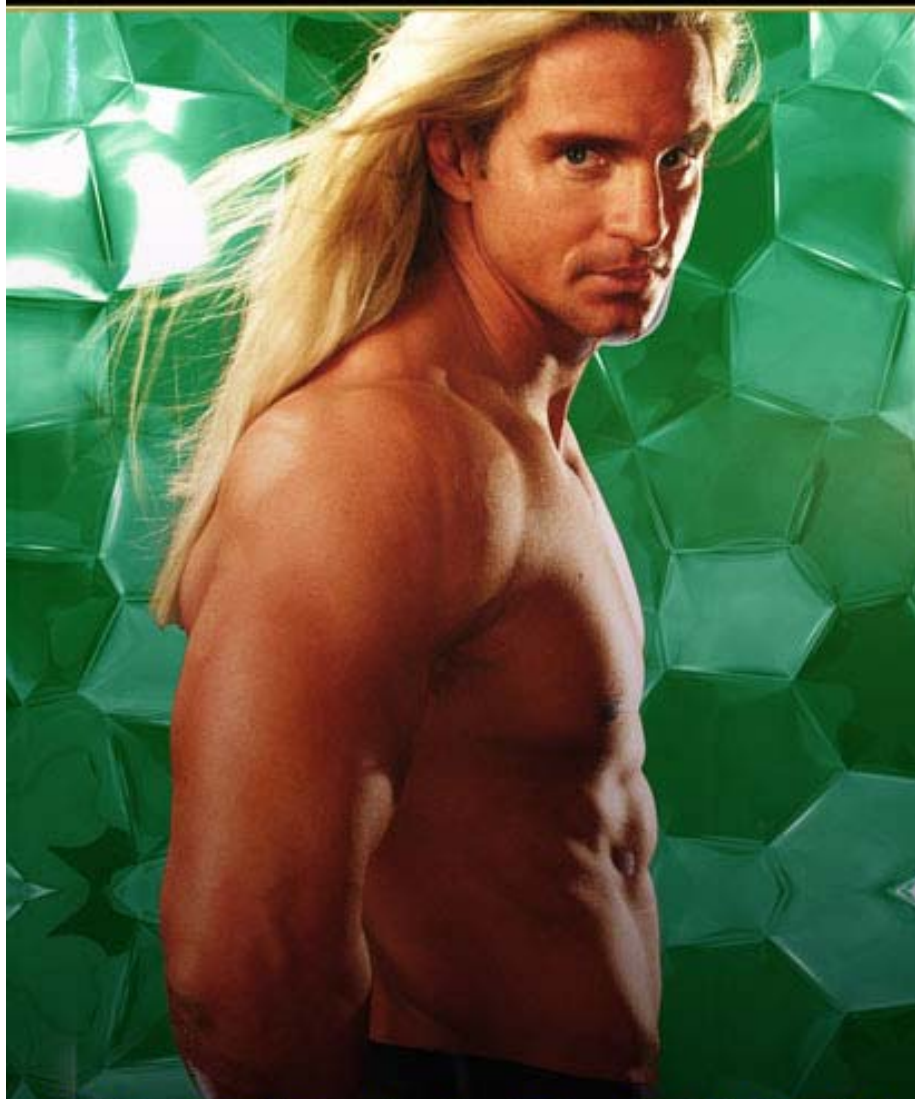


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



EMERALD EYES



SOLANGE
AYRE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Emerald Eyes

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EMERALD EYES

Solange Ayre

Dedication
Dedicated to all who suffered through Hurricane Katrina.

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Chapter One

Jonas Hitcheson wasn't thinking about his dream lover when the cruiser flashed its lights behind him. Lost, hungry and cursing himself for making that illegal U-turn, he fumbled for his wallet.

He glanced into the side mirror. Expecting a police officer, he was dumbfounded to see a goddess approaching his Jeep. Tall and long-legged, with skin the color of a caramel apple and full breasts that strained against her crisp uniform, she had to be a goddess. No human was such a perfect example of womanly beauty.

The loose-limbed swing of her rounded hips mesmerized him. He let the window down. "I've been breaking traffic laws all over the place this morning," he blurted. "I guess the odds finally caught up with me." *Great thing to say to a cop, Hitch. She'll think you're drunk.*

Maybe he was. The sight of her had given him a stronger buzz than downing an entire six-pack.

She bent to bring her face even with his. Her serene features were those of an Egyptian queen. "License and registration, sir."

Somehow he'd known she'd have one of those enthralling, whiskey voices.

He handed the items over. When her fingers brushed against his hand, light exploded behind his eyes, brightness flooding him like switching on a ten-thousand-watt chandelier.

Red alert! It's the woman I came down here to find!

He grabbed the door handle then jerked his hand back as though he'd received an electric shock. *Careful, Hitch. She has no idea who you are.*

As she returned to the cruiser, he thought about stroking her soft cheek, coaxing her to angle her head so their lips would meet. Sweat broke out under his Cleveland Indians cap. He took it off, raking an agitated hand through his hair.

At least he'd met her now. His chest tightened – along with his loins.

For the last few weeks he'd been dreaming about the woman who would become his lover. She'd been a murmur in his ear at night. A warm pressure against his back when he was about to wake, the feel of his dream woman making him happy again after so many months lost in grief after the death of his wife.

Once his dream lover had whispered his name. She hadn't called him "Hitch", the name Barbara had always used. His dream woman had called him "Jonas".

He'd never glimpsed her face in those dreams. Never visualized those plump lips with the kissable dip in the lower one. Never seen that luxuriant dark hair, pulled so tightly into a knot at the back of her neck. Would she let him take it down and wind it around his hands?

The thud of the cruiser door made him look up, every nerve straining with anticipation as she returned to his window. He wished her eyes weren't covered by those mirrored sunglasses.

But he didn't need to see them to know they'd be as green as a leafy glade.

"Since you're a tourist, I'll let you off with a warning, Mr. Hi –"

"Call me Hitch," he interrupted. "You won't shoot if I get out of my car, right?"

She didn't crack a smile. "I rarely shoot anyone," she said dryly. "Why do you want to exit your vehicle?"

"I've already seen you front and back. You need to get a good look at me before accepting my invitation to dinner."

One feathery dark brow rose above her sunglasses.

"Chemistry's important, after all," he added.

She gave him a severe look. *Shit*. What would he do if she turned him down?

"Feel free to leave your vehicle," she said. "Stay with your back against the door and keep your hands where I can see 'em, sir."

Exhilaration sped through him. "*Hitch*," he corrected her. He stepped down out of the Jeep and straightened.

She was taller than most women. Tall enough that he could have kissed her forehead without stooping.

Her gaze moved from his face to his t-shirt. "Spider-Man?" she asked. "What are you, six years old?"

He grinned. "Don't insult my favorite superhero," he said. "I promise I'll dress better when I take you out."

"What makes you think I'd go out with a skinny white boy like you?"

"Just a feeling I have. As soon as we touched, my psychic awareness kicked in."

"You're in the Big Easy now," she said, skepticism coloring her voice. "Wiggle your elbows too far, you'll hit a psychic."

"Okay, then let's just say I want to take you out and hear the story of your life. I could listen to your sexy voice forever." His smile broadened. "Yeah, even when you do that *Robocop* routine."

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. Was he finally getting through to her? "Why am I listening to your bullshit?" she asked.

"Because you like me. Did I mention you have a *fantastic* ass?" He pushed his hair back from his forehead. "Sorry, I'm kind of overwhelmed here. Is it too early to say that?"

"Let's leave each other's looks out of this for a moment," she said. "I don't date married men." She gave him a scornful look. "Don't deny it—I see the outline of your ring."

"I'm a widower. But hey, I'm impressed. Do you know keen powers of observation is the number two quality I find sexy in a woman?"

She put one hand on her hip. "Okay, I'll bite. What's number one?"

"A willingness to jump my bones repeatedly."

"Stop that or I'll put you under arrest."

"For what? Talking dirty to a beautiful woman?" He quirked up a brow. "Anyway, you'd have to use the cuffs, right? And frisk me." He held out both hands. Would she take him up on it? The idea of her touching him sent a jolt of excitement directly to his cock. "Go ahead. Make sure you do a thorough job when you pat me down."

She tapped her booted foot and said, "Mr. Hitcheson. Get back in your vehicle. *Now.*"

He turned up his palms. "Your wish is my command, officer." He reseated himself in the Jeep. "You know *my* name. Will you tell me yours? Or do I have to spend all day thinking of you as 'that gorgeous cop with the ass I'd like to' —"

"Cressy Trellen," she said.

"Cressy? Unusual name."

"Short for Cressida. From *Troilus and Cressida*."

"Oh right. One of Shakespeare's tragic couples." He directed a smoldering look at her. "We should try a rewrite. *Jonas and Cressida*—a new story with a happy ending."

She drew closer to the door. Why did she have to smell so great? He wanted to tuck his face between her full breasts and drink in her scent.

"Here's the deal, Mr. Hitcheson," she said. "If you're serious, I get off at seven. I'll be having a cold one at a bar called Nico's on Marlowe Street."

His heart sang with delight. *Everything's falling into place. I'll get the chance tonight to convince her we belong together.* "I'll be there—even if I have to swim Lake Pontchartrain."

"Worse," she said. "The place'll be packed with officers who don't take kindly to smart-mouthed tourists."

He just grinned. "I'll count on you to protect me."

Driving away from her almost killed him. Seven whole hours to go before he saw her again.

Oh man.

Forget about the restaurant he'd been looking for. He needed to go back to the hotel and take a cold shower. Or better yet, a long *hot* shower with some serious jacking off. He couldn't show up to meet her tonight with the kind of hard-on he was sporting right now.

Cressy. Cressida.

Funny, he'd never imagined his new lover would be wearing a badge and uniform. He imagined peeling away each layer of hard authority to find the soft woman underneath.

Doubt shook him as he pulled over and studied the map, trying to figure out how to get back to his hotel. Something was troubling Cressy—he'd been able to tell that from their single touch—but she was fortified like a castle with the drawbridge up. Even if he swam the moat, would she let him into the inner rooms where her true self dwelled?

* * * * *

Cressy blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness as she entered Nico's. Several officers from her shift were already standing at the bar. Since she'd stopped to change into civilian clothes, she was a latecomer.

The room was smoky but she took a deep breath anyway, enjoying the familiar odors of Cajun spices and hot sausage. Zydeco accordion music sounded from the jukebox. She wondered what Jonas Hitcheson would think of this place. Would he make it through the door once he saw the number of cops inside?

She wasn't sure why she'd encouraged him, except that she'd been having an awful week. The problems with her house were getting worse. The lawyer she'd hired was useless, that was for damn sure. Maybe what she needed was some carnal attention

from a good-looking man. A few orgasms would be a nice bonus and help her forget her pile of troubles for an evening.

LaRue let out a wolf whistle as Cressy joined the group at the bar. "Whoa! Someone's goin' out on the town tonight."

"Maybe." She nodded thanks as the bartender, Leon, slid a Stella Artois down to her. "I'm betting my date will get one look at this neighborhood and take off."

"Who's the guy?" LaRue asked.

Jonas Fellowes Hitcheson II, she recalled from his driver's license. Can't be a much WASPier name than that. Thirty-four years old. Six-four, two-ten, brown hair and eyes. Beautiful dark eyes...

"Yankee tourist," she told LaRue.

"Where'd you meet him?" Waters asked.

"Y'all sure have a lot of questions," she said, sampling the deliciously cold beer so that she could avoid answering.

DeLillo strolled over. "Hey, Trelle, if you're looking for a friend with benefits, why didn't you pick an officer?"

The sudden silence that came over the group told the rookie he'd blundered.

"Been there, done that," Cressy said quietly.

"Killed in the line," LaRue told DeLillo, frowning. He put his arm around Cressy's waist. "Lovey, don't let it put a cloud in your sky."

She took another sip of beer. "Greg passed twenty years ago. Seems like another life."

"I'm real sorry." DeLillo hung his head. "What lousy luck."

No. Greg's death had nothing to do with lousy luck. It was The Curse.

LaRue looked toward the door. "Hey, your guy's comin'."

By an effort of will, she kept her gaze fixed straight ahead. "How do you know?"

"He's got a big-ass present under his arm," LaRue said. He started to step away but she held onto his belt.

"Stay right where you are," she murmured.

He looked startled. "Aw, you're making it hard on the poor bastard."

"Damn straight."

Cressy kept her eyes on the gilded mirror above the bar, getting a close look at Jonas as he entered. His expression brightened when he spotted her, like a kid who'd been handed the biggest slab of ribs at a family barbecue.

He looked fine. *Damn* fine. True to his promise, he'd traded his Spidey tee for a pale-blue Ralph Lauren Polo shirt. His Levi's emphasized his long legs.

Was there anything sexier than a tall guy in tight jeans?

Yes. A tall guy *without* his jeans.

Apparently unintimidated by the eight officers at the bar, Jonas walked straight up to LaRue and held out his hand with a friendly smile. "Good evening, officer. Name's Hitch. Thanks for watching out for my date until I got here."

LaRue broke into a big grin and shook his hand. "Jake LaRue," he said. "Good to meet ya. Take care of this little lady, now."

Little lady? Cressy suppressed a snort.

"Sorry I'm late," Jonas said, his hand closing over hers. She liked his firm, confident grip. "I meant to show up before seven but I get lost every time I drive in this town. Ready to go?"

"Where are we headed?" She stole a glance at the package under his arm. Silver gift-wrap, big gold bow. About the size of a large box of chocolates.

"I made reservations at Bayona," he said.

So he really *did* want to impress her. But she was interested in one thing tonight and it wasn't rich food. She squeezed his fingers. "Why not stay here? Leon makes fresh jambalaya every afternoon. It's a treat."

"Sure, if that's what you want." If he felt disappointment at missing out on a top-notch culinary experience, he managed to hide it well.

She asked Leon to bring jambalaya and bread. Jonas let her lead him to a back corner.

"I thought you'd still be in uniform," he commented. "Don't get me wrong, you look terrific."

The compliment warmed her. "Thanks. I keep this outfit in my locker in case I feel like going out after my shift." The rose satin shirt had sequins around the low-cut neckline. She figured her tight black skirt gave him an even better look at the butt he'd admired earlier.

He slid into the vinyl booth beside her, settling in so close that she smelled the mint soap aroma rising off his skin. He must have showered right before coming to meet her. Shaved too—his cheeks had a slight flush that she found endearing. How would his skin feel under her palms?

"I brought you something," he said, handing her the present. "Hope you like it."

She was about to say she loved chocolate. But when she unwrapped it, she found a nineteenth-century edition of *Troilus and Cressida*.

The thoughtfulness he'd shown pleased her but made her uneasy as well. It would have been easy for him to pick up candy or flowers. This present had been chosen with care.

Don't worry. He's only a tourist. He won't be staying.

Thanking him, she stroked the embossed cover. "I have a small collection of old books. This will fit right in." She tucked the book into her shoulder bag.

"Finding it gave me something to do this afternoon," he said. "Besides fantasizing about you, I mean. And hoping you were really going to meet me."

She shrugged. "If I wasn't going to meet you, I'd have never said I was."

"Yeah. I should have known that." His gaze was fixed on her face. "I wish you hadn't chosen such a dark corner. I want to see those gorgeous green eyes."

She waved her hand at the next table. "Fetch a candle over."

Reaching out, he grabbed a glass-covered candle then took out a lighter.

"Do you smoke?" she asked as he lit the candle.

"No but a lighter's useful in my profession."

"Which is what? Arsonist?"

He grinned at her dry joke and put his hand over hers. "That must be *your* profession, judging by what you've done to me." Raising her hand to his mouth, he kissed her palm. The soft caress of his warm lips sent a tingle rushing through her. "I'm a ghost researcher and writer. I travel to haunted places and write books about them."

"So that explains your trip to the Big Easy," she said, her voice catching. He hadn't released her hand and was now tracing tiny, enticing circles on her palm with his thumb. It was difficult to speak when darts of pleasure pulsed up and down her arm. "We have more ghosts per inch than any other city in the US."

"Yeah, I could have done a whole book about New Orleans but it's just going to be one chapter in *Ghosts of the Old South*."

He paused as Leon brought their jambalaya and bread. Jonas took a large spoonful of the thick stew. "Wow, I've hardly ever smelled anything this good."

"Be careful, it's hot," she warned.

He wagged his brows at her. "I like *hot*."

Two can play that game. "I like mine with a lot of sausage. *Thick* sausage."

"Thick is good," he said. "So is long."

Stifling a giggle, she thought she could really learn to like this guy. He tickled her sense of humor. How often could she say that when she met a man?

"Maybe you'd like to see my house," she said. *And maybe I'd like to have you over so we can get down to business.* She imagined him in her bed, his lanky body naked, his cock

erect. Heat shot down her body and spread through her pussy. "Some folks say my house is haunted."

"You've got a ghost?" His dark eyes were alight with interest. "Who is it?"

"The first owner of my house, my several times great-grandmother. She was a *'femme de couleur libre'*—a free woman of color—who lived in the early nineteenth century."

