

ELLORA'S CAVE EXOTIKA

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CARTER

Sweeter
than *Wine*

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Sweeter Than Wine

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SWEETER THAN WINE

Margaret L. Carter

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Chapter One

A man of about forty with blue eyes, devilish brows and a narrow moustache stared down from the portrait above the bedroom fireplace. He had wavy, dark hair growing almost to his collar and wore a ruffled shirt and forest-green waistcoat. "So that's Gordon MacBain," Marie Tate said. "I've been wondering what he looked like." The piercing gaze of the painted eyes stirred a flutter just below her rib cage.

"Yes, that's our ghost." Mrs. Bertelli, owner of the bed-and-breakfast, gestured at the portrait. With a neatly trimmed cap of silver hair, she looked about ten years older than Marie's own fifty-one. "I hope you don't mind sharing your room with a restless spirit."

Marie laughed. She hadn't shared a bedroom with any man in the year and a half since her husband's death. Might as well start with a phantom. "Not at all. I came here especially to find out more about him." She owned MacBain's original house in Colonial Williamsburg, also operated as a B&B. He'd rented it out when he'd moved to this one at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. "He reminds me more of a pirate than a respectable merchant."

"Well, he did make most of his fortune as a smuggler during the Revolution."

Marie nodded. "And then established himself as a prosperous citizen before he had this house built for his young bride. Too bad he didn't get much time to enjoy his success." His wife, Louisa, had supposedly murdered him. "Have you actually seen the ghost?"

"Not I, but women who've slept in this room claim they've had supernatural experiences—noises, objects moving. I haven't heard the sounds myself but I sleep on the other side of the house."

"Only women? And they just hear him, don't see him?" While Marie didn't believe in ghosts, she felt a little disappointed anyway. She liked the fantasy of meeting that flamboyant character.

"Not when they're awake." The slim older woman's cheeks turned pink. "Some say they've had racy dreams about him. That could be the power of suggestion working. I've found things out of place when nobody was around to move them, though. Also, lights blink and the TV turns on by itself." At Marie's dubious frown, she added, "Oh, don't worry, I've had the wiring checked. Not only that—he always drinks his nightcap." She pointed at a glass of red wine on the mantel.

"You're kidding." Marie smiled at the novel gimmick. She'd chosen this B&B for her weekend getaway not only out of curiosity about Gordon MacBain but also to pick up ideas for her own flagging business. Maybe a ghost was what she needed to lure the tourists.

"I'm not making it up." Mrs. Bertelli gave an emphatic nod. "Maybe it's because he's obsessed with the failure of his grapevines to produce decent wine. The winery next door is named in his honor, of course. We leave a glass of their burgundy on the mantel every afternoon and the wine vanishes whether the room's occupied or not. The couple of times I've forgotten it, I've found pillows and books scattered around the next morning. Also, some people report loud noises and violent poltergeist activity in the late afternoon around the time of the murder." She tapped her foot on the weathered bricks of the hearth. "We even have a supernaturally indelible bloodstain that's supposed to mark the spot where he died." Her sardonic tone hinted at some skepticism about the origin of the stain.

A violent ghost sounded less appealing than a "racy" one. Marie glanced down at the discolored blotch. "Louisa killed him here?"

"Nobody knows exactly what happened, naturally," Mrs. Bertelli said. "Before the marriage, MacBain had a reputation as a womanizer. His wife was the jealous type. That evening the servants heard them fighting, which was nothing unusual. The next

thing anybody knew, Louisa jumped out that window and broke her neck." She waved at the window that offered a view of the mountains. "When the servants burst into this room, they found the master dead. He'd hit his head on the edge of the hearth—right there."

"That's quite a story."

The innkeeper's eyes narrowed. "All fact. It's written up in our ad leaflet." She indicated a table under the window where a stack of magazines and travel flyers lay beside a basket of fruit and a tray bearing cheese and crackers along with an open bottle of Riesling in an ice bucket.

"Oh, I'm not doubting you," Marie hastily assured her. "I'll take some of your brochures home with me and put them out for my guests if I can leave a few of mine with you."

"Fine. Just keep in mind that it's our story." With that tart remark, her hostess headed for the door.

"Of course. I wouldn't think of poaching your legend. There's plenty of history to go around." She certainly didn't want to get on the bad side of someone who might be able to help her business. "We could use the connection to promote each other."

"You have a good point there." Mrs. Bertelli's expression softened into a smile. "I'll leave you to get settled. Have a nice evening."

When the bedroom door closed, Marie let her shoulders slump with fatigue, glad for a couple of hours to rest before her dinner reservation at the restaurant attached to the winery. She hadn't taken a weekend off since Frank's death. She'd poured all her energy into the bed-and-breakfast because running it had been a dream they'd shared. She suspected he'd succumbed to a premature heart attack mainly from juggling innkeeper's chores with his day job. Frank's insurance had paid off the mortgage but if she wanted the inn to thrive, she'd have to do more than pass out brochures. She needed an angle to set it apart from all the other B&Bs in the historic district of the colonial capital.

Today would have marked their thirtieth anniversary, as good a time as any to wake up and get on with her life. To include a new man? Not likely. She smiled wryly at the idea. Having enjoyed a long marriage of solid happiness, she didn't expect to hit that jackpot twice. As for a passionate fling, her fantasies ran along the lines of somebody like Gordon MacBain, probably an extinct breed.

What she needed right now was a snack, not a fantasy lover. She chose a peach from the fruit basket and started to peel it with a paring knife. "You can be my inspiration, Mr. MacBain," she said to the portrait. If the son of Scottish immigrants could transform himself into a rich landowner, surely she could transform herself into the hostess of a flourishing historic inn. Too bad she couldn't find the hidden stash of the smuggler's lost treasure, which tradition claimed was hidden somewhere in the Williamsburg house.

A masculine chuckle sounded in her ear. At the same instant, a gust of wind ruffled her shoulder-length hair and blew her denim skirt up to her waist.

The knife in her hand slipped and nicked her left index finger. Blood dripped on the brick hearth at her feet. With a muttered curse, she sucked the wound. She'd either picked up a stray sound from outside or started hearing imaginary voices. And where had the wind come from? The half-open window let in the mild air of a late afternoon in September but no breeze stirred the lightweight, ruffled curtains.

Shaking her head, she set aside the knife and fruit then took the wineglass from the mantel in both hands. The cut on her finger smeared a drop of blood on the rim. Before she could raise the glass to her lips, something pinched her bottom.

With a yelp, she spun around. Nobody there. At the same instant, the goblet slipped from her hand.

Instead of hitting the floor, it hung suspended in midair.

"Okay, no reason to freak out. This is a dream. I must have lain down and dozed off." She glanced at the canopied bed, half expecting to see herself asleep on top of the quilt.

