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Once Upon a Time...



MIDNIGHT HOUR

ANNA LEIGH KEATON
MADISON LAYLE

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Midnight Hour

By

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&

Madison Layle

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Dedication

For all those who still believe in fairy tales.

Chapter One

The Everland Gazette

Announcing the Princetons' annual Christmas masquerade ball.

The whole kingdom to attend.

"Come on, Cindy. You've got to go to the ball. *Everyone's* going!"

Cindy sighed, brushed the hair out of her face with the back of her soap-covered hand, and looked over her shoulder at her two beautiful half-sisters. "Not everyone." She kept her voice even, her tone light, and added a little smile for tenderhearted Francesca.

Priscilla huffed, folded her arms over her ample chest, and leaned back against the kitchen worktable. "It's time for you to go out and meet some men."

Cindy laughed at that and turned back to the last pot left to scrub. "And just what man would I meet at the ball *everyone* is going to attend that I can't meet when I go to the market?" Men weren't interested in her, and she already knew everyone in town who mattered. Knew them, was friendly with them, but she saw the way they pitied *poor little Cindy*. "Besides, I don't see either of you two rushing out to get married."

"Did I say marriage?" Priscilla asked with a confused glance at Francesca. "Did you say marriage?"

"Nobody said anything about marriage...yet." Francesca sighed. "Cindy, we're not as old as you are."

"Gee, thanks."

"Oh, you know what I mean! If we were, we'd be looking under rocks to find a husband. You're so pretty, and we even got you this fancy dress—"

"It's a formal gown with a long skirt," Priscilla added with a nod as if that should settle the matter.

But it didn't. Long skirt or not, it was a dress that called for fancy shoes and grace, neither of which she had. A ball with dancing—it'd be too awkward. Cindy dumped the water out of the pot and glanced at the beautiful evening gown Francesca and Priscilla had bought for her. Tears stung her eyes, but she forced a smile. "You should take it back right now, get your money back, and let someone else wear it tonight."

Francesca pouted. "Don't you like it?"

"Yes, of course I do. It is gorgeous," Cindy agreed, "but I'm not going. I can't. Someone has to stay home and take care of Mother."

"You know as well as we do, there's nothing for you to do after Mom falls asleep," Priscilla protested. "And the party goes on for hours into the night. Come on. It'll be fun!"

"I'm sure it will be, so you two go for me and tell me about it later."

Priscilla gave a very unladylike snort.

Francesca held the gown against her, which was almost laughable since it would be five sizes too small for the tall, buxom bombshell. "I wish I could wear this gown. It's so silky. Did you feel it? If you felt it, you couldn't refuse. Here." She stepped forward, but Cindy held up her wet hands.

"No. Keep it away. If you want your money back it can't have water stains on it." It was the most beautiful piece of clothing she'd ever seen, some strange material that seemed to change hue in the light. It looked delectably smooth, would feel so good against her skin. The light blue color would match her eyes, too, which to her were so cold they looked as if they were filled with ice.

Ice. If she were made of ice, she wouldn't hurt so bad inside. "Thank you," she whispered because her throat felt suddenly tight. "But I'm not going."

"Mother goes to bed at seven," Priscilla said with a hint of

antipathy in her voice. "She doesn't get up until seven in the morning. She won't even know you're gone."

"I'll know I'm gone," she argued as she took off her apron and folded it. "Besides, I made plans to clean out the...uh...upstairs bathroom tonight."

Priscilla rolled her big brown doe eyes. "Oh please! Everything in this house is so damn clean we could eat off the Welcome mat on the front stoop. Why won't you let us do something for you this time? Or do something for yourself for once? All you ever do is work. You cook. You clean. You take care of Mom. I swear I'm going to start bringing men home to meet you if you don't go."

Cindy laid the folded apron on the worktable and quietly limped from the room. Her special shoe, made to fit her smaller left foot with its four-inch lift because of her shorter left leg, clomped noisily on the stone floor.

Her half-sisters were sweet, and they cared about her. That they couldn't see why she'd never marry and have a family of her own made her love them even more. But their words hurt.

"When we were little," Francesca said, following after her, "you used to tell us stories of big families, lots of kids, parents and grandparents around. You used to weave these tales of the perfect life. So why don't you go find it? Just because Mom's a little daft doesn't mean she's an invalid. If leaving her alone really bothers you, we can hire someone to come in and stay with her. You shouldn't feel obligated to do everything or give up having a life of your own. We can help take care of Mom, too."

"I know you can. You do. It's not that."

"Then what?"

The pain in her heart pierced very deep. Cindy hobbled into the sitting room and over to her stepmother seated in front of the blazing fire. She didn't answer Francesca. She still dreamed, in the quiet of her room, of a husband and a half-dozen children.

"How are you doing, Mother?" she asked.

Clara, the only mother she'd ever known, looked up from her

crocheting. She smiled, and her face wrinkled endearingly around her eyes. She wasn't so old, but the illness that addled her brain aged her features. "Good, good. And what would your name be?"

She forced another smile. Her face was beginning to hurt. "I'm Cindy, Mother."

"Oh, Cindy. You know I have a step-baby named Cindy Ellen. She's just the cutest little thing."

Cindy winced. "Would you like me to make you some fresh tea?" She lifted the lid of the teapot on the table next to Clara's chair, and saw that Clara hadn't touched it.

"No, no. I'm fine. I'm just going to finish this scarf for Ambrose." Clara glanced toward the wall of windows across the room. "It's getting awful cold out there."

A light snow fell, coating the trees in a lacy wonderland image of their backyard. Ambrose, Cindy's father, had been dead more than a decade. Not since he died had Clara been normal.

Poor Cindy, she'd heard people whisper behind her back. Living with the batty woman and her two flaky daughters. Poor Cindy, such a sweet girl. It's just too bad she's the way she is....

She didn't feel like Poor Cindy very often, but today was a bad day. Her hip and knee throbbed because of the change in weather. The cool, damp air pressing in on her joints made them ache with a fierceness that took all her will not to give in and weep. But she was strong. Had to be strong. Someone had to care for this family. Her papa was gone. They were her responsibility. Today, though, responsibility and burden seemed very close cousins.

"Mom, tell Cindy she has to go to the Princetons' ball tonight. We bought her a dress and everything!" Priscilla cried as she came into the room.

Francesca added, albeit less dramatically, "We did. It's pretty, and she'd look lovely in it, but we can't even get her to try it on. Won't you tell her she can go to the ball?"

Clara laid her knitting on her lap and frowned at her daughters. "Cindy's too young to attend a ball. Why, the child should be in bed by

eight." She turned her frown toward the window once more. "I do hope Ambrose hurries home. Cindy worries when he's not here by dark."

Cindy's stomach turned over, and she touched Clara's soft, fluffy white hair with a tender hand. "I'm sure he'll be home soon," she whispered.

Poor Clara was more like it. Living somewhere in her mind where her husband still lived, Cindy was just a child, and her two daughters weren't even born yet.

Clara flexed her gnarled fingers then rubbed one hand with the other.

"Oh, shoot," Cindy whispered. She patted Clara's arm. "I'll get you your hand cream, Mother. I forgot we ran out last night."

"Thank you, dear," Clara said as she gathered her yarn and crochet hook back into her hands. "They're hurting mighty fierce. Run up and get it, would you?"

Cindy turned away from Clara with a snappish retort on her tongue for her siblings, but she held it in. "Please," she whispered as she ushered the girls out of the sitting room. "I need to run to Madam Laveau's to get Mother more arthritis cream. Get ready, go to your ball, and have a good time, okay? Please?"

Francesca made a pout. "But how are we supposed to have fun without you there?"

"This isn't the first Princeton ball. They have it every year around Christmas time, so I'm sure it won't be the last. Maybe some other year I'll go, but right now, let me stay home with Mother. She needs me."

Priscilla scowled. "You're being stupid. Tonight could be the night, you know. Your prince charming could be there, and you'll miss him."

At that, Cindy laughed out loud. "Prince Charming? Dear, dear, dear. Just because we live in a silly little town called Everland doesn't mean there's a Prince Charming hiding out in a castle atop a hill somewhere waiting for Poor Cindy to come along." She shook her head, still grinning, happy to have found some real humor today.

If there were a Prince Charming, it would be Maxwell Princeton. He was the most handsome of all the Princeton sons, in her opinion. A

few years older than her thirty, he was the most striking man she'd ever seen. He'd even spoken to her once. She'd been at the market, her lifted shoe had caught on a rock, and she'd fallen, spilling her bag of vegetables all over the road. He'd been the only one to stop and help her gather them up then helped her to her feet. Though she'd avoided direct eye contact with him, she had glanced up through dark sunglasses once, just in time to see him smile at her, his Caribbean blue eyes sparkling as he bid her a good day.

Yes, if there were a prince in this silly little backward town, it was surely him, although some might say dark prince. Not because of anything sinister so much as from a dominant air about him that made people take notice, especially women. He remained one of the town's most eligible and sought-after bachelors.

Not that she sought him out. She'd always avoided any chance encounters with him, gone the other way if she'd seen him in the market, because in those few brief moments the one time they met, he hadn't seen her deformity. For just a minute or two, she felt normal—stupid and sprawled on the ground surrounded by beets, but normal—as a man, a very handsome man, smiled at her and helped her refill her grocery bags.

She swallowed down the memory and headed for the entry hall to retrieve her cloak. It would be a chilly walk to Madam Laveau's shop in the market district, and the cold wouldn't help her leg any. Maybe Madam Laveau would have something that could take away her aches for a little while too.

With a sigh, she wrapped her cloak tight around her, flipped up the hood, and headed out into the chilly winter afternoon.

Chapter Two

Marie Laveau didn't look up at first when she heard the jingle of the bell on the door, but then she remembered what day it was.

Business had trickled to zilch earlier in the day because of that damn masquerade ball.

Everyone, except her, was expected to attend. She hadn't set foot back on the Princeton estate in decades, not since that fateful night.... And she wouldn't go back, not even if the patriarch hand delivered a gilded invitation on bended knee.

The sound of footsteps slowly meandered down the aisles.

Who could that be at this hour?

She should've told Rupert to turn the sign in the door to Closed after he finished sweeping up. Where was that no-account nephew of hers? The least he could do was be here to deal with whoever was here so she wasn't interrupted in the middle of a very important task.

Grumbling to herself, she set a glass bottle and measuring spoon aside. She had to get the ingredients right, or her latest elixir wouldn't have the potency needed to accomplish her special client's needs.

A glance around for her nephew revealed the identity of Laveau's latest customer.

Marie didn't know whether to be elated or not.

Cindy was an enigma. The kindly daughter of a no-good, double-crossing merchant...

How dare he not pay after —

She gritted her teeth against the memory that was as fresh and bitter to her as the day she'd first laid eyes on the wealthy widower's sickly little girl, now a spinster who was browsing a display of all-natural, herbal remedies for joint pain. For herself or someone else?

Marie dismissed the passing question from her thoughts as her temper simmered over past wrongs. What did it matter who suffered such aches; they were nothing compared to the debt that family owed her.

She straightened the wrinkles out of her billowy garment and pasted on a smile for the child—well, not a *child*, although everyone was infantile to someone who'd been on the planet as long as Marie had. Though she'd lost her youthful beauty long ago, her strength and longevity lay in the dark magic that was her passion and the foundation of her livelihood, albeit hidden behind the more respectable façade of an herbal shop.

Cindy limped around the corner, looked up at Marie's approach, and smiled with a genuine, good-to-see-you gleam.

Marie's smile felt frozen to her skull, until she gave into the urge to glance down at the girl's odd-looking shoes.

It's a shame I can't take credit for such successes! And to think the incantation she'd uttered so long ago was still in effect and as strong as ever.

"Cindy, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you by my establishment on this snowy evening?"

"I'm here to pick up some more medicated lotion for Mom."

The old bat that was the girl's stepmother was a harmless simpleton who was more of a burden to the family than an asset.

"Top shelf to your right, dear," Marie said helpfully. At least the girl's continued business made up for some of the riches her father had failed to deliver.

When Cindy turned away, Marie let her gaze settle on the girl's feet, and she smiled. The girl's father had been right when he'd accused Marie of causing the changes in his daughter's leg that ended her dreams of dancing. *Such a simple little spell. Payback for short-changing me.* She'd denied it of course, and reveled in the agony on the man's face as he

realized there were some things his precious money couldn't buy.

She'd wanted to curse the man himself after he'd lashed out at her over the loss of his wife. Marie had tried to save the woman's life and had saved the baby—the very girl who now stood before her—but had the man thanked her? No. He'd offered her any price to brave that bad storm and act as midwife to his ailing, expectant wife. She'd done her best, but her magic hadn't been strong enough to prevent fate that night.

She'd vowed to make him pay after she'd found herself hustled from the Tudor-style house. And she had, in a manner of speaking, though it had taken a while to discover the right spell and get close enough to the child for it to work. She still remembered the day she'd happened upon the girl picking flowers along the path to market.

"I'll take the larger jar." Cindy held out her choice to Marie with a smile.

The curse hadn't altered the girl's demeanor, though Marie had believed it would make the child at least a little bitter. That it hadn't surprised her.

"Why are you not getting ready to go to the ball?" Marie asked as she headed behind the counter with the jar to ring up the purchase. "You caught me about to close up since everyone in town is going."

When the young woman's gaze refused to meet her own, Marie suspected she'd needled the right wound.

"My sisters will represent the family at the event tonight. I'm needed at home."

Unwilling to let it go, Marie became blunt. "No need to fib, dear. I understand."

Cindy's gaze shot to hers, and Marie wanted to smirk. "Fib? But I—"

"Such a fancy ball it will be, all the music and dancing, and you would feel uncomfortable, of course, with your condition."

"I beg your pardon."

"Oh, I admire you, Cindy," Marie hurried to say. "You've made the best of what you were given, never complaining, but you need not sugarcoat the truth when I can see it bothers you at times like this. We're

all human after all. It's perfectly understandable to want what we don't have. But what if I said I could help you go to that ball...just one night...where you could be bold and brazen if you wanted to be, your identity hidden behind a masquerade mask?"

Cindy smiled and shook her head. "I won't deny that I've dreamed of going to lavish events or... No. A mask won't hide my lame foot or give me the grace of a dancer. I think it's best I let my sisters—"

"No, the mask won't, but a magical pair of slippers would do the trick. For the right price, of course. I wouldn't offend you by offering charity."

"Slippers?"

Marie smiled. "The magic wouldn't be permanent," she warned. No, Marie didn't want to permanently remove the spell that handicapped the girl. "And you'd have to remove the shoes before the final stroke of midnight or risk serious damage to your feet."

"I don't understand."

"I'm saying that I could lease to you, for one night, a pair of magical slippers that would transform your malformed limb to match the other—just until midnight—and give you this one night of freedom to do whatever you want. Run. Dance. Experience life as you never have but always wanted to. What do you think?"

She chewed her bottom lip. "I-I'm not sure."

Marie bristled at the girl's skepticism. "Not sure I'm capable of such healing spells?"

"I've heard the rumors that you dabbled in bl—" Cindy stopped, blinked. "I mean, I've heard that you practice powerful magic, but I always brushed it off as jealous gossip."

How naïve!

"People can be cruel to those who are different." Marie knew Cindy would empathize with such a statement. "They fear things they do not understand. I know what people say behind my back. 'Black magic!' 'Voodoo witch.' But they still seek me out to help heal their aches, cure their ills, and I do. You know why?" She smiled at the young woman who now hung on her every word. "Because it's my business to help people."

She chuckled. "So, what do you think? Are you bold enough to give it a go?"

After another moment's hesitation, Cindy asked, "May I see the slippers?"

"Of course! Of course. I'll even let you try them on and prove what my magic is capable of doing for you. Just you wait here, and I'll only be a minute."

Marie locked the front door and turned the sign to Closed before she went into the back room to cast the spell. Quickly, she looked around the room for something to use and found a pair of ratty clogs she used when doing yard work. "Perfect."

She snatched up the pair, set them on the table, and began to chant as she gathered up a few other special ingredients to sprinkle over the shoes. The spell first transformed the dingy old clogs into a beautiful set of evening slippers, as clear as glass, the heels high and strong. Marie almost danced herself about the table as she continued to chant, lifting the left shoe high overhead.

The second part of the spell was simple, but it also held the most risk. Essentially, she was removing the curse that made the girl lame—a curse only Marie herself could remove since she'd cast the original incantation years before. That was the easy part. The risk came in relying on the girl to do what she was told. So long as Cindy did not don the shoe at any time after midnight, the reversal would not become permanent.

But it was a risk Marie was willing to take for the right price. And this time, she'd demand her money up front. Maybe, if all went well, she could coax the girl into becoming a repeat customer. It would serve the old man right if she could make more money off of the daughter than she ever had off of him. Too bad he was no longer alive to appreciate it, but maybe she'd succeed in making the old codger roll over in his grave.

She laughed out loud at the thought.

In the other room, Cindy heard the exuberant cackle and considered leaving, but she'd yet to pay for the ointment her mother needed, so she remained at the counter and waited.

Glancing down, she kept her hands occupied by adjusting the

pleats of her long skirt, a colorful fluid style popularized by the hippy generation but one she wore decades later because of the comfort and coverage.

The strange chants drew her attention to the back of the store once more, and she wondered what in the world was going on in that room. She'd heard the rumors about the eccentric shopkeeper, but Cindy had never been one to trust in gossip. She'd suffered the brunt of such talk herself over the years. Gossip and name calling.

Poor Cindy...the gimpy hippy.

Besides, the Laveau woman had always been pleasant to her, and her herbal remedies had been a godsend for her mother's aches and pains, as well as her own.

Still, the old lady was getting up there in years, and all of this sudden talk about spells and magical healing made Cindy wonder if the woman had finally gone off the deep end.

So she was surprised by the sight of elegant, clear-as-crystal slippers when Laveau returned. The footwear was breathtaking even against the backdrop of the old woman's gnarled fingers. They were also high-heeled, which had Cindy shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Laveau, but I can't—"

"Don't let them fool you, child."

Cindy looked closer. "But they look so fragile. Like glass."