"And she owned a house? Wasn't that unusual for the time?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not here. Many rich white men took such women as mistresses. They'd buy them houses, escort them to segregated balls, raise entire second families with them. It was such a common lifestyle that the system even had a name—*placage*."

"That's fascinating. And your ancestor has remained in the house?"

"I've never seen her. But I've heard her." Cressy suppressed a shudder, remembering the sobbing that had echoed through the house the night Greg was shot.

"Spirits are often drawn to me." His flirtatiousness had given way to an earnest tone. "I wonder if she'll show herself if I come over there."

She liked a man who took his profession seriously. "I doubt it. Isabelle d'Arvany turned against men after her lover betrayed her."

"Sounds like an interesting tale."

This time she couldn't hide her shudder. "Same old story. Beautiful woman, married man." She added in a lighter tone, "I wish I had the emerald necklace he gave her. But the family tradition says she tossed it in the Mississippi when her lover married another woman."

"Why didn't the lover marry Isabelle? Was it illegal back then?"

She nodded. "A white man couldn't marry a woman with African blood. Isabelle was a quadroon—that means one black grandparent. Isn't it funny how folks make up those labels for each other? Quadroon, octoroon, mulatto..."

"What do you call yourself, Cressy?"

She shrugged. "Skin shade doesn't matter—I'm a black woman. I sent my daughter to a black college."

His eyes widened. "You have a daughter old enough to be in *college*?"

"I surely do. She was no teen pregnancy either. I married my husband when I was a grown woman of twenty-one." *More fool me, flouting The Curse like that.* "I gave birth to Miranda three months after my husband died."

He took her hand again, holding it between both of his. The gentle pressure sent a thrill racing through her. "That must have been very hard for you," he said, his brows drawing together.

She acknowledged his sensitivity with a brusque nod, never liking to revisit those terrible months after Greg's death. "Anyway, I'm eight years older than you. Maybe that'll teach you not to pick up cops."

"Honey, when I meet a woman I'm crazy about, age is the last thing on my mind."

"So what *are* you thinking about?" she asked.

"Whether you like me enough to go to bed with me tonight."

"I wouldn't be sitting here if I wasn't considering it." She gave him a look from underneath her lashes. *Liar, like you hadn't already decided when you told him to meet you here. You're already thinking about his fingers teasing your breasts. His cock rubbing against your pussy. His groans as he's thrusting into you.*

He grinned at her. "So you're challenging me to close the deal. I used to be an advertising copywriter, so I'll give you my best product speech." Raising his chin, he put one hand on his chest. "You can't go wrong with the new and improved Hitch. He's the perfect age—plenty of youthful stamina and yet old enough to be fully experienced. He likes foreplay, gives great oral sex *and* will make breakfast in the morning."

She looked him in the eye, daring him. "Tell me more. Especially about that *oral sex* part."

"This is your lucky day!" he said, ratcheting up the enthusiasm. "We have a special offer where Hitch comes out to your house and gives a free demonstration."

"I'm intrigued." She raised her brows. "But how do I know you're any good?"

His eyes glinted with mischief. "Take my word for it?"

"No way. I'm a cop, remember?"

"Okay, let me say this." He lowered his voice, suddenly serious. "There's nothing I like better than making love to a woman. I learned a long time ago the best way to get my wife into bed was to offer to eat her out until she was sobbing with pleasure. Even a skinny white boy can learn to do that well."

Oh Lord. This is sounding better every minute. She wanted to feel his sensual mouth roving over her thighs, kissing them, traveling up to her sensitive folds. Her pulse quickened as she thought of his tongue laving her clit.

"Imagine we're in bed together." He wasn't touching her but his words aroused her just as surely as a caress. "Where do you like to be kissed? Neck, breasts, navel?"

Leaning closer to him, she breathed, "Yes."

He smiled at her answer. "I want to kiss every inch of you. Especially your breasts. I can't wait to see your nipples. I'll bet they're gorgeous when you're aroused." He put his warm palm on her shoulder. "I'll lick them and suck them until you're begging me to do something to satisfy you. That's when I'll go down on you."

She moistened her suddenly dry lips, her pelvis throbbing. "Enough about me," she said. "What do *you* like in bed?"

"It's difficult to choose. I keep thinking of all the different positions we'll try. Maybe doggy-style first. It's hard to imagine anything better than watching your beautiful ass quivering while I'm thrusting into you."

Okay, she had to agree with him—that sounded damn good. "Tell me something else."

He gave her that appealing grin again. "See, I knew you liked hearing me talk dirty. You know what turns me on? When a woman appreciates my cock. A few cries of 'Oh my God, you're so huge' and I'm a happy camper. Feel free to improvise on that theme."

"Are you huge?" she asked.

"Not especially. That's why I like a lot of flattery."

She took a cautious look up at the bar, wondering whether she could touch Jonas without any of her fellow officers noticing. Deciding that the red oilcloth over the booth's table hid their lower bodies adequately, she reached over and ran her fingers up his fly. She traced the outline of his cock, smiling at his gasp of surprise.

He was hard. And in spite of his words, a fine size. Thick as well. She imagined kneeling between his legs, sucking his cock and watching it turn darker and stiffer. His fists would clench as she worked her mouth up and down its length, caressing it until it stood up straight and proud. When his beautiful cock was slick with her saliva, she'd straddle him and lower herself down, ride him hard until they both shouted with pleasure.

"How do you feel about the woman-on-top position?" she asked.

His eyes darkened. "Nothing better than that. Not only do you do all the work but I get to watch your breasts bounce while you're moving." The heightened flush on his lean cheeks showed how much he enjoyed her touch as she rubbed his cock through his tight jeans. "You'd better stop what you're doing or I'll lift you up on the table and fuck you this minute."

She met his eyes. The longing she read in them heightened her own arousal. "You wouldn't dare."

One corner of his mouth rose. "You're right. Too many cops in here. But try me in some other bar—I might surprise you." He lowered his voice. "Better take your hand away. I don't want to walk past all your buddies with an enormous hard-on."

Reluctantly she removed her hand, feeling breathless as their gazes clung.

"I think you deserve a taste of your own medicine." His warm hand closed over her thigh. "No pantyhose. I like that." He stroked her thigh slowly, his palm moving upward. Her skin quivered under his touch. "Mmm. Lace panties. Nice." Teasing the crease between her thigh and her mound, he added, "This is not helping me regain control."

"Then stop," she said, confident that he wouldn't. She moved on the vinyl seat, spreading her legs, aching for more. All she wanted was for him to move his hand higher.

Now he had access to the damp heat between her thighs. He took immediate advantage of her altered position, rubbing her through the crotch of her panties. Her pussy throbbed, hungry for the rough thrust of a big cock. *His* cock.

"I can't stop. I love touching you." His breathing quickened. "Oh man—I don't believe how wet you are."

He pressed a finger into her slit, hampered by the lace of her panties. She gasped, wriggling against the pleasing touch.

"Of course I'm wet," she murmured. "It feels so good when you stroke my pussy."

"You're a bad girl to talk like that," he said.

"You don't know just how bad I can be."

"I'd like to find out."

She gave him a sultry look. "Then pay the check and let's go."

Chapter Two

After a quick stop in the restroom, Cressy stepped outside. The night air smelled of jasmine. The neon signs above bars and restaurants lit up the dark. The instant the door shut behind her, Jonas closed the distance between them.

"It was killing me in there, not being able to kiss you." Putting one hand on her waist, he used the other to tenderly caress her cheek. She lifted her face, enthralled by his masculine power as he backed her against the brick building and claimed her lips.

She wasn't prepared for the pleasure that flooded her when his hot mouth moved against hers. For the joy that tumbled through her when his lips persuaded hers to open. For the fierce arousal that overtook her when his tongue slid between her lips.

She threw her arms around his neck, pressing tightly against him. Her breasts pushed against his broad chest, her nipples peaking. His tongue traveled slowly over her teeth, exploring, titillating. Then his fingers urged her into a different position and he thrust his tongue against hers. A murmur of pleasure shivered between them. Knees buckling, she tightened her grip on him.

He whispered hoarsely, "One taste of you and I feel drunk."

Senses reeling, she tried to cool them both down by saying, "Maybe it's the jambalaya. Leon puts wine in it."

"It's not the hot stew," he said, pressing against her. "It's the hot woman." Without warning, his mouth was on her again, his teeth nipping at her neck. She threw her head back, her pussy clenching as he sucked and nibbled her flesh. His mouth roved up her neck to her jawline. He planted a quick row of kisses there, kisses that made her tremble against him.

God, how she wanted him to open her shirt and press his enticing mouth to her breasts. "You have to stop." She moved her hands to his shoulders but couldn't make herself push him away.

"I don't want to stop," he said. "Ever."

"You have to stop so we can go to my house."

Ignoring her, he sucked her earlobe. She whimpered, shivers of pure delight flowing down her neck. She tangled her fingers into his crisp waves of hair.

"Yeah, that's good," he muttered, kneading her butt. "I like feeling your hands on me."

She wasn't used to the waves of sexual arousal racking her body. Lord, in another moment she'd be unzipping his fly, rubbing against his cock until she satisfied the nagging ache inside her. Or pulling him into an alley and lifting up her skirt...

"Really, you have to stop," she said. "Or I'll be forced to arrest you."

"That's right, honey," he said. "Arrest me. Restrain me. Take me to a dark room and interrogate me."

The thought of being alone in a dark room with him set her pulse racing. His palm, molding and rubbing her butt cheek, stoked the fire he'd started deep within her.

"You can be the judge and jury too," he went on. "Sentence me to a week in your bed. Force me to make you come over and over."

Lord, that's just what I need. She forced acidity into her voice. "Talk is cheap. We can't do any of that in public." *We can't. No matter how much I want him to take me this instant.*

"You're right. Damn it." He released her and took a step back. "Where's your car? I'll follow you."

"I came to work by bus. We'll take your car."

"Great. Just keep your hands to yourself until we get to your house."

"I'll attempt to control myself," she said dryly. But it was harder than she thought as they walked up the street. She wanted to be in his arms again, inhaling his musky aftershave and drinking in his exciting caresses. Tingles of anticipation chased each other through her pussy as they approached his car.

"You're the one who should be arrested, you know," he said, opening the Jeep's door for her.

"Arrested for what?"

He got into the driver's seat. "Isn't there a crime called 'inducing panic'? You're guilty of 'inducing lust'."

"Then I need to be punished too," she said. She belted herself in, noticing the way his intent gaze fixed on her as she adjusted the seat belt between her breasts. "Sentence me to a spanking."

He started the car. "Oh man! Did you have to put that idea in my head?" He gave her a wry look. "Don't touch me – and don't talk either."

With a chuckle, she said, "Fine. Are you going to find my house using your 'psychic awareness'?"

* * * * *

Jonas remembered what his dad had told him way back in high school. *If you want to get rid of a woody, think about something cold.*

He gripped the steering wheel, picturing himself far away from humid New Orleans. *Okay, I'm a polar bear. It's cold, it's snowing, I need to catch fish. Polar bear, sushi. Raw fish...*

Raw. Cressy. The possibilities made his cock twitch back to life.

"Turn right," she said, her husky voice stimulating him as much as one of her incredible kisses.

A second polar bear invaded his fantasy, fluttering long black eyelashes at him. Fantastic ass on her too. *Sentence me to a spanking*, she said...

"Hell," he muttered. When she looked at him in surprise, he said, "How much farther?"

"We're almost there."

I sure am. God, he was so tempted to pull over, push up her skirt and thrust into her. *C'mon, Hitch. Take her home. You're too old to do it in the car like a high school kid.* Anyway, he wanted their first time to be memorable. A sensual delight, not a fumbling quickie in the Jeep.

But it was so hard to keep his hands to himself. Had he ever been this aroused before, even in his horny teenage days? He thought about those stealthy touches under the table at the bar. If only her panties hadn't been in the way, he'd have entered her slowly with two fingers, thrusting into her secret depths, making her warm cream flow over his hand until she came. She would have enjoyed that.

And he would have enjoyed exploring her soft heat, watching her face change as release flooded her body.

"We're here," she announced.

He pulled over to the curb. "Are we in the French Quarter?"

"Just outside it. My house is behind the gate," she said. High stucco walls blocked the house from view. A wrought iron gate served as an entrance.

Before he could walk around to her side of the Jeep, she exited and went to unlock the gate.

He had a quick impression of flagstone pavement, a nonworking fountain and a pale, narrow house with columns. An emerald glow flared up over the roof. *Does she have a spotlight on in the back? A green spotlight? But Christmas was three months ago.* Before he could think more about it, she grabbed his hand, hurried him across the courtyard and unlocked the front door.

They'd barely made it over the threshold when she surprised him by flinging herself against him, her mouth demanding, her hands exploring. Their lips melded

together, her heat scorching him. She plunged her tongue into his mouth. The spicy taste of her drove him wild. His cock strained against his jeans, demanding to come out and play.

Through the lust fogging his brain, all he could think about was getting her shirt off. His hands flexed, eager to knead her full breasts. As if reading his mind, she let go of him long enough to lift her shirt over her head.

Oh man. Her bra barely restrained her bosom, the nipples showing darkly through the lacy white cups. Her generous caramel globes captured and held his gaze.

"You're staring," she said. "Haven't you ever seen breasts before?"

"Not yours." He grasped them in his palms, pushing them together to make her deep cleavage deeper still, then lowered his head. He put his mouth over one lace-covered nipple, breathing in the heat of her, inhaling her peach scent. Fondling her other nipple through the stiff lace, he heard her quick intake of breath.

He wanted to put his mouth all over her, taste every inch of her lovely, smooth skin, lick and suck her nipples, navel and clit. And when she was hot and wet, frantic with desire, he'd sink his cock deep inside her pussy.

Pulling free of his arms, she opened a door leading to a center hall with a staircase. Rooms led off the hallway on each side. "Come in here," she said, leading him toward what looked like a sitting room.

Disappointed, he wondered why they weren't going to a bedroom. But his spirits rose when she added, "I can't wait. There's a fainting couch in here."

"Which one of us is going to faint?"

She turned to look at him, quirked up an eyebrow. "You'd better *not* pass out after all your big talk."

"It'll have to be you then," he said. No lights illuminated the room but the moonlight streaming in through the long windows revealed a fireplace with a mirror

over it, a crystal chandelier and the fainting couch—a long, backless chaise. “Women frequently faint when they see my cock.”

“Better hide it with a condom then.” She went to the chaise and lay back against the raised end, holding out her hand to him. “I hope you brought one.”

“One? You must be kidding. You’ve got your choice of red, blue, green or glow-in-the-dark yellow.” Taking her hand, he sat between her legs and leaned to kiss her again. Their mouths clung together, their tongues entwining frantically. He pushed her skirt up her thighs, thinking about removing her panties.

Seeming impatient with his gentleness, she steered his hand under her skirt. “Touch me,” she said, her voice husky with longing. “Like you did in the restaurant.”

“You don’t need to ask twice.” He reached for her mound, pausing as his fingers encountered soft curls. “Your panties have disappeared,” he said. “Must be one of those New Orleans voodoo things.”

“Silly—I took them off when I went to the restroom.”

The thought of her sitting beside him in the Jeep, open and exposed, made his pulse quicken. “Good thing you didn’t tell me that in the car. We’d have never made it into the house.”

He caressed her, his fingers dipping lower, circling the entrance to her slick channel. He slid his index finger inside her, marveling at how tight she felt. Wriggling his finger, he was encouraged when her inner muscles clamped down.

“Ohhhh,” she moaned. “That feels good.”

“You like my finger inside you? Would two feel twice as good?” Without waiting for her reply, he eased another finger in then began to move his hand in and out, brushing her clit with his thumb each time.

She rocked against his hand, making a little mewling sound that turned him on even more. Moonlight illuminated her lush body. Her abundant breasts spilled from her bra, while her skirt bunched wantonly around her hips.

Reaching up, she caressed his shoulders, her hands skimming down his arms. Her touch held a special magic for him. He hoped the reverse was true.

Hungering for her eager mouth, he thrust his tongue against hers, copying the rhythm of his hand. Moaning, she ran her fingers down his sides and up under his shirt. He craved more of her demanding touch, longed for her naked skin against his.

"Get those clothes off," she said. "I want to see your body."

"You bet."

Her disappointed, "Oh," when he took his hand away made him smile. He stood and pulled his shirt over his head, adding, "Just don't expect Mr. Universe."

"Body-builders do nothing for me. I prefer skinny white boys." Her eyes widened as he tossed his shirt aside. "Mmm—not so skinny after all. *Nice* chest. Do you play sports?"

"Tennis. Keeps me limber." He dug into his jeans pocket and withdrew a condom.

"Limber—now that sounds good," she said.

He kicked off his loafers and hurried to discard his jeans.

"And that *looks* good," she said as his cock sprang free. The sincere pleasure in her eyes delighted him.

What a great feeling to let his cock loose, unrestrained by tight clothing. And yet he couldn't wait to imprison his rod again, this time in the close confines of her sweet, clinging pussy. He was eager to do hard labor as long as Cressy was his jailer.

"Come here," she said. "I want to touch you."

"Cock, meet Cressy's hand." He stepped closer. "I hope you'll become very good friends."

