

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Gamble
of a
lifetime

Tricks
and
Treats

EILEEN ANN BRENNAN

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gamble of a Lifetime

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GAMBLE OF A LIFETIME

Eileen Ann Brennan

Dedication

To Diann for your unwavering encouragement.

To Mike, Andy and Elizabeth for your support, understanding and love.

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Zorro: Zorro Productions, Inc.

Chapter One

"Holy cow! You sure know how to set the scene for a party!" Lauren O'Toole stood on the expansive dock and stared at the whitewashed smokestacks of the massive nineteenth century riverboat that were silhouetted against the night sky. The soft glow of candlelight flickered from every window on all three decks. Wall sconces on the boat's outer walls illuminated the decks further. Even the moon had cooperated. The bright, shining orb made the artificial light superfluous except in the deep shadows.

"No one can accuse us of not putting on the best show in town." Sara Carter snagged two champagne flutes from a passing waiter and handed one to Lauren. Lauren grinned and accepted the glass from her best friend. "I wanted a Mississippi riverboat for this year's Halloween party and Darrel couldn't find one fast enough. This one was recently discovered and restored."

"Must be nice to have a man so head over heels for you he'd do things like this." Lauren sipped her champagne. "Not that I'll ever know."

"Oh, stop it. Just because that last creep wasn't the catch of the century is no reason to think the world's at an end. I promise, you are going to meet someone tonight who will rock your world. You're going to forget all about what happened and have a wild knock-your-socks-off Halloween night!"

Lauren gave her friend a grateful smile. "You're right. Even if it's just for tonight, I am going to party my brains out and have the night of my life."

Sara lifted her glass in a salute and gave a wide smile to a passing vampire and his vampiress. "Not exactly keeping with the theme, are they?" she muttered. "But then, it would be boring if everyone dressed the same."

Lauren glanced around at the crowd of costumed people waiting for the signal to board the riverboat. French maids, sexy witches and scantily clad fairy princesses along

with a few yummy bare-chested pirates and other imaginatively costumed people nibbled appetizers and imbibed from the many temporary bars set up on the dock.

"Don't worry. It looks like you'll have more than enough riverboat gamblers, captains and saloon girls. In fact, there are enough Kentucky colonels here to stock every fried chicken place east of the Mississippi."

"Don't forget the big contest before dawn. It will be up in the casino." Sara glanced up to the third tier of the riverboat and frowned. "They'd better get the lights on in that casino or we're going to have some very unhappy gamblers." She returned her attention to Lauren. "Anyway, the contest... We have some fantastic prizes for best costume, scariest costume, sexiest costume. You know the drill. It will be awesome so don't miss it."

A loud horn drowned out further conversation and they drifted with the rest of the merrymakers onto the Annabel Lee, the pride of Natchez. Lauren lost sight of Sara when Zorro swooped in, threw his cape around her and whisked her away.

That would be Darrel. Boy, Sara sure lucked out when she landed that hunk.

Within minutes the riverboat belched a huge burst of smoke, the paddlewheels churned the murky water and they were cruising down the river.

A large, steroid-enhanced body in a medieval executioner's costume jostled Lauren. Her breath caught in her throat. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Skintight black leather pants and a skullcap mask that covered his head and eyes but left the lower half of his face bare comprised the costume. His naked chest gleamed with a fresh coat of oil and his full lips curved into a sardonic smile. He stared down her dress, ogling her breasts.

"Did you forget? You invited me." The executioner's smile widened.

"Invited!" Lauren fought to bring her temper under control. He wasn't going to ruin another night. "That was before you decided to hump that sleazy waitress and before I kicked your sorry ass out. I would have thought you'd at least have the sense to stay away from my friend's party, you lowlife."

“Easy, babe. You don’t want to create a scene, do you?” He leaned forward and traced his index finger across the tops of her breasts. “Just because you had a little tantrum and threw my ring at me doesn’t mean it’s over. I’m not done with you, lady. Have you forgotten? You’re mine and nobody tells me to get lost.” Grabbing her arm, he dragged her into the shadows behind a wrought iron staircase and pushed her against the white clapboard of the riverboat’s cabin. He pressed himself full against her. One hand slid down her bodice, his rough fingers kneading her breast and pinching her nipple.

“Let me go!” She thought about screaming but didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten to her. She could handle Max. He wouldn’t do anything in such a public place. He was only trying to scare her and exert his male superiority...again. Squirming to put some distance between herself and the solid erection that pressed into her stomach only seemed to excite him more. With her free hand she tried to yank his disgusting paw out of her dress. How could she ever have thought she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this jerk?

“You think you can hide from me? Ignore my calls? You think I’m gonna put up with your smart-ass attitude?”

“Leave me alone! It’s over, Max!”

“It’s not over, babe. It will never be over between us. I own you.”

A long-fingered, finely boned hand clasped Max’s wrist and pulled it from her dress. “If you’ll pardon my interruption, sir, it would seem the lady is not entirely amenable to your advances. Perhaps you would care to direct your attentions elsewhere?” In one swift motion, the stranger twisted Max’s arm around his back and pulled him away from Lauren. Freed from Max’s hold, she leapt aside.

“What the —” Max attempted to jerk his arm from the newcomer’s grip, but it must have been stronger than the slender fingers indicated. The stranger slowly pushed Max’s arm higher. His jaw clenched and the lower portion of his face turned a mottled

red, visible even in the dim light from the candles. A low growl passed his lips and he went limp. "What the fuck?"

"You'd best watch your language in front of the lady. We wouldn't want to show any disrespect, would we? Now, why don't you try some of the amusements inside and enjoy the party? I would most sincerely regret having to throw you overboard. You never know what dangerous species you'll happen upon down there." The stranger's smooth Southern drawl and genteel words were in direct contrast to the fierce hold he had on Max. He wrenched Max's arm higher still until Lauren thought it would snap. Max grunted and tried to pull away but was held immobile.

"Do I have your word as a gentleman you'll leave the lady alone for the remainder of the evening?"

Max's face was a picture of sheer rage as he turned menacing eyes on her. In the dancing candlelight they gleamed pure hatred through the holes of the skullcap. Sweat rippled down his sinewy chest, which billowed with outraged anger. She shivered at the thought of how she'd once thought this man and his huge, muscle-corded body exciting. Now she felt nothing but fear, tinged with a thread of contempt.

"I repeat, sir. Do I have your word?"

The stranger apparently was not the least bit intimidated by Max's size. Max shot another quick glower at her then nodded. The stranger's hand came away. Max caught himself before he fell to the deck. He rubbed his arm and glared at her. "I'm not done with you." Shifting his eyes to her rescuer, he lifted his chin in challenge. "Or you, either." With a final menacing glance at them, Max whirled and was gone, lost in the crowd now milling about the main deck.

Lauren turned slowly and, looking up, found herself captured by two of the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. They seemed to register her every movement, her every thought, while all she could do was try not to lose herself in their midnight depths. Without warning amusement crinkled at their corners, sending a shiver of anticipation through her.

She dragged her gaze from his long enough to notice that the man before her had coal-black hair cut a little too long—or more likely it was the result of several missed appointments at the barber shop. High cheekbones and a chiseled nose over a lantern jaw that looked like it had seen more than one altercation with a wayward fist caught her notice.

“That was a rather dramatic introduction, wasn’t it? Allow me to present myself. Ashton Claymore, former Captain, CSA, now a lowly gentleman of chance, making his living through luck and, dare I say, skill.” He swept a courtly bow, covering his heart with one hand.

Lauren stared, disbelieving. She never would have pegged him as a bouncer if he hadn’t rescued her two minutes ago but then security guys came in all different forms these days. With that quick response to her rescue, he had to be here in some official capacity. Darrel and Sara’s parties leaned a little on the wild side so it wouldn’t be the first time Darrel had hired private security to keep an eye on things.

He certainly played his role to the hilt. Where had Sara found such a devastatingly handsome man? His unrelenting stare had shivers racing down her spine and a need to know more about him welling inside her. Could this man be the one to rock her world tonight? He certainly had the initial qualifications—right down to the sexy Southern drawl and antebellum manners.

If he was taking his costume’s role this seriously, she may as well too. After all, she was dressed for the part. Sara had suggested they come as saloon girls. The many layers of royal blue and black flounces on her skirt and the center slit cut to just an inch below her crotch—not to mention the low-cut striped bodice which resisted all her attempts to tug it a bit higher—pegged her as a saloon girl who made her living on her back instead of serving drinks.

