



THE TASTE OF SEDUCTION

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THE TASTE OF SEDUCTION

BY

DENYSE M. BRIDGER

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THE TASTE OF SEDUCTION
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The last, faint rays of the glowing afternoon were giving way to the steady encroachment of evening as she stared out at the glittering, sun-dappled beauty of San Francisco Bay. For several more moments, Chantille L'Amour delayed the increasingly wearisome task of her work and allowed her heart to pine for a simpler world in which to live. The world her parents spoke about with such longing; life before the Civil War had torn everything to pieces. Born in the midst of that conflict, Chantille had never enjoyed the peace and happiness her parents had known in their youth. She'd resented it, deeply, and because of it, she'd made choices that weighed heavily on her. Those dictates had done their part to age her spirit well beyond her twenty-five years of life.

The scents and sounds of the Barbary Coast wafted up to her, assaulting her senses now where they had once caressed. She'd arrived in San Francisco several years ago, bright-eyed and determined to be

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the master of her fate. Her money and family meant nothing to the hordes of men who flocked to her place of business. They cared only about the quantity of drink and companionship that was to be found at *The Palace*. The quality was another wasted effort on her part, though she steadfastly refused to compromise it.

With a barely audible sigh, Chantille pushed herself from a casual slouch against the window-frame and went to her bed. She'd laid out her clothes before bathing, a custom she often found soothing. She slipped the silk dressing gown off her shoulders and reached for the soft, ribbon-trimmed cotton drawers. The ritual of dressing eased her nerves, as it always did, and her spirits lifted as she closed the hooks on her corset and carefully tugged free the hand-woven froth of lace that decorated her chemise. Layers of crinolines and petticoats came next, and once she'd fastened them, she walked to her dressing table and sat before the mirror, applying a slight hint of rouge to her high cheekbones, then repeating the color in darker tones to her lips. She selected earrings, and a sparkling diamond necklace that was worth more than most of her customers would see in their lifetimes. She'd done her hair earlier, and turned her head to survey the results of her work. The pale ash blonde of her hair was set off by the inky black velvet ribbons that she'd taken time to weave into the intricate knot. Strands of fair hair had already escaped the confines of her careful design, but she knew better than to attempt to contain them further—by night's end, many more curling wisps would be falling around her face, giving her a deceptively angelic appearance that she knew appealed to men.

Her gaze fell to the ivory swells of her breasts, the ample curves made more prominent by the corset she wore. Her waist was naturally tiny, and the tightness of the shaping undergarment made her appear delicate, almost fragile. Another illusion, she thought as she laughed inwardly. She walked to the bed to retrieve the glowing silk gown she'd

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selected for the evening. It was pale amethyst in color, trimmed with deep plum lace and ribbon. She settled the heavy dress over her hips, pulled it closed tight to her body, then tugged the wide straps downward so her shoulders were almost bared. As she bent forward to retrieve a handkerchief from the top drawer of her dressing table, her look was caught by the reflection in the mirror. Her parents would be horrified to see her like this, her bosom all but falling from her dress, her face painted, and her dark brown eyes filled with knowledge that decent women would run from.

Oddly, the sadness that would once have accompanied the observation was missing now, and she realized she'd grown beyond caring what other people thought of her. Instead, the appealing image in the looking glass created an entirely different kind of ache within her. Loneliness, yes, but not the heartbreaking pain she'd known when she'd first arrived in San Francisco. This evening she was lonely for the very companionship the girls who worked for her sold on a nightly basis. Chantille seldom accepted the many propositions that came her way in the course of an evening, but tonight, she decided, she would attempt to be more receptive to the invitations she received.

It had been a very long time since she'd permitted a man's arms around her. Longer still since she'd enjoyed more intimate pleasures. Smiling, she turned and headed down to the main room of the vast saloon she owned and ran.

* * *

Austin Standish alighted from his carriage and glanced at the incongruous, regal splendor of *The Palace* saloon and casino. He paid his driver, then headed into the sprawling building, an old opera house that had been abandoned for a number of years before Chantille L'Amour had bought the place and set about reinventing it. He'd come to this particular establishment on numerous occasions since first discovering its existence, and had enjoyed most of the pleasures

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offered. There was one conquest he'd thus far failed to make, however, and he was honest enough to admit it was that very challenge that kept him coming back. The owner of the saloon was an enigmatic and alluring woman who'd quickly seen through the charm and easy arrogance that had enticed so many ladies before her. Despite several invitations, she'd never granted him an audience.

Inside the grand saloon and casino, the décor was a reflection of surprising sophistication and good taste. It was wasted on most of the clientele.

Austin spotted several gentlemen who frequented the place, gentlemen who preferred not to be seen in the company they presently enjoyed. He ignored them and went through to the casino's private room. He was known to the doorman and was immediately granted entrance. He spotted his quarry the minute he walked in; she was standing near the polished bar, surveying the customers and their talent at the tables.

Somewhere inside him he felt a familiar flutter of excitement, but dismissed it as ludicrous. He'd long ago learned the high price one paid for infatuation, and he refused to be swayed by it ever again. He wanted this alluring woman, but nothing more than that. A night in her bed and he'd be content to never again step inside *The Palace*.

