

How I Met My Husband: The Real-life Love Stories of 25 Romance Authors

**Edited by Michele Stegman
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Thanks to **Jennette Marie Powell**, the cover artist who also resized book covers and gave me a lot of other help with this book.

How I Met My Husband: True-life love stories from 25 romance authors

This book started out as a series of blog entries on my website (www.michelestegman.com). My husband read them and said, "This should be a book!" So, with the permission of the various authors, I put their stories into this book. I have also included book covers and excerpts from their books.

Enjoy!

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Michele Stegman

A Book of Life and a Trick

At the urging of a neighbor, I joined a local play group and got a part. When I went to the first rehearsal, music was playing and some people were dancing. There was one skinny guy in baggy clothes and he was dancing rather poorly, but he had the biggest smile on his face and I was instantly attracted. We talked briefly and he showed me his “Book of Life,” a scrapbook filled with quotes and pictures that showed me he was someone who loved life and people. This is the one, I thought.

I flirted with Ron for two years but he wasn’t interested in dating a shy, quiet person like me. One day I was again at the town hall to rehearse a play and he was there to rehearse a different one. I knew he was in that room and kept hanging around outside the door wondering what excuse I could find to go in and talk to him when he came out. He later told me it was because the guys he was with were saying what great legs that woman out there had and he suddenly realized he knew me. Being the outgoing guy that he was, he came out to say hello.

He had just come back from a trip to Greece and I mentioned that I had just finished taking a year of Greek. That seemed to impress him, but not enough. I thought that if I could just get him to my house to show me his slides of Greece, he would feel obligated to ask me out and I would at last get that date with him. He fell for it.

Ron was so happy to come to my house and show his slides to someone who really wanted to see them. Ron was an hour and a half late. I was heartbroken—until he came in the door with that big smile of his that never seemed to leave his face. When he was ready to leave I remember him standing by the door behind a waist high divider fumbling with his keys. Here it comes, I thought. He’s going to ask me out. I could tell he didn’t want to ask me, that he was hoping I’d say no. But I said yes and we made plans for the next weekend.

For someone who was so reluctant to ask me out, he sure planned a wonderful date. He even had a theme for the evening—the views of the city. We went for drinks at a restaurant that overlooked downtown. Then to a park with a wonderful view of the city. We ended at the airport for dinner watching planes land and take off. We sat in his car in the airport parking lot and talked. I kicked my shoes off and felt so comfortable with him. I felt I could be myself. He must have felt comfortable, too, because he asked me out again, and again. We started seeing each other almost every day and decided to get married.

He took me back to that park overlooking downtown to put the ring on my finger. Just as he slid it into place, a huge meteor streaked across the sky and burst into pieces over the city. We were married in a small ceremony 13 months after that first date. We have had our disagreements over the last 42 years but we have never had a fight. I am a better person because of Ron and he always makes me feel good about myself. He still wears that big smile and I don’t think anyone would recognize him without it.



About Mr. Right's Baby

Mr. Right's Baby: He wants to marry her. If she knew why, she just might walk away forever. www.michelestegman.com/books

Excerpt from Mr. Right's Baby

Her desk was still empty. Surely she wouldn't miss today. Not after he had waited so long. With a smile, Adrian Wright stood by the door of the first grade classroom welcoming each student who entered, a hand on the head to ruffle the hair of the boys, bending to help pick up dropped lunches or hair barrettes, answering the inevitable question of, "Are you Mrs. Sandy's substitute?" at least twelve times. But still she did not come. The clock was moving steadily toward eight and the room was fast filling up, but her desk was still empty—except for a well-chewed, fat, red pencil in the groove at the top. Her name, stuck onto the front of the desk at the beginning of the school year with sticker paper, was badly frayed from eight months of chairs and desks bumping, and stained from several dribbles of watercolor, but it was still legible. Carly Simmons.

The students were putting lunches in the coatroom, emptying book bags, putting homework papers on Mrs. Sandy's desk. They were talking and laughing freely, but were quiet and orderly. Mrs. Sandy had taught them well. About half of them had hair ranging from almost pure white to tow heads to light brown. The other half were dark-haired, dark-eyed Hispanics. Carly wasn't Hispanic, but he thought she would have dark hair. Like his.

The corridor was clearing as kids made a last minute dash for their classrooms. There were only three or four children left and they were older, third or fourth grade. Adrian grasped the doorknob to close the door. Maybe tomorrow, then. Maybe she would be here tomorrow.

A little girl suddenly came skidding around the corner of the hallway, long, dark braids flying, one of them already loose, the red ribbon dangling. She charged straight toward Mrs. Sandy's classroom doorway and straight into his heart. It was her

She was perfect. She was just as he had imagined her ever since he had learned of her existence six months ago. Her hair was, indeed, black like his. Black and shiny, and he wanted to touch it to see if it was as soft and silky as it looked. He held out a hand. He had patted the other kids on the head as they came in. But this time, his hand was shaking too badly so he let it drop. It wasn't just his hand that was shaking. He thought his legs might crumble beneath him if he weren't gripping the doorknob like an anchor in an emotional storm.

Carly caught herself with one hand on the doorframe and looked up at him, a big smile showing a perfect row of baby teeth she hadn't yet lost. "Are you Mrs. Sandy's substitute?" she asked.

Adrian tried to swallow the golf ball that had suddenly lodged in his throat. Unsuccessful, he merely nodded. Carly skipped on into the room, thumped her book bag onto the seat beside her desk, and started putting her books into her desk. Several girls gathered around her, one of them pointing out Carly's loosened braid. Carly pulled the elastic band from the end of her other braid and loosened it as well, leaving her hair in two, nearly waist length ponytails slightly waved from being held briefly in braids.

She was beautiful. He wanted to go right in there and scoop her up, and give her the seven years of hugs he had missed out on giving her. He wanted to feel her arms around his neck and hear her call him "Daddy."

But the little girl putting her homework paper on the teacher's desk had no idea he was her father. Maybe she didn't even know she had been adopted, given up without her father's knowledge or consent. All she knew of him was that while Mrs. Sandy was out having a baby, he was her substitute for the three weeks left of the school year. She didn't even know his name.

Adrian took just a moment to compose himself, gritting his teeth and taking a deep breath, before he had to go in there and treat her like any other child.

"First day jitters?" Mrs. Webb, the kindergarten teacher next door, was just reaching out to shut her door when she saw him. She smiled and shoved an unruly mop of blond curls off her forehead. "You'll do fine," she assured him. "I'll be right here if you need me. But Carly Simmons can help you out with classroom routine. She's a great kid."

"Carly." He could barely get the name out, but managed a smile "I'll remember. Thanks."

She nodded and closed her door, calling to an Edward to stop bouncing a ball.

When Adrian closed his own classroom door, he turned to find Carly standing there waiting for him. "Can you tie this for me?" she asked, pulling at the ribbon that still dangled from her ponytail. It had been tied over an elastic band that still held the ponytail in place.

Adrian it was a wonderful gift she was giving him, the right to tie a bow in her hair. Adrian took the ribbon, the backs of his fingers touching her hair. She tilted her head to give him better access and he tried to keep his hands from shaking as he performed this small service for her.

"Thank you," she said, reaching up to touch the slightly crooked bow before skipping to her seat.

"Thank you," he almost said before changing it quickly to, "You're welcome."

Adrian took up a piece of chalk, called the class to order and turned to write his name on the board. "This is my name," he told the class, "Mr. Wright.

The rest of the class simply nodded and sat waiting for him to continue, but he heard an audible gasp from Carly. Her eyes widened and her hand shot up.

"Yes?"

"Is that really who you are?" she asked. "Are you really Mr. Wright?"

Puzzled by her attitude, Adrian laughed and assured her that he was really was Mr. Wright. Then he passed out a math worksheet Mrs. Sandy had left for him and started the day.

For Adrian, the day spent with his daughter was a joy almost too painful to accept. He knew he gave her more attention than he gave anybody else. But he couldn't help it. He watched her add teeth marks to her pencil as she worked. He watched her play kick ball at recess. He watched her line up and go down to the cafeteria clutching a pink Barbie lunch box.

At lunchtime, he looked at her school records. It was just as the detective who had found her told him. Mother's name: Kathryn. Father: Brent, deceased.

By two-thirty, he had had about as much joy as he could hold for one day. His daughter seemed healthy, happy, and well-adjusted. She was outgoing and friendly, and very intelligent. He still wanted to know about her home life. What kind of mother was Kathryn Simmons? Loving? Gentle? Stern? Strict?

And somehow, he wanted to be a part of Carly's life. Unlike the woman who had given birth to her, there was no way he could just walk away from her.

As he led the class out to the buses, he allowed himself to pat her on the head, small compensation for all the good night kisses and bedtime stories he had been denied. She looked up at him. "My mom is supposed to pick me up. I hope she comes."

An alarm went off in Adrian's heart. Was her mother unreliable? Irresponsible? "Does she usually pick you up?" he asked.

Carly nodded, anxiously scanning the cars lined up in front of the school next to a row of yellow buses. "There she is! She came!" A wide smile of relief played over her face as she pointed to a sporty red car just rolling to a halt at the end of the line.

Adrian's brows crunched together at the sight of that car. He had envisioned a Toyota mini van or a Ford Escort. What was the mother of his child doing jaunting around in a flashy sports car? A flashy red sports car.

"Come on! You've got to meet her!" Carly was tugging at his hand, urging him toward the car. And her mother.

He definitely wanted to meet this woman.

"Just a minute, Carly. I have bus duty." He squeezed her hand holding her there, savoring the tang of joy that surged through his heart as her trusting fingers clasped his.

One boy jostled another getting on the bus and Adrian pulled him aside, holding his shoulder, making him wait until last. The boy fidgeted, Carly kept jumping up and down, but Adrian was the most impatient of all. At last the bus was loaded, the boy leapt up the steps, and Adrian let Carly tow him along toward that red car.

The door swung open even before Carly reached it, letting out a blast of rock music along with a stream of cold air. She tossed her book bag and lunch box behind the seat and bounced in. "Mom! I found him! I found Mr. Right. Now you can get married!"

Adrian's brows arched. Looking for Mr. Right, huh? So she was man hunting. Adrian bent down to get his first look at Kathryn Simmons. By this time he was expecting a barracuda with long red nails impatiently tapping the steering wheel.

She was not what he expected. She was worse. A dirty white gym shoe with a toe poking out sat on the brake. The leg was shapely enough to give Adrian's loins a lurch, except that there was some unidentifiable smear of sludge on the calf and a half-healed scrape on the knee. A slash of rusty brown cut across both thighs and a smudge of black grease went from thigh to a pair of cut off jeans that looked like they had been run over by a herd of cattle. There was a spate of bare midriff topped by an unwieldy pair of what Adrian could only think of as boobs, large and round and barely held in check by a once white shirt tied across the ribs. A strand of shoulder length blond hair streaked by sun and grime fell from a lopsided ponytail only tentatively held in place by a yellow elastic band. Her face, with its pug nose, softly rounded pink mouth, and wide blue eyes would have been more attractive without dirty brown and black streaks.

Adrian gritted his teeth and managed to be polite. "Hello, Mrs. Simmons. I'm Adrian Wright, Mrs. Sandy's substitute for the rest of the year."

Kathryn Simmons jabbed at the radio, cutting off the din, curling her fingers into fists and crossing her arms to hide broken nails lined with black. At that maneuver, her boobs threatened to escape and she shifted, risking a quick tug to her shirt before hiding her hands again.

"See, Mom? Mr. Right! I found him!" Carly was on her knees on the seat.

"Oh! Oh no, Honey! I didn't mean..." Mrs. Simmons's blush didn't stop at her face. It traveled down her throat right down to the curve of those awesome boobs. She looked at Adrian, horrified. "I'm sorry. She doesn't understand. I..." She swallowed hard and nodded her head. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Wright." She put the car into gear and Adrian took the hint to move back.

Adrian watched the car fade into the traffic. Well, not fade. Not that car. A helpless trepidation stole over him and he wondered about the wisdom of leaving his daughter in the care of Mrs. Kathryn Simmons.

You can purchase Mr. Right's Baby at:
Smashwords
Amazon

Visit Michele's Website for information and excerpts from all her books:
www.michelestegman.com.

Jennette Marie Powell

Looking for Mr. Goodwrench

I was supposed to go out with someone else that night. I'd met him a week earlier, through my friend Sue, and exchanged numbers. But talking with him a couple times was enough to convince me we'd both be wasting our time and money. The deepest conversation I could expect was what we liked to watch on TV (me: not much), and he'd said some things that made it obvious he was really only after one thing. So I called and cancelled.

It was the night before Labor Day, and our city had a great fireworks display. I went with Sue, and afterward, we stopped at a bar called Donnie's Place for a couple beers. Sue was a regular there, and immediately saw someone she knew. We sat down with the guy (ironically, named Donnie) and his friend, but before I knew it, Sue was halfway across the room talking to someone else she knew.

Had this happened a few months earlier, I would have sat there like a blubbering idiot, then made some excuse to join Sue. But I was a Dale Carnegie graduate (you know, the "How to Win Friends and Influence People" guy), and I decided to put what I'd learned to use. "So, what do you guys do for a living?"

I don't remember what the other guy said, but Donnie was a mechanic at a nearby Pontiac dealership.

My interest was immediately piqued, but not by his football-player build or boyish face. "I have a Sunbird with a bad oil leak," I said. "Do you work out of your home?" At the time, I was just out of college, an entry-level graphic designer who could pay my bills but not much else, especially dealership rates for car repairs.

He did, and seemed like a nice guy, so I got his number. I didn't call until a month later, when I'd saved up some money, and for a second, he didn't remember me. But then he did, and I made arrangements to bring the car over.

Another girl friend followed me to his house, and we met him in his front yard with his mom, and his Rottweiler, Warrior. I was immediately impressed—Warrior was the first big dog I'd ever met that didn't jump on me—something I tend to avoid, as being five-foot-zero, they're almost as big as me.

We chatted about the car, and noting jumped out at me that he might be a con man or a creep, and he knew what he was doing, so I left the car. Having his mom there—one of the sweetest, kindest people I've ever met—probably helped too. As we drove away, my friend noted, "You know, Jennette, he's kinda cute."

I was surprised. Before then, my "type" had been nerdy computer guys and engineers, or sometimes other graphic designers. But she was right.

He called the next day to let me know what was wrong with the car and how much the repairs would cost. He explained everything and never acted like I was clueless about cars (which I would have quickly picked up on, because I'm not clueless about cars, thanks to my brother). We talked about other things, and next thing I knew, I'd been on the phone for an hour—and I knew I wanted to see him again.

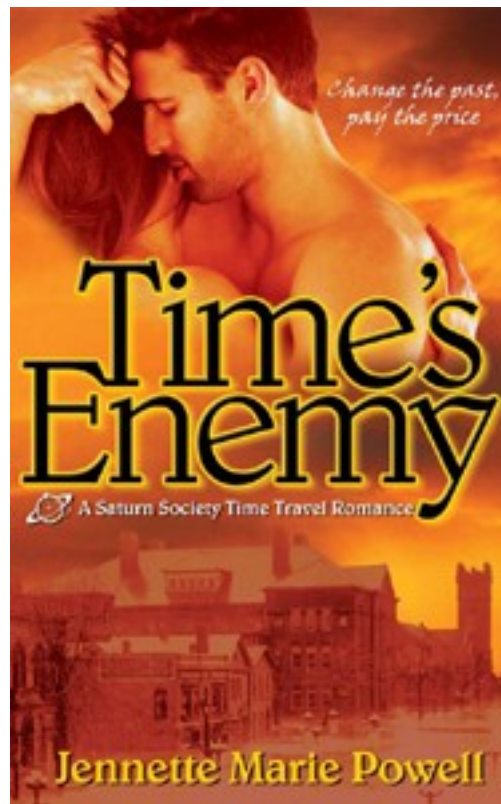
Friday, I picked up the car and paid him \$400 for replacing the head gasket and serpentine belt. The following weekend was Sweetest Day, and I found flowers on my doorstep. I'd been

dating another guy who was nice, but the chemistry just wasn't there. It was with Donnie, and I was thrilled to find that he'd sent the flowers.

A year and a half later, I had an engagement ring that cost much more than my car repairs. Twenty years later, I'd say I got my money's worth—and then some.

About Jennette

Jennette Marie Powell is the author of *Time's Enemy*, a time-travel romance in which an ordinary guy only wants to make things right, but becomes the target of a secret society of time travelers. A lifelong resident of the Dayton, Ohio area, she likes to dig beneath the surface and find the extraordinary beneath the mundane, whether in people, places, or historical events. While she has no desire to change the past, she enjoys learning about local history, particularly the early 20th century. Her preferred places to time travel are from her computer or Dayton's Carillon Historical Park. By day, she wrangles data and websites in between excursions to search for the aliens and spacecraft that legends say are stashed away on the military base where she works.



About *Time's Enemy*

One unwanted gift. One great wrong. One chance to make things right...

Tony Solomon never wanted to be a time traveler. But when a freak accident gifts him with the ability to travel in time, he becomes an unwilling initiate in a secret society of time travelers. Determined to prevent his daughter's murder, he violates the Society's highest law and becomes

a fugitive. When the Society refuses to tell Tony how to time-travel within his own life, he seeks help from Charlotte, the woman whose life he saved during a prior trip to the past.

When Tony arrives in 1933 looking for answers, Charlotte is both thrilled and terrified to see her childhood hero. Loyal to the Society, she is honor-bound to bring to justice those who manipulate time for their own gain. In giving him sanctuary, she faces a terrible choice—condemn the man she loves and to whom she owes her life, or deny her deepest convictions by helping him escape and risk sharing his sentence.

“I could not put it down. The characters were clear and well-drawn. The popping in and out of eras and changes in the surroundings in Dayton, Ohio, a place I have lived, failed to confuse me. That says a lot for the skill of the author.”

- Maggie, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance and More

Excerpt From Time's Enemy

Tony looked her in the eyes as his breathing slowed to normal, although his expression remained wary. “I was looking forward to going out, but I’m afraid I’m not feeling very well... maybe I’d better stay in.”

The lighter-than-air feeling in Charlotte’s stomach snapped, dropping her back to earth. He’d wanted to take her to the dance. Enough he hadn’t tried to ask his alarming questions yet that evening, as he’d tried every night so far. But now... “What’s wrong?”

He rubbed his stomach. “Nothing major, just a little heartburn.”

He was lying. Why? Did he know what Theodore wanted?

Tony moved to the sofa. “Sorry I ruined your plans.”

She shot a glance at the curtained window and sighed. “I suppose it’s just as well.”

He looked up, questioning. “It would look strange for me to show up with a man who’s supposed to be just my boarder,” she said. “Betty Clark from down the street goes every week with her sweetheart, she’d tell her mother and next thing you know... And next week, others would wonder what happened to you, why you’re not there after... you know.” After the Pull took him back to his time. She didn’t want to think about it.

He stood, his eyes never leaving her, and held out a hand. “Miss Henderson, would you care to dance?”

A thousand tiny wings beat against Charlotte’s heart, blowing away all thoughts of her obligation. It was just a dance. What could be the harm? The fluttering slowed, and she forced calm into her voice. “I’d love to.”

She slid her hand into his, and he led her to the center of the room. His other hand was warm on her back between her shoulder blades, and his sureness pushed away the last of her anxiety. She let him lead her in an odd, freestyle step that made up in feeling what it lacked in style. This moment could last forever. It’d never been that way with Elmer. Not even with Louie, the first and only man she’d let— No use thinking such things. She and Tony had no future. But they had tonight.

They swirled in time to the music, the feel of his hand in hers and on her shoulder sent an intoxicating warmth through her. “Did I tell you you look incredible?”

Her cheeks heated. “I believe you did. But I don’t mind hearing it again.” Perhaps the dress showed more than was proper. She didn’t care. She turned her face back to his and reveled in the

feeling that for this moment, there was only the two of them and the music. Nothing else existed. Her world began and ended in Tony's arms.

He pulled her close, enough to catch the dance-hall inspectors' notice had they gone to Triangle Park. She leaned into his shoulder and caught a whiff of the restaurant beneath a pleasant blend of his clean shirt and mildly musky man-scent. Too soon the song was over.

Charlotte tipped her head. "That was delightful." She didn't want to let him go, didn't want the emptiness, the sense of something lacking when they'd part. But she couldn't stand in the middle of the room holding his hand all night. She stepped back but Tony didn't release her. Instead, he tightened his hold and slid his other arm around her back, then drew her closer until their bodies touched. She let go of his hand, unable to do anything but look into his eyes.

"I'm sorry we didn't go to the dance," he said.

She looked down, conscious of the press of her breasts against his chest, then met his gaze again. "I'm not."

His eyes closed halfway and he lowered his head until his lips touched hers. A thrill coursed through her body as she angled her neck to meet his kiss.

His lips were soft, yet firm, and her body tingled with awareness everywhere they touched. He started to pull away, but she slid her arms around his back. He relaxed against her and did the same, his mouth still molded to hers, moving with hers. No future. Just this moment.

Finally he pulled back and dropped his arms. "God, I'm sorry. I had no business doing that."

Her fingers trailed down his arm as she stepped away. "I didn't try to stop you."

They moved to the sofa and sat with a wide gap between them. They stared at the radio, the way Tony said people in his time sat and watched the wondrous thing he called television.

Finally he spoke. "Look, Charlotte... maybe I should go to a hotel. I don't want to, but... I'm not be the man for you. Not when I have a week at the most to be here."

She studied her hands in her lap. Maybe he was right, but there was so much more at stake. His life, maybe his soul. She had to bring him to the Society. If she failed to keep her end of the bargain, Theodore would find Tony and make him a mindless shell of a man like Fred Cheltenham.

She'd watched Tony for four days. Tried to convince him his best chance to learn what he wanted to know lay in the Society House. He hadn't fallen for it.

He hadn't done anything wrong so far, but his questions warned her he would. She had to stop him.

Warmth crawled through her insides. He was so much more than the man who saved her life. "Maybe you're right," she said. He shifted, started to rise, but she touched his arm, stopping him. "But it's late. Stay here tonight. Go tomorrow if you must."

As soon as she got off work, they'd leave for the Society House. She'd insist on it. Trick him if she had to. He found her intriguing, enough to make him temporarily forget his mission. If all else failed, she'd use her "woman's wiles," as Theodore called it. Whatever it takes.

Time's Enemy is available in print and as an e-book in all major formats from the following retailers:

Amazon
Barnes & Noble
Smashwords

For more information visit Jennette's website: www.jenpowell.com.

