wren felt for the first time that she had someone on her side, that she was in on the joke. And she knew for a fact that they weren't finished with each other, not by a long shot.

"So," he said shakily, pulling back from her but keeping her hands in his, "you still want to go for that drink?"

"No, I don't think so," Wren said, grinning like an idiot and not caring a bit.

"No? I wonder what we should do instead?" He returned her silly grin, and for the first time Wren noticed the tiny dimple on his left cheek. Cute, no, *super* cute—but she had a feeling she was going to think just about everything about Austin was super cute. Wasn't that one of the side effects of being madly in love?

"I don't know," she replied, shrugging her shoulders in mock confusion. "I guess we could go back to my place and screw each other's brains out."

"Hmmm. That's a thought."

"Yeah, I thought you might like it," Wren smiled.

"But that might take some time," he said. "I don't know about you, but I'm feeling pretty smart. I think for my brains to be thoroughly screwed out we might have to spend a really long time together."

"Well, good thing I don't have any big plans for tonight."

"Tonight?" Austin asked, taking her hand and beginning to walk swiftly back towards their apartment building. "This might take days, weeks even. We should probably go pick up those groceries I dropped to make sure we don't starve to death."

"Right," Wren replied, trying to keep up the teasing tone, grateful that he wasn't looking back at her to see the smile drop from her face and her spirits come crashing back to earth.

He didn't know that there would only be tonight, that they had to make love enough in the next few hours to make it last forever. If he knew, would he still want her, would he still risk betraying the woman who wrote him letters from so far away? The thought stopped her dead in her tracks and she felt her hand slip from Austin's despite his firm grip. The loss of the contact caused her entire body to send up a wail of protest. It didn't want to think about right or wrong, didn't want to admit the rules of enchantment applied to the present situation, but she couldn't let this go any further, not without making sure Austin knew exactly what he was doing.

"What's wrong?" Austin asked, his own grin fading as he turned and saw her frozen on the sidewalk.

"What about your girlfriend?" Wren whispered, hating herself for saying the words, but knowing that she had no choice. She cared too much about this man to let him throw away a real relationship for a one-night stand. In reality it didn't matter what she wanted or dreamed of, there was only one outcome possible for her. They wouldn't have the chance at "everything" and it wasn't fair to ruin his chance for a happily-ever-after with someone else.

From the look on Austin's face, she had asked precisely the question he had been struggling not to ask himself. He was silent for a long time and Wren fought the urge to

stop the words that were coming with her mouth upon his, to try to take back what she'd said before it was too late.

"How did you know I have a girlfriend?" Austin finally asked quietly, his tone full of a sadness Wren didn't fully understand.

"I just know." She wasn't in the mood to make up some silly excuse. Even if the letters could be explained away, every man who had ever wanted her had a girlfriend, a fiancée, a wife, a lover—someone who came first in their heart. It was her curse. After three hundred years she knew there were no exceptions to the rule.

"You're psychic?" Austin asked, a humorless smile on his face.

"Something like that," she replied, wanting more than anything to reach out and touch him, to run her fingers over the tight muscles in his strong jaw and take away the pain in his eyes. She wanted to comfort him, to be there for him. But she couldn't. He wasn't hers to comfort.

"Come on, let's go get that drink," Austin said, taking her by the hand and pulling her along with him down the street.

"But I—"

"I'm not trying to avoid the question. I'll tell you anything you want to know. I just need a drink first."

Wren fell into step beside him, somehow knowing that he was going to tell her something different from any other man she'd asked this question. He wasn't going to make excuses, he wasn't going to deny that the woman in his life existed, or that she was important to him. He just wasn't the type who would lie about something like that.

Hell, he probably wasn't even going to try to get her into bed anymore.

Something in the way his hand held hers told her that the spell was broken. Whatever it was that had allowed Austin to kiss her, to touch her, to nearly take her home and make love to her, had vanished when she opened her mouth and said the word "girlfriend". She would probably curse herself later, but for the moment Wren was filled with a strange sense of calm.

She wanted to make love to Austin more than she'd wanted any man in her entire, unbearably long life, but she took comfort in the fact that she hadn't taken advantage of the man next to her. He was too good to be just another one-nighter for a girl like her. He was the type of man who deserved someone to love him, to be there for him in every way. And no matter how she might want to be that woman, it just wasn't possible.

Chapter Six

"Thanks," Austin said to the aging bartender, laying a few extra bills down on the scarred wooden bar before turning back to where Wren sat waiting at a table in the corner. He walked slowly towards her, trying not to spill the two draft beers in his hands as he struggled to work out what in the hell he was going to say to her.

A few hours ago it would have been simple, he would have simply told her that he was attracted to her, but that he had a commitment to someone else that kept him from acting on that attraction, end of story. Then he could have turned away, gone back to his lonely room and continued the frustrating business of waiting for Ella to come back to him, to decide whether she really wanted to be a part of his life.

But in the past fifteen minutes his whole world had been turned upside down. Against all logic or reason, he found himself falling in love with the girl whose wide blue eyes stared at him from across the room. The insane lust remained, but now it was accompanied by a feeling of tenderness and the knowledge that he didn't ever want to let her go.

It didn't make sense, he hardly knew her, but he wasn't a fool. He knew that this was what he had been looking for. He'd always been a person who trusted his instincts, and every single one of them was shouting that this was the woman for him, that he'd finally found his match.

So how was he going to sit down at that table and tell Wren that he belonged to another woman? A woman who had been gone for nearly a year, who he wasn't even sure loved him, but to whom he was bound until she decided to set him free? How could he tell her that there was no way he could break the promise he had made to Ella even though he knew he didn't love her anymore, and suspected now that he never had?

Wren would call him a fool, which he supposed he was. But he'd made too many mistakes where Ella was concerned already. He had to do the right thing now or regret it for the rest of his life. He might have been able to forgive himself an affair with his beautiful neighbor, but that was as far as their relationship could ever go.

That would never have been enough, you'd long for her for the rest of your life, said that same strange voice in his head, the one he had heard on the street before he'd dropped everything and run after Wren.

It sounded as if another person were speaking inside his mind. But maybe forcing himself to act so against his instincts for the past year had made his own voice of truth seem foreign, coming from somewhere outside himself.

Wherever it came from, the voice was probably right. Even after the brief moments they'd shared, Austin knew he would never stop longing for Wren, would be haunted

by the look in her eyes after they'd kissed in the street for the rest of his life. But he also knew that there wouldn't have been a chance of keeping his promise to Ella if he'd let himself finish what he and Wren had started.

The heat between them had been overwhelming. Austin had never been the type to share even a casual kiss on the street. He didn't like the idea that some stranger might witness a private moment, but minutes ago he'd been fully prepared to take Wren where they stood. It had gone beyond any excitement at the idea of being watched. He hadn't even remembered where he was or considered that they might be discovered, the need to be inside of her had been so strong.

If that truck hadn't come around the corner, he had no doubt that they would have screwed each other senseless right there against that brick wall. Even now he had to fight to keep his cock from surging to attention just from looking at her. She was unbelievable, breathtaking. Even mussed from their run and subsequent make out session, she was by far the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He sat down quickly, giving up the fight with his body and letting his erection strain against the fly of his jeans. He had a feeling there would be no relief for his present state as long as Wren was within a ten-mile radius – unless he finally let himself sink his cock into the paradise between her legs, into the hot, wet pussy he'd had his fingers buried in only a few minutes before. God, she'd been so ready for him, practically dripping on his hand. It was one of the most powerfully erotic things he'd ever known, and he wanted nothing more than to reach under the table and find her center again. He wanted his fingers in her, wanted to taste her cream with his mouth, wanted to suckle her clit –

Stop it, he admonished. No matter what he wanted, none of those things were an option, and despite the events of the past year, torturing himself wasn't usually one of his favorite hobbies.

"So..."

"So." She fidgeted slightly in front of him, nibbling on her bottom lip as she took the beer that he offered with a nervous smile. He tried to return the smile, but hell, he wasn't an actor. He left that to the guys who played with the swords he made. He had his own talents, but pretending he wasn't getting ready to do one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life was beyond him. Instead, he let out a tense sigh and turned his attention to his beer.

A drink will make this much easier, he heard the voice in his head encourage, reminding him why he'd suggested a few beers in the first place.

He gratefully followed the mental advice, lifting the amber brew to his lips and sucking down a large portion of the cold, slightly sour draft. It wasn't the best beer in town by a long shot, but it would get the job done, take the edge off so he could find a way to tell Wren the truth about him and Ella. He could already feel the alcohol begin to hum in his veins, a few more deep pulls and he'd be ready to say what needed to be said, ready to tell Wren why they'd never be more than neighbors.

Wren squinted her eyes, struggling to read Austin's expression more clearly, but met with little success. The bar was very dark, despite the bright sun that still shone outside. It was colder inside too, and the smell of spilt beer hung in the air. The place wasn't much more than a hole in the wall really, but Wren found the dingy atmosphere and slightly pungent scent oddly comforting. She breathed in deeply as she watched Austin drink his beer and waited for him to speak, feeling her nerves calm a bit as the sense of the familiar surrounded her.

The bar reminded her of the tiny pub she had owned in England in the eighteenth century. Dark wood lined the walls and the bar itself could have been carved by a woodworker from London's craftsman lane. She smiled as she remembered some of the characters she'd known then. She had enjoyed her time at that pub, had been sad to leave London, even though she had ended up opening a similar establishment in rural France not many years later.

Wren had always found it easiest to find jobs working around alcohol. Whether they were celebrating with a few drinks or drowning their sorrows, people in a pub tended to ask few questions. They were happy to talk about themselves rather than wonder why the barmaid seemed to remain oddly youthful and never landed a husband.

Pubs and bars also tended to be dark places, making it easier to hide your true appearance if you chose to do so. More than once, Wren had added a few lines to her face with makeup, a trick that allowed her to stay in one place longer, to enjoy a sense of being part of life before she had to move on once more.

"What are you thinking about?" Austin asked as he took another long drink of his beer, making Wren wonder what kind of story he was going to tell her if he really needed to build up some liquid courage.

"Nothing." Wren smiled and shrugged off the question, knowing that there was no way she could ever share with him her memories of the eighteenth century, but wishing she could. For once, she'd love to really be herself, with everything that entailed, including her centuries of memories and the history of her curse.

"Nothing," Austin repeated, looking dubious. "You look like someone died."

"Well then, what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Austin replied, a wry smile flashing across his face before he took another long drink.

"Exactly," Wren said, returning his smile.

"It's good that we understand each other."

"Actually, I'm still waiting to understand a few things," Wren prodded gently, hating the feeling of dread building inside of her. She wished he would just start talking, just tell her how much he loved his girlfriend, how he was committed to her, could never leave her, blah, blah, blah. The anticipation of hearing the painful words was killing her.

"I get to have a drink first, remember?" Austin said, staring down into his half-empty beer.

"Well, you should accomplish that pretty quickly the way you're going. Do you always gulp it down like that?"

"Only when I've been exercising," Austin teased, drinking again.

"Excellent way to hydrate yourself," Wren returned, almost hating how easily the conversation flowed between them. The more time they spent together, the easier it was to feel at ease with him and the harder it was to imagine never talking this way again.

"Absolutely," Austin said. "Honestly, I don't drink very often anymore. I had a little problem controlling myself in college, so I lay off the booze except for special occasions. I'm too old to be having a hangover on a regular basis."

"And how old is that? You don't look a day over thirty to me."

"I'm thirty-three, an old, old man."

"Wow, that is old, practically ancient," Wren laughed quietly, finally taking a drink of her own beer and noticing a slightly sour taste as the cold brew slid down her throat. They just didn't make beer like they used to, especially in the United States.

"It must seem that way to you. What are you, nineteen, twenty?" Austin asked.

"I'm twenty-one," Wren said sourly, hating to talk about her age. She had long ago grown tired of the attitude she received from people who thought she was much younger than she really was. She had three hundred years of experience to her name, she wasn't some naïve girl. But try explaining that to the average modern-day individual. Hell, try explaining it to *anyone*. Witches didn't hand out curses like they used to, a fact that was great for reducing burnings at the stake, but hard on a person trying to convince others that she was the victim of a centuries-old enchantment.

"Oh, a wee babe," Austin teased, looking a little sad. "You're much too young to be hanging out with an old man like me. I feel like I'm robbing the cradle."

"That's ridiculous," Wren said. "It's only twelve years."

"A very momentous twelve years," he countered.

"So what? Women date older men all the time," Wren argued, unable to believe that her age really had anything to do with his reluctance to be with her.

"They do, that's true, but I never have. I've always thought it better to have someone who had a little more experience, who could understand where I'm coming from. I happen to believe that a little age on a woman isn't a bad thing."

"Really?" Wren asked, a little surprised. "That's a rare attitude."

"I'm a rare kind of guy," Austin said with an almost cynical smile. "Also, my dad divorced my mother for a nineteen-year-old girl after twenty years of marriage. It kind of soured me on the whole 'younger woman' fantasy."

"I'm not a younger woman. I'm me," Wren replied in a tone that invited no argument. "And I have enough experience for *ten* thirty-three-year-olds. In fact, I—"

Wren snapped her mouth shut before the words on the tip of her tongue could spill out. What was wrong with her? She'd been a split second away from giving Austin yet another reason to push her away. The younger woman thing they could probably overcome, but she knew that crazy didn't go over well with men. Not to mention the fact that her past was really a non-issue. He was in a relationship and she was on her way out of town, there was no reason for her to start confiding in him. The few times she'd ever tried to share her history, the situation had ended badly, more than badly – horrendously. She knew better, but for some reason she still wanted to tell Austin the truth, and actually had to cover her mouth to help her gain control of the urge.

She hiccupped lightly behind her hand, surprised that her head already hummed slightly from the two sips of beer. Amazing what alcohol could do on an empty stomach. She was going to have to slow down if she hoped to avoid making a complete fool of herself.

"I bet you do."

"I do what?"

"Have a lot of experience." Austin's eyes flashed with desire and Wren knew where his mind was headed. She felt her body involuntarily spark with sexual response, her nipples beginning to tighten at the thought of how she would love to show him everything she'd learned from three hundred years of sexual experience.

But then the fire in his eyes faded as quickly as it had appeared. He cleared his throat, forcibly gaining control of himself.

"I mean, you seem very confident, more sure of yourself than most people in their early twenties."

"Right." Wren did her best to mimic his control, taking another sip of beer, hoping maybe the cold beverage would cool the heat inside her. Unfortunately, it seemed to be having the opposite effect.

"*I am* old for my age. *Really* old," Wren added, the slight break in her voice the only thing that betrayed how aroused she was becoming. Her pussy pulsed hungrily between her legs, and she shifted in her seat, hoping to ease the ache by rubbing her thighs together. But that only made it worse, so much worse. She was becoming as crazy for him as she'd been in the street, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to hold up her end of the conversation.

"You do seem old for your age. You also seem...lonely," Austin said.

"I am lonely," Wren confessed, surprised at herself and at him. This conversation was getting intense. People weren't usually this honest with each other. She almost never said what she was really thinking. But for some reason, she couldn't control the urge to tell Austin exactly what was in her heart, no more than she could control the mad lust coursing through her body, urging her to strip off her clothes and offer herself to Austin right here. She could already imagine the hunger in his eyes as he took in her naked form, almost feel his hands on her hips as he pulled her to the edge of the table and rammed his aching cock inside of her.

"I'd like to keep you company." Austin looked as shocked at the words coming from his mouth as she had felt about her own confessions. It seemed they were both suffering from the same strange malady, had lost the ability to deny what they were feeling, no matter how much either of them thought they should.

"But you can't," Wren said, blinking fast as a small wave of dizziness swept over her, leaving her lips tingling. *Crap, this was some powerful beer. At this rate, Austin was going to have to carry her home.*

Yes, god yes, she wanted him to carry her home, carry her home and throw her on his bed, rip her panties away from her and –

"You can't, no one can," she repeated, interrupting her own thoughts before they could get any more dangerous.

"You're right, I can't. But I want to, more than anything in the world," Austin whispered, leaning close to her and making her head spin even more with his nearness, and the unique, intoxicating smell of his body.

What was happening here? Surely this couldn't be just beer and hormones at work. Not that Wren underestimated the power of either, but she'd never felt this way, never known such a deep, horrible craving for another human being. She needed Austin in a way she'd never needed anything—food, water, you name it—and the need was quickly becoming completely uncontrollable.

"I want you more than I've wanted any another man," Wren found herself confessing. "I dream about you constantly. I fantasize about how you're going to fuck me and when you were touching me today I felt like I'd die if I didn't have you. I almost came in your hand."

"I wanted to be inside you so badly I felt like I'd crawl out of my own skin if I didn't get my cock in you, right there in the middle of the street," Austin rasped, leaning even closer so that their lips nearly touched across the table. The feel of his breath against her lips drove Wren wild, stoking the fire inside of her to the scalding point. "I wanted to pull down your jeans, turn you around and take you from behind right against that wall. I'm hard right now just thinking about touching you, about spreading the lips of your pussy and getting my cock inside –"

Austin pulled back from her, breathing heavily but struggling to control himself. He rubbed his palms against his eyes and smoothed his wavy brown hair away from his face, looking at Wren with eyes that clearly communicated that he was feeling as out of control as she was.

"God, I'm sorry," he began. "I don't know why –"

"I would have loved for you to fuck me from behind," Wren interrupted, unable to stop herself from reaching out and pulling his face close once more. "I'd love for you to fuck me anywhere, any way you wanted, with your cock, with your fingers, with your mouth. I don't care, I just know that I need to have you or I'm going to lose my mind." She barely finished her sentence before claiming his lips with her own.

She tasted beer in his mouth as he hungrily swirled his tongue against hers, but beer breath couldn't dampen the power of his kiss. Instantly, she was wild for him, moaning into the quiet air of the bar, every nerve in her body screaming for her to get closer to Austin Taylor. Wren deepened the kiss, using her lips, her tongue and her teeth, branding him with her mouth, letting him feel the desire that threatened to consume her whole.

"I've never wanted anyone like this," she murmured against his mouth, wishing that their bodies could be as intimately connected as their lips were at that moment.

"I want to fuck you right here on this table," Austin growled, reaching under her arms and pulling her to him across the table. She went willingly, sending his empty beer and her half-full glass crashing to the floor as she crawled into his arms.

"Hey, take it outside," the bartender called, shocking them back to their senses.

Wren let out a sound of pure surprise as they pulled away from each other, both turning to stare at the old man behind the bar, who was now calmly wiping down a clean beer glass. For someone who had just watched two people nearly go at it right in the middle of his bar, he seemed strangely unaffected. He didn't shout or threaten to call the cops, just casually gestured for them both to move towards the door.

"I'm sorry, I'll pay for the damages," Austin stammered, reaching for his wallet as Wren got herself down from the table and wiped a shaking hand across her mouth.

As embarrassed as she was to have lost control in front of a complete stranger, it was still difficult to restrain herself. She looked at Austin standing a few inches away and all she could think about was leaping into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and rocking her hips against the erection she could see straining the front of his pants. It took every ounce of willpower to cross her arms over her chest and stand still, waiting as Austin fished a few bills from his wallet and walked towards the bar.

"Don't worry about it," the bartender said, holding up his hand to refuse the money, once again acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened and gesturing towards the door. "You two just go enjoy yourselves. Don't worry about a thing."

"Thank you," Austin said, a part of him obviously wanting to insist the man take his money. When he turned to look back at her, Wren felt her entire body start to hum from the promise in Austin's eyes. Whether it was right or not, nothing was going to stop them now, nothing.

Wren inhaled sharply as Austin cleared the space between them in seconds and literally swept her off her feet. He lifted her like she weighed nothing and swiftly spirited her over the broken glass and out the door.

"Put me down," Wren demanded as they squinted in the bright sunlight.

"No, I'm not putting you down until your ass lands on my bed, preferably with your clothes off," Austin said, the set of his jaw making it clear that he meant exactly what he said as he continued carrying her swiftly back towards their apartment building.

"Put me down," Wren insisted, "so we can get there faster."

Austin turned to look in her eyes, a smile spreading across his face as he set her down and grabbed her hand. Wren smiled back as they both turned towards home and took off at a sprint. They might be going crazy, but at least they were going there together.

* * * * *

"What are you doing back here? We're not even open yet, man," a young woman with dark kohl-rimmed eyes and jet-black hair shouted, dropping the large bucket of ice she had been hauling up from the bar's basement. She propped her hands on her leather-clad hips and leveled a serious glare at the old man who stood in front of the beer taps.

"I was just a little thirsty," the old man said tiredly before ambling out from behind the bar and making his way towards the door.

"Yeah, well, you can't just serve yourself, dude, that's against the law," the girl barked. "I could call the cops on your ass."

"I was just leaving," the old man said as he tripped out the door, stumbling onto the sidewalk like the homeless alcoholic he appeared.

"Damn bums," he heard the girl curse as he turned to watch the two lovers run down the street. A smile crossed his face before he turned and walked away as swiftly as his shape would allow, back into the alley between the bar and the neighboring building.

Once hidden from view, Melonia allowed herself to transform from the old bartender back into her cat form. The transformation took nearly a minute, her bones aching as she shrunk in size. She fought the urge to cry out in pain. The only time she was truly vulnerable was in this period between forms and she tried her best not to draw attention to herself. Finally the transformation was complete.

Exhausted, she lay down beside the dumpster in the alley and rested her head on her furry paws. The smell from the garbage was horrendous, but Melonia couldn't imagine moving at the moment. It was a simple thing for her to take the shape of different animals, but it was more difficult to be truly convincing in a human form other than her own. It took a great deal of concentration and energy and she avoided it whenever possible, but today there had been no other option. She'd had to take advantage of the opportunity that was available.

She had followed Wren and Austin into the bar in her cat form, congratulating herself on her luck when the true barkeep seemed to be absent. She had assumed the form of the old man while crouched on the floor, and then risen into view behind the bar, ready to provide the two reluctant lovers with their beers, laced with a heavy dose of magical encouragement.

There was nothing quite like truth serum to drive two hearts already inclined towards each other closer together. Once the barriers of what "should be" or "could be"

said were removed, it was amazing how easily people could communicate, allowing affection and attraction to grow into something deeper.

Perhaps now she'll finally fall in love, Melonia thought to herself, feeling hopeful that Princess Wren might, at long last, discover the truth behind her enchantment.

From the moment she had cursed the princess, Melonia had known that there was a way for the curse to be broken. Just as for any action there was an equal and opposite reaction, for every enchantment there was an equal and opposite counter-enchantment. It was one of the rules of the universe and of all magic. Anything that could be done could be undone. The opportunity for transformation was always available to those who understood how to make use of it.

She had known that Princess Wren would suffer, had even wished that suffering upon her as punishment for attempting to end her life, but Melonia had never expected that it would take three hundred years for the princess to finally find the man who would help her end the curse.

Melonia couldn't imagine going without love for so long. She herself had enjoyed several special relationships in her long history and could only imagine how terribly lonely Wren must have been, especially after the death of her family. It was a wretched way to live. Even a spoiled princess with a penchant for public decapitations didn't deserve that kind of punishment.

After all, Wren hadn't succeeded in killing Melonia. It had been easy enough to use magic to make it appear that she had lost her head under the axe. Meanwhile, she had used the spectacle to her advantage, the confusion of so many people gathered in the square providing the perfect cover for her stealthy escape from the city. Illusions were simple magic, especially when the audience observing them wanted to believe what they were seeing.

In those days, the people of the kingdom, both peasants and royalty alike, loved nothing more than the public punishment of a witch. Of course, true witches would nearly always escape through tricks of magic and illusion. It was only the women ignorant of any magical knowledge who were tortured and killed, a fact which had always saddened Melonia. She had never been the sort who liked to see innocent people suffer.

And though Wren might not be a *complete* innocent, neither did she deserve an eternity of loneliness. Once Melonia had realized that the curse was still haunting the princess, she'd known she had to do what she could to help her end it. She honestly hadn't thought her help would be necessary, had assumed that Wren would eventually experience true love and that the spell would be broken. Unfortunately, she had underestimated the effect her curse would have upon the princess' heart, building a wall impenetrable even to the one man throughout the ages who was truly her perfect match.