"They are like glass, easily broken unless they're on someone's feet. That's part of the magic. You'll see. Just sit down right over there, slip off those shoes, and lift your skirt."

Cindy hesitantly obeyed the elderly woman while doubt wrinkled her brow.

With an ease that astounded Cindy, Laveau knelt down to put one shoe on Cindy's good foot. "There. I guessed the right size. Now for the other one."

"I'm not sure I—"

"Nonsense, child. Didn't that pappy of yours teach you to trust your elders and have a little faith?"

"Yes, ma'am." She lifted her lame foot, which was smaller and

weaker than her other.

Her father and the doctors he'd hired never could explain the condition that befell her when she was still a young girl, but Cindy vaguely remembered taking dance lessons as a small child. They were pleasant childhood memories that, the older she got, seemed more like faraway dreams that never came true.

Laveau slid the slipper onto her foot, and an instant tingly sensation shot through her leg.

"Oh!"

"This might hurt a little," Laveau warned.

She was right. The tingle turned into a bone-deep burn that had Cindy screaming, "Take it *off*!"

But just as she said it, her leg began to transform, lengthen. The pain was intense, but its effect faded amid the shock of that revelation. Her leg was growing!

Modesty be damned, she yanked her skirt higher to watch with awe as her foot stretched to fill in the near-invisible shoe.

The piercing pain of the transformation blotted out the aches she'd lived with for as long as she could remember, and then it was gone.

With a delighted giggle she didn't recognize as her own, she kicked both legs straight out and eyed the matching pair.

"Oh, my God! You did it!"

"It's only temporary," Laveau warned, dampening Cindy's excitement a bit. "You must take the shoes off before the final stroke of midnight or face dire consequences that I couldn't begin to describe. Understood?"

Cindy nodded solemnly.

"There's no refund if you don't heed my warning."

"I understand. I must take them off before midnight. I will."

"And return them to me immediately." Laveau climbed more slowly to her feet and dusted off her hands. "This is just a lease for one night only."

"One night, until midnight," Cindy repeated, her wide-eyed, enthusiastic gaze never leaving the remarkable sight of her matched feet.

“Now, for payment.”

An hour later, Cindy was headed back home for the second time, the slippers in hand. She’d had to remove the magical slippers and walk home for more money to complete her purchase because she hadn’t brought near enough, but the pain of suffering the transformation had been worth it, or would be once she put them on again.

During her first trek home, she’d considered backing out. The price was high, and it was only temporary. Cindy had never been one to splurge on herself, and that money might be needed for something more important.

But then, after she’d given her mother the ointment and heated up leftovers for their dinner, she saw the dress her sisters had given her.

They’d refused to take it back as she’d asked and instead left it draped across the foot of her bed with a feathered, beaded masquerade mask and a note: *For a sister as brave as she is beautiful. You deserve to dance.*

She’d decided then to go through with it. The family was financially secure, thanks to her father’s conservative precautions and wise, forward planning. She didn’t have to hold onto her own savings to ensure the family’s well-being.

She stumbled when her weaker foot slipped on a patch of ice on the sidewalk. Though she didn’t fall, she clutched the bag with the slippers to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Then, with a quick glance around to ensure she was alone, she sat on the curb and pulled out the shoes. There was no reason why she had to wait until she got home to don them, and wouldn’t having two strong legs get her home that much faster?

She was better prepared for the burn that ripped through her leg as the magic took hold and transformed the limb to match her other one. A smile even curled her lips when at last she felt the aches and pains diminish. Tossing her skirt back over her legs, she climbed to her feet and felt...tall.

She laughed, tossed her old shoes into the bag, and continued the trek home.

The heels were a bit awkward and unfamiliar, but step after step, she grew more confident. Soon, she made it home and almost ran to her

room where the dress awaited her. A quick glance at the clock told her she had just enough time to get dressed and check on her mother, who'd already retired to bed after dinner, before calling a cab to take her to the Princetons' masquerade ball.

Cindy stood in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door in the bathroom she shared with her half-sisters. The dress was a bit stretchy and clingy, smooth as silk. She lovingly ran her hand down the fabric covering her thighs and sighed. Never in her life had she worn anything so exquisite. And she most likely never would after this night, so she had to make the most of it. The flowing gown left her arms bare, was held up by the thinnest straps, and belled out ever so slightly just below her waist. The hemline fell just shy of the toes of her magical slippers.

As she reached for the elegant, feathery mask she'd set on the counter, she glanced at herself up close in the mirror over the sink. Priscilla and Francesca never left the house without their hair and makeup just so. Cindy's hair was long, blonde, and tied back at the nape of her neck. That wouldn't do. She yanked open the top drawer under the sink and scrounged until she found a big comb she'd seen Priscilla use. It took some trying—thank God she'd watched her sister get ready for dates!—to get all that hair twirled up into a French twist at the back of her head. She pulled down a few long tendrils to trail along the sides of her cheeks and pushed the On button on the curling iron, which lay nearby on the counter.

Then, something else she'd never bothered to do. She pulled open the next drawer and picked out a handful of makeup. She'd be wearing the mask that would cover everything but her eyes, lips, and chin. Taking the lid off a few different tubes, she found a deep red lipstick, hesitated only a moment, then lightly swiped it over her lips.

Her eyes widened first in alarm at how dark it was, how...*red*. But then a slow smile curved those lips, and she stared at the transformation. Wow. Just the hair and lipstick and she didn't look like the same Poor Cindy. She shuffled through more of the makeup and came up with a kohl eyeliner. Leaning forward so she was as close to the mirror as she could get, she touched the eyeliner to her top eyelid. And poked her eye.

“Ow!” She blinked, and her eye watered. She grabbed a tissue from the box on the counter and blotted her tears. Once she could see again, she leaned back over the sink and tried again, more carefully this time. After a few mistries, and having to wipe the stuff off, she finally had one eye outlined in the black, a small trail angling off at the crease. She grinned and tried to repeat it with the other side. Finally, after what seemed forever and numerous attempts, she had it as close to perfect as she could get.

She hurried to twine the curling iron around her trailing tendrils of hair at her cheeks until they bounced prettily, then picked up the can of hair spray, shut her eyes, and doused her head so everything would stay where she put it.

She grinned at her reflection when she was done, picked up her mask, ran to the phone—yes, actually ran!—and called for her taxi. At the last minute, as she waited for the cab, she snuck into her mother’s room, went to the walk-in closet, and shut herself in before turning on the light. She didn’t think her mom would mind if she borrowed a wrap for the night. She couldn’t wear her five-year-old wool cloak with this dress. It would make her look like Poor Cindy.

She found the white arctic fox fur wrap she’d always loved and took it out of the drawer. She ran it through her hands, rubbed it against her cheek, then with a swoop of her arms, draped it around her bare shoulders. The silky fur felt like heaven. She shut off the light, checked on her mother one last time to see her sleeping soundly, and made a dash for the front door just as the cabbie honked the horn. Snatching her mask off the entry hall table, she pulled it on so there was no possibility of the taxi driver recognizing her, and walked out into the chilly night.

Chapter Three

Maxwell Princeton was not in a festive mood, although he'd tried to keep a civil tongue and a welcoming smile as long as he'd stood in the receiving line...again.

The party was the same every year. The same decorations, the same food, the same people. Even with the masks, identities were easy to determine, so he couldn't count on the potential for a mystery to spark any thrill in tonight's events. He hadn't even managed to create an obvious stir by his outfit, aside from his father getting upset over his choice to forego a tuxedo this year.

He wasn't trying to be antisocial. He was just bored with the monotony of it all.

Everything was identical to last year and the year before that. He felt an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*, and he was tired of all the pomp and circumstance.

He'd left the receiving line as soon as the flood of partygoers waned to a trickle and, against his father's wishes, sought solitude in the shadows of a narrow second-floor balcony that encircled the spacious room transformed for the night into a ballroom. Throughout the year, the largest room in his parents' ancestral home better resembled that of a public library—a testament to his deceased grandfather's love of books. His father used it as an ostentatious study-turned-parlor where he greeted business associates and VIP guests.

Maxwell used it on occasion to play billiards. Aside from the pool

table, the space was usually filled with plush, oversized furniture and surrounded by wall-to-wall books, half of which could be accessed only by a lone spiral staircase to the balcony on which Maxwell now stood.

At present, elegant white drapes and festive holiday decorations hid the bookshelves. The pool table and dark leather furniture had been removed, replaced with a banquet table of food and little else, so there was plenty of room for guests to dance or mingle.

He wasn't in the mood to mingle, so he almost growled out his frustration when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Going to bite my head off for having the same idea as you?"

Maxwell turned to see his childhood playmate and older half-brother, Thomas Allen Princeton, stop a couple of feet from him with hand extended. Maxwell's father had adopted the toddler when he married Thomas' mother a scant year before the couple had Maxwell.

With a shared smile, the two siblings shook hands then pulled each other into a backslapping hug.

"Sorry," Maxwell said. "This is a pleasant surprise. How did you manage to avoid the receiving line duties? Father's pissed; he thinks you're a no-show again."

Thomas grinned. "Back door." He looked out over the colorful swirl of guests. "Remember when we were so eager to take part in all of that down there that we'd sneak out of bed to watch from up here?"

"In our cartoon hero pajamas." Max nodded with a chuckle. "Guess that explains the sense of déjà vu I'm feeling. Years later, and we're still up here looking down on it all."

"Once tasted, the forbidden fruit lost its appeal, I guess."

"That's because you can't just take a bite without some momma standing ready to shackle your dick to the tree."

Thomas laughed and peered over the railing. "Well, at least Marcus seems to be enjoying the attention."

"He's just returned from college. Being away from all of Father's matchmaking attempts makes the annual one easier to overlook, I suppose."

"You would think he had enough smarts now to realize what

Father is up to with these parties, but...what's he going for now? A PhD? Doesn't he have a BA or master's degree already?"

"Two BA's and one master's degree, I think. School has been his escape."

They all had their own ways of dealing with life in a small town. Some choices were just more socially acceptable than others, Maxwell thought. He gave his brother a knowing smirk.

Their sexual escapades and unwillingness to settle down had been thorns in their father's side for years. After the death of their mother and the more recent passing of their uncle, their father had become even more insistent. The family patriarch wanted his sons married and begetting children to carry on the Princeton name and legacy. Besides Thomas who bore the Princeton name through adoption, all that remained of the Princeton bloodline was himself, his younger brother Marcus, and their cousin Richard who had only just returned home to run the mining company because of Uncle Teddy's passing.

Though their reasons varied, all four men had managed to avoid wedding vows throughout their twenties, much to the chagrin of their parents. He scanned the crowd below and found his cousin seated between his aunt and her friend, Charles Dearborn, a banker who appeared to be talking nonstop. The way his cousin chugged his glass of champagne and grabbed another from a passing servant told the rest of the story. Maxwell smirked. Richard's mother was up to her old tricks, so it seemed Richard had some additional issues beyond matrimony to stress over.

Maxwell and his brothers sought escape from the constant familial pressures in different ways. Marcus hid behind his studies. Thomas fought back through loud confrontations with the patriarch and eventually left town to seek independence and a career in a nearby city, although he kept in touch with Maxwell who'd stayed to care for their crotchety father and assume the role of CEO of the family business.

The old man meant well, and Maxwell could understand his father's need to see his grandchildren. Maxwell wanted kids of his own someday, but he wasn't willing to trade paternity for a loveless,

duty-bound marriage bed. He had insatiable appetites that not many women could nourish; certainly no one he'd met in this tight community was capable of fulfilling his dominant desires.

Only Thomas knew of the more secretive ways Maxwell had for "blowing off steam" because he usually did so in a city fetish club accompanied by his brother.

Of course, there were the unproven rumors that floated around the small town. Most of them stemmed from his youthful exploits with females, but over the years, he'd learned to be careful, pickier. Especially now when every matron in town with a daughter old enough to say, "I do," seemed to side with his father on the topic of his most eligible bachelor status. With maturity, Maxwell had become much more circumspect about his personal fetishes and more adamant about remaining single so he could enjoy such entertainments.

Remaining free of the marriage trap was something of which all three brothers could agree. Although, Maxwell's reasons stemmed more from his disapproval of those women his father paraded in front of him as "suitable". He didn't want to have his spouse cherry-picked from a basket of debutants. He had his own criteria for a wife, and a lustful eye for his bank account—instead of him—wasn't it. He needed someone who saw beyond the wealth and superficial trappings of the public limelight and desired him, the man. Until then, he was content to remain single.

"So, what brings the prodigal son back to brave Father's wrath?"

"A real estate deal."

"Real estate?"

"It's not official, so don't tell anyone, but I'm buying the old Beaumont plantation."

Maxwell blinked. "The haunted house?"

Thomas laughed and leaned his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms. "The *abandoned* house. There are no remaining heirs to claim the place, so my attorney's working up a deal to get it for the cost of back property taxes. If everything goes according to plan, I'll be home for good by the first of the year."

"That's great, Tom!"

"What's great?"

At the question, Thomas straightened, and they both turned to see Marcus approaching.

Thomas ignored the query to change the subject and ask a question of his own. "Seeking solitude from the bevy of beauties, runt?"

Maxwell shook his head at the childhood nickname. Albeit younger than Max by more than two years, their little brother might've been a runt at one time, but the family's bookworm had him and Thomas beat in height by at least an inch now.

Marcus gave the eldest brother a sly smile. "Why would I want to do that when you two old farts forfeit the game to hide away up here like a pair of children spying on adults?"

"Smart-mouthed pup," Thomas said good-naturedly.

Maxwell chuckled. He'd missed the sibling ribbing that manifested whenever the brothers were together. Their presence made dealing with the duties as de facto host of his father's Christmas ball a bit easier.

"What brings you up here, Marcus?"

"Dad's looking for you."

Maxwell sighed. His solitude was over.

"Both of you."

Thomas cursed.

"Sorry," Marcus added, "but our aunt spotted you sneaking up the staircase—"

"I walked," Thomas interrupted. "I wasn't sneaking."

Maxwell shook his head and grinned.

Marcus continued with, "Well, you know how mouthy she can be. Didn't take two minutes for word to get back to Dad. I'm sure he's lined up a few choice matrimonial prospects for you both to meet."

That last remark soured his mood as Maxwell didn't appreciate his brother's humor. He stepped forward and, with one hand, grabbed the balcony rail to take one last look over the masked crowd before venturing down the stairs. When would his father finally get the picture? He wasn't interested in any shallow-minded, local prospect who he was certain would prefer him wearing the ball and chain instead of—

Who...? His gaze stopped on a latecomer, a spectacular looking vision he didn't recognize.

"Hey, who is that?" he asked his brothers, which drew their attention to the erotic dream poised in the doorway with a champagne flute in one delicate hand.

"Who? Oh!" Marcus said. He leaned forward. "Damn... I don't recall seeing her here last year."

"That's because she wasn't here last year," Maxwell said with certainty. He would've remembered. No hot-blooded man with an ounce of libido would forget a woman like that.

"You don't know her?" Thomas quipped.

"I—" Maxwell shook his head, dragged his gaze from the beauty, and eyed his brother. "You do?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I don't, but then I've been away."

"Me, too," Marcus said, "unfortunately. I might've opted for correspondence courses if I'd known someone like her lived around here." Marcus slapped Maxwell's shoulder. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Thomas snorted. "Isn't it obvious? Max doesn't recognize her, and if he did, I can't see him sharing." That was a lie, but on second thought... The two brothers had shared in the past, once or twice, but Max couldn't say for sure he'd be so willing to share *her*, if he ever got his hands on her.

"New neighbor, maybe?" Marcus mused.

She began to ease her way down the steps and into the room, her movements slow and somehow sensual. Elegant. She stood out in icy blue amid a rainbow of gaudy colors.

Thomas chuckled. "Or maybe Max is losing his edge."

"Well, if she is new in town, I might have to rethink my enrollment next semester."

Maxwell frowned at that idea and turned when Thomas touched his shoulder.

"You want me to go find out her name?"

"No. You deal with Dad." Silently praying she hadn't come with a date, Maxwell turned toward the spiral staircase, ignoring Thomas' curse. "And, Marcus, go back to school." Marcus' laughter echoed behind him,

Midnight Hour by Anna Leigh Keaton & Madison Layle

but he didn't care. He had a mysterious guest to investigate—*greet*.

A very pleasant mystery indeed.

Chapter Four

The ride to the Princeton estate was short, less than three minutes. When the valet opened the door for Cindy to exit the yellow car, she noticed that the temperature had risen slightly, and the wind that had been blowing earlier in the evening had calmed, but the man's breaths and her own were still visible in the chilled air.

"Good evening," the valet said in a cultured tone with a warm smile on his mouth and a pleasant gleam in his eyes. His long black coat fell to his knees, but she could see the black bow tie and white collar of a tuxedo at his throat.

"Hello," she said a bit shyly. She wasn't used to men smiling at her like that.

He shut the door of the car once she was out, and extended his arm. She gently wrapped her hand just below his elbow, and he led her up the stairs to the front door of the big house—not quite a mansion, but as close as one came in these parts.

Another man, this one dressed in a crisp black tuxedo, opened the door. "Good evening and welcome," he said in that same cultured tone as the valet. She wondered if they were hired from the same butler academy. She grinned at her own thoughts.

"May I take your wrap, miss...?" the butler asked with a suspended pause, as if he awaited her to introduce herself.

She didn't. Instead, she gave a slight nod, shrugged the fur from her shoulders, and handed it over.

Another man, yet again in a neatly pressed tux, came by bearing a tray of tall champagne flutes filled with sparkling amber liquid. He held the tray out to her, and although she didn't drink alcohol, she gingerly took one.

"Thank you," she said in wonder.

"Right this way, please," the butler said as he held out his hand in invitation to go through the marble-tiled foyer, past an elegant nine-foot tall Christmas tree, and toward the room from where she heard voices and music emanating. The party seemed to be well underway.

Careful of every step, afraid she'd twist an ankle in the high heels, she made her way across to the immense double doors. Then she stood in awe. A massive crystal chandelier hung from the high ceiling, giving off a soft golden glow to the room. Men in black tuxedos, women in brightly colored gowns. Everyone, excluding the servants, wore feathered and beaded masks, some modest, others extravagant.

