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Rose*

Fairy Rose

THE BEWITCHED COWBOY

TESS QUINN



Destiny's voice was thick and sluggish with sleep. "How can you not believe I'm your other half after everything that happened today, cowboy?"

Matt smiled into the crown of her hair. Her question bothered him, but he didn't think he could hide the truth from her. He didn't want to. Despite everything, he wanted to be honest.

"It's not that I don't believe in bonding. I just don't want anything to do with it or marriage. The last time I got involved with helping someone find the person they loved...bad things happened."

Destiny looked up at him, her face close to his as she continued to rest against his chest. "Sometimes, you can't stop life from going the way life was set to go."

"You can't stop 'destiny,' huh?" Matt knew he sounded rueful, but he couldn't help respecting her for her answer. For someone who reacted so intensely to any reminder of her mother, she didn't carry any guilt or blame anyone for her difficult life.

"What are we going to do for the next two weeks?" Destiny said, yawning. "We can't be away from each other, apparently. Leaving you doesn't feel...right."

Matt knew saying that must have taken courage. He didn't want her to know how close he already was to her. How panicked he felt. Was Destiny really the other half of his soul? He took a deep, ragged breath.

"Have you ever ridden a horse, Dr. Snow?"

"No."

Matt smiled at the dry tone in her voice. "Well you're going to have to get a crash course in riding, I guess."

"In your dreams, cowboy."

Matt smiled as he wrapped Destiny against him more firmly. Holding her this way calmed him, and that was what scared him the most.

The Bewitched Cowboy

by

Tess Quinn

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Kim Mendoza*

The Wild Rose Press

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Dedication

In loving memory of Mrs. Rutkowski, the first to
nurture and encourage my passion for writing. This
story is for her.

Chapter One

“What the hell do you mean I have to get married in two weeks or lose everything? I’m a damn cowboy, Gabe. Not a stud for Mom and Dad to pair up with women!”

Matt watched his brother tilt the beer bottle back for another gulp. He wanted to choke his twin for keeping this information a secret.

“Did you check the far left field?” Gabe finally said.

The tension in the room mirrored the ominous weather outside as thick black storm clouds churned and rolled over the house. Matt took two deep breaths to focus.

“You know I did,” Matt bit out. “Don’t change the subject. How could you keep this information from me? Didn’t you think it was important for me, for the vineyard, to know if there was a chance I could lose my magic? You know I never want to get married. I still don’t, even if it means I’ll lose power. If I had some time, I could have prevented this, damnit.”

The windows brightened for a second as a lightning storm began to rage outside. Matt tried to bite down on his temper. He was always able to control the storms despite his emotions, but today he couldn’t get a reign on anything. He was panicking.

He turned from the window to watch his brother lounge in the leather office chair behind the mahogany desk. The office belonged to their father until their parents packed up and moved out five years ago. That was when Matt and his twin took over the vineyard and the horses.

His brother Gabe, always the cultivator and the old soul, kept the soil rich and the grapes growing thickly on the vines. On a good day, Matt could keep the sun shining from six in the morning to nine at night. If he lost his powers, Gabe couldn't keep the vineyard going successfully on his own. They *needed* perfect weather. Their spread was located closest to the mountains, where growing perfect grapes was difficult. Yes, they could have a decent vineyard without magic, but a multi-million dollar success? Not possible.

"Marrying someone to save your power source is easier than you think," Gabe interjected. "April came to me last year because she was the other half of my powers. The women in our world hold the power source. A part of that power source is taken from the woman and tied to a man's soul in childhood. That's why women grow into their powers almost from birth while men grow into their powers as adolescents. Mom and Dad bound our power source to other witches when we were kids just like every other witch in our race. That bond is strong as hell. When the other half of your power source comes for you tomorrow, a puzzle piece will click into place you never knew was missing.

"Trust me on this. Accept the bonding spell, complete the ritual and marry the woman. You can't be with other partners after the bonding ritual. It's physically impossible. Once you're bonded and married, you'll get to keep your magic and your sanity."

"Just like that," Matt said, mimicking his brother's tone of voice. The house shook with the deafening sound of thunder.

"If you don't calm down, I'm going to send you out to take care of the horses. You're scaring them with the storm, Matt."

"Do you blame me? How can you sit there and tell me if I don't bond with a stranger in the two

weeks after her twenty-fifth birthday then I'll lose my powers?"

Gabe shrugged. "You guys have a strong bond. It'll be easier to accept her than you think. You were apparently bonded when you were a toddler. April and I weren't bonded until we were eleven or twelve."

Matt continued to pace the length of the office floor. He could see his footprints in the plush carpet. His boots made defined dents in the carpet and he stepped in the exact same spot with each stride.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched his brother sprawl in the chair with an easiness he envied. Gabe was always relaxed. Gabe may be his twin, but Matt knew they were as different as their powers. The similarities stopped at looks. They both had a lanky build topping at over six feet. Their hair was also a dark chestnut brown curling over the back of their necks and their foreheads. But Gabe's eyes were a bright emerald green while his were a cobalt blue.

Matt didn't want someone he cared about in his life. He could hurt them. He learned his mistakes from Maria. He was satisfied with the vineyard, the winery and the horses. A woman would complicate things. Matt needed his powers and he didn't want to lose them, but he had to get out of this.

"How do I unbind my magic?"

Gabe took another sip from his beer bottle. "Newsflash, brother. You can't. She's your other half now. The other half of the same whole power source. You've got no choice. You either accept the bonding ritual, or you lose your power."

"Were you this accepting when Mom and Dad told you about April?"

"No he wasn't."

Matt turned to see his sister-in-law standing at the doorway of the library. She stood with a distinct glow around her, softening the dark red hair that

framed her heart-shaped face. Matt watched as Gabe's face brightened and he held out his arms for her. She stepped into the room, stretched on her toes to give Matt a kiss on his cheek before she floated across the room and around the desk to settle in Gabe's lap.

"Your brother," April said, leaning into Gabe's frame, "fought his parents tooth and nail to get rid of me. Mom cast a secrecy spell on him so there would be no way for him to explain the truth until they released the spell. That's why he couldn't tell you until now."

Matt's relief was palpable when he heard his brother didn't purposely hide the truth. Matt shared everything with Gabe. They were closer than brothers; they were best friends.

"How does this whole bonding thing work?" Matt mumbled.

"A bond is created based on the astrological signs you're born under," April said. "If you match, there's a certain cataclysmic power surge when you meet for the first time. The parents have to burn a small symbol on the inside of your wrist matching the symbol burned on the wrist of your other half. The symbol won't become visible until the witching hour on the twenty-fifth anniversary of a female witch's birth. The symbols disappear shortly after. You'll feel the emotional pull immediately."

Matt had focused on his breathing so he could hold his anger under check. He scrubbed his hands over his face and listened for a moment as the thunder evaporated and a steady sound of rain beat against the roof.

"I don't want this."

"It's hard to resist the pull of your other half," April said. Her musical voice was pitched low and comforting. Soothing. The tension slowly eased from his shoulders.

"When is this woman coming?"

"She should be here by tomorrow or the day after," Gabe said.

"I need to talk to Mom and Dad. Maybe if I threaten to bring a hurricane down on the vineyard, they'll tell me how to get rid of this bonding bullshit. You'd think a cowboy wouldn't have to deal with something as archaic as arranged marriages."

"You won't bring the vineyard down just because you're pissed, and you and I both know it. Mom and Dad are in Africa on a witchcraft convention safari, so it's no use trying to talk to them. Suck it up, brother. Give the woman a chance," Gabe said. "She has more to lose than you do. If you don't bond, you give up your powers. If she doesn't bond, it's as if you've killed part of her soul and she dies."

Matt froze. He looked up at both Gabe and April. They stared at him intently. They had to be joking. When neither of them cracked a smile, he shook his head, stepped out of his pacing rut and headed toward the library door. His mind raced through spells, incantations, protection charms, anything to prevent his brother and sister-in-law's words from coming true. He gripped the door jam and paused.

"I thought you were on my side, Gabe," Matt said, quietly. "Why are you encouraging this?"

"I am on your side, which is why I'm encouraging this. This is what you need."

Matt left the room, refusing to look back. He heard April and Gabe speaking to each other quietly when he paused in the stairwell.

"Why is he so against Destiny?"

"I think he still carries bad memories from when Maria was alive."

"I hope this will be okay for him," April said. "Did you give him the rings?"

"Not yet. Mom and Dad want to explain the bonding ritual to him at the end of the two weeks. They asked me to hold onto both rings until then."

Matt's stomach tightened. He really didn't have a choice anymore, even though the decision to marry should have been his and his alone.

"*Silentium cella.*" He waited until the electric charge of his words course through his fingertips before he relaxed on the balls of his feet. When the power surge died, he pounded up the rest of the stairs. His silence spell would prevent his brother and sister-in-law from hearing him move through the house or upstairs in his suite. He didn't want to be bothered while he paced.

Life sucked. Dr. Destiny Snow was ready to throw down her belongings, toss her hands up and curse out whoever the hell was making her existence a complete bitch.

Her mother, her precious mother whom she'd taken care of for years, handed her a box of various letters before she packed her bag and waved as she jet-set to an African witchcraft safari. How had her mother been able to afford such a trip? She had money saved up for vacationing, of course. Money that Destiny never knew about, even though she spent most of her adult life paying her mother's bills.

Destiny struggled with her bags. Despite the comfortable heat, dragging her belongings was enough to create a trail of sweat down her back in any weather.

Destiny cursed when she remembered the letters. Bonded her power? Destiny was going to give her mother a piece of her mind when the witchcraft safari was over. How dare Mother keep something so important from her? Finding out that she would *die* if she didn't marry some backcountry cowboy was classified as important need-to-know information! She was a certified genius and was enrolled in Oxford at sixteen for God's sake. She had received her PhD from Yale by her twenty-first birthday. What was her mother thinking to bind her to a cow-

smelling ignorant hick who sat on a horse? Granted, Napa Valley was supposed to be heaven on Earth, a gorgeous and lush setting. Not to mention, owning a vineyard wasn't something to turn her nose up at, either...but the Burdocks were still farmers and horse trainers. She was used to city life. The only time she enjoyed wine was when she ordered a bottle at the *Chateau Briand*.

Destiny wiped her dirty hands on her new designer jeans. She groaned when a smudge of dirt appeared on the fabric at her thigh. Her Burberry was covered in dirt from wheeling her luggage along the dirt road. She perspired in the midday heat. Her hair plastered in wet clumps against her neck, turning her disposition sour.

Despite the warm weather, she couldn't see the sun. Wasn't Napa Valley supposed to be warm *and* sunny? Not to mention, wasn't Napa Valley more... uh, populated? She was dropped off in the center of some sort of town and had been instructed to follow a dirt road through the grape fields until she hit a huge white ranch house. Destiny wondered about the fear rooted in the voice of the people she talked to in town. Maybe it was because everyone knew the Burdock family was a group of witches. Hiding powers in a place where the population was so small would be difficult. In the city, she could hide her powers with no problem.

"You're a long way from home."

Destiny jumped. She dropped her Burberry purse and the handles of her matching suitcases. When she whirled to see who spoke, Destiny came face to face with a gorgeous, statuesque man towering over her. He was a lot closer than she expected as well. Her hand pressed to her heart and she waited for the rhythm to slow. Destiny was buzzing with nerves as the man stood there and stared at her. He didn't have a horse or any sort of car with him. He stood there in his cowboy hat and

plaid shirt. His thumbs were tucked in the pockets of his jeans. His eyes were a bright green...brighter than anything she had ever seen before. He couldn't hide the color despite the shade his hat provided.

"You scared me." Destiny pressed a palm to her chest. "I didn't hear you..."

The man shrugged, but he smiled back at her. "You were too busy cursing to notice me coming through the field," he said. "Can I help you?"

"I...I ah, I came to see the Burdock brothers? They have a ranch up this road. The people at the bus stop said no one drove down to their ranch so I had to walk from town."

The man grinned. His white teeth glinted despite the gray skies. He took a step forward and Destiny stepped back to maintain the space between them. She stumbled over her suitcases and the air whooshed around her as she fell flat on her back. Her elbow screamed on impact when she connected against solid ground. She struggled to a sitting position and wished she hadn't worn her nicest pair of jeans. She pushed the suitcases out of the way and tried to get to her feet. Thunder rolled in the distance and a crisp breeze slapped against her face. She bit down on her frustration as best as she could. The heat, dust and smell were getting to her and she didn't want to cause a storm on her first day at the Burdock house.

"You okay, ma'am?" He put a hand out to help Destiny to her feet. That was when she saw the glinting gold band on his left hand, an intricate design carved into the band. *He'd found the other half of his power already.* Destiny's fear subsided. He was like her. That probably explained why he didn't have a horse. He didn't need one to get around. Destiny hesitated for a moment before placing her hand in his. The man gently pulled her to her feet.

She brushed the dirt off of her hands on her

jeans. They were ruined forever and the thought alone made her feel unbelievably woeful. They were the last things she had bought before leaving Long Island, New York for Napa Valley. Entering an arranged marriage with a man all the way across the country was ridiculous, but she didn't want to die. To save her life, Destiny had left the comfort and safety of home to find a man she didn't want.

"I'm Gabriel Burdock, but everyone calls me Gabe. I should have remembered how...careful the town is about coming this way. I'm so sorry we couldn't come and pick you up."

Destiny brushed her jeans one more time before she stretched her hand out to shake his. She was closer to him now and she could see that his eyes were brighter when they weren't shaded. Her mother's letters said the other half of her power source shared her eye color. She wondered if everyone who bonded shared the same eye color. She wasn't around enough witches to know. Destiny had never met her father either, so she didn't know if he had the same violet eye color as her mother.

Destiny shook her head and tried to focus on putting up a professional front as she sized up the man quickly. Gabe Burdock had poetic features. His face was constructed in flat planes and soft edges. He was muscled and lean. His smile was sweet and there was a gentle aura about him. If her other half was like his twin, then she would be walking over him in a week.

"Destiny Snow," she said crisply, ignoring her train of thought. "My mother left on vacation a few weeks ago, but there were specific instructions in there for me to come here on August twenty-ninth. Apparently my—"

"The other half of your power source is here," Gabe finished. "My brother's name is Matt. Can I help you back to the house?"

Destiny nodded. She reached down to pick up

her purse, but before she could grip the handles on her bags, a spectrum of colors swirled and whispered around her. The colors disappeared as quickly as they came. Destiny swayed for a moment as she settled her center of gravity again.

Instead of staring down a long dirt road, she found herself in front a house. She stood on a wrap-around porch stretching around the side of the house. The porch sported a swinging bench, couches and chairs netted in by a screen.

"I thought this method of travel would be much easier than dragging suitcases through dirt." Destiny could hear the humor in his voice, but she didn't seem to mind it. Her whole situation was somewhat humorous, especially since she didn't have to drag her suitcases anymore.

"April," Gabe said. The word was softly spoken, but Destiny could feel her skin tingle from the magic in the air.

Before Destiny could ask what he meant, the front door opened. Destiny turned to face the most beautiful elfin woman she had ever seen. She had curly red hair flowing down her back. She was almost a foot smaller than Destiny's own five-eleven frame. However, her size wasn't as stunning as her eyes. The bright emerald color was framed with fans of perfectly curled lashes. Destiny was right. Gabe's eye color matched the eye color of his other half.

"Welcome," the woman said. Her voice even sounded musical. She opened her arms as if waiting for a hug. Destiny tried to be as casual as possible when she stepped into the woman's embrace. The feeling was awkward. Destiny's limbs were stiff as she coolly hugged the floral-scented woman.

"Destiny, this is my wife, April."

Destiny listened to the love radiating from Gabe's soft voice. He was such a strong man, such a gentle-natured man. He seemed perfect for this woman who was equally soft.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Did she sound as awkward as she felt?

"Please, come in." April stepped out of the arched doorway. "I'm sure you must be tired from traveling so far. I'll show you to your room. Gabe? Darling, can you please take Destiny's bags to the room?"

Destiny watched as Gabe and his wife shared a heated, intimate look before Gabe shimmered away with her bags.

"We can take the normal way up." April's voice held a lilt of amusement. "I'd like to show you around. Will your other things be shipped from your home?"

Destiny shifted her weight. "Uh, I thought it might be best to see if my 'other half'"—she made quotation marks in the air with her fingers—"would be interested in me first."

"Oh, he will," April said.

Destiny didn't know if she heard correctly, but there was fear in her voice.

"Um, okay." Destiny scanned the entrance and the expansive oak paneling and floors. The doorways were all arched and encrusted with beautiful, ornate designs. April must have picked up on her interest in the décor since she jumped right into showing her the rooms in the house.

Destiny walked behind April in awe. Everything was so open and spacious. The back of the house was almost entirely made of glass. The living room had a huge plasma screen T.V. mounted on the wall on one side and plush white couches against the opposite wall. The kitchen was chrome and marble with a small four-chair kitchen table. The dining room had Italian wood furniture and a crystal chandelier. Destiny was stunned by the opulence. She hadn't seen the upstairs yet, but she was sure it was probably just as modern.

