

SANDHAIN press

*Fairytale
Fantasies*

Awakening
BEAUTY

BONNIE DEE & MARIE TREANOR

To fight this evil, they'll have to make love. Lots of love.

Fairytale Fantasies, Book 3

Joel Thorne feels as if he's been sleepwalking through his life. Wealth and success are his; now he's at a crossroads. Politics beckons, a move that would be made easier with a loveless marriage of convenience to his ambitious friend and ally, Vee Gabor. During a long mountain hike to clear his head, he discovers a castle overgrown with thorns and, inside, a beautiful sleeping woman.

When Princess Aurora opens her eyes, Joel's handsome face is imprinted on her heart—then she's swamped with grief and loss. An evil fairy tried to take her pure blood to gain power, and though her other godmothers fended off the worst of the curse, she's been asleep for a thousand years. Worse, she's been erased from history and from the memories of all she loved. True love brought her back, but to what future?

Despite their instant, strong attraction, Joel's practical nature wars with the possibility that magic is real. Yet with every touch, every kiss, the heat and emotion grow more real than anything he's ever known. Their union also reawakens something else. Something darker. An evil fairy's centuries-old vendetta that just won't die.

Warning: Contains explicit, edge-of-your-dreams sex, a newly minted hero in training, and a fairy princess who kicks butt for the man she loves. No fairy dust was spared in the making of this book.

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Awakening Beauty

Bonnie Dee and Marie Treanor

Dedication

For every woman who has reached a point in her life when she realized it was time to wake up and take charge of her destiny.

Chapter One

It was like the end scene in *Ape Planet* when Charles Hester beheld the Brea Monument half buried in sand and realized he'd never left his own world. Joel sucked in a breath and blinked, unable to believe what he was seeing. In front of him stood a massive structure completely covered in ivy and brambles—a castle shrouded in greenery. The peaked roofs of two towers were the only manmade things to rise above the overgrowth and show there was a building underneath.

“What the fuck is this, and why isn't it on the map?” he muttered to himself as he walked toward where he judged the front gate might be. The answer to his second question was obvious. It was because he was so far off the map even a GPS unit couldn't find him. He'd hiked farther than he'd intended into these remote mountains and would likely have to spend the night up here. With any luck he could make his way back down to civilization in the morning.

Still, one would think ancient ruins like this would be tourist-worthy. The principality of Schlaushagen should have clearly marked signs to direct people to the site and a gift shop with brochures explaining the castle's history and selling tacky snow globes. Untapped financial potential always left Joel feeling a little uneasy, like a picture that begged to be straightened. He wasn't known as the Prince of Midas Street for nothing. If there was a way to turn any idea into money, Joel Thorne generally had a hand in it.

The bizarre ruins beckoned him to explore. Moving closer to the dense vegetation convinced him he would not find a way inside. Just as well, because it was likely crumbling masonry would kill him and no one would ever find him. Then suddenly he saw a path through the thorny vines, almost as if the briars had parted to make way for him.

Joel's curiosity over what might lie inside the structure was too great to resist. After all, he was on vacation. He was *allowed* to investigate this mystery without considering time or money management. It was curiously liberating, reminding him with an unexpected pang, of the daring, adventurous boy he'd once been.

He headed up the rough pathway and not one bramble scratched him or barred his way. He felt a strange pull inside as if something were drawing him onward, and the very air held the hushed sense of an impending change in the weather. It was eerie.

A pair of rusty iron gates was set into the castle wall. The thick, sweet scent of roses nearly choked him as he walked beneath an arching branch of the climbing flowers and pushed on the gates. They would be locked, of course. But with a squeal of their hinges, they swung open into a courtyard.

Entering the murky green space was like diving underwater. Tangled branches grew overhead, sheltering the courtyard like a roof. Dried leaves carpeted the ground, but beneath them were solid flagstones. Joel stopped and looked around. There was a fountain with dancing nymphs holding up jugs to catch water that had long since stopped flowing. Time and the elements had faded the carving on the statues, giving the nymphs a creepy, featureless quality. Joel felt a paranoid fear one of the statues would suddenly turn toward him, step down from the fountain and come at him, holding out her empty jug. The mental image was so strong it sent a shiver down his spine. He shook off the primitive fear and walked forward, determined to look inside the building.

He approached a pair of double doors, once stately and imposing, now a derelict shambles. One hung crookedly on its hinges, so they were clearly not locked or barred. The way was open to him as if the castle was welcoming him to come in. The hinges wailed as he pushed one of the heavy wooden doors open.

The inside of the front hall was nearly pitch-black. He stood for a moment waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. Portraits in ornate frames lined the walls, the faces pale blotches beneath the patina of age that covered them. He walked down the corridor on a velvety-thick layer of dust, past cobweb-draped wall sconces and occasional chairs and sideboards.

Coming to an archway, Joel paused and peered inside a room. From the furnishings, he guessed it had been a parlor. The divans, chairs, ottomans and end tables were coated with years of dust, as if the people who'd lived here had simply walked away one day, leaving the entire castle empty. Where had they gone and why?

He didn't generally think of himself as a man who was frightened by the unexplained or supernatural. But then, in his life he'd never encountered anything otherworldly. A career built on facts and figures, deadlines and diagrams had dragged him from poverty to the pinnacle of wealth, consuming every moment of his time and attention. He'd never bothered to ponder the oddities or miracles in the world. But this place was completely inexplicable. Even Joel Thorne couldn't overlook the strangeness of an ancient abandoned castle.

It was late afternoon outside, but as gloomy as midnight in the shadowed rooms. He wandered from one to another and wondered if he dared light a fire on the hearth of the sitting room and pass the night. The alternative was sleeping under the open sky on the side of the mountain, so no matter how haunted this place might feel, he would probably stay here.

Joel returned to the great hall and surveyed the grand staircase with its ornate, curving banisters that glimmered faintly beneath the layers of dirt. Real gold? He went over and rubbed the metal clean. It shone a dull yellow even in the darkness. He put a tentative foot on the bottom step—solid stone, not likely to

crumble. He mounted the stairs, his already pounding heart accelerating as he climbed. The odd feeling that something was waiting for him up there filled him, not with the dread of unseen monsters, but with the childish hope of a birthday morning. A little farther and he would find an amazing gift just for him.

The sensation continued to grow as he reached the landing and explored the second floor. But the special something wasn't here. The crazy inner GPS directed him toward another flight of stairs. He took out his flashlight and flicked it on before continuing his way up the stairs.

The third level appeared to be servants' quarters, tiny rooms with a cot in each. Joel hurried past them, his feet winged as he neared his destination. He didn't even question the undeniable urge that drove him on to another doorway. This one opened to reveal a stairwell that spiraled 'round and 'round inside one of the towers. The backs of his calves ached as he climbed the steep, narrow steps. At last he reached the top, a tiny area too small to even call a hallway, and yet another door begging to be opened.

He put his hand on the knob and turned it, holding his breath as he entered the room. He pointed the flashlight at what lay on the floor and stared. Ruins of the Brea Monument be damned, this sight was far more shocking.

A woman lay there, unconscious or perhaps dead. Her bright auburn curls and pale, lightly freckled skin were a dramatic contrast to her emerald green dress, parts of which shone like silk through the layers of disturbed dust.

Joel dropped to his knees beside the sleeping woman and lifted her wrist to feel for a pulse. Her heart beat slowly and steadily. Alive then, but deeply asleep or perhaps in a coma. He bent over her and touched the side of her face.

"Hey, lady. Are you all right? Wake up."

Something gripped her shoulder hard, and a hand kept patting at her face.

"Lady, wake up," a man's deep voice commanded.

Aurora frowned and shrugged, trying to shake off the hand. She needed sleep. She was exhausted and it wasn't time to get up yet.

"How did you get here?" The deep voice kept speaking. Why wouldn't he be quiet? Couldn't he see she was asleep? Likely it was a new footman, some lad from the country who had no idea of protocol. His accent was thick and strange, as if he were a foreigner. But what on earth would a manservant be doing in her bedroom? Such outrageous behavior was unforgivable, no matter how ignorant the new footman might be.

Her eyes flew open and she bolted upright. Her head spun at the sudden movement and her body ached all over, every joint screaming. She gasped in pain and stared at the man bending over her.

His hair was brown, cut unfashionably short, and he wore some sort of short-sleeved tunic with a jacket over it and a pair of dark blue leggings. No moustache or beard hid his jaw and chin, but the

unshaven stubble of several days shadowed them. Dark brows knit together over blue eyes that gazed at her with inappropriate intimacy.

“How did you get here? What happened to you?” His rough, informal address shocked her, and yet the timbre of his voice sent warm ripples of excitement through her. She suddenly felt wide awake, much more alert than she had in years.

“Who are *you*?” she countered. “And what are you doing in my bed chamber? I shall have you dismissed.”

The man glanced around. “I don’t think this is your bedroom.”

Aurora followed his gaze and realized she was in the south tower. Suddenly memories began to seep back into her consciousness. A siren call that had guided her feet to this place almost against her will. The spinning wheel haloed and glowing, drawing her to it, beckoning her to touch it. Her parents’ admonitions throughout her life about staying away from any kind of needle, pin, knife or any other pointed object had flown from her mind as she reached out to touch the shining spindle that drew her like a moth to flame. She remembered the sharp prick on her finger, a roaring sound that filled her ears, and then utter darkness.

She rubbed her forehead. “What happened to me? Why am I lying on the floor?”

“I don’t know. Did you hike up to this castle?” He stared at her gown. “Maybe you were doing a movie shoot, or...uh, wandered away from a medieval fair?”

“What are you talking about? Your words make no sense.”

“Never mind. Just relax. I’ll get you back to where you came from.” The man slid a satchel from his shoulder, opened it and took out a clear glass bottle from inside. He unscrewed the blue cap and handed it to her. “Have a drink.”

Aurora was surprised at the lightness of the water bottle. It wasn’t glass at all but some strange, slick material she’d never encountered before. Perhaps he was a wizard trying to get her to swallow a magic potion. But his eyes were kind, and she was too thirsty to care. She took the bottle and drank deeply before handing it back to him.

“Thank you, kind sir.” She addressed him formally since she couldn’t tell his class. She’d never seen any man dressed in such strange attire, and even his demeanor was different from the courtiers, noblemen, guards and menservants she’d known in her life. What country had this bright-eyed stranger come from and what gave him the temerity to address the Princess of Schlaushagen with such informality?

Aurora started to rise, but her legs buckled beneath her. The man shot out an arm and caught her. “Slow down there. You may have a head injury. Why don’t you just sit for a few minutes and then I’ll help you stand.”

“Tonight is my betrothal ball. I must finish getting ready. Help me rise at once and return to my rooms.”

“Your rooms in the castle?” His dark brows shot up.

“Yes, that is correct. What other? I will forgive your oafishness as you clearly do not know who I am. You are addressing the Princess Aurora. My father is King Hubert.”

“Oh.” The man nodded, but a pitying look filled his eyes and Aurora knew he did not believe her. Did he think she was some ladies’ maid dressed in her mistress’s ball gown?

The man stuck out his hand. “I’m Joel Thorne from Gwyn City in Linderwylde. Pleased to meet you.”

She stared at his hand, uncomprehending. What did he expect her to do with it?

After a moment, he dropped his hand. “Okay then. Maybe we should talk a little bit before I take you downstairs. Those tower steps are steep anyway.” Joel Thorne sat back on his heels. “I think I’d better warn you there’s no one besides us in the castle. The place looks like it’s been deserted for hundreds of years.”

The whirling inside Aurora’s head grew stronger. Her stomach heaved, and for a moment she was certain she would vomit the water she’d just drunk. “What are you saying?”

“This place is abandoned. Whoever you’re expecting to find down there is long gone.” He reached out and took her hand. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at the man’s hand wrapped warmly around hers and felt comforted rather than alarmed, despite his insane words. Of course she didn’t believe him. What he suggested was impossible, and yet something had happened to her after she’d touched that spindle. Something had come over her and made her swoon for heaven knew how many hours. Perhaps it was dark magic.

She lifted her gaze, taking in the dusty, cobwebbed walls and the tiny, filthy window. This wasn’t right. It hadn’t looked like this when she’d come up here. And where was the spinning wheel that had so fascinated her? Had someone come up and taken it away, yet left her here on the floor?

Somehow, that idea was more frightening than anything the odd stranger had yet said. Panic surged inside her with such force that she had to gasp to control it.

“Do you feel all right? You’re not going to pass out again, are you?” Joel Thorne pressed a hand to her forehead, feeling for a fever. “I need to get you to a doctor, but we’re miles from the nearest village.”

Aurora met his concerned gaze and found enough strength to respond with dignity. “Sir, much of what you say confounds me, and yet I trust you mean me no harm. From whence do you come and what brings you to the kingdom of Schlaushagen?”

“I’m from Linderwylde, here on vacation. I was hiking in the mountains when I came across these ruins...I mean, this castle. I was curious, so I came inside to explore. Sorry to destroy your illusions, miss, but there really is no one else here besides us. Whatever people you might have been traveling with have apparently left you behind.”

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Something was amiss here and she needed to find out what. She started to rise from the floor, gritting her teeth at the aching in her joints. Her body felt as if she’d lain on the cold, hard floor for a hundred years.

The man called Thorne offered her his arm again and she gratefully took it, allowing him to draw her upright. Her legs trembled and she grimaced as her head spun again. "Please escort me downstairs. I wish to find my father and mother."

"All right." He stopped trying to convince her that the castle was empty and slipped a presumptuous hand around her waist to support her as he led her toward the stairs. Aurora leaned into him more than was proper, but excused her behavior due to her dizziness. She certainly wasn't leaning because his strength reassured her or made her feel safe.

They walked close together down the very narrow spiral staircase. By halfway down, Thorne was nearly carrying her. With every step, Aurora felt a growing sense of trepidation. She feared what she would find, for the stranger's words disturbed her despite her protestation of disbelief. She kept remembering the silvery light around the spinning wheel, her overwhelming compulsion to touch the spindle and her mother's dire warnings throughout the years. Aurora had been forbidden to spin or even do needlepoint, bizarre prohibitions she'd never understood. But what if there'd been a reason behind her mother's apparent madness, a prophecy her parents had been trying to avoid? And what if by that one touch of her finger to the spindle, Aurora had brought down calamity upon herself and her family, a curse from which they would never recover?

She clung to Joel Thorne's hand and drew a deep breath as he pushed open the door at the bottom of the stairs.

Chapter Two

It was like walking through a nightmare. If it weren't for the pain every time she moved, she would have been sure she was still asleep. Perhaps she was dead. The alternative was unthinkable.

There was dirt everywhere, crumbling stone lying in the passages, ivy blocking the windows of the deserted, moldering rooms, growing up *inside* the walls. Grass and weeds pushed through cracks in the stone floors. Bushes sprouted in unlikely places. There was even a tree in the throne room. The whole castle crawled with cobwebs, dust, mold, the stench of damp and disrepair and neglect. And silence. Utter silence that she could never remember in her life before, except for the sound of their echoing footsteps crunching through rubble and dust.

Somewhere, with the part of her brain that could still think, she was aware she clutched the stranger's hand too tightly. But she couldn't make herself let go. It was as if he was the only other person in the world.

Oh please, no, please...

"How long has the palace been abandoned?" she whispered, blurting the words before she realized she couldn't bear the answer.

"More than decades," Joel Thorne answered. "The condition this place is in, I'd say several centuries. Which is a shame, leaving a beautiful building like this to rot."

"But that's impossible! Where is my mother? My father? What happened to everyone?" She stared out of the open door into the courtyard, so hopelessly overgrown that she could barely even see the fountain.

With a sudden movement more of fear than anger, she slammed the door on the impossible, unendurable sight.

"I don't know, Aurora," Thorne said as she swung toward him, looking for answers. There was helpless pity in his voice, in the butterfly touch of his fingers on her cheek.

She gasped. "I won't have it! I won't! It's impossible." She ran her fingers up his arm and clutched. Beneath his clothing was hard, relentless muscle. "What day is it?"

He blinked. "Saturday."

"More!"

"Saturday, the twenty-third of May."

"In the year...?"

He swallowed, as if he knew she wouldn't like the answer. She didn't even like the question. As long as she didn't know, she could pretend that everything was all right, that it was a trick, that she'd wandered into the wrong house and forgotten they'd shut this one up for whatever reason...

He told her.

The blood sang in her ears; dizziness rushed up from her toes in a low whoosh that might have been her own cry of fear and loss. And then, blessedly, the nightmare was shut out by blackness.

She could smell wood smoke, could hear the faint sounds of someone rustling in the room. So she wasn't alone. Someone had lit a fire. This was better. Beneath her still-aching body was softness, and she was conscious of warmth and comfort. Oh yes, this was much better.

Taking a risk, she opened her eyes.

The nightmare hadn't gone. Despair settled over her heart.

The vegetation across the window acted now as a curtain on the night. Lit candles were scattered about the room and the rubble had mostly been swept to one side. She was in the lesser drawing room. Beneath the high, carved stone fireplace mantel, Joel Thorne poked the flames on the hearth with a stick.

At least he hadn't abandoned her.

She'd never met him in her life before she'd awakened the last time and yet he seemed like her only hope, the only reality left for her to cling to. The flames danced across his clean-shaven, handsome face, shadowing the hollows of his jaw. It was a strong, intelligent face and, despite his odd dress, he gave an impression of solid reliability.

Unless he was tricking her. Unless all this was some kind of elaborate hoax, though with what aim...

He glanced up, interrupting her wild speculation, and gave a quick smile. A good smile, lightening the natural solemnity of his expression and making him look both younger and more approachable.

"You're awake again."

She pulled herself into a sitting position. "How long this time?"

He shrugged. "Just a few minutes. Long enough for me to carry you in here, beat some cushions and lay you on them in my sleeping bag. I loosened your dress, by the way, because it looked so uncomfortable, but I promise I didn't gape or grope."

She frowned. "Gape or grope? What does that mean?"

"Never mind," he said hastily.

As the rest of his speech sank in, she began to blush with understanding. She wasn't used to being handled by menservants, only by women, so this seemed wrong. And yet, oddly exciting. Of course, she was emotionally confused right now.

"Thank you," she said faintly, examining the strange quilted cocoon in which she was wrapped.

He walked toward her and crouched down among the dustier cushions beside her. "How do you feel?"

She swallowed. “Sore. Confused.” She closed her eyes on the upsurge of tears. “Desolate,” she whispered.

“Aurora.” Her name on his lips soothed, as did his hand when he laid it on hers, warm and comforting. “Don’t worry. We’ll work this out. It’s dark now, so we’ll stay here tonight. Tomorrow, I’ll take you down to the village and we can find a doctor who can help you.”

She stared at him. “Will he give me back lost time? Will he give me my mother and father? My friends and my betrothed?”

There was a pause while he searched her eyes. He wasn’t remotely intimidated by her anger. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “But I hope he’ll give you something that helps.”

He took his hand away and she felt curiously forlorn. But he only reached across her for his backpack. Clearly he had no concept of maintaining a respectful distance, for the hair on his arm, at once crisp and soft, actually tickled her chin. Even more strangely, she didn’t mind. She liked the smell of him, warm, a little faint sweat from exercise, something both elusive and alluring that reminded her of spice and orchards in summer.

He heaved the bag over her and dumped it between his long legs while he rummaged inside. “Hungry?”

Bemused as much by watching him as by his strange, curt speech, she had to think before she answered. “Um—yes, I think so...”

“Good.” He brought out some odd, light containers, pulling the lids off each with a mocking flourish. “Help yourself.”

Aurora closed her mouth. “What is it?”

“Bread, local cheese, salami and ham, some salad. Fruit, chocolate.” Misunderstanding her hesitation, he added, “There’s enough for two.”

It wasn’t what she was used to. Frankly, it was peasants’ food, but she’d been brought up never to be rude to her inferiors, and so she thanked him politely and reached into one box to pick up some cheese. He cut off a hunk of bread from the loaf, using a knife that unfolded from a short, rounded silver stick and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said again.

He took out a couple of bottles, one the clear water bottle she’d drunk from already, and the other a dark green color. He glanced at her. “There’s water and beer. I’d advise the former until you’ve seen the doctor.”

“I’ve never drunk beer in my life. Don’t you have any wine?”

“No.” He didn’t have to sound so pleased about it.

Sniffing, she took the water bottle, remembering to thank him once again. Her stomach rumbled and, as she bit into the bread and cheese together, she realized how good peasants’ food really was.

“So, Aurora, what’s the rest of your name?” he asked, placing two slices of salami and tomato slices onto one piece of bread.

“Alexandra Maria Helena, daughter of King Hubert Wilhelm George and Queen Elizabeth Annaliese.”

“I meant your surname.”

She frowned. “Do you jest? We are the royal family. Our lineage stretches back to the beginning of time.”

“The royal family, eh?” His tone still suggested that he doubted her word. “Schlaushagen is ruled by a democratically elected government these days.”

“Oh.” Aurora was at a loss to imagine a time in which her country did not have a monarch. How had such a thing come to pass? “Lauchevitzerstein is our family name.”

“My last name is Thorne,” he said and a quick smile flashed across his mouth. “No string of names and definitely no noble lineage. You can just call me Joel.”

He took a bite of his bread and Aurora found herself watching with fascination as his strong white teeth tore free a large chunk, taking it efficiently into his mouth and chewing close-mouthed. At least he didn’t have a peasant’s table manners.

When he’d swallowed, he picked up the green beer bottle and took a hefty swig. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen. It was my birthday when I...” She broke off, swamped once more by the memory of the glowing spinning wheel and the sharp, unexpected prick when she’d touched it.

“When you what?” he prompted.

“It was my birthday,” she repeated more slowly. “My parents had invited our friends, all the most powerful nobles from our country and from Karl’s, because our betrothal was to be announced. I was dressed for the ball, but the maids were so busy fussing over the correct jewelry for me I got bored, and wandered off.”

She stared in front of her, picked up the water bottle as if it held the secret of this mess. “I wanted to go to the south tower. I don’t know why. My parents had always forbidden it. But I’d snuck up there once before when I was a child, following one of the maids. It was full of sharp things, the things I was never allowed to go near—scissors and needles, pins, spinning wheels. So many that they positively *glittered*. That time the maid turned and saw me and quickly slammed and locked the door again.

“The night of the ball, I was drawn to return. I was nineteen and soon to be married. I didn’t want to be a child, so over-protected that I couldn’t even look at a pin! And so I went up there, even knowing the door would be locked. It always was.”

She looked at Joel, almost wondering at the effort of memory that seemed like yesterday and yet was hazy and confused. She couldn’t properly explain the compulsion that had drawn her to the tower. He gazed back steadily, waiting.

"It wasn't. That's the funny thing. The door wasn't locked at all. When I pushed, it opened immediately and now all that was there was one solitary spinning wheel. It glittered too. In fact, it shone so brightly I just had to touch it, to find out what it felt like. So I walked over to it. Despite what my parents had always said ever since I could remember, I knew I was an adult now and nothing as trivial as a spinning wheel could possibly damage me. I reached out and touched the spindle."

"Then what?" Joel prompted when she fell silent.

"I pricked my finger on it." She lifted the finger, examining it. "Look."

He leaned over, taking her hand, and gazed down at the healed scab on her right forefinger. He smiled and lifted the finger to his lips, kissing it lightly, briefly.

"You look, Aurora. That's not a thousand-year-old scab. And I have to say, none of you looks a thousand years old. I think you fell up there and hurt your head. It's quite a vivid story you've concocted for yourself, but with a doctor's help, I'm sure your true memories will come back."

Stricken, she stared at him. "But I want these ones. They're all I have. Joel, I want my mother..."

Joel said something beneath his breath and put his arms around her, drawing her close into his arms. "We'll find her," he promised. "We'll find everyone you've lost, everyone you need."

Stunned by his familiarity, she held herself rigid, but then, suddenly terrified he would let her go, she relaxed into his solid comfort and let the tears come. Suddenly she didn't care if he was a peasant or some strange lord from a future time that terrified her. She clutched his arms, his shoulders, as if they were her one salvation, buried her face in his chest and wept.

He held her in a big, rocking hug, stroking her hair until the storm had passed. Even then, when she slowly, shame-facedly, lifted her head, he didn't let her go. His lips tugged upward and, in shy response, she let hers follow.

He bent his head and softly kissed her mouth.

At the first touch of his lips, something surged through her, vital and desperate. It was a brief kiss, less even than she had shared with Karl the night before the ball she'd never got to, and yet it changed everything. He drew back slightly, and she realized he meant it as no more than comfort. Comforting the child that she wasn't. She needed... She didn't know what she needed, except him.

So she reached up and fastened her mouth to his.

Stunned, Joel let the deranged girl's sweet, clinging lips move over his. He should never have kissed her in the first place. She'd just looked so wounded and vulnerable—and yes, so damned beautiful—that it had seemed the right thing to do. It had been impulse, instinct, with the purest intentions, but even as he did it, part of him was aware that if she'd been male, old or unattractive, he was unlikely to have chosen that particular form of comfort.

He put his hand up to her face, meaning to disengage with gentleness, to explain how he couldn't possibly take advantage of someone so emotionally upset right now, but as he moved his lips to speak, she took it as a sign of response and sank deeper with a sigh.

Joe's body acted without permission and from the worst of intentions. Fire seemed to curl from her lips through his entire body. His cock, already perked by her beauty, rose up like a rampant beast in his pants. She was all softness and passion. Her breasts pressed into his chest. His hands itched to touch, to caress and tweak. With some superhuman effort, he prevailed, but he wouldn't have been human at all if he'd been able to resist kissing her back.

Hell, it was only a kiss, and whatever the beast in his pants was demanding, he'd make damned sure it got to be no more than that. So he opened his mouth wider, taking hers with him and slid his tongue into her mouth.

She tasted of lemons and vanilla, at once sweet and tangy, and she smelled delicious too, some heady scent of roses and sunshine that made him long to bury himself inside her. Her tongue seemed shocked to encounter his, but after an instant, it slid along his, and let him suck hers into his own mouth.

She let out a little moan, twisting in his arms as if she needed to get closer. Her lips, her whole body seemed to burn up with a fever of passion, and everything in him leapt to meet it. His hand closed over the softness of her silk-covered breast at last, felt the nipple grow under his palm until he slid his hand downward and caressed it with his thumb. She moaned again, her breath hot and exciting in his mouth.

Hot. Fever. Illness. Confusion. *For fuck's sake, Thorne, what are you doing?*

He slid his hand back to her waist, drew his mouth free with as much gentleness as he could muster.

"Aurora," he said a little too harshly. "Slow down."

Confusion clouded the warm passion in her eyes. Then hurt overlaid them both, and he groaned aloud.

"You don't like me," she whispered.

"God, it isn't that..."

"It must be. You don't fear my rank, if you even believe in it. I'm not usually so...immodest, but I'm not stupid. Just say I disgust you."

"Disgust me? Aurora, this is how much you disgust me." He seized her hand and carried it to the rigid hardness of his cock to make his point. Perhaps that wasn't wise under the circumstances, but he didn't think best in the grip of sexual frustration.

Her eyes widened, but she didn't pull away in shock. Neither, fortunately, did she delve inside his pants. Her fingers moved uncertainly, feeling the outline of his shaft. He swallowed, maintaining his self-control with difficulty.

Her face burned. He lifted her hand off his cock and carried it to his lips for a quick kiss. "That's how much I want you, so don't tempt me anymore. When you're better, and if you still want to come, I'd love to take you out to dinner."

Even as he said the words, he laughed at himself. He sounded so pompous and grown up. Which was another matter. The girl was nineteen and clearly not as experienced as he'd expected. Yet another reason to back off.

And yet the sneaking thought entered his head that if Vee had ever felt half so good in his arms, he wouldn't be this tormented over the decision he needed to make concerning their possible future together. She was not yet his fiancée, not really even his girlfriend, more of a business partner if anything. He owed Vee nothing, at least not in emotional terms, and yet even thinking of her now felt like treachery. Though whether to her or Aurora he wasn't clear and didn't want to be.

Aurora's gaze fell. She shifted away from him, and perversely, he wanted her back in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just feel so..."

"Needy," he said ruefully. "Me too, but with considerably less cause. Come on, eat up. It'll make you feel better."

Chapter Three

“This drawing room was one of my mother’s favorite rooms in the house. She loved to sit here playing the clavichord.” Aurora stroked her hand down the dusty keyboard and the musical instrument gave a discordant jangle. “She would die to see her beloved instrument ruined.” Her choice of words struck her like an arrow to the chest, for very likely her mother *was* dead, long dead and turned to dust.

“How could all this time have passed? A magic spell must have catapulted me forward through time. I must find a way back to my own time.”

Joel walked over to join her by the clavichord. He plunked one key over and over, a horribly out of tune B-flat. “Magic. I suppose that’s one possibility. Or some sort of wormhole through space. Or maybe, you simply came here with a film crew to make a...a music video or something. You went up into the tower alone, knocked yourself out and remained unconscious until I happened to come along.” He paused. “The wormhole idea is seeming more believable.”

Aurora stared at this odd man with his strange speech—and his mouth that could do such strange things to her insides when he kissed her. “Many of your words make no sense to me at all. How is it that you speak my language if you come from someplace far away?”

“I often come to Schlaushagen on business, so I speak the language fluently. In fact, I’ve lived in the capital, Hambriega, for nearly a year, overseeing the merger of two corporations. My work often involves travel and extended stays in various countries. I can speak three languages fluently and several others enough to get by.”

“Travel. How exciting that must be for you. I always wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, but my parents would barely let me outdoors. Do you know, in my entire life I’ve never been beyond the castle gardens?”

He glanced around the drawing room, now half garden itself. “A deluxe prison.”

“Yes. That’s the way I always felt, as if I was sheltered and loved but a prisoner.” Aurora didn’t share her secret—that most of the reason she’d been excited about marrying Karl, the Prince Regent of Blessen, was because the marriage would at last take her to a foreign land and an exciting new life. “But now I would give anything, even if I had to stay in this castle forever, to have my parents back.”

