

Red Red Blood Chapter 1

We met at the Mid-Winter Charity Ball, held to raise funds for a new research lab to be built later in the spring. It would be used to find cures for blood-related diseases and disorders.

He was dressed entirely in black, except for his crisp white tailored shirt. His polished gold cufflinks reflected the light from the overhead chandelier, almost making them glitter. His midnight black hair was short, streaked with silver at his temples, but long enough to be combed back from his face. His smile lit up the room as he walked towards me and I felt like a shy teenager being greeted at the door for her very first date. His voice was dark and smooth, reminding me of bittersweet chocolate. “ I’m Count Marcus of Fredericksburg. ” He captured my hand to kiss in greeting and I noticed the ring he wore on the middle finger of his left hand was a square-cut black onyx with diamonds around the outer edge and blood-red rubies in the center, marking out the letter ‘M’.

“ You were the only person I noticed from across the room, an enchanting vision dressed from head to toe in red, my favorite color. I knew I had to meet you. ”

The chill of his mouth came into contact with the back of my hand and cold shivers ran down my spine, spreading rapidly over the rest of my body. I tried to pull away, but he raised his head and locked his dark, piercing eyes to mine, lifting the very thoughts from my soul.

I listened with pleasure as the band played my favorite song, ‘Lady in Red.’ Marcus asked me to dance, knowing full well I wouldn’t refuse. Our bodies swayed so close I heard his heart beat in staccato blips and recognized the intoxicating scent of his cologne. I glanced up and saw the sad expression in his gaze. “ Your smile lights up this dull ballroom with its brightness! ” His voice dripped ice so cold it sent my temperature rising to the boiling point. “ You and your exquisite red silk gown suit this song, ” he murmured against my hair.

I’d seen this particular dress in the storefront window of an exclusive designer shop, earlier Saturday afternoon. It screamed out my name in red-hot chili pepper coloring and I dashed inside, impulsively telling the clerk I had to try on that particular gown. It clung to my body like a second skin,

simple in style, but revealing enough to make me feel sensuous and alluring. A driving force surged through me and I bought it on the spot, not considering that it would cost me well over a month's salary. I drove home in haste, wanting to admire it again, but it hung in the back of my car, encased in its own heavy-duty plastic designer bag.

I rushed to my door, unlocked it and ran up stairs, getting to my bedroom in record time. I stripped off my clothes and tried on my dress once more. It fit me perfectly and I purred in delight! The scooped neckline showed off just enough cleavage to make me feel enticing and desirable. The empire waist allowed the skirt front to billow right above my knees, while the back dropped in swirling waves to mid-calf. I stared at a reflection I didn't recognize, feeling like an imperial queen.

I slipped my crimson high heels on over flesh-toned stockings and grabbed my matching wallet purse off the nightstand. I flew downstairs and out the door, then hopped into my '97 emerald green Mustang and drove like a she-devil to get to the Charity Ball on time!

As we danced, I was mesmerized by his presence, floating in the clouds, my feet never touching the ground. When the music stopped, minutes or hours could have slipped by. Scores of conflicting emotions enveloped me and Marcus whispered in my ear, "Would you enjoy strolling through the Rose Garden with me, My Dear Nancy?"

I searched my memory but didn't recall telling him my name when we met. I willingly accepted his offer and we walked leisurely into another world, where the scent of a thousand roses filled the air. The gardens were enclosed in a climate-controlled area, allowing them to bloom year round. He tenderly held my hand, and I experienced what it felt like to be a giddy teenager again. I wanted this night, above any other night in my life, to be perfect, needing Marcus to see me as his equal in every possible way.

We wound our way through the many paths and he told me about his early life in Fredericksburg. "My Father was the original Count of Fredericksburg and had untold wealth, handed down from generation to generation. Gold, silver, jewels, and property came his way by conquering nearby kingdoms. My Mother was named Desiree', a name that befit her nature. She was the most beautiful and desirable woman in the entire country. Her loveliness was breathtaking! She had black curling hair, deep lavender eyes and a

lilting voice that dripped with honey. ” Marcus looked intently at me. “ Her family had riches and power beyond measure and it was love at first sight for both of them. My father’s dark eyes and bold manner won my mother’s heart and they married one month to the day after they met. ” He sighed deeply. “ My mother wasn’t a strong woman and she died while giving birth to me; my life began and hers ended. ” Tears glistened in his eyes.