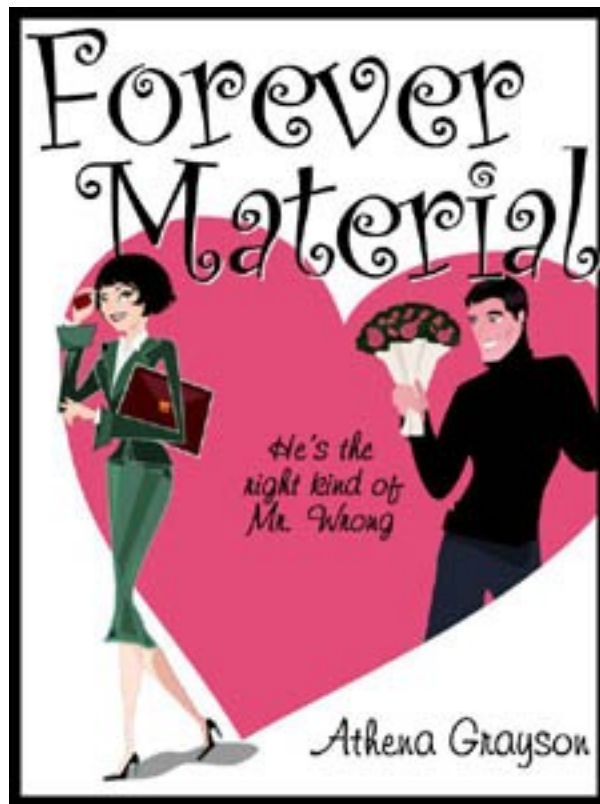
Athena Grayson

The Game of Love

“He Rolled a Lucky Dice.”

The sentiment might seem a little woo-woo, but even the practical Mister half agrees with the sentiment. Athena and The Mister met at the university SF/Fantasy/Role-Playing society. They spent over a year aiming for each other and missing, until one cold night over spring break Mr. Athena walked her home from gaming night and she thanked him by exploding hot cocoa all over him. Unable to resist such an overture (what man wouldn't succumb to exploding cocoa?), he invited her back to his house (or rather, he didn't put up much of a fight when she invited herself back), and there she stayed. Only later did he reveal that while she was exploding the chocolate, he let one of his lucky dice determine whether or not he would take the chance to ask her back to his place.

That was twenty years ago this March. Four and a half years after the Night of Exploding Chocolate, they made it official (and Athena made her wedding gown and the bridesmaid's dresses!) and it's been one big Dungeon Crawl ever since. “Fortunately,” says Athena, “we both kept our lucky dice and we've rolled our share of critical successes.”



About Forever Material

Athena writes romantic comedies across subgenres and believes that life imitates art. People who never stop looking for something to laugh about are rarely disappointed and have a better chance of stumbling into joy. *Forever* is her first full-length novel.

After making a fool out of herself too many times over bad boys with no responsibility and nothing but heartbreak on their minds, Barbara Whitehall developed a philosophy to help women like herself get over the bad boys and find good men. And it works. Her DateSmart workshops have become so popular that she's leased a storefront and is now giving them on a weekly basis. Hundreds of women have been helped through DateSmart, and while she hasn't found her Forever Material yet, she's confident that she'll recognize him when she sees him.

Jake Mancini's life was going just fine until his good-looking new neighbor walked into his life on killer legs. But those legs are nothing next to her lethal tongue. Her "DateSmart" workshops have cheated him out of several mutually enjoyable Saturday nights with attractive women.

But Barbara's always had a soft spot for bad boys, even though she knows they're bad for her. If she lets Jake get too close, she'll end up losing her heart to one more bad boy who'll toss it in the trash when he's done.

Excerpt from *Forever Material*

Jake Mancini was a swearing man. He'd have been swearing right now if it weren't for the wrench clamped in his teeth. Even a strong swear word might push him off his too-thin perch. A few bolted together two-by-twelve roof trusses supported him and the sea of acoustical tiles making up the dropped ceiling beneath him.

He ought to be just above the wall between his studio and the business next door. If I measured right. He edged forward. At one time, the space that would become his martial arts studio and the space that made up DateSmart had been one big store, especially its ceiling. Now, in order to fix one aluminum strip that held one row of acoustical tiles crookedly, he had to make the harrowing journey to No Man's Land.

The sultry voice of his nemesis—DateSmart's founder and head man-hater—drifted up from below. "The first thing you ladies will learn in this seminar is that smart women make smart choices, and that means kicking that loser to the curb."

He shook his head, the wrench in his teeth keeping him from cracking a smile. Barbara Whitehall claimed her seminars taught women how to date. That was a joke. He'd bet a six-pack that she hadn't had a date herself in at least ten years.

Which was a damn shame when you thought about it. The woman was a looker, no doubt about that—black hair and green cat's eyes and a toned, sleek body. The makings of a pin-up if he ever saw one. Until she opened her mouth.

In spite of her looks, the woman was one hundred percent shrew. She'd make somebody a doozy of an ex-wife someday, if she wasn't an ex-missus already.

He sucked in air around the wrench in his teeth, trying to avoid the inevitable drool that happened anytime you were working on something that involved gripping by mouth. The end of the wall was within reach, if he could just inch a little further.

He looked down to determine where to put his hands next and through some dumb luck, happened to see through to the floor below. Nausea oozed over him, causing sweat to pop out in rivulets that tickled in places he dare not try and scratch.

He froze. Barbara's flinty voice filtered up to him and for once, he was grateful for its biting harshness. He wasn't a fan of heights, but he'd rather be up here than down there.

"There are two ways to approach the finding of a compatible mate—the haphazard way and the DateSmart way. One of these could take you through a lifetime of losers before you find a suitable match. The other will weed out the losers before mistakes can be made.

"I'm going to teach you ladies how to make smart relationship decisions that will result in smart relationships. Now the first thing I want you to do is this."

Her voice stopped. He picked up the faint squeak of an erasable marker writing on a whiteboard. Just like her to have a whiteboard. Never trust anyone whose desk was clean and who actually used a whiteboard for something besides semi-pornographic doodles and silly quotes. One of the hard lessons his former life had taught him.

The shakes subsided from his muscles and he continued to edge forward, this time careful not to look straight down. Almost there. Soon he could look forward to not one flimsy set of two-by-tens under him, but two—and a rickety T-joint if he was really lucky.

In the meantime, nothing else up here entertained enough for him to stop listening to Barbara's lessons on dating.

"The first thing I want you to do is forget about love. Love is a myth, an excuse, and has nothing whatsoever to do with making smart relationship decisions."

Jake blinked. Damn, but the woman was vicious. Cold was the woman who didn't believe in love, man. Thankfully, a few murmurs of protest came from the Stepford manhaters in training down there.

Barbara's voice rose over the others. "I'm not saying people don't fall in love. But if you use love to direct your relationship decisions, you have a much greater chance of making a decision you'll come to regret. Do any of you want to date a loser?"

Some scattered and meek "no's" filtered up.

"I didn't think so." Her voice took on a satisfied edge. "For whatever reason, we women haven't yet evolved out of our ability to fall in love with losers. Making good relationship decisions involves logic, lucidity, and most importantly, leaving love out of it."

"But how can you control who you fall in love with?"

Saints be praised, a protester, Jake thought wryly. At last, he came to the cross-beam and settled himself on it gingerly.

The poor girl was shot down just after takeoff. "You may not be able to control who you're in love with, but you'd better be able to control who you'll be with. Which is where the DateSmart philosophy comes in."

Oh, enlighten me, Dating Diva. He didn't have to wait long. Barbara plowed on. "There are two kinds of men in this world, ladies. There's Forever Material—which we're all looking for—and there's Fling Material. What I'm here to teach you is that you will never make the one into the other, no matter how hard you try. There are men made in this world that can never give you what you want in a good, solid relationship. Don't waste your time trying to make them into something they're not."

He snorted around the wrench. She sounded like a nature show host, classifying apes. The thought that she might be talking about him entered his mind and he scoffed.

Sure, he hadn't dated the same woman for more than a few months in years, but that didn't mean he wasn't capable of it. He just wasn't some dweeb to follow around a woman and say, "Yes, Dumpling, no, Dumpling, I'll-do-whatever-you-want, Dumpling." He silently dared her to try and fit him into her little pigeonholes. She had no idea what she was talking about.

“Who here has ever dated a man in a leather jacket?”

Jake thought of his own beat-up buddy hanging downstairs. There was a rip in the sleeve that needed fixing.

“Did he ride a motorcycle?”

Unfair, he thought. There were dentists and accountants who rode those silly little Japanese things on weekends. He had a bona fide Hawg—a Fat Boy parked out back, all gleaming chrome and supple leather, babied like an only child. Besides, he didn’t ride the bike all the time. It slumbered safely through the winter in his garage. He drove the Corvette instead.

“Or drive a Corvette?”

Wait just a damn minute, here! This was out and out libelous behavior. She was casting aspersions on his character as part of her seminar!

“Aren’t they wonderful?”

What?!

“Isn’t that leather so masculine? Don’t you just love the way he moves? Like he owns the world? Isn’t he so sexy your knees shake?”

Murmurs of assent—some very enthusiastic—drifted up. He wondered if he should put on the jacket and hang around outside with the bike after the seminar to see which of the participants really meant it.

“What about the tough guy? The one who would start a fight for you? Whose hands are so...powerful.” Did he imagine it, or did her voice drop a husky octave?

Not Barbara the Ice Queen.

But who else had that voice? The one that continued in the same husky timbre, “Those powerful hands that turn gentle on your skin?”

He glanced down at his own hands. They were large and callused in places, but he was quite capable of a gentle touch on a woman’s body. He’d been told as much, if his former lovers were telling the truth. He wondered if Barbara was overly-sensitive. Would he be gentle enough for her picky tastes?

He blinked and wished he could shake his head to get that thought right out of his head. He had no business thinking of Barbara Whitehall that way, especially when she made it so clear at their first meeting that any flirtatious behavior on his part would be considered criminal behavior on hers.

“Don’t smile at me,” she’d said, right after he introduced himself, intrigued by the good-looking neighbor. “My goal in life is to help women avoid heartbreakers like you, Mr. Mancini.”

He’d been a little stunned—scratch that, a lot stunned—that she’d been so hostile. “Well,” he’d said, “maybe you’d better call me Jake since you already know me so well.”

Dreamy feminine sighs reached his ears. “Yeah,” one woman spoke up. “The bad boy who feels so good.” A round of giggles followed that suggestive comment.

Was it getting warmer up here? Maybe she had the heat in her place turned on and it was finally rising from the acoustical tiles. He set the wrench down absently, straining to hear more.

“Exactly,” Barbara purred. He’d be damned if she’d even given the time of day to anyone not in pinstripes. Still, he leaned a little closer to the beam and the conversation below. His dad always said women were a mystery, and a man needed all the help he could get in dealing with them.

“The brooding, bedroom eyes, that shy smile that’s almost a sneer.”

He blinked his own eyes. Were they bedroom eyes? Did he brood enough? You’ve been doing your share lately, his practical voice supplied.

“We’re addicted to them. We crave them. We need them like an addict needs a hit.” Impossibly, her voice dropped even lower, summoning a visual with it that he didn’t want. He most certainly did not want to imagine the Barbara that was supposed to go with that voice. The Barbara whose black hair feathered wildly around her face instead of the sleek, sharp pageboy. The Barbara whose cat eyes weren’t cold with hostility, but heated with passion, gazing heavily-lidded into his—

Stop right there, pal. He would not—absolutely would not—have sexual fantasies about Barbara Whitehall! He refused to have fantasies of any sort for that matter. Except maybe of waving goodbye as she packed up her stuff and left him in peace. Or at least moved out of her offices so he could expand his studio.

“We can’t help ourselves around him, can we, ladies?”

A chorus of “No, ma’am’s” and one, “Why would we want to?”

“Good question,” Barbara said. “Why would we want to say no to a man that turns us on, fulfills our fantasies, and makes us hot all over.”

“I could make you hot all over, darlin’,” he murmured, before he could stop himself. Good lord, did he say that out loud? He needed a sound beating for even thinking it! Sweat beaded on his bare skull, running in salty rivulets into his eyebrows. How could he be hot?

He sucked in a deep breath to clear his head of weird ideas and jammed the wrench on the bolt. Shoulda brought my socket wrench up here instead of the crescent, he thought. Hell, he shouldn’t even be up here. He wouldn’t if the landlord’s nephew—the building’s so-called Facilities Manager—actually did his job. Best to get this over and done with before his brain fried.

The bolt refused to budge under his half-assed effort. He had no leverage to throw his weight into it, and his wrists weren’t going to move it any time soon, so he carefully maneuvered himself to his knees. The bumpy wood of the support joist dug into him through his jeans and he hoped that they or his balance wouldn’t give out on him before he got this stupid bolt undone.

“He’s like chocolate—you want to pour him all over you and lick him off.”

Heat shot through him. He had no trouble imagining Barbara’s expression as she said that. Her lush lips turned up in a wicked smile, and her fey eyes twinkling. Against all reason, it didn’t matter squat that she’d sooner swallow a toad than turn that coy smile on him. Somewhere down deep, he knew without a doubt that he’d never again eat a hot fudge sundae without a semi.

Furious at the unscheduled vacation his common sense took, he jammed the heel of his hand on the wrench. The shock shot up to his shoulder, heralding a clear dart of pain in the very near future.

“We can’t get enough of him, can we, ladies?” There was amusement in her tone, and a note of something else—something that spoke of knowing and promise, and reached right into his solar plexus and grabbed a fistful of his gut. Sweat poured off his forehead, running into his eyes and he buried his head into his shoulder for an instant to wipe it away.

The sudden motion disoriented him and he clutched the wrench with a death grip until he felt sure enough to move again.

“We’ve just gotta have him, don’t we?” He suddenly wished for some nice, loud rock and roll to drown out the sound of Barbara’s seductive voice. The sudden slamming of his heart certainly wasn’t doing it.

He reached for the wrench.

“And we just can’t say no.”

He missed.

You can find Forever Material at Smashwords and Amazon or check her blog for more information at athenagraysen.com/blog/.

Brenda Hiatt

Halloween Hooker

And yes, the following story is absolutely true!

It was October 31st, 1979. I was in my first year of grad school and I'd been invited to a last-minute Halloween party at the house of a friend of my roommate's. (Following that?) The hostess and my roommate were both vampire fanatics (yes, even back then, vampires were big! Frank Langella's "Dracula" had recently come out) so of course they both dressed as vampires for the occasion. I wasn't, so I wore what I confess had become my usual Halloween costume since starting college (refined over the years)—a hooker. Hey, it's any easy costume: short skirt, lots of tacky jewelry and makeup, and plenty of attitude.

Because it was last minute, not many guests showed up, so the hostess began calling friends. One of the latecomers was this tall, skinny guy, not in costume, who when he met me, immediately asked, "So, what do you charge for your services?"

Well, I wasn't born yesterday, even then. (Plus, as I said, I'd used this costume before, so had a supply of comebacks.) I countered with my own question: "How much do you have?"

He checked his wallet and was startled to discover he had more money than he could remember having at once in his whole collegiate career. In his surprise, he blurted out the truth. "I have thirty dollars!"

Without missing a beat, I informed him that I charged thirty-five. He spent the rest of the party trying (unsuccessfully) to get someone to lend him five bucks. Between those efforts, we talked and I ended up driving him back to his place. No goodnight kiss, but we became friends after that, started dating the following summer, and just over a year after our Halloween introduction, he proposed. We've now been married for 30 years and that's still one of his favorite stories—and he has a LOT of stories! So do I, of course, but I put most of mine into books. Check out SCANDALOUS VIRTUE, which also involves a first meeting in costume!



Excerpt from *Scandalous Virtue*

Nessa paused, a mere step inside the room, surveying with bewildered delight this, her first masquerade. Gaily costumed revelers moved and shimmered in the candlelight of the chandeliers, dancing to the strains of a country tune or gathering in small groups to converse. Multihued dominoes vied with replicas of every historic personage imaginable.

Glancing down at her own low-cut scarlet gown with black trim, Nessa smiled to think she had feared her costume too flamboyant. What pains she had taken to slip away from her sister and sharp-eyed abigail yesterday in order to purchase this cyprian's costume! Prudence would doubtless have a spasm if she found it hidden in the back of Nessa's wardrobe, but it was nothing compared to the plumage she saw here displayed.

"Eh there, me beauty! Might ye care to dance?" inquired a poor imitation of Henry the Eighth at her elbow.

Abruptly, she remembered her sister's objections when Nessa had first mentioned this masquerade to her, about cits and other vulgar sorts attending. In her excitement and determination to attend she'd shrugged it off, but now the evidence was before her.

"Ah, not just yet, thank you," she replied nervously, taking a step away from the man, who reeked of spirits. Somehow, she hadn't really thought about what she'd do at the masquerade. She'd focused all her energies on simply getting here.

The man stepped closer. "'Ere now, you're not refusing to dance with yer monarch, are ye?" he prodded with a leer. "Royal privilege and all that."

Nessa swallowed. "No, it's not that. It's only—"

“She has a prior obligation, to confess her sins,” interrupted a tall, brown-robed monk. “Even Your Majesty must admit to the superior claims of the Church in such matters.” The monk’s accent was cultured, reassuring Nessa that this, at least, was a man of her own class.

The drunkard appeared disposed to argue, but a tilt of the monk’s head and an ominous glitter of brilliant blue eyes from behind his mask dissuaded him. Muttering something about more wine, King Henry moved away.

“Thank you, sir,” said Nessa, relieved. “He really was becoming most persistent.”

“One can hardly blame him.” The monk looked her over with a most unclerical gleam in his eye. “What do you here alone? Or is your protector busy procuring you a glass of iced champagne?”

“My—?” Nessa glanced down at her costume again and flushed. Perhaps it was a trifle too realistic. “No, I assure you I am here alone—but I do not intend to stay long. No more than an hour.”

The monk smiled, and Nessa realized how very handsome he was, even with a mask obscuring much of his face. “Then pray, allow me to act as your escort for the brief time you mean to grace this gathering with your presence.”

Nessa frowned, wondering if perhaps she had tumbled from the frying pan into the fire. “I, ah—”

“Surely you cannot feel less than safe with a man of the cloth?” he prompted. “Besides, our costumes complement each other so well.”

That forced a chuckle from Nessa, making her instantly more comfortable. Surely a man with a sense of humor could not be too evil. Though why she should think that, she did not know. Neither her father nor her husband had ever shown the slightest hint of whimsy, and both had been regarded by the world as the most upright and estimable of men.

“Very well, Friar, I place myself under the protection of the Church for the present.”

“In my present guise, I suppose I dare not request a kiss in return for such gallantry. But allow me to tell you your eyes are most haunting, even through that remarkable mask.”

“You flatter me, sir.” More than ever, Nessa suspected her escort’s costume was decidedly at odds with the man underneath. He might be the greatest rake in all London, for aught she knew. She cast about for some way to discover his name—not that it was likely to mean anything to her, as unfamiliar as she was with London Society.

Apparently she was not alone in her curiosity. “Since you do not intend to remain for the unmasking at midnight, might I know the name of the lady I have taken under my protection?”

Though he was but mimicking her earlier words, his phrasing still caused Nessa a thrill of alarm. Surely he did not truly believe her to be as she dressed tonight, a woman of easy virtue? Considering what her life had been until now, the idea was both outrageous and highly amusing. More than ever, she knew she must guard her identity at all costs.

“You may call me Monique,” she informed him. It was a name she’d always liked, and sufficiently French to fit her present role.

His well-shaped lips curved into a smile. For a fleeting moment, she wondered what it would be like to kiss those lips—then cut off such thoughts, shocked at herself. Clearly, she was taking her masquerade role far too seriously!

“Might I request this dance, Monique?” A waltz was just beginning.

“First might I know your name, Friar?” she asked boldly.

“In return for the dance, you may call me Brother Eligius,” he said loftily, taking her hand to lead her to the floor.

Nessa hung back. “One might ask what it is you are worthy of, Brother Eligius.”

“Ah, a lady who knows her Latin! Worthy of this dance, of course—and anything else you might see fit to bestow upon me,” he added with a lascivious wink. She might have been alarmed were it not clear he was teasing—and if his words didn’t send her thoughts down most improper channels.

She stood her ground. “I see. Perhaps I shall bestow the next dance upon you, then. This one is nearly over.” That was not quite true, but she could not bring herself to admit that she had never learned to waltz. Given her parents’, and then her late husband’s, views on the dance, she had never even dared to ask.

To her relief, the monk did not press the issue, but stood trading quips with her about both of their pseudonyms until the orchestra struck up a country dance. The dance was lively, allowing little opportunity for conversation, and by its conclusion Nessa’s hour was nearly up.

The two of them had drawn many curious stares, and as they left the dance floor a lanky man dressed as a harlequin approached them.

“What a sight this is!” he exclaimed. “Have you persuaded your partner to join you in a life of virtue, J— er, Friar?” A quick motion by the monk had prevented him from uttering the monk’s name, to Nessa’s frustration.

“Indeed, for her I believe it won’t be so much of a stretch, despite appearances,” he replied, making her wonder how on earth he had guessed that. “Am I not right, milady Monique?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” she replied, stung that her attempt to throw off propriety had been such a failure. With sudden recklessness, she swooped up onto her tiptoes to plant a swift kiss square on the monk’s mouth. Then, more shocked at her own boldness than he could possibly be, she turned quickly away.

“I really must be going, now,” she said breathlessly, not meeting his eye. “I wish you success in your conversions, Brother Eligius.” Before he could respond or even react, Nessa fled the scene of the most daring thing she’d ever done in her whole sheltered life.

Find links to all Brenda’s books at her website: brendahiatt.com.

Gwen Williams

A Good Friend

I was eighteen year old, and running around the IU campus with my dear friend. At one point we were in the Union, eating some of the world-famous sugar cookies from the Sugar & Spice. My friend suddenly announced that she was going to introduce me to her brother, who was just getting off work at one of the administrative offices on the IU campus. And that's where I met my future husband, in the stone archway of the Memorial Hall. We've been together for thirty years!



About Fantasy Follies

Rhiannon is a librarian with a secret. Underneath her prim and proper shell, she's alive with passionate fantasies ranging from being pleased by a well-oiled servant to being ordered into erotic obedience by a hot cop.

When Rhiannon agrees to go on a date with Sam, a corporate lawyer type, she dreads the evening. She's expecting to be bored out of her mind, but as they frequent art galleries and share laughs, Sam surprises her by revealing how much he, too, shares in her spirit of imagination and fun.

As they become closer, Sam indulges her fantasies by creating provocative sexual scenarios in downtown Cincinnati, using props and their own wild imaginations. For the first time, Rhiannon begins to feel how satisfying living in the real world can be.

When Rhiannon is offered a job in Seattle, how will she ever choose between the opportunity of her dreams and the blissful life that once seemed possible only in her fantasies?

Excerpt from Fantasy Follies

"I have a kind of a secret," she said, abashed.

"What is it?" he asked, stroking her hair as she leaned her head against his chest.

She spoke slowly, hesitantly. "I live in a kind of dream world."

"Don't we all?"

"Um, mine is kind of different." She laughed wryly. "I guess I got into the habit of doing this, as a way of coping with the loneliness, but I have these fantasy dazes."

"Fantasy whats?" he asked.

She laughed through her tears. "I like to pretend—I like to pretend I've got this awesome life—and I create these vivid fantasies where I have these amazing sexual encounters with random men."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Random men?"

"It never turns into real sex," she assured him hastily. "It's just, something I like to do."

He nodded with understanding. "I get it. You've got an awesome imagination."

"Oh, I suppose so," she said airily, then laughed.

"It's how you coped," he said soothingly. "I get it."

"Thank you," she said, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "I'm so glad you understand. I'm so glad you didn't freak out."