"I wasn't expecting this," she said as April

started up the winding staircase. "Aren't these guys cowboys?"

April laughed. "The Burdocks are businessmen. They have the most successful winery in Napa Valley. We have fertile land and perfect weather." She inclined her head toward Destiny.

"Well, they have horses, right? Doesn't that mean they're cowboys?"

April giggled. "Cowboys raise cattle. Gabe and Matt deal with wine and horses, which is why we don't call Gabe and Matt cowboys. Vintners would be the appropriate term since they raise grapes for wine. Of course, that isn't an attractive description, so you can always call them cowboys if you want. I'm sure Matt will love that. He has a John Wayne swagger, if you know what I mean. He calls himself a cowboy."

Destiny's laughter echoed through the stairwell. When they reached the top of the landing, April pointed out the small sitting room at the top of the stairs bridging two hallways that extended in opposite directions.

"This is our wing." April started down the left hallway. The hallway had three doors. April entered the first door.

"This is our baby room," April whispered. The space was empty, but the walls were painted a sunny yellow and a crib stood in the center of the room with a colorful blanket draped over the side.

"Are you expecting?"

"Yes." April's eyes glittered and one of her fragile hands rested on her stomach. "Gabe doesn't know yet, but I think he feels the baby. We've been trying to have a child. Gabe wanted a family so he set up a baby room when we redesigned the wing after the wedding."

"Congratulations." Destiny's heart squeezed with emotion. She hummed a gentle spell, one of the only ones she knew, to protect the mother and the

baby. The spell was more of a blessing, but she knew it would help if April ever needed any extra magic.

"Let me show you your room so you can freshen up before dinner. We'll be ready to eat in an hour." April started down the hallway at the opposite end of the floor and opened the last door on the right. Destiny gasped when she took in the lavish design of the room.

The bed against the far wall was easily king size with four towering posts jutting toward the ceiling. A soft mesh net, pinched and embroidered at each post softened the masculine edges of the bed. Dark red silk pillows added seductive coloring.

Glass doors opened to a balcony on the left and a small sitting area was situated to the right. The closet had folding doors that were pushed open. A few feet to the right of the closet was another door. Destiny assumed it was the bathroom.

"This is unbelievable," she said as she walked into the room. The opened closet had her clothes folded neatly on the shelves. The dress and suit she brought with her hung tidily on the hangers, and her suitcases, which looked surprisingly clean, were stacked on the top shelf.

"The bathroom is through there. Your things should be on the sink counter. Uh, ignore Matt's things. The other closet has some of his stuff, and he left his shaving things on the sink counter, too. He never puts them away," April said.

Destiny watched her wring her fingers together. "April? Matt's not going to be—"

"Oh, he won't bother you here." April blushed. "Dinner is in an hour. Go ahead and shower if you'd like. I'm sure you'll find the bathroom has everything you need. I'm so happy I'll finally have another woman around to talk to." April hugged Destiny again before she floated across the room quietly closed the door behind her.

"I am way out of my league." Destiny's nervous

behavior usually caused the weather to become ominously dark and windy. She was definitely nervous now since her stomach was tied in knots,, but there wasn't even a whisper of breeze against the glass panes of the balcony doors or the windows.

"England was like this the first time I went." Destiny tried not to remember the gangly little girl she was. "This whole marriage thing is a learning experience." She puffed out her chest and marched to the bathroom. She had to shower and clean up before dinner. Her surprisingly successful other half would be waiting.

Chapter Two

Matt was tired, bruised and aching. He'd had a run in with an ornery horse and he wasn't happy about the result. Along with the winery, his father had started a successful horse training facility where he trained the most difficult horses and the rarest breeds. Matt fell in love with horses as a kid and now headed the training operation. On a good day, he still loved training. On a bad day such as the one he was having, he could curse the animals to hell and back and not give a damn. A horse's kick to the gut was enough to break ribs, but he was able to move back in time and got away with a nasty bruise.

Matt opened the backdoor of the house and yelled a hello out for April. He didn't hear anything so he headed up the staircase. When he opened the door to his room, he knew something was different. The room smelled different. Scents of exotic sex and flowers hung in the air.

He quickly pulled off his boots and socks, his feet sinking into the plush carpet. As he unbuckled his belt, he scanned his room. Nothing seemed too out of place. Maybe April cleaned for him even though he usually kept everything tidy himself. He was about to shrug off the strange sensation when he turned toward the closets. They were open. When he stepped closer, he spotted *women's* clothes hanging on the racks and folded on the shelves. Fancy shirts were organized next to his jeans and button-down flannel wear. Was this the woman his mom and dad had sent?

Matt still didn't believe in this magic bond bullshit. He knew his brother found his perfect

woman, but Matt didn't believe that his brother fell in love because his parents sent April. Gabe's relationship was the product of pure luck.

The woman sent for him was probably a greedy gold digger underneath and knew bonding of other halves was an opportunity to dive into a wealthy man's pocket. The thought alone made his blood boil.

He heard the water running in the bathroom. The smell was even stronger, more erotic.

"I'll be damned." Matt stomped to the bathroom and yanked the door open. Luckily it wasn't locked; otherwise he would have had to break in. Matt was pissed enough to do some physical damage just to get his aggression out. He didn't want another storm to ruin the fields.

Girly products lined his marble vanity and sink. The bathroom had double sinks and he only used one. The woman had taken the liberty to put her stuff around the other sink. Steam was pouring out of the shower stall. He wished she was in the Jacuzzi tub. He would have had an easier time dragging her out.

Matt yanked open the shower stall door. "What the *hell* do you think you're—"

"Oh my God." The woman's black hair hung in thick ropes over her face and shoulders. She quickly scrambled to cover all of her exposed body parts.

Matt stared. She glowed...sort of like April but more beautiful, if surpassing April's beauty was even possible. Her skin had a clear shine and her oval face with high cheekbones and bow lips were just as stunning. Her body put Venus Rising to shame. Her breasts were high and pointed, plumping over the arm she had wrapped around them to obtain some modesty.

"Get out!...*Get out!*"

The last thing Matt saw before he stumbled back and walked out of the bathroom was the color of her eyes. They were the same exact shade as his.

Thunder roared in the distance. Why was there thundering? That only happened when his temper was getting the best of him. He had been angry, but that died the minute he threw open the shower door. His limbs were loose and numb with shock now so he couldn't be causing the thunder.

Matt heard the water shut off and the slide of the bathroom door. He listened as the woman rustled inside his bathroom. Two seconds later, she burst through the door like a force of fury.

"How *dare* you. Have you no concern for privacy? I was showering in *my* bathroom!"

"*Your* bathroom?" The woman had some nerve. She was still glistening from her shower and the robe she wore skimmed high on her thighs, exposing the longest pair of mouthwatering legs he had ever seen. Despite her appeal, she still had to be put in her place.

"Lady, you're in my room and in my bathroom. Who the hell do you think you are putting your clothes out? You can pack your shit because you're going straight back to wherever the hell you came from."

"Excuse me?" She propped her hands on her hips and her robe parted, exposing more skin above her breasts. "Your brother and sister-in-law happened to unpack my clothes for me. They gave me this room to stay in!"

"Like *hell* they did. I make the decision about who stays in my room and you can spend a night in my bed, lady, but you can take your damn clothes and leave."

He watched as the woman's mouth dropped and formed a perfect O. Her lips and the shape of her mouth gave him unbelievable ideas.

"You are the most ignorant, chauvinistic, jerk I've ever met. I thought a cowboy was bad enough but a chauvinistic cowboy? I'd rather die than let someone like you touch me!"

"Oh, please." Matt smirked. "You're one to be calling me names. You moved right in, assuming your looks would hide that you're nothing but a gold digger. No way someone as shrewd as you would believe this whole bonding bullshit."

Matt had to yell over the sound of thunder, lightening, hail and rain outside. He could barely hear himself think.

"Bonding bullshit? Yeah I think it's bullshit. I would've never chosen to be tied to someone as arrogant and crude as you if I had a say in my future."

"Matt, Destiny, stop!"

The storm quieted enough for them to talk. Gabe and April stood at the bedroom doorway. April's eyes were frantic and Gabe's mouth grim.

"The horses, Matt. If you don't calm down, think of the horses *you* have to deal with."

"The storm's not me," Matt snapped.

"Yeah, and I'm the president," the woman shouted.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" Matt tried to focus on relaxing, so he turned toward his brother and sister-in-law. They both looked guilty as hell.

"Destiny Snow," the woman responded. Her voice was prim. Cultured. "April, please tell him you gave me this room to stay in."

"Uhm, Destiny," April whispered. Matt watched as April leaned against her husband's side. She wrung her fingers until her knuckles were bright red.

"We don't have any empty rooms," Gabe said. "You and Matt have to share. As you are his other half, it's imperative for you to spend as much time as possible together."

"Do you mean to say," Destiny choked out, "I have to stay in the same room as *him*?"

He wasn't a damn infectious disease. He knew he didn't look half bad either. Destiny's attitude

fueled his hatred. She had no right to get all high-and-mighty. This was his place and he could do whatever the hell he wanted. "I don't exactly want you in my room either, sugar pie."

Her eyes widened and she fisted her hands against her sides. That brought Matt a minute sense of satisfaction.

"*Don't* call me that. And no way am I spending the night anywhere near you. I'll sleep on the floor in the baby's room."

"We don't have an air mattress or spare bed for the baby's room," Gabe said.

"The couch?"

"Too uncomfortable."

"Fine," she said. "I'll go to the nearest hotel."

"Destiny." Gabe's tone of voice sounded like he was trying to explain something complicated to a child. "In the morning, you'll feel like you're choking if you're too far away from Matt."

"I'll feel like I'm choking if I'm too close to him, too."

April's voice was quiet, barely discernable over the storm continuing to rage outside. "Please try to relax. The boys will have to go out and fix the damage if you don't calm down."

Matt watched the woman sputter and pinch her lips as she continued to tap her foot. She took a deep breath and nodded at April. Matt couldn't believe she was also controlling the weather with her emotions. Understanding and fear started weaving together in a clear tapestry. The matching eye colors. The matching powers. The bonded powers meant matching eye colors meant the same power. Wasn't he the only one cursed with controlling the weather?

He didn't want his brother to be right about bonding, but he was starting to fear there was no other explanation for the way things were turning out. He shot a pointed look at his twin.

"Why is she here, Gabe? I told you I didn't want her to come."

"Matt, you know our parents have arranged this...we told you about Destiny already. We didn't know where she was to let her know you weren't exactly, uh, receptive to the idea."

"And it's not like I had a choice." Destiny crossed her arms over her chest. "At least you get off easy. If you don't want me, you lose your power. But me? I *die*. You get off easy, cowboy."

Matt watched the woman's face. She really did glow. And her eyes. People had told him his eyes were eerie. Strange. But on Destiny Snow, he felt compelled to stare. He was drawn to her and he hated himself for it.

"I'm taking a shower." Matt walked by the woman, brushing against her. He bit down on the shock of electricity coursing through him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Destiny shiver.

"We'll talk about this over dinner and then we'll figure out how to get Ms. Snow and me out of this mess so someone can escort her back to town." He pulled off his sweat-stained shirt and stormed off to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. Once he was alone, he didn't bother hiding his doubt as he stripped out of the rest of his clothes. After all, he didn't want anyone to see him wonder whether or not there was truth to his brother's claim. Was there no other way out of this other than losing the one gift he had come to depend on? The one gift he was cursed with?

The man was an ignorant fool who was driving her crazy. He may have smelled like horse manure, but he was stunning. Even while she was terrified, embarrassed and angry, when he whipped the shower stall door open, Matt captivated her. No one shared her eye color...and she was even more surprised to note the piercing cobalt blue looked a

hell of a lot better on him than her.

Destiny changed into a fresh pair of jeans and t-shirt while the shower continued to run. She warmed when she realized he was as naked as she had been a few minutes ago. Drying her hair took a considerably long time due to the amount of hair she had, but she dried it as fast as she could and quickly wove a braid, which she spiraled on top of her head and pinned into place.

The water had stopped running as she slipped the last pin into her hair. She scrambled for a pair of socks and ran out of the room as fast as she could. She didn't want to know how Matt looked naked. She was sworn to hate him since he was the reason she was in this fix. The shock of electricity singing her nerves was so surprising. How was she supposed to hide her reaction from him?

Destiny pounded down the staircase and into the kitchen. April stood at the stove and stirred a pot with a long wooden spoon. Gabe was setting the table. She didn't realize someone as masculine as Gabe would be handling delicate china. Most importantly, Destiny didn't understand how these people living in such a chic-modern house wouldn't hire a cook to do the work for them.

"Can I help with anything?" Destiny's mother instilled manners into her and she wouldn't feel right standing around while they worked.

April turned to smile at her. "The ingredients for a salad are in the fridge and the bread is in the oven. If you could put both on the table, I would really appreciate it."

Destiny nodded and quickly grabbed the vegetables from the fridge to start with the salad. She was relieved she had something to do since she hated private dinner parties where the host only wanted her to stand to the side and sip wine. Working with her hands prevented anyone from seeing her fingers shaking. She could easily hide the

tremors in quick, easy movements.

Destiny worked with Gabe and April in silence for a few minutes until she heard the pounding on the staircase. She froze for a few moments before she continued to toss the salad. She refused to look up. He was gorgeous. He was unrefined but gorgeous and she didn't want to look at him.

"Are we drinking wine today?" Matt said. Destiny still refused to look, but she could swear heat radiated from his body. The warmth hit her relentlessly in waves. Her reaction exposed her and she didn't like it. Damn it, why couldn't he be ugly? The lack of chemistry would make hating him so much easier. But then again, she wasn't supposed to hate him. She was supposed to figure out a way to like this guy so she could bond and not die at the age of twenty-five.

"A bottle is chilling in the fridge," Gabe replied.

The hairs on the back of her neck raised when Matt slipped by her to reach the fridge.

The conversation in the kitchen stopped again. Matt had pulled the bottle of wine out of the fridge and grabbed wine goblets from the cupboard. April poured the thick beef stew into a serving pot while Gabe finished setting the table. Destiny put the tossed salad and thickly cut bread on the table as well. They all seemed to have finished at the same time and slid into their seats.

April started passing the salad bowl around.

"So where are you from, Destiny Snow?" Matt said as he took the salad bowl from his brother.

"Long Island."

"When were you told about this whole bonding ritual? I assume you found out the same time you were told the winery was worth millions of dollars."

The wine goblet was going to break if she gripped it any harder. She counted to ten and then backwards to one before she released her grip on the glass.

"I was told a few weeks ago. Is the winery worth millions?" She tucked a curl behind her ear. "Unfortunately for you, that does nothing to enhance your appeal."

"So what were you told about me? I wasn't told anything. I wish I knew I was bonded to a tight-ass bi—"

"Matt," Gabe snapped. "Watch it."

Destiny heard the rumbling in the distance. There were going to be major storms on the vineyard while both she and Matt were within a hundred yards of each other. She couldn't tell if her anger or Matt's caused this storm. Destiny finally looked up at April first, who was pushing the salad around, and then to the twins who were still glaring at each other from across the table.

"I didn't want this any more than you did, Matt. You may have the luxury of saying no to bonding with me, but I don't have a choice. I accept you or I die. I'm sure you couldn't care less whether or not I'm around, but I'd appreciate if you don't make this any harder on me than the situation already is."

She watched him pick up his goblet, cradling the curve of the glass in long, tapered fingers. He swirled the wine and shifted the goblet back and forth under his nose before taking a sip.

"Do you really believe you're going to die?"

"It's happened. I'm a researcher. I've done my work and found dying is a lot more common than I expected."

"You must have been relieved to know you're bonded to someone who's worth millions."

Despite the beautiful aura around him and the gentle golden brightness that glittered from his skin, Destiny could see the hardness etched in his face and the piercing anger behind his careless sarcasm. This couldn't be the other half of her soul.

"If you're implying I am only here for your money, save your breath. I'm here so I don't die in

two weeks. I have enough money of my own.”

“Wow, it’s refreshing to know how melodramatic you are. I’m still surprised you would believe in something like this.”

April had started pouring stew into everyone’s dishes. Destiny watched her flinch at Matt’s words. Gabe reached up to pat his wife on the arm. Destiny had to admit, her mother’s letter did seem over the top, but April would know what the weeks before bonding were like. Her stiffness and Gabe’s support were more telling than they knew.

“Like I said before. I did the research.” Destiny smiled at April. She wasn’t one for beef stew. But then again, lately with everything getting so busy at work and her mother driving her crazy, frozen dinners had been keeping her company at night.

