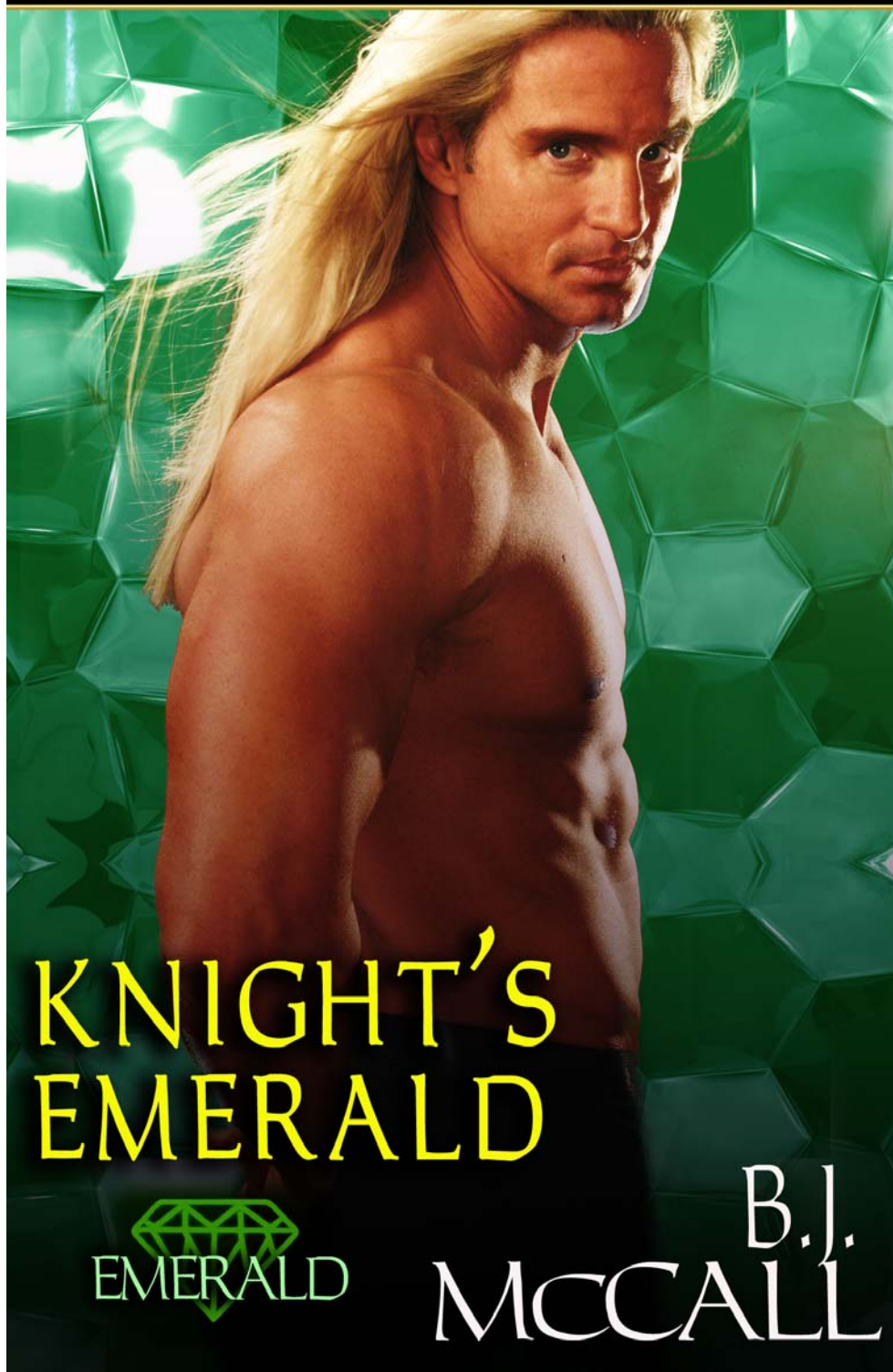


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



KNIGHT'S EMERALD


EMERALD

B.J.
MCCALL

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Knight's Emerald

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KNIGHT'S EMERALD

B.J. McCall

Chapter One

Con artists should be shot and Varis Montgomery deserved a bullet.

Swearing out loud, Astrid Radcliffe released her pent-up anger. A deep chuckle caught her off guard. Looking for the source, her gaze scanned the jagged rocks reaching like a long finger dipping into the sea.

Balancing a jean-clad knee against a rock face, Montgomery raised his camera and pointed the lens toward her.

She resisted the urge to flip off her grandmother's protégé.

A successful commercial photographer, Montgomery strived to be a painter. And thanks to her grandmother's patronage, his work was beginning to cause a stir in the San Francisco art community.

But the man was nothing more than a slick thief. How much money had he conned from her failing grandmother?

Despite her weak heart Morga Lynfield Radcliffe had a sharp mind and she'd seen beyond the handsome masks of men with velvet tongues pursuing Astrid for her trust fund or those seeking a portion of the dwindling Radcliffe fortune for myriad inventions, investments and charities. So why hadn't her grandmother looked beyond Montgomery's chiseled face and green eyes? As Morga had often commented during their conversations, the man should have been in front of the camera not behind it.

Tonight, Astrid would finally learn the extent of the financial damage.

Turning her back to Montgomery and the sea, Astrid looked at the L-shaped three-story house built over a hundred years ago by her enterprising ancestor. Modeled after a seventeenth-century manor house, the foundation was stone, the façade a soft gray, the lines more solid than graceful. Maintaining the place was a constant burden, but Astrid loved her home with every fiber of her being. She'd grown up playing in the

central courtyard and never tired of the stunning ocean views. Her gaze focused on the dormer windows poking out of the high-pitched roof. Recently her grandmother had renovated the unused servants quarters into an apartment, the entire third floor all for Montgomery.

Rejecting her grandmother's attempts at matchmaking, Astrid had not only refused to date the photographer, she'd deliberately avoided him. But avoiding Montgomery didn't prevent her from thinking about him, dreaming about him, imagining him naked and pondering the size his cock. The thought of him steel hard and deliciously long, the tip silken and burning hot came easily. Mentally, she dropped to her knees.

"Miss Radcliffe."

Astrid started and turned. Her pulse leaped. *Oh crap!*

Camera hanging around his neck, Montgomery stood just a few feet away.

"Sorry." A slight smile curved his lips. "I didn't mean disturb your thoughts."

A hot flush raced up her neck, her cheeks burned and her heart jumped into double time. She bit her lip.

He moved closer. The dark green pullover he wore outlined his broad shoulders and emphasized his eyes. "I wanted to thank you for inviting me to the reading."

"I didn't," she managed. "The attorney requested your presence. It was my grandmother's wish."

"Not yours?" He raised the camera and adjusted the lens. The multiple shutter clicks took her by surprise.

She turned away.

He lowered the camera. "Morga loved being photographed."

To make her point Astrid looked at him. "I'm not Morga. No photos tonight. Understood?"

His gaze held hers for a couple of heartbeats. "You don't like me do you?"

He aroused, confused and provoked her in more ways than she cared to acknowledge. Just being close to him was disconcerting but until tonight's proceedings were concluded she had to keep her foolish thoughts in check and be civil. "I expect you to respect my wishes."

"I'll make sure to leave my camera upstairs."

She'd seen Montgomery's professional work, the naked desire in the female models' eyes. The last thing she wanted was Montgomery capturing her errant thoughts on film. She imagined tossing his camera into the breaking waves below. A smile came easily at that thought.

He raised the camera and the shutter began clicking. "You have a beautiful smile. A great chin, fine cheekbones."

She bet he'd said the very same thing to his models. Astrid turned away and started walking back to the mansion.

Montgomery caught up and matched his strides with hers. "Tell me what I've done to offend you?"

"Tell me why you took advantage of my grandmother."