When the lovely Miss L'Amour glanced his way and held his eyes with her dark gaze, he had to forcibly ignore the laughter that bubbled up inside his head and continued despite his efforts to extinguish it. He inclined his head in a casual bow of acknowledgement, then went to purchase his usual thousand dollars worth of chips. He seldom lost, but his starting sum always remained the same. He entered the casino with a thousand dollars, and more often than not left with considerably more than he'd had upon his arrival.

The chandeliers set in the high ceiling threw off enough light to rival the early afternoon sun, and the noise level, while something that

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couldn't be entirely disregarded, was nowhere near the din that pervaded most saloons on the Coast. Standish was content for the moment to enjoy himself, he'd concentrate on the beautiful owner after he'd indulged his more mercenary tendencies.

Less than two hours later, his winning streak forced a division of his attention. His last bet at the roulette wheel had earned him in the vicinity of ten thousand dollars. The man in charge of the table was looking more than a little bit worried and he requested a moment to consult with the owner. Austin smiled and waited for the pretty woman to join them. He watched her for a few moments as she was informed of his good luck, and once again his stomach reacted with a disturbing flutter when she glanced at him, her stare bold and refreshingly direct as she considered her course of action. He realized, much to his inner horror, that he'd been holding his breath while he waited; he almost gasped in air when she smiled and began to walk toward him.

"Mr. Standish," she murmured when she had reached the roulette table. "How lovely to see you again."

He was surprised and one eyebrow arched, the response reflexive.

"I wasn't aware we'd met, Miss L'Amour."

She laughed softly and he was further enchanted.

"I don't believe we have," she agreed, "not officially. But I do know who you are, Mr. Standish. Otherwise," she added with a hint of irony, "you wouldn't be permitted to gamble in this suite."

"And am I to be permitted to continue this game, ma'am?"

"How lucky do you feel tonight, Mr. Standish?"

He grinned, the expression confident and charming, a device well used over the years. Miss L'Amour's tinkling amusement whispered in the space between them, then she nodded and went around the table herself. "Place your bets, gentlemen," she said, gesturing at the numbered black and red table surface. She picked up the gleaming white marble and prepared to send the roulette wheel spinning.

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When she bent forward, giving him a deliciously full view of her cleavage, Austin placed a reckless bet and sat back to watch the outcome.

“Your luck holds, Mr. Standish,” she said less than a minute later. “It would seem that I now owe you a substantial sum of money.” She walked from behind the table. “I’ll inform the cashier of your good fortune. When you wish to cash in, the money will be in my office.” With a brief nod of her head, she left the table, smiling despite the loss of revenue. Standish was charmed all over again.

“Sir?”

He turned to look at the man next to the roulette wheel. They were waiting for his next bet. He shook his head. “Not this time, Marty,” he said with a laugh. “I think I’ll quit while I’m still winning.”

The other man nodded, and the moment Austin left his chair, he was aware of another man taking his place. He headed for the bar, intent on exchanging more than a few words with Miss L’Amour.

* * *

Chantille watched Standish from her vantage point at the end of the bar. He was a handsome man, one she’d noticed on several occasions. As he stood, she took quick inventory of his appearance, chewing her bottom lip unconsciously as she absorbed the man’s almost palpable presence.

At a height of over six feet, Austin Standish was a man not easily overlooked. He had sandy blond hair with a lock perpetually falling over his forehead. Under the shaggy blond hair were the most startling green eyes Chantille had ever seen. His face was a fascinating blend of angles and contours, the individual features not perfect, yet the overall combination completely arresting and pleasing to the appreciative eye. He was slender, yet there was an undeniable sense of strength and power in the long line of his body. Tonight, as on other nights, he’d chosen a suit of black, the inky shade contrasted sharply by the stark

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white of his shirt. The frills at his cuffs and along the front of the shirt could have lessened the impact of strong masculinity that emanated from him, but somehow, they only added to his imposing aura. His brocade waistcoat was in a shade of palest gray, adorned by a gold watch chain that disappeared in a pocket at his left. Silver trimmed boots finished the polished and cultured image, and Chantille wondered how he'd remained a free man for so long. She didn't doubt for an instant that the company of women was something he never lacked.

She straightened when he caught her gaze and began to walk in her direction. Deep inside, she began to quiver, and the awareness that he could shake her so intensely with no effort was both disconcerting and annoying. Yet...

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"Thank you, no," she replied. "Have you come to collect your winnings, Mr. Standish?"

"If you can't be persuaded to grant me your company, then I'll have to settle for your money."

"You're far too charming to suffer loneliness," she countered. She walked away from the bar and led him into her office. She arched one eyebrow in subtle surprise when he closed the door behind them. "I assure you, Mr. Standish," she said, tone cool, "money is all you will be collecting in this office."

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"Ahh," he whispered. "Hope at last."

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“Hope has a way of disappearing just when you’re learning to count on it, Mr. Standish.”

“But the times it doesn’t are so sweet it makes the disappointments bearable, Miss L’Amour.”