A balcony encircled the room, giving evidence to a second floor above, the railing strewn with sparkling lights amid evergreen swags. Along the back wall were tables laden with all manner of food, ice sculpture swans, and at one end a fountain of liquid chocolate. On the main level, a long span of picture windows overlooked a snowy garden lit by what looked like antique gas lamps. The floor was shiny black marble, the walls draped with ivory silks.

She'd never seen anything as magnificent in her life and began to rethink her definition of a mansion.

A man behind her said, "Excuse us," and she pulled herself to the side so a couple could pass and take the four steps down onto the floor.

"So pretty," she whispered. She wanted to just stand here all night and stare, imprint the beauty on her mind so she could relive this moment later, after she was back to her normal self.

She searched the room and found her sisters near a marble column at one side of the room, not far from the string quartet in the corner. Two tall men stood with them, and even from where she stood, Cindy could see them giggling and flirty. She smiled and edged down the steps. She wanted to see the food, see what kind of goodies there were to dip in the

chocolate fountain, and she needed to stay far away from Francesca and Priscilla so they didn't recognize her and question her about her leg.

Gripping the champagne flute in her hand, she made her way across the massive ballroom, keeping near the wall of windows. The music was loud enough that the dancers could hear it, but soft enough that conversation flowed freely. Her heels clicked on the floor.

"Good evening," a tux-clad man said, bowing low and smiling.

She stopped moving and stared. "Hello," she said a bit formally. This man, this...that voice... She knew him. Oh, she knew him all right. The black mask that only covered his upper face didn't disguise him very well. He was Josh Highlander, the town butcher's arrogant son. They'd gone to school together, though she was a couple of years older than him. He'd made fun of her when they were young, and when he saw her in his father's shop now, he always leered at her.

"Would you care to dance, my fair lady?"

She narrowed her eyes and had the urge to throw her glass of champagne in his face. Sure, now that she walked without a limp she was a fair lady! What an ass. How she'd love to rip off her mask so he could see just who she was. Instead, she decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. She straightened her shoulders and looked down the nose of her feathered mask at him. "I think not." She made an unimpressed tisking sound.

His mouth fell open in a gape. Then he snapped it shut and glared. "Why not?"

"You're not my type."

"I'll have you know, lady, I'm one of the wealthiest men in this town. Where do you get off—"

"And coin in the pocket doesn't make a sow worthy of note," she snapped after which she pointedly turned on one of those tall heels and strode toward the food tables. It wasn't much, and it was very petty. She should feel guilty, but that man had tormented her for as long as she could remember. He was a louse who looked down on others he deemed inferior, and she hated his hypocrisy. He deserved a kick in the shin.

She reached the tables and forced herself to calm down. She would

not let that jerk sour her mood or ruin her night. Determined to enjoy herself, she looked around again and stared in astonishment. It was so...so...beautiful. Fruit cut into shapes; a red apple bird, a watermelon peacock, and a whole tray of kiwi hedgehogs. As she slowly moved down the line, not taking anything because she wasn't hungry but admiring the skill it took to create such culinary works of art, she saw bouquets of fresh veggies, finger sandwiches in a myriad variety, and shrimp cocktails in tiny crystal bowls.

"Josh is still fuming," she heard from behind her, and her scalp tingled. She knew that voice.

Maxwell Princeton.

Then his words registered, and she gasped as she turned slowly, hesitant to face her host. She wasn't normally so rude in public, especially to another person's guest in someone else's home. How could she forget for one moment that others were around or could overhear her act the hellion? Masks or no masks, she should've bitten her tongue, avoided a scene.

He stood before her tall and rather dashing, dressed in jet black, but not in a tuxedo like every other man at this ball. No, not Maxwell Princeton. He wore tight leather pants, a fluid, midnight-colored shirt, and a matching silk mask and bandana reminiscent of Zorro. At his side, however, instead of a sword, was... She frowned as she looked at whatever it was. A lasso or coiled whip?

The rich laugh that rolled out of him made her breath catch and her heart miss a beat, and she jerked her attention back to his dark blue eyes. "I say the little twerp deserved it. I haven't seen anyone put him in his place like that since he was in diapers."

A small smile curved her lips, and flames licked her cheeks. She dipped her chin, uncertain whether she wanted him to see how bad he made her blush.

Her gaze dropped back to that whip, and a shocking sense of heady anticipation streaked through her body. A thrill she'd never before experienced.

It added a touch of danger she found somehow exciting, or maybe

she sensed an adventure just from being able to speak to him again after so many years of watching him from afar. Though she tried to calm her nerves with a mental reminder that he was the host and therefore expected to mingle among all of his guests, she was still happy to have had him approach her first.

And I'm not the klutz with strewn groceries this time.

Thank God for my mask!

He tipped his head to the side, still smiling. "Are you hungry?" He glanced at the food-laden table at their side.

She shook her head and licked her lips, then forced herself not to make a face at the taste of lipstick.

He'd spoken softly, almost a husky whisper, and the topic of conversation was innocent, but the man was dangerous to her equilibrium. Just standing there so close to her, he made her desire things she shouldn't, yearn to do things she mustn't, and yet, anonymity made her bolder than she'd expected. Cindy felt liberated with her mask in place.

She realized she could be as brazen as she'd always dreamed she could be. Tonight was the one night she was free of her normal responsibilities, free to be herself—the only night she might ever have to enjoy time with a man she was very attracted to—and not have to worry about the consequences or deal with the physical pain that normally limited her to a daily routine of safe, dutiful solitude.

"Thirsty?" He made a point of looking at the glass she still held in her hand.

She shook her head again.

"Mute?" he asked with a hint of humor behind the word.

She laughed—giggled really, something she couldn't remember doing in a very long time. "No, I'm not mute."

"Well then, while we converse and get to know each other, perhaps you'd like to dance." He'd spoken it as a statement more than a question and gave her scant time to react. Before she could even decide how she should respond, he took the glass from her, deposited it on the tray of a passing waiter, and led her by the hand into the milieu of dancers.

"Uh...well..." Her fingers tingled where his touched hers. "I... It's been..." And then she was in his arms, her hand clasped firmly in his and her other laid upon his shoulder as he swung her around in a lively waltz.

"It's been...?" he queried.

She tried counting her steps. *One, two, three. One, two, three.* The last thing she wanted was to step on Maxwell Princeton's toes! "A long time..." *Two, three. One, two, three.* "...since I danced. I'm not very good."

"Ahh, but you're as graceful as a ballerina."

The counting forgotten, she looked into his eyes as pain pierced her soul. "Only tonight," she whispered to herself.

Maxwell heard her murmured words and wondered at the sadness he noticed, but he didn't comment on it because he sensed a query now would spoil the moment. So instead, he pulled her slim body closer to his and weaved through the dancers.

In the brief amount of time he'd spent with her, he'd learned a lot about his mysterious party guest. Before he'd even greeted her, he'd discovered she was much more than a pretty woman. With a unique mix of spunk and sincerity, she was more genuine than anyone else there. The joy in her eyes was as evident as the concern that dampened her smile.

What he didn't know was her identity, and that was about to drive him mad.

"Tell me your name," he said, wanting to banish the melancholy expression from her face. His command worked better than he could've hoped.

Her brilliant blue gaze collided with his. Her eyes seemed to twinkle with merriment, and her ruby lips curved anew.

"Now, Maxwell, you should know better. What kind of spoilsport do you take me for that you'd ask me to reveal my identity at a masquerade?"

So she knew him. His gaze narrowed. She appeared delighted that he did not recognize her. He tried to place her by voice, but no name came to mind. Her eyes? They were a pale aqua, almost gray, and very beautiful. No, he would've remembered her eyes if he'd ever seen them.

The feel of her body next to his? That thought made his cock hard

as granite, but it brought him no closer to solving the mystery of her identity. She didn't feel familiar. She felt new, unique, and perfect in his arms. Not familiar at all.

Needing a distraction from his body's reaction to her presence, he muttered, "You have me at a disadvantage, ma'am."

She laughed, a light airy sound that made him smile. "I'll bet that's rare indeed, sir," she said, taking on the same formality he'd used, although her words were laced with amusement.

She was right. He seldom found himself at a loss for words or confounded by events in his life. He was a man mature enough to know what he wanted, strong enough to work hard for it, and powerful enough to achieve it. He was also man enough to admit that her ability to thwart him intrigued him. She attracted him and his deeper desires like none other.

"But I disagree," she added, which brought him back to the matter at hand.

"You do?"

"Yes." She smiled up at him from behind a pretty mask of small feathers. "You have many advantages that supersede my own."

He twirled them around and murmured in her ear, "Oh, and what might they be?" He already knew she looked beyond superficial wealth and privilege; she'd made that clear when she put Josh in his place, but what did she value?

"You're taller and stronger than I am."

His lips quirked. "That's only advantageous if we were to arm wrestle."

She grinned. "And you're armed."

Ah, yes, the whip. He'd caught her curious glances earlier. Could she possibly share his interests? She didn't seem as appalled by its presence as his father had been. His father had frowned at him the instant he spotted the black leathery coils and Maxwell's lack of more formal attire.

"And just what do you intend to do with that, young man? This isn't a costume party."

That had led to a debate—he refused to consider it an

argument—over Maxwell's independent nature and his father's desire to see him settle down.

"I would've expected a sword," she said, drawing him from his rumination.

"A sword?" No, he wasn't into knife play.

"Yes, a sword or foil, like Zorro."

"Ah."

"But I think the whip suits you."

This conversation had taken an agreeable turn. She appeared comfortable enough now to tease him. He smiled as he dipped her over his arm to end the dance on the last note of music. "You do, huh?"

Breathlessly, she answered, "Yes, a darker, more dangerous Indiana Jones is definitely your style."

Laughing, he lifted her back onto her feet, but when she moved to step away, he pulled her closer. She fit against him as if she'd been made for him. "Not so fast."

"The music is over," she said, although she didn't try to pull away.

"Since you won't reveal your name, tell me this. What 'style' do you prefer, my mysterious lady?"

"Oh, definitely dark and dangerous. And you? What's your preference?"

"I like ladies of mystery who take pleasure in a taste of danger," he answered, enjoying their exchange enough to ignore the start of the next song. While others took the floor around them, he remained still with her held in his embrace.

"Do you know..." she began but stopped.

"Know what?" he murmured, wanting her to finish the thought, praying she was thinking what he was.

"You do know how to wield it, don't you?" He felt her give the whip at his hip a nudge or tug.

Their breaths mingled as she stared up at him, and though he couldn't see her whole face, her eyes told him all he needed to know.

"Come with me."

Chapter Five

He turned toward the nearest doorway, which led to a hallway.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she raced to keep up with his longer strides.

Once they'd escaped from the crowded room, he slowed so she didn't have to run in those heels.

"Someplace private." He stopped, uncertain he'd read the signs right. "Unless you want to stay at the party?"

She shook her head, confirmation that relieved his initial hesitation, but still he didn't move. Her eyes were wider than before.

Slowly, he lifted his hand to cup the side of her face.

"Don't," she blurted out and flinched away from his touch.

He blinked. Maybe he'd been wrong to assume they both wanted the same thing. He had to be sure. "Don't what? Don't kiss you?"

"Oh, sorry. I thought—" She closed her eyes and shook her head once more. "I meant my mask. I don't want to remove my mask...or shoes."

"Ah." She hadn't mentioned her dress. He smiled as his thumb brushed over the feathered edges of her mask. Leaning forward, he dipped his head and pressed the briefest of kisses on her soft lips. "You can keep your mask on." Another kiss, deeper this time. "And the shoes if you like."

He drank in her sigh, pulled her hard against his body, and kissed her the way he'd wanted to from the first moment he saw her. Like on the

dance floor, she followed his lead to perfection, her tongue caressing his in response, her lips soft and sweet yet exploring, mimicking his own movements. Afterwards, he leaned back to see her eyes closed, her lips parted in a slightly swollen pout. He nipped her sexy bottom lip with his teeth, swiped it with his tongue when she moaned, and said, "Come on."

He held her wrist as she trailed him to his bedroom where, the moment they entered, he spun her into the room and locked the door. He didn't want a single interruption, which was always possible with a house full of masked party guests imbibing on his father's stock of wine and liquors.

He looked at his mysterious dove. Yeah, that's what she reminded him of, with the pale-colored, elegant gown, the feathery mask, and those aqua doe eyes. She was beautiful and mysterious, with a touch of seeming innocence.

Cindy couldn't believe what was happening, but she loved the thrill that had her body all but vibrating with excitement. She'd admired this man from afar for a long time, and tonight he'd actually kissed her!

And, oh, he kissed with a passion unparalleled. The way he'd held her close, her curves molded to his hard...mmm. The way he made her heart skip, her body tremble. He wasn't even touching her now, and her muscles quivered.

"Do you know what I want to do to you?"

His question brought only one word to mind. *Sex*. He embodied it with every step he took as he walked around her. She held her breath and nodded.

More of a bookworm back in school, she'd never done more than make out with a guy before, a few kisses under the stadium bleachers.... Kisses that had meant nothing to the guy, she learned later. But that was long ago and had no bearing on tonight.

Although she was inexperienced, she was grown-up enough to know she wanted to do this, smart enough to know she might not get another chance. She wouldn't expect forever from him, and regardless of what she meant to him, she wanted Maxwell Princeton, if only for one night. So if that meant putting on a brave face and squelching her nerves,

she'd do her best.

He stopped to face her. "Say it. I want to hear you answer me out loud when I ask you a question, so there are no doubts, no chance for uncertainties or misunderstandings between us. Do you know what I want to do?"

She watched him circle her again, a dark figure, predatory. She swallowed and answered, "Yes, I know."

He completed another lap, paused in front of her, and fingered his whip. "And what is that?"

"You, uh, you want to make l—umm, well, I think you want to have sex...with me." Okay. So much for squelching her nerves. *Can I possibly sound more terrified?*

He smiled, and she felt a little better. He had a nice smile.

He took his coiled whip and brushed the loops of braided leather up her bare arm. Then relaxing his grip, he let the long tail slither back down her body as he ran the handle along her shoulders, around her neck, and toward him. He slowly continued to pull on the handle, letting the whip slither up her body and around the back of her neck until it lay draped over each shoulder.

Cindy couldn't breathe. She stared at him with giddy trepidation. This wasn't what she'd meant earlier when she asked him if he knew how to use the bullwhip, but it was infinitely better.

The handle still in one fist, he grabbed the other end and wrapped it around his hand. With the whip still stretched behind her neck, he used it to pull her against him. "I want to do more than *have sex*."

"More?"

"Yes, much, much more." He whispered the words against her cheek, and she melted against him. "I want to pleasure your body...."

He'd succeeded at that already, she thought.

"I want to command every sensation you experience until you scream with the need to have me take you...fuck you—"

"Oh." *Oh...* Her mind drew a blank on an exclamation profound enough to express how his words affected her.

"I want to kiss every inch of your skin until the taste of you is

forever etched in my memory, and I want to watch you do the same to me."

She whimpered at the visual images he painted for her. Speechless, she trembled in his arms.

"But first, I want to see you, all of you, without this gown." His lips brushed the side of her neck, and one of the thin straps that held up her dress slipped off her shoulder. "Do I have your consent?"

She clung to him with his silk shirt gathered in her fists. "Oh, yes."

"And your submission?"

"Yes." She'd agree to anything so long as he continued to make her feel the way she felt right now.

He released one end of the whip, pulled the other, and let it slither from her body. Then he stepped back, draping the whip once behind his own neck. At the sudden separation, she reluctantly forced her fingers to release his shirt. Then she wobbled on her heels and blinked at him, eager and even anxious to see what he'd do next.

"Remove your gown, my mystery lady."

It wasn't difficult with the side zipper under one arm, but her fingers trembled as she obeyed his request. The sound of the zipper gnawed at her frazzled nerves, and she had to take a deep breath before she dared to meet his gaze. Her dress hung from a single strap for a suspended second. He waited.

She nudged it off, and gravity took hold. The gown fell fast to pool around her heels. Her gaze low, she moved her hands to cover the apex of her thighs as she stood before him in nothing more than a plain strapless bra, thigh-high stockings, and her magical heels. She'd decided at home to forego panties because of how the dress had hugged her curves. She'd never dreamed she'd reveal her secret to Maxwell Princeton, let alone do it in such a way that left her fully exposed before him while he remained entirely dressed.

"So shy now," he murmured as he brushed his fingertips down her arms, gripped her wrists, and gently tugged her hands apart. "Don't be. You're magnificent."

A twinge of guilt over the magical illusion she'd bought tonight

weighed on her conscience, but not enough for her to take the shoes off. This night was her one opportunity to experience what other girls took for granted—the chance to be normal. One night to be with the man of her dreams.

The heated look in his eyes decided her.

She didn't know what all he had in mind. Her experience very limited, she wanted and needed his guidance, but she wouldn't back down from whatever he asked of her.

Her decision confirmed, her boldness returned, she gave him a brazen grin and said, "I like the way you wield that whip."

His lips twitched.

"Do I get the pleasure of seeing more of you?" she asked.

"In time." He raised her wrists above her head. "Don't move."

She watched him but didn't move a muscle as she felt his hands slide down her arms. Oh, God, how she loved the way his warm touch made her flesh tingle.

He reached behind her and—

Snick.

Her bra came loose and fell to the floor.

His palms settled on her hips, which made breathing all but impossible. When he bent forward and latched on to one breast with his mouth, her lungs quit altogether. This was new, different, and...*oh my, that feels good!*

He suckled her with hard draws at one nipple and then moved on to the other until she thought she'd collapse into a puddle at his feet. Just when she believed her knees would buckle, when she dropped her arms to comb her fingers in his hair, he pulled away and straightened to his full height.

"I thought I told you not to move?"

"Oh." She raised her hands up again, interlocking her fingers together overhead. "Sorry. I kind of got distracted."

He chuckled. "Distracted, hmm?"

She smiled at him. "Uh huh. You're very good at it, by the way."

"I see. So it's my fault you disobeyed?"

She frowned, unsure what the right answer was now that he'd backed her into a verbal corner so to speak. "I...well, no...I mean..."

He grinned, as if she'd somehow pleased him. His eyes, that mask. That gorgeous, bright smile.