His step faltered. "I never. Ahhhh. My apartment."

Astrid stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. "No, Mr. Montgomery, my house, my apartment."

He cocked his head to one side. "You want me to leave?"

"Very perceptive, Mr. Montgomery."

His lips thinned. "Don't worry, Miss Radcliffe," he said, walking past her. "I'll be gone by sunrise."

Astrid pulled up her collar against the chilly offshore wind. "I'll say goodbye now."

He swung around to face her, blocking the path. "Given your feelings I don't understand why Morga made me promise to attend the reading."

Astrid had to look up to meet his gaze. Eyes like his should come with a warning label, *Caution, looking may result in unwanted cravings*. "But here you are keeping your promise."

"It was Morga's wish." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Perhaps the reading was her final attempt to bring us together."

Together. Tonight only the two of them would remain in the house. Astrid bit her lip. She'd learned the hard way not to fall for a handsome face. "I doubt that is the reason for your attendance tonight."

His gaze narrowed. "Morga had some foolish notion that you and I were, how did she put it, well suited."

A shiver slid down her spine. All she had to do was get through more one night and he'd be out of her house, the temptation removed. Astrid stepped around him. "Perhaps another rich benefactor would better suit you. Goodbye, Mr. Montgomery."

Her step quickened as he called out. "Like I said, a foolish notion."

Chapter Two

Five minutes before midnight, Varis entered the study. Standing behind a large desk the Radcliffe attorney acknowledged his presence with a nod. Looking over a half-dozen gray-haired ladies Varis spotted Astrid sitting alone in the front row.

Instead of the usual ponytail, she wore her platinum blonde hair in an upswept style. She turned her head and her blue eyes met his. Her lips parted and their gazes locked, held for a couple of potent heartbeats before she looked away.

That look drove him crazy. Something in her eyes belied her cool words and dismissive actions. *Did she have any inkling of how badly he wanted her? Any idea what she did to him?*

Varis nodded to each of the ladies, all of whom he'd photographed over the last several months and joined Astrid in the front row.

"This row is for family," she said without looking at him.

Given the somber occasion Astrid wore a long-sleeved black dress, striking in its contrast to her pale skin, black pumps and a single strand of pearls. Leaning close he caught the delicate scent of her perfume. "I thought you were the only family."

Cool annoyance flashed in her eyes. "Which means you aren't."

There it was again, that damned rejection. It made him want her all the more. She'd thrown down the rejection gauntlet the first day he'd taken residence on the third floor. That day he'd taken up the challenge to have her, fuck her senseless and make her beg for more. Celibate days turned to weeks then months. His hand had become his only source of relief.

Fucking adolescence all over again!

Tonight was his last night in this house, his last chance to melt the icy barrier she put up whenever he was present.

"I'm very sorry for your loss." His gaze slid over Astrid's long, slender fingers and delicate hands. "I was very fond of Morga."

"Thank you, Mr. Montgomery."

Whispers from row behind him told Varis Morga's friends hadn't missed a word of the interchange. Neither had the Radcliffe attorney, Mr. Finney. Astrid gave the lawyer a quick nod and Finney addressed the audience as to the purpose of the gathering and began to read a short list of bequests.

Each of the ladies, Morga's dearest friends, was to receive a sum of twenty thousand dollars. That announcement brought a few gasps. The cook, housekeeper and gardener received modest bequests. As expected all jewelry and monetary assets, bank accounts, stocks and bonds were bequeathed to Astrid.

The attorney cleared his throat. "The house and surrounding lands I bequeath to my granddaughter Astrid Radcliffe, and to my dear friend Varis Montgomery I bequeath the Radcliffe emerald."

"What?" Astrid jumped to her feet and poked a long finger in Varis' face. "You did this. How dare you!"

Shocked by the announcement, Varis shook his head.

"Miss Radcliffe." The lawyer squared his narrow shoulders. "I assure you the will reflects Morga's wishes."

"I doubt that, Mr. Finney." Fury burned in her eyes. "I think Morga was unduly influenced."

Varis shot out of his chair. "You're way out of line here."

At six foot two, he stood a good four inches taller, but she didn't back down. "That emerald is priceless."

Priceless? She had to be kidding. "I asked for nothing. I expected nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

To keep my promise to Morga.

"I was invited."

Morga had wanted Varis to remain in residence but he'd flatly refused and had rented an apartment in San Francisco. On her deathbed Morga had begged him to attend the reading and spend one final night in the mansion. To please her and to thank her for all she'd done for him, Varis had given his word. Never had Morga mentioned a ring.

Astrid glared at him. "That emerald belongs to me."

"You can have it."

"I'm sorry but that's impossible," Mr. Finney interjected. He turned toward the bevy of elderly women. "Ladies, it's time to earn your inheritance."

The women gathered around Varis and began to chant. The chant leader, Miss Ella, grasped his left hand. A thin line of gray mist appeared, curling around his arm and spiraling down to his fingers. When he saw the emerald ring she held, Varis tried to clench his fist but his hand refused to obey his brain's command.

What the hell?

The mist swirled, encircling his hand and coiling through his fingers like a long ribbon. Shocked, he watched his fingers spread open.

Over the thundering of his heart and the ladies' chanting Varis heard Astrid's furious cry. "Damn you, Morga!"

"Mr. Finney! I don't want the emerald."

Miss Ella shoved the ring onto his third finger and the mist dissolved.

The nonsensical rhyming chant about closing doors and morning light continued as the ladies filed out of the library. Flexing his hand, Varis stared at the emerald. "What the hell just happened?"

The attorney cleared his throat. "Please, be seated."

Astrid started to protest but Varis spoke over her and tugged on the ring. "I don't want the emerald."

"Sit down, both of you."

Still pulling on the ring that refused to budge Varis dropped into a seat. After tossing him a barbed look, Astrid took a seat at the end of the row.

"May I continue?"

Astrid gripped the edge of her chair and nodded at Finney.

"To inherit the following conditions must be met." The attorney looked at Astrid. "My granddaughter Astrid and my friend Varis must remain together in the house confined to the third floor until they break the spell of the knight's emerald."

"This is insane," Astrid said. Her fists were clenched so tight her knuckles were white.

Varis forced his gaze from Astrid and looked at Finney. "Did you say spell?"

Chapter Three

Astrid jumped to her feet. "He did."

Hands fisted on her hips she confronted him with so much fury, Varis recoiled.

"You thought you were going to walk out with a fortune, didn't you? You have no idea what you've conned your way into."

"I don't want the damn emerald," he said, shoving his hand toward her. "You can have it. Take it, it's yours."

"Are you willing to cut off your finger?" Finney asked.

Varis jerked around. "What? You're kidding, right?"

"Until the spell is broken the ring won't come off," Astrid said.

He snapped his head around to face her. "I don't believe in spells."

She glared at him. "You will."

"I'll have the ring cut off."

"I wouldn't attempt that Mr. Montgomery," Finney said. "The legend says that horrible consequences will befall the bearer."

Was Finney making this up? "What legend?"

Astrid waved a slender hand. "It's a long story."

"Maybe the ladies can chant the thing off again. Is that worth another twenty grand, Miss Radcliffe?"

Her blue eyes flashed. "If getting rid of you was so simple, I'd pay them double."

Varis gritted his teeth. "Then I'll find another way."

"What not try to break the spell?" Finney asked.

"This is crazy. I'm leaving."

"You can't," Finney said. "The exits have been sealed."

Surely he hadn't heard him correctly.

"We couldn't take the chance you'd panic and run."

Varis considered testing the doors, but the possibility that Astrid might laugh at him held him fast. She smirked as if she knew what he was thinking.

"What if Miss Radcliffe was to panic and run?"

Her back stiffened and her chin shot up.

"She'd lose the house," Finney said. "The historical society would inherit."

Okay. He'd play along with the game Morga had set up. The old girl must be enjoying herself right now. "What do we have to do to break the spell?"

