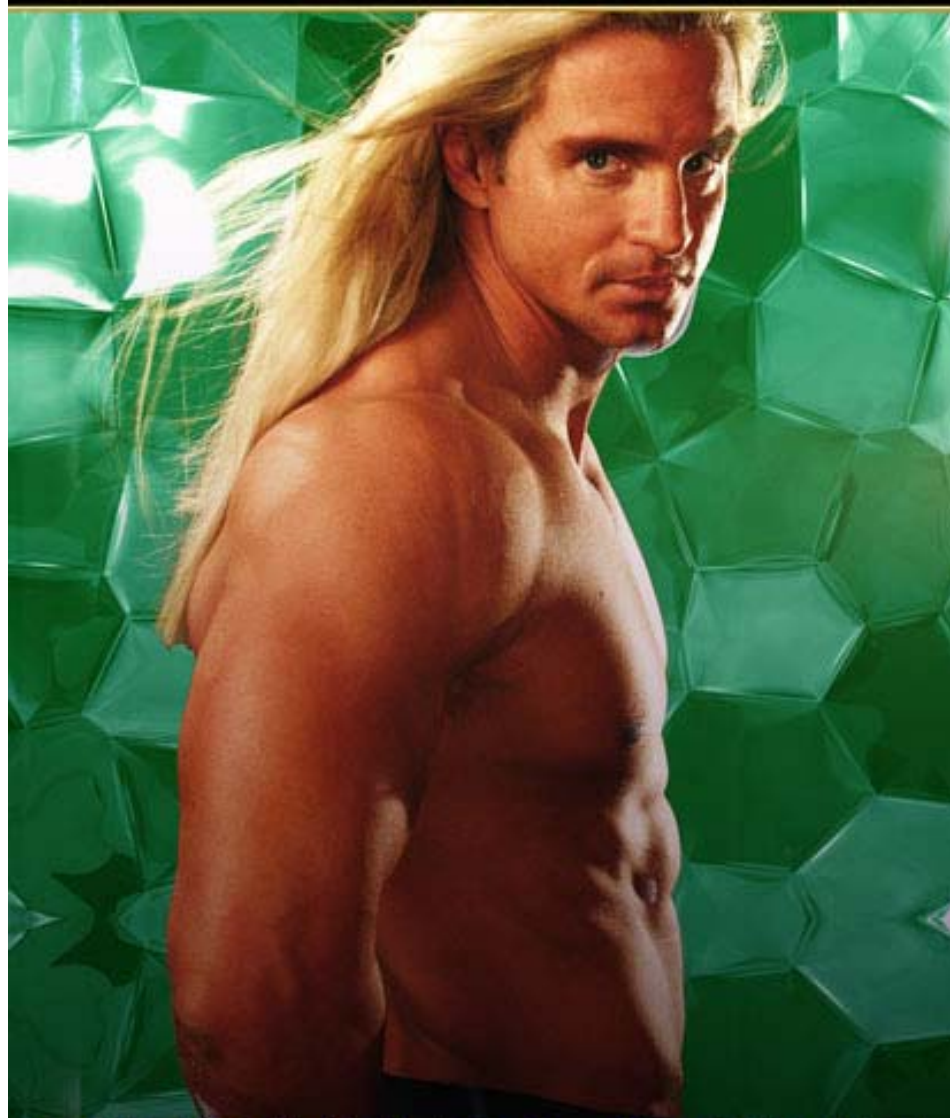


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



PERHAPS LOVE


EMERALD

MADISON
BLAKE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Perhaps Love

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PERHAPS LOVE

Madison Blake

Dedication

Dedicated to him, my inspiration. You know who you are.

And to my editor, Helen Woodall, who made my first publishing adventure with Ellora's Cave a very pleasant experience.

Chapter One

The woman on the bed bucked and writhed and screamed, her face twisted in a mask of intense pain and her shriek echoed in the small room.

"Sh, love, hold on...hold on." Esmeralda smoothed back her sister's honey-gold hair, now limp with exhaustion and sweat. Her heart twisted with pain and fear and her grip on Elisha's hand tightened. When her sister's cries subsided to whimpers, Esmeralda looked toward the other side of the cot, where a young woman with eyes old with wisdom sat nodding. "Well, Wise One?"

In the deepening gloom, Magda the Wise shook her head sorrowfully. "The disease is eating her insides, which causes her increasing pain as days pass by. I'm afraid she hasn't long to live."

"No!" The cry was one of reflexive denial. "Surely, there must be other cures we haven't tried. Maybe one of them will work. Please, Magda, I'll give you anything, anything—"

The young woman's sigh cut her off. "It's not a question of gold, Esme. As a healer, I don't want any of my patients to die but I've tried all mortal means possible—"

She fell to muttering, "Mortal...mortal...I wonder," glancing at Esmeralda and then away several times beneath her eyelashes so that Esmeralda feared she had gone mad. Finally, Esmeralda asked, "Is there anything you want to tell me, Magda?" When the healer didn't respond immediately, she continued with a touch of impatience, "Just say it. If it'll help Elisha, I'll do it."

After a few more seconds of mental struggling, the healer spoke, "Before she died, my teacher told me the story of the Life-Bringer."

"Life-Bringer?" Esmeralda echoed, her interest perked by the title.

Magda nodded. "The purest and brightest emerald imbued with the life essence of its creator, the Emerald Gem Immortal Orin. The Life-Bringer is said to have the ability to bring life even to the dead."

Hope sparked in her breast. "And it can cure any illness?"

"If it can bring life to the dead, a wasting disease like your sister's is nothing for the gem's power. It may be your sister's only hope."

"Where can I find it?" She leaned toward the healer, eager to set out that very day to look for the gem. Oh, she would have to make arrangements for someone to take care of Elisha and Asher —

Magda looked at her gravely. "It won't be easy. Nobody has been able to find Orin in a thousand or more years —"

Esmeralda was startled. "I'd have to find the immortal?"

"But of course. The gem is with him. It's always with him."

"Right. Tell me how to find him."

"As I said, it won't be easy..."

And it wasn't.

After obtaining Magda's acquiescence in leaving Elisha and her nephew Asher in her care, Esmeralda had set out from the tiny village in which she had lived all twenty-three years of her life with nothing but a satchel containing a change of clothing, some food and a little gold. For fifteen days, she had followed Magda's directions and trudged through forests, crossed streams and rivers and climbed over mountains and hills but as yet, she had seen no sign of the Emerald Palace in which Orin supposedly lived. The only thing she hadn't done was swim across the seven seas but she would do it if it meant saving Elisha's life. She had been close to giving up several times but each time, she thought of Elisha's pain-racked body and she would grit her teeth and take the next step onward. Perseverance, Magda had said, was needed to achieve her goal.

Each night, before darkness descended she sought out a small village in which she could find lodgings for the night. This evening an old couple was willing to share their food and set her up in their spare bedroom in exchange for a piece of gold.

As she slipped between the sheets for a much needed rest and all too aware of how little gold she had left, she chanted under her breath as her eyes closed, "I will find the Emerald Palace tomorrow... I will find...the Emerald Palace...tomorrow... Emerald Palace..."

Consciousness slowly seeped into Esmeralda's brain and she registered it was morning by the rays of light filtering in from the windows. She stretched on the bed, unwilling to open her eyes just yet, wanting to rest a little bit more before starting on her journey for the day. She moaned at the silken texture of the sheets underneath her body and the sensuous enjoyment of her skin on contact with such fine cloth. Someone's finger traced a line from her cheek to her throat and down the length of her bare arm.

"Beautiful," a man's reverent voice breathed.

Why was she naked? Who was in the room with her?

