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*Pretty  
Poison*

*By*

*Carol  
Shenold*





Pretty Poison  
By  
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A Tali Cates Short  
(Complete Short Story)





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### Summary

A short story involving our favorite gal Tali Cates...

### Excerpt

“J.T. took off for Lake Texoma this morning. I’m tied up with dispatch and I just got a call from Emma Love reporting a suspicious car out by the water plant.”

I held the phone as if it would bite. “Can’t Jake. handle it? You know how busy I am today and it’s not as if I work for the sheriff.”

When the phone woke me up at five that morning I groaned and turned over. I’d worked on parade floats until three in the morning. Whatever it was, I didn’t want to hear it.

Fayrene continued. “Marylee’s in the last stage of labor and Jake won’t budge from the hospital. Besides, you’ve helped out JT before, especially with Emma, who doesn’t like men.”

“Choice?” I asked.

Fayrene laughed. “He’s in jail, literally. He went to a club in Dallas last night and . . . .”





# *Pretty Poison*

Fayrene's voice tore off the top of my head through the phone. "Hey, Tali. Girlfriend, do you have a problem." She's our Mayor's wife and part time dispatcher for the Sheriff's office.

"J.T. took off for Lake Texoma this morning. I'm tied up with dispatch and I just got a call from Emma Love reporting a suspicious car out by the water plant."

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"Choice?" I asked.





Fayrene laughed. “He’s in jail, literally. He went to a club in Dallas last night and . . . .”

“I don’t want to know. How’s Emma?”

“Blowing and going about terrorists and her grandson’s water plant, kids in her organic garden.”

“All right. I’ll go. Just pray I get back in time for the parade kick off.”

I love holidays in Love, Texas. I especially like our parade, the Biggest Little Christmas Day Extravaganza in Texas, or at least in Love County. So as parade chairman, I had a vested interest in the event’s success. I didn’t have time for Emma’s paranoia. I threw on jeans and a jacket and left.

I headed out bumpy Farm Market road 1187, wishing I’d brought my truck instead of the red Impala, and almost ran down Emma, who was out in the road in front of her house, hopping mad. Surprisingly enough, at 90, she could and did move like a bird, with quick, decisive movements.

“Now Tali Cates, don’t you waste your time hanging around here for my chocolate chip cookies. You go on out there to the plant and arrest that hussy before she does something. She’s been hanging around since before dawn and was still there when I came out to fill the bird feeder.”

“Emma, what if she’s just looking around, at the scenery?”





“She doesn’t belong around here with her fancy clothes and expensive car. And you know no tourist is about to be taking pictures of the water plant. Take my word, that hussy’s up to no good. Now git.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” When Emma spoke, everyone jumped. She’d been the O.B. nurse at our local hospital for over 60 years and had delivered almost everyone in town. The county was named after her great grandpa.

I drove on down to the plant, windows open since the day felt more like May than December. Sweat dripping down my back didn’t improve my mood. A red Infiniti sat, trunk open, directly in front of the plant, as if daring anyone to object. A shapely blonde in a tight white dress straightened up from the open trunk. She slammed it shut just as I came to a stop next to her.

“Why, hello.” She looked me over. “Can I help you?”

“Tali Cates. And I was just going to ask you the same thing. Can I help you find something, someone, some place? Our water plant is nice and clean but not usually a tourist attraction.”

She stuck out her hand. “I’m Cassandra Chastain and I’m just looking around your lovely area here and taking some pictures of a rare bird, the Plains Wanderer, for a nature magazine.’ She handed me a press pass with picture I.D. and opened the trunk to show me her camera, which looked impressive on its tripod. She also had some plants in the trunk of the car, big ones with giant leaves like I’d seen around the fence in Emma’s yard.





“I’m also gathering some native greenery for my yard at home,” she said, noting my interest in the trunk contents. “The birds like plenty of cover and I love the fresh ground up beans for my salad. Can you point the way back to town? I thought I’d also take some shots of your Christmas celebration. I saw banners everywhere and I just adore quaint, small town rituals.

Common sense says no one tramps around on unpaved roads taking nature photos wearing a white dress and high heels. But maybe I was being sexist in my own way. I pointed the woman toward town and watched her drive away, ignoring the nagging feeling I’d missed something.

I filled in Emma, who snorted in disgust and stomped into her yard, mumbling something about young people just don’t know any of the important things these days.

By then it was 8am and I had to be on the float by 9:30. I had to change clothes, put on make-up and the costume after I called Fayrene.

On my way by the post office I noticed a wanted poster, one that looked way too much like the woman in white. I tried to put the thought out of my head too.

I, to my horror, had been picked to portray Lady Liberty, while Emma was justice. So there I stood, torch in hand, trying to keep my balance as we rocked down Main on Larry Martin’s old flat bed trailer.





Emma sat, holding her scales and watching the crowd. I saw gathering clouds and wondered if my torch would attract lightening.

“That woman was lying you know. You should have arrested her right then. I bet she was going to poison the water and we’d all die. I’d have sworn you knew better, child.”

“Emma. I can’t ask the sheriff to arrest people because they don’t look right, can I?”

“Your Daddy did and he was sheriff a good long time. I know you have his brains but you don’t use them some times. Too much college, I think. Look! There she is.”

Emma pointed and I looked. Sure enough, there was White-dress, snapping away on the edge of the street, only her camera pointed upward at the water tower, not at the parade.

I threw down my torch, hiked up the long dress and leaped off the truck, running as I hit the ground. Luckily I wore my boots and jeans under the toga.

The woman saw me coming and ran. One of her high heels broke just as my long skirt tripped me in the middle of a flying tackle and we landed in a heap. I knocked the small pistol out of her hand, just as J.T. arrived to cuff her. I didn’t want to know how she hid her gun under that tight dress.

After the parade, I talked to Emma. “Look, I found out she was wanted when I saw her picture at the department, plus she had a RAP sheet long as a





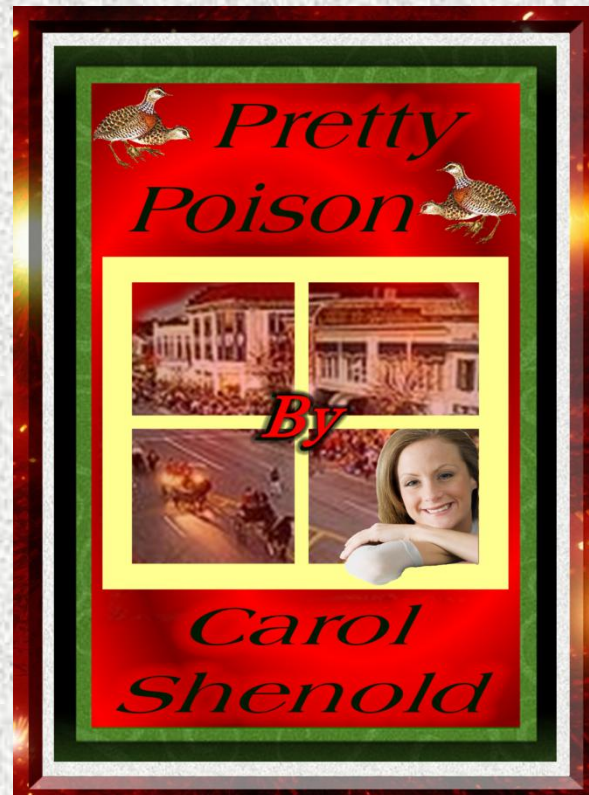
Texas summer. She's wanted in three states for suspected terrorist activities. But how did you know?"

"Well, you would have too if you'd just pay attention. Remember those plants you said the hussy was going to use for salads? Those are Castor Beans. Why do you think I keep all the kids from playing in my yard? They make a wonderful lush green border for my garden but two of the beans will kill you if you eat them."

"And that bird you said she was photographing. The Prairie Wanderer lives in Australia and only comes out at night. It would be major news if one was running around North Texas, in daylight."

Everyone said the parade was the best ever, what with all the excitement. As for me, I can do without that much action but I'll sure be picking Emma's brains about plants and birds from now on.





Pretty Poison

By

Carol Shenold

<http://carolshenold.com>

A Tali Cates Short

(Complete Short Story)









A Bloody Good Cruise  
By

Diana Rubino

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PUBLISHER

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### **Summary**

**Romance author Mona is human. Ship's doctor Fausto is a vampire. He can never be one of her kind and she's afraid to become one of his. As they sail the Mediterranean on writers' cruise, the couple is stalked by vampire hunters, and by Fausto's notorious ex-wife, Lucrezia Borgia. Events force Mona and Fausto team up with the hunters to capture Lucrezia, but where can they go from here? With Fausto's friend and Mona's editor vamping it up and a hunter on the loose, can this bloody good cruise have a happy ending?**

### **Excerpt**

**Mona forced a dose of cheer through her jangly nerves. Vampire hunters wouldn't have the balls to attack Fausto and his friends on this ship. Security was tight. "Well, you're here, so does that mean you've been going out, and aren't confined to your house any more?"**

**Fausto shrugged. "Almost. I couldn't wallow in self-pity forever. And I knew seeing you would make it worthwhile."**

**She smiled and gave him a genuine Italian cheek pinch. "I'll cheer you up, faccia bella, you can count on that. You must feel safe." She gestured at the tacky duds. "I mean, relatively speaking."**

**"Don't let this scare you." He glanced around over the rims of his shades. Uh-oh. Whenever he said, "don't let this scare you," it scared her. "I got an ominous message at the doctor's office earlier."**

**"What-" She swallowed a lump. "What kind of ominous message?"**





## Chapter One

### *Are We Being Watched?*

*The Romanza*, Rome, Italy

Mona Rossi stood on the top deck and gazed at Civitavecchia Harbor glistening in the sunset. The water was calm, but her nerves were churning up a storm. “Chill out. Fausto’s safe and so are you,” Mona repeated, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. “So I look like a nut talking to myself. But it helps. The homicidal stalkers didn’t make it on board and we’re gonna have a blast.” The possibility of a shipboard murder aside, the cruise ship *Romanza* was a palace of luxury and pampering: gourmet meals, massages, body wraps, partying under the stars ...

... Roman orgies ...

But activities like that weren’t announced in the daily *Cruise News*. She’d have to find one. Or plan one.

When not indulging in any of those decadent delights, chatting about purple prose with the other pink ink authors, sashaying around the ballroom as Cleopatra, or autographing her novels, she’d be jotting notes for new ideas. By the looks of her last royalty checks, her readers were jumping ship. Her romantic suspense series was losing its zing, especially after the hero went monogamous and married the heroine. A dwindling bank account was the push she needed to start a hot trend.

She went to the opposite railing, overlooking the deck below. A four-piece band was playing the Italian classic “Love Me the Way I Love You.” The singer was no Clay Aiken, but he sure was setting the mood. As she watched couples dancing, in tight embraces and lip-locks, she couldn’t help swaying to the romantic melody. As Mona debated whether to go down to the pool bar and order her first Strega of the voyage with her “welcome aboard” coupon, a dark-haired pixie bopped up the stairway and looked around.

“Tess! Over here!” she called to her book publisher and best friend.

“Mona, all your hard work and planning paid off!” She bounded over, arms wide, and gave Mona a bear hug in a cloud of Make it a Stiff One hair gel. “The ship’s crawling with authors, cover hunks, and *The Cutting Edge* reporters. They’re doing a segment on us every night for a week!”

“Oh yeah, they’ll be crawling all over us for interviews. And some of the authors’ mothers and aunts showed up. You sure you didn’t mention orgies in the ad?”





“Not in the ad, but I might’ve spread a small rumor. Speaking of hunks, my Moonmist authors are throwing a blowout for the cover models tonight. *The Cutting Edge* is going to cover it,” Tessie gushed, her breaths coming out in spurts of steam. “And guess who I got to make an appearance at the last minute? Furio!”

Mona hoped he *would* appear at the last minute. “How, in a chariot drawn by matched giraffes?”

“Okay, so he’s a little overbearing.” The wind blew her hair into her eyes, and she pushed it away. “He likes to hog the spotlight. I’m sure he won’t bring his life-sized book covers.”