Joel stroked a hand over the ebony cover of the clavichord. “I can understand that. I lost my parents when I was very young, or rather, my mother. I never knew my father. Mom died from a brain hemorrhage. I didn’t have any relatives who wanted to take me in, so I went into foster care.”

“You were an orphan?”

“Yes, that’s right. I went through a lot of foster homes before I decided I’d had enough and struck out on my own.” He shrugged and smiled, but there was no humor in the quick flash of teeth. “‘A self-made man’ they call me in the media, but I’d say my circumstances had a big hand in it. Now I’m a rich workaholic who never takes vacation days.” A slightly rueful look passed across his face. “Although this trip was my idea. I thought I’d enjoy hiking here in these remote mountains, and I wanted some time alone.”

Aurora pictured a boy with nothing, no father or mother or anyone else to care about him and no money to help him survive. It made her appreciate her overprotective parents with all her heart. Where were they now?

She turned away from the instrument that her mother would never play again. She faced Joel and met his dark blue eyes. “Please tell me about the world as it is now. I must know what I will be facing.”

He blew a breath. “I hardly know where to begin. Why don’t you tell me more about your world first and maybe we can piece together what might have happened.”

Aurora wrung her hands together. She felt restless. She needed to see every part of this place that until yesterday had been her home but was now a moldering ruin. “Let us walk as we talk. I feel too beside myself to sit still.”

“Sure. We can look around.” Joel did something with a small cylinder and a beam of light shot from it, illuminating the drawing room.

Aurora gasped at the display of magic. “You have wizarding skills?”

“What? This? It’s called a flashlight.” He flicked it on and off several times, then looked at her and murmured. “You really do act like you’ve never seen one before. All right. I’ll play along. It runs on a power source called batteries. There’s also something called electricity that lights, heats and cools our houses. You’ll see lots of machines these days that make work easier for people.”

“That is good. It is my understanding the peasants live hard lives.”

He offered her the metal cylinder and she shone the beam all around the room, up and down the walls and into every corner. But the sight depressed her. Then the light caught a mirror, reflecting her cloudy image back at her.

Aurora walked over to the wall and swept her hand across the glass, smearing the thick coating of dust. The mirror beneath was nearly ruined from the passage of time and barely showed her face in its spotty surface. The contrast between her face, which appeared perfectly normal, and the ancient mirror, which only yesterday had been highly polished, underscored the truth of what Joel claimed. Many years had passed since she’d pricked her finger on the spinning wheel and fainted.

A muddy version of Joel appeared in the glass beside her, a tall man with brown hair and kind eyes that gazed at her pityingly. He rested his hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his palm seeping through her

gown and into her skin. “Don’t look so sad. I’ll find a way to help you. That’s what I’m good at—fixing things.”

She turned away from the looking glass to lead the way out of the room. They entered the main hallway, drafty and filled with drifts of leaves that had blown in from the courtyard.

“If the drawing room was my mother’s favorite place, his private office behind the throne room was my father’s. When he was finished holding court, he would retire there with his friend Lord Brandebolt and smoke cigars until it looked like the room was on fire from the smoke billowing out beneath the door.” She smiled. “How Mother complained about the smell that permeated his clothing.”

“I don’t mind a fine cigar myself once in a while.” Joel glanced into the throne room as they passed. “And where did the princess spend her days?”

“I loved my garden best of all. It may have been walled, but I had the illusion of freedom when I strolled there. I’ll show it to you.” She was almost more afraid to see the ruin of her beloved garden than any other part of the castle. Her heart fluttered as she walked with Joel down a side corridor and through the door that opened into her garden.

It was a tangled wilderness. The ornamental trees had long since lived their span and toppled over. Weeds choked every flower bed, and an overgrowth of ivy or brambles covered most of the fountains and statues. The only beauty to be found was in the pink roses that grew in wild profusion among the brambles.

Aurora felt disoriented. Although she’d walked the paths of this patch of ground all her life, now she couldn’t even find her way to the gazebo where she’d spent so many days reclining on a divan and reading stories about faraway lands. Her throat constricted and her eyes burned, but she didn’t want to cry in front of Joel Thorne—not again.

“I guess there’s nothing to see,” she said bitterly and turned to walk back inside.

He took her arm, his firm hand supporting her elbow and reminding her of how it had felt when he touched her face and held her body. “Come on. We’ll sit down and talk. I have a flask of whiskey. I think you could use a shot.”

Aurora allowed him to lead her through the desolate place that had once been her home. She sat on the cushion he called a “sleeping bag” and watched Joel poke the little fire on the hearth. He added some more twigs and leaves and helped the feeble glow along with a magic wand he said was a “lighter”. It occurred to her a chimney that hadn’t been used in a thousand years might not be the safest conductor for smoke and sparks, but decided it didn’t really matter if the entire mausoleum of her lost life caught fire.

After he’d built up the fire by adding a few logs, he crouched by his bag and pulled from it a metal flask that he handed to her. “Just a sip. It’s pretty strong, but it will warm you up.”

Aurora thought of all her mother’s warnings about taking food or drink from strangers and what magic potions could do to a person. But could things get any worse if she suddenly sprouted a tail and horns or was put back to sleep for another thousand years? She took the flask and sipped at the liquid

within. It seared her throat and set a fire glowing in her belly. She coughed and choked, and Joel patted her back.

“Easy now.” He took the flask back and sipped from it himself. “Tell me more about what happened to you in the tower, how you fell unconscious. Some event must have triggered that. Tell me about this, um, spinning wheel. Since it isn’t there now, someone must have taken the trouble to remove the evidence. Do you have any idea who would have wished you harm and had the power to...make a spell like this?”

Aurora leaned her head back against one of the cushions. “My mother hinted at something that happened at my birth or shortly after, but she was always vague. She never told me the exact reason she and my father were so concerned about my having contact with pointed objects.” She frowned. “I asked her many times. I asked my nursemaid and later my governess and any other servant I could cajole into gossiping with me, but they all shifted away from the topic every time I brought it up. It was almost as if they *couldn’t* tell me. I wondered if there was some kind of spell keeping them from telling me the truth, for certainly knowing *why* I was in danger could only have helped protect me from it.”

Among the memories flitting through her head as she spoke, one vision stayed with her, of one of her childhood birthday parties—or was it at several parties? Sitting by her parents as her godmothers made a fuss of her. They were delightful, charming creatures who always made her laugh, and whose very presence seemed to sparkle with magic. Aurora had loved them, had loved being with them, and so the contrast was all the greater when the other woman had arrived.

At the memory, Aurora lifted her head. “Valborga!”

Tall, beautiful, chilling, Valborga was her godmothers’ sister, who generally came to her parties too. But when Valborga arrived, the queen had seized Aurora’s hand as if to protect her, and Valborga herself had never done more than bestow a smile upon her that had iced her very bones.

“Perhaps Valborga cursed me. She’s a witch. *Was* a witch...? I always had the impression my parents invited her to the palace out of fear. Or perhaps they just couldn’t stop her from coming.”

Joel capped the flask of whiskey, drew his long legs up before him and clasped his arms around them. Aurora was struck by the oddity of his clothing down to his very shoes, which were nothing like any she’d seen before. If the dilapidated appearance of the castle weren’t enough to convince her that this was a different time, Joel’s apparel coupled with his unusual speech and manners were proof enough. Such strange things as the lighter, the flashlight and the sleeping bag sealed her belief. But from his tone of voice and expressions of doubt, especially now as she talked of Valborga, Aurora knew Joel didn’t believe she spoke the truth.

“I am not crazy, you know,” she said. “I did not simply wander in here and lie down to sleep.”

Joel hesitated. “In my world, there are stories of olden times, legends, tall tales, distortions of ancient history that may have once been believed as fact but are now told only to entertain children. No adult believes in these fairytales.”

Again he paused, resting his chin on his knees and gazing at the fire. Aurora was struck by how the glow gilded his features and cast the hollows beneath his cheekbones and jaw in shadow. Her heart leaped along with the crackling flames, and her body tensed with attraction to this handsome man. How could she think of such a thing under the circumstances?

“So you think I’m telling you a child’s tale?” she asked, speaking a bit more sharply than she’d intended.

“No. I’m telling you that I’ve heard stories of such enchantments before, many years ago. At school, in a children’s picture book one of my teachers read aloud. I was in second grade. The teacher was Mrs. Donovan. She was nice, and I loved when she read to us. My mom wasn’t the kind who did.” He shrugged, looking embarrassed as if he’d said more than he’d intended. “The point is she once read a story about a princess cursed at birth. First she was given good gifts by fairies who’d been invited to her christening—beauty, health, a great personality, a marvelous singing voice and so on. But an angry, jealous fairy exploded into the midst of the ceremony and swore that on the eve of the child’s sixteenth birthday she would choke on an apple and die.”

Aurora leaned toward him, riveted by his voice telling part of a story she was well familiar with. She knew several magical guests, including her godmothers, had attended her christening and blessed her with good fortune, but the latter part of his tale, she’d never heard. It explained so much of why her mother had fussed over her and controlled every aspect of her life. Perhaps even why she’d felt the need to protect Aurora from Valborga.

“But she didn’t die,” Joel continued. “After the evil fairy left and while the princess’s parents and all the court were mourning this calamity, another good fairy stepped forward. She hadn’t yet bestowed her gift. While she couldn’t completely change what the evil one had ordained, she could alleviate it. Instead of dying, the princess would fall asleep until a prince came and kissed her.”

“That’s a horrible story! Who would tell a child such an awful, frightening thing, even if it was only meant to be make-believe?” Aurora frowned.

“I guess you’re right. Many of those old folktales were violent or frightening, but they all had a happy ending. And in this one the princess is kissed awake and lives happily ever after.”

“How?” she exploded. “How could anyone who’s been ripped from her family and thrust into the future ever find happiness?”

Joel unfolded his legs and stretched them out before him. “In the story as I remember it, the entire castle was put to sleep so everyone she loved was there when she woke.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I never really thought about how the princess might feel. As a kid, I pictured myself as the brave hero, fighting his way past dragons to get into the castle and rescue her.”

“You didn’t kiss me,” Aurora pointed out. “You poked me awake.”

He shrugged. "This isn't a fairytale and I didn't know what to make of you lying there like that. I thought maybe I should perform CPR."

She had no idea what he was talking about. "So, if the story you were told as a child is at least partially true, all of this was pre-ordained and it was inevitable that a certain man should awaken me."

"The entire thing is crazy," he said. "I was thinking more that you probably heard the same story as a child, and maybe when you hit your head, you imagined yourself into it." He must have seen her frown of annoyance, then, for he added hastily, "But even if it were true, I certainly wouldn't be the hero of the piece. It was a complete accident I was here at all. I had some important decisions to make about my future, so I decided to take a break and do some hiking in the mountains."

Aurora's mind was in a whirl, trying to encompass the blurred line between reality and make-believe. Of course she believed in magic. It was an accepted part of the world she lived in. But to learn her entire life was predestined and had become fodder for a children's story was too much to take in. As for the idea that she'd made up her own life story from the same tale, that was unthinkable.

One thought shone clear in her mind. "The fact you came here and found me when no one else has in a thousand years suggests you are the man the fairy foretold would come." She met Joel's worried gaze. "Maybe this *is* your destiny. Maybe it's mine."

His eyes widened. Tiny flames, perhaps a reflection of the fire, seemed to leap in them then darken in a way that caught at her breath. There *was* a connection...

Then his eyelids dropped like hoods. "I don't believe in destiny," he said harshly. "We make our own paths, good and bad."

It didn't matter. He was a stranger. Why should he want a shared destiny? Why should she? She didn't, of course. He was too *alien*. So why did his denial feel like a slap in the face?

She couldn't help the twist of her lip. "In all my life I never chose anything more important than the color of a gown. All my choices were made for me. Except the decision to touch the spinning wheel. Sometimes leaving it to destiny is best."

"I don't believe that. Of course other people's decisions impact you too. In your case, your curiosity was provoked by your parents' decision to overprotect you." He dragged an impatient hand through his hair, almost as if he was angry, though with who wasn't clear. "If any of this is real. Look, Aurora, let's just get some sleep, and tomorrow, we'll get clear of here and find a doctor. You take the sleeping bag and the cushions. I'll be fine on the floor."

Chapter Four

Joel's eyes snapped open to darkness and raging lust. A woman's light, sensual fingers caressed his balls, closed around his cock with a grip that was both inexperienced and arousingly eager.

Aurora? What the...?

Unmistakably, lips slid down the length of his shaft, depriving him of breath, never mind the warning words that flew out of his head as well as his throat. He shuddered. When her lips wrapped around the sensitive head, he nearly exploded. Too long without sex, too little ability to resist this unexpected assault on his senses...

Snap out of it, Thorne! You're more than your libido!

Sitting bolt upright, he reached for her, drawing her caressing mouth off his cock with a pop that made him groan. Aurora smiled at him with all the beauty he remembered, plus a new siren-like quality that made him want to drag her under him and fuck her senseless.

Gripping her naked shoulders, he drew her closer. Mistake. She was totally nude, her flesh soft and warm and yielding to his touch. "You mustn't," he managed. "You're not well."

"I've never felt better. And neither have you." She pressed closer to him, her soft, hard-tipped breasts pressing into his chest. He was naked too. When the hell had that happened? Her hands roamed up and down his back with eager appreciation.

"Make love to me, Joel. Take pleasure in me, every pleasure you want..."

"Don't," he gasped, but it was too late. Her mouth was on his, and it felt so good he couldn't push her away. She grabbed his hand, pressing it to her breast. Her elongated nipple hardened even more under his palm, which moved without his permission, kneading and caressing. She moaned with such obvious pleasure that his lust raged out of all control. He pushed her back, flinging his thigh across her as she whispered words of encouragement in his ear.

"Oh, yes. Oh, Joel, I want you so much, I need you. Love me, love me..."

Her thighs were silken smooth, parting for him without hesitation. Between them was hot, welcoming wetness that soaked his probing cock. Her eyes stared into his, so clouded with lust that he knew beyond doubt she was no virgin in reality.

Screw destiny. He'd fuck her because they both wanted it. Lowering his head, he took her soft, luscious lips in his and pushed his cock slowly inside her hot, clinging pussy. It felt so good he couldn't

contain his groan of bliss. He should make it last for her, she was so sweet and sexy, and yet there was no way he could, not when she was calling his name already.

“Joel, Joel...*Joel!*”

He wasn't falling, yet he seemed to land with a crash. Now his eyes really were open. Aurora was gazing into them, but she wasn't kissing or caressing him. Nor was she naked. Still in her silken ball gown, she was shaking him by the shoulder, her eyes both anxious and irritated. Absolutely not aroused. Unlike him.

Oh, fuck.

He yanked his hand away from his naked cock. Thank God he'd covered himself with his coat.

“What?” he said hoarsely. “What is it?”

“You sleep like the dead. Even when you're having bad dreams.”

Bad dreams? Christ, no. Well, only in the sense of naughty. Smothering inappropriate laughter, he coughed instead. “Are you all right? Can't you sleep?”

“Not really. But then I seem to have spent rather a lot of my life unconscious, so it isn't really surprising. It's getting light. I thought we could have an early start.”

Joel found it hard to look beyond her amazing eyes, not full of wicked desire as in the dream, but no less intriguing for that. Whether she was injured or insane or a product of impossible magic, he'd never met anyone quite like her. And he knew he wouldn't just dump her at a hospital and go on his way. More than duty would keep him close to her. He wanted to know more.

“Are you actually awake?” she demanded.

“Yes, sorry,” he mumbled, taking in at last the pale dawn light seeping through the leafy window. “Good idea. I just need some coffee first. There's a camp stove in my pack.”

Her fingers were unexpectedly clumsy as she rummaged inside his bag, as if she really wasn't used to doing things for herself. Joel used the opportunity to surreptitiously refasten his jeans and try to reduce his raging hard-on by thinking about hospitals and long walks and swimming in ice-cold lakes.

Rolling onto his stomach, he took the little stove she produced from his bag with some doubt and lit it. By the time he'd made coffee, he felt back in control—and relieved that he hadn't really taken advantage of the fragile creature in his care, tempting as she was.

Aurora seemed impatient, a little on edge yet excited, and he remembered that she believed she'd never been outside this castle. It was going to be an interesting day.

“All right, let's go,” he said when she came back from foraging in her bedroom with a slightly dusty and moth-eaten cloak and a small bag. She drew in her breath and set off with purposeful strides.

Because she seemed to need it, he took her hand when they emerged into the courtyard, leading her along the overgrown, broken path, through the trailing bushes.

Although the sun was coming up, it seemed cold. Aurora clearly felt it too because she shivered and her hand twitched convulsively in his, gripping his fingers.

“It’s not far to the village, is it?” she asked. “Don’t you have a horse?”

“No,” he said, “and no.” He frowned at the thorns blocking their path. He was sure they hadn’t been there when he arrived here yesterday. They’d clearly fallen since then. He pushed the branches back, holding them for Aurora to pass under his arm.

As she did so, more sprang across in front of her. She halted, reaching out before he could stop her to push them aside.

“Take care,” he warned, just as she let out a squeal of pain. “They’re sharp.”

Her eyes turned up to his were wild. “That’s how the spindle felt. Joel, don’t let me sleep again!”

“You won’t sleep,” he soothed, examining the prickle of blood on her finger. “They’re just brambles. Let me cut them back.”

Retrieving his Swiss army knife from his pocket, he hacked through the branch and stepped forward, just as another fell across the path. He frowned, cutting through it too, but ahead of them, he saw more and more swishing across what was left of the path, like a falling house of cards.

“What the...?” The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, making his skin crawl with some cold, half-understood warning. He remembered his feeling that the vegetation had parted for him as he’d made his way up to the castle. As if he’d been enticed in. Now he felt they wouldn’t be allowed to leave. Claustrophobia surged up, spurring him forward, hacking at the ever-thickening jagged branches with one hand while dragging Aurora after him with the other.

“Pull up your hood,” he barked. “Stay close.”

There was no need of the latter advice. She could hardly have gotten any closer to him, slipping beneath branches in perfect time with him. She wrapped the cloak around her arm and pushed other branches off both of them as they made their slow, desperate way forward.

“It’s magic,” she whispered. “Bad magic. I’m not meant to leave here...”

“Oh, you’re leaving,” Joel said grimly. “We both are.”

Joel never gave up on anything, and he certainly wasn’t going to be defeated by a few briars. If there was something unnatural in their movement, as if deliberately twisting across the path, blown by an unseen and unfelt wind, he shoved that to one side and concentrated on getting the hell out.

Discovering the rusting iron gates was a relief. “Nearly there,” he said encouragingly to the girl whose eyes were big and frightened but remained focused on the task. Her scratched and bloodied hands shook too, but they were still useful in saving both of them from the worst of the thorns and, after her outburst about evil magic, she never uttered a word.

The gates were no barrier. One hung crazily off one hinge; the other was held ajar by a thick tangle of clinging branches. Joel stepped forward with a relief he was loath to admit, just as the open gate slammed

toward him. With a muffled cry, Aurora clutched him, trying to draw him back. The branches that had held the gate lashed against them like the crack of several whips, just as he caught the gate in both hands. The force of it hurt. The broken half of the gate swung madly, as if trying to close too.

Seizing Aurora even closer to him in one protective arm, Joel strode around the now immovable gate that had so nearly crashed into his face. Aurora stared at the twitching, broken construction as they sidled past it, as if expecting it to attack them. Cold sweat broke out on his neck and forehead. He knew how she felt. This was weird. Too fucking weird to be real.

But it seemed the gate was too damaged to harm them. Christ, did he really think that? And there were only a few yards of overgrown vegetation to go now they'd reached outside the courtyard. It too whipped across the path he'd trodden so freely yesterday, but at least it thinned now with every step until, with a feeling of stepping from cold darkness into bright sunlight, they walked free.

Joel loosened his arm on the girl's shoulder, anxiously scanning her for signs of hurt. Slowly, mutely, she turned her face up to his, as if examining him in the same way. Only one long scratch down her left cheek marred her creamy skin, but her hood was torn. In fact, all of her once-fine cloak was now looking the worse for wear. She reached up one trembling, bloody hand to touch his jaw.

"You're hurt," she whispered. "You're bleeding."

His face did sting. He smiled lopsidedly. "As if I've been mauled by a cat?" He caught her fluttering hand and held it firmly in his. Both he and Aurora were covered in scratches, some of them deep and bleeding. "I'm sorry. It wasn't that bad on the way in."

She nodded. "You were meant to come in. But now she knows I'm awake and neither of us is meant to leave."

He frowned. "*Who* knows you're awake?"

"Valborga, the wicked woman who must have cursed me when I was a baby."

Joel's nerves were on edge. "Thousands of years ago? I doubt she's still alive to give a damn whether or not you're awake!"

"Why not? I am. Besides, I think fairy folk are immortal."

"Of course they are," Joel soothed. Oh yes, definitely time for the doctor. Although perhaps he should be seeing one too. He glanced back at the dense, still vegetation covering everything apart from the castle's turrets. Even the broken gate had stopped swinging. "Come on. Let's get down to the village."

High above them the black slash of a raven's wings cut across the pale blue sky, its presence commanding the air space and driving away all other birds. The raven swooped low, flying silently behind the hiking couple as they made their way through the rugged terrain and down the mountainside. The bird's shadow fell across theirs, but neither Joel nor Aurora was aware they were being followed.

Chapter Five

By the time they found the doctor's surgery—part of his house, it turned out—Aurora had stopped clutching Joel's arm every time she saw a car. Joel could only be grateful for the quiet of the village. He hated to imagine her reaction to the noise and chaos of the city traffic. But if he'd hoped coming out of isolation would have sparked her normal memories, he was doomed to disappointment.

The villagers gaped at her as she passed in her torn cloak, rumpled hair and silken ball gown, nodding regally to them as she passed. In truth, she gaped at them too, although with a secrecy that she seemed to imagine was polite.

"Goodness, they're dressed just like you," she said once. "Or almost..."

She had a point. Expensive hiking gear just didn't look any better than the cheap stuff.

"Good gracious, her legs! *All* their legs!" she gasped as some girls smiled at her. They wore either tight leggings or short skirts. But at least they smiled. Most people smiled at her, after they got over their astonishment at her appearance. She had that effect.

Even the doctor's receptionist smiled, and the waiting patients. When Joel explained the problem and mentioned possible head injury, the receptionist got straight on the phone, and two minutes later they were both ushered into the doctor's surgery.

Joel did wonder if he should be there. After all, he was no relation to Aurora, but it was important that the doctor understand all the circumstances. And besides, Aurora removed all possibility of his leaving by clutching his hand so tightly he doubted he could have escaped if he'd wanted to.

The doctor, a bespectacled, middle-aged man with a slightly bored expression, blinked as Aurora took off her cloak, and gave a slightly bemused smile. "So, you've had a bump on your head?" he said, holding one of the two patients' chairs for her to sit.

"Oh, no," she said.

"Yes, we think so," Joel said at the same time.

"I see. What seems to be the trouble?"

Since the doctor asked Aurora directly, Joel held his tongue.

"I pricked my finger," Aurora said, revealing the pinprick she'd shown him last night. It was almost healed. Unlike the scratches which covered her hand.

"More than your finger," said the doctor. "You need to wash those and put some antiseptic ointment on them. What happened?"

“We were walking in the hills. Up by the old castle,” Joel said hastily.

The doctor frowned. “What old castle?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Aurora said sadly. “There were thorns.”

“I found her unconscious,” Joel interjected. “She seemed—still seems—a bit confused. I’m worried that she has some head injury.”

Aurora gave him a glare that made him feel unaccountably guilty, as if he were a traitor. But the doctor immediately sprang into action, examining her head with thorough care while asking her questions about her name and age and where she lived. At her answers, he cast a more understanding glance at Joel.

He held his finger in front of her face and got her to follow it with her eyes. He shone lights into her eyes, took a blood-pressure reading, a process that Aurora watched with wide-eyed interest, and finally pronounced, “I can find nothing whatsoever wrong with her. She’s one of the healthiest people I’ve ever examined. Perfect blood-pressure, no trace of external or internal injury. I can tell you I’ve never seen her before, so I doubt she lives in the village. I would advise you to go to the city, contact the police there, and have her more thoroughly checked at the hospital. If nothing else, they will direct you toward more specialist care.”

Joel stood, taking Aurora’s hand to draw her with him. “Thank you, doctor.” He didn’t say it wasn’t his responsibility. He couldn’t desert her. “We’ll do that.”

The doctor cast a doubtful glance at Aurora, who inclined her head with incomparable grace. “Good-bye, doctor,” she said and smiled. At once, the doctor’s face broke into a smile of its own.

“Good-bye, my dear,” he said kindly. “Good luck.” He opened the surgery door. “Let me know the outcome,” he added. “If you can.”

On the street, Joel put his hand around Aurora’s waist as he walked beside her. For a man to touch a young woman and particularly a royal princess in such a familiar way was unthinkable in her world. But she was far from the court and the life she’d known there. Even though this country was still called Schlaushagen, it was many lifetimes away from the place she’d known. Besides, even in her own time, Aurora had known little of life outside the castle.

There was so much noise and color and confusion, so many sights to take in and try to comprehend: the vehicles on the street that moved without horses to draw them, the music that occasionally blared from a storefront with no orchestra in sight, the bizarre clothing and hairstyles the people wore, and the strange gadgets they talked into as they passed by on the sidewalk. Few of them looked at or acknowledged one another, and yet they all stared at her as if she was the odd one. Aurora shrank inside her ball gown, wanting to shrivel up and disappear.

“My clothes are not right,” she muttered to Joel.

“We’ll stop by a store and get you some,” he answered. “Then we’ll go back to my hotel room and figure out what to do next.”

She was glad of his warm, strong hand at her back, guiding her past these many strangers and through this outlandish new world.

“Here. This will do.” Joel let go of her to open the door of a shop.

Aurora walked inside and was assaulted by loud, jangling music that tore at her ears and a thudding drumbeat that vibrated through her very spine. She clenched her hands at her sides, resisting the urge to cover her ears and straightened her back, tipping up her chin.

The sales girl had shockingly short, dark hair with unlikely blond strands through it, and a silver hoop stuck right through her nostril. She swept a glance over Aurora’s dress before meeting her eyes. “Can I help you?” There was a snigger in her tone and a quiver in her red-painted lips.

Aurora quelled her with a stare that made the girl drop her gaze. “Yes, you may. I shall require new clothing, as you can see. Are you the seamstress?”

“Um...” The young woman darted a look at Joel as if begging for help.

“The clothes here are off the rack,” he explained quietly to Aurora. “Women don’t use seamstresses these days. Why don’t you choose a few tops and jeans you think might fit and try them on in the dressing room?”

Humiliated to be unable to do something as simple as choose a wardrobe without guidance, Aurora allowed Joel and the salesgirl to make suggestions. The girl seemed to have gotten rid of her bad attitude. She enthusiastically pulled tops off of hangers and blue trousers such as she and Joel both wore from shelves.

“You’ll look hot in these. Trust me.” She handed a pile of clothing to Aurora. “The dressing room’s back there.”

Aurora stared at the brightly colored pile in her arms, then at the young woman. “Aren’t you going to dress me?”

“These clothes are pretty easy. I think you can do it.” Joel took her arm and led her toward the back of the store.

With dismay, Aurora faced a stall with a curtain to use as a door. “I’m to change in there? But how will I get out of this dress?” She turned to show Joel the problem. There were buttons all the way down the back of the gown. It was nearly impossible to put on without a maid.

“I’ll do it. Come on.” Joel pulled back the curtain and hustled her inside. The booth was small and he stood right behind her, his hands working the buttons from their hoops.

Aurora caught her breath, shocked at his temerity. But there was really no other choice and she had opened the door to such familiarity by kissing him last night. She thought of the how that had felt, how it

had made her blood burn and her body tense all the way down to her toes. And she thought of how he'd held her hand to the bulge in his trousers, letting her feel the results their kissing had had on him.

Now, as his fingers busily moved down her back, loosening the binding bodice, heat built inside her once more. Her nipples felt tender as they pressed against the stiff fabric and flutters of excitement darted through her like the butterflies that had once flitted in her garden. She held perfectly still until he slipped the sleeves down her shoulders, and then he stepped back, clearing his throat.

"I guess you can get it from here."

Aurora glanced over her shoulder to watch him draw back the curtain on its rings and step outside the stall. For a moment his gaze met hers and his blue eyes smoldered like a pair of slow-burning coals.

She exhaled as he closed the curtain and then turned her attention to removing the rest of her undergarments. There was no place to put her dress or petticoats, so they fell to the floor in a drift. She stepped out of the circle of silk and picked up the first tiny little top. It had no sleeves, just narrow cord-like things to hold up a tube of fabric. Aurora would've thought it was a chemise of some kind, but she'd seen women on the street wearing such tops with nothing to cover them.

She regarded her corset and looked at the top again. Clearly it would not do to put the scrap of fabric on over her corset. She would have to undress completely. Setting the top aside, she unfastened the hooks and eyes on the front of her corset and took it off. Her torso was completely naked, and she was intimately aware of Joel standing just on the other side of the curtain. She felt a terrible compulsion to pull the drape open and allow him to see her completely naked.

Aurora quickly put on the pale blue top and stared down at her front. There were little cups built in to support her breasts, but their rounded shape was clearly revealed and the press of her nipples was obvious. She couldn't imagine going out of the dressing room in this shirt.

The salesgirl had given her a stack of underwear, and Aurora chose a pair decorated with bright red cherries. They slid up her legs and barely covered her sex and her rear. She picked up a pair of the blue trousers called "jeans" and frowned at them. Other than her drawers, she'd never worn a garment that separated her legs. But most of the people she'd seen today, both women and men, seemed to be wearing the garment.

She placed her foot into one leg, hopping on the other foot until she'd slid it all the way through. Then she transferred her weight and balanced as she pulled the other leg on. The jeans fit like a glove, and the row of interlocking notches holding them together was a marvelous invention. She pulled the tab up and down several times, watching the teeth come together and pull apart, and then she fastened the button at the top.

Aurora faced her reflection in the startlingly clear mirror and saw an auburn-haired girl with wide hazel eyes and pale skin. The new clothes hugged every curve of her body. She appeared like all the other girls she'd seen today and wondered if Joel would like her new look. Instantly, shame burned through her.