“Right you are, sir,” she agreed with a thoughtful smile. She made a decision then, a reckless choice that she didn’t take time to consider. “Perhaps I could persuade you to dine with me in my suite?”

Austin’s gaze was considering and she wondered, with a tiny leap of panic, if she’d miscalculated his interest.

“It’s never a good idea to offer a man paradise if your plan is to shut the gates before he has a chance to come inside, Miss L’Amour.”

It was a veiled warning, but a warning just the same. This man was not one to be toyed with or played for a fool. She was drawn a little more deeply into his presence, in spite of herself.

“And you think I’m offering you paradise, Mr. Standish?”

“I’m fairly certain of it, yes,” he murmured, voice low and compelling.

She smiled and went past him to the safe that was in her office. She collected his money and brought it to him.

“Your winnings, Mr.—”

“Austin.”

“Austin,” she corrected.

He took a double-eagle from the pocket of his waistcoat and held it between his index and middle fingers. With a quick grin, he slipped it into the valley between her breasts, caressing silken skin for the briefest instant before drawing his hand back. The flicker in her dark eyes made his smile deepen.

“You take liberties with great ease,” she whispered, her voice husky and exotic.

“Before the night’s over, I plan to take a great many more,” he assured her.

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“Perhaps I’ll be the one to take liberties tonight, Mr. Standish.”

“I’d be delighted to put myself in your hands, Miss L’Amour.”

She smiled. “Would you wait here for a few moments? I have to speak to my maid.”

He settled in an armchair near the fire and contemplated his current run of luck. He intended to take full advantage of the rare chance to be close to the remarkable woman who owned *The Palace*. He’d been waiting longer for her than he’d ever waited for any other woman.

* * *

As she led him to the private wing of the large building that housed her home and business, Chantille had time to question the wisdom of her actions—again. She’d been berating herself for most of the past thirty minutes. Austin Standish was a danger to her, and it was something she knew on an instinctive level. Not that he would hurt her, of course. But, he was dangerous, just the same.

She was acutely aware of every panther-like, lissome step he took behind her. He was elegant in manner and dress, quietly contained but always alert. The sense of being in perilous company assailed her with new severity. She opened the twin doors to her bedroom suite and went inside, hearing him close the doors as he joined her.

She continued into the room, uncomfortable as she chaffed against the restraints of her heavy dress and the many layers beneath it. She’d permitted a few select men into this suite over the past five years, but none had ever made her so acutely aware of herself and the desire to shed her clothes and feel solid muscles and male hardness pressed to her warm curves. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples strained against the fabric of her chemise, rubbing against the soft material until the pebbled points ached. Between her thighs, a slow, steady throb began to increase in rhythm, finding a matching tempo in her heartbeat.

The soft illumination from the fireplace touched the wood, warming the smooth, lustrous finish as shadows danced on the walls and glimmered

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in the reflections of the mirror that adorned one wall of the room. She saw nothing, only the darkness that had grown around her so steadily throughout the past half-hour, a darkness that touched her with fears she couldn't clearly define, much less explain.

Watching the play of light catch in the soft gold of his hair, Chantille was struck again by the intuitive knowledge that dominated the man's handsome features. Barely suppressed sensuality and anticipation were so strong in the shadowed intimacy of the suite that she felt she could reach out and touch the things that presently put them on opposite sides of a chasm she didn't know with certainty she wanted to close. The only thing she did know was that she wanted to be with him more than she had any man she'd ever met.

"Tell me what you're feeling right now, Chantille?"

"Angry."

"At me?"

"No," she whispered, then shook her head. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't like being vulnerable."

For the first time, Chantille looked right at him, and Austin could read all the uncertainty he hadn't taken the time to notice before. He answered her honestly, unwilling to do anything less. "Being vulnerable isn't always a bad thing, Chantille. Sometimes it makes you stronger."

"I don't believe that, and you certainly don't." The edge was back in her tone. "I feel like I did when I was a child, needing to be wanted. When I came to San Francisco, I swore I'd never feel that way again."

Austin drew in a deep draught of air and ran a hand through his hair.

"You don't have to be afraid of anything, Chantille." He knew the words were weak, and he could have kicked himself for them once they were spoken.

She actually managed to smile at the statement, though there was no warmth in the expression.

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“Weak women hold no appeal for men like you, Mr. Standish,” she remarked.

“Is that what you want? To appeal to me?”

She laughed, a low murmur of sound that stirred the air between them.

“I want to share my bed with you, Austin,” she conceded. “What I don’t want is for it to cost me everything I’ve worked for.”

“What are you afraid of losing?”

“My independence.”

“Your heart.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Don’t lie to me, or to yourself.”

Chantille met his eyes as if she were trying to pierce the shadows that surrounded them, to see what lay hidden behind that confident stare. When nothing shone forth, she closed her eyes.

Austin let the silence engulf them again for a long minute, then he closed the distance, touched her chin, and made her face him. His thumb brushed at the tear welled in the corner of her eye.

“I do want you,” she murmured, voice raw with the force of her feelings.

The loneliness and the need for reassurance was almost a physical presence in the room with them, and Austin was forced to wonder just how long it had been since Chantille L’Amour had uttered those words to any man. If she ever had.