“Better yet, ask him to send his hair, pecs, and cleft chin aboard. He can stay on land.”

“I’ll get him to serenade you,” Tessie kidded. “He can’t carry a tune, but I betcha he’ll be carrying somebody out of there tonight.”

Mona closed her eyes, and Fausto’s image smashed Furio to pieces. “I’m waiting for my own gorgeous hunk. I haven’t seen him in three months, and my butterflies have butterflies.” She glanced at her watch. “He said he’d be here when the ship pulls out.”

“So, you’re all dolled up for him, not the television cameras.” She rubbed Mona’s faux ermine sleeve and gave the toe of her left Gianmarco Lorenzi boot a nudge. “Speaking of hunks. Hubba hubba. What you got under there? A Victoria’s Secret spank-me number?”

“Almost.” Mona untied the scarf and opened the coat to show Tessie her goodies: a low-cut lacy cami that showed enough cleavage to get him begging for more and a short skirt. Wraparound. But she buttoned up when goose bumps started popping up.

“That’ll speed up his launch mechanism.” Tessie nodded with approval. “But ditch the religious medal. Nothing spoils a guy’s view of perfect pushup boobs like Mother Mary watching him.”

“But it’s Saint Paul, patron saint of authors. I wear it all the time. I sometimes forget it’s on.” She wound her scarf around her neck. “I just hope Fausto’s aboard and hasn’t extended his leave.” Fausto Silvius, her on-again-off-again main squeeze, was the reason she’d wheedled with Apollo Cruise Lines for a New Year’s romance writers’ cruise. He was one of Apollo’s shipboard doctors, but hadn’t worked in six months because of a personal tragedy. As one of a despised and outcast minority, he’d been forced to lay low for a while. And Mona, born with the worry gene that ran in big Italian families, was scared to death for him. Her pep talk monologue of a few minutes ago didn’t make her all that smug about her own safety either.

“He’s due aboard to report for duty.” Tessie raised her stenciled-penciled brows. “Why would he jump ship?” The whipping wind off the Tyrrhenian Sea didn’t budge a strand of her foil-streaked Stiff One hair.





Mona pulled up her faux chinchilla hat over her ears. Damn, it was nippy out here. Why couldn't she have arranged to meet Fausto in one of the thirteen bars? Or her stateroom with the extra-eight-hundred-dollar window? Her big idea, a rendezvous under the rising moon surrounded by twinkling lights, didn't include blue lips, a red nose, and stiff nipples.

"This is his first assignment since his family was murdered. So he might not feel he's ready yet." Mona dug out her Cherries in the Snow lipstick from her pocket and ran it over her lips, using the case as a mirror. She checked out the rest of her face, one inch at a time. Mascara unsmudged, brows still in place, and her nose wasn't running. She had to admit she felt like a schoolgirl waiting for her date to show up. Well, it *was* a date.

Tessie glanced at a few passengers braving the chill to wave *arrividerci* to some poor souls left behind on the pier. "Don't worry, with you on the ship, he'll be on it. Trust me. He wouldn't pass up a wild ride with you on this floating passion pit."

"Let's hope so." She felt that familiar tingle of excitement as she imagined strolling the promenade deck with him in the wee hours. Or clinging to each other in ecstasy as the ship rocked and rolled...

But if things ended where she hoped it wouldn't, she'd have problems.

"Check out Pops over there." Tessie tilted her head in the direction of a well-built elderly gent in black tie and tails, shiny Oxfords clicking across the deck. "Now, why isn't he flashing a piece of blonde arm candy?"

"He's probably one of the dancers. They pay older gents to glide across the ballroom floors with single female passengers. I've talked with a few of these John O'Hurley clones, and the ones who get lucky brag about their conquests. To me, they're one rung down from overaged boy toys."

"Hmm, I wouldn't mind hanging on his rung." Tessie gave the *signor* a little wave, and he strolled over to them.

"Beautiful night, no?" He spread his arms, as if embracing the air, and took in a deep breath.

Mona noticed an Eastern European accent. "Gorgeous. Are you a dancer?"

"Yes, ma'am." He clicked his heels. "But I know none of your vild modern steps. My specialty is valtzes."

"Maybe I can talk you into dancing a *tarantella* if we run into each other," Mona goaded.

He clutched at his chest. "Be still my heart!" His smile reached his eyes.

Pulling his lapels to his throat, he said, "Brrr, this makes my blood run cold. I bid you ladies adieu for now." He gave a bow, turned on a shiny heel, and pranced down the stairs.

"Not old enough for him, are we?" Tessie snorted.

"No, just not desperate enough. He was kinda cute, though, in a macabre kind of way."





Tessie shivered, hugging her arms to herself. “He almost made my blood curdle! He sounded like Dracula. Romantic, but a little creepy.”

Mona nodded. “Looked like him, too. But let’s not let our imaginations run away with us. You don’t want an eight-second one-night stand with an AARP veteran anyway.” Mona gave Tessie a nudge. “You’ll finally get to spend some one-on-one time with Quintus. That is, if we don’t get too bogged down in massages, costume balls, and hunk bashes.” Tessie finally hooked up with Quintus, another shipboard doctor, after some detours kept them apart: work, travel, divorces ...

Mona knew Quintus was planning on popping the question to Tessie on this cruise. She was thrilled for her friend, but felt a twinge of envy. She could be entering eternal bliss with Fausto if she wasn’t so skittish about...certain things.

Tessie had her cigarillo case half fished out of her purse, but a blast of wind changed her mind. “We’re very lucky, Mona. Eligible bachelors aren’t easy to come by in our age group. I mean, I never dreamed I’d get to snag a gorgeous Italian wine connoisseur who models mens’ undies on the side. Both of them are real renaissance men.”

“Oh yeah, you can call them that, all right.” What Mona needed to divulge to her friend in the next few hours, especially before the question pop, was that Fausto and Quintus weren’t human. And neither were any of their gorgeous Italian wine connoisseur pals. They all shared a common gene.

Fausto, her longtime friend, fan, and almost-but-not-quite romantic interest *was* a Renaissance man. Literally. He was four-hundred-plus years old.

And undead.

Therefore, hence, and ergo—a vampire.

\*\*\*\*

Fausto entered the doctors’ office and looked around, breathing in the familiar aromas of disinfectant, soap, and the faint trace of medicine. A long-lost emotion rushed back—the feeling of being needed. But knowing his family was gone and he was all alone made it a bittersweet moment.

He sat at his desk and studied the inventory list. Someone approached, throwing a shadow over his paperwork.

“Dr. Silvius!” The staff captain, Paolo Brunetti, stood there, arms spread wide. Fausto went around the desk and gave his colleague an Italian bear hug, with the customary two-cheek kiss. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Fausto said. “I needed to get back to work. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now.” Not wanting to dwell on the condolences, he got straight to business. “As soon as Dr. Lombard gets here, we’ll hold the drug count, and while you’re verifying that, I can go over the hospital budget.”





“Oh, before I forget.” Brunetti opened one of the file cabinets along the wall. “This was left outside the door.”

He placed a small cardboard box on the desk. Fausto’s name was typed on a mailing label. Thinking it was medicine or supplies, he pulled it open, but what he saw inside brought back all the rage of the last six months—and a new stab of fear.

\*\*\*\*

Mona glanced at her watch again. Five minutes to five. She was tempted to spill all to Tessie, but they’d be pulling out at five, and Fausto should be here any minute. No doubt he’d be in one of his tacky disguises. He knew he’d have enemies aboard, and to throw them off the scent, he’d plod around like a typical American tourist on his first cruise, schlocky enough to blend right in, the exact opposite of what his nemeses expected. So she kept her eyes peeled for a gaudy Hawaiian print shirt, a droopy straw hat, leopard-rimmed Ray Bans, baggy Bermuda shorts, and Kmart flip-flops.

That would be the real test for Tessie—could she consider marriage with a vampire without freaking? Her finding out would pack a double whammy—her best-selling authors wrote vampire romances, and they were on this cruise, giving workshops on the sexy, mysterious, sexy, transient, sexy, lascivious creatures. Mona smiled, her toes curling in anticipation of Fausto’s lingual kisses, his licks, his caresses—and the ship-rocking orgasms they shared.

Just as Mona’s juices started to simmer, Tessie’s eyes darted over to the side. “Don’t look now, but if this guy tries to pick either of us up, we’ll say we’re together. And if he doesn’t believe that, we’ll start smooching.”

Oh no, Mona thought. Not even here two hours and some loser is trying to...

Clunky footsteps approached, a large familiar hand touched her shoulder, and she spun around to face a Mets-baseball-capped, blue-Ray-Banned, Yogi Berra-jerseyed, scruffy-bearded sanitation worker whose idea of a luxury cruise was the Sunset Special on the Circle Line.

“Yo, sista.” He lowered the shades and peeked at her with his midnight-blue-sky-with-twinkling-stars eyes.

“Fausto! *Bello mio!*” She slid her arms around his waist, and they fell into an old-fashioned Italian rocking hug, nearly knocking each other over. “You made it! It’s so good to see you!” She held him at arm’s length and zipped her eyes up and down. “You look so—” She gestured with her hands. “—so Flatbush! Nobody would ever guess you’re the lifesaving hunk they’ll all flock to when Mussolini’s Revenge breaks out.”

“Yoo gotta prob’m wit’ dat?” His Brooklynese was flawless, too, but why not? He’d lived there for eighty-six years. But he only used the lingo when joking around or when some Joizey bum cut him off in traffic. He stroked the stubbly





whiskers and rammed his other hand into his tatty jeans pocket, but it emerged from a hole. “This is the first time I skipped a shave since I was ten. I’ve used three fewer blades so far.” He now spoke in his regular voice, plain, unaccented American. “I thought of skipping the deodorant, but didn’t want anybody to think I’m French. And it’s too cold for the touristy garb. I thought I’d go low-end Gotham instead.”

“You’re low end, all right. Make it more real. Cut into the line at the Chocoholics Buffet, and flip everybody the boid.” She noticed Tessie staring bug-eyed, not knowing what to make of this dude looking like he’d just shoved his way off the D train from Flushing Avenue after blowing his paycheck on scratch tickets. “Teresa Lionetti, you know Fausto Silvius. Fausto, of course you remember Teresa.”

Before the third syllable was out of her mouth, Tessie broke in, “Please! Call me Tessie. Teresa sounds too much like a saint or a mother, neither of which I am—or may ever be.”

He pulled off a ratty racing glove and they shook hands.

“Nice to see you again, Tessie. That’s the name of my favorite aunt. *Zia* Tessie makes the best pasta sauce south of Milano and said she’ll take the recipe to the grave with her—but she didn’t say whose. She’ll never take it to hers, we know that.”

Mona added *sotto voce*, “He’s, uh—incognito for now, and I’ll tell you why later.” She’d explain the whole story, but only after a few Chiantis, with Fausto offstage. First Mona had to tell her that Fausto and Quintus were related and shared a rare ancient Roman gene. Contrary to best-selling lore, true vampirism was genetic. So she’d get bad news: Fausto and Quintus are vampires. And good news: they’re not fanged, cape-swirling ghouls.

Fausto gave Mona a wink. “You’ve got some audience on board, ladies. Every man’s floating fantasy. That Toi Brennan from *The Cutting Edge* is even hotter in person.” He glanced over the rail to the deck below and the crowded dancers, now wiggling to “Mambo Italiano.” “Did every romance writer in the business sign up?”

“Registration is hopping!” Tessie jumped from one Salvatore Ferragmo over-the-knee boot to the other, flicking her scarf around her neck. “This was such a good idea of Mona’s! We’re gonna party like it’s nineteen ninety-nine. Again. Schmaltz it up for the television cameras. And maybe even talk about the writing business.” She rubbed her palms together. “So, Mona tells me you’re a budding medical thriller writer.”

He gave his ever-modest one-shoulder shrug. “I wrote two partials when I was on leave the last few months.” He didn’t elaborate, but Tessie nodded her understanding. “They’re on CDs back home.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the ocean. “If you can take a peek at them and tell me if I shouldn’t quit my night job, you’ve got two more coasters.”