How could she think about what some man she'd just met might think of her looks when her family was gone forever? A new wave of sadness crested and crashed through her, wiping away the momentary flash of vanity. Aurora took off the shirt and tried on the rest of the clothing with scarcely a glance in the mirror to see how they fit.

"How are you doing in there?" Joel called after several minutes, startling her with the nearness of his voice. "You can wear some of the clothes if they work for you."

Work for her? He had such an odd way of saying things, but his accent was intriguing. She liked the way he drew out his vowels, long and lazy, yet the consonants were clipped and abrupt. His speech seemed to reflect two aspects of his character. She'd seen his capacity to be careful and patient with her, but sensed an underlying urgency that told her Joel was a man used to moving fast and making quick decisions.

Aurora pulled open the curtain and came out of the dressing room wearing the last clothes she'd tried—another pair of jeans and a little thing the salesgirl had called a halter top. She'd also pulled on a long-sleeved sweater to hide her bare arms. The denim pants covered her legs completely but still left her feeling exposed. The purpose of a woman's long skirt was to hide the fact she had any limbs beneath it at all.

As Joel's gaze swept her body, Aurora might as well have been naked. His eyes seemed to pierce her clothing and see all of her. But if his gaze was hungry, his tone was calm. "You look very presentable. You'll blend right in."

The woman with the ring in her nose came up behind him to inspect Aurora. She bobbed her head approvingly. "You're smoking. But you should take off that sweater. It doesn't really go with the top."

Reluctantly Aurora handed her the pile of clothes while she removed the sweater. Her arms prickled with gooseflesh although the room wasn't cold, and Joel's gaze grew even more intense. He swallowed and gestured at the clothing in the salesgirl's arms. "I'll, uh, pay for those."

Aurora followed them to a counter and watched with interest while the woman ran a little device over the tag on each garment, then accepted a card from Joel. She did something with a machine and he signed a little piece of paper. It was all very mysterious, and Aurora wondered what had happened to *gats* and *shitzols*, the currency used in Schlaushagen in her time. Good heavens, she sounded like her great-grandmother comparing the present day to "her" time. It was as if she was old, yet she'd never even had a chance to be young, the way her parents had protected her from every aspect of life.

Joel handed Aurora a large bag with her ball gown bundled into it. He carried the rest of their purchases.

"Hey," the salesgirl said. "You might want to rethink the shoes, too." She pointed at Aurora's low heels with the emerald encrusted buckles. "There's a shoe store a couple of doors down."

"Thanks."

Joel led the way to a cobbler shop, where Aurora was overwhelmed by the variety of footwear. What looked like workmen's shoes and boots had a section not far from ladies' fashionable high heels. She tried to make sense out of the egalitarian display. "Does everyone buy their shoes from the same store, the commoners and nobility alike?"

"Yes. There's no denying class still exists, but not in the way you're used to. If someone has enough money, he or she can buy whatever he wishes."

Joel guided her to an aisle of women's footwear, where he chose a box from the shelf and took out an ugly shoe with a flat sole and tall sides. Aurora sat on a low stool while he knelt and loosened the laces before slipping the shoe on her foot.

"Isn't that a worker's shoe?" she protested, trying to find a polite way to tell him she'd rather die than wear such an unsightly thing.

"Everyone wears tennis shoes. They're good for walking, running, sports, everything. They're an essential part of your wardrobe." He tied the laces and told her to walk back and forth.

Aurora was surprised at the comfort of the shoes. They might look horrid, but they were like walking on cushions.

"Do they fit?" he asked.

She nodded and sat down, leaning to untie a lace and wondering why no one was serving them. A young woman wearing a very short skirt lingered at the counter, staring out the window. Aurora lowered her voice. "That salesgirl is not helpful. If the cobbler who owns the shop returns, I'm certain she'll be let go."

"Maybe." Joel laughed and rose. "Want to try on a few more pairs? Sandals, high heels, loafers?"

Aurora browsed the shelves, selecting various types of shoes that might go with her new clothing. She returned to the chair with an armful of boxes.

Joel grinned. "Some things never change."

"What do you mean?"

"Women's love affair with shoes. A lot of things may change in the world, but people really don't. We still have the same desires and dreams."

"What is your dream, Joel?" she asked as she slipped on a pair of low slippers with a strap that apparently went between one's toes. "Tell me something about your life, for I'm certainly tired of thinking about mine. You said you are a businessman. What exactly is it you do?"

"Spend far too much of my time in boardrooms and meetings and at my computer. I run facts and figures and get people to come to agreements for their financial benefit and, of course, my own."

"Do you enjoy your work? You sound as if maybe you don't."

He paused, weighing a silver shoe in one hand. "I enjoy the chase, the conquest, the kill. I enjoy winning. And I really enjoy the money. I didn't grow up with it, so I still appreciate having whatever I need or want."

Aurora watched his face, his expression suddenly harsh and remote. "And what is it you want?" she prompted gently. "Do you really have it?"

He glanced at her, then put the shoe back on the shelf. "I have everything I need."

Aurora recognized his tone. It was one she'd used in her mind often enough when trying to convince herself she was content with her life. She was a princess. She wanted for nothing except perhaps a little freedom. She had no reason to complain. Those were all things she'd told herself, but one day her pent up frustration boiled to a head and led her on a foolish adventure into a forbidden tower.

She changed the subject. "May I take these...and these? And really this pair would go well with the striped top."

"Sure. Take them all," he said. "Are you hungry? I'm starving. We could stop for something on the way back to my hotel, but perhaps it would be better to order room service. You've been through a lot and might appreciate some quiet time to adjust to it all."

"That would be wonderful," Aurora agreed, for her head was suddenly pounding from the sheer number of things she'd seen in the past few hours. There was simply too much to think about and try to understand. For someone who'd never been out of her own environment, the world was too overwhelming.

As they walked toward Joel's hotel, which was not too far away, they passed a park where children played and their nannies, or perhaps their mothers, watched them. A stab of loss went through Aurora as she saw a family strolling together. How many times had she walked in her garden with her own mother? Now she never would again.

Then her gaze was caught by a couple sitting on a bench kissing in broad daylight. The young woman's arms were wrapped around her suitor's neck. His hands were...well, they were all over her body, touching and stroking and even grasping at her bosom.

Aurora looked quickly away, her body burning with embarrassment at the display but also with deep desire. She thought of how Joel's kisses had felt and his arms around her, and she wanted to do what those young people were doing. It was shameful.

Beside her, Joel chuckled. "A little too much PDA for you?"

"What?"

"Public display. That couple over there."

"Do people do such things now?" she asked. "Right where anyone can see them? There are children all around. It's most unseemly."

"Yes, it's still considered impolite to grope like that in public, especially when kids are around, but in general, these days, people are a lot freer in their behavior."

"I have never even seen anyone kiss in public, let alone do something like...that?" Aurora snuck another glance at the man and woman pressed together so closely a sheet of parchment wouldn't fit between them.

"Have you ever kissed someone?" Joel's amusement at her expense was rather annoying.

"Yes. My fiancé, Prince Karl, after our marriage arrangement was finalized." She was annoyed that Joel thought she was so innocent—even though it was true. She wanted to prove to him that she was an adult woman with desires a virginal princess wasn't supposed to possess. "I was quite prepared for our wedding night. I know what happens and what a wife is supposed to do. In fact, I was quite eager for...it."

That wasn't exactly true. She'd been rather more nervous than eager to lie with Karl. It occurred to her she'd never really thought of him as a real person. They'd hardly spoken, and when they did it was stilted and mundane. No doubt their lovemaking would have been the same, wooden and awkward.

Nothing like the instant attraction she'd felt from the moment she beheld Joel. It was as if a force beyond herself had invaded her. She responded to his touch with practiced ease and wanted to do oh-so-many things with him a young lady shouldn't want to do.

Joel dropped the subject.

They passed out of the park and soon reached the inn where Joel was staying. By the time they'd reached the building, Aurora was exhausted from both the long hike down the mountain and through town, and from the onslaught of new sights and information and customs.

The man at the reception desk of the hotel hardly spared them a glance as they walked past. Aurora had the fleeting thought that it was utterly improper of her to go up to a man's room in an inn, but she was beyond worrying about such things now. Her life was in shambles, the world had moved on, and if she didn't adapt to the new ways, she'd never survive.

Joel ushered her into a rather small room with a very large bed, a dresser with a mirror and a box on top of it. There was a window from which Aurora could see the street and a little side room with strange contrivances in it. Joel set the many shopping bags on the floor and took the bag containing her dress from Aurora.

"You look about done in," he said. "You should take a hot shower and a nap."

A nap sounded lovely, but she had no idea what a shower was.

When Joel led her to the small room and showed her how water gushed directly from the wall like a fountain, Aurora was enchanted. She put her hand under the steaming spray, testing the heat and strength of the water.

He showed her the soap for her skin, a different, liquid kind for her hair, a washcloth and a towel to dry off with afterward. Then he laid out a shirt and short pants for her to put on, and then left her alone in the bathing room.

Aurora stripped off her new clothes and gingerly stepped into the shower. The heat and moisture enveloped her, soothing her aching muscles. This was the most amazing invention she'd seen yet. She closed her eyes as the water pummeled her back and she breathed in the steam. She could almost have fallen asleep leaning against the tiled wall. Her hands moved dreamily over her body, shampooing her hair and washing with the fragrant soap, and in her haze of sleepiness, she imagined what it would be like to have Joel's large hands roaming her body liked this.

Aurora had noticed all the women's naked legs she'd seen that day were shaven, so she took the shaver Joel had provided and carefully drew it up her legs until they were silky smooth. She also trimmed around the tangle of curls at the junction of her legs and then she slipped her finger between her folds and touched herself. She'd learned to pleasure herself in her bed at night when all her maids had finally left her alone. It was the one part of her life she felt she could control. No one there to watch or judge or tell her it was wrong. She'd enjoyed those sublime moments of ecstasy she'd given herself, even while she knew it was probably considered horribly wrong.

But now, there was no one to tell her what to think or do or say or believe.

Clearly she had awakened in an entirely different world. One in which a couple in love could very nearly copulate right on a park bench if they wanted to. Such freedom of expression was astonishing, a bit off-putting under the circumstances with the children and all, but also extremely liberating. Aurora felt as if invisible bonds were falling away from her as she realized she too could touch and kiss and feel without boundaries.

Leaning against the wall with the water beating down on her, she closed her eyes and imagined Joel's fingers touching her there. He would stroke the little bud that sent sparkles of delight through her, and then he might push his finger inside her like so, testing her wetness and depth. What else might he put inside her? Aurora knew. She was not ignorant of what men did with their cocks. But she'd never seen one and couldn't quite picture how it looked or how it might feel inside her. Would it hurt, or would it fill that aching yearning inside?

A loud knock on the door jerked her hand away from between her legs. "Are you all right in there?" Joel's distant voice called.

Aurora was as flustered as if he'd caught her touching herself and knew that he was in her fantasy. "Yes. Yes, I'm doing well. The shower is very nice."

And clearly she'd spent too much time in it if he was asking about her. Aurora rinsed off one last time and reluctantly turned off the water. She pulled back the curtain to find steam so thick she could scarcely locate the towel. She hurriedly dried her body with the soft towel, so much more absorbent than the flannel cloth she was used to using. A person could become accustomed to modern luxuries like running water very quickly.

After dressing in the top and shorts, Aurora regarded herself in the mirror. Her arms and legs were so...bare. She couldn't imagine going into the other room and exposing herself to Joel like this. At the same time, excitement flickered through her at the idea. She liked the way his eyes darkened and his lids lowered when he studied her body as he'd done several times since they'd met. Knowing he was attracted to her made her feel very powerful in an odd way.

Aurora drew a deep breath, turned the knob on the door and walked into the coolness of the bedroom with its very large bed. Joel lay stretched on the bed, leaning against a pair of pillows and watching moving pictures on the box that sat on the chest of drawers. Voices and music came from the box. Aurora gasped in astonishment, forgot all about her appearance and padded barefoot over to the bed. She couldn't take her eyes from the colorful images as she plunked down onto the mattress beside Joel.

"What magic is this?" she murmured.

"Not magic. Technology," he explained. "Images sent through space and received by the television set. This is how we get our news and other information, but it's mostly used for entertainment. Have you seen plays before?"

"Traveling performers come to court sometimes. They sing ballads, juggle, tell stories and sometimes act out scenes." Aurora pushed her damp hair back from her face and focused on the fast-moving pictures. It was enough to make her queasy how quickly they shifted.

"This is something like that. It's a way of telling stories. People act them out."

"Astonishing." She began to actually hear what the man and woman in the box were saying to each other. They wore clothing similar to what she was used to, and the man was telling the woman he loved her, that it had always been her even when they fought.

Aurora leaned forward with her cheek resting on her hand and her elbow propped on her knee and listened to the story.

Chapter Six

As entranced as Aurora was by the TV, Joel was equally mesmerized by her. She was fucking adorable wearing her little tank top and boxers with her elegant limbs on display. Her red hair lay in dark, damp hanks over her back. He'd drawn the drapes so the room was quite dim for late afternoon and Aurora's pale face reflected the flickering light of the television set. Her beautiful, hazel eyes were wide and her expression as transfixed as if she was having a religious revelation. Joel felt a little stab of guilt for spoiling her purity with the drug of television. It could be terribly addictive to a woman whose life had been empty of technology.

But she was content and relaxed and clearly enjoying the period drama about star-crossed lovers, so he leaned back into the pillows and simply watched her.

It was good to see her distracted from her own grief, even if just for a little while. He'd never doubted the grief was real, whatever her impossible fantasy. Uneasily, he remembered the castle vegetation that had seemed to spring across their path far too continuously for chance.

Joel shivered. He was being infected by Aurora's madness. But what the hell was going on with her? She'd suffered no obvious injury. There was no clear reason to account for her memory loss or her very peculiar fantasy. It wasn't even a fantasy that brought her any joy. Perhaps she'd always been crazy.

Fresh unease twisted through him. She didn't appear mad. In fact, she was disturbingly sweet and vulnerable and sexy...and he couldn't deny he'd felt as threatened as she did up at the castle this morning, however silly that seemed now he was back in civilization.

A burst of music from the television heralded the roll of credits. Aurora's head snapped round to him in indignation.

"What's happening, now? Where have the people gone?" she demanded.

"The program's finished," Joel explained.

"It can't be! That woman has just discovered her long lost son is still alive, and the man with the ridiculous name wants to kill himself because the beautiful, blond girl is marrying someone else! What will happen to them?"

"You'll find out next week," Joel said hastily, sliding off the bed to escape the furious accusation in her eyes. "When the next episode is on."

She frowned. "Truly?"

"Truly. Now, shall we order some food? What would you like to eat?" Grabbing the room service menu from the table, he dropped it into her lap.

Discussing the food was fine; waiting for it to be delivered while flicking around the television channels was fine too. Only when it had arrived and they spread it between them on the bed like a picnic did the shadow fall back over her face.

Joel couldn't help reaching out and touching her pale, scratched cheek. "It'll be all right," he said gently.

But instead of cheering her, his kindness made her eyes fill. "Will it?" she whispered. "How?"

"I don't know," Joel admitted, dunking a piece of bread in the tasty stew. "But we'll work something out." Since she continued to gaze at him with expectation, he was forced to admit that the time for soothing platitudes had passed. He gave her a lopsided smile. "We have to decide what to do next. And for the first time in years, I haven't a clue what that should be."

To his relief, she smiled back, just a little wanly. "I'm not your responsibility, Joel. I know you want to get back to your own life."

"Actually, I don't yet. Eat up."

Obediently, she took a wary forkful, then, looking slightly surprised by its goodness, she reached for another. "Why not?" she asked.

"I'm on holiday, taking time off."

"Oh, yes. You said you have some things to think about. Like what?"

"Like what's the right thing to do next." He broke off, his bread poised in mid-air as he was struck by the parallel between his problem and Aurora's. He was uncharacteristically indecisive about both.

"About what?" Aurora pursued. "Your business?"

"Oh, no. I always know what to do about that. It's thriving, expanding all over the world. I barely need to do anything with it now. I've achieved every success I can. I can almost sit back and just watch it grow."

She gave him a surprisingly shrewd glance over her glass of mineral water. "But you don't want to do that. You'd be bored."

"I'm told there's more to life than business."

She nodded. "Home and children." She repeated it like a well-learned lesson. According to her fantasy, that was to have been her fate. As a princess she would've been educated for only that purpose. A royal home, of course, but it wasn't so very different from what many women fantasized about. Not Vee, of course, who'd made it clear she was interested only in a mutually beneficial business arrangement.

"Partly," he said uncomfortably. "And there is politics."

She frowned. "Politics?"

“Government. I have a—friend who runs a promotion company. They publicize and promote lots of different things to the public, but Vee, my friend, specializes in political promotions. She’s suggested I stand for election to the Government Assembly, with a view to the presidency in a few years.”

“President,” she repeated. “That is like a king, yes?”

“Sort of. Only the president isn’t born to the office, he’s elected to it by the people.”

“And your friend Vee tells the people who to elect?”

He couldn’t suppress a surprised laugh. “I suppose she does! They don’t have to listen to her, of course, but she has a way of being very persuasive. The word is, I’m unlikely to lose with her backing me.”

Aurora’s gaze was wide and clear, and yet he had the impression that there was a lot going on behind her open façade. “So where does the home and family come in?”

He shrugged. “Traditionally, married politicians do better than unmarried ones. People seem to place greater trust in a family man than in a carefree bachelor.”

She cocked her head on one side. “You don’t seem very carefree to me. But who’s the lucky lady who would lend you this respectability?”

He should have taken offense at the self-righteous distaste in her voice, but in truth her view coincided so closely with his that he only sighed. “That’s another part of the problem. Vee rather covets the role herself.”

Aurora looked down at her plate, pushing her fork idly into the stew. “She loves you?”

“No. Well, maybe. I don’t know. The truth is, we’re pretty well suited. We’re both hard-working, committed people whose grand passions seem to be confined to work.”

Her gaze lifted and she scanned his face. “You don’t love her either. It’s a marriage of convenience. Mine too,” she added wistfully. “Although I would have loved him, I know I would have.”

“You can’t know any such thing,” Joel said, unreasonably irritated by this statement.

“You mean you don’t think you will learn to love this Vee woman?”

Joel dragged his hand through his hair. He wasn’t used to conversations like these, but the unworldly, unexpectedly sexy little princess on his bed was just too damned easy to talk to.

“I don’t know. The political thing is a challenge. It’s something new, but I’ve no idea if I’d be any good at it. And if I’m honest, part of me does like the idea of a proper home with a wife and family. Only...oh hell, I don’t know.” He rose from the bed and cleared off the plates and flatware, setting the tray on the dresser.

“Only the other part of you doesn’t?” She sounded oddly hopeful.

“The other part of me is scared,” he confessed. It was the first time he’d admitted that to himself too. “Scared of commitment, of letting down someone else if and when I fail. And besides...” Joel dropped back onto the bed, pushing the pillow against the headboard and leaning into it. “It’s funny. If I close my eyes, I can see myself making speeches, fighting verbal battles in the Assembly and working hard to get

things done behind the scenes. I can see myself making things better, making a difference. But when it comes to the marriage bit, I close my eyes and nothing comes. I can conjure up a picture of Vee, but she isn't beside me. I can see us talking and working as friends, but I can't see the family part."

He broke off.

Aurora said, "And that's what you are trying to decide on this holiday, whether to go into politics and whether to marry this Vee?"

"In a nutshell."

"Well, I would try the politics and hold off on the wedding. If she won't help you without marriage, she's not a nice enough woman for you." She smoothed the rumpled coverlet briskly as if certain she'd solved his problem.

Joel blinked. He felt like laughing, only it wasn't funny. Aurora wasn't funny either. She was serious, intending to help him as he'd helped her. He could dismiss her words as naïve and laughably innocent. And yet they struck a chord of simple honesty that was in danger of getting lost in all the spin and dealing of politics. He felt a twinge of loss. He'd almost decided to go through with Vee's proposal, but now, because of the words of this child who couldn't even look after herself, he'd almost decided not to.

Who was he kidding? She wasn't a child. She was a fully grown woman of strong if unawakened passions. That had been obvious last night, and he recognized it afresh now. Her eyes grew warm as they gazed into his face, and her long eyelashes swept down to cover her surge of desire.

Joel's body heated in instant response. Oh yes, she was woman enough to feel the attraction that simmered and sparked between them as they lay side by side on the bed. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her pert little breasts in their skimpy top, had to fight the urge to lean across the bed and touch the pebbled nipples clearly visible through the fabric, roll them between his fingers, push up her top and kiss her breasts. A night in his arms would waken her, all right. He'd make sure of that, show her the importance, the confusion, sex could add to one's life decisions.

No, he wouldn't. That would be far too unkind. It wasn't even true. He wanted her because she was lovely and because she—*moved* him, not because he wanted to prove anything. And he couldn't be so callous as to take her when she was so confused and grief-stricken. He was well aware her interest in his life was much like the television for her right now—escape from her own devastating problems.

With a stern internal warning to his hardening cock, he said aloud, "Well, we both have a lot to think about. I suggest we should sleep on it."

She flushed, adding delectable rosy color to her face and neck and even her shoulders. His cock ignored his warnings.

"Where will you sleep?" she asked, lifting her head, once again the princess addressing her servant, which had the effect of instantly squashing his half-formed, half-hearted plan to try to get another room for himself.

“Here,” he said dryly. “There’s plenty of space for both of us.”

She eyed the bed dubiously. “I’m used to sleeping alone in a bed this size.”

“Aurora, for the last several hundred years, apparently, you’ve slept on a wooden floor. Get over it. Trust me, we won’t even touch hands.”

Convinced she’d never be able to sleep with anyone else, let alone Joel, lying in the same bed, Aurora curled up on the edge, as far away from him as she could get. She thought she wanted time to herself, to grieve. But as she stared into the darkness, she began to wonder if she was too numb, or too confused by the world’s new strangeness. Or perhaps the sheer number of years her parents had been dead already had somehow dulled the edges.

When she closed her eyes, she remembered them perfectly, every detail of their loving, anxious faces, every expression of anger or care or concentration, every tone of voice used to address her, friends, servants, ministers... She could see them in the castle, sitting on their thrones, walking in the gardens, laughing with her in some childhood game, or riding out toward the gates.

But she couldn’t see them here in this weird new world. She couldn’t imagine them in this hotel room accepting Joel’s easy, informal kindness. She certainly couldn’t imagine their reaction to his lowly birth, his disrespectful manners and his managing ways. They’d never meet him, never know anything about him, and although that thought brought a lump to her throat, it seemed to keep the actual grief at bay, as if she’d left her parents in another country while she got on with her own life.

She tried to imagine their shock at finding her in this bed wearing nothing but her wispy chemise and shorts with Joel asleep in some undergarment only a foot away from her. But this was a new life, a new Aurora, and she could do things she never would have considered before.

Part of her wanted to laugh with joy at the sense of freedom that surged through her. The other part listened to Joel’s deep, even breathing and wanted to turn over to watch him sleep. Unable to resist, she finally did so, remembering to sigh as she resettled on the pillow. Just in case her movement woke him, she’d pretend to be asleep.

But his breathing continued without pause or hitch. He lay with his back to her, his arm flung out of the quilt to reveal the broad line of his naked shoulders and back. There was no detail to be seen in the dark. But a chink of light from the street broke through the heavy curtains to shine near his edge of the bed. Slowly, she raised herself on one elbow and looked over his shoulder at his sleeping face.

She’d been right. The light did illuminate his features, smooth and contented in sleep, seeming much younger and more vulnerable than in his wakeful state. She felt an urge to touch his face, the fine creases around his eyes, his full, still lips... She remembered how they’d felt on hers. Her heart beat faster and louder.

There was magic in a kiss. She'd always been taught that and she believed it. The kiss of this man was meant to awaken her, she was sure. And if the "fairytale" Joel had told her was at least partially true, then the spell of her guardian fairies must have been so strong that his very presence had done the job. He wasn't a prince. But in this world, neither was she a princess, and she found she didn't much care. Not when she could gaze on the sleeping face of this strong, handsome man and imagine his arms around her and his mouth on hers once more.

He stirred, turning with a hint of restlessness. In fright, Aurora, whipped back on her other side and pretended to sleep. She might be the "new" Aurora with the power to do as she wished, but she was also the old Aurora who was shy and nervous about all this.

Joel grunted and then breathed normally again, long and deep. Aurora let out a sigh of relief. But he was closer now. She could feel his warm breath tickling her nape, making the tiny hairs there stand up in awareness. At first, she was frightened to move, and then, slowly, she realized she liked his breath on her neck; she liked his nearness, the warmth radiating from his body to hers. Sharing a bed was not so bad. Except that it made her wonder what would happen if he came any closer, if he touched her...

He wouldn't. He'd said so, and she had the feeling he regarded her as more of a precocious child than a woman capable of adult feelings. Her body heated. Adult sensations. Joel's kisses on her mouth, on her breasts, Joel's clever, knowing hands all over her body, fanning the flame she could feel burning here between her legs.

She let her mind go, fantasizing about more of those kisses, imagining his hand caressing her thigh, sliding inward to stroke the little nub of delight. Would he bring her to full pleasure that way? Oh yes, certainly in this fantasy. She wanted his cock too, but since she had no idea how that would feel, she'd stick with his hand.

At her shoulder, Joel stirred again, as if he was too hot or uncomfortable. His breath pushed out, ruffling her hair, and without warning he shifted against her. Shocked, she expected him to jump away again immediately, but instead, he let out a grunt of apparent satisfaction and hooked one arm over her.

Aurora was afraid to breathe, especially when his thighs curved against hers, fitting his whole body around her shape.

When one got over the shock, she decided after several moments, it was really quite a nice, enveloping hug. She couldn't even take offense since he was obviously asleep and unaware whom he was cuddling. Or even that he *was* cuddling. Well, she would take the comfort and the oddly sweet, stolen excitement of his touch. It was real, physical, and so much better than fantasy.

She smiled into the pillow and closed her eyes. And since his hand lay so close, she wrapped her fingers around his. Now she could sleep.

She'd almost drifted off when he moved closer, pressing against her. Her eyes sprang open. Shocked all over again, she felt the hardness of his erection pushing against her bottom, insinuating itself between

her cheeks. His hand slid free of her fingers and down inside the quilt, finding the curve of her waist and hip and thigh. The warm breath on her neck hitched as his hand caressed and tangled in her chemise, drawing it up until he found skin to stroke instead. He gave a faint, inarticulate murmur of satisfaction.

Paralyzed by sensation, by the idea that her fantasy was beginning in reality, Aurora didn't even try to stop him. She didn't want to. She loved the feel of his hand on her thigh, moving up over her hip. It burned where it touched and spread tingles through her whole body. He moved against her back with lazy sensuality, rubbing his erect cock against the soft flesh of her bottom through her loose jogging shorts and his. Her whole body burning now, she wondered what *that*, his cock would feel like, skin to skin. His thigh moved on hers, at once smooth and rough with its short, coarse hairs, and she loved that too.

But he was asleep. This wasn't fair to him. It seemed to Aurora that she had never wanted anything more in her life than this man's caresses right now, but he'd already made it plain he didn't want to involve himself with her. After all, there was the unspeakable Vee woman who wanted to marry him and get him elected as president.

She found it hard to care about that as his fingers caressed the flesh of her waist and stomach, slowly pushing the waistband of the shorts ever lower. She wore nothing beneath them. He stroked the tingles into a thousand tiny fires that all seemed to meet between her legs, and despite all the moisture pooling there so rapidly, none of it quenched the flame.

When his hand swept upward beneath the camisole and over her breast, she gasped. It felt so good cupping and exploring, her one anxiety was that he'd stop. Instead, his fingertips rubbed over her nipple and pinched. Aurora moaned, then bit her lip because she didn't want to waken him. Or no, she *did* want to waken him and ensure he knew he was making love to *her*. Was he awake? Impossible to tell. His breath was loud and ragged in her ear. His roaming hand left her breast to sweep down her stomach, gliding over her navel and down between her parted legs. The shorts were halfway off her hips now, and Aurora quickly pushed them all the way down her legs, baring herself to him. Unhindered, his fingers slid through her folds and unerringly found her slick, swollen nub.

She cried out at his touch, but her voice was lost in his groan. Abruptly, he rose up on his elbow, pinning her thigh under his and looming over her. Before she could even make out if his eyes were open, his mouth took hers, and she was lost in fire and need and wonder.

Instead of his fingers, it was his cock, somehow freed from his shorts, that probed her pussy now. His hands were busy at her breast and hips. He released her mouth, only to drag his lips downward over her neck and breast, and fasten to her nipple like a starving man.

The sensation of his suckling, as unexpected as it was intense, drowned the last of her doubts in a surge of profound lust that she couldn't fight. Reaching her arms around his neck, she thrust upward from pure instinct, helping him to find his way to her pulsing entrance. Like a reflex, he thrust back and she gasped at the feel of his cock inside her, stretching her. It didn't hurt, precisely, but the discomfort did

dampen her desire, if only for an instant. The moment he moved again, pushing farther inside her with a groan of pleasure, she ignored the discomfort in her desperation to feel more of *that*.

His mouth returned to hers, kissing her thoroughly, his tongue pushing in rhythm with his cock, tangling and stroking with hers while his lips caressed and sucked. In bewildered wonder, Aurora hung on, moving with his increasingly wild thrusts until she lost all control in the intensity of sensation. The burning pleasure gathered at her core until she thought she would explode. She dug her nails into his shoulders, his back, silently pleading, though for what she didn't understand, and then the pleasure seemed to burst, like a wave on the rocks, deluging her with a surge of ecstasy so fierce that she wondered if she were dying.

"Oh yes, sweetheart," Joel whispered against her shaking lips, still thrusting slowly, almost lazily inside her. "Let it go. Let it all go."

His eyes were open, staring into hers with clouded intensity. He looked almost ferociously triumphant. Mutely, she lifted her lips again, and he took them as the fire began to die slowly back.

Which was odd, because she could still smell it.