"Of course I wouldn't freak out." He held her closer. "But now we've met, do you think you might be cutting down on...well, random imaginary sex with random imaginary men?"

"I think I already have," she mused, snuggling against his chest. "After I met you, the next time I had a fantasy daze moment, it was with you."

He reared his head back in surprise, and then a look of pleasure crossed his face. "Really now?"

She nodded, smiling. "Yes, really."

"How was I?"

She laughed. "You were awesome!"

"Well," he said, his voice suddenly husky, "I'd like to see how I perform in real life, wouldn't you?"

She smiled. "I would love that above all else."

"So," he said, reaching inside her blouse and tracing his finger along the curve of her left breast, "are you okay now with things going to the next level?"

"Yes," she said with a mock gravity that belied the tears welling up in her throat, "please continue."

"Yes, ma'am."

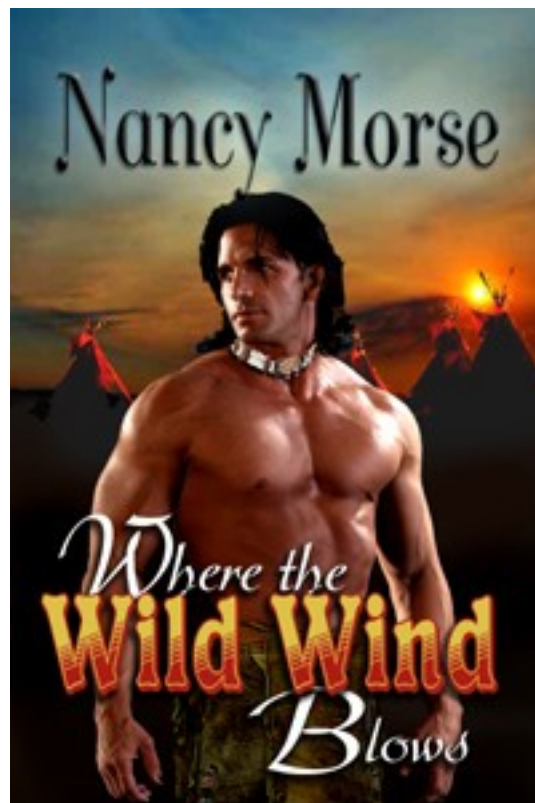
He traced his fingers along the lacy edge to her bra. Then, releasing his right hand from her waist, he reached behind her back and expertly unhooked her bra. She moaned under her breath as he gently pulled her bra off her breasts.

"Let's get this off you, shall we?"

Nancy Morse

Grandma's Wisdom

We were kids from the same neighborhood. That summer I was 16, he was 17. I thought he was cute and funny. What I didn't know was that his mom died when he was 5 and that summer his dad was dying. When I heard the news of his dad's death, I went to the funeral, and my heart went out to this boy who looked like the saddest person in the world. Some weeks later, the kids we were hanging out with all went home for the evening and we found ourselves together. We sat on the grass for hours. He talked about the pain he was in. I listened. We fell in love. We were inseparable after that. My mom didn't like the direction our friendship was taking and complained to my grandma about the boy I was seeing. Grandma told her, "She sees something in him that you don't see". Grandma was right. My mom saw a boy who was floundering and didn't seem to have much of a future. I saw a kind, intelligent, introspective and funny guy who had a deep need to love and be loved. This April we'll be married 45 years. He told me once that after all the bad things he'd been through I am his reward. That's the best thing anyone ever said to me.



About Where the Wild Wind Blows

Born and raised in Sioux country, Katie McCabe, daughter of an Indian trader, finds herself alone and adrift after her family is killed in a battle between the Indians and the soldiers. Black

Moon, the fierce Oglala warrior who has sworn to fight to keep the white people from taking his land, rescues her and brings her to live in his village. The love that ignites between these two wild hearts is tested by Katie's obligation to marry a man she does not love, by a promise made to a dying woman, the treachery of a jealous adversary, abduction by Crow Indians, the love of a cavalry lieutenant, and the tensions that erupt between the Sioux and the U.S. Army during the tumultuous 1850s, as a headstrong white girl and a proud Oglala warrior fight for their love and the wild country of their birth.

Excerpt from Where the Wild Wind Blows

There was nothing friendly about him. He sat without moving, deceptively relaxed in a cross-legged position, puffing silently on a long-stemmed pipe. The fire sent shadows flickering across his face and bare chest and cast him in an ominous light. There was a menace about him, an undisguised hostility, and a proud arrogance. The colors and design of the beaded bag that hung from his rawhide belt confirmed that he was Lakota.

Her voice sounded small and childlike when it slipped into the space between them. "How long was I sleeping?"

If he was surprised that she spoke his language, he gave no indication of it. Tossing a stick onto the fire, he said stoically, "The sun has risen and fallen once."

A day. She had slept an entire day. It seemed incredible until she recalled just how much there was to forget. She began to tremble, and into the darkness she raged at the utter senselessness of it all. "Why did they have to die like that?"

A muscle twitched in his high-boned cheek. His voice came low and reeking of bitterness from across the flames. "Word of this killing will spread like wildfire and many others will be asking that question."

Remembering what her father always told her about the Indian way, Katie swallowed down the lump in her throat and said in a voice that quavered, "My father will have many fine gifts for you for helping me to escape."

"Your father is dead."

She did not hear him. "He will be very grateful to you."

He repeated, "Your father is dead."

This time she could not block it out. His cold, flat words were the awful confirmation of what she had already sensed in the depths of her being. They had a final, absolute ring to them.

"Richard." She uttered the name as part statement, part question, aimed at no one in particular.

He tapped the spent ashes out of the pipe bowl, saying as he did, "The one with hair the color of the red dog is dead."

It wasn't that he referred to Richard as a fox that caused her to flinch, but the casual way in which he said it. Tears began to form, hot, stinging tears of disbelief and outrage and sorrow. Her shoulders started to shake as great sobs seized her. Like water from a broken beaver dam the tears rushed from her eyes and she wept into her hands. First, her mother had been taken from her, leaving a void that would never be filled. Now, her father and brother, and with them, dreams of Ireland and a life that was never to be fulfilled. The world was suddenly a dark and lonely place, with death and destruction as the only rewards for living.

Black Moon watched her from across the embers. "Death is part of the circle of life," he said. "Man moves in a sun-wise direction. He comes from the south, the source of all life, and

moves toward the west, the setting sun of his life. As he grows older, he approaches the cold north where the white hairs wait. If he lives long enough, he comes to the source of light and understanding that is the east. From there he returns to the place where his life began, to his mother, the Earth. We all return to the place of our beginning. Only the weak ones cry." There was no pity in his voice, no compassion, only a hint of mocking.

Katie lifted her chin and glared back at him. With tear-stained cheeks and eyes wild and bright, she declared with a sudden burst of pride, "I am not weak. I am strong."

His face remained implacable. He gave an indolent shrug, and said, "Is that why you shake like a frightened long-ears? Tell me, little red-haired long-ears just how strong you are."

"I am no rabbit," she said. "Do not call me that."

His jaw tightened at her insolence. "I will call you whatever I please."

"I have a name. It is Katie."

"Names can be changed. A boy is known by his cradle name until he earns a new one."

"But I am a woman, and even among the Lakota a woman does not change the name she receives at birth. My name is Katie and I will answer to no other."

From the storm clouds she saw gathering in his smoky eyes she expected him to draw his knife from its hide sheath and silence her with it for speaking so boldly. But he made no move toward his weapon.

They lapsed into silence. Katie had no idea how long she sat there with her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms hugging them tight. During the indeterminate hours that passed in which neither of them spoke, she scrutinized him from across the flickering flames.

His hair, unbound and hanging long and straight over his shoulders, was darker than the recesses of the cave where no light shone. The fire illuminated a face that bore the stamp of power and sheer force of will. With its high cheekbones, straight nose and well defined mouth, its handsomeness was compelling. It drew her toward it, much like the glazed windows of her father's cabin on the Laramie had often drawn magpies that flew against them with a thud and an explosion of feathers.

She could not help but notice that his legs were slim and hard, made for wrapping around a horse's bare back. A lean, tough belly showed not a hint of extra flesh. His bare narrow shoulders seemed perfectly made for slipping easily through thick groves and brush. His arms were well-muscled from a lifetime of drawing taut bowstrings. A band of red-dyed porcupine quills spanned one forearm. The hands that held the pipe, with their long, tapered fingers, were almost too beautiful to belong to a man.

Yet despite the physical appeal of him that she found so compelling, there was a hardness about him, of angular features and taut muscles and the suggestion of an inflexible spirit. But it was his eyes, in which the flames of the fire shone so brightly, that burned with such undisguised hatred it sent chills through her and forced her to turn her face away.

The silence stretched on and on.

Where the Wild Wind Blows can be found on Amazon and Smashwords.

Meredith Bond

Not So Awful After All

I was an undergraduate at Penn. The day I moved into my dorm in my senior year, I was greeted by a good-looking Indian guy standing in the front office. His introduction to me was “Hi! I’m Arup, as in awful!” He was so adorable, I immediately shot back, “Why not Arup as in all right?” I think he actually blushed—not an easy feat for someone with a darker complexion. From that day on, we became great friends. We knew that there was a lot more going on between us, but he was a graduate student and an RA in the dorm and the rules explicitly stated that RAs and residents were not allowed to date. The minute I finished my last class in May, he asked me out. We’ve been together ever since—going on twenty-five years! We’ve been married for nineteen—convincing him to marry me despite our religious and cultural differences is a whole other story!



About Magic In The Storm

Magic In The Storm is a Regency-set Paranormal Romance.

Morgan Vallentyne is trapped. A direct descendent of Morgan le Fey, he knows he is destined for greatness—but cannot access the magical abilities that should be his. When he learns that he has only one month to achieve his full powers, he begins to lose hope. But after a violent storm throws a beautiful girl into his path, the magic begins.

Adriana Hayden is desperate to be free. Born to paint the natural world with unprecedented passion and vision, she is fenced in by the conventions of 19th century English society. But after meeting the handsome and mysterious Morgan, her world begins to open to enchanted possibilities she could never have imagined.

Brought together by the forces of nature, their love is fanned by the winds of fate. The only way to fulfill their destinies is for each to unlock the powers of the other—through the magical tempest of their passions.

Excerpt from Magic In The Storm

Gently, he pulled her to the French doors behind them that led into the back garden, but she stopped as he was about to go outside into the rain.

“We’ll get wet!”

“No, we won’t. Watch.” He let go of her hand and took a step out the door. Adriana watched in fascination as Morgan stood outside in the rain without one drop falling on him. It all just seemed to bend around him, as if he were holding up an umbrella—only he wasn’t.

He took her hand and pulled her outside to join him under his non-existent umbrella. Laughing at her expression, and then said, “You know, I don’t think it was supposed to rain at all today.” With a wave of his hand, the rain stopped.

Adriana’s world faded once again as she watched the deep gray clouds just skitter away with the wave of his hand. A brilliant blue sky appeared and a dazzling sun shone down on them, warm and full of the expectation of flowers and lovely walks in the park. She was grateful that Morgan was keeping a firm hold on her elbow. In the sudden shimmering heat of the sun-drenched garden, the fresh scent of the earth enveloped them making her feel light-headed.

Morgan bent down to a rose bush next to the door that had not yet bloomed, but was filled with the promise of many deep red blossoms. As he gently cupped his hand under one bud, it burst into bloom, unfolding its petals even as she watched. He then plucked it off the bush.

He handed it to Adriana. Their fingers touched as she took the bloom from him. Small pinpricks shot from his fingers into hers, leaving her hand tingling.

Holding the rose delicately in her shaking hand, she tried to steady her breathing. There was no logical explanation for what he had done.

“Then you really are... you truly are a witch?” she managed to whisper not lifting her eyes from the flower—it all seemed so impossible.

“We prefer the term Vallen. Witches are ordinary people who dabble with potions, but they are not truly magical.”

Morgan watched as Adriana’s green eyes widened with wonder when she finally she lifted them to look him. The gold and red in her auburn hair glinted in the brilliant sunlight. “But, yes, truly. I am Vallen. I am a Vallen who cares for you a great deal.”

He couldn’t resist reaching out and touching her. She was so beautiful even in her awe and amid her fears. She was strong and brave in a way he couldn’t have expected from anyone else. He ran his hand gently up her cheek and then feathered his lips across hers, leaving a trail of tingles.

A rush of heat went pulsing through his veins as she took a step closer to him. He wrapped his hands around her delicate waist and pulled her close. He needed to feel her, all of her. His lips descended upon hers, pressing his desire into her.

Fire licked at his blood as Adriana opened her mouth and allowed their tongues to dance together. He could feel her arms moving around his neck, as she relaxed and accepted him for who he truly was.

Happiness and joy coursed through him. Now, finally, he could be completely honest with her. How long had he wanted to be able to share his life, his feelings and his problems with her—to show her just how much they had in common. And now, finally, finally, he could.

Reluctantly, he pulled away from her. He wanted to tell her everything, to share everything with her.

“Adriana, I am so happy. Happy to be with you, and to be able to speak with you openly and honestly,” he began.

A frown marred her beautiful face. “You haven’t been honest with me up until now?”

“I haven’t been able to be. But I’ve wanted to.”

“So, why haven’t you?” she said, taking a step away from him.

“I couldn’t. I couldn’t risk telling you.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“It’s too dangerous. I wouldn’t have told you now, except you witnessed the fight with my mother. It is very dangerous for people to know I’m Vallen. What if you accidentally tell someone and it gets out? I could be killed. It’s not common any more, but witches are still drowned or burned at the stake and we are commonly mistaken for them. People are not kind to us, Adriana.”

Adriana focused her eyes on the ground, clearly thinking about this. Slowly she nodded her head. Thank goodness, she understood—but still, the fear that she might tell someone was sharp in his gut.

“You can never tell anyone what we are—my mother, Kat and I—that we have powers,” Morgan said vehemently, adding a touch of magic to his voice.

“I will never tell...” She stopped speaking and raised her eyes up to meet his. “You... what did you do?” she asked, with a tremor in her voice.

“I’m sorry. I put a suggestion into your mind. If you try to tell anyone I’m Vallen, you won’t be able to—just as you couldn’t tell your companion my name until I released my hold.”

“Why did you do that? Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do, I just.... This is so important, Adriana,” He hated using his magic on her.

“You don’t trust me not to tell anyone.” She was beginning to get angry again. He could feel it sparking out of her, pricking him like tiny little needles.

He didn’t do anything for a full minute, hoping she would calm down. He wanted to trust her. He wanted to so very much, but there was just the slightest hesitation, the little voice in the back of his head telling him to be cautious.

Meredith Bond is the award-winning author of four traditional Regency romances. She has also been teaching creative writing for the past five years and has published a book to help all levels of writers. Magic In The Storm can be found at:

Amazon

Barnes & Noble

Smashwords:

And more can always be found at www.meredithbond.com.

Cassandra Carr

Friendship to More

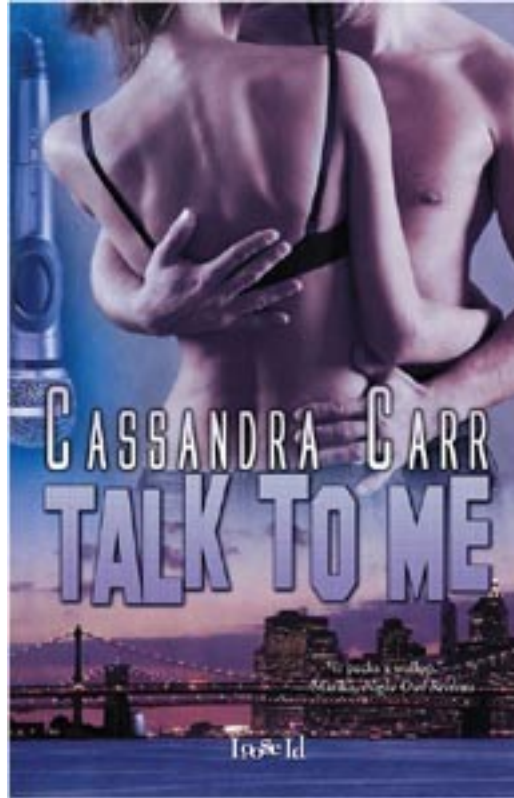
My spouse and I met at work while I was married to someone else. Before you think I caused a scandal, know this: I was only friends with him while I was married. But after I separated from my husband and was ready to date again I looked around me. Like many 20-somethings, I didn't think there were many good men around. Then I considered my friend.

He'd had a good upbringing and had solid values. He had a good job. He was the same religion I was, which wouldn't have been a deal breaker but certainly made things easier. And then I said to myself, "Why is this guy not taken? Well, fellow single women, who are apparently all idiots, since you didn't take him off the market, I'm going to!"

As I said, though, he was my friend, so I was faced with the always-fun "how to turn a friend into a boyfriend" dilemma. He made it a little easier when he did a few things that told me he was interested too. We had been going out for a while, but as friends - he knew I had lost a lot of my friends when I left my husband, so he started inviting me places with his group of friends, taking me to dinner, etc.

One night at dinner I broached the subject. I told him I felt bad that we were basically dating without giving him any of the, um, benefits. ;-) That night after dinner we went to see a band, and as we watched he put his arm around me. Then when we parted ways that night, he kissed me. And so our relationship was born!

That was almost eleven years ago. We've been married for seven and a half years and have a three-year-old daughter we adore. And the best part? When I asked him before I had even sold a book if he wanted me to go back to work, he said, "Writing makes you happy. Stay home with the baby and write." Wow, I love that man...



Excerpt from Talk to Me

Drew Milan watched, fascinated, as a leggy woman with unruly dark brown hair that reached halfway down her back twisted herself underneath the producer's desk. As he continued perusing her body, he noticed her long, slim legs encased in skintight leather boots. Man, are those a sexy pair of boots! Kill me now, and I'll go with a huge freakin' smile on my face. He was a leg man, and this angel had been dropped from the sky especially for him. He must've done some good deed he couldn't remember to have had this good fortune bestowed upon him. The question was, what she was doing crawling around under the equipment?

She started to back out, and Drew felt his groin tighten as inch by inch of glorious legs unfolded themselves. Finally managing to pull himself out of his reverie, he cleared his throat. The woman jerked and turned around, revealing a large set of light brown eyes, a small nose set into the middle of a long face with a pointed chin, and an incredible set of full, luscious lips.

"Can I help you?" The woman blushed furiously, her pale skin flushing bright pink.

* * * * *

Knowing instantly that this Adonis of a man was retired hockey player Drew Milan, the host of the show Jamie MacMahon was producing, she silently berated herself for blushing like a schoolgirl as she struggled to her feet and swiped at the dust coating her skirt. If I'd known I was going to be crawling around under the equipment first thing, I would've worn jeans.

A quick inspection of his barrel chest and huge biceps, both highlighted nicely by the skintight polo shirt he was wearing, confirmed he still kept himself in shape, even though he'd retired a few years back.

He appraised her openly, his gaze raking up and down her body. Not used to such unconcealed interest on the part of men—especially those she worked with—she wasn't sure

how to react. She attempted to ignore his heated stare. “Um, hi, Mr. Milan, I’m Jamie MacMahon.” You’re babbling...

“Jamie?” he repeated.

“Yes, your new producer.”

“Oh!” He looked dumbstruck. “I was under the impression my new producer was a man.”

Great. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Milan. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

He grinned, and his whole face transformed before her eyes. Oh, he still had a strong square jaw and high-slashing cheekbones that highlighted his closely cropped, jet-black hair, but his smile lit up the whole room. Blue-gray eyes the color of the sea during a rainstorm softened to a light aqua. Her breath caught in her throat, and her pulse began to thunder. She covered her heart, and Drew’s gaze followed the movement before returning to her face.

“I’m not disappointed. I’m surprised, but I’m most definitely not disappointed. And call me Drew. Mr. Milan makes me feel like an old man, and I shudder to think a beautiful young thing like you thinks I’m an old man.” His eyes blazed as he stared at her.

My God—he’s blatantly hitting on me. Maybe he hits on every woman he meets, the same way I imagine what a gorgeous pair of shoes would look like if I were wearing them.

She coughed delicately into her hand. Old? No. Unbelievably hot, yes. And wow, his voice was mesmerizing—rough yet sensual. Forcing herself to keep her focus on the job, she glanced at the studio behind her. “Well, Drew, the show is about to start. Anything I need to know other than what’s on the show log?”

He shrugged. “Not really. Gonna be a light show tonight, so keep the calls coming. I don’t like yammering on and on just to fill dead air.”

“Got it.”

“I don’t think I expect a lot from my producers, but apparently the guys upstairs disagree. Anyway, I’ll be gentle, I promise. Well, unless you don’t want me to be.” Throwing her a cheeky wink, he sauntered into the studio, sat, and picked up his headphones.

Jamie considered actually fanning her face, knowing she must be badly blushing. Glancing at the clock, she hurried to sit. They still had about ninety seconds until the syndicated sports show they aired from three to seven p.m. ended. There was a short ad sequence after that, and then they were on. She put the studio in queue so she could speak to him without it going on the air. “Do you need a countdown?”

“Just because I was a hockey player doesn’t mean I can’t count,” he chided her. “I had to read a scoreboard, you know.” He was separated from her by about ten feet and a pane of glass, but she could easily see the taunting smile playing on his lips.

Jamie blushed yet again. Dammit! “That’s not what I was implying.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. I’ve got it.”

Taking a focusing breath like she’d learned in her yoga class back in Buffalo, Jamie detected a hint of the scent he’d left behind—something that screamed “male.” It sent her imagination into overdrive, wondering what wonderful things he could do with that maleness. She’d seen his headshot in the main reception area when she’d come in for her interview but had no idea he was this gorgeous up close. She had a feeling he would wreak havoc with her peace of mind, and she wasn’t at all sure she was ready for his undoubtedly overwhelming presence. He had reduced her to a mass of shivering need within minutes.

Just last night she’d read that he’d come by the less than flattering nickname “The Beast” during his playing days in the NHL. Apparently he’d been a tough character on and off the ice,

and with his hulking frame, the nickname certainly seemed accurate, but not in an entirely bad way—more like in a bad-boy way. Jamie shuddered. She was nervous as hell, and the undercurrent of sexual tension wasn't helping matters.

For more information about Cassandra's books, go to her website:

<http://www.booksbycassandracarr.com>.

Janet Fox

He Had a Stake in the Outcome

My hubby and I were set up by a mutual friend, and it was not love at first sight.

I was in the midst of a disastrous romance—painful, and wrong, wrong, wrong. I was working at the time at a place in New York (no names, please), and actually had suffered a string of wrong romances. (Honestly, I tended toward self-sacrifice on the altar of the men I worshipped.) I confided this latest disaster to a friend, Walter, who just listened...and then suggested a lunch date with someone he knew.

This guy—his name was Jeff—was one of the sweetest people I'd ever met. Did I fall in love right then? No, of course not. I was into self-abasement. How could I fall for a sweet guy?

Well, he was so sweet that he kept asking me out for lunch. After a time getting to know him I confided my misery—how my boyfriend did this or that, how miserable I was about this or that—and he listened, ever-patient.