Destiny picked up her spoon and nibbled. She sighed as she savored the thick, spicy taste exploding in her mouth. The aroma was mouthwatering alone, but the taste was even better. Destiny chewed while she focused on the different table accents. The colorful fiesta dishes brightened the white place mats with exotic paisley designs. A colorful bouquet of flowers rioted in the middle of the table, spilling out of the vase. The vines curled under the white ceramic serving dishes. She was accustomed to eating on designer matching sets when dining at her friends’ dinner parties, but for some reason, she enjoyed this setting more than all of the fine china she had ever experienced.

“Not up to your taste, Ms. Snow?” Matt said.

Destiny’s head shot up. He was too busy mocking her with a smirk and a raised brow.

“I was thinking this is the most personal meal I’ve had in years.”

April beamed. “I hope you like the stew.”

“It’s delicious. You have to share the recipe,” Destiny said, meaning every word.

“I’d love to share the recipe. It’s so easy.”

"I can't imagine you cooking in your tidy apron," Matt said.

Destiny continued to ignore him. "The flowers are amazing, April. Do you have a garden?"

The woman smiled at her husband before answering. "We have a greenhouse Gabe built for me out back. Gabe's magic is with the vines, but he lets me channel mine into the plants we have."

"Is growing what you do? You can control growth?"

"Yes. When I first came here, Gabe brought me the most beautiful full-bloomed roses I have ever seen. One rose a day for the fourteen days. They were these deep red roses with huge, fully opened petals. I still have them in water in our bedroom a year later."

Destiny watched as Gabe lifted his wife's hand and kissed her fingers. She turned to look at Matt and was surprised to find his face twisted in pain. When he caught her watching him, the creases in his face ironed out until he was unreadable.

"Uh, so I'm probably in the dark just as much as Matt is, but why did our parents decide to arrange our 'others,' so to speak, and why did your parents choose me for Matt?"

"Apparently your mother came to visit us because our mothers went to school together. Matt and I were five and you were an infant. Mom said that Matt wouldn't stop looking at you. He wouldn't stop sitting next to you and would get upset if you cried. They checked to see if your magic patterns matched and they were identical. Our parents bonded you two that day."

Although it was probably time for the sun to set, rays of light streamed through the windows and everything brightened for a moment until Destiny firmly clamped on her emotional surge. Her cheeks flamed and she tried to hide behind her wine glass.

"I don't understand. If your parents knew my

mother, then why haven't they spoken to each other all these years? Why haven't your parents gone to visit my mother? I should've at least heard about your family."

"I'm not sure. All I know is your mother said she couldn't visit us again...something about your father."

Destiny froze. Her spoon, piled high with stew, dripped into the bowl. Her hand was stuck midair between dish and mouth. She slipped the spoon into her lips, focusing on the taste. Salt. Spice. Thick beef chunks. Tang.

"I understand," she said after swallowing and a few seconds of dead silence. She continued to eat in a methodical manner. The beef practically melted when she slipped chunks between her lips. The vegetables were perfectly cooked.

"I don't," Matt replied. "What about your father?"

"Nothing."

"Look, if were in the same boat, you have to tell me what's going on."

Destiny's gaze locked with Matt's and she stared at him for a few seconds before she told him in an even tone, "My father died when I was young. My mother went a little crazy. I've been taking care of her ever since."

Matt continued to sip his wine. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did she lose her sanity because your parents were bonded?"

"So my mother said in a letter. I haven't spoken to her in weeks. She went on this African safari for witches."

Gabe started laughing. "Holy hell, they planned it!"

"Who planned what?" Destiny asked.

"Our parents," Gabe said. "Matt's and my parents are on an African safari for witches, too. I can bet the vineyard your mom and our parents

planned on going together so you and Matt couldn't tear into them for doing this to you both."

"Smart of them," Matt said, his voice as dry as desert heat. "When I get my hands on them..."

"You'll thank them." April patted her brother-in-law on the hand. "I know you will."

Destiny's teeth locked together so hard they made a loud clicking sound she was sure echoed throughout the kitchen. This was getting too much. She didn't want this.

"Look, is there any way to bond quickly so I can move back to New York and Matt can stay here? I don't want this any more than Matt does."

Matt raised his eyebrow again, his mouth in a crooked, smug smile putting her on edge.

"We can bond now if you want," Matt said. "You can be out of here tomorrow."

Destiny could feel her nerves fraying. His unwavering stare made her nervous. The baby-fine hairs on the back of neck prickled as she squirmed under his scrutiny.

"Uh, Destiny? Matt?" April interrupted. "You wouldn't last for the two week period even if you do bond now. You have to be here for two weeks following the twelfth hour of the female's twenty-fifth birthday. For the next two weeks you two can seldom be apart, otherwise you'll be sick. Literally."

"What? Even if we're bonded? You're joking." Destiny needed to get out of Napa Valley. She had to get away from this man.

April shook her head. "As of midnight, you have to be at least in the same room or within speaking distance of each other. You'll get sick. You don't want to know what I'm talking about. Matt, don't you remember how three days after my birthday I didn't leave the house?"

Destiny watched as Matt's lips parted. "Weren't you sick? Well, for a while. After you got better, weren't you and Gabe...uhm..."

April blushed Gabe grinned at his wife's embarrassment. "We were just taking advantage of our bonding time."

They were so sweet and looked so in love. Destiny knew how rare displays of passion and adoration were. She couldn't help but smile.

"Oh no you don't," Matt said.

"Oh no I don't, what?"

He threw his napkin down on the table and leaned back in his chair. "You're one of those girls who believes in fairy tales, aren't you? The way you're looking at April and Gabe—you want a love story like that? News flash—my brother and I are nothing alike. If you think I'm ever going to look at you with stars in my eyes, lady, you're out of your mind."

Destiny knew she shouldn't bristle with irritation, but she wasn't going to let him have the parting shot. And she was an academic, for God's sake. How dare this idiot imply she was so gullible? She could never believe in love like Gabe and April's for herself. She'd seen too much heartache.

"I doubt anyone could ever love you, Mr. Burdock. I suggest you get off your high horse, pardon the pun, and help me figure out a way to get both of us out of this mess." Her stomach was tightening hard enough to demand her attention. She pressed a hand against her abdomen. "I don't know why there has to be a two-week period where we have to stay together."

"Why do you think mortals have a honeymoon period that traditionally lasts for two weeks?" April asked. "The two week time frame is from our bonding stories. A Wiccan couple needs two weeks for the bonding to be completed. For the two souls to recognize each other and attach, even if you do the bonding ritual on the first day."

A distant rumbling grew from the distance. Another storm.

"I wonder," Destiny mused as she continued to sip her wine, "do the locals here ever question why there are so many storms? In one hour there has already been the threat of two thunderstorms. What a temper he must have, Gabe."

Gabe laughed and even though his brother looked murderous, the man remained relaxed. Apparently Gabe wasn't intimidated by his twin.

"We live in a part of the valley where the soil isn't as rich because we have vineyards closest to the mountains. To keep the unnaturally rich soil and the unique weather patterns for this area a secret, we've cast safeguards. The weather doesn't extend past those safeguards unless Matt gets uncontrollably angry. That's only happened on rare occasions."

"Really? That's surprising."

"We have a few thousand acres in the vineyard toward the east and we have our winery factory and our storage plant south of here. The business we run starts with the grapes here on the vineyard and ends with the bottling and shipping in our plant. We have a manager who takes care of the vineyard and wine tasting tours as well as the small restaurant next to the plant. The tourism builds extra revenue."

"I'm impressed. Like April told me earlier, you are both more business owners than cowboys, as I was led to believe."

"We have horses, too." Gabe smiled when April, who had gotten up to retrieve plates from the kitchen counter, placed a slice of pie in front of him. She served everyone else while Gabe explained the horse training operation.

"The stables are located a hundred yards away along with a training track for them. Matt oversees the horses."

"Sure, Gabe, why don't you tell the woman exactly how much we make a year, too. I'm trying to get rid of her, not get her to stay."

Destiny dug into her slice of pie with relish. Not

even Matt's bad mood wasn't going to ruin dessert for her.

"Just so you know," she said as she slipped a cherry between her lips, "I probably make as much as you do in a year with one of my psychology books."

"You're a writer." April's face brightened with a pretty smile. "That's so exciting. What do you write?"

"I have a PhD in parapsychology. I write about para-sensitive humans and their effects on society."

April's inquisitive nature was more relaxing for Destiny than anything she'd been through in the last forty-eight hours. She answered April's questions about her work while they finished dessert. After the four of them polished off the pie, Destiny followed April's lead and took her dishes to the sink.

Gabe also brought his dishes over, kissed his wife on the cheek and began packing the leftover stew and salad. Matt sat in his seat for a while before he too pitched in with the kitchen work.

The closer he stood next to Destiny in the crowded kitchen space, the harder Destiny began to shiver. Her shoulders tightened so no one would know he had such an effect on her. How could someone so beautiful, someone with such dashing features and strength be so ill bred?

"You're an interesting piece of work, Ms. Snow," Matt said when there was a brief moment of silence amid the conversation. "You seem relatively calm about your father's death and your mother's mental condition."

A wine goblet Destiny was drying slipped from her hands and shattered in the marble sink. A jagged edge sliced her wrist.

Chapter Three

“Shit.” Destiny hissed as she watched the blood pour out of the two inch cut sliced through the blue vein on her wrist. She was dripping all over the kitchen counter and sink.

“Oh my God! Here, press this towel over the wound,” April said.

She didn’t know there could be so much blood. She pressed the towel to the cut, but it quickly became red. Destiny tried to think of the healing spell her mother taught her whenever she became clumsy and hurt herself, but she was already so light-headed, she couldn’t think clearly. Matt had been standing next to her. He invaded her precious personal space, gripped her wrist in his hand and pulled it directly under the overhead light. He exerted so much pressure against her wrist that her skin ached.

“Well at least you answered my question honestly this time,” Matt muttered as April ran to get a first aid kit.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Easy breathing, Destiny lectured to herself. She couldn’t afford a panic attack. She hadn’t suffered a panic attack since she was a child. Violent things happened when she lost control. The earthquake under her apartment building. The small hurricane that wiped out part of an island while she was on vacation.

Matt’s question, memory of her mother, her fear and anxiety about coming out west were all doing crazy things to her heartbeat. This was too much to handle. She kept everything locked up, but Matt was

insistent on prying her emotional mess open. Why did it hurt her so much to think about her mother and her father the way this man had easily portrayed them?

Her mother loved her. She needed her mother's love. She didn't need anything else. Destiny's relationship with her mother had suffered when her father died, but they got over it.

She had to focus on something other than her mother and father. Unfortunately, the panic attack couldn't be controlled any longer. Christ, she hated blood. Destiny stared at the compress that was turning a darker shade of red by the second. What was that spell? The harder she tried to remember, the more she panicked. Her throat was swelling shut.

"You've been so collected ever since I yanked my bathroom stall door open, Dr. Snow. All through dinner you didn't even give a hint as to what you were thinking. Not one flinch. But the minute I mention your father's death, you slice your wrist open. Maybe you're not as cold-hearted and you pretend to be, huh?"

"Bastard," she croaked. Her father's death was before she could even remember. Did Matt think she didn't feel guilty about his passing? She couldn't breathe. A balloon had inflated in her lungs and taken up all the space for oxygen.

What was the spell, damnit? She couldn't regulate her heartbeat. That was the first step to stopping her panic attack. Breathe in and out. In and out.

Her power swelled and light orbs flashed in front of her eyes. The pain was sharp and her blood smelled sickly sweet.

The roar was deafening. Words in a different language buzzed through her soul and the electric charge raced across her skin from the back of her neck to the balls of her feet. The roar became so loud

she swore she could hear the echo outside of her body. Shockwaves burst throughout the house.

"Shit," Gabe said. He ran for the front door. Matt stood with his hand gripping her wrist, trying to clot the blood.

Where was April? Didn't she have a healing spell? She was a witch. All four of them were. How many witches did it take to heal a cut? Her mother would have healed her in two seconds. Her mother would have known what to do before she went crazy. *Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.* She'd never had to deal with a panic attack alone. Why was her wrist throbbing so badly? Why couldn't she breathe? The balloon in her lungs inflated all the more. She felt like she was going to throw up or collapse from the lack of air.

"Matt, the horses," Gabe yelled from the front door. Matt looked indecisive for a moment before he dragged Destiny, careful of her wrist, to the front door. Destiny stumbled behind him onto the porch.

"Damnit, what are we going to do?"

Destiny watched in horror as the barn in the distance glowed. Holy God, the roof was on fire. She did this. She caused this. Her vision became hazy. Shooting stars flashed before her eyes.

Just as Destiny was ready to accept her death, April burst through the door with a small white box in her hand. Despite the bad situation, Destiny marginally relaxed when she smelled the herbs in April's box. The herbs were probably the same as her mother's healing kit.

"I can't put the fire out, April," Gabe said. His hand was extended toward the glowing barn, but nothing was happening. "I have to get the horses out." He was about to transport himself to the barn but paused when Destiny reached out with her good arm to stop him. She clenched a fistful of his shirt in her hand.

"I can put the fire out. Reverse the damage." Did

he even hear her? She could barely hear herself over the roaring in her ears. She still couldn't inhale enough air in her lungs and she prayed she could hold it together to tell them what they needed to know. The cut and her heart hurt so badly.

Mama. She was always there for her mother,, but her mother wasn't always there for her.

"You need to calm down," April said. "You're panicking. Is your panic attack causing the fire?"

Destiny nodded. "Knock me out. Sleeping spell," she gasped.

She didn't know why, but Matt's arms around her allowed some of her hyper-anxiety to ebb. His lips pressed against her ear and she shivered when he whispered something to her in Latin. The words mirrored the spell her mother used to say. The throbbing in her wrist eased. Her breathing relaxed. Someone had deflated the balloon in her throat, and she could now breathe a little easier. An infinite darkness began to swallow her whole and she couldn't hold herself up anymore. The words that she desperately tried to remember surfaced through her clouded memory.

"Ostendo sum ruina causa per ira." Destiny's knees buckled and the faint sound of rain grew louder as she welcomed the dark.

Moonlight filtered through the balcony doors and illuminated the bedroom. Destiny slept beside him, pale and fragile. Despite her obvious loss of blood, her skin still had a golden hue. Matt focused on her sharp features. Purple smudges shadowed her almond-shaped eyes. She laid facing away from him with her injured arm draped over the thick blanket. The wrist she had cut earlier wasn't even wrapped. He knew there was too much blood lost. He had held her while April put a mud pack of herbs over the bleeding wound. Whatever was in April's pack didn't even leave a faint scar. Matt recited the

healing spell himself while Destiny slept through the whole thing.

She was resting next to him on his netted four-post bed. Gabe insisted Matt should sleep near Destiny in case she was sick when she woke up. He protested and yelled at his brother while April helped Destiny change into a silk gown short enough to skim the top of her knees. They calmly left him alone with her without listening to a word he said. He didn't want anything to do with her, even if her wound was his fault.

Matt had made the decision to sleep on the couch when Destiny woke up, within five minutes of his sitting alone with her. He'd already pulled extra sheets out of the hall closet. All he had to do was wait until midnight when the spell would wear off. The twelfth hour striking the anniversary of her birth. Not only would the sleeping spell wear off, but he had to see if anything happened to shed light on the bonding ritual stuff.

He wore a simple pair of boxers while resting against the headboard. He usually slept naked, but he didn't want to trigger another panic attack when Destiny woke up.

The curve of her hip shifted with even breathing. She was so unbelievably feminine she could wear a paper sack and still look sexy. She was also taller than any other woman he had come across. He didn't realize how much until he stood next to her in the kitchen. The top of her head was the same level as his cheekbone. She made April look like a fairy in comparison.

Matt's dick hardened as he watched her shift to get more comfortable. He stroked Destiny's arm from shoulder to wrist as she slept. His thoughts drifted back to the scene in the kitchen. He was worried for her when she cut herself. He shouldn't have said anything, but the damage was already done when her face mirrored the pain, the sorrow he caused. It

was cruel to remind her of the heartache when she obviously tried so hard to keep everything under wraps. If anyone knew how hard coping with a painful memory was, he did.

A knock sounded on his door—faint, as if to prevent waking those who slept inside. Hesitating for a moment, he stroked a fingertip down Destiny's cheek before he shifted off the bed and headed toward the bedroom door. He didn't want to question why he felt so cold when he left Destiny's side. Opening the door, he blinked as the hallway light abruptly forced his eyes to adjust.

April stood in her robe, her curling hair tied on the top of her head and a tray in her hand.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she whispered as she extended the tray.

"I was up." Matt took the tray from her. "What's all this?" The tray was covered with toast, a small butter dish, a bottle of ginger ale and a covered cup that smelled like tea. The tray also had a strange looking paste sitting in a side dish.

"Destiny will be ill when she wakes up in a few minutes," April said. "She'll relax in an hour, and afterward you have to make sure she eats. The toast will stay warm until then, along with the tea. The paste is a cream you need to massage on her back. It will ease her muscles, as she'll be sore."

"April, don't get attached to her," Matt said. "I'm going to make sure she leaves."