Mr. Finney cleared his throat. "I think Miss Radcliffe should explain that in private, upstairs."

The pinking of Astrid's cheeks intrigued Varis. "Shall we, Miss Radcliffe? My apartment is quite comfortable."

"I'm sure it is."

Head held high, the heiress strode out of the room.

His gaze fastened on her lovely ass, Varis followed. Come hell or high water his dry spell was over. Gathered at the base of the main staircase the elderly ladies started chanting again.

Hips swaying, Astrid swept passed the chanters and headed up the stairs. The woman had fabulous legs and slender ankles worthy of a nibble. Ankles led to calves, then thighs and to what Varis suspected was the sweetest and most enchanting pussy. Once one broke through that cool exterior that is.

Lord, he wanted to fuck her!

Taking the stairs two at a time Varis caught up with Astrid on the second floor landing. The singsong voices carried up the stairwell.

When they reached the third floor, Varis asked, "Why are they chanting?"

Astrid's lips curved into a sly, seductive smile. "Try going downstairs."

Suspicious of the obvious challenge Varis turned. Instead of stepping down he walked into an invisible wall. Knocked off balance he stumbled backward. "What the hell?"

"They sealed off the apartment from the rest of the house."

"That's impossible." Varis reached out, everywhere he touched he met resistance and a swirling mist surrounded his hand. When he pulled his hand away the mist dissolved back into the invisible barrier running from floor to ceiling. Shaking his head in disbelief he glanced at Astrid. "What's the trick?"

"Unfortunately we are the subjects of another spell. Or in this case, the victims."

"One wasn't enough? How are they doing it?"

"Miss Ella is a witch."

With that she walked away.

Varis took a deep breath and followed her into the living room.

"Witch? Miss Ella? That sweet little ole lady?"

Astrid settled onto the leather sofa and crossed her legs. Her hem slid up, revealing several inches of pale thigh. He ached to bury his face in her crotch.

She snapped her fingers. When he looked up she gave him an indulgent smile. "Want to try the stairs again?"

He threw up his hands. "What am I saying? There are no such things as witches."

Astrid kicked off her heels and curled her fabulous legs beneath her. "Tell me you have something to drink, Mr. Montgomery."

Liquor sounded damn good. Varis removed his jacket and walked into the kitchen. He glanced over the open counter into the living room where Astrid sat rubbing her temples.

"What's your poison? I have gin and a bottle of champagne."

"Since we have nothing to celebrate I'll take a martini."

Her verbal jab hit hard. He pulled the bottle of gin out of the freezer, grabbed the vermouth out of the refrigerator and set them on the counter with a decided *thunk*. He didn't want the emerald. Before mixing the drinks Varis turned on the tap and tugged on the ring. It still wouldn't budge. He added soap and pulled harder but nothing happened.

Astrid fingered her pearls. "You still don't get it do you?"

"Get what?"

"Mix the martinis, Mr. Montgomery, and I'll explain."

He poured the gin and added a splash of vermouth. Drinks in hand Varis joined Astrid on the sofa. "Sorry, I'm fresh out of olives."

Her slender hand wrapped around the glass. "Apology accepted."

"Since we're stuck here together how about calling a truce?"

Her gaze met his. "I've been real bitch, haven't I?"

He saw a tiny crack in that cool exterior. "Call me Varis?"

She glanced around, rubbed her hand over the arm of the sofa. "You did a great job with the space, Varis. Did you know this was my father's favorite sofa?"

He shook his head.

"Morga couldn't bear to look at it. She stored it up here after he died."

"I enjoyed living here. The views are exceptional."

She sipped her martini. After a long minute he asked, "About this legend?"

"Relax, Varis. You make an excellent martini and you'll have an easier time with this after we've finished our drinks."

Varis started to protest but realized Astrid had actually complimented him twice. Things were looking up. He removed his shoes, propped his feet on the coffee table and sank into the plush leather sofa.

While they sipped their drinks Varis let his gaze slid over Astrid. Years of patrician breeding rested in her features. Her eyes were ice blue, her skin pale and flawless, her

chin slightly sharp and her nose straight and perfectly proportioned. She sipped her drink, the gin glistening on her full lower lip.

Did passion burn beneath that cool, confident surface?

The photographer in him wanted to ignite her emotions and capture them on film, the painter hungered to portray them on canvas and the man ached to experience them firsthand.

He imagined her naked, beneath him, those fabulous legs wrapped around his waist and her wet pussy tight around his cock. A deep thrum began in his middle, pushing his heart rate higher, heating his blood. *Did she scream when she came?*

"You're staring, Varis."

"I'd like to photograph you."

He wondered how she would have reacted if he'd told her he wanted to bend her over the back of the sofa and fuck her from behind.

Her fingers stroked the stem of her glass, sliding up and down the smooth length. Varis imagined her hand doing the same to his cock.

Her hand pausing mid-stroke she looked away. A few seconds later she asked, "Morga never mentioned the knight's emerald to you?"

Trying to ignore the deep throbbing in his balls, Varis looked at the emerald ring. Set in gold, the square-cut gem was impressive. "Until tonight, I never knew it existed. So tell me the legend of the knight's emerald."

"I'll give you the short version."

"Please."

"The legend begins with two knights, the emerald knight and the black knight, who fought side by side during the crusades. The emerald knight was betrothed to the daughter of a wealthy lord, the marriage arranged before the lady had taken her first steps.

The betrothed knight was wounded in battle. Hovering at death's door, he gave the ring to the black knight and made him pledge to present it to the lady as a token of his fidelity and his family's honor."

Astrid sipped her martini. "Struck by the lady's beauty, the black knight courted her with vigor.

But the wounded knight survived and demanded the marriage contract be fulfilled. Unfortunately, the lady had fallen in love with the black knight. She refused to marry her betrothed.

Wanting to ensure the lady's passion, the emerald knight sought the help of a sorcerer. The sorcerer placed a spell upon the ring and instructed the knight to take the lady away from her servants and relatives for only in isolation would the couple find bliss."

Varis swallowed the last of his drink. "Did it work?"

"The knight sequestered his lady in the tower room of her father's castle and after a fortnight together the lady submitted. Within the year she delivered a son."

"So why did Morga give the ring to me?"

"Morga picked you, Varis. While Miss Ella put the ring on your finger she evoked the spell of the knight's emerald."

"Morga believed that by throwing us together for the night we'd fall madly in love like the knight and the lady?"

"The ring has been in our family for hundreds of years. Morga believed the legend."

"Do you?"

Her gaze remained on her drink. "I know we're imprisoned on this floor until we break the spell."

A delicious suspicion swirled in his middle. Varis placed a fingertip beneath her chin, gently forcing her to look at him. "Astrid, how do we break the spell?"

She visibly swallowed. "We sleep together."

* * * * *

"Sleep?" His thumb slipped over her cheek. "As in resting in the same bed or as in fucking each other brains out?"

His gaze, as emerald green as the ring on his finger, held Astrid spellbound and his touch sent tingles down her spine. "The latter."

A seductive smile touched his lips. Over the rim of her glass Astrid watched his expression change from sensual to sinful. "I'm rather good at the latter."

Was his cool confidence an act or was he as good as he looked?

Since the ring was placed on his finger Astrid had known exactly what Morga had intended. Once under the spell she'd be putty in his hands.

His fingertips slid along her neck, leaving a promising trail of fire.

She sucked in a breath. *Oh God.*

"Relax, Astrid. Breaking this spell might be satisfying."

Deep in her middle she went hot and tight. "You realize Morga didn't go to all this trouble for a midnight quickie?"

He leaned closer. "Who said anything about a quickie?"

His whispered words slid over her like a sensual caress.

"I need another drink."

"You haven't finished the one you have."

Fully aware the gin wasn't the only thing heating her blood, Astrid downed the rest of her martini.