She scented a vagrant aroma of pipe tobacco. "Nay, Mistress, you are awake." The rich bass voice, tinged with humor, vibrated under her breastbone. The glass tilted and the ruby wine began to drain into nothingness.

Marie backed away, her mouth gaping in astonishment. The deadbolt on the door clicked into the locked position while the curtains closed themselves. The glass floated to the mantel and rested there.

"Other women don't hear my voice or feel my touch when they're awake. I wonder why you're different." Invisible fingers tweaked a nipple through her blouse.

Static electricity zapped her breast and sent a miniature bolt of lightning straight to her clit. A trickle of heat flowed between her thighs. When her knees wobbled, an arm wrapped around her waist to support her. She still didn't see anyone...until she glanced in the mirror of the dresser across from the window. The translucent form of Gordon MacBain, wearing the green waistcoat of the portrait, embraced her from behind.

"It's a pleasure to welcome a buxom, golden-haired beauty to my home."

That settled it. She was dreaming. Aside from "buxom" instead of well padded and the gallant failure to mention the silver streaks in the gold, the word "beauty" confirmed the voice as a figment of her imagination. She'd never heard that from any man in real life, not even her late husband.

The ghost's free hand skimmed over her breasts, teasing each nipple to a peak. He might not look solid but he definitely felt that way. Capturing her left hand, he raised it to his lips and swirled his tongue around her cut finger. A shudder of pleasure raced up her arm and radiated across her breasts and down to the pit of her stomach. A moan escaped her lips.

"You can actually feel this?"

"Yes! I mean no! I don't feel anything because you're not real. But keep doing it anyway."

"I can taste your blood." Wonder suffused the disembodied voice. "I can feel your skin and even smell your perfume. It reminds me of honeysuckles. In all the years since

I died, this has never happened before.” His mouth left her finger and trailed kisses up her arm. The flick of his tongue tickled the tender skin on the inside of her elbow.

Shivering, she said, “What are you doing?”

“A woman of your experience shouldn’t have to ask,” the voice teased. “I’m trying to make your pussy wet.”

“It’s working.” She squeezed her thighs together to relieve the growing ache in her clit.

He nibbled a path back to her hand and drew her finger between his pursed lips. The suction heated her skin and made her breath quicken. In the mirror she saw her face flush. The buttons on her blouse popped open one by one. Her erect nipples puckered the lace of the bra. The stray breeze she’d felt before tickled the nape of her neck and lifted her skirt again. Fingers stretched the elastic of her panties and traced the outline of her labia. Hot wetness trickled from her slit.

“Shall I continue? Never in my life, or after it, have I forced myself on a lady.”

She struggled for breath. “Not an issue – this isn’t really happening. Don’t stop.”

His hand withdrew though, to strip off her blouse. Her bra hooks came undone and the bra whisked off, landing on the bed. She saw herself in the mirror, naked from the waist up, with the half-transparent man behind her. He loomed over her by a head. The black of his hair and the piercing blue of his eyes looked clearer than they had a minute earlier. A faint glow surrounded him. “Why aren’t you undressed too?”

“Your wish is my command.” His clothes vanished. The tan of his face and arms faded to a paler shade on the part of his chest she could see, where she glimpsed dark, curling hair. He clasped her more firmly against his body.

She gasped at the hard ridge against the crease between her butt cheeks. Wiggling against his erection, she watched a dusky rose blush spread over her face and chest. His hand roamed over her breasts, barely skimming the nipples before moving on. She bit back a moan when he fondled the lower curve of each breast in turn without touching the taut peaks.

"You fill my hand perfectly," he said, nuzzling the hollow between her neck and shoulder. The rasp of his moustache made her skin prickle. "You're growing hotter," he said. "I can feel your heat. It's a miracle."

"Oh, yeah, I'm hot." Grabbing his hand, she pressed it to her right breast.

With soft laughter that tickled the nape of her neck, he teased the nipple with one finger. Fresh liquid gushed between her legs.

"If this is my fantasy, what are you waiting for?" She reached down to cup her mound and stroke her hardening clit through the damp cloth.

"If you're ready, I won't wait any longer." His hand pushed hers out of the way. Again he insinuated his fingers inside the elastic to skim up and down her pussy lips.

"I'm ready," she panted, hardly able to speak. Her clit was already pulsing. It hadn't felt any touch other than hers for a year and a half.

"You want me to frig you?"

"Oh, yes," she hissed.

"Since this house became an inn, I've seduced countless women in their dreams but never in their waking hours. I can hardly wait to make you spend." He probed her slit just enough to make her squirm with urgency.

"It won't take long."

"Your juices feel as thick as honey. They'd probably taste as sweet too."

At that image, her vagina clenched in anticipation. She thrust back against him, stimulated by the pressure of his cock. His fingers flicked in and out of her sheath, making her rock her hips in response. "Can you feel this too?" she gasped.

"Yes." His hoarse voice rumbled in her ear and resonated through her bones. "For the first time since I died, I can feel a woman's flesh." His thumb circled her clit. "I want your underclothes off."

A second later her sandals unbuckled themselves. She automatically toed them off. Her panties slithered down her legs. She stepped out of them and planted her feet apart to spread her thighs.

"That's better. Your skin is like silk on my cock." He spread her moisture over her clit. The slick glide of his finger on the swollen bud made her flesh tighten with need. Again and again he swept down the length of her slit and back up with torturous slowness. She held her breath waiting for each swirl of his finger around her most sensitive spot. Each time, he skimmed the aching tip and moved on.

"Please," she breathed.

His lips grazed her hair. "Tell me what you want."

"My clit. I can't wait. Rub it now."

His wandering caress returned to that spot and settled into a rhythmic stroke. At the same time, long, cool fingers penetrated her pussy lips. "Your bud is so thick and firm. You must have a great need for relief."

"I sure do." She closed her eyes, trembling, and clutched for support at the arm locked around her waist. He felt solid, his chest firm against her back, his cock pressing against her butt. Heat mounted between her legs and radiated over her whole body.

"Faster...need to come." She thrust her hips forward to meet his touch. Her head reeled with the dancing of his fingers on her clit. It started to pulse and her inner muscles rippled along with it. She cried out as her climax swept over her.

The next instant, a gust of wind lifted her off the floor. Her eyes flew open and she let out a shriek of alarm.

The ghost laughed. "There's nothing to fear." His hands clasped her rib cage.

Hearing a swish of cloth, she looked over her shoulder and saw the covers on the bed folding back. The same force that held her up wafted her over to deposit her on the sheets. She landed with a jolt that shocked the breath from her lungs. Her skirt flipped up to her waist. Gordon MacBain floated over the bed, his body hovering inches above

hers. He palmed her breasts, sending a fresh surge of heat from the taut nipples to the flesh between her thighs, still quivering with aftershocks.