“Oh, I’m sure they’re real heart-stoppers. Doctors write some of the best fiction.” She pulled out her cig case once again and snapped it open. “Must be their ability to play God that gives them great imaginations.” She fished in her bag for a lighter. In a flash, he whipped one out of his pocket and lit up for her.

“*Grazie.*” Tessie took a long drag, and the wind whipped away the smoke when she blew it out. “Now I’m outta here, you two, so you can catch up. I need to help work registration anyway. Later, Mona.” She turned to him. “Fausto, it was fun seeing you—whoever you’re supposed to be.” She flitted away before Mona could protest she wasn’t intruding on anything.

But she was happy to be alone with Fausto for this short time before he had to report for duty. She gave him another impromptu hug, and they held each other, swaying gently, for the duration of “On An Evening In Roma.” The wind died down, and she felt content in his arms once again, knowing this moment wouldn’t last long. When the song ended, she felt a jolt. The metallic scrape of the hull and three loud blasts followed. The ship was pulling out. As the lights along the pier slid away, he checked his watch, a cheap Timex to match the getup, of course. “My shift starts at six, but let’s meet, say around midnight, in the doctors’ private lounge, the *Salute*. It’s on the Monte Carlo Deck below us, starboard and forward, past the fitness center. Knock and, when someone opens the peephole, say ‘*parlo pianissimo.*’ That’s the code word for this cruise.”

They sure were paranoid. “Like a speakeasy. Should I bring my own bathtub gin?”

“No, but homemade wine would help,” he said. “I packed in a hurry and didn’t bring any.”

“How ’bout a can of Bud and a Krazy Straw to go with your outfit?”

“I won’t be wearing the outfit. I might not be wearing much at all. The lounge is very casual. You’ll see just how casual it is when you get there.” He gave her a smile that melted her toenail polish.

The jet lag was catching up with her, but all the excitement made her feel wired. She clasped her hands around his and blessed her good fortune. She was on her first Apollo cruise, this rotten year was about to end, and she was with fellow authors, hungry reporters, and one of her favorite people in the world.

What could go wrong?





## Chapter Two

### Vampire Ball Busters

Mona forced a dose of cheer through her jangly nerves. Vampire hunters wouldn't have the balls to attack Fausto and his friends on this ship. Security was tight. "Well, you're here, so does that mean you've been going out and aren't confined to your house anymore?"

Fausto shrugged. "Almost. I couldn't wallow in self-pity forever. And I knew seeing you would make it worthwhile."

She smiled and gave him a genuine Italian cheek pinch. "I'll cheer you up, *faccia bella*. You can count on that. You must feel safe." She gestured at the tacky duds. "I mean, relatively speaking."

"Don't let this scare you." He glanced around over the rims of his shades. *Uh-oh*. Whenever he said, "Don't let this scare you," it scared her. "I got an ominous message at the doctors' office earlier."

"What—" She swallowed a lump. "What kind of ominous message?"

He shook his head. "Nothing to get alarmed about. The hunters just want me to know they're here. After the initial jolt wore off, I said, 'Okay, I'm being stalked again.' But I'm used to it. It doesn't make me constantly look over my shoulder like in the old days. My family's murder gave me a reality check. If they want me, they'll get me. I can't let it interfere with my work or what little leisure time I have here. And you shouldn't either." He gazed at her adoringly and cupped her cheek. His hand was surprisingly warm. "But you're still scared. All the blood's drained out of your face, and not in a good way."

He always knew how to read her.

"I'm that pale?"

"A few days on Rhodes with a bottle of Tan Fastic SPF zero will take care of that."

He was right, but she glanced around. Again. They were completely alone. Below, the band was packing up, and the dance floor was emptying. The hum of the ship's engine and vibrating floor were the only sounds.

"Then I'll go about my business like everything's cool and we'll have the time of our lives." She said it, but didn't believe it. Yet.

"Oh, I can help you do that, all right." He winked and gave her his familiar half-smile that etched a crescent line beside his mouth. "How about talking to your psychic friend? She might put your mind at ease. Is she on board?"

"No, June's not here, but Kyla is. She's a Druid and does Tarot readings. Would you like a session with her?"





He swept off the shades, which told her he couldn't be all that worried. Illuminated only by the spotlights on the deck rail, pinpoints of light shone in his midnight blue eyes like the stars that glittered over them. "And tell her everything?"

"No, you don't have to tell her anything about your—about you. Chances are, she'll know anyway, but won't judge you on it. She's a very good Tarot reader. Just take her reading at face value."

"Meeting a psychic isn't the best way for me to keep a low profile."

She wished he didn't feel that way and hoped to change his mind someday, but not right now. One of her New Year's resolutions was to stop trying to make things happen before their time. Who was little Mona Rossi from the dot on the globe called TriBeCa to buck the universe? "Fausto, do you think the hunters following you are the same ones who—uh—" Her hands fluttered, and she hoped they could do the talking for her.

As usual, he knew what she was trying to say. "Killed my family?" He nodded, a sigh his only outward sign of emotion. "Oh, it's them, all right. The infamous Fellowship of the Faithful formed just days after my sixty-seventh great-grandfather let it slip that he enjoyed feeding from his wife, and they're so widespread now, there's more of them than there are of us. But they have a lunatic extremist branch. We call them The Vampire Ball Busters. Wherever I go, somebody from that crew isn't far behind me."

"How do they know you're a vampire? You've always been so discreet about it."

"They've followed my family through sixty-seven generations, keeping tabs on our birth records, our movements around the globe. They've been backed by the Catholic Church since the fourth century, so they have plenty of financial support. The mainstream hunters of the Fellowship, and by mainstream I mean as opposed to the Ball Busters, have regular meetings and conventions, and when they do corner one of us, the worst they do is give us a finger-shakin' scolding about being hell-bound if we don't repent, give up this sinful lifestyle, and join a local parish. What they don't realize is that most of us are already God-fearing Christians, and our 'lifestyle'"—he made quotation marks with his fingers—"is the way we're born. But if we were the spawn of Satan, why wouldn't we go to hell to be with our creator?" He gave an ironic laugh and shook his head. "*Pazzo.*"

"So what makes the fringe lunatics—the Ball Busters—want to kill vampires instead of just converting them?" She pulled her hat around her ears and moved closer, feeling a tingle as her arm touched his.

"The extremists have personal vendettas. Usually one of their loved ones was killed by a vampire—not one of us, of course, but vamps who've truly turned sour and bleed humans to death for the fun of it. So they think we're all out to suck the human race dry, but that shows how ignorant they are. The Ball Busters who murdered my family wanted revenge because a sadistic vampire cult killed





a hunter's daughter last year. The Ball Busters hunted some of the cult members down and slaughtered them. But that's not enough for them. For vengeance they go after all vampires."

"But why did they kill your family if someone else killed their daughter?"

"They go after whoever they can get. Their mission is to rid the world of vampires, so why not members of the ancient Silvius family? There's enough of us around; some of my relatives are easy targets. They're not careful, like I am." He slid the shades back on.

"Do you know what these Ball Busters look like? The ones after you now?"

Another blast of wind blew his hair into his eyes, and she brushed it back as he drew her against the length of his body. She tingled and instantly felt safer. And warmer. Then hotter.

"I don't know specifically who they'll be this time. That's why I always have to keep an eye out."

"My God, what a way to live." She shuddered under her layers of cashmere and faux fur.

"It becomes part of your day-to-day reality. Not unlike what every citizen has to get used to these days. Be vigilant. If you see something suspicious, report it. Ordinary citizens have to keep an eye out. I have to keep both eyes out." But his eyes were fixed on hers. She grasped his hand, brought it to her lips, and kissed it. He warmed her all the way through.

"Enough about me," he said. "What's going on with you? Have the police recovered any of those things your husband absconded with?"

"Ex-husband, as of two weeks ago. The divorce was final the day he went to jail."

"Congratulations. You're well rid of him. I still don't know why you didn't press charges. He's a criminal, plain and simple."

"He has enough problems being a gambler. After I got over the rage of coming home and finding the house almost gutted, and recovered from the shock of seeing the big gaping space where my piano had been, instinct told me what happened. Sure, he's a bastard for doing that to me, lying about going to work when he was going to the racetrack, taking off without a word instead of talking it out, asking me for help. But when he got arrested for embezzling from his company, and confessed to selling my things, I felt sorry for the both of us. Like we're both a couple of losers and it's no wonder we hooked up."

"No reason to feel sorry for yourself, *cara*. You'll get through this. You're stronger than you think. And you're no loser."

"But it couldn't have happened at a worse time. I married a gambler and a thief. My book sales are off. And I'm going broke, Fausto. My finances are sinking faster than the Titanic—oops, bad analogy. I'm hanging on to my self-esteem by a thread. The thread almost snapped the other day when the credit card company





called me and said I was over my limit. I said, 'I know, but I'm worth it.' And I went out and had my hair foiled for the second time this month."

"Don't blame yourself because Ted is a gambler or that your sales are off. The reading public is very fickle. Find another genre, and go with it."

"That's what I'm here for." She perked up. "The next big trend."

"Isn't it better to write about what you know—and love?"

"Sure, but market savvy never hurts. That's one reason I organized this writers' cruise. To get ideas about what's out there." She flexed her fingers. "Right now all that's out there is cold. We'd better go inside. It's getting too nippy up here." She got out her card key. "My cabin's on the Paris Deck."

They walked down the metal steps to the pool deck. The band was gone, the dance floor and bar empty. The pool and hot tub were still covered. They were the only ones on this deck—she hoped. "If you're not going to let hunters ruin this cruise, then I'll try not to. But you've had more practice than me."

"Don't get me wrong, I do fear them," he said. "But I can't live my life hiding from them or running from them. If they get close enough to confront me—or us, if we're together—I can protect us." He patted the slight bulge under his jersey. "But I don't go out of my way to taunt them." They entered the corridor, and the glassed-in elevators faced them. "Like here, for instance. I always take the stairs." He lowered his voice. "I don't want to get stuck in an elevator with some of them. They travel in packs."

So they took the stairs down to the Paris Deck. "You doctors might be allowed firearms aboard, but how can a regular passenger smuggle any weapons on?"

"They manage," he said. "Remember, they have a powerful entity with big bucks behind them."

"Oh yeah. How can I forget? The Church collects a fortune just with the money Italians pin to statues."

As they walked down the corridor, a mid-baby-boomer couple squeezed by. All narrow cruise ship corridors forced a step aside and a cheery "Howya doin'!" especially at the beginning, when excitement ran high. She guessed they were bored empty nesters. He probably rented a trophy girlfriend, and she hid a bouquet of vibrators in her Just My Size bra drawer. But that was Mona, typical writer, conjuring up character sketches of everybody, and no part of New York City crawled with more characters than TriBeCa, where she people-peeped from her loft's fire escape.

She also noticed one more detail. They both wore big silver crucifixes.

*Crucifixes!*

She grasped Fausto's arm and gestured wildly as the couple passed. Her heart beat faster.

"They've got—" she whispered as she thumped her chest.

"What? Breast implants?"

"No! Silver crucifixes!" The couple was out of earshot, but Mona still trembled.





“So? A lot of people wear those. This is an Italian cruise line, remember?”

“I’m keeping an eye out for those two,” she declared. For all she knew, the squeaky clean suburbanites were the zealots trained to kill now and ask questions in the next life.

She shuddered as the couple continued down the hall and out to the elevators.

“Calm down,” he soothed. “A few days into the pampering of shipboard life’ll mellow you.”

“I hope so.” She sighed, forcing it out of her mind. For the first time since daylight, her breath didn’t come out as steam. Still, she was jittery, and knew she’d be fighting jitters this entire trip. But Fausto looked calmer than she’d ever seen him. She knew the disguise helped, but he never let his guard down completely. He’d once told her, “One of nature’s imbalances is there are too many nuts and not enough nuthouses.”

At her cabin door, he bent down and gently kissed her. She hadn’t expected it, but let the kiss linger and followed his lead. Liquid warmth spread over her. She had to end this before she collapsed. It would be so easy to fall into his arms and let a rapturous romance sweep her away if she didn’t mind altering her destiny. But she wasn’t ready to even think about that. So she pulled away gently as her lips burned for more. “Fausto, I’m here to comfort you, to cheer you up. Not to complicate things. We’ve been over this before.”