“I want you, too, Chantille.”

Austin’s whispered words were like a soft breath of air touching her face as he leaned forward to cover her lips with a tender kiss. She moved into the caress with a soft gasp, and her knees seemed to buckle as Austin’s tongue slipped into her mouth with possessive hunger.

Chantille broke the intense kiss and her head fell back as a sigh of relief and pleasure slipped out of her. She wrapped her arms around Austin’s neck, then buried her face against his broad shoulder as she

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shivered into the sensations they were igniting in each other. She smiled at the slight catch in Austin's breathing already, then shuddered when his hands began to work the buttons of her gown.

Suddenly, she eased free of his embrace and took a step back. He watched, eyes narrowed for a moment as he waited to see why she'd withdrawn. The wariness left his gaze a few seconds later when she lit another lamp and stood next to it.

The soft golden glow of the flickering lamplight illuminated the deft movements of her hands as she undid the buttons and hooks that held her gown together. Austin smiled and went to sit in a chair near the fireplace, his eyes never leaving her. The beautiful amethyst silk crumpled into a heap at her feet, and she gracefully stepped free of the shimmering mass. Next the petticoats and crinolines fell into a crisp white pile, and she smiled, the expression faintly wicked with delight. He forced himself to remain still while she undid the hooks of her corset, her actions slow and deliberate. Her eyes never lost their hold on his, and she walked toward him, hips swaying seductively.

When she was standing directly in front of him, Austin smiled up at her. His look dropped, and his eyes locked on the thrusting peaks of her breasts, mere inches from his lips, nipples a soft shadow against the white of her chemise. She bent slightly and cupped his face in her hands as she leaned into a slow, exploring kiss. Austin's arms went around her and he lifted her off her feet and sat her astride his thighs as he settled deeper into the armchair. The kiss went on forever and grew more intense with each tiny stroke of tongue they exchanged. When he thought he'd die for want of air, she drew away again and met his gaze.

Austin's smile became a grin when Chantille slipped the straps of her chemise off her shoulders, then tugged on the front of the thin garment. She peeled the material away from her skin, offering lush ivory breasts to him. He was only vaguely surprised when she took his hands, kissed each palm, then placed his eager fingers over the smooth swells of her flesh.

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She placed her own hands on his shoulders and slid closer to him, her thighs gliding against his.

She turned as she pushed closer, and her breath hissed from between her teeth when he licked slowly at the ripe nipple she'd all but guided to his lips. She kissed his temple and pressed against him until he took the hard point into his mouth and began to suckle. He repeated the erotic play, first lavishing attention to one nipple, then the other, encouraged by the soft moans that escaped Chantille as she rocked gently in his lap.

"Austin..."

"Mmmmm?"

"Let me up?"

He leaned back in the chair and released her, curiosity holding his lust at bay for the moment.

She slid back, laughed shakily when her knees wobbled, then she walked a few steps from him. The light trailed her, seemed to be drawn to her within the room, and he watched with renewed fascination as she finished opening the chemise and tossed it aside. She locked her gaze with his again for an instant, then smiled when his eyes followed the motion of her hands.

Chantille cupped her breasts, squeezed and fondled until the sensation threatened to make her legs fold under her. She smiled, faint challenge in the expression, then pulled the ties on her drawers. His gaze was slitted now, and the air between them was charged with eroticism. One hand slid inside the soft cotton underwear and his eyebrow rose in answer to the action.

As her fingers probed deeper, she shivered, making contact with the slick wetness between her thighs. She slipped one finger into her body, then glided it along her swollen folds until she found the throbbing bud.

"Take off the drawers, Chantille," Austin ordered, his voice low but intense. "I want to see you."

She considered his request, then complied. Naked now, she knelt on

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the bed and spread her thighs, giving him an unimpeded view of her body. She closed her eyes, and for a few moments, she forgot he was in the room with her. Her fingers moved again, found the pulse of her desire, and began to stroke, her slick fingers flicking rapidly at the sensitive nub of flesh while her other hand fondled her breasts and tugged on the aching nipples. As her breathing grew more strained, she was aware of noises and opened her eyes. He was undressing, and watching her, never missing a motion of her hands, however slight.

She spread her legs wider and began to thrust her fingers deep inside her, then pulled them out to continue stroking. She was only dimly aware of Austin's murmur of approval as her climax started to build into an intense explosion of pleasure. Sparks glittered behind her eyes and she moaned loudly as the shudders crashed over her in waves.

When she was able to breathe normally again, she settled more comfortably on the feather mattress and saw that he'd popped the cork on the chilled champagne she'd ordered sent to her rooms. The tray on the low table next to the door was laden with fresh fruit, chocolates, and her favorite mint candies. All as she'd requested before inviting Austin into her sanctuary.

Austin picked up the tray and brought it to her. She accepted it and looked at him. He was fully aroused, his erection something she couldn't pretend to ignore, even had she wanted to. His legs were long and lean, his chest broad, fair hair sprinkled lightly across the contoured muscles and growing darker as it trailed downward to merge with the nest of dark sandy hair surrounding the base of his cock. He sat and selected a chocolate from the tray. When he licked it suggestively, she took the sweet from him and held it in the palm of her hand for a moment before she closed her fist around it. Austin's eye glittered, and he laughed.