She batted her eyes, trying to play the part of a sultry nineteenth century floozy. “I’m Lauren. So you were a captain huh? What is the CSA? I’m not familiar with all that military alphabet soup.”

He raised an eyebrow. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Lauren." He lifted her hand to his lips, but at the last second turned it over and kissed the center of her palm. The slight tickle of his tongue on her hot flesh and thoughts of where else he could use that tongue set her blood to boiling.

He looked into her eyes without releasing her hand. "CSA? Why, I refer to the Confederate States of America. Has it been so long ago that it is forgotten?"

Boy, he's good at role-playing. "Um, no, I guess my mind is a bit slow after that encounter with Max. Thank you for saving me."

"No thanks needed, Miss, only doing what's necessary." He used her hand as a lever, drawing her nearer. "Now, may I fetch you a libation from the bar to help forget the incident?" The deep voice was no more than a whisper in her ear, so close she could feel the loose wisps of her hair stir with his breath. Feeling the heat of his body just a scant inch from hers, she forgot how to speak.

"Or perhaps you would prefer something delectable from the buffet?" His smile widened. "Although the chef would need to work magic to concoct something more delectable than what is gracing the floor before me."

Lauren, never the shy sort, nonetheless felt a trail of heat work its way up her chest, not stopping until her cheeks burned at the outrageous compliment.

"I beg your pardon, Miss, if I've embarrassed you, but you must know that when confronted with hair the color of a blazing forest fire and eyes as blue as the deepest sapphire it is impossible for a man to notice anything else."

Lauren opened her mouth, a glib retort on the tip of her tongue, then pressed her lips together in what she hoped was an inviting smile. This man could make the evening *very* interesting.

Where most men masquerading as Southern colonels and gamblers had dressed in white suits, this man's was mortal sin black, richly adorned with an emerald green brocade vest. A thick gold chain indicated a watch in the vest pocket. The only other adornment was a blood-red rose in the lapel buttonhole.

His gaze settled momentarily on her cleavage, and she hoped her nipple had not crested the top of the bodice as it had done several times on the ride to the dock. His eyes widened and she knew her dress had betrayed her yet again. Somehow the urge to tug it up didn't materialize. She rather liked that smoldering look in those devilishly charming eyes.

"Perhaps a glass of champagne would be nice...to start." She patted her hair, which she'd let hang free down her back, and reveled in the direction his gaze had taken.

His eyes shot to hers. "Yes...indeed...champagne." He glanced around and signaled to a waiter, then helped himself to a flute from the offered tray. When he gave it to her, Lauren brushed the pads of her fingers against the back of his hand. He arched an eyebrow, his fingers lingering just a moment too long before releasing his hold. "Are you here to try your luck at the gaming tables or are you one who needs the instant gratification of the, what are they called? Oh yes, the one-armed bandits?"

"Instant gratification has its advantages." Lauren sipped her champagne. "But then, the long, slow rhythm of a game has its appeal too."

This time the gambler raised both his eyebrows. "I see. Then perhaps we should try both?"

Chapter Two

He is simply too yummy to be true. Lauren gave him a wide smile, understanding and agreeing with his proposal. Always prepared, the little pouch snapped to her belt held a generous supply of condoms – courtesy of Sara in the hopes that an opportunity such as this presented itself.

She raised the flute to her mouth, letting the bubbles tickle her nose before she drained the shimmering liquid. Ashton's smoldering eyes never left hers. He reached for her glass and placed it on a nearby table. Still standing in the shadow of the stairs, Lauren slid a hand up his lapel to the rose. His chest was solid and the muscles bunched beneath her splayed palm. His quick intake of breath emboldened her to continue masquerading as the loose saloon girl. She fingered the flower. "I love roses."

The corners of his mouth quirked up into a sliver of a grin and he slid his fingers down the length of her arm, resting them lightly on her hand before removing the blossom. Smoothing back her hair, he tucked the rose behind her ear. "Though magnificent, the poor bloom pales when compared with your beauty."

Lauren's knees quivered. He may be too good to be true, but for now he was all hers and that suited her just fine. She took a deep breath and mentally thanked Sara for railroading her into joining the party tonight. Sara and Darrel's parties had a reputation for providing the perfect opportunity to explore new boundaries – total abandonment without repercussions or commitment. Tonight was for adventure, mystery and getting over a bad relationship. Lauren was more than ready to jump into the game and become a player.

"If you won't accept my thanks for rescuing me, perhaps there is some other way I can show my appreciation?" Taking a deep breath, she edged further back into the

darkness, guiding his hand to the underside of her breast. If he was any kind of a man he'd take it from there.

In the faint glimmer of candlelight, his lips twisted into a knowing smile and his thumb pushed its way down the front of her dress. Oh, he knew what to do all right.

"The soft bud transforms to a hard pebble with the simple touch of my finger. What will it do with the touch of my lips?" He dipped his head and ran his tongue across the top of her exposed breast while he continued to tease her nipple. In one swift motion he freed both her breasts, the loose neckline of her dress offering no resistance. He leaned back, inspecting his handiwork. "Such creamy flesh should not be hidden from an admirer's view...or his lips." He bent and continued to gently nibble the tops of her aching mounds.

A rush of white lightning shot from her breast to her clit as his tongue moved lower to twirl around the sensitive tip of her nipple. She ran her fingers through his silky hair and arched back to offer up more of herself. He laved her areola, teasing and flicking his tongue close but not touching the distended bud. Her heart pounded against her ribs and her clit pulsed in anticipation of that moment.

She opened her eyes to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Had she really lucked out and found such a skilled and sexy partner so quickly? She wanted to feel his lips, his tongue, his hands on every inch of her heated skin.

Across the deck, near the railing, the moonlight illuminated several other couples—a Roman with his toga around his hips fucked a French maid who seemed to have misplaced most of her uniform. A court jester and a Scottish highlander took turns lapping the pussy of a fairy princess who lounged with spread thighs in a deck chair. Up and down the deck costumed figures engaged in delights or watched as others performed. Lauren couldn't look away. The sights fed an inner fire. She wanted to feel this stranger's hot, hard cock buried up to the hilt within her.

"Please," she moaned, allowing her innermost desires to take hold. "Please." She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the sensations of the moment. Her clit throbbed

with the unbearable need to feel his fingers separate her folds and massage her aching nub.

Finally his mouth surrounded her nipple, the strong pull of his lips drawing deeply. His hard suckling sent tremor after tremor between her thighs. Had she not been braced between him and the wall she would have slid to the floor in a puddle of desire. He lifted his head and regret shot through her even as the erotic sensations continued to assault her body. She looked at her breast, wet and reddened from his attention.

"I was correct. Nothing the chef could concoct would be as delectable as this." He cupped one breast and lowered his head to place a soft kiss on the tip of her nipple. "Nothing."

His hand traced a path from her breast to her hip where it lingered a moment before moving lower to cup her bottom. A gentle squeeze and she shifted to nestle her pelvis more snugly against him. The hard press of his erection brought a thrill of heat coursing through her, a heat so overpowering it threatened to send her over the edge before he even entered her. But she wanted more. Tonight was Halloween. A night made for adventure – and mischief.

With a few evidently well practiced moves, his hand tunneled beneath the ruffles of her taffeta skirt. The scorching touch of his palm massaging her heated cheek sent a new wave of yearning to her burning pussy. She offered her lips, quivering in anticipation. He didn't disappoint her. His mouth slanted down onto hers and his hips swayed in the same rhythm as his lips – a slow smoldering waltz.

She wound her arms around his broad shoulders and marveled as her hands pressed over hard planes of sinewy muscle. He may masquerade as a riverboat gambler, but Ashton Claymore made his living through bodily labor. This body had not been manufactured in a gym, like Max's. This body had earned every inch of its sleek musculature.

In the next moment Ashton's tongue joined in the dance and led hers in a sultry tango, swirling and dipping until she thought she'd never breathe again. His other arm

held her locked to his chest, so close she could feel the pounding of his heartbeat in her own breast. When he entwined his tongue around hers and coaxed it back into the hot recesses of his mouth her entire body went up in flames. He closed his lips and sucked, first gently then with a vigor that had her clinging to him and begging for more.

His fingers slid under the band of her lacy black thong, tracing the string between her cheeks. He released her tongue and slid his lips to nibble on her sensitive earlobe. "I find your lack of adequate undergarments most distracting—and most enticing." His ragged breathing confirmed his heightened awareness of her. "It seems like forever since I have touched a woman and all others are forgotten memories now that I have touched you." His fingers slipped up and down the thin band of her thong, stroking her cheeks and delving between them.