"I'm still burning," she whispered. "I can smell the smoke."

He smiled and rolled onto his back with her on top of him. "You're a funny little thing. You can't possibly smell smoke in this kind of fire."

He broke off, his nose twitching. And suddenly Aurora could hear the fire too, crackling flames outside her body.

Joel sprang off her. Flames licked around the television set, stretching out toward the bed. Aurora began to choke on the smoke.

Joel grabbed a large, red cylinder from the wall and ran with it toward the fire. Aurora, unsure why, lunged after him, and without warning was flung back on the bed. She could see only flames, and at the fire's core, a furious face that swooped at her, snarling words that made no sense.

"My time has nearly come. You will not stand in the way of my plans again. I'll have what I need from you at last."

"Valborga," she whispered.

Abruptly the flames and the fiery face were both gone. Joel stepped through the smoke, naked and magnificent and, as noisy hell broke loose all around her, took her in his arms.

Chapter Seven

For an instant, Joel thought she was dead.

The fire extinguished, he strode toward the bed, where she lay wide-eyed and still as death. Something clawed at his stomach. It might have been fear, or fury; he didn't pause to analyze it. Instinct propelled him onto the bed to seize her in his arms. She let out a gasp that almost felled him with relief. He barely noticed that the smoke alarm had belatedly gone off.

"I saw her," Aurora whispered. "I saw Valborga. She sent the fire."

"No, Aurora, it was only an accidental fire. Probably a short circuit in a wire or something." But again he recalled the lashing vines that had seemed determined to stop them leaving the castle and wasn't so certain. The TV had been off. There was nothing that would've sparked an electrical fire.

Fuck, could any of Aurora's fantasy actually be true? Was he actually going to believe in this entire story of enchantment and evil fairies? Was there really some pissed off paranormal being trying to hurt Aurora? If so, he had to be ready for another attack.

But no, that was nuts, insane, impossible.

"It was her," Aurora uttered. "I know it. She is still after me. Why does she hate me so? Even as a child, I used to shrivel when she looked at me with a smile on her lips and such fury in her eyes..."

Joel continued to cradle her in his arms for another moment, then urged her to rise from the bed. "Come on. The alarm system has gone off and they'll be evacuating the hotel. We should dress."

Joel jerked on clothes and shoes, while Aurora did the same, then he ushered her from the room. In the hallway, other guests were coming out of their rooms and chattering nervously about the possibility of a fire. Everyone went downstairs and waited outside in the pre-dawn gray, huddled in robes and slippers or dressed in clothing, depending on whether they'd taken the alarm very seriously.

Joel found the night manager and explained that the fire appeared to center in the TV in his room, which suggested an electrical short. He hoped the firefighters would find some perfectly pedestrian explanation for the blaze. The truck arrived, sirens blaring so loudly Aurora covered her ears and trembled in Joel's embrace.

It didn't take the crew long to check out the hotel and give the all-clear so the guests could return to their rooms. The manager offered Joel and Aurora another room for the remainder of the night, but he refused. It was nearly morning and he was ready to pack and leave this burg behind before something else happened.

"I'm taking you home to Gwyn City with me," he told Aurora. "Then we'll figure out what comes next."

"Yes, Joel," she replied, seemingly in shock or else lost in thought as she followed him back to the room.

She'd been withdrawn ever since the fire. If she wasn't traumatized by the blaze, she probably was by what had happened just before it. They hadn't yet discussed the night time groping that had turned into full scale sex. Joel didn't want to talk about it now so he concentrated on packing their smoke-infused clothing. He just wanted to get on the road. Luckily, Aurora wasn't clamoring for a discussion either. Hell, maybe it was best to put the night behind them and never mention what had happened at all.

Except the thing wasn't going to go away. Sex stood between them now like an invisible hedge. Sex with a virgin, who he'd promised would be safe sharing a bed with him. Sex that he hadn't even had the pleasure of finishing. Despite the disturbance of the fire and its aftermath, a low pulse of desire still throbbed in his groin. Even now he wanted her.

Joel glanced at Aurora, carefully folding the last of her purchases and returning them to the shopping bag. "Are you ready? You can catch some more sleep in the taxi if you're tired, but I really want to leave this place."

"I think she can find me wherever I go. Whatever magic is linking us has survived the centuries. I don't believe it's going to end until I'm dead—or she is." Aurora sounded much older as she made this solemn pronouncement. "Whatever has caused Valborga's vendetta against me, her determination hasn't wavered in over a thousand years."

Joel shifted his feet uncomfortably, but she could well have a point. Whatever had happened to her, she had been left alone and unconscious up at the castle, and something or someone had set fire to this room. The threat to her was real.

"Power," he said reluctantly. "That's what usually fuels grudges. Someone has it. Someone else wants it. Maybe your enemy feels she was cheated out of something."

"She said something about me standing in the way of her plans and needing something from me. What could I possibly have that she wants?"

He shook his head as he shouldered his bag. At least he could consider her problem more easily in those terms. "I don't know, but we'll figure it out somehow."

On the ride to the airport, Joel almost broached the subject of his inappropriate behavior in the night. But he didn't want the taxi driver to overhear, and besides, the trip was brief. Then they were at the airport and there were travel preparations to deal with. He couldn't figure out a way to get Aurora on board a commercial flight without paperwork, so he simply chartered a private jet to fly them to Linderwyde.

She stared out the window with amazement as the plane took off from the runway and rose higher until the mountains of Schlaushagen were blue shadows below them.

“This machine is flying and you say it is not magic?” She turned to Joel, her eyes shining. “What a remarkable time you live in. What wonders men have devised.”

“I guess so.” He smiled. The girl had an uncanny knack for making his jaded eyes see the world anew and to marvel at it as he hadn’t done since he was very young.

“Tell me about this place you’re from,” she ordered imperiously.

Her wish was his command, and it kept him from having to tackle the sex topic, so Joel told her everything he could think of about Linderwylde. The country was as old as Schlaushagen and much of its history was shrouded in mystery. Only the childish or gullible believed the old tales that the gold on which the country’s prosperity was founded came from some magic underworld. Hard work, enterprise and ingenuity were the qualities that had really made Linderwylde the most powerful, successful nation in the world.

“We’ll land in the capital, Gwyn City,” Joel finished.

He fell silent, drinking his bottled water and glancing at Aurora’s profile as she looked out the window at the clouds. In the clothes she wore now, she could be any modern girl, but to him the very tilt of her chin and the fineness of her features proclaimed she was special. The idea of bloodlines and breeding had always been lost on Joel, a self-made man, but he swore he could see royal grace in Aurora’s slightest gesture.

He touched her arm, and she turned to him. “I think we need to talk about last night. Not the fire, but what happened before.” He drew a deep breath and blurted out an apology. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to attack you like that. At first I thought I was dreaming, but when I woke up, I didn’t stop. I should have, but I didn’t.”

She frowned. “You think what we did together was wrong? Well, of course you do. You’re practically engaged to that woman Vee.”

“No, it’s not because of that. She and I have no formal commitment to each other. I don’t feel guilty about Vee. I feel bad because I promised you it was safe to share a bed and then I was all over you.”

“I could have stopped you.”

“But you’re innocent. You didn’t know what you were getting into. It was up to me to put on the brakes.”

Her lush lips pressed together in a tight line. “I’m not a child, despite what you seem to think. I know my own mind. I know what I want. I’m sorry you feel guilty and wish it had never happened, because I very much enjoyed what we did.”

“You did?”

“Couldn’t you tell?” Her brows were drawn together in a scowl that only made her more beautiful.

Joel remembered her soft moans and the way her body had moved beneath his, how her lips had molded to his and her hands had clutched at him. His cock began to swell in response to the memory. “Well, yes, I noticed, but it was still wrong of me to take advantage.”

Her glare grew more fierce. “You’re still using words that suggest I’m a child or mentally incompetent. I’m a grown woman. I may not have had any choice about sleeping for a thousand years, but now that I’m awake, I make my own decisions. If I choose to kiss you or have...sexual congress with you, I don’t need to be protected from my inclinations. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Joel realized he wasn’t being ironic. The address tripped off his tongue as naturally as if he’d been her subject all his life.

“Good.” She turned back to the window with a little flounce that made him grin. He was glad she didn’t see his smile. It would’ve made her angrier.

The pilot’s voice over the intercom announced they were beginning their descent. The plane hit a little turbulence and began to pitch as it dropped. Aurora grew tense and gripped the armrests. Joel covered her hand with his until they touched down.

Since there were only the two of them on the eight-passenger jet, disembarking and gathering their baggage took only minutes. They walked through the terminal slowly as Aurora was distracted by the crowds and the shops. Joel hailed a cab from the queue in front of the building, and soon they were cutting through downtown traffic on the way to his apartment building.

As he took the bags from the trunk of the cab, Aurora stood on the sidewalk, shading her eyes and looking up to the top of the building. “You live here? It is like a castle.”

“It’s not all mine, just one apartment near the top. Apartments are like rented rooms,” he explained.

“Like the one we stayed in last night? I thought you were quite wealthy. I don’t understand. Why do you only have a rented room and not a proper home?” Aurora cradled the bag with her crumpled ball gown against her as if this link to her past might guard against all the changes coming at her so fast.

“More rooms than one. You’ll see.” He paid the driver, who was looking at Aurora curiously as he listened in on the conversation, and then Joel ushered Aurora into the foyer of the building.

She was impressed by the elevator. “I can barely feel it moving,” she exclaimed, then gasped and clutched his arm when it came to a sudden stop and the doors slid open.

Joel was surprised at the trepidation he felt as he unlocked the door to his apartment. He’d never been one to care much about people’s opinions. He’d grown up dirt poor, but hadn’t overcompensated by buying flashy cars, clothes or big boy toys to show off to others. But at this moment, he very much wanted Aurora to be a little impressed by the place where he lived. Of course, it was no castle, but in many ways it was superior to the medieval simplicity of her former home.

He felt a warm sense of satisfaction as she put down her bags and wandered around the open space, making approving murmurs. “Oh my, this carpeting is so soft. The amber shade of this upholstery is

lovely.” She brushed a hand along the back of the couch, then hurried over to the shelving unit. “So many books! And you can see the entire city from this window.”

Then her attention was caught by the flat screen TV nestled in an alcove on one wall. She clasped her hands together in an attitude of worship as she stared at it. “You have a television. It’s even bigger than the one in the hotel last night. Can you make it show stories?”

He smiled. “Absolutely. But first let’s unpack and launder our clothes. Even those that were in the bags reek of smoke.”

“Wash our own clothes?” Her attention broke away from the blank TV screen as she stared at him in dismay.

“Most people don’t have servants these days, but we do have all kinds of machines that make work easy. I’ll show you.” He led her to the closet off the kitchen and demonstrated how to start a load in the washing machine.

“That is simply magical,” she exclaimed as she watched the washer fill with water and begin to churn before Joel put the lid down. “But with such marvelous inventions and people no longer hiring servants, what does it leave for the common folk to do for a living?”

“New inventions open new industries. The work people do has changed over the years. More jobs require skilled rather than unskilled labor. There’s no doubt that evolution has caused some trouble along the way, but life is all about change, and people learn to adapt.” Joel beckoned her to follow him and led her to his bedroom.

One glance at his bed and he realized how she might misinterpret his intention. “I’ll find you something clean to wear so you can wash what you have on. You can take another shower to get the smoke smell out of your hair.”

He focused on pulling a T-shirt and sweats from his dresser drawer and kept his mind off the bed that called him like a siren and his cock that began to rise at the mere thought of her lying in his bed. His reaction to Aurora was almost unnatural. It was as if he’d never had a woman in his apartment before, as if he didn’t deal with women on a daily basis at work, or as if he was some teenage boy who’d never been laid. Her presence made him jumpy, nervous, hungry and horny beyond all reason.

Joel slammed the dresser drawer closed with a little more force than necessary and handed Aurora the clothes. “They’ll be big for you, but at least they’re clean. Bathroom’s over here.”

He led her to the one off his bedroom. It contained a huge, luxurious spa of a tub and a lot of gleaming chrome and dull black tiling. “Maybe you’d like a bath instead of a shower.” He went over and started filling the tub with visions of Aurora in bubbles floating in his head.

“Thank you, Joel. You’ve been so kind in every way since the moment you woke me up in the castle. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

He straightened from turning on the tap, and she stood right beside him, looking up at him with those wide hazel eyes, so sincere.

“No problem,” he murmured faintly, his voice seeming to come from miles away as her eyes drew him in. Then he was leaning toward her, slipping an arm around her waist and drawing her up tight against him as he kissed her.

“Mm,” she moaned into his mouth. Her hands curved over his shoulders, holding on, and she snuggled her body even closer to his.

Joel slid his hands down her back and cupped her rear. His erection pressed into her belly. She must have felt it even through her clothes, and he couldn’t resist thrusting against her just a bit. The grinding only made him desperate to continue what had been so violently interrupted earlier that morning. He wanted to fuck her with an intensity that almost scared him. Last night he would’ve done it without a condom or any other kind of pregnancy prevention. His common sense was addled where Aurora was concerned.

Abruptly, Joel broke free, grasping her arms and pushing her away. “All right,” he said breathlessly. “Everything you need’s on the edge of the tub, and there are fresh towels in the cupboard.” He turned away, ready to flee the room.

“Joel, wait.” Her voice stopped him. “Are you leaving because you don’t want me or because you still think I don’t know what’s best for me?”

She’d neglected a third option—because he feared becoming entangled with her. Something deep inside told him he was on the verge of taking the biggest plunge of his life, bigger than any multi-million dollar corporate gamble, bigger than any political decision he might or might not make. The pulsing livewire of connection between them was unlike anything he’d ever experienced. At first he’d told himself he was afraid that naïve Aurora would become too attached to him. Now he had to admit he was more terrified he’d fallen hopelessly under her spell.

She reached out a hand to him. “Please stay. We could... We could bathe together.”

Just the words made his cock twitch and his balls ache. The idea of soaping her flesh, washing her hair, playing with her toes in the water... He groaned.

“Fuck it.” Joel seized Aurora, lifting her off her feet and into his arms. The moment he pulled her against him, he felt as if a lost piece of himself had clicked into place.

She wrapped her arms around him and their mouths melted together, his tongue dipping between her lips and seeking her heat. She pushed her fingers through his hair, cradling his head, and whimpered softly. The little sound drove him wild. He thrust against her. He didn’t want to go slowly or gently tutor her body in the ways of lovemaking. He wanted to possess her like a cave man. It took all his strength to reel himself in.

Joel broke off the passionate kiss and gazed into Aurora's face. "You're positive you want to do this?"

"Yes." Her voice had dropped several notes and came out a husky drawl that made his flesh burn. She tugged at the hem of Joel's shirt, lifting it up.

He peeled off his T-shirt and threw it aside, then stripped off her shirt, another of those little tank tops with the built-in cups. Her bare breasts were perfect globes, just the right size to fill a palm, and her rosy nipples stood at pert attention in the center of small, puckered areolas. If she'd slept for a thousand years, gravity hadn't touched her.

Aurora blushed and averted her eyes as he studied her chest, but she didn't raise her hands to cover her breasts.

Joel lowered his head and bent to draw a nipple into his mouth, sucking hard enough to elicit a gasp. He plucked at the other nipple, rolling it between his fingers and even pinching a little.

"Oh. Oh, my," she whispered and her fingers stole back into his hair to hold his head to her breast.

He lavished attention on one, then the other, checking his rampaging libido and concentrating on her pleasure. Then he moved lower, trailing his lips and tongue down her taut stomach, which twitched beneath his mouth. He unfastened her jeans and tugged them over her hips. Aurora shimmied out of them and her panties, and he pulled them off her legs.

He kissed his way around the triangle of auburn curls that marked her sex and breathed in her musky scent, salivating for a taste of her. He trailed his fingernails lightly up the insides of her thighs, making her wiggle. Grasping her hips, he pulled her legs farther apart and buried his face between them. The first touch of his tongue to her clit made her jerk.

Joel glanced up to meet her wide-eyed gaze.

"Is this right? Is this what people do? I didn't know."

"Relax. Let me take care of you. You'll enjoy it, I promise." And then he went to work, using all the skill in his tongue to bring her to the edge of orgasm. He lapped between her labia and inside her, then swirled around her tender bud until she moaned and writhed, gripping onto his shoulders to hold herself upright.

He brought her close several times before backing off, making her whimper, and then at last with a few well-placed strokes and nibbles, he gave her release. Aurora clung to him and he supported her with hands at her waist as she shuddered and cried out.

But now his cock ached beyond enduring. Joel rose, stripped off his jeans and lifted her onto his engorged shaft. She was so wet he entered her in an easy glide. Her body enveloped him in heat and tightness. He sighed in satisfaction.

Pressing her back against the linen cupboard, he thrust into her with unbridled urgency. Desire galloped through him like a runaway horse careening out of control. He gazed into her heavy-lidded, lust-sated eyes and filled her over and over.

The sounds of the water splashing into the tub, the slap of their naked flesh coming together, and his grunts as he pumped into her, echoed off the tiled walls. As the tension inside him reached its peak, his balls drew tight and he stroked faster. Only as he came with a loud groan of completion did he realize he'd once again completely forgotten to put on a condom, but it was too late. He was buried deep inside her, his cock pulsing as he released.

Joel collapsed against Aurora, pinning her to the cupboard door and breathing heavily. When he'd recovered, he straightened and looked into her eyes. "All right? I wasn't too hard."

"You were just hard enough." She smiled mischievously.

His eyebrows shot up at the double entendre from the innocent princess who wasn't supposed to know such things. *King's daughter, my arse... And yet...* He kissed her and set her on the floor, letting go of her reluctantly, then crossed to the tub and turned off the water that had nearly reached the top.

Joel let out some water, added bath salts, and piled plenty of towels nearby for when they were finished. He held out his hand to Aurora. She took it and stepped into the steaming water. He moved into the large tub behind her, and they settled into the blissful warmth, steeping like a pair of tea bags. Wrapping his arms around her slippery body, he pulled her between his legs.

Aurora relaxed against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "This is heavenly. Another wonderful invention. Everyone in the world must live like royalty now."

"Not everyone." Joel remembered a vermin-infested apartment that was never warm enough in the winter, and sneaking showers in the boys' locker room before the school day began because the water and electricity had been shut off at home. "It still takes money to have nice things."

As he dipped the sponge in the water and squirted gel onto it, she looked at him over her shoulder. "You said before you weren't always wealthy. Tell me more about your life. I want to know what you were like as a boy, what your life was like."

He worked the soap into lather and began to wash Aurora's arm, smoothing the sponge over her wet skin. He didn't answer her question and she prompted him.

"Please. We've done the most intimate thing two people can do, and yet I realize how little I know about you. You said your mother died when you were young. You must have missed her terribly."

Guilt shot through him as it always did when he thought about his mom. Guilt because there'd been a strong element of relief mixed with the grief and pain of her passing. He cleared his throat and concentrated on soaping Aurora's chest and breasts. "I said she died of a brain hemorrhage, but that's only partly true. It was caused by a drug overdose. She was a junkie."

"What does that mean?" she asked softly.

“Sometimes people take drugs to feel good, but there are side effects that are bad for the body,” he explained briefly. “She took too much and it killed her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Because of her habit, we were dirt poor. It was a struggle to survive, and I vowed I’d get out of the slums.” He gestured at the room around them. “I succeeded. But now it seems I’ve forgotten how to do anything except work.”

She took the sponge from his hand, plunged it into the water and turned toward him to glide it over his shoulders and chest. “You have riches, but you’ve never learned to enjoy them. I think taking a vacation to hike in the mountains was a good beginning. It led you to me.”

“Yes, it did. The best distraction from work I’ve had in a very long time.” He pushed the wet tendrils of her hair over her shoulder and gazed at her flushed breasts, streaked with soapy trails. Incredibly, his cock began to harden again. Joel leaned forward, water sloshing dangerously close to the rim of the tub, and cupped her cheek. He kissed her moist lips. “Let me wash your hair for you now.”

She dipped her head back in the water, and he shampooed her hair. He’d never performed this intimate service for a woman. He liked the feeling of her small head cradled between his hands. The mass of red locks turned as dark as mahogany as he rinsed away the lather with the shower head.

“Your turn,” Aurora announced when he was finished. She knelt behind him and took the sprayer from him to wet his hair.

Joel submitted to her ministrations, feeling an odd sense of vulnerability and surrender. It wasn’t as if he’d never had someone wash his hair at a salon prior to a haircut, but this was different—personal, lovingly intimate as she plunged her hands into his hair and massaged his skull.

He closed his eyes and relaxed, allowing the feeling of being cared for to wash over him. The thorny hedge of detachment he used to keep emotion at bay had parted to allow Aurora inside and although it alarmed him, he was too damn comfortable to worry about it.

“I must thank you again for everything you’ve done to help me,” she said, after she’d rinsed his hair clean. “If I’d awakened to find anyone but you, I don’t know if I could have survived it.” She rested her hands on his wet shoulders. “It was always meant to be you.”

Joel nodded, without hesitation this time, knowing deep inside that she spoke the truth. He’d felt it since the moment he’d found her. His left brain had tried to apply logic and make excuses for the strange sense of connection between them, but his elemental self couldn’t deny it. As for the rest of her story, he’d worry about it later, not now.

The water was growing cool by the time they’d finished washing every part of each other. They got out of the tub, wrapped up in thick towels and were headed for Joel’s bedroom when the doorbell rang.

The jarring buzz sheared through Joel's haze of relaxation, setting his nerves jangling. He didn't have many friends, only business acquaintances. Unless this was a delivery or someone ringing the wrong apartment, there was only one person he could think of who would drop by unannounced.

He pressed the button on the call box by the door. "Yeah?"

"Hello, darling. It's Vee. Want to let me up?"

Chapter Eight

Aurora stared at him, stricken by this intrusion into their perfect moment. Joel looked blank, almost as if he couldn't remember who Vee was. Or was hiding something from Aurora. A frisson of fear ran down her spine as she realized how little she knew him, despite the intimacy that seemed so natural.

Joel's lips quirked into a one-sided smile. "It's not a good time, Vee," he said into the box. "I've just gotten back."

And just because he was sending the other woman away, Aurora's heart lightened again. "It's all right," she murmured. "I'd like to meet her. I'll just go and dress."

She was rewarded with the broadening of Joel's smile.

"Tell you what, Vee, come up for a few minutes if you like. There's someone I want you to meet."

Joel flung on a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, but at least spared her a quick kiss before he went to open the door for Vee. Aurora, dressing more slowly in Joel's over-large clothes, felt pathetically grateful for that kiss. It was as if all her adult self-confidence, stroked and bolstered by the last couple of hours with Joel, was disintegrating around her. She did want to meet Vee and judge the woman for herself before she decided what to do. Yet now the moment was upon her, she felt like a gauche child at her first grown-up party.

Vee was more than Joel's friend. She was his occasional lover and possible future wife. He'd known Aurora only for a couple of days, and for most of the time he'd thought her insane. Maybe he still did. She wanted to hide in the bedroom and not come out. She wanted to rush to the door and greet the other woman with Joel's hand held possessively in her own.

She was too late. She could hear the other woman's voice, light, quick and decisive.

"Joel! So sorry to disturb you, darling. I just couldn't resist when I saw your lights on. I wasn't expecting you back until next week."

"Something came up," Joel said.

The sound of exchanged cheek-kisses set Aurora's teeth on edge. Was she jealous? She couldn't remember ever feeling that particular emotion before. But then, in her old pampered life, who or what on earth had she ever had any cause to be jealous of? Whereas here and now...

As their voices faded out of range—they must have gone into the living room—Aurora dragged Joel's comb through her hair and glanced ruefully at her reflection in the dresser mirror. She looked like a street urchin wearing an older brother's ill-fitting clothes. Except that her cheeks glowed with health and her

eyes, despite her sudden anxiety, seemed to shine with a deeper happiness. She smiled, hugging that happiness to herself, tingling all over again as she recalled the delicious lovemaking in the bathroom and the subsequent long, wonderful soak. She'd never felt so close to anyone in her life.

She lifted her head. *He doesn't love Vee. It's me he's meant to be with. I know it.* In which case, she didn't need glamorous clothes and jewels to win him. She didn't even need to clutch him to her in order to prove it. She was Princess Aurora, and he was her prince.

That decided, she tossed the comb back on the dresser and marched out to meet her rival.

Vee sat on the sofa opposite the living room door, talking, so Aurora had a moment to observe her before she was noticed. At first glance she was everything Aurora had feared and expected: darkly beautiful, elegant, poised. She wore a rather severe skirt with matching jacket, which she unbuttoned as she talked to reveal a silk embroidered blouse beneath. Her face matched her clothing: cold, smart, with a cynical quirk to her painted lips. It was almost a relief to be able to hate her.

Only then she laughed at something Joel said as he poured wine at the polished wood cabinet in the corner. Her expression changed to one of utter merriment. Her eyes laughed along with her lips, uninhibited delight poured out in her voice, and Aurora's heart ached, because she couldn't hate the woman after all.

Swallowing, she walked into the room.

Joel glanced up at once and smiled. Vee turned her head, the laughter dying on her lips. Aurora noticed other things about her now too. The severity of her clothes was relieved by a broad ribbon of silk tied around her neck and flowing down her back and shoulder. Another tied her hair behind, adding both softness and personal style to her otherwise severe beauty.

Oh yes, this was one serious rival. Aurora's heart sank further, even as she smiled and held out her hand to the other woman.

"Ah, you must be Joel's mysterious visitor," Vee said, with a rather charming air of mock conspiracy. Her hand was cool but friendly, neither too eager to escape nor gripping too strongly.

"This is Aurora," Joel said, walking toward them with a glass of wine in each hand. "Aurora, I'd like you to meet Vee Gabor."

As their hands parted, Vee looked her up and down, though not in a disparaging kind of way. "Those clothes never looked so stylish on Joel," she observed, with clear amusement.

Aurora forced a smile to her lips. "My own clothes are all dirty. There was a fire," she said lamely.

"Goodness." Wide-eyed, Vee glanced from her to Joel, accepting the glass of wine as she demanded, "Where? Were you hurt?"

"In our hotel room in Schlaushagen. And no, we're both fine."

By not so much as a flicker did Vee betray any unease over the implication that her almost-fiancé and Aurora had been sharing the same room. It was Aurora who felt like blushing, although at the same time, she was fiercely glad that Joel made their relationship plain from the outset.

To cover her discomfort, she hurried into speech. “Joel tells me you want to promote his entry into politics.” She sat down beside Vee and took her glass from Joel with a quick smile. The tingle of electricity that passed from this slightest brush of his fingers, helped bring her confidence back.

“We’ve talked about it,” Vee said. “I think he has so much more to offer than boring old business. And even more to gain.” She raised her glass in a toast to him, which he accepted with a mocking inclination of the head.

Aurora watched her curiously. A sheltered upbringing and a thousand years of sleep didn’t make her the strongest judge of character, but shouldn’t Vee betray just the slightest hint of jealousy or unease here? Even if she didn’t love Joel—and there was certainly an easy friendship between them containing enough affection to rile Aurora—shouldn’t she be slightly anxious as to how Aurora’s sudden appearance in Joel’s life would affect their plans?

But Vee, it seemed, was a very unusual person. Either she was spectacularly good at covering her emotions or she really was pleased to meet Aurora and had no issues over her relationship whatsoever. Did that make her cold and unfeeling or generous-hearted?

As Vee gave her a quick wink, she inclined reluctantly toward the latter.

Aurora sipped her wine. “So, how do you go about promoting a candidate for election?”

Half an hour flew by, largely with Vee answering Aurora’s insatiably curious questions. Joel, observing them from the armchair on the other side of the fireplace, said very little. If anything, Aurora thought he was relieved that she and Vee were getting on so well.

When Vee stood to go, Aurora was almost disappointed, perhaps because she felt she hadn’t begun to understand her.

“I’m having a little birthday soiree at the house next week,” Vee said as she buttoned up her jacket once more. “I hope you’ll swing by. Both of you,” she added with a quick smile that encompassed Aurora before her gaze came back to Joel’s. “All the party representatives will be there. It’s make up your mind time, my dear.”

“What did she mean by that?” Aurora asked, frowning, when Joel had finally closed the door behind her and wandered back into the living-room.

Joel shrugged and walked across to the cabinet to refill his glass. “She has a long waiting list of clients. She needs me to decide what I want to do.”

Aurora stared at him. “You mean she still wants to marry you?”

“I don’t honestly know,” Joel said ruefully, bringing the bottle with him to the sofa to top off Aurora’s wine.

“Isn’t that a bit odd of her?”

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean, shouldn’t she be bothered that you and I...” She broke off, flushing hot under Joel’s suddenly lecherous gaze. As he sat beside her, his thigh pressed into hers and she had to make a strong effort not to squirm with the sudden upsurge of lust. How could she want him again so soon when her sex still felt rubbed raw from their previous encounter?

“Vee’s just not the jealous type,” Joel said. “That’s one of the reasons I like her, and one of the reasons a marriage of convenience with her might have worked.”

Aurora opened her mouth, questions about his intentions ready to spill off her tongue. But Joel, as if he knew and didn’t want to answer them, hurried back into speech. “Didn’t you like her?”

Aurora considered. “Yes,” she said slowly. “Of course I liked her. She’s funny and direct and unusual—even for this strange age—and very charming. Only...”

Joel sighed. “Only what?”

Aurora hesitated, trying to find the words. “There’s something strange about her. As you know, I didn’t get out much before you found me, but I had a lot of time to observe the people around me—my parents, nobles, ministers, servants, merchants, even magical beings—and none of them had her...reactions.”

Joel frowned. “Reactions? To what?”

“To everything! To your coming home early from your holiday, to the fire in the hotel, to my sudden and quite unexplained presence. Didn’t you notice? She asked me my opinion on a couple of points, but she never once asked who on earth I am, where I come from, what I do. And I’ve been in your age long enough to know that isn’t normal.”

“Not everyone behaves in the same way,” Joel said, a crease of irritation between his brows. “Vee is a bit single-minded, maybe even blinkered at times. As for not prying into your life, I think we just have to put that down to Vee’s sensitivity and be grateful for it.”