“Who said anything about complicating things?” He didn’t realize it wasn’t her Lorenzi’s stiletto heels making her knees wobbly. It was the affection and desire burning in his eyes. “What’s a little kiss?”

“There was nothing little about it.”

“We’re on a luxury liner about to sail off into the moonlit Mediterranean, we’ve missed each other, and we’re sharing grief and pain and trying to heal each other’s raw emotions. I wasn’t reading any more into it than that. But it looks like you were, romance author.” He tilted her chin up and teasingly touched her lips with his, brushing her earlobe with his fingertips. She tingled at the intimate gesture.

She didn’t want this moment to end. Trusting herself not to give in to him completely and become a vampiress by evening’s end, she asked, “How much time have you got?”

“If fifty-five minutes is enough for you, it’s enough for me.” They embraced and he pressed his body against hers. Her desire grew more sensitive to the feel of his growing hardness. “It would be a quickie, but I’ll make it up to you later.”

“So you’re asking for an invite in?” Her breath came in short gasps as his tongue flicked over her earlobes. How could she refuse a guy who considered fifty-five minutes a quickie?

“I was hoping it would be your idea.” His mouth descended upon hers, his hands winding through her hair, his tongue probing. A low growl escaped his throat.





On wobbly knees, she forced herself to end the kiss. "This'll be way better inside." She turned and stabbed the slot with her card key, pulled it out and shoved the door open.

The cabin was bathed in pale moonlight and shadows. They unzipped, unbuttoned, and unsnapped, throwing coats, hats, sweaters aside. In their underwear, they waltzed over to her bed, and her heartbeat quickened as she tossed aside the life jacket from this afternoon's drill.

He lowered her to the bed and unhooked her bra. She let a smile play over her face, glad she'd worn the bra that opened in front. Had Jezz, her nickname for her sex-starved alter ego, been telling her something when she got dressed?

He grasped her hands in his, bringing them up over her head. Her thighs parted and he straddled her. His lips blazed a fiery trail down her neck, between her breasts. Then he flicked his tongue over the sensitive buds until she shuddered with a wild wave of desire. Her thighs closed around him, and they moved together in exquisite agony.

They were just about to move to the next step when a loud, insistent beeping shattered the moment. "Damn!" He groaned in frustration as he rolled off her. She instantly felt cold.

"What is it?"

"My pager." He groped around on the floor and held the pager to the clock's glow on the table. "The doctors' office, an emergency."

"And this isn't?" Months of pent-up desire were draining through her. She felt like she'd been doused with a bucket of ice.

"I'm sorry, honey, it's one of the drawbacks of being a doctor."

"Another doctor can't cover for you?"

"An emergency's an emergency," he replied patiently and began piling his clothes back on. "It must be serious to need two of us."

"Yeah, I know," she muttered, but remembered how grateful she was to the doctor who took her in when she broke her ankle and crawled there in agony.

Back in disguise, he bent over and gave her a light, teasing kiss. "See you in the lounge at midnight. And maybe we can pick up this quickie where we left off." He gave her fingers a lingering grasp. "Your eyes are like limpid pools, doll." He let himself out and made sure the door was locked.

She lay on the bed for a long time. Did she want to pick up where they'd left off? It took a tremendous amount of willpower to make love with Fausto without letting him feed from her. One of these nights it would happen. She sensed it. And there'd be no turning back.

After thinking about it over and over, still unable to make that life-altering decision, she put it out of her mind for now, ready for some pampering. She unzipped her evening gowns from her garment bag, unpacked her moisturizer, neck firmer, toner, and cosmetics, and lined them up on the vanity. She set her





Bumble and bumble hair products on the edge of the tub. A makeover always took her mind off whatever was eating at her.

She flipped on her vanity light and spotted a gold Godiva box and a champagne bottle in the ice bucket. Someone wishing her bon voyage? Who could it be? She ran down her list of pals' names as she fumbled to open the envelope. But inside was far from a bon voyage wish.

A folded note fell out, and when she opened it, her heart lurched. It was a fax.

Mona, I tried your cell, but you're out of range. I want you to have a blast, but I had a vivid premonition last night and must warn you. Two shadowy figures are trailing you and Fausto. So watch your back. I'll let you know if I see any more details. Aside from that, enjoy the champagne and truffles, and bon voyage. Love, June

All her fears and jitters rushed back full force. What a way to start a cruise. With New York's most famous, respected psychic telling her she and Fausto were targets for a couple of nuts. She sank into the chair, re-reading the warning. *Should we get off right now? Too late, we're already moving!* What was the next port? Naples. A big enough city to disappear in.

There was a lot to be afraid of these days. But she wasn't going to flee her beloved New York and live the rest of her days hiding in the North Dakota woods from psychos or whatever the terrorist de jour was these days. Besides, out there, she'd have Bigfoot to worry about.

"I. Am. Not. Running. Away!" She crumpled June's fax and chucked it into the wastebasket. No wacko was going to chase them around. She'd keep her eyes open and watch her back, just like June said.

She couldn't barge into the doctors' office and tell Fausto about this now. So she wrote him a note to deliver on the way down.

She continued as if everything was wicked cool: laid out her black Vera Wang strapless with the slit up the side and buffed her fuchsia Christian Louboutin low heels, but decided on her "chick lit" Choos, the four-inch-heel "boudoir slides" as plugged on Ebay, where she bid and won them for \$259.99, half the retail price. She laughed as she buffed the Swarovski crystals on the buckles. Why didn't they call a spade a spade? If they'd listed them as fuck-me shoes, they probably would've got the \$520. She showered, shampooed, blow-dried, root-lifted, curled her long auburn hair into cascading ringlets and inserted her aqua contact lenses. She brushed her brows down with Vaseline and hairspray on a Q-tip. After applying her foundation, blush, and trademark Cherries in the Snow lipstick, she gave herself a full-length view in the mirror. Good. The bikini waxing was holding up.





She flipped through her underwear drawer, tossing aside thongs, more sensible briefs, bras—but it wasn't here. Her strapless pushup. She remembered packing it. Or did she?

“Oh no.” She couldn't wear the Wang without the strapless pushup. “Damn! I knew I'd forget something! But why that?” She racked her brain for a solution. Finally, she got out her nail scissors and started snipping away at the straps on one of her regular bras. It looked natural enough under the Wang, but for good measure she taped the edges down with Band-Aids.

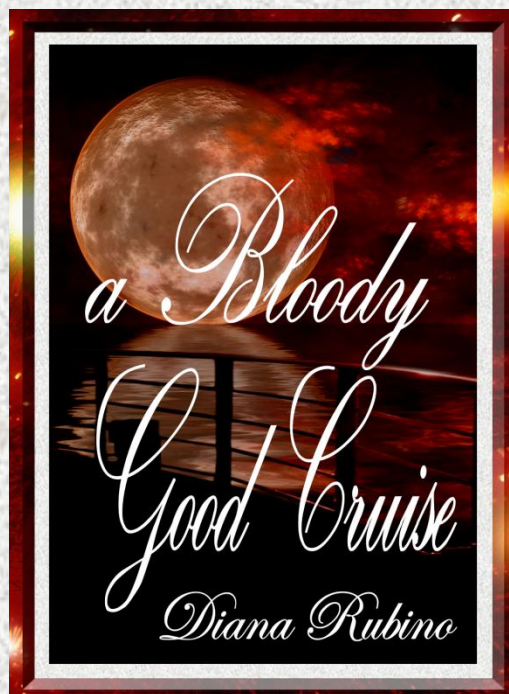
Acting out her favorite proverb about life being short, she knocked the neck off the champagne bottle and devoured all but two truffles. The champagne was Mumm's, her—*hic!*—favorite. Nice of June to remember that.

She sucked in her stomach and tucked in her buns, remembering Lana Turner's classic trick of walking like a quarter was between her buttocks. Especially since she'd read that high heels made a woman's ass stick out twenty-five percent more.

Before leaving, she took one more swig of champagne and sang the Carnival Cruise song from that hokey commercial, “If they could”—*hic!*—“see me now, I'm havin' such a ball, la-da-da-da-da”—*hic!*—“da...”

Now if she just could keep Fausto—and herself—alive.





A Bloody Good Cruise  
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Ginger Simpson

Sisters in Time





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## Summary

Two eras collide when a modern day attorney and a pioneer wife find themselves locked in a time not their own.

Mariah Cassidy awakens in the twentieth century. Confined in a pristine environment, hooked to tubes and beeping machines, she's scared, confused and wondering why everyone keeps calling her Mrs. Morgan. Who is the strange man who keeps massaging her forehead and telling her everything is going to be alright?

Taylor Morgan tries to focus on her surroundings through a blinding headache. The patchwork quilt, the water basin, and the archaic room don't strike a familiar chord. Her mouth gapes when a handsome man waltzes into the room, calls her darling, and expresses his delight that she's on the road to recovery.

Clearly something is amiss.

## Excerpt

Suddenly, an intense rumbling sound shook the prairie stillness. From an almost cloudless sky, thunder cast a single bolt of lightning, striking the ground with energy enough to propel dirt through the air and set fire to a small patch of grass. Immediately, calm prevailed; only a column of smoke billowing skyward remained as evidence.

Frank pondered the strange occurrence, but fueled by the need to find his wife, hurried in the direction of the fading smoke. "Mariah, Mariah, please answer me."

His boots cut a path through the heavy brush.

In the grass beyond the wagon, he spied the brim of her yellow bonnet. He rushed to her side, finding her in an oddly contorted position. Mariah's head rested against a large rock and rivulets of red dripped onto the grass beneath her. Frank's throat Frank's throat





constricted. “Oh my God, are you all right? Mariah, answer me, please.” His words were little more than a whisper over his choking fear.

He gently removed her head covering and inspected the crimson-stained gash on her temple. “Callie,” he yelled, “Get the tablecloth from the picnic basket. I have to stop this bleeding. Quickly, Jacob, bring me the water jug.”

Frank cleaned Mariah’s wound then wrapped a makeshift bandage around her head, but she remained unconscious. He had to make her hear him; she had to wake up. A tear trickled down his cheek and he brushed it away. His children already sobbed with fear; he had to show strength.

Frank continued to bathe his wife’s face with cool water. “Mariah, please darlin’...” He looked to the sky. “Lord this can’t be happening.”





## Chapter Three

*Colorado Territory--1872*

Taylor's head pounded with pain. Trying to focus, she opened her eyes and blinked a few times, then propped herself up on her elbows. Everything looked strange. The room seemed bright and cheery, but things appeared very old fashioned. She fingered the patchwork quilt covering the bed, and puzzled over the antique mirror hanging above an old-time washbowl and pitcher across the room. An incessant ache throbbed in her temple.

Where was she? What'd happened to her? A zillion questions raced through her mind.

"David," she called for her husband. Her voice painfully resonated in her head. "David, where are you?"

She slid off the bed. Her legs wavered beneath her and she clung to the bedpost. Slowly, as she regained her equilibrium, she weaved across the room and peered into the mirror. A massive bandage covered the top her head; black circles ringed her swollen eyes. She didn't recognize herself.

"Boy, I look like hell," she muttered.

As she raised her hand to touch the bandage, the door behind her opened, and she spied the reflection of a strange man.

"Mariah, sweetheart. You're finally awake." He crossed the room with open arms.

Taylor spun and faced him. Feeling disoriented, she shook her head. "You have the wrong room, sir."

His brows arched. "Mariah, what are you talking about? What wrong room?"

"Look fella, I'm not Mariah. Evidently you're in the wrong place if you are looking for someone by that name."

The stranger rushed over and took her in his arms. "Oh my sweet angel, the bump on your head is worse than Doc Samuels thought."

Taylor shoved him away. "Take your hands off me. Who is Doc Samuels, and *who* in the hell are you?"

Suddenly, the room spun. Her stomach turned queasy. Needing to sit, she staggered back to the bed, her gaze still assessing the stranger.

"I'm Frank...your husband." He followed her, his head cocked, his eyes clouded in confusion.





She swallowed. "Excuse me? My husband's name is David...David Morgan. I don't know who you are, mister, but you must be the one who bumped *your* head if you think I'm your wife."