"Dare I ask?"

She opened her hand, the chocolate sticky and melted. Grinning, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and stroked up and down, coating

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him with the rich, silky cream.

“What now?”

His voice was tight with excitement and she slid off the bed to kneel next to it. She caught his look for a moment and enjoyed the light that reflected back to her, the flames a mixture of lamplight and his desire. When she bent forward, took his cock into her mouth and began to lick the chocolate in long sensual strokes, his groan of agonized pleasure was highly satisfying.

“You taste delicious,” she whispered a few moments later as she drew back to look at him again. She took a sliver of crisp apple off the tray and held it between her teeth as she rose to kiss him again. He bit off his half of the fruit, chewed and swallowed, then pulled her mouth into full contact with his, sucking her bottom lip between his as he chewed gently on it for a second, then slid his tongue into the warmth of her mouth.

“More chocolate?” she asked a short while later.

“I don’t think you’ve finished the first lot,” he noted, glancing down at his cock, still shining with chocolate.

“So I see.”

She lowered her head and Austin bit back a sigh as he watched her head moving up and down, her tongue playing over him with easy finesse, seeking and finding the spots that made him tremble in spite of his efforts not to reveal how intensely he was responding to her touch. He’d never met anyone as bold and uninhibited as Chantille was at that moment.

“Honey?”

Her voice penetrated the fog in his head and he looked at her, speechless for an instant. She laughed, delighted, and he pulled her back onto the bed and rolled over until she was pinned beneath him.

“I’m hungry,” she murmured half-heartedly.

He reached out, snagged another slice of apple, and dipped it in the honey that was in one of the small crystal bowls on the tray. He ran the dripping edge of the apple across her chin, then licked it off, savoring the

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taste of her skin and the sweet honey together. She snaked a hand across the bed and twirled her finger in the sticky chocolate sauce, then traced one of her nipples, dabbing the rigid tip repeatedly.

“Taste?” she offered, holding her breast for him.

He popped the honey-covered apple into her mouth and bent to suck her nipple, tongue lapping at the chocolate, enjoying her. Her back arched off the bed when he bit carefully, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he continued to nibble. When he lifted his head, she touched his mouth with her sticky fingers. He sucked them into his mouth and licked them clean as she giggled.

“Champagne?” He poured two glasses, then allowed her to push him onto his back. She took one glass from the tray and handed him the other as she sat across his thighs.

“Are you enjoying this as much as you hoped, Mr. Standish?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawled and toasted her with a nod of his head.

She touched his glass with hers and sipped the bubbling wine for a few moments.

“I’ve never done this with anyone else,” she confessed, uncertain why she wanted him to understand that he was different from her other chosen partners.

“I know,” he assured her, realizing he did indeed know it somewhere inside him.

Chantille wriggled upward until she was almost sitting on his chest. She grinned and dumped the champagne down the smooth plane of her stomach, shivering when the cool wine trickled between her legs. She spread her thighs wider and pushed her hips toward him as Austin cupped her bottom and began licking, his tongue burrowing into her wet folds until he came into contact with the hooded nub of flesh he’d been seeking. The taste of wine and Chantille was intoxicating in a way that champagne alone could never be, and he held her with a firm grip while he sampled every inch of her throbbing wetness. She grabbed the brass headboard and

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hung on, her hips trying to move into a rapid rhythm he refused to permit yet.

The climax hit her full force when Austin began to flick feather-like strokes over the pulsing bud that was trapped between his lips. She bucked against him and a low scream came from her as her entire body convulsed with pleasure. He continued the erotic torture and she lost track of time as the violent waves of euphoria tumbled over her. When he finally released her, she was certain she was going to faint in his arms.

Austin rolled her onto her back and positioned himself over her. She was gasping and panting in air, her skin flushed with sweat. He lifted her hips and entered her swiftly, the shock of sensation making them both stare in surprise. Chantille moaned and her legs wrapped around his waist as she pulled him down into a hot, lusty kiss.

“Hard, Austin,” she said next to his ear, voice hoarse. “Like you’ll never have another woman again.”

He’d never have another woman like this one, he realized, his body moving into a fast, demanding rhythm that found its match in her writhing limbs. The added fuel fanning the flames was the normally absent emotional bond. Austin rarely loved any woman he was with, but he was quickly learning that Chantille had already found her way past years of barriers—whether she had intended to or not.

“Austin...”

He looked down into her eyes, his body still moving over her, his thrusts slower now, but each one burying him deep inside her. He was caught in the languor of the ageless rhythm of sex, enjoying this lovemaking more than he’d dared to hope. She was tight, wet, and her body was clutching his cock like she’d never let him go. He wanted it to last forever, and he didn’t want to speak, wasn’t certain he could, really, but he nodded.