Varis took the empty glass out of her hand and set it aside. When he cupped her face in his big hands her pulse leaped. Head tilted, he lowered his mouth to hers.

He kissed her with an unhurried ease, letting her senses come alive to the feel of his lips, the warmth of his body, the scent of his skin. His long fingers were hot against her flesh, his touch tender and so very tantalizing.

His tongue slid over hers, teasing and testing, the taste of him delicious and seductive.

His scent engulfed her, touching something deep, needy and earthy, long ignored and prime for blossoming. Desire coiled in her belly, heating her core. Her pussy fluttered and creamed.

He raked a thumb along her jaw, grazing the lobe of her ear. His breath hitched telling her wasn't immune to the spell.

The touch of his hand on her knee made her gasp. His fingers dipped beneath her dress, slowly slid up her bare thigh. She trembled as he slipped a fingertip under the edge of her panties, skimmed her damp curls.

Instinctively she relaxed, nearly came as the pad of his finger brushed over her clit.

Ohmigod.

The bone-melting kiss ended leaving her breathless and aroused. Although her mind acknowledged her reaction was spell driven, her body didn't care. She ached and trembled and deep within her womb she thrummed.

When he started to unzip her dress, the possible consequences of their induced passion washed over her. She snapped her legs together.

"I'd like another martini."

Lips thinning, he released the zipper tab. "I'd prefer you conscious."

"Please, Varis."

His erection obvious, he rose and strode into the kitchen. While he mixed the drinks Astrid counted the days since her last period.

Varis joined her on the sofa and handed her a fresh martini. "Perhaps this will smooth the wrinkle from your brow."

"Can't hurt."

He frowned. "Is it fucking me or fucking in general you object to?"

She looked him in the eyes. "I like fucking."

His left eyebrow shot up. Astrid sipped her martini. The cold liquid slid smoothly down her hot throat. "Have you considered the consequences the spell might bring?"

A smile curved his lips. "Just because the knight wanted to claim the lady I doubt I'll be driven to drag you to the altar and force you to marry me in the morning."

"The knight's spell wasn't cast for matrimony. To honor the contract the lady's father would have dragged her, kicking and screaming, to the altar. The knight wanted passion and a son."

That got his attention.

"Like I said Morga didn't go to all this trouble just for your pleasure. Please, Varis, tell me you have condoms."

Groaning, he shook his head.

Astrid's insides clenched. "We're screwed!"

Laughter bubbled out of his chest.

"This isn't amusing."

"I'm sorry," he said, popping the top two buttons of his white shirt open. "It's like I'm caught in some weird dream."

Although he'd apologized he was have difficulty suppressing his mirth. He wiped his eyes and looked at her.

"It's the ultimate predicament. Thanks to a *spell* I'm locked up with a beautiful woman, totally consumed by her, so hot my insides are shaking and without a single condom."

Beautiful. Hot and consuming. His words were as sensual as his touch. Thick, searing desire moved through her.

"Can we wait them out?" he asked. "Surely, they'll let us out in the morning."

"Mr. Finney will handle my calls and appointments. The staff is off for the weekend. How long before you're missed?"

"I'm due in L.A. the day after tomorrow."

"Think you can hold out 'til the cavalry arrives?"

He tossed back a good portion of his drink. "Not a chance. What about you?"

Astrid sipped her martini, welcomed the buzz. "A couple more of these of neither of us will care."

He set his drink aside, whisked hers out of her fingers and placed it out of her reach. "It's going to happen, Astrid." His gaze met hers. "You and I naked, together, entwined." His voice dropped. "We can't stop it. I'm not sure I want to, despite the possible consequences."

Her breath caught.

He cupped the base of her head, drawing her close. "I've wanted you for too damn long to let you get so shit-faced you won't care or remember who's inside you."

His eyes glittered. "I want you to feel everything I do to you. Every kiss, every lick, every touch, every stroke."

Heat flooded her insides, her skin went tight and hot and her clothes were suddenly restrictive.

Chapter Four

One by one he plucked the pins from her hair, threading his fingers through the thick mass until it fell loose over her shoulders. He brushed his lips against hers, caught her lower lip between his teeth.

Inside everything heated and tightened, ached.

Astrid closed her eyes as he kissed a path along the column of her neck. Pausing, he pressed his lips to her wildly pulsing artery.

He lifted his head. "I've dreamed of being inside you."

She unbuttoned his shirt, slid her hands over his muscled chest. Heat seeped through her palms, warming her blood. She slid her thumb over one flat nipple, licked the nub.

He grasped her hand, pressing his lips to her palm. "I feel like I'm on fire."

"It's the spell."

"It's you."

Her heart leaped at his admission.

He drew her close, crushing her breasts to his solid chest and lowered her to the sofa. Her back sank into the soft, cool leather. Stretching out beside her, Varis kissed her, thoroughly, deeply, coaxing her tongue into his mouth. He suckled her tongue, she answered in kind.

Seeking his heat, she pressed her mons to the hard ridge of his erection.

When he lifted his head, she moistened her lips where the taste of him lingered.

"Astrid, look at me."

Struggling out of the sensual fog he'd spun, she opened her eyes and met his fiery gaze. Desire rolled through her, hot and heavy, melting the last glimmer of caution.

Caught in the spell's heady magic, Astrid trembled.

"We're doing this?"

She nodded.

"No stopping. No excuses. I don't think I could handle it."

She fisted his shirt and yanked the tails out of his waistband.

The color of his eyes deepened as he shifted his weight, gripped the hem of her dress and pushed it up baring her thighs, exposing her silk panties.

He sucked in a breath. His fingertips skated along the waistband of her panties.
"Red is my favorite color."

Tonight of all nights, why had she chosen the red?

She'd worked very hard to deny the sensual beast he evoked. A beast she'd managed to suppress whenever Varis was in residence, except in her dreams. But until now they'd been just that, dreams that left her aching and wet.

"Tonight," he said, caressing her through the thin silk, his fingertips gently furrowing. "Nothing should surprise me."

He bit his lower lip and groaned. "You're so soft"

Her heart skipped a beat at the huskiness of his voice. He slipped a finger beneath her panties, brushed a fingertip over her clit. Slow and easy, he eased her aching bud from its protective hood. With each gentle stroke, her breath came faster, hotter.

"Take off your pearls."

"Ohhhhh. What?"

The pad of his finger circled her clit. "Take off your pearls."

The circles became tighter, faster. Hovering near climax, she reached up and released the clasp. The pearls slid between her breasts and landed in her lap.

When Varis removed his fingertip, Astrid cried out in protest. "Varis, please."

Her clit burning, she watched him wrap her great-grandmother's pearls around his fingers, covering the joints. Slowly, he ran his hand up and down her inner thighs,

pressing the pearls against her soft flesh. With each delicious stroke the pearls came closer to her pussy.

Never had any man turned her on in so provocative way.

The pearls skimmed her silk-clad pussy, bringing her ass off the sofa.

Oh God. That felt good.

He settled his hand between her legs, rubbing the pearls along her slit over her clit and back again. She closed her eyes, focused on the amazing heat building between her legs, the hot throbbing of her pussy and her burning clit.

Each brush of the pearls brought her closer to climax. Her thighs trembling, she moaned.

"Look at me, Astrid."

She sucked in a breath as he rolled the pearls over her clit. Swearing softly, she opened her eyes.

His were like green fire, his expression intent. "Look into my eyes when you scream."

Ohmigod. The pearls, the silk, the sweet friction, totally erotic, more than she could take. Noisy and blatant, screaming his name, she climaxed, drenching the patch of silk beneath the moving pearls.

His gaze held hers and his hand remained between her legs until her pussy ceased trembling. When her breathing returned to something close to normal he removed his hand and unwound the pearls.

To her surprise he replaced the necklace and brushed his lips to hers. "I like you in pearls."