Her lips twitching at his joke, she rubbed her palm over the head. His eyes half-closed, he drank in the exciting touch as her curious fingers caressed his hot length. She ran her hand down the shaft as though testing the weight and heft of his cock. He reveled in the feel of her firm strokes. *Oh man, I'm going to come if she keeps doing that.*

"I need to put a condom on," he said.

"Let me do it."

God yes! He handed her the foil packet. She sat up to open it, then leaned forward over his cock and kissed the head. The teasing brush of her lips took his level of arousal to a feverish pitch.

Slowly, she slid the condom over the head of his cock. When she rolled it down his erect shaft, he gasped, overwhelmed with the exquisite sensations of her hands on him. Once he was sheathed, she cupped his balls, stroking them gently with her fingertips. His groin tightened. He couldn't wait to thrust into her.

"I want you so much," she said, lying back and raising her knees.

"I've wanted you ever since you pulled me over," he answered, joining her on the fainting couch. He got into position, rubbing the head of his cock against her nether lips. She arched up, wordlessly asking him to plunge into her, but he restrained himself.

Our first time. Try to remember every second, Hitch. "Do you like that?" He entered her just an inch, gritting his teeth with the effort of holding back.

"I need more," she gasped. "Give me your cock."

His cock thought that was a terrific idea but the last remaining sane part of his mind whispered, *Make her wait a little longer.*

He lowered his head to kiss her. *My dream woman. Right here with me.* Tenderness flooded his heart. Stroking her cheek, he murmured, "You're so beautiful, Cressida."

Sudden tears shimmered in her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. Her warm hands gripped his shoulders. "Make love to me."

Oh man. Enough waiting already.

He'd never felt anything equal to that first long plunge. She gave way under his thrust like butter warmed by the sun. Then her pussy tightened around him as he pulled back. He let out a startled groan, fighting the urge to start a hard, fast pounding.

Make it really good for her, Hitch. He looked down into her lovely face, trying to memorize the enticing curve of her parted lips, the tiny mole on her left cheek, her dazzling green eyes. *I knew she was out there. I can't believe I found her. I can't believe we're here together.*

She looked back at him, something deep and fathomless in her gaze. Reaching up, she held his face between her hands.

"You're so big and hard." Her voice trembled. "And you feel great inside me."

"Music to my ears, honey. Keep it up." He kept his tone light, biting back the words he really wanted to say, *You're mine, Cressida. I want you now and forever.*

"You keep it up," she retorted. "Give it to me hard – as hard as you can!"

Spurred on by her words, he thrust deep and fast. She bucked under him, crying out in ecstasy as his cock surged inside her.

"That's good!" she gasped, rising to meet his plunging, questing cock.

Her pussy pulled him in every time he thrust, heightening his excitement. She clawed his back like a wild woman. Her palms moved down his body until she gripped his butt cheeks, pulling him closer every time he plunged forward.

Jolts of pleasure ranged up and down his shaft. He wanted this to go on forever – and yet he wanted to come. He could barely hold back. God, he needed to come.

Damn it, make her climax first. By the way she was moving and trembling underneath him, he knew she was close.

Then she threw back her head. "Oh Lord!"

Her pussy pulsed around him, squeezing him until he could no longer stop himself.

"Oh Jonas!"

He felt the waves of her orgasm crash through her. And then he came too, a white-hot release that seemed to spill forth, not from his cock alone but from his entire body.

Lights blazed above his head, the sudden brilliance blinding him. He shook his head, unsure what was happening. Was this reality or had the psychic part of his mind gone haywire?

The room's crystal chandelier had turned on by itself, every bulb lit.

He looked down. Cressy's beautiful emerald eyes were wide with astonishment.

And then they were plunged into darkness again.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"The chandelier came on," she murmured. "Don't worry. The house needs rewiring. The electricity is erratic sometimes..."

He knew damn well it was the ghost. But if Cressy didn't want to talk about it, he wasn't going to push her.

Can't think about it now. His cock throbbed. He was breathing hard, his heart still pounding from the intensity of his orgasm.

Finally he pulled out and removed the condom from his softening cock. "There's a wastebasket near the fireplace," she murmured. While he disposed of the condom, she turned on her side, moving over to make room for him.

He lay down beside her. Holding her close, he realized he'd almost forgotten the special thrill of being with a new lover. Although with Cressy, that wasn't the right description. How could she be new when it seemed like he'd known her forever? They were destined for each other. As surely as her sweet body was tucked against his chest, she was already tucked into his heart.

* * * * *

Cressy sighed, wondering how long Jonas was planning to stay in town. She'd purposely avoided asking the question, not wanting to get into a discussion about whether they'd see each other after tonight.

Only tonight? I'll die. I want him again. And again. She breathed in his minty scent. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this content and relaxed, with her head

pillowed on his firm chest. Moving slightly, she licked his brown nipple. His arm tightened around her shoulders.

"Cressida," he whispered. She loved the way he said her name, as though it were a poem.

Strong emotion swirled between them. Words rose to her lips, phrases like, *Lord, you were fantastic* and *Please stay and make love to me all night*.

She commanded herself, *Keep things light*. "Well, Jonas—I wondered if you'd be all talk and no action."

"So what's the verdict?" he asked.

"The talk is good but the action is a damn sight better."

A slow grin spread across his face—a grin with a hint of masculine smugness. Well, he deserved to be complimented on his skills. Her body still throbbed from the powerful orgasm he'd given her.

Surely she could spend another evening—or two—with him, without drawing down The Curse. She had to fall in love for The Curse to begin. And everyone knew it took weeks to fall in love.

"You called me Jonas," he said. His dark eyes held a gentle, wondering look as he gazed at her.

She stroked his cheek. "It *is* your name, isn't it? Or did you give me a false ID?"

"Yeah, like I'd make up the name Jonas Fellowes Hitcheson," he said wryly.

She chuckled. "If you don't like your name, change it."

"Can't be done. I'm named after my grandpa. He'd shoot me—he's a ferocious old geezer."

"Well, I don't care for your nickname. It sounds like something I'd put on a trailer." Shifting against his chest, she craned her neck to kiss his shoulder. "You'll always be Jonas to me."

"I knew that," he muttered.

She didn't want to hear any more about his so-called psychic abilities. She was far more interested in his other talents.

Weaving her fingers through his thick waves of dark hair, she said, "This couch isn't big enough for two. Want to go somewhere else?"

His nice eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. "I'll go wherever you want. The backyard, the balcony, swinging from the chandelier...just name it."

"How about my bed?" she asked.

His mouth grazed hers and a shower of sparks flared inside her. "Excellent choice." Unfolding his lanky body, he stood. His hair was attractively tousled. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his lean waist, muscular thighs or wiry arms. He looked even better naked than clothed.

He offered his hand. Rising, she found herself pulled into a bear hug. "This is so great, being here with you!" he said. "I feel like I just won the lottery." Giving her a smacking kiss, he added, "What am I talking about? This is better. I wouldn't trade you for a million bucks, honey."

Money or sex? Now there was a dilemma. Much though she could have used a big lottery prize, an encounter like this was all too rare in her life. She might even call it priceless.

Moving his hands to her shoulders, he bent to her cleavage. His hot mouth roved over the tops of her breasts, distracting her so she didn't even realize he'd unclasped her bra until he pulled it away.

"Good God," he said, taking a step back. The smoldering look in his eyes made her pussy pulse with longing. "Ever consider being an artist's model? On second thought, don't. I can't stand thinking about some other guy seeing you naked."

"Right, I'll turn down the next artist who begs me to pose," she said. "Assuming there's anyone who wants to paint a middle-aged woman carrying thirty extra pounds."

He gave her a long, leisurely kiss. Her knees weakened as his lips pressed hers, his tongue exploring her mouth.

Unzipping her skirt, he tugged it gently down her hips. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I thought we were heading upstairs."

"I want to see those extra pounds you were talking about. So far you look perfect to me."

He slid the skirt down her thighs. Sinking to his knees, he gently lifted her feet in turn. Removing the skirt, he laid it on the fainting couch.

She trembled when he grasped her hips. His face was at the level of her pubic curls. "You're beautiful," he said. "Don't ever let me hear you put yourself down. Or I'll have to give you that spanking we were talking about earlier."

That idea made her pussy wet. "Don't make promises you're not going to keep," she said, her voice shaking.

Palming her buttocks, he kneaded them with a strong, firm pressure that sent arousal coursing through her. With a deep breath, he moved his face into her curls. His shoulders lifted as he inhaled.

"If you bottled that scent, you'd help more guys than Viagra," he said.

She let out a startled chuckle. *Whatever will he say next?* His hands on her butt were driving her crazy with need. *He can say whatever he likes as long as he keeps touching me.*

He urged her thighs apart with his hands. Lord, she couldn't wait to feel his tongue parting her sensitive folds, lapping the cream from her slit.

His first long lick drew a gasp of rapture from her. Her legs trembled as his tongue made another long circuit, swirling from her ass up along her lips and ending with a tender laving of her clit. Thrills raced through her at the wet drag of his tongue.

She didn't want him to stop, even for a moment but she was afraid her legs wouldn't hold her any longer. "I-I have to lie down."

"Lie on the fainting couch. Spread your legs as far as you can. Let's see if I can make you faint with pleasure," he said, the deep note in his voice affecting her like an aphrodisiac. Reluctantly she left his grip, feeling drunk with sensation as she lay at the end of the chaise. He stayed on the floor, running his palms up and down her thighs.

"I wish the chandelier would go on again," he said hopefully. He stroked her curls back from her clit. She loved the enticing touch of his fingers but wanted to feel his tongue even more.

"Why?" she asked.

"I can't see your beautiful pussy."

"You were doing fine a few minutes ago, even without light."

"Okay, I can take a hint as well as the next guy," he said. He lowered his face again. Then his mouth was on her, his tongue warm and wet, tracing a gentle path around her channel.

She could never decide which she liked more, a thick cock inside her or this wonderful, intimate attention from a lover. Her insides seemed to melt as he kept up a steady rhythm.

She closed her eyes, imagining herself suspended in space, her body quiescent except for her greedy vagina and clit. All she wanted was the next thrilling lick, the next gently firm pressure that was sending her straight to heaven.

And he delivered. Over and over, his touch light and teasing until she found herself arching her hips, rubbing herself wantonly against his mouth.

His chest shuddering, he moved back. She whimpered, desperate for more. Then she felt his hands on her, his thumbs holding her lips open. He flattened his tongue against her and dragged upward. She cried out, shaking, the jolt of pleasure almost unbearable. Wetness leaked from her hot, swollen pussy. He groaned with satisfaction, a deep sound that added to her excitement.

He lapped faster now, each enthralling stroke ending in a swirling tease of her clit. She was suspended on a rack of pure delight, caring for nothing except the next caress of his skillful tongue.

The waves of sensation crested. She let out a ragged cry of satisfaction. Had she startled him? It didn't seem to bother him—instead his tongue moved faster, deeper. Her body opened to pure pleasure like a newly hatched butterfly unfurling its wings for the first time.

Finally he raised his head, stroking her with one hand as the pulsating sensations began to recede.

His eyes glittered as he looked down at her. He pushed a damp lock of hair from his forehead. "I have to fuck you again."

"Good idea." She waited impatiently while he fumbled for a condom in his discarded jeans. His hands shook as he sheathed himself. *He's as eager as I am.*

This time he didn't tease her but entered her in one deep, satisfying thrust. "Oh man, do you feel good," he gasped.

She answered with a moan. He took up a steady rhythm and her pussy, already sensitized from her other orgasms, clung tightly around his pistoning cock. *Yes, yes, just like that.* His thick rod drove her toward ecstasy every time he moved.

I could spend the rest of my life doing this. The thought startled her.

Of course I like him. He's a skilled lover, as well as a considerate one. But I have to remember this is strictly short-term.

Every powerful thrust filled her with quivering delight. Her hips moved underneath him, arching upward to take all of his impressive length. Her pussy clung around his shaft, unwilling to release him each time he pulled back, welcoming him every time he surged into her. Pleasure mounted effortlessly. Before she knew it, another orgasm pulsed through her, shaking her with its intensity. Guttural sounds spilled from her throat. Embarrassing sounds, but she was past caring.

He was oddly quiet when he came, exhaling a long sigh. Afterward he stayed inside her, his steady gaze on her face.

Reaching up to stroke his shoulder, she said, "That was a darned impressive 'free demonstration'."

"Yeah?" His eyes lit with pleasure. "Something kinda told me you were enjoying it."

She suppressed a giggle. "I'm a little surprised at myself. I'm glad I didn't put you off your stride."

"Honey, I love it when you make noise. Makes me feel like I'm doing something right." His fingertips flowed along her cheek in a languid caress. She shivered at the pleasing sensation.

"Am I still invited upstairs?" he asked.

She captured his hand and kissed the palm. "I'm not done with you yet, Yankee." She couldn't wait to stretch out beside him in her big bed, where there would be room for both of them.

They got up from the fainting couch. "Bring the condoms," she reminded him. "You promised you like woman-on-top."

He grinned. "Just give me twenty minutes to recharge my batteries."

She headed for the staircase, feeling his gaze riveted on her naked butt as he followed her.

"Hmm...make that *ten* minutes," he said.

Chapter Three

Jonas buried his face in the pillow, absorbing the aroma of clean cotton and the enticing scent of Cressy's peach shampoo. Utterly limp and boneless, he felt as though he and the bed had bonded to form some strange human-furniture creature. He could live with that—as long as Cressida joined him every night. The thought of her lounging against the sheets made his cock twitch to life. *Maybe not so limp after all.*

Three intense encounters in two hours. Pretty damn amazing. She'd worn him out, even if she'd done most of the work that last time by getting on top. Man, that was a fantastic position—having her ride his stiff cock while he reached up to tease and fondle her nipples.

The mattress moved. He forced his eyes open, admiring the sight of her gorgeous naked ass as she stood.

"Come back soon," he murmured.

"I'll try to pee fast." Her tone was ironic. But she paused to drop a light kiss on his forehead on her way out of the room.

He smiled.

The breeze from the ceiling fan chilled the light sheen of sweat on his body but he was too lethargic to move. Cressy came back in and joined him, covering both of them with a sheet.

"You must have read my mind," he said.

Spooning behind him, she pressed her breasts into his back and flung a casually possessive arm around his waist. "Does this mean you're staying the night?" she asked.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me out of here." He paused, considering. "Wild horses don't scare me—I *like* horses. Now if you told me wild dinosaurs were coming for me, I'd skedaddle. I've been scared of dinosaurs since I was three years old."

Her lips caressed his shoulder. "You're scared of dinosaurs but not ghosts? You are one crazy Yankee."

"You've got my number, honey. I guess as a cop, you size people up fast."

She chuckled. "That's right. Soon as you got out of that Jeep, I wondered what you'd be like in bed. And here we are." Her palm moved slowly over his hip, then searched lower. Her fingers closed around his cock. Drowsily, he enjoyed how she explored its length, teased the head, stroked the shaft.

"Honey, I'm an old man of thirty-four. Three times is about my limit."

"That's what you think." She moved her hand provocatively, a teasing slide against his skin, until she was pumping up and down.

Despite his words, he was responding to her efforts. Seemed like his cock was a lot more awake than he was. He blinked hard to banish his sleepiness and rolled to face her.

The sight of her naked breasts was a further stimulation. He draped an arm around her. "You need some loving again? Is that what you're telling me?"

"It's been three years since I've gone to bed with a man, Jonas. That's a hell of a long time."

"You were just waiting for me, honey."

"Conceited much?" she asked, her tone sassy.

He teased her right nipple, watching how her face changed as her body responded. With his other hand he stroked her thighs, which parted immediately for him. "If that's the way you're going to talk to me, you'll have to beg for it."

"I'll never beg," she said.

"Is that so? We'll just have to see who can hold out longer." Pinching her nipple lightly, he watched it pucker.

He threw his leg over her, his half-erect cock pushing against her pelvis. She shifted, trying to position herself so that his cock would nudge her entrance. Moving to thwart her attempt, he went to work on her breasts, rolling her left nipple between his thumb and forefinger while he nibbled and sucked the other. It swelled in his mouth. He swirled his tongue over it, then raised his head to admire its new size.

"I'm ready," she murmured, her hand stroking his cock.

"I haven't heard any begging yet." It was hard to resist her insistent caresses. He could barely wait to plunge into her.

"You know you want to fuck me," she said. "Your cock's as hard as a-a baseball bat."

That got to him. He sucked in his breath. "Flattery's good — but it isn't begging."

She played with the head of his cock, rubbing her thumb over the tiny hole. A drop of fluid welled up. Leaning down, she flicked it off with her tongue. "Oh God," he groaned. The sight almost had him coming then and there.

He needed to distract her if he was going to win this game. "We need a condom," he said.

She gave him a smug smile. "I got one out earlier." Reaching over to the nightstand, she retrieved a foil packet and opened it. When she smoothed it over his shaft, he gritted his teeth, enduring the exquisite torture of her sensual touch.

"You're all prepared now. Let's do it," she said.

To tease her, he moved into position, holding his cock at the base. He rubbed it up and down her slit, barely able to keep from sliding into her.

"Now," she insisted.

He cupped his hand around his ear. "Did I hear you beg? I don't think so." He hoped she'd give in soon, because he was at the breaking point.