Her eyes snapped open and encountered a stern face, all sharp, chiseled angles, with thickly slashed green-hued eyebrows, ferocious emerald eyes, a large nose and hollowed-out cheeks. It was so at odds with the soft voice she had heard that for a moment, she found it hard to match the voice to the face she saw.

Then she remembered she was naked.

She screamed, slapped his hand away from her body and scrambled to find something to cover herself with. But there was nothing—no blankets, no pillows, nothing. So she scooted to the opposite side of the bed from him and drew her knees up in an attempt to retain her modesty.

"Who-who are you?" She hated herself for her quavering voice. "What did you do with my clothes? Give them back to me."

“No mortal things can enter the Emerald Palace,” he thundered. He stood up and paced the length of the bed, glancing back at her once in a while. The robes he wore were the green of the forest and the hem swirled about his legs in interesting patterns. She noted with some fascination that the fitted sheet on the big bed was also green. On a hunch, she peered behind him and somehow, she wasn’t surprised to find the other furniture in the room and the walls and floor to be of the same color—though in a different shade—as the bed. The walls and the floor particularly drew her gaze. The sheen and brilliance of their surfaces brought to mind the clarity and polished appearance of the emerald.

She was dizzy for a moment. She had done it! She had reached the Emerald Palace.

Didn’t the man just confirm it? She recalled his words. “Mortal? But I’m mortal.”

He stopped and sat on a chair near the bed. His fierce stare intimidated her but it was the way he was looking at her that disturbed her and the intensity in his green eyes was doing strange things to her, making her weak and warm. Alarming, her nipples were peaking, the way they always did when in contact with the cold and she was puzzled at the growing wetness in the place between her thighs.

But she couldn’t look away from his gaze. She was captured, ensnared.

His eyebrows drew together in the center, making him appear even fiercer. He shifted on the chair. “Mortal beings can come to the palace once in their lifetimes but once they leave, they can never return. Mortal things, however, can never enter. If you wish for some robes, I’ll have some delivered to you later.”

She refused to be frightened by him and her chin lifted a bit. “Yes, I wish.” Something struck her. “How did I come to be here? Last I remember I was sleeping in the cottage of an old couple.”

“Suffice it to say, your determination brought you here.” His expression softened so imperceptibly she thought she imagined it. “And what did you come here for, mortal?”

“I’m seeking the Life-Bringer.” She didn’t think it possible but he paled and even flinched before he caught himself.

"Why?"

"To heal my sister, whose life is in grave danger." She reached out a pleading hand and was about to crawl to him when she remembered her naked state. She clutched her hands more tightly around her knees. "Please, sir, if you know where it is—oh!" She suddenly remembered Magda's advice. "I'm to look for the Emerald Gem Immortal Orin. Does he live here? Would it be possible to seek an audience with him?"

He stared at her for long moments before answering, "You are looking at him."

"You're Orin?" she asked, stunned. Her heart sank. He didn't look the type who would easily give up a precious gem. If he were an old man and the grandfatherly type, she could imagine herself begging him to help her. But this man looked like neither mountains nor prayers could move him.

"Yes. Is anything the matter?" He sounded irritated.

"Oh, nothing," she hastily assured. It wouldn't do to make him mad when she needed him. "I need the emerald, the Life-Bringer, to save my sister." She licked her lips in her nervousness and almost lost her thoughts when she noted his green eyes settling hungrily on her mouth. "Please, can you lend it to me, for a little while?"

The chair fell back as he jerked to a standing position. "The Life-Bringer can't be lent!" He roared. "Nor is it given freely. It must be earned, it must be bought. What payment can you give for something as precious as the Life-Bringer?"

"Gold?" Her thoughts churned in dismay even as she voiced the answer. She didn't have enough gold to pay the high price Orin would be asking for the emerald.

"Is the Life-Bringer worth so little?" he sneered.

She started. Gold wasn't enough? He was right. The Life-Bringer was priceless. Her sister's life was priceless. What did she have that was worth the equal of her sister's life, something so precious she held dear to her heart and guarded it with every breath in her, that once it was given away, she could never get it back?

"My virginity."

“What?”

He didn’t shout his surprise but she trembled from her own temerity. Nevertheless, she held her head high as she licked her lips and tried to speak in a firm voice, “My virginity. My innocence.” She wondered if he would accept the price she was offering. No doubt as an immortal, he would have scores of lovely virgins for his pleasure but she had nothing else to give.

He inclined his head abruptly. “Fine. And two weeks in my bed. At the end of the two weeks, I’ll tell you how to get the Life-Bringer.”

She was elated by his agreement. She could also feel a huge sense of relief that at the end of two weeks, finally, her sister would be cured. She wished these two weeks would speed by and she would already be at the last day of that time, with the Life-Bringer in her hands on her way to —

Realization hit her. “Two weeks?” she whispered and looked at him aghast. “My sister could be dead by that time and —”

“The moment you stepped into the palace, your sister’s condition was suspended,” he said impatiently. “She will neither grow worse nor better while you’re here. And no, you can’t stay here indefinitely as a mortal,” he snapped in answer to her thoughts.

Did he really read my thoughts? was her incongruous thought before relief surged through her. Her sister would be saved.

The man’s deep voice drew her back from her thoughts. “And we shall begin today.” He righted the fallen chair, sat down and when the robe settled, her eyes riveted to the site between his thighs where the robe tented. As she watched, the tent rose higher and higher and arched until its tip touched his stomach. He followed her gaze and when her head lifted, he smiled with so much sensuality that heat flowed and ebbed in repeated waves from her neck to her face. “Come here,” he commanded softly. “I would accept your gift right now.”

She finally realized what she had offered to the immortal.

She quivered – with fear, with shame, with embarrassment. She knew what sex was in theory but she had never been tempted. She had been filled with lofty ideals of wanting her first experience to be with the man she loved. But no such man had ever come and then Elisha had gotten sick and all Esmeralda's time had been filled with taking care of her sister and her nephew. Now she felt cheated and a tiny core of anger started to burn in her. A moment later, it deflated, because no one had forced her to do this. She was the one who had offered it as the price for the Life-Bringer.

Nothing mattered but her sister.

Her hands fell to her sides and she shuffled toward him on her buttocks, careful to keep her knees drawn up and covering as much of her breasts and pussy as she could. Halfway across the bed, she risked a glance at him from beneath her lashes and her breath caught at the flash of sympathy that softened the fierce features of his face. He watched her with hooded eyes, yet she sensed infinite patience in his stance.

A moment later, she was standing before him, her hands covering her breasts and pussy in embarrassment. He took hold of her hands and drew them to her sides. His sharp, indrawn breath pulled her gaze to his face and her heart skittered at the intense lust and admiration in his eyes. "Beautiful," he said hoarsely as the back of his hand trailed reverently from the wide flare of her hips up her small waist to the heavy weight of her breasts. "Smooth...and such creamy skin... A prize indeed."

He tugged her closer to stand between his legs. He pressed his mouth to her stomach and his thick green hair tickled the undersides of her full breasts. Unexpectedly, she moaned. She hadn't anticipated the soft, sensuous feel of his hair on her bare skin, or the hot, moist touch of his mouth, which was now mobile and sucking her flesh. A shaft of lust lanced through her and ended in her pussy, which dripped and clenched with need.

This wasn't going to be the romantic first time of her dreams but it wouldn't be unpleasant. Already, she was taut with anticipation of the pleasures that he still hadn't

revealed to her, pleasures to be experienced from the touch of his hands, his mouth and his cock.

His cock. She had a sudden yearning to see his eager length, to touch and to kiss, to hold...