Thank goddess I found her, or she would have been lost for certain, Melonia thought as she lifted herself from the ground and began to slink back towards Wren's apartment in her cat form.

It had been either pure coincidence or an act of the goddess herself that Melonia had passed Wren one day on the streets of New York. Of all the places in the world, they had both happened to choose the same city at the same time. Considering that many had stayed away from the metropolis in recent troubled years, it was all the more amazing that they had crossed each other's path.

That day on the street, Melonia had immediately stopped to stare, recognizing the princess instantly, despite her modern clothes. Her face, her hair, everything else was nearly the same as it had been centuries before. She was still frozen in time, eternally a girl on the verge of becoming a woman, cursed to be perpetually abandoned until she found a way to open herself to a man and love him with a pure heart.

For her part, Wren had looked Melonia directly in the face and continued walking down the street, seemingly unaffected. She had been over a block away before she'd frozen in her tracks and spun back around, a look of pure disbelief on her face. She had run back to the spot where she had spotted Melonia, but there had been no one there.

Melonia had watched from nearby in her cat form, knowing that she had to follow the princess home and see what could be done to help her end the curse. She'd suffered long enough. It was time for her to be set free from her enchantment, time for her to be allowed to live a real human life with a man to love her.

In her mind, Melonia prayed that tonight would be the night that would finally take the princess over the edge. The potion she had slipped in their drinks would force them to be honest with each other, and their natural magnetism should do the rest. With a little bit of luck, Wren should finally wake up next to her lover in the morning.

Thinking about the night in store for the princess caused a bit of fire to awaken in her own body. It had been a long time since Melonia had found a man to warm her bed. Perhaps she would use this night to entertain herself, as well, to give Wren and Austin some time alone without her feline interference.

A gleam of anticipation shone in her eyes as she emerged from another alleyway in her true form, a long black dress hugging her ample curves, her green eyes flashing as her olive skin shone golden in the fading sunlight. The men on the street began to respond to her instantly and Melonia knew that she would find satisfaction this night. With a sultry smile for the handsome, dark-skinned businessman approaching her on the sidewalk, Melonia silently wished Princess Wren the same.

Chapter Seven

Austin and Wren were panting by the time they reached Austin's door, both from their run and the desire mounting between them. Austin fumbled his keys from his pocket, shaking as he finally slipped the key into the lock. Wren shook as well, her entire body overwhelmed with wanting. She'd never experienced a need like this and knew that she couldn't hold out much longer. Their first time would have to be hard and fast. She needed him inside her, ramming between her legs, easing some of the sexual tension that was quickly driving her out of her mind. She didn't want soft or gentle, she needed to fuck, to be fucked. There would be time for slow and sultry lovemaking later in the evening.

Austin pulled her inside and slammed the door behind them, instantly pressing her back against the door and taking her lips in a bruising kiss, his tongue demanding entrance to her mouth, taking control in a way he hadn't before.

"You need to be wearing fewer clothes," Austin said, pulling away long enough to lift her t-shirt up and over her head before his arms were around her again. Wren gasped as he spread her legs, lifting them to wrap around his waist. The feel of her breasts, covered only by the thin lace of her bra, smashed against his strong chest sent a rush of raw need through her body.

"Ditto," she panted, tugging at the bottom of his shirt.

"In a second." His hands grasped her hips and pulled her against his cock, his fingertips digging into her soft flesh with a force that made her groan and arch even closer, not caring that the wood from the damn door was digging into her shoulders.

"Fine, don't take off your shirt, just get us out of these jeans and fuck me right here, right now." Wren followed the command by running her tongue down to where neck met shoulder. There she bit down, hard, letting him know with her teeth how wild she was, so ready to feel his cock moving inside of her that anticipation had long ago evolved into maddening frustration.

"Ahh," she gasped as he returned the bite on her neck, the slight sting of pain only making her hotter, making her nipples harden to the point of agony as she realized how much she wanted to feel those teeth raking along her sensitive tips.

"I'm going to fuck you, but I'm going to take my time. I've wanted this for too long to rush," he said, his touch gentling as he ran his tongue down to the hollow at the base of her throat. "I'm going to make you wait. I want you as wet for me as you were out there in the street." His words puffed against her skin, and the gentle swirling pressure of his tongue caused her to shudder. With a moan, Wren's head dropped back as her body released another rush of liquid heat.

"God, I'm already so wet for you. Feel me, can't you feel me, even through our clothes?" Wren moaned, grabbing fistfuls of his soft hair and pulling his mouth closer as she arched her body forward, beginning to grind her hips against him, running her clit up and down his hard length until she was seconds from coming, violently, without even the touch of a single finger between her legs.

Austin only groaned in response, hugging her body tightly against his before spinning quickly into the room, moving them both back towards the bed. He set her down only for the barest of moments, giving them just enough time to dispose of their clothes. Wren managed to get down to her underwear before he pulled her back against him. They came together with another wild kiss, a tangling of tongues and lips that had Wren's head spinning by the time the back of her knees hit the bed and Austin fell heavily on top of her.

"I love this, love feeling you this close," Wren breathed, relishing the feel of his weight on top of her, his warm skin against hers. She dug her fingernails into his back, pressing him closer, inhaling his scent, feeling that each place where their skin touched was pulsing with pure electricity. The sensation was truly breathtaking and Wren actually felt a brief flash of fear for what was coming, wondered if her body would be able to handle the ecstasy of actually having him fuck her with all that hard, hot need pulsing against her thigh. If just lying skin to skin with him was this overwhelming, she couldn't imagine the feelings that would consume her when he pulled her panties down, spread her wide and worked his thick cock into her dripping channel.

"I love you," Austin replied, pulling away from her to strip her bra from her body and toss it to the floor, pausing for a moment above her, looking down at her breasts with such hunger that Wren felt her body flush and her nipples tighten in response.

Love. Good god, had he really said love?

Wren's heart jumped. Was it possible that she had heard him correctly, that he'd really meant something said in the heat of the moment? Austin lowered his head, his mouth closing around one of her nipples, and Wren lost the ability to analyze anything.

His mouth was so hot, setting fire to her skin, his tongue sweeping over her peak again and again as he gently suckled her. Wren writhed against him, her hands clawing at his shoulders, knowing that she was tearing his skin, but unable to control herself. There was a direct line from her breast to her clit and each time he teased her nipple with his mouth her whole body tightened another impossible notch, getting closer and closer to release. She was going to come, any second, come simply from him sucking on her nipple. It was unbelievable, had never happened in her entire, vastly varied, sexual experience.

"I'm going to come, god, I'm going to—"

"Come, baby, come," he moaned against her skin, increasing the suction of his mouth on her breast, pinning her aching nipple against the roof of his mouth and doing something wicked with his tongue that made her pussy scream for release.

"I want you inside me."

“Wren, god, Wren, I want you to come from —”

“Fuck me. Fuck me, Austin,” she gasped, then outright begged. “Now, please now, I need your cock in me.”

She was so wet and swollen, aching past the point of mere readiness, lost to a sexual desperation, a core-deep craving for his body to meld with her own. Her folds were so slick, the walls of her interior pulsing and throbbing with an almost frightening need, painfully empty. She needed him filling her, needed it so badly that tears began to roll out of her eyes and she feared she might break out in full fledged sobs at any second.

Austin pulled himself away from her breast and brought his lips back to her own. She met him in a frantic kiss, a choked sound escaping from her throat as he pressed the head of his cock against her through the thin fabric of his boxer briefs. Wren reached down and ran her hand under the waistband of his shorts, grasping his cock in a firm grip and running her hand up and down his shaft before teasing his already wet tip with her fingers.

Hungrily she lifted her wet fingers to her mouth, pulling away from his kiss so that she could lick his cum from her fingertips. She rolled her tongue around her own fingers, then sucked them deep into her mouth, mimicking the way that she would ravage his shaft if he would let her venture between his legs. If that didn't drive him to the brink, convince him that it was time for foreplay to turn into something a hell of a lot more serious, nothing would.

“I wanted to wait, wanted to take my time,” Austin groaned as he watched Wren, his cock seeming to grow impossibly harder and longer as he watched her taste him. Good god, what would feel to have those pink lips close around his cock, her tongue rolling along his shaft as she suckled him into her mouth?

“Next time,” Wren rasped as she worked to free him from his last bit of clothing, pulling at his boxer-briefs with shaking hands, leaving no doubt that she was more than ready for him to end their mutual frustration.

He finished the job with one hand, untangling the gray shorts from his ankles before he moved his hands to her hips, stripping her of her pale pink panties in one smooth motion.

“God, you're beautiful,” he murmured, his eyes devouring the sight of her slick pussy with its surrounding damp curls. Shaking, he ran a fingertip over her clit and dipped into her swollen opening, nearly losing his control as she arched against him and his finger was suddenly encased in her wet, pulsing channel.

She was right, there'd be time for tasting and tantalizing next time. Right now he needed to get his cock inside that sweet, glistening pussy. No matter how much he would love to taste the musky heat of her, drive his tongue into her, suckle her cream into his mouth, right now his cock was hungrier than any other part of his body. Quickly he dipped his finger inside of her once, twice, and then tested her with two fingers. She opened to him immediately, thrusting her hips and struggling to breathe.

She squirmed and cried out as he continued to test her, three fingers entering as he gently teased her clit with the pad of his thumb. He used his other hand to grip the base of his cock tightly, helping hold back the urge to come. He hadn't gotten this close to being inside her to lose it now.

"Austin," she begged, her hands reaching for him, the look in her eyes saying she just might perpetrate some violence against him if he didn't dispense with the preliminaries and get down to fucking her—fast. Austin quickly withdrew his hand, stroking her folds a few more times before stretching himself out above her body, every muscle tensed as he realized he was finally going to be inside the woman who had completely obsessed his imagination for months.

Wren moaned as she felt Austin's heavy sex brushing against her bare thigh. He was so close, inches away from touching the head of his cock to her dripping slit. The anticipation took her breath away. She closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness swept over her. Her womb clenched low in her belly and she moaned, an animal sound of need.

"Look at me," Austin whispered, his hands on either side of her face, gently stroking away the tears that were still slowly streaming from her eyes.

"Please," she breathed, forcing her eyes to open.

She was going to make another demand, order him to get his cock in her, but what she saw in his gaze took her breath away. It was too much for her to take, the desire, the need, the love in his eyes sent her over the edge. She'd wanted to wait to have him inside of her more than anything, had done her damndest to hold back while he played her body with more skill than any lover she'd ever known, but now there was no choice. She started to come, waves of release emanating from deep inside her causing her entire body to spasm.

"I'm coming," she moaned, her eyes sliding closed as unparalleled bliss swept through her.

"Come, baby, I want you to come," Austin moaned as he used his knee to open her thighs a bit wider and finally thrust himself inside of her up to his aching balls. Sweet god, she *was* already coming, he could feel her on his cock, her tight wetness gripping him as if she would pull him even deeper inside her pulsing passage. The feeling was unbelievable, and when her hips lifted, claiming every last inch of him, Austin lost all control.

He pounded away inside her slick, tight pussy, withdrawing his shaft and sheathing himself deeper and deeper, again and again. The tension built inside of him until he was literally blind with it, everything in the room disappearing as his world exploded, his hips thrusting forward violently as his whole body arched and a cry of pure primal release burst from his throat.

His cock spasmed and things low in his belly clutched with an awe-inspiring pleasure, his orgasm lasting longer than it ever had, the waves of blissful release continuing to roll over his entire being, body and soul, for longer than he would have

believed possible. As he came, he ground his pelvis against Wren's clit, instinctively knowing that he could take her over the edge again and needing to feel that sweet grip of her pussy around his cock more than anything in the world.

Still moving his hips, still riding the electric wave of his own orgasm, he moistened his fingers and took them to her breasts, roughly rolling the already taut buds between his finger and thumb. She gasped, her hands coming up to cover his own as he caressed both of her peaks with his hands.

"I want you to come again," he demanded, pinching one nipple roughly before he let it go, bending down to lick away the slight sting, sucking the beaded tip into the warmth of his mouth. He could tell Wren liked a little bit of pain, and he certainly didn't mind the scratches that marked his shoulders. Feeling her break his skin with her fingernails, so abandoned to her pleasure that she'd lost all control, had been one of the most erotic things he'd ever known.

"You want me to come again?" she asked, her breath already coming faster.

"God, yes," he said, increasing the pressure of his hips, rocking against her clit again and again.

"Then touch me...here." Wren guided his hand down around the curve of her bottom and Austin knew immediately what she wanted. He groaned and eagerly spread her cheeks, teasing his finger around the tight, puckered ring of her ass. He'd been dying to know if this would give a woman pleasure, but he'd never had a lover bold enough to let him try. Until Wren. She wouldn't be afraid to try anything that might bring them mutual pleasure, he knew instinctively.

"Yes," she sighed as he slid the tip of his finger into her body, pumping lightly in and out until he felt her relax. Then he went deeper and deeper, and finally added a second finger, all while grinding his hips and worshipping her breasts with his mouth. Within seconds he felt her body tense and pulled his mouth away from her nipple to watch as bliss overtook her.

"Oh!" Wren screamed as her body came apart again, her orgasm almost painful as she exploded in response to his urging hips and skilled fingers, her muscles clamping down around his pulsing cock, around the two thick fingers in her ass, with almost shocking strength. She raked her nails down his shoulders to his arms, clenching her hands onto his biceps, struggling to hold on to consciousness as her body tightened violently around his softening length.

She lifted her hips into him again and again, gasping for air as her body took its second dose of unbelievable pleasure. Her eyes were closed, but she was hyperaware of Austin watching her. She could hear him moaning with appreciation as he watched her come, knew instinctively that he was relishing her orgasm almost as much as his own.

As the shock waves began to lessen in severity, Wren decided to sweeten the show for him, taking her breasts in her hands and stroking her nipples with her fingertips. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared up into his face.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, watching as she moved a hand from her breast to her pussy, teasing her clit for a moment before stroking her hand up the base of his cock. Almost immediately, she felt his jump of response as the portion of him still buried inside her began to thicken.

"No, leave them, please," Wren moaned as Austin began to withdraw his fingers from her ass. She wanted that fullness, was dying to feel the combined pressure of his cock fully erect inside of her and his fingers working her back entry. She knew it would feel wonderful for him too, make her pussy tighter, hotter. She wanted that for him as much as she craved her own pleasure—maybe even more. She'd never felt like this, so driven to give everything to her lover, to drop every last wall, abolish any barrier that might keep her from taking him to the heights of ecstasy.

"You're beautiful," she whispered, increasing the pressure of her hands at her breast and on his cock, feeling her body start to make the climb towards release once again, and wondering for a moment if she could stand the exquisite pleasure of a third orgasm.

Austin felt it become difficult to swallow as he looked into her eyes, her wide, blue, beautiful eyes filled with trust and humor and...love. She loved him too. She may not have said the words yet, but it was clear in her every move, in the way she breathed, the way she touched him, the way she opened to him, holding nothing back, letting him feel every ounce of passion locked inside of her.

"This is crazy," he breathed, a shaky laugh coming from his chest as he continued to grow longer and harder inside of her, the increased pressure of her vaginal walls making it hard to breath.

"What's crazy?" she asked, beginning to move her hips up and down, coaxing even more length from his cock.

"I'm hard again," he breathed, beginning to answer her thrusts with his own, mimicking the action with his fingers. "It's unbelievable. I'm not Superman."

"It feels pretty super to me," she moaned. "But to be safe, why don't we make sure that everything's all right down there?"

Before he realized what she was doing, she'd pulled his hands from her body, and wiggled away. With a wicked smile, she pushed him back to stand at the edge of the bed, and sat on her heels, looking at his throbbing, engorged cock with obvious admiration. No doubt about it, he was as rock hard as he'd been ten minutes ago, his erection standing at attention all the way up to his navel.

"Miracles can happen," he teased, stroking his hand slowly up and down his cock, still glistening from her body. He smiled, watching Wren's breath grow shallow as she stared hungrily at him, giving her a taste of what it was like to watch.

Apparently she loved it as much as he did. Her eyes darkened with unmistakable desire and her tongue slid out to moisten her lips. Quickly she came to her knees and began to crawl towards him on all fours. Austin felt his breath catch as he watched her

approach. He had to blink hard, just to make sure this gorgeous naked woman with her wild hair and flashing eyes wasn't a creation of his imagination.

"Now that we've made that perfectly clear, I think we should put that cock to good use," the very real Wren murmured, pushing his hand aside as she moved her mouth to him, teasing his cock with the tip of her tongue before slowly taking his entire length in her mouth, pulling his shaft deep inside her throat before beginning a gentle, suckling pressure. Austin felt his eyes close and a shudder run through his body. She was real, all right, even if everything she did to his body felt too good to be true.

"Oh god, Wren," he moaned, his hands coming up to tangle gently in her hair. The desire to explode was overwhelming as she slid up and down, up and down, her hot, wet mouth caressing him as the walls of her pussy had earlier.

"You make me feel like I'm fourteen," he gasped, pulling her mouth gently away from him before he lost control and shot himself into her sweet lips. "I could come from feeling your breath on me."

"I came from looking into your eyes," Wren confessed, the intimate words spilling easily from her mouth as she licked the taste of them from her lips. The taste of their cum on his cock had almost been enough to make her orgasm again, it was so intimate, so primal.

She wanted to stay there between his legs and pleasure him, suckling his cock and cupping his balls until he lost himself in her mouth. She wanted to taste his cum sliding down her throat. She wanted to hear him call her name as he exploded with his hands tangled in her hair, but her pussy, the greedy little thing, had other ideas.

She was already aching to fuck him again, her sex slick and ready to feel the thick length of him filling her. Slowly, she licked her way up his chest, trailing her tongue over the smooth, muscled planes of his stomach, pausing to tease his flat, dusky nipples with her tongue as he had hers.

"I want to take you like I wanted to in the street," Austin breathed as she raked her teeth over his taut nipple. He closed his eyes from the pleasure of it and let his hands brush lightly over her silken skin, wanting to touch her everywhere at once, but settling with tracing the line of her spine with one hand while the other gently toyed with her breast, now heavy and swollen in his hand.

"You want to fuck me from behind?" she asked, slowly turning around and leaning forward onto her hands, presenting him with her heart-shaped ass and her wet cleft.

"Yes, I do," he returned, his breath catching painfully. He'd always had a healthy appreciation of female anatomy, but he wouldn't have believed, until now, that a pussy could be a thing of such unparalleled beauty. Almost shaking with the force of his need, he reached forward and pulled her hips back until her knees slid off the bed and her feet touched the floor. Swiftly, he parted her folds and guided himself into her, relishing the feel of her as she took every inch of him in, the pleasure of being in her more intense than anything he'd ever known.

"Oh, Austin," she moaned, tilting her hips back and rolling her pelvis in circles around his cock.

"How do you like it?" he asked softly as he put his hands to her hips and began to pull her pussy up and down his length in slow, sensual motions, tilting his hips forward at the end of each thrust to fill her with every inch of him.

"I like *that*," she returned, her voice filled with the same tension that consumed his body. They were close to the edge, yet again. Austin wondered if this spell between them would ever be broken, if he could ever be inside her for more than two minutes before he started to lose his mind. He couldn't imagine anything more enjoyable than sticking around to find out.

"What else do you like?" Austin asked, sliding his hand around to tease her clit, circling the sensitive nub with his fingers before he began to slide his middle finger up and down, firmly applying the pressure that would cause her to clench around him in seconds.

"Oh my...god," Wren gasped, feeling her knees begin to collapse as her whole body turned to liquid heat from the pressure of his hands on her clit and his cock deep inside her. Slowly she began to crumple to the floor, but then his strong arm was around her, lifting her onto the bed and laying her on her stomach.

His weight was on top of her from behind now, one hand still busy between her legs as he moved the other to capture her nipple. And then he began to move inside her again, slowly gaining momentum with his cock as his hands kept up a steady, soft pressure on her breast and clit.

Wren moaned and squirmed beneath him, knowing that he was intentionally drawing out her climb to ecstasy, consciously bringing her to the edge of the precipice but not letting her spill over.

"Austin," she gasped, her fingers clawing at the sheets and her hips bucking back against him until he finally gave her what she wanted, beginning to slam himself inside of her, hips pumping, cock reaching up into her center, hands moving faster and faster between her thighs until she came with such force that she nearly lifted both of them off the bed.

Calling out his name, tears streaming down her face, gasping for breath, she came and came, hearing him begin the same nonsensical rambling as he lost himself as well, spilling himself deep inside her, clinging to her with both arms, kissing her neck, her shoulder, her cheekbone. They clung to each other as the waves of pleasure consumed them. Each clenching of their bodies brought a new level of release, taking them to a place where there was no separation, only the union of two energies experiencing the near pain of ultimate bliss.

Finally the tremors began to subside and they both began a leisurely float back to earth. Eventually Austin rolled his weight from her and Wren snuggled close to his side, resting her cheek on his chest. They were quiet for several minutes, simply

concentrating on breathing, neither quite able to believe the pleasure they had just given and taken from each other.

"That was unbelievable," Austin whispered finally, his hand gently tangling in her hair as she traced her fingers up and down his chest, the only movement she was capable of at the moment.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she teased, a smile on her face. So this was what it felt like to make love. Until now, she'd only been fucking. Only with Austin, only tonight, had there been magic in the room, love behind every touch.

"I may have said it before, but now I know I didn't really mean it," Austin said honestly, unable to recall another sexual experience at all after what had just transpired. A few hours ago he wouldn't have believed the kind of passion they had just shared was even possible.

"I know what you mean," Wren said, moving to place a soft kiss on the blondish-brown curls that covered the top of his chest. "I've been with a lot of men, but never imagined anything like this."

"I don't want to hear about other men," Austin growled, pulling her closer and suddenly feeling insanely territorial. "There aren't going to be any other men."

"Oh there aren't?" Wren laughed. "What are you going to do, hold me hostage?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Austin murmured, still unable to keep himself from speaking exactly what he was thinking. "But I don't want anyone else to touch you. I don't care about your past, only your future. I want to be damned sure I'm the last man to get his dick anywhere near you."

"You don't care about my past?" she asked, sounding incredibly sad, so much so that Austin had to pull away and look deep in her eyes, letting her know that he meant exactly what he had said.

"No, I don't. I don't care if you've fucked a hundred men, two hundred, a thousand, even. I love you and from now on it can only be you and me. We can forget anyone else even existed." Austin said.

"Even your girlfriend?" Wren whispered.

"Even my girlfriend," he returned. "I can't deny how I feel for you. And it would be wrong to lie to her, to let her think that what we had was the real thing."

"Maybe it *is* real, maybe you're just confused –"

"No, this is real. You know it is. This is what we've been waiting for and I don't want to waste any more time. I want to be with you, Wren, for now and for as long as you can stand me," Austin said, knowing the words came straight from his heart even though he wouldn't have imagined himself capable of spilling his soul in such a way. He supposed it was just what real love did to a man. Suddenly he didn't care about his pride. He'd do anything to make sure this woman in his arms stayed there forever, absolutely anything.

"Forever's a really long time," Wren said. "What if there's no way we can have forever?"

"I won't believe that," Austin returned, his jaw clenching as he rolled her over on her back, pinning her down with his body and forcing her to look at him. "I know you love me, it's written all over your face."

"But it doesn't matter," Wren said, her expression beginning to close against him. "You won't be here in the morning."

"Oh hell yes, I will be," Austin said, cupping her face in his hands and struggling to get through to her even as he watched her attempt to move herself beyond his emotional reach. "There's no way you're getting rid of me."

"You're lying," Wren said stonily. "You don't know it now, but you are."

"Is this lying?" Austin asked, reaching down between her legs and feeling her pulsing, wet pussy. "You want me again already, you're dying for it, just like I am."

In one swift move Austin parted her thighs and drove himself into her, stopping when he had filled her completely to look into her eyes. The passion there was unmistakable, no matter how she tried to hide it.

"Can you go for the rest of your life knowing that you're not getting this?" he asked, slowly beginning to thrust inside her, knowing instinctively how close she was to coming and stopping right before the waves began to crash over her body.

"If you can," he continued, swiftly rolling her on top of him and letting his hands move away from her body, forcing himself to lie still beneath her no matter how much he wanted to plunge himself into her depths. "If you can, then get up. Leave right now and don't ever look back."