"Bastard," she said.

"You're never going to get it if you call me names." Sweat broke out across his brow.

"Sweet bastard," she amended. "*Please, Jonas!*"

"That's more like it." He thrust inside her, groaning when her pussy sucked his cock deep inside.

He was finally able to take it slowly now, giving her long, leisurely strokes, pausing often to kiss her or suck her nipples. She dug her fingers into his buttocks, trying to hurry him. But he stuck with *slow* and *deep*.

When he felt the first flutterings of her orgasm, he quickened his pace, moving faster to take them both to overwhelming pleasure.

"That was the best yet," she murmured later as they held each other.

"Maybe you just enjoy begging for it."

She stroked his cheek. "We'll see. Maybe I'll make *you* beg next time."

He blinked, dazzled by the range of possibilities that remark brought forth. Tightening his grip on her, he kissed the sweet spot at the nape of her neck. "I can't believe how lucky I am. Do you have any idea what a terrific woman you are?"

"I'm ordinary, really." She sounded uncomfortable.

"You must be kidding. Not only are you beautiful—and so sexy you could give a statue a hard-on—but you're also intelligent, brave and witty."

With a chuckle, she said, "That's quite a list. Add thrifty and clean and I've got all the Boy Scout virtues."

Man, he couldn't stop kissing the satin skin of her neck. "If you'd been in my troop, honey, I'd never have quit Scouting." He loved her little murmur of enjoyment when he caressed her smooth shoulders. "Being here with you really makes me happy."

"You've made me happy tonight too," she said, snuggling her face into his chest.

I want more than just tonight. "It would be easy to fall in love with you." So easy I'm there already.

"Jonas..." She turned in his arms to look into his face. "You don't have to say all this stuff. I'm a big girl. We're having a fun, short encounter—I know that."

"Honey—"

She put two fingers over his mouth. "No, I mean it. I don't want to hear another word tonight." Yawning, she added, "And I'm exhausted. Let's go to sleep, okay?"

She's not ready to hear what I want to say. Disappointed, he nodded. "Okay. Good night, Cressida."

"Night." She shifted in his arms, settling herself for sleep.

He was exhausted too but it took him awhile to fall asleep. He lay with half-closed eyes for a time, enjoying the fragrant warmth of her in his arms, listening to her soft breathing.

Hours later, he thought he awoke. A flickering green glow, like he'd seen when he entered the house, lit the room. The furnishings were oddly changed, the pretty blue and white wallpaper of the bedroom replaced by an ornate green and gold print. Heavy gold draperies covered the windows.

Confused, he spotted Cressy at the vanity table, clad in an elaborate lacy negligee, powdering her nose. His groin tightened as she stroked the powder-puff over her abundant breasts. He wanted to approach her from behind, run his palms over her shoulders and drop kisses on the back of her neck. Then while she was distracted by his mouth, he'd reach around and cup her warm breasts.

But he was unable to move. He could only watch as another man approached her, a short man with red-gold curls. Jealousy roiled through his gut. *Who's this asshole?*

Smiling, she looked up at the man over her shoulder. And Jonas realized that in spite of her black hair and caramel skin, she wasn't Cressy.

Am I seeing Cressy's ancestor with her lover?

"I have a special gift for you, my sweet Isabelle," the man said. "Look into the mirror."

When she faced the mirror, he drew something out of his pocket, fastened it around her neck and stepped aside.

The necklace was made of delicate silver links, interspersed with matching emeralds, each about half an inch in circumference. The jewels glowed like beacons around Isabelle's neck. The man kissed her just like Jonas had wanted to, before he realized she wasn't Cressy.

Then the woman spoke, her voice ominously controlled. "Why have you given me this princely gift, Armand? 'Tis a farewell gift, yes?"

Armand hung his head. "My marriage has been long arranged. Once it is accomplished, I will travel to the Georgia wilderness to live with my new bride and manage her estate." His voice broke as he added, "I may never see New Orleans again." Tentatively, he reached out to caress her shoulder. "With your beauty, Isabelle, you will soon find another —"

"No!" Her voice rose in a shriek. Swiftly she threw herself against him, going for his face with her blood-red fingernails.

What a wildcat! Isabelle sobbed her lover's name even as she clawed blood from his neck.

Hot-blooded women must run in Cressy's family. Armand struggled with Isabelle, grasping her wrists to control her. She broke free and scratched his cheek.

Note to self – don't piss Cressy off.

On the other hand, a playful wrestling match could be...exciting. Particularly the part where he pinned Cressy to the bed.

Green mists swirled, clouding his vision. When the mists dispersed, he saw Isabelle sitting at a table, the necklace in one hand, a shining tool in the other.

Is she ripping the necklace to pieces in anger? He shook his head, puzzled by what the dream was showing him.

She pried at an emerald with the tool—pliers, he realized.

The jewel shot free and slid off the table. “*Merde!*” she exclaimed, swearing in French. She bent to retrieve it, hampered by her swollen belly.

Isabelle owned the house and the necklace. But her lover had deserted her. A woman alone, with a child on the way. Just like Cressy had been left alone and pregnant after her husband died. His heart squeezed with compassion.

What had become of Isabelle? Cressy hadn’t told him very much. Yet Isabelle’s ghost still lingered in the house. Had she suffered some unhappy fate?

* * * * *

Cressy woke to an empty bed. Where was Jonas? When she didn’t find him in the bathroom, she wondered if he’d left the house.

All you wanted was a one-night stand with a good-looking tourist. If he’s gone, it might be the best thing for both of us. He’s smart, funny and great in bed – it’d be way too easy to get attached to him.

But those sensible thoughts did nothing to counteract her dismay. *Did he really leave me without saying goodbye?*

Putting on a short satin robe, she padded downstairs barefoot, entered the parlor and looked around for her purse.

A tuneless whistling drifted in from the kitchen. She breathed a sigh of relief, unable to deny the happiness that bubbled up in her heart.

Not good. I have to be careful here. Biting her lip, she looked up at the chandelier. “It doesn’t matter how much I like him,” she said aloud. “He’ll be leaving New Orleans any day now. He lives up North. Once he leaves, I’ll never see him again.”

Her spirits plummeted. Why couldn’t she have what other women had? A long-term lover. A partner. A husband.

She imagined what Jonas would say if she told him about The Curse. Would he be like Greg and believe he could defy Isabelle's dark legacy? Most likely. A man who investigated haunted houses didn't scare easily. She'd better keep her mouth shut.

She found her purse and retrieved the book he'd given her. Sitting on the fainting couch, she examined a breathtaking steel engraving of Shakespeare's Cressida lifting her long, dark hair. *I'll have this as a memento. And I'll always remember he said I was beautiful.*

Jonas came into the room carrying a rattan tray loaded with two coffee mugs, the sugar bowl, a plate of buttered toast and a jar of marmalade. He wore jeans and socks, nothing else. His bare chest looked even more delicious than the food, making her debate whether she ought to drink the coffee or jump his bones. Would she ever be able to sit on the fainting couch again without recalling their incredible first encounter?

Sniffing the coffee appreciatively, she said, "So your claim of making breakfast in the morning wasn't just hype."

"Of course not." Jonas pulled up a chair and set the tray on the coffee table. "I'd hate to get in trouble with the Better Business Bureau." He handed her a mug.

"I didn't realize you were so domestic," she said.

"Domestic?" He made a face. "Do I need to assert my masculinity? Hey, woman—bring me a beer. I'm gonna watch football."

His irreverence brought a smile to her lips. "I think you did plenty to assert your masculinity last night."

"Yeah? So did I remind you of A, a cowboy, B, a pirate, or C, a caveman?"

"The answer is D, none of the above. What woman in her right mind would want a hairy, smelly caveman? Give me a tall Yankee any day."

"You got him, honey." He loaded his coffee with several teaspoons of sugar. "Am I keeping you from work? It's after eight."

"I'm working a short shift today, three 'til seven. What are your plans? Do you have a haunted house to visit?"

He sipped his coffee. "My plan is to spend the entire day in bed with you. With any luck, I'll convince you to call in sick."

Lord, that sounded wonderful. Her nipples tingled as she thought about his touch.

Watch it, Cressy. You're already too involved with him. She snorted. "Like that wouldn't be obvious, when half the department saw me leave Nico's with you."

His face was totally deadpan as he said, "You tell your boss, *I'm desperately ill and in need of multiple injections.*"

"Is that what you call it?" she asked softly.

"I'll call it whatever you want as long as we get to do it again. 'Upstairs, downstairs and in my lady's chamber'," he quoted the nursery rhyme. Rising, he looked around the room. "Too bad I couldn't see this room in the dark last night. With the lights on, it would have felt like making love in the middle of Versailles."

"The parlor was decorated a long time ago," she said, glancing at the bright gilding on the crown molding, the red-and-gold striped wallpaper and the china figurines on the marble mantel. "I've never wanted to update it. I thought it was the most beautiful place on earth when I was a little girl."

"It's unique all right." He went over to the fireplace, examining the wood surrounding the opening. "Wow, look at these cat carvings. Too bad someone painted everything gold."

Three cats were carved into each side of the fireplace, their eyes staring out at the room, their ears stiff and alert. The heavy gilding obscured their more delicate lines but they were recognizably feline, about the size of real cats.

She gave the carvings a fond look. "When I was five years old, I used to lie on the rug and talk to the kitties. I named all of them," she said, her voice quavering. *My daughter liked the cats too when she was little. But her daughter will never live in this house. After all these generations of d'Aroany women, the house will be lost on my watch.*

Jonas was quick to sense her mood. "What's wrong, honey?" He joined her on the fainting couch, putting his arm around her shoulders.

She shook her head. She hadn't told anyone about the problems with the house, except for the lawyer she'd hired. The useless scum. In spite of his extravagant claims and the huge retainer she'd paid, he hadn't been able to do a damn thing to get the Historic District Landmarks Commission off her back.

In any case, why force Jonas to listen to her problems? He was nothing more than a pleasant diversion for a day – or two – not someone who could help her.

"I saw the letter in the kitchen," he went on, his voice somber. "I don't mean to pry but...well, it's right up on the fridge. I have this bad habit – anytime there's a print, I read it. Cereal boxes, t-shirts with slogans, letters from the Historic District Landmarks Commission, whatever."

His warm embrace was comforting. Too much so. Rising, she wandered to the window and gazed out, unseeing.

"This house has been owned by my family for more than one hundred and fifty years," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "We haven't always had the money to keep it up...and now it needs everything at once. The Commission has the power to inspect historic property – they inspected here two years ago. You wouldn't believe how much needs to be done. The roof, the foundation, the wall outside."

He nodded. "We have housing inspections every three to five years where I live in Ohio. They're a huge pain in the ass. But what's the problem here? Are you saying you don't have the money to do the repairs?"

"The lowest estimate I got was one hundred and sixty thousand dollars." She looked out at the stucco wall enclosing her property. "More than I can afford."

He frowned thoughtfully. "You can't get a mortgage? Your house must be worth more than that."

Running her fingertips over the white marble windowsill, she said, "The house is worth considerably more than that. But I don't own it outright." She sighed. "When my

mother died, she left the house to me and my sister Portia. I had to buy Portia out. I already *have* a mortgage for a quarter-million dollars. I can barely pay it."

He whistled. "That's a good chunk of change, all right."

Sweat broke out on her forehead. "That's not all. If I don't do the repairs myself, the Commission will do them and put a lien against my property. And they'll fine me up to one hundred dollars a day."

He joined her at the window, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Honey, you need to find the emeralds. I'll bet if you sold them, they'd pay for the repair work."

She gave him a startled glance. "Isabelle's necklace, you mean? I told you, she threw it in the Mississippi River. That's the story that came down through my family."

His voice amazingly confident, he said, "Oh no. She may have fed the necklace to the fish but she pried the emeralds out first. They're still in this house."

* * * * *

Of course she didn't believe him at first. People never did. He was used to that.

"Just because you dreamed about Isabelle doesn't mean that's what really happened," she said after he'd described his vision. "People dream all kinds of crazy stuff."

"I've been having psychic dreams since I was six years old. I'm sure this one is true."

"Okay, suppose Isabelle *did* take the emeralds out of the necklace," she said. He winced at the skepticism in her voice. "What makes you think they're still in the house? Times were hard in the South after the War Between the States. Maybe Isabelle sold the jewels later."

He looked her in the eye, trying to will her to believe him. "When we walked up to your house last night, there was a green glow around it. And every time I saw the emeralds in my dream, they glowed. The jewels are still here."

Pain jolted through him from the distrust in her expression. "Honey, I told you right off that I'm psychic," he said. "Full disclosure."

Her candid green eyes studied him. "I've never taken much stock in all that ESP stuff. Some of the other officers have tried working with psychics to find lost children or solve crimes. They never got more than vague generalities."

He shrugged. "I've never been able to use my abilities for much. It's never worked for the lottery or horse racing. The only advantage is when I go into a haunted house, I *always* get a reaction from whatever's there."

"Can you tell what I'm thinking right now?" she asked.

"I can't read minds. But if I had to guess, I'd say you want my cock again." He smiled. "That can be arranged—if you ask nicely."

She snorted. "I guess you're not as psychic as you *think* you are."

Coming closer, he untied the sash on her robe. "You sure about that?" He parted the satin folds. *Just like opening a Christmas present. Oh man, no panties.* His cock swelled inside his jeans. "You *sure* you don't want my cock?" He teased both nipples with his fingers, watching as they puckered under his touch. She moaned.

"Jonas." Her strong hands gripped his wrists, holding him off. "If you really mean it...about the emeralds...then we should look for them."

"Right after we make love," he said, the sight of her bountiful curves driving every other thought from his mind.

"No," she answered. "If we make love first, we'll be sleepy afterward and we won't get anything accomplished."

He knew she was right but it was damn hard to let her go. "We can search a room or two and then take a break," he said hopefully.

Cressy made herself back away from him. His minty scent was far too arousing. Did he have any idea how hard it was to put him off? "It may take several hours per

room," she warned. "Are you sure you're ready for this? It's certainly not what you signed on for."

His expression reproached her. "Of course I want to help," he said. "We'll divide up the bedrooms. That'll make the search go faster."

"No, we'll stay together," she said firmly.

His eager expression made her ashamed of her suspicions.

"I don't want to be apart from you either." He pulled her close. "But—" He stopped talking and peered into her face. "Oh. That isn't what you meant." His brows drew together. Releasing her, he said, "You slept with me but you don't trust me not to steal your emeralds?"

The hurt look in his eyes pierced her to the heart. Nevertheless she raised her chin. "You know what I do for a living. In my job, I see the worst in people."

"Giving traffic tickets?"

"Do you know how many times my life's been in danger at traffic stops? Can you say the same about your job, Mr. Ghost Researcher?"

"It's the writing that's *really* dangerous," he said but his usual grin was absent. "Look—I'm going back to my hotel. Give me a call at La Maison Rouge if you find the jewels. I'll be interested to know if my dream was on target." He picked up his shirt from the back of a chair and pulled it over his head.

Silently she watched as he found his shoes and slipped them on. *He's serious. He's really going to leave.*

"So all that stuff you said to me in bed was just bullshit?" she asked.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. She'd never seen his expression so stern. With his prominent nose held high and the tinge of color in his lean cheeks, he reminded her of a noble knight whose honor had been insulted.

"I meant every word," he said, the tone of his voice chilling her blood. "But apparently our encounter didn't hold the same meaning for you."

When he opened the door, her heart moved into her throat.

“Jonas!” She hurried across the room and wound her arms around his waist, feeling the stiffness of his body. She imagined him walking away. If she let him go now, she’d never see him again. “Don’t go. I can’t bear it.” Her heart twisted. *I’m not ready to say goodbye yet. Not by a long shot.*

She held her breath, waiting. Then turning in her arms, he kissed the top of her head. She felt his long exhalation as he relaxed. “Okay, honey. I’ll stay if you want me to. I understand. It’s hard to trust another person.”

“Suspicious bitches make good cops,” she murmured.

“Don’t call yourself names.” Stroking her cheek, he added, “We’ll search the bedrooms together. And if you think I’ve found the emeralds and concealed them—feel free to give me a strip search.”

The return of his usual buoyancy was a relief. “C’mon upstairs,” she said. “We’ll start with the guest room.”

As he followed her up the staircase, he asked, “Does the guest room have a bed?”

“Why?”

“Just asking.”

Chapter Four

Jonas wondered if he truly could have walked out of Cressida's house. It would have been like cutting his own heart out. Worse...like chopping it up in a Cuisinart.

He knew it was too early to tell her everything he wanted to say. She'd made that clear last night when she'd cut him off.

But she wouldn't be able to hold out forever. He was sure of it. He just needed to keep wooing her. Without words, since she didn't want to hear them.

What else would she like? Gifts? Good food and fine wine? Many more orgasms? He especially favored that last idea.

As to the emeralds, finding them for her would certainly help his cause.

They reached the guest bedroom. He looked around approvingly at the pleasant area that shared a wall with Cressy's bedroom. The lace curtains let the sun in. The room was sparsely furnished with a double bed, a dresser and an armoire.