She cried out in excitement. His mouth had moved up her body and his tongue laved and licked her nipple, teasing the already tight bud into turgid prominence. Her hands clenched and unclenched beside her. She looked down at Orin's fierce face and saw that he had closed his eyes and his cheeks were ruddy in obvious enjoyment of his task. She shuddered at the sight of his luscious tongue as it flicked against her nipple. She had the uncomfortable urge to capture that tongue into her mouth—

He closed his mouth over her breast and sucked. She closed her eyes and cried out again, in shock this time. She hadn't known men would do this, or the intense hunger he would raise in her at the action. Uncaring of his assumed displeasure, she dug her nails into the fleshy meat of his shoulders and held on as he continued to suck her breast, like Asher had done at Elisha's breasts almost two years ago. Then, the sight of her nephew had elicited a maternal reaction in her, nothing like this maelstrom of desire and need.

He moved his attentions to her other breast and the deep, yawning hunger in her doubled, tripled, quadrupled. She didn't know how to contain this intense craving and the ache in her belly intensified with each suction pull of his mouth. His hands trailed down her arms to cup her buttocks and he squeezed and kneaded the soft cheeks.

Then, abruptly, he stopped. His hands fell away and his mouth parted with her breast. "I can't take any more," he said hoarsely. He stood, scooped her up in his arms and laid her gently on the bed. He disrobed and she had a fleeting glimpse of his monstrous cock before he climbed on top of her.

A swirl of fear penetrated the passion haze of her mind. "No...no..." She panicked. How would that big thing ever fit in her? He would surely tear her apart. She would die and what would happen to Elisha?

"Sh, sh," he soothed, the back of his hand caressing her cheek. "I know you're afraid. This is your first time but there's nothing to fear. It will hurt when I first enter but no more after that, I promise."

"You won't fit. You won't fit," she said hysterically as she thrashed her limbs beneath him. He felt strong and virile and so very male. How would she be able to fight him if he insisted on pushing his cock into her?

"I *will* fit." The amusement and firmness in his tone stopped her hysterics.

She stared at him, certain of it now. "You're mad."

His eyebrow quirked. "Let's continue and see, shall we?" He didn't wait for her answer but bent down to take her nipple into his mouth again and sucked.

The desire that had been banked rose and overwhelmed her fear. Soft, mewling cries escaped from her lips and her hands buried themselves in his thick hair. She luxuriated in the soft strands, even as she arched her back in pleasure at the pulling motion of his mouth. She pressed his head closer to her body, willing him to take more of her breast into his mouth.

Unconsciously, one of her legs rose to lay her foot flat on the bed and he took advantage of the situation. He slipped his knee in between her legs and nudged them further apart, until he was lying in between them, his hard cock throbbing against her wet pussy. He crushed his hips against her and she grounded back in spontaneous response. He eased a hand in between their bodies and guided his cock to her entrance. She stiffened but he distracted her with another suck on her breast. *Damn but the man was good at this.*

She felt him easing into her, one inch at a time and she felt herself stretching, widening to accommodate him. The tension in her belly was back with a vengeance and it speeded up in strength with his penetration. She wanted to...move but she didn't want to. She denied the urge, not wanting to do anything to hasten Orin's progress into her body and maybe tear her apart.

A drop of sweat splashed onto her stomach. Her hands moved down from his hair and trailed over the corded length of his neck and the equally tense muscles on his shoulders. She realized the great effort he was exerting to maintain his control and his slow progress into her body. Finally, he stopped and lifted his head. "How are you feeling?"

His concern touched something deep in her. It had been so long since anyone had cared for her. Ever since her brother-by-marriage died and her sister got sick, Esmeralda was the strong one in the family. She took care of everyone but nobody ever asked about her.

It also made her realize he wasn't the monster she had thought he was. He looked ferocious but that was because of the features he was born with. His actions and words since he started fondling her had shown her to be a caring and thoughtful man, selfless and kind. And he desired her a great deal.

"Fine," she managed.

"Good."

He surged deep into her.

She screamed.

She was wrong.

He *was* a monster.

Chapter Two

A moment after the scream released from her throat, it was swallowed by his mouth on hers. It was the first time he had kissed her and she was so astonished that she stopped shrieking. The pain had subsided to a numb throb, she noted dimly but she was too entranced by the sensation of his firm lips over hers and his rough tongue licking inside her mouth to pay much attention to it. This was nice. She released a raw moan and dug her fingers into his shoulders. She remembered her desire and pursed her mouth to suck at his tongue boldly and the rough feeling of it against her soft lips sent shafts of molten heat to her pussy. His unabashed growls made her desire him even more, if it were possible.

Without breaking the kiss, he scooped her legs up on his neck and the position made him slide deeper into her. It didn't hurt and she sighed against his mouth. It was his turn to suck her tongue and bolts of lust shot through her.

He moved then, an in-out rhythm that brushed his cock against her insides, which increased in tempo as the seconds passed and it somehow had a connection to her belly, because the pressure lodged there spiraled and the tension coiled tighter and tighter, taut as a spring. Something was happening to her body, something she had no control over, because she thrashed and twisted and wriggled under him through no conscious thought, her body arched and her hips rolled and her pussy was contracting madly around his iron-hard cock, gloving him, gripping him mercilessly.

She tore her mouth from him and screamed his name in ecstasy, because such intense pleasure needed an outlet. He pumped into her several more times, each time bringing on waves of orgasms that slammed into her, before he himself roared his rapture and shot his seed inside her.

When they lay panting side by side on the wide emerald bed, she raised herself and kissed him softly on the lips. She smiled down into his questioning eyes. "Thank you. It was wonderful."

"I didn't hurt you?"

"At first, yes, but the rest was marvelous." She squeezed his arm. "I'm glad it was you."

"Me too," he said solemnly. "Lie down." He got up and strode from the bed and soon returned with a small basin and a towel. She was wondering what he was about when he sat at her feet with the wrung towel in his hand. He folded it into a square. "Open your legs."

She instinctively closed them tighter together. She knew what he wanted to do and she was embarrassed. "No..." She sat up and tried to snatch the towel from his hands. "I'll-I'll do it."

"Let me serve you...ah..." He frowned. "You know, it boggles the mind but I don't even know your name."

She blushed. "Esmeralda. My family calls me Esme."

"Esme." His eyes caressed her face. "It suits you." His free hand was doing the same to her leg and it was only when the warm towel was pressed against her pussy that she realized what he had done.

"You tricked me," she accused. She had been so lost in the warm green of his eyes that she was barely aware of what he was doing.

"Let me, Esme," he said gravely. "I did this to you. Let me do something to make up for it."

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she nodded and widened her legs. He washed her impersonally and thoroughly, cleaning not only her pussy but her inner thighs as well. She watched his head bent close to her thighs, the dark green of his hair

in sharp contrast to her pale skin. Her heart skipped and the same alluring wetness of awhile ago invaded her pussy. She wanted him again.

“Orin...” she breathed.

He glanced up and his eyes darkened. After wiping his cock with the towel, he threw it inside the basin and some water splashed out onto the floor. He climbed up onto the bed but stayed at the foot, where her legs still lay sprawled before him. She wanted him beside her, she wanted to touch him.

A wicked, very male smile covered his mouth and her heart skidded to a stop at the sight. He really was very attractive, if he would only smile more often. He advanced on all fours in a predatory manner, the way a jungle cat would on its prey, silent and graceful, and stopped when he was at her thighs. She watched with bated breath for his next move.

He lowered his head until she could feel his breath on the blond thatch at the juncture of her thighs. And like a tamed cat, he licked her with one long swipe of his tongue. Unbelievably aroused, she forgot her embarrassment and widened her legs, her breath coming in shallow pants. He cupped her buttocks, lifted her to his gaze and purred. Though her knees weakened at the green fire that burned in his gaze, she nevertheless raised her legs and rested them on his shoulders, because they suddenly felt too heavy for her to hold up. His rough tongue slid capriciously over her folds, teased her and explored every nook and cranny of her pussy. By the time his tongue glided over the hard bud that was the center of her pleasure, she was already tense and rigid, mindless with wanting. She hadn't known such a small appendage held so much power.