Wren looked down at the man beneath her, seeing the fear in his eyes, despite the fact that he was obviously giving her an ultimatum. He was taking a huge risk and he knew it. Looking past the stern set of his jaw, into the soul of the man she knew loved her more than any other she'd ever known, she realized that he truly believed that he would never leave. But, even more importantly, that he would never be whole again if she left.

She ran her hands over his face, tracing the outline of his brows and cheeks, caressing his lips with her fingertips, trying to capture him forever in her memory before she began to guide her hips up and down his shaft. She rode him gently at first, forcing herself to concentrate on the pleasure growing within her rather than the pain threatening to break her heart when she thought of never being with him like this again.

"Baby," he breathed, the relief clear in his face as he began to thrust his hips to meet her, his hands moving under her arms, pulling her down so his mouth could begin the exquisite torture of tasting her breasts.

Feeling his tongue rolling gently over her nipple again and again, Wren gave herself up to the delight of her body, feeling the tension within her grow to impossible levels.

Austin's teasing mouth closed over her nipple, beginning deep rhythmic pulls on her breast. Wren gasped, squeezing her eyes shut against the torturous pleasure. Frenzied, she began to ride him harder, her clit grinding against his pelvis as his cock stretched the walls of her pussy, his girth making her feel as if the sensitive flesh of her opening extended deep inside of her.

"Please, I need..." she gasped, desperate for release, her pussy throbbing around his length as her hips bucked up and down his shaft, her breath coming in shallow gasps as every inch of her body hummed with her need for him, striving to find the release she ached for.

"What do you need?" Austin groaned against her breasts, his teeth nipping at her swollen nipples as his hands took control of her hips, guiding her clit into even more intimate contact with his thrusts.

"I need..." she pleaded, seconds before his teeth nipped at her breast even harder, the slight pain triggering her orgasm just as his cock exploded inside her. Wren screamed with the pleasure of it, relishing the feel of being on top of him as her walls pulsed around his shaft and wave after wave of pleasure flowed from her womb to every corner of her body.

Truly spent, she collapsed on top of him, recovering her breath as she listened to his heart beat beneath her cheek. His hands gently stroked up and down her back, giving her more comfort with that simple gesture than she had ever felt from another human being. Wren felt tears begin to slowly roll from her eyes even as she smiled and snuggled closer to his body. It seemed she'd cried more in the past twenty-four hours than in the past two hundred years.

But probably for the first time in her long life, she was crying because she was so unbelievably happy. She felt like crying and laughing and dancing and screaming all at the same time. She'd done everything in her power to make sure this never happened, had run from love as if it were the deadliest of plagues, but now it was too late. For the most part, she was glad.

"I love you," she whispered softly, waiting for Austin's response, longing to hear him echo the words one more time before she awoke in the morning alone.

When the silence dragged on, she tentatively lifted her head, smiling when she saw Austin's face soft with sleep, his full lips parted in peaceful rest. He was beautiful, almost childlike and so vulnerable. Wren let her hand stroke his cheek softly, smiling through her tears as her heart seemed to grow fuller with each moment.

"I love you," she repeated, reaching up to plant a soft kiss on his lips and smiling as his arms instinctively closed tighter around her, pulling her to him as he made a sleepy noise of pleasure.

Despite her utter exhaustion, Wren fought sleep with everything in her, wanting to memorize the feel of his skin against hers, his cock still inside her as they slept, his breath softly stirring her hair. Finally, just as the stars began to fade from the sky outside, Wren slept, and dreamt of the life she would never have.

Chapter Eight

Wren awoke slowly, rubbing her hand across her eyes and squinting against the bright sunlight that bathed the bed. By the look of the light, it was nearly noon. Sleepily, she rolled over, relishing the ache of her muscles, especially the soreness between her legs. At least she would have that small, real-life reminder of the dream she'd lived last night.

As she had expected, she was alone in Austin's bed, the plain white sheets crumpled around her and the scent of their lovemaking the only testimony to their night of passion. Wistfully, she ran her hand down the indentation in the bed where his body had lain next to her. It might have been her imagination, but the spot still seemed warm. On impulse, she rolled over onto her stomach, inhaling the scent of him and smiling.

She'd decided last night that there would be no more tears. Finally, she could understand the age-old sentiment that it was "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all". The emotion that filled her made her feel like a different woman, as if she had been transformed into something better simply by allowing herself to care for someone else more than she cared for herself.

"I love you," she whispered into the sheets, closing her eyes, wanting to remember Austin's face in sleep one more time before he was truly out of her life for good.

"I love you too," came a masculine chuckle from the doorway, causing Wren to flip over far faster than was graceful or sexy. "But isn't talking to yourself a sign of mental instability?"

Austin smiled and shut the door behind him, crossing quickly to the bed to plant a soft kiss on her mouth, which still hung open in surprise. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be here. There had to be some mistake. Maybe she was still dreaming, her subconscious so determined to draw out the night that it had created this amazingly lifelike morning-after dream.

Wren rubbed her eyes again, blinking as Austin's handsome face once again came into view. If this was a dream, it was unlike any she'd ever had before. She could smell the coffee Austin held in his hand, and to her knowledge, she'd never had much of a sense of smell in her REM state.

"Wake up sleepyhead," he whispered, kissing her again and placing the cup of coffee in her hand. "I figured I'd better go get some caffeine to help revive you. You've been sleeping like the dead and it's almost noon."

"You just went to get coffee?" Wren asked, taking a quick pull of the drink in her hand. Maybe she had finally become delusional. If so, hopefully the caffeine would help bring her back to her senses. But then, if this were a delusion, the coffee wouldn't be

real either. Would imaginary caffeine have the same effect as the real thing? She had no idea, but was certain she had bigger things to worry about.

"And muffins and bagels and some fruit," Austin continued, beginning to unpack his sack of goodies at the small kitchenette across the room. "I didn't know what you liked for breakfast, but I figured you'd be hungry. I know I built up quite an appetite last night."

"But this can't happen," Wren said, setting her coffee down on the bedside table and rising on decidedly unsteady legs. She had to go to him, had to feel him to even contemplate believing that he was real, that he was actually in this room, talking to her, looking at her with eyes as loving as they had looked last night.

"What can't happen?" Austin asked, smiling down at the hand she'd placed on his arm before turning to take her fully in his embrace. His grin took a turn for the naughty as he ran his hands down her back and cupped her bare ass in his large palms, desire clear on his face as he gave each buttock a gentle squeeze.

"This! It can't happen, it just can't!" Wren said, jumping away from him. "You. Here. With me. It's impossible! It's never happened. Never!"

Realizing that she was babbling hysterically, Wren clamped her mouth shut and bit down on her lip, struggling to hold herself together as she scampered around the room collecting her clothing. She managed to wiggle into her panties and t-shirt, and was searching the ground frantically for any sign of her jeans, when Austin came up beside her. "Hey, calm down," he said, taking hold of her hands, forcing her to look him in the eye. "It's fine. I'm here, you're here, we're going to have some breakfast and take it from there. There's nothing to worry about. I know we said a lot of things last night, but there's no pressure, I don't—"

"You don't understand. There's something wrong, something must have happened. I don't know what exactly, but it can't be good," Wren rattled on, still unable to find her pants and beginning to contemplate dashing out into the hall without them. She couldn't escape the feeling that something horrible would happen to Austin if she stayed. She was cursed. If he was still here, it could only be bad news.

"Wren," he said sternly, breaking through her panic with his firm voice. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid, I'm just—" Wren broke off, not knowing what to say next, but grateful that she no longer suffered from the urge to confess that she was a cursed princess who had never spent a "morning after" with a man. The strange compulsion to tell him the whole truth and nothing but the truth had passed. Perhaps it had been shocked out of her when he walked through that door and turned her whole world upside down.

"You're just what?" he asked gently, smoothing her hair out of her face and pulling her close again.

"Confused," she breathed. Confused was putting it mildly.

"Join the club," Austin replied. "But I want you to know that I couldn't be happier. As long as you still feel the way you felt last night, I don't care how nervous you are about this morning. We'll get through it together."

"So...you still...like me?" she asked softly, holding her breath as he smiled and planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Of course I do, I love you. What about you?" Austin asked, anxiety tightening his features and wiping the smile from his face. He still loved her. He still loved her and was nervous that she might not love him back. Life as she'd known it was officially altered.

"Yes—of course I do." Wren said, but her voice sounded small and terrified. This was what she'd secretly prayed for every morning for hundreds of years. She'd never imagined that fear would be her dominant emotion when that prayer was finally answered. But she *was* afraid, so afraid. She still couldn't believe this was real, that Austin was here and feeling the way he'd felt last night, let alone contemplate the possible implications.

"Shit, I'm so glad. I wouldn't say something like that unless I meant it, but for a second there you had me wondering if—"

"But no one ever—I mean, this isn't—" Wren began, stopping again when the tightness in her chest overwhelmed her.

"Listen, I don't know who hurt you so badly," Austin whispered, leaning down to press his warm lips against hers, more tenderness than passion in his touch. "But you don't have to worry anymore. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. You'd have to beat me with a stick to keep me away."

"Beat you with a stick?" Wren whispered, something breaking inside of her as she repeated the words. For some reason that was the phrase that did it, that finally convinced her subconscious that this wasn't a dream, or a hallucination. This was real and this man in front of her was the one, the one she'd been waiting for, praying for, the man who was never, ever going to leave her.

Her heart felt like it was imploding inside her chest and tears began to pour from her eyes, sobs of relief racking her body. Centuries of loneliness began to seep from her wounded heart, taking her ability to stand with it.

So much for her vow to stop crying.

"Wren," Austin whispered with concern, scooping her into his arms and carrying her back to bed. He lay down beside her and held her, pressing his body into hers in a way that made her certain that he was never going to let her go.

Finally, the force of her sobs began to subside. It took a while, a long while, but Austin didn't ask any questions, didn't make her feel like a fool. He just held her, murmuring soothing words against her forehead until she lay quietly in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, lifting her puffy, tear-stained face to his, not caring that her nose was running or that she probably looked like death warmed over. It wasn't every day that a curse was broken or that a girl realized that she was going to have the

chance to be with the man of her dreams. Besides, she had a feeling that Austin would always think she was beautiful, even when she looked her worst. It was what love did to a person.

"You don't have to be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry about."

"Still, I'm betting most women wouldn't start crying hysterically after you brought home coffee and muffins," she whispered with a smile.

"I knew the muffins were a bad idea. I should have gone for the yogurt," Austin teased, hugging her close when his joke sent her off on another mini round of tears. Amazing, the things that could make her cry today

"But yogurt isn't manly," Wren finally teased back, giggling and sobbing and raining enthusiastic kisses over his face and neck. She was giddy, almost shaking with excitement as she flipped him onto his back and straddled his body. Once there, she squeezed him with her thighs, bouncing up and down in sheer joy, unable to contain the euphoria coursing through her.

"You aren't very manly either," Austin laughed, grinning up at her. His cock somehow managed to survive her enthusiasm, and was already beginning to swell beneath her as his hands gripped her hips.

"I'm not?" Wren asked in mock surprise, still smiling and laughing as she stopped bouncing and began to rock her hips sensually against his swelling shaft.

"God, woman," Austin moaned, reaching up to strip her of the t-shirt she had donned only a few minutes before. "You're going to be the death of me. Can't you even let me have breakfast first? I need to build up my strength."

"Oh, you do?" Wren smiled, quickening the stroking motions of her hips on his cock until he was panting with need, hands fumbling at the closure of his jeans, struggling to free himself so that he could bury his length inside her.

"Well, I wouldn't want you to faint from exhaustion," Wren teased, leaping from his body and crossing the room towards the breakfast he had laid out, struggling to hide the fact that desire was humming through her body, and her thighs already slick with her own wet heat.

"Get back here," Austin growled, laughter and need thick in his voice as he chased her across the room, grabbing her around the waist and hauling her back towards the bed.

"No, no," she argued with a laugh, twisting free of his grasp and running back to the food. "You have to keep up your strength. I'm not going to listen to you bitching about starving to death right in the middle of—"

"I'll show you bitching, woman."

As he charged back towards her, Wren quickly grabbed a piece of fruit from the container Austin had unpacked. She shimmied out of her panties, throwing them to the floor before lifting her hips to sit on the counter. She then spread her legs wide, placing

the piece of cut pineapple at the entry of her pussy, gasping as the cold fruit slowly penetrated her slick, pulsing sex.

"Breakfast is very important," she smiled, beginning to caress herself, smiling as Austin's erection began to strain against his fly. He watched with rapt fascination as Wren ran her fingers over her folds and sensually circled her clit.

"You're absolutely right," Austin said, realizing exactly what kind of breakfast she had in mind. "I couldn't imagine anything I'd enjoy more."

Coming to stand before her, he gently stroked her thighs, planting a kiss on her lips before he began to lick his way slowly down her body. First his tongue traced a scalding path down her neck, making her breath catch as he swirled the hollow at the base of her throat. She moaned and held him closer, but he was moving again, down, down, pausing to tease her puckered nipples, circling her bellybutton and finally lowering his head between her legs.

"This is a beautiful piece of pineapple," he breathed, nearly driving Wren mad with the feel of his warm breath on her thighs.

"Tasty too," he murmured as he slowly began to lick at the fruit, deliberately avoiding the heated skin of Wren's pussy until she moaned and arched against him, feeling as if she'd die if he didn't move the teasing pressure of his tongue.

"Austin," she begged, laughing despite the sweet torture that he was inflicting on her body.

"Yes, my love?" he asked, all innocence as he quickly rose from between her legs and looked her in the eyes.

"Please," she moaned, grabbing his face and pulling him to her, loving the vibration of his laughter against her lips as she tasted the pineapple on his tongue.

"Actually, I can't stand pineapple," he said, reaching down and sliding the fruit gently from her body before lifting her in his arms and tossing her playfully on the bed.

Wren laughed until Austin lowered his smiling face between her legs. This time, thank god, there was no hesitation.

"Austin," she cried out as he tunneled into her depths, plunging and withdrawing before he finally ran his talented tongue over her clit again and again. He circled the sensitive nub with wicked skill, bringing her near the edge in seconds before he began to dip the tip of his tongue into her again, lapping away the slick heat he'd summoned from her body. She lifted her hips against him, feeling his tongue slide deep inside her pussy even as his fingers moved to caress the puckered ring of her ass.

"Fuck me," she moaned, pulling at his hair. She didn't want to do anything to interrupt the blissful torture his mouth was inflicting on her dripping cleft, but she ached for the feel of his cock. She wanted him inside her, stretching her, claiming her. There was nothing that would make this morning more perfect than feeling his thick, heavy sex buried to his balls in her swollen pussy.

"Come for me first, come on my mouth." The words rumbled between her thighs, vibrating against her clit and making it impossible for her to disobey his command, no matter how much she ached to feel him inside her.

She screamed his name as she came, lifting into the tongue that continued to fuck her as her channel contracted violently. Waves of pleasure coursed through her body from her clit to every inch of her skin, tightening her nipples, making her lips part and her cheeks burn with heat. Between her legs, Austin continued to lap at her sex, drinking her cream, moaning his appreciation in a way that made her body start to tighten again, before her first orgasm had fully had its way with her.

"Now? Will you fuck me now?" she asked, her voice more than a little breathless.

"I'm not going to fuck you," Austin said, traveling back up her body to kiss her neck, his hands smoothing up and down, teasing the sides of her breasts.

"Why not?" Wren moaned, arching towards him and reaching down between their bodies to capture his length in her hand. Austin groaned as she began to stroke him, her fingers pausing to circle the hood of his cock, rolling his own wetness around his tip until he jerked in her hand.

"I'm never going to fuck you," Austin said, reaching beside the bed for a foil wrapper. "I'm going to make love to you."

"Oh yeah?" Wren whispered, a tender smile on her face despite the fact that she continued to stroke his cock with one hand and cup his balls with the other.

"Yeah," Austin returned, pulling away from her and quickly sheathing himself. "I'm only sorry I didn't remember this last night. I think I was a little out of my mind."

"It's fine, I can't—" Wren said, her words dying in her throat as he slid inside her, his cock filling her even more fully than she remembered. There was no need to say she couldn't get pregnant, there would be time for discussions like that later.

"You feel even better than I remembered," he mumbled against her lips, his breath catching as she tightened her pussy around him, gripping his hot length with her most intimate muscles. "Shit."

"You like that?" Wren asked, continuing to contract and release around the cock he kept buried inside her.

"It's amazing, but you'd better stop if you want this to last longer than five minutes."

"Five minutes will be fine, we wouldn't want our coffee to get cold."

"Fuck the coffee," he growled, thrusting sharply, deeply, in and out of her pussy and then holding still inside of her again.

"I appreciate my daily caffeine fix and I've already come once. Let this be for you, I want to see you lose control." As she whispered the words, Wren let her hand drop down between their bodies. She easily gathered some of the slickness from her pussy and smoothed it behind Austin's tightened sac, back to caress the puckered ring of his ass.

He inhaled sharply as she dipped one finger inside, the look in his eyes telling her that this was the first time he'd had a lover touch him this way. The knowledge made a wicked grin appear on Wren's face, and increased her determination to make him wild with need, wild enough to take his pleasure from her freely, without worrying about holding back for her orgasm. She loved to come as much as the next girl, but she wanted to give this gift to him, was dying to see him so possessed by passion that he rode her with all the strength in his massive body.

"That feels —"

"A little strange?" she asked, adding a second finger and continuing her gentle, shallow finger-fucking of his ass. After a few more strokes she began to match the rhythm with her hips, gradually deepening her penetration as he pressed forward to grind his pelvis against her clit.

"Yes," he breathed, closing his eyes and swallowing hard, letting her know that it felt very, very good.

"Just relax," Wren said, adding a third finger, the excitement of his cry of pleasure as she did so almost enough to make her come. The power to make her lover crazy with need had always aroused her, but exerting that power over the man she loved, using it to introduce him to a new form of passion was absolutely intoxicating. Her skin buzzed with it, her lips tingling and the desire in her belly tightening to the critical point.

"Fuck me harder," she demanded, her voice thick with desire, and her breath coming fast as her release threatened to crash over her body. But she wouldn't come, not until he lost himself, abandoned his control completely.

"I told you, I'm never going to fuck you," he said, his thrusts coming faster, deeper, harder, his body rolling into hers with enough force to make her gasp. "I'm going to make love to you."

The words were barely out of his mouth before he cried out, a sound of pure abandon. With one strong hand he grabbed her wrist, and pulled her hand from his ass. Then, pressing both of her hands into the mattress above her head, he began to fuck her, ride her with a violence that made sound of skin pounding against skin fill the room. Wren lifted her knees and spread herself wide, opening her body to him, taking everything he could give.

The head of his cock made brutal contact with the opening of her womb and the slight pain, the pressure that made her so potently aware of the secret places deep inside her body, was all that it took. She came with a wild cry, squirming beneath him as he continued to pump inside her gripping channel. A sobbing sound wrung from Austin's throat a few thrusts later, and Wren moaned with frustration as she felt his cock start to pulse inside her. God, she wanted to feel his cum splashing inside her, wanted to feel the hot evidence of his passion dripping between her thighs.

"Stupid condoms," she muttered into his neck as he collapsed heavily on top of her, releasing her hands so she could wrap them around his shoulders.

"I know. After last night, it's hard to go back, but it's for the best. I never would have lasted as long as I did without it. You feel too good," he said, raising up on his arms to stare down into her eyes.

"So you liked it?" she asked, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

"Yes, I liked it," he laughed. "As if you had to ask."

"I think I might know a few other things you might like." Wren followed the words with a sharp pinch on the flesh of Austin's ass, using just the right amount of pressure if the way his cock jumped inside her was any indication.

"Oh yeah? What about your coffee? I don't want it to get any colder," Austin teased, rolling them over so that she was on top and delivering a light smack to her ass that had her breath coming more quickly.

"Fuck the coffee," she said, crying out in pleasure as he delivered two more light spansks and then began to massage the sting away with his large, warm hands.

"That's a girl, that's what I like to hear." And then he smiled, and Wren knew that she'd found not only the love of her life, but the lover as well.

Chapter Nine

They spent the rest of the morning exploring Austin's apartment and each other. Wren straddled Austin in the chair in the corner, Austin took her from behind against the kitchen counter, Wren wrapped her legs tightly around him as they showered, enjoying the slick feel of their soapy bodies pounding into one another, straining yet again towards ecstasy.

Only when Austin absolutely insisted that they needed something more sustaining than leftover bagels and muffins did Wren reluctantly kiss him goodbye and scamper across the hallway, still wet and tingling from their sensual shower.

"I'll be five minutes," Austin said. "Be ready."

"I *am* a woman, you know," Wren said with a laugh. "I need at least five minutes just to put on my makeup."

"You don't need makeup," Austin said. "You're beautiful without it."

"Right," Wren said, smiling despite her dubious tone. "I think you might be a little biased."

"Are you saying I'm blinded by love?" Austin asked as he stood in his doorway, looking more handsome with every passing second.

"Something like that," Wren murmured as he crossed the hall and pulled her tightly to him, bending down to ravage her mouth with his own. Minutes later he finally ended the kiss, leaving Wren dizzy from the loss of contact.

"I'm in love, but my eyes are working perfectly," he whispered in her ear before gripping the lobe in his teeth and biting down.

Wren felt her breath catch and was about to grab his hand and yank him into her apartment for round six or seven, or whatever number they were on, when he pulled away with a wicked laugh. Then he was strolling back across the hall, calm and collected, as if he weren't responsible for driving her crazy with just a simple kiss.

"Five minutes," he repeated cockily before closing his door with a smile.

"Five minutes indeed," Wren breathed, grinning as she turned back to her apartment, determined to make him wait at least ten. He might be delicious, sweet, handsome and sexy as hell, but she couldn't let him get too cocky.

She hummed to herself as she shut the door behind her, practically dancing over to her closet to find something suitable to wear on this, the first day of the rest of her life. She'd only made it halfway to the closet door, however, when she was stopped dead in her tracks by the sound of a cat meowing on her windowsill.

"Eden," Wren whispered, turning to face the petite black cat who lay sunning herself on the sill, looking as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Wren on the other hand felt her stomach fall and her throat clench as a wave of nausea swept over her with enough force to make her groan. She was going to be sick, right here in the middle of the room. Dear god, she should have taken Austin's advice about sustenance more seriously. She didn't know if she could handle her enchanted talking cat on an empty stomach.

"What do you want?" Wren asked cautiously, swallowing hard, forcing down the acid that had risen in her throat. How could she have forgotten about the damn cat?

She'd blame the night of passion, but she knew better. Something told her that Austin's abandon hadn't been simply a twist of fate. It was too much of a coincidence that Eden's cryptic proclamation about the curse being breakable and the actual breaking of the curse had occurred within twenty-four hours of each other. Wren might be sleep deprived, exhausted, drunk on sexual pleasure and half starved to death, but she wasn't a complete moron.

I don't want anything, just for you to finally be happy, the cat said, seeming to smile at her across the room.

"Why don't I believe you?" Wren asked, feeling fear grow within her again. Having Austin return to her this morning had to be some kind of fluke. She wasn't that lucky. She was a cursed princess and had long ago stopped hoping for her happy ending. Even though she'd been giddy with excitement a few moments before, she knew that a part of her had been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Why can't you just be happy? the cat asked, sounding a bit irritated at her pessimism. *You've finally found true love and broken a three hundred year curse, you'd think that you'd be over the moon with joy.*

"Well I'm sorry if three hundred years of bad experience have taught me to be a bit suspicious of happiness," Wren said, glaring at the cat. "Besides, why should I trust you? You're a liar."

I never lied, I –

"You lived with me, ate my food, meowed at the door every day like you were thrilled to see me, but the entire time you were spying on me, reading my mind and god knows what –"

I never read your mind, only your thoughts and –

"Same difference. And then, when you finally came clean, you made me feel like the biggest fool in the world."

There was nothing that I did that –

"You could have told me how to end the curse."

I couldn't tell you. It's not that I didn't want to, the cat said softly in her head.

"Why not?" Wren asked, crossing her arms defiantly, determined not to play according to the feline's rules.

I couldn't tell you. The one who casts the curse cannot be the one to reveal its cure. It is one of the oldest rules of magic, the cat said cryptically before it began to transform before her eyes.