Frustrated, she quipped, "Well, if you weren't so darn sexy, I might have a chance of avoiding such mental lapses."

He laughed, loud and robust enough that she startled slightly. When he stopped, he tipped her chin up with a finger and gave her a peck on the nose. "And if you weren't so damn adorable, I might've been able to punish you for your lapse." He swept her into his strong arms and carried her to his bed where he laid her down atop the midnight navy bedding.

"Punish?" She couldn't prevent her quick glance at his whip.

His grin hadn't abated. "Maybe later."

Why did that hold such titillating promise?

Chapter Six

"Just relax a second."

She did by running her hands out over the plush bedding. The material was soft, and the spicy-musky scent of him permeated the air around her.

She didn't want to blink for fear she'd awaken to find all of this to be a dream. A vivid, oh-please-don't-stop dream.

He stood before her in all black from head to toe, that leathery whip draped over his broad shoulders, and she feared he'd vanish.

He didn't. Instead, he held her gaze and said, "Raise your arms overhead."

When she obeyed, he bent a knee on the bed and leaned over her to wind the whip's thinner end around her wrists a few times. He finished by slipping the handle between her arms and around to secure the loops with a single knot.

"You could pull free of this if you need to," he said, "but if you do, I'll take that as a sign you want to stop. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust me?"

She nodded.

"Good," he said with the kind of smile that made her want to sigh. He walked around to the foot of the bed.

"What are you going to do?" Trust or no trust, she wanted to know, prepare herself.

He grabbed her by the ankles. "I'm going to enjoy every inch of your body." With that, he spread her legs, and Cindy forgot how to breathe, how to speak.

Through her nylons, he kissed her ankles, her calves, her knees. Who knew a knee could be so sensitive! Higher he continued, inch by inch, and then he kissed bare skin just above each stocking while he crawled onto the bed between her parted thighs. For several seconds she stared down the length of her body to watch him, but he took his time—a kiss here, a lick there—until she was forced to close her eyes and moan with pleasure.

Never in her life had she felt so alive, so needy. For what, she couldn't define. She only knew she didn't want him to stop, not for a second.

He seemed to know her body better than she did. He kept her positioned on her back, legs spread, as he explored every hill and valley of her body with his hands, his lips. When he flicked the tips of her breasts with his tongue, she arched her back for more. When he dipped that talented tongue in to tickle her navel, she begged him to do it again.

"Please," she said.

"Please what?" he murmured against her inner thigh before he nipped it and laved away the sting.

She shook her head, unable to articulate what she wanted him to do next. Her whole body tingled as if it hovered on the edge of a cliff, whipped by a wind and ready to topple into the abyss.

Then he touched her sex, parting the moist lips no man had ever seen, much less caressed, and she whimpered. The sensations were forbidden, risqué, exciting, and more. So much more than she'd ever dreamed possible. And when he licked her there, she flinched with surprise.

"Oh, G—" Her exclamation caught in her throat, because he flicked her clit, a tiny bud of nerves that sent an unexpected, utterly pleasurable jolt through her body.

But he didn't stop at one. He repeatedly, rapidly teased her there until she writhed and panted. She couldn't look down to watch him. Not

anymore. She didn't think she could take that; it would be too overwhelming, so she stared at the ceiling and tried to concentrate on everything he made her feel.

She cried out when he tongued and fingered her pussy, but the inner explosion occurred when he, without warning, sucked hard on her clit. Though she bucked against his mouth, moaning and writhing, he continued to torment her flesh for long seconds, which kept the climax going and her muscles tensed.

At last, he pulled away, and she collapsed in a sated sprawl, her heart pounding in her chest, her pussy pulsing in time to her heartbeat.

The mattress jostled her a little when he climbed off the bed, and the sound of a zipper made her blink and turn her face toward him. To think of all the glorious things he'd done to her thus far, and he was still dressed! She watched him tug his shirttails from his leather pants, unbutton the shirt, and toss it on the floor. Not wanting to miss a second, she stared at his toned muscles while he sat on the bed to remove one boot after another. And she smiled when he stood up and slid those leather pants off to reveal no underwear and an impressive erection.

As she studied his cock, which rose from a nest of dark curls, he didn't move, didn't cover himself. His bold immodesty made her glance up to see his expression, which was patient and calm.

His gaze met hers. She nibbled her bottom lip, slightly embarrassed to have been caught gawking at...at all of him, but he didn't seem to mind. He stood before her in nothing but his black bandana and mask, a total image of sexual virility and danger that renewed the thrill.

"Do you approve?" he said with a slight curl to his lips.

Do I ever! Though he asked for reassurance, the man had to know the kind of effect he had on the female psyche. Okay, on *her* psyche. "Yes, I do. Very much."

With a smile, he crawled back onto the bed and straddled her waist. "So, tell me. Did you enjoy your flight, little dove?" She didn't quite grasp the question until he reached behind his back to twirl her clit with a fingertip that made her bend both legs and shove her pussy toward him. He chuckled. "I guess that answers my question." With a tap on her cunt,

he stopped, and she frowned.

He ignored her pout while he gathered pillows from beneath the bedding around her and stuffed them under her head and shoulders. When he had her inclined the way he wanted, he asked, "Comfy?"

She nodded.

He began to fondle her bare breasts. "Good." His thumbs brushed over her nipples, making them tighten to hard beads. "'Cause I'm just getting started."

She let her eyelids drift shut while he continued to gently squeeze and massage her breasts. Then he moved over her, and she opened her eyes to see him slide his cock between her breasts, which he held together as he rocked back and forth.

Their gazes collided, and he smiled down at her, though he didn't stop moving—his hands still, his hips shifting slowly, steadily.

"You're like a dream," he said, surprising her because she'd been thinking the same thing about him. "You know that? The way you taste, the way you feel, it's like you're made for me...a perfect fit."

She'd never know what gave her the bravery to do what she did next; she only knew his words made her want to do more for him, to make him feel the same pleasure he'd given her earlier. So, on his next thrust, she lifted her head and licked at the tip of his cock.

He stopped in an instant. His sapphire gaze held hers, and she held her breath, a little worried that she'd stepped over some line she wasn't supposed to cross. But then he released her breasts and leaned his body toward her face.

"Do that again," he whispered, so she did.

His skin was silk on her tongue. The slight taste of salt evident in the first swipe.

He sighed and leaned closer. "Do it again." His hands pressed into the mattress on either side of her stretched, bound arms as he held himself up while he kept his cock positioned at her mouth.

She parted her lips and swirled her tongue around the head of his cock until he pushed forward and entered her mouth. She gasped at his entry, the thick cock filling her mouth, forcing her jaw down.

“Go ahead. Suck me, little dove.”

She did just that as she drew in a deep breath to settle her excited nerves and calm her frazzled thoughts. Somehow, as unique as this experience was, it felt right. She wanted to do it right, to make him react to her actions as wildly as he’d made her react to his.

So, she tightened her lips and suckled his cock as if it were the sweetest of treats. When she heard him groan, felt him buck closer, she wanted to shout for joy. She redoubled her efforts.

He began to move, to lift and fall in and out of her mouth, so she opened as wide as she could and hummed with pleasure each time he filled her mouth with his hard cock.

But all too soon, he pulled out, sat up, and looked down at her. His broad chest heaved with a deep breath he took, and his cock lay stiff and moist against her body. He cupped her cheek with one palm, caressing her lips with his thumb. “You could make me forget myself,” he murmured in a husky bass with a cheerful, brief chuckle.

She stared into his eyes and prayed for this night to never end. If her sisters saw her now, they wouldn’t recognize her. She didn’t feel at all like her former dowdy, dutiful self.

She felt attractive, beautiful even, and cherished. Desired.

With no idea how to respond, no clue what to say to him, she kissed his thumb instead. He scooted down, bent over, and kissed her hard on the mouth. Their tongues dueled and danced together while he blanketed her with his warm body and stole the breath from her lungs.

She wanted to touch him, hug him to her, never let go, but she held still, fearful that if she moved, the leathery binds would slacken too much, and he might stop.

Suddenly, his hands were everywhere. He squeezed one breast, let go, and moved lower. He cradled her head for more kisses as he devoured her mouth and rained a trail of intoxication along her jaw, down her neck, behind her ear.

“Oh, God, that feels so good, Maxwell.”

“It gets better,” he warned before he tickled her ear with his tongue, sending waves of goose bumps across her skin.

He lifted her left leg and plunged his cock into her body.

She screamed.

He cursed and froze. His breaths warmed her shoulder while he remained motionless.

She stayed tense, but over the course of several quick pants, she began to relax. The spark of pain subsided inside her as her inner muscles adapted to the unfamiliar intrusion.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Worried over the tone of that question, she ignored it and rushed to say, "I trust you. It is better already...for me." She kissed the side of his head. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

A laugh burst from his lips, and he collapsed over her.

Squished, she grunted. "Can't breathe...."

"Sorry." He rose up on his elbows, which gave her enough relief without removing the wonderful weight of most of his body. He eyed her from behind his mask, and she forced herself not to look away. "No," he said softly after a little while. "You didn't hurt me, my innocent little dove. And I promise I won't hurt you anymore either, but I must move now."

She shook her head. "No. Don't go, not yet."

He smiled. "Oh, I'm not going anywhere." But he did move. He shifted his lean hips, a slight withdrawal and a delicious thrust forward, and she felt the most exquisite sensation deep inside her body.

"Oh!"

"You like that?" He did it again.

She sighed with pleasure. "Very much so. You...ah! *That* is remarkable."

His smile became a grin. "Indeed." With that one word, he proceeded to dance with her in a way she'd never envisioned possible.

Not that she didn't know what sex was; she did. She wasn't naïve about the mechanics of what they were doing. She just had never realized it could feel so wonderful. So perfect.

"Please don't stop."

"I can't," he answered breathily while he fulfilled her wish with

each new thrust of his firm cock. "You're so tight." Another plunge. A kiss and lick to the neck. "Hang on."

To what? she wondered and then wrapped her legs around his waist.

What began as a slow tease transformed into a rapid rhythm of strokes that left her panting for more of the same. He lifted her legs to his shoulders as he moved her into a new position and penetrated deeper than before.

"Oh, oh, oh, yesss!" she hissed. The sensations magnified tenfold.

He didn't stop. He took her, claimed her, shoved her even higher until together they peaked. This time, when he froze, she couldn't remain still. Her entire being quivered from the orgasm he'd ignited while he filled her with spurt after spurt of warm cum.

After a suspended moment, he released her legs and came down over her to touch her forehead with his own. A soft kiss pressed to her lips, and he rolled to the side, pulling her atop him. Transposed, he cradled her hips against his groin while his cock softened and the kiss lingered.

"Mmm." She smiled as she pulled away, using her elbows to either side of his head. Bending her legs, she moved to sit up, and he held her steady with firm grips at her hips. Though his cock had softened and left her body, he retained enough hardness to present a delightful pressure when she sat on him.

She watched him close his eyes, felt him lift his hips with a quick pump that made her bounce and giggle. She rubbed his chest with her hands, her wrists still bound loosely with the whip.

"You're very good at this," she admitted, the compliment honest and heartfelt.

He gave her the cutest lopsided smile. "Thanks. You have been a rather amazing surprise tonight as well."

Despite a slight, slick soreness between her legs, she was happy, content, and wasn't ready to move off of him. Apparently he wasn't either, because he held onto her legs, rubbing her thighs with warm, splayed hands.

She massaged his chest and watched a satisfied smile curl his lips. Their movements were slow, almost lazy—his hands moving over her legs, hips, and sides—her palms caressing the hard plains of his chest and shoulders, lower across his rippled abs.

She scooted back a bit to trace a fingertip around his navel and down the fine line of soft hair toward his cock, which had begun to lengthen with renewed awareness. When she touched the moist head, brushed across the tiny hole, he sighed and lifted his hips. His cock hardened further.

She glanced at his face to see his eyes remained closed, but he'd parted his lips on that sigh. She couldn't help herself; she leaned down and licked his lips, brazenly dipping her tongue inside. He came alive beneath her as he altered the exploratory kiss into pure urgent need. For countless seconds, minutes—who knew?—he held her in a firm embrace while she savored his heated kisses.

When she at last pushed away, she sat up and froze. As if he'd planned it, her move aligned with his erection, which slipped unhindered into her pussy in one smooth glide.

Half a heartbeat later, he gripped her waist and bucked beneath her, lodging his thick cock against her womb.

She gasped at the sudden entry and tight fit. Her fingers curled into fists against his chest.

He groaned, held her in place, and murmured, "Perfect."

Her heart soared. Though the result of her move had been unintentional, she couldn't agree more with his assessment.

He opened his eyes, squeezed her waist, and said, "Ride me."

She blanked, but he guided her into motion, showed her what he liked, and she discovered a rhythm most pleasing to her as well.

"That's it." He began to thrust beneath her in opposition to her bounce and grind. "Faster. Yeah, like that." Each jolt was another spark that fanned the flames of her arousal until she couldn't take it anymore. She cried out as the orgasm swept through her, and she collapsed over him to tremble in his arms.

He held her close, pumped a few more times, and found his own

release inside her welcoming body.

She came back to reality, awakened by the gentle, seductive petting he bestowed over her bare back and buttocks. At some point during the lovemaking, her binds had slackened enough that the whip's coils had all but fallen from her wrists. With a sated sigh, she left the braided leather pooled around her wrists, pushed up to a seated position, and looked down at him with a smile.

Then an elegant, mechanical tune began to play from somewhere out in the hallway.

She turned her head toward the door. "What's that?" She looked back at him when he lightly slapped her thigh.

"The grandfather clock in the hall. It always plays music before it then chimes the hour."

Worry crashed into her arousal. "Hour? What time is it?"

"Midnight, I imagine. Time for the unmasking." He was still smiling as he reached for his mask and bandana and ripped them off in one smooth yank.

"Midnight? No!" She easily jerked free of the coiled whip and scrambled from the bed to grab her dress from the floor. "It can't be...."

"Oomph!" Maxwell lay stunned more from her emphatic cry than her knee to his groin when she bolted from his bed. He'd never seen a woman react with such fear. "What the—?"

It didn't make any sense.

"I'm so sorry. I'm late. I've gotta go!"

His ego and body bruised, he struggled through the pain to roll from the bed as she fought a moment with the lock on the door. By the time he gained his feet, his dove had her dress on and was flying the coop.

"Wait!" He reached for her and missed.

Cursing under his breath, he headed after her only to stop two steps into the hallway, belatedly realizing he was nude.

He raced back into his room and snatched up his pants. Hopping into them, he took only enough time to carefully zip them up before he ran barefoot and shirtless from the room. He startled guests who'd decided to overflow from the crowded ballroom to continue the party in

the foyer and other parts of the house. The boisterous crowd and noise had swelled, everyone enjoying the unmasking.

"Excuse me. Move please. Pardon me." Spotting one of his brothers laughingly kissing a girl's neck, he shoved his way through the group and grabbed Marcus by the arm. "Did you see her?"

"See who?" Marcus' gaze dropped to eye his dishabille. "What happened to you?"

Exasperated, he snapped, "Who the fuck do you think?"

The girl beside Marcus gasped. Maxwell ignored her and kept searching the guests. *There!*

He didn't hear what his brother said. He was too busy weaving through the group toward the front door, which the butler was closing. He slapped a hand on the door just as it clicked shut.

"Excuse me, Ronald. Did you see a beautiful lady?"

"Sir?"

"Dressed in pale blue. Blonde, about this tall—"

"Yes, sir. She just left—"

Maxwell jerked open the door.

"Didn't even give me time to retrieve her wrap. Sir?"

He heard his butler, realized his words explained why the man was holding a white and furry stole, but he didn't want to waste more time, not if he could catch up with her.

The steps had been mostly cleared of snow, the shadows thick, and his mystery woman was nowhere in sight. He jogged down the stairs looking for any sign of her.

A tiny clink made him look down to discover a shoe, nearly invisible in the snow at the edge of the walkway. As he leaned down to pick up his find, his butler cleared his throat behind him.

"Sir, your coat..."

He looked up to see Ronald drop a pair of snow boots beside him and hold out a goose down coat.

"And some shoes. I cannot permit you to wade out into the night without proper attire, sir. You'll catch pneumonia."

And Father would kill me if the cold didn't.

He tugged on the boots and shrugged into the coat, but he knew it was pointless to go farther. She'd probably taken one of the cabs his father had parked in the circle drive, ready to take home anyone unfit to drive.

He picked up the shoe, wondering how in the world the woman could walk in it, and decided he would find her. She had to live someplace close. She knew him. She'd known of the party. Only those in the small, close-knit community had been invited.

"I will find you," he murmured into the night. *And when I do, I'll never let you go again.*

Chapter Seven

Bong. The clock chimed as Cindy raced down the hall. She had to remove her shoes before the final stroke of midnight!

Bong.

Was that three or four?

Bong.

She pushed her way through the crowd that had gathered in the hallway.

Bong.

She turned the wrong way, she realized, and doubled back. There! At the end of the hall, the foyer.

Bong.

Everyone seemed to be in her way. She muttered a series of "Excuse me's" as she shoved through the crowded foyer, past the gorgeous Christmas tree, and made it to the door.

Bong.

The butler stood there guarding it.

"I've got to go! It's an emergency," she cried as she reached past him and grabbed the ornate handle.

Bong.

"I'll get your wrap."

Bong.

She jerked the door open and dashed out into the cold. She skidded on a slightly icy patch on the landing, gained her footing, and headed

down the steps as fast as she could.

Bong.

She kicked her left foot, and the shoe went flying.

Bong.

She dove for the shoe, but it disappeared into the snow. *Oh, God, where is it?* The pain was immediate and intense as she dug through the icy pile of white stuff. She kicked off the right shoe. Her leg twisted and shrank back to its withered, normal formation.

Bong.

Silence. Midnight.

"Miss! Your wrap," the butler called as he came down the steps toward her. She grabbed the right shoe and hobbled as fast as she could down the last few steps, leaped into one of the yellow cabs parked at the curb, and shouted her address at the driver as she twisted around to see the butler standing on the steps, her mother's gorgeous fur in his hands.