Her heated skin thrummed with a need to feel more of him, to have more of him. Without her voicing this need, he seemed to know instinctively how to please her. Shifting his pelvis, he drew his finger across the lace at her hip and followed it to the silky thatch at the apex of her thighs. She thought she would disintegrate from his teasing. "Hmm, that's nice."

"I think so, but I believe we will both like this even more." He stretched his touch lower, finding her swollen clit.

"Oh, yeah." She could scarcely breathe. "Keep doing that." She buried her face in his shoulder, against the smooth fabric of his jacket. The sharp scent of sandalwood greeted her—sandalwood, smoke and bourbon. Inhaling deeply, she hoped to ingrain his distinct scent forever in her mind.

"I plan to, just as I plan to explore every inch of your dewy folds." His fingers played with her, sliding into her wet channel and spreading her moisture along the cleft of her folds. She rubbed her naked breasts, already heavy with desire, against the smooth brocade of his vest. Spasms of delight whipped through her, exciting every nerve ending before they centered and shot like lightning straight to her inner core.

"I believe we can dispense with these." Ashton skimmed his thumbs under the lacy bands of the thong and eased the fabric down her thighs. She shimmied and the thong slipped to her ankles.

Once free of it, she reached for his zipper but found a row of buttons. Of course. His costume would be authentic. Her fingers tunneled through the layers of his garments until they connected with her goal—stiff, hot and thick.

"Oh, Lauren, your touch is heaven itself." His groan of satisfaction was loud enough to attract onlookers but she didn't care. As she stroked and fondled his stiff erection, her only thought was to feel it inside her—slow and tender at first, then hard and pounding deep within her.

She groped and found her little pouch where it had twisted to the side on her belt and removed a condom. Better take care of business before she lost her head entirely. She held up the packet. "May I?"

His puzzled look rather surprised her but he nodded. She tore the packet with her teeth and slowly rolled the condom down his shaft. When the condom was secured, she allowed herself the pleasure of caressing his balls until he groaned with satisfaction. His mesmerizing eyes never left hers, and she noted a amused look of understanding when she finished her task. "A most ingenious invention." He positioned her against the wall and lifted her leg to his hip. "I hope you will excuse my enthusiasm, but it has been a very long time and if I don't have you right this minute, I fear I will burst."

Ashton rocked his hips forward, rubbing his cock against her belly, silently signaling for her next move. She hopped and wrapped her legs around him as his long fingers cupped her bottom for support. "Put me inside you," he groaned.

Trembling with a need she hadn't felt in ages, Lauren reached and grasped his swollen cock, reveling in its thickness and length. She explored the tip with her thumb, rubbing the tiny drop of moisture over the velvety head.

But the time for teasing had passed. She guided him to her pussy, placing the head at her opening. In one swift move he thrust deeply to his hilt, filling her so completely

she let out a small cry. She clenched him, milking him with her inner walls as a fire so bright, so hot, engulfed her, she almost came on his first stroke. Tightening her legs around his hips, she encircled his broad shoulders and held on for dear life.

A strangled moan tore from his throat. "My God, Lauren." He rested his forehead against hers but remained motionless while her muscles clenched and unclenched around his cock. Small beads of sweat formed on his brow as he accepted the full pleasure of her gift. She continued the motion until desperation welled up within her and she thought she would dissolve if he didn't move.

"Please, Ashton!" She released her inner muscles but he remained buried deep within her. "Now!"

As if waking from a dream, he lifted his head. Hovering in the deep shadows as they were, his expression was hidden from her, but his ragged breathing told her all she needed to know. His hips shifted as he oh-so-slowly withdrew his cock so only the head remained inside her. She savored the exquisite sense of loss for a moment before he swiftly thrust back inside her dripping pussy.

"I fear I can no longer restrain my passions. It has been too long and you are a temptress beyond reason." He buried his face in the crook of her neck as he drew back, then thrust himself deeply within her. He pressed her solidly against the riverboat cabin and adjusted his hands to spread her thighs wider and angle her to receive him more deeply.

His hard thrusts came one upon the next, fast and unrelenting. She answered them with her own escalating passion and tightened her hold on his wide shoulders. Her lips found the soft lobe of his ear and she sucked it into her mouth.

A tremor ran the length of his back. "What spell do you hold on me?" His hoarse words were barely audible between his jagged breaths.

His hot breath, his long fingers wedged between her heated cheeks and his powerful, unrelenting thrusts worked their own magic as they threw her into an orgasm so sharp she bucked and cried out at the intensity. With one hard thrust,

Ashton ground his pelvis against her mound. The spasms of his climax heightened her awareness of her own, sending wave after wave of delicious sensations streaming through her blood. She drifted on a river of shimmering pleasure and dreams, numb to all but her own fulfillment.

When she returned to reality, Ashton was slumped against her, pinning her to the cabin wall, his face again buried in the crook of her neck. As his breathing slowed, his hands released his grip on her thighs and she slipped her legs from his hips. Still too wobbly to stand on her stilettos, she was grateful as his hands spanned her waist to hold her steady.

"As I said, you are indeed quite the temptress." He smoothed her ruffled skirt back into place and she adjusted the neckline of her dress. His hands brushed her mound and he appeared to have some difficulty removing the condom.

"Allow me." She accomplished the task but kept her fingers on his cock. Though it was no longer swollen, she couldn't resist just one more touch of his hot, wet flesh.

After a long minute his hand covered her. "If you continue that, we will spend the entire evening right here in the shadow of this staircase and, while I appreciate the fine workmanship, I'd rather pursue our activities in a less public setting."

A warm glow spread through her at his words. She gently squeezed his balls and released them. Though she knew he couldn't see her smile, she grinned from ear to ear. He could charm the panties off a saint. "Maybe we should take a little breather for a few minutes. The night is young and I don't want to wear you out this early."

"As you wish, m'dear." The answering smile in his voice rang loudly in her ears. "Although I must assure you there is no danger of wearing me out."

She smoothed her skirt as he adjusted his clothing. She did a quick scan of the deck for her thong, but looking for a tiny piece of black lace in the dark shadows was clearly a lost cause.

Ashton extended his palm, indicating she should precede him. He kept his hand on the small of her back and guided her down the main promenade of the deck, skirting

past dancing, drinking and sexually engaged merrymakers. The candles and muted lighting provided ample shadows for those who wished to engage in some semi-private carnal adventures, but Lauren's attention was drawn to those couples who gravitated to the areas of the deck washed in bright moonlight.

They passed the vampire and vampiress she'd seen on the dock. The woman knelt before her companion, fondling and massaging his balls with both her hands while sliding his engorged cock in and out of her mouth. He didn't move but clutched the boat's railing, bracing his back as if to keep from toppling over, and stared blankly up at the heavens. Lauren halted, stopping Ashton's long strides.

Neither the vampire nor his mate noticed they had an audience. The vampiress moved her lips down the side of his cock, her tongue flicking along the length of him.

Lauren stood transfixed, waiting for the woman's mouth to reach his balls, to suck them in and lave them with her tongue. Her clit tingled and she rubbed her ass against her handsome escort, standing directly behind her.

"So you enjoy a bit of voyeurism, Miss Lauren?"

She leaned back and smiled up at him. "You never know when you'll learn something new."

Ashton placed his aroused cock against her back and together they watched the couple. A small circle of onlookers gathered and began to cheer the couple on. The vampiress sucked in the man's testicle and Lauren savored the sharp stab in her clit. She loved the sense of giving and power that came with that act, the feeling of pleasuring her lover until he groaned for mercy. She slipped her hand low and fumbled with her skirt to burrow her fingers between her dripping folds.

Ashton's hand followed hers. "Please. Allow me."

He slid his fingers deftly between the folds of her pussy, finding her aroused clit. Capturing it between his thumb and forefinger, he pinched it. She was already excited from sex with Ashton, and now the erotic show playing out before her brought on another orgasm. It came swift and hard. Lights exploded in her head. As if from a

distance she watched a few people in the gathering shift their attention from the vampires to her. Several applauded and nodded their approval when her climax overtook her.

"I admire a woman who isn't afraid to ask for what she wants." Ashton's hoarse growl brought her back to earth as he withdrew his fingers and smoothed her skirt into place. "Although I'd prefer to be a more...active participant."

She squeezed her legs together, drawing out the last little spasms. "That works for me." She returned her attention to the vampires. The woman now stood next to her partner, who had already refastened his zipper. He draped his arm around her and they turned to look out over the rippling water.