She chanted his name, begged, pleaded, cajoled but he withheld the sought-for release from her. He continued his examination of her pussy, found the entrance to her channel and stabbed into it in much the same manner as his cock had done mere minutes ago. He repeated the movement and she was pushed again to that senseless state where need and want collided, where the weight in her breasts and belly grew

heavier with each passing second. She lost the last of her shyness and embarrassment. She gripped his hair and pulled, cursed, shouted and demanded. "Orin, now! Damn you, immortal! Now!"

He rubbed his tongue rapidly over and over her clitoris until she spun out of control. He curled his tongue around the hard bud and sucked until she convulsed into wild movements and ground her pussy into his face.

She hadn't known it was possible to ascend to the heights this way and she enjoyed the orgasm that rippled through her very much but she felt surprisingly empty having it alone. When he lay down beside her, she asked, "Why?"

Somehow, he understood her question without the need to have it clarified. He cradled her in his arms. "You're too sore. I'd like to give you some time to rest before forcing another time on—"

She stopped him with her fingers to his lips. She smiled and shook her head. "It wasn't force. I gave my virginity to you willingly, in exchange for the Life-Bringer and if I weren't too sore, I'd like to do it again with you, a hundred times over." Hot color suffused her cheeks but she forced herself to continue looking into his eyes. "More."

He chuckled. "And you shall," he promised, his hand caressing her hips.

"Magda said you're an immortal."

"Who's Magda?"

"She's one of the wise women of the village, a healer. The best in several villages. But for all her skills, she couldn't heal my sister." She buried her face in his warm shoulder, afraid to contemplate what might happen to Elisha if she hadn't found the Emerald Palace.

He smoothed her hair and the gesture was oddly soothing. "She's right, I'm an immortal but I don't live forever. As the Emerald Immortal, I oversee the production and placement of emeralds on all the planets in the universe. However, my greatest life's task is to create and maintain the Life-Bringer and only worthy mortals can win it."

"You mean you will die one day?" She supposed she was foolish to ask that question. He had already said he didn't live forever but she had thought immortals did.

"Yes but it will take several millennia. I succeeded my father, who was the Emerald Immortal before me. His name was also Orin, by the way."

"And you need someone to...succeed you?" She swallowed hard. If he succeeded his father, then he would need a son to come after him. Did he already have this son? She wasn't sure if she wanted to know. Were immortals also governed by the humans' need to marry and procreate?

"A son." His voice highly amused, he continued, "And if that question is a roundabout way of asking if I have a son, then no, I don't."

He was really making her ask. But no, if she weren't filled with so much curiosity, she needn't ask. She wouldn't ask. It would be very embarrassing and he would know she—"Are you married?" she blurted out.

A hearty laughter escaped his throat, though it sounded a bit rusty. "Did I mistake you and were you instead leading to that question?" he teased.

She could feel warmth traveling up her cheeks but she turned her face away from his shoulder and glared up at him. "I should've asked you that at the outset, because I wouldn't have agreed to the two weeks if I'd known you were married."

He stilled. "But you'd still have given your virginity to me?"

"Payment for the Life-Bringer," she muttered.

He stared down at her for a long time before answering, "Payment was your virginity *and* the two weeks. No, I'm not married."

"And do you have sex with everyone who came asking for the Life-Bringer?"

His nostrils flared. "What is this? An inquisition?"

She stiffened, then thought over her questions and admitted she sounded like a jealous nag, the kind all men hated. She turned away from him to lie on her other side. "I'm sorry, I have no right." It was silly but her eyes misted. She had to remember she

had no claim on him, that she was here only for the Life-Bringer. She supposed she was having a little infatuation with him, which was not surprising, since he was her first lover. She felt so alone then and wished she could be on her way home with the Life-Bringer in her hands.

Orin moved toward her and slid an arm around her waist, bringing her fully against him. "You're the first one." *And probably the only one.*

Her body relaxed a bit but he knew her guard was still up against him. There wasn't anything else he could say, because it would be too soon and too revealing.

She was the first woman he had desired in a very long time. He couldn't believe his ears when she had offered to have sex with him, in exchange for the Life-Bringer. His heart had beaten so hard and fast he couldn't hear her for a moment above the roar of his blood. But she had repeated her price in that sexy voice of hers and she had licked her lips. It was the final straw. He'd gone hard with just the thought of sucking her pink tongue into his mouth.

Sex had grown stale and boring in the last two of the almost three millennia of his existence. In fact, life had ceased to hold meaning and his only comfort was that one day, perhaps, the Life-Bringer that he had carefully created and nurtured would be used to save lives.

But from the time he saw her naked in his bed, honey-gold hair spread out over the emerald sheet, she had stirred him as no other woman had. It wasn't only her beauty or the perfection of her womanly form but also her courage and persistence and love that moved him. And now, he had generosity to add to her endearing list of qualities. He hadn't also expected the laughter that had sprung up between them, or how easy it had been to tease her. No, he hadn't expected to feel at ease with her so soon, not with someone who came for the Life-Bringer.

The Life-Bringer. His heart thudded in slow desolation as he stared bleakly over her shoulder. He hadn't told her the complete truth. She had to possess a certain quality

before the Life-Bringer would leave with her willingly and he would find out in the coming days whether she had it or not. Did he hope she had the necessary trait to be worthy of the Life-Bringer?

He shook his head. It wasn't up to him.

The woman in his arms sighed, distracting him and he looked down to see that, in her exhaustion, she had fallen asleep. A tender smile curved his lips and he left the bed to get a striped green blanket from the chest of drawers standing in the far corner of the room. He climbed back in and spread the blanket to cover their cooling bodies.

No matter, they had two weeks together and he meant to make the most of it.

She woke to the sensation of firm lips moving over her mouth, engaging her in a prolonged and drugged kiss. She hummed her enjoyment and responded. As full consciousness returned, she became aware that he was thrusting himself in and out of her in slow – very slow – motion. Though she was still a bit sore, his movements didn't hurt at all. She wouldn't mind being awakened like this every day of her life.

When he lifted his head, she opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Good morning."

"It's already afternoon," he said huskily. He never stopped his pumping action and he looked like he was enjoying the feel of his cock being wrapped in her warmth too much to propel them both to culmination in a hurry. She herself felt...cherished, beloved by his slow thrusts. "Are you hungry?"

The moment he asked, her stomach rumbled. Their eyes met and they laughed.

He reached for something beside her shoulder. She followed his movement and saw a tray filled with fruits and beverages. She turned to face him and saw him offering her a piece of grape. "How –"

"Eat." He traced the grape enticingly along the line of her mouth.

She complied and he fed her another piece. When the juice ran down the side of her mouth, he bent and licked it up with his tongue. Adroitly, he stole a kiss from her and

allowed his tongue to move into her mouth in the same manner as his cock was doing to her pussy for a few arousing seconds. When he lifted his head, he was driving into her a wee bit faster, enough to press solidly against her clit.

“Orin...” she said breathlessly. “I want you.”

He shook his head. “You’re still hungry –”

“Yes, I am,” she agreed. “For you.” How could she want him so urgently, yet he seemed indifferent, though his cock was in her? She wanted them to reach the heights again, to soar off the cliff and shatter into a million pieces together. She worked her inner muscles and grasped his cock in a contracting motion. She was delighted to hear a gasp escape his throat. He surged and ground involuntarily into her.