And then came a lunch where I was spouting: it was awful, he was hurtful, what should I do? Jeff cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said, looking at his fork, “I really can't advise you because I have a stake in the outcome.”

I sat back in the booth, and the heavens parted (or lightning bolts struck, or the earth opened...you get the idea) and I knew. I saw Jeff for the first time, and I was totally, goober-smacked, in love.

That was that, and we've been together for 33 years.



About Forgiven

Kula Baker never expected to find herself on the streets of San Francisco in 1906. The daughter of an outlaw, Kula is soon swept up in a world of art and elegance—a world she hardly dared dream of back in Montana. She meets the handsome David Wong, whose smiling eyes and soft-spoken manner have an uncanny way of breaking through Kula’s carefully crafted reserve. Yet when a mighty earthquake strikes and the wreckage threatens all she holds dear, Kula realizes that only by unlocking her heart can she begin to carve a new future for herself.

Excerpt from Forgiven

“I had this dream. In the whispering restless dark I saw myself dressed fine, because my pa and I had made a proper home, because Pa had taken on proper employment. I could read books all day long if I wished, in my own parlor, in my own silks and velvets. I could catch the eye of a gentleman. A gentleman who would treat me right so I’d never have to cook or scrub or sew again. A gentleman who’d look on me with soft eyes.

A new century lay open before us, where all things could be made clean and shiny, even a man’s soul. Why, I’d heard that men could get up in the air in flying machines, men flying like birds. If that were true, why then, anything was possible. It might even be possible for me, the part native daughter of an outlaw, to become a lady.”

For more information about Janet and her books, visit her website: janetsfox.com.

Margaret Carroll

A Walk Through the Plaza

May 14, 2009, was a beautiful warm evening in Santa Fe, New Mexico. My friend, Nuala, and I were there on vacation, and had spent the day hiking at Puye Cliffs, sacred lands for the Anasazi. Nuala was supposed to be getting married that weekend in Rye, New York. Her fiancé had called it off. She wanted to get out of town, go somewhere and forget what was supposed to be happening. I had some vacation time coming, so off we went. New Mexico was breathtaking. The Plaza was packed. We arrived at the restaurant, Mark Miller's Coyote Cafe, and were told it would be a short wait for dinner. We waited in the rooftop bar with its stunning view of the sunset lighting up the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. I got chatting with a man who gave that view a run for the money! His name was Rand Carroll and he had a smile as bright as the New Mexico sky. Way too soon, our table was called and we left. I could have kicked myself for saying goodbye, but was in a great mood just for having met him. I was happy the entire next day as we hiked some trails Rand Carroll had suggested. I showered and changed for dinner and applied my makeup with care. We'd been in Santa Fe long enough to know everyone in town walks through the Plaza at night. Unless I had completely imagined the chemistry between us, I figured it was a sure bet that my handsome stranger would be there tonight. I looked around at first and was sad not to see him I guessed I must be reading too much into it. And then - like the parting of the Red Sea - there he was. Standing in the middle of the crowd, smiling at me. Like he'd been waiting to see me for his entire life. He greeted me by name, like we were old friends. And asked if we could join him and his friends for dinner. Nuala had called weeks earlier to book Geronimo, the hottest restaurant in NM at that time. As I lied and said we'd be delighted, Nuala tried to tell him about our plans. I kicked her. So hard she probably still has a bruise. Nuala is a good sport. We ditched our plans and joined Rand Carroll and his friends. They were riding Harley Davidson motorcycles - I had never seen one up close! We hopped on the back and roared off into the night. I still remember Nuala in her pearls, holding on for dear life to some guy with a ponytail (I got to ride with Rand). Rand Carroll and I were married exactly one year later - to the day. Guess who did one of the readings at the ceremony?



About A Dark Love

A Dark Love received a starred review in PW when it was released, made their Top 100 Books of 2009 list and was nominated for a Rita (RS category). It can be purchased in bookstores, at Amazon or Barnes & Noble online

Excerpt from A Dark Love

The cab dropped Caroline in a seedy part of town, one block from the Greyhound bus station. Pippin let out a small whine of protest when she bundled him into the tote and hoisted it onto her shoulder before entering a fast-food restaurant she had visited several times in preparation for this. The lunch crowd hadn't arrived yet, and the staff behind the counter didn't even glance up when Caroline entered. She made a beeline for the bathroom.

The place reeked of cigarettes and the musky smell of homeless people, perfect for her purposes. And, thankfully, deserted. With her heart hammering inside her chest, she made for the roomy handicapped stall at the end. Bolting the stall door behind her, she set the tote down. Pippin stuck his nose out, sniffed and yawned before curling into a ball and drifting back to sleep.

She pulled out the scissors and comb, looked in the mirror, took a deep breath and began snipping. Her long brown hair drifted to the floor like dying leaves from a tree in autumn.

Caroline cut in a line around her neck, just above her chin. Pulling the ends straight up in sections over her head, she jabbed straight down in short strokes, the way her hairdresser did. The result was passable, she decided.

She swept the loose hair from the floor and flushed it. Tearing open the dye, she mixed it up in the sink. She knew exactly what to do. She had purchased a box several weeks ago and memorized the instructions before tossing it into a public trash can on the way home.

Porter didn't approve of women who dyed their hair.

She lined the neck of her tee-shirt with paper towels before donning the clear plastic gloves and applying bleach from the roots all the way through to the ends. She took care not to drip on her shirt.

She needed to wait twenty minutes. Ammonia stung her nose and eyes. Her shoulder and back muscles ached. She had spent the night locked in their bathroom at home, curled on a bath towel on the cold tiled floor. Praying Porter wouldn't break the door down. Too frightened to sleep. Tempted to unlatch the window and climb out, taking her chances in the narrow airshaft that separated their house from the one next door. But she was afraid the noise would attract Porter's attention. She had made up her mind. Today would be the day. And now it was happening.

Tears sprang to her eyes as the full impact of her actions hit home. There was no going back. He would kill her if she did. Caroline tried to push the thought from her mind. She didn't want to lose her nerve.

The door to the ladies room swung open, making her jump. She prayed it wasn't anybody requiring use of the handicapped stall. But luck was with her. She listened to sounds from another stall as the minutes ticked by, trying not to think.

When twenty minutes had passed, she stood stiffly and rinsed in the sink, blotting her hair as best she could with paper towels. She ran the drugstore comb through her new short locks and surveyed the result.

A stranger gazed back with short blonde hair, a neck that was exposed and eyes that were hollow, haunted. She couldn't bear the sight. She slipped the oversized sunglasses back on, waiting till her eyes adjusted to the dimness.

She checked her watch for the thousandth time. She was on schedule.

By now, he knew.

The thought sent a jolt of fear sizzling through her like an electric current, robbing her breath and making the stall spin. She squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed the cold porcelain sink for support. She took a deep breath, licked her lips and tried to swallow. But her throat refused to close around the ball of solid fear inside her. Because she knew as sure as she stood here that his search had begun.

She opened her eyes and reached with unsteady hands for the People's tote bag, which now held all of her earthly belongings. She took one last look in the mirror at the frightened stranger.

"Alice Stevens," she whispered. "Good luck."

Lyn Cote

The Light that Illuminates

I met my DH at a church singles New Year's Eve party. He didn't make much of an impression on that first meeting. But the next time I met him, it was as if a bright light shone all around him. I kept blinking and looking around but the bright light was only around him! I took it as a sign. We were married nine months later and are still together over 35 years later!



About La Belle Christiane

Can the beautiful daughter of a French courtesan find a love that lasts for a lifetime?

In the early 1770's, Christiane Pelletier, an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, is next in a line of courtesans who have been favorites at the French court during the reigns of two monarchs. Yet she longs to be the beloved wife of one man, not a lovely piece of human art passed from one noble to another. And the winds of change are sweeping Europe.

After her mother's violent murder, Christiane flees France with her renegade father. In the Canadian wilderness, she survives the shock of leaving a life of wealth and privilege. To escape frontier violence, she moves southward only to become involved in the burgeoning American Revolution. Daughter of a French courtesan to frontier wife to companion of Lady Washington, Christiane moves into the heart of the American rebel elite. But one man in her life can never be

forgotten. Once he was her friend. Now he has become her enemy. Will he prove to be her destiny? Only God knows.

The Story Behind Lyn Cote Self-Publishing La Belle Christiane

About La Belle Christiane, my very first manuscript—never published until now!

When I began writing my first manuscript, I literally ran after my two toddlers with a clipboard in my hand and wrote whenever they paused! I wrote that story without knowing anything about writing or marketing fiction. In fact, I told myself just to write the book and then I'd think about polishing and marketing it. The thought of that was overwhelming at the time. It took me three years of writing to finish my first manuscript-1,000 handwritten pages. Whew!

When I began trying to market it, I found out that while it garnered interest from agents and editors, it never found a publisher. I think that's because there are "unwritten" rules for inspirational fiction and I didn't know them or follow them. I still think it's a good story and I've revised it and improved it once more. And now it's FINALLY available in digital and print. I did this because I didn't want it to sit ignored in my files forever. So now I'll let the readers decide whether it deserved to be published or not. I hope you agree with me and let others know about it.

Excerpt from La Belle Christiane

British Canada, July 1774

Tonight, I'll lie beside some stranger as his wife. Christiane blinked away the bright morning sunlight but could not blink away the dread. Once again she had embarked on another journey that would change her life. She sat between her Algonquin father Shaw-nee-awk-kee and his son in a birch bark canoe. To the rhythm of the dipping paddles, they were gliding farther down the Ottawa River. In the cramped space, she hugged her knees to herself and pressed her forehead against her tattered skirt.

She glanced sideways into the remorseless current, wishing for time, for control. But instead, the river, shimmering with molten sunlight, gave her glimmers of the past—candlelight on silver, soft lace against skin, frosting on the tip of the tongue. But she'd fled France with her father, here to Canada and then. . . She thrust all thoughts of the past year aside. She had to face today. Tonight, I'll be some stranger's wife.

The thought brought fear, a rush of sensation—as if the bottom of the canoe, her protection, parted, and she was plunged into the cool water. She fought her way to the surface of this feeling, gasping for air, pushing down panic. She pressed her face harder against her knees. I will not shame myself. Ever.

For information on Lyn's books and where to purchase them, go to her website:

<http://LynCote.net> or <http://www.BooksbyLynCote.com>

Patricia Lieb

Lumps in the Mattress

During our eighteen years of marriage we beat many lumps from our mattress. Like beating feathers into place with a broom, we managed to smooth it. Though no one mattress can ever completely please two people, we were comfortable.

We were married on a sunny winter day. I smile now remembering how we went to downtown Chicago, to the Cook County Court House, and got married by a cranky Judge and his balding lady secretary. That day, we started beating lumps from our mattress.

The biggest lump ever to enter our mattress was the tumor growing inside you, eating and growing behind your stomach, as if it were as welcomed as a sunny winter day.

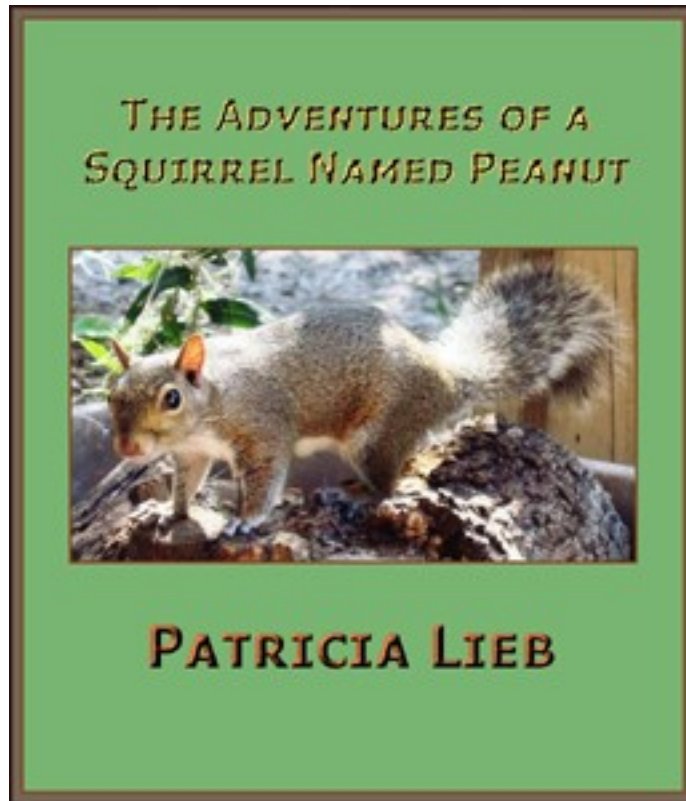
The mattress slid then, and the spread was never on straight, and it sank on the side where you spend your days and nights. I wondered what was going through your mind. Were you angry? If so, you never let it show. Surely you felt anger. I know when you told me of the tumor, I just said, "Dammed." And you said, "Damned is what I said." I wondered how you could contain your feelings. Rage. Didn't you feel rage as in Dylan Thomas' poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Rage.

We had good in our marriage. I will not pretend we were saints here, pretend everything was always in order for it certainly was not. We had our differences. But differences usually made us closer. Once you said, "If we never disagreed we would not be communicating." Our disagreements usually led to our clinging to each other through the night and walking, our hands locked, in places we had never been.

I walked to your hospital room after talking with your doctor and I knew you would never be well again.

I learned a lot from you. I adopted so much of your philosophy. I discovered the important things in life. I learned from you that material things are not most important. I learned to think about what is real in life and to pursue my dreams.

Dreams. Yes, my husband, I remember all our dreams. I remember all the things you taught me.



About The Adventures of a Squirrel Named Peanut

Peanut tells of his adventures of life in the “lady’s” yard and how he gets into trouble but she loves him anyway. The “Lady” lectures him and hand-feeds him peanuts daily.

Judy Lynn Hubbard

Destined

I believe in love at first sight and I guess I have my parents to blame for that. My mother had car trouble and my father, who was a mechanic, just happened to stop and give her a hand. They met by chance, but the two of them knew then and there they were destined to be together—and six children and sixty-one years later, proves they were right!



About These Arms of Mine

When Alesha Robinson abruptly ended her brief relationship with Derrick Chandler, she earned his wrath. Now she needs his cooperation to save her brother. To her amazement, he promises to help her—if she agrees to marry him.

Alesha is convinced that all Derrick wants from her is revenge; however, whenever they are in the same room together and especially when they touch, smoldering passion each had thought long ago extinguished, flames to vibrant life resulting in passionate days and oh-so steamy nights!

As weeks turn into months, Alesha finds herself longing for a traditional marriage with the man whose heart she now realizes she had needlessly broken. If he knew the true circumstances surrounding her previous betrayal, would he consider giving her a second chance to stay in his arms and in his life—forever?

Excerpt from These Arms of Mine

“What if I told you that I wouldn’t press charges against your brother?” His unexpected words halted her rapid departure.

Had she heard him correctly? She turned and her puzzled eyes encountered his enigmatic, serious ones.

“What did you say?”

“I think you heard me.”

“Don’t toy with me.”

An arrogant half-smile turned up the corners of his mouth at her chastising tone.

“I never play, unless I choose the game and am assured of victory.”

She believed him; he was a man used to getting his way—always, except once with her. She slowly walked back until she was standing in front of his desk again.

“You’re serious about letting Robert off the hook?”

“Yes, deadly.”

Something in his tone worried her, yet she stood her ground. She had the feeling she would regret her next question; however, she had to ask it.

“What do you want in return?”

He stood and slowly, deliberately walked until he was standing in front of her, so close that their bodies were almost touching. She resisted a strong impulse to turn and run, or more disturbingly, take the few steps necessary to bring them breast-to-breast. She faced him unwaveringly as she waited apprehensively for his response.

His eyes roamed over her from head to toe, leisurely, thoroughly. His blatant inspection made her feel as if she were a piece of prime meat he was preparing to devour with that wicked, pleasure-evoking mouth of his. Her heart began to beat erratically, but not from fear, from another just as strong emotion.

“Something only you can give me.”

“Which is what?” She tilted her head up his tall frame staring at him uneasily.

He continued to subject her to his slow, highly disturbing scrutiny, eyes lingering unnecessarily long on her moist, slightly parted lips, before lifting to meet her eyes once again. His thorough examination was more disquieting than anything she could have imagined he would say; however, his next words proved her wrong.

“I want you.” He truthfully answered.

He was unblinking and serious as he continued staring into her huge, horrified eyes. After a few seconds of pregnant silence, he laughed out loud at her apparent, absolute shock. He knew his declaration was the last thing she had expected to hear; it was honestly the last thing he had expected to utter.

She didn’t make a move as his brief laughter reverberated in the deafeningly quiet office before silencing again. He made no further attempt at speech and she was unable to formulate anything remotely akin to intelligent verbiage; therefore, she stared at him unblinkingly, a hand slowly going to her suddenly constricted throat while her heart thudded loudly in her ears.

When she finally found her voice it was hushed and strained, “You can’t be serious!”

“Can’t I?”

She searched his face for signs that he was being facetious, yet found none. Still, he had to be joking! That had to be it; at least, she hoped that was it. Her other hand moved to her suddenly throbbing temple and she tried to laugh dismissively; she couldn't have heard him correctly.

"I must have misunderstood you."

"Did you?" Piercing eyes studied her pale face carefully.

"Did you say that you want...me?" She forced herself to repeat his ridiculous statement.

"You did understand me."

"What do you mean by want?" As she articulated the question, she was petrified of his response.

"Want: A transitive verb meaning to desire, to have need for, to crave."

Every word he used to describe his meaning brought vivid, not undesirable pictures to her whirlwind mind. She swallowed hard to dispel the lump that had rapidly risen in her throat, but to no avail. She stared at the man in front of her, amusement still twinkling in his eyes; yet, underneath the levity something else lurked—a seriousness that terrified her.

Eileen Cook

Christmas Tree Magic

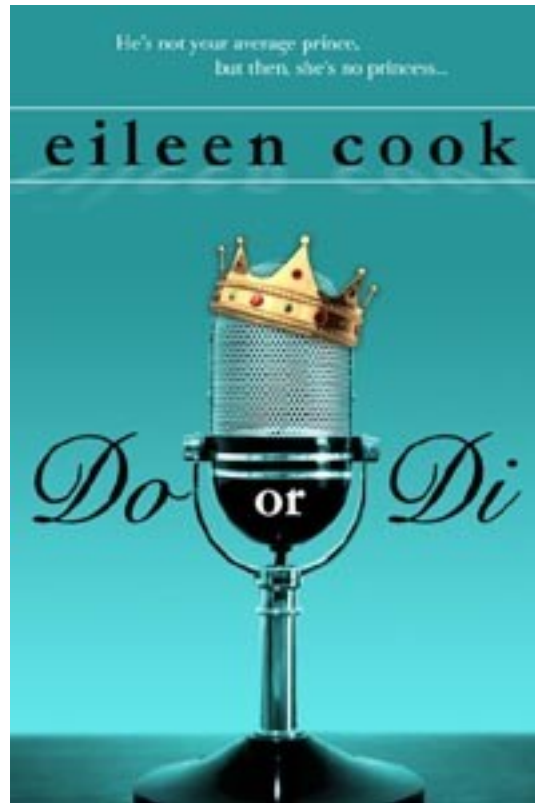
I met my husband Bob at a Halloween party in college. He was dressed like Friar Tuck from the Robin Hood series. I'm not sure why I found that attractive, it could have been all those years at Catholic school. I suspect the more likely reason was the vast amount of cheap beer I'd consumed that evening. He was also pretty cute.

The moment I knew I would marry him was more romantic and would come years later. It was Christmas. I had my first official post-college job earning less than I earned waiting tables while in school. (Oh English degree- you were enjoyable, but not marketable.) I couldn't afford to go home for the holidays that year. I lived in a dumpy apartment, I made nowhere near enough to support my book and shoe habit, and I was in a job I hated. It is safe to say I wasn't feeling the holiday spirit. I made Scrooge look like a perky cheerleader in comparison to my mood.

Bob was living across the country. We kept our relationship going through long distance phone calls and the occasional visit. The night before I had a weepy phone conversation where I told him that there was no point in Christmas even coming that year. When I got home from work that night there was a florist waiting for me. The fellow told me he owned the shop and normally didn't make deliveries, but he wanted to make this one. He'd never gotten this type of order before.

The florist opened the van and pulled out a giant six foot Christmas tree. It came complete with a stand, lights, and ornaments. He helped me set it up in my living room. The florist gave me a pack of foil wrapped cookies that his wife had made. He said that Bob hadn't asked for that, but he felt like throwing it in. No charge.

I pulled out some Christmas music and put it on. I had the sense that maybe things weren't that bad after all. If there was someone who loved me enough to make all this happen from half a world away, then who knew what else we could tackle if we were together. I decided right then and there that I was going to marry that man. Eighteen years later I don't have a single regret.



About **Do or Di**

A laugh out loud romantic comedy, from the author of *Unpredictable* and *Getting Revenge* on Lauren Wood. Erin Callighan has given up on the idea of a fairy tale romance. Having dated her own version of the Seven Dwarves (including Grumpy and Sleepy), she's letting go of the idea of Prince Charming and settling for Prince Good Enough. Erin's focused on reaching her dream of having her own talk radio show, even if it means having to temporarily co-host with the annoying "Voice of Seattle", Colin Stewart. To score points with her station manager, she agrees to be a part of the Positive Partnerships program that matches her with Diana, a troubled pre-teen who swears she's channeling the spirit of the late Princess Diana. She's supposed to be mentoring Diana, but the channeled princess has a lot to teach Erin about love and happily ever after endings.

Excerpt from **Do or Di**

There comes a time in a woman's life when she must acknowledge that her pursuit of Prince Charming has failed and that she is merely kissing frogs. I didn't want to give up on the idea of fairy-tale romance; I'd merely accepted reality. However, my best friend Avita wasn't ready to surrender on my behalf.

"There's a guy who just started working with Darsh. He's really cute." She took her chai tea from the barista.

"No," I said. Avita meant well, but I had to shut this down. Once she got a plan in place she was like a rabid military general. She didn't surrender easily.

“You can’t say no, you haven’t met him yet.” She held up a perfectly manicured hand to stop my protest. “Besides, don’t think of it like a blind date. If I happen to have you over for dinner, and Darsh happens to invite over one of his single co-workers, then it’s just a lucky coincidence.”

I blew on my tea. “That’s not the kind of luck I need. You know I’d do just about anything for one of your dinners, but no more blind dates. I am declaring myself to be a blind date free zone.”

“You can’t give up. You never know when you’re going to meet the right guy.” Avita was like the kid who still believed in Santa and no matter how much you pointed out that it was awfully odd that Santa was able to be at all those malls at the same time; she would still cling to the fat guy in the suit. I can’t say that I blamed her. I like the idea of a gift-giving jolly elf as much as the next person.

“I have officially filled my quota of bad dates. I have the list to prove it,” I said. I held open the door for her so we could walk back to the office. I had other reasons for not wanting for her to try and fix me up, but there was no way I was going to get into with her.

“You’re not still doing that dwarf thing are you?”

“The last guy you hooked me up with, the one from your gym, slotted in nicely as Sneezy.”

“His name was David, and I’ll admit he was a bit focused on his health.”