"Apparently we missed the, um, climax of the show." Ashton traced his tongue in a line from her ear to the base of her throat.

She laughed and stepped away. "You do have a way with words. Come on." She laced her fingers with his. "We're on a riverboat. You're a gambler. Let's go gamble."

"A capital idea, m'dear." They strolled down the deck, pointing to couples engaged in sex and commenting on the techniques. Lauren noted several she would like to try and, to her delight, Ashton concurred.

As fascinating as the sexual escapades were, Lauren was interested in finding out more about Ashton.

"So do you work for Sara and Darrel frequently or is this your first time?" Lauren couldn't imagine missing this man at her friends' other parties, but she'd been so enamored with Max she could very well have overlooked him.

"Sara and Darrel? I don't work for anyone." He kept her hand tucked in the crook of his arm as they ascended two flights of stairs to the main gaming casino on the uppermost deck.

"But saving me from Max... I thought you were..."

He eyed her speculatively. "I see. Actually, I came with the riverboat. Ah, I believe we've found an excellent place to lose our money." Ashton opened the door to a large, richly appointed room decorated with red velvet drapes and gold-flocked wallpaper, jammed with gaming tables, dealers and card players. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings and each corner sported a well stocked bar. With the shouts of winners, the ringing of the slot machines and the tinkling of piano keys, the noise was deafening—just the thing to keep a party lively.

So the riverboat owners provided their own security. Not surprising in this day and age. She smiled up at Ashton, anticipation fluttering through her stomach. Tonight could only get better—as long as this dashing rogue was by her side. The taste she'd had only served to fuel her appetite to explore every facet of him.

Her gaze shifted to a sign with an arrow marked "restrooms" and she suddenly became aware of a need a tad more immediate than the one she was currently pursuing. The several flutes of champagne she'd consumed were making their presence known in a most alarming way. The slick fluid that clung between her thighs threatened to dribble down her legs.

"Why don't you go in and find a card game to amuse yourself for a few minutes? I'll be right back."

His face clouded and eyes that a moment before had been openly amused turned narrow.

"Off in search of greener pastures?"

"No, no." Was that a little show of jealousy? How nice. She gave him a wink and what she hoped was a disarming smile. "If you must know I have to use the little saloon girl's room. I'll be right back."

He arched his eyebrows then bowed. "By all means, Miss Lauren, forgive my indelicate inquiry. I'll await your return by the blackjack table."

Her heart leapt at his hungry look. With a quick finger wave, she hurried in the direction the sign pointed. Before turning the corner she glanced back to see him disappear into the salon.

Finding the restroom proved to be a challenge, but she located it despite several dark passageways and many twists and turns. Upon leaving, she took a moment to regain her bearings. She needed to turn right, then left, pass by a steep staircase and then take the second left back to the casino.

A faint shuffle sounded behind her. She glanced over her shoulder into the dim hallway. Nothing. They sure could use a few more lights over here. Maybe it was only the rustle of her taffeta skirt. Picking up her pace, she hurried to the first turn. Why on earth would they put the restrooms in such an out of the way place? Her heart thudded in her chest. This was silly. She rounded the second turn. She was perfectly safe on –

Heavy footsteps hit the floor behind her. She lifted her skirts, ready to dash. A meaty hand grabbed a hunk of her hair, stopping her retreat and pulling her hard against a familiar muscled body.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going, bitch?”

“Max!”

“I told you it would never be over between us but you didn’t listen,” he hissed into her ear. “No one will ever have you but me. You didn’t let that bastard touch you, did you?” He yanked her hair, making her wince with pain. With her back pressed to his front, he lowered his mouth to her ear. She could feel the hard ridge of his erection growing, hear the excitement in his heavy breathing. “Did you?”

Powerless against his superior strength, she glanced around for a weapon, anything to give her a slight advantage, but the narrow causeway was empty of anything useful. Maybe she could brazen it out.

“Let me go! You gave up your right to question me when you fucked that waitress.”

“And she was a damn good fuck, but that’s no reason to think you can leave me. And now you’re going to pay for it.” He tightened his hold on her hair and shoved his

other powerful hand down the front of her dress, grabbing her breast and squeezing it until she yelped in pain. Fear coursed through her veins. Max had always had a dangerous air about him. Once it had thrilled her. Now it only scared her. The scent of his excitement reached her nostrils. His labored breathing sounded like thunder in her ears. She struggled against him, grasping at anything.

He caught both her hands in one huge paw and turned her, yanking the loose neckline of her costume. Bending his head, he brought his mouth down roughly over her breast. The violation was made worse by the leather skullcap. It gave the whole scene a surreal feeling, as if she were a player in some horrible porn movie.

She inhaled, readying to let out a terrified scream, but his words stopped her. "Scream and I'll bite it off. I swear I will." His teeth clamped tight against her nipple. The weight of his heavy body pressed her backward. The heel of her stiletto slipped. Her leg dangled in mid-air. The stairs! She shoved him, trying to angle herself away from the steep drop, but he continued his mauling, oblivious to the danger. His coarse lips attacked her breast as if it were his favorite dessert while he pawed her other breast with his sweaty hand.

"I thought we agreed you would avoid Miss Lauren for the remainder of the evening."

The world seemed to shift to slow motion.

Max's head shoots up, the fire in his eyes blazing even in the murky hall. Ashton's long fingers squeezing Max's shoulder, pulling him away from her. Max turning, his fist coming up. Her foot, searching for a hold. Her arms flailing, trying to find something, anything to stop her backward motion. The shock on Ashton's face as he reaches for her. Max blocking his path, a sadistic grin spreading across his face. Then nothing but air and a feeling of fatal resignation.

Chapter Three

“Oomph.” Before she even had time to scream, Lauren landed with a thud—not against bone-shattering cement or iron grillwork, but against a solid chest. Two strong arms clutched her and the fragrant smell of sandalwood, cigar smoke and bourbon enveloped her. An odd sense of relief and security settled over her, easing her pounding heart. Ah, Ashton was here.

“You really should be a bit more wary of the company you keep, Miss Lauren.”

“Ashton?” Lauren’s eyes popped open. Wait just a minute. It was impossible! He was on the upper deck, fighting with Max. No way could he have gotten to the bottom of the stairs to catch her. “What are you doing here?”

“Evidently, rescuing you yet again.” His droll words contradicted his rigid stance and the death grip that held her braced against his chest—a chest that seemed as solid and secure as a locked vault. “Are you all right? Did he harm you?”

Gasping for breath, Lauren peered up the darkened stairwell. Max was nowhere in sight. She returned her attention to Ashton. Could he have darted around her? Was it possible for him to have reached the lower deck first? How? Max’s huge frame had blocked the way. He’d still been at the top of the stairs as she stumbled and fell.

“How could you catch me? You couldn’t have gotten here first.”

“Nonsense. It was a simple matter to dash around your assailant and come to your assistance. Obviously you were too overcome with fear to notice. Perhaps you might steer clear of that gentleman. He doesn’t appear to have your best interests at heart.”

His arms tightened but she leaned back to stare into his face. His jaw was set in a hard line, almost as if he made an effort not to clench his teeth. His lips had disappeared into a thin string across his face and yet his expression was not entirely belligerent. Below an arched, questioning eyebrow, a concerned softness lay in his eyes.

The shock of barreling down the stairwell began to subside and her wildly thudding heartbeat leveled off. There was definitely something odd about her rescue...and about her rescuer's explanation. She gazed into the unfathomable depths of his coal-black eyes but found no answers there. What she did find was a steely regard that warned her he would not be providing any more information on the topic. Maybe it would be better to drop it for now and follow his change of subject. There was still too much she wanted to discover about this man and she didn't want to alienate him by pressing for explanations he obviously was unwilling to provide.

"That lunatic tries to kill me and you think he might not be looking after my best interests. What are you? The master of understatement?" She swiped her hand through her hair. Drat. Her rose was gone.

"Do not doubt that the *executioner* will receive his just retribution, but I was merely trying to make light of the situation to forestall any anxiety you may be experiencing." His warm breath tickled her shoulder and, in his arms, the terrifying incident drifted further away.

She tore her gaze from his and surveyed their surroundings. The stairwell was closer to the second level promenade deck than she'd imagined. Where above she'd been in a darkened corridor, here moonlight streamed in through white-paned windows, revealing a small, comfortably furnished lounge. A plush couch and several chairs dotted the room along with a few well placed tables. The couch appeared comfortable. Hmm, Ashton had mentioned finding a more secluded location to continue their Halloween adventure.