Wren sucked in a breath through her ever-tightening chest and backed up quickly, flattening herself against the wall as the cat's skin began to stretch hideously. She could safely say that the sound of bones and skin being reformed was something she never wanted to hear again, and was more grotesquely creepy than anything she could have imagined. Except, of course, being confronted with the witch who had set her life on its present cursed course in the first place.

"Melonia," Wren whispered. Every cell in her body was screaming for her to run like hell, but she was frozen in shock.

Either that or the witch had used her powers to render her motionless. A quick wiggle of her fingers assured Wren that she could still move, but did nothing to convince her petrified feet to head towards the door.

"Please, don't be afraid," Melonia said, an almost kindly look in her eyes. "I only came here to help you end the curse. Now that I have, I'll go. I simply wanted to say congratulations on your new life and to wish you all the best."

"What?" Wren gasped, unable to believe that the witch was sincere. There had to be a catch. She'd ordered the woman beheaded, for god's sake. Sure, that might have been ten lifetimes ago, but a beheading was a beheading, and it was impossible for her to believe that Melonia was now sugar and spice and everything nice, wishing her nothing but happiness.

"Wren, it saddens me that your heart has learned to fear giving others your trust," Melonia sighed, apparently still able to read her mind. "I suppose my curse was largely responsible for that and I want you to know I'm sorry. I never meant for your enchantment to last this long. Your crime did not deserve such a punishment, especially considering that you have long since repented your decision to end my life."

"I don't understand," Wren said, reeling from the witch's words. She was sorry? This didn't mesh with Wren's memory of the witch, a fierce and defiant woman who had cursed her in front of the entire kingdom.

"We all grow," Melonia said with a smile. "When I saw you on the street six months ago I knew that I had long grown past any resentment. As I said, I didn't mean for you to suffer so long. I truly thought that you would discover the means to break the spell within a few years of my uttering the curse. In my mind, it was a fairly simple cure."

"Fairly simple?" Wren squeaked. Fairly simple? Three hundred years to figure it out and the woman was saying the cure was simple? The whole "beheading" business was starting to look very appealing.

"Well, yes, as far as curses are concerned."

"If it was so simple, why do I still not know what the hell I did to break it?" Wren asked, realizing the words were false the instant they left her mouth.

Shit. It was *love*. It had to be, it was the only thing that had been different about Austin. Mind-blowing sex and multiple orgasms aside, last night had been magical in another way. It was the first time she'd ever felt so treasured, had ever given herself permission to treasure someone else in return.

"You're right, it is love. Though multiple orgasms are nothing to scoff at either," Melonia said, a teasing glint in her eye. The witch was teasing her. It wasn't possible. Wren felt her head begin spinning again. She wasn't in the mood to be teased, not right now, not yet.

"So all I had to do all these years —"

Wren's voice broke as she tried to say the words. She couldn't even say it, couldn't admit to herself, out loud, that the power to end her curse had been within her own heart since the very beginning. She could have saved herself no end of suffering, could have spared her father a death in which he believed his only daughter would be cursed and alone until the end of time.

"You can't blame yourself," Melonia whispered, beginning to walk towards Wren slowly, as if approaching a wounded animal. "The curse itself helped build the walls around your heart that kept you from finding love. And apparently, your perfect match took his time being born into the universe. From the look on your face this morning, however, he was evidently worth the wait."

"Don't come any closer," Wren said, holding up her hands as tension hummed through every bone in her body. "I know that what I did to you was unforgivable and I know that I wouldn't have wanted any man but Austin, but you'll have to excuse me if a part of me still hates you for what you've put me through."

"I understand," Melonia said with what Wren sensed was true regret. "Though in my own foolishness, I had hoped we could be friends. There are so few of us in this modern world who can understand what it's like to live through the ages."

"So you never did die?" Wren asked, her sluggish mind finally grasping that important detail.

"No, I escaped with the help of magic and the aid of your betrothed. He wasn't much of a man, or a prince, but he didn't want me dead, especially when he knew I carried his seed in my belly," Melonia said, her mouth twisting in a wry smile.

"So you did want to put your child on the throne," Wren said, only vaguely recalling the fear she'd had so long ago, the worry almost seeming like another person's memory. "But you didn't succeed, my uncle and his children ruled for the next one hundred years."

"No, my son never ruled, but he did have a great destiny, and having a father who was a prince ensured that he would have the fortune and status to live out that destiny," Melonia said proudly. "I couldn't have cared less about your prince. He was a means to an end. You yourself know how vital such connections were in that time."

"Yes, I guess I do understand. I wouldn't have then, but I do now," Wren said, then continued after a few thoughtful moments. "And I suppose I forgive you."

As she uttered the words, Wren felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from her soul. Easily, she allowed her hatred and resentment for the witch to leave her, making more room in her heart for more important emotions. The past was best left in the past, she knew that better than anyone. She had a chance at a real life now, there was no sense in letting old grudges taint what promised to be a golden future.

"But I still don't want to be buddies," she added, a small smile stretching across her lips as she offered the witch her hand.

"Understandable." Melonia waved Wren's hand away. "Such a mannish gesture, I prefer the woman's way."

With those words, she leaned close and pressed a gentle kiss to Wren's cheek. Wren accepted the gesture for what it was, the official ending to the drama between them, the farce of epic proportions that had begun so many hundreds of years past.

"You will understand the love for a son yourself," Melonia whispered softly in her ear. "Far sooner than you might think."

Wren's eyes widened in surprise and her hand flew unbidden to her belly. She imagined that she could feel the slow, quiet pulsing of a new life force radiating warmly under her palm. "But I can't get pregnant, the curse—"

"The curse is a thing of the past and so are all the rules that went along with it," Melonia said with a wink before she crawled onto the windowsill with catlike grace. "Get back to the man who loves you, and enjoy learning the rules of your real life."

With those words she jumped from the sill, her long black hair flying as her lithe body fell through the air. Wren ran to the window, looking out in time to see a small black cat land prettily on the ground below. The feline looked up at her once more before turning and disappearing into the maze of the city streets.

For a brief moment, Wren actually felt a twinge of regret. Perhaps she should have taken the witch up on her offer of friendship. She certainly didn't have an abundance of girlfriends at the moment, and it would have been nice to talk about the old times with someone who truly understood, someone who'd actually been there.

"What are you, crazy?" Wren muttered to herself before shutting the window and locking it tightly. Better to steer clear of anyone with that kind of power. If the past three hundred years had taught her anything, it was respect for a witch.

"Are you ready?" Austin asked, his voice muffled as he knocked a beat on the outside of her door.

"Just a minute, I'll be right out," Wren said, her eyes still fixed on the window where Melonia had disappeared. It was over, the enchantment was finally over, and she could say goodbye to that part of her life.

As she headed to her closet and pulled out her favorite summer dress, a leftover from her flapper days in the roaring twenties, Wren felt excitement and hope flood through her. She had an entire curse-free future in front of her, and the man she loved waiting for her in the hallway. She couldn't imagine anything that could make her feel luckier than she did already, but if the witch's words were to be believed...

"Time will tell," Wren said, her smile ridiculously wide as she zipped up her dress and wondered how much longer she'd be able to fit into her clothes. Could she really be pregnant? It would be the icing on a cake she never thought she'd be eating, and she knew he would be as happy as she was.

Laughing, Wren ran a comb and a bit of mousse through her still damp hair, applied a coat of cranberry lip gloss and was at the door in two minutes flat. There was no need to make the man wait. Wren was hungry, both for the dinner he had promised and the life that was out there waiting for them

"Beautiful," he said as she opened the door.

"Likewise," she repeated, knowing in her heart that the same word could be applied to their future.

Chapter Ten

Melonia hadn't gone more than two blocks from Wren's apartment when the sight of a beautiful Indian woman emerging from a cab made her freeze in her tracks. She'd seen that face before, had looked into those almond eyes, but where? And why did she feel this sudden leap of fear for Wren's happiness? Hadn't she just left her in the first flush of a lifetime love?

Quickly, she doubled back, coming to curl her cat's body around a street light no more than three feet from where the cabbie unloaded the woman's luggage. She paid him, tipping generously from the nod of appreciation he gave before speeding away. She then turned her eyes down the street, towards the apartment building from whence Melonia had just come, her eyes wistful and her expression more than a bit nervous.

Gently, her hand smoothed over the light fabric of her purple sari, giving Melonia the first glimpse of her swollen belly. From the look of things, she was no more than five or six months along, but on her delicate frame the beginnings of new life were more than evident. The sense of dread within Melonia doubled as the Indian woman grasped the smaller of the two bags and began to pull her larger suitcase behind her down the street, headed straight for the door from which Austin and Wren would emerge at any moment.

In the instant that the door opened and Austin's jaw dropped in shock, Melonia realized exactly where she had seen the beautiful Indian woman before. She was the woman in the pictures in Austin's apartment, the girlfriend who he had felt obligated to stay with after an unfortunate accident left her scarred.

Melonia had snooped about Austin's room as well as thoroughly invaded his thoughts, learning all she needed to know to make sure he and Wren would encounter no obstacles to their coming together. She knew that Austin no longer loved this Ella, and had sensed that the woman had begun to move away from Austin in her heart as well.

If she'd been forced to place a bet, Melonia would have wagered that Ella was never coming home, that she and her parents would stay in India indefinitely. She was no foreteller of the future, her gifts lying in other areas of the magical arts, but her hunches were usually correct.

Apparently not this time, she thought to herself, wincing inwardly. She had also been terribly wrong about how long Princess Wren would remain under her curse. *Note to self, no more leaving anything to chance where this particular princess is concerned.*

If she hadn't known better, Melonia might have thought Wren was laboring under some other type of curse or misfortune spell. But there was no other magic clinging to her. This was just your garden variety bad timing, but all was not lost. She could still

use her powers to intervene on the other woman's behalf. Melonia hadn't wasted six months of work getting the two lovers together to watch their chances ruined before they had even begun. This Ella would simply have to stand aside.

Of course a baby complicated things, especially if it was Austin's child. But Melonia could have sworn that his thoughts had indicated that she'd been gone for nearly a year. If that were the case, there was no chance Austin could have fathered the child. Unless, of course, he had visited the woman in India at some point before Melonia had come to live in Wren's apartment.

This is getting entirely too complicated.

Whether the babe was his or not, Melonia knew that she had to ensure Wren and Austin stayed together. She had seen love like theirs only a few times in her many centuries of life. Love could grow between many different kinds of people, but those two were truly soul mates, had been destined for each other since the beginning of time. If something were to tear them apart now, they would both lead miserable incarnations until they reconnected in another life.

Wren, for one, didn't deserve to have to wait any longer for her happiness. She'd spent three hundred years waiting for her chance at true love. She had paid her dues a thousand times over and Melonia meant to ensure that this time, the princess would finally get her man.

Slowly, she slunk down the street, disappearing into the alleyway between Wren's apartment building and the deli next door. She settled in next to the rough bricks and focused her mind, tuning in to the events taking place not ten feet beyond her, quietly sending a wave of positive energy towards the princess, hoping she would be able to receive it.

* * * * *

Austin practically skipped down the stairs of the apartment building, for once not caring about the trash that littered the staircase and cluttered the lobby of the aging complex. He had Wren's hand in his and everything seemed right with the world. For the first time in more than a year, Austin felt hopeful, happy and content.

As they reached the front door, he turned to look at the woman beside him, once again nearly floored by her beauty. She seemed to grow more and more stunning the longer he was with her. The dress she wore now looked like something out of an old movie, beautiful and feminine and the perfect shade of peach.

"You look like you're going to eat me alive," she whispered, pulling her towards him for a kiss before they exited onto the city streets.

Austin felt himself harden as soon as her soft lips touched his, and growled as she began to gently suck and nibble at his bottom lip. The way the sexual energy between them flared to life in an instant was unbelievable. It actually prompted thoughts of forgetting dinner altogether and carrying her back up the stairs they had just descended. What the hell was delivery service for, if not occasions like this?

"No you don't, I intend to be wined and dined, my friend," Wren giggled, squirming out of his grasp as if she could read his thoughts. "No more sex until you woo me."

"Oh, you need to be wooed now, do you?" Austin laughed, reaching over to grab her waist and pulling her to him. "You didn't need much wooing last night. In fact some would say that you were a pretty cheap date."

"And some would say that you are a dirty man-slut," Wren teased with mock severity, unbuttoning the top of his fly and slipping her hand down the front of his pants.

"A dirty man-slut?" Austin laughed, despite the fact that her touch was driving him wild.

"Yes. A dirty. Man. Slut," Wren said, punctuating each of her words with a firm stroke up and down the hot shaft she held in her hand.

"Shit," Austin breathed, running his fingers lightly along the side of her breasts and fighting the urge to lift her thin skirt and slip his fingers inside her pussy, to see if she was as turned on as he was quickly becoming.

She might bring out the exhibitionist in him, but he wasn't about to start anything they couldn't finish here in the hallway. Whatever madness had possessed him yesterday in the street was gone, replaced by a different kind of madness, the insane urge to make sure no one else ever saw her eyes glaze with passion. No one but him.

"If you really want dinner, you should stop that, right now," Austin warned.

"Or what?" she asked, her hand tightening around his cock almost to the point of pain, but not quite—oh god, not quite. Instead, it brought him right to the edge, seconds away from coming right there in the middle of the hall.

"Or I'm going to haul your ass upstairs, pull down those pink panties and take you against the door," Austin said, the visual conjured up by his words making it even more difficult to restrain himself.

"I'm not wearing pink panties anymore," she said with an innocent smile. "See?"

With those words, she pulled her hand out of his pants and lifted the front of her skirt, showing him exactly what she *wasn't* wearing beneath.

"You are evil," Austin said, his breath hissing from his body as he took in her pantyless state. Her dark curls were trimmed close to her body, close enough that he could see that the lips of her sex were already plump with need.

"I am not," Wren said, dropping the skirt back into place just as he began to reach for her. "I would be evil if I didn't let you touch me under the tablecloth at dinner."

"I really love you," Austin said, the thought of making her come as they sat in some secluded corner of a dark restaurant beyond appealing.

"I love you too." She smiled, a tender, loving smile that somehow fit perfectly with her teasing.

"Let's go," Austin said, pulling her out the door. "I'm suddenly in the mood for a nice, juicy steak."

"Me too," Wren agreed with a smile. "This whole marathon sex thing seems to make me crave red meat."

Austin felt his teasing reply die on his lips as they descended the front stairs of the apartment building and his gaze connected with a pair of golden, almond-shaped eyes. The warm summer night chilled around him and he felt the smile slip from his face even as his hand clenched tightly around Wren's. His body wanted to cling to her, to make sure that nothing made her leave, especially the appearance of the last person he had ever expected.

"Austin, good evening," Ella said slowly, as if she were simply meeting him for a friendly chat. If he hadn't known the truth, he would never have dreamed she had been gone for nearly a year. Hers was the greeting of a casual acquaintance, not a lover who had communicated with him through a weekly letter, or a woman who had appeared on his front stoop out of nowhere, without even bothering to tell him that she was coming home.

"Hello, Ella," Austin replied, forcing his voice to stay even and neutral.

Of all the days for her to show up. He'd spent a miserable year waiting for her to return, lonely and celibate, committed to the empty shell their relationship had become. Now, on the one day he left his apartment with his hand on another woman, she decided to make her way back into his life. If this was the universe's idea of a joke, he sure as hell wasn't laughing.

"And who is this?" Ella asked softly, her eyes guarded.

"Ella, this is Wren, my neighbor," Austin said, casually removing his hand from Wren's. He had no idea where his hands needed to be, torn between what felt so right and the guilt that was making a painful resurgence. "Wren, this is Ella, my —"

"Friend," Ella interrupted, her hand smoothing over her rounded belly in a slightly nervous gesture. It was then that Austin noticed what would have been blindingly obvious had he not been in the throes of his own angst. Ella was pregnant, fairly far along from the look of things, and there was no way that he was the man responsible. That had to mean...

Austin suddenly felt a weight lift from his shoulders.

"Ella," he whispered with a smile. "You look fantastic."

With a grin in Wren's direction, Austin descended the steps, taking Ella into his arms for a quick embrace, laughing as her newly swollen belly got in the way. She joined him with an easy laugh of her own, and once again put a loving hand to her stomach. She was happy, she'd found somebody else and she was happy. If he hadn't had Wren waiting for him at the top of the stairs, he might have been pissed as hell that Ella had kept him hanging for months when she was obviously otherwise involved, but he was too excited about his own future to care. He was glad Ella had moved on, was ready to let bygones be bygones and move on with his real life, his life with Wren.

"I guess this isn't what either of us expected," she said, smiling widely even as she shot a slightly nervous look in his direction.

"I'm happy for you," Austin assured her. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"The son of one of my parents' friends in India. He's a doctor of traditional medicine," Ella confessed, the look of love on her face unmistakable. "My parents told me they took me to him to help with the scars, but as soon as I met him, I knew they had other things in mind."

"So your parents finally convinced you to get rid of the American guy," Austin teased.

"Oh, I didn't want to like him," Ella laughed. "I fought them tooth and nail. I never thought an arranged relationship could ever work, but —"

"Sometimes love sneaks up on you," Austin interrupted, knowing now that it wouldn't hurt Ella for him to introduce Wren properly, to let her know that he'd found love as well.

"Wren?" he called, but when he turned around to smile at her, to ask her to come down and meet his old friend, she wasn't there.

"Where did she go?" Ella asked, her eyes widening as she touched her belly. "You don't think she —"

"Shit, I didn't even think," Austin cursed, looking both ways down the mostly abandoned sidewalk before he called her name again. "Wren!"

"Austin, go to her," Ella said. "I just came back to pick up some of my things and wanted to tell you in person that I'd found someone, and that I wanted you to be happy. You obviously love her, go find her and make things right."

"I will," Austin said. "But let's stay in touch, Ella. I'd like for us to be friends."

"We will always be friends, Austin," Ella said, a soft look in her eyes. "But I'm flying to India tonight. I only came back to empty out my apartment. I'm moving there for good."

"Then I won't see you again."

"No, but I'll be wishing you good thoughts always," Ella said, reaching up to give him a soft kiss on the cheek. "And I'll send you pictures of the baby when she comes. Now go, find your girl before she gets away from you for good."

"I will," Austin said with a smile, turning to run back up the stairs of the apartment building. He hadn't seen Wren on the street in either direction and there was no way she could have disappeared so quickly in the heels she was wearing. She must have gone back inside. He'd simply knock on her door and force her to let him explain.

He'd been an idiot, not even stopping to consider what conclusions she might be jumping to. She'd seen the pictures of Ella in his apartment, and had no doubt put two and two together to make six. He could imagine how hurt Wren must be if she thought he was thrilled to see his ex, and that she was obviously expecting a baby, but he knew she would forgive him. Once he explained, she would understand.

Austin sprinted up the last few steps, eager to put Wren's mind at ease and get their evening back on track.

"Wren, let me in," Austin panted, tapping lightly on her door. "I obviously have a few things to explain."

Silence met him from the other side of the door, and Austin felt a sinking in his gut. She had to be inside, she just had to be. If she wasn't, he might have seriously damaged their fledgling relationship. It was a simple misunderstanding, but she had been so sure that he wasn't going to stick around, so deeply hurt by someone or something that she'd broken down simply from seeing him arrive with coffee and bagels that morning.

It would be so easy to lose her trust. Austin knew that much instinctively. He had to find her, had to convince her that she had misunderstood the situation. Their relationship was too new and vulnerable, and the thought of losing her literally made Austin ill.

"Please, Wren, you've got to let me in," Austin pleaded, banging harder on the door. "You've got to let me explain."

Once again, silence was the only reply.

"Shit." Austin slammed the flat of his hand on the door in frustration before turning to run back down the stairs. She wasn't there. Somehow she must have managed to slip away while he was busy with Ella.

Austin burst out of the front door seconds later, looking wildly in both directions, not a clue as to which way he should go. If he were a woman who thought her new lover was abandoning her for his pregnant ex, which way would he run?

Finally he decided to go in the opposite direction from where she had run yesterday. If she truly wanted to avoid him, she probably wouldn't go back to where it might be easy for him to find her.

Go back, she's upstairs, a voice sounded in his head, but Austin only shook his head and began running up the street towards the uptown train.

He'd already looked upstairs, she obviously wasn't there. He didn't need to break the door down. If she'd been in her room he would have sensed it. He could feel her energy from ten feet away, felt connected to her as if she were a part of him. If she'd been there, there was no way that he could have been mistaken about it and he'd had enough of that damn voice. Right now he didn't have time for a mental breakdown, he had to find Wren.

His breath began to burn in his lungs and he drew more than a few curious stares as he ran down the street, calling out Wren's name every few feet. But he couldn't care less if the entire city of New York thought he was certifiable. Wren was the only one who mattered. The sudden fear that he had lost her forever eclipsed everything else. He just had to find her, had to get to her...before it was too late.

Chapter Eleven

"Thanks, Joe, I owe you one," Wren said softly as she heard Austin run back down the stairs. As his footsteps faded, her body collapsed against the door of Joe's apartment, the fear of being discovered flowing out of her, leaving room for even more despair to settle in her heart. Great, just great.

"No problem, I'm glad to be of *service*," Joe said, his voice heavy with innuendo. "I'm here to please."

"Right," Wren sighed and turned away from him, unaffected. Even the obvious leer on his face couldn't make her any sicker than she was already. Her new life had fallen apart in a matter of hours, the happy future she had foolishly believed could be hers destroyed the second that Austin had let go of her hand and gone to embrace his pregnant girlfriend.

Of course he had a pregnant girlfriend, *of course* he was thrilled that he was going to be the father to another woman's child. That was what she had expected from the start, that was the life, the luck, that she had known for three hundred years. The only surprising thing about all of this was that she had somehow allowed herself to buy into the fantasy that a life filled with love could really be hers.

"Listen, I'm glad you came by," Joe said, slowly coming towards her, reaching out a hand to brush two fingers down her arm. Wren shivered with revulsion, but didn't pull away. What was the point? If she couldn't be with Austin, it didn't seem to matter who did or didn't touch her.

"Yeah?" she whispered, her voice distant even to her own ears. She realized that she just might be in shock. Right now nothing seemed real, even her own skin. She felt cold, outside herself, lost in a way that she'd never been lost before. It was pathetic, really. Nearly three hundred years of holding herself together and she was broken so easily, shattered by the very thing that had ended her enchantment.

Love did stink. The song was right. It also hurt and burned and ached. She'd never dreamed something could cut so deeply, so quickly, or that its loss would leave her so horribly numb, so empty inside.

"Yeah, I wanted to apologize for the other day. I had a bad day," Joe said, moving closer and smoothing both of his hands over her hips. "I overreacted."

"Sure, no problem," Wren muttered, wishing she could get angry, be outraged, disgusted, feel anything but this buzzing, terrifying numbness.

"I appreciate your understanding," Joe said softly, moving his hands around to her bottom and beginning to knead her ass in his hands like an unwieldy mound of dough.

His ineptitude might have made her laugh some other time, but right now she couldn't imagine anything being funny ever again.

"Joe," she sighed, weakly pushing his hands away from her ass, only to find that he simply transferred them back to her hips, pulling her closer and lowering his mouth to lick a long, repulsive trail down her neck with his sloppy wet tongue.

"Joe's gonna make you feel better, just you wait," Joe said, bringing one hand to her breast and beginning the same strange kneading motion he had been using on her butt. He couldn't have been less erotically stimulating if he'd tried, and Wren felt her stomach turn. Of course, she had a feeling that any man's touch would make her stomach turn from now on.

After Austin, there would be no going back to her life of meaningless one-night stands. No matter how talented a lover she might find, the ache for the man who had helped her break the curse would always be there, tormenting her with the knowledge of what she could never have. Some part of her tried to protest, to say that she could find love again, now that the enchantment had ended, but Wren didn't want anyone else. Anyone else would be a pale imitation of the man who had touched her body, mind and soul more deeply than anyone she had ever known.

Joe, of course, with his clumsy fumbling was just...sad. Gross and sad. The thought of his dick anywhere near her made her want to dry heave. She had to get out of his apartment, had to let him know it was never going to happen before they had a repeat of yesterday's episode in the hall.