“Your stomach’s still rumbling.” She could see him trying to control himself, though sweat started to bead on his forehead. He reached for the tray again, his hand trembling. He came back with several grapes in his hand. He fed them to her, while their eyes stared into one another. She hadn’t known there could be such eloquence in a person’s eyes. They didn’t need to speak, because their eyes were holding myriad conversations while she chewed slowly and savored the tangy juice of the grape as it slid down her throat.

One grape slipped from his hand, rolled and came to rest in the valley between her breasts. They both glanced down at it, then she held her breath as his head descended and he took the grape into his mouth. He kissed and licked the soft skin there, then trailed sideways to nuzzle against one full, heavy breast. A yearning sound slipped past her lips the exact instant his mouth enveloped her nipple in its heated cavern. He scraped his teeth lightly on the tight bud and she gasped as liquid heat lanced through her and opened the door to the deep hunger that had consumed her earlier.

Orin must have felt the same need, because he lost his deceptively lazy movements. His thrusts picked up speed, he sucked on her breast with frantic haste and his hand pinched and rubbed her other nipple in a frenzy. She was caught up in his whirlpool of movement and the tightening pressure sneaked up on her, settled in her belly for only a

second before it began its swift coiling ascent, higher and higher even as Orin's plunges became faster and shallower. His groin slammed against her clit with resounding thuds and the mattress squeaked with the ferocity of their movements.

She experienced the fierce joy of being in the center of the storm again and she exulted even as she strained for the pleasure that was nearly within reach.

She shattered and splintered as waves and waves of bliss washed over her and she urged him toward the same completion. He shouted her name as rushes of warm liquid hit her womb, once, twice, thrice. Panting for breath, they crumpled back on the bed, arms and legs entwined.

Even as satiation lingered in their blood, they exchanged soft kisses, unable to keep their hands off each other. Orin's hands never stopped caressing her body, while she found extreme pleasure in running her hands over his smooth, muscled chest. Esmeralda wondered if that was because such intimacy was new to them, or if it would always be this way between them. But then, she would never know, because she would leave in two weeks and he had said that any mortal who left wouldn't be able to come back.

"Why do you suddenly look so sad?" His gaze roved over her face in concern, before breaking out in a teasing smile. "Surely, my lovemaking skill hasn't deteriorated so swiftly, has it?"

She chuckled. "No." She thrust the miserable thought out of her head. There was nothing she could do about it anyway. "I won't praise you either, for fear your head will swell," she teased back. "I was just wondering if you're still angry at me." She saw that he knew the incident she referred to by the way his face sobered.

"No, I-I'm just not used to having anyone question me that way," he admitted. "Being alone for close to two millennia had a tendency to do that to a person, even an immortal."

Her head swam. "Two millennia?" She croaked. "But-but you don't look a day older than...than thirty."

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Thank you but I'm close to my third millennia. We immortals live an extraordinarily long life."

"What do you do? I mean, do you work? Like, back at home, if I wasn't tending my sister, I would be planting crops in the fields, along with my neighbors."

"So that accounts for the calluses on your hands. But how were you able to maintain such a creamy complexion?"

"Oh." She blushed at the evidence of her vanity. "I took care to cover every bit of my skin whenever I go out under Ragnon's three suns and I also wear a hat. I want to, um, appear beautiful for my, uh, lover when the time comes."

"You are beautiful." The frank admiration in his eyes gave evidence to his words.

"Thank you but you're not changing the subject. What do you do?"

"I create and nurture the Life-Bringer myself. Aside from that, I also create the emerald seeds and oversee my workers who plant the seeds and care for their growth. I also direct them where to place the grown emeralds after the seeds have grown to their full potential." He frowned. "Some workers are quite careless and the emeralds under their care are less than perfect but we can't throw them away, as the stones take thousands of years to grow."

Her eyes were growing bigger and bigger with his recitation. "You mean you plant the emeralds on the...the planets themselves?"

"No, we plant them here in the emerald garden. When they've grown, the workers will harvest them and by then, I would know where I want to place the gems, whether on Earth or Ragnon or another planet in the universe."

"The universe!" she breathed.

"You've become a regular parrot," he commented, amused.

"We have emeralds on Ragnon. I thought you take care only of the gems for Ragnon."

"Ragnon is small. I wouldn't need several millennia to take care of the emerald quota for Ragnon."

"And these workers? Are they mortal or immortal like you?"

"Neither. They're created from the gem itself. They'll still be here long after I've gone."

"That sounds fascinating. What are they like? Oh, I want to see one." Her enthusiasm bubbled and infected the man beside her, who laughed.

"You will," he promised. "You'd have seen Sonia when she came to bring us the food awhile ago but you were asleep. I'll accompany you to the garden some time."

"Will you? Oh, thank you!" Then, perplexed, her brows knitted together. "How come you're not much different from humans?" she asked in wonder. "I mean, aside from the overall greenish tinge of your person, you're shaped like a human and function like one." Recalling their vigorous lovemaking, she blushed, then continued, "And aside from being able to create gems, you laugh and talk and feel emotions and can't read minds and need sex like humans and —"

"The only difference between a human and an immortal is that an immortal lives so much longer," he answered quietly. "It can get very lonely at times."

"Were you lonely?"

"I was." His throat worked as though he wanted to say more and he swallowed hard. "But then you came."

Her eyes misted. She wished she didn't have to leave but she must. Her sister needed her, her nephew needed her. But how could she turn her back on Orin, who so obviously needed her too?

She blinked the tears away. "Aren't there other immortals with whom you could socialize?"

“After seeing each other’s faces for a couple of thousand years, we’ve grown tired of each other. We met only once in the last hundred years to discuss and share new techniques and improvements we’ve discovered in gem creation and management.”

* * * * *

For the next few days, they left the bed only to allow Orin’s servants to clean the room and change the bedding, which was soiled and rumpled from their activities. Esmeralda dressed in a multi-shade green robe that Orin had given her and he showed her around the palace. Wonder struck her speechless when she entered the great hall and saw the tall columns and the high ceiling made from scintillating, flawless emeralds. In fact, the whole palace was made from emeralds and the effect was a cool atmosphere, serene and peaceful.

He also brought her to the emerald garden—an enormous tract of land—and she saw workers toiling under a sun that gave off light but no heat. That was when she knew she wasn’t on Ragnon.

She laughed with delight when she finally saw the workers who worked in the fields and the servants who labored in the palace. They were shaped like humans but they were made of the same material as the palace—beautiful, sparkling emeralds. However, they were warm, living, talking beings and they made her feel welcome and answered all her questions about the nurturing of the gems.

“Where’s the Life-Bringer?” She looked around her in the fields, wondering in which particular section the emerald was located. She had to admit that she was excited about visiting the emerald garden primarily because she had thought she would catch a glimpse of the Life-Bringer. Her glance happened to fall on Orin’s face, which was shuttered and remote, when mere moments ago, he had been laughing and talking enthusiastically about his emeralds, his babies.

“It’s not here,” he said shortly. “You’ll see it on the fourteenth day and not a moment before.” He strode away.

She was left to stare at him, perplexed, and all the enjoyment of the day seeped out of her. She supposed he couldn't bear to part with a beloved treasure. But surely he could create and nurture another one. He was the Emerald Immortal, wasn't he?

Outside of these excursions, they spent every waking moment in the huge bed. Orin was very imaginative and he led her through a variety of positions, each one more outrageous and seemingly impossible to perform than the last but his favorite one was feeding her while he fucked her with a slow, steady rhythm. He possessed tremendous stamina for maintaining the rhythm for long minutes at a time, as she realized once to her frustration. However, even if she would never admit it to him, she found it terribly erotic and arousing and romantic.

About three days after she had arrived, he stuck a short, greased stick in her butt. Initially, she had vehemently protested but his whispered promises of future orgasmic pleasures convinced her to relent. Each day though, the stick was replaced by another a little bit thicker and a little bit longer, until she decided she had enough.