Matt felt like a heel when April's face fell. He had an overwhelming need to comfort her because she was such a gentle thing, but he couldn't stop his frustration from building. This was getting out of hand. He'd known he was a witch since he was a kid, but he still didn't believe in the surreal. This was Cinderella meets the arranged marriage from hell and he didn't want anything to do with this warped fairytale. If he had to hurt April to get out of this situation, he'd do it.

"I'll leave you to your privacy. Matt, tomorrow morning..."

"What?"

She bit her lip, and her eyebrows pinched. "Nothing. If she gets too sick for you to take care of by yourself, let me know. I'll help."

April turned and floated down the hallway back toward her wing of the house.

Matt shut the door and silently padded back over to the bed. He set the tray on the table next to Destiny's side. Her long black curls haloed her face on the pillow.

He had checked her out in the brief time it took for April to help her change. She was telling the truth. She didn't need his money so he couldn't accuse her for being a gold digger anymore. Dr. Destiny Snow could buy his ranch a few times over. She was a certified genius. She earned her PhD by the time most students earned their bachelors degree. She had already published three textbooks and was currently working on her fourth.

An independent, classy woman like Destiny probably hated the Burdock place, despite its location in rustic Napa Valley. He owned half of the most successful vineyard in the country, but he was still a farmer, a horse trainer and like Destiny said, he acted like a cowboy. His world was a far cry from the city life she was used to.

Destiny seemed to think she was completely self-sufficient and she didn't need a man. The bonding ritual knowledge must have killed her when her mother told her the truth.

Matt sat on the edge of the bed next to her hip and watched the clock next to the lamp tick. Less than one minute from midnight. Happy twenty-fifth birthday, Destiny Snow, he mused. Soon you will be on your way home.

Granted, he should feel more uplifted about having a beautiful, leggy, half-naked woman in his

bed, but if she was going to be sick, they weren't going to be screwing like rabbits...which was the only reason he would want a beautiful, leggy, half-naked woman in his bed, anyway.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One. The faint chime of the grandfather clock in the living room rang throughout the house. Matt listened to all twelve chimes. Nothing happened. His relief was palpable when the house settled into quiet again and Destiny continued to sleep peacefully.

"Bonded to each other, my ass." Matt slipped off the bed. He had rounded the footboard when Destiny jerked up into a sitting position. Her eyes, heavy with sleep, blinked as she scanned the room. He rounded the bed the rest of the way and slipped onto the bed.

"What are you doing here?" her voice was throaty, scratched with disuse and heavy sleep.

"I was going to sleep, but April brought a tray of food she thought you would need to eat." He slipped under the covers and propped himself against the headboard again. His plans for sleeping on the couch vanished when he realized how annoyed Destiny would be if he stayed. She looked so sexy, so mussed. He wanted to needle her and get her spewing and spitting with irritation before he let her off the hook.

Destiny leaned away from him. "Why are you in the same bed as me?" Her bedroom eyes blinked rapidly as if she was attempting to clear her vision.

Matt tried to cover his need for her by yawning and lifting his knee to block her view of his crotch.

"Gabe and April are convinced you need to be in the same room as me since you might get sick tonight. Guess they were wrong, huh?"

"Is the barn..."

"It's okay."

"The horses?"

His opinion of her softened. He didn't think a city woman would care about a bunch of horses, but

she seemed genuinely concerned.

"They're fine and behaving as if nothing happened."

Destiny pressed her hand against her chest above the deep V of her sleeping gown. "Thank God."

"Let's try and get some sleep." His fingers skimmed over the curve of her shoulder, lingering on her softness. He grinned when she jerked away from him.

"If you think I'm going to—"

Her words were cut off with a gasp. Her eyes widened with shock, her mouth fell open and she jerked away from him. Matt was about to ask her what was wrong when a sharp, pricking pain lanced through the pit of his stomach and then on the inside of his wrist. He wrapped an arm across his abdomen.

"What the..."

Destiny slammed back against the bed. The glow around her intensified. She shrieked. Her torso arched off the bed at the same instant excruciating pain ripped through Matt's stomach as if he were being sliced in half. He was blinded for a moment and then, as quickly as the pain had started, the feeling disappeared as if he was never in pain in the first place. He looked at the inside of his wrist where the Celtic symbol for storm was imprinted within a unity circle, burned into his skin. A mark he never had before.

Destiny's torso dropped back on the bed, the light emanating from her skin dimming to the healthy glow. Her chest heaved as she gasped for air.

"What the fuck was that?" Matt tried to level his own breathing. He reached for Destiny's hand, blindly and yanked it away from the bedcovers she was gripping. She had the same mark on her wrist.

Destiny continued to gasp for air, her eyes closed. Her skin damp with sweat.

“Destiny?”

Her eyes snapped open and before Matt could ask if she was okay, she pulled away from him, leaped from the bed and ran to the bathroom. He heard the distinct sounds of vomiting.

He cringed as he crossed the room. He turned on the bathroom lights and saw Destiny leaning over the toilet. Her fingers trembled as she reached up to flush.

“Go away,” she groaned. She looked even more fragile curled up on the floor. He grabbed a plastic cup and filled it with water before he got down on his knees in front of her and handed her the cup.

“Come on. You gotta rinse. You’ll feel better.” Matt helped her to her feet and watched as Destiny rinsed and spit in the sink. She stumbled into him and Matt wrapped his arms around her as she leaned against his chest.

“You did this,” she croaked. “This is all because of you.”

Matt smiled and tucked her head against his throat. She was warm against him and her curves, her height fit him perfectly. His other half.

Matt didn’t want to think about bonding and other halves right now. She was doing something to him to soften his disposition toward her. He would be able to think more clearly later.

When Destiny began swaying, he reached down and hooked an arm under her knees. He carried her back to bed and put her underneath the covers.

He was about to go and grab a bucket for her in case she was going to be sick again when Destiny bolted out of bed for the second time and ran for the bathroom. He ignored her cursing and stayed with her for the next hour as she periodically became sick. She sat in his lap on the bathroom floor. Her eyes remained closed most of the time.

After the hour was over, her body collapsed with the heaviness of fatigue. Matt had to help her brush

and rinse her mouth with mouthwash. She insisted on a shower because she was drenched with sweat. He waited outside the door while she washed and changed into a loose pair of cotton sweatpants and one of his t-shirts.

When she came out of the bathroom, glowing and smelling like exotic flowers, Matt didn't hesitate to scoop her up in his arms again. She grumbled even as she pressed her forehead against his neck. Against her protests, he lifted her shirt and rubbed the cream into her back. April was right. He could feel her melting under his hands.

"How long did April say I was supposed to be sick?" Destiny croaked as Matt sat on the bed against the headboard and situated her between his knees.

"Only an hour or so. She said you had to eat." He reached over to the bedside table and handed Destiny the warm plate of dry toast.

Destiny slipped the plate from his hands and began nibbling on a tiny piece of toast. Matt watched from over her shoulder, enthralled by the fragile movements of her lips. She ate delicately, a complete contradiction to her strong and assured movements and attitude.

"Do you want some tea? April said herbal tea was supposed to help."

Destiny nodded. Her eyelids drooped and her damp hair curtained her face while Matt took the plate from her and set it back on the tray. He managed to grab the cup of tea and uncover it even though Destiny was still nestled between his knees and curled up against his chest. He held the cup for her as she took a few sips and settled against him more readily.

She felt good. Why did she feel so good? Why did he feel the need to take care of her? He knew he was protective of things he considered under his care. He didn't know Destiny Snow yet, he didn't know if he

even liked her, but he was already territorial. There was an innocence about Destiny he was drawn to.

Destiny's voice was thick and sluggish with sleep. "How can you not believe I'm your other half after everything that happened today, cowboy?"

Matt smiled into the crown of her hair. Her question bothered him, but he didn't think he could hide the truth from her. He didn't want to. Despite everything, he wanted to be honest.

"It's not that I don't believe in bonding. I just don't want anything to do with it or marriage. The last time I got involved with helping someone find the person they loved...bad things happened."

Destiny looked up at him, her face close to his as she continued to rest against his chest. "Sometimes, you can't stop life from going the way life was set to go."

"You can't stop 'destiny,' huh?" Matt knew he sounded rueful, but he couldn't help respecting her for her answer. For someone who reacted so intensely to any reminder of her mother, she didn't carry any guilt or blame anyone for her difficult life.

"What are we going to do for the next two weeks?" Destiny said, yawning. "We can't be away from each other, apparently. Leaving you doesn't feel...right."

Matt knew saying that must have taken courage. He didn't want her to know how close he already was to her. How panicked he felt. Was Destiny really the other half of his soul? He took a deep, ragged breath.

"Have you ever ridden a horse, Dr. Snow?"

"No."

Matt smiled at the dry tone in her voice. "Well you're going to have to get a crash course in riding, I guess."

"In your dreams, cowboy."

Matt smiled as he wrapped Destiny against him more firmly. Holding her this way calmed him, and

The Bewitched Cowboy

that was what scared him the most.

Chapter Four

Matt woke up with the biggest hard-on he'd had since his teen years. He groaned as Destiny's soft curves pressed against him. She wiggled in her sleep, inciting another groan. He was barely awake, but he managed to kick the bed covers to the foot of the bed. The sun poured through the open windows, heating his bare skin. He was already pressing his lips against the back of her neck before he opened his eyes. His hands ran down her torso and he jerked when he contacted bare flesh. Through half open eyelids, he saw that Destiny had managed to kick off her sweatpants.

One of his arms was tucked under her pillow while the other moved up from her bare thigh to skim across her stomach and under her t-shirt. He bunched the shirt up against her breasts. Matt lifted his head to look down at her and spotted the sheer pair of black lace panties. His dick tightened to the point of pain.

Destiny rubbed against him again and rolled onto her back. She had managed to shift so she lay in the crook of his elbow. Their mouths were barely inches from each other. Matt couldn't resist running his hand from her stomach around to her hip and up under her shirt to skim the heel of his hand again the side of her breast.

"Matt." Destiny cuddled against him, her voice thick with sleep much the same as it was before she dozed off. This time he detected heady desire laced through the throaty sound. He watched her pink little tongue sneaking through the seam of her mouth and licking her upper lip.

“Morning woody.” His thumb grazed over one peaked nipple and he heard her moan.

He had to have her. He was burning for her and he couldn’t think about anything else but her panties.

“What’s happening to me?” Destiny whispered. She arched again under Matt’s quick fingers. He was caught off guard when she lifted one leg and drew her thigh up against his to wrap teasingly around his hip. Her arms came up to wrap around his neck and before Matt could think twice, she had pressed those cherry-red lips against his.

The soft texture of her mouth was shocking and explosive in taste. He couldn’t string two words together in his head. All the colors and textures he used to describe feelings burst in a single mass. Matt rolled on top of her and muffled an oath when she firmly locked both of her legs around his hips. He could feel her panties were wet through the fabric of his boxers. His tongue thrust into her mouth and he growled when she sucked delicately. He rolled his hips forward, enjoying the mewling sounds she made and the pressure of her hips forcing back against his, begging him to thrust against her again.

His mouth slanted over hers, sucking, teasing. A fire built in his stomach, in his groin, begging for him to move on. They rocked together for a few minutes, rubbing their sexes against each other until they were breathless with feeling.

Matt couldn’t withstand temptation anymore. Her skin was burning under his hands and he needed to feel all of her underneath him. A growl erupted from the back of his throat and he tore his mouth away, his chest, heaving as he struggled to his knees between her legs.

Destiny’s eyes were glassed over with sex and desire. “Hurry,” she cried, breathy and gasping for air.

They tore at her clothes. Matt yanked his t-shirt

off of her. Since the urgency was so primal and thick, he refused to move from his position between her legs and he ripped the scrape of black lace until the resounding tear pierced through the noise of their moans and gasps.

Matt pulled off his boxers and pressed against Destiny again, this time skin to skin. Her hard nipples buried in his chest hair and her wetness pressed against his dick.

"Destiny." He reached down and guided himself into her. No time for teasing, for touching. He needed to feel her squeeze around him. He wanted her hard, fast. The fire was burning in his brain now to fuck her until neither of them could think or move.

He slipped halfway inside her and froze. She was so tight it astounded him. He pulled out and thrust forward again. Destiny gasped and tensed. Matt froze. Someone like Destiny, a sexual goddess, was still a virgin?

"Matt," she whispered.

He tried to pull out again and regain some semblance of control, but Destiny convulsed over the tip of his sex and his dread was instantly pushed aside with need. He buried himself in her with one fast stroke.

She gasped. Her muscles tensed and her arms, once wrapped around his neck, now began pushing at him.

"Matt, *stop*."

Matt lifted slightly and looked down at her face. He cradled her chin in his hands and brushed her tears from her cheeks. Her eyes widened and her lips trembled. Tears pooled and slipped between her thick black lashes. Didn't anyone tell her the first time was going to hurt?

"Shh, baby, the pain will stop in a second. Jesus, Destiny, I didn't know."

She continued to tense and he could feel her

struggle again. The haze of lust began to thin and he felt like the biggest idiot in the world. He was hurting her and he didn't even know how to stop.

Maria's words drifted in the back of his mind. He didn't want to think of her at the moment, but he was desperate. Matt leaned down, kissed Destiny on her cheek and whispered to her in Latin.

"Tactus contineo, tergum excorio, sentio mihi iam, estus intus. Pectus pectoris ut pectus pectoris, animus ut animus, alieno thy poena ut does non vado. Rimor thy iucunditas quod mihi."

The translation was simple, and the spell took barely a second to work. *Touch to touch, skin to skin, feel me now, the heat within. Heart to heart, soul to soul, forget thy pain that does not go. Explore thy pleasure I have and me. As it will, so mote it be.*

Destiny stopped struggling. He waited as she sunk deep into the mattress, every muscle relaxing. Her arms wrapped around him again, her legs resuming their position around his waist. Matt stroked Destiny's cheeks as her eyes glassed over.

"Oh, Matt," Destiny whispered.

He stayed lodged in one spot, trying to ease his breathing as she clenched around him. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he thrust slowly in and out of her sheath. Testing himself. Pleasuring her.

She shifted again and he groaned. Instead of pushing him away this time, she gasped at the friction between them and rolled her hips forward. Matt knew he was lost and there was no turning back.

He began pumping slowly at first and then with increased speed. His mouth found Destiny's and he wrapped her up against him as he began pushing with more force. The distinct sound of the headboard against the wall increased over their gasps and groans. His bed shouldn't have been able to move. The frame never moved before. Their frenetic screwing made him even more excited and urged

him to increase the speed and pressure.

Matt pushed harder and harder. He couldn't get deep enough. She was so tight and wet. Her hands were everywhere, tugging his hair, raking against his back, cupping his hips and forcing him to move faster.

Matt reached down and hooked each hand under Destiny's knees. He forced her legs up and spread them as far as they could go.

Destiny cried out and he watched her as he held her legs in place and continued with the steady rhythm. Her delicate inner tissues gripped him hard and began squeezing him, pulsating around him, shaking with an explosive orgasm.

"Matt!"

The familiar pressure built in his sac and he let out a roar as he released into her. The pleasure blinded him and he collapsed on top of her.

They lay like shipwreck survivors, in a tangle of sweaty arms and legs. Matt didn't know if minutes passed or an hour. His heart continued to beat frantically in his chest. His breathing was ragged. He took a few gulps of air, but nothing helped.

"What was that?" He was finally able to say. One minute he was sleeping, the next he had a hard-on so thick a cat could use it as a scratching post, and then they were fucking each other's brains out.

"I don't have any idea," Destiny murmured. "My insides were on fire."

Matt winced. "Yeah. Me too." He rolled to his side and hauled her up against his chest. Destiny shifted and he was sure she would pull away from him, since they were finished. Instead, she shifted closer, as if seeking his heat.

Matt lifted his head to look down at Destiny, her face still wet with the sheen of sweat. Her eyes still closed. Without the pristine makeup presentation she had an angelic child-like quality about her. He traced a fingertip down her cheek.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," Matt whispered. He couldn't stop touching her. She was so beautiful. He had no idea where the fire in his gut had developed from, but if he could lay like this with Destiny, he welcomed the flames with open arms.

"You did this," she mumbled, her chest rising and falling with her labored breath. Matt brushed the damp tendrils of hair clinging to her forehead.

"Yeah." Matt grinned. He watched as one of her eyes popped open and she glared at him. He chuckled, and the movements made his chest hair rub against one of her breasts. He watched, gleefully as one of her nipples peaked. He traced a fingertip over the turgid flesh before Destiny smacked his hand away.

"You don't want me to touch you after you let me fuck you until both of us were blind with lust?" He smirked at her, but he wasn't prepared when he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Destiny, what's wrong?"

"Was that all it was to you?" She sniffled. "F-f-fucking? How can you be so damn insensitive?" She pushed away from him and stumbled out of bed.

"Destiny, we just met each other." Matt sat up and watched her bend over to pick up the shirt he had pulled off of her. His mind blanked at the sight of her heart-shaped rear end right in front of his face. She was standing up too soon for his taste and stalking toward the bathroom.