"Please," Wren sighed.

"Please what, baby? Anything you want," Joe groaned, beginning to grind himself against her, reaching under her dress. "Are you wet for me?"

Ewww.

"It's not going to happen, Joe," Wren said, finally forcing her body into motion. In one smooth movement, she twisted away from him and opened the door to the hallway, grateful to escape Joe's touch and the strange, moldy smell of his pigsty of an apartment. Even the stale air in the hall smelled like springtime in comparison.

"Hey," Joe protested. "You're the one who came to me."

"Sorry."

"You don't sound sorry. You know what you are? You're a fuckin' tease."

"Joe, listen—"

"If you don't watch out, someday, some guy's not going to take no for an answer."

"Like you almost didn't?" Wren asked, starting to lose her patience. She had bigger things to worry about at the moment than Joe's frustrated cock.

"I wouldn't have done that," Joe said. "I told you, I just had a bad day. I'm not that kind of guy. I don't need to force anybody, I get plenty of chicks begging me for it on a daily basis."

"I'm glad, Joe," Wren said, suddenly feeling a little sorry for the man in front of her. She'd rarely seen him with a woman and sensed in some ways he was as lonely as she was herself. He deserved her pity. At least she'd had a few hours of knowing what it was like to be treasured by another human being. She doubted Joe would ever know anything more meaningful than the porn he ordered on pay-per-view.

"Yeah, whatever," Joe said, slamming the door in her face, as if he could sense her pity and wanted no part of it.

Wren sighed and turned back to her door, listlessly moving back to her apartment, wondering what she should do now that her dreams for a bright future had proved foolish. Lying down and dying seemed to be a fairly desirable option. A life without Austin seemed like no life at all.

But she wasn't that kind of person, never had been, never would be. Not to mention that the thought of her father, of his search for a way to break her spell, wouldn't allow her a coward's choice. He was the only other man who had loved her, who had treated her as if she were a meaningful person in the world. How could she betray his memory by not having the courage to move on? It would be unforgivable, and a waste of what time she had left.

"The curse is broken. There's a whole world out there," Wren muttered to herself, struggling to feel the slightest bit optimistic as she entered her lonely apartment and stood staring at the few worldly belongings that she had collected through the ages.

If she couldn't have the life she had dreamed of, she could still do something good with her life. For the first time in three hundred years, Wren felt the profound urge to take care of other people. She had been selfish with her energies, she realized that now. Loving Austin had opened her heart in a way that it had never been before. She now knew that she had something to give the world, something that actually might be worth having.

"And I thank you for that," Wren whispered, tears gathering in her eyes, though she refused to let them fall.

As she began to load her clothes and a few treasured keepsakes into her suitcase, Wren knew that she was saying goodbye to New York for good. She had to leave, had to make a clean break and start an entirely new life. She'd be on the next flight out of JFK if luck were on her side.

She would take herself beyond Austin's reach. Even if he had a change of heart and decided he didn't want to be with the mother of his child, Wren knew that she would never forget the joy she'd seen in his eyes when he'd gone to her. He'd looked like a man saved from the guillotine as he'd moved towards the painfully beautiful pregnant woman waiting for him on the sidewalk, all of her belongings behind her, as if she'd come home to him at last.

"I can't be second best," Wren said aloud as she zipped her suitcase closed and pressed her lips tightly together. "Not after all these years."

Even if it means that your son will grow up without a father? asked a quiet voice from the windowsill.

"You again," Wren said as she looked up to see a small black cat crawl into her apartment, dropping lightly to the floor, before it crept towards her, stopping only inches from her foot.

I'm so sorry, Wren, Melonia's voice came again.

"This time it's not your fault," Wren whispered with a wry smile, looking away as Melonia began the gruesome act of transformation. She hoped that wasn't bad manners, but she didn't think she could take a repeat of that particular performance, not right now. "This time it was just a case of bad timing, I guess. A curse of a different kind altogether."

"But there still might be a chance for you both. Austin and his lover seemed happy to see one another, but their thoughts weren't clear to me. There might be something that we don't understand. You should talk to him—"

"I don't need to talk."

"Wren, be reasonable, there's nothing—"

"I know what we started together. If he felt the same way I did, he never would have been happy to see another woman expecting his child, Melonia. I could have forgiven a lot of things, tried to work through a lot of complications, but not that. It's too much," Wren said, snapping her suitcase closed with more force than was necessary. She wouldn't break down and cry, not in front of the witch, not in front of anyone. She was done with tears...at least for today.

"But what of your own son?" Melonia asked. "I hate to be the method by which you learn the news, but you *are* carrying his child. I can sense the new life inside of you."

"He belonged to her first." She wasn't ready to think about the reality of being a mother. She'd wanted the fairy tale, the happily-ever-after with as many babies as she and her husband could handle, but she'd never thought about raising a child by herself. She wasn't a fool, she knew that being a parent was one of the hardest jobs in the world and she'd never wanted to do the job solo.

She'd think about the baby...later, much later.

Wren made a quick sweep of the apartment with her eyes, making sure she had left nothing precious behind. Who was she kidding, what possession could ever be more precious than the child she carried?

"Crap," Wren said, running a hand through her hair. She was going to have to think about the baby. No matter what she had wanted, she was going to be a single parent and she was going to have to make sure she was ready for her child to be born into the world. Nine months had never seemed so horribly short.

"Wren, please. Don't do this to yourself. He loves you more than the other woman, I'm certain of it," Melonia said, seeming almost as frustrated as Wren was herself, though not nearly as dreary.

"It doesn't matter, he chose her. Even if he changes his mind, I don't want to be a second choice," Wren said, raising her hand to silence Melonia's objections. "If he loved me as much as I love him, he wouldn't have gone to her. The second he did that, it told me that a part of him still wanted a life with her, and who am I to take that away from him? To take that from their child?"

"His true love, his soul mate and the mother of his child, that's who," Melonia said, the passion in her voice nearly stirring Wren's heart into a feeble hope before her rational mind once again took control.

"No, I'm just the woman who was here," Wren said. "He did love me, and maybe could have loved me forever. I believe that much is true. But how can I ask him to give up a son or daughter with the woman he had promised himself to? How can I take away his chance at a real love, a real family, when all I can offer him is a big mess?"

"I don't think you're a mess."

"I'm three hundred years old, for god's sake, with a heart screwed up from centuries of bad choices. How can I compare to a normal woman, especially a beautiful woman like that?"

"But what about the child?"

"A child he didn't want," Wren protested, wincing at how badly the words stung. "He remembered to use protection this morning, and said he would have last night if he'd been in his right mind."

Melonia was quiet at those words and Wren thought she saw a guilty look come over the witch's face. She didn't need any more confirmation that Melonia had had a hand in the events of last night. But Wren didn't blame her. Whatever she'd done, she'd only helped push them into a situation that they had both been more than eager to take advantage of. There was no way that she could regret that one night of passion or the new life that grew inside her, it was the one beautiful thing she had to look forward to.

"You are throwing away more than you understand," Melonia cautioned. "I've lived even longer than you have yourself. I've seen soul mates search for each other through the ages, each soul miserable and forlorn until they finally find one another. You've found Austin. Are you willing to let him go, knowing that it might be centuries before you will hold him in your arms again?"

"We'll be together again?" Wren asked, a small spark of hope hiccupping in her chest.

"Soul mates always find one another, eventually. But do you want to wait another century, maybe two, three or four, before you know what it's like to experience the bliss of true love again?" Melonia asked, her eyes tearing up a bit.

Well, damn, the witch cared, she really did. The compassion in her expression was unmistakable, and her conviction was enough to make Wren a little optimistic.

"At least I know that I'll find him again," she said. "That will have to be enough."

"Oh, Wren," Melonia said, coming to embrace her. Wren sighed and submitted to the arms around her, reminded for a brief moment of her mother, the woman who had harbored such great hopes for her so many years ago.

"I'll be all right," Wren said, feeling the words to be true. "I'm going to be a mom, I'll have to be all right. My baby needs me. I'm just going to try to make the most of this life and the next and however many more I'm going to get."

"Without love."

"I believe I'll find Austin again. And next time, you can be damned sure I won't ever let him go."

"Bless you," Melonia whispered into her hair. "May all the good energy of the universe bless you and your babe and speed you into your lover's arms."

A little too poetic for Wren's tastes...but it still made her tear up.

"So you'll leave now?" Wren pulled away from the embrace with a laugh, feeling strangely sad to let go of the woman who had played such a momentous role in her life.

"For now," Melonia said. "But I will visit you if you'll allow it. I would like to check in on you from time to time. And I have a soft spot for beautiful little babies. I will bring a birthday gift when the time comes."

"That would be nice," Wren said with a smile.

"I'm glad you've changed your mind," Melonia said, returning her smile and running a soothing hand over her hair. "I would be honored to be considered a friend to the most resilient princess I have ever known."

"Thanks," Wren said, nearly losing the battle against breaking down. "I don't feel all that resilient, I feel like I'm going to shatter into a thousand pieces."

"I know, but you won't," Melonia said with a strange smile.

"No, I won't," Wren agreed, nodding goodbye as she picked up her suitcase. She locked the door behind her and walked down the curving steps for the last time, leaving her old life behind.

The cab ride across the George Washington Bridge was the longest of her life, every tick of the meter a reminder that she was moving further and further away from the man she loved. What the hell was she going to do with herself? For that matter, where the hell was she going?

The airport, I'm going to the airport and I'll figure it out from there. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the seat, completely exhausted and not at all up to thinking too far into the future.

All she wanted right now was to disappear into another city's streets, to forget that she had ever been the woman she was in New York, to forget that she had ever found a love that would haunt her for the rest of her life. She would find a good job, something that she and her son could be proud of, and she would do her best to give him the kind of childhood that she had known before her mother had died.

"San Francisco, if you have it," Wren muttered to the agent behind the desk at the first airline she tried.

"Of course ma'am," the forcefully cheerful woman said, hauling Wren's suitcase onto the baggage scale with a clenching of her jaw. "Is this the only baggage you'll be checking for the trip?"

"Yes, it is," Wren said, wishing that she could check her emotional baggage as well.

"Gate 24, boarding in about an hour," the airline worker chirped in her most chipper voice. "You really lucked out, that was the last seat available on that flight."

"I really lucked out," Wren echoed, her voice falling flat even to her own ears as she turned to walk towards security.

Snap out of it, woman, she mentally berated herself as she submitted to a thorough inspection by a female security officer and made her way to the gate. She had a child to nurture, had been blessed with a profound responsibility as well as a wonderful gift. She needed to stop feeling sorry for herself and start concentrating on what mattered. Of course, that was so much easier said than done.

"Mama, I don't want to ride by the window," a young boy whined as his mother attempted to settle him into a particularly comfy position in first class.

"Jacob, you need to sleep," his mother pleaded as she attempted to settle her restless charge into the window seat with a pillow and blanket.

Wren smiled slightly at the interchange, settling into the seat behind them, glad that she had treated herself to a first class ticket. After the past several hours, she deserved a bit of comfort. Also, the mother and son in front of her would serve as a perfect reminder of where her focus should lie.

It was time to concentrate on the life inside her and the bright future she would help build for her son. She had an opportunity to give her child all the love in her heart. There was nothing in the world that could have brought her more joy, except of course having Austin beside her.

"Dream on," she whispered to herself, closing her eyes and trying not to see Austin's hazel eyes in her mind as the plane accelerated down the runway, lifting its wheels from the ground and spiriting her away to a new life.

Chapter Twelve

"Wren," Austin called quietly, slowly and repeatedly thumping his fist on her door, trying not to awaken the other residents on the floor.

Once again, silence greeted him. With a sigh, he pulled a hand down his weary face and then moved to rub at his eyes. He'd looked for her in every corner of the city, until the sky had started to grow light and the subways filled with early morning workers headed to the bakeries and donut shops. No matter what his gut told him, she had to be here. Unless, of course, she'd decided to abandon her apartment and all her furnishings in her haste to get him out of her life for good. He tried to dismiss the idea as ridiculous, but couldn't deny the leap of panic in his chest.

"Please, Wren," he called more loudly, resuming his steady thudding on her door. He'd stand here all day if he had to, until the sun set again. There was nothing at work that couldn't wait, and even if there was a pressing order, he knew he'd never be able to concentrate on a job until this mess had been sorted out, until the woman he loved knew that he hadn't chosen his ex over their newfound feelings for each other.

"Wren," he yelled, allowing the frustration and exhaustion of the night to overwhelm him as he slammed his fist into the door. If she were sleeping that would be sure to wake her. Maybe if she were prodded a little less gently she'd feel obligated to come give him a piece of her mind. He'd gladly take it, he'd take her any way he could get her, just as long as she'd give him the chance to explain.

Perhaps she'd come stumbling to the door, hair ruffled with sleep, face slightly puffed and angry, ready to tell him exactly where he could go. Then he'd take her in his arms and pull her back to the bed, explain everything as he removed their clothing, as he slid himself inside her and made love to her until she realized that there would never be another woman for him but her.

"Hey, could you knock it off?" grumbled Joe from down the hall. He was the last person Austin had any patience for at the moment.

"Get back inside, Joe, this is between Wren and me," Austin growled, his eyes flashing in Joe's direction. The other man's assault on Wren took on a whole new meaning now that Austin knew what it was like to hold her in his arms, to love her with his body until they both lost their minds.

The thought of Joe's hands on her made him clench his jaw and ball his hands into fists at his sides. He was tired and irritated enough to throw a well-placed punch at the man if he made the exceedingly unwise mistake of staying in the hall for another ten seconds.

"Wren's gone, man," Joe said, smiling widely as he leaned against his door in a pair of filthy boxers and scratched himself lazily. The indolent look on his face made Austin

want to punch him even more, but he needed to find out what the sleazebag knew first, before he could let himself succumb to his more base and violent urges.

"What do you mean?" Austin snapped, charging down the hall with enough menace that Joe was obviously reconsidering his choice to engage Austin in an altercation. Surprise, surprise, maybe the man wasn't a complete idiot after all.

"Tell me," Austin said, shoving Joe back against his door and feeling a surge of satisfaction as the man winced when his back made contact with the doorknob. Good, the bastard deserved anything he could dish out and more. Let him know what it was like to be overpowered and afraid.

"Back off man, I'll call the cops on your ass," Joe threatened, opening his door and fleeing back into his apartment, scampering to find a pair of pants among the mess of dirty laundry on his floor.

"Tell me what you know about Wren and I'll leave," Austin said, striding into the room. "But if you've done anything to hurt her, I'm going to cut your dick off."

"I didn't do anything to her," Joe whined, his eyes darting to the computer monitor on his desk before he added, "at least not anything she didn't want me to do. She came to me, not the other way around."

"You're a liar," Austin roared, lifting him by the arms and throwing him across the room, the rage burning inside him truly terrifying. He felt as if he could kill Joe with his bare hands, and that was enough to break through some of the anger.

This wasn't like him, it just wasn't. His job might make him stronger than most men, but he never used his strength this way, never acted out with violence. He could count the number of fist fights he'd been in on one hand. No matter what Joe had done, no matter how scared he was that something had happened to Wren, he had to control himself. He'd let the police handle this if he had to, but Joe sure as hell wasn't getting out of the room before he gave him some answers.

"Please, man," Joe begged. "Just watch the tape for yourself, just watch it, man. It proves I didn't do anything."

"I'm supposed to believe Wren not only allowed you to touch her, but let you tape it? Do I look stupid, Joe?" Austin asked, feeling his hands start to ball into fists when Joe took a second too long with his answer.

"I have a camera in the corner," Joe said, with obvious reluctance. "She didn't know I was filming, but she knew what she wanted. I didn't do anything to her that she didn't ask for. Just press the space bar on the computer and you'll see for yourself."

"Don't move," Austin glared, moving over to the computer, stepping over mounds of dirty clothes, empty soda cans and the remains of several take-out dinners. He no longer wondered why the complex had rodent problems. With a filthy rat like Joe in the building, it was unbelievable that they hadn't been completely overrun with vermin.

At Joe's equally messy desk, Austin reached over and touched the space bar, keeping one eye trained on the monitor and one eye on Joe. He was obviously lying, probably trying to divert his attention so that he could sneak to the door and save his

sorry ass. Whatever his plan, he was definitely up to something, Austin could tell by the nervous excitement that flashed in his eyes.

Suddenly Wren's voice came from the computer and Austin jerked his full attention to the screen. He didn't know what he'd expected to see, but it sure as hell wasn't this. There was Wren, up against the door of Joe's apartment, wearing the same dress she'd had on last night. She was thanking Joe for something, then Joe was running his hand down her arm as she shivered. With revulsion, or desire? Her face was maddeningly unexpressive, but she made no move to push Joe away.

The tape played on and Austin watched in horror as Joe began to put his hands on Wren, touching her in places that Austin had vowed no other man would ever touch her. He felt sick, nearly blinded by rage, waiting for the slightest signal from Wren that she didn't want Joe to touch her, that he was forcing her to submit to him somehow. When that sign came, Joe would regret the day he was born, let alone the day he decided it would be a good idea to film the women foolish enough to enter his apartment.

Then the unthinkable happened, Joe moved his hands to her breasts and began to roll his hips against her. Austin watched in horror as Wren closed her eyes and let out a single word. "Please." Her head tilted back as Joe began to move his hand underneath her dress, his repulsive fingers probing Wren, his Wren. Austin felt his stomach clench and bile rise in his throat.

As abruptly as it began, the movie on the screen froze, the image of Wren with her head thrown back in pleasure taunting him from the glowing monitor. Austin groaned low in his throat, a sound a wounded animal would make, before he slammed his hands down on the desk, closing his eyes as if he could blot the scene he had just witnessed from his mind forever.

"Where's the rest of it?" Austin finally asked over his shoulder through a clenched jaw, unable to look in Joe's direction for fear that he might destroy him with his bare hands, despite the fact that the other man hadn't forced Wren to do anything. The jealousy that surged within him frightened him. He felt driven to the edge of madness by the idea that another man had put his dick inside Wren, had made her moan with desire and release as her body pulsed around his cock.

"That's it," Joe said cautiously, no longer seeming nearly as cocky, apparently sensing that he was still a small misstep away from being beaten within an inch of his life. "I erased the rest."

"You erased it?" Austin asked, the disbelief clear in his tone. Why would a pervert like Joe film himself with a woman only to erase it later? It made no sense.

"Yeah, I...uh...felt bad."

"You felt bad?" Austin repeated, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he finally turned to glare at Joe across the room.

"Yeah, I did, man," Joe pleaded. "I really liked her, you know. And I felt bad about the other day and so I erased it. I just kept that part as a reminder."

"You're going to erase it now," Austin whispered, moving away from the computer and gesturing to Joe to make quick work of disposing of the footage.

"Hey, it's my video," Joe whined, crossing his arms like a defiant two-year-old.

"Filmed without her knowledge or consent," Austin said softly, his tone menacing. "I believe that's a crime."

"Right, you're right. I'll erase it. No problem," Joe said, moving to the computer and trashing the file in seconds flat. "There, it's done, no hard feelings."

"No hard feelings," Austin said, glad that the look on his face wiped Joe's tentative smile from his face.

"I mean, it's not like I don't have my memories," Joe said, his tone just the slightest bit taunting.

And that was all it took to shatter the last of Austin's self control.

He crossed the room in seconds and threw Joe up against the wall, his forearm against the other man's neck, cutting off more air than was comfortable. Joe sputtered and struggled, his legs kicking wildly, but the feel of the other man's sharp kicks to his shins was nothing compared the pain that was coursing through his chest, somewhere in the vicinity of his heart.

"You will never speak of this again, you will never speak to *me* again, period. If you so much as look at me in the hallway, I'm going to make you very, very sorry," Austin said, before dropping Joe to the floor and striding from the room.

He had to get out of that room, away from Joe and that damned computer before he did something that he would really regret.

Austin fled down the hall and slammed his own door behind him, unable to believe he had lost control of himself so completely. Joe had done nothing wrong, except, of course, film his encounter with Wren without her knowledge. Wren had seemed willing enough, if not overly enthusiastic. But the sight of Joe touching her had driven him over the edge. He'd stopped thinking logically and had acted from pure animalistic rage. He'd never known that he could be so fiercely possessive of another person, filled with a jealousy he hadn't earned the right to feel.

They barely knew each other. Wren didn't know what he did for a living, and he didn't even know her last name, for god's sake. He had no right to feel that she belonged to him, or to feel so thoroughly owned by her. But he did feel it, god help him, felt like he would be a broken man until Wren was back. A part of him was missing. She was that part, that missing piece.

Collapsing on the edge of his bed, Austin felt his heart twist at the sight of the still-rumpled sheets. They'd been too starved after the night and day of lovemaking to bother making the bed before they went to dinner. Besides, Austin had assumed they'd be right back between the sheets as soon as they finished restoring their energy with a little steak and red wine. He'd never thought that anything could keep them from it, keep them from each other.

"Shit," he said, shocked to find himself fighting tears. He swallowed once, twice, forcing the lump in his throat to disappear. He was a full-grown man, a Southern man no less. He never cried. He hadn't cried when his father had left his mother, hadn't even cried when Ella was burned, he wasn't about to cry now over a woman he had known intimately for less than two days.

"The bitch," he muttered, trying to get angry, trying to force himself to hate her. After all, what kind of person would run to the first available warm male body and fuck his brains out just because she'd misunderstood a situation? Couldn't she have tried to talk to him, yell at him, slap the shit out of him?

No, she'd probably realized that none of that would hurt him the way sleeping with Joe would. She'd been angry, had thought that he was happy to see Ella carrying what Wren assumed was his child. Surely he could understand her urge to seek revenge, to try to hurt him as much as he had apparently hurt her?

But he *couldn't* understand. He couldn't justify her actions. She should have trusted him enough to let him explain. If she'd really loved him, no matter how new or wildly impulsive their love had been, she would have discovered the truth of the situation before running off into Joe's arms. But she hadn't.

Could he have lived with a woman like that? Could he have loved and trusted and nurtured a relationship with someone who would run off and screw around with someone else the second they had a fight or a misunderstanding? He knew immediately the answer was no, but he wasn't so sure about the last question that plagued him.

Could he live without her?

He honestly didn't know, but as he stripped the sheets from the bed and headed down to the laundry to wash the scent of her from his life, he knew that he would have to try. He would have to convince himself that she'd been nothing more than a dream, that looking into her eyes didn't make him feel like the man he'd always wanted to be, that the feel of her body around him wasn't the purest bliss he'd ever known.

He'd concentrate on work, on moving out of this hellhole of an apartment complex. He'd remove himself from everything that reminded him of her and maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to forget that a part of his soul was missing, a part that he would never get back.

Chapter Thirteen

Eight months later...

Austin shrugged on his coat and grabbed the keys to the workshop. He was the last one out again today, but all the hard work was paying off. He had to forge fifteen more Viking swords for a film shooting off the coast of Maine and then he'd have completed all his work obligations. He'd finally be free to leave New York City and all its painful memories behind. The last few years had been some of the roughest of his life, and he was more than ready for a fresh start. Preferably a fresh start in a place where the female of the species was a little less emotionally hazardous—as if such a fantasy existed.

A cool spring breeze whipped through his hair and he turned up his collar against the chill. Winter just didn't seem to want to let go this year. March was never a warm or sunny month in the city, but they'd had actual snow showers the past two weeks in a row. It was almost enough to convince him to head back to Texas. Sure, his extremely large, over-involved family was a pain in the ass, but you couldn't beat the climate.

Or you could try to track her down, see if she stayed on the east coast, maybe –

"Stop it." He'd started reprimanding himself out loud every time his thoughts turned in that particular direction. It was enough for the other guys at work to start looking at him a little strangely. Austin figured they could look all they wanted, he'd be gone soon anyway, and maybe he'd serve as a living warning to any of the schmucks dumb enough to believe in love at first sight.

Speaking of love at first sight...

Austin froze at the corner, the breath knocked from his body as the front of the apartment complex came into view. She was there. He'd fantasized about this moment more times than he could count, but after eight months he'd started to lose hope of ever seeing that fantasy become reality. He'd been so sure that he'd never see her again, that he took a second look and a third, to make sure this wasn't a case of mistaken identity.