"I see now that you are a woman of unparalleled fortitude. It is impossible not to admire that...or many of your other attributes." Her attention jumped back to the man holding her. His gaze shifted lower and his nostrils flared. She knew exactly what had caught his attention. Embarrassed at Max's mauling of her, she quickly pulled up the neckline of her bodice, covering her sore nipple. Where earlier she'd welcomed

Ashton's interest in her breasts, now she couldn't bear the thought of him seeing the red and swollen mound.

"There's no reason to hide yourself from me, darlin'. You're as seductive and appealing as when you first boarded the Annabel Lee. From the moment I gazed upon you I had eyes for no one else." He dipped his head, whispering in her ear. "I feel obliged to repeat my earlier question. Are you hurt? Has he damaged you in any way?"

The man had a tongue as smooth as the devil himself. She released her dress and, at his concerned look, tugged the neckline to expose her breasts for his scrutiny. Her left nipple, still distended and sore, jutted out as if begging for Ashton to comfort it. She slid her hand up his shoulder and around his neck. "I am still a bit shaken. My breast feels like it got caught in a wringer. I could use a little TLC."

The feel of his strong arms holding her, nestling her against his hard muscles while he openly stared at her naked flesh, sent spasms of electricity shooting through her veins. All thoughts of Max flew away as she watched the molten desire spread across Ashton's face.

As if awakening from a trance, he lifted his gaze to stare into her eyes. "TLC?"

His look of puzzlement and concern wrapped a warm glove of affection around her heart. "TLC. Tender loving care."

She didn't think his eyes could become any darker, but now they fairly glistened with a hunger she'd never seen in any man before.

"Tender...loving...care? I would like nothing more than to provide you with TLC for all eternity... Or at least until sunrise."

Until sunrise? A stab of pain shot through her at his words. This didn't sound like he had anything long-term in mind. Not that she had thought that far ahead. But they had seemed to hit it off so well. "Um, you can put me down now." She tried to make her tone matter-of-fact but couldn't disguise the frosty edge.

"I've said something to upset you." He ignored her request and tightened his hold. "My apologies."

What was the matter with her? Ashton was a one-night stand. A Halloween treat and nothing more. She may as well enjoy what time they had on this little jaunt.

"May I suggest we retire to my cabin and tend to some TLC posthaste? It's located directly through here."

At her nod he gathered her close to him, turned and strode heavily into a wall.

"Oomph!" For the second time in ten minutes Lauren had the wind knocked out of her when the side of her body hit an unmovable barrier.

"Damn. Forgot again," Ashton muttered under his breath, staring at the wall as if it had just been erected.

Her gaze followed his, then she shifted it to stare at Ashton's shoulder. It had disappeared into the wall. She shook her head. Had the fall down the stairwell affected her perception? Or maybe her eyesight? She looked again. He hadn't moved, but stood as still as the sphinx. His hand was wrapped firmly about her upper arm but it extended as if it were growing out of the wall!

No, she wasn't mistaken. A large portion of Ashton had vanished. It seemed only her body prevented him from vanishing entirely. She struggled against his firm grasp. "I don't know what is going on here but I want no part of it! Put me down!"

"Please, Miss Lauren, I mean you no harm."

She wiggled and squirmed but he held her fast. Her gyrations did succeed in pulling him into clear view. "I didn't imagine it. You walked through that wall like it was a doorway. I know what I saw! Let me go!"

Ashton released his hold on her legs and lowered them to the floor but kept his arm firmly around her shoulders, effectively stopping any attempt to run.

"Please, let me explain."

Her legs buckled and she leaned heavily against him. He was as solid, as firm as...as...the wall! She staggered away but mustered enough strength to grab the stair

railing. "Don't you come near me you...you...whatever you are! If you're some kind of an alien, you won't be doing any anal probes on me!"

She tried to lift her foot in an attempt to run but it felt like lead and she couldn't persuade it to move. The paralyzing fear that had gripped her as she'd fallen down the stairwell overtook her again, only this time it held a tantalizing sense of anticipation. She had guessed he was a dangerous man but a man nonetheless. What kind of a man could disappear through walls?

He was at her side now, his long fingers felt like satin stroking the length of her arm.

"You're safe with me. There is no question of that. Will you let me explain?" His lips nibbled at the tender flesh behind her ear and his other hand came up to gently massage her shoulder. "Please?"

His soft tone and warm caresses wheedled their way through her fear and she nodded her acquiescence. He led her into the small lounge she'd spied in the moonlight, and she sank into the plush velvety depths of the long couch. Taking a seat on the coffee table opposite her, he held her hand and stared intently into her eyes. The passion in his gaze sent breathless shudders through her entire being. Whoa boy, whatever he was, she might be persuaded to do just about anything he wanted – anal probes included.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

She was so intent on the endless depth of his eyes she almost missed the question. "Huh? Ghosts? Like in 'I see dead people'?"

"Precisely."

"I never thought about it. I guess so." She shrugged, then eyed him skeptically. "You're not going to tell me you're a ghost, are you? Because I have tangible proof that you're a man—a real man." She raised her eyebrows, making a pointed reference to their recent sexual encounter.

He squeezed her hand. Was it to reassure her that he was a real man or to make sure she didn't bolt for the stairwell?

“Actually, for one night a year I am both. On All Hollow’s Eve, the night of my, er, demise, I return to my corporeal body, and yet I maintain some of my, shall we say, more *spiritual* attributes.”

“Your demise? What are you talking about?”

“I have walked these boards for many years, wondering why I am here when I should have gone on to my just reward—or perhaps my eternal damnation—many lifetimes ago. Could it all have been a dream? Have I merely awoken now because an angel with flaming hair and a sensuality that would make Venus de Milo hang her head in shame has graced this humble vessel with her presence?”

Holy cow. Can this guy string words together! “So you’re telling me that you’re dead and have been for a long time?” How come she hadn’t been the least bit embarrassed about having sex with him on deck but his flowery speech had her cheeks heating like a schoolgirl caught spying in the boys locker room? She stared into his eyes, eyes so earnest she’d almost believe every word that passed his lips. But...she *knew* what she’d seen. His shoulder *had* disappeared into the wall. She *had* felt the impact. Was it possible he really was a ghost? That would be a new one to her—or anybody! “So tell me, how did you meet your *demise*?”

The relief on his face made her want to throw her arms around him and tell him she’d believe any hokey story he told.

“I had the unfortunate chance to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Huh?”

“The year was 1867. As I mentioned, in the days following the war I made my way in the world through my skill at the gaming tables. Poker to be precise. One evening, after a rather victorious night, I collected my winnings and was enjoying a cheroot on the upper deck. I heard what I thought was an altercation in that same causeway where you encountered your executioner.”

A shiver ran down her spine at the mention of Max. Ashton squeezed her hands and gave her a reassuring smile. "Let your fear go. You are safe. He cannot harm you while I am here."

An odd sense of comfort washed over her. No, nothing could happen to her if Ashton was near. She gripped his hands. "Go on."

"At the sound of a somewhat alarmed feminine voice I elected to investigate the situation. Some blackguard with too much whiskey in his belly had waylaid one of the serving girls and pressed his attentions. Evidently they had had a relationship which she wished to terminate. I intervened and, er, advised the gentleman of the lady's lack of interest and suggested he depart, which he did. I thought the matter ended and bade the young woman a good evening."

Ashton stopped and shook his head. His dark hair gleamed in the moonlight streaming through the windows and she tugged her hand free to brush a stray lock from his forehead. "What happened then?"

"As I turned the corner I glanced back. The bastard—forgive me, I mean the scoundrel—reappeared in the causeway. His arm lifted. The dagger flashed in the moonlight. I realized his intent. The girl had turned away, unaware of the danger. There was no choice to be made. I hurled myself into his path to save her."

For the first time since he began, Ashton looked away. "As I lay there helpless, unable to move, I heard the lady scream and beg for her life. There was a harsh laugh and the spurt of gurgling blood as he slit her graceful throat. I recall an acute longing for what would never be...and then...nothing."

Chapter Four

A few boisterous partiers wandered past the windows, casting macabre shadows over Ashton's bent head. In an instant of fear Lauren glanced up but Max was not among them. They moved on, evidently in search of more entertainment.

Entertainment. Her eyes shot to Ashton. Entertainment. What had Sara said? *I promise, you are going to meet someone tonight who will rock your world...* So that was it! Ashton was Sara's promise! It all made sense. He really was her Halloween treat...and the trick must be all the smoke and mirrors that made her think he could disappear through walls! There was no question that Sara and Darrel could afford top-notch magicians and illusionists, and all sorts of optical effects for their party to make her think she found a real ghost. She looked at Ashton still bent over one of her hands.