"Well, if you aren't, then just who might you be?"

"Taylor Morgan. I live in Denver. Can you please tell me where I am?"

"You're in Colorado, about two hours from Denver City. Don't you remember?"

"Two hours? How in the hell did I get here?"

Frank's eyes widened. "When did you start cussing?"

"Don't worry about it, just answer me. How did I get here?" Her last nerve frayed, and he plucked at it.

"Don't you recall? We were going to town in the wagon—"

"Wagon? What the hell would I be doing in a wagon? A station wagon?"

Frank took a deep breath. "We were going to town, and Jacob needed to pee. I think he disturbed some rattlesnakes and they spooked the horses...sound familiar?"

Taylor's mind raced. Who was this loony? Before he spoke again, she assaulted him with a barrage of questions. "Who is Jacob? Wagon? What horses? I don't know what you're talking about. Frank...is it? Look, *Frank*, I have an idea. Why don't you just call me a cab and I'll get out of your way."

She looked down at the tacky nightgown she wore and wondered who had removed her clothing. Tugging at the sack-like shift, she let out an exasperated huff. "If you'll just retrieve my things, I'll get dressed and be ready to go when the taxi gets here."

\*\*\*\*

Frank felt totally bewildered. *Taxi? Cab?* He wasn't surprised she didn't remember the events leading to her injury, but he *was* shocked she'd created a new personality for herself. "Look, Mariah, uh...Taylor, you've been in and out of consciousness for almost two weeks now. Doc Samuels visits almost every day to check on you. Now, you just lay down and I'll send for him."

Taylor shot him a puzzled stare. "Why would a doctor make a house call? If I was injured, why am I not in a hospital?"

"Hospital? Doc Samuels is all we have around these parts. We always send for the Doc when someone is hurt. Now, try to stay calm until he gets here. In the meantime, can I have Callie fix you something to eat? You must be starving."

Taylor winced when she squared her shoulders. She massaged her temples with her fingertips. "Look, Frank, or whatever your name is. I don't know any Callie, and I don't know what you're trying to pull, but it's not working. Don't *piss me* off. Either call me a taxi or bring me the damn phone!"

Her anger and continued cussing stunned him. "Can we just wait until Doc Samuels gets here and checks you out? Please? Lay down and rest."





She rolled her eyes. “Okay, I guess it wouldn’t hurt. I don’t feel very well. My head throbs with every heartbeat, and I feel woozy. *But* after I’ve rested a bit, I’m outta here.” She leaned back on the pillow.

“That’s a good girl.” He picked up her feet, swiveled them around to the bed. “I’ll send someone for the doctor.”

Frank raced out of the room, closing the door behind him. He paused in the hallway and leaned against the wall, trying to make sense of what had just happened. There was no logic to it. He made his way downstairs and headed for the bunkhouse and his foreman, passing his daughter without saying a word.

“Lloyd, Lloyd!” Frank yelled. “You need to get to town quick and get Doc Samuels out here. Something’s not right with the missus.”

Callie waited on the porch, concern etched on her face. She looked so much like her mother, same reddish hair and big green eyes. “Pa, what’s wrong. Is it Ma? Is she worse?”

He grasped her shoulders. “Callie honey, I have to be honest with you. I’m really worried about your ma. She woke up and doesn’t know who she is. She doesn’t even know *me*! Far as I can tell, she thinks she’s somebody else—someone named Taylor something.”

“Are you sure?”

“Believe me, this is no joke. Maybe if you went upstairs, she might recognize you.”

Callie turned to go, but he grabbed her arm. “No, maybe that’s not a good idea. Perhaps it’d be better if you and Jacob gave Ma a few more days to rest. She’s still not feeling well.” He wrestled with his indecisiveness. Considering Mariah’s temper display and continued use of bad language, he decided. “Yep, that’s probably the best idea. Let her sleep until Doc Samuels gets here.”

Frank shoved his hands into his pockets and paced the length of the porch.

Callie stepped in front of him. “Pa, don’t worry. She’ll be fine. It’s just that bad bump on her head... isn’t it?” A deep crease furrowed his daughter’s brow. “She will be all right, won’t she, Pa?”

Frank put his arm around her. “I’ll make you a deal, honey. If you don’t worry, then I won’t. Doc Samuels will fix her up as good as new.”

“Worry ‘bout what, Pa?” Jacob jumped onto the porch, his hair tousled and dirt smudged on his cheek.

“It’s nothing important, son.” Frank lied through his teeth and he knew it. His stomach was already in a knot and he feared the worst.





## Chapter Four

*Denver, Colorado--2002*

David sat in the chair next to his wife's hospital bed. His jaw twitched in response to her denial. "What do you mean you aren't Taylor? Of course, you are."

Mariah shook her head and whispered, "No, I'm not! *My name is Mariah Cassidy.*"

She seemed so serious; it worried him. "Fine, sweetheart. Whatever you say. You rest and I'll go get the nurse or a doctor or...somebody."

He cast a final confused look over his shoulder as he walked out the door.

Mariah took another sip of ginger ale. The bubbles tickled her nose and eased her dry throat. She needed to talk—she had questions—lots of them. The main one: why in the world a stranger considered her his wife. She glanced around the room, hoping something would strike a familiar cord. It didn't.

He returned with the doctor, and pointed at her. "Dr. Shaw, please calm my wife. Tell her what you told me."

"Mrs. Morgan," Dr. Shaw approached the bed. His spectacles rested halfway down a pointy nose, his gray hair looked as though someone had greased it to his head. "I think you should know that some memory impairment is expected from the type of trauma you suffered."

Mariah tried to sit straighter but winced at the pain. "My memory is just fine. I know perfectly well who I am. My name is Mariah Cassidy. I don't know this man and I don't know you. I don't even know *where* I am." She wanted to scream.

Tears welled in her eyes.

Dr. Shaw touched her should. "Calm down, Mrs. Morgan. You're in Saint Anthony's Hospital in Denver. You've been in a serious car accident. It may take a while, but everything will come back to you. Just give it time."

Frustration welled and caught in Mariah's throat. Why did everyone believe her to be Taylor Morgan? Something seemed terribly wrong. She didn't understand who or what this 'car' thing was they keep talking about, but before she could voice her thoughts, the doctor walked to the machine on the other side of her bed. "Here, let me give you something to calm you a little."

He inserted a needle into the tube in her arm, and Mariah felt herself drifting off. "Wait. Wai..."

\*\*\*\*





David massaged his brow. "Doctor, are you sure she's going to be all right?"

"Mr. Morgan, like I told your wife, you have to give it time. It's not at all unusual for someone who has suffered a head trauma to have memory loss. She'll be fine." He picked up the chart at the foot of the bed and jotted something down, then glanced up. "Do yourself a favor, Mr. Morgan. Go home and get some rest."

David glanced at his sleeping wife. Longing for a nap himself, he nodded. "I guess you're right. I could stand a break. Will she be out long?"

"She'll sleep for the rest of the day. Why don't you come back this evening?"

David lifted his wife's limp hand, kissed it and whispered, "I'll be back later, darling. Sleep well."

\* \* \* \*

Mariah fought to open her eyes. Blinking to adjust to the room's darkness, she saw only dim shades of orange and red filtering around the window. She assumed the sun must be setting.

She looked around and determined she was alone. Trying to sit upright, she propped herself on one hand.

"Yes, Mrs. Morgan. You rang? What can I do for you?" The voice from nowhere startled her.

Searching for the source, Mariah surveyed the room. Was there a ghost haunting her now?

"Mrs. Morgan. Are you there?"

Straining, Mariah forced herself into a sitting position. "Ye...yes, I'm here, but where *are* you?" Her voice trembled as her gaze roamed the room.

"I'm at the nurse's station, Mrs. Morgan. You pushed your call button. What do you need?"

Mariah raised her hand and saw the device beneath her palm. As if scalded by hot water, she jerked her hand away. "I'm sorry, I didn't know about the...the button."

"Are you sure you don't need anything? If not, we'll be in soon to check your vitals."

Vitals? There was that word again. Mariah wondered what it meant. She wondered if it had something to do with why they kept coming into her room and poking at her.

Being careful of the tube in her arm, she dropped her legs over the side of the bed and sat for a moment. Her head pounded, keeping beat with her heart. "I need to get up, but *how* if I'm connected to this horrid contraption," she mumbled.

If only she could look out the window, maybe she'd see something familiar.

The nurse came in just as Mariah prepared to stand. "Oh nooooo, Mrs. Morgan. It's much too soon for you to be up. You put those toes right back under the





covers. We took your catheter tube out, but if you need to use the bathroom, it's the bedpan for now."

Mariah's mind screamed. *Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Morgan. I'm not Mrs. Morgan.*

Catheter? Bedpan? Every time someone spoke it created yet another question she wanted to ask. She obediently put her feet back upon the bed and allowed the nurse to pull the covers over her.

"That's a good girl. Now, let's check that temperature." The white-clad woman stuck a strange device in Mariah's ear. "Good, ninety-eight point six on the nose."

Placing her finger in her ear, Mariah checked to make sure nothing remained inside. "What was that?"

"Oh, you haven't seen the newest thermometer?" The woman held it up. "This little gem is certainly better than the one you held under your tongue for three minutes." She jotted some notes on a piece of paper then looked up at Mariah. "Say, sounds like your voice is getting stronger, Mrs. Morgan. How's your throat feeling?"

"Much better. It's still sore, but at least I can talk."

After wrapping the strange-looking contraption around Mariah's upper arm again, the woman squeezed the little bulb until the band grew uncomfortably tight. She then placed the small, circular disc on the inner side of Mariah's elbow.

"What's that you're doing now?" Mariah received only an annoyed look in return.

"Shhh," the nurse commanded with authority. "I need to hear your pulse."

Mariah didn't dare utter a sound and waited until the woman straightened again. "Are you through?"

"Yes, Mrs. Morgan. Your temp and blood pressure are fine. Now that you're able to take fluids orally, let's get that nasty old tube out of your arm. It looks like you're on the mend. Mr. Morgan should be able to take you home in a few days."

The hair on the back of Mariah's neck bristled at the thought. She snuggled deeper into her pillows and wondered to which home she was going. She gazed to the ceiling. *Please, God, let it be the Rocking C.*

"There, no more annoying tube." The nurse interrupted Mariah's thoughts of her beloved ranch. "Would you like to watch some TV?"

Mariah massaged the crook of her arm, relieved to be able to move it freely. "Watch what?"

"TV, you know...television?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't know what that is."

The nurse pointed at a square box suspended in the corner. "Wow, you really are suffering from memory loss. That's the television." She approached the bedside table, pulled out the drawer and handed Mariah an object. "Here's the remote control."

She took it. What did it do, and why would one watch a black box with a glass front? She studied the mysterious thing then cast a puzzled look at her attendant.





The nurse took the remote from her, aimed it in the direction of the box and pushed a button. The image of a man appeared on the screen. Mariah heard him talking. She stiffened and leaned back against the bed. Was he speaking to her? Trying to make sense of all the strange happenings made her head hurt.

When the nurse pushed another button, the screen immediately changed to a man kissing a woman. She depressed the button again—a person cooking, then someone talking about feminine hygiene. Mariah’s mouth gaped. Why would they talk about such a private thing? What was this thing called a remote control? Was it a product of the devil himself?

The nurse handed the control back to Mariah. “Ring if there’s anything you need, Mrs. Morgan.” The woman left the room.

Being called Mrs. Morgan didn’t faze Mariah—she busied herself pushing buttons. Suddenly the sound got very loud; it hurt her ears. Mariah frantically searched to find a way to lower it before the nurse came back to scold her. Fumbling with the buttons, she found it and sighed.

Undaunted, she scanned the channels, searching for the kissing couple, but they were gone. Instead, she found a big yellow singing bird. She settled back against her pillow and watched with wide eyes. If only Frank was here. Maybe he could help her make sense of all this.

\*\*\*\*

The orderly removed her dinner tray just as David returned. He brushed her forehead with a kiss. “Hello, darling. I’m glad to see you’re awake.”