“Let me move,” she asked, and laughed at his surprise. He reluctantly withdrew and watched while she rolled over and pulled herself to her

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knees again. She reached for the brass rails of the headboard and spread her legs wide again. The graceful curve of her back, flowing down into the luscious round buttocks made the pain his groin intensify further, and he quickly accepted her wordless invitation.

Austin grasped her waist and entered her hard and fast, enjoying the choked whimper that slipped from her. She bent lower and he lost himself; his entire world consisted solely of slick, taut heat and the sounds of moist, steamy sex. Within minutes her body spasmed violently and the clutch of her muscles around him brought him to a shuddering climax that seemed to go on and on as he spilled into her.

As the tremors quieted, and their rasping gulps for air grew fainter, Austin's grip on her waist loosened. He eased free of her, and another shockwave rocked his body at the loss of contact. Chantille sighed and twisted around until she lay on the bed looking up at him. Austin sat back on his knees, wondering if he'd ever be able to move again—or if he even wanted to.

"Nice ride, Mr. Standish," she murmured, then laughed soft and low in her throat.

"A woman of your talents deserves nothing less, Miss L'Amour," he replied, matching her tone. Austin finally forced his body to move and he sat next to her hip, one hand absently splayed over her sticky stomach. "We're quite a mess," he noted with a crooked smile. Chocolate smears, and champagne that was quickly drying to their skin since they'd separated, were more evident now than when they'd been preoccupied with satisfying other hunger.

She propped herself up on her elbows and laughed. "I don't think I've enjoyed wine and sweets this much before," she said. "But I do think a bath is in order." She slid off the bed and went to pull a cord that dangled near the fireplace.

Austin collapsed on his back and enjoyed her naked beauty as she took the tray from the bedside table and put it next to the main door to her suite.

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She had no maidenly shyness about herself, and he fully appreciated the bob of her breasts as she walked about the room and the easy sway of her hips. She was a stunning woman, even more so without her clothes on, he decided.

A discreet knock at the door made him curious, and he watched with new admiration for her candor as she opened the door and held it so that the portly maid could come in enough to retrieve the tray.

“Bring fresh wine, Suzie, and something to eat. I’m famished! And have Carrie run a bath for me, then she can go home for the night.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Suzie glanced briefly at Austin, then left them.

When Chantille turned to look at Austin again, she was grinning.

“Mr. Standish, would you like to join me?”

There was nothing he’d like more, and he said as much. When she indicated a door on the other side of the spacious room, he dragged himself off the bed and followed her. She had a bathing room attached to her suite, and once they’d entered the small room, he was pleased to discover candles lit and a large copper tub filled halfway with steaming water.

A stove took up most of one corner, and a young woman, Carrie, he presumed, was now dumping cold water into the tub to take the edge off what had already been drawn from the stove reservoir. The girl went about her task without looking at Chantille or him, and he was impressed with the easy rapport Chantille obviously had with her employees. He’d rarely seen such effortless respect accorded servants, and the lack of self-consciousness shown by Chantille’s employees. They accepted her, and she accepted them.

Once Carrie had placed a pile of bath linen on a stand next to the tub, she left the room and he watched Chantille test the water. She smiled and climbed into the gleaming tub, settling in with a sigh. She arched one eyebrow and waited. Austin went to join her.

A knock at the door told him the wine and food had arrived.

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“Would you like to have dinner now?”

Grinning, he shook his head.

“Put the tray in my room, Suzie,” she called out. “I’ll have supper after my bath.”

“Are we going to eat it or play with it?” Austin wondered aloud, laughter in his tone.

“Maybe both,” she quipped. “It was fun the first time, wasn’t it?”

He threw back his head and laughed heartily. Chantille was enchanted by the sound, and the unaffected pleasure that pervaded his mood. She’d watched Austin Standish many times when he was gambling at her tables, but she’d never seen this side of him—the playful, youthful side of him that truly enjoyed life and all it offered. She knew he was dangerous, she’d seen men step aside for him, and heard them talk. Standish was a man with secrets, but honorable and loyal to anyone he called friend. All she’d learned about him over the past year could never have prepared her for the sense of peace she found in his company. A serenity that was rivaled only by the undercurrent of desire and excitement he created within her just by breathing.

“What are you thinking about?”

The query startled her, and the sudden seriousness in his eyes was also unexpected. And more than a little disconcerting. She decided to give him an honest answer.

“You.”

“I’m flattered,” he replied, though with less humor than he intended. Truth was suddenly emerging between them.

“Why?”

“You’re an exceptional woman, Chantille.”

“I’m a whore, Austin,” she chided, angry without quite understanding why.

“No, you’re not.” When she glared at him, he continued. “I’ve known whores, honey. A few of them. In all the time I’ve been coming to your

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establishment, I've never seen you accept an invitation, let alone ask a man into your suite."

"You're not here every night, Austin."

He smiled at the defensive tone.

"No, I'm not," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean I'm not sure of what I've just said." He didn't bother adding that he'd known the instant their bodies connected that there hadn't been many men before him.