Aurora jumped up, unable to bear the censure in his voice. She wanted to stamp her foot and shout at him for his willful misunderstanding, and only just remembered in time that she was an adult with a mission to make him recognize his love for her.

Summoning what dignity she could muster, she said, “As, of course, I am.” And she set her glass on the table before walking steadily out of the room. He didn’t call her back or follow.

Numb, Aurora went into the bedroom and sank down on the bed. She’d managed to quarrel with him without even trying. Over Vee, whom she had, in fact, liked. She’d just been trying to think aloud, to understand with him the vague unease the woman had inspired in her. What would he do now? Decide she was too difficult and go and marry Vee who would never be so rude as to comment on his relationship with another woman?

Have I lost him even before I began the fight?

Suddenly terrified, she lay down, burying her face in one of the pillows and inhaling the faint, evocative scent that was purely Joel, while she tried to think what to do.

“Aurora.”

Startled, she lifted her head and saw him framed in the doorway, large and solid and so desirable that the very sight of him released a flood of sexual moisture into her borrowed pants.

“Are you crying?” he asked gently.

“No.”

“Liar.” He came toward her and sat on the bed beside her.

“I’m merely a bit emotional just now,” she said hastily, dashing the back of her hand across her eyes. “It’s nothing to do with you.”

He took her hand and kissed the damp fingers. “I don’t want to make you cry. And I don’t want to talk about Vee. I want to make love to you.”

Aurora looked at him through strands of her rumpled hair. She’d already won, but refused to give in at once. “Will you think of her?”

He smiled at that, a quick, open smile that held nothing back. “Of course not. Even when I’m not touching you or looking at you, I find it very hard to think of anyone or anything else.” He ran his fingers through her hair, drawing it back from her face. “I think you’re a witch.”

“A good witch?”

“A very bad and very sexy witch.” He leaned over her and kissed her mouth until, with a slow and delicious surrender, she opened for him and let him in.

She could tell herself she was following her mission, binding him to her as he was meant to be bound, but the truth was, she couldn’t resist him. She didn’t want to. The brush of his lips, the touch of his hands, brought an instant clamor of desire, a need that his caresses both soothed and aroused. As she burrowed under his T-shirt, flattening her palms across the hot, smooth skin of his back, he undressed her, pulling off the oversized pants and top before pausing to gaze down at her, his hands poised to remove his own shirt.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he whispered and stripped off his clothes to lie over her on the bed and kiss her mouth as if he’d never leave it. His fingers caressed her breasts, flicked and pinched at her elongated nipples until she arched upward into him. His fully erect cock slipped between her thighs, and she gripped it there, wriggling, to try and slide it inside her.

“Sh-sh,” he murmured. “Relax. There’s no hurry. No hard and fast quickie, or furtive, sleepy screw this time, delicious though they were. Just slow and gentle and sweet...”

He punctuated each word with sensual, unhurried kisses that pulled softly at the skin of her jaw and throat and breasts, seducing her away from tension and into a haze of heady sensation. It came to her that Joel was a skilled lover, that he must have known a lot of women to become so, but the knowledge didn’t

hurt her. It was part of who he was, and she certainly couldn't object to the way he played her blissful body like a musical instrument, eliciting moans and sighs and tiny cries of ecstasy as he kissed and caressed her.

"Oh, yes," she whispered eagerly as his lips began to slide inward between her thighs. That had felt so wonderful before that she was eager to know the pleasure again. And yet sex was a curious thing, it seemed, with infinite variations, for on this occasion, the same act felt very different, if equally enjoyable. Perhaps because he was deliberately taking his time, each stroke of his tongue long and slow between her folds, curling lazily around her clitoris and unfurling along her labia once more. His mouth clung to her lower lips, moving and sucking in languorous kisses that should have brought the climax galloping upon her, and yet didn't. Even when she tried to push herself onto his mouth, wriggling faster to feel the ultimate joy, he held her by the hips to control the speed of things and went back to teasing her clitoris with his tongue.

When she began to wriggle again, he shocked her by pushing a finger inside her. He lifted his head to see her reaction, and she stared at him.

"What?" he asked hoarsely. "Are you sore there? Don't you like it?"

She swallowed, feeling the finger move higher and explore until it found a place that made her gasp out, "I like it! Oh yes, I like it."

"Good," he growled, and kissed her sex once more, his tongue, his whole mouth moving in rhythm with his finger as it pushed in and out of her body, swirling and plunging and gliding over the sweet spot that brought pleasure rushing and spreading. A second finger joined the first, and the slow fire burned suddenly out of control, consuming her. She writhed so wildly in her convulsions that he had to hold her firmly by the hips, but he didn't let up. Astonishingly another climax began to flow from the dying first, and Aurora wondered if she could expire with pleasure, especially when his hands roved over her buttocks, kneading, and his thumbs parted her cheeks and pressed.

Aurora screamed, bucking helplessly until he showed mercy and released her. Sliding up her body, he seemed to breathe as hard as she did through her daze of joy. She reached for his mouth, kissing him with wild gratitude, tasting her own musky desire. He smiled against her lips and held her between the legs, as if to comfort her as the orgasm finally faded. Except just when she began to speak, his hand stirred, and to her amazement the pleasure built and exploded once more.

"Oh, goodness," she said shakily, when she could say anything at all. "I didn't know so much was possible..."

Joel's eyes glowed with a fever of lust and triumph, and just a little laughter. "So much? Sweetheart, that was just a taster. I haven't even begun to fuck you yet."

Despite the massive satisfaction he'd just given her, she let out a moan at his words, pushing closer into his body, and he laughed softly, kissing her throat and lips. Aurora tightened her arms around him and then pushed so that they rolled over on the bed and she could sit astride him.

“Can I do that to you?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Pleasure you with my mouth.”

“Please, feel free,” he croaked. But she’d already caught the flame of eagerness in his eyes and was sliding down his body to take his rigid cock in her hand. It seemed impossibly large to be able to fit inside one small woman, and yet she knew very well that it could. She traced her fingertips up its blue veins, loving the feel of the soft, velvety skin. She began to stroke, drawing back the foreskin from the purple head. A bead of moisture emerged from the tiny slit there. Intrigued, Aurora licked it. She liked the way he gasped. She liked the way he tasted—a little salty, a little spicy and yet still Joel—and so she kissed the head again and slid her lips along the entire length of the shaft until she found his heavy balls. She took them in her hand in an exploring sort of way and kissed her way back up to the head of his cock.

Emboldened by his obvious enjoyment—his head was thrown back, his lips parted, his hands tangled in her hair as if afraid she’d stop—she took as much of his cock as she could into her mouth and began to suck while she stroked his foreskin up and down with one hand and tenderly caressed his balls with the other.

“Oh, fuck,” he gasped. “You can do that all night...”

Happy enough to oblige, she continued, using her tongue as well to taste him more deeply. He liked that so much she did it some more, tongue-lashing him harder. Abruptly, the balls in her hand seemed to tighten. He gasped and his fingers released her hair to seize her shoulders instead and drag her up his body. Her mouth came off his cock with a pop and he lifted her over it instead, driving it between her legs and unerringly inside her with a groan of agonized pleasure.

He squeezed his eyes shut so hard that for an instant she wondered if he really was in actual pain. The she realized, with awe, that he was holding back his climax so that he could move inside her and make the moment last.

She’d expected a rough, almost brutal repeat of the fast, hard lovemaking in the bathroom, but even now, so clearly desperate for release, he kept his word, and thrust with long, slow strokes that stoked her fires afresh.

Joel’s whole body trembled with the effort. Enchanted, she squeezed with the muscles that gave her so much pleasure. There was a little residual pain in there, but not enough to daunt her. She rose and fell on his shaft, catching his rhythm and forcing the pace just a little faster as she hugged and caressed his cock within her. She coaxed him until he finally let go his massive control and thrust furiously into her, holding her buttocks steady for his onslaught.

Once again, she heard his shout of triumph, felt the hot pleasure of the liquid spurting up inside her. And suddenly she wanted to know the pleasure *with* him. She was so close already, all it took was a few

more wriggles and bounces on his spasming cock and then she was in heaven with him, their lips and limbs all tangled together in one convulsing mass of joy.

For a while, cuddled close on his chest after his breathing had calmed and evened, she thought he'd fallen asleep. She didn't mind. She'd never felt so warm and safe and happy in her life, and there would be other moments to tell him so.

But then he surprised her by laughing softly, his chest vibrating under her cheek. "You *are* a little witch, you know. What magic have you practiced on me?"

"Sex," she said brazenly.

He laughed again with such delight that she lifted her head and rested her chin on his chest to look at him. "When I first met you," she remembered. "I didn't think you could laugh like that."

"Like what?"

"Sort of...carefree."

"You have that effect on me," he admitted.

"I shouldn't have," she said ruefully. "I've brought you lots of cares and confused your life."

His arms tightened around her. He smoothed her hair with one tender hand. "That's the weirdest thing of all. I find I like being confused by you. It's impossible to be bored or dissatisfied anywhere near you."

Aurora almost purred, like a cat with cream. "Really?"

"Really."

Ignoring the slightly embarrassed note that had crept into his voice, she observed, "I think you're bored and dissatisfied quite a lot."

"Maybe." His lips twisted. "But I've never noticed it until now. I kept myself too busy, worked too hard and worried too much about how to make a few more dollars to add to the mountain I already have. There was never time to have much in the way of fun. Or put down roots—never wanted them. Never wanted the house, family, even a dog because I didn't have time to look after them. Work always came first." He gave a quick, not quite humorous laugh. "Actually, I think I was more *boring* than bored!"

Aurora dropped a kiss on his chest, and was gratified to feel his instant caress in response. "I don't believe that," she said roundly. "You're too interesting a person."

"You said yourself you don't get out much!" The sardonic smile began to fade from his lips. "Perhaps that's what draws us together. Loneliness."

"It's more than that," Aurora said at once. "You must feel it."

Then she wished she hadn't spoken with so much intensity, for a slightly strained, anxious look crossed his face. He pulled himself into a sitting position, as if disengaging from her, but instinct made her cling on and in the end he didn't object, merely settled her more comfortably on his lap and kissed her.

"Like I said, you confuse me. I'm no hero, Aurora, no fairytale prince."

"Are you warning me off?" she demanded.

“No. Yes. Maybe.” The words weren’t particularly encouraging, but since his arms tightened around her as he spoke, and he buried his face in her hair as if trying to inhale her, she let them pass.

“You’re a good man,” she said, grasping him by the shoulders to look into his face. “With a lot to give to the world as well as to any woman lucky enough to win your love. You’ve been a driven man, I can see that, but you’re running out of excuses.”

He blinked. “Excuses?”

“There’s always time for love.”

Abruptly, as if the last word bothered him, he rolled her onto her back. Aurora’s pulse leapt at the prospect of even more lovemaking, but having pinned her ruthlessly under his body, he merely stared down into her face.

“I can’t make up my mind,” he said slowly, “whether you’re very naïve, or very wise.”

“Does it matter, if I make you happy?”

His lips curved into a smile as he brought them down on hers. “No,” he said into her mouth. “No.”

Chapter Nine

The raven swooped down from the sky and landed on a tree branch, its weight setting the bough swaying. Pigeons that had been contentedly cooing and strutting over the ground looking for stray tidbits rose into the air *en masse* and flew to the shelter of the building eaves where they roosted. The red-eyed raven watched the silly birds flutter madly. They knew she was not a predator that would attack them but sensed something dangerous about her that put them to flight.

Foolish though they may be, the birds were smarter than humans. Even when she was cloaked in her feathered form, the pigeons could see Valborga's true nature, whereas she could walk among mortals every day and none of them sensed her otherness.

How many years had she dwelled on this earth, generation after generation passing away, and none of them aware of her true face and form, her imprisoned power? Now her time had almost come, the period of enforced hibernation was over, and her magic would soon bloom into full glory again. This time there would be no pesky sisters to hobble her by modifying her spells or limiting her strength. The others of her kind had gone away along with the rest of the magic that used to fill the world so when Valborga finally achieved full potency she would reign supreme.

Only one thing stood between her and her ascendancy, and she was watching the annoying wench right now. Little Aurora, bane of her existence. The girl was like a cockroach that just could not be crushed. Right now she hung on her lover's arm, pointing at the Brea Monument that towered over the surrounding buildings like a shining crystal beacon. The princess was clearly impressed and chattering away, while Joel smiled at her with the fond indulgence of a besotted lover. Disgusting creatures, the pair of them. But Valborga would take what she needed from each of them.

Attempting to keep them in the castle had been a mistake, as had been her flare of temper that had caused the fire in the motel. Trapping or killing these two wouldn't help her. She needed things they possessed. Aurora's blood was nectar that she would drink deeply, and Joel Thorne's human strength, along with his financial power, would give her the last piece she needed to achieve the height of her glory. She would make use of both the rose and the thorn, the transformative liquid and the earthly necessity.

A thousand years was almost over, the protection spell already breaking, and her metaphoric wings were about to unfurl and spread their shadow across the land.

With a guttural croak, the raven lifted off the tree branch and flapped her wings to gain height before following the oblivious lovers on their tour of the city.

“Tell me more about the woman for whom the tower was named,” Aurora begged. “She must have been a remarkable person for a building to bear her name after so many years.”

“The legend goes that Queen Brea’s father was the king of the underworld and her mother was a simple miller’s daughter who became queen by accident. There’s a bit about spinning straw into gold and a journey to the underworld and some kind of bet. I only vaguely remember the story from when I was a kid, but apart from the fairytale aspect, Queen Brea was real enough. They say she ushered in an era of prosperity and peace.”

Joel clasped Aurora’s hand and swung it lightly. When was the last time he’d spent a day like this on what normal people would call a real date, simply meandering along and looking at the city in which he lived?

“What happened to her?” Aurora prompted.

“History’s sketchy. There was a long, bleak period after her reign. Things fell apart. Warlords representing various factions clashed. Information and records were destroyed. No one really knows the exact causes, but the so-called Golden Age ended and chaos ruled for quite some time. But eventually science and reason helped us achieve not only useful inventions but a better way of governing ourselves—democracy over dictatorship.”

“Now your government officials are elected?” Aurora’s fine brows puckered as she mulled over the history lesson. God, she was adorable when she was serious.

“Yes, at least in this country. And yours,” he added. “No monarchy in Schlaushagen for many years.”

“And no magic,” she added. “No one believes in spells or conjuring, wizards, fairies or magical beings any longer?”

“No. There’s no sign of it in this world. I’ve never seen anything remotely paranormal up until a few days ago and those crazy vines.” It had crept up on him, this slow belief in her story, not just because it was the only theory that fit the available facts, but because of her. Because of last night’s relaxed closeness. It simply wasn’t possible to spend all night in Aurora’s arms and still think her insane. He’d never even mentioned the hospital to her.

“I wonder where the magic went and why Valborga still has her powers? Perhaps one has something to do with the other.” She looked up and froze, transfixed by an enormous, colorful billboard across the front of a building. The moving ad displayed a clip from a current theater musical. Aurora smiled in delight at the flashy dance number. She was even more adorable when she was happy.

“What is this? Can we see it on the television too?”

“No, that’s a live show. I can buy tickets and take you.” He spoke without thinking of anything besides seeing more of that enraptured expression on her face.

She turned to him, her face so radiant it practically burned him. “Truly? That would be wonderful.”

“I’ll see what I can do about getting seats for tonight.” Joel was amazed at how much he wanted to please her. He wished he could do something bigger, greater than buy a couple of theater tickets, or the pretty necklace they’d seen in a shop window this morning. She made him want to be heroic or commit some grand gesture to prove his worthiness—like some ridiculous knight errant jousting with his lady’s handkerchief tied around his arm. What the hell had come over him? He was losing his pragmatic self more with every moment he spent in Aurora’s company.

Joel looked away from her. “Come on. We’ll take a ferry ride so you can see the city from the water.” As they walked to the waterfront he busied himself with making reservations by phone for the show and for a trendy restaurant. He’d show Aurora a good time, all the while keeping his eyes open for another attack from the mysterious force that seemed bent on hurting her. But he wouldn’t become too attached. If sex was binding them closer and closer, he should sever that connection. He couldn’t deal with the emotional bond that seemed to be entwining them as surely as the thick vines that had barred their exit from the castle. Such strength of feeling frankly scared the hell out of him.

Keep it light, Joel. Show her a good time, get her set up in the world, and then walk away. You have too much work to do to become involved with this girl.

But as Aurora excitedly gripped his arm and called his attention to the amusement park on the wharf, Joel feared it was already too late. He was, to use an old-fashioned word, smitten. Struck hard by the desire to cherish and protect this innocent yet wise young woman who’d bloomed in his life like an unexpected flower shooting up from a crack in the asphalt.

By the time they’d ridden the carousel, the Ferris wheel, which left Aurora breathless, and a rinky-dink rollercoaster that left imprints of her fingers on Joel’s arm, he decided they’d had enough excitement for one day.

However, there was more to come, for as they began to stroll toward the exit a child, who’d somehow managed to free himself from his safety harness, stood up on the still-spinning merry-go-round, crying for his mother as he stumbled into the hardness of brightly painted horses and fire engines with flashing lights.

Although the youth in control of the ride immediately put the brakes on it, the child wouldn’t wait and tumbled off the platform before anyone could reach him. He fell heavily, screaming with fear and pain. Since the woman who was clearly the boy’s mother rushed to him immediately, Joel felt no need to intervene. Aurora, however, bolted across to the scene, her compassion, presumably, outweighing her knowledge of her own uselessness in such a situation. She was a pampered princess who hadn’t been able to dress herself until two days ago. How did she imagine she could aid an injured child?

Nevertheless, Joel felt his heart warm to her instinctive desire to help. She really was adorable when she demonstrated her caring. As he strolled forward in her wake, he realized that not for the first time he’d misjudged her. The child’s mother knelt by his side, her hands tugging at her hair while she screamed for

an ambulance. It was Aurora who stroked the boy's hair and spoke to him in low, soothing tones that calmed him, while with her free hand she felt his arms and legs. Joel realized she was asking him about where the pain was, and receiving answers that she seemed to understand.

The mother stopped screaming too.

"I think his arm's broken," Aurora said to her quietly. And certainly it lay at a very peculiar angle. "A physician must set it."

Tears still streamed down the boy's cheeks, agony glared out of his terrified eyes and twisted, trembling lips. Aurora, still touching his arm, frowned in concentration, then suddenly jerked it.

The boy gasped. His eyes widened and a smile lit his face like the sun after a storm. "That's better," he said.

Aurora smiled from him to the stunned mother. "Not broken," she said. "Just..." She struggled for the right words. "...knocked out of place."

"Dislocated." Joel supplied the word, staring at the kid in wonder.

"Oh," said the mother, understanding dawning on her relieved face. "Thank you so much, miss. You've saved us a doctor's bill too."

"How did you know?" Joel demanded when he managed to drag Aurora away. He was ridiculously proud of her and yet only too aware of the harm that would have come both to the child and to Aurora if she'd been wrong in her snap diagnosis.

"It didn't feel *right*," Aurora said airily. "I felt around it and knew where it should be. And then I realized the bones all felt straight and unbroken. The same thing used to happen to my father's best hunting hound. I watched once, as its keeper jerked the leg back into place. The next time it happened, I did it." She laughed. "My mother said bone-setting was not a suitable occupation for a princess. She said the same about midwifery when the kitchen maid..."

As if struck, she stopped in her tracks and Joel had to pull her along by the arm. "Do you have female physicians in this age?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

She said nothing more, but for some time after, her face wore a thoughtful expression that Joel found it hard to look away from.

At last she said, "And doctors must be paid. You paid the doctor in Schlaushagen, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But you are wealthy. That woman, the boy's mother, she would have struggled to pay if they'd needed a doctor?"

"Maybe. There are ways of saving, but many people do still struggle. Actually, that's one of the issues I want to bring before the Assembly—a reform of our health service to make it fairer and more accessible to all."

He stopped, wondering if she would understand what he was talking about, but she nodded, hugging his arm to her side and smiling at him with all the force of a sunbeam. It felt like a reward before he'd even done anything, and his rebellious loins stirred.

After the excitement in the park, rather than ride the tourist ferry, they returned to his apartment to rest before going out again.

He knew he was in trouble from the moment they hit the door. His desire for her had been growing all day as they did the sightseeing thing. In fact, he'd dragged her beneath the boardwalk near the amusement park and they'd made out for a while. Joel had felt like a teenager again, frantically groping, dry humping and kissing in a semi-public place because he and his girlfriend had no place else to go. But he wasn't a kid anymore. He did have a home to return to and by the time he reached it he knew his intention to put a stop to sex with Aurora was going to be impossible to adhere to.

They were both stripped bare before they reached the bedroom, a trail of clothes strewn throughout the apartment. Joel tumbled her back on the bed and dove into her outstretched arms. Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling his head down for a kiss. He groaned as he sank into her softness and tasted her sugary mouth, sweet from the slushie she'd drunk at the pier.

They kissed as if both were starved for oxygen only the other could supply. Joel's cock pressed insistently into her belly, but he didn't enter her yet. Right now it felt good simply to tussle on the bed, rolling over, limbs twining, hands grasping for flesh. His every molecule felt more alive and vibrant whenever he was with her, not just when he was enjoying the pleasure of her body crushed against his.

Joel flipped them over so Aurora was on top. She pulled away, her flaming hair curtaining both their faces, and gazed into his eyes. "Joel," she murmured and the sound of his name spoken in that husky, hungry voice sent a shaft of lust spearing through him.

"Woman, you *are* a witch," he muttered as he slid his hands down to cup her rear and adjusted his cock so it aimed at her entrance.

She smiled quite wickedly and slid onto him slow and easy, enveloping him in heat and wetness. "You give me power," she whispered back. "Every time we do this, I feel like the most powerful magical being."

He chuckled and lifted his head off the pillow, reaching for her mouth again. Their tongues swept around each other as she rose and fell on him, setting a leisurely pace. She drew him deeper and deeper into her—not only physically, but mentally. She filled all his senses until he lost his perception of himself and knew only her.

He stroked his hands over her smooth skin, marveling at the miracle of her youthful femininity. She felt damned toned for a girl who'd been in hibernation for a thousand years.

Joel released her mouth with a gasp and dropped his head back against the pillow. His eyes nearly closed as Aurora rode him faster, sitting straight and bouncing on top of him. Her pert breasts jiggled in an

enticing way that drove him crazy. He focused on them with his slitted gaze and on the unbearable friction heating his cock.

Aurora whimpered and bounced and, when she came, her body spasmed around him, her inner muscles clenching hard. She cried out, “Oh, Joel,” and this time hearing her call his name put him over the edge. He thrust his hips off the bed and filled her deeply once more. His release shuddered through him with the strength of a summer storm, bursting out of nowhere to leave the parched land drenched.

As he came back into himself, Joel opened his eyes and beheld Aurora sitting above him, watching his face.

“You appear to be quite in pain when you”—she hesitated over the word—“come.”

He grinned. “It’s a good kind of pain.”

“Yes, it is.” She smiled and lifted up to let him slide out of her.

They lay side by side in the aftermath, facing each other and not speaking for several long moments. Joel reached out and brushed bright strands of hair from her sweaty forehead, then caressed her lips with his finger.

“Such a soft, sweet mouth.”

She nipped his fingertip, then drew it into her mouth and sucked before letting it go. Her light hazel eyes were so open and direct. “Joel, have you...” She paused and licked her lips before continuing. “That is, were there many... Have you had many women?”

He shook his head. “Nu-uh. That’s a loaded question. No one ever really wants to hear the answer.”

“That many?” she said dryly.

“I’m over thirty and a single man. In today’s world, we don’t usually wait for marriage to have sex.”

“Of course. I don’t believe men in my time waited either. Only women are supposed to be pure on their wedding night.”

“These days women take what they want too. No one is expected to be a virgin much past puberty. And sex often doesn’t have anything to do with love.”

“Oh. I see.” She looked at their laced fingers on the sheet between them. “But don’t you feel something special is lost if you give yourself away to anyone whenever you feel...aroused by them?”

“I’ve never thought about it.” That was true. He hadn’t believed in love for so long that considering emotions hardly occurred to him.

“What about Vee? I suppose you’ve—”

“We can stop talking about this any time,” he interrupted. “I don’t want to discuss my past relationships with you.”

“I was only curious.” She pulled her hand away from his and rolled onto her back.

Perhaps it was best to make sure she realized the truth about him right now before she grew any more attached.

“Aurora, I’ve told you I don’t get involved. My work is all I have time for. That’s why an arrangement with someone like Vee is perfect for me. I don’t want to hurt you,” he said gently, “but you must understand, as wonderful as these past few days have been, our time together can’t last. My vacation is almost over. I have to return to my regular life, my responsibilities.”

There was a long pause before she answered. “I understand. I’m part of your holiday, a temporary diversion.”

“It’s the way it has to be. I’m sorry. But I’ll help you get settled into a place of your own and give you whatever money you need. I won’t leave you alone in this world.” *I just won’t be with you.*

Silence fell between them, so profound that he could hear the refrigerator’s soft hum floating all the way from the kitchen.

“I do want to protect you from Valborga,” Joel added after some time. “I’m not sure how we can find out more about her or how to stop her, but I won’t leave you to fight her alone.” If the fairy was even real. The attacking vines and fluke fire seemed less magical now that he was back in his own apartment in his own world. Perhaps they’d been freakish anomalies with some physical explanation.

Aurora nodded. “I’d appreciate a little help learning to live in this modern world, but I’ll be all right on my own. It’s time for me to grow up and live my own life at last.”

Her voice was a cool breeze blowing through the room. It chilled Joel even lying beside her warm body beneath the covers. He should be glad of her attitude. She’d taken his words well. No tears or protests that they were meant to be together. She was still a young woman despite her thousand year sleep and could have been overly emotional and clinging. He should be grateful she was acting so mature and calm, almost regal.

Instead, his heart felt like stone as he rose from the bed to take a shower.

A somber mood infected the rest of the evening. Aurora appeared to enjoy the restaurant and the stage musical, but her appreciation was tempered by a sense of aloofness. The joyous, excited girl from the amusement park was gone and Joel spent the evening trying to find her again. He couldn’t break through Aurora’s new layer of reserve and knew he shouldn’t even try. After all, he’d asked for this. He was the one who’d put up a barrier between them.

They shared his bed that night, but not their bodies. Aurora turned her back to him and went to sleep, or pretended to. Joel stared at the back of her head and longed to touch the soft nape of her neck revealed between auburn tresses. But he couldn’t reach for her and pull away from her at the same time. It wasn’t right or fair. At last he turned away, rolling onto his side to stare at the glowing numbers on the bedside clock as they marked the night’s passing.

Chapter Ten

“You must try this on. It will look marvelous on you with your coloring.”

Vee smiled at Aurora, and the hair on her nape rose. She couldn't figure out why Vee set her so on edge. The woman was more than kind and charming without a trace of sarcasm as far as Aurora could tell. That was precisely what continued to bother her. Vee didn't display any jealousy or much curiosity about the stranger who'd entangled herself with Joel. That lack of feeling—coupled with the fact that Joel had certainly had sex with the woman—was enough to drive Aurora mad.

But at the moment, Vee was her host, escorting her on a shopping expedition while Joel went to his office to catch up on some work. The woman had taken time from her own busy schedule to go with Aurora and give her a woman's perspective on current fashions. Aurora had no right to feel suspicious and jealous, but nevertheless those emotions churned inside her.

She accepted the emerald green sweater Vee offered her, appreciating the softness of the material that was not wool or cotton but a fabric she'd never felt before. “It is very lovely.”

“Oh yes, it will look stunning with your hair.” The older woman regarded her with the eye of an artist surveying a canvas. “We must find a dress in that same color for you to wear to my birthday celebration.”

Aurora smiled faintly. She turned to go to the dressing room, then stopped and faced Vee again. “I must ask you something”—she took a deep breath—“about your feelings for Joel. We can't go on pretending it is not odd for him to come back from his holiday with a strange woman. Doesn't it bother you at all?”

Vee's smile dimmed. “I must admit I was taken aback when I came over to see Joel and found you there. But we've both agreed our relationship is a business arrangement. I don't care for him in the way most women would find ‘normal’. I suppose that's why it's so difficult for you to understand.”

“Yes, it is,” Aurora admitted, almost with a sense of relief to finally have the words spoken. “How can you wish to marry him, even for political reasons, and not at the very least feel a proprietary attachment to him?”

“I do. I wouldn't be at all pleased if our marriage plans were derailed by some sexual fling.”

Her total honesty took Aurora completely by surprise. She didn't know whether to feel offended at being called a sexual fling or be impressed by Vee's candor.

“But Joel is at heart as pragmatic as I am. I fully trust he’ll make the right decision, and meanwhile, I won’t stand in the way of this—whatever it is. Even after we’re married, if he wishes to have extra-marital relations, I wouldn’t be offended, nor would I expect him to be if I should do the same.”

Was this an example of a modern woman? If so, Aurora thought she would never ever fit into this new world. She couldn’t bear the thought of her man with another woman, even if the other woman had been there first like Vee. Aurora kept imagining her elegant features twisted in passion or her stylish hair mussed from bed or her body naked and her limbs wrapped around Joel. Not only was it difficult to envision Vee losing control in that way, but the pictures made Aurora almost physically ill.

But now Vee was looking at her expectantly. She must find some answer. “That is a very logical point of view. I don’t know if I could be so sensible about my husband.”

“You’re still very young. You’ll learn that relationships between men and women are never so easy and you won’t find the kind of happily ever after one reads about in fairytales.”

She had no reply for that so Aurora took the clothes Vee had helped her pick out and went to the dressing room to try them on. As she changed one outfit for another, examining the fit of each in a mirror, Aurora thought maybe Vee was less comfortable about her presence than she admitted to. Perhaps she was using this shopping excursion as a chance to learn about the interloper in her life, reconnoitering the enemy, as it were.