Tears tracked her cheeks. "Please," she begged the driver. "Go. Now."

The car lurched into motion as the cabbie hit the gas. A sob broke free then, and she buried her face in her hands.

Stupid, stupid Cindy, she chided herself. How could she have lost track of the time?

But she knew how. Maxwell's heated touch, his loving hands, the way he made her fly like the dove he'd called her.

"We're here," the driver said as he pulled to a stop in front of the home she'd grown up in, the home she'd probably die old and alone in.

"I..." She'd had a few dollars tucked into her bra, which was on the floor in Maxwell's bedroom. "Give me a minute please. I need to get some money." When she reached for the door handle, the cabbie turned in his seat.

"Looks like you had a rough night. This one's on me."

She licked her lips and met his gaze briefly. She swallowed hard. "It'll just take me a minute..."

"It's all right. I'll have plenty more fares to make up for it before the night's through."

Another tear slithered down her cheek. "Thank you," she whispered and pushed the door open. Several inches of snow blanketed the sidewalk, and her nylon-covered feet felt like blocks of ice as she made her way up the few steps to the house. She pulled the key from its hiding spot behind the mail drop on the wall, then went inside, shut the door, and locked it behind her. No telling how late Francesca and Priscilla would be out. They probably went home with those men they'd been flirting with.

Pain radiated up her leg straight into her hip, making it nearly impossible to walk, but she did. She forced herself to climb the stairs to the bathroom between hers and Francesca's room. She set the one glass slipper on the counter and, as she shed the dress, she turned on the tap to fill the tub with warm water.

The tears wouldn't stop though, and she hated herself for the pity flowing through her. The night had been so wonderful. She'd danced while being held in Maxwell Princeton's arms. And then he'd made love to her. She didn't care what he called it; to her it had been love. The deepest she'd ever feel.

Before she stepped into the tub, she touched the slight stickiness on her inner thighs. And now she was about to wash away the only symbol that proved it had really happened.

With another heart-wrenching sob, she gently lowered her body into the hot water. Her one night of normalcy had first turned into a dream, then a nightmare. The pain was intense, worse than she could ever remember it. Had she not gotten the shoes off before midnight? Had she waited too long? Was she doomed to live with *this* pain for eternity?

She could endure the pain if she could be in Maxwell's arms just one more time. But that, she knew, was the most impossible fantasy she couldn't let herself have.

* * * * *

Marie Laveau was not in a good mood. How could she have trusted that girl? She should have known better. Cindy was the daughter

of a no-good swindling jackass. Marie marched up the cobbled road toward the Carlson home. God help that girl if she'd worn those shoes past midnight. She'd make her pay and pay for the rest of her life. If she thought a little crippled leg was bad, just wait!

Along with the fury, fear curled through her. Those shoes broke the spell she'd cast on that girl years before. If Cindy hadn't removed them by midnight, the spell would be broken forever, and her secret might get out. She needed those shoes back. She never should have taken a chance, even with a girl who always did as she was told.

She stomped up the path to the front of the Carlson house and beat her fist against the door. God help that child if she disobeyed and discovered Marie's duplicity.

How would she be able to explain her lie to the girl about suffering worse pains than her current disability should she keep the shoes on past midnight? She wouldn't, not if the girl had disobeyed and the original curse was broken. And if Marie loathed anything, it was to be caught in a lie.

She pounded her fist a few more times.

God help herself if her secret got out. The rumors were bad enough; proof could have her banished from Everland. Could possibly have her jailed for the things she'd done over the years.

"I'm coming!" came an irritated feminine voice. Obviously one of Cindy's half-sisters. Cindy was too soft-spoken to sound that rude.

The door jerked open and Francesca, or Priscilla, stood before her, hair a mess and nightgown wrinkled. Marie had never been able to tell which one was which. She frowned at Marie, her eyes a bit bloodshot. Whether from lack of sleep or alcohol or both, it didn't matter to Marie.

"Madam Laveau? What brings you—"

"Where is she?"

After a pause, the dumbfounded girl asked, "Who?"

Marie pushed past the girl. "Cindy. Where is she? Where's that girl?" she demanded as she headed for the stairs to the bedrooms. The last time she'd been in this house was when Cindy was born and Cindy's mother died, but she remembered that the bedrooms were upstairs.

"Still in bed, I think," came the girl's response as she followed Marie up the steps. "It's early. Mother's not even up yet. Is something wrong?"

Everything was wrong! Marie threw open a bedroom door. It crashed into the wall with a loud bang, and the girl in the bed sat up with a start.

"Wha—" It was the other girl, not Cindy.

Marie moved down the hallway and opened the next door. A bathroom. The next door was the one she sought. Cindy lay in the bed, curled in a ball. Marie stormed into the room and slammed the door behind her in the sister's overly curious face.

Once she reached the bedside, she demanded, "Where are they?"

Cindy rolled over and stared at her through the gloom of the darkened room. Even in the dusky light, Marie could see the dark circles under the girl's eyes.

"Where are the *shoes*?" she demanded, hands on hips. "I have to have them back."

She didn't think Cindy had broken the rules if she looked quite so horrible. If she'd permanently removed the spell on her crippled leg, she'd most likely be dancing in the streets.

Cindy reached down to lift the bed skirt, and Marie spotted one of the glass slippers.

She snatched it up and peered under the bed for the other. "There's only one. Where's the second one?"

"I lost the other one, Madam Laveau. I'm sorry. I was in such a hurry—"

"Lost? You *lost* the shoe?"

Cindy pushed back the covers and moved her legs over the edge of the bed. Her nightgown rode up to her thighs, and Marie saw her shriveled, disfigured leg. A little sense of relief zipped through her, but the fury returned. She still needed that other shoe, the *important* one with the spell on it!

"I'm sorry, Madam Laveau. I tried to find it, but I couldn't see it in the snow."

"Couldn't find it? You were wearing it!" She shook the shoe she did have in the girl's face.

Cindy glanced down at her leg. "I know. I got them off in time, I think. I tried. I just had such a wonderful time I lost track, and when I kicked it off, it flew into the snow...somewhere."

"You stupid chit!"

"I couldn't see it. It was dark, and the shoe's clear and..." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "I swear I looked."

If that shoe was found by someone else she'd cursed over the years, and they put it on... Rage boiled through Marie's blood. This was all Cindy's fault!

"Couldn't see it? I'll show you what..." She mumbled as she reached into the small pouch she always carried with her, pulled out a handful of her magically concocted dust, and flung it in Cindy's face. "There! Now you will never see again." As Cindy cried out and threw her hands over her face, Marie cursed and threw the slipper to the floor where it shattered into a million tiny shards of crystal. Then she turned to leave.

She would find the damn shoe herself. Find it, and destroy it.

When Marie jerked the door open, the two other girls stood in the hallway, eyes wide.

"Out of my way!" Marie shoved past them and stormed down the hall to the stairs. One shoe had been destroyed. Now she must find the other and demolish it before it wound up in the hands of someone who would learn the secrets of her black magic.

* * * * *

Cindy bawled, her eyes and face stinging as though she'd been attacked by a swarm of bees.

"Cindy," Francesca cried. The bed dipped, and arms surrounded Cindy's shoulders.

She shrugged them off and scrubbed her face with her hands. "Water. Please. I need water." She tried to stand up, but those arms pulled her back.

"No. Don't get up. There's glass all over the floor," Francesca said. "Priscilla is getting you water."

"Hurry. It stings," Cindy cried, the pain almost unbearable. Her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead.

"Here," Priscilla said, and a cool wet cloth pressed against her hands.

Cindy snatched it and slapped it onto her face. It helped ease the pain. She couldn't believe Madam Laveau would hurt her that way. She could understand her being upset, but to physically harm her? That was so unlike the kindly woman who ran the herb shop.

Her skin soothed by the moist cloth, she wiped away whatever had caused the pain then lowered the cloth from her face and opened her eyes.

"No!"

"What?" Francesca asked.

"What did that witch do to you?" Priscilla demanded.

"I—I can't see," Cindy whispered, the depth of what Laveau had done to her sinking in.

"What?" Priscilla screeched. "She blinded you? I'm going to kill that old hag."

"Wait!" Cindy cried when she heard footsteps stomping toward the door. "She might hurt you, too. Don't. Please. It's my own fault. I lost—"

She cut herself off. She couldn't tell her sisters what she'd done last night, that she'd bought a night of normalcy.

"We heard. You lost some shoe," Francesca said, her voice quieter, more reassuring, as she rubbed Cindy's arm.

"That doesn't give that hag the right to storm in here and blind you," Priscilla snapped, her anger still evident. "I knew I should've tossed her out when she barged into my bedroom."

Cindy tried to hold in the tears of shame, of fear. Shame she'd lost Laveau's magical slipper, fear that she couldn't do what needed to be done to care for their mother if she couldn't see. She opened her eyes wide, thinking maybe she had them closed and didn't realize. She pressed her fingers against her eyelids then opened them again. Blackness. She saw nothing but a tunnel of darkness.

She heard the brush of straw bristles against the hardwood floor, and the tinkle of broken glass as Priscilla swept it into a pile.

"What is that? What broke?" Had Marie taken out her anger on something else in the room? Destroyed something of hers since she'd lost something of Marie's?

"It's a lot of tiny clear glass shards."

Clear? The shoe. It had to be the shoe, but why would Marie destroy one shoe and get so angry over the loss of its partner?

Then the bed dipped on the other side of her.

"Tell us what happened last night, sis," Priscilla said, touching her shoulder. "And don't deny it. We saw you at the ball."

Cindy tried to shake her head, but she knew it was useless.

"We saw you running for the door. At least we thought it might be you because we recognized the dress and the mask. But you were running; your leg was..."

"Normal," Cindy finished. She bit her lip and tried to stem the tears that kept flowing from her unseeing eyes. With another shake of her head, she said, "I just wanted to be normal for one night. I paid Madam Laveau for those..." She shrugged. "They were magical, real magic. They fixed my leg. But she told me I had to take them off by midnight...and give them back. The spell was only a temporary illusion. But I lost track of time, and then I lost one of the shoes."

"So the bitch blinded you?" Priscilla shouted. "I'm going to find that woman and—"

"No! No. Promise me. You mustn't go anywhere near her. She'll hurt you. Look what she did to me."

"She's an evil woman," Francesca said softly. "There's got to be something we can do. She can't just come into our home and *blind* you."

"Maybe it's temporary," Cindy said, her heart filled with hope, but she somehow doubted it. Madam Laveau had been very angry. Still, the spell she cast to make a magical shoe that fixed her leg had only lasted until midnight. Surely the blinding spell would be a fleeting thing, too.

"You don't know that. We have to do something," Priscilla said. "Go to the police. Have the woman charged with...I don't know, assault

at the very least. Temporary or not, she blinded you!"

Deep inside of her, Cindy thought maybe she deserved it. She'd paid for black magic. She'd tried to be someone she wasn't. This was her punishment.

Cindy shook her head. She would not let them risk themselves over something she did. "Just let it go, for me, please. There's no way I want to risk any more danger by angering the woman further." She took a deep, shuddery breath and swiped her arm over her face to clean away the tears. "I'll learn to deal with this just like I did my leg."

Priscilla growled low in her throat like a rabid dog. "This is crap. How can you sit there and be so damn calm? You can't see!"

Cindy swallowed hard. No, she couldn't see. And her leg throbbed so badly she wondered if she'd even be able to walk. "I'll be okay."

Francesca patted her arm. "We'll take care of you."

Tears burned her blinded eyes. She didn't deserve their care. She'd brought all this on herself. She should have known something bad would happen. She'd let herself believe in a fairy tale ending, in dreams coming true for one night. Now she'd pay the price.

"I'll figure something out," Cindy said. "I will. Give me a little bit to adjust to this, and things will get back to normal."

"Jeez, Cin!" Priscilla exclaimed as she stood up, the bed jostling as she moved. "You're not Superwoman. If we go to the cops, they can make her...fix you."

No cops! "Or she could do worse. And what makes you think the cops would believe us? Think about it. Fairy dust that blinds on contact? They won't buy that."

"Not fairy dust," Priscilla protested. "We'll tell them it was some sort of chemical powder. It could've been anything. They'd believe us."

"Really? And what about the magical glass slippers that heal bum legs?" She paused and got no response. Satisfied that she'd won the argument, she continued with, "Seriously, if we were to go to them with such a tale of hocus pocus, they'd laugh us out of the station." Cindy's stomach clenched. She'd been the brunt of enough jokes and gossip over the years. She just wanted to fade back into obscurity, go back to life as it

was supposed to be.

Silence permeated the room for a long moment, and Cindy heard Priscilla's heavy breathing, something she always did when she was really mad.

"This isn't over," Priscilla said then stomped out of the room.

"Please," Cindy called after her. "Priscilla!"

Francesca patted her arm again. Cindy wanted to bury her face against her sister and cry, but she was the strong one in the family. She couldn't let her tenderhearted sister know just how scared she was. Couldn't let her see how much pain she was in, both emotionally and physically.

She forced a smile. "I'm all right, Francesca."

"Are you sure?"

Cindy nodded. "Just help me find the bathroom, and I'll start figuring things out."

Chapter Eight

Marie Laveau made her way to the Princeton estate. It wasn't far, and the walk in the brisk winter sunshine helped cool her temper a little. That little brat wouldn't ever see again, and that helped salve some of her pique. Lost the shoe. *Lost* the damn thing. Marie couldn't believe how utterly stupid she'd been to even make those damn things for the girl. Yes, the money had been good, but this could ruin her life. At least Cindy had gotten them off her feet before midnight. Now all she had to do was find the damn thing and destroy it. Cindy said she lost it in the snow. Well, she should be able to find it in the bright light of day.

No point in taking unnecessary risks. When the Princeton land came into view, she ducked into a shaded area and glanced around to make sure no one was present. Then she chanted an old cloaking spell to change her appearance. It wouldn't last long but hopefully long enough for her to find the shoe and be gone from here. The last thing she needed was for the Princetons to find her, the real her, on their property.

As she approached the stone pillars to the front of the estate, she began looking for the missing shoe. If the girl had been telling the truth about running late, she must've taken them off as she left the ball, which meant she wouldn't have walked home barefoot. It was reasonable to assume the shoe would be somewhere between the circular drive, where Old Man Princeton always had a row of taxis waiting to drive home inebriated partygoers, and the front door of the mansion.

All she had to do now was search the snow piles along the short

path.

To her delight, the weather had warmed overnight, and the snow that had fallen the day before was mostly melted except where it had been shoveled into small heaps to clear the paths. This should be a simple matter, she decided, and kicked her booted foot into a small mound of sticky snow to begin the search. Maybe she'd get lucky and have one of her kicks shatter the problematic footwear.

She made her way along the drive, repeating the process of kicking snow and spreading it, searching for that blasted glass slipper. She wished she could break the spell on it without actually having it in her possession. That would make things simpler. Of course, she also wished she'd made the pair blazing red instead of clear as crystal.

As she approached the steps to the front of the mansion, she turned her back, hoping no one was home to see her. Even with the cloaking illusion, she didn't desire contact with anyone in the Princeton household.

No such luck, she thought as the door opened and a male voice called to her.

"May I help you with something?"

At least it wasn't Old Man Princeton, and she didn't believe the voice belonged to any of the sons, of which she'd heard they were all home for the ball.

Time to put her magic to the test.

With a smile on her face, she turned and looked up the stairs to see a well-dressed, white-haired butler standing on the landing outside the door. "Oh, yes. I lost my shoe here last night and was hoping to find it. It's a..." She paused, trying to come up with a good reason. Important just didn't cut it. She didn't know what fancy brands were popular these days. "It's a family heirloom."

The dour man smiled, transforming his face into that of a kindly uncle. It took everything in Marie not to sneer.

"Right this way, miss. Mr. Princeton was hoping you'd return."

Damn. Had one of them found the shoe? If so, it should be easy enough to get back. The Princetons were known for their philanthropy. Surely they wouldn't hold a girl's shoe hostage.

Holding the blasted smile on her face, she hurried up the steps. "Thank you," she said a bit breathlessly. Though she might have taken on the features and body of a woman a fraction of her age, she was still the same old woman on the inside. Unfortunately, magic like plastic surgery could only do so much in the endeavor of eternal youth.

"Right this way," the butler said, leading the way to a closed door. "Please wait here. He's in his office. I'll just tell him you're here."

Another house she hadn't been within in ages. It hadn't changed much. Maybe a bit of updating and remodeling, but it was still a massive monstrosity of a home. The riches practically poured out of the marble walls and floors. She clenched her fists as jealous anger simmered.

* * * * *

Maxwell sat at his desk, head propped on his hand, and envisioned the beauty he'd bedded the night before. In front of him sat a pile of papers he should be going through, business agreements, contracts, bills to be paid. But he couldn't get the woman out of his mind. He had her shoe, her sexy little bra she'd left on the floor of his bedroom, and a white fox fur stole. She'd been in such a hurry, she'd left her fur.

He racked his brain, trying to figure out who she was. To own a fur like that didn't take huge riches, but she wasn't one of the poorer residents of the town, not that it would've mattered to him if she had been. He just couldn't rule it out as the reason for her fearful flight. The dress she'd worn, however, had to have cost a bit because it had been silky soft to the touch and seemed tailored to fit her luscious body.

He knew everyone in Everland, at least by sight, or so he thought. It was a small town, and his father's business had its fingers in just about every aspect of life here. Along with the mining company, now run by his cousin, the Princeton family was the largest employer in the county. Since taking over the company a couple of years earlier, Maxwell had doubled their net worth simply because he wasn't as scary to deal with as his prestigious father had always been.

He had lunch in the market district at least three times a week to

make himself seen, make him seem less untouchable than his dour father had been. Something he'd learned from his mother. She was the brainchild behind the community parties, which his father now used to further his own agenda of persuading his sons toward matrimony and preferably child rearing.

The party. So where had she come from? His mystery woman. Gorgeous, sensual, innocent as the dove to which he'd compared her. She wasn't a schoolgirl or naïve twenty-something. Still, she'd gifted him with her innocence and then taken his heart when she ran into the dark of night at the stroke of midnight.

At a brisk knock on the door, he jerked his head up and cleared his throat. Back to business...

"Come in."