“Like ripe fruit,” he murmured. If he noticed her “fruit” didn’t form perfect globes anymore, he didn’t mention that detail. “Now I’ll find out if you taste as delicious as I imagine.” His hair hung down to tickle her chest and his moustache rasped against her skin when he nuzzled her. His tongue flicked the tip of each nipple. She whimpered in protest when he didn’t linger.

The bottle of pale golden wine rose from the table and floated to the ghost’s hand. He splashed a few cool drops in the valley between her breasts. A shiver coursed over her. He lapped the trickle of wine, then spilled a drop on one nipple and licked it off. Without giving her time to react, he did the same with the other nipple. She squirmed and clutched his shoulders.

“Be patient. We have ample time.” Humor tinged his voice. He poured a trail of wine down the center of her body to pool in her navel and chased it with his tongue. The tingle he left in his path spread to her inner thighs and the sensitized bud.

“I don’t want to be patient. I need to come again.” How long had it been since she’d enjoyed multiple orgasms? Well, in a dream anything could happen.

In response he splashed wine onto her lower abdomen, where it flowed onto her mound. Gasping, she arched her hips. His tongue swirled over the triangle of hair and lapped the chilled droplets. When he continued lower and reached her clit, she clutched the sheet under her and hissed through gritted teeth.

He parted her labia and lapped up and down her slit. “Just as I thought,” he said. “Like honey. Sweeter than any wine.”

Tiny shocks danced over her pussy in the wake of his tongue. Her clit tightened and throbbed. She couldn’t help moaning and flexing her hips. Hovering on the edge of release, she strained toward the climax just out of reach. “Don’t stop! I need to come in the worst way.”

"Believe me, sweet lady, it will be the best way." Again he circled her most sensitive spot without touching it. "Does your pearl need attention?"

"It sure does!"

His tongue spiraled around her clit until her moans led him to the aching tip. She cried out in relief when he found the place where she needed him most. He flicked it faster the louder she screamed, at the same time probing her slit to fill the emptiness there. Her thigh muscles clenched and her vagina rippled with the onset of her climax. She closed her eyes and let it rush over her.

His hands on her hips anchored her through the waves of ecstasy. When they finally receded, she let herself go limp and lay trembling, drawing long, shuddering breaths.

"You look beautiful when you spend." His lips brushed hers. "How I wish I could feel your cunt embracing my cock."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. She didn't remember ever being caressed with such exquisite precision. Did he have a supernatural ability to sense exactly where she needed stimulation or was she just reacting against her long abstinence?

Oh, right, he was a figment of her imagination. Of course he gave her what she wanted. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, silently laughing at herself for lapsing into one second of belief that he was more than a fantasy.

After catching her breath, she opened her eyes to find the ghost gazing down at her, his arms folded and his mouth curved in a smug smile. Her eyes wandered over his lean, muscled body to his jutting cock. "Why are you still here?" she asked. "Now that you've made me come, I should wake up." Not that she didn't feel awake. The furniture and the rest of her surroundings looked sharp-edged and solid, aside from MacBain himself, who became more opaque with each moment, although a faintly luminous nimbus still surrounded him.

"I assure you, lovely lady, with all the women I've pleased in their sleep, I know the difference between dreaming and waking. You're awake."

She patted the sheet and ran her hands over her damp torso and thighs. Everything felt real, including the light breeze from the window cooling her flushed skin. “Then I’m talking to a ghost. The spirit of a dead man.” Her heart raced.

Chapter Two

"Please don't fear me." He sounded almost hurt.

"I guess it's a little late for that." She squashed an impulse to panic and run screaming out the door. Wearing nothing but a skirt, that wouldn't be a practical response anyway.

"Wait a minute! Then I actually yelled out loud! Mrs. Bertelli and everybody in the house must have heard." She covered her face. "I may never set foot outside this room again."

"Not that I wouldn't enjoy the company but don't let that trouble you. When I manifest, I envelop this space in silence, like a glass dome covering it."

She raised herself on one elbow and tilted her head back to cast a suspicious frown at him. "Great, unless that's a line you're using to string me along."

"Didn't you hear the innkeeper mention that she's never heard the noises her female guests reported?"

"Yeah, I guess so." A genuine haunting raised too many questions for Marie to worry about that detail for long. Okay, so her beliefs about life and death had suffered a fundamental shock. That didn't mean either she or the world had gone crazy. After all, hadn't most people throughout history believed in restless spirits? And this one didn't seem at all dangerous. If he truly existed, though, she had made love with another man on her anniversary. Even with her widowed status, the act felt like a betrayal.

Obviously noticing her abrupt stillness, the ghost said, "You seem troubled. Why?"

"I haven't been with a man since my husband died a year and a half ago. Today we would've been married thirty years. It seems wrong."

Putting an arm around her shoulders, he hugged her tightly to him. He traced the outline of her mouth and brushed her hair back from her face. "As you say, you've been alone for a year and a half. Suppose you'd lain with a living man?" The gentleness in his voice surprised her.

"I'd feel even worse."

"Would your husband reproach you for seeking happiness? Would he want you to veil yourself in mourning forever like Queen Victoria?"

"I guess not," she mumbled with her face hidden against his chest. "He'd want me to move on as long as it was with the right man."

"For this night, if nothing else, I'll strive to be that man."

She leaned back to gaze into his eyes. "You keep saying nobody who was awake has ever seen or felt you. Why me?"

He frowned in thought. "I've been cogitating on that question. What happened to make you aware of me? Right after you cut your finger— Ah, that's it! I should have guessed." His glowing eyes literally sparkled with the joy of discovery. "It's all in Homer."

"Huh? What does a haunted bedroom have to do with the Trojan War?"

"Do your modern schools not teach the classics? According to ancient mythology, shades in the underworld couldn't speak until they'd imbibed an offering of blood. First your blood dripped on the hearth and mingled with mine. That, along with the drop I tasted, must have given me the power to be felt and seen as well as heard."

"That stain on the bricks really does mark the spot where you died?"

He nodded. "Otherwise I wouldn't be able to manifest here in any way. I can do that because part of my mortal being lingers here. I believe as long as you allow me an occasional sip of your blood, I'll be visible and tangible. But only to you, I daresay."

"So how did you haunt the room all this time? Make noises and throw things around?"

"Perhaps by some form of electricity, such as Dr. Franklin captured with his kite and people of your day use to activate your marvelous inventions." He cupped her cheek and bent to kiss the top of her head. "When you leave on the morrow, I'll be reduced to that phantom existence again, able to touch women only while they dream. Grant me this whole night to lavish pleasure on you."

"Yes." What harm could one night of passion do? As far as safe sex went, nothing could be safer than sharing her body with a man who technically didn't have one.

"My deepest thanks." He raised her hand to his lips. The flick of his tongue in the center of her palm sent a frisson coursing up her arm. "I have a cockstand."

"Yeah, I see that. Pretty hard to miss." A nearly hysterical giggle escaped her.