Standing in the doorway, he half-closed his eyes. If the emeralds were in this room, would his psychic awareness reveal them? Would he sense the same green glow?

Help me find them, he murmured inwardly—addressing who or what, he didn't know. *Not for myself. For Cressida. She needs them.*

"This was Portia's room," she said. Her expression was doubtful. "If the emeralds were hidden here, she would have found them."

"Not necessarily, if she wasn't looking for them. Have you ever noticed a creaky floorboard?"

She gave him a skeptical look and walked across the room. Almost every step she took drew a noise from the old wood. "Everything in this house has its own sound. The floors creak, the pipes sigh and the windows rattle."

"Then you'll have to examine the floor by sight," he said. "Are any of the boards different from the others? Any of the nails newer?"

"You seem to know a lot about it. Ever been a police detective?"

"Merely an investigator of ghosts in old houses. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've found behind walls or under floorboards."

She shuddered, which made him grin. "Hey, I'm sure you've seen your share of grisly sights too," he said.

"More than I wanted. That's why I've never worked Homicide."

That made him recall his earlier thought about Cressy's ancestor. "Did Isabelle die in this house? She wasn't murdered, was she?"

"No, she died of yellow fever in the 1870s." Cressy gave him a questioning look. "Why would you think she was murdered?"

"When people are murdered, sometimes they become ghosts instead of...moving on. Most of the time they don't realize they're dead." Frowning, he added, "I wonder why Isabelle's still hanging out here."

Cressy gave him a guarded look. Was there something she wasn't telling him? "Maybe she doesn't want to leave," she said, lowering her voice.

"Or maybe she *can't*." Rubbing his chin, he tried to figure out the best approach. "Mind if I look in the closet?"

She shrugged. "Search anywhere you please."

"Yeah? I'll remember that when we get to your bedroom." He opened the closet, which was too narrow to accommodate clothes hangers. A few shirts, presumably Cressy's, hung from hooks. He breathed deeply, his cock twitching at the faint hint of her peach scent.

Stop day-dreaming about sex. Don't even think about sucking her plump nipples. Try not to remember her sweet little murmurs and gasps when you touch her.

He pushed his hair back from his suddenly damp forehead. *Concentrate on the emeralds. If I were a little green jewel, where would I be hiding?*

The closet failed to reveal any secret passageways or false walls. They inspected the rest of the room, Jonas tapping the walls, listening for hollow places, while Cressy scrutinized the floor and lower moldings. She brought a stepladder out from a hall closet and examined the upper moldings as well while Jonas checked the door frames.

"Let's try the study next," she suggested at last. "The floor in there is more interesting."

He followed her into the next room, which held several bookcases, a desk and a computer. The floor was covered by a thick red and blue Oriental rug. Cressy lifted part of the rug away to reveal a parquet design.

Stepping back, he admired the way the floor had been laid out with darker and lighter strips of wood in an intricate sunburst. "Good thinking," he said. "If Isabelle hid the emeralds under the floor boards, the design would make it easy to keep track of where she put them."

Cressy got down on her hands and knees on the carpet, looking intently at the part of the wood floor she'd exposed.

His gaze was drawn to her gorgeous ass. Her position made it impossible not to look. Particularly the way her robe had hitched up to expose an enticing bit of her right buttock.

I was thinking about doggy-style all along. How did I get distracted?

The mere thought of taking her from behind had him hard instantly.

Cressy glanced up over her shoulder at him. "Aren't you going to tap the walls?"

"I see something else I want to tap into," he said, discarding his shoes. He reached into his pocket for a condom.

"I thought we were looking for the emeralds."

"I'll concentrate better on the search if we make love first," he assured her. Removing his jeans, he sheathed himself, briefly admiring the way his cock looked decked out in electric blue. "If we don't, I'll die of horniness. Then you'll have *two* ghosts in the house."

"Heaven forbid." Her eyes laughed at him. "Should we go into the bedroom?"

"Heck no, stay in that position. It's perfect." Dropping to his knees behind her, he leaned over her back and kissed her shoulder. "*You're* perfect, Cressida."

She discarded her robe. "You don't have to say things like that," she said uncomfortably. "I'm far from perfect."

Oh man. Her ass is flawless. The twin globes were firm and inviting, just begging for the touch of his hands. "Hey now," he said, his palms kneading her soft skin, drawing a shudder in response. "What did I say I was going to do if you put yourself down again?"

Her breath hitched as he moved his hands in circles, caressing and gently separating her buttocks. His groin tightened. His cock was eager to get started, to plunge into her delicious, steamy depths—but he had something else to take care of first.

"I don't remember," she answered. But from the way her voice quavered, he was sure she was lying.

Cressy trembled with anticipation. Would he really have the nerve to spank her? When she'd first mentioned it in the car, she knew she'd intrigued him.

"Then you need to be reminded," he said. He brought his hand down on her right buttock, not enough to hurt, just enough to give her a pleasurable sting. She gasped, feeling the light slap vibrate through her butt and pussy.

Oh Lord. She figured he'd be just the right man to give her a sexy spanking. She knew instinctively he'd never hurt a woman—he wouldn't take it too far. But he was adventurous enough to try something different.

"How many are you going to give me?" she asked.

"Five."

She loved the firm decisiveness in his voice. "That many?"

"You bet. And that first one was just practice." He was stroking his fingertips over her pussy lips now. She was already so wet and hot from the thought of getting spanked that she could hardly bear it.

Without warning, his palm landed on her left buttock. She jerked at the sting. Her pussy throbbed.

"That was one," he said. "Are you ready for more?"

"No, I've had enough."

"Four more," he said.

Thank goodness he wasn't going to let her off. She waited for what he would do next.

Two more slaps in quick succession. Lord, what that did to her. He followed up by rubbing her buttocks with his palms, soothing the area he'd just spanked.

"Getting spanked turns you on, doesn't it?" he asked.

Lord yes! "No," she protested. "It hurts."

"I'll bet your pretty pussy is already wet with anticipation. Isn't it, Cressy?"

As a matter of fact, it was. She smelled the scent of her arousal blending with his male musk. "Let me go," she demanded, trying to move away from him.

"No way," he said, gripping her hips to hold her in place. "Not until you get what you deserve." He caressed her right buttock, his palm moving slowly over her skin. "Are you going to tell me whether you're wet or am I going to have to check for myself?"

"I'm not speaking to you."

His hand moved lower. Fingers slid into her wet channel—she was sure he was using two. She breathed hard as he teased her slick heat, making her shiver with delight. Her pussy gushed wetness around his caressing fingers.

“Man, I can’t wait to fuck you,” he said. “You’ll feel so good around my cock.”

She answered with a moan. His fingers stroking inside her felt almost as good as his long, stiff rod. Her buttocks tingled from the last two spanks, even as she craved the next one.

Five minutes ago she’d been caught up in their search for the emeralds, a little annoyed at his insistence on making love. Now all she wanted was his big cock inside her again, filling her, pushing her to another overwhelming orgasm.

“I’m going to give you two more spanks,” he said, his voice stern. “They’ll sting, because I don’t want you to forget your lesson. Then I’m going to fuck you as hard and fast as I can.” He fondled her opening. “Are you ready?”

“Lord yes.” She’d never been so ready in her life. Hearing him talk about what he was going to do to her was as arousing as the spanking.

The last two swats reverberated through her pussy like a vibrator on the highest setting. She cried out, close to coming from sheer excitement. Then she felt his cock probing her feminine lips, sliding against her creamy slickness. He thrust home in one firm movement, his large cock so satisfying, so thrilling.

Her pleasure spiraled higher and higher as he plunged deep and fast then pulled back quickly. It took only three swift, powerful thrusts before she spasmed around his cock. Delight flooded her.

“Harder,” she gasped, rocking back against him.

He gripped her hips, moving in short, savage lunges. Her orgasm grew in intensity. She was moving as hard as he was, pushing herself against him every time he thrust into her. She cried out over and over, a wordless keening of pleasure.

Finally the waves of ecstasy slowed and receded.

"Oh God!" he ground out, rocking to a halt. His hands tightened on her hips and she knew he was coming. She squeezed his cock with her inner muscles, feeling as though her whole body glowed from the orgasm she'd experienced.

He thrust once more with a loud groan, then stilled. Their hoarse breathing echoed through the room.

His hands stroked her back tenderly. Then he moved away. She sighed, hating the empty feeling when his cock was gone.

She settled on the rug, turning on her side. He followed her down, facing her. Caressing her shoulder, he asked, "I didn't spank too hard, did I?"

"It was perfect." She touched his cheek. "I have no idea why but that's always been a huge turn-on for me."

"I'll keep it in mind." He reached down to remove the condom. "What do you think—is blue my color?"

"Did you bring a purple one? Purple's *my* favorite color."

His brows drew together. "I didn't buy purple. Next time, I promise."

Next time? Is there going to be a next time? Today was it, as far as she was concerned. But how could she explain that to him?

She knew darn well what she ought to do. Give him a hearty goodbye when they parted. And never see him again.

Disaster loomed if she kept sleeping with him.

I'm not going to fall in love just because he's so good at fucking.

For his own safety, I absolutely refuse to fall in love with him.

Tracing his lips with her fingertips, she decided she really liked his mouth. His lower lip was full, an infallible sign of a sensual man.

From the expression in his eyes, she knew he was going to say something sweet.

She pressed his shoulder to forestall him. "Jonas...while I was looking at the floor, I noticed one of the woods strips is off-kilter."

His eyebrows flew up. "You mean you noticed *while we were doing it*?"

"I'm good at multitasking."

With a fearsome frown, he said, "Cressida Trelle, I expect you to pay attention when I make love to you. Either think about what a terrific lover I am or concentrate on your pleasure. Do not think about the floor, your job or even the Starship Enterprise."

She let out a giggle. "Oddly enough, the Starship Enterprise rarely comes to mind."

"Really? What do you think about in your spare time?"

"How I'm going to pay for the things the house needs. Whether the roof will come down around my head."

Immediately his expression turned contrite. "Okay, honey. I know we have to find your emeralds." Getting to his feet, he scooped up his discarded jeans and put them on. "Show me that wood strip."

Tying her robe, she guided him to one of the dark, triangular points of the sunburst design. Frowning, he knelt in front of it, palms flat on the floor.

"What are you doing?" she asked, low-voiced.

He gave her a quick, almost apologetic look. "Stay quiet for a minute. I'll see if I can sense anything."

When he closed his eyes, a shiver ran down her spine. This uncanny side of him made her uneasy.

Maybe this whole "psychic" thing was his way of trying to impress women. Biting her lip, she thought she didn't have to take it at face value.

Hell, every way you turned in the French Quarter, some voodoo woman, tarot reader or tea-leaf interpreter was scamming money off the tourists. Even if Jonas *believed* he had psychic powers, it didn't mean he really had them. Or that anyone did.

"I'm sensing something green under the floor board," he said, his voice rising in excitement. "Got a crowbar?"

"A crow—" She broke off, realizing he was joking. "I think *I'll* handle this task." Going to the desk, she found a screwdriver in the top drawer. She knelt then wedged the screwdriver carefully under the edges of the triangular point, worried that she would crack the old wood. To Jonas' credit, he kept silent and let her work. She appreciated that he respected her competence with tools and didn't try to take over.

With a creak of protest, the wood piece loosened. She held her breath as she lifted it away. Was it possible that Isabelle's emeralds were really here?

Jonas leaned in closer.

They stared down at a dusty bottle of absinthe.

"Well," he said, his tone ironic, "I told you it was green."

* * * * *

Jonas watched as Cressy lifted out the bottle and placed it on the desk. Dust sparkled through the air. Wrinkling her nose, she sneezed.

Man, she's adorable when she sneezes. He shook his head at himself. *Hitch, you've got it bad.*

But you knew that as soon as you saw her.

"I wonder if it's still drinkable," he said.

She shrugged. "Fancy booze has never been my style. I prefer beer."

"A woman after my own heart. See, we were meant to be together."

She gave him a *back off* look. God, he hated that look. Why was she so skittish every time he tried to tell her how he felt?

"Let's search my room next," she said.

"Remind me what we're looking for again." He followed her into the bedroom. "Sexy lingerie?"

"You wish. Why don't *you* examine the upper moldings this time? I'm sick of climbing on and off the ladder."

"I'd rather look through your drawers."

"You. The ladder. Now," she said, her voice stern.

"Ask nicely. Unless you want another spanking."

The expression in her eyes showed that she was tempted. But she said, "Please, Jonas. It goes much faster with both of us looking."

"Okay, honey." Setting the ladder in the corner by the closet, he went up the rungs and began tapping the molding, looking for loose boards and listening for hollow places. By the time he'd gone most of the way around the room, his aching knees had shown him what she meant about climbing on and off the ladder.

If she was going to have emeralds concealed at her place, why couldn't she live in a studio apartment?

Coming to a large, framed watercolor of Lake Pontchartrain, he moved it aside and saw a metal safe with a latch made for a padlock, built right into the wall. It looked old – the perfect place to hide a cache of jewels. Thrilled with his find, he said, "Cressy! Look, there's a safe here!"

"Oh, I know all about it. Just let it alone."

Unwilling to let his discovery go so easily, he leaned across the top of the stepladder. "I found a safe like this once in a haunted Victorian in Oberlin, Ohio. A doctor's wife had been murdered there in 1897 but her murderer was never brought to justice. Turns out the safe had a false bottom. Underneath it, the doctor had hidden the scalpel with which he murdered his wife."

Cressy put her hands on her hips. "Is that the truth? Or are you just being nosy about my safe?"

"Nosy? *Me*? I prefer to think of it as scientific curiosity."

"All right. Let me get my things and then you can check it out." When she opened the door, the metal hinges creaked in protest. He peered in, seeing nothing inside except

a pink vinyl traveling case. As she lifted it out, the top flap opened and a bright purple vibrator fell to the floor.

She stooped and wordlessly put the vinyl phallus back in the case, her embarrassment obvious. He knew she didn't want him to look at her, so he turned away and examined the safe. It was exactly what it appeared to be, a safe made of one cast piece plus a door, bolted into the wall.

He needed to say something to alleviate Cressy's chagrin. "So you store your toys in the safe?" he asked, keeping his tone matter-of-fact. "My wife and I always kept ours in the nightstand."

She looked up at him. He knew she was gauging his expression, trying to determine whether he was judging her.

"My daughter used to go through my dresser and vanity table when she was little," Cressy said. "I got in the habit of hiding everything."

He stepped off the ladder and took her in his arms. "You don't mind that I saw your vibrator – do you?"

She looked up into his face, her expression rueful. "I shouldn't, I suppose... But I do."

"Guys jack off all the time. Trust me on this. Why shouldn't a healthy woman pleasure herself? I'd be worried about you if you didn't." Tightening his embrace, he kissed her forehead, tenderly amused at her attitude. She'd touched him in a public restaurant and encouraged him to spank her but a vibrator embarrassed her?

Maybe he could help her get over that.

"You know what would be fun?" He lowered his voice. "Lie on the bed. Spread your legs and show me what you do for yourself."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. I don't think I can."

"Of course you can." Bringing his lips to hers, he gave her a lingering kiss, his tongue probing her mouth intimately. "Do this for both of us, honey. I guarantee you, it'll be exciting."

Cressy gazed into Jonas' earnest eyes. Something about his firm voice reassured her. A tingle of lust chased through her as she thought about using the vibrator while his gaze devoured her.

"Show me everything," he said. "Everything you do when you masturbate."

With a nod, she took his hand and led him to the bed. He sat at the foot while she opened her robe and let it fall to the floor. His eyes never left her as she got into bed and lay back against the pillows. She raised her knees, keeping her legs together.

"What do you think about when you pleasure yourself?" he asked.

"Cocks. How they look. How they feel." The cream gathered in her pussy as she remembered how *his* cock had felt a short while ago, ramming into her from behind. Her voice grew huskier. "Right now I'm thinking about you thrusting into me. Driving deep."

"God, that sounds good to me too." He wet his lips.

She put her hands over her breasts and teased both nipples with her fingers. "Now I'm thinking about your mouth on my breasts. I like it when you make my nipples really big." They were growing now, rising under the stimulation of her rubbing fingertips.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you look?" he asked. "I could spend a year just sitting here, staring at your pretty breasts. And your pussy. Cressy – open your legs for me."

Her creaming pussy made a soft, wet sound as her thighs parted. He leaned closer, his lingering gaze a caress.

She thought about how wonderful it felt when he stroked her nether lips...brushed his hand against her clit...thrust a long finger into her eager channel. "Do you want to touch me?" she asked.

"Yeah...but I won't. Touch yourself, Cressy. While I watch."

She cupped her pussy in her right hand, squeezing gently. Then she rubbed two fingers along her pussy lips, teasing herself. "I'm thinking about your fingers inside me," she said. "That always feels so great. Almost as good as your cock."

"Put your fingers in your pussy." He licked his lips.

She slid two fingers into her channel. The slippery wetness made it easy. Letting out a low moan, she moved her hand up and down, feeling her arousal build swiftly.

"That's the most erotic thing I've ever seen," he whispered. "Cressy finger-fucking herself."

She pulled her hand away, afraid she was going to climax. She wanted to make this last.