However, that was the day she first saw his cock up close. In the previous eight days, he had been more interested in sticking his cock into her pussy to allow her more than a simple touch or caress. Today, she had awakened to find him sprawled beside her on the bed with a hard-on waving proudly in the cool, morning air.

She crawled to the foot of the bed and marveled at the long throbbing length. Just looking at it was enough to cause her pussy to clench with longing and her rectal muscles to tighten around the stick. "It's green," she said reverently. It wasn't emerald-green but the rich, dark green of forest leaves.

"I'm the Emerald Immortal, of course, it would be green," he commented in a strangled voice.

She edged closer, held it in one hand and rubbed it against her cheek. She purred at the heat that caressed her cheek, at the velvety texture and the male scent of musk emanating from it. She sighed.

"Take it in your mouth," he instructed hoarsely.

"Really?" But even as she asked the question, she realized she wanted to very much. She hadn't any experience in what a man would like a woman to do with his cock but she followed her instincts and stroked the tip over her lips in a slow massage. She found she liked it as well, because her pussy clenched and creamed. Orin's harsh groans provoked her to lick the pre-cum that had coated her lips before giving the heated length of his cock several long swipes of her tongue. Orin gripped her hair and arched his body.

She loved his reactions, because they let her know how much he liked what she was doing to him. It encouraged her to open her mouth wide and take his cock in as deeply as she could. She stopped and breathed for a moment before going down further, as much as she dared without gagging, but he was so long she couldn't manage all of him.

Soon, Orin was guiding her head movements as she went up and down on him languidly. She sucked him sweetly, pursing her mouth when she neared the tip and then opening wide again as she slid the length of him inside her. She was aware of his other hand fisting the bedclothes, of his rigid, arching body and feet that were planted flat on the bed. She repeated sucking his cock several times and was really enjoying it when he roared for her to cease.

"But —"

"Later," he promised as he sat up. "Now, I want to come in your ass."

"My ass!" she exclaimed but the rest of her words were muffled as he pressed her head down on the covers. He inserted two pillows under her stomach and urged her buttocks higher in the air. This was another new experience for her and she thrilled in anticipation after the momentary fear had subsided.

She trusted Orin. He wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

He took the stick in her butt out and massaged her butt with oil. He replaced the stick with his greased finger. He added another one and pushed in and he was stretching her wider than the stick had. He worked his way in some more and wriggled his fingers and the first tendrils of desire curled through her, though mixed with the

kind of pain that came with being widened, like when he first pushed his thick cock into her pussy. She whimpered.

"You're almost ready," he said. The excitement in his voice infected her. "I'm going to replace my fingers with my cock."

"But...but..." she protested.

"I'll fit, don't worry," he assured her, his voice amused as his fingers slipped out. Too soon, his engorged cock, the one she had been sucking with abandon mere moments earlier, started to push in into her butt.

It was a tight squeeze and a little painful. But then, he was *so* big.

"Orin, no," she begged, crying.

"Sh. It will hurt the first time, Esme, like it did when I breached your maidenhead. But if you follow my instructions, it won't hurt much, I promise. And, it'll be very, very, pleasurable for you, trust me." His honeyed voice drawled out the words, obliterating the fear and making her shiver in anticipation. He reached down, squeezed her breasts and rolled her nipples. Lust streaked in her, although she still wished he would just fuck her pussy. But she trusted him, didn't she? All right, she would do as he asked and if it still hurt, she would ask him to stop. He kissed the long line of her spine and sucked the skin at her nape. She shuddered with longing for him but her pussy was empty. "Relax when I push in. Don't fight me, please."

She tried her best to relax, remembering the desire she had felt with his fingers, and his cock inched its way in. Involuntarily, she pushed back and took in more of his turgid length and felt her ass stretching wide. It burned like hell, yet underlying it was a thin thread of pleasure. She sobbed, because unbelievably, she wanted more and she was wetter than she had ever been before. His hand moved from her breast to her pussy and he thrummed her clit. A wave of intense pleasure rolled over her and she cried out, at the same instant that he pushed his cock all the way in and buried himself in her ass.

She couldn't help the scream that rent the air.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." His voice was filled with remorse as his harsh breathing filled her ear. "It's too soon, I never meant to hurt – I'm pulling out now –"

"No," she commanded. "Stay." He was thick and filled her completely and beyond and her ass was burning, yes, but his cock had also rubbed against nerve endings that had made her delirious with pleasure and she wanted to experience it again. "Let me accustom myself to your size first. And while I'm doing that, why don't you kiss me?" It was the first suggestion she'd made during her entire stay here and she felt herself to be very bold ordering an immortal to do the things she wanted.

"With pleasure." He made tiny, biting kisses at her neck while his hands caressed her body, particularly her breasts. He flicked his finger against her clit and pleasure swirled for a moment before it danced out of reach. He repeated the gesture and her hips bucked against him and pushed his cock further in.

"Move," she demanded breathlessly.

He withdrew and slammed into her, over and over, again and again. His cock was so wide that no matter what angle he thrust it in, he always rubbed vigorously over those nerve endings inside her and she could feel the wisps of the feverish pleasure rising up in her again – more intense, more powerful than the heights he had previously brought her to. "Faster..."

She was a willing accomplice in his efforts as she ground her hips and pushed back against him brazenly. She hadn't known that her butt possessed so many pleasure points and she wanted to explore and experience each one with him. For now, it was enough that his cock was stroking over that particular spot with frenetic speed, his hand slid in her pussy and his fingers alternated chafing her clit and plunging into her channel, wringing gasps of pleasure from her. Above her, he strained and sweated with effort.

"I can't keep this up for long," he rasped hoarsely. "I need you to come now. Now!"

As though her body was tied to his words, she convulsed at the exact moment of his shouted word and was taken to a world where there was nothing but soul-shattering,

mindless pleasure. She screamed and bucked and writhed in his arms, while her pussy clenched and her rectal muscles contracted madly around his rampaging cock. Wave after wave of intense pleasure crashed down on her as he continued to thrust into her. No one could endure this much sensation, so much rapture and ecstasy. Vertigo slammed into her and she fainted.

When consciousness returned, she opened her eyes to see him looking down at her with worried eyes.

“Are you all right?” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the center of her palm, his eyes never leaving hers.

Tears sprang to her eyes at her gesture but she managed a smile. “Aside from a sore ass, I’ve never felt better.” Her free hand reached up and caressed his cheek. “What about you? Did you – Were you able to, um...”

“Yes.” His lips turned down, his smile wry. “I released just as you fainted, I believe. I was terrified when I realized you were out cold.”

“Poor baby.” Her tone was amused and indulgent, something she never used except with her nephew. But she realized with this man – this immortal – she had run the gamut of her emotions from fear to tenderness to lust...and something more. Something like...love. For all that he was immortal, he was very human, with human wants and needs and emotions. He made her want to take care of him, protect him, please him and banish his loneliness.

But so what if she loved him? She was leaving in six days and she would never see him again. And what about him? How did he feel about her? She knew he desired her and maybe, even cared for her, as evidenced by his worry and concern. He delighted in showing her the wonders of his palace and he was enthusiastic in teaching her the sexual arts. But did he love her? If he did, wouldn’t he have broken down the walls around him? He remained elusive and mysterious about the Life-Bringer. He never revealed things about his family, about the other immortals, about his life except his

work. He didn't even want to mention the Life-Bringer, except for the one time that he told her he personally created and nurtured the emerald.

Her heart ached and threatened to break.