He knew he was lying through his teeth when he said what he had with her was just fucking. What a lie. They were bonded to each other. Bonding scared him to the bones, but he was finally starting to believe all of this arranged marriage crap his parents and Gabe were forcing down his throat. Before he could curse again at the revelation, his heart tugged in his chest and he experienced a momentary sense of loss as Destiny stormed farther away from him toward the bathroom.

Before she slammed the door behind her, she turned to face him and shouted, "You do realize lust is one of the side effects of this whole 'bonding of other halves' bullshit, right? I would never find you appealing if we weren't stuck with this damn bonding thing. You did absolutely nothing for me, Matthew Burdock."

Destiny slammed the door between them and Matt heard the water in the shower turn on. He bounded off the bed.

"Bullshit. She was hot for me. Even bonding couldn't have caused that amount of lust. She was the one," he growled as he stormed toward the bathroom door, "that couldn't keep her hands off of *me*."

He turned the handle and found the door locked. "Shit."

Matt tried to unlock the door by using a breaking spell. He was a witch, dammit. When he realized his spell was blocked by a safeguard she set in place, he roared. Fine. He would go in the old-fashioned way.

He took two steps back and rammed his shoulder into the door. The door splintered easily and Matt had a momentary rush of satisfaction when Destiny gasped. He ignored the stinging in his shoulder from the impact and started toward her. The sense of loss immediately dissipated. The closer he stood next to her, the better he felt. She was getting into the shower stall when he broke through the door. One foot was inside the stall while the other remained on the carpet. Her jaw dropped. She was flushed, naked and glowing, even though her cobalt blue eyes blazed with shock.

"I swear to God, it's not beneath me to turn you into a damned toad," she shouted.

She squeaked when he pushed her hands out of his way and he grabbed her narrow waist. He ignored her yelp of surprise and lifted her into the

shower stall and shoved her under the water's spray.

"You enjoyed the sex," he growled even as she sputtered and shoved damp locks of hair out of her face.

"God, you are such an ignorant...ignorant cowboy!"

Matt blinked for a moment and threw his head back, laughing at her indignant expression.

"Thank you, darlin'." He gripped her head between his hands, pulling her toward him for a kiss. Her struggles subsided after a few moments, and she melted against his chest. Her hands were in his hair and she was making those unbelievably erotic mewling sounds as she pressed as close to him as she possibly could. Her reaction burned through Matt's soul. Their hands streaked over each other and the sensations intensified until he was afraid they would go up in flames.

Matt pushed her up against the wall and hoisted her up so she wrapped her legs around his waist. He sucked, teased, fingered and tormented before sliding into her. She came three times before he came for the second time that morning.

Matt didn't know what was happening, but despite the fatigued and heavy muscles, he shampooed her hair gently as she leaned against him, her arms wrapped loosely around his waist. They both lathered and washed each other with lethargic and possessive movements. Matt dried them as quickly as he could before he picked Destiny up and carried her to the bed. They collapsed against the pillows and fell asleep.

They woke an hour later to a knock on his bedroom door. Matt pressed an absent-minded kiss against Destiny's lips and smiled when she sighed and cuddled against his pillow.

He was aware enough to put his boxers on before he answered his door. Matt was also acutely aware of the growing sense of loss the farther he

stepped away from Destiny. He didn't know if he liked the feeling. Ignoring the dull throb in his chest, he swung the door open. His twin stood on the other side, grinning at him.

"So you found out the perk about the two-week bonding period, haven't you?" Gabe said, smirking.

Matt rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but smile back.

"How long is this supposed to last?"

His brother's eyes widened and his brows lifted nearly to his hairline. Matt could still see the hint of humor behind his eyes. When Gabe's jaw dropped, Matt knew his twin was mocking him.

"You mean you're done denying there is such thing as bonding?"

"Destiny hated me last night, Gabe. This morning, she couldn't wait to crawl into my skin. That's either a fucking miracle or..."

"Magic." Gabe reached out and cuffed Matt's shoulder. "The feeling gets stronger if you do the bonding spell with her. The first three days are strange because you don't know each other, but you have this pull and you can't stop wanting each other in a physical way. I came up to tell you that you have the next few days off. You can't be out of shouting distance from each other. You'll feel empty and Destiny would be in terrible pain."

"What? No, I can't let you handle the ranch without me. It takes the two of us to get the job done every day."

"The vines and horses don't need you on a daily basis," Gabe said.

"We'll get behind schedule in training and if someone doesn't oversee the manufacturing to make sure things are running smoothly, there could be a glitch."

"You don't understand. You can't leave Destiny. She'll be in terrible pain if you do."

"You know, just because I'm open to the

possibility of this bonding of other halves thing doesn't mean I believe in all of these additional rules." He grabbed his brother's wrist and turned it so he could see the face of his watch.

"Shit, it's almost lunch. Okay, we'll be down, we'll eat and then I'll help you out in the barn," Matt said.

"You're playing with fire," Gabe said. "Especially the first three days when you'll feel like you have a permanent hard-on."

"I'll be downstairs in five." Matt closed the door on his brother's face.

"Matt?" Destiny said from the bed. He turned to see her sit up, her face still soft with sleep, her hair tumbling around her shoulders. She gripped the sheet against her breasts and Matt knew his witch sure as hell cast a spell over him.

"Come on, Destiny." He walked over to the bed and scooped her up in his arms. "We have to get dressed so I can get some work done today."

"Matt," she whispered again. He was carrying her toward the bathroom so they could get dressed when she said his name again.

He looked down at her face and instantly grew an erection. How could he react like this after making love to her so much already? Destiny's slumberous eyes were hot and her hands began rubbing his shoulders. The fire in the pit of his stomach grew again. He had to get downstairs so he could help his brother, but he couldn't ignore Destiny either.

He bent over her and kissed her within an inch of her life. "Fast again," he gasped as he lowered her to the carpet. "I'm going to do you fast and hard."

Chapter Five

"I hate you."

Destiny couldn't move. She could barely roll over on her stomach. She had been naked for what felt like days. They had only traveled from shower to bed to the bedroom door where April left trays of food.

She was awash with embarrassment. If April was leaving food, she sure as hell had a good idea about what was happening in the room.

"You didn't say you hated me five minutes ago." Matt smirked while tracing circles on her shoulder. A warmed tingling sensation skated over her skin. She didn't understand the pull he had on her. The minute he began talking about working or moving away from her, she had the unexplainable need to jump his bones and have crazy monkey sex. She was an academic, damn it. She did not have crazy monkey sex. She was much too sophisticated to be engaging in crazy monkey sex against a wall, on the rug, bent over the arm of a couch, in the shower, in the Jacuzzi, on every corner of the bed, tied to the bed, on the balcony and in a chair.

And scientifically speaking, how could she still be aroused after such a strenuous workout? How could he still get hard?

"What are you thinking?" Matt said, his voice rough against her ear.

She turned her head and stroked his cheek. His face was covered in a thick scruff.

"What time is it?"

He turned to look over his shoulder at the bedside clock. "Ten. Why?"

"I'm thinking I'm too sophisticated to have sex

all day with you and we should really get up.”

“Yeah, I was wondering why my dick hasn’t fallen off yet.”

“And why I’m not really that sore, even though I should be.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence again. Matt lifted his head to look at the clock on his bedside table. “It’s late. I should have helped my brother today.” His hand stroked over Destiny’s hip and rested against one of her butt cheeks. She jerked when he squeezed but relaxed when he continued to knead her skin. She never had anyone massage her butt before, but things with Matt seemed okay.

“We should get in the shower,” Destiny mumbled.

“We took two showers today already,” Matt said. He had leaned down to kiss Destiny’s cheek, but she didn’t want to waste the touch of his lips so she turned her head for him to press against her own lips. He hummed and sunk into the kiss with her for a few minutes before pulling away and sliding off the bed.

“Where are you going?” Destiny hated the sound of need twining through her words.

“I thought you wanted to take a shower. This time we aren’t going to wash your hair. You have too much of it,” he said as he rounded the bed and quickly scooped her up.

Destiny wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed the shell of his ear. Her height certainly had advantages.

They were relatively well-behaved in the shower. She let him rinse her off and she returned the favor. They dried each other before dressing.

“Aren’t you going to wear a robe?”

Destiny shook her head as she slipped into a pair of cotton sweatpants and a tank top. “Robes are bulky. I like this better.” She didn’t know why he was grinning at her and her choice in clothing, but

she wasn't interested. She was too attuned at the moment to his boxers and muscle shirt.

"Where are we going?" Destiny said as they both padded barefoot down the dark stairwell.

"Do you want some ice cream?"

Her stomach growled with hunger. She was always up for ice cream.

Matt loosely linked his fingers with hers as they walked to the kitchen. He flipped on the light and kissed her fingers quickly before letting go to pull out a carton of rocky road ice cream from the freezer. Destiny's mouth watered. She waited for Matt to grab two spoons.

"What, no bowls?"

Her heart turned over in her chest when he grinned. Destiny wanted to bite this chin when the small indentation winked at her.

Instead, she sat at the table. Matt handed her a spoon before opening the carton of ice cream and placing the carton between them. He dipped his spoon in the ice cream before slipping the spoon between his lips. Destiny followed suit. They ate in silence for a few minutes, enjoying their treat.

"What are you thinking?" Asking the question was becoming a game Destiny enjoyed. She was expecting a flip retort from her lover, but instead, she watched his carefree smile morph into a more solemn expression.

"It's not easy accepting this whole bonding thing."

Destiny's spoon froze halfway to her mouth. "In the few days I've known you, I don't think I've ever heard you bring bonding up first."

"I knew someone," he replied, licking his spoon. "They didn't think I was right when I told them they were wasting their life on a loser. We argued and this person died in a snowstorm. Needless to say, it's hard to believe I can have a soul mate, for lack of a better term, because of the damage I've caused and

the lives I've already ruined."

Destiny's heart went out to him. He tried to hide the pain so well. She had her own pain and heartache she was hiding, but telling Matt about that now would only make his decision to bond with her more difficult.

She didn't want to guilt him into anything, but she needed to know eventually if he would set aside his luggage just as she was trying to do and give their relationship a chance. After all, she wasn't her mother and he definitely wasn't whomever this person was he was talking about.

"So," Destiny said, her heart beating wildly as she tried to formulate the words in her head. "If our life would be like the last twenty-four hours...would you claim me as your other half?"

Her hope fell, spiraling into numbness when Matt continued to eat his ice cream in silence, focusing intently on the carton in front of him.

"Matt," she whispered, her voice cracking. She hated herself for showing any weakness. They didn't do a lot of talking in the time they spent together. Maybe she was expecting too much from him. They needed to know more about each other. He was, after all, from a completely different world than she was. The sliver of hope left was quickly smothered when Matt finally spoke.

"I don't want this, Destiny." He reached out and brushed a finger down her cheek. "I never wanted to bond. I know I'm not the guy for you. If there is a chance our parents could undo this whole dying thing, then I want to try first before bonding with you. If our parents can't undo the bond and there is a chance you'll die, I'll bond with you, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life with anyone. We'll hurt each other. This is the best plan of action for both of us. Besides...don't you want your freedom?"

"Of course I want my freedom, but we were bonded for a reason. We may not know that reason

but we feel it. I feel it. Don't you? Does marrying me repulse you so much that you're willing to lose your powers over it?"

Matt rolled his shoulders back, but he was able to look Destiny in the eyes now. His resolve and determination become more apparent the longer they looked at each other.

Destiny wanted to cry. For some reason, this rejection hurt more than anything else she had ever suffered through. The sensation burned through her soul. Tears started to run down her cheeks.

"Oh, baby." Matt reached out to hold her. "Please don't cry. I don't know why, but I can't watch you cry."

Destiny pushed his hands away from her and shoved away from the table. "We can't be too far apart from each other, but I'm going to go to bed. We'll get past the rest of the two weeks and hopefully your parents can undo the bonding. If not, we can bond and then move on after I leave. That is, if I live."

They hadn't been farther than twenty feet from each other since Destiny had gotten sick the night before. From the kitchen to his bedroom was the largest amount of space there had been between them. With every step she took, Destiny felt the pull to turn around and go back to her other half. She kept walking, despite the increasing weight on her heart and pressure against her chest with the expanding distance. This was heartache. Her clinical mind examined the emotion until she couldn't separate herself from the pain anymore.

As she entered Matt's bedroom, she glanced out the window and watched as the outdoor ground lights illuminated the snow falling in heavy flakes. Destiny fell clumsily onto the bed and curled into a ball underneath the blanket.

She knew the moment Matt began walking up the stairs. Her muscles began relaxing on their own

accord. She sighed when he entered the room and crossed toward the bed. She heard him slip under the covers behind her, but she wasn't prepared for the arm wrapping around her waist yanking her up against a hard chest.

"Is that the feeling my brother was talking about?" Matt whispered against her ear.

"What feeling?" Destiny whispered back. She was warm now; exhausted but warm.

"The heavy feeling. The sadness."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She felt his soft laugh rumble in his chest against her back. She was too tired to understand what was so funny.

She was half asleep when she thought she heard Matt whisper in her ear, "Liar."

"You're so stupid, Matt," Gabe snapped. Destiny drank her cup of coffee and was mildly surprised the composed brother was laying into his twin so early in the morning.

"Don't you feel the pull you still have with your other? You won't last out there for more than an hour, and she'll suffocate in here if you're too far apart."

"How do you know?" Matt calmly forked more pancakes into his plate. "You didn't leave April for a moment the two weeks you were together."

"Actually, he did." April placed a dish of scrambled eggs on the table. "Gabe and I didn't know the rules because his parents weren't very clear on them. We found out the hard way. It just might be easier to listen to us since we learned the hard way."

"Matt wouldn't do that." Destiny smirked when Matt's gaze narrowed on her. His eyes blazed a bright cobalt blue. Let the man fume, Destiny thought. She was going to die at the end of the two weeks if he continued to be stubborn, so she might

as well enjoy herself. Destiny took another sip of her coffee to hide her smile.

"You're playing with fire here, Matt. You're going to hurt her," Gabe interrupted.

Matt pointed at Destiny. "Does she look like she's hurting? She looks pretty damn smug to me. I should go out to prove all of you wrong."

"I've never looked smug," Destiny said as she bit her lip to try to hide another smile.

Destiny finished her coffee and read the local paper while the twins continued to argue. Destiny was appalled the leading story was a focus article on chief of police and his dedication to the town. She flipped through the rest of the paper in disgust while vaguely listening to the rest of the argument between the brothers.

"Okay, I'm going to head out to the stables," Matt said, slamming his hat on top of his head.

"Haven't you been listening to a single thing I've said? That's way too far from the main house, damnit."

"Exactly. I'm going to prove you wrong, buddy."

"A hundred bucks," Destiny said. She had her money on Gabe and figured she could make a profit off of the pain Matt was probably going to cause her.

"What was that?"

Destiny stood and picked her plate and cup from the table. She rounded the table, intending to put her dishes in the sink. "I bet you a hundred bucks Gabe's right," she said over her shoulder.

She was vaguely aware Matt was still fuming. She could feel it. She figured their shared emotions were another side-effect of the bonding period. The closer he was, the clearer his emotions were to her.

"You can't be serious, Destiny."

"I'm dead serious. You've had a losing streak lately, so I figured profiting from your stupidity wouldn't be such a bad idea."

Destiny didn't hear him cross the kitchen, but

before she could prepare herself, Matt had whipped her around and pressed her against the counter edge. Her dishes crashed into the marble basin sink.

"Matt, I could have broken the dishes!"

His mouth looked as if it were carved out of stone. The rest of his face was hardened in barely controlled emotion. He hands settled on the sink ledge as he leaned close enough for their noses to touch.

"I don't give a shit about the dishes. You're supposed to be on *my* side."

"Not after last night," Destiny said, softly. She felt the slight fractures in her heart increase when she remembered his expression over the ice cream carton. She had taken a chance on him and exposed a bit of herself when he rejected her. She still remembered the stinging sensation even though Matt made love to her gently when they woke up in the morning. As if he cared for her.

Her lover's features softened for a moment. She was surprised when his lips curved.

"Make it two hundred." He pressed a quick kiss against her mouth. The brim of his hat tilted up when it hit her head. She glared when he winked.

How dare he tell her he didn't want her and then go on and kiss her? Make love to her whenever he saw fit? This was not what she wanted for herself. She should be in New York working on another book. She had more pride than to be waiting for her other to come to his blasted senses...or to die of a broken heart and soul.

She watched Matt saunter through the kitchen to the front door. He had the tightest pair of jeans she had ever seen. She had to admit her other half had a great butt. His jeans were paired with a fitted plaid shirt hugging his wide shoulders and fitting against his tapered waist and lean hips. She tried not to stare since Gabe and April were still in the kitchen with her.