Her hair was a little longer, nearly brushing the top of her ass, and the lines of her body were partially obscured by her bulky sweater, but it was Wren. There was no doubt about it. He didn't even need for her to turn around to be certain, but turn she did, as if she sensed his presence from a block away.

Her mouth flew open as their eyes met and a thousand different things were communicated in the space of an instant. Sorrow, pain, regret, fear, hope, need—there were so many emotions in that deep blue gaze. But there was only one way that Austin could respond to any of them. Before they talked, before they cried, before they screamed at each other or whatever the hell else they were going to do, he needed her. He needed to feel her close, needed the touch of her lips, her hot skin pressed against

his. The loss of their physical connection had torn out a piece of his soul, a piece that he wanted back — right now.

She stood eerily still as he stalked slowly towards her. He could feel the tension that hummed in the air, see the uncertainty warring within her. Was he going to kiss her or shake her? She wasn't sure, and damn him, but the sight of a little fear mingling with her desire did it for him. He'd never hurt a woman, never wanted to hurt a woman, especially Wren, but for some reason her obvious anxiety made his cock even harder, made it difficult to keep his pace slow and even. He wanted to run to her, to pull her against him and demand her sexual submission, but this moment was too precious to rush.

He actually slowed his pace as he got closer to where she stood, enjoying the way she began to shift uncertainly on her feet as one hand flew up to her mouth. He didn't remember Wren biting her nails when she was nervous, but then maybe he'd never seen her nervous. There was so much he didn't know about her, so much that he couldn't wait to learn.

"Austin, I —"

"Don't talk." He didn't give her a chance to disobey, but reached out and claimed both of her hips in his hands, pulling her into him. Immediately he moved one hand to fist in her hair, forcing her neck back, her mouth up to meet his. Her breath rushed out through her slightly parted lips with a sigh, a sigh that he swallowed with a brutal kiss. His tongue demanded admission into her mouth and she gave it willingly, meeting his thrusts with hunger, mating her mouth with his. He waited until small, needy moans sounded from the back of her throat before he pulled away, biting down on her bottom lip with sufficient force for her moan to turn into a hiss of pain.

"You bastard! What are trying to do? Bleed me?"

"What if I said yes? What if I said I wanted to turn you over my knee and tan your ass until you screamed, wanted to tie you to my bed? What would you do, Wren? Would you run, the way you did the first time? Run to Joe and let him fuck you?" Austin had no idea where the words came from, they were so out of character, but they just poured out of him, louder than he'd intended. He was glad no one else was on the street, that the entire neighborhood was oddly abandoned, not a sound but his voice to break the unnatural silence.

"No, I wouldn't." The look in her eyes was defiant, but the way she softened in his arms told him the words were true. She would let him do whatever he wanted to her, would take whatever punishment he felt fit to dish out as long as they could be together again. The knowledge was almost enough to wipe away the last of his anger...almost.

"Then let's get upstairs."

"Austin, please, can't we talk, can't we —"

"Get your ass upstairs," he said, delivering a swat that wasn't entirely friendly, but that made Wren's eyes darken nonetheless. He wondered if this punishment wouldn't be as sweet for her as it was going to be for him. She hadn't seemed to mind a little pain

the first time they were together. But then, would he really want her to suffer? He got off on giving her pleasure as much as taking his own, more even.

There were upstairs in seconds. Austin couldn't even remember how they got there, but suddenly Wren was sitting nude in the middle of his bed, her hands crossed in her lap awaiting his direction. He stood at the end of the bed, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and a look he knew conveyed how long he'd been waiting to have his woman back where she belonged. Slowly he joined her on the bed, forcing her beneath him, pinning her to the sheets with his rock-hard length between her spread legs.

"Austin," she moaned, arching into him, her nipples already hot, tight against his chest, more than a little excited by the game they were preparing to play.

Even with the thin covering of his briefs, he could still feel how wet Wren was becoming. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her. Austin smiled against her lips as he realized exactly how to punish his wayward love.

Just as he couldn't quite remember climbing the stairs, he couldn't pinpoint the moment he'd risen from the bed and gone to his closet to fetch a handful of ties, but they were suddenly there. He threw the majority onto the bedside table, but the thickest, a black silk tie, he kept in his hand. The look in Wren's eyes before he slowly tied the makeshift blindfold on her was almost enough to make him forget the damn thing altogether. She looked hungry, for him and only him, and he couldn't wait to make sure her appetite was thoroughly sated.

"Roll over."

"I prefer this side facing up," Wren said, gasping in surprise and then groaning as he captured one of her nipples in his mouth and sucked – hard.

"I don't care what you prefer." Austin raked his teeth over the tip of her breast even as he took her other nipple in his hand and rolled it roughly between his fingers. He pinched hard enough to sting the sensitive flesh, then moved to ease the pain with slow, sensuous strokes of his tongue. He repeated the process again and again, alternating between her breasts until she was writhing beneath him. Her hips bucked wildly into his, but he carefully lifted out of range whenever she arched upward. He wanted this to last, to be an erotic lesson in patience that she wouldn't soon forget, and that wasn't going to happen if he let his cock get too enthusiastically involved.

"Please, Austin, I want –"

"I don't care what you want."

"That's a lie," she panted, fingers tangling in his hair. "You care, you care too much. That's why you're so angry, isn't it?"

"I'm not angry."

"You're right, you're not. You're hurt. Austin, please let me –"

"Time to tie your wrists. Roll over." Hurt was the last thing he wanted to talk about. He'd spent the past eight months hurting, the next few hours were about healing, reconnecting and fucking the woman beneath him until she remembered why

his should be the only cock anywhere near her pussy. If she was still capable of conversation, he obviously wasn't doing his job.

Austin flipped Wren over onto her stomach without asking a third time. She resisted at first, but then willingly lifted her arms to the top of the bed where he secured them with two more ties. Despite her initial reticence, she seemed as excited by what they were about to do as he was, her breath coming noticeably faster by the time he finished knotting the restraints around her wrists.

"Too tight?"

"No."

"Good," Austin grunted before he began to make his way down towards her ankles. He took his time, pressing kisses to the back of her neck, letting his tongue trace a path down the hollow of her spine, his hands trail down the curve of her waist. When he reached her ass, he let his teeth explore her alabaster skin even more thoroughly, biting down just hard enough to leave small red welts. He took his time choosing each place that he marked her, letting his hot breath play across her skin before first tongue, and then teeth became better acquainted.

"Lie still," he ordered as she wiggled beneath him, rubbing her thighs together in response to his attentions. He could smell the unique, purely female scent of her arousal becoming thicker in the air, and it was all he could do not to spread her legs and feast on her pussy. But this wasn't about quick satisfaction, for either of them.

Instead, he spread her wide and let his tongue trace a teasing trail up the inside of her thigh until he was close, so close, to tasting her before he retreated. He repeated the same on the other side as he massaged the sensitive skin of her thighs, cursing himself as he watched the pink lips of her pussy plump and a fresh slickness begin to dampen the curls around her sex. He wanted his tongue in there so badly he could practically taste her in his mouth.

"Later," he mumbled against the sinfully soft skin of her inner thigh before flicking his tongue, just once, over the pink nub of her clit.

"Austin!" she cried out his name, her voice colored with the beginnings of what he wanted to hear — desperation.

He smiled against the hollow at the back of her knee and continued kissing his way down her body, until he reached her slender ankles. Spreading her just a little wider, he tied both ankles to the footboard, blessing his decision to buy the mission style furniture with the rows of parallel slats.

"Now I've got you secured. I wonder what I should do with you?" Austin asked the words casually, idly, but followed them up with a swift, sharp smack on Wren's ass with the flat of his hand.

She cried out and arched her spine, trying to bend her knees to lift her hips, but the restraints kept her from that much movement. He could see what she was aiming for, however, see how she struggled to present him with her pussy in a primitive invitation to take her from behind. God, he wanted to take her up on that invite more than she

knew. His cock was already throbbing uncomfortably, the head so fully engorged that it pulsed an unhealthy purple. The desire low in his belly had become almost painful, and the thought of ramming into the soft, slick folds of her sex was enough to make his body scream for an end to this game.

"Please," she moaned, her hips starting to roll against the bed in small, grinding circles, as if she would seek her own release against the covers bunched beneath her.

"Don't you dare come until I tell you," Austin said, arming the threat with two swift slaps on the sensitive spot where ass met thigh. She cried out in response and wiggled even more vigorously.

"What if I can't help myself?" The slight note of fear in her voice didn't fool him for a second. She was enjoying this game, and not trying nearly hard enough to make him believe that she wasn't. If he were really the type to crave authentic dominant and submissive sexual play, he might be annoyed, but all Austin felt was relief, excitement and a healthy dose of gratitude.

He stretched himself over her body, letting her take his weight, the crevice of her ass cradling his cock, and brought his lips to her ear. "Do you know how much I love you? How much I love that we're so perfect together? That there's nothing we can't try, no experiment in bed or out that would be too extreme as long as I got to hold you in my arms when we were done?"

"I love you so much, Austin. I'm sorry, so sorry."

"Don't tell me you're sorry, Wren," Austin said, lifting her hips with one arm and positioning a pillow underneath. "Show me."

He thrust into her with one long, smooth stroke, echoing her cry of pleasure with his own once he was buried in her slick heat. His fingers dug into the soft swells of her hips as he felt her pussy tighten around him. She was close, so damn close, and so was he, but he wasn't going to come until they finished this game, played it out the way it needed to be played.

"Show me," he repeated, starting to thrust slowly in and out of her tight channel.

"How can I show you when I can't even use my arms or legs?" She sounded a little frustrated and started to struggle against her bonds as she did her best to push back into his thrusts.

"You're doing a pretty good job right now," Austin said, his voice thick, not wanting to think too deeply about why watching her squirm for freedom beneath him was so powerfully exciting. It awakened something primal, some ancient mating instinct that enjoyed a little struggle from his partner, that wanted to bend down and take the nape of her neck in his teeth as he fucked her. Before he could second-guess the urge, he bent down, kissing her neck before he trailed his tongue to where he wanted to be.

"Yes." She hissed the word as his teeth took a firm grip on her shoulder, and squirmed even more when he changed his leverage. His strokes became shallower, but

faster, sharper, jabbing into the bundle of nerves deep inside her that he knew would bring her as close to completion as he was.

"Are you ready to come on my cock?" he breathed into her neck.

"I'm close, so close. Just touch my clit, Austin. Touch it and I'm going to come."

Austin almost did exactly as she asked. He was as desperate for her release as for his own, but something stopped him. The part of him that was still playing the game didn't want to make it quite that easy for her, or himself.

"You've got a pillow between your legs," he said, slowing his thrusts, knowing he had to if he was going to make her do this the hard way. If he kept pumping into her, kept hearing the soft little grunts she made as she pressed back to meet him he was going to come before she did. And that was unacceptable, completely unacceptable, even after nearly eight months without sexual contact of any kind.

"It's not enough, Austin, it's —"

"Make it enough," he said, thrusting harder until her hips sank deep into the pillow with each sharp penetration. The thought of how long he'd been without a woman, how he hadn't even been able to enjoy a casual affair after what Wren had done to his heart strengthened his resolve. He wanted her to come, but he didn't want it to be easy.

"Okay, okay." She said the words in a soft, desperate voice and began to wiggle against the pillow as he fucked her from behind. The sight of her ass moving, struggling towards release as he sank in and out of her dripping cleft was almost too much, but he held on, waiting for those mewling sounds she was making to evolve into the cry of satisfaction that he longed to hear.

"Come for me, Wren, come," he commanded as he felt her nearing the brink and his own thrusts grew progressively swifter, harder, deeper.

"Oh please, I'm almost...*please*," she mumbled, increasing her efforts against the pillow, the tension so clear in every line of her body that Austin decided it was time for her torment to end.

"Come. *Now*." The directive was accompanied by two fingers sliding around her hip, down to where the nub of her clit was standing at attention, far past ready for his stimulation.

She screamed out her release seconds later, arching her ass back into his cock until he was completely encased in her throbbing channel. Austin threw back his head and joined her cry of release, his orgasm almost painful. His balls ached and things low in his belly clutched with a ferocity that surely wasn't healthy. God, it had been so long, too long without the only woman who had ever made him feel bliss like this. He hadn't known his body was capable of such pleasure before Wren, and that made it all the harder to move on to something casual, meaningless or ordinary after she was gone.

Now, thank god, he wouldn't have to.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear. He rested his full weight on her back, but she was still breathing steadily. He wasn't hurting her, which was a good thing since

the thought of moving at the moment seemed impossible. He couldn't ever remember feeling this spent.

She laughed in response and snuggled closer, seeming to sink into the mattress, making Austin decide it was time to move whether he had the energy or not. With a sigh he rolled to his side, his cock sliding from her wet heat. He brought his hand to the small of her back and then let it smooth down over the curve of her ass, but even that gentle pressure seemed to make Wren's body heavier. She sunk a little further into the cotton sheets and his heart lurched in his chest.

"Wren?" Austin sat up, his sexual contentment quickly turning to fear as Wren made no answer, only sunk deeper, faster, swiftly being swallowed alive by his bed. It was impossible, what he was watching, it could never happen, had never happened, it was almost as if –

Austin sat up in bed, sweat rolling down his chest, the telltale evidence of his dream drenching the front of his briefs. A dream, another damn wet dream. He couldn't believe it. It had seemed so real, *she* had seemed so real. He could still remember the smell of her, the taste of her skin.

And you always will. You'll never forget her, she'll haunt you forever, even in –

"Shut up," he ordered his subconscious. Ignoring the horrible tightness in his chest, Austin went to the sink and filled a tall glass of water, downing it in one long, chugging drink. Hydration was important, especially when you planned to get yourself back to sleep with a little aid from Mr. Jim Beam.

His whisky consumption had seen a marked increase in the past few months. But his gym wasn't open at two in the morning. Only exercise and alcohol seemed to have any effect in easing the horrible craving for her that lived with him day and night, itching under his skin until he felt like an addict denied a fix.

"To you, Wren." He toasted the air, a grim look on his face as he tossed back a few fingers of the sharp, woodsy liquor and poured another drink.

He would forget her, he would move on. Whether it took another hundred days and nights or two hundred, he would find a way to kill her memory, to forget that such a woman existed.

Right, and then you'll sprout wings and fly.

"Shut up." Austin took his second drink and went to turn on the television. Time to silence his damned inner voice with late night reruns of horrible sitcoms he hadn't even enjoyed when they were new. Torturous, but not as bad as lying awake in the dark while his mind flipped through his memories of Wren. Memories that were far too few for how deeply she'd touched him. Still, they were enough to break his heart a second time when he realized those memories were all he'd ever have.

Chapter Fourteen

Wren sighed with pleasure as she collapsed onto the fainting couch just delivered from the antique store down the street. She'd known her house wouldn't be completely furnished until she had a fainting couch placed squarely in front of the first story window of her new brownstone, and this afternoon she'd finally found the perfect one, a faded blue number from the 1920s. It put the finishing touch on her cozy nest.

The home had been ridiculously expensive, San Francisco real estate being some of the most desirable property in the world, but Wren didn't care. She'd been saving the fortune she had inherited from her father for the day when she finally had her real life back. When she'd seen the house, she'd fallen in love immediately and known that it had to be hers. It wasn't a castle, but it would be the perfect place for her little prince to grow up.

Wren laughed out loud as the baby did a flip within her belly, seeming to like the idea of being a prince. Of course, Wren would do her best to make sure he grew into a worthy prince, the kind of man who would be gentle and kind as well as strong and confident. A man who would have a sense of humor, but know when to stand firm, a man like the father he would never know.

Wren flinched a little, as she always did when Austin ran through her mind, but managed to put the pain aside. She was becoming an expert at living with a piece of her heart missing. She'd learned to concentrate on her son, on the future, even though her body, mind and spirit ached for Austin more and more each day. She had thought it would get easier, or at least start to get easier, time healing all wounds and all that, but it hadn't. It just got harder and harder and –

Quickly, she turned her thoughts back to the baby. Safe thoughts, she had to keep thinking safe thoughts or she knew she would succumb to a kind of sadness she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle. At least not handle and be the kind of mom she wanted to be.

A mom to a prince, though he would never rule. Ravendell had long ago converted to a democracy, but he would be invited to all the ceremonial royal functions and would have his lineage recognized. He would be a person who the people looked up to and she wanted him to be worthy of the honor.

Wren felt her smile return as she rose to get some tea in her bright, sunny kitchen. She still couldn't quite believe her baby would be able to claim his heritage, even though he would never be able to tell anyone that his mother was actually a name in the history books, or that his grandfather had been a king who lived over three hundred years ago.

It had been easier than Wren ever imagined to claim her true identity, or at least a close facsimile of that identity. Melonia had produced documents that traced the modern day Wren's lineage back to an ancient ancestor, a "cursed" princess who had been considered nothing more than a legend until that point. Modern genetics had done the rest, making it possible to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was a long-lost member of the royal family. The people of her country had welcomed her back with open arms, thrilled that she could not only speak an ancient form of their language, but had also dedicated her life to historical studies.

Wren felt a little swell of pride at the idea that she was quickly becoming one of the leading experts on the customs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She sometimes felt a little guilty for her unfair advantage, having actually lived during the times that other scholars had only read about, but then, she *was* using her knowledge for the benefit of others. So her doctorate had been obtained with the help of a certain witch. Magically matriculated or not, she still knew she was doing good work for her students and historical studies in general.

She'd been working at several local colleges and universities for the past six months and loved teaching more than she could have imagined. It made her feel intelligent, mature and necessary. She relished going into work each day for the first time in her long life. For the most part, the students were bright and curious, and there were a few that she had even come to consider friends.

Three girls in her Berkeley class were throwing her a shower next weekend. They wanted her to have their baby presents before spring break, just in case she had the baby before they returned from their vacations. Wren smoothed her hands over her distended stomach and smiled as the baby kicked beneath her palm. It was almost time, she'd be taking off the rest of the spring and summer terms to be with Stephen, the name she had chosen for her baby boy, in honor of his grandfather.

She would miss teaching, but couldn't imagine leaving her munchkin with a nanny even for a few hours until he was at least four-months-old. Wren had taken a keen interest in babies since moving to San Francisco and it seemed to her that the little things were just too fragile for the first few months to be handed over to anyone but their mother or father.

Father. There it was again, the word that brought Austin's face to her mind at least a hundred times a day. He would have been a wonderful father, there was no doubt in her mind. She supposed he *was* already a wonderful father to the child he and Ella had created. Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest, as it always did when she imagined Austin with his new family. She'd grown up a lot in the past eight months, probably more than she had in the past two hundred years, but she still couldn't help the jealousy that haunted her.

She wished more than anything that she could let Austin know that Stephen was going to be born, that she could tell him how much she still loved him, that she could beg him to come be with her, to choose her instead of Ella. But she'd made her decision

and she had to stand by it. She was giving Austin a chance at a happy life, without her or their unplanned baby as complications.

Besides, if he'd really loved her he would have come after her, wouldn't he? Her name and picture had been in the papers. A long-lost princess was a fairly big deal for the American tabloids, at least until some teen pop star got pregnant by her third cousin—which wouldn't have been a big deal at all in Wren's time, but seemed to horrify the modern media for months. Regardless, it would have been easy enough for Austin to find her if he'd been so inclined. Obviously he hadn't, so she continued to work to keep him out of her mind and her heart.

Wren took her tea back to the front room, settling onto her fainting couch and sipping the hot beverage slowly, enjoying the way the late afternoon light filled the room. She was glad that the days were getting longer. There had been times in the cold, short days of winter when her spirits had really sagged, and she'd felt lonelier in her new home than she'd wanted to admit.

But Melonia had shown up at the end of January bearing baby presents, and had helped distract her for several weeks. Wren had enjoyed her time with the witch more than she'd expected, and couldn't wait for her next visit. It was the last thing she would have ever thought could happen, but they were quickly becoming good friends. Melonia fit in wonderfully in California, much more than she ever would have in New York. No one batted an eye at her tendency to wear full period costume when she got nostalgic for the "old days"—the really old days.

Wren had enjoyed talking about old times with the witch. It had been nice to finally have a friend with whom she could be completely herself, as odd as that self might be. They had discovered they had a lot of other things in common, as well, including a mutual weakness for fine dining that kept them busy sampling the fare at some of San Francisco's most famous restaurants.

They'd also walked in the parks, bundled up for a boat trip across the bay and even gone dancing one night, despite the fact that Wren was six months pregnant at the time. She'd felt her fun and sexy self again for a few hours, and had even been asked out by the friend of the man Melonia had captured for her evening entertainment.

Wren had refused, though it had been flattering that a man still found her interesting, despite her obvious "baggage". He'd seemed like a very nice person too, the kind of man who understood that sometimes people made mistakes and who respected her for going through with motherhood on her own. But Wren knew that she wasn't ready to date anyone yet, and might never be ready.

Geez...she was horrible. She was still a young woman, at least physically. She might still meet someone, find another man to share her life with.

"Right, and then hell will freeze over," she muttered into her tea.

She felt her brow furrow as she once again debated the wisdom of refusing Melonia's casual offer to check in on "Stephen's father" as she called him, honoring Wren's request that Austin's name never be mentioned. Right before she'd left, Melonia

had hinted that she would find Austin and make sure that he and Ella were happy, just to put Wren's mind at ease about her decision. But Wren knew better than to give the witch her blessing to start meddling.

Melonia tended to use her magic to arrange things to her satisfaction. Wren wasn't completely sure it was a conscious process, but whatever Melonia thought should take place had an alarming habit of coming to pass. She might say that she was simply going to check in on Austin, but in truth she would probably cast a spell on the man. He'd be possessed by the sudden urge to make a trip to San Francisco and seek out a certain princess, and she'd be horribly embarrassed. The last thing she wanted was Austin coming to her out of magical coercion. If he came to her, she wanted it to be because he loved her, because he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

No, Wren had had more than had her fill of magic and enchantment, she simply wanted to live out the rest of her days as a relatively normal human being. As normal as a formerly enchanted member of a royal family –

"Shit!" she suddenly cursed into the quiet house, vaulting from her chair as quickly as a woman who was eight months pregnant and holding a cup of hot tea could vault. She'd entirely forgotten about the royal reception.

"Where is my mind?" Wren scampered into the kitchen and dumped her cup in the sink. Pregnancy hormones – great for filling a gal with prepartum contentment, bad for remembering anything. Melonia had warned her about "mommy brain", but Wren had assumed it would set in after the baby was born. Wrong again.

She climbed the stairs to her room faster than she had in weeks, and began burrowing about in her closet. She knew she had a black maternity cocktail dress in there somewhere. She'd bought it a few weeks ago, thinking it would do for the reception if she didn't find anything better. But then, in the midst of preparing to leave her classes in the hands of a substitute, she'd completely forgotten to go looking for another.

"Aha!" It was cuter than she remembered, with a nice satin ribbon right above the belly. And she'd actually managed to locate it in less than ten minutes, a new record for her overstuffed walk-in.

A look at the clock revealed it was only six. Wren sighed with relief as she realized there was still time for a shower since her hair could definitely use a wash and blow-dry. She started the water and hung the dress inside the bathroom, hoping the steam would dispense with the few wrinkles that creased the satiny fabric. She didn't have the time or energy to set out the ironing board. Dashing back to her room, she began to search her lingerie drawer, praying that she'd find at least one pair of hose without a run down the back.

"Why aren't you dressed yet?" a voice gasped from behind her. Wren squealed and jumped a foot in the air before she spun around to see Melonia standing on the other side of her bedroom, seemingly conjured up by her thoughts of her a second before.

"Geez! You scared the crap out of me," Wren said. "You're going to send me into premature labor one of these days."

"Sorry." Melonia smiled, not looking sorry at all. "But I thought you'd be leaving in a few minutes, I expected to find you all decked out for the ball."

"It's not a ball, it's a cocktail reception and dinner where a few people are going to speak," Wren said. "I figure it won't matter if I'm a little late for the cocktails, it's not like I can have a martini. Hell, I can't even eat unpasteurized cheese." The rules for pregnant women had certainly changed since her time—when women in confinement had a few ales with their dinner to help strengthen the child.

"It's bad form to be late for your own party," Melonia chastised. "Especially a royal party."