An immortal and a human? Impossible. This was nothing to him but a pleasant sexual interlude, a tiny speck in his vast years of life. She would also treat it as such. Think of the great experience she would bring to her marriage bed. She inwardly laughed. A crazy laugh. Marriage bed? She didn't see how she would be interested in marriage, if the man were not Orin.

Oh, stop, stop. There were six more days and she would enjoy them and store them up in her memory to hold her for the rest of her life.

"What is it?" His anxious question drew her out of her thoughts. He was so attuned to her mood changes that she wondered... No. She squelched the thought. She wouldn't allow herself any false hope.

She pinned a seductive smile on her lips. "I was just wondering," she caressed his hips and inserted her leg in between his, "if you would like to fuck me again."

A slow smile replaced his worried frown. "I would certainly like to *make love* to you again," was his reply before his lips descended on hers.

Chapter Three

"So we have come to this," she said quietly. Yesterday was the last blissful day of her life in the Emerald Palace. She had never thought this day would come so fast. She remembered the first day she had woken up to see Orin's emerald gaze on her and she recalled how she had wanted the two weeks to speed by so she could go home to her sister with the cure. Now that that day was here, she wished she could go back, she wished she had one more day to spend with Orin with nothing on her mind but being with him.

"Yes." He frowned and shifted uneasily on his feet. They were standing facing each other in front of the bed and he had ordered her to clothe herself, though he remained naked. He reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I wish there were some other way but — These two weeks have been wonderful, haven't they?"

"Yes." Her smile wavered and his image blurred.

"Don't cry. Your dearest dream is about to come true. You're about to hold the Life-Bringer in your hands. And when you go home, I just want... Will you remember me and the time we had here?"

Was that a hint of vulnerability in his voice? Desperation? "Yes," she whispered and dashed away her tears with the back of her hands. She wanted to fill her eyes with him, she wanted her last image to be a clear picture of him and she would hold it in her heart forever.

After long minutes had passed in which they stared at each other, he broke off and cleared his throat. "Well then." He squatted and reached into the pocket of his robe, which lay at his feet.

She forgot she was breathing. The Life-Bringer. She was about to see the emerald that she had come for.

And was disappointed when he drew out a small platinum dagger and confused when he straightened and placed it in her hands, the hilt facing her.

She sucked in a deep breath and stared down at it without comprehension. "Am I to dig for the Life-Bringer somewhere?"

He looked at her gravely. "Yes."

"All right. Let us go." She assumed they were going to the emerald garden and made a move toward the doorway but stopped when she realized he hadn't budged an inch. She turned back toward him. "Orin?"

He pointed to a region near his heart. "Here."

"What?" She gazed back, not understanding. Or maybe, she didn't want to understand, because it would be the most horrible trick.

"The Life-Bringer is my heart. It sustains my life at the same time that I imbue it with my life essence. To cure your sister, you have to get my heart." He was very calm but a fine sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

He has an emerald for a heart, she thought wildly, over and over, because she couldn't bear to think of the most important thing. When she continued to remain silent, he said, "You have to kill me, Esme, if you want to save your sister. The dagger is very sharp, so you won't have much trouble —"

The dagger fell to the ground, missing her feet by an inch. Pain grew in her breast until she could no longer breathe. "No!" The wail burst out from her throat as she launched herself into Orin's arms. "No, please, any way but this —" She sobbed even harder when his arms came around her and he pressed her to his chest. "There must be some other way —"

"There is no other way." His voice was firm. "You have to do this, Esme. Have you forgotten that you came to retrieve the Life-Bringer for your sister? You endured two weeks for this. Now that you have won it, you're going to throw it away?"

"But I can't. I can't do this. How can you...ask me to choose? I love you, Orin, I love you. I can't—" Tears streamed down her eyes in torrents and wetted his chest. "I can't. I can't kill you!"

His arms moved to her shoulders and drew her away from his body. "You love me?" Only a sliver of hope was in his voice but she heard it...and dared she to hope for the impossible? Was there a way out of this situation? A happy resolution for everyone? She didn't know but she was going to take things one step at a time and maybe, if Orin loved her, she could stay with him and they could search for another cure for her sister. Maybe, somewhere in the universe, there was another Life-Bringer for her sister.

"Yes." She dashed the tears away with the backs of her hands. "How could you not know? I love you." She gazed up at his beloved face and affirmed in her heart he was the only one she wanted to wake up to every morning, the one she wanted by her side for the rest of her short life. If she could, if he loved her.

"And I love my sister and my nephew. I..." She squared her shoulders as she came to a decision. "I wish I could give my nephew the chance to grow up and be loved by his mother but he will have to be satisfied with an aunt who'll love him as though he were her own son." She stared at Orin through her tears. "I can't kill you, Orin, because it would be a betrayal of my love and my sister wouldn't understand why I would kill someone so that she could live. She would hate her life, you see, so I really can't kill you, even if I didn't love you. But I do, I love you very much." She traced his face with her eyes and hands, raised herself on her toes and kissed him. Then she stooped down, picked up the dagger and held its hilt toward him. "Here's your dagger."

He accepted it gravely, numbly.

"I have to go back and take care of my sister but before I leave, can I spend the rest of today and tonight with you for the last time?" He still hadn't spoken, so she had to assume he didn't love her, that he never cared for her, that what he felt for her was only sexual lust. Her heart filled with burning pain but she couldn't force him to feel something he didn't. And it was better this way, better that he was honest than if he

lied. "I can never come back, you said so before." She tried to manage a brave smile and failed.

Suddenly, Orin was choking. The dagger dropped from his hands and clattered to the emerald floor. His eyes bulged and he doubled over as his hands clawed at his throat.

"Orin!" she shrieked and fell beside him. Panic seared her heart. "What's going on? What's happening?" Her hands fluttered helplessly. "What can I do? Tell me what to do," she pleaded, as he thrashed about on the floor, gripped by something she couldn't see or even sense.

Then, as abruptly as it started, he stopped and lay quietly on the floor, panting. He stuck his thumb and forefinger into his mouth and drew out a small, dull stone. He took her hand, placed it in the center of her palm and closed her fingers over it. "The Life-Bringer." He smiled wryly. "Or at least, a piece of it. It'll be enough to heal your sister."

She couldn't believe it, she dared't believe. When he took his hand away and sat up, she opened her fingers and stared at the green stone. This was the purest and brightest emerald that Magda had talked about? It looked so ordinary it was hard to believe it could hold any special powers. It didn't even glitter, as the floor and the walls of the bedroom did. The thoughts flashed across her mind with lightning speed. *And this is his heart? How can he still be alive then? And what was that business about killing him? Or his choking?*

"Orin, you have much to explain." Her voice was remarkably calm, despite the turbulent emotions roiling within her.

"The Life-Bringer can't be handed out easily to any seeker," he began somberly. "The seeker must both pay the price and undergo the test. I've accepted the price but you still needed to go through the test to be proved worthy. And, I'm happy to say, you've passed with flying colors."

Her mind whirled. "I'm assuming the test was when you asked me to kill you? What kind of test was that?"

“You have to understand what the Life-Bringer is. From its name, it brings life. But as it brings life, it also cannot be the cause of death. If you had killed me, you would be betraying its very nature and it would never go with you willingly.”

“There’s a paradox there. If I—or any seeker—don’t kill you, how would I get the Life-Bringer?”

His lips quirked. “But you have it now in your hand, haven’t you?” He took pity on her confused frown and explained further. “There wouldn’t have been any real killing involved. If you had attempted to stab me, I wouldn’t have died and you wouldn’t have gotten the emerald. But the test would have proven your true nature, that you were willing to murder to get the gem. Anyone who murders does not really love life, which is the essence of the Life-Bringer. And I would have sent you away, back to your homeland, without the gem.”