"Let me taste," he said. Taking her hand, he drew her fingers into his mouth, sucking on them, probing into the crease between them with a teasing tongue. Her hips bucked involuntarily. Lord, she was so hot, so eager to be filled. Her pussy clenched with anticipation.

"Jonas, let's make love," she suggested.

He shook his head. "I want to watch you with your vibrator." The case lay on the bed between them. He handed it to her. Eagerly she unzipped the top and took her vibrator out.

She always cleaned it after a session, so she felt no hesitation about holding the rounded head to her lips. It was made to look just like a man's organ. Although about the same length as Jonas' mighty cock, it was more slender. Tentatively she circled the head with her tongue, watching Jonas from the corner of her eye. He was breathing hard, his face flushed.

Making her mouth into an “o”, she sucked the vibrator in slowly then moved it in and out of her mouth, making an “mmmm” sound. Its plastic aroma was disappointing. She loved the smell of Jonas, that delicious combination of mint and musk.

Jonas unzipped his jeans. His cock emerged, hard and engorged. He ran his palm up the long shaft, never taking his eyes off her.

“Forget what I said before.” He moved his hand faster, up and down. “What you’re doing right now — *that’s* the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen.”

She took the vibrator out of her mouth and rubbed it against her nether lips. “How about this?”

“Oh *man*. Tell me how it feels.”

The vinyl head of the vibrator slid easily into her wet, swollen entrance. “Lord, it feels so good. I need something inside me.”

“Fuck yourself, Cressy,” he said, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. “Fuck yourself while I watch.” His palm moved over the head of his cock, which glistened with pearly fluid.

She slid the vibrator in, letting out a long sigh of ecstasy as most of its length disappeared inside her pussy. “Oh...so good,” she murmured. She drew it all the way out again. The purple shaft shone wetly with her juices.

“More,” he commanded hoarsely.

She’d never heard a better idea. Plunging it in again, she gave the base a slight twist. The low vibration started, increasing her intense arousal. She moved it in and out, in and out, moaning. Her pussy clenched around the phallus’s quivering onslaught.

“Lord — I’m so close to coming,” she groaned.

He leaned over and grabbed a handful of tissues from the bedside table. “I’m damn close too, honey,” he said.

She twisted the base again. The vibrator hummed loudly. She pushed it in and out faster and faster. “Oh Lord!” she gasped. “Almost there!”

“Yeah—that’s good. Come for me, honey. I want to see you come.” His hand raced up and down his cock.

Pushing the vibrator in deep, she cried out wordlessly as her climax rolled through her. She moved her hips frantically, fucking the vinyl cock, trying to make the heady sensations last.

His orgasm must have taken him at almost the same moment. He groaned, staring up at the ceiling, holding the tissues over the head of his cock.

At last she turned off the vibrator and pulled it out, laying it on the nightstand. She relaxed against the pillows, listening to the pounding of her heart, enjoying the calm that enfolded her as her climax died away.

He rose and left the room, presumably to clean up. When he returned, he stretched out beside her and looked into her eyes.

“Did you enjoy that as much as I did?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure how to answer. It rather surprised her that yes, she *had* enjoyed it. Once, long ago, her husband had asked her to masturbate for him and she’d refused. She’d been so much younger then, less confident of her sexuality.

Confusion flooded her. How had she gotten so comfortable with Jonas so quickly? She’d never meant that to happen.

This was supposed to be a one-night stand. Nothing more.

“I liked it,” she said but she heard uncertainty in her voice. Maybe he heard it too because he stroked her neck and arm comfortingly.

“Funny,” he said. “Something about that is so intimate—even more so than regular sex.” Leaning toward her, he gave her a sweet, lips-only kiss. “Thank you, honey. I loved watching you do that.”

I liked watching you too.

I like everything about you. And that’s dangerous.

She compressed her lips. *Cressy, you know what you have to do. You know what will happen if you fall in love.*

Closing her eyes, she steeled herself for what had to be done.

Jonas turned on his back, picturing how she'd looked as she displayed herself for him. Not only was she his dream woman, not only was she beautiful and smart, but she was also the sexiest woman he'd ever met.

Could he possibly convince her to call in sick? The thought of leaving her made his heart ache.

"It's getting on for two o'clock," she said, her voice cool. "I've got to make ready for work."

"I thought you were going to call in sick." Craftily, he added, "We need to keep looking for your emeralds."

"I can look later. I've got to go in today. Otherwise everyone will know I stayed home to be with you. I can't stand the gossip."

"Okay, honey," he said. "Mind if I take a shower before I go?"

She hesitated. "Actually, I do. I'm in a hurry today."

Reluctantly he got out of bed and found his shirt. He pulled it over his head, asking, "Need a ride to work?"

She shook her head. "I always take the bus." She gave him a bright, false smile. "Do you have your shoes? I'll walk you down to the door."

She wants me out of here immediately. Why?

He wasn't sure what to say as he followed her down the long staircase. *This is new, Hitch. Usually you can't shut up.*

But he had a feeling that whatever he said would only make everything worse.

Had the evidence of his psychic abilities frightened her? He didn't consider sensing the green absinthe that impressive. He'd done things that made that look like a card trick.

He'd done things that scared even *him*.

I should have kept my big mouth shut.

But he knew that wasn't right. *If she's really my dream lover, it's best she knows all about me. I can't hide that part of myself.*

Was she having second thoughts about masturbating in front of him?

Maybe the smart thing to do was pretend everything was fine.

When they reached the bottom of the staircase, he turned to face her. "Let's have dinner tonight. Bayona?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes. Sensing something was amiss, he put his hands on her shoulders. "Honey, I've got to see you again." When she didn't reply, he said, "There's something you're not telling me. Are you seeing someone else?"

"Lord no! I told you, I haven't been with anyone in three years."

"Then how about if I meet you at Nico's again?"

She huffed out a sigh. "Listen, Jonas... Nothing against you but...this is not a good idea. I've been doing fine without a man in my life. Every time I get attached, things don't work out."

"Then those other men weren't right for you." Panic coiled in his gut. How could he convince her she was wrong? "Honey, give us a chance. Didn't we have a great time last night? And today?"

"I need some time to think." Her voice dropped to a murmur. "Give me your cell number. Maybe I'll call later."

Maybe? He took a card out of his wallet, his mind racing. Should he leave quietly? Or grab her and kiss her passionately until she agreed to whatever he wanted?

Ruefully he decided strong-arm tactics weren't going to work here. He just couldn't risk losing her for good.

She walked him through the foyer and opened the front door.

Just one more kiss. He put his hand under her chin, lifting it gently. He thought he saw tears shining in her lovely green eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers.

And then her lips were clinging to his, so passionately that he had to gather her close. There was longing in her kiss. And desire. And just a hint of that underlying sweetness that had held him enthralled for the last day.

Then she was pulling away from him. “Goodbye, Jonas.”

And what he heard in her voice wasn’t *Goodbye for now* but *Goodbye forever*.

Chapter Five

Cressy sat in her squad car, watching the traffic while battling dejection. The late afternoon sun was blinding.

She hadn't called Jonas last night. Instead she'd worked her shift then gone home to an empty house and an empty bed. She'd searched the rest of the upstairs for the emeralds, trying to keep thoughts of him from invading her mind.

Then she'd lain awake half the night remembering every detail of their time together.

I can't see Jonas again. Cut him off right now. Don't prolong the agony.

It was the sensible thing to do – quit seeing him before she got too attached.

If the emeralds are really in the house, I can find them without his help.

But right now the emeralds didn't seem to matter. She'd enjoyed being with him so much. When had she ever felt so compatible with a man? His joyful attitude was rare. She'd rarely laughed so much with any companion. And then there were the frequent moments of tenderness that had turned their encounter into more – much more – than a one-night stand.

I like him way too much. Falling in love would be an easy step to take.

One step...right off a cliff.

She blinked back tears.

He must be leaving town soon anyway. The longer I keep this up, the worse it will be for both of us once he leaves.

And if I fall in love, he'll be in danger. Think about that, Cressy.

Her mind knew what to do. But her body didn't agree. Her nipples kept remembering his hot mouth, the way he sucked just hard enough to please them. Her pussy moistened at the thought of his thick cock.

One more night with him...just one more.

No. Absolutely not.

A rusted-out Caddy drew her attention as it weaved between lanes.

The driver caught sight of her. The Caddy sped up, swerved and went through a red light.

Putting her siren on, she swung out into traffic.

* * * * *

Jonas lay back on the bed and glanced at his watch for the forty-third time in the last few hours. Damn it, what use was it being psychic if he couldn't influence the woman he loved to call him?

She'd hustled him out so quickly yesterday, he hadn't thought to ask for her cell phone number. Of course he could always call her at the police station. But he wasn't sure how that would go over with her.

The duties he'd neglected weighed him down. He should have contacted his editor today. Instead he'd stayed in bed, staring at the television. In the late afternoon he'd gone out to buy condoms...hoping he would have a use for them.

He'd walked down Bourbon Street, pausing occasionally to listen to street musicians. Beautiful girls in wispy bits of lingerie had tried to entice him into topless bars but they'd been easy to ignore. The only woman who interested him was a tall cop with green eyes.

Suppose she never called him? Cold sweat broke out at the thought. So *that* was why people turned into creepy stalkers. He'd never understood until now. He'd do anything to catch a glimpse of her again, even sit outside her house in the Jeep until she went to work in the morning.

Ten o'clock now. She isn't going to call tonight.

He was in New Orleans, a city he'd never visited before. Maybe he needed to go for another walk. Find a club and listen to some jazz. Have a few beers.

Rising from the bed long enough to strip down to his boxers, he glared at his cell phone. *Damn it, why don't you ring?*

Even if she did call, tonight or tomorrow, he wasn't going to make a fool of himself begging to see her. He'd be cool and calm. Let *her* sweat a little. He'd keep his mouth shut. He wouldn't tell her he'd spent the entire day thinking about her, that he'd missed her like peanut butter missed jelly.

If only he could do something for her, something spectacular. Restless, he paced around the room, imagining a scenario where they were out together. *I've got her backed against a wall, kissing her – oh man, her mouth is so sexy. A mugger approaches. Big guy with an evil leer. Big knife too. Heroically, I shove Cressy behind me and say, "You're fucking with the wrong guy..."*

Grimacing, he admitted he'd probably get killed. Or maybe Cressy would end up saving *his* ass. After all, she was a police officer, while his last fight had taken place in eighth grade. Against a seventh grader. And he'd lost.

Someone knocked on the door.

Throwing on a bathrobe, he went to answer. He couldn't imagine who it would be. Probably Room Service calling at the wrong room.

Opening the door, he found Cressy waiting, a tentative smile on her lovely face. "I hope you don't mind that I came by without calling –"

He pulled her into a tight embrace, his heart overturning with pure, unadulterated joy. "Are you kidding? I spent the whole day thinking about you." *Wait, I wasn't going to say that.*

She put her arms around his waist but he felt the tension in her body. "I thought about you too," she said. "Let me in the room please, Jonas."

Difficult though it was, he released her and stepped back. Locking the door and fastening the chain, she said, "I can't believe you opened the door without asking who it is. You need to be more careful."

Is she really concerned about me or is that merely her cop instincts? "Hey, anyone bothers me, he'll find out he's fucking with the wrong guy. How did you know where I am?"

"You mentioned the hotel. The front desk gave me your room number." She gazed up at him. "Lord, I was hoping you'd be in."

She was wearing her police uniform. Then he noticed the bandage wrapped around her left wrist. "What happened here?" he asked, touching her wrist carefully.

Shrugging, she said, "Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Tell me."

She huffed out a sigh. "This asshole I stopped had a knife. I got scratched. It's no big deal—I didn't even need stitches."

"Shit!" He folded her into his arms. "Thank God you're okay." He buried his face in her fragrant black hair, closing his eyes. His heart pounded. What if she'd been badly wounded? Killed?

Could I even survive that? I barely made it through Barbara's death.

"He rushed me. I reacted before I thought about it." Frowning, she added, "He ended up in the hospital."

"Did you shoot him?" He hoped so. Anyone who hurt Cressy deserved severe punishment.

"No, no—I told you, I hardly ever shoot anyone," she said. "I only broke his hand."

He gazed at her, admiration of her bravery warring with concern for her safety. But some instinct warned him that she didn't want to be fussed over. "Guess I'd better watch myself around you," he said, trying to speak lightly. "I like *my* bones unbroken."

Her fingers moved sensually down his back. "I'd never hurt you." Lifting her face, she gave him a long look. "Not intentionally."

Looking down at her, he realized he didn't understand what her eyes were saying. Before he could figure it out, she laid her head against his chest. "Oh Jonas, I'm so glad to be with you again. Let's lie down together."

"Sure, honey." His hands went to the top button of her uniform shirt. "How about if I take these clothes off you first?"

She nodded, standing quietly as he stepped back to unfasten her buttons. Opening her shirt, he was delighted to find she was wearing a black underwire bra. Her dusky breasts looked incredibly sexy, restrained only by gauzy cups that revealed her dark, erect nipples. He rubbed his thumbs over them, enjoying the way their pebbled peaks felt through the sheer fabric.

With a little murmur of pleasure, she said, "I love the way you touch me."

"I can't decide what's better, fondling your breasts or kissing them." Lowering his head, he kissed and sucked each nipple in turn. She put her hands inside his robe, clinging tightly to his waist, moaning and trembling against him.

"This is a new experience for me," he said. When she looked at him questioningly, he added, "I've never undressed a cop before."

"I'm glad you don't make a habit of seducing police officers."

"Hey, who was the seducer? Didn't you pull me over because you wanted my body?" He unbuckled her belt and slid her trousers down, caressing her. The feel of her satin-clad, lush hips made his cock spring to attention.

Her lips twitched. "Actually, my thought process was more like, *I can't believe that asshole made an illegal U-turn right in front of me.*"

"It's a damn good thing I did, or we'd never have found each other," he retorted, waiting for her to respond with one of her dry remarks.

She surprised him by saying, "Yes, that was a stroke of luck." His heart leapt with hope. Was she finally beginning to see there was more between them than just great sex?

"Luck—or maybe destiny," he said. "Here, honey. Sit down." When she sat on the edge of the bed, he knelt in front of her. He unzipped her boots and removed them, then pulled her trousers off.

Her wispy bikini briefs matched her bra. He kissed the shadowy depression of her navel and the smooth flesh underneath it. "Guess what? You're at the perfect height for me to eat your pussy. Scoot back a little."

She moved back and parted her thighs. The glow of the bedside lamp let him see her glistening pink folds. "I can't wait," she said. "You're so good at that."

The compliment pleased him, making him more determined than ever to outdo his last attempt. Stroking her thighs with his palms, he leaned forward and rubbed his mouth against her nether lips. She panted with excitement and spread her legs farther apart.

Lifting his head, he stroked her lightly with two fingers. "You should see how you look when you get aroused," he said. "Everything swells. Makes me want to fuck you right this second." He brushed his hand along her lips. "And you're so wet. All ready for my cock. Or my tongue."

"Yes, lick me." She arched her hips. "I've been thinking about this all day."

I'll draw it out for a while this time. If I can hold out. He concentrated on giving her tiny licks. God, he couldn't get enough of her slightly salty, slightly sweet juices. He wanted to plunge his tongue into her but held back, keeping to quick, tentative tastes.

She thrust herself against his mouth. "Please, Jonas! I need more."

He kissed her clit. "You must learn patience, Grasshopper," he said solemnly, mangling the Chinese accent.

She giggled. He waited until she was still again then let his tongue play all around her swollen opening. Her little gasping cries aroused him almost beyond what he could handle. What was it about her? Now he knew what charcoal soaked in lighter fluid felt like. The merest touch of her body ignited him to a blaze that was out of control.

He flicked her clit quickly, over and over. She writhed underneath his mouth. "Jonas – more! I'm begging you!"

Relenting, he pointed his tongue and gave her several strokes up the entire length of her lips.

"Lord yes!" she moaned. "More of that!"

He licked again and again, pleased to hear her cries grow louder, more impassioned. His cock throbbed, trying to break free of his boxers. When her sounds took on a deeper note, he knew she was close to climax.

Cressy shook and trembled under Jonas' mouth. Lord, it ought to be illegal to do oral sex this well. She couldn't speak...couldn't think...all she wanted was more of this incredible delight.

He shifted position and thrust his tongue into her channel, plunging it in and out like a thick, wet cock.

She choked out his name, grinding her pussy against his mouth.

His thumb went to her clit. He rubbed lightly in circles, slowly driving her out of her mind. Pleasure surged through her in hot waves. She shrieked, suspended in sensation so intense that she thought she might black out.

Hands fisting, toes curling, she panted as tremor after tremor passed through her. He stayed with her, stroking her gently with his hand as her climax peaked, then slowly lessened.

Giving her thigh a last kiss, Jonas rose. She could see by his tented boxers that he was erect. She waited expectantly, hoping he'd want to make love now. Her soaked pussy was still throbbing, eager for his thick cock to pound into her.

He slid the boxers off. His cock stood tall and proud. But he said nothing about having sex. Instead, he lay on the bed and turned on his side, facing her. She moved up to lie beside him. When he embraced her, she nestled against his chest. With a long sigh of contentment, she said, "I feel so comfortable in your arms. Like I've come home."