The door opened, and Ronald stood in the doorway, a big grin on his normally stern face. "Mr. Princeton. The party guest you were asking about before has returned."

Maxwell's heart leaped into his throat. Did he mean...? He had to. Who else would he be talking about? Maxwell had quizzed every employee last night about his mystery woman's identity, and he'd come up empty. No one recognized her.

"Shall I show her in?"

Maxwell came to his feet. "Yes. Of course!"

Ronald stepped to the side, and in walked his little dove. He smiled.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Princeton. When I was here last night, I lost a shoe when I was leaving, and I couldn't find it in the snow. It's a family heirloom, you see, and I—"

"Now I'm Mr. Princeton?" he blurted out, frowning at the woman with whom he'd spent the most spectacular evening of his life.

The door shut with a quiet click as Ronald left them alone. Maybe she was putting on a front because of Ronald's presence, he speculated as he watched her glance back at that door before turning to him once more.

"Well, yes," the woman said. "You are Maxwell Princeton."

She stood across the room from him, and she looked the same, but

something wasn't right. Something other than the fact that she pretended not to have shared a very heated, very intimate time in his bed.

He rounded the desk, leaned back against it, and folded his arms over his chest. "A shoe you say?" He could play her game if that was what she wanted.

Her gaze shifted away from him, around the room, never staying on any one thing. Was she nervous? Did she regret their time together?

"Yes. It's a crystal shoe, so it's hard to see, especially in the dark. And it was late when I had to leave. I think I lost it in the snow somewhere on the path, maybe out front? I was wondering if perhaps someone here might've found it."

That explanation fit last night's events. After the clock struck midnight, that is. "I see." He didn't move a muscle as he studied her, the way she stood, the way she was dressed.

"Mr. Princeton, do you have my shoe?"

He raised an eyebrow. She sure looked like his mystery woman. Same body, same eye color, same gorgeous, pouty lips... He pushed away from the desk, dropped his arms to his sides, and walked toward her.

Though her eyes widened a little, she didn't back away from him. He liked that.

"Why'd you leave in such a hurry last night?"

"I—well—you see..."

He stopped a mere foot in front of her. She straightened her spine and looked him directly in the eyes. And that's when he saw it. His mystery woman had been shy, sweet, flirty, with eyes the color of a hot summer sky. Though the color was the same in the light of day, something was seriously lacking in these eyes.

Where was the excited sparkle, the happiness, the recognition of all they'd shared in their brief time together? Or even the sadness he'd noted that one time.

"Yes?" he prompted when she didn't continue. "Why would you run out so fast you lost a shoe and didn't try to find it?"

"Well, like I said, it was dark."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I was late."

That was exactly the excuse his dove had given before, only last night she'd seemed fearful. Today, not so much. "Late for what?"

She frowned at him with a narrowed gaze...so unlike the masked woman from the previous night.

"That, sir, is none of your business."

His little dove wouldn't speak in that stubborn, irritated tone. He had to admit he'd only met the woman once, a brief but mutually pleasurable encounter. Although, he was usually damn good at reading people, and he had a strong feeling his mystery woman wouldn't have it in her heart to be evasive. Masquerades usually brought out the brazen side of people. Yet, she'd been shy and submissive, albeit forthright with everything but her name.

Today, without the mask, this person before him was...different. But she knew about the shoe, running out of the party last night, and the vague reasons for doing so.

Twins? Could his little dove have a twin? Because surely this wasn't the sweet-hearted lady who'd warmed his bed last night, was she?

Only one way to find out, Maxwell surmised. He closed the short distance between them and pulled her hard against him as he lowered his head and claimed her lips with his own.

The woman responded instantly, aggressively. She grabbed the back of his head and shoved her tongue into his mouth while she ground her pelvis against his.

Maxwell jerked back, almost stumbling. This was not the woman he sought. No way in hell his little dove would have attacked him like that. She'd been a virgin last night, and yes, she'd even initiated a kiss or two, but never like that. Now she stood there with a look filled with lust, not the sweeter, innocent attraction of last night. No, this woman appeared as if she couldn't wait to get her claws into him. *Greedy*. As the town's most wealthy, eligible bachelor, he'd seen that look before plenty of times.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"What does it matter? You want me, don't you?" She stepped

toward him, and he backed up.

He was a very dominant male, but this creature scared the hell out of him. Her lips had been hard, and she tasted wrong. Very wrong. Dirty almost. She needed to get out of his house, and now.

He shook his head. "I want to know your name. Tell me."

She stopped, frowned. "No."

He started to turn toward his desk, and then for some reason decided against turning his back on his unfathomable guest. "I think there's been some kind of terrible mistake," he muttered, unsure what to think of her.

"What? Did you think your kisses would somehow make me forget why I came? Ha! Turned the tables on ya, didn't I? Look, Mr. Princeton. Either you have my shoe or not," she said, now sounding angry. "If you have my shoe, I suggest you hand it over, or I'll be forced to go to the police. You cannot keep my property."

He raised his eyebrow again. "You left it here. Possession is nine-tenths of the law."

The woman let out a frustrated screech that made him wince, and then just like that she composed herself and tried a new tact.

"Please?"

Her attempt at looking innocent failed. Maybe that was the problem. Her eyes, they held many characteristics, but innocence wasn't among them.

"Your name."

She stamped her foot and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Stubborn pup," but that didn't make any sense. When she looked at him, he stared back.

"What does that matter?" she asked, stepping toward him as he moved backwards to lean against his desk once more.

"It's a simple question. Isn't it?"

"I prefer anonymity. I'm a...a very important person, and if word got out I lived here—"

"What else did you leave here? Other than your shoe, of course," he said, wanting to swipe his hand over his mouth to rid himself of her

taste.

She stopped advancing, and her eyes widened a bit, although she tried to hide the surprise with a little chuckle. "Well, you see, I was in such a hurry. Who knows what I might have forgotten? The shoe is the important thing, though. It's a family heirloom."

"So you said." No woman would forget that she left behind a fur wrap and her bra. He slipped one hand into his left pocket to hold the folded bills he'd chosen to carry with him after finding them on his bedroom floor cradled in the cup of her bra. It wasn't a large sum of money by any means, but like a small token, the folded bills reminded him of her. He shook his head at the stranger before him. "You need to leave."

She gasped a sound of outrage. "Why you little—I *need* my shoe, Maxwell. If you don't give it to me I'll..."

The woman knew his name, but when she said it, it wasn't right. When his mystery woman said it, there was such emotion behind it that the sound of his name on her lips made him tingle all over. When this woman said it, it sounded like a curse. Nothing about her was right. "You'll what? Go to the police? Go ahead. You're an imposter. I don't have *your* shoe. Get out of my home."

"You'll be sorry about this," the woman said in a low hiss.

He chuckled, but the sound was dry, humorless. "I already am." He gave in to the urge and swiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "Get out before I call the police and have you removed."

She turned on the heel of her winter boot and marched to the door. "Damn Princetons. Damn 'em all," he heard her mutter. "No better than that snob of an uncle."

"What?"

But she jerked open the heavy door and was through it. What had she meant by that? His uncle? What uncle? The only uncle he'd had was deceased, the result of a recent, fatal heart attack while down in the mines. And, unlike his aunt who could be a bit uppity, Uncle Teddy had been a very down-to-earth kind of guy. *A snob?*

He shook his head. She was crazy, whoever she was. But at least

now he had something to go on. He had to be looking for a set of twins new to town. It was the only answer for the uncanny physical resemblance between the two women. And the evil sister was pissed the nice sister lost the family heirloom shoe. Why the nice sister hadn't returned to claim it herself was an unanswered question he'd yet to fathom, but he would figure it out. Somehow, some way.

He sat down at his desk and pulled open his desk drawer. In it lay the lacy, white strapless bra his little dove had been wearing, and atop it sat the pretty crystal shoe. He lifted the shoe out of the drawer and ran his hand over the smooth surface. It was very pretty, but he didn't think it was an heirloom as this woman had said. No. If it had been, there'd be some scuffs on it, some sign it had been worn for longer than just last night.

He narrowed his eyes at it and turned it over in his hand again. What was so special about this shoe? Aside from its unusual makeup, he couldn't see how it would be of any value greater than the fur wrap that had been left behind as well. Something strange was going on here, and he was going to find a way to figure it all out.

Another knock on his door.

He gently set the shoe back into the drawer. "Not now!" He sure as hell wasn't in the mood for any more company. What he needed was a stiff drink to get the taste of that imposter off his tongue.

"Wow," his brother Thomas said as he ignored Maxwell's shout and stepped into the room. "Who pissed in your cornflakes this morning?"

"Oh, hey bro. Look, I'm just not exactly good company right now. I've got a lot on my mind." He busied himself with moving a stack of ledgers from one corner of his desk to another and shifting some papers around.

Thomas took a chair across from the desk anyway. "So, your morning-after reunion with the one-nighter went sour, huh?"

Maxwell sighed. "You make amends with Dad?" he asked, attempting to change the subject.

Thomas shrugged. "He's pleased that I'm back and is planning a

Welcome Home gathering, to which I'm sure he'll invite every single female in the county on the off-chance I'll find a bride. I decided to let him have his hopes."

"Wise choice." His father had been a force to reckon with in business, but he was more bark than bite. And deep down, he wanted what was best for his boys; he couldn't be faulted for that. The old man just wasn't willing to be patient and allow his sons to make their own way in the world when it came to women.

Maxwell straightened up some more papers on his desk, took a letter opener and sliced open an envelope even though he knew it was junk mail that he intended to shred.

"Now answer my question. You decide the pretty blonde wasn't worth it after all? I saw her leave, and she didn't look all that happy. That's the second time she's flown the coop. You losing your touch or what?"

Maxwell met his brother's gaze with a frown. "Last night she was perfect. Today..."

"Hey, from what I saw last night and today, she's a looker, but morning-afters are never good. Haven't I taught you anything?"

"I think they're twins."

Thomas leaned forward. "They? What are you talking about?"

Maxwell shook his head and twirled a gold-plated ballpoint pen. "The face was the same. The body, too, but I don't know. Kissing her today was like kissing...something...old."

"Maybe she forgot to brush this morning," Thomas suggested and cracked up laughing.

Maxwell rolled his eyes. "I'm serious. This isn't a situation of over imbibing—go to bed with a vixen and wake up with a shrew plus a hangover. There must be two of them. They look alike, virtually identical, but they acted very different. Everything about that woman today was wrong. She's not the same person I slept with last night."

Thomas sobered. "Different how?"

"I can't really explain it." He opened the drawer, pulled out the shoe again, and set it gently on the desktop. "She knew about this."

"What is that?"

"It's a shoe."

"I know that," Thomas quipped. "It's like a life-sized crystal figurine of a stiletto. Where'd you get it, and why is it in your desk drawer?"

"It's *her* shoe. I mean the girl from the party. She was wearing a pair of these and left this one behind in her dash out the door at midnight."

Thomas picked up the shoe and gave him a skeptical look. "It's made of glass, bro."

"I know, but I swear she was wearing them, refused to even take them off. How in the hell she walked, danced, or even ran in them is beyond me, but I know what I saw." He took the fragile slipper from his brother's big fist. "In fact, *this shoe* seemed to be the only purpose for today's visit. The woman asked for her shoe back."

"So why didn't you give it to her?"

"Because something wasn't right about her."

"Not right..."

"She called me 'Mr. Princeton' as if we'd never been intimate together, and she even threatened me when I wouldn't hand it over."

"That's weird. I was only joking about you losing your touch, but to be bested by a shoe?" Thomas smirked.

"Would you knock it off? I'm telling you she wasn't the same woman. She couldn't tell me what else she left here either. Who forgets about a white fox wrap?" *Or a tiny scrap of lace that had encased the most luscious set of boobs I'd ever had the pleasure of suck—*

"Well, hell! Who knows what goes through a woman's mind? Many have a thing about shoes, but I can't see one valuing a slipper over a fur wrap, especially in the winter. Having the fur would be more practical, but then not all women are practical."

"Tell me about it..." The whole mystery behind the woman baffled and vexed him.

"What do you intend to do now?"

Maxwell leaned back in his office chair. "I don't know. I can't get

last night out of my mind. I've been sitting here trying to figure out how a set of twins could move into the area and I not know about it."

"Is that what's bugging you most? Or is it something more?"

Maxwell stared at his brother for a long moment before answering. "I know Dad's wanted us to settle down, get married...have his grandkids. I get that, and until now, I didn't think a woman existed who could accept my...needs. Especially not here in this Podunk town."

"And after one night, you think she's the one?"

Maxwell pushed to his feet and paced. "I don't know. Maybe. I'm telling you she was perfect." He spun toward his brother—the only one in the family that he knew shared his personal, nontraditional fetishes. "I bound her wrists, and she didn't freak out. She's sweet and submissive, and the way she looked at me with those eyes... I never would've guessed she was a virgin—"

"Whoa! Are you telling me— *Seriously?*"

"Dead serious. She didn't tell me. I sort of discovered that on my own."

Neither he nor his brother had sought out virgins, had more likely avoided them because of the complications inherent in such activities.

"No wonder she ran out of here."

"No, that's just it. She didn't freak out and run because of that. We'd gotten past all of that and were enjoying ourselves."

"So what spooked her and had you causing a stir by running through the party with nothing but your pants on?"

Maxwell stepped over to look out the window. He should've known Thomas would find out, if he hadn't seen it for himself. "Marcus told you about that, huh?"

"He didn't have to. The grapevine is still growing strong in this little town, especially when the town's folk are all in one place. You're lucky Father had already retired to bed by then and that Ronald has kept his visitors limited today to those not prone to gossip."

"I'll be sure to thank Ronald later." Their butler was one of a kind, invaluable in keeping the household running smoothly, especially considering all of the drama the Princeton boys had been capable of

causing over the years.

"So what spooked your girl?"

"She didn't bolt until that old grandfather clock started chiming midnight. Then she ran scared. Not of me though. It was something else, something..."

"Something you want to help her with?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I can't explain it, Tom, but she's special. If she's in some sort of trouble, I want to help, but I can't do that unless I know who she is and what made her run." He sat back down and picked up the shoe again. "I think this shoe is the key to finding her."

"And her look-a-like was no help?"

"No. She wouldn't tell me her name either. Gave me some ludicrous spiel about her being famous and not wanting to be recognized. I didn't buy it, not at all. But I do know for sure she really wanted this shoe."

"Well then, there is one thing you could consider."

He stared at his brother whose expression was more serious than amused now. "What's that? Hire a detective?"

"Maybe, but I was thinking more along the lines of putting an ad in the Gazette."

"What'll that accomplish?"

"Grapevine, remember? It can't hurt to let the town know you're looking for her. Maybe someone recognized her and will come forward. Or maybe she'll realize your intent to return her things, and the real mystery girl will come back. If so, at least you'll know whether she wants to continue what you started."

"Maybe," Maxwell allowed.

"It beats sitting around here and moping about it."

He narrowed his gaze on his brother who grinned in return. "All right, how 'bout we head over to the market for lunch. We can stop by the newspaper office on the way back." And maybe he'd get lucky and spot her in the crowd.

Thomas pushed out of his chair. "Sure. I'm up for a big lunch, especially if you're buying."

Midnight Hour by Anna Leigh Keaton & Madison Layle

Maxwell chuckled, but before he left, he took the shoe and locked it away in the wall safe behind his mother's portrait.

Chapter Nine

The Everland Gazette

Princeton Seeks Owner of Shoe

"Hey, Cindy! You gotta read this."

Priscilla's shout startled Cindy who knocked over the mop bucket, spilling soapy water all across the tiled floor.

"I can't read," she snapped before she could regain her cool. Her sight, albeit not pitch black as before, had not returned completely. Her whole world was fuzzy shadows, which made housekeeping a true challenge and reading impossible. She'd already knocked a picture off the wall, toppled a glass figurine, and now spilled her mop bucket.

"Here, I'll take that," Francesca said, giving the mop handle a tug.

Cindy held tight and tugged back. "I can do—"

"Sorry. Let her have the mop," Priscilla urged, her fingers closing around Cindy's wrist. "I want to read this to you. It's important."

Cindy gave in out of frustration. She couldn't see, but she could hear well enough, and feel well enough to know that her attempt to clean the floor had resulted in a bigger mess. Water seeped into the shoe on her good foot.

"I'll just clean this up," Francesca said in a helpful tone, and Cindy tried not to scowl. Her sisters meant well and were not to blame for Cindy's emotional instability.

A tug on her arm had her moving as guided.

"Here, sit down." Priscilla certainly sounded excited about something, which Cindy had to admit was better than her temper. She still worried over Priscilla making good on her vow to go after Laveau. Cindy wanted nothing more to do with the woman, so she was pleased to see that something had apparently cheered her up and maybe gotten her mind off vengeful thoughts.

"Okay, listen to this," Priscilla said after Cindy had taken her designated seat on the couch and she'd dropped down onto the cushion beside her.

"I'm all ears," she teased, feeling her own mood rise a little, influenced by Priscilla's upbeat demeanor.

"It's from an advertisement in the paper. 'Maxwell Princeton, CEO of Princeton Enterprises, seeks the owner of a shoe left behind, among other items, the evening of the family's annual masquerade ball. If the owner of these items wishes their return, they are to call on him in person at his home. Owner must describe shoe and other items to ensure their return.'" Cindy heard the paper crinkle as Priscilla put it down, and then her sister grabbed her by the hand. "Isn't that great?"

No, it was terrible. She couldn't face Maxwell like she was now. What would she say? What *could* she say? *Sorry to mislead you. I won't tell anyone you had sex with the gimpy hippy.* Yeah, that'd go over real well.

"You can go back there, get the shoe, return it to that devil woman, and get your sight back."

"No."

"No? What do you mean no?"

Cindy's headstrong sibling's temper was simmering again, but she couldn't think of a way to explain without sharing more of what had happened that night. As great as it had been, reality was she'd made a mistake, tried to be something she wasn't, and had paid dearly for her foolhardy escapade. She just wanted to put it behind her. She couldn't face Maxwell, and she didn't doubt that he'd soon call off the search for his "little dove".

How could he accept a blinded bird with a broken wing?