It isn’t that I wanted to give up the idea of a fairy-tale romance; it’s just that rather than a prince, I could lay claim to having dated each of the seven dwarves:

1.Grumpy: Richard was a tortured artistic soul. He taught photography at the community college. It was difficult for Richard as no one understood him or appreciated his genius. Initially I found his dark, brooding moods sort of sexy, but I would later realize he was just cranky.

2.Doc: Keith worked in the finance district and came across as sort of the Clark Kent type in his glasses and button-down suits. I found his knowledge of arcane trivia sort of fun and quirky until I realized we could never have a conversation without him correcting my grammar or tossing in some bizarre fact like the annual rainfall in the Congo.

3.Bashful: Joel was so shy I had to ask him out. He blushed and stuttered any time someone spoke to him, including on voice mails. I kept hoping that once he grew comfortable we would fall into a relaxed relationship where he would open up his deep, sensitive soul to me. This never happened. He made me anxious. It was like dating a bomb squad guy who had palsy.

4.Happy: Kirk was my first younger man. At twenty-three he was annoyingly happy. I couldn’t tell if it was because the world hadn’t kicked him around enough or if he would always be this way. You would think being around someone with a positive attitude would be refreshing in today’s cynical world. However, one too many “Turn that smile upside down!” moments and I wanted to make him cry. This is not the basis for a lasting relationship.

5.Sleepy: Liam was a believer in not subjecting himself to the tyranny of “the man.” He found regular employment to be too restricting and kept him from reaching his “goals.” In the three months that we dated it appeared that the scope of his goals including sleeping until noon and laying on my couch scratching his balls while watching reruns of America’s Next Top Model.

6.Doopy: Carter was without a doubt the most attractive man I ever dated. He was Calvin-Klein-underwear-model handsome. He was so attractive I could almost overlook that I had stuffed animals smarter than him. Almost. We were out at a dinner and I was discussing euthanasia and my views on the meaning and value of life. When I asked him what he thought and he said he knew there were a lot of youth in Asia, I knew it was over.

7.Sneezy: David was Avita's latest find for me. They went to the same gym. He had an amazing body, and for good reason. I would come to discover he spent his entire life focused on maintenance. David took every supplement available; there was a fine dusting of protein powder on everything he owned. It was like being around Mount St. Helens after it went off. He was the biggest hypochondriac I'd ever met. If he had as much as a sniffle he treated it as if his body had betrayed him. He stressed over food labels as if they contained military secrets. I couldn't stand him wincing every time I put something in my mouth.

"David wasn't focused on his health, he was obsessed. Do you remember the time we double dated with you guys and he wouldn't let anyone have popcorn at the movie? He smuggled in his own organic granola for us. Tell me you haven't forgotten. It was made with some kind of algae that was supposedly full of antioxidants."

Avita snorted. "That stuff was pretty bad."

We reached the radio station where we worked. Avita worked as producer. My job in sales was far less exciting. However, I had no intent in staying in it forever. If I couldn't have love it seemed only fair I should have an amazing career.

"You excited for Darsh's work event tonight?" I asked. Avita's husband had just been promoted and she'd been counting down the days to a big swanky party.

"I was. Station management emailed first thing this morning. They want a break down on call numbers for the show. It means I'll get there late."

"Can't the numbers wait a day?"

"Apparently not." She tried to shrug off the disappointment. "Meet up for lunch?"

"Sure."

"And just think about the dinner with Darsh's co-worker. You never know," she called over her shoulder.

You can find Do or Di on Amazon.

Mary Campisi

I Found Love at the Grocery Store

I never thought I would meet my future husband in a grocery store. As a matter of fact, after a painful divorce, I never thought I'd remarry. But strange things happen when you least expect them and that's definitely our story.

It was the end of summer, almost fall. Cool enough for a sweatshirt, but warm enough still to enjoy shorts. My three daughters, ages 3, 6 and 7, were with their father, so I had a day to myself. What to do? Go to the grocery store, of course. What would life be like if not for Saturday morning shopping amidst the aisles of specials and free samples? Like most seasoned, working mothers, I had the routine down.

But there was nothing ordinary about that Saturday. Something happened that changed the course of my life—I met my future husband. It wasn't actually in the grocery store, I never made it past the parking lot. Jim was coming out, carrying a grocery bag when I saw him. We were acquaintances by name recognition only. I had never met him and didn't know much about him other than the fact that we were indirect neighbors and like myself, he had recently gone through a painful divorce. I wanted to say hello and let him know that I too was a divorce statistic. More importantly, I wanted him to know I had not only survived, but was healthy, happy and thriving, and hoped he was too.

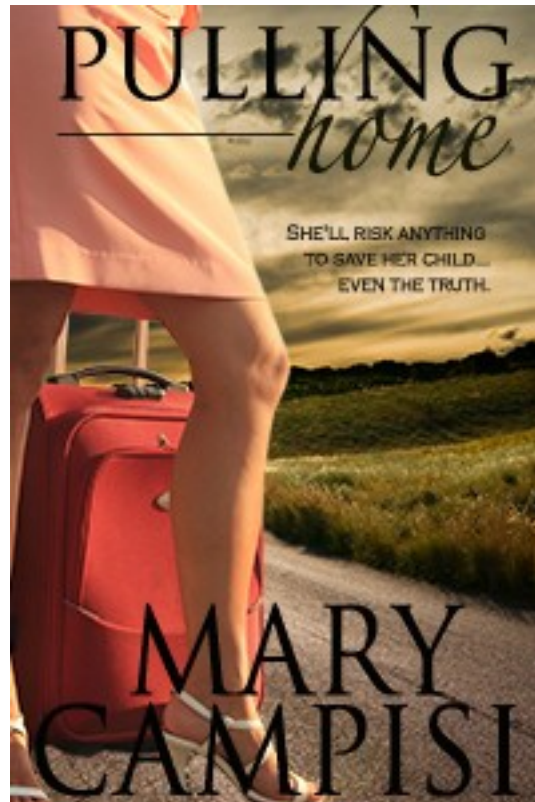
I walked up to him, extended my hand, and introduced myself. I'm sure I took him by surprise, but he smiled and was quite gracious throughout our short conversation. I walked away, glad I had made the effort. A few days later, Jim called and we talked on the phone....about the challenges of being a single parent, the juggle to mesh work and family, concerns for the children caught in the backlash of divorce. The conversations were mutually supportive and I found myself looking forward to the many that followed. We soon became friends and began doing things together—casual dinner, movie or walk on the beach. Because neither of us was interested in a romantic relationship, we slowly, unknowingly, let our guards down and discovered each other.

We shared hopes, dreams, visions. One day, I woke up and realized that the thought of a relationship no longer scared me as it had months before. I once thought I would never trust a man again, and yet I trusted Jim. Very much. This gentle, caring man with the warm brown eyes had worked his way into my heart. Soon after, our relationship blossomed and we allowed ourselves to open up to love again. And we remained the best of friends, nurturing and supporting each other, as true friends do.

It is easy to recall the night I realized I wanted to spend my life with this man whose quiet strength and integrity showed in all of his actions. It was winter, cold and blustery. Snow fell throughout the day and into the early evening. I had just put the kids to bed and knew if I didn't shovel some sort of path out of my driveway, I wouldn't be able to get to work in the morning. There really was no choice, so I pulled on my boots, buttoned my coat and grabbed a hat, mittens and scarf. I opened the door, preparing myself for the mountains of snow I would need to tackle. I did indeed see piles and piles of snow, but they were stacked beside the sidewalk and driveway, not on them. There was a clean path to my door! Who had done this wonderful deed?!

Just then, the phone rang and I hurried inside. It was Jim, asking if I'd looked out the window yet. I smiled and then I laughed. I should have known it could only be him. He told me he had hired a snow removal service to take care of my snow. All season! I was ecstatic. And then I wanted to cry at the selflessness of the act. Jim gave me more than one present that night. He gave me hope for a beautiful future together and enough love to see it through.

We have been married almost seventeen years, have raised five children, (my three, his two), and life is good. Very good. I thank God every day for Jim's love and commitment. I also thank Him for grocery stores.



About Pulling Home

She'll risk anything to save her child...even the truth

It's taken nine years and a cross-country move, but Audra Valentine Wheyton has kept her secrets safe. She's created the perfect life—a husband who loves her, a daughter she adores, and a position as head writer for an award-winning daytime soap. When her husband dies suddenly, Audra returns to her hometown for the funeral and faces a community that has not forgotten her meager beginnings and a man who has never forgiven her for marrying his brother.

Jack Wheyton is a successful pediatric neurosurgeon who is about to become engaged when Audra walks back into his life with her daughter. He forgave his brother long ago for taking something that had been his, something he hadn't even realized he wanted until it was gone. But forgiving Audra is another story...and forgetting her? Near impossible.

When a shattering illness strikes Audra's daughter, she turns to Jack to save her child and risks exposing a secret that will change their lives forever.

Excerpt from Pulling Home

Jack hugged his aunt, relieved for the few extra seconds before he had to confront his brother's wife. When the Heaven Scent threatened to send him into a sneeze attack, he eased from his aunt's grasp and pecked her cheek. "I know, Aunt Ginny, I know." Then he straightened and faced her.

She wasn't nineteen anymore, that was damn sure. Her breasts filled the pink sweater and he could guess at the tell-tale signs of ample cleavage rimming her bra, despite the absence of a neckline. His eyes were trained in female body parts which had nothing to do with his medical expertise. Jack knew women's bodies, knew how to please them, knew how to drive them wild.

He'd known how to do both to her. Seven weeks of pure lust. He'd never told a soul about it. Had she? He glanced down which proved another fatal mistake as he caught a glimpse of thigh. Were her legs still strong and toned—like they were when she used to wrap them around his back?

"Jack," Aunt Virginia interrupted his less than brotherly thoughts, "this is Audra Valentine." She paused. "Christian's wife."

There it was, thrown right back in her face. Audra Valentine, the girl from the wrong side of town. In his family's eyes, she would always be a Valentine first, a Wheyton, second. Jack lifted his gaze and met hers. Huge mistake. Horrible. Disastrous. She still had the most entrancing eyes, like whiskey burning his throat all the way to the lining of his gut. Right now those eyes were staring at him and through him. "Audra." Somehow he managed to slide her name through his lips without heaving. "I'm very sorry." Sorry I had to see you again. Sorry I ever touched you in the first place. Sorry I compare every woman I'm with to you.

"Thank you."

The huskiness of her voice sent a thousand jolts of electricity through him. Damn her. Damn him. This was his brother's wife, for Chrissake. But she'd been Jack's lover first. Or had she been sleeping with both of them at the same time? That was one torture that never left him. He'd find out before she flew back to California, even if he had to pull every beautiful strand of mahogany hair from her head to do it.

She brushed her gaze past him with a coolness that surprised him. The old Audra Valentine wouldn't have been able to dismiss him so easily. But this one pushed him aside as though he were day-old coffee. Christ, it was going to be a long few days.

"Audra." Leslie sliced through his thoughts. "Leslie Richot. We never officially met but I've heard quite a bit about you."

Jack cleared his throat. And none of it good. You're the one who stole the man she was going to marry. He knew that's what Leslie was thinking, knew that's what the whole room was thinking.

Audra's lips pulled at the ends. "I'm sure you have."

"Leslie's Jack's fiancé." Aunt Virginia clutched Jack's hand and squeezed.

"Aunt Ginny, that's not exactly correct." He snatched a glance at Leslie who watched him with open curiosity.

"Why not? You've been seeing this girl for two years, haven't you? And you're thirty-five, my boy. Time for wedding bells and babies. No more dilly dallying." She plumped out her thin lips and nodded. "It's your duty."

Heat crept up Jack's neck, smothered his cheeks and chin. He was thirty-five years old but right now he felt sixteen. "This really isn't a good time, Aunt Ginny."

“No,” she agreed, yanking out a crumpled tissue and swiping her nose. “It’s not.” She hiccupped and the tears escaped, streaking her rouged cheeks.

“Oh, Virginia,” Leslie patted her arm. “I know.” She lowered her voice to a sympathy pitch. “I know.”

Audra glanced at him one last time before he moved toward the casket. He didn’t want to look at his brother. He’d just faced Christian’s wife and he’d certainly not wanted to do that. But this? He swallowed and cleared his throat. This was his little brother, shrouded in cream silk and roses, his lips an unnatural pink, his skin drenched in pancake makeup. It wasn’t right, and it wasn’t fair and it didn’t matter that Jack was a doctor and knew life and death had nothing to do with right and fair.

Two days ago he’d stood beside his mother as she stroked Christian’s cold cheek and told him about the cherry pie she’d baked for him and how she’d bought his favorite horseradish cheese at the deli. Jack’s father grew pastier with each recount and by the time his wife started on about the stuffed pork chops she’d planned for Christian’s welcome home dinner, the old man let out a groan and half limped, half ran from the room.

Jack stood before the casket now but refused to look at his brother’s face. His gaze fell to the hands, clasped together, graceful fingers laced over one another, the gold wedding band glinting love and commitment. Jack squeezed his eyes shut. I’m sorry, Christian. Sorry I ever touched her. Forgive me. God, forgive me.

For information on Mary’s books go to her website: www.marycampisi.com.

Julie Lence

Traitorous Dealings

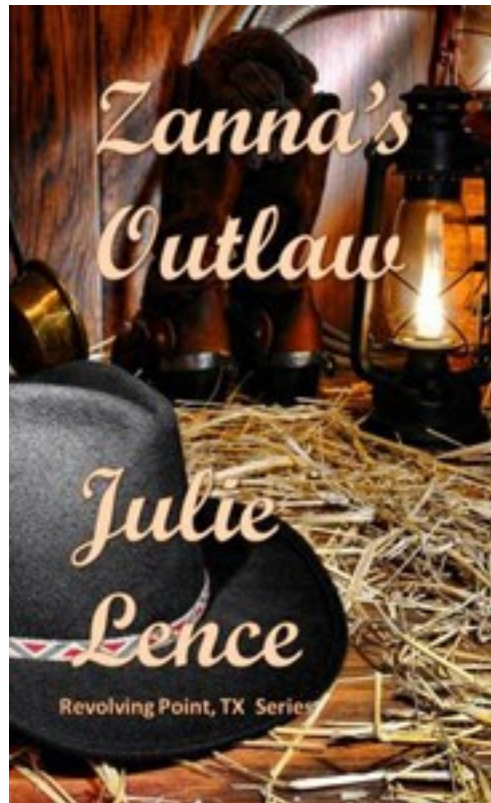
My husband, Stan, and I are high school sweethearts. We met in 12th grade. I knew his friend, Brad, and he knew my friend, Dawn. It was through Dawn that Stan and I met for the first time, on the way to a school Pep Rally. It definitely was not love at first sight. In fact, we didn't like each other. But Dawn liked Stan, so I saw him frequently. Brad would sometimes accompany Stan, and little by little, I got to know Stan better. Weeks after initially meeting Stan, I realized I did like him, and Brad was crazy for Dawn. So, Brad and I worked together to split up Stan and Dawn, and then Brad began dating Dawn and I began dating Stan. A little unorthodox, even traitorous, but those were the days of high school.

Brad and Dawn's relationship didn't last. They broke up a few weeks later, but Stan and I didn't. He introduced me to his family, I introduced him to mine and soon we were inseparable. We spent lunch time together—his mom made some great sandwiches—went shopping and had dinner at each other's homes. He went into the Air Force January of 1983 and the following January we married. Folks said it wouldn't last, but this past January we celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary.

We've had some great times through the years, and some hard times. One of the things that has kept us strong is the fact we come from the same town, the same background. We'll agonize over purchasing a piece of furniture for a month, yet we'll buy a house in a day. We'll argue a point to death and then make up. Movies, restaurants; our tastes are usually in sync. We applaud each other's accomplishments, support careers and suffer right along with each other's downfalls, and we listen when the other has something to say—usually.

Stan is a really great guy. It's because of him that I enjoy being a stay-at-home mom, with a writing career. He's always quick to help with computer problems, and he does brag about my writing accomplishments—this I learned from his co-workers. I will definitely keep him for another 28 years, and more.

As for Brad and Dawn...Dawn and I remain friends to this day. She's an awesome lady with a family of her own. Brad, I'm sad to say, we have lost touch with him. Last we heard, he was married and living in Florida. Stan and I owe a lot to both of them. We never would have met, much less have entered a relationship, without them.



About Zanna's Outlaw

Buck Grayson once lived within the boundaries of the law and will do so again—for Zanna.

Excerpt from Zanna's Outlaw

Buck stepped inside, closed the door and didn't make a move toward her. "That woman downstairs is worse than Emma."

"Did you come up here to complain?" She folded her arms beneath her breasts.

"I came to tell you I took this damn job for you." Plus, it made it easier to flush out Hanson's hired guns before they harmed her. But she didn't need to know that. She'd want to help and would do so behind his back if he didn't let her. "Not because I want a tumble between the sheets, but because you're my woman. That used to mean something to you."

"It still would if you'd tell me you love me."

"Dammit, Zanna. You know I do."

"Then say it," she challenged. "And don't give me the same old line about words being hard for you."

"They are." At least, those words were. The last time he'd said them his family had been murdered. With enemies lurking in the shadows, the same could happen to her. Pissing her off was one thing. He could tolerate her icy glare. Losing her forever was a whole different matter. "That doesn't mean I don't feel them."

She sighed irritably and looked away.

"Doesn't my coming here count for something when I swore I wouldn't?"

“If you can’t say the words,” she returned her gaze to him, “then I want you to prove you love me and intend to stay.”

“How?”

“By courting me.”

“What the hell do you think the last three years have been?”

“I thought I knew, but now I’m not so sure.” She glared at him. “You say I’m your woman. Prove it.”

“Sonofabitch, Zanna. Couldn’t you just beat me with your fry pan?”

“No,” she said in that same snotty tone that had beaten him many times in the past.

You can find more information about Julie’s book at her website: www.julielence.com.

Nikki Duncan

Love in the Lunch Line

Before I was a kid-wrangling-admin, task-managing, obsessive-in-love-with-writing, I was simply a woman in love with her husband. That simplicity disappeared years ago, though it's fun to revisit those days in my memories. This time, I'm going to take you down memory lane with me...if you can stand it.

It was a bright and sunny day in my junior year of high school. I was laughing with my friends as we entered the cafeteria for our lunch half-hour. There, across the room, sat a cute boy selling yearbooks. My friend waved at him and we kept going, with me asking her casually who he was. "Someone I went out with once. He's nice." It wasn't much to go on, but clearly she wasn't hiding any crush on him. And clearly the same was true of him because he began flirting with me from across the room. Okay, so his idea of flirting was making what I now know to be vulgar gestures.

Man, I was naïve.

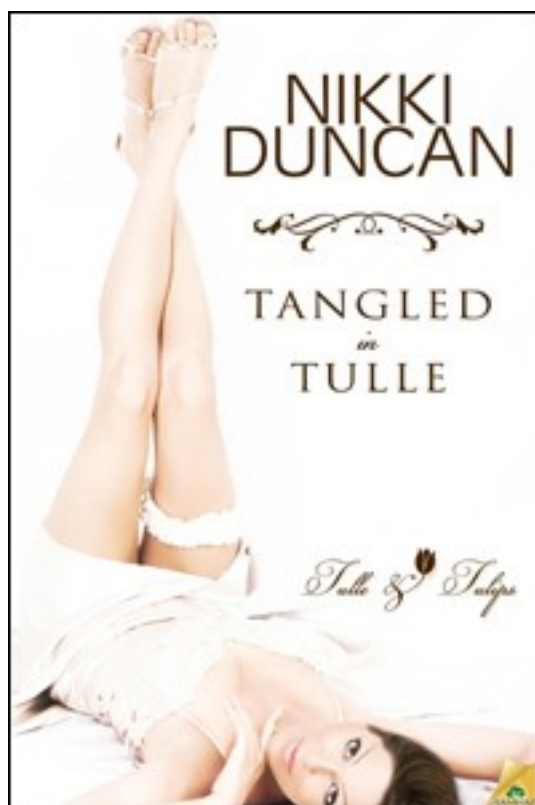
Fast forward a few weeks, with some cafeteria and hallway flirting in our past. We had an early release day for school and a bunch of friends and I had decided to go to Memories—a local diner where they made the best hamburgers and malts. Yep, those places were cool even in the early nineties.

What I didn't know was that my friends invited this cute boy I'd been flirting with. Then they promptly stood us up. I was traumatized. He was in a spot. It would be rude if he made me eat alone, so he stuck around. We ate. We laughed. We talked. We played a guessing game where he had me trying to figure out his middle name. The clue... "It has ice in it." You let me know if you can guess it, because I sure couldn't.

These beginning days should have revealed so much of what I was getting into. His sense of humor is still raunchy and he still loves to play pranks. But I was a blissfully blind girl with a crush. I only knew he was fun and nice to me, even if he didn't ask directly for a date. It seemed we fell into a pattern. My mom took me to the football games (a major sign that I liked him because I HATE football) where I would watch him play (in the band) and then he would drive me home. We classed the night up by stopping at McDonald's to share an order of fries on the way home. I think he liked me just because I was a cheap date.

Fast forward through high school where we dated almost constantly (minus one brief stint where he went stupid for a redhead) though we didn't see each other quite as much after he graduated a year before me. Then, shortly after I graduated, he asked me to marry him. I said yes and we decided to move in together (and *insert gasp here* live in sin.) My mother was dead set against this idea claiming that he would never really marry me. I ignored her and followed my heart.

I have to say, I haven't been sorry. We did get married not long after moving in together. Then we bought a house and began our family. And I am constantly reminded of the fun loving guy I dated in high school when he makes perverted comments and pulls pranks (mainly on his mom these days.) And I am constantly thrilled that I've spent the last 20 years with him. I can only imagine what we'll do together in the next 20 as I continue to feather bits and pieces of hubby into the heroes I put on paper.



About Tangled in Tulle

Lori Mullins yearns to shake off her past and live free of shadows and fear. Yet her only shot at obtaining the capital to launch her business rests in a man she met during a lie. A man whose voice alone turned her from jaded escort to giddy schoolgirl. A man who almost died because of her.

Trevor Masters can call off his search for the woman he loves. The woman he dreamt of while comatose. The quest for her heart, however, is only beginning. The trick will be convincing her he doesn't blame her—and that she deserves to accept herself as the woman who holds his heart.

Business negotiations land Lori in a heavenly hell. Heaven that Trevor is close enough to touch. Hell that she's planning her first designer wedding. His. And something's not quite right. The kind, compassionate man she fell for all those months ago, the man who's engaged to another, seems intent on wooing her...

Excerpt from Tangled in Tulle, book 1 in the Tulle and Tulips series.

"I can't do this." Lori Mullins reached over and pushed the button to lower the top on her best friend's convertible despite the chilled Miami air. A Christmas carol jingled from somewhere in the distance, though it was over a month away.

Inside the car-fume-scented parking garage fear squeezed her lungs faster than walls moving in on a claustrophobe. She needed fresh air, reassurance, courage. The confidence she'd had as

an operative for a clandestine arm of the CIA had dehydrated into a pea-sized shell and been squashed.