Although she stiffened at his show of affection, she noticed how good he smelled. Clean, yet a little like the sweet-smelling toilet water she bought at the mercantile. She still struggled to understand why this man insisted he knew her—and all too well, apparently. Her earlier statement about her identity seemed to trouble him. She hesitated to upset him again, at least until she had a chance to understand things more clearly.

“I just ate.” She picked a safe topic.

“How was it? You know what they say about hospital food.” David took off his coat and sat next to her bed.

“It was good. I enjoyed it.” She didn’t know who *they* were or what *they* said.

“The nurse tells me you tried to get out of bed.”

“I’m tired of lying here. I just wanted to look out the window.” She pulled her mouth into a pout.

David laughed. “You were never a good sick person, Taylor. Too darn impatient.”

*There he goes with that Taylor thing again. Enough is enough!*

“David...uh...David, is it? We need to discuss why you think I’m Taylor. I assume Taylor is your wife.”





David's eyes widened and his mouth dropped. He leapt to his feet and looked deep into her eyes. "Taylor! I don't *think*, I *know* you're Taylor. You *are* my wife! I've been married to you for over five years now. You look like my wife, you sound like my wife and you carry the driver's license that told the police you are my wife. That's why they called me."

"Police? Driver's license? Your wife? This isn't making any sense at all. You're scaring me." Mariah covered her face with her hands.

David put a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, don't cry. Maybe if we try going back to when the accident happened, you might remember." He sat. "I hope this works."

Mariah brushed away her tears and composed herself. "I'm willing to try anything." She chewed on her bottom lip while she thought hard about the last thing she recalled. "Hmmm, I remember waking up, getting dressed, waking up the kids—"

"*What kids?*" David almost fell out of his chair.

"Jacob and Callie, of course." His reaction caused her to pause for a moment, but she continued. "Then, after breakfast we all got into the wagon to go into town. That's the last thing I remember." She shrugged her shoulders then grimaced at the resulting pain.

David leaned over and rubbed her hand. "You poor darling. You're all confused."

Mariah jerked her hand away. "I'm *not* confused. You seem to be the one who's befuddled. If you could just find Frank, I'm sure he'll explain everything."

David patted her hand. "Okay, sweetheart. You try to get some rest, and I'll see if I can find Frank."

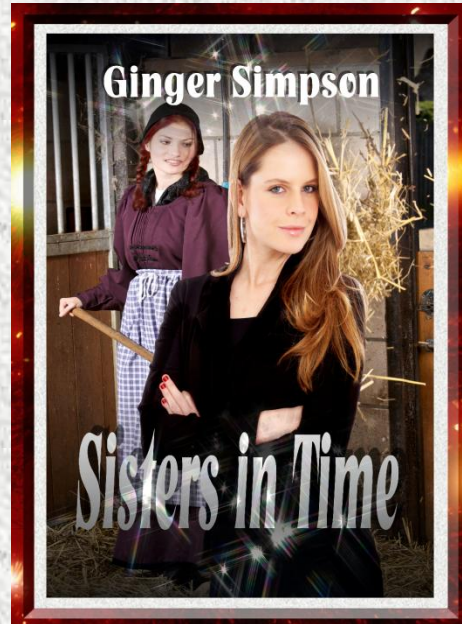
He put on his coat. "Goodnight, sweetheart, I'll be back tomorrow."

She saw tension in his jaw, but felt thankful he didn't kiss her.

When he left, her body relaxed. She turned onto her side and fluffed her pillow. If she could just fall asleep, maybe when she woke, it would all be over. Unfortunately, her gaze rested on the remote control on the table, and her hand snaked out to grab it. Thoughts of finding a mirror were lost with the wonder of the amazing black box.

*Now let's see. I push this button.*





Sisters in Time

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# Chocolate Seductions

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## Summary

Chocolate Seductions is the first installment of the Cursed Seduction is a series involving 5 women and their men....

To whom shall ever read this,

Once, a long time ago; two men from different walks of life used many women for their own pleasures. Neither had a care for what would happen to the women when they were finished with them. That is, until a witch cursed them. Now these two men have to find their true love and learn to sacrifice all. It has been many centuries since and they still have not found the woman to set them free. Another and more tragic twist to this fate is that of the generation to follow them, each descendant throughout time will suffer until the first two are cured. Chocolate Seduction is hopefully the beginning of the end of their suffering.

Lost throughout time,  
Nathaniel and Sabastian

## Excerpt

"Its about damn time, I thought I was going to have to knock the door down. I know you're spoiled but don't you give a damn about anyone else?" He grabbed me roughly before shoving himself inside.

I turned to close the door and was greeted with the one person who could save me, Harry.

"Hey, can't I come in?" His voice sounded tired and I began to worry why he was here.

"I'm sorry Harry, please come in." Once he was inside I checked to make sure no one else was standing there before shutting the door and enclosing us in the dark.

Grant's voice vibrated across my skin and I felt chills go down my spine, even that one night together couldn't prepare me for the surge of heat I felt. "Ambrosia, I realize that you..."

"Stop it, stop using your voice on her right now. She can't withstand the sound and you know it." Harry's voice was equally rough but his felt as a cold shower, instead of the heat Grant's had caused.

"Oh I know that many of women have bowed down to the great Grant Dionysus but I will not be one of them." I tried to put the anger I felt at the betrayal of Harry's statement had made aside. Harry for the first time in a very long time was why I had been upset; it was not at the sound of Grant's voice but what Harry had said.





## CHAPTER 2

I drove up through the Vineyard and noticed that the winter months had been kind. Most of the plants looked healthy if dormant, and I knew the manager William was looking after them with loving hands. I meant it when I took over the Winery, and I would have stayed behind to take care of it, if William had not volunteered to stay on.

I pulled up slowly in front of the house along the long driveway that formed an elegant circle in front of the house. As I rolled the car to a stop, the suddenness of being home brought forward mixed emotions. Mother was coming out the door with Keith's mother, Charice, following closely behind. Even the maid's son Andy was waiting for me to get out of the car. I really didn't want to get out though. Yes, I missed them but standing there behind them all was Grant. He had come here instead of going to his home. Why? How in hell did he beat me here and who was the tall blonde hanging on his arm?

Pulling in all the emotional strength I possessed, I climbed out and allowed myself to be enveloped by both mothers.

"We were beginning to wonder if you were going to change your mind," Charice said with humor in her voice.

"Welcome home, darling. We have missed you so," Mother said before pulling me into her tiny embrace.

My mother, Lynette, is barely five-foot tall and smaller in height than most teenagers. Her long black hair was pulled stylishly up onto the top of her head, accented by diamond earrings and a small locket around her neck. Her silk dress may have looked out of place in the country, especially in the middle of winter but Mother pulled it off with style and flair.





Charice was next, “Oh, my dear. I am so sorry. How is my daughter by marriage but always first in my heart?” she greeted me yet again with same thing she had said since the day Keith and I had gotten engaged.

“Fine, thanks. And you?” The words were American but the accent was all Burundi and that meant high classed Italian.

I watched the woman pull herself even taller. Charice was five foot eight, but now seemed over ten feet tall, with her striking blonde hair, and blue eyes, her Norse ancestry shined through.

“I am better now that you are home once more. I only wish it would be forever.” That was the same line she had used every time I came home since leaving.

I understood I was all they had left since Keith had died but I was my own person as well. “I am sorry but you know Sinfully Chocolate needs my full attention right now. Maybe in a few years I will be able to spend more time away, but not now.”

I watched their faces go from happy to disappointed, and didn’t know why I even bothered. They would not be happy until I came home to stay but I knew my home was in a loft across the ocean, with the smell of fresh chocolate drifting through out it.

“Well, who is going to help me get my things to my room?” I asked changing the topic.

“I will,” Andy piped up.

Once we got my bags into my old room, I begged jetlag and asked for a couple hours to rest. Instead of lying down though, I put my things away and hid the Christmas gifts I brought with me in the closet. Afterwards I sat down at my desk and stared out at the vineyard, hoping for some sort of inspiration to save Sinfully Chocolates and Burundi Wines.





A couple of hours later and no closer to solving my problem, I decided it was time to face the others again. I found Mother in the library having a drink. “Mother, I didn’t know you drank this early in the day,” I teased as she walked in the room.

“Well, since it almost dinnertime and we are celebrating, I suggested your mother join us,” Grant stated from somewhere behind the door.

I jumped out of my skin, and it took me a moment to recover and respond. “I am sorry Grant, I didn’t notice you standing there. How nice to see you again.” Ever the polite lady.

“Again?” Mother asked.

“Oh, yes. Didn’t Grant tell you we met at the airport, if only for a moment?” I replied while wondering why he hadn’t said anything.

“No. I am afraid that in all the commotion I simply forgot our encounter. There is no need to apologize for your lack of not noticing us though, since we are so clearly hidden from view,” he sneered.

Which of course was not true, a person paying attention could see the entire room from the doorway. And that was what he had implied I was not paying attention. He had also made sure that I had no choice but to acknowledge the other woman in the room with us. “Pardon me, this is twice I have not introduced myself. I am Ambrosia Burundi Dionysus, Grant’s cousin.” I used my full name though I hadn’t in years, and wasn’t really sure why I did so now. No one in St. Louis knew my married name, and the fact that I used it now bothered me.

“Hello, it’s a pleasure I’m sure. I’m Theresa, Grant’s fiancée,” The perfectly sculpted woman purred.

I hoped the shock was only on the inside and didn’t show on my face.

*Fiancée? When had that happened?*





“Yes, Theresa and I are to be married after the New Year. We of course hope that you can attend.”

I knew he didn't want me there any more than I wanted to be, but family responsibilities would demand no less. “I shall have to check my calendar of course, but I will undoubtedly do my best,” I answered as politely as possible, before turning to my mother once more. “I had not realized it was so close to dinnertime. I hope my traveling clothes will be all right, Mother.”

“You know how happy I am that you are here, but as we have guest and more arriving this evening, it would be only appropriate if you were dressed more accordingly. So if it would not be too much trouble, would you mind changing? I hung a dinner dress in your dressing room earlier.”

Well that was it; she had already begun dressing me again. “Of course Mother. How long do I have to get ready?”

“The guest will be here within the hour. I am so sorry I forgot to mention it before. I had not planned on you resting quite so long after your trip, though I hope you are quite recovered now.”

Knowing there was no way out of it, I simply excused myself and went back upstairs. The last time I was home, Mother had pointed out it was time to start using the dressing room as a lady of my station was supposed to, but I hated acting as someone I was not.

I noticed the blue silk chiffon hanging next to a large mirror inside the dressing room. *Wonderful*. Silk never looked right on my figure and blue was even worse. I groaned aloud when I saw the strapless dress. *With my breasts, who was Mother kidding?* I looked at the dressing table and found that Mother believed it possible. Lying there discretely with my hose was a strapless camisole with a hidden support bra inside. *Well at least I will not fall out during dinner.*





Once I had the dress on, I found that I couldn't reach the zipper. "Great. What else is going to go wrong?"

Dropping my shoulders in disbelief, I went to the doorway holding the dress closed in the back with one hand and turning the knob with the other. The last thing I expected, however, was Grant being on the other side of the door.

"I knew our rooms being across from one another was going to cause problems," he grumbled.

I was so shocked that I almost started backing up until I remembered my dress still wasn't zipped.

"Well are you just going to stand there complaining, or are you going to help me zip so I can go and finished getting ready?" I fired back.

"Oh, I apologize. I didn't realize you were a lady in distress. Please, allow me to offer my services. I once unzipped your dress so zipping it should be no problem." His smooth reply aggravated me even more.

Knowing arguing with him was not going to get me anywhere; I just turned my back to him and held my breath in anticipation for him to finish what I had so stupidly started. Just when I thought I couldn't hold my breath any longer, I felt Grants hands on my shoulders. His touch was gentle, almost too gentle actually. As his hands slid down to just above my waist, memories from the past came flooding back.

It had been one month since the night of the reading, Grant and I had been arguing over both Burundi Wines and Sinfully Chocolate. Unable to stand it anymore, I stormed out of the room and headed outside to the gazebo. It had been unusually warm that day and I had changed from my black silk pants suit into a sundress after the funeral. I don't know how long I'd stood there with tears running down my face when I felt strong arms circle my waist.