"The point is, I feel the pressure building in it. I feel the need to sheathe it in your cunt. That's something I haven't known in the past two centuries. I satisfied women but got no satisfaction myself. In fact, I experienced lust only in my mind, not in the flesh I didn't possess."

She sat up. "That sounds like a harsh fate."

"Perhaps it's my punishment. Before my marriage I spent many years as a rake, expending my lust on women with no thought for their welfare. Since I died, I've given pleasure without being able to enjoy it myself."

"Well, tonight feel free to enjoy everything you can, Mr. MacBain." She ran her fingertips up his shaft from root to tip. It twitched as if with a life of its own. Her vagina rippled with eagerness to be filled. She'd settled for a vibrator for too long. Not interested in casual sex, she'd had to take care of her own needs. A ghost's lovemaking, though, didn't threaten any of the complications a fling with a living man would.

He caught her hand and fitted it around his cock. "Won't you call me by my given name, darling?"

"I'd love to, Gordon." She slid her hand up and down his shaft.

"Tighter." He sounded short of breath, though he didn't need to breathe.

Squeezing, she felt his cock grow even firmer. It pointed almost straight up. He pumped his pelvis in time with her strokes while she fondled his sac.

"That's it, play with my stones." His fingers curled around her shoulders. "I almost think I could get relief."

Her pulse raced and heat welled between her legs at the thought of how his cock would feel thrusting there instead of into her palm. "This is the hardest hard-on I've ever felt. Were you this virile in life?"

"I don't quite remember, to be honest. I shape my outward form as I imagine it should be. That's one of the advantages of having ectoplasm instead of flesh."

"Then you have either a great memory or a vivid imagination." She couldn't help comparing his vigor with conditions in her husband's last year of life, when the blood pressure meds had made erections chancy. That thought provoked a twinge of guilt. She squashed it like a pesky mosquito. Today and tonight she was free to indulge herself.

With her other hand she kneaded his butt. The firmness of his buns made her insides flutter with excitement. His cock lengthened and stiffened still more. "Yeah, you have a fantastic imagination."

Gordon's voice lowered to a growl. "Enough talk. My cock's about to burst. I need to spend."

She tightened her clasp and rubbed more briskly. He thrust faster and she followed his lead.

"I'm close. Harder!" The bedside and overhead lights blinked on and off, strobing in sync with the rocking of his hips. The television switched on, filling the air with the wail of a country singer.

Marie pressed her fingers into the spot just behind Gordon's sac while stimulating the head of his cock in a more rapid tempo. Static electricity crackled in her hair and skittered over her body. Her nipples and clit tingled with it. Sparks flew from the friction between her hand and his penis. He threw back his head with a wordless roar.

She felt him stiffen and throb in her grip. A fountain of neon-blue light erupted from his cock.

She kept rubbing until his spasms died away. The TV turned off. Shuddering, he wrapped his arms around her. She put her arms around his waist to return the hug. With her ear against the middle of his chest, she felt a scattering of hairs over skin that was refreshingly cool on her flushed face.

Stroking her hair, he whispered, "Thank you."

She nuzzled him and felt a nipple pucker up under her cheek. "My pleasure."

"You've given me what I never dared hope I could ever have again." He planted a kiss on the top of her head.

He'd given her something she'd missed for a long time too, not only sexual release, but also the closeness of a man's embrace. Tears stung her eyes again as she luxuriated in the firmness of his chest and the strength of his arms. So what if his body was an illusion he created by force of will? It was still a quantum leap of improvement over having nobody to hug at all.

His erection nudged her, alerting her to another advantage ectoplasm had over flesh. "You came but you're still hard."

"I don't have the limitations of a living body. Yes, I got satisfaction but I'll never get enough of you. I want to be inside you as deep as possible."

"I want that too. Your cock in my pussy." A blush warmed her face and torso. She'd never spoken her needs so bluntly in all the years of her marriage.

"Off with your skirt, then." A light touch of his hand unsnapped and unzipped the skirt. She lifted her hips to let him tug it off.

"Ah, that's better. I love the feel of your bare flesh." He slipped his hands under her rear to squeeze her butt cheeks. "What a lovely plump arse you have."

"Plump?" she squealed, slapping his chest.

He laughed. "It's a compliment." He kneaded her bottom. "This stirs me the same way the lushness of your bosom does." His hands roamed over her body, sweeping up and down her back, molding the outer curves of her breasts, grazing the crease of her butt.

Electricity danced over her skin. Her pulse sped up. Already the needy place between her legs was growing hot again. Her flesh quivered at the kisses he scattered over her neck and shoulders.

"So many endless years watching without touching," he muttered into the valley between her breasts. "What a treasure you're bestowing on me."

She massaged his shoulders and arms. She too was thrilled to the core at this chance to touch and hold a lover.

Lifting his head, he reached out and a wineglass floated to him. Without touching the bottle, he poured the glass half full. "Drink."

She swallowed the crisp, fruity liquid from the goblet he tilted for her.

"Let me taste the sweetness of the wine on your lips." His tongue swirled around her mouth.

Sighing, she parted her lips. His tongue slipped inside and hers darted to meet it. Ripples of excitement radiated from there to her nipples and the tender flesh between her thighs. She clung to him and let her eyes drift shut. Her head whirled.

When his kisses paused, she released a soft mewl of protest. Slitting her eyes, she watched him sip the wine. He released the glass to let it float away and kissed her again. She received him with a gasp of surprise. Cool wine trickled from his mouth into hers. The frisson zapped straight to her pussy. She flung a leg over one of his and rocked against his thigh.

"What do you want?" he growled into the curve of her neck.

"You know what. Come inside me."

He wrapped his arms around her. The two of them spun around until she found herself floating face up a few inches above the bed. She let out a tiny shriek and clutched him. His body covered hers while his embrace supported her.

"Don't be afraid." The head of his penis nudged her slit. "I won't let you fall. Open for me."

She spread her thighs. His cock slipped inside inch by inch. She twined her legs around his and flexed her hips, urging him on, but he wouldn't speed up.

"So tight." He gently bit the side of her neck. "Like silk and honey." Lodged to the hilt at last, he began to draw out just as slowly.

She tried to force a faster rhythm but couldn't get any traction. "Move," she gasped. "Make me come."

He clutched her butt to clasp her tightly to him and thrust in and out, gradually increasing his speed. She locked her legs around his hips and pumped in unison with him. He angled his pelvis to rub against her mound.

A tingle started in her clit and spread through her core. Heat flared deep inside her. Her pussy quivered inside with the onslaught of her climax.

"I feel it—your cunt embracing my cock." He thrust to the root and locked her against him.

A fresh wave rushed over her. She clung to him through the shattering tremors.

She was still shaking when he flipped over and settled onto the bed, face up with her on top, his cock still lodged inside her. "Ride me."

Chapter Three

Marie had to gulp for breath to talk. "You don't think this is shameless and wicked?"