His warm lips lingered on her neck. "Honey...don't get me wrong, I love to hear you say that. But you seem...different today."

"Different how?"

Confusion warred across his features. "Sweeter," he said finally. Then he added hastily, "Not that you weren't sweet yesterday."

She knew very well what he meant. But she said nothing.

"Is it because of the incident today?" he asked.

"Sometimes... Sometimes I feel easier when I'm away from my house." *Away from Isabelle.*

He looked startled. "But honey, you've lived in that house your whole life." His eyes narrowed. "Do you mean you're uneasy bringing a man there?"

That was too close for comfort. To distract him, she ran her palm up his hot shaft. "Don't you want to make love? You feel like you're ready to go."

"Honey, I'm always ready for you. But I thought you might rather talk."

She shook her head. "Your big cock's distracting me."

"I feel really bad about that," he said, smirking. "The condoms are in the drawer next to you."

She reached into the nightstand drawer and groped for a packet. The one she brought out had a tiny American flag printed in the corner of the packaging. She peered at it. "What color is this one?"

"Red, white and blue, of course," he said. "If we don't use it, then the terrorists will have won."

"As an officer of the law, I need to do my patriotic duty." She opened the package and put the condom on him, giggling at the way his cock appeared clad in three colors. "Should I salute?" she asked.

"How about humming a few bars of 'Hail to the Chief'?"

"I think I'll just kiss you instead." Leaning over him, she nibbled on his sensual lower lip. Next she teased him by giving him tiny kisses all over his mouth until, with a frustrated growl, he plunged his hand into her hair and held her firmly to him. She gave him a deep kiss, stroking his tongue with her own. Quivering with anticipation, she tasted his unique flavor, mixed with a hint of her own juices.

With a gasp, he sucked her tongue, his hands moving up to open the front closure of her bra. She sighed in relief as her heavy breasts were released from the constricting undergarment. Grasping her breasts, he rubbed and squeezed them in his big hands.

She threw her head back. "Lord, it makes me so hot when you do that."

"How hot are you? I'd better check." One of his hands continued to rub her breast while the other fondled her mound.

"Hot enough to heat up your cock."

He grinned. "Prove it."

He took her hands, steadying her as she straddled his hips. She rose up then came back down, impaling herself on his stiff rod. Squeezing him with her inner muscles, she was pleased to hear his long groan of pleasure.

Over and over she lifted her hips then came down, grinding against him. He bucked underneath her. His cock was so thick and satisfying.

"Ride me, honey – wear me out." Panting, he gripped her hips. She moved faster, pounding hard against him, every nerve thrilling to the feel of him inside her.

He pulled her down toward him and sucked her right nipple, drawing on it hard with insistent lips. Red-hot desire shot through her, adding to the fire in her pussy. Her explosive climax spread through her body, her tunnel throbbing around his shaft. His long groan told her that he'd reached his own satisfaction.

They fell asleep, tangled in each other's arms.

* * * * *

Early morning sunlight woke Jonas. Turning on his side, he gazed at Cressy, trying to decide if she was more beautiful awake or asleep. Her regal features were relaxed now, without the strain he often noticed when she was conscious.

Torn between waking her and letting her sleep, he dropped a light kiss on her hair. The sight of the bandage on her wrist reminded him of her wound. *She needs her sleep*, he decided. Quietly he rose, cleaned up and donned his bathrobe.

He glanced at the nightstand. *It never hurts to be prepared. Maybe I'll get lucky this morning.* Opening the drawer, he found a condom and shoved it in the pocket of his robe.

He grabbed a handful of the manuscript pages for *Ghosts of the Old South* and went out to the room's spacious balcony.

Leaving the pages on the table by the lounge chair, he stood by the railing looking out over the city. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled the cool morning air, pleased there was a time of day when the air wasn't thick with humidity. He thought he smelled the murky water and mud scent of the Mississippi River.

The rising sun crept over the chimneys, dormer windows and brick buildings, giving New Orleans the appearance of a perfect, fairy tale city. From this height, there was no sign of the damage Hurricane Katrina had inflicted. The hotel across the street was a charming sight, a white-washed stucco building, each room with a wrought iron balcony hung with ivy and flowering plants.

No one else was out this early. He wondered about the people in the other hotel. Were any of those guests as happy as he was this morning?

A sense of triumph pervaded him. *She came to me when she was hurt. She came to me to have her troubles soothed.*

He longed to be there for her always. If only she would accept him as part of her life.

Sitting in the lounge chair, he closed his eyes. *I want all of her. Her companionship – her trust – her love. And in return I'll give her mine.* He took a deep breath. *Cressida, let me love you.*

As if drawn by the power of his entreaty, Cressy opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony wrapped in a sheet. With a little laugh, she asked, “Jonas, were you *sleeping* out here?”

“No, just thinking about you.” He drank in the sight of her. Her height, queenly shoulders and the long white sheet made her resemble a classical statue. No, not a statue—a Greek goddess. “I always thought Venus was a blonde—probably because of the painting of Venus on the half-shell. But I was wrong. The Goddess of Love has ebony hair and skin the color of warm sand.”

“How you do go on,” she said. But he could tell from her voice that he’d pleased her. She bent to kiss him then went to stand by the railing.

Rising, he came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. With a little sigh of contentment, she relaxed against his chest. Joy tumbled through him. He suppressed the words of love that rose to his lips, afraid of frightening her with his intensity.

“How’s your wrist this morning?” he asked.

“Not bad. I got up in the night and took aspirin. You didn’t even move. I really *did* wear you out, didn’t I?”

He opened his robe. Now only the thin sheet was between their naked bodies. “Sure. I’m not used to making love with a goddess.”

Chuckling, she raised her head and sniffed the air. As she moved, she pressed her enticing buttocks against his cock, which responded instantly to the stimulation.

“I think someone’s brewing coffee,” she said.

“I can’t smell it.” He opened her hair clip. Her long hair spilled down like a black satin curtain. Weaving one hand through it, he lifted the strands to his face and breathed deeply. “All I can smell is your hair. It always smells like peaches. Now I’m

going to get a hard-on whenever I'm in the produce aisle at the grocery store. And it's all your fault."

"So sorry about that." He couldn't help noticing that she didn't sound a bit sorry. Wriggling her butt, she said, "Speaking of hard-ons, you seem to have one right now."

"Yeah? That's your fault too." He pulled the sheet down a few inches, exposing her breasts. He grasped them in his palms, squeezing them, seduced by their warmth and softness.

"Jonas!" she protested. "Someone might see us."

The sight of her dusky mounds captured in his eager fingers made his cock swell with anticipation. He circled her nipples with his thumbs, delighted with how quickly they peaked.

"No one's up this early. God, your breasts are so sexy. I wish I could suck them from back here." He bent to give her neck a sucking kiss instead. He'd never get enough of her smooth skin. And her generous breasts. And her tiny moans of pleasure.

She jerked and trembled under his mouth. "Lord...you're doing...a fine job...with your hands." Arching her neck, she cried out as he bit gently, marking her as his own.

"I want you so much," she murmured. "Let's go inside."

"We're staying right here." To emphasize his point, he pressed his cock against her backside. "Why else do you think I came down to New Orleans?"

"For outdoor fucking?"

"You bet. If I tried this in Cleveland in March, I'd freeze my ass off." God, her lovely nipples were twice their normal size. He pinched the right one.

She gasped, "Do that again." He complied, pleased when she caught her breath.

He reached into his pocket for the condom. Purple this time. He hoped she'd appreciate that he'd bought the color she'd requested.

A delivery truck came slowly down the street. Cressy pushed against him. "Jonas, that truck's stopping!"

"So what?" He hurried to get the condom in place. "We're not naked. We look like a nice, normal couple enjoying the morning air." Parting the sheet she wore, he held his cock against her, rubbing it up and down to ascertain the opening. Thank God she was a statuesque woman. Her sex was in just the right place for a tall man to thrust into her. He groaned, loving the way her flowing juices eased his invasion.

Speaking into her ear, he said, "God, your pussy's perfect for my cock."

Her inner muscles squeezed him. "Do you like that?"

"I like everything you do, honey."

The delivery truck stopped in front of the hotel. "Oh Lord, I think the driver's getting out," she said. "Don't move!"

Wickedly, he thrust forward hard. She cried out, "Ohhh!" just as the deliveryman jumped out of the truck. The young man looked up at them then glanced away, face reddening as he disappeared into the hotel.

Cressy groped to bring the sheet higher, covering her chest. "He saw my breasts!"

"Isn't that a New Orleans tradition?" Jonas asked. He didn't care if the whole world saw him taking her. *She's mine, folks. You can look but you can't touch. She belongs to me.*

"Only during Mardi Gras," she retorted.

"Consider this our own personal Mardi Gras." He reached around to touch her clit through the sheet.

He plunged in and out, lust inflaming him, making his thrusts quick and hard. She whimpered, wriggling against him. "Yes! Fuck me, Jonas. Lord, your cock feels good. So good and so thick."

She gripped the railing, her knuckles turning white as she pushed back against him.

Across the street, a woman appeared in one of the hotel windows. Her gaze alighted on them. She stared as Jonas massaged Cressy's clit through the sheet. Cressy's breath came fast as she writhed against his hand.

The woman in the other hotel turned her head and spoke. Her window was closed, so Jonas couldn't hear her. Soon a man joined her. She pointed at Jonas and Cressy. The man grinned and gave Jonas a thumbs-up signal.

Jonas pulled the sheet down so that Cressy's voluptuous breasts were on display again. Maintaining his grip on her waist, he rolled her left nipple between his thumb and fingers with his other hand. She moaned, her pussy gushing anew.

The man embraced his partner and bent her backward. Jerking up her pajama top, he sucked her breasts. They weren't as magnificent as Cressy's, Jonas decided. Still, the other couple's activity heightened his excitement.

The woman reached upward, her hands clawing the man's back. Ragged waves of desire jolted up and down Jonas' cock. The tight hug of Cressy's hot tunnel surrounding his shaft, combined with the sight of the lusty couple in the other hotel, was quickly bringing him to climax.

Cressy groaned his name. Her pussy clutched his cock and he felt a pulsing, throbbing orgasm flow through her. Her beautiful ass bucked against him. He gritted his teeth, trying to allow her to finish before he came.

Her head fell back against his shoulder as she cried out.

Across the street, the man dropped to his knees. Pulling down his partner's pajama bottoms, he latched on to her sex. Her hands moved into his dark hair, holding him in place while he licked and sucked her.

Liquid fire coursed up Jonas' shaft. Unable to hold back a moment longer, he shouted with delight as release overtook him. He came long and hard, feeling her spasming pussy pressing against his cock, milking him over and over.

They were both breathing hard as his erection softened. Turning her in his arms, he embraced her.

"I didn't know you were such a bad boy," she murmured. "That deliveryman got quite an eyeful."

He wasn't the only one. "Just think, you made his day. It's one of those 'random acts of kindness' everyone's supposed to do."

She giggled. "More like a 'random act of lust'."

"Those are even better." Turning his robed back to the street, he removed the condom.

Yawning, she said, "I need more sleep after that." She opened the door to the room.

"I'll be right there." He gathered up his manuscript pages then took a final look at the hotel room across the street. The couple had disappeared.

He followed Cressy into the room. After disposing of the condom and cleaning up, he came out of the bathroom to find her sprawled across the bed, gloriously naked.

"What time do you have to be at work today?" he asked.

"I've got two days off – because of my wound, you know."

"I hope that means you're going to stick around." He joined her on the bed, drawing her against his chest. "After we rest, I'll take us out to breakfast – or lunch. Then we can come back here, make love, then go out to dinner, make love some more – sound like a plan?"

"I don't even have a change of clothes with me."

"I'll lend you a t-shirt. Would you like *Star Wars* or *Battlestar Galactica*?" he asked.

"Well, I just don't know how I'll ever choose between them."

"I'm sure you're not being sarcastic about two of my favorite science-fiction universes. How about you model them both for me and let me pick?" Cressy filling out his Darth Vader t-shirt...now that was something to look forward to.

"You really know how to show a girl a good time."

"You bet, honey."

Her lips curved upward as she snuggled closer to him. Her eyes shut.

Am I being selfish? I should have suggested looking for the emeralds. Well, we can talk about it later.

God, it was so good to hold her in his arms, listening to her soft breathing.

Despite his best efforts, his eyes closed. Before long he plunged into sleep—and dreamed about Isabelle.

Cressy's ancestor sat at the head of a long table, a silver knife to her right. Twelve tall black candles flickered in a circle in front of her. Inside the circle, the emeralds were heaped in a pile, glowing in the candlelight.

Isabelle swayed back and forth in her chair. Her voice rose in a keening chant. He caught some words of French mixed with some other language.

"Legba!" she called out, staring across at the other end of the table. Fear prickled up and down Jonas' spine, raising goose bumps on his arms. "*Legba, répondez à ma prière! Answer my prayer!*"

She swayed back and forth, her eyes rolling upward in her head. Jonas' chills increased. Who was this strangely named god whom she prayed to?

"Legba, I implore you! You must save the women of my family from my folly!"

Raising her left hand, she took up the knife. Jonas tried to step forward, desperate to prevent whatever she was going to do. But he was unable to move.

"None of them must suffer as I have suffered. None must love, for all men are faithless! Hear me, Legba. *They must not fall in love!*"

Jonas gasped as she slashed her palm with the point of the knife. Blood welled up from the long cut. Agony crossed her face.

She held her hand over the emeralds, letting the blood drip down.

"Legba!" she called once again.

Every candle went out at once.

He jerked awake, drenched in sweat. Sitting upright in bed, he rubbed his throbbing temples. God, his head felt like someone had shot an arrow through it.

His sudden movement must have awakened Cressy. She blinked up at him sleepily. "What's wrong?" she murmured. "Bad dream?"

He fumbled for the light. "Yeah, a real nightmare. Let's not talk about it." Reclining again, he put his arms around her, glad to feel the solid warmth of her after the dream's lingering horror.

"Relax," she murmured, running her hands slowly through his hair. "You're okay, Jonas. I won't let anything hurt you."

Soothed by her gentle touch, he said, "You really care for me, don't you?"

Her hand faltered. "I've known you only a few days."

"That's no answer. I'm crazy about you. You know that, right?"

She sighed. "What's the use of talking? I live here and you live up North. This has been nice but...I really don't think long-distance relationships are a good idea."

"I'll move down here. It's awfully humid but I guess I can stand it."

She turned, staring into his face. "You can't just up and move! Don't you have a job? A house?"

"My wife and I owned a house," he said. "I sold it after she died. Couldn't bear living there alone... And I don't have a nine-to-five job. Aside from the ghost books, I write freelance articles. I can do that just as well down here as in Cleveland."

Cressy was thoroughly awake now. *I'll never meet anyone like him again.* Tears pricked behind her eyes. *He's willing to move so he can be with me.* Lord, she wanted to say, *I'm crazy about you too. Come live with me.*

If she said that, if she let him into her life, he would die. Like Greg. Like her father. Like every other man who had loved a woman of her family, ever since Isabelle d'Arvany's time.

I should never have come to him last night. But after the terror and stress of the day she'd had, this was the only place she'd wanted to be. All she'd thought about were his kisses, his embraces. She'd run to him like a hunted vixen seeking refuge.

But the thought of never seeing him after today was dreadful. She fingered the bandage on her wrist, wishing the knife had gone into her heart instead. Death couldn't hold more pain than she felt already.

"Barbara — my wife — died over two years ago," he went on quietly. "Depression hit me hard. It took a long time to get better. But you must know about that."

She surely did. She remembered the black days after Greg had been shot. Her grief. And her guilt because she'd ignored The Curse.

"On the second anniversary of her death, I took off my wedding ring," he said, drawing a shuddering breath. "That was tough."

"I know." She took his hand and squeezed it. "I cried when I put mine away."

Giving her hand an answering squeeze, he said, "But after that, I started dreaming." A long pause. "About *you*."

She flinched. "What do you mean?"

He answered patiently, "I knew there would be another woman in my life. I never saw your face in my dreams but I knew you were out there. Somewhere in the South. When my editor suggested I come down here to research the next book, something went *ping* in my head. I wanted to find you. I *had* to find you. My dream woman."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "It's not me, Jonas. I can't...can't be that woman for you."

His arms tightened around her. "Don't say that! Listen, I know this is sudden. We don't have to talk about marriage. Heck, I'd marry you tomorrow but I know you aren't ready to hear that. So I thought I'd move down here, get a small apartment. We'll see each other—go out to dinner—I'll help you look for the emeralds—" He stopped abruptly, staring up at the ceiling. "Oh God!"

"What's wrong?"

"I was thinking about my dream." He looked into her face, his expression urgent. "Cressy, did Isabelle practice magic? Voodoo?"

"I'm not sure..." she said slowly.

"My dream was about Isabelle. I think — no, I'm *sure* — she was putting a spell on the emeralds."

Chapter Six

"Cressida, there's something you're not telling me." Jonas hated to be stern with her but he had to know the whole story. He gave her a quick glance as they drove back to her house. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her face expressionless.