Grant's breath was warm on my skin as he spoke softly against my neck. "Ambrosia, I am sorry. I did not mean for it to get out of hand like that. I just want what is best for both our families and me owning both Burundi Wines and now Sinfully Chocolates is just that."

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I just used Keith's life's work to secure Burundi Wines solely under my control. I cannot turn around and sell it. It's a part of my heritage, my family, my future and I am not selling it to you or anyone else." I began to pull away and Grant tightened his arms more securely around me.

"I give you my word I didn't come out here to argue with you. Truce? For now, at least?"

Not knowing if he was sincere or not, but too tired to fight anymore, I simply nodded my head. I expected him to release me and was surprised when he rested his head on top of my own. Tired, lonely, and finally having Grant's gentle attention after so many years of wanting him, I sighed and relaxed in his embrace.

Shortly after I felt the tension leave his body as well. We both stood there in silence, comforting one another. As my body sank more deeply into his, I felt a twinge begin deep inside me and then felt his growing response.

I moved to escape, as Grant turned me in his arms, silencing any protest with a tender kiss. His lips grew more intent the longer our mouths touched and his hands were no longer simply resting on my waist, but moving up and down on my back. At my groan of need he moved his hands to the zipper and began to work it slowly down.

I always wore a bra but when I changed, I'd chosen a dress that didn't require one, in that moment I nearly began panting with relief. As he lowered the zipper, the straps fell and left my upper body bare in the moonlight to his gaze, I heard Grant inhale sharply. The sound of his arousal, the feel of him pushed all





thoughts of doubt from my mind; I melted into his tender touch and persuasive kisses.

When we were both naked and lying on our discarded clothes he stopped only once to ask if I was sure. I responded by pulling him down onto me completely. Grant began suckling my nipples as his hands moved slowly down my stomach to rest at the junction of my thighs.

I whimpered for him not to stop and gasped as I felt his fingers begin to rub my moist core. His strokes became more intense with each pass and I found myself raising my hips to meet him. When his fingers suddenly filled me, it felt as though he was filling all of me. With each shove of his hand I felt my body growing weaker and wetter.

“Please Grant, I don’t think I can take anymore,” I begged.

He smiled down at me and moved in between my thighs. He stared into my eyes as the head of him slipped inside. Grant paused then, as if he was waiting for me to adjust, but I had wanted this for so long that I lifted my hips to take him deeper.

The control that had been holding him back was now gone. He began to move smoothly in and out of me, each stroke harder and deeper than the one before. The feel of him reaching the end of me stole my breath. The more I moved against him the farther he went, until the pain and pleasure of it caused my body to tremble in need, while my heart pounded frantically in my chest.

When I thought I was going to die from the need building inside me, he pushed us over the edge in one final thrust. As my body gripped him in climax he thrust again and again, bringing me farther with each stroke, until I thought we would pass out in one endless orgasm.

Afterwards, we lay beside one another with my head resting on his chest. “Thank you,” he whispered softly.





I began to ask why, when he answered me.

“I promise I will take good care of Burundi Wines and Sinfully Chocolate, and you for giving them to me.”

I could not stop the flinch caused by the shock from what he had said. With tears of anger, hurt, and betrayal coursing down my face, I hit him in the stomach as hard as I could. He rolled away cursing, as I stumbled up and tried to grab my dress. When it wouldn't budge, I cried out furiously and fled inside with only my sandals in hand.

I locked my doors that night and turned on the radio so loud I was surprised no one had come and complained, then again they might have. I couldn't hear anything outside of my own heart pounding in denial. The following morning, before anyone woke, I left Mother a note beside my bed and fled back to Paris. From there I caught the first flight to the U.S and never looked back.

\* \* \* \* \*

A whimper escaped as I pulled away from him with more strength than necessary forcing him to stumble backwards. I wasn't sure but I thought he had been remembering the last time we had touched, or at least the scorching glare in his eyes led me to believe it.





## CHAPTER 3

The meal that evening had been disastrous to say the least. First after running away from Grant in the foyer and then again in the hallway, he was angrier than ever at me. I then arrived after the first of the guest had begun to arrive, which earned me a look from Mother. As the evening progressed several of the guest, and Mother included had tried to draw me into conversations. The topics had ranged from the coming holidays and parties being held or other tedious issues that my Mother and I guess the Burundi Heiress should be concerned about. Mother had accepted on our behalf while I found myself not denying or confirming anything.

When dinner had finally been served, I had been grateful that is until I found myself sitting across from Grant and Theresa. Turning away from them I found that I was seated between two of my Mother's friends. The women had tried to draw me into talking about their single sons and even grandchildren, but all I would do was nod once in a while, thankfully they finally gave up and turned away.

I had noticed though that Grant and Theresa had found not only each others company charming it seemed, but also everyone else around them. The few times I thought Theresa would try to talk with me I turned my head and looked down the long table as if I was waiting on someone. Each time I avoided talking with her, Grant would go from calm to angry. *Why did he care what I thought anyway?*

After dinner, drinks were served in the parlor. Mother tried to get me to play heiress again and play something on the Baby Grand, but I just shrugged my





shoulders making no move toward it. I could play and had once enjoyed it, but when I had miscarried I lost all love for it, and simply didn't want to be near it anymore.

I would be damned if I play for these people who not only did not know me but also did not care about anything but what others were saying. I had been so rude to everyone that I began to think I was safe from anyone talking to me at all; it was then that Charice came up with a young man at her side. She was the one woman I thought I was safe from match making from, sighing I turned towards them.

"Ambrose I don't know if you remember Kevin Jaggar, he was a friend of Keith's and is Grant's attorney." Charice introduced him.

I looked at him over cautiously before placing my hand in his, "Its nice to meet you."

"I was afraid of this, you don't remember me do you?"

His voice had sounded familiar but I simply could not place him. "No I'm sorry, should I?"

"Oh yes my dear he was one of Keith's grooms in your wedding." Charice explained.

I looked at him then, I mean really looked at him. He was tall, probably six feet at least; he had midnight black hair that curled slightly at the ends, with brilliant green eyes. His suit of dark green matched his eyes eerily and I could tell that there was pure muscle underneath. I just couldn't place him though.

"I know this is horrible, since you were in my wedding, but the only Kevin I remember was Irish with dark reddish brown hair, and glasses."

"I knew I had changed some, but I hadn't realized until now, just how much. I have been in California for the past few years. Between the sun, my hair changing colors and contacts, I guess I do look different."





It was then that I remembered him, and began to smile in confusion, I wanted to like him even though he was Grant's attorney, which was wrong on so many different levels. "Hair coloring? Why would you color your hair, I remember it being a vibrant red." It had been the most glorious red hair I had ever seen.

"Well I will let you to get to know each other again." Charice said cheerily while turning away from us and towards another friend of hers.

He laughed before smiling and then finally replying. "Can you imagine the color of it after the sun had lightened it, no I had to color it and well black is hard to get rid off." At the look of displeasure, he continued. "Also, I don't know what I did, but I apologize and hope that you let me make it up to you."

His laugh was deep and I wanted to forgive him but I guess the anger I felt towards Grant and anyone associated with him, was purely visible. "I won't sell. Tell him to accept that and leave me alone." With that I turned to leave, as he placed a hand on my arm halting me.

"Tell who, tell me who and I will make sure he understands." Kevin promised heatedly. "I won't allow anyone to bother the widow of my friend."

I stopped and starred at him, he was insane, that had to be the only excuse for him. To try and make me believe that he did not know how Grant tried to force a sell each time we were near one another. But the surprise at his statement was what had caught me off guard. No one referred to me as Keith's widow, even if it was true. Everyone else was afraid I would get upset, so they either didn't mention him or referred to him as my husband, as though acting he was alive would make a difference.

"I am going to act as though you don't know and tell you, but I want you to know that I don't believe it for a minute. Fine, tell Grant that neither Burundi Wines or Sinfully Chocolate are not now, nor will they ever be for sale. I don't





care how profitable or in debt they get, Burundi Wines and Sinfully Chocolate are mine.”

He stood there staring at me for a moment and I began to wonder if he was going to get angry. Maybe he did not like me referring to his client and friend that way. I began to think that I misjudged him and started to say something, anything; when he began laughing.

“I’m sorry, truly I am. It’s just that I think Grant has finally met someone who will say no to him and mean it. I didn’t know he was still trying to get you to sell, if you want I will tell him to stop, or should I advise him as his attorney to discontinue this bad endeavor.”

He was laughing full out now, and I couldn’t help the giggle that escaped. I knew what he meant, he was right I would physically hurt Grant if I had too.

“There’s no reason to get yourself in the middle of this, he will eventually get it, and if not I am only here a couple of weeks. Now, on to more a pleasant discussion, how have you been since the wedding?”

“As I mentioned I am now practicing in California, but being Grant’s attorney keeps bringing me back here more than you would believe.”

\* \* \* \* \*

We ended up talking most of the evening and when he asked me to dance, I felt as if we had known each other for years, I smiled while taking his hand. As he swept me across the dance floor, I remembered the last time we had met, and mentioned it to him.

“We danced at my wedding didn’t we?”

“Yes

The one word held so much emotion in it, I didn’t know what else to say.





By the time the guests were leaving, I found myself accepting an invitation to a dinner and at the very least once dance at Kevin's New Years Party. Also promising him a dance at my Mother's Christmas Eve party.

I noticed Grant looking over at us a few times but when our eyes met, I placed my hand on Kevin's arm leading him across the room to refresh our drinks.

I went to bed that evening feeling better than I had since coming here then I had before.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dressing in a cheerful mood I pulled out a green silk pantsuit Mother had picked for me. Mother may not have picked for comfort but she definitely had picked for style. Pulling my hair back with a simple clasp and adding gold studs, I made my way downstairs.

As I entered the room, I asked cheerfully "Good morning Mother, Charice; what's on our plans for the day?"

"Well Charice and I were going to have brunch at Mrs. De Knights but if you want we can do something else."

As I started to answer, as Grant came into the room. "Morning ladies how are you all this morning?"

"Were just discussing the days plans, and you Grant, I trust you slept well last night?" I answered. If he wanted to be civil then so could I, besides the pleasure from the night before was still lingering inside me.

It took him a moment but he responded politely enough. "I slept fine, your mother as always has comfortable rooms and beds."

"Oh mother I just remembered I cannot join you today, I have a meeting this morning at the winery. Seems we may have a new sweeter wine sprouting from





the bad season.” I quietly informed them, or least that was what I hoped the message I got this morning meant.

“Oh my dear you are always working, you’re going to waste your life away working all the time, though I am glad to hear about the grapes.” Mother complained and commented in her usual style.

“Yes well I have huge plans for Burundi Wines and Sinfully Chocolates and if I am going to be ready in time I am going to have to work some while I’m here. Now if you all will excuse me, I need to change and get going.”

After pausing to kiss Mother and Charice on the cheek, I walked out of the room. Once in the foyer, I began to head up the winding staircase when the doorbell rang. Turning around I headed to answer it before Andrew or his mother came running. I was pleasantly surprised after I saw who was on the other side.

“Kevin, what are you doing here?”

“I had hoped to take you to lunch today but it looks as though I may be too late.”

I laughed softly. “Too late for lunch, we just finished breakfast.”

Kevin laughed when he realized what he had said. “I was hoping you would have lunch with me today, but it looks as though you already have plans.”

“Actually I was on my way to change, I do have some business to do, but if you don’t mind tagging along we can get some lunch afterwards.” I offered.

“It would be my pleasure.” I turned and rushed up the stairs. The pleasure I had felt before intensified at the smile curving his lips.

Once I had changed into a cardigan sweater and jeans I went back down to meet Kevin. “I hope this will be all right for lunch but I believe in being comfortable when I’m working.” I asked out of courtesy, I knew the sweater would be all right and the jeans were brand new.





“It’s perfect, actually I’d rather wear jeans but I figured you would want lunch someplace nice.”

I arched my eyebrows at him and then realized no one here really knew the real me, that jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes are my favorite things to wear. “I’ll make you a deal unless you tell me otherwise, when we have plans I will wear jeans every time.”