His hands skimmed over her breasts and flared out to clasp her waist, searing her skin with the heat of his arousal. "You're confusing me with my grandnephew's generation. In my time we frankly acknowledged women's desires and knew a female could be as lusty as a male." He reached up again and teased her nipples with his thumbs. "Unless you're sated already?"

"No way." To her astonishment, she needed to come again. The pressure was already building in her clit. Kneeling on the mattress, she rocked against him. The way he filled and stretched her vagina made it clench with eagerness to feel him explode inside her. She dug her nails into his chest and met his thrusts with her own.

The hair on his loins tickled her clit. Finding the perfect tilt of her hips, she savored the sensation of rubbing that burning spot against him.

He gripped her waist. "Yes! Ride me faster, higher."

The moment her release started, he groaned and rammed into her. She felt the pulsation of his cock as he came with her. The electricity of his climax sizzled through her body. Fireworks sparked behind her closed eyelids. She shuddered with ecstasy for what seemed like forever until exhaustion made her collapse, fighting for breath, onto his chest.

His arms folded around her, his hands stroking her until she stopped gasping and trembling.

With a shaky giggle, she rolled onto her side and rested her head on his shoulder. "Maybe I'm imagining this after all. I thought I'd permanently forgotten how to do that." She hadn't had a climax that intense in years.

"I can vouch that you remember very well."

"To think I'd have missed it completely if I hadn't been curious about your history and decided to check out this place."

"The good fortune is mine." He patted her shoulder and drew her more snugly against him. "When you first arrived, I heard you telling Mistress Bertelli that you own my old house in Williamsburg."

"Right, it's a B and B a lot like this one."

"It must have changed a great deal since my day." He sounded almost wistful.

"Not so much as you might think. Colonial Williamsburg has historic preservation rules. They try to restore buildings to their original state and keep them as authentic as possible. Allowing for electricity and modern plumbing, of course."

"I would like to be able to see my former home as it is today," he said, "but I'm bound here."

"Why did you move almost to the frontier to build your dream house?"

"The same reason you and your husband decided to run an inn, I suppose. To make a fresh start. I had a bit of a reputation as a philanderer, you know, and I didn't want to force Louisa to live among folk who remembered my old bachelor ways too well. I thought she'd be happier here."

"That plan didn't work out great, did it?"

"Nay," he said with a rueful chuckle. "Nor did my ambition to produce vintage wines like the ones I'd sampled on my visits to France. I had better luck with whiskey, as befitted my Highland heritage. But if Mr. Jefferson could raise fine grapes, I thought, why couldn't I?"

"From what I've read, he didn't make a huge success of his vineyards either."

"No matter, there's a thriving winery on my land today and every night I imbibe a glass of their best. Ghostly existence has its compensations."

"Can you actually taste the wine?"

"Now I can, thanks to that drop of your blood. Before that, all I enjoyed was a fleeting tang that evaporated the instant I made the liquid vanish. A ghost of a taste, you might say. And don't ask me where it goes in the absence of a physical stomach," he added, obviously anticipating her next question. "Nobody handed me a guidebook to the afterlife when I died. I've kept draining the glass each night because it amused me to mystify the guests. I clung to the hope that someday I'd gain the ability to savor the vintage."

"I'm glad I could give you that. You've given me so much pleasure in return."

He chuckled. "It's not over yet. You haven't shared that with any man since you were widowed—how long ago?"

"About a year and a half. No, I'm not into one-night stands and I haven't met anybody I'm attracted to. Well, until today." She blushed.

"A lusty female like you must have missed the joys of the marriage bed. When you needed relief, you relied on your own hands? I couldn't even do that for myself."

"Yes," she said, blushing even hotter. "Or a pillow, the shower spray or a vibrator. That's an electrical device shaped like a penis."

"I know what it is. I've watched women in this room use them."

Marie propped herself on one elbow and frowned at him. "I'm not sure how I feel about your two centuries of voyeurism."

"It was the only way to assuage the loneliness and tedium of my condition." He put an arm around her and coaxed her to lie back against his shoulder. "Your husband never appeared to you after he died?"

"No." Until this minute, it had never occurred to her that he could. "I guess he went into the light or wherever good people go." She flushed as she realized what she'd said. "Not that I'm judging whether or not you're good."

Gordon laughed. "No need to apologize. I know very well that I didn't lead an exemplary life. Existence trapped in this room leaves a bit to be desired but it's not bad."

When I'm alone, I read." He gestured at a low bookshelf next to the bed. "Besides the delight of sharing women's dreams, I also learn about this strange century of yours from the conversations of visitors and the babble of the television box." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "Though sometimes I have trouble making out what's real and what's only playacting."

"Don't worry about that. So does half the audience."

"In any case, no matter how odd this world may be, I'm in no hurry to leave it and face judgment for my transgressions."

"Did your wife actually murder you?"

"Not exactly. She did kill me but it was an accident."

"The story says you were fighting."

He heaved a phantom sigh that emitted no puff of breath on Marie's skin. "Aye, we quarreled too often. Building this house cost a good deal of money. I couldn't bask in the comfort of married life and play at being a gentleman farmer. I had to maintain my mercantile business in Williamsburg. For that I had to travel quite a bit."

"Which was a lot harder and more time-consuming in your century." For all her amateur study of history, she still found it hard to imagine the morning's drive between here and Williamsburg transformed into an arduous trip of several days.

"Louisa got it into her head that I spent my nights away from home dallying with women I'd known in my bachelor days."

"Did you?" Recalling his reputation, Marie sharpened her tone.

"No. I admit I married her more for family connections than from personal attachment but I was faithful to my vows. I was more than ready to turn over a new leaf. A man my age grows tired of flitting from one brief liaison to another. In truth, Louisa and I would both have been happier if I'd chosen to wed a mature woman—someone like you—rather than a flighty maiden like her."

"Thanks, I guess." Although Marie liked to consider herself mature, she didn't think of that quality as her most enticing trait.

"She had romantic notions about a passionate husband who'd dance attendance on her. My long absences came as a severe disappointment."

"She must have gotten lonely, stuck here while you were gone." In the late eighteenth century, country life must have sometimes meant isolation, even for the rich. No phone or internet to keep in touch with the outside world, no car she could jump into and casually drive to a neighbor's plantation or the nearest city.

"True, and she wasn't much for practicing the domestic arts. I thought little of her plight then, except to become impatient with her constant jealousy. I think she might even have become a trifle unhinged on the subject."

"And that's why she killed you?"

"As you supposed, we were quarreling. I'd just returned from a journey to face yet another torrent of accusations. I answered her tirade with one of my own. In the midst of the shouting, Louisa slapped and shoved me. I tripped and fell backward onto the hearth and hit my head."

Marie winced in sympathy.