"You're brother is such a jerk," Destiny snapped at Gabe for good measure before she turned her back toward the sink and began methodically washing the dishes. She knew Gabe and April were still watching her as she finished the first dish.

She could feel the distance between her and Matt growing. First there was emptiness, then sorrow and then the pain. Her heart tightened in her chest to the point of agony. Someone had managed to tie barbed wire around her throat, her chest, her stomach. She traced her finger tips across the base of her neck and looked at them. No blood. She almost expected bleeding. The pain tripled in the space of one heartbeat.

"Oh my God," she gasped as she pressed the heel of her hand into her sternum.

"Destiny!" She heard April run and felt the fairy light touch against her waist as the woman tried to hold her steady.

Destiny couldn't console her. She was too busy feeling the excruciating pain grow and spread. The barbed wire sensation was bad...but the suffocation was worse.

"Destiny," April said again. Destiny couldn't hold her weight up over her knees anymore. She collapsed to the floor. The pain wasn't supposed to be this bad. Her heart wasn't supposed to hurt to the point of madness. She couldn't think what to do. She couldn't walk toward the door with the hope of getting closer to Matt. If she could get a few inches closer to him maybe she would be okay.

A pressure began to squeeze her throat.

"Gabe, call Matt. She's suffocating."

Destiny heard Gabe's heavy pounding footsteps as he ran out the kitchen. Couldn't he flash out or something? What good was teleportation if he didn't use it in an emergency? The thought started fading as an inky blackness began to cloud her vision.

The front door slammed and Destiny thought if

she was in such a bad position, hopefully Matt was in a hell of a lot more pain than she was. He deserved to be trampled by the first pissed-off stallion he crossed paths with. She closed her eyes when the blindness engulfed her. She felt as if someone was holding her head under water. She couldn't fight anymore and started to succumb to the horrifying pain. She just wanted Matt to hold her before she died.

Chapter Six

"Is this proof enough for you?" Gabe said. "She nearly died because of your stupidity."

"Jesus, it looks like someone strangled her. Are those bruises on her neck?" The other voice was distinctly Matt's. He sounded tired, almost defeated.

"Yeah, and they were a hell of a lot blacker before you came along," Gabe replied.

Destiny opened her eyes, hoping there weren't any blinding lights to make it difficult to see. The room was shadowed and when she blinked to clear her vision, she was able to recognize Matt's bed. April sat next to her, stroking her hair. The blinds and drapes were drawn so the room was in shadow.

Matt leaned down over her. She saw the stress lines bracketing his mouth and the corners of his eyes. His pallor probably mirrored hers.

"You okay?" he said, gruffly.

Destiny didn't want to speak. Her throat was aching, sore, so she didn't want to talk in case her throat would hurt even more. Gabe and April slipped out of the room and Destiny felt a dip in the mattress as Matt got on the bed from the other side. Before she could protest, he had stretched out next to her and wrapped an arm around her waist. He tucked her against his chest, pressed a kiss to her neck and whispered the pain-removing spell against her skin.

The ache around her throat and the lingering hurt in her chest cavity quickly dissolved. Destiny took a deep breath and instead of blasting him and letting him know how pissed she was, the only noise that escaped sounded like a sob.

"Baby," Matt crooned as he rubbed the small of her back. "I'm sorry."

"You are such an asshole," Destiny cried. The tears rolled down the side of her face as she pushed against his chest. Matt pushed her shirt up and rubbed her back. He pressed kisses against her forehead, temple and neck. Destiny tried to calm her pulse, but she couldn't stop it from racing erratically.

"I'm sorry," he said again. Destiny hiccupped when he sipped at her tears.

"And is that the only damn spell you know?" Destiny raged. She wanted to hit him again, punch him, beg him never to leave her again, but she didn't know how. She started breaking inside when he left her. She hadn't felt that way since her father died.

Matt sighed against her hair. Destiny figured he wasn't going to answer her question. She scooted closer so she was pressed firmly against his body. She rubbed her face against his shoulder.

"I have to work today, baby." Matt wrapped her up in his arms, pressing his mouth against the curve of her shoulder. "Seriously this time. Have you ever been on a horse?"

Destiny froze. She inched away from him and sat up, careful for any dizzy sensation. When there wasn't any leftover uneasiness, she slid off the bed to face him.

"You want me to get on a damned horse and go riding with you off in the countryside?"

Matt propped himself up on his elbow. "I'll park your pretty little butt under a tree. We'll make sure you have some food and maybe a novel to keep you entertained. You can sit and do whatever you want to stay busy."

"You are out of your mind if you think I'm going to get on a damned horse."

"Well, you saw what happened just now. We can't stay away from each other. Do you want to almost die again?"

Destiny folded her arms over her chest. She knew she looked like her mother, standing there and tapping her foot. But she wasn't her mother. She was going to survive her broken heart. "Did you even feel a twinge of pain when you walked away from me?"

"If I did, there is no way in hell I would tell you," he replied, grinning.

"You kept walking," Destiny cried. "You kept walking even though you knew I was sick and I was suffocating."

"And burning from the inside out." His voice was quiet, husky. He had gotten up and stood on the other side of the bed. Destiny watched him scrub his face and rub the back of his neck before looking up at her again.

"Come on. Do you have some sort of hiking boots on you? I'll get you a pair if you don't."

"Matt, I am not going to go out in the stupid wilderness or something. You can stay right here. Your horses can do without you for a few damn days."

"It's not the wilderness, for God sake. It's *Napa Valley*."

He won in the end, of course. Matt quickly pulled out a pair of pink boots from the downstairs closet that belonged to his mother. He packed her things up and carried her bodily down to the truck parked near the back porch. She had her laptop with her. She insisted on bringing her work so she could be productive.

Matt pulled the truck up to the barn doors. He helped Destiny out of her seat and linked his fingers comfortably with hers before strolling into the barn.

Ducky, one of the hired hands who took care of the horses, was busy grooming Storm. He had been with the Burdocks since Matt's father was in charge of the family operation. He was a small man with graying hair and a toothy smile. His face was

leathered from the California sun and he wheezed when he laughed. The only indication of his powers was his strange black eye color. He was a horse whisperer, no doubt about it, and one of Matt's favorite people.

Matt called the man over. "Ducky, I want to introduce you to Destiny."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am." The old man cackled as he kissed Destiny's knuckles.

"Likewise," Destiny replied.

Matt looked for a hint of distaste in Destiny's expression but there was nothing but interest. He was surprised a city girl would be so comfortable around a strange old man. But then again, she was full of unexpected surprises.

"Are you going to take Storm for his exercise?" Ducky said. "The monster has been missing you."

"You named your horse Storm?" Destiny asked.

"Yeah," he grinned. "Storm is an angry horse, a stallion, and since he's mine...well, the name fit."

"I have a nasty cat back in Long Island. She's black Siamese. I named her Storm because she hisses and scratches everyone except me."

He laughed and ran a hand down Destiny's hair. She smiled before leaning forward and planting a kiss on the corner of his mouth. She looked so pretty in the afternoon glow of the sun. Her cheeks were tinted with a natural pink and she glowed as usual. She had tied her hair up in a ponytail. Her hair curled down the length of her slender back. Her bright blue eyes were, cliché enough, bewitching.

"So since you haven't been on a horse, you want to give it a shot?" Matt asked.

Destiny shook her head vehemently. She continued shaking it while Matt introduced her to Storm and lifted her hand to rub against the animal's neck. Matt was pleasantly surprised when Storm didn't act skittish around the woman like he was around everyone else. If anything, the horse

shifted closer to Destiny's touch.

Matt swung up on the stallion's back and enjoyed Destiny's muffled shriek when he leaned down and lifted her onto the saddle in front of him.

"You're crazy," she shouted. "I'm not a horse person, cowboy."

"You're bonded to me, baby. Doesn't that mean you're a cowgirl, since you're the other half of me?"

"In your dreams."

"Relax." Matt laughed. He settled her hips more firmly against his and tried to keep a firm lid on the sexual tension radiating to his groin. Her perfectly-shaped rear was snuggled up against his crotch, tempting him like nothing else in this world could.

When they started off toward the fields, Destiny bounced hard in the saddle and Matt continued to whisper instructions in her ear about relaxing. She finally got the gist of moving with the horse and sunk more deeply in the saddle.

"This isn't so bad," she mumbled.

"Do you want to take a tour of the operation?"

"Sure." Destiny was still a little tense, but she was a quick learner and began moving with him as they rode at an easy and steady pace.

Matt took her through the west side of the spread and past the winery plants. He fed her sour grapes and laughed at her expression when her lips puckered. He kissed her under overhanging eaves and galloped through the open field between the the storage warehouse and distilling plant.

She didn't know when it happened and she didn't know how...but sometime between the chemical equation Matt explained to her about changing grape juice to wine and the kisses under the vines, Destiny had fallen in love with a cowboy. His gruff, cocky exterior drove her insane...but the pull Destiny felt for him wasn't because their magic was bonded. He completed her sentences, handed her things before she even asked for them and kissed

her when he instinctively knew she needed his touch.

"What are you thinking?" he mumbled as he shifted his head in Destiny's lap.

"Are you always going to ask me that question?"

"Mhm. I like to know what you're thinking."

Destiny combed her fingers through his hair while she watched the few people working in the field methodically take care of the vines. Storm was tied to one of the branches on the other side of the tree. He peacefully grazed as far as the reins allowed.

"You've got quite a spread, cowboy," Destiny said as she pressed her other hand against his chest. "I'm impressed."

"Really?" His eyes were still closed as he stretched under Destiny's fingers. "I thought I couldn't impress you any more than I did with the chemical equation we use at the fermentation plant."

She giggled. "Yeah, that was pretty impressive."

"But I'm sure things are much more interesting back home for you," he said.

"Well, it's a different feel." She didn't want to tell him how much she loved the weather, the greenery, the fresh smell of the earth more in Napa Valley than in New York where she had a mild affect on the weather.

"Yeah, but you must be eager to get back home, right?"

Destiny paused in mid-stroke. "Why do I get the feeling that although you showed me the vineyard, you don't want me to like it?"

Matt sighed and shifted off of her lap. "Although I've finally come around, and yes, after this morning, I understand this whole bonding thing, I still want my freedom. I think it would be best, after these two weeks, if my parents can't or won't undo the bonding thing, we get the ceremony over with and you make your way home."

She wasn't going to become like her mother. She wasn't going to go crazy since she didn't have a man in her life, and by God, if going home without Matt was the only way to show how strong she was, going home was exactly what she would do.

"Your brother told us we may not be able to live without each other even when the bonding period is over. You've made yourself clear you're okay with living alone," Destiny said carefully. "But what made you different from Gabe? Why are you so afraid, so dead-set against getting involved with someone?"

"Because of Maria."

Destiny's heart stopped. Her lungs clenched and her gut lodged in her throat. Another woman. She shouldn't have been surprised. He was a gorgeous guy, despite his chauvinistic ways.

"Did she leave you?" Destiny prayed her voice sounded as casual as she willed it to be. If he was going to leave her, then she would die before she would let him know she cared he loved another woman.

"Maria died when she was sixteen. When I was seventeen."

"So she was your high school girlfriend?"

A surprising smile spread on Matt's face. "Maria was my sister."

Destiny didn't know what to say. He had a sister? "How did she die?"

"She was the one I was telling you about earlier. She died in a snow storm. I caused it."

Destiny could tell by the tone of his voice how much he blamed himself for her death. "You got into an argument," she said softly.

He nodded and continued to focus on the fields spreading out in front of them. The crisp smell of lush earth and growth with a balmy breeze seeped into Destiny's pores as she relaxed. She was beginning to understand the man she had come to love.

"You were seventeen. You couldn't control your emotions."

Matt got to his feet before Destiny could reach out and touch him, to console him. He turned to face her, his eyes blazing bright blue.

"She was pregnant. She was leaving to meet her son-of-a-bitch boyfriend. Mom and Dad were terrified for her, begged her to marry this other guy, probably because he was her bonded half." Matt let out a humorless laugh and twined his fingers with hers. "I begged Maria to stay because her boyfriend had a nasty temper. She refused and told me that I didn't want her to be happy. I was furious. I didn't know how to control my temper back then since I was just growing into my powers. I continued to rage for hours even though my father tried to stop me. When mom told me other people could get hurt if I didn't calm down, I finally relaxed and was ready to apologize to my sister. By then, Maria was nowhere to be found.

"We found her body later." His voice dripped with bitterness he must have hidden over the years. "She had gone to that asshole and said she left us for him. He had only wanted her for the money. She was devastated when he told her to get an abortion. She tried to walk home in the snowstorm. Her baby didn't make it. Someone found her, took her to the hospital. The doctors told her the baby was dead. She left. Started walking, god knows where. She cast a choking spell and killed herself.

"I forced her to do it, Destiny. All because she couldn't stand life without that bastard. I don't want anyone to ever have that power over me." Matt finally turned to look at Destiny. "I don't want anyone to ever have a say in if I live or if I die."

Destiny reached out and cupped his chin. "It was not your fault. She left because in her mind, there was no other choice. Take some advice from someone who knows. You can't change the past.

Your sister wasn't old enough to understand what a death can do to family. She only thought of what was best for herself."

Destiny watched the smoldering blue in his eyes soften.

"You've had a rough life, too, huh? Why are you so optimistic when nothing has given you reason to be?"

Destiny didn't comment as he continued watching her. They weren't talking about Maria anymore. She had to know where they stood. What he planned on doing with her.

"Are you going to bond with me or not, cowboy?" The corner of her lips curved.

Matt flicked a curl over her shoulder. "That depends, cowgirl. I don't want to chance you dying. But you have to understand...your place is back in the city. I'm a Napa Valley man. Stay in touch with me, but we can't have a future. I don't want to hurt you."

Destiny tried to smile. She knew he could feel her sadness so she didn't bother hiding her tears. Strange that she didn't mind crying, when usually she tried to hide evidence of her emotions from others. Maybe she should write a book about the para-psychological connections between bonded witches and the effect on emotions.

"Hey, Boss," a man yelled from the field. "Since you're out here, you wanna check on this one line for us before we ship it to the plant?"

"How far is the line out?" Matt yelled back.

"Just a few yards in. You can still keep an eye on your lady," he chuckled.

Matt leaned forward and kissed Destiny on the forehead. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'll wait right here."

Matt winked before sauntering toward the field. She watched where the tops of the vines met blue sky and knew the greenery would never be as lush

or as plentiful in Long Island. Back East, the hedges and shrubs were manicured in exact shapes to contour and compliment the cement and steel buildings. She didn't expect to, but Destiny was falling in love with Napa Valley with the same intensity she had fallen in love with Matt. She collapsed back on the ground and watched her man walk away.

The further he moved from her, the stronger the pull was to go to him. To be with him. Heartache was a good word for the sensation. He was giving her heartache.

"Why so sad?"

Destiny scrambled to her feet. Gabe stood back, holding up a flower as a peace offering. She pressed the heel of her hand to her chest before she took the tulip from his hand.

"Sneaking up on people is not nice," she grumbled.

Gabe laughed. He motioned for her to sit again. Destiny tucked her legs under her while she made herself comfortable under the tree. He walked around her, stepping over the grass and gnarled roots of the tree. After every step, a bed of bursting colorful flowers sprung from under his feet. An explosion of color and petals cushioned Destiny's hips and legs, softening the ground beneath where she sat.

"This is so beautiful." Destiny leaned in and smelled another tulip. "It must be great to command the Earth." She slipped off her boots and dug her toes into the blooms.

Gabe picked up what looked like a small white flower, but when he handed it to her, the flower transformed into an exotic lily.

"Great weather, great earth," he said after Destiny mumbled another thank you. "Why do you think our vineyard is one of the most successful in all of Napa Valley?"

"Touché." Destiny held the lily up to her nose and breathed in the exotic smell. She stretched her legs out, enjoying the fragrance and silky soft feel of blooming buds beneath her legs. She looked up and blushed when she saw Gabe watching her.

"You love the outdoors," Gabe commented.

"The weather and scenery are beautiful out here."

"So you wouldn't have an issue moving here if Matt claimed you as his other half?"

Destiny traced the lily down her cheek. She looked out to see Matt already heading back toward her when he spotted his brother. He was pulled to a halt by another one of the workers who began talking to him, waving his arms animatedly.

Destiny sighed rubbing the heel of one hand against her eye. "Matt told me he has no intention of living with me even if he does bond with me."

"Shit."

"The choice is his. I can't force him."

"You could love him."

Destiny's head snapped up. She had been tracing a fingertip over a lily petal gripped in her hand. She wasn't stupid. She had a genius I.Q.

"You know, I've fought for everything I've ever had my entire life. I don't think I can fight this one, Gabe."

"I think you're wrong. You are fighting for him. Stay strong, Destiny. He'll feel your strength and slowly but surely, he'll come around. I know it."

"What's going on here?" Matt asked. Destiny didn't know Matt had crossed the field toward them. He loomed over her now. His face was hard as he stared at his brother.

"Why is she upset, Gabe? What did you do?"