Well, two could play at that. Aurora would use this time with Vee to find out all she could about her and about Joel from another person’s point of view. Maybe then she could understand why he was pushing her away when every fiber of her being told her they belonged together. Her heart had felt shredded yesterday when he’d told her their relationship must end, but she wouldn’t believe it. She was almost certain Joel was fighting against the same irresistible bond. He was afraid to commit to anything other than his work and gaining power. She refused to believe those were the only things that mattered to him. He’d already admitted they weren’t.

Aurora emerged from the dressing room and smiled at Vee. “You were right. The green sweater is perfect for me. I also like the rest of these.”

Vee returned her smile. “I have Joel’s magic card that will make them all yours. After this I’ll take you to Aprille’s so you can choose a dress for my party.”

“Wonderful.” Aurora smiled even wider. “And you can tell me all about yourself. I want to know how a woman becomes as talented and successful as you are. I could use the lesson. It’s as if I’ve spent years sleeping and now I’m ready to wake up and truly start my life.”

The girl was as transparent as water. It was all Vee could do not to laugh at her pointed questioning as she tried to understand what made someone like Joel tick and how someone like Vee could capture him.

But she hid her laughter, along with her animosity. For the rest, she kept her answers candid, and offered honest advice about the evening dresses Aurora tried on in Aprille's. And if she was conscious of a spasm dangerously close to jealousy as the younger woman emerged from the changing room looking heart-stoppingly gorgeous in a diaphanous green silk gown, well, that was easy to deal with too.

Joel might be falling in love with the chit. Aurora might be beautiful and sweet and charming. But it was still Vee he would marry, Vee whom he needed. And so she said without hesitation, "That's the one. Buy it." And sent the staff to find just the right shoes to go with it.

As Aurora happily handed over her purchases, a price tag dangled in front of her face and her eyes widened. Drawing Vee a little way back, she whispered, "Isn't that an awful lot of money?"

"Not for Joel," Vee said, both surprised and amused. "If he wants to buy things for you, let him. He can afford it."

Aurora frowned, apparently wrestling with some unexpected scruple. "I don't think...I don't think I want to be beholden to him."

"You already are," Vee pointed out.

"Yes, but that was necessity. This is different."

"Don't worry about it," Vee advised, smothering a yawn. "It's good for him, and I'm sure it will allay the guilt later on."

Aurora's frown deepened, then her eyes widened. She bit her lip and turned hastily away. It wasn't until they got outside the shop that she said in a small, hard voice, "You mean the guilt he'll feel for severing our relationship in order to marry you?"

Vee sighed. The child was becoming tiresome. "I've already explained that it doesn't have to be like that. In fact, whatever happens between you and Joel, I hope *we* will still be friends after the wedding."

Aurora's gaze was bleak as she climbed into Vee's sporty car. "I'm sorry. I don't think that will be possible for me."

Aurora stared at the telephone in Joel's apartment. She knew how to operate it and she had the numbers both for Joel's office and his mobile phone. She wanted to call him, just to hear his voice. She could ask him what he'd like to eat for dinner and try to cook it.

She had a very visual idea of what she wanted for this evening. The little round table in the living room set for two, with candles instead of the harsh electric light and she and Joel talking over a tasty meal that she surprised him by preparing herself. He'd see that she could be practical too. And later... Well, she refused to give up without a fight. Sulking wouldn't win Joel away from Vee. She needed to get over her hurt and simply seduce him.

If she had the courage to risk a rejection from him.

Determined, she rose to her feet and picked up the phone. She dialed his office number first and heard the sound of ringing. Her heart beat faster, anticipating the surprise in his voice when she spoke.

“Good afternoon. Joel Thorne’s office. How may I help you?”

Aurora cleared her throat. “Could I speak to Joel, please? This is...”

“I’m sorry, Joel isn’t available right now. He left early for home. May I take a message?”

“No thank you,” said Aurora happily and hung up. He was on his way. He must have missed her, must be as anxious as she to clear the air and make up. More relaxed this time, she pressed the numbers for Joel’s mobile and waited for him to answer.

“Hello?”

Aurora dropped the phone as if it had stung her. It fell onto the sofa beside her and lay there emitting the sounds of distant music and many-voiced talk and laughter in the background. Cutting through the noise like a knife came another “Hello?” still in the crisp, impatient, unmistakable tones of Vee Gabor.

Slowly, Aurora reached out to break the connection, but before she did, the line went dead.

He left early to be with her, not me. What in the world do I do now?

“Was that my phone?” Joel asked, returning to the table in time to see Vee patting the pocket of his jacket that hung casually over the back of his chair.

“Yes, but it rang off.”

Joel sat and rummaged in his pocket for the phone. He couldn’t rid himself of the thought that it might have been Aurora, prepared to speak to him at last. His day at work had been pretty pointless thanks to his anxiety over her, his own behavior and what the hell he should do about both of those things. And even when he did come to a decision on those issues, he still couldn’t concentrate because Aurora’s beautiful face kept swimming in front of his eyes—Aurora laughing, Aurora excited or mesmerized by something he merely took for granted, Aurora courageously dealing with her new world and her new grief, Aurora in the throes of passion...

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” Vee asked, distracting him from the phone.

Straightening, he left the phone in his pocket and gave Vee all his attention as she deserved. “I’ve come to a few decisions,” he said, and she nodded. As usual, her eyes were open and frank, eager, but never cloyingly eager, to hear what he had to say.

Joel took a deep breath. “I’ve decided I *would* like to go into politics. And that I would like you to manage that for me.”

Vee smiled. “Excellent. It’s the right decision, Joel and I knew you’d make it.”

He lifted one calming hand. “Hold on, I haven’t finished yet. I know you’re not going to agree with this part so whole-heartedly, but I hope that won’t stop us working together.”

For the first time since he'd known her, a hint of uncertainty passed across her face, lending her a surprising air of vulnerability. It only lasted a second, but it didn't make what he had to say any easier. The awful suspicion began to form in his head that he'd been wrong, that perhaps Vee did care for him in a more personal way.

"I don't think we should get married," he said quickly, very quickly, because whether or not he'd hurt her, he wanted the matter cleared up now. "I appreciate all the advantages that would come from it, but the truth is, Vee, I don't want to marry for such reasons. And not wanting it, I'd make a lousy husband. Truth be told, I'd make a lousy husband whatever the reasons."

Vee picked up her glass, twisting the stem thoughtfully between her steady fingers. "I see. And does this decision have anything to do with the delightful Aurora?"

Joel's smile was twisted. "I can't pretend it doesn't. The whole vacation has had quite a profound effect on me, made me see things more clearly. On the other hand, I'm not marrying Aurora either. She and I both need space to adjust and grow. It's just that life around her tends to be maddeningly—intense." He broke off, afraid of saying too much, of *thinking* too much.

"Poor old Joel." Surprisingly, she sounded more sympathetic than angry. "Struggling to escape the claws of a beautiful, charming child."

"It isn't like that," he snapped.

"Isn't it?" Vee leaned forward, her face perfectly serious, displaying only concern in her steady eyes and urgent lips. "Joel, how much do you really know about her? She appeared out of nowhere, spinning you some cock-and-bull fairytale to get you to look after her. Since then, she's been sponging off you, spending your money faster than you're making it, just in case she doesn't get the star prize after all!"

"What star prize?"

"You, you oaf! Marriage! She has nothing, you have everything she wants."

"She isn't like that, Vee," Joel said with all the certainty in his heart.

"Isn't she? You weren't shopping with her this afternoon. She bought a gown costing nearly as much as your apartment, to say nothing of the shoes and the diamond necklace."

Joel blinked. "Diamonds?" Stupidly, what hurt was that she wanted diamonds after the necklace he'd already given her. As if she liked it more than his.

"And the rest. Joel, she's a kid, a gold-digging kid, and if I thought she'd make you happy, I'd keep my mouth shut. But we had a little talk and she's made it plain she wants me out of your life completely. Now that could be jealousy, true love or whatever, but I don't know that and neither do you."

Joel gulped down his beer. Anger vied with the lowering knowledge that she was right about one thing. He barely knew Aurora. Vee's description of her was not one he recognized. With Aurora, everything was instinct, and although he didn't believe what Vee was saying, looking at her through Vee's cool, sharp eyes was daunting.

“Don’t do anything hasty,” Vee said, drawing back to sip her own wine.

“I won’t. To be honest,” he added ruefully, “I doubt she’s even talking to me.”

Vee sighed. “Such a chaotic life isn’t for you, Joel.”

“Probably not.” *Nor a staid, dull one like mine for her.*

He took another mouthful of beer and glanced again at Vee. She was gazing at him, thoughtfully.

“All right,” she said at last. “I get that while you’re so churned up with this Aurora business you don’t want to commit to marriage with me.”

That wasn’t quite what he’d said or meant, but Joel let it pass.

“And I get that you want the space for you and Aurora to get to know each other properly. I’m all in favor of that. As we discussed, any relationship you and I embark upon need not be exclusive. So, let’s start the ball rolling on the political front. We’ll make your intentions known at my birthday party and take it from there. The marriage thing, we’ll put on hold. We’re friends. We can do whatever seems right for us, whenever we choose. All I ask in return is that you don’t rush into marriage, exclusive or otherwise, with someone else.”

“That was never on the agenda,” he protested.

Wasn’t it? Hadn’t Aurora seen it that way? Hadn’t he himself been so carried away on more than one occasion that he’d begun to imagine a fairytale ending? The trouble was, around Aurora it was so hard to remember that life wasn’t a fairytale, that there was no such thing as magic and happy ever after...

But there is magic. There are branches that spring to block your way, and fires that start for no reason, and princesses who sleep for a thousand years and wake up as young and beautiful as on the day they first dropped off.

Suddenly struck, Joel blurted, “How do you know about the ‘cock and bull fairytale’?”

“Pardon me?”

“You said she’d spun me a cock and bull fairytale.”

“Well, she did, didn’t she? She spun the same one to me.”

“She isn’t mad,” Joel insisted.

“No, I don’t think she is. So you have to consider the alternatives.”

Chapter Eleven

Aurora was following her original plan. Though she gave up on the idea of baking her own bread, she followed her nose to a nearby bakery and bought a delicious-smelling fresh loaf with the “loose change” Joel had given her this morning. Then, keeping her spirits up, she gazed around the flat, looking for ways to create the atmosphere she sought.

And as she looked, she began to understand Joel’s words last night. She realized that his apartment was spacious by the day’s standards, that everything, from the soft pile carpet to the tasteful wallpaper, was of the highest quality. But although there was enough furniture to be comfortable, she was sure much of it was never used—like the charming, round table in the living room that was just the right size for two to dine together intimately.

In fact, none of the apartment looked terribly lived in—apart from his bedroom that was now cluttered with her few possessions: the necklace he’d given her yesterday in pride of place on his dresser, beside her brush and comb and a pretty, sparkly box she’d bought at the pier. Besides that, his neatly-placed comb, clothes brush and one bottle of aftershave looked stark and impersonal.

Looking with fresh, understanding eyes, she realized there was no personal clutter in Joel’s apartment, any more than there was in his life. Apart from a few bright pictures—which she was fairly sure he hadn’t even chosen himself—there was no ornamentation. He’d spoken the truth last night. He really had devoted himself to work, left no room for anything else. But was it really that he had no time, or that he was afraid?

A smile began to play around Aurora’s lips. She would have to show him the way, reveal the pleasure of home and roots and love, persuade him that magic took many forms.

More happily now, she set the little table in the living room, covering it with a white linen cloth that looked as if it had never been used before, and placed the cutlery as she’d observed was correct for this age. She found napkins and wine glasses and a tiny vase in which she put one rose from the bunch of flowers she’d bought while out with Vee. After setting the little vase in the middle of the table, she arranged the rest of the flowers in a large jug and laid it on the windowsill. Then she rummaged in the cupboards and drawers for candles and holders. She put one in the middle of the table and scattered the others about the room. It was still too bright to light them yet, but she’d do that before they ate.

Satisfied with the prettiness of the table, and the improvement to the room that one vase of flowers had made, she piled all of today’s clothes purchases, still in their boxes and bags, against the wall farthest away from the table, ready to be returned. With a quick, appraising glance, she left the room and went in

search of the steaks she'd seen earlier in Joel's freezer. Taking them out, she laid them on plate ready to be cooked when he came in, and washed salad leaves, tomatoes and cucumbers. It looked quite good mixed up in a bowl with some lemon juice.

Since she was splattered with water and some blood that had dripped off the steaks, she headed for Joel's bedroom to change. But before she got there, she heard the scratching of his key in the door. Her heart seemed to lurch into her stomach. Gladness that he'd left Vee so early warred with panic as to how he would greet her, how she should greet him, and annoyance that she couldn't be groomed and beautiful but flustered and dirty when he came in the door.

Before she could lift her frozen limbs and flee into the bedroom, the front door opened and Joel strode in, looking large and solid and so handsome that butterflies plunged and dived in her stomach.

"Hello," she said lamely. "I was just going to change."

Although he smiled, with a slightly sardonic twist that she was at a loss to account for, he didn't seem to notice anything wrong with her appearance, merely brushed past her to the living room while she bolted for the fastest shower and change of clothes she had yet experienced.

Emerging with her damp hair brushed but still glistening, wearing jeans and a top that he'd bought for her in Schlaushagen, she found him in the living room, idly poking with his toe at the boxes and bags from her shopping expedition with Vee. He didn't seem to have noticed her lovingly set table.

He had a glass of wine in one hand, barely touched. "I poured you one," he said, glancing up as she came in. Neither his tone nor his cool expression was encouraging but at least he looked at her. In fact, she had the comforting notion that he couldn't look away.

"What's all this?" he asked, giving an extra toe-poke to the nearest bag.

"Oh. Vee took me shopping. She said you asked her to."

"I did. Aren't you going to open it all? Try it on?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "I'm not going to keep it. You've been very generous, Joel, but I've seen the prices now in other shops and these items are too expensive. Far more than is right."

His steady eyes didn't leave her face. "That's probably true. Vee only goes to the best shops. Over-priced, but tasteful."

Relieved that she was right in this, she tried a smile. But he didn't smile back. His mood was very odd; she couldn't place it or reach him, and her brief upsurge of confidence seeped away.

"Aren't you going to show me the goodies?" he asked.

"What's the point when it's all going back?"

He shrugged and set his glass on the table to crouch down and begin tearing open the bags and boxes. "Quite a haul," he said, tossing a small, rectangular box at her so quickly that she only just caught it. "What's in there?"

Aurora frowned. "I've no idea," she said ruefully, opening it to reveal a necklace that sparkled so brightly it hurt her eyes. "Goodness. Where did that come from?"

"Aprille's, according to the box."

"Oh no. It was just the dress and shoes that came from Aprille's." And yet he was right. The box did have the shop's label. "They must have put it in by accident. We never even looked at jewelry. Unless it's Vee's and it just got in the wrong bag? I suppose I'd better check with her before I take it back with the rest!"

As she reached past him for the phone, he caught her arm with more impatience than tenderness. "Don't be ridiculous. You're not going to take it back. I wouldn't have you dressed in cheap, tawdry stuff when I can buy you something better."

It was pure instinct to throw off his arm in outrage. Anger followed swiftly. Glaring at him, she uttered, "Actually, it isn't up to you. I have accepted your gifts along with your help, but it stops here. I'm not a doll to be dressed or owned by you or by anyone else. I'm grateful for your help, Joel Thorne, but I will neither be bought nor paid off. Tomorrow, I shall begin to search for some kind of employment. Even in this modern age there must be some work I am fit for. And in the long term, I shall learn to be a physician."

Without waiting to see his reaction, she stormed into the kitchen, wrenched the gas on full under the waiting frying pan and poured in a large dollop of oil. She was so furious that for once she didn't even register his presence in the room. It was only when she reached for the steaks that she saw him standing by the door, one shoulder resting against the frame, watching her. She froze then, with her fingers gripping the cold, moist meat.

"I'm sorry," Joel said quietly. "I was rude and ungracious, but I didn't mean to be quite such a total bastard. What I meant was, it's my pleasure to give you things you like, including everything in there. There's no ulterior motive, no strings and no messages attached."

Aurora swallowed. She had a sudden urge to cry, but the anger hadn't dissipated; it was just directed at herself for allowing Vee's insinuations to stick.

"I know," she muttered and threw both steaks into the pan in quick succession. The oil sputtered and burst into a frenzy of sizzling and spitting. "Ouch!" She jumped as several spots of hot oil landed on her face and wrist.

At once Joel was there, drawing her back out of range. "Careful," he warned. "I don't think they're defrosted. They'll spit like anything. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm making dinner."

His smile was warmer now, twisting through her stomach and loins. "I see that you are."

She was very aware of his warm hands on her shoulder and waist, in no obvious hurry to release her.

"The table in the living room is beautiful," he added, and she let herself smile at last.

"I didn't know I was meant to defrost them," she said, waving a spatula at the steaks. "Will they be all right? I've never cooked them before. Actually, I've never cooked anything before."

"They'll be fine."

"I've dirtied these clothes now too, haven't I?"

"You look beautiful."

She recognized the hot desire clouding his eyes. It boosted both her confidence and her lust. She *could* win him, she could.

She turned away from him, poking the steaks with her spatula. "Sit down," she said lightly. "I'll bring everything out. Joel?" she added as an afterthought, as he reluctantly dropped his arms and walked away. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Er—how long do I cook them for?"

Laughter sprang into his eyes as he came back to her. Her stomach jolted, for he took her straight into his arms. "About as long as this kiss," he said and took it.

The spatula fell to the floor as Aurora's arms lifted around his neck of their own volition. She melted into his kiss, almost weeping with the relief and happiness after the awful coldness of last night and the anxiety of today. None of that mattered, only the love, the rightness of them being together, of making Joel see that. And for this moment, at least, he did see it. Otherwise, he couldn't have kissed her like that.

Their lips and tongues parted slowly. "I don't think the steaks are quite ready," he said huskily and bent to her mouth once more. But more than his lips were busy now. As she pressed into his hard crotch, his hand roved up her waist to her breast, eliciting a moan of need from her. Lost in the heady upsurge of lust, she was barely aware of being edged back until the corner of the table dug into her bottom.

His hand swept under her buttocks, lifting her off her feet and laying her on the table top. "I never thought of myself as a kitchen-table man before," he muttered, unfastening the buttons on his trousers, "but you, Aurora, you do something to me. If it's not magic, it's something damned close."

The table was flat and cool against her back and even more against her rear after he'd tugged her pants off, leaving her bottom naked. His body pressed against her hard, covering her as his cock insistently pushed its way to her entrance.

Aurora had never realized there were so many different ways for a man and woman to make love. Not merely physical positions, but the strength and speed or the intimacy of the act; sometimes rushed and desperate like now, sometimes a slow, sweet affirmation of feelings. She enjoyed both ways, but right now hot and hard was very, very good as Joel thrust into her with urgency. She was open and ready for him, had been since the moment he'd entered the apartment, even when she was angry. Aurora wondered if that was quite normal for a woman, to unfurl like some kind of flower simply at the sight of the man she loved.

For it must be love, this bond between them. She'd never felt anything like it before, certainly not during the few times she'd met with her fiancé, Karl. This felt like what all the poets described, a glorious

pain that rocked her to the depths of her soul and a certainty that she'd found something that had been missing for her entire life.

Aurora wrapped her legs around the backs of Joel's thighs, hugging him to her. He rocked against her, pushing her a little farther back on the table with each thrust. At this rate, her head would fall off the edge in a moment. She suppressed a laugh and clung to his heaving back. And when his climax shuddered through him, she lifted her hips, rising to meet his final thrust.

For a moment, they both lay panting, listening to the sizzling of the meat on the stove, then Joel parted from her. He slid to the floor and helped her to her feet.

"Was that all right?" he asked. "You didn't get to come."

"That's all right. We have all night." *And the rest of our lives if you'll finally put down your guard and let me all the way in.*

She smiled at him before returning to the stove to keep their dinner from burning.

Joel lay beside Aurora, their hands pressed together, measuring the size of palms and the length of fingers before clasping them together. He was absolutely content, more than he could ever remember being in his ambitious, grasping life. He was comfortably full from a good meal, and the woman he could finally admit he loved was lying beside him. So what if he'd known her only a few days or if she was perhaps a trifle young and unworldly for him, he'd given up fighting what fate seemed to have destined. Joel had never given up on a struggle in his life and was surprised to learn how liberating it was to simply cave in to a greater power than himself.

"I will find employment, you know," she said abruptly. Her head moved on his chest as she tipped her face to look up at him. "I've been coddled and taken care of all my life. I allowed it. That is what a princess is meant to do. But I'm no longer a princess, and this is no longer the same world. I see how the women have their own power now to decide their futures. And I really think I would make a good doctor, just not yet."

"I think you would too, and it's right you should look into it. I'll help you do that. In the meantime, I'm certain I could find some sort of entry level position in one of my companies. I can't promise the work would be very challenging, but it would be a start." He wondered if her agenda to be a modern woman included living in her own apartment for a while. As much as he'd wanted that yesterday, he dreaded it now. He wished she would stay with him, but he wouldn't deny her the opportunity to grow. They could date like two normal people and eventually move in together.

She propped an elbow on the pillow beside him and rested her cheek in her hand as she looked down at him. "Even though I greatly appreciate the offer, I would like to find a job on my own. It would be far too easy to keep depending on you, Joel."

He nodded his understanding. “Well, at least let me get you started. I can catch you up on some of what you’ve missed over the past thousand years and you can take classes to further your education. You’ll need to before they’ll let you in to medical school. But trust me, there’s no shame in having a friend help you get a job. People do it all the time. It’s what you do after you’re given that leg up that is the true test of what you’re capable of.”

“Is that how it was for you?” she asked. “You said your life was difficult and you had to fight to become successful. Was there anyone along the way who helped you?”

He paused, hating to bring up the name he knew she didn’t want to hear. He was aware Aurora was jealous of Vee even as she tried to forge a polite friendship with the other woman in his life. If he was being honest, he got a little charge from the fact that she cared enough to be jealous.

“Actually, Vee was the one who helped me achieve this level of financial success. I’d already come a long way on my own, but if she hadn’t given me help right when I needed it most, I doubt if I’d be here today.”

“Oh.” She lay back down so he could no longer see her face.

He brushed his hand over the living flame of her hair. “You don’t have to be jealous of her, you know. She has been a friend, a mentor, and I’ll admit, even a lover on occasion. But I’ve never felt about her even a fraction of what I feel for you. Vee has agreed to manage my political career, but I’ve told her today that marriage is not part of the package, and I swear to you she and I will be nothing but professional partners.”

“Good.”

He grinned at the satisfaction in her tone and continued to stroke her soft curls. They lay in comfortable silence for several minutes and he nearly thought she was asleep when Aurora spoke again.

“Joel?”

“Yes.”

“I think you will make a good leader. All that energy you’ve focused on business up until now will go toward making your country a better place for people to live in. I think...” She hesitated, stroking her hand over Joel’s chest, combing her fingers through the light pelt of hair.

“I think my father was a good king, although as his daughter I couldn’t really know what people thought of him. But I see in you many of his qualities. You are strong and determined yet you wish to be fair and to help those in need. Aren’t those the most important aspects of a leader?”

“I hope so.” He hugged her with the arm he had wrapped around her body. Her faith in him touched him. He’d never doubted his business acumen but hadn’t been certain his abilities would translate into the political arena. “I don’t want to be another of those leaders who makes a lot of promises he finds impossible to keep once he’s gained office.”

She nodded, her hair tickling his chest. “You can’t please everyone. The best you can do is to listen to all parties, then make the most just decision possible. That’s what my father used to say.”

He noticed she spoke of her father in the past tense, which he supposed was a positive sign, demonstrating that she accepted the fact her parents—and everyone she knew—were long gone.

“You know, Vee is from Schlaushagen,” he remarked, then realized it might sound as if he was trying to force a friendship between the two women in his life. “Not that I expect you to spend time with her if it makes you uncomfortable, but I thought she could share with you the history of your country after the time of your father’s reign. It might be nice for you to hear it from a fellow countryman.

“She didn’t mention that fact when we were shopping together, but I noticed she has no accent like yours. She speaks my native language more like what I’m used to than the people we met in the village, the doctor or the sales clerks. I should’ve guessed her heritage.” Aurora didn’t sound annoyed that he’d brought up Vee again, but then women sometimes hid their insecurities.

He shrugged. “Only if you’re interested. Honestly, other than attending this birthday bash we’ve already committed to, you don’t have to spend any more time with her if you don’t want to. You don’t have to like her.”

“Good, because I don’t.”

Her candor surprised the hell out of him.

She pushed up on her elbow and faced him again. “And it’s not just jealousy. There’s something about her that doesn’t *feel* right. She smiles and says all the right things, but underneath her charm I feel coldness, an emptiness. I’m sorry. I know she’s been your friend for a long time, but I don’t trust the woman.”

Joel had no idea what to say. He wasn’t about to defend Vee, which would only upset Aurora, but didn’t intend to abandon a friend simply because of a vague feeling. On the other hand, if he was truly going to commit to a real, solid relationship with Aurora, maybe he should consider her feelings more. He would certainly not like it if she had a close male friend who’d once been her fuck buddy, not at all. In fact, just the thought of this imaginary man sent a shaft of white-hot rage through him. He wanted to kill the guy.

Joel considered his next words carefully. “If having me work closely with Vee makes you uncomfortable, I’ll find another campaign manager. It’s not as if I can’t hire someone else.”

“You would do that?” Her brows knit together and she shook her head. “No. I couldn’t ask you to. If she’s the best there is and she can help you win, then you must have her. I may not trust her, but I trust you.”

He thought about the diamonds Aurora had said she’d never seen let alone purchased, and about Vee claiming that sweet, naïve Aurora was a gold-digger.

“And I trust you,” he said. “If you tell me she sets off some inner alarm, I’ll rely on your judgment. After this birthday party, I’ll tell her I changed my mind. I don’t want to say it before the party and ruin it for her.”

He owed Vee that much at least. But as he lay there holding Aurora while her breathing deepened and her small body grew heavier draped over his, Joel wondered if he'd been telling himself for too long that he "owed" Vee. Yes, she'd once helped further his career, but did that mean he must be beholden to her for the rest of his life?

The more he thought about their relationship, the more he realized she'd shaped it to her will every step of the way, so subtly manipulating him he'd hardly been aware of it. Not to say he hadn't made plenty of bold business choices on his own, but whenever Vee had had a really strong opinion about something, he'd listened and usually deferred to her. It was because she offered sound, practical advice that advanced both their interests. But it was also because he'd subconsciously felt indebted to her.

It was time to sever his relationship with Vee at last. Perhaps they could remain friends at a distance, polite acquaintances who occasionally kept in touch, but nothing beyond that. He was on a new course now, the route he'd half believed he'd never take. Wife—for he had no doubt Aurora wouldn't remain a girlfriend for long—family and home. Hell, maybe he'd finally get a real house and even that dog he'd always kind of wanted.

The big, black bird perched on the window ledge, peering through the glass with eyes as red as the fiery coals of rage that burned inside her. She wanted to crash through the glass, explode into the room and demolish the lovers who curled so smug and stupid in their bed. Foolish mortals seemed to have completely forgotten how dangerous she was. Her attacking vines and her fire were eclipsed in their tiny brains by worries about their inane love life. She wished she could confront them right now where they lay: sup on the girl's essence, kill her and then make her idiot lover forget she had ever existed.

But the time was not yet right. Only a little longer and then she would have the necessary strength to make Princess Aurora suffer torment so great that a sleep of a mere thousand years would seem like a blessing rather than a curse.

Chapter Twelve

As Aurora stepped out of the shiny black car that Joel had rented for the evening—a limo, he called it—she felt as if she’d finally arrived at the ball she’d been meant to attend so many years ago. She was dressed in as royal a gown as she’d ever worn as a princess and stood beside the most handsome prince imaginable. Only her parents were missing from this scene. And of course she would’ve been surrounded by people she knew in a palace both beloved and stifling.

When she’d first awakened from her long sleep, it had felt like only a few hours had passed. The shock of discovering her world had disappeared was overwhelming. But soon the memories of her past life had begun to fade, as if they had indeed happened to a girl long, long ago. Maybe that blurring was part of the same fairy magic that had put her to sleep. If so, it seemed a bit of kindness at odds with the cruel joke of stealing her life away.

Ah, but she had a new life now. Aurora hugged Joel’s arm and looked up at his profile, chiseled and masculine, but with soft lips that begged for a kiss. She licked her own lips.

He glanced down at her, blue eyes twinkling. “Stop it,” he whispered. “I can hear your thoughts. You are a naughty, insatiable girl.”

Lights exploded like stars in Aurora’s vision as people with boxes in their hands pointed them at the couple. She frowned, blinked and shielded her eyes.

“It’s all right,” Joel said. “They’re taking our picture, making likenesses of us to put in the newspaper. Vee always invites the media to her events, and they always come. Just smile and look beautiful. That’s easy for you.”

Together they strolled down a red carpet, separated from the crowd on either side by thick, velvet-covered ropes strung between short poles. Aurora did as Joel bid; she waved her hand and bestowed a smile on the people on one side of the carpet, then the other. She’d had a lifetime’s worth of practice waving from balconies, paths and doorways to cheering townsfolk and peasants who visited the castle on special days—just to see her, according to her doting parents. And she’d graciously accepted many a bow or a curtsy from noblemen and women.

Just as then, she seemed to attract more than her share of attention. As she and Joel neared the front door of the grand house, she became aware of a rush of cameramen and women to this end, all pointing and flashing their lights at her and Joel—and this despite the arrival of other guests behind them.

“Who’s your date, Joel?” one of the crowd called out.

Someone else cried, "Joel, does your lovely lady have a name? National TV viewers want to know!"

"Why do they want to know that?" Aurora asked, baffled.

"Because you're beautiful and they've never seen you before. People still love a romance." He gave a quick grin, as though acknowledging that though he'd meant to be cynical, he spoke in the surprised tone of a man making a new discovery.

Aurora laughed and, as she put her foot on the first step, she called back over her shoulder, "Aurora! My name is Aurora!" A hundred flashes seemed to go off at once, blinding her, and she had to depend on Joel to guide her into the house.

In some amusement, he murmured, "They'll love you now! Almost as much as I do."