Never would she think of her great-grandmother's necklace in quite the same way.

He stood, took her hands and drew her to her feet. "Nothing but pearls."

Her whole body clenched.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her down a short hall to the bedroom and

set her on her feet.

The slanted ceiling, low walls and dim lighting gave the room a cavelike feeling. A huge bed covered in white dominated the tight space. Other than the massive bed the room had no furniture or personal items. Groupings of electric candles placed in far corners cast a low but warm, inviting golden glow.

He'd set the stage for seduction. Ready to submit, Astrid imagined what was to come. Images of Varis naked and hard filled her mind, set her heart to racing.

He stood behind her, his breath warm against the nape of her neck. Anticipation sang through her blood. His lips settled against her skin and his fingers grasped the zipper of her dress. His fingertips followed the zipper's whisper along her spine to the small of her back.

Those warm fingers slipped beneath her dress, gently guiding the material off her shoulders and down her arms. The black knit pooled around her feet.

She heard the rustle of clothes as he undressed. Naked, he pressed his body to her back and wrapped his arms around her waist.

He splayed his hands over her belly, caressing her, leaving a trail of fire wherever he touched. His arms were thick with muscle, tanned and dusted with dark hair.

The hard ridge of him pressed against her buttocks, his heat seeping through the delicate silk. He nipped her shoulder.

"I want to devour you."

She leaned into him, dropped her head back and closed her eyes, an act of total submission. Reaching back, she gripped his thighs, rubbing her palms over his hard muscles.

He popped the front clasp of her bra, freeing her breasts for a mere second before enclosing them in his big hands. Calloused thumbs rasped her nipples to throbbing points. Palms kneaded and long fingers caressed her flesh.

Everywhere she ached. Everywhere he touched she burned.

Using his teeth he pushed the thin straps off her shoulders.

She turned letting the bra fall away, grasped a handful of his dark, silky hair and met his glittering gaze. "Devour me."

In a heartbeat she was stretched out on his bed, his muscled chest pressed to hers, the ridge of his erection digging into the soft flesh of her belly.

His mouth swooped down, capturing hers, his tongue slid into her mouth. She grabbed his shoulders, caressed his arms and back, tunneling her fingers into his thick muscles.

He thrust his hips, making her aware of each hard inch of his cock. Her toes curled and her heart pounded.

The touch of his hand to her breast sent a spiral of heat straight to her pussy. He filled his hand with her flesh, kneading and caressing. Her blood went hot, her bones liquid.

She arched her back seeking more pleasure, more heat.

The lush kiss ended, his lips tearing from hers, covering a nipple and drawing deeply. He suckled, tugging fiercely on her swollen nipple. Her pussy throbbed and burned.

Mindless she fisted his hair, demanding more.

His tongue swirled around her nipple, his teeth nipping the aching point. He grabbed her ass, kneading her flesh.

He rocked his hips, digging his hard length into the soft inner flesh of her thigh. She wanted his cock inside her, now. Thrusting her pelvis, she wanted him to know her need.

"Fuck me."

"Not yet," he whispered.

Silently, she cursed him as a rolling ache tore through her.

He kissed his way down to her bellybutton, teasing her quivering skin with his

warm breath before suckling her flesh.

A trail of fire followed his lips. Heat poured off her skin, yet she shivered in anticipation as his lips touched the lacy edge of her panties and his fingers rubbed the damp silk between her legs.

"I love wet silk."

His words had barely pierced her brain before his mouth was pressed to the silk shielding her pussy. The sliding of his tongue against the silk sent shock waves through her body and heat racing through her bloodstream.

She clenched and creamed, bit her lip to keep from screaming.

The wet silk clung to her pussy, the heat of his mouth penetrating the soaked material. The friction of silk against hot flesh took her to the sweet edge.

His lips settled against the silk, seeking, finding her clit. He suckled, tugging greedily on her aching bud.

The needy moan building in her throat came out as a muffled scream as her climax slammed through her, the intensity taking her by complete surprise.

She bucked her hips, thrusting her pussy against his mouth, again and again, demanding more.

He pressed his lips tighter, heightening the pleasure, the passion, bringing her to another deeper, rolling pinnacle.

Lungs burning, her breath came in fast puffs and her insides trembled. The aftermath convulsing within her shook Astrid to the core. Never had she come with such raw passion.

He placed his hand over the narrow strip of wet silk, massaging her, making her burn again. He gripped the wet, fragile silk, pressed the heel of his hand to her pussy. Wanting more, she rocked her hips, rubbing her pussy against his palm.

Green and fiery, his gaze met hers. Then silk ripped. No match for his powerful hand her panties were gone in one swift yank. He dropped his head, his hot breath

grazing her wet curls before he buried his tongue inside her convulsing flesh.

Her pulse leaped and her pussy trembled. After months of physical depravation her senses burned, every cell came alive and hungered for more.

His lips moved over her quivering folds and his tongue licked the walls of her pussy. His hair brushed her inner thighs, teasing the sensitive flesh, adding to the sensory pleasure.

She sizzled, creaming beneath his agile tongue and demanding lips. After a hundred nights of unfulfilled anguish she exploded like bursts of fireworks.

Digging her fingers into the mattress, she bucked beneath him, pushing her throbbing clit against his tongue. Gripping her ass with one big hand, he held her tight. He suckled hard and deep, driving her to the peak of ecstasy.

She clenched her teeth and gushed.

He licked her juices, soothing her trembling pussy until she stretched like a satisfied cat.

When he rose to his knees, Astrid opened her eyes and sucked in a breath. At the sight of him, her pussy clenched. The candlelight flickered over his skin, accentuating the tan line riding low on his lean hips and the thick erection jutting from the nest of black curls between his muscled thighs.

Her imagination hadn't done him justice.

His gaze held hers as he eased his weight over her, settled his hips between her open thighs. He fisted his big cock and rubbed the broad head along her slit.

She grasped his shoulders, held on as he probed, dipping the thick crown into her wet folds. Seated, he thrust, pushing deep and fast.

A groan tore from his throat. She answered with a moan and arched her hips.

Thick and hot, hard as stone, his cock filled her, stretching her to accept his size and length.

Gasping, Astrid and wrapped her legs around his lean waist, surging her hips up,

taking his next thrust.

He went deep then withdrew, sliding his hard flesh against her slick quivering walls. She tightened around him, her pussy sucking on his moving shaft.

An audible breath exploded from his chest. His muscles tensed, stilled. His cock twitched.

He sucked in a deep breath, looked into her eyes and grasped her hand. Fingers gripping hers almost to the point of pain, he pulled her hand high over her head. Then he began to move his hips in a slow, primal rhythm with only his grunts and her gasps as the music.

His gaze never wavered, the eye-to-eye contact enhancing each deep thrust, every slow withdrawal. He filled her, again and again, his trim belly rubbing against hers, his solid chest brushing her breasts with each lush stroke.

He lowered his head, captured her nipple between his lips and suckled lustily. She grabbed him tight, tugging with equal intensity on his hot flesh.

He nipped her breast. She squeezed down on him, hard.

Surging and retreating they moved together, the pace quickening, the urgency building. The air heated and thickened. Perspiration dewed his hot skin, slicking her breasts and their bellies.

He drove into her, wild and relentless, making her wetter, hotter, taking her to an unimaginable erotic edge and beyond.

She clenched, quivering in a gush of wet heat, crying out his name.

The cords of his neck stood out and wet strands of hair clung to his forehead. He plunged deep. Then an intense shudder over took him.

When their breathing returned to normal, his brazen green gaze met hers. "Is the lady satisfied?"

She brushed his hair off his forehead. "Almost."

Chapter Five

She fisted his hair, aggressively suckling his tongue.

Varis expected a gentle kiss, a moment of cozy warmth, not a demand. Her soft body arched beneath him, her breasts pushing against his chest, insistent and compelling.