Chantille chose to end the conversation, and he indulged in the simple pleasure of watching her bathe. When she handed him the soap and stood up, he murmured a soft purr of appreciation as the water cascaded down the supple curves and valleys of her body, gleaming in the radiance of the candle flames. She stepped clear of the tub and dried, making no pretense of hiding from his brazen stare. When she was done, she pulled on a silk dressing gown and bent to kiss him. He turned the caress into a slow, tantalizing exploration of her mouth, and when he finally released her, she kissed his forehead.

"Take your time," she suggested. "I promise I won't eat everything on the dinner tray."

His laughter trailed her from the bathing room, and she was settled on the bed when he returned a short while later, hair glistening with water, and his body shimmering gold in the lamplight. He sat at her feet and reached out to grab a biscuit off the platter balanced on her lap.

"You've got a good cook," he said. He was about to lean back on the bed and relax when the sound of a gunshot had him off the mattress and pulling on his pants. Chantille set the tray on the bedside table and ran for the wardrobe on the other side of the room. When she turned, she had a Colt Peacemaker gripped in her hands. Austin took the weapon from her and headed for the door.

"Where's the exit to this wing?"

She slipped past him and he followed her to a door at the end of the hall. She opened it without hesitation and continued running along the

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corridor beyond. Bedroom doors were opening, and she stopped long enough to speak to one of the girls peering into the hall with a worried expression.

“Who’s with Faith?”

“Jesse.”

She nodded and started to run in earnest, Austin at her heels.

“Who’s Jesse?” He had a feeling he already knew and it wasn’t good.

“Jesse Landon,” she supplied as she reached the door and flung it open. She barely paused to take in the scene before she launched at the startled man who stood over the body on the bed. Shrieking like a madwoman, Chantille jumped on his back, then began kicking and pounding on him when he tried to throw her aside. Faith was a friend, someone Chantille had grown close to over the past year. She cared about all of the girls who worked for her, in whatever capacity they worked, and she always looked after them. Tonight she hadn’t been present to see who was being entertained, and it was an oversight she vowed would not happen again. Jesse went still a moment later and she knew why when he released her and she fell next to the prone figure on the bed.

“I wouldn’t, Jesse,” Austin’s voice cut through her thoughts, lethal with rage.

Chantille looked at him, almost surprised to see him now that her panic had eased a little. Faith was still breathing, even though she’d been shot, her bare midriff bloody and maimed by the bullet hole in her side.

“This ain’t your business, Standish!”

“You’ve just shot a woman, Jesse,” Austin replied. “Now get dressed. We’re going downstairs to wait for the police.” When the younger man began to lift his arm, Austin stepped farther into the room. “You really don’t want to make me kill you, Jesse.”

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“I’m not goin’ back to prison, Standish,” he snarled. “Not for shootin’ a whore.”

“You should have thought of that before you shot her.”

Chantille flinched when Austin fired, and she barely contained a scream of terror when Jesse Landon’s body fell next to her on Faith’s bed. He’d foolishly tried to outdraw Standish, and had paid the price for his folly.

Jesse’s gun hit the floor, and Austin was suddenly lifting her off the bed and carrying her out of the room. He set her on her feet in the corridor, handed her over to Suzie, then went back into the room, issuing orders to the staff and the girls who were congregating in the hall.

“Austin?”

“I’ll deal with this, Chantille,” he called back. “Just go back to your suite, honey.”

Shocked by the relief she felt at this taking charge of the situation, Chantille’s pride nonetheless reared up inside her and she shook her head.

“This is my business, Austin. I’ll take care of things.”

He glared at her in annoyance that was in no way feigned.

“I haven’t got time to argue the point, Chantille,” he snapped. “I’ll send someone for the police, and see that she gets to a doctor. Leave it at that.”

“Austin...”

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her once. “Don’t argue with me, sweetheart,” he stated. “I know a few of the men policing this district, it’ll be simpler for you if I explain this.”

When she appeared ready to object again, he released her and handed her off to Suzie, who nodded in agreement. Chantille acquiesced, leaned into Suzie’s supporting shoulder and permitted herself to be led back to her bedroom.

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“He’s a good man, Miss L’Amour,” Suzie said when Chantille was tucked into bed. “I’m mighty glad you’ve taken up with someone like him and not the likes o’ Jesse Landon. Poor Faith was always too blind to see that boy for the no-good he was.”

“I haven’t ‘taken up’ with Austin Standish, Suzie,” she remonstrated her maid.

Suzie, motherly and portly, snorted her opinion of that statement.

“Tell that to Mr. Standish, missy,” Suzie remarked. “I think from the way he looks at you he’s got different ideas.”

“Suzie...”

“You don’t scare me none, Miss,” Suzie retorted, “so don’t be takin’ that tone. I’ve known you too long and too well to think you don’t care about that man. Elsewise he wouldn’t be in your rooms.”

A curt knock on the door ended the exchange, and Austin entered the room after a perfunctory “come in” from Chantille. Suzie smiled at him, then left again.

He placed the Peacemaker on the bedside table and watched her for a moment.

“I’ve talked to the police and you can make a statement tomorrow morning, Chantille. Faith’s being taken to a doctor now. She’ll make it,” he added when she looked ready to leap from the bed.

“Thank you, Mr. Standish.”