"Since when do you give a fig about royalty?" Wren asked, her eyes narrowing. Something was going on. Melonia had made her disdain for royals abundantly clear, dubbing Wren one of the few princesses she could stomach without a stiff drink or three. Why had she suddenly become concerned with following the dictates of royal propriety?

"Give a fig?"

"I'm trying to cut down on my cussing. In preparation for the wondrous event and all that. Don't avoid the question."

"I don't give a fig for myself, but you should make a good impression for Stephen's sake," Melonia said before waving her hands towards Wren and the shower. The water shut off and Wren felt a cold wind sweep over her body. She was about to shiver when the wind disappeared and she found herself clean and dressed.

"Now then, that's better." Melonia smiled smugly.

"I hate it when you do that, it feels unnatural."

"But you look great."

"I enjoy taking a shower, hot water is very relaxing."

"Off you go. There's a car waiting downstairs."

"What is this, eye makeup?" Wren said, looking in the mirror, approving of the tasteful updo Melonia had chosen for her hair, but unsure about the touches of kohl on her lids. She'd never been able to master the art of eyeliner, even in three hundred years of makeup application.

"It looks fabulous, dramatic with your fair skin," Melonia said, dismissing her concern and shooing her towards the stairs.

"It's not too slutty?" Wren asked, grabbing her small clutch bag and examining herself once more in the mirror.

"You're eight months pregnant," Melonia sighed. "You couldn't look slutty if you wanted to. You look beautiful, elegant and composed, the perfect princess. Now get out of here before I carry you down the stairs myself."

"All right, all right," Wren said, unable to repress a small snort as she imagined the petite Melonia trying to lift her and her enormous belly.

"I guess I'll see you when I get home?" Wren asked as she moved to the front door, grabbing her black wrap in case the spring night turned colder. "You are staying for a while, I assume?"

"I'll be here for the big event," Melonia said with a noncommittal shrug.

"The big event isn't for another month," Wren reminded her, once again feeling the sneaking suspicion that Melonia was up to no good.

"Please," the witch sighed, rolling her eyes skyward. "You really need to work on learning to trust."

"And you really need to work on not reading my mind whenever you feel like it," Wren said, sticking her tongue out at the witch as she made her way carefully down the brick stairs to the car that was waiting for her outside.

"Right," Melonia said with a mischievous smile. "Old habits die hard."

Wren harrumphed, but nodded her thanks to the driver as he helped her into the back seat of the black limousine. Melonia could be a pain in the ass, but Wren was grateful that she was helping her to arrive at the event both on time and in a true princess fashion. Wren didn't want to hurt any of her new relatives' feelings, she'd just spent too many years as a single girl to give adequate attention to the details of her newly reclaimed royal status.

The car pulled away and Wren smiled as she settled back against the leather seats. Tonight she'd finally regain her true place in the world. She was once again a princess, a woman with a family and a history, as well as a future filled with purpose and meaning. It would have been everything she'd dreamed of, if she only had a prince by her side to share it.

Hell, who was she kidding? She didn't want a prince, she wanted Austin—just Austin—and no one else.

"But you can't have everything," Wren said, forcing herself to keep her chin up and her mind on the exciting evening to come. This was her life, and she wasn't going to ruin the night by allowing herself to fantasize about a man half a world away.

* * * * *

Melonia watched the car drive down the steep San Francisco street before dashing back inside, using her magic to tidy the house and add a few touches to Wren's cozy bedroom. The woman had taken a turn for the matronly when choosing the décor for her boudoir. Understandable, considering Wren firmly believed she'd be alone for the rest of her life, but inappropriate for what Melonia hoped would be the romantic finish to tonight's royal event.

"There, that should do it," Melonia said to herself, gazing with satisfaction at the champagne-colored silk bedroom set that she had arranged on Wren's bed, complete

with at least a dozen pillows. When one was pregnant, sex was so much more comfortable with a little well-placed padding.

A few candles and an arrangement of fresh flowers completed the atmosphere of sensual elegance. Melonia congratulated herself on her creation. There was no way the two newly reunited lovers would be able to resist a night of passion in this room, despite the fact that Wren was just about as pregnant as a woman could be.

That is, they wouldn't be able to resist if Austin used the ticket that she had placed in his hand. He'd been skeptical, extremely skeptical. She'd had to pull out all the stops to convince him of the truth, but in the end she'd left the decision in his hands. After all, she'd promised Wren that she wouldn't use magic to send Austin in her direction.

And she had kept that promise. She hadn't used magic...at least not directly. It hadn't been her fault that the man had needed a little supernatural convincing...

"What is wrong with you?" Melonia demanded, glaring down at Austin from the top of the front steps, hands on her hips, outrage clear in her voice.

"Excuse me?" Austin asked, cautiously addressing the woman who acted like he'd just pissed in her window planter. He squinted his eyes in her direction, and ran a hand down his face. He knew he'd been working way too hard, but was he really starting to forget people? He blinked a few times and then opened his eyes wide. Nope, he didn't remember her, but she was certainly still there, and looking mad as hell.

"Where have you been for the past eight months? Don't you realize you're wasting precious time?" the woman demanded, her hands on her curvy hips and her wild black hair swirling about her with a life of its own. He might have considered her beautiful if he was able to think of any woman but Wren, or if she didn't look like she'd enjoy ripping his still-beating heart from his chest.

"Excuse me," Austin said impatiently, not in the mood to deal with any crazies today. He'd been in a bad mood since the dream that had awoken him two nights before, and he didn't see that mood improving by engaging in conversation with a lunatic. "You must have me confused with someone else."

He tried to step around her and enter the apartment building, anticipating another lonely night spent boxing up the last of his belongings. He still wasn't sure where he was moving, the housing market in New York being too pricey for his budget. But he had finally finished up at work, and was moving his things into storage tomorrow, freeing himself of this apartment once and for all.

The memories of Wren were killing him and constantly meeting Joe in the hallway was almost more than he could handle and still stay sane. The urge to strangle Joe hadn't abated in the slightest in the past months, and Austin knew he needed to get out of New York before he did something he'd regret.

Thoughts of boxes and loathsome neighbors were cut short, however, when the woman on the steps moved to block his entrance. She placed two small but firm hands on his chest, halting his progress as effectively as any three-hundred-pound bouncer at

one of New York's exclusive nightclubs. Suddenly he felt paralyzed, almost dizzy. Of course, that shouldn't be a surprise. He had been working fifteen-hour days to finish up one last order for his boss before he left town. He should have been feeling lightheaded long before now, the only surprising thing was how weak he was. No one had ever been able to stop him in his tracks with a touch, especially not a woman half his size.

"I'm not confused. You're Austin Taylor, you're thirty-three years old, you work as a metal worker down the street, you're originally from Texas," the woman recited. "And you've disappointed me more than you can imagine."

"Who are you?" Austin asked, feeling a strange sense of recognition as he looked into the woman's eyes. He knew her somehow, but he couldn't for the life of him remember where they had met. But he must know her, even her voice was hauntingly familiar.

"Who I am doesn't matter," the woman said. "It's who *you* are that's important. And you, Mr. Taylor, are a man about to miss out on one of the most important events in his life."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Austin asked, ignoring the prickle of fear that had started at the back of his neck. He was not going to be bullied by a strange woman who had obviously gone off the deep end, no matter how many details of his life she was in possession of, or how familiar she seemed.

He wasn't the sort of person who responded well to rough tactics, especially in the mood he'd been in for the past several months. He'd pick her up and remove her from his path forcibly if he had to. He didn't like the idea of overpowering a woman, but this one was pushing him past his limits.

"Don't even think about it," the woman said, her eyes flashing as she took two fistfuls of his shirt and spun him around until his back slammed into the brick wall of the apartment building. As he struggled to breathe, part of him realized that this woman had read his mind. Good god, *she'd read his mind*, and was clearly showing him who had the superior strength in this situation.

He didn't know if madness could make a petite woman this strong, but his instincts told him that it was absolutely impossible, no matter how many endorphins were flowing through her body. Those same instincts also told him that he was out of his element. Whoever this woman was, he suspected that he was dealing with some supernatural force beyond his control. Too bad he didn't *believe* in the supernatural.

"We all must adjust our beliefs as we are given new information," the woman said softly, loosening her grip on him a bit. "Not to do so is not only foolish and pigheaded, but a terrible waste."

"What do you want?" Austin asked, wishing he could back away from her.

"I want you to find happiness," the woman said, stepping back a bit as if she sensed his need for space. "And I want Wren to find happiness. She deserves it more than you know."

"You're a friend of Wren's?" Austin asked, feeling a jump of pure joy in his heart just from the simple act of saying her name. Had she regretted her decision to leave? Was she coming back to New York, to him, to give them both a second chance at the happiness he knew they could have together?

God, he was pathetic. Austin firmly tamped down the hope that had swelled in his stupid heart. It didn't matter if Wren was back. She'd made her choice, she'd betrayed him with Joe and she'd left without even saying goodbye. He wouldn't take her back, even if she were here in the flesh. And he certainly wasn't going to be persuaded by this crazy woman. He was through with Wren, finished. That brief chapter in his life was closed.

"Please, you aren't even fooling *yourself*. You're as in love with her as she is with you. Just go to her," the woman urged with a small smile.

"Who are you?" Austin repeated in a whisper. She was reading his mind, there was no doubt about it now, and it was downright creepy.

"I am Melonia. I am a friend of Wren's as well as a person skilled in the magical arts," the woman said.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm a witch."

"A witch," Austin repeated slowly. "As in hocus-pocus, pointy hats and magical spells?"

"The pointy hat isn't mandatory."

"Right," Austin said, with a small laugh, despite the fact that he was still wary of the woman. She was making jokes, so he would wager that whatever or whoever the hell she was, she wasn't going to kill him.

"I wouldn't be so sure," she said, her lips twisting into a grin that was unquestionably wicked.

"That was another joke, right?"

"Mostly."

"You're reading my mind. It's disturbing."

"Here's something more disturbing—I cursed Princess Wren nearly three hundred years ago, when we weren't quite so friendly with each other. She was enchanted until you helped her break the spell. But what should have been a wonderful time in her life has been anything but, because of your stubbornness."

"What?"

"I cursed her to a life of meaningless sexuality, one-night stands. She would never have a man to love her, always be the other woman, alone in her bed each morning no matter who slept with her the night before."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand —"

"You don't have to understand, you just have to realize the mistake you've made and go to her, make this right before it's too late."

"Wren...is a cursed...*princess*?" Austin asked slowly, the words not seeming one-tenth as strange as they should have. Hadn't she seemed strangely timeless, beautiful in a way that didn't seem to belong to the twenty-first century? Hadn't there been something in her eyes, a knowing look that no girl of only twenty-one ever could have achieved? The explanation almost made sense...in a completely crazy sort of way.

Three hundred years of loneliness would make it hard to trust someone. It would explain why she'd been so certain that he would leave, why she'd broken down and wept in his arms as if an unbelievable burden had been lifted from her heart. It would also explain why she'd been so ready to jump to the conclusion that he'd chosen Ella instead of her. But could he really believe that she had lived for three centuries? Could he really believe that she was *cursed*?

"I've already explained. She's *not* cursed anymore. You helped break her curse," Melonia said. "She loves you—true love—and so the spell is broken. Unfortunately, her heart is broken as well. What madness possessed you? How could you abandon your soul mate for a woman who means nothing to you, regardless of the fact that she carried your child?"

"Ella wasn't carrying my child, and I *didn't* abandon Wren—she ran off without giving me time to explain. *And* she screwed another man."

"She didn't screw anyone, that's ridiculous," Melonia said, looking genuinely surprised. "I know that much for a fact."

"I saw a tape," Austin said, still finding it impossible to think about that tape without wanting to smash something. "It made it pretty clear what she was doing."

"I don't know the real truth behind that story, but I know that she loves you. I also know that she hasn't touched another man in eight months," Melonia promised. "If you go to her, I'm sure she can explain."

"I don't need any explanations," Austin said, despite the fact that a part of him wanted to believe anything, no matter how weird, if it meant he had an excuse to see Wren again. He wished more than anything that Wren could explain the situation with Joe away, that there had been some horrible misunderstanding and they could start over again, give their love a real chance.

But how could she explain away that tape? He knew what he'd seen. It had certainly been more logical than the conversation he was currently having. Call him crazy, but it was easier to believe what he'd seen on a hidden camera than to buy into the story of a mind-reading witch and a centuries-old cursed princess.

"This is ridiculous," the witch sighed. "If you'd just listened to me that night when I told you she was still in the building, we wouldn't be having this conversation. You and Wren would still be together, and you wouldn't be wasting everyone's time."

Austin suddenly realized why her voice seemed so familiar. Hers was the voice he had heard in his head all those months ago, the one that had started speaking to him

only hours before he and Wren had finally come together. His mouth felt very dry and the sounds of the outside world muted as his mind tried to wrap itself around the fact that he was actually talking to a real, live witch.

"There are many truths in the world that are not accepted by current notions of reality," Melonia said. "Remember, reality is always shifting. Once people thought the world was flat and that the sun revolved around the earth."

"Right," Austin muttered.

"I'm glad you're starting to see things sensibly," Melonia said, irritatingly chipper.

"None of this matters. I don't care if you're a witch or the goddamned tooth fairy. If Wren wanted to be with me, she'd be here herself."

"She wants to be with you," Melonia argued. "She's just confused."

"I understand the feeling."

"Go to her," Melonia said, putting an envelope in his hand. "Explain yourself, let her explain. By tomorrow night, you could find yourself happier than you ever dreamed."

"What is this?" Austin asked, looking down at the package in his hands. When he looked up, the witch seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Hurrying down the steps, he looked down the street in either direction, seeing no sign of the small, curvy woman with the long black hair.

Carefully, he opened the envelope, half expecting some magical potion to come wafting out of the plain unmarked package. Instead, he found a plane ticket and an invitation to a party in San Francisco. Did that mean Wren was in San Francisco? Would she be at this party? More importantly, would she really want to see him if he dropped everything and traveled across the country at a moment's notice? Would she believe that a witch had given him the tickets, or would she decide that he was a complete lunatic?

Quit asking questions and go to her.

Austin jumped at the sound of the witch's voice in his head.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Austin was soon safely inside his nearly empty apartment. What the hell did a man do after an encounter with a witch? A pragmatist at heart, he decided to finish boxing up the last of his crap. By the time he'd showered, warmed up leftovers and done a final cleaning of the place, he'd nearly succeeded in pushing the entire encounter on the steps out of his mind. Nearly.

Sleep didn't come easily. He tossed and turned for hours, fighting the urge to think about Wren, about what it would be like to see her again, to hold her, to tell her that he loved her no matter what she'd done. Finally, well after midnight, Austin slept—only to dream of a woman with bright blue eyes that danced when she said his name, and a little boy who had her porcelain skin and his wavy brown hair.

Chapter Fifteen

Wren slowly descended the stairs from the ballroom of the embassy, holding on to the long, curved banister, just in case. She'd gotten a little clumsy lately and didn't want to risk a fall. And right now, her slow pace had its advantages. The longer it took to get down the stairs, the longer she could put off taking her place of honor in the receiving line.

Her newfound family and the other representatives from her country were unfailingly kind and gracious, but Wren found herself oddly shy around them. She'd blushed bright red throughout the short speech she had given to conclude the banquet, coming close to tears as she thanked everyone for the warm reception she'd received. By the time she shook hands with each of them personally, Wren was sure she'd be a blubbering mess.

She laughed as she stepped off the last stair and moved across the room to stand by Gregory, the head consul of the embassy and the man who had been indispensable in guiding her through the evening. He looked as overwhelmed as she did, his sparkling blue eyes shining a bit as he smiled and opened his arms to her. It wasn't every day that a country found a new princess, after all, and it wasn't every day that a lonely, cursed princess found a home. If there was ever a time when a little mushiness was appropriate, surely this was it.

"My girl, your speech was beautiful," Gregory said, grasping her hands and planting a kiss on each of her cheeks. "So elegant and charming and gracious, it seems that you have been working at being a princess all of your life."

"Thank you, Gregory," Wren said, turning to smile as the line of well-wishers moved towards her. "I want to thank you again for this amazing evening. I will remember it forever."

"It was my pleasure, Princess Wren." Gregory turned to introduce her to the first couple in line, a man who was her distant cousin and his wife. Wren greeted them with a smile and kisses on each cheek.

They kissed each other vigorously, not merely the polite air kisses of other Europeans. The custom had been a little overwhelming at first, but now Wren joined in wholeheartedly. She'd always thought air kisses ridiculous, and it seemed silly to shake hands with family.

The people marched past, each taking their turn to welcome her personally, but no one paused for too long. It was getting late and by the way the wine had flowed freely during the five-course dinner, Wren suspected many of the guests were ready to retreat to their hotels for a much-needed rest. She herself was exhausted, but so giddy with excitement she felt she could have stayed up for hours.

As she bid farewell to the last people in line, Wren felt a wave of melancholy settle over her. A part of her wished she would be going back to her country with her guests. How wonderful it would be to be surrounded by friends and family, to finally be home again, to be able to be herself for the first time since she was actually a girl of twenty-one.

Wren suddenly wondered why she hadn't chosen to go home, why she was staying in the United States. She was a princess again, she had a country and a home and a place in the world, why was she insisting on remaining in exile? Was she simply having a hard time adjusting to the idea that she was no longer cursed, or was it that a part of her felt that to leave the U.S. was to truly leave behind all hope for the miracle that she secretly dreamed of?

"Princess Amelia Erin Vanderbeer, I presume." Wren jumped at the soft, slightly mocking voice coming from behind her. She'd thought the receiving line had come to an end, but apparently there was someone still waiting to wish her well—someone whose voice was achingly familiar.

"Austin?" she whispered, almost afraid to turn around.

After centuries of bad luck, it was impossible to believe that her prayers might have really been answered. She'd just been thinking of him, it was too much of a coincidence. She was imagining that she could smell the unique scent of him, feel the electricity that jumped between them whenever they were within ten feet of each other.

"Hi, Wren."

"Hi," she breathed, the air rushing from her lungs. He was here, he was really here. What the hell was she going to do?

Turning around might be a good start.

Right. Turn around.

Wren spun slowly, every cell in her body begin to sing with joy as her eyes traveled up the length of Austin's long, tuxedoed frame. Unless she had fallen asleep in her kiwi-lime sorbet, he was really here.

"Hi," she whispered again. Good god. Eight months and a million thoughts of him later, and all she could think to say was "hi"?

"Hi," he repeated, making her feel a little better. At least they were both reduced to one-syllable responses. "You look beautiful."

"You too," Wren said, feeling a blush heat her face. She couldn't remember the last time she'd blushed, but it seemed the only fitting response to him, to the way he looked.

He really was beautiful, more stunning than any prince she had ever seen. He filled out his tux in a way that made him seem born to wear black tie, but his rumpled hair provided the perfect contrast to his elegant clothes. He looked sexy as hell and more beddable than ever.

She hadn't felt the slightest twinge of a sexual desire in months, but now Wren had to work hard to keep from reaching out to grab hold of his tie and pull him to her. She

was dying to run her hands through his hair, to pull his lips down to hers so she could taste him, satisfying the hunger that had begun to burn through her veins as soon as she'd laid eyes on him.

"You really *are* a princess," Austin whispered, looking down at the floor and then back up at her nervously, a lock of shaggy brown hair falling in one eye.

A rush of heat swept through her body, tightening her nipples, making her ache for him to take her right there, right where they stood. Surely the few remaining guests wouldn't mind if the handsome man in front of her turned their newfound princess around and pushed his cock into her from behind while she braced herself against the rail of the staircase.

"I am," Wren replied, trying to stay casual, but the catch in her voice gave her excitement away. "But I'm still Wren—it's the name my family called me. When I was a baby, I used to kind of scoot around the castle on my butt instead of crawling. My mom said I looked like a little wren. The name stuck for some reason."

Brilliant, the butt scooting story. You were better off with the monosyllables.

"I like it," Austin said awkwardly, looking like he might smile before nervousness returned to his face. "So I guess that means that the crazy woman who argued with me on my steps was really a witch?"

"Melonia...oh god," Wren said, the hope that had been building in her chest crashing down into her stomach with such violence that Stephen rolled inside her. *Magical interference.* She should have known, should have known that Austin would never come for her of his own free will.

"I'm sorry, I'll make her lift the spell. I told her not to interfere. I'm so embar—"

"Wren, I'm not under any spell, at least none that I know of."

"But you're here, after all these months. Why now?"

"Your friend helped me pull my head out of my ass, but not with magic. I've wanted to be with you since the day you left. I was just being...stubborn."

"I wanted to be with you too," Wren found herself confessing. "But I didn't want to ruin things for you."

"There's nothing to ruin," Austin said. "The only person who matters to me is right here, but it looks like I might be too late."

"Too late for what?" Wren asked, watching Austin's gaze slide down to her rounded belly and then back up to her eyes.

"If you're going to have a child with someone else, I guess you wouldn't be—"

"Are you crazy? What someone else? Stephen is ours, Austin, yours and mine. I haven't been with anyone but you."

"Wren, I know about Joe. Don't lie to me. I want to work it out, no matter what happened, but I need you to tell me the truth. I need for us to be—"

"Joe? What about Joe? What the hell does *he* have to do with anything?"

"I saw a tape he made. I know you were in his room the night you left," Austin said haltingly, as if it sickened him to say the words.

"He made a tape? Jesus, what a creep."

"Well you knew that much before you went into his room."

"I went to his room because I knew it was the last place you'd look for me," Wren snapped, her eyes flashing. Love of her super-long life or not, Austin's self-righteous crap was starting to get on her nerves. "You'll have to excuse me if I didn't want to have to listen to you tell me how happy you were that your girlfriend was back in town and you were going to be a daddy."

"Ella was already married to another man when we saw her, to the father of her baby," Austin half-shouted. "I was only congratulating her. You would have known that if you'd given me the chance to explain instead of running off to jump in bed with Joe."

"I didn't jump in bed with Joe," Wren countered, then felt her face slacken as the realization of what he'd just said hit her full force. "You mean you're not with Ella? You didn't... She didn't..."

"No, I'm not with Ella," Austin said, pushing his hair off his face with a sigh of frustration. "I'm not with anyone. I can't be with anyone, because I can't stop thinking about *you*."

"You can't?" Wren asked, a thrill of pleasure shooting through her in spite of herself. A part of her wanted to stay mad, but how could she? It was hard to be pissy when your most heartfelt wish was being granted. "I can't stop thinking about you either."

"I need to be with you," Austin said, pulling her to him, running his hands possessively down her back as if he couldn't stand to be separated from her for another instant. "I don't give a damn what you did with Joe."

"I didn't sleep with Joe, you ass," Wren said, slapping at his chest even as her body pressed itself against him with a will of its own. "You're the father of this baby and the only man who's had his cock anywhere near me in well over eight months. Which is a personal record for me, I'll have you know."

"Eight months?"

"Eight months, no cock," Wren affirmed, trying not to moan as Austin pulled her even closer to him, close enough to leave no doubt that he was happy to be there.

"God, I love it when you say cock," Austin growled softly in her ear as one hand ventured scandalously close to her ass.

"So you believe me?" Wren breathed, wanting nothing more than to let him do what he would to her, screw what the remaining guests might think. But she couldn't let this go.

If they were going to be together, they'd have to trust each other and that wouldn't happen if Austin thought she'd been with Joe. She held her breath and pulled away

from him, far enough that she could look into his eyes. Silently, she sent out a prayer that he would believe her, part of her knowing that she wouldn't survive if she had to leave him a second time.

The silence stretched on for longer than was comfortable, but Wren refused to look away. Let him look as deep into her heart as he wanted, she had nothing to hide.

"I knew that son of a bitch was lying," Austin said finally, the tension flowing from his body as he smiled. Wren let out a grateful breath and held him as close as her belly would allow, feeling her heart lift as if an unimaginable weight had been removed from it. "He's just lucky that I'm going to be too busy to fly back to New York to kick his ass."

"You're not going back to New York?" Wren asked, in shock that her wildest dreams were coming true.

"Why would I go anywhere? We're going to have a baby." Austin followed up his words with a huge smile, as if the truth were just hitting him. Slowly he moved one hand around to press against her stomach, caressing their child.