“You can,” Misty didn’t acknowledge the cooler air sweeping away the heater’s warmth as she pointed toward the automated doors across the parking garage. “Just go into the lobby, walk to the elevator and push the ‘up’ button.”

“Then when the doors open...” Lori trailed off, lost for a moment in the squeals of tires, the slam of doors and beep of an alarm, the stink of exhaust and rubber. She may not have been the highest level Whitestone operative, her final mission as an escort may never make sense, but she’d had a one-hundred-percent success rate on her jobs. Self-doubt had never been in her cache of attributes. Until now.

Until the last one, which had cost her the man she’d loved, ended her career and nearly claimed her life.

“You see the man who can grant your dreams,” Misty put in when Lori said nothing more.

“If only it were so simple.” Past success meant nothing. For that matter, few things from the past mattered beyond their power to impact her future.

“You shouldn’t be afraid of this.”

But she was. Maybe if she’d talked about why asking Trevor Masters for help was so tough she could’ve convinced Misty to pitch the business plan. The fact remained that while Misty was interested in working with her as the head floral designer, Tulle and Tulips Designer Weddings was Lori’s chance for a new beginning. A new life and talking about Trevor meant thinking about the part of her past she was trying to escape.

“You’ve covered every angle of the business plan. Your projections are smart and conservative.”

“But...”

Misty speared her with a hard glare, cutting off her arguments. “If Trevor Masters is half the businessman you claim, he’ll see your brilliance and will have no choice but to back you.”

“Except wedding planning has absolutely no relation to technology.” And he has every reason to want to turn me away. “I shouldn’t have contacted him.” Not that she’d gotten past his new assistant.

“Successful, smart business ventures are one and the same no matter what name you put on them.” Misty reached over Lori and opened the door. “Get out. Go. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

Putting into words what could happen, why facing Trevor was so painful, hurt more than thinking about it—and that was plenty debilitating—so Lori nodded once and swung her legs from the car. The click of her heels on the concrete vibrated up her thighs. The vibration reminded her of the first time she’d taken this same path to see Trevor Masters.

The assignment to accompany the CEO to a business dinner had seemed simple, yet her life had been forever changed.

Misty reached for the button to raise the car top. Holding Misty’s certainty close, Lori grabbed her briefcase and torture forged determination. “You can be a real pain in the ass.”

“Eh. What good’s a friend if she can’t give you a kick in the keister on occasion?”

“No good at all.” The Misty inspired, cheek-stretching smile erased Lori’s concerns and fears. Misty was the single person who’d stayed permanent in her life, and had known she worked for the government. She’d been the one to help her heal and discover a sense of freedom from the past.

Even if the freedom wouldn't last, Lori laughed. Feeling stronger, she crossed to the doors and approached the elevators. Three times she stopped, turned and contemplated running away.

A bell chimed. The doors opened to reveal the posh marble elevator she'd once felt comfortable in.

Comfortable.

She smirked and stiffened her spine.

As the doors closed, cutting off her retreat, Lori's mind slipped back to the last time she'd pushed that button to take this ride.

The knee-length, form-hugging cocktail dress finished off with delicate jewelry and rhinestone covered stilettos whispered seductive power and made her feel strong. Or maybe that came from the anticipation of seeing Trevor again.

He captivated her. Had from their first meeting. Still did.

Serious-minded with a reputation for caring first and foremost about business, he'd allowed her glimpses of his melted-fudge heart. He'd laughed with her and shared casual dinners with her. He'd pulled her in until she cared more about the man than the job.

He'd become emotionally dangerous.

That last night together, with the city lights caressing the waters lapping at the beach, while they sat on the couch in the apartment off his office sharing pizza and tingling from sex, she'd become the dangerous one. The weapon.

She'd almost gotten him killed because she'd failed to discover Madame V's goals or how far she'd push things to win.

Only after she'd returned to the Elegant Entertainment mansion had she overheard Madame V, her boss of the moment, boasting about how Lori had helped ensure that Trevor would sign a high-profile contract before the night—and his life—were over. She'd only barely managed to get back to Trevor's office in time to stop his suicidal rush into traffic.

The elevator chimed with the announcement of Lori's arrival. Her heart slowed to a crawl. I should have found another backer.

The doors opened. In slate-gray suit pants, a crisply pressed, pale blue shirt which matched his eyes perfectly and a tie a shade darker stood the man she'd longed to see. Dreaded to see.

Trevor.

She took a step. Stopped.

Her heart trembled within its shrinking cage. Hopes, doubts, fears coalesced and lodged into a word barricade in her throat.

His long, narrow face, frozen in an I'm-on-a-mission-and-won't-be-swayed stare, captivated her as quickly as it had the first time. Like the first time, she knew the secret to his success had to lie in part in his skill at hiding his thoughts, because knowing he was on a mission didn't help without knowing what mission.

Not knowing made erecting defenses impossible and she needed all of them she could muster.

"Lori." Her name, soft and even, with no inflection or hint of emotion, served as a backhand to the cheekbone. Sharp. Blinding. She shouldn't have come to him. She should have listened to the fifteen banks unwilling to take a chance on her in the current economic climate.

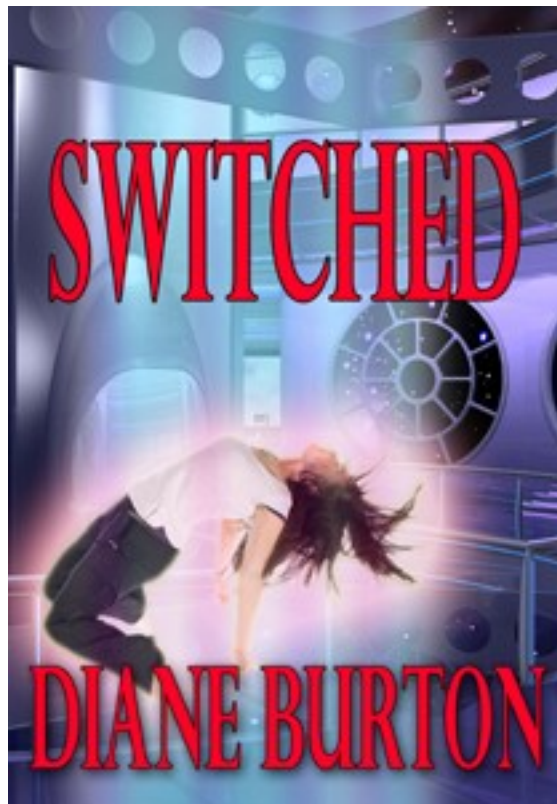
Nikki's most recent release is *TANGLED IN TULLE*, the first book of a new wedding planner series. Find information on this and Nikki's other stories on her website at

www.nikkiduncan.com.

Diane Burton

Intervention

I met my husband on my first and only blind date arranged by three married friends who wanted company in their misery—er, happiness. Our initial contact was a phone call that lasted over an hour and it wasn't one sided with me doing all the yakking. We found we had so much in common including the fact that we lived across the apartment complex parking lot from each other. With me working regular hours as a teacher and him working swing shift at a steel mill, we weren't likely to meet without our friends' intervention. He asked me out for a drink (I think he was hedging his bet in case I was a real dog). Something clicked because the drink extended into dinner and then on to a movie. Best first date I ever had. I didn't learn until later that a commercial I enthused about during dinner was for his company's competitor. He obviously didn't hold that against me as we've been together for nearly forty years.



About Switched, a futuristic romance

Kidnapped by aliens? By mistake? When a wise-cracking Earth girl is beamed aboard an alien starship, she meets a regular Mr. Spock. The captain's well-organized life is turned upside down by the free-spirited Terran. Fate brings them together. Treachery tears them apart.

Excerpt from Switched

The captain walked over to a small alcove. A short shelf jutted from the wall about waist-high. "Would you care for refreshments?" he asked. "Perhaps a cup of xephod tea. You may find it quite soothing."

"What, no Earl Grey?" Jessie smirked. "Captain Picard would offer Earl Grey."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose then looked at her. Was that pity in his eyes? "If it eases your mind to believe this is a Star Trek convention, so be it. As Ensign Drakus pointed out that is a popular pastime for aficionados of what you Terrans consider science fiction." He held out a steaming container.

She accepted the handleless cup and stared briefly into the depths of deep red liquid. "This isn't some sort of drug, is it?" She sniffed. The fragrance reminded her of cinnamon and citrus. "Like you'd tell me if it was," she muttered in self-derision.

"I will drink first to ease your mind." He raised his own cup, inhaled the aroma, and took a swallow.

"How long before you keel over?"

He stared at her.

"Okay, okay. Just joking." She sipped the aromatic liquid. Pure, unadulterated pleasure flowed over her tongue. As she swallowed the tea, warmth coursed down her throat and radiated outward. The tension in her neck and arms disappeared, leaving behind tranquility. "Whoa. I could really use this after a long day. I'd give my eyeteeth for some to take home. Is this stuff legal?"

The tight muscles in his face relaxed and he smiled. Good God, what a smile. The corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement. For a moment, she thought he looked familiar. But, as she stared at him, his smile disappeared and an intensity came into his eyes. Those tingly feelings started skitting over her skin again.

"Alliance Space Fleet regulations prohibit illegal substances aboard starships," he pontificated. He had to spoil things by sounding like her dad again.

As he perched on the arm of a chair, his uniform stretched over the hard muscles of his thigh. She nearly choked on her tea. Geez, Jess, get your mind above his waist.

"You still do not believe, do you?"

"What?" Distracted, she picked up another carving. This one had antlers, a duckbill, and webbed feet.

"That is a rumiduck. It is native to my planet, Serenia." He paused, thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is better you do not believe. That will cause you less anxiety. And if you do return to your home, you can convince yourself this was all a dream."

"Whoever carved these had a wonderful imagina—" She whipped her head up. "What do you mean if I return home? Look, mister, I have a business to run, a loan that rivals the national debt, car payments on a truck older than me, and the IRS wants their thirteen hundred dollars in estimated taxes by next Thursday so you damn well better figure out how to get me home." She inhaled sharply, trying to catch her breath. The calming effects of the tea had completely disappeared.

When he began to stroke his whiskerless chin, she forgot everything. Her anger, her fear. She stared at his face. Having received a few whisker burns, she wondered what it would be like to kiss a man with a face so smooth.

A jolt ran through her. What am I thinking?

"I like your spirit, Jessica Marie Wyndom." His killer smile, coupled with his smooth baritone, struck a resonant chord deep within her.

Whew. That tea must be an aphrodisiac. Her emotions were running amok.

"You are not fearful like the others."

Again, cold trickled down her spine. She bobbled the carving of a unicorn, the only beast she recognized. "Others?"

"Periodically, we orbit your planet. The younger members of my crew like to listen to your rock-and-roll music." He grimaced. "I admit the music is better than the raucous sounds from Zorf. Of course, none can compare to the soothing quality of the music from my home planet, Serenia."

Zorf? Serenia? He's into play-acting a little too deep.

"On occasion, I have indulged my crew by allowing them to transport a rock star aboard. Like you, many thought this was a science-fiction convention. However, we did not disabuse them of that concept."

"Why aren't you letting me believe?"

He smiled—that killer smile again—which made her heart do a little tap dance. "You are different." Before she could ask how, he went on. "Our purpose is research. We are observers of civilization. Yours is a primitive culture, much like we were once. We find Earth...interesting."

She'd humor him. Maybe he had to deliver his whole spiel before admitting this was all make-believe. "Okay, if you're really an alien from a galaxy far, far away, how come I can understand you and your crew?" She gave him a triumphant look.

"The universal translator I attached behind your ear provides two-way translations. It converts our terms into comparable concepts in your language. The Alliance is comprised of many planets whose inhabitants are of various races and species. Our translators enable us to communicate with one another."

When he tapped the black spot behind his ear, she noticed his long, slender fingers which, like his hands, were devoid of hair.

"Without our universal translators," he continued, "it would be impossible to communicate with the members of the Alliance or to understand the inhabitants of the primitive planets we research, like Earth."

She ignored the reference to primitive. "So, you're like—voyeurs?"

He frowned. "Observers."

"This is too much. Next, you're going to say you want to impregnate me to carry on your species because your planet is dying."

He arched that eyebrow again. "Why would I wish to mate with an inhabitant from such a primitive culture?"

"Talk about adding insult to injury," she huffed with exaggerated affront. "First, I'm kidnapped by aliens—by mistake, no less. And now you're telling me no sex?" She gave him a droll look. "Bummer."

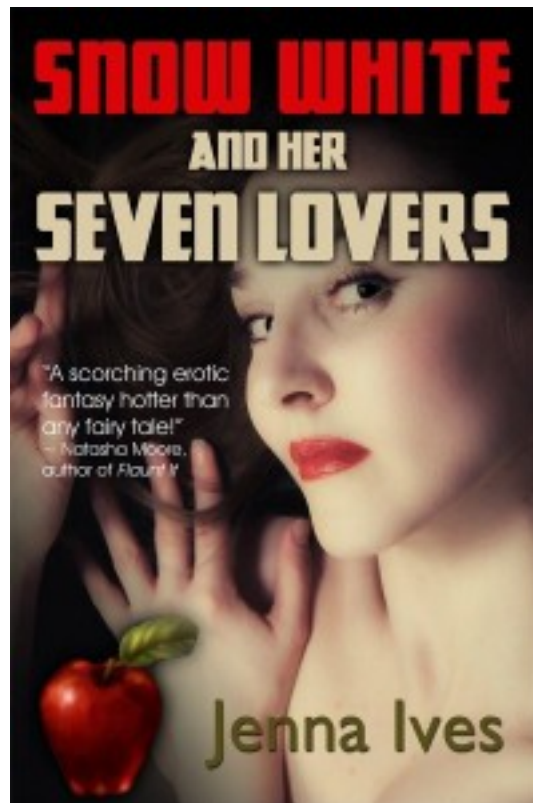
Switched is available in e-format at Amazon and Barnes & Noble

For more information about Diane Burton—out of this world adventures—and her books, visit her website: www.dianeburton.com.

Jenna Ives

Only an Englishman Would Do

When I was 11-years-old, my 8-year-old cousin and I used to sit around my bedroom like typical young girls and daydream about what our husbands would be like. She vowed to marry Donny Osmond when she grew up, but I always insisted that I was going to marry an Englishman. Fast forward a dozen years: I'd become a real working girl, living far from home in New York City and working at a TV network job I loved, when one Saturday night I walked into a bar with two of my girlfriends and met this handsome Englishman! The minute he and I started talking, it was like we'd known each other forever. We married two years later. To this day, my cousin still teases me about it! And no, she did not marry Donny Osmond.



About Snow White and Her Seven Lovers

Snow White And Her Seven Lovers, is an erotic version of the classic fairy tale, which has our poisoned, amnesiac heroine moving in with the ER doctor who saved her life and his six best friends. It's only until she regains her memory and can figure out who tried to kill her, but never underestimate the powerful attraction of seven gorgeous guys.

Excerpt from Snow White and Her Seven Lovers

Today was Saturday.

That meant sex with Doc tonight.

Not only was he a real doctor, but his favorite sexual fantasy was to “play doctor” with me. And frankly, my favorite activity was to spend the whole week thinking up ailments he could, um, treat me for.

Mostly they were gynecological.

Yes, if I was honest, I’d have to say that Saturday was my favorite day of the week. Not that I’d admit it to my six other lovers. I was very satisfied with—and by—each of them. But Doc was my clear favorite.

And it wasn’t only because of the sex.

Hmm. Maybe I should start this story from the beginning...

Doc was the first person I’d seen on that day three months ago when my entire life had changed. I’d opened my eyes to find myself in a hospital emergency room, with the most incredible pair of baby blues staring down at me in obvious concern. I’d been nauseous, my throat painfully sore, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember what had happened. Or even who I was.

However, I could definitely appreciate the sight of my gorgeous black-haired, blue-eyed doctor. I’d probably fallen half in lust with him right then.

Doc had patiently explained that I’d been poisoned. And that a bunch of his friends had found me lying unconscious in a nearby orchard and brought me to the hospital. And sure enough, just minutes after I’d regained consciousness, there were six additional sets of eyes looking down at me with equal concern.

Wow. Seven hot men, one more gorgeous than the next.

Doc took personal charge of my case, and at least two of his six friends stopped by to check on me each evening. With no memory—and so no family I could contact—the friends’ visits became my favorite part of the day, especially as I got to know them better. The policeman. The librarian. The teacher. The computer whiz. The engineer. The sweet-faced baker, who brought me chocolate chip cookies to offset the bland hospital food. Together with Doc, they were an amazingly diverse bunch of guys, yet clearly the best of friends.

And these men shared more than just friendship. I discovered they all had a deep sense of responsibility—they obviously felt very protective after rescuing me in the orchard.

On the night before I was to be discharged, they’d all gathered in my hospital room, concern etched on each and every male face.

Doc frowned. “I don’t like it, but the hospital has to let you go tomorrow. You’re perfectly healthy now, and yet... you were poisoned.” He blew out a breath. “I’m convinced it wasn’t a suicide attempt, because your mental state seems far from suicidal. But that leaves us with this: it’s been seventy-two hours, and no one’s come to the hospital looking for you...”

“...or to the police station, either,” the cop, Tom, added. “There haven’t even been any leads I could follow. It’s odd—if someone was trying to kill you, my police instincts tell me they’d be snooping around, wanting to know if they’d succeeded. There should be some clue I could follow. This doesn’t make sense.”

“After all,” the engineer, Steve, pointed out, “you don’t exactly look like a runaway who doesn’t want to be found—”

“—or some vagrant street person,” the sloe-eyed librarian, Brad, agreed.

No, I didn’t feel like a runaway, a street person, or someone intent on suicide, but there were a host of other possibilities, like ... was I married? Doc told me I hadn’t been wearing a ring

when his friends discovered me in the orchard, but even so, several times over the last few days I'd stared at my finger, even feeling the skin for a possible indentation. But there was nothing. No tan line, no mark, just smooth skin. And if I was honest, in my gut I didn't feel married.

But not knowing who I was made me sick to my stomach.

"When we found you, you had no purse with you," the teacher, Bob, reminded me. "And no cell phone..."

"...which means you have no money," the computer whiz Jacob finished. "No I.D. Can't do much in the world without those."

It was true. On top of no memory, I had no way of supporting myself. How did an amnesiac go about starting a new life? What was I going to do?

There was a heavy silence in the room, until Doc said, "You know, you could move into our house."

That suggestion was met by a chorus of male heads bobbing in eager agreement.

It was an incredibly generous offer, and their enthusiasm touched my heart. "You guys have been great, but..."

"Please, consider it," Doc urged. "We all live together in a big place on the outskirts of town—an old bed and breakfast we converted back to a house. You'd have free room and board, and in return, maybe you can cook a few meals for us. With a place to stay, you wouldn't feel such pressure to force your memory to return. Plus, if you move in with us, I can watch over your recovery."

I blushed a little self-consciously. During these last three days, I'd found that I'd like to do much more than cook for these seven gorgeous guys, which was another reason I was convinced I wasn't married. In getting to know them, I'd discovered that each one of these men had qualities that attracted me. How was it possible that such decent, good-hearted guys were all still single?

I fidgeted in my hospital bed. "I don't know..."

"If you stay with us, I can keep my ears open at the police station for any news on your case," Tom pointed out. "Or, if your memory returns—and it turns out someone really did try to kill you—you'll have me right there when you remember the identity of the perp." He paused. "And if your memory doesn't return, you'd be safest with seven of us around to protect you if that scumbag should decide to try again."

Goodness. There were so many logical reasons for me to move in with them, in addition to this attraction I felt.

"But you need a name," the sweet-faced baker declared. "What'll we call you?"

"How about Blanche?" Doc suggested. "Blanche is the French word for white. And you're white, in a way. Clean, like a blank slate. You can create your own identity from here on out, or at least until you remember the one you had."

Blanche. It didn't strike any memories, so obviously it wasn't my real name, but it would do as well as any other. At least for the time being.

"What do you say, Blanche?" Doc asked quietly. "Will you come live with us?"

I looked around at seven expectant faces. It was true that with no money I didn't have many alternatives for living arrangements, but in the end it wasn't really a hard decision to make. They obviously wanted me to stay with them as much as I was tempted to accept. This tight-knit band of best friends had saved my life, and even though I'd known them for only three short days, my gut told me I could trust them.

"Okay," I agreed.

They took me home the next day.

During that first week, I'd fully expected Doc to come home from the hospital with news that frantic relatives were looking for me. Or Tom telling me that someone had finally filled out a missing persons report at the police station. But there was nothing. The days turned into weeks, until two months had gone by with no word from anyone. And no return of my memory, either.

So I made a decision: I resolved not to dwell on the depressing possibility of never knowing, but instead be grateful that I was safe in this house with these wonderful men.

And now, after three months, I honestly couldn't imagine my life any other way. I was deeply happy here. These seven friends had welcomed me with open arms, treated me like a princess from Day One, and I'd decided somewhere along the way that I wanted to do something to repay their kindness and support. Slowly, I set about discovering what each man seemed to be lacking in his life, and then resolved to fill that need in whatever way I could.

Granted, it wasn't too much of a surprise in a house bachelors to find that what was lacking was a meaningful relationship with a woman, but it was a surprise to find how much I wanted to be that woman. For all of them.

In whatever way they needed. Physically, intellectually or emotionally.

I'd come to love all seven of these men, each in different ways. And as we'd settled into a comfortable routine here, that routine came to include my spending some private time with each man on a different evening of the week.

Seven men. Seven days. To do whatever they wanted.

But I definitely loved my time with Doc the best. With a shiver of anticipation now, I knocked lightly on Doc's bedroom door, then turned the handle and let myself in. He looked up from the thick medical journal he was studying at his desk.

"Excuse me, doctor. I'm sorry to bother you, but I have this pain..."

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. The game was on.

"I see." His voice dropped to a low rumble, and his blue eyes darkened to the sexiest shade of sapphire. I loved it when he looked at me like that. It made me go all shivery inside. "Where exactly would this pain be?"

"Between my legs, doctor."

"Hmm." He pushed his chair back from his desk, looking at me thoughtfully. "Is it a sharp pain, or more of a dull ache?"

I feigned innocence, playing my part. "I'm not sure. It just feels... uncomfortable."

"Ah. A medical mystery. Well then, I'll definitely need to examine you to determine what might be causing it. Take off your clothes and hop up on the bed."

"All my clothes?" I made my voice sound sweetly naïve. God, how I loved playing these games!

"Oh, yes. The discomfort might be between your legs, but it could originate in another area of your body. You never know."

"Well... all right, doctor. If you say so."

He rose from his chair and headed for the closet. I knew he was going for his medical bag, the one he always kept in the house for emergencies, the one which had been enhanced recently with a few special, er, instruments that he only used on me.

I shivered in delicious anticipation and slipped out of my clothes, letting them fall haphazardly to the floor. Then I laid on his bed.