"No matter, I didn't suffer much. I remember only a stunning blow and a momentary sharp pain before everything went dark. The next thing I knew, I found myself floating above my own body with Louisa shaking it and wailing. When she realized I was dead and the servants were pounding on the door, she rushed to the window in a frenzy. I tried to call out to her but she didn't see or hear me."

"So she jumped."

He nodded. "As she told me later, she took her life in remorse for what she'd done to me."

"Told you? Wait a minute, you talked to her ghost?"

"Well, yes, many times." His eyes shifted from hers.

A dismaying suspicion crept over her. "How'd you manage that?"

He made an embarrassed throat-clearing noise before answering, "She's bound here too. The veranda beneath the window is paved with some of the original flagstones, stained with her blood."

Marie sat up with a yelp of alarm. "What? Your wife saw everything we just did?"

Gordon wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her down beside him. "No, no, nothing like that. She manifests for only a few minutes each day, between the time when she killed me and the moment of her death. Besides, she's properly my widow now, not my wife."

Allowing herself to relax but not snuggle close to him right away, Marie said, "In these circumstances, I'm not sure that makes any practical difference." After mulling over the story for a minute, she asked, "Does Mrs. Bertelli know Louisa's here too?"

He shook his head. "As far as she's concerned, her inn is haunted by a single spirit. With Louisa appearing only a few minutes each evening, her presence isn't obvious." He laughed softly. "None of the self-styled mediums who've visited here have figured out the true situation either."

"Mediums? Mrs. Bertelli brought in psychics?"

"Yes, and she wasn't the first owner to try that. There was quite a fad for spiritualism in the nineteenth century, you know. Most of the people who've tried to contact me were frauds, of course. A few of the supposed sensitives actually did have the gift of perceiving the supernatural. Either way, I enjoyed playing tricks on them."

"Tricks? Like what?"

"Levitating the table, raising a chill wind to rattle the window and blow out the candles, that sort of thing. Sometimes I seized the pen a medium was using for automatic writing and scribbled nonsense. Or I might trace bawdy words on their Ouija boards." He smiled in obvious pleasure at the memories. "Eventually they all gave up and left me in peace."

"You didn't try to speak seriously through them?"

"Why bother? I had nothing to say. The only time I conveyed a genuine message was when I ordered Mistress Bertelli to supply me with that daily glass of burgundy."

Marie couldn't help feeling sorry for his loneliness, far beyond what she'd had to endure. At least she could find comfort by speaking with people and touching them. "It doesn't seem fair that you've gone through two centuries of punishment for, at most, twenty years of carousing."

"A bit more than that." He grinned. "I was a precocious youth."

She slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Yeah, I bet. Anyway, it seems to me you should have atoned enough by now."

"It's been tedious at times but far from painful. And tonight I have you." Twining his hands in her hair, he nibbled her ear and trailed gentle kisses along her cheek to her mouth. He captured her lips and coaxed them apart with his tongue. Her head spun with the electric thrill of his kiss until she thought for a second she was floating above the mattress again. "Let me offset a few more of my sins by serving your needs." He traced a path from the hollow of her throat to the valley between her breasts. Tiny sparks leaped from his fingertips to make her skin tingle. Her nipples and clit tightened at the sensation.

"Don't forget about your needs." She squeezed his cock, eager to have it inside her again.

Clasping her hand and sliding it up and down his shaft, he said, "How could I? But I also can't forget you're only mortal. You have to keep up your strength." He reached toward the small table under the window. The paring knife and the peach she'd discarded flew into his grasp. With deft speed he peeled off the fuzz then raised the fruit to her mouth. "Here, you must take nourishment."

When she bit into the fruit, its lush flavor exploded in her mouth and juice dribbled over her chin. Gordon kissed the liquid from her lips and lapped it from her chin and neck. A delicious shiver coursed through her. She took another bite and he imitated her.

"I can actually taste it." He nibbled her fingertips. "Although I still prefer the flavor of your skin." He held the peach to her lips until she'd eaten all of it while he nipped her fingers and lips between bites. After she'd finished, he wafted away the seed and the knife. A napkin from the table drifted into her lap.

"Speaking of food," she said, wiping her hands, "I'm scheduled to have dinner at the winery restaurant later."

"Then you should go and eat heartily, of course. You'll need the stamina." His smug grin verged on a leer."

"I'm not sure I want to leave. Will you be here when I get back?" She still wasn't a hundred percent convinced that he wouldn't turn out to be a wish-fulfillment hallucination, a figment who would vanish if she fell asleep or even let him out of her sight.

"You can rely on that," he said with a wry smile. "It's not as if I can go anywhere."

"You're literally stuck in this room?"

"Not quite. I'm tied to my material remains, so I can also manifest in the churchyard where my corpse lies. It's more entertaining here."

"So let's get on with the entertainment." On the chance he did vanish without warning, she wanted to fit in as much passion as the hours would hold. "How about this?" She bent to circle the head of his cock with her tongue.

"Yes!" he hissed. "More."

She drew the tip of his cock between her lips and swirled her tongue around it while tickling his balls.

"Ah!" He clutched her shoulders. "Yes. Suck my cock."

She pulled him deeper into her mouth and worked up and down his shaft as her fingers traced the firm ridge on its underside. She relished the way her suction made his cock harden and pulse with urgency.

"Enough." His thumbs dug into her collarbone. "I don't want to spend outside your cunt yet." When she stopped, he said, "Thank you. I can hardly remember when I last felt the heat of a woman's mouth on my cock. A gentleman didn't ask that of his wife in my day."

"What else have you missed in the past two hundred years?"

"This." With an eddy of wind, he raised her from the mattress and turned her facedown.

Panting, she propped herself on her elbows and glanced back at him. "I'll never get used to that."

He grinned. "Good, I wouldn't wish you to become bored." Again he silently summoned the wine bottle. She gasped when he poured a thin trail down her spine. He caught it with his tongue just as it began to flow into the crack between her ass cheeks.

Trembling, she crumpled the pillowcase in her fists. His tongue flicked up her back to the nape of her neck. He explored her breasts with one hand, coaxing the nipples to peaks, then wandered down her abdomen to her cleft. "Please," she whispered. "I don't think I can have another climax."

"Of course you can." He reached beneath her and fondled the hair on her mound. "Get up on your knees."

She tucked her legs up to her chest. Unable to touch him in return, she waited helplessly for his next move.

"Trust me," he murmured. His moustache brushed the nape of her neck, sending fresh shudders through her. "I'll never hurt you." His erection slid up and down the crease of her buttocks while one hand caressed each of her nipples in turn and the other delved between her pussy lips.

She hissed as his fingers grazed her still-swollen clit. The sensitized tip burned with an ache that quickly blossomed into an urgent need for relief. Whimpering, she buried her face in the pillow. She spasmed when his cock plunged into her. It seared her channel. When he started to thrust, the angle and depth excited her with an intensity

that verged on pain. She gritted her teeth, her arms and legs quivering while he strummed her clit. Waves of ecstasy radiated from that spot and flooded her senses. She screamed as her inner muscles contracted around his hard cock.