"I don't like to talk about it," she said. "Men don't listen anyway. I told Greg... He wouldn't take heed." When she sniffed back a sob, his heart twisted. "I *did*, Jonas. I warned him."

"Honey, tell me the whole story."

"Isabelle put a Curse on our family," Cressy said, her voice cracking. "Any man who loves a d'Arvany woman will die."

He couldn't suppress the shudder that went through him. "Is that why you've pulled back from me? Turned away every time I tried to tell you how I feel?"

"That's why." She rubbed her face. "I'm so afraid of harming you."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he demanded. Pain filled him at the realization that she'd concealed this from him.

"My husband said it was superstitious nonsense. I thought you'd be like him. He died, like every other man who loved a woman of my family."

"I don't understand. Isabelle's lover betrayed her. Why didn't she put The Curse on *him*? Why curse her own descendants?"

Her chest heaving, Cressy looked out the passenger window of the Jeep. "I think I know. She still loved him. She didn't want to hurt him." After a long moment, she added, "And perhaps she didn't think of it as a curse. She wanted to spare the women in her family from her same mistake." Turning back toward him, she put her hand on his arm. "But no matter what the danger, women can't help falling for lovable men."

That made him feel a lot better. "If she put the spell on the emeralds and the emeralds are still in the house, maybe that's why Isabelle's ghost lingers there. I *did* wonder about that."

"Does this mean The Curse itself is tied to the emeralds somehow?"

His brows flew up. "Interesting idea."

Cressy's eyes widened. "Jonas! What happens if the emeralds are taken *out of the house*? Will The Curse be broken?"

"God, I hope so! I'll bet you're right—The Curse must be anchored to the house through the jewels!"

She clenched her hands in her lap, her eyes closing. He wondered whether she was saying a prayer.

"We have to find those emeralds," she said at last, her voice quiet and determined. "Not just so I can save my house. But for us. We can't be together unless we find them. I can't risk losing another man I lo — another man I care about."

Taking his hand off the wheel, he enclosed her hand in his. "You want us to be together, honey? You mean that?"

"Yes. But only if I know you'll be safe from The Curse."

* * * * *

In the early afternoon, Jonas sat on the fainting couch, raking his hands through his hair. Cressy paced around the room, biting her lip.

"I can't think where else to look," she said, the despair in her heart stealing into her voice. "We've searched every single room, most of them twice. We've looked at every bit of molding, every floorboard, every wall."

He shook his head. "What about the courtyard?"

"My great-grandmother Aurelia had it put in. It wasn't there in Isabelle's time."

"You don't suppose Isabelle buried the jewels outside somewhere?"

She looked out the window. "Jonas, let's face it. If we have to dig up all the ground out there — raise all those flagstones — we'll never find the emeralds."

There was no humor in his voice as he asked, "Are you *sure* you don't want to move to another house?"

Whirling around, she spoke sharply. "My family has owned this house for a century and a half. It's my heritage. I will never sell it!"

"Okay, okay," he said, raising one hand as though to fend off her glare. "You're right, honey."

Mollified, she said, "Short of bulldozing the house, I don't see what else we can do."

"You don't have any letters Isabelle wrote? No family stories about her hiding the emeralds?"

"You asked me before," she said. "I told you, no. The family story said she threw the emeralds in the Mississippi River. I'm beginning to think that story was right!"

"Well, *I* have to believe my dreams," he said stubbornly. "She took the emeralds out of the necklace. She put the spell on the emeralds. Why am I dreaming all that if the jewels can't be found?"

"You'd better dream where they are then," she snapped, then immediately felt guilty when he looked up, a hurt expression in his eyes.

After all, Jonas was frustrated too. He'd spent the last five hours searching every bit as diligently as she had.

She went over to him and put her hand on his cheek. "I'm sorry. I'm a bitch to talk to you like that."

Taking her hand, he kissed the palm. "We're both tired, that's all." He raised his eyebrows at her. "And some of us are very dirty."

She smiled. "Looking up the chimney with a flashlight will do that to a person."

"I like dirty girls," he said. Standing, he gave her a quick kiss. "I need something to eat. Then we'll think about our next step." The corner of his mouth went up. "If you like, I'll stay here tonight. And I promise I'll do my best to dream about Isabelle hiding the jewels."

"I think we should—" She broke off as his expression changed. "What is it?" she asked. "Did you think of something?"

He took her hands, gripping them. "Listen, Cressy—there's one other thing I can try. But it's a little...well, as a police officer, you're good in emergencies, right?"

Apprehension darted through her at his tone. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll put myself into a trance. Isabelle's here—I'll try to speak to her. Ask her where she hid the jewels. If I can contact her, we'll find them."

She stared into his eager face. "Have you ever done that type of thing before?"

"Sure. I've trained with mediums." Reluctantly he added, "But the last time I did it, I couldn't wake up. Wound up in the hospital for two days in a coma. My wife was furious."

"I don't blame her," Cressy said. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of him unconscious, unable to awaken. "No, Jonas. It's too dangerous."

"I've got to try."

"We should wait and find a real medium. There are plenty in New Orleans."

He shook his head. "I'm not willing to ask others to put themselves at risk. I think I know what I did wrong last time." He squeezed her hands. "Stay with me. Slap me around if it seems like I'm going too deep."

"How will I be able to tell?" She couldn't bear the thought of losing him. "I'm afraid you'll be hurt." She put her arms around his waist, leaning into his solid chest. "I can't let you do it."

"Your job is dangerous, honey, but you do it anyway." He touched her wrist gently to remind her. "I have to try."

She wasn't happy about it but she finally agreed. Jonas directed her to shut the blinds against the afternoon light. He brought the desk chair over then stretched out on the fainting couch, loosening his belt and discarding his shoes.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Sit with me. Hold my hand." He grinned up at her. "Think about what a terrific lover I am."

"How long should I give you?" She took his left hand in hers, while her right hand formed a fist, the nails digging into her palm.

"Half an hour. Unless I'm levitating or something – then you might want to bring me out of it." At her startled look he added, "Just kidding."

"Don't kid around like that unless you want to get slapped," she told him.

She held his hand loosely, watching his face while he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Chewing her lip, she thought about the emeralds and the spell Isabelle had cast. If only they could find the jewels, they would have the money to fix the house.

And Jonas would be safe. She longed for that most of all. They'd be together. Her eyes lingered on his lanky body. If only he could be hers permanently, she'd ask for nothing more for herself.

Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to daydream of a life with him. She'd turn the study over to him so he'd have a place of his own for his writing. Lord, it would be wonderful to come home to him, instead of to an empty house. The days would be so much more fun with him around.

The nights would be even better.

But if we don't find the emeralds, we can never have that. Agony shot through her. *Oh Lord, why did I ever pull him over? Why did I agree to go out with him? It's torture to be with him for this short time. To lose him after spending these beautiful hours together.*

She jumped as he muttered something. Bending nearer to him, she waited.

"Burning," he murmured. "Flames. Fire." His voice dropped and his words were jumbled.

She checked her watch. Twenty minutes had passed.

His troubled muttering went on. She kept glancing at her watch, hoping he would awaken of his own accord. The minutes ticked by. Her heart raced. Would she be able to bring him out of it?

At the thirty-minute mark, she began shaking his shoulder and speaking his name. "Jonas. *Jonas! Wake up!*"

When he didn't respond, her heart plummeted. *Is it happening again? Will he end up in the hospital?* She slapped his cheeks lightly. When his eyes still didn't open, she slapped him again, harder this time.

"Jonas! Please!"

His body twitched. She waited hopefully but nothing happened.

Hurrying to the kitchen, she filled a cup with cold water. Bringing it to him, she opened his shirt and dripped water onto his chest. He remained unresponsive.

Should she wait longer? Keep an eye on him and hope he'd come out of it? Or call 9-1-1?

Her eyes filled with tears as she gazed down at him. Her handsome lover...why had she allowed him to risk himself this way?

Jonas recognized this place. He'd been here before, wandering through this gray, featureless desolation.

His pulse quickened. Last time he'd come here, he'd found himself trapped, unable to awaken. He'd been frightened, fearing he would be condemned to linger here forever.

Mists swirled about his feet, making it impossible to see where he walked. No landmarks loomed ahead to give him a destination.

He was so tired. If he lay down, would he find rest? Peace?

Don't do it. Instinct warned that if he stopped moving, he would never leave.

Cressida. The thought of her fanned a spark of hope in his heart.

I'm here for you, honey. To find your ancestor.

He kept walking.

Was that another person, far in the distance? "Isabelle?" he called, quickening his pace.

Kneeling at Jonas' side, Cressy kissed his beautiful lips. *It worked for Sleeping Beauty's prince...why not for me?*

Had his eyelids fluttered? She kissed him again, a longer kiss this time. "Jonas, wake up," she murmured, stroking his cheek. "Please. I need you."

She undid the remaining buttons on his shirt and folded it back, exposing his entire broad chest with its brown nipples and thin line of dark hair down the middle. Working her way down, she kissed him over and over, her lips lingering at his navel. "Wake up and stay with me. Stay with me forever."

She stroked his lean waist with her fingertips, then opened his belt and pulled down his trousers and boxer shorts. His big cock curved against his right thigh.

If she could wake his cock, maybe *he* would awaken from his trance.

She grasped it at the base in her right hand, fondling his balls with her left hand. They were heavy in her palm. She rolled them gently. Did his breathing quicken?

She slid her hand up and down his shaft, encouraged when she felt it stiffen. "Jonas, wake up!" He didn't move so she kept up her motions until his cock stood erect.

Shifting his legs apart, she moved up onto the fainting couch and knelt. Grasping his cock again, she lowered her face and took the head in her mouth.

He moaned. Was he waking or was that part of his muttering? She raised her head and spoke his name sharply. His eyes remained shut.

She sucked him again, licking all around the head with her tongue, dipping the point of her tongue into the tiny hole.

She worked her way down his shaft with her lips, stroking him as his rod grew harder.

Tracing the long vein with her tongue, she prayed that he would awaken.

I've got to bring him out of this trance. Frantically she sucked harder, her head bobbing as she took his long, thick length into her throat, going all the way down. She pumped the base with her hand each time she came up, then pulled at the head with her lips.

Lord, his beautiful cock is like a steel rod. She moved her head faster, up and down, feeling his cock grow hotter.

His hips bucked. A guttural roar broke from him as he spurted into her mouth. She kept her lips around his rod, continuing to suck, taking everything he had to give.

"Cressy?" He sounded bewildered.

Keeping her hand tightly around his cock, she sat up and looked into his face. His eyes were open.

She swallowed. "I was afraid you weren't going to wake up." She sniffed back a sob. Dizzy with relief, she leaned forward and kissed him.

"What just happened?" His hand went to his forehead. "I feel like I just had the best blowjob of my life – and I wasn't even awake for most of it."

"I couldn't wake you up. So...I tried this."

He blinked. "Yeah? Sure beats an alarm clock."

She patted his cheek. *Thank you, Lord. He's back to himself again.* "Don't expect a wake-up call like that every day," she said dryly. She rose from the couch, wishing they'd done this upstairs where she could have lain beside him and held him. "Did you...did you manage to contact Isabelle? You were muttering the whole time."

"I couldn't speak to her." He sat up, the confused expression still on his face. Slowly, as though every movement hurt him, he stood up, found his jeans and pulled

them on. "Sorry. I don't think that helped at all. I saw Isabelle again. She was standing in flames. Fire all around her. I don't know what that means though. Hellfire?" He shook his head as though bewildered. "How can she be in Hell if she's still here?"

Cressy sat on the fainting couch. "Fire...flames," she mused. "The fireplace? Damn it, I searched every inch of it! I felt every brick to see if it was loose. I even looked up the flue!"

In the middle of fastening his shirt buttons, he halted. "You searched the fireplace. But I didn't."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"Then you look. See if you sense anything," she said, her voice shaking.

He strode over to the fireplace. Putting out his palms, he ran them over the mantel. She watched, compressing her lips to hold back her questions. Sweat broke out on her forehead.

"They're here," he whispered. "I'm sure of it."

She jumped up and joined him. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it might leap out of her chest.

Eyes half-closed, he moved his palms slowly over each brick. She remained silent, holding her breath, afraid of distracting him.

Finally he looked at her and shook his head.

He moved to the left side of the fireplace, peering at the enclosure. Putting out his hands again, he touched the old wood.

Lord, please! she prayed. If we don't find the jewels, we can't be together. And I want him. I need him. I need him so much. Please!

When he came to the cats, he stopped. He stepped back, his eyes fixed on the carved figures.

He took a penknife out of his pocket and opened it.

Her hand flew to her mouth. What was he doing?

Raising the knife to the top cat's left eye, he scraped at the gold paint. The gilding peeled away in short curls.

He worked the knife all around the cat's eye, then pried at it. The eye dropped into his hand.

He sucked in his breath. Turning the eye over, he held it up to show her the clear, green back.

Her heart leapt with joy. Emotion choked her so that she could barely speak. "The cats' eyes! I don't believe it!"

Putting the emerald on the mantel, he clasped her in an exuberant hug. "We found 'em! We found 'em!" Taking a step back, he grabbed her hands and danced her around the room. Delight tumbled through her as he led her in dizzying circles. "We did it! God, we found 'em!"

"*You* found them!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him over and over.

"Now you can stay in your house!" He kissed her back between every word. "I'm so glad! Man, I'm so happy, I feel drunk!"

Oddly enough, staying in the house didn't matter to her as much as it used to. Only one thing was really important. "Jonas, if The Curse is broken, then *we can stay together!*"

They stopped and embraced. She was so happy she wanted to remain in the middle of the room, holding him, locked in his arms forever. Wiping back tears of relief and joy, she smiled as he kissed her mouth, her eyelids, her forehead.

At last they returned to the fireplace. Holding tightly to her hand, he touched the other cats' eyes.

"Six cats. Twelve eyes. Twelve emeralds," he said. "Isabelle must have put them in the carvings, then painted over them so no one would know."

"I never could have found them without you. I never would have guessed that hiding place." Her voice dropped to a near-whisper as she added, "Thank you, sweetheart."

Jonas was startled, realizing it was the first time she'd used an endearment with him. Was it possible to burst with pure joy?

He loved her so much. Would she ever feel as though she could say the words to him?

He leaned to kiss her once more. "But *you* thought of the fireplace. Very clever, Cressida. You sure you shouldn't become a detective?"

"I'll think about it," she said. "And maybe you should write up this incident for *Ghosts of the Old South*?"

"You bet. But I'll have to censor myself." He waggled his brows at her. "My books usually don't include hot sex scenes."

"No, I certainly don't want you writing about our love life. Past—or future."

She went to the desk, returning with a penknife of her own. "Let's get the rest of the jewels out. We'll put them in a safe deposit box at my bank."

"I'll drive you to some jewelers with one or two, see how much they're worth," he suggested.

In another twenty minutes, all twelve jewels were released.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded. "I want to get these emeralds out of this house so you'll be safe."

He hoped their theory was correct. Would The Curse be laid to rest when the emeralds were removed? Or would Isabelle's dark magic continue to ruin the lives of her descendants?

Cressy wrapped the emeralds in two plastic bags, giving one bag to him to put in his pocket. She put the other into her purse.

As they crossed the threshold, something made Jonas look back at the house. Cressy stopped too, peering in the same direction.

A tall woman stood at the long front window. Her form shimmered, light beaming from every part of her body.

She held out her hands to them.

"Isabelle?" Cressy whispered.

And Isabelle replied. The word she spoke echoed in Jonas' head. "*Merci.*" *Thank you.*

The ghost looked upward. She raised her arms, her face ecstatic.

Then she was gone.

Jonas closed his eyes for a long moment.

"Did you see her?" Cressy demanded.

He turned and put his hands on her shoulders. "Cressy—I believe we saw her for the last time."

"Do you think she looked happy?" Cressy asked wistfully.

"I'm sure of it," he said, confident he was speaking the truth. "Remember how long she's been trapped here, honey. She must have suffered. Must have felt guilty."

Cressy nodded slowly. "I know she did. I'm certain she regretted what she did to her family."

"Now she's free."

"And I'm free too," Cressy half-whispered. "Free of Isabelle's dark curse."

Jubilant, she looked up into his face.

Love for this beautiful, proud woman flooded his heart. *I've found my dream woman.*

Slowly, her hand stroked his cheek. "This is the first time in my life I've ever spoken these words to a man without fear," she said. Her lovely eyes shimmered with emotion as she met his gaze. "Jonas—I love you."

About the Author

Solange Ayre, galaxy-hopping investigative journalist, also serves as a policy advisor to the United Conglomeration of Planetary Jurisdictions. She makes her home on Ayriana, her private island-republic in the West Caribbean region of Earth.

After a whirlwind childhood living in the capitals of Europe, Solange married St. Georges Ayre, one of the wealthiest men in the world. The crystal palace he bought her on Ayriana is the primary tourist attraction in the area – at least, for those who can find it. St. George's mysterious assassination is still mourned by his grieving widow.

Directly descended from King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Solange graciously supports the democratic government of France and relinquishes her claim to the throne. Under no circumstances will she answer to the title "Your Highness."

In her spare time, Solange enjoys breeding and showing her prize-winning miniature dragons as well as researching and writing erotic romance.

Solange 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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