What an actor! This guy should get an award for that performance! He'd actually had her believing he was a Confederate captain turned riverboat gambler. He was good, real good.

If she'd liked him before, now her heart warmed and churned for him. That he would make such an effort to give her a magical Halloween, to make her feel so special and, regardless of any role-playing, to protect her from Max, made her want to break out in the happy dance.

It was Halloween. A night for ghosts, goblins and pretending you were someone you weren't. Ashton had played his part and now she would play hers.

"How very horrible for you. So now you mysteriously appear... When did you say?"

His warm lips caressed her hand. "Thank you for understanding." His soft murmur was almost lost in the sloshing melody of the paddlewheel. "I am here always in spirit,

but regain my earthly body only at sundown on All Hallow's Eve, until the following sunrise."

Lauren giggled. This was fun! "So why do you think you're still hanging around? I mean, is it one of those unfinished business things?"

He shrugged and continued to place feather kisses on the back of her hand.

Hmm, maybe he hasn't worked out that part of his script. Better try another direction. "So you must have seen a lot in the last hundred years."

He lifted his head and the desperation in his eyes confirmed he was an accomplished actor. "One hundred and forty years, but no, I'm confined to the riverboat. I cannot pass beyond its boundaries."

"Well, once a year for a hundred and forty years. Considering the duration, you must have met and...had a good time with quite a few women."

He tossed her a rueful grin and returned his attention to her hand. "Unfortunately, the Annabel Lee was grounded for most of those years in a tributary well off the main flow of the river. It is only recently that she was discovered and restored to her former glory. In fact, this is the first expedition in a hundred years on which I have had the pleasure of meeting anyone of the feminine sex."

This was just too good to let pass. The man was incredibly skilled and, without his making any overt move, he had her hotter than Mississippi in August. "So you're saying I'm the first woman you've had in all that time?" She suppressed the giggle that threatened to bubble over.

Ashton lifted his head to stare out the window. Was he avoiding her eyes? "I must say, Miss Lauren, I find your inquiry most indiscreet...but I will answer it." He turned the full force of his gaze on her. "Yes. You are the first woman I have lain with in a very long time."

The heat from his eyes scorched her very soul. Forget about acting. This man wanted her. His consuming stare turned her blood to thick, rolling lava, sending rivulets of desire coursing through her veins. The quick sex they'd had on the deck

hadn't begun to quench her need. Without taking her eyes from his, she cautiously guided the hand he still held and placed it on her thigh. High on her thigh.

His breathing quickened and he moved his other hand to a matching place on her other thigh. "I find I can resist most things, but such a generous invitation from such a seductive woman is not one of them." He slid his fingers upward beneath her skirt. "Your skin is as soft as the richest velvet I have ever touched, as smooth as satin and twice as supple."

She shivered at his words and spread her thighs a little wider, anticipating the gentle probing that awaited her when he reached his goal.

"Wider, darlin'. A gentleman never leaves his woman wanting. In fact, it is his duty to ensure she is thoroughly satisfied in every way." He leaned forward, positioning his dark-clad knees between hers and widening his stance as his fingers inched their sensuous journey upward. Bending, he placed a kiss at the crook of her neck. His warm breath fanned her shoulder and her breasts grew heavy, the nipples taut and yearning.

Instead of joining her on the couch as she expected, he dropped to his knees and pulled her bottom to the edge of the couch. Her dress slid up, revealing her naked mound, and he pushed it higher so that she was bared to her waist. "This is what I missed the first time, the opportunity to appreciate your beauty to its fullest."

He cocked an eyebrow and directed his heated gaze at her breasts. She couldn't stop a slight smile as she read his unspoken request. Tracing a finger back and forth along the neckline of her bodice, she stroked the tops of her breasts, giving him the gift of anticipation. It wasn't wasted. His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. With each stroke she shifted the loose neckline lower. His gaze wandered between her breasts and her mound. Tingles of excitement shot through her as his harsh breathing filled the room.

"You are not only a temptress but also an accomplished tease." Using his index finger, he traced a line from her navel to the silky thatch of hair between her thighs. "Ah, but what am I saying? A woman cannot be a temptress without being a tease."

His finger moved as a lover's should—slowly, practiced and with an unerring goal. It slid lower, between her lips, and easily found her sensitive clit. She shuddered at his touch and spread her legs wider.

"So the temptress becomes the tempted." He continued to stroke her clit, circling it then skimming his finger delicately across.

"Hmm." She stopped toying with her breasts, closed her eyes and concentrated on the delicious shivers Ashton was creating.

"Ah, you're not playing fair. Will you now deprive me of the sight of your lovely nipples? My mouth is watering for a sight of them."

Lifting her eyelids, she found his midnight gaze focused on her pussy. His evident fascination sent a new wave of desire coursing through her veins. How erotic to be scrutinized and studied so completely. She squirmed at the intensity of his gaze.

"You're beautiful." His voice held that molten silver tone that set her blood on fire. "Every inch of you."

She skimmed her thumbs across her neckline, lifting and lowering it until her naked breasts were exposed for his inspection. At her movement his eyes shot up and a slight smile turned the corners of his mouth. She pinched both her nipples for him, twirling them between her thumbs and forefingers, enticing them to stand proud and erect.

His mesmerizing finger on her clit dwarfed all other sensations, leaving her on the brink of a climax. Would he make her beg? All right, she'd beg if she had to. "Your mouth isn't the only thing watering right now."

His smile grew wider and his gaze returned to her pussy. "Why, Miss Lauren, I believe you might be correct. Shall I investigate?"

She flopped her head against the back of the couch. If he didn't do something soon she'd go up in smoke.

And then she felt him. Soft at first but with increasing enthusiasm—his fingers separating her folds, a warm puff of air as he moved closer, the flick of his tongue as it

danced across the tip of her swollen nub. His mouth was featherlight one moment and then he began his exploration in earnest. She dug her heels into the carpet as his tongue trailed thickly down one side of her pussy to circle the dripping opening of her channel before sliding up the opposite side.

She came off the couch squirming but his long fingers dug into her hips, keeping her in place. He used everything—his fingers, his tongue, his lips—probing, licking, kissing until she quivered uncontrollably and the blinding, pulsing, shattering force of her orgasm overtook her.

Sagging against the couch, she tugged his shoulders, wanting him to mount her, wanting to feel his cock buried deep inside her. He lifted his head and nuzzled in her damp patch of hair.

“Not yet, darlin’. I’ve not yet quenched my thirst for you.” He cupped her cheeks, bringing her pussy up to his lips, then leisurely began his dizzying lapping again.

After her third orgasm, she needed his pulsing cock impaling her, filling her, pumping her so badly she was ready to tear his clothes off. When he lifted his head to plant a stream of open-mouthed kisses across her abdomen she grabbed his hair with both fists and yanked him toward her. “Now, Ashton, fuck me now!”

Freeing himself from her grasp, he stood and stripped off his clothes. Naked, he was a magnificent example of his sex—broad shoulders, sculpted arms, firm abs and a cock so long and thick it made her mouth water. She scrambled and tossed him a condom, watching with relish as he rolled it down his pulsing shaft.

He took the seat next to her on the couch and pulled her onto his lap so she straddled his hips. She ran her palms up his lightly haired chest. The slick glimmer of sweat and his ragged breathing told her that as nonchalant as he appeared, eating her pussy had excited him close to the breaking point. She wound her arms around his neck and rubbed his cock with her belly.

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh, what you do to me, my love. You take me beyond whatever heaven I may have wished for.”

“Who needs heaven when they have this?” She lowered her mouth and took his with all the passion and abandon that welled up within her. He returned the kiss with a ferocity that surprised and excited her. Holding her head, he angled her mouth for his pleasure. His tongue advanced, parried and retreated only to advance again in what seemed like an endless duel.

She clung to him, savoring each movement. His hands traced a furious path down her back to grip her hips and raise her. “Now, my love, join with me now!” With this hoarse entreaty, he lowered her with infinite care until the tip of his cock met her hot, wet opening. At the moment of delicious contact, he jerked his hips upward and brought her down hard, impaling her on his stiff erection.

For a moment neither one moved. Only their sharp intakes of breath and heaving chests showed they were alive. She was drowning in the endless depths of his eyes and he seemed to be caught in the same maelstrom of hers. Almost imperceptibly, she felt a minute thrust of his hips. She answered with a slight squeezing of her inner walls. The hunger in his eyes flared and the tempo of his hips increased, calling her to take in more of his essence, all of his soul.