“Deal, but only during the day, in the evenings its dress up all the way or I may miss seeing your heavenly shoulders, and tempting legs.”

I blushed at his compliment I just couldn’t help it. No one had flirted with me in a very long time. I went to reply in kind except a sarcastic female voice penetrated first.

“Well how perfectly sweet, and just think I thought the widow, was celibate.”

“Theresa how perfectly charming of you to join us, I didn’t realize you were an early riser?” I said ignoring her comment.

“Yes we were just discussing the days events. I apologize if we interrupted your beauty sleep we all know how much you need it.” Kevin replied carefully.

“Oh excuse me, I didn’t realize you felt for her that way. Grant will be so pleased to know that his lawyer is finalizing the deal for Burundi Wines and Sinfully Chocolate.” Theresa sneered from above us.

“I realize that you are Grant’s fiancé and that him and his mother are welcome in my home, but you my dear, Theresa was it, are not welcome. And if you push me I will be happy to show what we do with unwanted guest. Now If you both will excuse me I really don’t have time for childish behaviors.” With that I simply walked up the stairs and went past the wench without another word. Realizing that I had allowed her comment and appearance to push me around in my own home.





Once in my room though, I screamed my frustration out in my pillow. *How dare she come into my home and act as though she owns it? I don't care if she is Grant's fiancée I will show her to the door.* I looked around the room and tried to decide why I had come back up here in the first place. I almost hoped that Kevin had changed his mind and left. Not really knowing or caring, I went back downstairs slipping out the back way.

I slipped out the back of the house and headed towards the stables. I needed to get away. As the smells inside hit I remembered better times and funny enough, Harry. I don't know why I thought of him then, I couldn't remember one time we had been in here together, only that I wished he was here now.

I decided on a pale mare to ride down to the Winery and asked the groom, Matthew to ride along and bring her back. I knew he would have spent the entire day waiting on me but it just didn't seem right. All the way there I wished I could simply ride away and forget about everything and everyone. *I cannot and will not give up everything I have worked so hard for.*

Being back in the office forced memories of the times when Keith and I had been happier and most importantly together. This was one of the few places we could be ourselves and still connect, one of the very few places that I had felt as though we were meant to be together. No, my marriage hadn't been perfect but we had always been friends. I often wondered where we would have been if he hadn't found me crying that day, so long ago.

\*\*\*\*\*

I had only been 16 at the time but I had a huge crush on Grant and been devastated when I caught him kissing his girlfriend. I couldn't remember her name anymore, but that day had marked a new beginning for Keith and me; and





possibly the end as well. Keith had found me hiding my tears from the world behind one of the barrels of wine.

When he had asked what was wrong, I told him my heart had been broken, he promised to make it right. Keith had then turned me and gave me my first kiss, needless to say we were caught and our mothers decided that the best course of action was to announce that we had an arranged marriage. It had not mattered that it was they themselves that had caught us, word would spread and neither family wanted that.

It was a few years later on the actual day of my graduation when I saw Grant again. He had grown from a spoiled teenager into a fierce man. He had come up to me from behind and had asked where he could find the Spoiled Heiress of Burundi Wines.

I had known he would be there but had no idea he would be nasty about it. Slowly I turned towards him and smiled innocently. “I don’t know about spoiled, but I am the Heiress of Burundi Wines. Do I know you?”

“Ambrose I didn’t realize, I mean I apologize for being so rude, I would never call you spoiled to your face, at least on such an important day.” He smiled as though he was apologizing and though it had been years since I had seen him I didn’t buy it then and really don’t now.

“Why Grant I almost didn’t recognize you, I guess jet setting playboy fits your image. How are you?” He wanted to be politely nasty and I knew how to play the game.

“Jet setting playboy, well I must say that one was original, did you read it in some magazine this morning?”

“I could lie and say no, but why bother we both know the papers are correct where you are concerned. My graduation guarantees that I will be the one to run Burundi Wines. I know you hate that fact but you should have known that it





would have never gone to you. Now if you will excuse me I have other things I would rather be doing.”

We didn't speak for the rest of the day, and I had wondered if he had gone back to Paris. Later that night I found out differently...

I had been walking in the Garden behind our home trying to accept the fact that Keith and I would be married shortly. I know I had agreed to it and he was a good friend but there was no real love between us.

I had been naive enough back then that I believed I should love the man I was to marry.

Sitting down carefully on the ground, I grimaced as I felt the thorns from the roses poking me through the Silk Pajamas Mother had given me. Why she kept assuming that I would prefer them to cotton I never know. Carefully lifting up I gingerly pulled one of the thorns out when I heard someone laughing quietly behind me.

Turning I groaned out loud and stared back at the man who was slowly becoming my own personal menace. “Grant you really should sneak up a little more louder.”

What, I know it didn't make sense at the time, and still doesn't today, but he just gets on my last nerve.

“Ah I was not sneaking up on anyone, I cannot help it if you are not mature enough to treat silk properly. What would your Mother say if she knew you were sitting on the ground in Silk? Better yet what would Keith say?”

“It's really none of your business and you will not say anything to either of them, since you are not even supposed to be here. Besides Keith would simply sit beside me or place me on his lap.”





I knew I made a mistake the second the words left my mouth, when would I learn not to bait him? Grant's eyes showed I was in trouble and my pride was probably the only reason I didn't shriek.

"Well then we wouldn't want anyone to think I was not taking care of the Heiress." With that he picked me up and settled us both down on the soft moss, a few feet from the roses. Sitting in his lap had once been a fantasy but I was a married woman now or at least going to be in only a few days.

"Grant, let me go right now. This is not right." I may have controlled the squeak but I couldn't hide the tremor in my voice and cursed him for it.

He laughed jarring me slightly, "Why should I put you down, you marrying Keith doesn't change anything other than the fact you will get the Winery faster. We both know it's not a love match. Actually why are you two even getting married? I know that neither of our families believes in arranged marriages any more."

"Oh really and why do you say that? Just because it's the 20<sup>th</sup> century and arranged marriages may not be common, why would you believe that mine is a farce?"

His grin went from the casual and normally cocky one, to one of something I didn't know but almost recognized.

"I know our families no longer believe in them since both your family and mine turned me down when I asked for them to arrange ours."

I sat there still in his lap dumbfounded. When had this happened and why would my family say no? What did they know that I did not? I almost asked but instead acted as though I had known all along.

"Well though the bride normally doesn't have a say so, but since I am the only child and heir, I was asked about your offer and turned them down flat. I don't have time for boys, and you Grant though old enough in years, are still very much a Boy."





“A boy, what the hell do you mean a boy?” He grabbed my arms fiercely then and bent his head towards mine...

I don't know what would have come next, because I could hear my mother calling out my name.

Hissing, I jerked free and called out to her. I looked down at Grant one last time before running back inside. That look stayed with me for a long time, it was a look of possession and I was the thing he was after.

Keith and I were married shortly later. Though I still remember being held in Grant's arms I never turned away from my husband or what was expected of me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Frustrated, I got up from the desk and made my way down to the wine barrels, there had to be an answer that would save both the Winery and the Sinfully Chocolate. I went over to the new batch of Wine I had been told about and found it was exceptionally sweet almost to sweet though, and definitely would have to be a dessert wine. Burundi Wines were known for their Dinner Wines and not for Dessert Wines, how can we use something that is not even a part of our traditions? Who would willingly buy a new flavor of our wines if we had never been known for them?

Standing there I thought of someone who had not crossed my mind except when I was in real trouble, my Father. Even though he had died when I was a child and though I had been told about him I could remember very much about him. Other than he was the reason that Burundi Wines was a success or had been.





*What would he do, how would he have used the new wines?* Would he be angry that I was trying to combine the tradition of Burundi Wines with something new like Sinfully Chocolate?

Knowing the answers was not coming; I left the winery and headed towards the stable. It was then I remembered that I had told Matthew to take my horse back home. “Now why in the world did I do that?”

“Do what Ambrose?”

I screamed out in surprise as Kevin came up behind me.

“Oh Kevin I did not expect you.”

The look on his face told me he had planned on us going ahead with our plans. Feeling ashamed I tried to explain myself. “Kevin I am so sorry I didn’t forget, not really, just with everything going on the time got away from me.”

“That’s okay, Grant said I was fool for even trying.” He turned to walk away when I gently placed my hand on his arm.

“Kevin don’t go, I truly am sorry. Now what did you have planned for lunch?” I tried to sound hopeful but what little of a grin he had was gone.

“Its alright Ambrose really it is, I had hoped...Never mind.”

With that he simply walked off.

I couldn’t believe Grant had only been in my life a couple of hours and was already ruining everything. Stomping back to the office I looked down at my sensible shoes and wondered if going back and facing the others, was really worth the mile long walk. Heaving a sigh I knew if I didn’t return home, then they would simply come and get me. That might not be so bad but I knew in my gut that it would be Grant who found me.

Knowing that I had no choice but to return, yet putting it off for as long as possible, I went back to the Desk and stared down at the paperwork. Instead of





dealing with all of the pressures at the house, I decided to make sure my books matched the Winery's books.

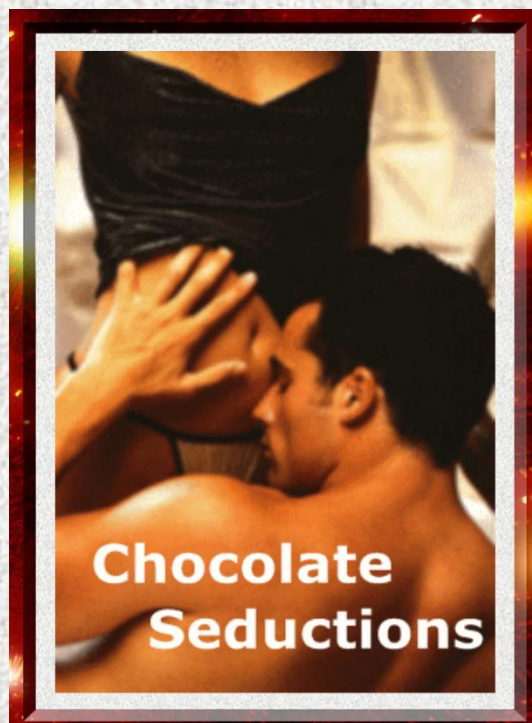
I don't know how long I sat there only that I had not really gotten a lot of work finished. I knew the books were in line, faxing them back and forth every week, then seeing them at least once a year had made sure of it. More than ever before I realized how close we were to losing everything. The house was the only piece of property we had free and clear, it was something each Burundi before me had made sure stayed ours and ours alone.

I thought of each piece of equipment Burundi Wines owned and we were running with the bare minimum as it was. You can only cut back so far before you have nothing left to work with. I thought of the expensive clothes my Mother and I owned. I knew I had quit buying anything extravagant but worried Mother had not. What could I do, where could I cut, to make sure we even stayed open long enough for the new wine to succeed or fail.

We barely had enough staff to run the big house, stables and manage the Winery. I knew I could get rid of the horses and then we wouldn't need a stable hand, but Matthew had been born here and getting rid of him seemed cruel. Not knowing where to cut or what to get rid off I looked out the window that once inspired the Burundi's before me and began to worry that maybe I shouldn't have taken over. Maybe Dionysus Wines would have been a better choice.

Frustrated and getting a headache I laid down on the Sofa in the room closing my eyes.





## Chocolate Seductions

By

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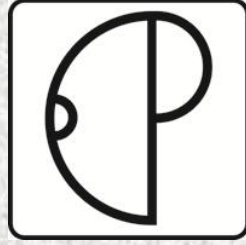
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Dee Owens has been writing since 2004 with her first book *La Roe's* published in print in 2005, followed by *Fay's Wish* in 2006 then re-released in 2009.

Both *Fay's Wish* and *La Roe's* are available at her website <http://deewens.webs.com/apps/webstore/>. *Chocolate Seductions* has been released in eBook format for the Holiday Season and can be purchased on her site as well. The Print version will be released sometime December 2009.

Dee Owens is also the Owner and Founder of Personalized Marketing. Personalized Marketing has branched out into Personalized Marketing & Promotions, (PM) Literary Service, and Personalized Marketing's Mystic Times Blog.

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