His eyebrows rose, and his expression was not pleasant as he glowered at her.

“Mr. Standish again. Isn’t it a bit late in the night for that kind of formality, *Miss L’Amour*?”

“I’ve enjoyed your company tonight, Mr... Austin,” she relented softly, not daring to look at him now. “But I think it’s time you were leaving.”

He laughed at her and her head shot up, dark eyes flashing with annoyance, pale ash locks still tumbling from the remnants of the

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intricate coil with which she had begun the evening.

"I don't think you want me gone just yet, Chantille."

Her eyes narrowed slightly when he began unbuttoning his pants and slipped free of them. His interest was immediately apparent and she shook her head in wordless denial.

"No more, Austin," she whispered. "I can't risk it."

"Risk what?"

He sat on the edge of the mattress and tugged the sheets away, knowing she'd be naked to his gaze in all ways.

"I don't want you," she whispered.

"I don't believe you." To make his point he kissed her, easing her onto her back as he joined her on the bed, using his weight to press her into the feather mattress until he was lying over her, and she was clinging to him in blatant longing.

"Tell me again that you don't want me here, Chantille," he challenged as he nuzzled her neck and collarbone.

"I don't want... Oh, God! Austin..." His name disintegrated into a hiss of pleasure when he cupped her breasts in his palms and began to lick her nipples. He continued the erotic play until she was pushing up against him, her hips seeking closer contact. When he held her head between his hands, she stared, torn between desire and fear.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

She shook her head.

"Tell me, sweetheart," he repeated. "Say it, and I'll never leave."

"I don't believe you." The hard velvet heat of his cock was poised at the entrance to her body, and she wanted nothing more than to feel him driving deep into her. She was afraid of the price he was asking, afraid she'd be wrong and he would leave...

"Chantille..."

"Make love to me, Austin," she whispered brokenly. "Stay with me."

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With a groan that blurred triumph and desperate need, he thrust into her, buried completely in her eager wetness. Words, frantic whispers and the sounds of rapture filled the room as they sought release and completion in each other. When it was over a long while later, Chantille curled close to his side, head on his shoulder, hand over his heart as she stroked light touches across the smooth contours of his chest.

"I don't think I'll ever look at chocolate the same way after tonight," Austin mused thoughtfully.

"What?"

He laughed. "From now on chocolate and champagne are the taste of seduction."

She considered it for a moment, then peered up at him.

"From now on?"

"You don't really think you're driving me away after this?"

"I certainly hope not," she murmured. She twisted a little and he pulled her back to his chest, spooning their bodies together as they nestled beneath the blankets.

"Chantille?"

"Yes."

"Yes to what?"

She giggled, unable to repress the silly noise, or the happiness that evoked it.

"Yes to anything, Austin," she replied. "I just want to sleep now. Anything else can wait until morning."

"In the morning I plan to keep you busy," he promised.

"Yes." She glanced over her shoulder and the glint in her eyes was vaguely wicked when she added, "I'll tell Suzie to bring champagne and chocolate for breakfast..."

DENYSE M. BRIDGER

Denyse is a native of Atlantic Canada, born in the country's Easternmost province, Newfoundland, and raised in Nova Scotia. A lifelong dreamer, she began writing at an early age and can't recall a time when she wasn't creating in some artistic form.

"My first published story was, oddly enough, a media based tale written for the TV series *Miami Vice*, first published in 1986. Up until that time I had never heard of fanzines and fandom. It's proven to be an immensely valuable training ground for professional writing in that it teaches discipline and attention to detail. There's no tougher critic than a fan who knows their show or movie down to the tiniest nuance, and they're not shy about telling you when you've missed the mark!"

An active interest in the American West has been a lifetime obsession, too. Cowboys have been a love-affair that began at the tender age of three, and eventually expanded to encompass an equally timeless passion for pirates, Greek Gods, and Ancient Egypt. The other side of the Old West intrigue is an affinity for Victorian England, particularly the 1885-1895 part of the century.

The American Civil War has also been a source of avid interest. "How can anyone not be moved by the tragedy that defines that conflict? There are endless stories of courage and honor, and each man and woman who lived through America's greatest turmoil was left scarred in some way. Those who rose above their losses and went on with the

stoicism and utter bravery of eternal legends really have to inspire and humble anyone who reads about them.”

At this point in her career, Denyse has had published in the vicinity of 400 stories and novellas, in almost any genre you can name. “The only thing I haven’t tried yet is hard-core science fiction, and horror. Since I don’t consider vampires as I write them to be the fodder of horror, I classify those stories as Dark Fantasy.” Many of her vampire stories have appeared in Margaret L. Carter’s anthology, *The Vampire’s Crypt*, and *Night To Dawn*, published and edited by Dawn Callahan. Her poetry has been published internationally.

Denyse has also been the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Fan Quality Award, which is given annually for excellence in fan fictions based on film and television. As of May 2004, there are four awards in her collection, and no less than a dozen nominations to her credit.

What’s next on the agenda? “I hope many more stories for AQP. A home for my ‘labor of love’ Greek fantasy novel. And more time to get all the ideas in my head down onto the written page...”

* * *

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