“But because I didn’t kill you or even make the attempt?” She didn’t stab him because she loved him, not because—

“You couldn’t do it, because you love me.” He grinned and he was sidetracked for a bit. “You really do, don’t you?”

She nodded, uncertain with his reaction.

“Oh, my love.” He leaned toward her and kissed her. Like always, she kissed him back, because she couldn’t seem to help herself. She loved him and she craved physical closeness with him. He shifted the robe off her, placed her on the bed and he worshipped her body. He took an inordinately long time caressing, kissing and fondling her breasts, her nipples, her navel, her abdomen. There was a different quality to his lovemaking. Before, it had been pure, unadulterated lust but now, lust still underscored most of his actions but it was tempered with something tender—perhaps love.

When he slid his cock in her waiting wetness, he whispered in her ear, “I love you.” He repeated the phrase over and over as he drove into her body and his words rang in her ears as she received his hard length into her, as she luxuriated in the friction his

thrusting generated in her, as desire curled and tightened its grip on her and even as she came apart in his arms and he in hers.

They remained joined together after they had slaked their hunger. He seemed unwilling to move out of her and he was still hard enough not to slip out of her. Holding her tight, he rolled over so that she was sprawled on top of him. She was content to remain in that position until she remembered his words and she grinned, much the same as he had earlier. She lifted her head and gazed at him in wonder. "You love me."

"Yes."

"Can I stay with you?"

"Do you think you can stand being an immortal?" The love burning in his eyes was so intense she felt she could drown in it. "I have to warn you that I can't bear for you to grow old and die and leave me to face thousands of years alone."

She didn't even have to think. "Yes, if it means being with you."

"Anyway, you can't come back as a mortal." He grinned. "You'd have to be an immortal to do that."

"Come back? What do you mean?"

"Aren't you going to give the Life-Bringer to your sister?" he asked pointedly and chided. "How quickly we forget."

"The Life-Bringer!" she exclaimed, then sat up, extricated herself in a hurry and searched the floor. "Oh no, I've lost it."

"Hey, that's my heart you're talking about. How could you lose it?" he asked complacently, still lying on the bed.

"Come down and help me find it. I don't want you coughing up another piece for me. I was scared to death when you did that awhile ago." She shuddered as she laid one shoulder on the floor and looked under the bed. "I don't want to go through it another time."

“Even if I had wanted to, I can’t. I can only ‘cough up’ the Life-Bringer once for each qualified seeker,” he said quietly, then instructed. “Close your hand and open it again.”

She straightened and obeyed his instructions. When she opened her fingers, the piece of emerald was lying in the center of her palm. “How – How did you do that?”

“Magic.” He smiled briefly. He left the bed, crossed to the table and from the top drawer, he took a small cloth bag. “Here, place it inside.” They left the bag with the emerald inside it on top of the table.

When they were snuggled under the covers on the bed once again, she prompted, “You haven’t finished your explanation.”

“What? Oh yes, I was...distracted, as I recall.” He bent his head to kiss her. “Like this.”

She kissed him back, then pushed him away. “And I’ll never hear the full story if you don’t stop it.”

He sighed theatrically but he didn’t kiss her again. He took up the explanation. “If I remember correctly, you couldn’t kill me because you love me. But you continued and said that you couldn’t kill me because your sister would hate it, she wouldn’t want to live knowing a life had been taken to enable her to do so. You yourself love life,” he concluded quietly, “or you wouldn’t have known what your sister would feel or abide by it. And in your not killing, in your love for life itself, you gained the reward that you seek – the Life-Bringer.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the center of her palm again, all the while holding her eyes with his. “My heart. A small piece to cure your sister and the rest of it is yours.”

She was perilously close to tears. “And if someone were to come seeking for it?”

“Why, you’d have a hand in deciding whether the seeker is worthy or not.”

“I won’t share you with any woman,” she declared fiercely. “Not even for one moment.”

He laughed. He actually laughed. He was probably pleased that she was so possessive. "You won't have to," he promised. "Payment for the Life-Bringer can come in many forms, not merely sex but all seekers have to undergo the same test." He turned serious. "Now, here is what we'll do. Tomorrow morning, I'll send you home in my carriage, together with the Life-Bringer and a small bag of gems for your sister." He held up a hand when she was about to speak. He traced a finger down her nose. "I don't want you to worry about them while you're here, which I know you'll do. The gems will provide for their living, until your nephew has grown up enough to take care of his mother. It's the least I can do for taking you away from them, Esme. All right?"

She nodded. He was more generous than she thought, more thoughtful than she could ever hope for.

"Place the Life-Bringer under your sister's tongue and within twelve hours, the life essence from the gem will have leaked into your sister's bloodstream, gained victory over the disease and repaired her body. Now, listen carefully." She leaned forward, not wanting to miss anything important. "The carriage will wait for you but you have to be seated inside it before twenty-four hours are up from the time you alighted. The footman will prepare a drink for you that will make you an immortal. It will also make you sleep during the journey but I trust my men implicitly. They will see to it that you make it here safe and sound. Remember, within twenty-four hours. If not..." He closed his eyes as though he couldn't contemplate the consequences. "You will remain a mortal and you will never be able to enter the Emerald Palace again."

We would never be together.

His unvoiced fear hung in the air.

She bent to kiss him and in that kiss was a world of promise. "I will be back in time."

Epilogue

He wore a path across the emerald floor of his bedroom. More than twenty-four hours had passed but she wasn't here yet. Of course, he didn't know how long it would take to travel from here to her homeland and back again but shouldn't she be here by now?

His insides churned with worry and anxiety. He had just experienced the happiest and most contented fourteen days in his two thousand years. He had awakened each morning with expectation and eagerness and though he loved being in bed with Esmeralda, he also couldn't wait to show her his domain. They hadn't even begun to explore the entirety of the Emerald Palace. It was so huge there were places nobody had ever gone to. He was also impatient to introduce her to the other gem immortals, people who were his friends and associates. Perhaps they could revive their yearly meetings, although he was fully aware that only *he* had changed and the other immortals might still be of the same opinion. Well, he could show her the universe then, he was sure she would like that.

Was he sure? He paused in his pacing, checked by a hideous thought. What if she had gotten scared of being an immortal—after all, living would take a very long time—and decided not to come back? Or her sister needed her and she couldn't bear to leave them? What would he do then?

Dread reared its ugly head and his knees weakened until he had no choice but to sink to the floor before he fell over. He couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again. The pain was too much to contemplate, the hopelessness too bleak to imagine—

Someone laid a hand on his shoulder. "Orin?" That someone went down on her knees beside him and hugged him. "I'm back."

He struggled out of the abyss and looked at her in wonder, at her long, greenish, wavy hair, the light verdant hue of her huge eyes and her still-creamy complexion. He hoped her skin would never turn green. "You're back." He started to laugh. He caught her up in his arms and swung her around. "You're back." A crazy, bubbling-over-with-happiness kind of laughter welled up in him and burst forth from his lips.

Her grasp on his shoulders tightened as she laughed with him.

She was back to stay, for however long eternity would be for them.

About the Author

Madison Blake is a firm believer in love and happy endings. That's why she loves stories wherein the characters go through adversities to emerge victorious in the end. An eternal optimist, she always tries to see the positive side in every negative situation, the silver lining in every dark cloud, so to speak. She has gone through a lot of failures and disappointments in life, but there is one thing she would never give up on: the fulfillment of her dream, which is to be a multi-published and award-winning author.

Holding a day job means that she doesn't get much time to write, so Madison tries to cram her free time with as much writing as she can. Even so, she would make time to read her favorite genre (romance), especially when she's experiencing writer's block. She loves to read and write about strong heroines, and she's on the eternal quest for the powerful, attractive, mysterious, yummy hero, the kind of man who'll make you sigh and say, "He's the one."

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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