“Ah...I can’t bear it!” He gripped her waist and sank his teeth into her shoulder. Yet another climax convulsed her. He exploded inside her with even more dazzling fireworks than before.

Her head reeled. After what felt like a timeless interval suspended in a glowing void, the pyrotechnics faded from her vision and her breathing slowed to normal.

He slipped off her and they turned on their sides. Just as he kissed her lightly on the cheek, the bed vibrated as if an earthquake had hit the house. But she’d never heard of an earthquake in central Virginia.

Chapter Four

"What's going on? The earth is supposed to shake *during* a climax, not after it's over."

A gust of wind swept across the rug with a roar like a peal of thunder. Flames flared in the fireplace and instantly vanished. Sitting up, Marie clutched Gordon's hand. "Are you doing that?"

"No, indeed. Damn, it's her time. I'd mercifully forgotten for the moment. I'm getting bloody tired of these daily battles."

The lights blinked on and off. Leaflets on the table fluttered into the air like a flock of birds. The pillows flew off the bed. A harsh voice with a feminine pitch yelled, "At it again, are you? You're as much of a beast in rut as you were before you died."

Marie gasped, sprang to her feet and snatched up the quilt to shield her naked body. "Is that Louisa?"

"Who else would I be?" the phantom retorted.

Pulling open the nightstand drawer, Marie grabbed the Bible and brandished it. "Begone!"

A laugh like tinkling glass mocked the gesture. "Don't waste your time. Plenty of busybodies have tried to exorcise us with crosses, crystals, herbs, all manner of rubbish. We're bound here permanently." The female ghost's tone sharpened. "To my endless regret. I wouldn't have killed myself if I'd known it would trap me with this philandering tomcat for eternity."

"Will you quit harping on that subject?" Gordon shouted. "I never once dallied with another woman while we were married."

Scorn edged the disembodied voice. "You've done more than enough of that in the two hundred years since."

"Which is none of your business. Have you forgotten we promised to be faithful until death parted us, not beyond?"

"I wish it had parted us. This is a fate worse than death. I thought I'd find peace and instead I'm trapped here with you forever."

"Do you think I like it any better? I'd leave if I could."

The phantom emitted a wordless shriek. The window rattled and the curtains billowed. An apple flew out of the basket and passed through Gordon's body. Marie ducked as it hurtled past her. Cushions from the chair by the fireplace followed, then a folio-size book on Virginia gardens from the serving table. Dodging the book, she dropped the Bible, leaped onto the bed and covered her head with her arms. The sheet wrapped around her like a cocoon and squeezed her chest. She struggled to breathe.

When the chair levitated, Gordon yelled, "Stop! Not another move."

The chair dropped to the floor with a thud. The sheet slackened, releasing Marie. She caught the hem and again held it up to shield herself.

"Don't you dare lift a finger against her," Gordon said. "In a manner of speaking. She has nothing to do with your grudge against me."

"What's this?" Though still sharp, Louisa's tone held curiosity as well as anger. "Why do you care what I do to a mortal?"

He folded his arms and glared at the spot the voice emanated from. "That too is none of your business. Just believe that if you don't leave her alone, I will find a way to hurt you."

"Hmm." The sound came out almost as a purr. "So she matters to you as more than a vessel for your lust." The window rattled but less violently than before.

He sat beside Marie and put an arm around her shoulders. "She does."

A knock sounded on the door. She jumped and stared in that direction. Mrs. Bertelli's voice said, "Mrs. Tate? I just wanted to check that you're comfortable."

"You lied," Marie whispered. "She heard all that racket."

The spectral activity froze. Gordon murmured, "Answer her. She couldn't hear before but she'll be able to now."

Marie swallowed and piped up, "Sure, I'm fine."

"None of those poltergeist disturbances?" The question sounded pleasant enough, with no edge of suspicion.

"Not a one." Marie crossed her fingers. "Perfect peace and quiet. I'm loving it."

"That's good, then. Sorry for bothering you." The woman's steps tapped away down the corridor.

The curtains began to undulate with a moan of phantom wind. "You see, she poses no problem," Gordon said. "Now I've restored the dome of silence." Since he spoke in a normal tone and Mrs. Bertelli didn't turn back to investigate that sound or the weird keening, Marie had to conclude he was telling the truth.

A miniature whirlwind eddied in the middle of the room. "How odd," Louisa said. "You've never taken more than a passing interest in any of your other nightly playmates. This one is different?"

"Yes. Mistress Tate is different." He didn't offer any further explanation.

"I care about him too," Marie said to the invisible spirit. "He doesn't deserve your hate now, if he ever did." She leaned into Gordon's embrace.

A gust of wind scattered the leaflets across the floor. "What? You've communicated with him? You can see and feel him?"

"Yes." Since Gordon hadn't given any details, Marie didn't think she should, either.

"That has never happened before. How did you deserve such a boon?" A magazine slapped Gordon in the face and floated through his head to land on the floor behind him. He barely flinched.

"Why did it do that?" Marie asked. "You're solid."

"Only to you. Remember?" he said.

"Then this woman is truly different from the others," Louisa said.

"Just as I told you. I don't deserve her but I'll bask in her passion for this night."

The sheet snatched itself out of Marie's grip. "This pleases you? You want to lavish your favors on my prodigal husband?"

"Like he said, he hasn't been your husband for a long time. And it pleases me just fine."

With a sniff of disdain, the voice said, "That's all very well for the two of you tonight. When you go back to wherever you came from, I'll still be caged here with him." The lights and TV flicked on and off. "I get only a few minutes of consciousness each evening and I have to spend it watching him play with these modern toys or frolic with female guests."

In a tone close to a growl, he said, "I'd be delighted to break out of this cage and leave it to your sole possession. I have no way of escaping this place short of perpetually hovering around my grave, which I refuse to do."

"Wait a minute." Marie sprang to her feet, forgetting her nudity in the excitement of her idea. "Maybe there is a way you can leave."

Gordon turned to her with a quizzical arch of one eyebrow.

"Explain yourself," Louisa ordered.

"Gordon, you said you can manifest anywhere part of your body exists, right?"

"True."

"And that splotch on the hearth actually is your blood?"

He nodded.

"Then it's simple." Walking over to the table under the window, Marie picked up the knife and an envelope left there for guest comments. She knelt by the fireplace and

scraped a layer of brick dust from the indelible stain into the envelope. "Would this be enough of your physical substance?"

He touched the envelope. Sparks scintillated from his fingertip. "Yes, quite enough."

Standing, she sealed the flap and tucked the envelope into her purse. "Then it goes home with me and you can come along." She added with a tremor of uncertainty, "If that's what you want."