A tear slipped from her eye, and she wiped it away with a

frustrated sweep of her hand. She had responsibilities around this house and no time to sit on her butt feeling sorry for herself.

Accept fate and move on, she told herself. "What's done is done. Besides, if he's advertising his lost find, I'm sure Madam Laveau has already gone there to claim her property, don't you think?"

Priscilla sputtered a bit before she said, "Well, what about the other stuff?"

Sightless, Cindy stared straight ahead. No way would she admit to leaving her bra in his bedroom! Not to her sisters. And the paltry amount of money that had been tucked inside was not worth the effort.

She would like to get her mother's wrap back, though, but how could she? He wouldn't accept that she, blinded and lame, was the same woman who'd danced with him and gazed into his sensuous eyes while they made love in his bed.

"What other stuff?" she asked, neither denying nor admitting to ownership of the lost goods. "A lot of people were there and could've left things behind. I'm sure they'll claim their property as well."

"But that's not what it says in th—"

"Priscilla, enough about that night. It's over. I went. I had fun, but it's time to face reality and get on with our lives. I'm sure the Princetons have better things to do than to worry over the tedious chore of returning items to party guests absentminded enough to leave the things in the first place. They're just trying to be honorable, and I commend them for that, but we have much more important things to deal with. So drop the subject, okay? I've got chores to do."

It was a fine speech, firm delivery, probably her best. And it was also utter rubbish, but she'd brazen her way through. She stood up, brushed off her skirt, and held out her hand as she began to count her steps across the room.

She ignored the incoherent grumble uttered behind her.

* * * * *

Maxwell wanted to flog his brother with a cat of nine tails, a

bullwhip—something that would sting him enough so that he never *ever* interfered in Maxwell's business again with such idiotic ideas of newspaper ads.

Ever since the ad hit the small town newsstand, his home had been the finish line for a steady stream of hopeful females trying to pass themselves off as the owner of the glass slipper.

The problem was that *none* of them, not one single solitary woman, could describe the shoe correctly, much less any of the other items that his mystery woman had left behind.

"If you'd just let me *see* the shoe, maybe try it on! I'm sure I could prove to you that I'm the one you're looking for," the young girl said as he escorted her and her mother to the door.

"That won't be necessary. I do hope you find your...um...puce garter belt and fuchsia panties, because nothing fitting that description has turned up here. I assure you."

"But they were G-string—"

He closed the door in their overeager faces, certain Ronald could handle them from there.

Leaning against the door, he sighed. *My dove hadn't worn any panties at all.* With that thought, a weary smile creased his face. After another moment, he shoved away from the door and headed back to his desk. He'd taken three steps when the door behind him opened.

He closed his eyes, dropped his head forward in defeat, and sighed. *Here we go again...*

"Sir, there are a couple more women here to see you," Ronald said.

"Surprise, surprise," Maxwell muttered as he gathered himself and turned. "Show them in, but don't go far. I'm sure they'll be leaving soon."

"Yes, sir." Ronald stepped aside and held his hand out for the two women—girls really—to enter.

The pair stepped into the room. One clutched a copy of the Gazette to her chest. The other didn't look all that impressed to be there. He recognized them instantly.

"You're the Carlson sisters, aren't you?"

They both nodded.

He was done mollicoddling these women. "Thank you for coming, but you are not who I seek. Neither of you are the owner of the shoe." Rounding his desk, he dropped into his chair. He was so tired, and completely disheartened. Two days of women, some barely even legal age, traipsing through his office, trying to convince him they were the one he sought.

"No, we're not," the one with more attitude and less awe on her face answered as she folded her arms across her chest. "But we think our sister is."

That was different. He raised an eyebrow.

"And we can't really describe the shoe in detail," the more timid of the two said. "But we're certain that the shoe you have is our sister's."

Uh huh. He almost scoffed aloud at her assurance.

"Well," she continued undeterred, "actually she borrowed it, and we really need to get it back for her."

"You believe I'll just hand it over because you say you need it?" He chuckled a dry little laugh. "I didn't know there was a third one of you, anyway. Where'd she come from?" Ambrose Carlson had been a merchant, and he'd had some business with Maxwell's father. But if he remembered correctly, Ambrose had been dead a long time.

"She's our half-sister," the attitude-laden woman said, propping her hands on her hips.

"Your mother remarried?" Maybe he had lost touch with the goings on in the community.

She looked at him as if he'd lost his marbles. "No. Our *older* half-sister, Cindy."

"Please, we need your help," the other one chimed in. "If we don't get that shoe back, then Cindy won't get her eyesight back."

He stared at her a long moment. He was a pretty good read of character, and she wasn't lying as so many of the other women had who'd entered his domain the last two days, but what she was saying didn't add up. "Please, sit down." He gestured toward the chairs opposite his desk. Once they sat, he asked, "What do you mean, won't get her eyesight back?"

"Look, we just—"

The timid one stopped the other with a hand on her arm, and then she leaned over to whisper something in her sister's ear, which caused the gruff girl to huff, plop back in the chair, and cross her arms again. Satisfied, the shy girl turned to him once more.

"Mr. Princeton, our sister did something she's not proud of, and she lost a shoe made of some kind of glass, we think. It was clear. We know that much. Are we right?"

He didn't want to say so, but they were, so he asked instead, "Do you have the other shoe by which I can make a comparison?"

The mild-mannered girl shook her head sadly. "It broke."

"Broke?"

"The person she borrowed it from shattered it."

"I don't understand."

"Well, the person got very angry at Cindy. If she doesn't return that shoe—"

"But if one is broke, why demand return of the other?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Francesca," the other said. "You're just confusing the man. Marie Laveau leased Cindy a pair of shoes to fix her leg for the night. When she didn't return them, the bitch destroyed the one shoe and blinded our sister."

Maxwell's jaw slackened. "Marie Laveau? The herbalist downtown?"

"Yeah. Her, but a *witch* is more like it."

"I'm sorry," he said. "You lost me. Why did your sister need a pair of shoes to fix her leg?"

The sisters exchanged a glance.

"Can you just forget I said that?"

He shook his head. He wanted the whole story, and this seemed the most promising one he'd heard thus far.

Francesca answered for the pair. "I guess it's okay for you to know. It's not like it's a secret or anything. You see, Cindy's been crippled since childhood. Her leg is deformed. Laveau promised her a...well...a cure for it for the night. The cure was the enchanted pair of slippers, but she was

supposed to take the shoes off by midnight. That's how she lost it. She was in such a hurry to get it off as she ran out of here, she lost it in the snow."

Maxwell leaned forward and propped his arms on his desk, folding his hands together to keep from grabbing the women and making them tell him everything. The midnight thing, the fear in his little dove's face, her race from his house. The reason she would have left behind the shoe and her fur. If one accepted the idea of a magical slippers...

"Your sister told you all these things?"

"Some," the one with attitude said, although she seemed a fraction calmer now that he was showing a keen interest. "She doesn't want to talk much about that night. Says it's over and is willing to live blind forever if we just forget it. Mostly we overheard Laveau yelling at her for losing the shoe. When Laveau left, Cindy was blind." Her anger returned in the blink of an eye. "That damn bi—"

Francesca elbowed her sister to shut her up. "Mr. Princeton. If you knew Cindy, you'd know what a sweet, wonderful woman she is. She just wanted to be normal for one night, to dance like she did when she was a little girl before the problems with her leg began. Daddy used to tell stories about how beautifully Cindy danced." She shook her head, and her lips turned down in a frown. "Please, Mr. Princeton. If it's not the right shoe, we'll return it to you. I swear. We can't let Cindy be blind forever. It's not her fault, even though we think she thinks it is. She never does anything for herself, and we begged her to go to your ball. We even bought her a dress and mask, so we're just trying to right a wrong."

"What'd the dress look like?" he demanded, getting to his feet.

"Oh, it was so pretty," Francesca said with a grin. "The most amazing shade of blue that matched her eyes. She hates her eyes, says they're cold, but they're not. She's the warmest, sweetest, most gent—"

"The mask. What'd it look like?"

The other sister eyed him and huffed impatiently. "Blue to match the dress, made of tiny feathers and beads. It covered almost her whole face. Would you just give us the shoe, please? Like Francesca said, if it's not the right one, we'll bring it right back. We don't want some other

woman's shoe. We just need to get Cindy fixed, and Laveau is the only one who can do that."

Maxwell's gut clenched. His little dove was blind? Crippled? Dear God, no wonder she shot out of his bed so fast. "Does Cindy have a twin?"

Both girls frowned. "No," Francesca said.

He'd heard the small town gossip about Laveau, but he'd blown it off as nothing but the typical crap said about anyone a little different. But if the woman could make a shoe that took away a deformity, could she have been...? He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, remembering the imposter who'd looked like Cindy and who'd kissed him. If all of this was fact...

His gut churned in disgust as he thought of the gnarled old woman who ran the herbal shop. Why would she destroy one shoe in anger only to go to such extremes to obtain the other one? Unless...

"Look. Will you give us the shoe or not?" the moody one demanded.

"Where is she?"

"Cindy?" Francesca asked.

"Yes. Cindy. Your sister."

"At home."

He went back to his desk, pulled open the drawer, and withdrew the glass stiletto. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To your house. I need to see if she's really the one." He headed for the door.

"Wait! What do you want with Cindy?"

He stopped at the door and turned to the one who demanded an answer. Both women had come out of their chairs and caught up to him.

"What's your name?"

"Priscilla. What do you want with our sister?"

"I want to see her. To see if she's the one who wore this to the ball." He held up the shoe.

"Whoa, buddy," Priscilla said. "Cindy can't handle any more upset

right now. She cries a lot, and she'd kill us if she knew we came here. I told her about your ad in the paper, and she ordered us to drop the whole thing. She was adamant, and I don't want her hurt. We just want to take the shoe back to Laveau and see if it's the one she's missing. Hold it ransom until she fixes whatever she did to Cindy."

"I'll deal with Laveau," Maxwell stated, anger simmering inside of him, "if this is really the shoe your sister lost."

Francesca grabbed her sister's arm. "Cindy's going to be angry," she whispered, but Maxwell heard.

"You're scared of your crippled, blinded sister? Is she into black magic, too?"

"No," Priscilla said then pressed her lips tight.

"Mr. Princeton," Francesca said softly. "We love our sister, and if you knew her, you'd know just how tenderhearted she is. We just don't want her upset any more than she already is. She hides it and thinks she's the strong one in our little family, but she's not. She works like a slave to keep us all happy. She makes our meals, cleans the house, takes care of our mother who has problems...."

"And you let her," he stated with disgust.

They both shook their heads.

"You don't get it," Priscilla said. "Nobody *lets* Cindy do anything. She just does what she's always done. It's the only thing that makes her happy. Feeling needed. But since all of this happened... She hates it that we've tried to take over since that bitch blinded her. She still thinks she can do everything, won't let us do her any favors. It's her damn mission in life to take care of everybody."

The anger left him, and he felt so bad for this woman of whom they spoke. Even if it wasn't his little dove, she sounded like an incredible woman. He prayed she was the one, though. "I need to see her."

The sisters stood firm, unmoving.

"I swear I won't upset her."

"Why's it so important?" Priscilla demanded. "Laveau is the one who needs the stupid shoe."

"Trust me. It's important." So damn important he couldn't put the

need into words. "I won't upset her."

The sisters glanced at each other, and then Francesca shrugged.

Priscilla stalled. "If you do, we'll have your head. She's been through enough."

He nodded. "It's a deal." He opened the door and shook his head at his butler who had patiently waited in the wings.

The sisters followed Maxwell from his office, down the long hall toward the kitchen, and then out to the garage. He held the back door for them to get into his car, then got behind the wheel. "You live on Stacia Street, right?" he asked as he hit the button on the opener to raise the garage door.

"Yes," Francesca said. "8143."

He started the car.

Within minutes he was pulling up in front of the Carlson's Tudor-style home in one of the more affluent neighborhoods of their small town, just a couple of blocks from the Market District. He could see why someone living here hadn't been concerned about the few bucks she'd left on his bedroom floor along with her bra. Maybe she could even forgo the fox fur.

"She's really self-conscious about her leg, Mr. Princeton," Francesca said after he shut off the car.

"She can't see," Priscilla said. "Guess it doesn't matter if he stares."

He got out, tucked the glass slipper into his jacket pocket, and held open the back door for them to exit the vehicle, then followed them up the path to the front door.

As Francesca turned the knob, Priscilla turned around and narrowed her eyes at him. "I mean it. Don't do *anything* that's going to make her cry."

"I swear," he said solemnly, barely able to stand there and not rush into the house to see if the one they discussed was *his* woman.

Francesca pushed the door open, and they all walked in.

"Something's burning," he said, getting a strong whiff of what smelled like overcooked apple pie.

The sisters rushed ahead, calling for Cindy.

"In the kitchen!" a shout came back, and he followed Priscilla and Francesca.

A woman stood at the stove, her back to the door he'd just walked through. She leaned against the stovetop, her head bowed over a blackened pie.

"Sis?" Francesca said as she went up to the much smaller, petite woman at the stove.

Cindy. Her hair was the right color, her size too, from what he could see hidden behind the loose, cable-knit sweater and long, flowing skirt. He dropped his gaze to her feet and saw her left shoe with its tall lift.

"I burned the pie," the woman said, and his heart stalled in his chest. That voice. The one that had haunted his dreams since the night of the ball. "I just can't..." Her shoulders dropped even more, and her head lowered. "I just can't..."

"Little dove," he whispered.

Cindy turned with a yelp. "Who's here? Who said that?" she demanded, grabbing Francesca who stood next to her. "What have you done?"

"Nothing! It's okay," Francesca began, her expression one of alarmed worry. "It's just—"

"It's me, Cindy," he said, trying out her name as he moved toward her.

With a cry, she jerked back, bumped the countertop, and tumbled to the floor. "No! Get out. Go away." She scooted across the room on her butt, pulling herself along with one hand, covering her face with the other. "Don't see me."

He went after her, narrowly avoiding Priscilla's grasp. He fell to his knees next to Cindy and hugged her against his chest. "Shh, dove. It's okay. It's okay."

She shoved at his chest, tried twisting away. "I'm not who you think I am!"

"Yes, you are," he murmured against her hair that smelled of burned piecrust and the woman he loved. "You so are."

"Hey, man. I warned you. Get your hands off our sister," Priscilla said, grabbing his shoulder and yanking on him.

Priscilla wasn't strong enough to pull him away from his dove. He ignored her attempts at trying, lifted Cindy's chin with his hand, and brushed his mouth over hers.

Cindy quit fighting and collapsed against his chest in tears. He hugged her close, and Priscilla let go.

"Go away," Cindy muttered. "Please don't see me this way."

"I can't, not after I've spent the last days praying I'd see you again."

"I'm ugly."

How could she say that? How could she think it? He kissed the top of her bowed head, her face buried against his chest. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"I can't see." She raised her face toward his.

He cupped her damp cheek. "I know."

"I can't walk right." She kicked out her left leg and pulled her skirt to her knee. "It's hideous. I'm not the woman you were with. I was lying to you. To myself." Tears trickled down her cheeks, and he hurt for her, with her. He kissed her softly and heard her sisters back away.

When he paused from the kiss that felt so right, he looked into Cindy's gorgeous eyes. "I have the feeling that night at the ball was the first night you were ever honest with yourself."

She blinked, but he could tell she couldn't see him. Her gaze was unfocused, although he'd know those eyes anywhere. Then she shook her head. "No. I paid for that night with cash, and now I'll pay for the rest of my life for my stupid vanity. I should never have let myself believe I could have something that wasn't real."

"But you can!" He cradled her face in his hands. "I'm real, Cindy."

"Not for me. You are just a dream."

"Dreams can come true. You were mine."

Another tear dripped from her eye. "I'm not that woman."

He couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his lips. "Oh, you are. You're everything I've ever dreamed of. And when your sisters told

me about you, I knew I hadn't read you wrong."

She frowned. "My sisters? What—?"

He reached down and tugged at her shoestrings to untie her left shoe, the one with the lift.

She jerked her leg, as if trying to get away from him, but he held her firm against him as he started to tug the heavy footwear off of her.

"Don't," she whispered in plea.

"Shh."

She buried her face against his neck, her warm breath sending a tingle down his spine and heat into his groin. He slipped the shoe off of her foot, then her thick, white sock. He cringed when he got a look at her foot, twisted and deformed. "Oh, little dove," he whispered as he ran his hand over her foot, wishing he could take away the pain she must experience every day.

"Don't," she begged again, but didn't pull away this time.

"Shh," he repeated. "Trust me."

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the glass slipper. If it worked once, why wouldn't it work again? She hadn't had pain the night of the ball; of that he was sure. She'd danced with grace, though as he'd told his brother, he wasn't sure how it was possible when she wore glass shoes. But what convinced him to test his theory more than anything was the story of how badly Laveau wanted the shoe back. If it had lost its magic, then why did she desire its return so much?

He reached down and slid the slipper onto Cindy's foot.

Cindy screamed, and her whole body went stiff in his arms. "No! Oh, God, no!"

He went to jerk the shoe off of her but, although it had went on easily, it was now stuck. He couldn't get it to budge, and her thrashing didn't help.

Fuck! What have I done?

"Cindy," one or both of the sisters cried. The girls rushed to her, falling to their knees next to them, both trying to help him remove the damn shoe.

Her leg lengthened, her foot straightened and filled the glass. And

then Cindy went lax in his arms, panting, her face pressed against his chest. As he and the sisters stared, the beautiful crystal stiletto transformed into an ugly, mud-encrusted, black clog. Priscilla tried a final time and was able to yank it off of her sister's foot. With a scowl, she tossed it a short distance away onto the kitchen's tiled floor.

He held Cindy close and caressed her hair as he eyed her perfectly formed foot and leg.

"Cindy?" Francesca said softly. "Are you okay?"

Cindy clung to his jacket lapel and shook her head. "What's it look like now?" she said, her words muffled against his chest. "How bad is it?"

"Uh, Cindy. It's not..." Priscilla glanced up from her sister's foot to meet Maxwell's eyes. "It's still normal, and the shoe's off."

"Cindy, dove. Is the pain gone?" He prayed it was.

She nodded against him.