That she wanted still wanted him sent a shot of pleasure right to his balls.

He rolled onto his back, taking her with him. Stretched out on top of him, she rolled her hips.

“Uhmnnnnnn.”

“You may have to work for this one,” he said, praying she wanted to do all sorts of wonderful things to him with her soft hands and hot mouth.

Giving him a predatory stare, she flipped her hair back and straddled his thighs. Then she licked her lips.

“That will bring back the dead,” he said.

She stroked his shaft, her touch far too gentle. He ached to grab her by the hair and guide her beautiful mouth to his cock. Just the thought of her sucking his cock made his balls start humming.

His pulse leaped when she licked her palms and slid them up and down his length, base to head and back again. With each stroke, she gripped him tighter and moved her hand faster, bringing him to full erection.

He sucked in a breath.

Smiling she leaned down, licked the tip of his cock and blew gently, her warm breath teasing his wet flesh.

His blood thundering, Varis anticipated the moment she'd take him in her mouth and ease his torment.

Wet and hot, her lush mouth surrounded his cock bringing sweet relief. Her tongue curled around the sensitive crown.

"Suck me."

She took him deep and firm, devouring his length so quickly his ass came off the mattress. She gripped the root of him, tightening her fingers around the shaft as she sucked him.

Her tongue encircled the crown and slid along the underside as she swallowed his length, then tugged her way back to the throbbing head. Again and again, she devoured him, sucking him hard.

She grasped his sac, rolling his balls in her palm, driving him insane.

The deep thrum in his balls increased, the pressure building as she sucked and tugged on his shaft. Riding the edge of climax, he groaned. He needed to come inside her, find his satisfaction in her tight pussy.

Varis gripped her hair, tugged gently until she released his throbbing cock. Lips glistening and blue eyes burning, her gaze met his.

He shifted position and knelt in the center of the bed.

"Lord, I want to fuck you. Come inside you."

Her gaze dropped to his straining cock.

"I want it raw and wild," he warned.

She looked at him, lifted her chin in challenge and climbed onto his lap. In the candlelight he could see the soft flesh of her pussy, her glistening inviting folds. His cock jerked. She touched his chest, her nails scrapping over his nipples before moving down to his belly.

She grasped his cock, planted the tip in her moist center and plunged, forcing him between her wet, fleshy lips.

“Fuck me.”

Varis lunged upward, driving his cock inside her sweet pussy. She met his thrust, took him so deep he nearly came. Tight and wet, she clenched around him.

A believer in safe sex and a consistent user of condoms, the erotic skin-to-skin contact had Varis reeling. He gripped her ass, restrained his need to control the rhythm.

Breasts bouncing she rode him fast, pounding her pussy on his shaft. He gritted his teeth and thrust his hips, driving into her heat again and again. Relentless, she punished his cock. He shuddered, his muscles protesting his efforts to hold back his release.

Dewed with perspiration, his slick skin slid against hers.

She ratcheted up the pace, pushing him to fuck her hard and fast. Heart hammering and blood thundering, his muscles shook and his breath came in harsh gulps. His lungs screamed, but still she rode him, sucking his cock with her tight pussy, taking him closer to climax with each rhythmic thrust of her amazing hips.

She throbbed around him, clenching and grabbing.

Every muscle shaking from exertion, the sharp edge of ecstasy slammed into him. Silently screaming with unbridled bliss, Varis yielded to the intense pressure. Pulsing waves shot from his balls, spurting hot semen into her quivering cunt.

* * * * *

Shifting in his sleep, Varis touched warm skin. Remembering with whom he slept, he smiled and caressed Astrid’s perfectly rounded ass.

He’d wanted Astrid since the first time he’d laid eyes on her months ago, but she would have nothing to do with him.

Thanks to the spell they’d finally connected and he’d had the most amazing fuck of his life. Desire rolled through him stirring his cock to life. Perhaps the time constraints spurred him or the real possibility that Astrid would want nothing to do with him once the spell had run its course.

Good God. She had him believing in spells.

He tugged on the ring. It didn't budge.

Hot and eager for more spell sex, his cock stretched.

Snuggling closer he reached between her thighs, probed her pussy finding it wet and responsive. He added a finger, pumped her soft flesh than added another. In his dreams, he'd often taken her from behind. Tonight, he wanted to end the fantasy.

She stirred. Varis removed his hand and placed a slick finger against her lips.

"Suck it."

She did, suckling it with the same gusto with which she'd taken his cock in her mouth. She suckled each finger, ending her erotic exploration with his ring finger. Her tongue slid over the emerald.

"It won't come off," he said.

He rolled her onto her stomach and stretched out on top of her, pressing his erection to her fine ass.

"I'm going to fuck you 'til it does."

Slowly he kissed his way down her spine, sucking and nipping her soft skin. He licked the curve of her ass, sliding his tongue along the crease between one firm globe and her thigh. He teased the tender crevice between her cheeks with his finger until the veins lacing his cock were turgid with hot blood and her moans were a siren's song.

Varis kneeled between her spread thighs and stroked his straining cock. Slipping an arm beneath her waist, he lifted her hips. Lush and inviting, her pussy beckoned.

He caressed her ass, kneading her soft flesh before slipping a hand between her thighs. Using her natural lubricant he slicked two fingers before thrusting them deep inside her pussy. Her passage hot and wet, he fucked her slowly until she moaned and demanded his cock.

"Varis, now, please."

Fisting his length, he went home in a heart-stopping thrust. Her pussy closed around him, squeezing, pulling him into her wet heat.

He loved fucking her, feeling her moist folds slide over him.

She rocked back, taking him deeper and deeper.

Lord, he wanted to thrust hard and fuck her 'til his heart quit. Balls humming and blood thundering, Varis reined in his desire to climax. He wanted to share the moment of ecstasy, the rapture, wanted her quivering as he filled her with cum.

He had to hold on, combat the sweet fury building in his balls.

Varis sucked in a couple of deep breaths, thought he had command of his body. That tenuous control slipped as Astrid's hot pussy sucked on his cock.

He planted a quick, light slap on her ass then caressed the same spot with his palm. Her pussy creamed, wet and hot. He gave her another sweet slap. Rewarded with a flood of hot cream, he smacked her again.

Skin slapped and primal gasps filled the room as Varis deepened his strokes, fucking her hard. Perspiration drenched his hair, ran down his thighs and beaded the small of his back. Balls humming and riding the hot edge, he resisted the urge to give her another sensual tap.

"Again, Varis. Again!"

His palm connected with her sweet ass. Her back arched and a high pitch keening sound tore from her throat. Pussy pulsing wildly, she grabbed him in a viselike grip and soaked his cock with hot cum.

Powerful and intoxicating, his climax wrenched free.

His breath burned his lungs, heat poured from his skin and his legs trembled.

On the verge of collapse, Varis withdrew and stretched out beside Astrid. Smiling, he curled his body to hers and closed his eyes.

Chapter Six

Varis awoke to bright sunlight. Squinting, he looked around the bedroom and wondered if Astrid had deserted him sometime during the night. But what a night!

Raking a hand through his hair he realized the emerald was still on his finger. She wouldn't have gone far.

"Good Morning." Wearing his white dress shirt Astrid appeared in the doorway holding two steaming mugs. "Coffee?"

Pleased she was wearing his shirt and hopefully nothing else, Varis sat up and draped the sheet over his lower body. "You're an angel."

"I hope you like it black."

He nodded. Coffee in hand, Varis waited 'til she sat on the edge of the bed. Bathed in sunlight, her hair glowed like spun gold.

"Thanks for the coffee. I take it we can move around the house?"

"We can."

He held out his left hand. "I guess you'll be wanting the ring."

It came off with ease. Although he didn't want the ring her quick action to retrieve it stung.

She palmed the emerald. "Thanks."

"Quite a night."

Hers lips curved into a gentle smile. "You were right about one thing."