She gripped his shoulders. Her eyes never left his as she fell further and further into him. With each thrust, he called her to a new level of passion and she readily answered, rising higher and higher until a blinding, blood-rushing orgasm broke, sending her crashing into wave after wave of pleasure.

Ashton held her hips, bucking beneath her. “More. More.” His harsh growl filled her ears as she collapsed against his chest and still he continued to drive himself deeper. “More.” He froze, and in that instant she memorized the slick sheen of sweat on his body, his distinct scent of male arousal, the deep heaving of his lungs. Then he convulsed in a spasm of thrusts and groans, releasing his thick, hot seed. She clung to him, milking him, wanting to coax out every last drop he had. He stiffened then fell against the back of the couch.

Lauren leaned heavily against Ashton, her heartbeat pounding like a rock concert in her ears. Ashton's arms moved from their grip on her hips to enfold her in a warm embrace and she buried her face in his shoulder. Snuggled against his chest, she listened to his heart beat in counterpoint to hers, producing a continuous rhythm of satiated, but not quenched, desire.

"That was quite magnificent, darlin'. I could only wish to have you like this every night." He brushed his lips across her temple then nuzzled her hair. "Every night for all eternity."

That warm glove that had surrounded her heart earlier again wrapped itself around her. After only one night, she had no trouble seeing herself and Ashton together, if not for eternity then for a very long time. Was she in love? Could she have fallen in love so quickly? She knew nothing about him except that he was a bouncer on a riverboat and an exceptional actor. Did it matter? Right at this moment, nothing mattered except being in his arms and listening to his labored breathing.

She shivered at the thought of what he had made her feel, how he had responded to her. She shivered again and tried to snuggle closer.

"You're cold." He wrapped his arms more firmly around her but a long shudder ran the length of her body. "I fear the artificially cold temperature device has been activated. It is a marvelous invention but I have yet to determine how to regulate it."

She leaned back and smiled. His boyish grin totally disarmed her. "Artificial cold temperature... Oh, you mean the air conditioner. It's probably on a central switch."

He rubbed her back in an attempt to warm her. "M'dear, you are covered in gooseflesh. I fear your rather revealing attire is less than adequate against the chill. Let me get you a blanket. He gently lifted her and set her on the couch beside him. "I will be but a moment."

Stripped of his warmth, Lauren wrapped her arms around herself and smiled as he stood. She could pull her dress up over her breasts, but she liked the way Ashton's hot gaze kept straying to them. A blanket would keep them both warm and still give him

easy access to her breasts. Besides, it wasn't every day a girl had such chivalrous attention from a gallant Southern gentleman. He bent and kissed the top of her head then turned and strode quickly away, disappearing into the wall.

She sat bolt upright, unwilling to believe what she saw—again. No, this wasn't happening. Standing on legs so shaky she didn't know how she made them move, she tiptoed to where she had last seen Ashton. She ran her palm over the wall and attempted to push her hand through it. Solid. Trying several more places, she encountered the same result. There must be a latch or a mechanism somewhere that released a hidden door.

Placing her hand on the wall for balance, she bent to examine the baseboard. Instead of a smooth surface, coarse hairs tickled her palm. She lifted her gaze to find her hand resting on a naked thigh. Craning her neck, she saw Ashton, a blanket under his arm, emerging from the wall.

She fell back onto her butt and scrambled away. Her heart rate doubled. This was no case of smoke and mirrors. Ashton *was* walking through the wall!

Chapter Five

"Are you all right, m'dear? What are you doing down there?" He strode toward her but she warded him off with the flat of her hand.

"Keep away from me! This time I know what I saw! You're some kind of a monster!"

He stopped his advance. "What are you talking about? I told you. I'm a ghost."

She stared transfixed, the import of his words crashing around her. Holy crap! He wasn't an actor! He was telling the truth! "Stay away from me!" She came to her feet slowly and backed away.

"Please, darlin', don't do this. We have such little time left. Dawn will be upon us soon and I'll lose my corporeal self. Don't waste these precious moments." He dropped the blanket and held out his arms. "Please, Lauren, come to me."

She chanced a quick glance at the door behind her. Yeah, she could make it.

"Lauren! No!"

In a flash, she was out the door and running down the steps. A ghost! An honest-to-goodness Halloween ghost!

Tugging the neckline of her dress over her breasts, she reached the main deck. Her gaze darted back and forth. Exhausted, half-naked partiers slumped in deck chairs— asleep or unconscious, she couldn't tell. The clink of the piano tinkled down from the main casino and the shoosh and clank of an occasional slot machine reached her ears. Hide. She had to hide.

A door opening midway up the deck caught her notice. It was directly opposite the gate where they had boarded the riverboat. If she hid there she could be the first one off this cursed boat and be gone before anyone noticed.

She hustled past a cowboy who wore only chaps and a hat as he leaned against the railing. A topless French maid and a fairy clad only in white gossamer wings giggled and moaned as together they serviced his impressive package with their mouths and hands. Even though his eyes were wide open, his gritted teeth and clenched fists assured Lauren she wouldn't be noticed. Forcing herself not to run, she sauntered up the deck and slid into the hallway.

Her heartbeat pounded and she stuffed a fist into her mouth to keep from crying aloud. Tears streamed down her face and, slumping against the wall, she brushed them away with the back of her hand. A ghost. She'd fallen in love with a nineteenth century ghost. A Confederate captain, no less, who was stuck on a restored riverboat because of unfinished business. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He probably wasn't supposed to die that way. Maybe that's why he was still hanging around. What did it matter? He was dead either way.

She leaned her head against the rough wood of the hallway and tried not to feel his breath on her neck, his arms securely around her, his cock buried deep inside her. How could she forget the way his eyes looked into her very soul or the way his touch carried her beyond herself to new depths of self-discovery?

A thought struck. If she couldn't have him for herself, maybe she could discover what went wrong and help him find peace. Besides, she couldn't have it end like this. She may be the most selfish person on the planet but she had to see him once more, if only to tell him she loved him.

There wasn't much time. The edges of dawn teased the graying morning light. Soon the sun would rise and he would vanish, at least until next Halloween. She stepped out onto the deck and glanced up and down. It was deserted now. The cowboy and his friends were nowhere to be seen, even the comatose bodies in the deck chairs had disappeared. Everyone must have gravitated to the casino for the big costume contest.

Where would Ashton be? The casino? No, he wouldn't be partying, not now. She'd try the salon where she'd left him. She turned. A sharp pain shot through her head and she flew backward as her hair was almost yanked out by the roots.

"I've been looking for you, bitch. Been hiding out with that fucking gambler?" Max smelled of whisky and cigarette smoke. His torso was slick with oil and sweat as he held her tight against his naked chest.

"I'm done with you. I don't want you, but I'm gonna make sure nobody gets you." Something sharp pricked her back. "Feel that, bitch? I made a quick visit to the kitchen. They have some very sharp knives just sitting around for the taking. I've got one for you and one for that fucker you've been with. First you. Then him. He should have kept his nose outta where it didn't belong. Where's he hiding?"

Max's free hand groped under her dress, between her legs. The contact of his calloused fingers against her tender clit sent shudders of revulsion through her. "You're naked! You whore! You *have* been fucking him!"

In his surprise, the pressure of the knifepoint against her back eased a fraction. It was now or never. She brought the spike heel of her stiletto down on his instep and jabbed her elbow sharply into his ribs. Max released his hold long enough for her to break free. She zigzagged down the deck, running as fast as she could in four-inch heels. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder. Max clutched his side where she had landed her elbow. His other arm drew up. Steel glinted in the dim gaslight.

She focused her attention on the dock, looming just off the bow of the boat. Jump overboard and swim for it? Right, if only she knew how to swim. Nowhere to hide. She dashed down the center of the deck to keep from tripping on chairs. Distance. Maybe he couldn't throw the knife this far. Heavy feet pounded after her. Another glance. His hand drew back. The knife soared toward her. She stumbled. Nowhere to hide.

"Lauren! For the love of God, duck!" Ashton emerged from the cabin wall and threw himself in front of her. The knife found its mark. He fell back, knocking her to the deck behind him.

"Ashton!" On her knees, Lauren scuttled to him. The knife protruded from the center of his chest. Max had landed a direct hit in Ashton's heart. Blood oozed through his vest, a macabre pattern forming on the green brocade. She bent and held his face between her hands. "Don't you dare die. Don't leave me."