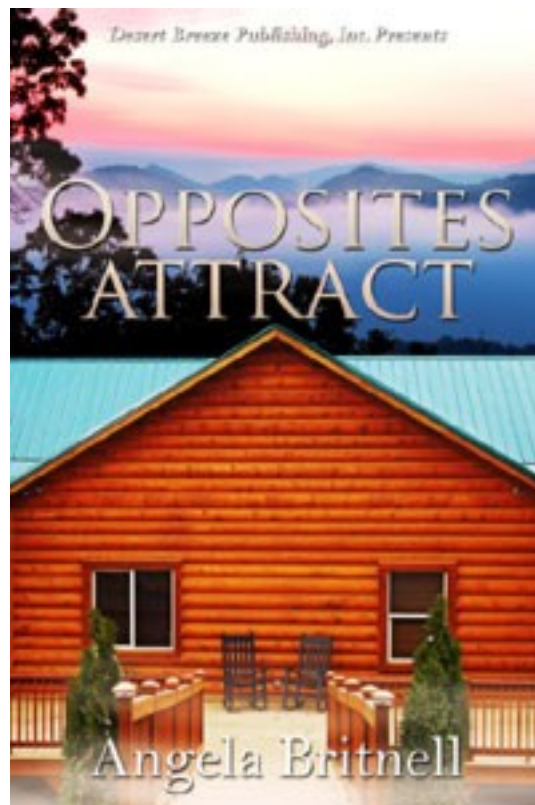
The novella is available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and All Romance eBooks.

Angela Britnell

A Wren in Denmark

Almost thirty years ago as a young Wren, which is what girls in the Royal Navy were called then, I arrived at my NATO posting in Denmark. I was sure I'd be surrounded by blond handsome Danes but instead I ended up with my own tall, dark, handsome stranger and wouldn't swap him for anything.

Richard was there with the US Navy and we immediately hit it off sharing the same dry sense of humor. We'd only known each other a month and things were going well when I almost messed things up. I was on duty one day and was one of two people responsible for locking up our particular section. The next morning I arrived at work to be confronted by the fact a safe was left open and three guesses what duty officer discovered this security breach? Luckily he decided I wasn't a complete ditz and asked me out anyway! We were engaged in a few months and married less than a year later. Nearly 29 years of marriage and three wonderful sons later we still laugh about that day and yes—he still checks I've locked the door when we go away on holiday!



About Opposites Attract

Why can no one believe Holly and Brett are content with their single lives? Certainly their interfering parents don't and they decide to take action. The 'Opposites Attract' dating agency has the theory if normal matchmaking hasn't worked they'll turn it upside down. The uptight

British policewoman and the laid-back Southern writer are complete opposites and so will make the perfect mismatch. A weekend in Paris turns magical but secrets, lies and sheer stubbornness threaten this romance before it hardly gets off the ground. Holly and Brett will fight love all the way and it's a question of who'll give in first.

Excerpt From Opposites Attract

Holly sucked in a deep breath. This wasn't on her agenda. The neat picture she'd formed of Brett Adair - short, thin, pale and chain-smoking - was just blown into next week. She preferred her men sharp, from their haircuts to their suits, to their minds. No way did she have any interest whatsoever in a lanky American with a cowboy hat and an accent straight from 'The Dukes of Hazzard.' He probably made moonshine in his spare time, when he wasn't shooting squirrels or ... whatever they did. She would make her position crystal clear. "The only things I plan on enjoying are the sights of Paris. I don't intend to let the fact I have to see them in the company of a stranger spoil my weekend. It's unfortunate, but I'm sure we can make the best of things."

"Hey, you don't take any prisoners do you?" Brett threw up his arms in mock surrender.

"Actually I do, often, or have you forgotten what I do for a living?"

Brett laughed. The deep, warm sound of it sent a little shiver through her belly. That laugh made her almost give in and smile.

"Smart lady. You're quick on the draw, anyone ever tell you that?"

"Not if they wanted to see me again." Mortified heat instantly flamed in her cheeks. God, that sounded like flirting.

A lazy smile crept from his eyes—a deep Mediterranean blue she'd have preferred not to notice—all the way to his mouth, turning up the edges of lips way too tempting to a woman who hadn't been kissed in over a year. Her belly clenched. She told herself she was just hungry.

Brett tipped his head toward her and stared straight into her eyes. One slight move, and his mouth would touch hers. Oh, God. Would he kiss her senseless if she wasn't careful? Her heart raced. Would he dare? Did she want him to?

"Come on, y'all. Time to get on board. Paris, here we come."

Brett took a step back and grinned at his father. "Sure thing, me and Holly here were just getting to know each other. Weren't we, darlin'?"

Holly buttoned her jacket, grateful for the interruption. She could've done something really stupid, there. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not your darling and never will be. We've merely got to tolerate each other for two days like reasonable adults. End of story."

For more information on Angela and her books, go to her website:
www.angelabritnellromance.com.

Cris Anson

They Danced into My Heart

On a Friday the thirteenth at the dawn of the Age of Aquarius, I was at a singles club's monthly dance in my mini-dress and heavy eyeliner and teased hair. And I loved to dance! I was always out on the floor. During the band's intermission, I sat at a table of ten to meet 'n' mingle. When the music started up again, almost everyone stood up and partnered off to the dance floor. All except me and a long-haired, bearded, hippie hunk. "Well," I said, "are you going to sit here or are we going to dance?" Turns out he was quite a dancer, and he danced his way into my heart. I knew after three dates that he was The One. We married six months from the day we met, on a Saturday the thirteenth (we didn't want to wait for the next Friday the thirteenth). His name was Fred and my friends called him Fredbeard (channeling Redbeard the Pirate—his beard did have a red tinge to it).

Alas, Happy Ever After only lasted twelve and a half years, and he died of cancer.

Nevertheless, lightning did strike me twice!

I don't even remember meeting Ed, he was just...there. My husband had given me a single-reflex camera for our fifth Christmas together, and I joined a local camera club to make sense of its bells and whistles. Eventually I became that club's newsletter editor and I became aware of Ed as a fellow officer and board member. When Fred and I held parties, Ed joined the fun. When we hosted a photo outing at our farm, Ed was part of the group. When my husband was dying, Ed came to visit him in the hospital.

Afterward, Ed knew how much I was grieving, so several months later, to get me out of my I-want-to-be-alone mind-set, he offered to teach me how to use the new macro lens I had in my camera bag. He helped me with yard chores, he shoveled snow, drove me around searching for photo ops. He never pushed, never made a "move", he was just...there. He'd merely say, "I know you're hurting."

One evening he drove me to a nightclub an hour away where a 17-piece Big Band played Forties music a la Glenn Miller and we danced. And danced and danced. And I knew I had found another True Love.

This one lasted almost twenty-three years. Ed's gone now, and I've grieved again. I miss them both, remember them both with a heart full of love, but I'm looking for more lightning. Because people die, but romance lives on.

Is it any wonder that I should WRITE romance? And that I put bits and pieces of each of my husbands into my fictional heroes?



About Punishment and Mercy

A wanton young widow in 1694 Massachusetts Bay Colony is flogged in public for sexual congress outside matrimony. Her irate father forces her marriage to a dominating blacksmith. But the blacksmith's apprentice falls in love with her. Two men loving one woman. How will she find her heart's desire?

Excerpt from Punishment and Mercy

Her father's dire gaze pinned her to the pine-planked floor. "All you need understand is that as of the morrow, Master Burroughs has agreed to take you to wife in exchange for your dowry of Asa Walcott's lands, which I have held in trust for you."

"What! You cannot be—"

"Silence!" His thunderous voice rolled around the large stone-walled room and came to rest heavily on her pounding heart. "You have shamed yourself and me with your promiscuous and devious ways. No God-fearing man is safe from your wiles as long as you remain free to sway your hips through the streets of Dunwood without escort."

He took a heavy breath. "Being a widow does not give you license to lure the unwary to lecherous thoughts and deeds. You should be filling your days with good works for the poor instead of ensnaring the minds of those susceptible to the Devil's intentions."

"I have done no such—"

"You will not run your mouth to me! You have been nothing but a thistle in my boot since your worthy husband left his earthly home, God rest his immortal soul. You have caused me no

end of dishonor by your shameless behavior. Today's blatant display of your...your bosoms did not go unmentioned by the proper ladies of the church."

With all her fierce will she kept her voice from rising to a screech. "It was the Reverend who stripped me of my gown, the Reverend who flogged me so harshly that I twisted and curled to avoid his vindictive strokes. Do not make it appear as though I deliberately sought to expose myself." Mercy could feel her face and throat heat as the lie threatened to ensnare her.

Her father shot off his chair and lunged for her. "The Almighty help me, but I cannot wait until I am free of this burden of your insolent tongue! Would that I had been gifted with all sons, for your brothers have never shamed me." He gripped her shoulders and began shaking her. Mercy's head bobbed back and forth.

"I will handle the she-cat." Master Burroughs calmly stepped forward, towering over them to lay a restraining hand on her father's shoulder. The old man, heaving a deep and relieved breath, released her and, with an oath on his lips, retreated to the table and poured himself another mug of rum.

"Mercy Walcott," the blacksmith said, gripping her shoulders with a fearsome strength, "you may have been able to ignore your father's strictures, but I assure you, you will be subservient to me in all things."

His eyes penetrated deep into hers, making her limbs weak, as did his thumbs lightly caressing her shoulders under the linsey-woolsey of her robe. "Beginning this moment you will obey me in matters large and small. You will walk a step behind me. You will hasten to do my bidding whatsoever it shall be. And I will save you from your wicked ways and protect you from the meddlers and the whisperers and, yes, the weak men who lust after you. Once you have felt the touch of my...dominance, you will wish for no other. This I promise."

Releasing her, he spun on the heel of his shined leather boot and pinned her father with his stare. "I expect to see her at tomorrow's church service, Mr. Phips, ready and willing to be wed." His glance raked her for an instant, scalding her. "And I expect her to be suitably and demurely attired. Henceforth no man shall see any hint of what is mine alone."

Without another word or glance, Master Burroughs departed her father's humble home, leaving Mercy speechless and her heart thudding.

For more information about Cris Anson and her books, go to her website:
www.crisanson.com.

Beate Boeker

Around the World to Find Love

“I have to work as a trainee in an accounting department before I can enroll for the next level of my university course,” I told my father at breakfast one day. “Several weeks, in fact. Any idea how to make that bearable?”

“Sure,” my father spread a pound of butter onto his toast, as he did every morning. “Why don’t you go to Hong Kong?”

I blinked. Hong Kong? I knew nothing about Hong Kong. I had grown up in Germany and spent nine months in France, so I was seriously Europe-minded. Asia didn’t tempt me. Besides, I didn’t like big cities.

On the other hand, I needed all the help I could get to scrape through the weeks of accounting (you will have guessed by now that I’m not an enthusiastic number-cruncher.).

“What do you have in mind?” I asked with caution.

“I know a guy there. He’s the managing director of our Hong Kong subsidiary, and I think he would take you on. Write an application and give it to me. I’ll pass it on.”

My father worked for a large chemical company in Duesseldorf, Germany, and had to travel a lot, so he knew people all over the world. Sweating over my application, I tried to make it sound as interesting as I could, but with my twenty-one years in life, I still felt I had too little to say.

When I was finally done, I gave the precious letter and my meager CV to my father and asked him every week for months if he had received an answer. Nothing. At some point, I decided to forget Hong Kong and to get on with my math exam preparation instead (a painful experience).

Two weeks before I was scheduled to go, he got a call. “Is your daughter still interested in coming to HK?” the CEO asked.

“I guess so,” my father said.

“Then tell her to come. But she has to stay at a hotel because my nephew is living with us at the moment.”

“Stupid nephew,” I said when I heard the news (that was after I had finished screaming with excitement.) “Why does he have to stay there right now?”

After days packed full with excitement and preparations and vaccinations, I curled up on my airplane going to Hong Kong and couldn’t believe my luck. I still remember the book I read - Daddy Longlegs by Jean Webster. To this day, it’s one of my favorites.

The wife of the CEO met me at the airport. I was wildly excited. Everything was so different. I’d never seen such high buildings, had never seen building constructions made of bamboo, had never seen so many people in one spot. And the smell - oh, the smell. So exotic, so un-German, so spicy . . . I was quivering with anticipation.

“We have to pick up Michi downtown, then we’ll go out for dinner,” she said.

Michi. Michi is a German nick-name for a small boy who’s real name is Michael. I pursed my lips. No doubt he’s sixteen and a computer nerd. (I’d learned already that he was working as a trainee at a large computer company).

But when I met “Michi” (I later learned that no-one but his aunt calls him like that), I realized that this guy was older than I am, with long, jeans-clad legs and the kindest brown eyes I had ever seen. That night, he drove me and another business acquaintance home from dinner.

The business acquaintance asked, “Why are you taking the long road to go downtown? The tunnel would be quicker.”

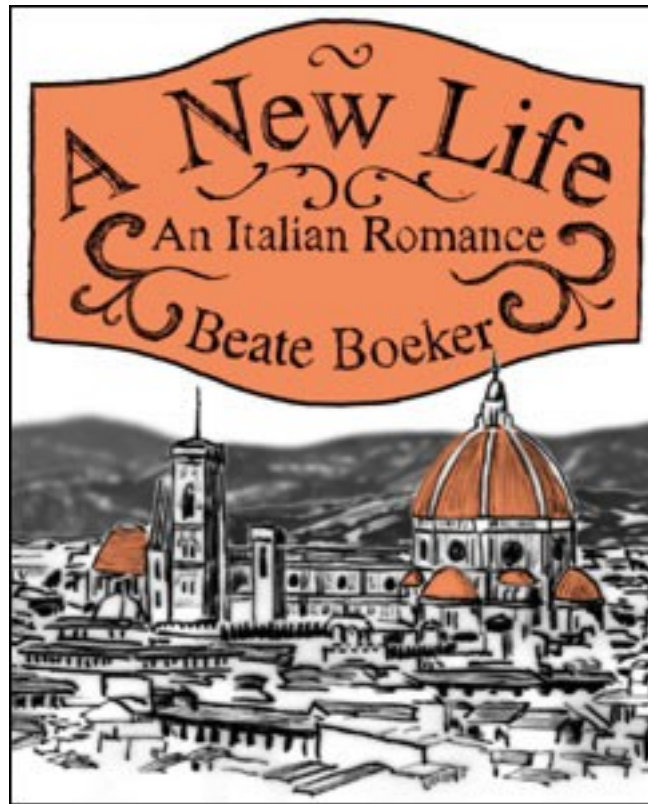
Michael replied. “It’s Beate’s first night in Hong Kong. She has to see the skyline.”

I knew then that the kind eyes had not been misleading.

In the next weeks, I fell in love with Hong Kong. With its busy people, with the amazing food (I could live on Dim Sum, morning, day, night), with the bar Ned Kelly’s, with that amazing mix of modern life and Chinese tradition . . . and I fell in love with Michael.

At the beginning of my stay, The CEO told Michael to keep an eye on “the kid”. After all, he had promised my father to keep me safe in the big city. But when my weeks in Hong Kong came to an end, he looked at us, shook his head at his nephew, and said. “I didn’t mean it quite like that when I said you should look after her.”

It is a bit strange that two Germans had to travel to the other end of the world to meet, but today - a good twenty years later - I still say it was right. It was meant to be.



About A New Life

Beate Boeker is a marketing manager by day and a writer by night. She has published several contemporary romances with Avalon Books and a range of e-books. Her latest e-novel is called A New Life, a mix of romance and mystery, set in Italy.

If you mix Latin and German, Beate Boeker literally translates as Happy Books, and with a name like that, what else can she do but find a happy ending for her novels?

Excerpt from A New Life

"No, I didn't kill him." Anne frowned at the sound of her voice. If only she knew how to say it in Italian.

Then again, no. Anne shook her head.

She didn't have to know it.

Because nobody would ask.

She had to remember it was all in the past.

The loudspeaker spat out some Italian sentences. Anne tilted her head but didn't understand a word. Thank God the stewardess continued in English. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we're now approaching Florence. Please fasten your seat belts, and put your seats in an upright position."

Florence! Anne swallowed. How often had she dreamed of Florence. How often had she asked her mother to show her the pictures yet again, to speak of the light, of the beauty, of the Italian sun. Anne closed her eyes. She could hear her mother even now, her musical voice and her explosive laughter.

She would never have believed that one day, she would be reluctant to see Florence.

Anne clenched her teeth. She had to stop thinking about it. She had to concentrate on a dream come true, no matter the circumstances, no matter it felt like a nightmare.

She angled her head to get a better view of Florence through the window, but the plane was surrounded by clouds. It looked as if they were cutting through a thick layer of gray cotton wool.

Almost there. Anne's eyes burned as she fought back a wave of fear. How she wished she could go back to Seattle. But that wasn't an option.

You'll be fine, she told herself and stared at the clouds. The red lights from the wings reflected in the towering gray masses before they cut into them. For an instant, Anne closed her eyes. Even if the whole of Europe should turn out to be gray, it had one big advantage.

Nobody knew her here.

That counted more than everything. She nodded to herself. Giorgio had promised she could avoid all Americans at the hotel. Maybe, for once, Giorgio had told the truth.

She sighed. How she wished she didn't depend on their weak family connection.

The plane dipped lower, and they emerged from the gray cotton wool. Anne's eyes widened. How close to the ground they were already! For an instant, she could make out a few scattered buildings before the rain streamed along the little oval window in horizontal lines and blurred her view. She might see more if she took off her huge sun-glasses, bought especially to hide as much of her face as possible, but she had kept them on all the way because they made her feel anonymous. She would soon have to face the world without them. All too soon.

Half an hour later, she stared at a huge sign on the wall while waiting for her giant suitcase to arrive on the belt.

Benvenuto da Firenze. Welcome to Florence. Willkommen in Florenz. Bienvenue à Florence. The words reverberated through her. Welcome. Would she be welcome? She doubted it. Anne grabbed her elephant suitcase, hefted it off the belt and dragged it to the exit. Her heart beat hard against her ribs.

The airport was so small, you could walk in ten minutes from one end to the other. It had just one floor and a flat roof, and if you wanted to get lost here, you had a job to do. Somehow, the small size made it sympathetic and manageable. Then again, you could be seen and

recognized in no time at all. Anne swallowed, hurried through the glass doors, and took a deep breath. Italy smelled of rain and dust.

It wouldn't take long to get to the 'centro storico', the old city center. Half an hour or so, the guy at the travel agency had said. Anne's throat felt parched. She would have to face the manager of the Garibaldi Hotel soon. Peter Grant.

Giorgio had told her Mr. Grant would not be a problem. He'd promised to discuss everything with him. He'd promised Mr. Grant would welcome her with open arms. He'd also promised Mr. Grant would be discreet.

Anne bent her head to avoid the worst of the rain and turned to her left, following a sign that said 'Taxi'. The rain dropped into the small of her neck and ran down her back with chilly fingers. Until yesterday, her long hair had kept her warm. How she missed its familiar weight; how vulnerable she felt. What a stupid idea to cut her long hair only because it would make her look different from the girl on trial. Anne huddled deeper into her coat, but the wind cut through it and made her shudder. She splashed into a puddle, and immediately, water seeped through the seams of her shoes. Darn. You're so silly. Take off your sunglasses now. Do.

But no. Not yet.

Her thoughts turned back to Peter Grant. She wasn't so sure about the open-armed-welcome. From all she'd learned the last months, few people welcomed you with open arms if you've just been released from custody, and on a murder charge at that.

She bit her lips and stopped next to the first taxi in line. With a forced smile, she bent forward and looked through a dirty window. The taxi driver opened it, his face impassive. Anne summoned up the sentence she had learned by heart. "Nel centro storico?"

The taxi driver nodded. He scowled at her huge suitcase, then at the pouring rain, grunted something she didn't understand and heaved himself out of his Renault.

For an instant, Anne wanted to say she was sorry to be a bother, then she shook herself. She wasn't responsible for the weather. Where had all her self esteem gone? Half a year ago, she would have made a joke about the rain. Now every little unpleasantness went straight to the core. She pressed her lips together and dived into the back of the taxi. It smelled of stale cigarettes.

When the Renault started to drive with a rattle that told her the exhaust tube wasn't going to last much longer, she stared out of the window. Blinded by the rain and her sun-glasses, she didn't see much. A few trees, thin, straggling. Some low houses, with the typical roofs made of four equal triangular pieces, slanted to meet at the tip. Shutters with peeling paint, closed to keep out the sun that was nowhere to be seen and hard to imagine. Where was the Florence her mother had loved?

Anne shook herself. She had to think positive. She had to take back her life, make it into something good, something clean. She sighed. Would it ever become possible to forget she'd been imprisoned on a murder charge? Would she be able to forget the accusing stare of Alec's friends, and let's face it, her own, who believed she had tampered with his car? Would life ever turn back into something sane, something to have confidence in?

She'd been innocent. It hadn't helped.

The houses got higher, and the streets narrowed until Anne wondered if she could open the door of the taxi without hitting it against a wall. It got darker by the minute. The rain pelted onto the roof with angry blows, deafening her. She felt as if she was sitting inside a clammy tin box. Anne hunched up her shoulders and curled her cold toes.

When the taxi stopped, and her amiable driver indicated with a move of the head that she had reached her destiny, she fumbled out some unfamiliar Euro notes and pressed them into his

hands. His fingers were red, like sausages. The sausages disappeared in a black zip-bag and reappeared with some change.

“Grazie.” Anne’s voice trembled.

With a sigh, the taxi driver heaved himself out and went to the back of the car.

Anne clutched her handbag hard. Now. Her new life was about to begin.

Get out, she told herself. Don’t be a coward.

But her legs were frozen stiff. She was unable to move.

Oh, it would be so nice if she could find a mouse hole somewhere. Just a little mouse hole, well hidden; that would do.

For more information about Beate and her books, go to her website:

<http://www.happybooks.de>.

Victoria Roder

I wouldn't Have Married You if I Didn't Love You Kind of Guy

If you glanced at my husband, the stereo-typical label would be “Biker.” He rides a Harley, has tattoos and a goatee and I call him Big-Guy. He has never been a gusher. You know what I mean, that lovey dovey, Valentines Day every day kind of guy. He’s more of the, I wouldn’t have married you if I didn’t love you kind of guy.

For our seventeenth anniversary we celebrated at a special restaurant. I excused myself to use the ladies room and when I returned he opened a small velvet box and presented me with an anniversary ring. I was shocked and thrilled! My husband is a bit shy. He doesn’t like large groups of people and doesn’t like to be in the spotlight. So what truly surprised me, and was out of character for my husband, was what he had already planned before he presented me with the ring.

“Will you marry me, again? I called your Pastor and booked your church for next year on our anniversary to renew our vows.” He gave me his cocky smile and a tilt of his head adding, “If you want to.”

Don’t tell my husband, but he could have put an onion ring on my finger and I wouldn’t have cared. What meant the world to me is that he would do something so out of his character, because he knew it would make me happy. That’s true love, putting someone else’s needs above our own. As the years have passed, my husband and I have learned to do that on a daily basis, even with the little things. For example, asking the other person if they need something while were up, calling each other everyday, and saying I love you everyday. It took us a little while to figure it out, but we treat each other according to the ‘golden rule’—treating each other as we want to be treated. What a great relationship the ‘golden rule’ nurtures.

We invest time in each other, camping with our dogs, motorcycle rides and visiting with friends, together. To nurture a relationship over the long haul, the special surprises and celebrations are memorable, but it is the little things that make the glue to hold a relationship together.