Gabe shrugged. "We were talking about things. Painful things." He turned and patted Destiny on the shoulder. "Blessed be." He disappeared before Destiny could return the rare Wiccan goodbye.

"What did he say to you?" Matt sat next to her. He wrapped an arm around her and Destiny nestled close. "What's wrong?"

Destiny shook her head but tried to bury herself tightly against his shoulder. If she had two weeks with him, she was going to spend the time by feeling the love, not the heartache.

"Do you want me to take you back? Don't you like the vineyard?"

Destiny sighed. "You know I do even though you don't want me to."

"Destiny—"

"Relax. Your brother and I were talking about how I should visit or something when I move away after our two weeks are over."

"Are you? Moving away, I mean." He stroked her hair. He was becoming attached and he knew spending any more time with her than he needed to would make things all the more difficult for her. The quicker he got her to move, the better everything would be all around...but forcing her to give him a definite answer so quickly might backfire.

"I'll go after the two weeks are over," she said. "When are you going to bond with me?"

"We'll exchange rings at the end of two weeks."

Destiny leaned against him for a moment before she asked the question brewing in the back of her mind. "Why do you wear the bonding rings as a necklace when you were never a believer in it? You don't wear them to bed, but when you got up this morning with plans to leave the house, you put the necklace on. I think I remember you wearing them the first night I met you, too."

"They were something my parents gave to me. Gabe told me this morning that these rings were going to go to Maria, but she wouldn't have use for them and she would want me to have them. I didn't even know I wore bonding rings," he mused. "After all these years..."

“Were a set made for your brother and you separately or something?”

“My brother said his rings came from Mom and Dad, but he didn’t get them until right before April came to the vineyard. I think I’m supposed to use Maria’s rings, but I don’t know yet.”

Destiny looked down at her fingers, intertwined with his. “If we’re living apart from each other, I’m assuming we’re not going to be officially married...so we can see other people, right?” Destiny felt him tense, and she almost smiled. Good. If he didn’t like the idea, maybe he would stop being so pig-headed and want to keep her.

“Do you have someone at home you want to see?” Matt asked casually.

“Well I’m not a virgin anymore, so there isn’t anything stopping me from dating other guys.”

The air whooshed around her as she suddenly found herself flat on her back in the flowerbed. Matt’s face was inches from hers. His eyes were focused, his lips tight and pinched.

“Maybe talking about other men while you’re sleeping with me for two weeks isn’t the smartest idea,” he growled.

“Why?” She tucked her tongue in the pocket of her cheek to prevent smiling.

He leaned down and pressed his lips gently against her neck. “What if I tell you I don’t like it?”

“What if I tell you I don’t care?” Destiny knew she sounded breathless which probably encouraged Matt even more.

He shifted until he was looking down at her. His grim expression relaxed until his mouth spread in a boyish grin she had come to expect. “Really? Then I guess you wouldn’t care if I did this either,” he said before rolling with her.

She shrieked, laughed and finally sunk into the pure joy of kissing her other half.

Chapter Seven

Destiny was weak. Matt could see the fatigue etched in the lines of her face. They spent their nights in bed and she tagged along with him most days through the vineyard, even helping him while he was training the horses. Toward the end of the second week, they were able to stay apart more readily. However, the larger the space between them, the more Destiny became a shallow version of herself. Her beautiful healthy glow, the rosy tint in her cheeks began fading with each passing day.

"You need to eat more." He ran a hand down her hair. She was sitting at the dining room table in front of her laptop, typing away despite the time. That was another habit they shared. Matt was always a morning person. He didn't expect Destiny to get up with him, but she was out of bed before he opened his eyes most mornings.

"I'm not hungry," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

She looked up at him. The purple smudges under her eyes had deepened into dark grooves. "You're tired. Exhausted. I keep you up too late."

"I'm *fine*. The weather in New York will be good for me." She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "When are you going to bond with me?"

"When Gabe tells me how to do it. He's been hedging."

"Did you ask him why?"

God, her skin was porcelain white. "I don't know. Apparently we're waiting for something."

Destiny turned back to her computer and pulled up a webpage. "Well, we're not in the new moon

phase yet," she mused. "Do you know if tomorrow is an auspicious day?"

"Not that I know of."

"So what is Gabe waiting for?"

"Why are you guys so talkative in the morning?"

Gabe asked as he treaded down the stairs. April was right behind him. Both witches had wet hair, evidence of their shower.

"We're wondering why you haven't told Matt about the bonding ritual," Destiny said. "I'm sure your father told you, but why hasn't anyone told us?"

"Dad wanted to do it himself," Gabe replied. "They should be back from their trip soon. He probably planned it so you had enough time to get over your anger."

"Wow, that's really trusting of him," Matt replied.

"You can tell him that yourself." Gabe turned the coffee machine on and sat at the other end of the table. "He'll be here soon. You know Mom and Dad are early birds."

"What?" Destiny's jaw dropped. "Your parents are coming today? I have to meet them today?" She stumbled out of her chair and toward the staircase.

"You look fine," Matt yelled after her.

"You're an idiot," she shouted from the top of the staircase. "What do you know?"

Matt shrugged. He tried to ignore the slight pang and the spreading ache in his chest.

"She's right," a man's voice interrupted. "And you're right. You are an idiot, but she looked fine."

Matt turned back to the table. His father sat next to Gabe.

"Hi Dad," Matt mumbled. Before he could move, a hand gently squeezed his shoulder. He turned to see his mother's smiling face. She was about the same size as April. He didn't understand how his father and Gabe didn't break their wives.

"Hi Mom." He enveloped the woman in his arms.

"How was your safari?" April asked as she too hugged the woman. Matt watched as his parents eyed him warily before answering Gabe and April's questions.

"We had a good time. Your mother and I expected you, Matt, to be in a better position when we returned. Maybe we should have spoken to you before we left."

Matt rolled his eyes. "I doubt it would have made a difference, but I don't like you hiding things from me."

"We didn't hide anything from you, dear," his mother said as she patted his shoulder. "We didn't tell you the whole truth. I'm sure you understand why, with your temper and everything. We thought it might be best if your brother told you."

"Well, Destiny and I have come to an agreement that is probably the exact opposite of what you hoped." Matt couldn't hide the hostility in his voice. The bitterness burned the tip of his tongue like acid.

"What agreement have you come up with?" Matt's father crossed his arms over his chest. Matt knew exactly where he got his stubbornness from. His father had already made up his mind before hearing him out.

"We're going to bond because whatever I feel, I don't want Destiny to die. I wouldn't want that for anyone. But the minute the bonding ceremony is over, Destiny is going to go back to Long Island and I'm going to live here. We're going to go on with our separate lives. I don't ever intend to marry and if she does, well, she's free to do so. We'll be friends, but I don't know if we'll ever be able to see each other again."

"Oh, honey," Matt's mom said gently.

"This has to do with Maria, does it?"

Matt turned toward his father, his eyes steely hard. "Don't bring her up."

"You bet your ass I'm going to bring her up,"

Matt's father jerked out of chair. "In the stables. Now. It's time we hash this out. You're about to ruin your and that poor girl's life because of your idiocy."

Matt's father rounded the table and clapped Matt on the shoulder. They blinked out of the kitchen and were standing in the middle of the stables a second later.

"You need to warn me before you do that," Matt muttered.

"What is wrong with you?" the older man roared. His face tightened with anger. The lines in his face stretched thin, creating definitive white edges to the planes of his face. "You have everything going for you and Destiny. You two are *made* for each other."

"I don't want to talk about what I've already decided." Matt turned to pace the length of the stables. He cared about Destiny. He didn't want anything to happen to her, but Gabe had assured him neither of them would have a choking sensation when they stepped far away from each other after they bonded. Right now, he could feel the thickness in his throat because he was farther from Destiny than he had been in two weeks. A sadness settled in his heart. He wanted to call out to his other half to make sure she was okay, but he refrained. He didn't have the right.

"Why do you want to live far away from her? What good does that do besides cause both of you grief?"

Matt watched his father's violet eyes glow. The man had always been the strongest figure in his life. He rarely became angry. Matt struggled to contain his own temper.

"I don't want her to feel trapped. I don't want her to be hurt by something I might do. I don't want to be tied to someone who will have the same affect on me that Maria's low-life boyfriend had on her."

"Maria died because she chose to die. You can't control people's destinies."

"I can control who I hurt or who hurts me. I know this is the right for my other half and me. We'll be better off this way."

"That's it," the older man said. He spread his palms out and spoke the spell of the dead. The spell of sleep. The air stirred and Matt waited for the spell to be completed before he asked what his father was doing.

"Tonight you're going to do a sleep walk. A sleep walk of the dead."

A witch conducted a sleep walk when deep-seated issues with a loved one who'd passed had not been resolved. A sleep walk occurred on the psychic plane. Matt would meet his sister the way he remembered her when she was alive. Her personality would be the same, but the conversation would be with her soul from the other world.

"Is a sleep walk even possible? It's been years." Matt didn't think a sleep walk would be possible unless he was tied by magic and bonded by some para-psychic connection. Maria and he were related, but they didn't share the same power.

"It is now," the other man said. "Talk to Maria. I can only say so much to try to get through your thick head. Your sister will hopefully have better luck."

Matt didn't want to see his sister. The pain would be unbearable if he saw her again. Worse, he didn't know if Maria would forgive him for the storm that caused her miscarriage. Deep down, he knew if he hadn't become so angry, she wouldn't have died.

Matt's father cupped the back of his neck as they began the trek back to the house. Matt was grateful since he needed a few minutes to digest what had happened.

"Did you come back from your trip to tell me about the bonding or to convince me to do the bonding ritual?"

"I came back to tell you how to do the ritual and give you the one piece of advice I know you need."

“What’s that?”

“You’ll do whatever you need to do to take care of the woman you love.”

Matt’s throat closed up. He didn’t want to think about the L-word. Worse, he didn’t like how Destiny’s face flashed in his mind when love came to mind.

“What makes you think I’m in love?”

“Because you kept looking at the stairs when we stood in the kitchen and you kept pacing toward the house when we were in the barn. Worse, your brother told me you can’t stop talking about how you worry about her.”

“That could be friendly concern.”

“It could, but I know you, son. You’re in love and the feeling is wearing you down. After tonight, hopefully your relationship and your love for Destiny will all make sense to you.”

Matt didn’t want to think about loving his other half. He didn’t want to be in love with her. But most importantly, he didn’t want to rehash the feelings with subconscious memories and the spirit of his sister. What was he going to do if she didn’t forgive him for his mistake? He pushed his errant thoughts out of his mind and focused on the tension unraveling in his gut the closer he stepped to the house...the closer he stepped to his other half.

Chapter Eight

“Hi honey.”

Destiny opened the door to Matt’s bedroom to see her mother sitting on the couch in the sitting area. Her surprise was probably plastered across her face, because the woman started laughing.

“How could you think I would miss something as wonderful as your wedding day?” The once vibrant woman still had some of her elfish charm when she grinned at Destiny. Her face was round with cherub cheeks and folded wrinkles softening the corners of her eyes. She was half of Destiny’s size, with rounded hips and a child-like appeal.

“Hi, Mama.” Destiny shut the door behind her and settled in her mother’s arms for a hug. “How was your safari with the Burdocks?”

“The trip was wonderful, darling.” Her slate-gray eyes glowed with humor. “We saw all of these wonderful exotic animals.”

“What is a witch safari, anyway?”

“The vacation is quite self explanatory. Along with the everyday giraffes and monkeys and tigers, we saw unicorns and gryphons and dragons as well.”

“Did you take pictures?”

“Oh I wish I could, dear, but I forgot my camera so I didn’t bother. A witch safari is something one should see for oneself, anyway.”

Destiny settled against her mother like she was a kid. She needed comfort just this once in her life. She could feel Matt far away from her and the distance hurt. She needed to lean for a minute. If this distance was hard to accept, how was she going to be when she flew back to New York? She tried to

clamp down on her sadness. The vineyard didn't need frost, rain or snow at the moment.

"You're quiet. Why? You're not happy?" Her mother asked.

"I'm not staying with him," Destiny replied. "We're going to bond first and then we're parting ways. I'm free to get on with my life and Matt is free to get on with his."

"But, you—you can't!"

Destiny sat up and faced her mother. The woman's normally pleasant face contorted with shock. Her jaw dropped and her fingers flew to cover her mouth.

"We already made the decision, Mama. This decision is for the best."

"You'll be heartbroken. You'll go crazy. You'll be away from him for so long. I'd *know*. When your father died, you saw what happened to me. She scrambled to her feet. "I don't want you to turn out like me."

"Mama, I'll be fine. I'm prepared for the repercussions of my decision. I have you and my career to keep me busy."

Her mother scrambled around the center coffee table. "What is wrong with you? You're a fighter. My daughter fights for what she knows is right. Why aren't you fighting this?"

"Because it's not my choice," Destiny yelled back. "Couldn't her mother this once be intelligent enough, despite her eccentricities, to agree with her?"

"You have a choice, Destiny. Your father died and I had no choice but to live without him. You can stay here and have a happy life. You don't have to go through what I did."

"He doesn't *want* me."

Matt was so far away. She didn't have the energy to argue without Matt nearby. Destiny's body was drained, her spirit defeated.

The older woman's shoulders rose and fell with

each labored breath. "You haven't fought for your relationship at all. You're accepting everything the way it is instead of telling Matt what you think is right. Do you blame your father because I went crazy? Do you blame me for not dealing with his death and raising you the way I should? Do you think you won't go crazy because your other half doesn't have complete control over you?"

"Mama, stop. I'm not going to stay if he doesn't want anything to do with me. I have pride."

They faced each other like caged fighters in the tiny sitting area. Destiny was momentarily distracted when the tension began seeping from her shoulders. Matt was back in the house...or close enough for her to relax.

"I love you, baby, but pride has no place here. You need to fight for this."

"What makes you think I want to fight? Mama, I don't blame you for what you went through after Dad died. But this isn't about you and it isn't about Dad. Matt doesn't want to be with me and I'm independent enough to be on my own. I've always been on my own." Destiny regretted the words the minute she spoke them. Her mother blinked rapidly to fight off the tears she caused.

"Oh Mama, I didn't mean—"

"Don't you realize you're bonded together already? The ceremony and the words will make things official, but trying to struggle against your emotions is useless."

"I'm not struggling. I'm accepting."

"No, but I'm out of time. He's coming." She spoke so softly, Destiny was barely able to hear her. "Talk to him. I'll see you tomorrow. I haven't seen Sue and George since you were a baby. I'm going to go have tea with them."

Destiny's mother shimmered out of the room a second before Matt opened the bedroom door. Destiny swayed from the force of the relief washing

over her. He electrified her, he dazzled her and she didn't want to beg him to keep her. She could only take so much rejection.

"Matt."

He focused on her before closing the door behind him. "Are you okay? I heard voices shouting from the bottom of the staircase."

"My mother was here," Destiny said. "She was trying to talk me out of our—"

"Decision," Matt finished. "My father took me down to the stables for the same reason."

Matt folded Destiny close and she sighed with the contact of muscle to soft skin. She was her strongest when they were right near each other.

"Will the sadness ever go away?" he mumbled against her hair.

"I hope so." Destiny stroked his chest and his back, soaking in his comfort.

"I'm going to do a sleep walk tonight."

Destiny pulled back to look at his face. His eyes were glazed over as he focused on something over her shoulder. She understood why he was so preoccupied. A sleep walk was a draining exercise and used for people who shared a lasting magic bond. Wasn't she the only person who had a bond with him? Unless...

"Are you sure you're going to be okay to see Maria again?" Destiny asked gently.

"Do I have a choice? My father already cast the spell."

Destiny reached up and pressed a kiss against his lips. She was eye to eye with him if she stood on her toes. "Do you want me to come with you?"

His eyebrows rose as he absently returned the kiss. "It's tough for one person to do a sleep walk alone if they have a bond. To be a carry-on is even more draining. And you still look tired." He ran a thumb under her eyes for the dozenth time in the past few days.

"I'd do it if you need me." She loved him. He may not want to hear it, but she was going to be there for him regardless.

"I think this is something I need to do on my own." Matt leaned down to kiss her in more earnest this time. He slipped his tongue through the seam of her lips before slipping his fingers under her shirt to stroke the underside of her breasts.

"Your parents are here, aren't they?" Destiny sighed as Matt kneaded her breasts.

"Yes, but you're much more entertaining to be around," he mumbled against her lips before pulling her down to the couch.

They spent the rest of the day making love. April brought food to them like she did for the first few days Destiny and Matt were together. Instead of becoming embarrassed, they savored the last few hours they had together.

That night, right before they dozed off, Matt slipped inside Destiny and anchored her hips to his. After two weeks of unquenched lust, they were finally too sore to make love again. That didn't stop him from holding her as close as he possibly could. Matt kissed her fiercely. Right before they fell asleep, he heard her whisper against his neck.

"If you need me, I'll be here."