The apology stuck on the tip of his tongue. He'd caused her immense pain, obviously, but... He ran his hand over her leg, her calf. "Before, when you took the shoe off..."

Cindy sat up a bit and blinked at him, focused on his face. He heard the faint hitch in her breathing before she whispered, "I can see you." She blinked a few more times in quick succession. "Oh, my God! I can see." Her voice held more power as she turned to look down at her foot. "And my leg! What the...?" A startled laugh flowed out of her as she kicked her right leg out and held her feet up in the air side by side. "It's not... Where's the shoe?"

With two fingers, as if afraid to touch the thing, Francesca picked up the clog and held it up. "It turned into this."

Cindy frowned, but then gave him a tentative grin. "Am I...?"

If Maxwell was afraid to hope, he was positive his little dove was terrified. "It looks that way."

"But I don't understand." Cindy removed her shoe from the other foot and stared at her bare feet in awe. "I mean, I'm thrilled if this is permanent, but I'm scared, too, because Madam Laveau said I'd suffer unspeakable suffering if I kept the shoes on past midnight. What if this is...temporary? What if it gets worse?"

"I'll be here just the same," he said, giving her a chaste kiss for comfort. Then he glanced at the old clog. "But I suspect what she told you wasn't entirely true. You did suffer a lot of pain, for which I'm sorry, sweetheart. I had no idea—"

She touched his face. "No. How could you?"

"But I think," he continued, "she gave you the dire warning so you'd take the shoes off. I think she knew you could be healed and for whatever reason, she didn't want that to happen. Maybe she couldn't put a time limit on the spell after all."

Francesca asked, "Are you saying she cast a spell that healed Cindy, but knew it would be permanent only if she wore the shoes past midnight, and Laveau didn't tell her?"

Maxwell looked up and shrugged. "It's the only thing that explains why she was so adamant about getting back the shoe. You said Cindy leased the shoes, right?"

The girls nodded, including Cindy.

"So, maybe it was future profit she was interested in. Maybe she hoped to make more money off of you by getting you to pay for the shoes again another time. This is all speculation of course, and I can't be sure, but as a businessman I do know all there is to know about encouraging repeat customers."

"But then Cindy lost the shoe, so..." Francesca began.

"There went her chance of making a profit," he finished. "It's the only thing that makes sense for why she would destroy one of the shoes but go to such lengths to get the other one back."

"That does it! Marie Laveau is even a bigger bitch than I thought," Priscilla screamed, lunging to her feet and pacing away. "God, when I get my hands on her."

The kitchen door swung open, and there stood Mrs. Carlson. "What's going on in my kitchen?"

Maxwell hadn't seen the woman in years, but she still had the same sweet look about her. Of course, right this second she didn't look very sweet. She looked furious.

"And who dares say that woman's name in my house?"

Cindy tried pushing off of his lap, but he held her still.

"Mom?" Francesca said, standing up and going to the woman's side. "Mom, are you okay?"

"That witch is a wicked woman. I don't want her name said in my house. She caused problems for my Ambrose."

"Come on, Mom," Francesca said, trying to guide her mother out of the room.

"No," Maxwell said. "Let her speak." Then, to Mrs. Carlson, "What do you mean by problems?"

"Problems?" the older woman asked, somewhat baffled by the question. "What are you folks doing sitting on my kitchen floor?"

"For Daddy, Mom," Cindy said. "What problems did Daddy have with Madam Laveau?"

"Oooh! Don't say that wicked woman's name! He always believed she did something to little Cindy. People think we're crazy to believe someone could cause a deformity in a little girl, but I know what I know, and I know my Ambrose wouldn't make things up. He told me how she was the midwife who'd been unable to save Cindy's mother. And how, in his grief, he'd had to deal with her demands for more money than she normally charged, as if she deserved a royal ransom for her troubles. *Her* troubles! Ambrose was the one who lost the mother of his child and had a tiny little baby to worry about. He paid that greedy witch at first, but it wasn't enough. She insisted on more, and he had her thrown out. She vowed revenge, and she got it. I know that woman hurt our little girl. How else do you explain that not one single doctor could tell us why she got so sick, why her leg just shriveled up, almost overnight, too?" Mrs. Carlson frowned, her gaze fixated on time gone by, as she began to wring her arthritic hands together. "That poor child. It hurts Ambrose so much to see her in such pain. He blames himself, you know."

The room fell into stunned silence. Maxwell had heard rumors of Mrs. Carlson's mental decline, but right now she spoke as if she were completely lucid, except for the fact she referred to her husband as if he still lived and Cindy was still a little girl.

Francesca put her arm around her mother. "It's okay, Mom."

Cindy's okay now."

Maxwell prayed Francesca was right.

"Not only did it fix your leg," Priscilla said to Cindy, "but your eyesight, too. Do you think that stupid shoe somehow reversed something she did to you years ago?"

Cindy looked at her mother, her feet, her sisters, then into Maxwell's eyes. "What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, dove. It's possible, I guess. Then again, this morning I didn't think anything like any of this was possible."

She nodded and tried to get up again. He held her tight against him, and she gave in, relaxing against his chest once more.

"So, um," Francesca took her mother's hand. "Did you need something, Mom?"

The slight, white-haired woman frowned, and a vacant look hovered in her eyes as she looked at her daughter. It was as if her outburst about Laveau had never happened, or she couldn't remember anything about it. With a brief shake of her head, she pulled away from Francesca and left the room.

"Better not say that woman's name in the house again," Priscilla muttered.

Cindy stared at her feet, wiggled her toes. "Mom told me stories about when I was little. How Daddy took me to dance classes and how proud he was of me. Then I don't remember exactly when it happened, sometime around age six or seven, but I know I got sick for a while. Nothing the doctors did seemed to work. When I got better, my leg never grew right after that." She looked up at Maxwell.

"It had to be that witch," Priscilla said, anger evident in her tone. "Somehow she cast a spell on you as a child and just conned you into paying her to remove it. That must be why she wanted the shoe back, 'cause it could undo all the damage she'd done to you. God, we have to warn people about her. She's dangerous. Wonder what else she's done to other people."

"We'll worry about that tomorrow," Maxwell said. There was only one thing on his mind now that it was all over, the mystery solved, and

that was getting *his* Cindy, *his* little dove, home where he could protect her, love her...maybe even start on that family his father dreamed about.

Keeping her firmly in his arms, he stood up and headed for the front door.

"Where are you taking me?"

"My house," he said, as if that were obvious.

She began to squirm. "I can't go now," Cindy protested. "I have chores to do around here, especially now that I can see."

Francesca piped up, "Already did 'em!"

"But...but I have to cook Mother's dinner."

"I can do that," Priscilla said in a tone that brooked no more arguments. She opened the front door. "We'll be fine. You two go and have a good time!" Her sibling's grin was entirely too cheeky.

"See? Permission granted." Maxwell grinned and kept walking right through the doorway.

"I—"

Her sister shut the door.

"You what?" he asked.

"I can walk."

"Yes, you can...later."

* * * * *

He'd carried her to his car, a rather ostentatious Mercedes convertible with its top up, and then carried her again despite her protests once they'd reached his home. Only the second time he'd chosen a less than romantic way of bearing her weight.

"I'm not a sack of potatoes, you know."

"You should've behaved yourself and not tried to get out of the car. I told you I'd let you walk...later."

He had raced around the car to prevent her from getting out on her own. Her toes had barely touched pavement when he'd tossed her over one shoulder.

"It is later," she said. "Let me down."

"No." He popped her on the butt.

"Ow! Stop that." Of course, her objections lost all potency the moment she giggled. Her laughter came out choked and choppy as she bounced against his back.

She clawed at his waistline for support while he slapped her on the butt again and greeted his distinguished butler as if returning home with a woman slung over his shoulder was completely natural.

"Thank you, Ronald." He spun around. "Meet Cindy."

Her cheeks flamed as she tried to see the man through her hair.

"Greetings, Miss. Welcome to the Princetons' home."

"Hi." She gave him a little wave and ducked her head again. "I can't believe you won't let me down."

Maxwell spun again to head through the house. "Don't want you getting away again."

"But we're inside, and I'm not go—"

"Maxwell Princeton! What do you think you're doing with that poor girl? Put her down this instant."

"Sorry, Dad. Can't do that."

Cindy cringed behind Maxwell's back. Butt in the air—even if she was clothed—was not exactly how she wanted to meet his father. She yelped when Maxwell swung her off his shoulder and into his arms. She clamped her arms around his neck, holding on for dear life, but before she could recover her breath, he sealed his mouth over hers for a thought-erasing kiss.

When he pulled away enough to speak, he said, "But I would like to introduce you to Cindy, the woman who will make all of your dreams come true."

His father gaped, which seemed to mirror her own expression. *His* dreams? Whatever in the world did Maxwell mean by that? She tried to smile at Mr. Princeton but had to turn a curious eye toward the man's stubborn son, who grinned at her.

"I know," Maxwell said, his deep voice quieting as they stared into each other's eyes, "she's already fulfilled all of mine."

Cindy's grin came easily, and she ran her fingers into his hair, the

strands as soft as her melted heart.

Maxwell's father sputtered, cleared his throat, and then very formally said, "A pleasure to meet you...Cindy, is it?"

She turned to the family patron. "Yes, sir. Cindy Carlson."

"Not for long if I can help it," Maxwell murmured against her ear as he tickled her sensitive flesh with his nose and tongue.

"Maaaxxx..." she urged, uncertain how to take that remark and already a bit nervous about carrying on in such a way in front of his father. "Behave."

He playfully growled and bounced her in his arms, causing her to squeal and cling to him.

"Carlson? Ah, yes, Carlson. I believe I knew your father," his father was saying as if nothing untoward was occurring. "Ambrose Carlson. Yes, he was a great man. My sympathies on his passing."

Cindy blinked, turned. "Thank you, sir."

The man looked at his son, his expression more stern, his voice brash. "Well, son, don't just stand in my way dawdling in the foyer. You're keeping me from my scheduled rounds. You know how the boys at the country club get when I'm late for the poker game. I have things to do, a lot of things—probably be gone all day."

"Yes, Dad. Have fun." Maxwell's smile was pure devilment before he kissed her again and stepped aside to let his father pass.

"You, too, my boy. You, too."

He refused to let her bare feet touch the floor until he had her back in his bedroom where she belonged. By his side, in his bed, forever; that was what he wanted.

He couldn't get over how hard and fast he'd fallen for her, and though he regretted not having met her sooner or gotten to know her before now, he didn't want to waste one second of the rest of his life now that he'd found her.

Dropping her legs, he let her slide down his body while still holding her close to him. Her grip on his neck loosened as she gazed up at him with a smile on her face.

He kissed her hard, pressed her against his closed bedroom door,

and cupped her butt, after which he gathered her skirt up, inch by agonizing inch. When he reached the hem, he thumbed the band of her panties and gave a tug that had them slipping down to drop around her ankles.

"Kick those off. You won't need them again...for a long time."

"I won't?" she asked but did as instructed.

"Nuh uh." He nuzzled her neck and gave her a boost so she could wrap her legs around his waist. "I like the skirts, but I'd love them even more if you were naked beneath them—our little secret that only you and I know and no one else will ever discover."

Her hands roamed all over him—in constant motion over his shoulders, down his back, or up into his hair. "I was thinking of hemming them up; maybe go buy some new ones that are shorter."

He licked the outer shell of her ear. "Shorter's even better." He fondled her butt and rubbed his clothed bulge against her clit, the friction making both of them moan. "I can't wait." Another second without her and he feared he would come in his pants like an adolescent boy.

"Then don't," she whispered.

Tossing finesse aside, he unfastened his pants, shoved them out of his way, and then rammed his erect cock into her moist cunt. She squealed as he took her hard against the door, rutted into her like a man possessed. But he couldn't get enough of her, had to reassure himself that she was for real. She was here, and she was his.

Her supple body welcomed him, engulfed his cock, and took everything he had to give. Inside her, he found pleasure. In her embrace, he found acceptance. And in her eyes, in her kisses, he found love.

The climax struck with a force that almost buckled his knees. He thrust again and again as his cum exploded from him to fill her womb. While he leaned against her and the door that supported them both, he felt her muscles quiver around him, faint echoes of her own orgasm.

"Are you always like this?" she asked against his shoulder, one of her hands slipping beneath his shirt to rub his back.

He pulled away slowly and set her on her feet. "Like what?"

She shrugged, a pretty blush staining her cheeks. "So vigorous?"

He fought with the urge to smile while he pulled his shirt off over his head and tossed it to the floor. "You tend to have that effect on me." Then he toed off his shoes and finished removing the rest of his clothes.

She'd stepped out of her skirt pooled at her bare feet and removed her top only to hesitate with her bra and glance up at his statement. "Ah. So I'm at fault?"

That did it. He grinned. "'Well, if you weren't so darn sexy,'" he said, quoting her words from the night at the party, "I might not walk around with a constant hard-on." He stood with fists on hips and gaze dropped to his supporting evidence.

She laughed. "'And if you weren't so adorable'..." she quoted in kind and then paused. "But you are adorable." She reached out to grasp his cock, which was well on the way to a fast recovery from his earlier rapture. "Every inch of you, in fact." Her gaze lifted to his. "No, you're more than that. You make me feel beautiful."

"You are."

Her smile testified to the truth of his declaration.

"And you are descent and frisky—"

"Frisky?" he interrupted, almost unable to speak with her touching him the way she was.

She smirked and dropped her gaze back to his cock, as if that was explanation enough, and it was. From hilt to tip, she stroked him with a gentle yet firm grip.

"Okay," he said with a choked chuckle. "I can do frisky."

"There's more."

"Uh huh." God, he hoped so. More of her touches, her kisses...

"You're caring and stubborn—"

"Stubborn?" he protested.

"All men are. You refused to put me down—prime example. I still can't believe I had to meet your father that way."

So that's what kept the rosy glow on her cheeks. He grinned. "We Princetons have our little quirks."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really? I never would've guessed. And how, pray tell, am I supposed to make all of *his* dreams

come true?"

"Don't you know?" He kissed her, whirled around, and dropped with her on his bed with a bounce. After her half shriek, half laugh, she gave him a soft moan as he began to finish undressing her, which wouldn't take long since only her bra remained. But he took his time and made a point of kissing every bit of flesh he revealed, and then some.

When he took one of her nipples into his mouth, she murmured, "You're distracting me again."

He grinned and nipped her breast. "Am I?"

"Mmm hmm. No fair...avoiding my question."

He skimmed his tongue along her collarbone, suckled for a minute at the point where her pulse pounded, and then whispered, "My father feared I'd never find a woman I'd want to marry."

Her breath hitched. He smiled and kissed her neck, her jaw, her luscious lips. When he pulled back to look into her face, her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"He's dreamed of this day."

"Marry?"

He nodded. "I know this seems fast, but I feel I've waited and searched for you all my life. I worried that I'd never find anyone willing to submit to my... 'vigorous' appetites." He grinned. Blanketing her body with his, he positioned his cock at the dewy opening to her cunt and slid in. Slow and steady, he entered her, never taking his eyes from hers.

Her legs parted, wrapped around him, a welcome embrace. For several moments, he rocked against her supple body, his cock delving deeper into her warmth. Then he halted before the intoxication of their union could distract him from all that he wanted to tell her.

"I fell in love with you, my little dove, and I can't think of anything I could possibly wish for more than to have you as my wife." He kissed her lips again. "My friend and confidant." A kiss on the nose. "My submissive, insatiable lover."

A tear slipped from her lashes. He kissed it away, murmuring, "Shh. I didn't tell you that to make you cry."

"I know." She sniffled.

“Will you, Cindy? Will you be mine?”

Another tear escaped to plot a lazy, meandering path down her cheek. She reached up and cupped his face. “I love you, too, Maxwell. I can’t find the right words to express all I feel.”

“Say yes. Say you’ll be mine.” That was all he wanted to hear.

She smiled. Those precious emotions he cherished were evident in her icy blue eyes. “Yes. *Yes*, I’ll be yours. Today, tomorrow, and forever after.”

Even as his heart swelled, he leaned down and kissed her long and deeply, then murmured, “Happily ever after.”

Epilogue

The package arrived with the afternoon mail. Marie Laveau had to sign for it, which made her curious over what it could be. She didn't recall ordering anything lately.

There was no return address evident on the box, so she used a box cutter to rip into the packaging. When she peeled back the flaps and dumped the contents onto her worktable in the back room of the shop, she scowled.

There on the table lay her dirty old clog. Someone had put the damn slipper on and triggered the spell's completion.

With a snarl, she snatched up the thick envelope that had fallen out with the shoe and tore into it.

A handwritten letter accompanied a stack of neatly folded legal-looking documents, so she read it first.

Madam Laveau,

As you are no doubt aware by now, the spell you cast upon the shoe has been fulfilled, for which you have my gratitude. Because of your "magical endeavors" shall we say—regardless of whether it was your intention to do a good deed or not—you have done just that and made my future bride, Cindy, very happy.

Because of that, and that alone, I'm extending this olive branch.

I have purchased from your mortgage lender the title to the

building in which you now live and work. You may continue to do both with no need to take further action of any kind, including payments—consider this your reward for services rendered—so long as nothing, absolutely nothing, of a negative nature befalls Cindy, her family, myself, or any member of my family from this day forward.

Included with this letter are legal documents already filed with my law firm. In them, you'll discover that should any accident or medical problem of a suspicious nature occur, my lawyers are to order the immediate eviction of this building's occupants and demolish the structure, turning it into a community garden.

So, while I thank you for your involvement in the matter that brought Cindy into my life, I recommend the practice of casting incantations of a more "protective" nature...thus ensuring a bright and secure future for us all.

*Regards,
Maxwell Princeton*

Marie set the letter aside and narrowed her eyes at the mud-encrusted clog. There would be hell to pay now, she vowed. Somehow, she'd get her revenge. Somehow.

The End

Author's Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure, and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (a.k.a. “my darling hubby”), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar....

You can visit Madison and Anna Leigh at their Web sites: www.madisonlayle.com, www.annaleighkeaton.com, or check out all the exciting happenings at Incognito at: www.incognitoseries.com and in Everland at: www.onceuponatimeseries.com