Still in a dizzying haze of lights and slightly smug happiness, Aurora rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. Since it was a warm summer evening, they had no coats to give up to the army of servants who lined the entrance hall and the stairs up that they climbed in the wake of a middle-aged couple.

"This is almost like the old days," Aurora murmured. "Vee lives a little like a queen, does she not?"

"She likes her luxuries," Joel acknowledged. "On the other hand, all these people don't work for her all the time! She's hired them for tonight just to make her party go smoothly."

Nonsense, it's to impress her guests. But Aurora kept that unkind thought to herself. She chose to be magnanimous in victory, and had every intention of showing Vee nothing but civility. In fact, she could almost feel sorry for the other woman, losing Joel so completely. However, she refused to feel guilty. Marriage with Vee would have been disastrous for Joel, locking him into the cold, soulless world he so badly needed to break out of for his own happiness, even for his own sanity. She, Aurora, would bring him happiness, and in return, she was receiving it.

Vee stood just inside the large drawing room to greet her guests. Resplendent in a sparkling black evening gown with trailing black gauze flowing from her hair and one shoulder, she looked chic and sophisticated as she exchanged quick words with the man whose hand she still held. Her back was to Aurora, so she had an excellent view of the woman's swan-like neck, her perfect coiffure, and the jet drop earrings that dangled from her ears.

Aurora couldn't help drawing in her breath, no longer with fear of a rival, but with amazement that she'd won Joel from so stunning and talented a woman as Vee undoubtedly was. Joel's fingers curled 'round hers, as if to reassure her, and she loved him even more for that. She cast him a quick, loving smile just as the eager man in front finally released Vee's hand and she was able to turn to the middle-aged couple ahead of Joel and Aurora.

Only it wasn't Vee.

Aurora stared. Blood sang in her ears so loudly that she was afraid she'd faint, and she gripped Joel's hand like a vise. It was as if Vee had put on—no, taken off—a mask and the jolt of recognition nearly

overwhelmed Aurora. Memory, the pain of fear and loss rushed on her so fast that it was a moment before she could actually put a name to the being behind the mask.

Valborga.

Aurora couldn't breathe, not even when the middle-aged couple moved on with only brief greetings of "Happy Birthday, darling!" and Vee turned to Joel, reaching for him with the talons of a witch.

Terror for him broke through Aurora's paralysis at last and she lunged forward to get between him and Valborga. At the last moment, the evil enchantress shifted her attention from Joel to Aurora and her eyes widened almost imperceptibly before they darkened like night.

"Aurora, always so affectionate," she gushed, seizing her hands. But the words she projected into Aurora's head were more honest.

So, you finally know me. I can't make up my mind whether you're slow-witted or lucky. What gave me away, in the end?

"Love," Aurora whispered. Her limbs had grown heavy, her head was spinning. Terrified she was being sent back into the sleep from which Joel had awakened her, she hung on, trying to turn her head to see Joel.

You make no sense, Valborga said coldly. But then, you never did.

Her arms closed around Aurora like steel. Aloud, Vee said anxiously, "Joel, I think she's going to faint. Let me take her to lie down for a moment."

"I'll take her," Joel said at once, sounding alarmed.

"No, no, you stay here and look after the party—this is women's stuff. I'll only be a moment and then I'll send her back to you."

Over Valborga's shoulder, Aurora could see him now but hazily. The sleep was coming again. It was taking her from him. She dug her nails so hard into Valborga's arms that the woman let out a hiss. But it seemed Aurora couldn't stop herself being led away, almost carried from the room.

Once outside the drawing room—they must have left by a different door because they weren't at the top of the staircase but in a little passage—Valborga dragged her along with greater speed and no pretense of gentleness. Aurora didn't care. Whatever sleep-spell she'd been fighting seemed to have lifted. Perhaps Valborga used it only to get her away from Joel.

Wrenching herself free of Valborga's hold, she demanded, "Why are you here? What is it you want?"

"You," Valborga said irritably, continuing to march along the passageway. "Why could you not just have slept another measly two weeks?"

She didn't seem to care whether or not Aurora followed. Aurora glanced back at the closed drawing-room door, then back to Valborga, who waited at another doorway, almost tapping her foot with impatience.

The need to be with Joel almost overwhelmed her, but now that she could think and focus again, she knew she needed to find out exactly what Valborga was up to. Fleeing would only postpone the inevitable and she refused to spend the rest of her life, or Joel's, running. Besides, she was fairly sure Valborga would have locked the drawing-room door, either physically or magically. She doubted anyone inside would hear her knocking or shouting.

Straightening her shoulders with decision, Aurora strode toward Vee, who bowed her into the room beyond with blatant irony.

"Come into my boudoir, Highness. Be my honored guest once more."

Ignoring, that, Aurora merely brushed past her and, before Vee had even entered behind her, demanded, "What difference would it have made if I'd slept another two weeks?"

"The spell would have been lifted, and I'd have been able to deal with you away from prying eyes in that great mausoleum of a castle. Joel need never have met you and I wouldn't have to go to the trouble of wiping his memory clear of you. You were always bloody annoying. Wait here."

"*Wait here?*" Aurora all but exploded. "Is that likely? *Wait here* while you go back to the party and wipe Joel's mind of the only happiness he's ever known? Oh, no. I want to know what's going on!"

Valborga laughed. "Yes, it was curiosity that pricked your finger last time too, wasn't it? Only my blasted sisters kept me away from you then, mitigated what spells I had already cast on you all, so that you didn't die but slept the spell away."

As if she saw how her words were hurting, Valborga let her hand fall away from the door handle and turned fully back to Aurora.

"You..." Aurora whispered. "I knew it was you, of course. But why did they just leave me there on the floor? Why did no one so much as put me into a bed?"

"Because they forgot you ever existed. As soon as they left it, they forgot the castle ever existed either. Yes, my doing. My sisters couldn't stop that, though they prevented my gaining anything from it, damn them. They shut me out with a powerful protective spell, and I've had to wait another thousand years for this opportunity, a thousand years of boredom, Aurora. I owe you for that too."

"The good fairies disabled you," Aurora guessed. "Took away your magic so you couldn't harm anyone else."

"But they couldn't bring themselves to have me killed. Their weakness, my opportunity. And this time, there will be no mistakes. This time, you die and *I* get the prince and the power to rule the world."

Laughing at her own wit, Valborga reached again for the handle.

"I don't understand," Aurora objected. "Why should you get your magic back now?"

"Because the thousand years of my sisters' spell is up. This is the thousandth anniversary of your aborted betrothal party, the day you pricked your finger and went to sleep. The thousandth anniversary of

the day they took almost all my magic, leaving me weak and helpless, little better than a mortal in this stupid world. Why..."

"Where are they now?" Aurora interrupted.

Valborga blinked. "Where are what?"

"Your sisters."

Something flashed in Valborga's eye, a gleam of malevolence, a hatred deeper than any she'd yet revealed.

"Who cares?" she said and went out.

It happened so fast, Aurora didn't even have time to blink. Somewhere, even as she leapt futilely to stop the door closing, she registered that Valborga shouldn't be able to move so quickly. It was impossible, and yet Aurora threw herself at an already closed and locked door.

To be on the safe side, Valborga hurled a quick spell over her shoulder to protect the lock. Though she could feel her strength returning almost by the minute, she didn't need a particularly powerful or long-lasting enchantment to confine Aurora. She just needed to keep her away from Joel until she was ready. She couldn't have the little idiot prattling to Joel about his Vee being the wicked fairy who'd put her to sleep for a thousand years. She couldn't be sure Joel would dismiss the tale as nonsense. After all, he seemed to have bought into the rest of it. He'd been quite clear that Aurora wasn't mad, and even their little chat in the bar hadn't weaned him off his passion for the wretched girl.

What is it about bloody Aurora? she wondered as she hurried along the passage back to the drawing-room. An entire castle full of royal family, nobles and staff, had all been completely besotted with her. Valborga's own sisters had taken Aurora's side against one of their own. Although it wasn't the first time they'd done so, it was certainly the first time they'd punished Valborga so severely for her crime.

Valborga squashed down the old rage at that and returned to the present. Which was that Aurora now had Joel eating out of her hand when Valborga needed him to complete her plan.

Entering the drawing-room, she saw that, as usual, Joel was playing his part to perfection. It gave her a sneaking satisfaction to see him standing in as host for her, greeting her guests as if they were already married, already one. She hoped Aurora understood that subtlety too.

Smiling, she hurried up to him, noting with a twinge of irritation the speed with which he came to meet her, the anxiety creasing his brow as he demanded, "How is Aurora?"

"She'll be fine," Valborga soothed, smiling at a late arrival and offering her cheek with a few words of welcome. "She just needs to lie down for a bit."

"What's the matter with her?" Joel asked.

Damn him, why couldn't he be as repelled as every other man by the mysterious and dreadful words "women's trouble"?

“Darling, don’t make me discuss that here in public. Aurora would never forgive either of us. Now, come and meet Peter Grimm. As leader of the party, his favor will be vital to you.”

Actually, after tonight, the only vital favor in this country will be mine...

Joel found Peter Grimm to be most welcoming. They’d been acquainted socially for several years, but now, already clearly primed by Vee, Grimm was flatteringly delighted by Joel’s interest and by what his election could do for the party.

“We’ll be in power in no time,” he said with satisfaction. “This government has had its day. The next election is ours!”

Joel rather thought he was right, although after a slightly deeper discussion he found Grimm to be somewhat limited in vision. Vee was right about that—the party needed someone with more than just enthusiasm and a likeable manner. Joel knew that he could drive things forward, promote and carry out wide, sweeping changes that truly would benefit the country.

Even without Vee’s active support in the election, he could do this. And with Aurora by his side, who knew what he could accomplish?

For the first time in years, he felt excited about his career. A far more selfless ambition was rising up, inextricably tied with the unexpected new happiness of his personal life. Aurora...

The unease lurking at the back of his mind caused by her sudden “women’s trouble” rose again to the surface. Mixed with worry was a desire to tell her about his excitement at his new political future, and a basic, intense desire simply to be with her.

Vee was on the other side of the room, saying goodbye to guests who had to leave early. During a faint lull in the conversation—the music had paused too—he heard her saying, “I’m so sorry you have to go! I was about to show everyone my mysterious birthday present. But I’m sure you’ll hear all about it.”

Joel moved toward her, in the renewed buzz of questions and laughter and a burst of lively music from the discreetly hidden speakers. But someone else had caught her attention, and suddenly he just couldn’t be bothered with going through the motions of politeness and fielding curious questions from the other guests. He’d already acted as host for Vee this evening, so he’d damn well take advantage of the position.

Turning, he left the room by the inner door, the one that led to Vee’s bedroom and to the best guest room. In his time, Joel had occupied both and he was sure Aurora would be in one of them.

Striding down the passage, he came first to the guest bedroom, gave a quick perfunctory knock and threw open the door. Although it was immaculately made-up as usual, he knew at once that Aurora wasn’t there. He couldn’t smell her, couldn’t *sense* her.

Not even pausing to close the door, he covered the few strides to Vee’s own room and gave the same back-handed knock, almost at the same time as he turned the handle. Only this time the door didn’t budge.

That wasn't very trusting of Vee, locking her door against her own birthday guests. Only why would she lock it if Aurora were in there? His gaze dropped to the lock. And why would she leave the key there? Frowning, he called urgently, "Aurora?"

There came a clunk, a thump and some rustling, through which Aurora's breathless voice answered, "Joel? Oh good, how do I get out of here? She's locked me in."

"What the...?" Anger such as he'd rarely felt surged up against the woman he'd always regarded as a friend. What the hell was she thinking of? Furiously, he took hold of the key still in the lock and wrenched it around. The lock turned easily and he pushed against the door. It still didn't give.

He frowned, trying in vain to turn the key farther. "Aurora, are you all right?"

"I'm fine..."

"I've unlocked the door but it won't budge. I'm going to get Vee."

"No!" Aurora cried out in clear alarm. "Don't do that! She must have put some kind of spell on it. Joel, Joel, are you still there?" Her voice seemed to be coming from very close now, as if she'd thrown herself to her knees and was speaking through the keyhole.

At the obvious distress in her voice, Joel found himself crouching down to comfort her. "Of course I'm still here. I just want to get you out of there the quickest way, and Vee is in for the verbal smacking of her life."

As he spoke, as lightly and soothingly as he could, he drew the key from the lock, peering inside it to find the source of whatever was blocking it. But all he could see through the tiny hole was a shadowy section of Aurora's lips and her teeth biting down on her lower lip.

"It'll be something more mundane than magic," he promised her, eyeing the space between the door and the frame across which the lock should slide. There was nothing there, and yet when he turned the handle once more, he still couldn't budge the door. "Bizarre," he murmured.

"Joel, I understand it now, or some of it at least. I know why I slept so long and I know we have to stop Valborga before she regains all her old power and more—the power she wanted when she first attacked me."

Distracted, Joel laid his forehead against the door. Somehow, in the last week, he'd become so absorbed in Aurora, in his love for her, that he'd almost forgotten the shadowy threat that hung over her. Any vague attempt to research her history had resulted in dead ends. Aurora's birth had been recorded, but there was no record of her death or anything else about her. It was as if she'd been forgotten by history. But after a thousand years it wasn't surprising. It wasn't as if she'd ever reigned in Schlaushagen and, except as marriage tools and the bearers of heirs, women hadn't been regarded as being very important in those days. She wasn't the only woman to be lost in the mists of time. What was surprising, to say the least, was that she was still here. And in Vee's locked bedroom.

Shaking his head to clear it, he said grimly, “I won’t let her harm you. Vee picked a bad time to play such games.”

“Joel, listen to me,” she pleaded and, aching for her obvious pain, he placed his lips at his side of the keyhole. He felt like a stupidly romantic boy prevented by a cruel guardian from contacting his love, and he didn’t care.

“I’m listening,” he whispered.

“Joel, Valborga is *here*. In this house.”

He inhaled sharply. Weirdly, he could taste Aurora, as if he’d drawn her breath in with his own. The sensation overcame the sudden prickling of alarm at her words. “Have you seen her?” he asked urgently.

“Yes...”

Something clicked. It didn’t make a sound, yet he was aware that something in the door suddenly gave. Flinging out one hand he again grasped the handle and the door swung open.

Aurora threw herself into his arms and he clutched her to him with the satisfied feeling of reattaching a missing part of himself.

“I was trying to climb out the window when I heard you,” she confided.

“Aurora, you could have killed yourself! It’s too high.”

“Well, I didn’t know what she’d done with you.”

“Yes, well,” Joel said, releasing her and squaring his shoulders. “Time to have a final chat with Vee, I think.”

Aurora seized his shoulder and gave him a frustrated little shake. “Joel, haven’t you grasped it yet? Vee *is* Valborga!”

Chapter Thirteen

It was the moment Aurora dreaded. She knew the knowledge would hurt him. Worse, she was afraid he would blame the accusation on her own jealousy, and she was aware they didn't have time to quarrel. They needed to work together to foil Valborga.

Joel stared at her, frowning. "Don't be ridiculous," he said at last. "I've known Vee forever."

"No, you haven't. You've known her a few years. I've known her considerably longer."

"Then why didn't you tell me before?"

"I only just recognized her! I was with you, holding your hand, perfectly happy, even feeling magnanimous toward her, and then she turned around and it was if her mask slipped. She saw at once that I knew her. That's why she grabbed me and put some kind of sleeping spell on me. I was so afraid I was going under for another thousand years and that you'd be dead when I woke!"

She couldn't help throwing both arms around him once more, and he hugged her convulsively. "Shit, Aurora, this is way beyond me. I can deal with business conflict. I'd fight off any number of robbers or muggers for you. I can even deal with a jealous ex who locks my girlfriend in her bedroom. But this stuff, this magic you're talking of, I don't understand any of it. What does she *want*?"

"Power, like you said." Aurora had spent some time thinking about Valborga's words while she worried away at the window lock with a hairpin from the dressing table. "It was what she always wanted. She used to be very strong, but her sisters were always enough to counteract her. From what I remember, and from the fairytale you told me, I think that when I was born, she cursed me. I never knew why, and to be honest I don't think anyone else did either. They put it down to plain badness, but now I think she always had a plan. The curse was a spell to draw me to the spinning wheel, to make me prick my finger."

Aurora frowned. "I don't quite understand that bit yet. But I was meant to die of it, and my death should somehow have given Valborga the extra power she craved. At the moment I fell asleep, every memory of me died." She swallowed. "My parents, my friends. They never even knew they were bereaved. I should be glad for them, and yet it hurts me so much not to be remembered, not even to have been known."

Joel's arms tightened. His lips in her hair, on her forehead and cheeks, comforted her, gave her the strength to move on with her urgent explanation.

Catching at his head with both hands, she said. "But the good fairies, Valborga's sisters, stepped in yet again. Though they couldn't undo the curse, they commuted it, so that I slept rather than died. True love

always breaks a bad spell, so I suppose they hoped my true love would find me and kiss me. Only he never did, until you came.”

Joel regarded her with fascination. “You say the most outrageous things as if they’re plain fact. ‘True love always breaks a bad spell’. How the hell can you *know* that?”

Aurora shrugged. “It *was* plain fact in my day. Everybody knew it. How do you think we broke the spell on the bedroom door just now? Our breath mingled, the breath of lovers, and overcame it. That was how I finally recognized Vee, because we were holding hands, because we have grown so close and because...” She broke off and gave him a quick, teasing look. “Because you’ve stopped fighting it and accepted me as your love.”

Something leapt in his eyes, drowning his struggle to accept her explanation. “Oh, I accept you. That part I have no trouble in believing.” He lowered his head, bestowing a quick, sensual kiss on her lips. “And if our love gives us strength against Valborga, then by all means let us do a little more loving.”

“Joel,” she protested in a half-hearted sort of a way. He pushed her against the wall and followed to pin her there by his hips so she could feel his erection growing. Suddenly breathless, she realized he was serious, and her heart seemed to plunge straight downward past her stomach to her core, which heated with sudden, completely inappropriate desire.

Joel’s hot, clouded eyes devoured her. His hand, swiftly freeing her breast from the alluring green dress, caressed with urgent, trembling fingers that melted her to delicious weakness. “I can’t keep my hands off you. You tell me that’s a good thing, so take your medicine,” he breathed, covering her mouth with his.

Oh help, did they have time for this? Did she care? Was the satisfaction of this craving not more important right now than anything? Of course not. Valborga in charge of the world didn’t bear thinking about, and she tried to tell him so, muttering the words into his devouring mouth, even while she kissed him back.

He dragged up her skirt with his free hand, spreading his fingers over her thigh and sliding inward to her already wet panties. He gave a grunt of satisfaction and drew them to one side, his thumb sliding over her slick, sensitive clitoris and making her gasp and writhe against him.

Wicked excitement that she was doing this with him in Valborga’s own house, where they could be discovered by her or anyone else at any time, surged through Aurora, urging her on. She lifted one leg over his thigh, pushing her hands between their bodies to unfasten his buttons, feverishly seeking and finding his now fully erect cock. His breath hissed when she grasped it, and guided it to her hungry pussy. Standing on tiptoe to give him easier access, she pushed his cock inside herself and gave a moan of pleasure and need.

But he was already thrusting. Like that day in the kitchen, this was hard and fast and furious, and with the extra, naughty fillip of possible discovery, Aurora’s climax rose quickly. As they strained and writhed, coupling with a desperation that was entirely new to her, she wondered if she could stop now, even to save the world, and realized as orgasm exploded, convulsing her, that this wonder, this joy could never destroy

the world. Only the lack of it could do that. And Joel joining her at the peak with a muffled groan was like an affirmation.

The abrupt click of a door, the rising hubbub of noise from the drawing room, broke through her wild pleasure but couldn't halt it. Joel's head turned with hers toward the drawing room door. The dark figure of Valborga stood there, curiously small and insubstantial when seen through the haze of orgasm.

Aurora clutched Joel, as if to warn him of what he had to already know, but again Joel surprised her, giving one last, extra thrust inside her to prolong the bliss. His long, low groan was both blatant and graphic.

Only then did he slide out of her, smoothing down her dress before tucking his cock discreetly back into his pants. While Aurora, still tingling and bemused, leaned back into the wall to gather herself, he turned, still buttoning his pants, to face Valborga.

"A little loving," he observed unnecessarily, "never hurt anyone."

"Except you," Aurora said hoarsely. She cleared her throat. Her voice might be weak and breathless from the furious encounter, but inside, she suddenly felt as strong as a lion.

Valborga said coldly, "You found each other. How sweet. Do come back to the party."

"You might prefer to discuss things in private," Joel said. Aurora had never heard him sound so grim or so cold and had a sudden vision of the hardness that had brought him success.

"On the contrary," Valborga drawled. "I want you to see my new birthday present."

"Your call," Joel said grimly. "But company won't stop me, Vee."

Valborga cast a contemptuous glance at Aurora, still straightening her gown over her breasts. "Clearly," she said with distaste, and in spite of herself, Aurora laughed.

Valborga sniffed as if it was hardly the reaction she'd been looking for, and turned on her heel. Joel strode after her and Aurora ran to catch at his hand. They needed to face her together with all the strength of their love if they were to overcome her power.

They entered together into a ring of murmuring, laughing people surrounding Vee's mysterious present. The crowd fell back to let their hostess have access, and Aurora stopped in her tracks. Her lips parted; her fingers slid numbly out of Joel's as she stared at a pure gold spinning wheel.

It was happening again, that nearly irresistible need to reach out to the device. Memory of the last occasion flooded back, and Aurora clenched her hands into fists at her sides. *So that's what happened to the spinning wheel in the tower...* It appeared wildly out of place here in the midst of the throng of well-dressed party guests, who gazed at it with curiosity and amazement.

"Vee, what in the world...?" a woman in red sequins and satin asked. "Who sent you this contraption, and why? It's unique, I'll grant you, but what are you supposed to do with it?"

"Display it, of course." Valborga answered smoothly. "Most of you don't know this, but my great-ancestors were in the textile trade. Many hundreds of years ago, the women in my family were known for

weaving the finest cloth in the land. This wheel is an homage to my past and a testament to the bright future I plan to spin with my betrothed, Joel Thorne.” She grasped his arm and pulled him beside her, inserting her body between Joel and Aurora. “We’ve chosen tonight to announce our engagement as well as his candidacy for the National Assembly.”

Aurora felt the pall of sleepiness settling over her like a heavy fog and the sounds of the guests applauding and calling out congratulations sounded distant. She knew she had to physically connect with Joel. Only together would they be powerful enough to fight off Valborga’s magic, but she felt like she was in a dream. Her heavy hands seemed disconnected from her body as she struggled to reach for him.

Then his voice rose above the others as he protested Valborga’s announcement. “I’m sorry to contradict my long time friend, Vee. At the risk of ruining her party, I must explain that while it’s true I plan to run for the Assembly, this engagement announcement is premature. Vee and I had discussed the possibility, but I’ve decided against it. As you may have noticed, I’m here with another woman.”

He pulled his arm away from Valborga and stepped back to reach for Aurora’s hand. But before he could grasp it, the evil fairy raised her arm and began to mutter. Even through her debilitating heaviness, Aurora realized with despair that Valborga was uttering another curse. But there was no time to warn Joel. A bolt of lightning conjured from the air blasted him, throwing him across the room, away from Aurora. She cried out, but had no idea if the wail of loss and terror sounded only inside her head.

Among the guests, the celebratory mood changed as fast as the lightning bolt. Several women screamed. Other people cried out and fell back from the source of the crackling electricity. Valborga stood in the center of a widening circle, revealed in her true form. Her human mask had slipped entirely to show the evil within. Not that her face was the twisted scowl of a demon. On the contrary, she was perhaps more beautiful than ever, but so hard and cold it hurt the eyes to look upon her.

She turned to Aurora, whose feet were too numb to run. Her head felt thick and so heavy she could barely hold it upright as she stared at Valborga like a mouse confronting a hypnotizing snake.

“No need for me to hide from these fools any longer. My moment is at hand, and afterward none of them will remember what they saw. Come.” The evil enchantress crooked a finger, beckoning her forward and Aurora stumbled to obey like a jerky marionette.

No! She must rouse her will. She could not give in to the inexorable pull of Valborga’s invisible strings. Aurora dug in her heels and stopped moving.

“What do you want from me?” she gasped.

Another crook of Valborga’s fingers dragged Aurora a step closer to the spinning wheel with its needle-sharp spindle. “It’s so simple one would think it would be easy to take, but no, my sisters’ spells have hemmed me in and blocked me from getting what I need.”

“What is it I have that you need so badly?” Though it was difficult to form the words, she managed to push them out.

Valborga smiled, a thin, chilling gesture. “Blood. Your power is in your blood, and it will make me invincible.”

Aurora was dumbfounded. As far as she knew, her family was not magical. “But how? Why?” she got out.

Valborga’s lips curled into a pitying sneer. “They never even told you that, did they? Your mother was the last of the royal humans to carry ancient fairy blood in her veins. I did everything to prevent her marrying the king who carried the purest of human royal blood, including seducing him myself. The fool could have known such power, such splendor with me. But he chose her, and even worse, conceived you when the planets were in perfect alignment. From the day you were born, I knew you had to die to give me your blood and your power.”

Valborga laughed. “No wonder they coddled you so. You truly were the most precious being in either the human or magical realms.”

Aurora struggled to grasp the words, staring into Valborga’s cold, perfect face as if she could somehow absorb the explanation better that way. Her parents had never given her any inkling what it was Valborga sought from her. Instead, they’d foolishly kept her away from pointed objects and the plain truth. If they’d only trusted her enough to give her some control over her own life, perhaps she could have prevented the curse from occurring.

A burst of fury at them for endangering her through their over-protectiveness jolted Aurora awake. She shook off her stupor and threw her body into Valborga, knocking her backward.

The enchantress was completely taken by surprise. Clearly she’d never anticipated a physical blow. She staggered under the weight of Aurora’s tackle and fell to the floor. Aurora landed on top of her, the long skirt of her evening gown twisting around her legs and binding them. She pulled back her arm and plowed her fist into Valborga’s face, cracking through that frozen demeanor and startling a cry from the enchantress. Rage for the loss of her family and the stolen years of her life blazed through Aurora with the heat of a forest fire. She would not lose her life again nor would she allow Valborga to take Joel from her.

“Leave. Me. Alone.” Aurora punctuated each word with a hit. Her knuckles ached. The ring Joel had placed on her finger cut Vee’s cheekbone, and blood trickled down to her ear. Another blow and Valborga’s head snapped to the side. Aurora was vaguely aware of noise around her. The party guests hadn’t left, but seemed content to keep their distance. No one tried to break up the fight.

Valborga suddenly gathered her wits and threw Aurora off her, not with physical strength, but with a surge of power that propelled her several yards away. Aurora landed on her back with a bone-cracking thud. Pain lanced through her spine and the back of her skull. Her vision darkened and she gasped for breath as she struggled to rise.

Through a haze, she saw Valborga stand. Electric current shimmered around her body, making the black gauze of her dress flutter as if in a breeze and her hair crackle around her face. She lifted her arms

and began an incantation that pulled Aurora upright as if seized again by invisible strings. Her legs moved against her volition, striding across the room toward the spindle again. Against her will, her arm lifted and her trembling finger stretched toward the gleaming point.

“Touch it!” Valborga demanded. “Prick your finger, slice your wrist, I don’t care which, just do it and offer me your blood.”

Aurora stopped with her hand held just above the gleaming point and suddenly realized Valborga could push her no farther. The enchantress might mesmerize her into touching the spindle, but in order for the magical power of the blood exchange to work, Aurora must give it to her freely.

That she would never do. Perhaps once, the first time when she was young and trusting, if Valborga had been there when she pricked her finger, she would have held it out to her enemy for healing. But now she knew better. She would never allow Valborga to have such power—whatever power it was that her blood apparently contained.

The evil fairy’s eyes glittered and narrowed. She raised her hand threateningly toward Joel’s sprawled body, sparks dancing on her palm.

“Give me your blood or your lover dies.”

Joel came to with his ears ringing and his body aching as if he’d been drop-kicked by a giant. He blinked and focused hazy eyes on the scene before him. Aurora was straddling Vee and using her face as a punching bag, then suddenly she was thrown back by an invisible force and slammed against the floor.

Vee looked different now, and not just because of the trickle of blood down her cheek. It was as if some semi-transparent veil or a coating of make-up had been lifted from her face. She had never looked so cold or inhuman. And with a sickening jolt of realization, Joel remembered that she wasn’t human, that she was Valborga, the evil enchantress who threatened Aurora.

Vee—Valborga— raised her arms and spoke some foreign incantation. Aurora was jerked upright and took halting steps toward the spinning wheel. As she reached a hand toward the spindle, Valborga shouted something about blood.

Joel scarcely heard her. He launched himself to his feet and across the room. He didn’t know what Valborga wanted but he was damned if he’d let Aurora be put back to sleep for another thousand years. He practically flew to her side, grabbed her and pulled her back against him. The moment their bodies made contact, Valborga seemed to falter. She frowned and shook her arms like a person trying to jump-start dying batteries with a good jostling. In his arms, Aurora’s body struggled, caught between Valborga’s magic and her own willpower coupled with Joel’s.

“I won’t let her take you,” he whispered. “Hold on.”

Aurora turned in the circle of his arms, tilting her face to his. “Kiss me.” She slid her hands around his neck and pulled him down, covering his mouth with hers. Joel felt seared by her lips. There was a potent

sizzle where their mouths merged. All of a sudden he understood what Aurora had been trying to tell him. True love was more than mere fairytale fodder. The two of them united was not simply some romantic concept, but an actual force strong enough to conquer evil.

Around them a white light began to glow. He was vaguely aware of the light, the faraway voices of the other people in the room, and of Valborga shaking her arms and cursing in several languages, but most of his consciousness was focused solely on Aurora. She filled his senses. She was the light and the joy that poured through him and swirled all around him. And he was that for her. Two beings become one.

Joel held her soft, warm body in his arms and kissed her as the light grew more intense. Rays shot out from them like sunlight. He glanced at Valborga. She was stamping her feet now like a toddler having a tantrum. Her glacial face had melted and was twisted in a scowl of pure fury.