He eyed her over the rim of his cup. Her long blonde hair fell well past her shoulders and her face appeared makeup free and freshly scrubbed. She was so damn beautiful he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"What's that?" he asked, ignoring the quickening of his heart.

"You really are pretty good at the latter."

Her admission sent joy shooting through his chest, clutching at his heart. "I take it we've broken the spell."

"I think we can consider it done."

Sipping his coffee, he recalled her concerns. The possibility she might have conceived didn't cause him a moment's worry. He had to let her know that he'd embrace her condition. Either way, last night was just a beginning. He wanted forever. He had no idea what Astrid wanted. "And if there are consequences?"

"This was Morga's game. I won't hold you responsible."

"Don't push me away, Astrid. I'd like to see how you look in the rest of my shirts."

She sat her coffee cup on the windowsill. "I realize Morga appeared to be rich, but there is no vast Radcliffe fortune. There was once but now I strive to maintain the house and the grounds and pay the taxes. Morga's personal funds are gone. My trust fund was locked up to keep it away from the parents. I only get the income and I won't sell the emerald."

Not liking the direction of the conversation he asked, "Your point is?"

"I can't help your career."

Fury raced through him and pain laced his heart. Even after the amazing night they'd shared she still believed he wanted her money. "I never accepted or conned money from Morga. In fact the only thing I did was escort her to events, which I enjoyed and yes she did introduce me to gallery owners and art critics. Using this apartment and those introductions was the extent of Morga's generosity. I don't want or need your patronage."

"Then I wish you well."

She turned away and looked out the window.

"That's where you want to leave it?"

Instead of responding she leaned forward, her attention focused outside.

"Astrid, I want to see you again."

Her gasp told him she'd seen his special view below.

The ring dropped from her hand onto the windowsill. "You can see my balcony from here."

Her head snapped around. Accusations against him colored her expression.

"I didn't design the house," he said in his defense.

"You should have told me. I thought this was still used for storage. Last night I should have realized."

"I used the bedroom for a studio. The light's better. The bed fit so I made this my bedroom."

"I sunbathe out there. I, I've, damn you, Varis." Fury blazed in her eyes. "That's my private balcony."

He had seen her naked and in various states of dress. One night he'd watched her bring herself to orgasm. Although her hands were mostly hidden beneath her pajamas, watching her in the throes of climax was one of the most erotic moments of his life. A short time later he'd jerked off in the shower, but maybe now wasn't the time to share that information.

"I saw you naked, more than once," he admitted. "You are a beautiful woman, Astrid. Your body is like a work of art, irresistible to the artist."

He edged closer to her. She shot to her feet, came close to smacking her head on the slanted ceiling. "You photographed me?"

"I sketched you."

"It's okay to be a voyeur if you're an artist?"

Placing his cup next to hers, he hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her down on top of him. The moment his back hit the bed, he rolled her beneath him.

"I am mesmerized by your beauty. If that's makes me a voyeur, I plead guilty. I want you, Astrid. I want to photograph you, paint you, fuck you, make love to you and sleep with you in my arms."

A smile hovered at the corners of her mouth. "It was the spell. It made us both a little wild."

He recalled the powerful climaxes that had racked his body. But he'd felt more than just physical pleasure. "I thought we connected."

"Surely our emotions were more passionate as well."

She'd affected his emotions for weeks. Last night's intimacy had just given them more depth.

"What happened between us last night was about as real as it gets."

He slid his hand underneath the tail of the shirt, running his fingers over her skin to cup her bare breast. Beneath his palm her heart pounded, the rapid pace telling him she wasn't immune to his touch. "This thing between us is real."

Shifting his hips, he pushed her thighs apart and positioned the head of his stretching cock against her moist slit. He rocked his hips, seating the sensitive tip inside her soft wetness. *Oh, God.*

"Put you legs around me."

To his surprise she complied. He went rock hard.

"It can't always be raw and wild," she said, rubbing a thigh against his hip.

He parted the tails of the shirt. Skin met skin.

"Sometimes it will be raw and wild, sometimes sweet and mellow. No matter the intensity, I'll still want you. Today, tomorrow and the day after that."

Intent on proving his words Varis entered her slowly.

"Make love to me, Astrid."

With each thrust, she opened, her warm, moist walls contracting around him, her lush pussy welcoming him.

"Lord, I love fucking you."

He rasped her nipple with his thumb, stroking the taut point until she moaned and clamped down on his cock. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. With each sweet twist she rewarded him with a tiny gasp and another squeeze.

No matter how many times they made love he'd never get enough of her.

Their breathing became ragged and very air around them heated. Again and again, she surged up to meet his faster thrusts, milking him, taking him closer to heaven.

A cry tore from her throat as she clamped down on him, tighter, engulfing his cock in a hot creamy flush.

Coming in lusty bursts, Varis joined her.

Body still humming, he rested his forehead against hers. "Did that meet your expectations?"

She pushed on his shoulders. "I had none."

"Sure you did," he said, rolling onto his back.

"You're a great fuck." She sat up and adjusted the shirt. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"It's a start."

She started to climb out of bed. He caught the tail of the shirt and pulled her back.

"Going somewhere?"

"I have a meeting."

He sighed. "I have a plane to catch."

She planted a quick kiss on his lips and climbed out of bed. "I guess this is goodbye then."

"Is that what you want?"

"I'll have the shirt cleaned and pressed. And when you have time I'd like to see those sketches."

"The sketches are in my apartment in San Francisco."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You're not staying here?"

He shook his head. "I don't want your money, I want you. I might even be in love with you, but if you want me, you'll have to come to me."

Without saying a word she scooped up the emerald and left the room. By the time Varis had showered, shaved and dressed Astrid had left the house.

Chapter Seven

Astrid carried a pot of tea and a plate of fresh croissants into the sunroom and sat opposite Miss Ella. She poured two cups of tea and handed one to her godmother.

Cool, gray eyes flicked over her. "You haven't been sleeping. What's bothering you, my dear?"

Despite her years, Ella's mind was razor sharp.

After several nights of tossing and turning, Astrid had called her godmother and invited her for breakfast. "It's the spell. It still lingers."

Ella's eyes widened. "I don't understand."

Astrid drew in a breath. She didn't want to discuss the dreams that made sleep impossible. Before her night with Varis the dreams were sensual and arousing, but now they were erotic torture.

"We broke the spell. Varis returned the ring. I thought it was done."

Ella sipped her tea. "What was done?"

"The knight's spell. It's like he's here."

"The knight?"

"Not the knight. Varis."

"Maybe it's just the man," Ella said. "Varis is a handsome devil."

Astrid wondered what Ella would say if she saw Varis naked with a hard-on.

"Have you noticed the way he looks at you?"

Astrid ripped her brain from an image of Varis' sculpted body and impressive cock.
"How does he look at me?"

Ella grinned. "Like he could eat you in one fierce gulp."

Devour. Wasn't that the word Varis used? "It's the spell. We both were caught up in it."

"I'm not talking about last night. I've been observing the man for weeks. He's in love with you, dear."

"But that's impossible. Our social interaction has been limited at best."

"Many a man has fallen in love without the benefit of conversation."

Was it possible Varis loved her? Astrid shook her head. No, he was reacting to the same strong forces as she. Rid the house of the spell and everything would return to normal.

"You initiated the knight's spell. You have to remove it."

"I didn't." Ella shook her perfectly coiffed head of snow-white hair. "I couldn't."

"I saw you do it."

"My spells sealed the ring on his finger and the access between floors, nothing more. Everything ended at sunrise."

Astrid's heart began to pound. "You must be mistaken."

"I performed the spells with perfect precision according to Morga's dying request. Whatever happened between you and Varis had nothing to do with the knight's spell."

Hands shaking, Astrid set her cup on the table. "What are you saying?"

"I didn't evoke the knight's spell."