Her fear that she'd leapt to a faulty assumption vanished as soon as his eyes lit with a blue gleam and the glow around his body brightened. "That is exactly what I want and would never have dared to hope for." His arms folded around her.

"You'd gladly relieve me of his presence?" Louisa broke in. "Then I beg your pardon for flinging missiles at you."

Marie pulled away from Gordon as one catch occurred to her. "Oh, no, I can't steal Mrs. Bertelli's ghost story. If she found out, I'd never hear the end of it. She'd probably sue me for occult plagiarism or something."

"Louisa will be here," he said. "Won't you? It isn't as if you have anywhere else to go either. Our hostess is unaware of your existence. Continue the hauntings in my place, even if only for these few moments each day, and she'll never know the difference. She expects the room to be disordered from time to time, something you've demonstrated you are fully capable of."

"I suppose I could do that," Louisa said in a slightly grudging tone, "for the sake of getting rid of you."

He said, "If you want this chamber all to yourself, you must keep your word on that and also make the daily glass of wine vanish. The emptying of the glass is the main feature of Mistress Bertelli's spectral tale."

"I can do that," Louisa said.

"Sounds like a plan." Marie hugged Gordon, who tightened his embrace and gave her a light slap on the butt. A blush heated her skin. "A legendary ghost haunting my B and B should attract more customers and get me out of my financial bind."

"If you're concerned about poaching the ghost from this inn," he said, "how will you explain the apparition of my spirit in your house?"

"Not a problem. I don't have to identify the hunter. Lots of colorful people have lived there over the years. I can drop hints that it's your nephew who inherited the place and visitors will draw their own conclusions." Hoping she was facing the right direction, she said to Louisa, "You really won't mind being stuck here alone? Maybe you could move on to the afterlife now that you won't be feuding with Gordon."

"No thank you. I've committed murder and suicide. I'll be quite satisfied to stay here now that I don't have to share this room with him."

"Perhaps it's our feuding that has limited you to a few violent minutes of apparition each day," Gordon said. "Now that you won't be overshadowed by me, your allotted time may expand."

"That's a cheerful prospect." A fragrance of lavender perfumed the air as a hopeful lilt infused her voice. "Who knows, maybe I can indulge in some dalliance myself now and then."

"Just keep in mind," Gordon said, "that I can reappear on this spot to check on you at any time. So make sure you keep your bargain."

"What better incentive could I have? I'll do anything to avoid seeing or hearing you again. One thing—I'd relish being able to touch a man, even if only for a few minutes. Tell me why you can do that with her." When he only smiled, she added, "Surely that's not too much to ask. Please, I have only a moment left."

"Oh, very well. It's the blood. Tasting a drop of her blood made me fully present."

"Thank you." A gust of wind whooshed through the room with a final vortex of loose paper before silence fell. The lavender aroma died away.

A wave of Gordon's hand sent all the scattered objects flying to their proper places.

Shaking, Marie clung to him as he ran his hands up and down her back in a slow, comforting rhythm. "Wow. That's enough haunting to last me a good long time. Present company excluded, of course."

"You have no qualms about allowing me to come with you?"

She tilted her head to bask in the gleam of his electric-blue eyes. "Not a one. I just thought of something, though. Will you actually need regular doses of my blood to keep appearing in solid form?"

"We can't be sure until we try. I might need a drop each night. How do you feel about that?"

One drop of blood per night sounded like a small price to pay for his company. "No problem."

"I'll be glad to return to my original home. I was never fully content here."

"You'll get a chance to see what's been changed and how much of the original house we've kept."

"I look forward to it." He scooped her up in his arms, carried her to the bed and sat with her on his lap. He nuzzled the junction between her shoulder and neck. When she sighed and leaned back, his tongue flicked the hollow of her throat.

She made a soft sound of protest when he paused to speak. "You said your innkeeping venture suffers from a lack of funds. It's just occurred to me that I could help in another way besides performing a spectral show for your guests."

She twined her arms around his neck. "How's that?"

"Have the restoration folk in that Colonial Williamsburg of yours ever torn down and rebuilt the fireplace in the upstairs parlor?"

After a minute of rummaging through memories of the process she'd gone through to get her business permits, she said, "Not that I know of. I was told it's composed of the original brickwork."

"Behind a certain brick there's a niche where I hid valuables I didn't want known to the taxing authorities. I meant to return for the jewelry and coins but died before I got around to it."

"The lost treasure? I thought that was nothing but a legend."

"If my nephew, who inherited the property, never found it, it's still there. Would it somewhat alleviate your financial problems?"

Her heartbeat tripped with rising excitement. "You know it! Depending on the laws about archaeological finds, of course, but I'm sure I'd get something out of it. If nothing else, I could write up a cool story about being led to the treasure by a ghost, which would attract flocks of tourists."

He gave her a lingering kiss that made her head reel with lack of air by the time he broke it off. "I'm delighted to be of service."

"I'll let you haunt that upstairs parlor. You can visit my bedroom by invitation." From the way he'd described his limitations, she guessed she could set his boundaries by the placement of the envelope that held specks of his blood. "As much as I'm enjoying this, I won't have you invisibly watching me twenty-four hours a day."

"Would I do such a thing?" he said with a wicked grin.

"I'm not sure but I wouldn't put it past you. After all, in your heyday you were the next thing to a pirate."

"Ah, but death has reformed me." He brushed a kiss on the back of her hand. "I gladly accept whatever you care to offer."

"I hope you won't get tired of playing the resident spook every night."

"Not with your delicious company to spice up those nights."

She still had trouble accepting his flattery at face value. A dismaying fact popped into her brain. "You're ten years younger than I am."

His laugh vibrated through her bones. "Sweetheart, I'm at least two hundred years older."

She shook her head. "You know what I mean. You'll stay forty forever while I keep aging."

"I assure you, from my perspective that doesn't matter. From this day forth, I exist on this plane to lavish my passion on you."

She mulled over what they'd discussed earlier about his atonement for his wild bachelor years. "With what you're doing for me, you'll finish expiating your sins before you know it. You'll be free to move on to the next plane, whatever that is."

Drawing her head onto his shoulder, he smoothed her hair. "I'm in no hurry at all to make that change."

Wistfulness stole over her as she reflected on that probable outcome. Though she would miss him when he eventually won free of his earthbound state, she wouldn't want to hold him back from a higher destiny. "I know you won't stay forever but, then, I won't have to depend on you forever either." In his role as her ideal fantasy lover, he would be the ideal guide for her first venture outside the isolation of her grief.

"Time means little in the afterlife. Let's enjoy the present, my lady." He tangled his fingers in her hair and covered her mouth with his. With their arms and legs intertwined, they floated above the bed and their passion soared together.

About the Author

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She's received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii and the University of California. She is a 2000 Eppie Award winner in horror and, with her husband, retired Navy Captain Leslie Roy Carter, she coauthored a fantasy novel.

Margaret welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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