“Touch it, you little bitch,” she screamed. “Rip open your skin and give me your blood. I’ve waited too long for this.”

In a flash, Joel realized why she’d been pulling Aurora toward the spindle step by step. She couldn’t take what she craved. Aurora’s blood had to be given to her or its potency would be lost.

The radiant beams around them shone blindingly bright, filling the room with magic and frightening the rest of the guests into fleeing the room. Valborga fell back several steps. She stopped yelling but her lips moved silently. She cupped her hands and waved her arms in a gathering motion. The few people who hadn’t fled began dropping onto the floor in boneless heaps. Joel guessed Valborga was collecting their life energy to bolster her own.

He held Aurora tighter, kissed her more passionately and loved her even more deeply. When Vee hurled a bolt of power intended to break them apart, their rays intensified and deflected her blow. A shaft of light as pure white as empty paper waiting for its story to be written arched toward the enchantress. The second before it struck her, she howled and disappeared. A huge black bird flew up from the spot where she’d been and flew across the room, heading for the open doorway.

But the doors slammed shut and a different kind of portal opened.

Joel broke off the kiss but continued to hold Aurora as they watched the very air split apart and another unnatural light flood into the room. Emerging from the unearthly glow were three misty figures that quickly solidified into human forms.

“My godmothers,” Aurora murmured in awe. “The ones who protected me from Valborga’s curse.”

The tallest of the three caught hold of the raven as it battered itself against the door and clung to the creature while it shimmered in form, turning back into Vee, then a bird, then Vee again. Joel clung to Aurora, the one vital, stable thing in the midst of this nightmare. To learn his trusted friend was a villainous creature was horrifying. And although he couldn’t help but believe in magic now, watching Valborga’s transformations made him nauseated, overwhelmed by surrealism.

At last her figure stopped flickering and remained in human form, panting and pulling against her sister's hands. Blood still trickled down her face from where Aurora had cut her cheekbone. Her hair straggled down from her customary smooth chignon, and raven feathers clung to the jet-black strands.

"Let go of me," she snarled.

"You've caused enough mischief in this world, Valborga," the dark-haired fairy said. "We were foolish enough to imagine you could do no more harm here."

The third sister lifted a hand to touch Valborga's face. "We'd hoped that by the time a thousand years were past you might have changed, but I can see you have not."

The woman turned and glided over to where Joel and Aurora remained locked together in an impenetrable embrace. "Princess Aurora, I am sorry we weren't able to do more to help you. We could not harm our own sister or break her spell any more than she could do to any one of us. Sleeping for a thousand years may have seemed more like a curse to you than dying would have, but Bettina saw the shape of your fate." She nodded toward the black-haired fairy. "It seemed the wisest course we could follow."

"The stars are perfectly aligned for ascension to power on this date. Valborga knew this, but didn't understand the power was never to be hers." Bettina gazed at Joel with eyes so dark and wise he felt he was looking into the face of an angel. "This one, your beloved, is the person who will lead the world into a new age."

Her sudden smile dazzled Joel, making it harder to follow her words. "The brightest star of his generation," she continued warmly, "by his own strength and hard work, but he too has a distinguished lineage. He is descended from the magical union of King Ragnorak of the underworld and Queen Gwyneth of Linderwylde, through their daughter, the great Queen Brea. This line was diluted after many generations, but his poor, confused mother still carried the blood that makes Joel the chosen one."

There would be time to think about that later, when he wasn't so stunned. For now, it just seemed enough that a weight was lifted from him in connection with his unhappy mother, as if he'd finally found the reason she'd been the way she was. *Poor, confused mother*. Constantly feeling different, pulled in directions she didn't understand. With no one to turn to, without even the personal strength that had carried him through similar conflicts, she'd relied on drugs for relief, for escape, for *something*. It was like a confirmation of what he'd always known, that inside she'd been a good and loving person.

Bettina said, "You didn't know, did you? But my sister did. Your human strength, with Ragnorak's power, however diluted, was to have bolstered her own."

Valborga jerked in her sister's hold, but it seemed to be more in anger than any effort to free herself. Bettina didn't even glance at her. Lifting her hand as if in a blessing, she said, "Joel and Aurora, in your union the good of our two realms are united at last. The world needs you together as much as you need each other."

When her eyes released him, Joel closed his mouth. The cynical, skeptical part of him tried to find a way to make fun of her prophecy and couldn't, because something inside him rose up with strength and excitement to meet the challenge. It was like a confirmation of what he'd already acknowledged was right. Aurora clung to him, pressing her cheek against his chest with obvious happiness. Although she was smiling wildly at the fairies she'd called her godmothers, she seemed incapable of releasing Joel to embrace them.

In any case, they were somewhat occupied. The tallest sister held on to Valborga's arm with a guard's grip. "We will take her with us now to the magical realm. Banishing her without her powers clearly has not worked. From now on, she must live and learn with us."

Valborga hissed, "I will never live with you! There is nothing you can teach me!"

All three sisters gazed at her sadly, but Bettina smiled as she glided back to her. "Valborga, we've just shown yet again that we're stronger than you. Even these mixed-race humans can teach you. Your power is corrupted and weakened by your hatred. You must see now that their love brings them strength. As ours for you can heal and strengthen you."

Valborga curled her lip, giving another futile jerk of her arm. "Don't make me laugh. You never had any love for me, just for each other! I was the one left alone, constantly punished and banished and excluded! My power denied me..."

"Oh, Valborga," the taller sister protested.

But Bettina said ruefully, "Maybe she has a point. Although the love was there, maybe we were harsh with her when we should have been understanding. She was a naughty child when perhaps we were too young to be wise enough to teach her. Valborga, we always loved you, even if you couldn't see it. But we will talk, and maybe this time it will be different."

"Ha! Already, you confine me!"

"Damn right," said Bettina with a beatific smile.

She glanced back at Joel and Aurora, whose arms by now had loosened but not released each other. "We'll wake these good people before we go, and cast the spell wide to quiet memories of this night's events among those who've already left."

Aurora said anxiously, "But you'll leave our memories? I want to remember it all. I want Joel to remember!"

"Of course. You and Joel will remember."

Joel frowned, gazing at the people flopped and recumbent around the floor. His people, if they eventually accepted his leadership. And it was his job to speak for them as well as to look out for them.

"It's not right," he said abruptly, and Aurora as well as all three fairies glanced at him in surprise. "They're sentient beings, not puppets. You can't treat them the way Valborga treated them, treated Aurora's family. You can't just wipe out their memories. It's what makes them who they are."

It appeared to be a novel idea to the fairies, who immediately went into a huddle. But Joel already felt his reward in Aurora's beaming smile.

At last Bettina said, "To remember might harm them. Some of them at least. We can make it seem like a dream. Those who are strong enough will recognize it as reality, the others never will. And that will be our last act of interference." She smiled. "Unless you ask for our help. Our portal is open once more, to those able to use it. Goodbye, my child, you've become a wonderful woman and made the best choice of your life in your husband."

And she waved her arm around the room and moved back. Her leg and part of her lower body disappeared. Valborga made a lunge to escape, but it seemed her sisters were prepared for that, for they held on grimly and all three stepped together into nothingness.

Chapter Fourteen

Aurora looked up from her textbook in which the words were all starting to blur together into meaningless nonsense. It was definitely time for a study break and, gazing at Joel across the room, she knew just how she wanted to take that break. She shut the book and set it on the table beside the couch where she lay, then rose and stalked across the room toward her victim. She draped her arms over the back of his chair and rested her chin on his shoulder, feeling the crisp edge of his collar against her cheek and inhaling the warm, spicy scent of his cologne.

“Busy?” she asked.

“Always,” he answered, but put the file he was reading on his lap. He reached up to cup her cheek and turned his face to kiss her over his shoulder. “But never too busy for you.”

Aurora rounded the edge of the chair and perched on one broad arm, but Joel quickly snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. He tugged the crumpled document out from under her and tossed it onto the floor.

“How’s your studying going?”

“It’s difficult. There’s so much to learn, historical facts most people would’ve grown up with but which are brand new to me.” She thought about how much she’d missed and felt a familiar pang of homesickness for the world she’d been born into. “But it’s interesting too, seeing history unfold as one long story, learning how one event led to the next and how people repeated the same mistakes generation after generation.”

“There are some great documentaries and historical based movies that should make it easier for you to learn and remember all those facts and people.” Joel rubbed her back and she wanted to arch and purr beneath his hand. “The television can be used for more than cheesy romances and reality shows.”

“Cheesy?” His vernacular was still sometimes unfamiliar, but she could tell the term was derogatory from the way he said it. “I *like* romances and people making over their homes and gardens and clothes and lives.”

Joel leaned in and kissed the corner of her mouth. “You’ve done an amazing job of that yourself. You’ve adjusted to losing your family and the life you knew. You’ve got us living in a real home instead of a generic apartment. You’ve tackled school and volunteering at the hospital. And you’ve completely made me over too.”

He jerked his thumb at the file on the floor. "See, I can put work aside and it doesn't bother me in the least." With that he slipped his hand around her nape and drew her in for something more than a peck on the lips.

Although Aurora cooperated with enthusiasm, winding her tongue around his and pressing close to him, she couldn't resist teasing. Drawing her mouth free after a few moments, she said, "Ah but this is different. This is work for the people, not just making money. I don't want you to stop doing that."

"Slave driver," he said, sweeping his hand up under her skirt. "Everyone's entitled to an hour off."

"Joel," she gasped, undulating as his hand slid over her thighs and bottom. "I do *like* being with you."

"Good," he said, rather indistinctly since his mouth was buried in her neck, nipping and licking.

"But do you think we're doing the right thing?"

He lifted his head, a faint frown between his warm, clouded eyes. "Making love?"

She smiled, kissing his mouth. "Oh no, I know that's the right thing. I mean you taking the slow, democratic route into politics, and me studying arts before I go into medicine. I worry sometimes that it's all taking too long."

"You're desperate to live," he said, stroking her hair. "I like that in you. But I think if we're to save the world, we have to learn enough to make the right decisions. *And* have fun."

"I hoped you'd say that." She shifted in his arms to straddle him, then wriggled back so that she could unfasten his trousers more easily. "It seems more worthwhile, more *necessary* somehow, if the decisions are ours, rather than some preordained events that we have no control over. It's the same with us," she added as he impatiently brushed her hands aside to free his already fully erect cock from his unfastened jeans and underpants. "I had this feeling that we should be together, from the beginning, when you first awakened me."

"I wish I'd kissed you," he said ruefully, gently massaging her hips before pulling aside her panties. "Instead of shaking you as if you were some homeless person inconveniently asleep on my doorstep."

"You kissed me later," she remembered. "That's when I really knew." She raised herself up, looking deep into his eyes as he held his cock steady for her, and lowered herself onto him with a long, slow sigh. "You feel so good inside me, Joel... I wanted us to be together. I wanted us to be *meant*... And now all I can remember is my fairy godmother telling me I'd made the best decision of my life in choosing you."

She began to move on him, in slow, sensual circles. "And if I hadn't, if I'd been too stuck-up to recognize love for someone so different from the men I'd known before...oh Joel, what if we'd never come together?"

He thrust up inside her, making her gasp as the pleasure soared. He reached under her top, finding and caressing her breasts. "You got under my skin. I'd have found you again. But it doesn't matter, does it? We *are* together, and nothing, either human or magical, can break us apart."

She put her arms around his neck and bent her head to kiss him. They moved slowly, sweetly, without urgency now that their bodies knew each other so well. And yet to Aurora it always felt new, always different. This time was like an affirmation, about the sheer emotion of loving him rather than the physical ecstasy they could achieve. Not that she rejected the pleasure. Indeed, she accepted it, helped drive it onward, writhing, rising and falling on his cock, and lapping up his groans of delight. Sensing her mood, he kept it slow, even at the end when she knew his urge was to pound into her. Instead, he stroked her clitoris with his clever, sensitive fingers, while pushing rhythmically inside her. He watched with hot, triumphant eyes as she fell over the edge into bliss. And even then, trembling with his own need, he kept the slow pace, holding her there until he came too with a long, deep groan that seemed to fill her soul.

As her heart slowly quieted, and she lay on his chest, listening to the strong, still wild beats of his, she knew that this was the time.

“Joel?”

“Mmm.” She could tell, just from his tone that his eyes were closed, that he was half-falling into post-coital slumber.

“We never used protection. Ever.”

“I know.” The smile was in his voice again, making her smile back as she lifted one lethargic hand to stroke his chest, rubbing her finger over his nipple. He was always amused when she picked up modern phrases or concepts. “It doesn’t matter now we’re together, but at the beginning, it used to eat me up with guilt. I’m a controlled man—at least I used to be—but I could never wait to screw you. Part of me even liked the risk.”

“As if you wanted to impregnate me?”

“Maybe. Maybe I knew I’d never let you go.”

“So you’d be happy if we had a baby?”

Somewhat belatedly, Joel appeared to pick up on where this was going. His hand in her hair drew her head up so that he could look into her face. “You want to have a baby? While you’re still studying?”

“Would you mind?”

“Mind? Of course not!”

“Good,” Aurora said with relief. “Because we are.”

She sat up, pushing her tangled hair out of her eyes. Joel stared up at her in bemused wonder, fear and joy chasing each other across his face. She took a deep breath. “And I’m sorry if you don’t like this, but I plan to tell her—or him—everything from the beginning. Our child will grow up knowing all about magic—including Valborga—as well as his own world.”

Slowly, Joel reached up and drew her back down into his arms. “Oh, we’ll tell her,” he promised. “This time we’ll learn from history. Our child will be as precious as you were to the world, but her protection will be knowledge.”

Satisfied, Aurora laid her head on his shoulder. At this moment it felt as if her contentment was complete. As if she was truly happy not just for this moment, but for ever after.

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Demon Lover

Rumplestiltskin is not his name, and this hunk's no gnarled old goblin.

Demon Lover

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Fairytale Fantasies, Book 2

In his quest to land her a rich husband, Gwyneth's father has gone one step too far and bragged to the king's steward. Now she faces an impossible task: spin a room full of straw into gold by morning, or their lives are forfeit. She despairs, until a black-garbed figure offers to solve her problem for a price. One kiss.

He returns the second night, and the third. With each sensual encounter, the stakes escalate along with her attraction to her mysterious visitor. Then he claims the ultimate price—her child—and she realizes too late she's made a deal with the king of the Underworld.

From the moment he kisses her, Ragnorak knows Gwyneth's child will be a worthy heir for his kingdom. But with each touch, he wants more. He wants her to be queen of his strangely beautiful world—and for her to want to stay. But that will mean giving her the ultimate weapon—the power of his name.

Gwyneth has only three chances to drive her demon lover over the edge of bliss. But when the stakes suddenly shift, it's Ragnorak who stands to lose everything...

Warning: This book turns a well-known fairytale upside down, and involves hot sex with a villainous demon—or is he...?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Demon Lover:

Once more Gwyneth waited in the room full of straw, desperate and alone, but with a sliver of hope which she hadn't possessed the previous night. For now she knew there was someone who could give her the magic to perform the impossible task. But what could she do to summon him?

She stood in the center of the room, sneezing as the chaff in the air tickled her nose, and examined the chamber from corner to corner. How *had* he entered the room? Did one of the great stone blocks which made up the walls and floor move aside to provide him entrance? And where exactly had he come from?

She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "Sir," she called softly, "I beseech you to come to me again. I need your help. Please."

There was no answer. The dead silence was disturbed only by a tiny rustle, perhaps of a mouse brought in with one of the bales of straw.

Gwyneth clasped her hands together. "I cannot do this alone. I need your magic. Please, I'll do anything you require if only you will save me once more."

More silence. What if he didn't come this time? Now that the king was convinced she could perform the task, he might take her refusal to accomplish it a second time as willful disobedience—perhaps treason. Could she convince him that her magic power was used up since the full moon of the fifth month was

waning? She couldn't be expected to produce gold again until another eighteen years had passed, according to her father's bizarre claim.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tears slipped from the corners to trickle down her cheeks. "Please, I need you," she whispered.

"Then you shall have me, my lady." The voice murmuring near her ear, hot breath tickling her neck, nearly jolted her out of her skin. She started to whirl to face him and her shoulder slammed into his hard chest. He stood right behind her, as solid and immovable as a wall.

One gloved finger reached out and caught the tear which had dripped nearly to her jaw. "Diamonds," he murmured. "More beautiful than the green glass you wear around your neck."

Gwyneth automatically reached up to touch the elaborate emerald necklace that draped her throat. "You're here," was all she could manage to say.

He dipped his hooded head slightly. "Your wish is my command, but as before, I will demand a payment."

What this time? Her heart pounded as she remembered the ravishing kiss last night, the way it had stolen her breath away and made her skin burn.

"I have this necklace." She fingered the cold, hard gems. "Although I don't know how I would explain its loss to the king."

"Then you don't really *have* the necklace if it doesn't belong to you." He stroked a hand down her arm from shoulder to wrist, and her flesh tingled. "But you have other jewels more precious than those. Rubies." He touched her lips lightly with a fingertip. "Star sapphires." He indicated her blue eyes. "And a single precious pearl."

One gloved hand slid down the front of her gown to cup her mound through the layers of silk and petticoats. He pressed hard with his finger on the very bud she had massaged earlier, and warmth bloomed from the sensitive spot.

Gwyneth drew in a sharp breath.

For a sizzling moment they remained locked together with his hand on her pussy the only point of contact, and then, abruptly, the demon stepped away from her. She felt the absence of his commanding presence which had made the air around her positively crackle with energy.

She licked her lips before she spoke. "What would you have me give?"

He looked around the room. "There's more work to be done tonight."

It was true. The room was filled with nearly half as much straw as the previous night.

"I would need more than a kiss this time."

Scissors of fear and excitement snipped through her mask of calm. "How much more?"

"I want to touch you. Everywhere. And I want you to touch me."

Her excitement mounted. He would unmask, then. She would see his face at last. But then the other half of what he demanded struck her. He wanted to see and touch her body—naked. She'd never been naked in front of anyone in her entire life.

At her hesitation, he added, "I will not have sex with you, nor will I force you to do anything you don't enjoy. But I must have something for my trouble."

Gwyneth had no other options, and a deep-seated part of her wanted to know his touch and to have his gaze travel over her body. Just thinking about it set her afire all over again.

"Very well. It's a deal."

"Then you may begin to spin. I suggest you hurry, as there's a great deal of work to be done and I demand some time at the end of the evening for myself."

Gwyneth gazed at the mountainous bales of straw and empty spindles waiting to be filled. Her fingers were already swollen and sore despite the balm one of the serving women had treated them with. The task before her seemed monumental—but *at least not impossible now*, she reminded herself as she cut the twine on the first bale of straw.

She sat on the stool and fed the strands into the flyer while her foot pumped the treadle, making the wheel spin round. Gold thread began to coil around the first empty bobbin. She fed her lapful of straw into the machine and reached for more, all the while rhythmically pumping her foot up and down. It was impossible to see at what point the strands of straw became metallic gold. The wheel was a blur, the distaff spun and Gwyneth gave up trying to see the moment of change, accepting the magic as she did the mysterious wizard himself.

She hummed softly and rocked in time to the rhythm of her foot on the treadle. All the while she was acutely aware of the man who watched her.

"Do you enjoy spinning?" he suddenly asked.

"When I'm not doing it to save my life, yes."

"What is that song you hum?"

"An old spinning song one of the women in the village taught me. It helps me keep a rhythm so the thread is spun evenly."

"Your mother didn't teach you?"

"No. She died when I was very young."

"I see." He had moved to stand beside her, watching her hands move and standing with his own clasped behind his back. "And what of your father?"

"He raised me the best way he could, I believe."

"The way one would raise a prize calf for the market." His tone was as sour as week old milk.

She stopped spinning and turned to him, glaring. "My father loves me. He wants the best for me. Is there any harm in that?"

“When it puts you at the king’s mercy? Yes.”

Gwyneth nearly knocked her stool over as she rose and marched over to fetch another bale of straw. She was sweating as she dragged the heavy load past the dark-cloaked man.

“You will never be done in time at this rate, and there won’t be time for my payment,” he remarked. “I will help you to finish faster.”

With a swirl of his hooded cape, he turned from her and brought over another bale of straw. He handed her bundles of straw and replaced her distaff each time it was full of gold. Gwyneth’s hands flew as she fed straw into the flyer, her foot was a blur operating the treadle and the wheel spun so fast it made her dizzy. She was fairly certain the stranger was responsible for this increased speed with his mysterious magic.

Much sooner than the previous evening, or at least she thought so, although she had no timepiece with which to measure the night, the seemingly insurmountable task was finished. Rows and rows of golden thread sat on the floor. Only a few bobbins were still empty, and there was no straw left except for chaff and dust that littered the floor.

Her back stiffened as Gwyneth became aware of the stranger standing behind her. His hands rested on her shoulders, heavy and warm. She was torn between pulling away from the unfamiliar touch and purring like a cat as he kneaded her muscles lightly.

“Are you ready to pay my price?” The low rumble of his voice set her very bones trembling in a not entirely unpleasant way.

All her light—and all his love—may not be enough to hold the nightmares at bay...

Dust of Dreams

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Guardians of Light, Book 4

Mingling with other races is strictly forbidden, but dream faerie Pryseis has no choice. An innocent goblin child suffers dangerous nightmares, and it should be a simple task to cure him and return to her anxious sisters before the council knows she's gone.

Yet there's a reason a creature of air and sunlight has no business underground. Now in chains, prisoner of an ungrateful goblin sorcerer, Pryseis despairs that anyone will save her. Her only comfort—the memory of a man she can only touch in her dreams.

Benilo ta Myran, with the reluctant blessing of his elven king and queen, takes up a quest some would call mad, driven by the certain knowledge that the beautiful faerie who invades his dreams is in danger. He carries a terrible secret—war has broken his healing powers—yet he cannot leave her to face the darkness alone.

The first touch of their flesh surpasses their most erotic dreams, but the nightmare has just begun. There's the suffering child, and a sorcerer who won't go down without a fight. And the clock is ticking down for Pryseis, who must return home—or fade away.

Warning: Beware of wounded bunnies, hungry trolls, low ceilings, glowing mold and goblins bearing gifts. Most of all, beware beautiful faeries and hot elves appearing in your dreams. They may lead you astray...and steal your heart.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Dust of Dreams:

Pryseis watched the goblins leave the encampment and gave up trying to discern their intended target. Benilo was right. She curled up next to him. They both needed rest. At least she wasn't alone. He pulled her into his arms, and she ended up half-sprawled across his chest. She stiffened and pulled away. *"I don't want to hurt you."*

"Does not hurt in the slightest," he said.

She felt no deception in his thoughts. And *she* felt better, surrounded by his warmth, his strength. His heart beat under her ear, slow and steady. She went boneless by slow degrees, matching him breath for breath. His scent curled around her, through her. That's what had been absent afore, in her dream. He'd not *felt* real, for all they'd shared. Now there was solid warmth, hot male skin scented with sunlit ferns. She toyed with a lock of his hair—unexpected softness, a cascade of light. His calloused fingers caressed her back, and she shivered at the goose bumps that rose in their wake. Unbidden, her mind drifted back to the dream. Her breasts swelled and she flushed, embarrassed as her nipples tightened against him.

His fingers trailed over the curve of her backside. She tried to squirm away, but Benilo held her still. *"Shh, easy, beauty,"* he soothed, the brush of his mind in hers seduction itself. *"Do not fear me. I would never hurt you."*

"It wasn't real," she denied.

"But it was, and this is. Look at me."

Pryseis was caught in the hypnotic blue power of his gaze. Blue as the mountain sky, hot as the living fires within the earth. Open desire there for her to read, to feel. She gasped, and his eyes darkened. She reached out to trace his lips with her fingers. He captured her hand in his, raising it so he could tease, not her palm, but the sensitive skin of her inner wrist. It caused an unexpected tingle in her breasts, and she whimpered as her nipples tightened further, an almost painful arousal.

"This is crazy."

"The sweetest madness."

"Anyone could walk in."

"Then we shall have to be quiet." Benilo rolled over so they lay side by side, raised himself up to nibble along the side of her neck. Her nails tightened on his shoulders when he found a sensitive spot, and he stroked her there with his tongue, suckling on her skin until she whimpered and wriggled closer. He curled a hand around her breast, circling her aching nipple with his thumb, and she gasped in his ear. He shuddered at the sound, and moved to capture her lips with his.

Pryseis opened to him, taking him deep, savoring the dark, wild taste of him as her tongue tangled with his. Every stroke of his tongue heightened her craving, her need. This was naught like the dream. It was so much more real. She felt herself swelling, softening, kenned he caught the scent of her arousal when he slid his muscled thigh betwixt hers, drew her leg up over his hip. Benilo bent his head to her breast, taking a long pull, teasing her nipple with the rasp of his tongue. She bit her lip to silence the cry that rose. Sweet Mother, how he made her ache!

"You make me burn, beauty." He drew her hand down to his erection, pulsing hot and heavy against the fingers she curled around him. His mind was a swirl of hot air, boiling water, pure fire. A chaos of pure need pulled her in until she drowned in sensation. Desire and need. The light of his passion drew her, but instead of burning, she took it in, took him in. It was a magic she'd never kenned, a joining she'd never conceived of. Body and mind. Heart and soul.

"Dracken rue, beauty, this is as real as it gets." Benilo sounded desperate as he thrust into Pryseis' wet, willing body. She held him close, in her heart, in her mind. He surged into her body, again and again, taking them both higher until barriers shattered as the Light swamped them both. *"I bind myself to you. Whenever, whatever your need, I shall come to you. To you do I answer with body or blood. My life for yours. My soul to yours, 'til our last breath. Never again shall you be alone. You are mine, in this lifetime and the next. I shall ever be yours, for always. We are one."*

Pryseis shattered in a splendor of Light, and he took her mouth to silence her cry as she screamed in his mind and pulsed around him. His heart answered her back as he poured himself into her. Solid earth in his muscles, churning water in the trickle of sweat, the blood boiling in the fiery heat of passion, the air in their shared breath, his very life as he succumbed to passion. She took it all in and flew. The cold air of the mountaintops, the Mother's very breath. The Light settled deep within their souls—sun, moon and stars.

Her net shone bright. She felt rejuvenated, almost as if she'd drunk from the pool itself. And Benilo...he felt whole. Healed. Balanced.

He gasped for breath. His eyes widened as he sensed the change in them both. "*Lady of Light, what have I done?*"

"Umm...I think you healed us both." She grinned. "Interesting technique, healer."

"It is more than that. Give it a moment." He looked wild and a little desperate as he took her hand and placed it against his stomach. "What do you feel?"

"Your skin under my hand." She stroked her hand across his stomach, and she flinched as she struck a ticklish spot—on her own side. It was as if she felt her own touch. Her heart pounded in her ear—with his trepidation. "Wait..."

He reached out to run his fingers through her hair, and she shuddered as the silken strands slid across her knuckles. "Stop it! What did you *do*?" Pryseis hissed, trying to keep her voice at a whisper. "Get out of my mind."

"I cannot." His voice was grim. His face, grimmer still. "I found a way to heal us, aye. But the only way to do so was to open up to the elements—and each other. I found a way for you to take my energy—by binding us together. As life mates."

She felt him in her heart, in her blood. In her mind. The words of the vow came back to her, blessed by the Mother. Permanent. Irreversible. "I don't believe this!"

"It was not what I intended to do at all," he defended himself. "I did not even intend to kiss you."

"Don't you blame me for this!"

"I do not, but I believe there was a higher power involved." He glared at her. "Without the pool, you would have died, Pryseis. I remember that much of my lessons. Faeries do not survive without a direct infusion of elemental energy. I can give you that. As much as you need, as often as you need."

His conviction burned in her chest. His pure intentions. He hadn't intended to bind them together, but it was the only way to do what they both needed doing. He'd needed healing as much as she had. And with the sharing, they were both stronger. She tried to recall what she knew of elven life mates. They knew what each other felt, thought. No secrets. No privacy.

"No loneliness," he whispered. "Total support. A passion that just grows hotter with time...and practice...with a partner who knows what you need almost before you need it."

She shivered at his words, at the way his gaze dropped to her breasts. She could almost feel his mouth on her, there...

He groaned, and she felt her body—his body—tighten in response. “Careful, beauty.”

“Well, you missed one. ’Tis feeling neglect-*ed*.” The last part of the word was all but a squeak as he captured her nipple betwixt his lips. She felt the pull of it betwixt her thighs.

“*So sweet...*” She caught Benilo’s thought, the wonder of her silken skin sliding against his body. She felt her tightly puckered nipple on her own tongue and panicked at the momentary disorientation.

“*Easy, beauty.*” Benilo was right there with her. “*Do not focus on you, or me. Just go with the feeling, the sensations. It is us.*”

It was like the dream, but a hundredfold more intense. Wonder and awe, softness and hard strength, drowning in fiery need. She rained kisses down his stomach, no longer hesitating at the trail of flame that flickered across her own skin. He stroked betwixt her wet swollen folds, and she felt the hot cream coating her fingers. She ached to be buried in all that softness, feel all that hot, wet tightness squeezing around her. She took him in her hand, in her mouth, and the exquisite agony of her tongue circling the sensitive head of an organ she didn’t even *have* almost made her shatter then and there.

“*Do it.*” His voice was rough, almost harsh, in her mind. He spun her about so she straddled his face. He buried his head betwixt her thighs, his tongue probing for the sensitive bud hidden in her folds. Embarrassment warred with excruciating arousal. “*Do not hold back.*” His need for the wet heat of her mouth, the intoxicating taste of her on his tongue, drove her to take him into her mouth, tracing the engorged vein that ran along the underside of his shaft. She moved on his mouth, rubbing against his tongue.

“Mmph!” Pryseis jerked as he suckled that bud into a point of pure fire and she shattered over him. Relaxing her mouth, she took him deeper, down her throat.

Benilo, too, was beyond words, at the wet heat of her tongue, stroking, pressing. She sucked him down, squeezed around him, and his body erupted. She started, gagged and then swallowed. The second shock of pleasure at that action all but knocked him senseless.

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