A shiver slid down Astrid's spine as sensual memories flooded her brain. If her response had nothing to do with the spell, then everything that happened had been real. Her reaction, her need, her desire, her emotions were real.

This sweet pain surrounding her heart was real.

"I couldn't evoke the spell," Ella continued. "The original spell was changed centuries ago."

"Changed? How?"

Ella selected a croissant and took a bite. "Delicious. You should enjoy one while I tell you the rest of the story."

The moment Ella concluded her story, Astrid jumped to her feet. She kissed her godmother on the cheek. "Forgive me, but I've got to go."

"Go where, dear?"

"To catch my knight before he gets away."

* * * * *

The buzz of the doorbell brought Varis away from a fresh cup of coffee and the morning news to the intercom. Still dressed in pajama bottoms, he wasn't expecting company nor was he in the mood to make small talk. With each passing day his hope waned. Perhaps Astrid would never come to her senses.

Trusting his instincts, Varis resisted the urge to go to her. She had to come to him. Otherwise their relationship would always be about that damn ring and her money.

"Varis?"

Joy shot through him. He hit the lock release and raced down three flights of stairs. Looking more beautiful than ever in a black skirt, white sweater and strappy high heels, Astrid stood just inside the door. She wore her long blonde hair in a ponytail.

"I have something for you."

"I hope it's you."

She opened her clenched hand. The emerald ring rested in her outstretched palm.

Varis cupped her face and brushed his lips to hers. The contact sent heat rocketing through blood, bone and sinew. His heart pounded.

She took his left hand and slid the ring on his finger.

"The hell with the ring. The only thing I want is you."

Smiling, she slid her arms around his neck. "Devour me, Varis."

"Are you always going to be so demanding?" he asked, pulling her against him. Fierce desire surged through him. Damn, she felt good.

He slammed his mouth down on hers, determined to give her what she wanted, what he needed.

Her lips were lush, her breasts soft, her body yielding. His cock swelled.

She dug her fingers into his bare shoulders, pressed her belly to his erection.

He lifted his head. "Maybe we should take this upstairs."

His gaze glued to her long legs and swaying ass, Varis followed her hurried progress up the narrow winding stairs.

Her breathing audible, she paused on the second floor landing. "How far?"

"All the way to the top," he said. "I like the light."

"And your women breathless?"

On the top floor landing, he cupped her face. "The only woman I want is you, Astrid. Get used to it."

She grabbed him by the shoulders and jumped into his arms, catching him around the waist with her thighs. "I intend to. Now shut up and take me to bed."

He anchored an arm around her slim waist. "Demanding and aggressive. This just gets better and better."

Varis carried her into his apartment and shouldered the door closed.

The hell with the bed, he wanted her now.

He pressed her back against the door and reached under her skirt, touched bare ass. Heat shot to his balls.

"I don't want the emerald. I want you." He stroked her firm ass. "Need this."

She reached between their bodies and pulled the tie of his cotton pajamas. "Take it."

The material slid down his thighs, pooling around his ankles.

His fingertips skimmed over her damp curls and stroked her moist pussy. "No silk panties to rip and tear?"

"Once the insane need for you hit me, I jumped in the car. I took them off while crossing the Golden Gate Bridge."

She yanked down the zipper of her sweater. She wasn't wearing a bra, only pearls. His gaze slid over her flawless skin, focused on her firm breasts and pink nipples. His mouth watered.

"All I've been thinking about is fucking you," she whispered, wrapping her hand around his straining cock. "I nearly came in car."

When she rubbed the head along her wet slit he nearly came.

Varis thrust and slid home. Open and hot she took him deep, grabbing him tight with her pussy.

"You still want it raw and wild?"

He hadn't given a thought to protection. All he'd thought about was wanting her, needing her, convincing her to marry him.

Although Varis hadn't intended popping the question while fucking, timing was everything. Hips rocking, he looked into her eyes. "Marry me, have my babies?"

Silky wet she took his deep thrust with a sharp intake of breath. "You're serious?"

He thrust harder, faster, banging her ass against the door. "I was serious the first time I laid eyes on you." He sucked in breath. "I love you."

She clenched, making his balls hum. "You love fucking me."

On the verge of climaxing, he pushed deep and stilled. Lord, she was gonna kill him.

"Marry me. Lock up the Radcliffe money for our children."

Her nails dug into his shoulders. "You *are* serious."

"I think I've loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I knew it the moment I saw you in my shirt."

"Why didn't you say something?"

He pumped his hips. "I thought all you wanted was the ring."

She tightened around him. "Why did you let me walk away without a word?"

Her wet heat surrounding him, Varis withdrew and went deep. "I was hurt because you believed I was after your fucking money."

He thrust faster, harder. "Lord, you make my blood run hot."

She gripped his hair, tugged gently. "You make me burn."

"After this, I'm not fucking you again until you say yes."

She clamped down on his cock. "Then it's a yes."

His heart thundering, Varis moved his hips, measuring his strokes to make the pleasure last. Every muscle tightened. The pressure building behind his balls, he rode the sharp edge. His cock was so hard it hurt. A delicious pain he wanted to feel forever throbbed in his balls.

She grabbed at his swollen cock, milking him with a passionate urgency.

A flood of wet heat signaled her climax. The look in her eyes and the soft utterance he'd ached to hear sent him over the intense edge.

"I love you, Varis."

His heart lurched. He exploded in hot wave, sliding past the edge of sweet pain to a whole new level of ecstasy.

Weak-kneed, Varis pressed his forehead against the door. He sucked in a deep breath, then another.

Holding his trembling body tight, she whispered those precious three words once again.

"What took you so long?"

"I thought our amazing lovemaking was due to the spell. I didn't believe it was real."

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "It was real for me."

"I wasn't ready to face my own feelings. I called Miss Ella and asked her to remove the knight's spell."

He gripped her waist and stepped back. "So you think the spell is the reason we've fallen in love?"

Her thighs slid along his. When her feet touched the floor, she straightened her skirt.

"I think I've been in love with you for some time."

Varis smiled. "So the spell had nothing to do with it?"

"Miss Ella performed two spells, one to seal the ring on your finger and one to close the exits just as Morga requested, but she didn't evoke the knight's spell. She couldn't. The spell had been changed."

"Does it matter?"

"Actually, it does. Miss Ella told me the rest of the legend."

Varis pulled up his pajamas and secured the tie. "The short version, please."

"Several years after the lady married the emerald knight, she attended a jousting tournament. The black knight was a participant and won the day. That night during the celebration ball, they danced. He told her although he had married, she would always be his true love."

"But the lady remained faithful to her husband, right?"

She grinned and stroked his cheek. "She did, but after saying goodbye to the black knight she visited the sorcerer and had the spell altered."

"Altered, how?"

"The emerald would pass from father to the firstborn son but should the only Radcliffe heir be a female then the spell would forever be null and void."

Relief washed over him. "Thank God."

"But the lady added a twist of her own. The heiress would only find true love with a male descendant of the black knight."

Varis groaned. "It's just a legend."

"The black knight was called the Black Montgomerie. The spelling has changed slightly, but that's why Morga picked you."

"Because of my name?"

"Because he's your ancestor. Morga had your lineage traced. That's why she chose you, Varis."

He raked a hand through his hair. "You're marrying me because I'm related to the black knight?"

"I'm marrying you because I love you. And because..."

If she mentioned a spell or a legend, he would lose it.

She smiled. "You really are very, very good in bed."

On a high unlike anything he'd ever experienced, Varis scooped her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He dropped her onto his bed. "Prove it."

She pulled off her sweater. "That I love you?"

He yanked on the tie of his pajamas. "That I'm very, very good in bed."

About the Author

The youngest of seven sisters born in the hills of West Virginia, B.J. McCall lives beneath the redwoods of Northern California. Combining her love of romance and science fiction, she invites the reader to explore her universe.

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

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