Victoria Roder lives in Central Wisconsin with her husband and house full of pets. She is the author of action thriller, Bolt Action, Champagne Books; paranormal romance, The Dream House Visions and Nightmares, Inspirational Devotional book; It’s Not You—It’s Them: Six Steps to Healing and Thriving after abuse, Dancing With Bear Publishing. Her short stories have appeared in Chicken Soup for the Soul, A Cup of Comfort, The Latke Hound a Christmas Anthology and One Red Rose Valentine Anthology from Dancing With Bear Publishing. She has three children’s books coming soon, and writes articles and creates puzzles for magazines and activity books.



About Bolt Action

In the Action Thriller, Bolt Action from Champagne Books, Detective Leslie Bolt is a smart talking, gun hording, Harley riding investigator forced to work a serial murder case with her sexy ex-lover. After a childhood of abuse suffered at the hand of her father, Leslie sleeps with a Ruger Blackhawk .357 under her pillow, has a Browning A-Bolt Stainless Stalker rifle in her broom closet, and a Saturday Night Special stashed in her road-hog cookie jar. The body count mounts and Detective Bolt must conquer her own past, as she races to capture “The State Quarter Killer” before her sister is the next victim.

Excerpt from Bolt Action

Out of my collection of weapons I have stashed around my apartment, I chose my Browning A-Bolt Stainless Stalker rifle from behind the mop in the broom closet. I headed in the direction of my enclosed storage area. Flipping on the porch light in hopes of frightening an intruder, I exited my front door. As I reached the bottom of the wooden steps, I could detect an outline of a person in front of the shadowed storage door. Male-at least six feet tall.

Cocking the rifle, I warned, “Stop. I have a rifle.”

“Calm down, Bolt. It’s just me.” Lance Kestler ran his hand through his thick black hair as he stepped from the shadows into the glow of the porch light.

“Oh for crying out loud. What the hell are you doing here?” I released the trigger. “Did you just come out of my storage area?”

“No. I got out of my car and walked toward your door.” Kestler placed his hands on his slim hips. “How come you never wear your hair down during the day?”

I ignored the question. "I heard a door close."

Kestler shrugged his broad, black Fieora-clothed shoulders, and wobbled on his feet. "Must'a heard my car door."

Headlights from a passing car shined toward me and I slid the rifle behind my back. "Whatever. It's like midnight what the hell do you want?"

"Well, I remembered you don't sleep much at night, so I assumed you'd still be up. Or maybe you just didn't sleep at night because I kept you up-or should I say, you kept me up?" Kestler took a stumbling step forward.

I blew out a breath in frustration. How did I ever get involved with this guy in the first place? "Get off it, Kestler. You've been drinking. What do you want?"

"Aren't you gonna invite me in?" He winked in his typical cocky manner. "It's been a long time since I've had your firm body under mine."

I shook my head. "Are you kidding me?"

"Look, I want to apologize for how things have been going between us lately." Lance stumbled and dragged his hand across the side of the duplex to stabilize himself.

"Apologize?" The rifle dug into my hand as I tightened my grip. "You can't even talk in complete sentences. How come you only show up to talk after you've been drinking?"

Kestler advanced two steps toward me. "What's wrong with you? I'm trying to rekindle a civil relationship between us, and you show up acting like Annie Oakley the sharpshooter."

"You don't do apologies, or favors without an ulterior motive." I pointed the rifle toward him. "What the hell do you want? Why don't you go home?"

"What? You're gonna shoot me?" Lance put his hands up, pretending to surrender and laughed.

His humor was lost on me. I wanted Kestler off my property and wanted him to know I meant business. Not that I would have shot him. Probably. "You've been drinking, and you're trespassing. I believed you were an intruder and I had to defend myself." I shrugged my shoulders. "Sounds convincing. I might be able to get someone to buy that."

"You'd Miss."

My finger itched to pull the trigger. "Don't you remember my target scores where always better than yours?"

Lance winked at me. "That's because I was distracted by your cute ass."

"You are an ass."

"I'm done trying to be nice to you."

"When did you start?"

"Screw you." He turned to stomp back toward his car.

I lowered the rifle and called out, "Kestler, you've been drinking. Should I call you a cab?"

I heard him open his car door. As I walked backward up the three steps to the front door, it didn't take detective skills to realize he didn't have the ability nor the courtesy to answer me. Kester was six feet tall—could he have consumed more than two drinks an hour? I ran back down the steps to offer him a ride.

"Kestler!" I pounded on the hood of the car. "Kestler, wait!"

He jammed the car in reverse, spun it around and squealed his tires on the usually quiet street. I watched him drive off and prayed he wouldn't hit someone on his way home. Retreating inside my apartment, I locked and dead bolted the front door. I returned the A-Bolt rifle to its spot behind the mop, and headed for the phone to call in a tip about a drunk driver. If he was

lucky, he'd be stopped by a friendly cop. It not-if he had to spend the night in the drunk tank at least he wouldn't kill himself or anyone else.

For more information about Victoria and her books visit her website:
www.victoriaroder.com.

Cindy Spencer Pape

The Geek and the Townie

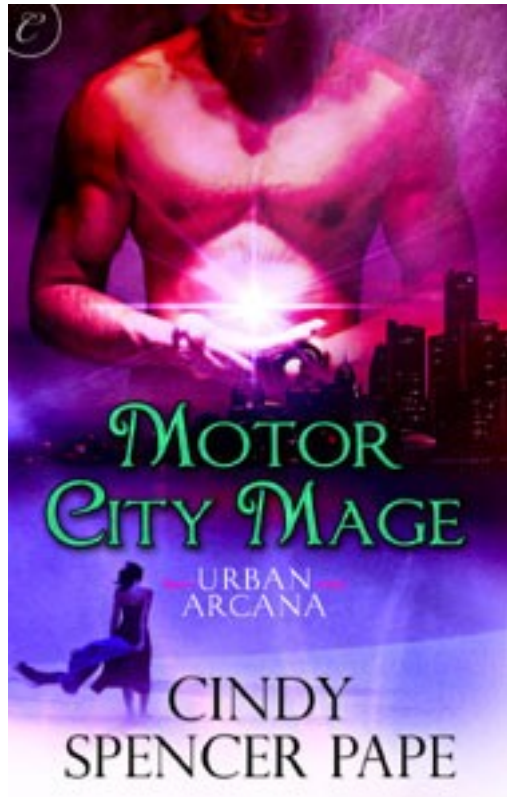
It was January of 1982, and I'd just returned to Central Michigan University for the second semester of my freshman year. I moved in a bit early, and there weren't a whole lot of people on campus yet. After calling around, I found one friend in dorm at the far end of campus who was already back, so I tromped through the snow to visit.

This friend had gotten to know a bunch of local guys, (townies) who played Dungeons and Dragons and other role-playing games. Since they all lived at home, she was the point person to allow them to use the big tables in the dorm basement for their gaming sessions. Sometimes she joined them, but that night she wasn't. I'd never played any of these games but was interested, so I agreed to go downstairs and meet her friends. (Besides, what 18-year-old girl doesn't want to meet a bunch of new guys?) Being kind of goofy, we went in armed with snowballs, and said hello by pelting the six or seven game-playing geeks with them.

Up they leapt. One really cute guy picked up the other girl, the one they knew, and said he was going to bury her in a snow bank. Another, well over six foot, toned, and with the brush cut and black glasses to attest that he'd just left the military, picked me up and carried me outside as well. (Yeah, I was a lot smaller then. Sigh.) He looked a little scary and he did put me in the snow beside my friend, but unlike her, I was set in gently and on my feet—not face first. Afterward, we all laughed and I had made a bunch of new friends. For the rest of my college career, I was officially one of the guys, and learned to role-play as if I'd been born to it. I still think a lot of my writing has its roots in the character creation process from those games, and some of these guys are still among my closest friends.

The big guy with the ugly glasses was only around for a few days, as he was off to a different school, several hours north. I heard about him periodically, met him a couple times when he was home and I was at school. Then the summer of my senior year, I got a job on campus, and he came home, with a job as a landscaper at an apartment complex. We ran into each other playing D&D or softball, and I realized that with longer hair and nicer glasses, he was really kind of hot. Then all at about the same time, he sprained his knee, and my roommate and I each sprained an ankle. While all our friends were working, for a couple weeks, the three of us were stuck on crutches. So of course we hung out. One night my roommate was gone, and just Glenn and I sat on the couch, watching reruns of the Twilight Zone.

After the first five minutes, we weren't watching the TV anymore. The chemistry was like nothing I'd ever experienced. (Though to be honest, I was a geek who didn't have a whole lot of experience.) We dated for all of about 3 weeks before he proposed, and were married a month after my graduation—and a year to the day after our first official date. Thirty years after we first met and twenty-six years after the wedding, he's still my best friend, and still a hot geek with glasses, and we still play games together. I always laugh when people ask about Valentine plans. My husband refers to Valentine's Day as "Amateur Hour." To him, a real man demonstrates his love all year around.



Excerpt from *Motor City Mage*

Des looked up at the heavens and sighed. “Fine. I’ll explain everything tomorrow at Thanksgiving dinner. Now where are you parked? I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I walked from home—parking permits are too damn expensive for a waitress.”

Des ignored that. He knew she had family money and made a good bit as part owner of the club. She probably walked just to be contrary to her cousins, who’d want her protected. As an older brother himself, he considered scolding her about the idiocy of a young, attractive woman walking alone in Detroit, especially since dusk was falling rapidly. The city was a dangerous one due to unemployment and bad race relations, even before adding in the trouble caused by rogue demons and other supernatural beings. Lana should know better. Then he remembered this particular damsel could grow fangs and claws if she needed them and kept his mouth shut.

“I wouldn’t say no to a lift though, if you’re parked nearby. It’s gotten colder since I left home this morning.”

“Of course.” His parents had raised him to be a gentleman. He continued toward the lot where he’d parked. “So,” he said, just to keep his mind off her...assets. “What are you studying?”

“Computer engineering.” She climbed into the passenger side of his car without waiting for him to open her door. When he got in beside her, she snorted. “Why look so shocked? Were you expecting me to say animal behavior? Woof.”

He shrugged. “How on earth was I supposed to know?”

“Good point. Not like you’ve ever paid any attention to our lives. We’re all just possible suspects to you, aren’t we, Des?” The anger in her voice held another note. Was it...hurt? That

was something he'd never meant to do. He'd always assumed she was far too confident and thick-skinned for it to be possible.

Des stuck the key in the ignition and ignored it, turning to face Lana instead. He schooled his expression to one of neutral friendliness. "I pay a lot more attention than you think I do. The problem is, most of the times we've met have been about saving the world, or at least somebody's life. We haven't exactly had the chance to talk about our hopes and dreams for the future." He let a small smile twitch at his lips. "Besides, I'm a—let me get it right—grumpy, antisocial asshole. Just ask my sister."

Lana laughed again. "All right, I'll give you that." Her voice softened and she gave him a tiny half-smile, wrinkling her classic, patrician nose. "But you've come through for my family when we needed you. You're a good friend, despite your best attempts not to be."

"Well, don't tell anyone. My reputation will be ruined."

She made an X across her chest. "Promise." She studied his face before reaching up to flick a finger across his cheek. Her demeanor changed, and suddenly, the aggressive, in-your-face she-wolf was gone, replaced by the caring woman he'd always pretended not to see. "Damn, you really have been running yourself ragged. This demon thing—it's a lot more serious than you've let on, isn't it?"

He shrugged, wishing he hadn't noticed the softness of her hand in that miniscule touch. Just a flick of one turquoise-painted fingertip made his spine tingle in a way no one else ever had—not in his whole thirty-nine years. He didn't have the faintest idea how to respond.

"Tell me." Her hand fluttered down to rest on his knee. Even through his heavy wool slacks, her touch all but seared his skin, he was that tuned in to her.

This was bad. Why was he responding to her so much more strongly today than usual? And why was she being so kind and—well—tactile? He bit his lip as it occurred to him this was the first time they'd had any kind of conversation alone, rather than as part of a larger group. He couldn't ignore her, pretending she was just one of the crowd. And werewolves were into touch. Which is why he'd typically stayed at the far end of a room from her. Now though, in the small space of the car, the dynamic between them was changing so fast he couldn't catch his breath. "What was it you wanted to know?" He'd been so tangled up he hadn't heard her question.

"Last we heard, Nightshade was presumed dead and random species of demons were trickling into the city. I assume the Wyndewin have been busy rounding them up and trying to ship them home."

"Pretty much. Some of them put up a fight and end up dead, others suicide when they're captured." Like the one today from Vatsu—a plane so dry and arid the creatures came here just because of the water that abounded on Earth. They didn't usually hurt anyone, but because they had scaly green skin and hooves and couldn't shape-shift, they couldn't be allowed to roam around freely. "Until we find the gate, there's no way to send them home."

"That sucks." She patted his knee and pulled her hand back. "I sometimes think it's time for us to all come out, let the humans know that they're not alone in this world. Then harmless beings like Vatsu wouldn't be rounded up just because they look different."

"Me too." The depth of her thinking made it impossible for him to maintain his self-delusion that she was flighty and self-centered. Fine. She's not an idiot. Get over it and move on. Another layer of defense falls away. "But then I think about the Salem witch trials and the Inquisition. History hasn't been kind to my people, let alone yours."

“No, silver bullets sure aren’t my idea of a good time,” she agreed. When she leaned across the armrest to lay her head on his shoulder it felt utterly natural on a physical level, though to Des, it was a near-cataclysmic shift in their relationship.

Motor City Mage is available from Carnia Press.

Susan May Patterson

Love Begins Late

I was well into middle age. Had never married, never really wanted to marry. Had ended a very bad relationship very painfully a couple of years previously and totally (I thought) given up on men.

Divorced for a very long time, he was recently out of active duty military service and into the reserves.

We were both passionately interested in Egyptology. The local chapter of the American Research Center in Egypt had been organized in my den and we were holding the very first public meeting at a local university. He had been a member of the national organization, so of course he came to the first meeting.

I don't remember meeting him. Of course, there was a lot going on that night, but he was the silent type who hardly spoke at all. In the succeeding meetings I did get to know him—casually, as I did everyone, trying to keep our struggling little organization alive. We spoke briefly, usually nothing more than a greeting or short comment over the refreshment table, the way you speak to anyone you barely know in an organization.

That went on for six years. As I am neither deaf, dumb, blind nor dead I could appreciate that he was a very good looking man, but I wasn't interested in men. I had been too badly hurt.

I had promised to loan him a book—Thomas Hoving's then-new book on Tutankhamen—but due to upheavals in my life (new job, ill mother) had forgotten to bring it to the meeting. We agreed that he would come to my apartment and pick it up. I was glad, thinking that maybe he'd stay half an hour or so and we could chat.

He stayed eight hours—and all we did was chat. To this day I'm not sure how he did it, but all my barriers were evaporated and from that day we were a committed couple. Neither of us ever saw anyone else.

Six weeks later we were at a Garth Brooks concert. As Garth sang 'If Tomorrow Never Comes' this wonderful, silent, somewhat stiff military man who didn't even like to hold hands in public turned around and gave me a full-screen, Technicolor MGM kiss and suddenly I wanted nothing more on this earth than to marry him.

Things went on like this for almost three years. It was a wonderfully comfortable routine—weekends together, weeks spent with me at my flat, he at his house. It was so comfortable, in fact, that I could see it carrying on forever like that—and, greedy being that I am—I wanted more. I wanted the whole enchilada—marriage, a house together, roses around the door. Kids were out of the question, of course, and that scared me. I was too old, but what if he wanted some? I did mention that he is a number of years younger than I, didn't I?

So—I started to work up the moral courage to broach the subject with him and break off with him if necessary, but I decided to wait until our three year anniversary had passed. I also loved him so much that I prayed I'd have the strength to do it.

Three months before our anniversary we took a trip to Egypt that lasted almost a month. He was adamant that we be in Egypt for his birthday, so I cancelled all the plans for the lovely party I had planned and off we went. We rented a flat in Giza (five minutes' walk from the Sphinx). I didn't take a present for him to open just to have to take back, so instead I took him a sappily

romantic card and promised him a birthday night dinner at the Mena House, a fantabulous 5-star hotel across the street from the Pyramids.

Being a romantic, I told him I wanted to be kissed in the gardens of the Mena Hotel, as they are absolutely beautiful. We got there early before the restaurant was open, so we went to the phone room (our flat was phone-less) and called all our friends in Cairo, making arrangements to see them while we were there. The restaurant still wasn't open, so he looked at me oddly and said, "Well, let's get this over with."

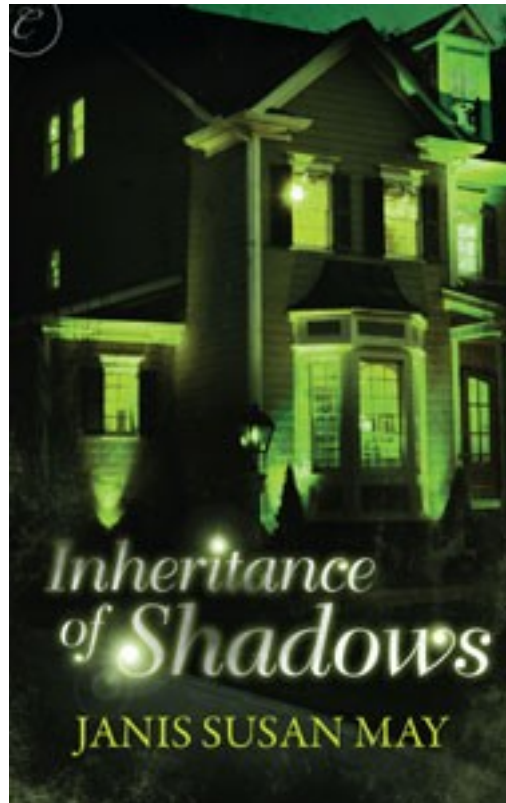
I almost cried, but I own both a calendar and a mirror and thought I'd best be satisfied with what I had. We went out to the gardens and walked around until we found this lovely little knoll where one of the Pyramids loomed over us from some five hundred yards away. (Yes, they are big enough that they can loom most effectively at that distance!) There was smooth grass under our feet; we were surrounded by flowering bushes and stood beneath a European flowering mimosa that perfumed the air with its unique, sweet scent. Overhead a three-quarter moon floated in the navy-blue evening sky.

He gave me a spectacular kiss, then, without letting me go, said, "I waited until we were here to tell you I want you to be my wife."

We were married in a small, very romantic ceremony in a cute little stone church almost six months to the day later. I wore a long ecru lace gown and a crown of flowers in my hair. He wore his dress military uniform. It was a very different (and much more traditional) wedding than we had first planned.

Since then life has been a roller coaster. My mother, ill for many years, passed away three weeks after the wedding. The company I worked for imploded. The Husband convinced me that I should stay home and try to write again, after having had to give it up for over ten years to take care of my mother. He is still my biggest cheerleader and personal patron of the arts. After years of simple reserve duty, The Husband was deployed overseas for four years out of eight—two of them to Iraq. We celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary in Paris last year. In spite of all the ups and downs I would not change one iota of our relationship. He is indeed the other half of my heart and life is not complete without him.

Love does indeed begin late.



About Inheritance of Shadows

INHERITANCE OF SHADOWS is a traditional Gothic romance.

Daughter of a fabled fantasy writer whom she never knew, Aurora Mathis not only must save her own life but find out if the strange world her father created is truly fictitious.

Excerpt from Inheritance of Shadows

“Which door did you use out of the house?” Corwin asked in a voice no louder than a breath.

The cold air had started me thinking again. Why was Corwin afraid of being caught by the security guard? He was a guest here, after all.

And what was a guest doing in a dark garage after midnight?

“The front one.”

“Did you leave it unlocked?”

“Yes.”

“Lucky for us there’s no alarm system,” he muttered and again my curiosity arose. I hadn’t learned that there was no alarm until it was necessary for me to go around it.

When had Corwin found out?

And why?

“Corwin, I want to know—”

“Keep it down, will you? If we have any luck at all we can get back in before someone discovers the door is open.”

“Why—”

He ignored me and slid out the door for another careful look around before grabbing my hand again and dragging me out. We took a circuitous route around the yard, going from deep shadow to deeper shadow as if the faint starlight would advertise our presence. In truth, I was glad he had my hand, for as close as Corwin was I could barely see him.

It must be very late, because the stars were getting brighter. I wondered muzzily how strange it was that the bright stars were just along the horizon. Stranger still, they were moving...

"Corwin, look."

Corwin's hand muffled my mouth and not very gently. "Hush, dammit!" he hissed softly. "Keep your mouth shut. Maybe they didn't hear."

If they had, they gave no sign. Now even I could see that the line of sparkling lights were not stars at all, but torches. Real, burning torches, not flashlights or plastic facsimiles. They weren't bright enough to push back the night well, but gave enough light to show that those who carried them were nothing human.

His hand still tightly over my mouth, Corwin dragged me into the deep shade of a tree. His encircling arms were like steel bands. Whispering directly into my ear, he ordered me to silence.

I didn't have to be told twice. Now I could see that the marchers were costumed as creatures from the Land of the Two Suns and were probably nothing more than conventioners living out some sort of role-playing fantasy instead of signboards to my madness. I could see the Racontraneux, ever the eternal politicians in their elegant multi-colored flowing robes and several triads of Eisfodea, the unpredictable mountain creatures who were covered with long silky hair that eddied in the breeze like a cloud. There were a band of soldierly Melphs, looking more like martial teddy-bears in brown fur and shiny armor than vicious mercenaries, and even several short round Ghrones, their traditional red and blue outfits making them appear to be some kind of squashy beach ball. And lastly...

I caught my breath as a supernatural fear gripped my throat.

At the tail end of this eerie procession came a Shining One, all in white. The torchlight danced off his tiny wings and golden horns, making it look as if he were surrounded by a cloud of fireflies. His suit was so white that it seemed to glow a pale blue. His face was dead white, too, and from this distance looked as featureless as an egg.

James?

What would James be doing with this group?

Then rationality set in. This imposter was visibly shorter than James, and much chunkier, with a definite pot belly. James was quite muscular in spite of his lean frame. I had learned that when we danced.

The group turned and trod off into the trees, moving with the precision of a military drill. I watched, holding my breath, until they were swallowed by the dark woods.

"Did you recognize any of them?" Corwin whispered in my ear.

I shook my head. Not one face had been recognizable even as human, let alone as an individual. They must, I decided with painful slowness, have worn masks.

Still, there was something uncanny about the whole procession. In spite of its size and number the crowd had been so very silent. Even their feet made no sounds. There was no talking, no singing. I would have expected some jollity, some laughter, perhaps even some song from such a group. Instead there was a solemnity and sense of purpose that was frightening in its intensity. Apart from the wild diversity of their costumes, they could have been a procession of spectral monks from some raped and dissolved abbey in England, treading across the land as they had for centuries.

For more information about Janis and her books go to one of her websites:
www.JanisSusanMay.com or www.JanisPattersonMysteries.com

The End?

I hope this isn't the end for you! I hope you have found, or will find, your own real-life romance! And I hope you will look for and enjoy some of the books featured in this book.