A slight smile curved his lips. "How odd. If I didn't feel as if my life's blood was actually draining away, I'd chide you for thinking a ghost could actually die. I believe I may be leaving for real this time."

"No, don't die. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I believe you." She wedged herself closer to cradle his head in her lap. "I love you." Ashton showed no sign of hearing and her words seemed to drift away in the gentle sloshing of the paddlewheel. It didn't matter. She simply had to tell him. "Oh, Ashton, I do love you."

Heavy footsteps shook the deck next to her. Max! He stood over them, the other knife poised to strike.

"Isn't this cozy? *I love you. Don't die.* Not to worry, bitch. You'll be joining him in a minute."

"No, Max. Don't. You can't get away with this!"

"Sure I can. A little murder-suicide. He murdered you in a jealous rage then killed himself in remorse. They're all up in the casino. No one can see us back here—even the pilot's on the other side."

Max reached down, grabbing a hank of her hair and jerking her neck back. "It's over, bitch."

She froze as Max lowered the knife to press against her throat. She wanted to scream, to strike out, but staring into the dark holes of Max's mask she knew it was useless. Any doubts she may have had fled. Max was going to kill her.

Ashton's hand squeezed her thigh, evidently a last goodbye before she joined him forever. With a muffled thud the riverboat knocked roughly into the dock, throwing Max off balance. In one swift motion Ashton's slender fingers circled the handle of the

knife and freed it from his chest. With an upward thrust, he sank it to the hilt in Max's heart.

Max's shocked expression must have mirrored her own. He swayed for a moment then another jolt against the dock sent him toppling to the deck. Ashton fell back into her lap, eyes closed, breathing heavily.

The mantra that ran through her head came out her mouth. "Please don't die. I love you. Please don't die..." She closed her eyes, willing all her strength into him. It didn't matter that he was a ghost and already dead. She couldn't let him go.

A touch as gentle as a summer breeze stroked her cheek. She opened her eyes to find Ashton's concerned ones staring at her. His knuckles moved back and forth in a hypnotic caress. "I am not going to die, my love. That would be redundant." He sat up and kissed her gently on the forehead.

She touched his chest. Solid as ever. All traces of the blood that had stained his vest were gone. Sadness tinged with a thread of joy surrounded her. He may still be a ghost, but he was in some form alive.

He stood and helped her to her feet. "Come. We'd best get you away before my ill deed is discovered." They both stared at Max, sprawled motionless on the deck, his eyes lifeless in the executioner's mask.

"Shouldn't we at least cover him or something?"

Ashton clasped her elbow and hurried her toward the exit gate. "I'll do that in a moment. First we must get you away so that no suspicion falls in your direction. Since I will return to my spirit form shortly, I will attempt to leave evidence that I am the guilty party and have escaped."

She tugged her arm from his grasp. "I'm not leaving you."

They stood at the gangway and he opened the gate to allow her to step off the riverboat. She turned to face him. His fingers were gentle as they curved around her neck and he drew her toward him. "You're not leaving me. Evidently I will always be

here. Should you so desire, on some warm spring day, come aboard the Annabel Lee. My spirit will be with you here."

"Next Halloween! I'll see you next Halloween!"

"No!" He shifted to clasp both her shoulders, bringing his nose within an inch of hers. "No. I will not have you wasting your life for a brief encounter once a year. I am dead, Lauren. You are alive and I will have you live that life to the fullest!"

"You can't stop me from coming next year." Why did she sound like a petulant child? He was right. She shouldn't live for only one night...but she loved him. How could she bear not to grasp every minute she could spend with him?

"You're right, I cannot stop you from coming onboard on All Hollow's Eve, but I can stop you from seeing me. I must leave you with no hope for a future with me because there is none. If you come next year, or any year, I will not show myself to you. It is over."

The anguish in his voice matched the anguish in her heart. She wanted to argue, to rant, to beg, to convince him to see her. But even as he said the words she knew he was right. It was over.

Her eyes swam and she could scarcely see his tormented face through her tears. She threw her arms around his neck. "Then kiss me like you'll never see me again."

His mouth came down and devoured hers as he held her in a vise-like grip. Yes, it was the kiss of a man who loved her, a man she would never see again.

When he finally broke away he held her from him. "Go, my love. Now, before the sun rises. I must tend to the executioner."

Lauren raised her hand one last time to trace the line of his jaw, the angle of his cheekbone.

In her peripheral vision she caught sight of Max, his hand raised, clutching a knife as he charged up behind Ashton. Blood ran thick and heavy down Max's chest. More than ever he looked his role of executioner.

A scream died in her throat but her reflexes took hold. She pushed Ashton through the gate onto the dock. He stumbled but she darted after him and grabbed his hand to run to safety. He stood statue still.

"Come on, before he catches up!" She tried to pull him, but he didn't budge.

"I am on the dock."

She glanced over her shoulder. Max stood not ten feet behind them on the riverboat, bearing down toward the exit gate.

"Well, la-di-da for you. Now let's move!" She stopped and stared at Ashton. He *was* on the dock.

An angry roar reached her ears and they both turned. Max stood at the gangway poised to sprint after them, but his progress seemed to be blocked by an invisible barrier. "What the fuck is going on here?" His bellow echoed in the heavy, pre-dawn air. He opened his mouth again but was drowned out by a raucous cheer from the casino. The party was still in full swing.

As they watched, dawn peeked over the treetops behind them. Ashton clutched at her hand. "Farewell, my love. Live your life to the fullest as we have loved to the fullest tonight."

The shadows slipped away, but he held her gaze as the full force of the sun engulfed him in its glowing rays. How would it happen? Would he somehow dissolve into the coming day? She waited, her heart sinking to the soles of her feet.

"Ashton? Is something supposed to happen?"

Still grasping her hands, he stood before her, a startled expression on his face. "I don't understand."

"What the fuck?" Max's pitiful scream reverberated across the dock. Their eyes shot to the gangway. Lauren's mouth dropped open. Max had stopped beating the invisible roadblock at the riverboat gate. The blood and knife gash were gone from his chest. Full sunlight reached him and, before she could fathom what was happening, he appeared

to slowly fade into the air. At the last instant his gaze settled on her. The evil that emanated from the holes in the executioner's mask filled her with dread and she stepped closer to Ashton, snuggling against his side—his very solid side.

In the wink of an eye Max disappeared. Lauren and Ashton stood transfixed, staring at the spot that Max no longer occupied.

"Er, where did he go?" Her voice sounded as small as she felt. "Why are you still here?"

Ashton held her tighter. "I don't know. By rights, I should not have been able to leave the riverboat. *I* should have faded away, not the executioner."

"You saved my life back there. Do you think that had anything to do with it? Maybe I'm your unfinished business. You couldn't save that poor girl in 1867, but you saved me."

She smoothed her hands up his torso and around his neck. "It's after dawn. It's not Halloween anymore and you're off the riverboat. Whatever happened, I know you're as real and alive as I am."

Ashton squeezed her and buried his face in the crook of her neck. "I am alive. I'm whole again."

She stroked his hair. "I love you."

A huge shout ricocheted around the dock and doors burst open all over the Annabel Lee. Exhausted partiers poured from the ship onto the dock, engulfing Lauren and Ashton in their wake.

He lifted his head and kissed her. "I couldn't say it before, but now —"

"Lauren! Lauren! Over here!"

Lauren turned to see Sara, one arm wrapped around Zorro, the other waving. "We missed you at the costume contest. Where have you been all night?" Zorro bent and whispered something in her ear. "Never mind, Darrel says it's none of my business.

We're going to Harry's for breakfast. I see you found yourself a delicious Halloween treat. Bring him along. We can always use another devilishly handsome gambler!"

Lauren laughed and nodded. "Come on, Captain. No way am I leaving you ever again." She linked her arm through his and led him through the crowd. "By the way, what was it you couldn't say before?"

He stopped, took her in his arms and lowered his mouth to hers. "Only that I absolutely adore you."

The End

About the Author

Five years ago, Eileen Ann decided to take a year off from her software consulting business. There was too much to do that couldn't be accomplished between airline flights and hotel stays. Just as soon as she got that garage cleaned, she'd jump right back into the rat race.

Well, the rats are on their own. She still can't walk through the garage, but every day she has a hot date with a to-die-for alpha male—or males!—and hunches over her computer as they fight, angst, or wander through her stories. Multi-published in several genres, Eileen Ann resides in sunny Florida with her husband and one and a half children. (Allegedly, her son is away at school—or so he claims.)

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

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