"Yes we are," Wren said, heat burning through her. Such an innocent touch shouldn't make things low in her body clench, shouldn't make her pussy wet, make her clit start to pulse a frantic SOS against her black satin panties. But it did, oh god it did, and she wanted that hand between her legs with a violence that probably wasn't healthy.

"You should see the look on your face," Austin said, his voice husky, laced with the knowledge of exactly what he was doing to her.

"It's been eight months." Wren tried to make the words a joke, but failed. Being this painfully aroused wasn't funny, it was...painful.

"So I'm assuming it's okay to go home with you so we can fuck like bunnies?" Austin asked, as his erection pressed boldly against her swollen stomach.

"It's more than okay," Wren said, flicking a casual finger across his cock, smiling with feminine satisfaction when she drew a sound of need from the back of his throat. "In fact, if we don't get back to my place ASAP, I may take your cock out right here in the middle of the embassy."

"God, I love you," Austin laughed, leaning down to plant a swift, searing kiss on her lips before he grabbed her hand and headed towards the door.

* * * * *

They made it to the bedroom, but only because the limo ride was short. Otherwise, the teasing fingers that Austin had slid in and out of her wet, swollen folds would have driven Wren over the edge. She would have demanded that he replace his fingers with his cock, regardless of the fact that they were bumping up and down the steep streets of San Francisco and her belly would have surely complicated things.

Inside the entryway of the house, Wren threw her keys in the general direction of the dish by the door, unwilling to remove her lips, teeth or tongue from Austin long enough to see where they landed.

"I need to fuck you, right now," she moaned, struggling to reach the fly of his pants.

"Wait. Let's do this right." Austin scooped her up in his arms and headed for the stairs. "I assume your bedroom is upstairs?"

"I don't care about a bed. Put me down, I'm too heavy to carry," Wren said.

"You're enormous," Austin agreed. "Good thing I've been working out since you left."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a son of a bitch?" Wren asked as he put her down outside the door to the master bedroom.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're the most beautiful, sexy pregnant woman in the universe?"

"Really?" Wren smiled, reaching out to unbutton his shirt, murmuring her appreciation as she exposed his finely sculpted chest. The man wasn't kidding. He *had* been working out, disproving her belief that he couldn't get any hotter.

"Very nice," she sighed, moving her fingers slowly down his chest, brushing up and down the soft hair that ran from his pecs to his narrow waist. She leaned forward to press a kiss to his chest, letting her tongue swirl over his tightening nipple. The man tasted even better than he looked, and Wren felt her mouth literally begin to water before he buried his fingers in her hair and pulled her mouth back to his own.

"I had to do something to work out all that sexual frustration," he said before softly joining their lips, gently teasing her mouth, before finally allowing her the fierce joining of their mouths that she wanted.

"Austin," Wren sighed as she mated her tongue with his, relishing the salty taste of him as her pussy began to throb even harder with need. The feel of his chest against her breasts as he pulled her close was all the encouragement she needed to finish helping him out of his dress shirt. She swiftly pushed the shirt off his shoulders and then moved her hands to his belt.

"Not yet," he whispered, reaching around to the back of her dress and struggling with the zipper.

"Yes, *yet*," she said, undoing his belt and starting on his top button.

"I want to see you first, damn it." He let out a frustrated laugh and turned her around, kissing the sensitive skin at the base of her neck before putting his full concentration towards freeing her from her dress.

"Maternity clothes, they're just not made for easy access," Wren joked, feeling a little nervous for him to see her. She'd felt surprisingly sexy since she'd been pregnant, but would he look at her the same way? Sure, he'd said she was sexy and beautiful, but would the reality of her swollen breasts, padded body and dimply hips turn him off?

"God, you're unbelievable," Austin breathed. He finally freed her from her dress, his voice hoarse with raw need as he slid the fabric to the floor. With shaking hands, he turned her around and stood back to study her, his hands tracing down the sides of her body as his eyes moved over her with undisguised fascination.

"Unbelievable good, or unbelievable as in an alien has taken over my body and might burst through my stomach at any moment?"

"Do you really need to ask that question?"

"No, I don't." Because she didn't. Austin wanted her, badly, there was no doubt in her mind. He thought she was a pregnant sex goddess and couldn't wait to worship at her temple with his gorgeous cock.

But the man didn't seem to be in the mood to rush. His soft touch was maddeningly leisurely as he moved his hands down to her hips, his fingers teasing, darting inside the top of her panties, running under her belly, within inches of where her pussy ached for him. Wren moaned as a rush of liquid heat flowed between her thighs, her body already anticipating the pleasure of his thick fingers sliding over her clit, teasing her opening before he thrust inside her. She was so hot, her pussy swollen and throbbing with need, she suspected she'd come just from the pressure of his fingers sliding in and out of her slick folds.

But Austin only smiled devilishly at her before his hands started moving up again. Obviously he was intent on torturing her. Wren made a mental note to return the favor before her attention was once again riveted to his touch. His hands lingered on her belly for a moment, a sweet smile crossing his face before he reached around to her back, releasing the clasp on her bra and freeing her breasts.

Austin moaned with appreciation as the scrap of fabric fell to the floor, then cupped her swollen heaviness in his hands, his palms relishing the weight and feel of her before he began running his thumbs over her dusky nipples with a pressure that made Wren feel weak in the knees.

"God, that feels so good," Wren said, barely able to form words, the pleasure coursing from her nipples straight to her clit was so intense.

"Your body's even more responsive than before. Just the slightest touch and —"

"I'll show you the slightest touch." Already half drunk with pleasure, Wren swayed on her feet as she reached for the cock that thrust so eagerly towards her through Austin's pants. The man was wearing entirely too many clothes, a fact she vowed to remedy in the very near future.

"Easy, tiger," he laughed. And then he scooped her up in his arms again, carrying her into the bedroom and laying her down on luxurious bedding she sure as hell hadn't put on the bed. More Melonia, Wren suspected, but she'd get to the bottom of that later. Right now she couldn't think of anything but the man who hovered over her, love and lust mingled in his eyes.

"Take me in your mouth," Wren whispered, arching towards him as he lowered his lips to her breast. He suckled her gently, aware of how sensitive her nipples had

become. His rough tongue circled first one peak and then the other, his hot, wet mouth tightening things low in Wren's body until she squirmed beneath him, breathless and wanting.

"God, I love you," she moaned, her throat tight as he lifted his head and smiled.

"I love you too," he breathed, his breath coming as quickly as her own. "I'm only sorry I can't make this last longer, but I want you. I need to be inside you, right now."

"I want you inside of me, ten minutes ago," Wren replied, her pulse pounding madly as she watched him free his cock from his pants. His thick length was already beaded with a small tear of pre-come, swollen to the point that it was nearly purple. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen and she wanted it in her now, deep and hard and fast.

"Will you open your legs, babe? I'd love to at least be inside you before I embarrass myself," Austin said as he gripped the base of his shaft with a slightly pained look on his face.

"Is this going to be a two-minute thing?" Wren laughed.

"I'd like to say no way, but it *has* been eight months."

"Wimp."

"Spread your legs and I'll show you who's a wimp," he said, his smile tinged with something a little dark and entirely wonderful.

"I can't this way," Wren laughed, holding one hand against his chest as she reached over to nibble at his ear. Gently, she urged him onto his back. "I get a little dizzy when I lie on my back too long. The weight of the baby cuts off my circulation."

"The baby," Austin whispered, sliding off his pants with a smile as he watched her straddle him. "We're going to have a baby."

"Yes we are," Wren said, gently positioning him at the entry of her sex, unable to wait another second to have his cock inside her. "And this is how we made him. Remember?"

"Oh god, it's all coming back to me now."

"I thought it might," Wren gasped as she slid down, so full of him but wanting more, wanting every last inch of him held within her pulsing body.

"Wren," Austin groaned as she slowly sheathed him deeper inside her with a wiggle of her hips. Her engorged vaginal walls clenched around him even more tightly than before, making it a snug fit. The increased blood flow that came with pregnancy made her acutely aware of each centimeter of her molten interior, even more aware of how perfectly he filled her, stretching her with his thickness until it almost hurt.

Wren moaned and closed her eyes, her thighs trembling as electricity radiated from her clit to every nerve ending in her body. She felt alive, aware of every inch of her skin in a way she'd never known. She started riding him slowly, the intensity of the sensation building as his hands seemed to touch her everywhere, his fingers teasing her nipples, gripping her buttocks, guiding her up and down his length. It seemed as if a

hot wind were blowing through her hair, tickling the back of her neck, letting her know release was only a few fevered thrusts away. Every inch of her skin burned for his touch, aching for something to ease the terrible, beautiful pressure knotted low in her body. She was close, so very, very close.

Gasping for air, she tried to keep moving, to move faster, to brace herself against his chest, but suddenly she knew she just wasn't going to be able to manage the increased weight of her body. The muscles she was using right now hadn't had a workout since she was about fifty pounds lighter, and they were fading under the challenge. She groaned with frustration and nearly gave in to the urge to cry. She could feel him beginning to pulse and jerk inside of her, and wanted nothing more than to join him, to scream out her pleasure into his mouth as their tongues tangled together with pure abandon.

As if reading her mind, Austin pulled out, clenching his hand at the base of his cock and closing his eyes, struggling to hold back his climax. "You're going to come," he promised, his voice a hoarse growl that shivered over her skin.

"God, I want to come."

"Then come here," Austin said, pulling her down beside him and cradling her in a spoon position. Wren arched her bottom against his cock, aching for him to take her despite the fact that the position wasn't the most comfortable. But what position *was* comfortable when you were eight months pregnant? She just wanted to fuck, to come, to feel *him* coming, calling her name against her neck. Maybe even biting her neck—oh god, biting sounded good right now.

"Austin, please," she begged, grinding her hips back against him and feeling him pull away with a gasp, clearly still near the edge.

"Here," he said, offering her a small pillow from the bed. "Tuck it under your belly." Wren did as he asked, surprised that the pillow did actually relieve the uncomfortable pressure that lying on her side had been causing her for the past several weeks.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" Wren asked, casting a suspicious look over her shoulder.

"Let's just say a little bird taught me a few tricks."

"Do you have a thing for pregnant women?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," he laughed.

"I don't know how many kids you want, but—"

"I don't have a thing for pregnant women, just you. Where's your vibrator?"

"How did you know I have a vibra—" Wren started to ask, then gasped out loud as she covered her breasts with her hands. "Melonia! She isn't here, is she? She isn't talking to you telepathically?"

"Not now, in the car," Austin admitted. "It usually gives me the creeps, but in this situation I could use all the advice I could get."

"Ahh, so this *is* your first time with a pregnant lady," Wren said in a sultry voice as she reached over to pull her small silver vibrator from the drawer by the bed. She was grateful to Melonia for her advice, but glad that she wasn't snooping about the bedroom at the moment. Some things were too private to share with anyone.

"Yes, it is," Austin laughed deep in his throat, before rotating the base of the vibrator so that it buzzed on a low setting. "Be gentle with me."

"But it's obviously not your first time with a vibrator," Wren muttered with a smile, watching him expertly grip the device and guide it in a teasing motion between her breasts, over her rounded belly and then slowly, slowly, down between her legs.

All rational thought fled, replaced by unbelievable sensation. Wren arched and gasped for breath as Austin began to tease her clit in a gentle circling motion, the pleasure so much more intense than when she used the device herself. His tongue traced a searing path down her neck and he opened his jaw wide and bit down, holding her with his teeth in a gesture that felt as ancient and primal as the act of mating itself.

Wren moaned low in her throat as his other hand moved to her breast, rolling the pebbled nub of her nipple between his fingers and thumb, driving her crazy until she writhed against him, lacking only one thing to make her pleasure complete.

And then he was giving it to her, thrusting his hot, pulsing cock deep into her dripping channel. Her body clenched immediately around him, shockwaves of orgasm causing her to scream out into the empty room, her womb contracting so powerfully that her entire stomach became rock hard. Wren gasped at the sensation, overcome by the pleasure that washed between their bodies, relishing the sound of Austin's moans of release and his breath on her neck as he poured himself inside of her.

A few minutes latter, a buzzing sound finally brought Wren back to her body. She reached over and shut off the vibrator that had fallen from Austin's relaxed hand. She smiled as she placed the vibrator back on the bedside table, imagining how much she was going to enjoy sliding it under his balls, teasing his ass while she suckled his cock. She couldn't wait to see the look of complete abandon on his face that had been on hers only seconds before.

"Oohh...shit." She inhaled suddenly, surprised as her entire belly contracted, once again becoming a hard, round ball. She smoothed her hand over the tight skin, grateful to feel her muscles relax after a few seconds and to recognize the powerful kick of her baby's foot under her hand.

"Is that the baby?" Austin asked, awe clear in his voice as he moved his hand to where hers had been a moment before.

"That's him," Wren said, laughing as the baby kicked into his hand and Austin's face lit up with amazement.

"We're having a boy?" Austin asked, still smiling like a lunatic and making Wren possibly the happiest woman in the world.

"I couldn't stand the suspense," Wren said with a slightly guilty look. She was a little ashamed of herself for denying Austin the experience of knowing that he was

going to be a dad. If only she hadn't been so ready to believe the worst. Silently she made a vow that things would be different from now on, she would be different.

"I'm sorry, Austin, you know I never —"

She completely lost her train of thought when her stomach clamped down around itself again. She'd had some contractions before, but never this severe. Wren began to wonder if sex was as safe as the books and doctors claimed. Maybe they were only considering ordinary sex, not mind-blowing, vibrator-using, take-me-from-behind sex.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Austin said, turning her in his arms so that he could plant a kiss on the tip of her nose and look deep into her eyes. "We were both stupid and stubborn. We'll just have to try to be smarter in the future. Besides, I can't imagine what your past must have done to you. If I'd been in your place, I know I would have found it hard to believe that my life was ever going to change."

"So you know?" Wren asked. "About the curse and everything?"

"I'm still having a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that you're three hundred years old, but I know," Austin replied with a crooked grin.

"I told you I was old for my age."

"Now *you're* the one who's robbing the cradle."

"No, you're fairly mature for someone still in his third dec — Oh shit, ouch!"

Wren winced as a contraction tightened her stomach with sudden violence. Something was wrong. Braxton Hicks contractions weren't supposed to be this strong, or come in such alarmingly regular intervals. Suddenly she started to worry about the baby. If she had endangered her son by behaving like a sex-crazed lunatic, she would never forgive herself.

"It's the baby, isn't it?"

"I think I'm having contractions," Wren said, unable to believe what she was feeling.

"But you said you weren't due for another month," Austin said, looking as if he were feeling as guilty as she was. "Did we hurt him, did we cause this to happen?"

"I don't know," Wren said honestly, moving gently to a seated position. "But I think I'd better call my doctor."

"You stay here, I'll go get the phone," Austin said, jumping to his feet and pulling on his boxer briefs. "Where is it?"

"Downstairs, in the kitchen, but I can go with you, I'm not an invalid," Wren protested, standing up and managing three steps towards the bedroom door before a gush of water spilled down her thighs. Dumbfounded, she and Austin both stared at the water and then back at each other.

"My water broke," Wren said. Nothing like stating the obvious to bring on a wave of absolute panic. "Oh my god, my water broke."

"It's okay," Austin said, coming to her side and wrapping her in his arms, taking control in a calm and collected way. It was as if he sensed the anxiety that had just

overwhelmed her and was determined not to let her go hysterical. If she hadn't been *feeling* completely hysterical, she might have been pissed at his attitude, but right now, it was just comforting. "Sit on the bed, I'll get you clothes and something to sit on in the car."

"I haven't even packed the bag yet," Wren wailed, her head beginning to pound as the reality of the situation set in. "It wasn't supposed to be for another month. I'm not ready, I don't have my things or the baby's things. There's stuff I'm supposed to bring. I'm not ready yet, this can't be happening."

"It is happening and it's going to be fine," Austin soothed with a calming smile. "Anything you need I can come back and get for you or go out and buy. I don't know about my taste in baby clothes, but I'm sure I can manage diapers and anything else we need."

"Diapers, we're going to need diapers."

"Yes, we are."

"For our baby."

"Yes."

"That's going to be born right now."

"Hopefully not *right now* right now, but soon. It's going to be fine, babies are born a month early all the time."

"Okay, you're right. It's going to be fine." Starting to feel a bit calmer, Wren allowed herself to be bundled into a pair of pajama pants and a sweatshirt. A call to her doctor confirmed that she should be headed to the hospital, but told her that she didn't need to rush. As long as the baby was still moving everything was fine. Dr. Walters also seconded Austin's assurances that a month wasn't terribly early. There might be a few complications, they might need to keep the baby for a few extra days in the hospital, but the chances were still overwhelmingly in their favor for a safe and healthy birth.

Safe and healthy, the two words she always wanted to come before the word birth. She would have also liked painless and stress-free, but Wren was a realist, at least when it came to adjectives.

The doctor's words calmed her considerably, however, and she actually began to feel a bit of excitement as she threw underwear and extra pajamas into a bag. In also went the tiny blue layette that Melonia had brought for the baby several months past. Wren hadn't bought any other clothes yet, feeling that it was unlucky to purchase too many things for her son until he was born.

It was an old superstition, left over from centuries past, but one that had stuck with her for some reason, maybe because she had lost her own mother to childbirth. It had been hard enough burying her mother and stillborn little brother, but at least they hadn't had to disassemble a nursery that had been lovingly prepared for the baby. Shivering, Wren pushed the dark thoughts from her mind. She didn't live in such dangerous times anymore. She was lucky enough to be giving birth in the days of

modern medicine, epidurals and incubators, with a loving man by her side. She was going to be fine and so was the baby.

Fourteen hours later, that cheery thought came back to haunt her.

"More weight, add more weight," the doctor was yelling at someone, but Wren couldn't see anything from behind the sheet that covered her belly like a crime scene the cops didn't want the civilians to look too closely at.

"But her ribcage is pretty small, I thought—"

"More weight, push him out, we've got to get him out." The doctor cut off the voice Wren now recognized as belonging to the nurse who had just come on shift a few hours ago. Whatever the hell the doctor wanted her to do, Wren prayed that she would do it. Get Stephen out, get him breathing before she lost her mind.

Her breath came out in a sharp gasp as she felt one of the nurses throw all her weight against the top of her ribs, rolling down her body like one of those devices that squeezed the toothpaste to the end of the tube. It hurt like hell, despite the fact she knew she was supposed to be numb from her epidural, but she would put up with anything, any pain, as long as Stephen was born healthy and breathing.

She was exhausted, terrified and more helpless than she'd ever been in her life. Austin sat next to her, smoothing her hair, but looking just as terrified and helpless as she felt. The baby's heartbeat had become dangerously slow and from the look in her doctor's eyes and the way they had rushed her to surgery, Wren knew that things didn't look good. As she heard the C-section continue behind the blue curtain, felt hands tugging at an opening in her skin that never should have been there, she closed her eyes and sent out a prayer, pleading that her son would survive.

After minutes that seemed to stretch on for hours, Wren felt the tugging motion of the doctor pulling the baby free. Desperate for information, she looked into Austin's eyes, seeing them glued directly to her face. He was staying with her. He could have stood and looked over the curtain, could have seen for himself the condition of the baby, but he was staying her with her.

"We'll see him for the first time together," he whispered and Wren felt her throat tighten as they both held their breath, waiting for the slightest sound to be uttered from the other side of the blue cloth.

"Well, it's a boy. No ultrasound mistakes," Dr. Walters finally belted out in a voice that Wren knew was meant to tell her that everything was going to be fine. As if on cue, Stephen began to wail at the top of his lungs, sounding remarkably hearty for a premature baby.

"He's all right," she cried, laughter and tears mingling as Austin pressed a kiss to her lips.

"Thank god," he said, sounding as relieved as she did before he continued in a voice loud enough for her ears only, "and thank god you waited a few centuries."

Wren nodded in response, knowing that he'd been thinking the same thing she had. If she'd lived out a normal life in the eighteenth century, she and her son would both have died in childbirth, just like her mother. Not for the first time since she met Austin, she suspected that there might have been a method to the madness of being a cursed princess. Some benevolent force might have been looking out for her all those years, helping her keep going until she found her true love, until it was safe for her son to be born.

The cynical woman she had been wouldn't have believed in such good fortune, but one look into the hazel eyes next to her reminded her that her whole life had changed. Not only was she not cursed, she was probably one of the happiest, luckiest people on the face of the earth. If she hadn't been numb from the neck down, she would have pinched herself.

Seconds later, their baby, wrapped tightly in a blue-and-pink-striped hospital blanket, was held up to her face. Though the rest of her body had been numbed for the C-section, Wren could still move her head to take in the tiny creature. At the sight of his wrinkled little face and wide, squalling mouth, she knew she was a goner. For only the second time in her life, it was love at first sight.

Epilogue

"Are you sure we can trust her with him?" Austin asked, sounding only slightly concerned as he and Wren stood on the porch of their beach house and watched Melonia disappear towards the ocean. Stephen gripped one of her hands tightly as he toddled uncertainly next to her.

"She had a son of her own, Austin, I'm sure she knows what she's doing," Wren teased, reaching over to ruffle his hair. "Don't you think this hair is due for a cut? It's getting positively mullet-ish."

"You love my mullet, woman," Austin growled, making Wren laugh as he swept her into his arms. She shot him a look that let him know how much she'd like to see said mullet nestled between her legs in the very near future.

"Don't risk our son's wellbeing because you're horny, Wren. I thought I knew you better than that, I thought—"

"Will you shut up? I told you, she was a mom."

"What, a few hundred years ago? I bet her skills are rusty," he teased, nibbling a searing trail from her ear down to the base of her neck and back again. If there was one thing having a one-year-old had taught them, it was to seize the moment when they had the chance.

"Well, I could call her back, say we've changed our minds about letting Stephen spend the night at her bungalow," Wren said, pretending to pull away from him and move towards the steps that led down to the sand.

"Like hell you will," Austin said, running to catch her and throw her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Wren squealed with laughter and took advantage of the opportunity to give his delicious ass a few appreciative squeezes as he carried her into the bedroom of the house they had rented for the week.

"Are you fondling my ass?" he asked, flipping her onto the bed and moving over her in one smooth motion.

"No, now I'm fondling your cock," Wren said, a decidedly naughty look in her eye as she reached down to rake her fingernails over the bulge in his jeans.

"No, *now* you're fondling my cock," Austin repeated, an answering smile appearing as he freed himself from his jeans and guided her cool hand to his hot length. He closed his eyes to savor the moment, amazed once again that their lovemaking continued to grow hotter each time they took their pleasure with each other. Even a teething one-year-old who woke them five times in the night couldn't put a damper on their mutual lust.

"I want you, husband," Wren whispered, shimmying out of her bathing suit and smiling at how right the word felt on her lips. The quiet ceremony that afternoon had been beautiful, attended by a few friends. Stephen had been with them before the priest, remaining remarkably quiet as long as Austin held both him and his blankie in his arms.

"And you'll have me, wife," Austin growled, returning her smile before he slid himself deep inside her, stopping only when he felt the entrance to her womb at the tip of his cock. When he was buried to the hilt, her throbbing sweetness surrounding him, he paused, stroking his thumb down her face and planting a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

"I know you do. Love me," she whispered, answering his words before he had a chance to say them. Damned if the woman wasn't becoming telepathic.

"Do you know I love you more every day?" he returned, dropping a kiss on her forehead and then another on her nose, holding back the urge to thrust inside of her until she realized how much she meant to him, how much she would always mean.

"I do." Wren reached up and ran a soft hand down his face. "I'm going to love you for the rest of your life, until we're both old and saggy and missing some of our teeth."

"Not the most romantic thing I've ever heard, but it'll do," Austin breathed, beginning to move inside his wife until they climaxed together, their souls becoming one in a way that only true lovers could.

As Wren felt her body clenching around Austin, every cell drawing him closer to her, she knew that the bliss of being with this man had been worth the wait. All three hundred years of it.

About the Author

Anna J. Evans is a multipublished author who thinks romance is sexier with a sense of humor. She loves reading and writing paranormal romantic adventures and is thrilled to hear from fans. You can visit her website, email her, or join her Yahoo group (Anna_Evans_lolsexy-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) for free reads, the latest publishing news, and monthly member-only give-aways.

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