He wanted to say yes, that he did need her support with a frightening ferocity. Instead, he squeezed her one last time as he drifted into the sleep walk.

Chapter Nine

“Hi, Matt.”

Matt turned around to see his sister standing next to her favorite horse, Changeling. She’d raised the horse from a filly. Changeling had died a few years after Maria passed away.

Matt stepped into the sunlight toward his sister. The scene around them changed to a bright meadow. His sister looked the way she had before she died. Mousy brown, baby-fine hair flitted in the breeze around her amber eyes. She wore a plaid shirt tucked into a pair of jeans and her favorite pair of cowboy boots.

“Maria.” His voice sounded coarse, as if he’d swallowed sandpaper.

Maria giggled and let Changeling’s reigns go before she ran into Matt’s arms. He hugged her, wishing she could come back with him, wishing she was still alive.

“*Matt*,” she stressed. Her voice took such a high-pitched familiar tone that the sound had Matt smiling against her hair. “You’re getting so old! I don’t know how Destiny can stand you.”

Destiny. He didn’t feel the pang he usually did when he thought about her or when he was away from her. It...confused him.

“Don’t worry. It’s because you’re sleep walking. Most emotions are put on hold while you’re doing this. She’s perfectly fine and sleeping right next to you,” Maria said. “Come. Let’s talk.”

The scenery changed again and a creek like the one Matt, Gabe and Maria played in as kids snaked through a rolling countryside. Maria pulled him to

sit on the edge of the water. His pulse began to race. Nausea rolled in the pit of his stomach. His heart began to pound in anticipation of the confrontation. He wanted to grab Maria and hold her so that she could be with him again. He wanted to shake her, yell, for leaving him and the rest of the family the way she did. He wanted to cry and release some of the sadness, the hurt that had been resting inside of him for years. Was it really his fault that his baby sister died?

"I'm so sorry, Maria. I'm so, so sorry for the storm and for you losing your baby."

Maria's face contorted, tightened in a mask of pain for a minute before her features ironed out into peaceful, flawless planes.

"Matty, my death wasn't your fault." She squeezed his arm with the use of his childhood nickname. She was, after all, the same personality, the same way he remembered as a child.

"If there wasn't a storm, then you wouldn't have had a miscarriage, then you wouldn't have—"

"Died?" she said, finishing his sentence. "Big brother, I would have died, anyway. I wouldn't have wanted to live without my child. The doctor told me the miscarriage was inevitable. I was too young and my body wasn't prepared for the baby."

"What? No." Matt shook his head. "You wouldn't have killed yourself if the storm hadn't caused...I mean, you were going to be home and be with us. Things would have been all right if you were with us."

"No," Maria said, gently. "The baby would have gone and then I would have died because I wasn't strong enough to deal with the loss. I'm so sorry I had to leave you and Mom, Dad and Gabe, but this was meant to happen."

"We could have been there for you. I could have been there for you."

"I love you. I think you're an idiot sometimes,

but I love you and always will. You didn't let me down, Matty. I let *you* down."

Matt looked at his hand encased by the tiny pale fingers of his sister's. She died at the age of sixteen. He lived to the age of thirty. He had Destiny. Matt shook his head. He didn't want to start thinking there was a chance he could be with her, he didn't want to think there was a chance they could be together when he wouldn't hurt her like he hurt Maria. Trusting someone as much as he trusted Destiny was dangerous. Loving someone as much as he loved Destiny was frightening.

"Are you paying attention? I let you down, big brother." Maria leaned her head against Matt's shoulder. "I didn't love you, all of you, enough to stick around. I didn't believe in yours, Mom and Dad's, or Gabe's love enough to stick around. I left because I had to be with my baby, a baby the doctor said was already miscarrying before they found me in the storm. Don't you think that if the storm was hurting me, I would have called for Mom and Dad or something?"

"How?" Matt said. "You didn't have that power. You were alone out there."

"Like I said." Maria sighed. "A complete idiot. Matty, I could make people think what I wanted. If I was in trouble, don't you think I would focus on Mom and Dad and make them think I was in trouble, too?"

"Why didn't you?" Matt pulled away from Maria. He was burning hot with anger now. He wanted to roar, yell, hit something. His knees were weak with it, his eyes burned with unshed tears and all that he could do was breathe slowly. He loved his sister. Second chances were rare and he wasn't going to leave her with bitterness in his mouth. Not this time.

"Why didn't you, then? Why did you walk through the storm?"

Maria shrugged. "I just needed some space. It had nothing to do with you. Does it still snow when you're mad?"

"It storms," Matt mumbled.

Maria tossed her head back and laughed a rich, childish sound. "That is totally like you, Matty."

He walked five paces to the left and then five paces to the right. He spent years thinking about the storm and blaming himself for Maria's death. She confirmed something he hadn't accepted over the years. Something his brother and his parents had constantly told him. He always knew Maria had a wild and independent streak. How could he have forgotten her rash behavior?

"Why did you do something so stupid and hurt us, Maria?"

Her gold eyes brightened for a moment and her irises expanded. "You know the answer to that. I've said it already and so has the rest of the family. I did what was best for me. My death wasn't your fault. Please believe that. Do you want me to say it in Latin?"

Matt shot her an annoyed look, but he felt joy in his heart. Her mischievous expression, her small glibs always made him laugh.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. Accepting something completely opposite of what he spent years believing was difficult. The truth stuck to the back of his throat and created a nasty uncomfortable feeling he couldn't get rid of. He sat again and wrapped an arm around his sister's shoulders.

"I told Destiny I didn't want to be with her because I didn't want to hurt someone like I hurt you. I didn't want to have power over someone or I didn't want someone to have so much power over me."

Maria nuzzled her face against his chest for a minute, like she had as a small child. "I've said it before and I'll say it again. Idiot. What do you think

now that I've beat some sense into you?"

"I still don't want to hurt her. I'm afraid I will."

"Matty, you know about Destiny's father and how he died, right? Well Destiny's mother made the choice to stay for her daughter. Dying or leaving her are the only two ways you can hurt her as badly as you think you're capable of doing. You've spent enough time with her to know she's tough enough to set you straight if you do something stupid."

Matt smirked when he remembered Destiny's temper tantrums over the last two weeks. She could flay him with her sharp tongue better than anyone else. She got all snooty whenever he said something to piss her off. He didn't want to think about how he wouldn't have anyone to fight with, to laugh with, or to love if she left him. If he made her leave.

"Let's say I believe you, but let's also say I still think it's a bad idea for me to stay with her."

"Then I'd say you're being a coward," Maria snapped. "And my brother is anything but a coward."

Matt grinned at Maria's upturned face. He tapped her nose. "You know I love her, don't you?"

"Kinda hard to miss," Maria whispered. Her eyes started to water. "Will you tell her about me? Will you have babies and remind them they had an aunt?"

Matt could feel the emotion strangle him slowly. The burning behind his eyes grew more painful. "I wish you were still with us. I miss you, sprout."

They hugged, squeezing each other with a desperate pressure Matt didn't know how to control.

"I love you, big brother," Maria whispered. "It's time for you to go."

They stood, still hugging. "I love you, too. I'm still sorry and I want you to know how much I love you," Matt said.

"Before I go, I want to ask a favor from you."

"Okay."

"Find Sam Durgan and tell him that if things

would have been different, I would have loved him with all my heart. That I'll still love him and I'll be with him."

"Wait, who's Sam—"

"That's for you to find out, silly." She giggled. Maria blew him a kiss and backed out of Matt's arms. She started toward Changeling, who was still grazing on the grass near the far side of the hill. The scenery changed back to the stables and finally Matt felt the pull Destiny and he shared. He sighed, hoping he wasn't too late to convince Destiny he was wrong and he wanted her to stay. He was going to do everything in his power to keep her.

"Bye, sprout," Matt whispered. He waved, watching her image fade in the distance. He was finally able to say goodbye to his sister.

Matt woke up with a jerk and instead of the warmth of Destiny's body next to him, the other side of the bed was empty and cold. He jerked to a sitting position and turned toward the balcony windows. To his shock, snow was falling outside in a steady set of flurries. The depression and hollowness, the sense of loss was oppressive enough to steal his breath.

"Destiny," he whispered. Matt shot out of bed and jumped in a pair of jeans as fast as he possibly could. He didn't know why, but Destiny had left, and he could feel her dying the farther she moved away from him.

Chapter Ten

She was so cold. The wind and the iciness of the flurries numbed her fingertips and the rest of her extremities. How could she think logically in this weather about getting to the bus stop? Research showed that lower temperatures caused a decrease in brain function which could lead to hallucinations, black outs and psychotic behavior. Hopefully she would die soon and she wouldn't have to worry about psychosis, her extremities or any other numbness and pain she had left.

Destiny woke in the morning light with a feeling of oppressed helplessness. She decided to go down to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She didn't hear the voices until she reached the top of the staircase. Her mother and what must have been Matt's parents were talking in hushed tones. The time had to be four a.m. at the latest.

"You know your daughter best, Francis," the woman said. "Do you think she loves Matt?"

"My daughter has always been the one who knew me better than I knew her. I'm ashamed to admit I didn't pay enough attention to her."

The man spoke next. "I talked to Matt in the barn. He should still be in the sleep walk right now. I hope he comes to his senses about this whole thing. I know he took Maria's death the hardest, but this is ridiculous."

"Honey," the woman said. "You can't force your son to overcome his grief. We were hoping Destiny would help him with that..."

"George, you couldn't help your son as much as I helped my daughter with her grief after Jim died.

Maybe separating Destiny and Matt at birth was a mistake. They could have grown on each other over the years, or something.”

“Francis, our kids would have built resentment for each other if they knew they had no choice in binding with each other. But they’re older now. Matt may not love Destiny now, but if they spend more time together, he can,” the woman mused.

Destiny bit her fist to hold back the cry. She snuck back into the bedroom. She watched Matt’s form curled under the blanket toward her side of the bed. His body rose and fell with each breath. She made her decision in the few seconds she watched Matt and made sure he was safe.

She would rather die than bond to someone who didn’t want her. Her mother was right. She should fight and the only way to fight Matt was to prevent from bonding with him. She knew she was going to be only half-alive if Matt sent her away and never loved her in return.

Her other was firmly locked in his sleep walk and she didn’t want to pull him out too early despite her desperate need to say goodbye. She swallowed her sob, blew him a kiss and snuck out the back door of the house.

Destiny had to laugh as she trudged through the snow covered path between the vineyard fields. She decided not to pack her bags. She was going to die anyway...but of course, like a true woman of the world, she carried her purse with her. No one could separate her from her Burberry purse. ’Til death do them part. Destiny pressed her chapped lips together and bit down on another shiver. Her thin sweater was no match for the iciness cloaked her.

She started counting her steps and watching as each foot imprinted the snow in a perfect shoe shape. “One, two, three, four...”

She should have spoken to her mother before leaving, but she didn’t want anyone to talk her out of

her decision. Her mother had helped enough. She reminded Destiny how strong of a woman she was. Destiny made her own choices and she didn't let a man dictate what she thought or how she acted. Destiny also had her pride. If she wasn't going to spend her life with Matt, then she was going to suck it up and end things right there.

"You're up early."

Destiny's head shot up and she nearly ran into Storm. The massive stallion almost trampled her as he skittered forward and then back. Destiny jumped to the side, hoping she didn't squeak too loudly.

She looked up to see the tall, powerful man seated on the horse. Matt's knees gripped the animal's ribs, holding the beast in place. He wore a light coat and his Stetson. His cheeks, normally clean-shaven, were scruffy with early morning growth.

"Where you goin' cowgirl?" Matt's voice was light and teasing...but his eyes bore into her like hard sapphires.

"I'm not going to bond with you." Destiny could barely see with the snow coming down hard now. She should have known he was near. She didn't feel like someone was shoving cotton balls in her mouth, suffocating her.

"I thought you were going to bond and then leave?" Matt hopped off his horse. "Don't you remember? If we don't bond, you die and I lose my powers."

Destiny sighed. She forgot about that little clause in the deal when she made her decision a few hours before. He lost his powers and he needed them for his ranch. She was acting selfish, but since she was going to die anyway, why should she care? "If you're here to make sure I bond with you to ensure your powers stay intact, I don't give a shit. I'm leaving. And yeah, I know I'm supposed to die, but that's the plan."

He stepped closer to her now. His features looked so strong against the powder-soft snowfall. "Why are you willing to die?"

Destiny's eyes filled with tears. Damn it, she wasn't going to cry. She said she wasn't going to cry and promised herself she would die before she told him why she made her decision.

Her mouth didn't cooperate. "I'm not going to be miserable in Long Island for the rest of my life. I know we're going to feel like crap if we're too far away from each other even after we bond. Why do you think Gabe goes back to the house so often? He *wants* to be with April. I refuse to be a martyr like my mother and go crazy all the way across the country while you don't suffer at all because you never wanted me in the first place!"

"Is that the only reason?"

"I don't want to end up like my mother," she snapped.

"I spoke to Maria in my sleep walk. She said to wish us luck."

"Yeah right." Destiny shoved his hand away from her hair. "I know how you're so happy about this whole bonding thing."

"I didn't kill her, baby." Destiny paused when she heard the hurt in his voice. He loved his sister. Leaving her again must have been incredibly difficult. She softened.

"I know, Matt," she whispered back.

"I used her death as an excuse because I didn't want someone to hurt me the way she had when she left. The way the asshole she loved hurt her...but we can't control other people's actions. We can only control our own. Her death, as much pain as it caused, was meant to be. She didn't belong in our world after her baby died."

"She made a choice," Destiny said slowly. She didn't understand where Matt was going with this. "And I made mine."

“Un-make it.” He cupped her hands in his. His lips hovering over hers.

“What?” Destiny couldn’t think, couldn’t concentrate on what he was saying.

“Un-make your decision. I want to be with you. I love you Destiny Snow, and I want to bond with you because you’re the other half of my soul.”

Destiny’s knees went weak. Her head spun and she couldn’t hold her weight up anymore, so she collapsed against him.

“Too much adrenaline,” she mumbled against his shirt as his arms wrapped loosely around her.

He laughed then, disturbing the eerie silence that surrounded them. “Only you would say something like that when I’m trying to be romantic and making you weak in the knees.”

“It’s not you, it’s adrenaline.”

He kissed her then. His lips grazed over hers, before he pressed them sweetly against hers. Destiny, for the first time, couldn’t hold her feelings back, and she had to say the words inside her heart since he first smiled with his rakish grin.

“I love you, cowboy,” she whispered. The snow stopped and the sun crept out behind thick gray clouds. “I didn’t want to bond with you if you were going to make me leave.”

“If you would have stayed in bed where you belonged, then I wouldn’t have had to follow you out here to tell you this stuff.” She almost purred when he opened his jacket and wrapped it around her.

“You’re an idiot,” she said against the sweet smelling skin at his neck.

“That seems to be the general consensus lately.”

They stood hugging each other, as the snow melted around them. The fatigue and pain had subsided, and her rational brain kicked into high gear. Questions raced through her mind as she fingered his shirt at his lower back under his coat.

“Your change of heart is a bit sudden,” she said

carefully.

Matt shook his head. "This is something I knew, but I was trying to deny it for so long. I was afraid of what could happen if things went wrong."

"So you loved me from before your sleep walk?"

"How could I not, baby?" He pulled back to kiss the corner of her mouth before his lips traced over her cheekbone and to her temple. "Will you bond with me? Stay with me? Will you marry me, Destiny Snow?"

Destiny's heart pounded in her chest and she tightened her hold on him. She loved him so much. "I will, but if you ever break my heart or do something stupid again, I swear, I'll turn you into a toad."

Matt grinned before he lifted her off her feet and spun her in circles. He laughed when she let out a shriek.

"I'm so sorry for these past two weeks. The bad parts of the last two weeks." When he dropped her back on her feet, she was immediately wrapped in his arms again. "I'll make them up to you. You're not your mother and I'm not responsible for my sister's death. We'll probably make our own mistakes, but we'll work through them together."

"We will." Destiny was finally starting to trust him. He loved her. He had always been honest with her. She soaked in the pure joy of the emotion.

"And to think," she said, giggling when Matt lifted her into the saddle on Storm's back before settling behind her. "I never imagined I would fall in love with a cowboy."

"You never had a chance." Matt squeezed her waist. "You never had a chance."

Destiny smiled, too happy to be incensed by his cockiness, as she and her other half rode off into the sunrise.

About the Author

Award-winning author Tess Quinn was raised in the countryside of northeast Pennsylvania. With very little to do in a town where the local high school gym was a barn and the cow-human ratio was 2.5 to 1, Tess filled her spare time with eighties music and a lot of reading. Unfortunately, there was only one bookstore and two libraries in the valley while Tess was growing up, so she started writing sequels to her favorite novels. When she ran out of favorites to write about, she started creating her own stories, and she has been writing ever since. Tess graduated from Muhlenberg College with a B.A. in English. She continues her obsession with writing while she currently attends law school in New York.

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