“ My Father never recovered from that day; his heart was broken and he grew steadily weaker as the years passed by. On my sixteenth birthday he left this earth to be with my Mother, the love of his life. I inherited his title, Count of Fredericksburg and all the responsibilities that go with it. I’ve invested my money wisely, have no financial worries and do as I please, traveling the world over, contributing to a vast assortment of charitable organizations. I’ve seen exotic places and met many lovely women on my journeys, but the ultimate pleasure in my life so far has been meeting you. ” He stopped walking and turned to face me directly. “ Your resemblance to my Mother is very remarkable; she adored red and I see you do as well. ” He picked up on my apprehensions. “ Please tell me about yourself. ”

“ I grew up in an orphanage. ” My nerves made me tremble.

“ Don’t ever be afraid to tell me anything and everything, because I really want to know. ” His tone was gentle and set me at ease.

“ When I graduated from high school, I received a full scholarship to a prestigious all girls’ college and majored in marketing and accounting. I’ve worked for David Winslow as his executive assistant for the past year and in fact, I helped him plan and arrange the Charity Ball. ”

“ And a splendid job you’ve done, My Dear. Do you have a husband or boyfriend perhaps? ”

“ No family, no husband, and definitely no boyfriend. ” I blushed in embarrassment. “ The last boyfriend I had dumped me for my best friend. He told me it was because I wanted to be sure of my feelings before I committed myself to being physically intimate with a man. Now it’s my job and me. ” Had I told him too much about my life?

“ To keep yourself pure until your innermost feelings are truly discovered is to be commended. You’re a very rare and delicate person, Nancy. Would

you consider being my ‘Lady in Red?’ ” He bent his head, his chilled lips colder than ice as he brushed my cheek, but his mouth left a wake of burning sensations on my skin.

“ There’s no need to answer me now. ” He spoke so quietly I almost didn’t catch his words, but their softness imprinted themselves in my soul and I knew we’d be together for eternity and beyond.

“ Yes, Marcus. All the time in the world. ” Had we walked for miles and miles or was it only a few feet? It was past midnight when we arrived back at the Charity Ball. I was the luckiest girl in the world to have a man like Marcus take an interest in me, causing my heart to sing a brand new song. My greatest desire was to become his ‘Lady in Red.’ “ Marcus... ”

He put a finger to my lips. “ I have business matters to attend to, but I want to see you tonight, ” he demanded. “ I’ll have Gustav, my driver, call for you at 7 pm sharp! ” He turned on his heel and as he strode out of sight, I realized I missed him already.

I went to the ladies room to freshen up and stopped inside the door when I heard two of my co-workers gossiping. One of them said, “ I don’t know what Count Marcus sees in her. Why, she’s as plain as white bread! ” They laughed in derision. “ Marcus is so handsome he could have any woman at this Ball or in the entire world. ”

The other girl said, “ Maybe he felt sorry for her. I’ll bet Mr. Winslow made him an offer he couldn’t very well refuse, so he pretended to take an interest in Nancy as part of a lucrative business deal. ”

As quietly as possible, I backed out of the powder room, not wanting them to know I’d overheard their conversation. Scalding tears flowed from my eyes, falling faster and faster down my cheeks. Sickness hit the pit of my stomach and I ran out of the building to the East Wing balcony. In the darkness a poem came to mind...

Speak To Me

Speak to me no more of love and romance
They only serve to bring pain and bitterness
It only goes along with love is blind
And it was for me, love was so unkind

My hurting heart now has a gaping wound
There's nothing left, no joy is found
Just my broken heart, where your love used to be
I thought your heart only belonged to me

No more can I give, no love is received
Too much in your deceitful love, I believed
Speak to me no more of love and romance
I can only feel the pain and bitterness

After a short while I calmed down, giving myself another pep talk. " Girlfriend, get a grip on yourself and face the facts. You're just a fool to think that Count Marcus would have any interest in a 'Plain Jane,' because that's exactly what you are. His driver will probably be a no show as well. " The further away Marcus was, the less influence he seemed to have. Little did I realize that this would be my one and only chance to escape with my life still intact. It started to rain, the drops becoming bigger and heavier, pelting my skin and making me hurt. Thunder rumbled across the pitch-black background of the starless night and all the streetlights in the immediate vicinity were knocked out. Streaks of lightning illuminated the few cars left in the parking lot below, so I turned around to go back inside and was startled by a figure standing close behind me. My heart did flip-flops and I almost fainted. " Mark, you certainly gave me a fright! "

Mark Patterson was my only real friend and had always been there for me. " What's wrong, Nancy? I saw you crying earlier, but didn't want to intrude on your privacy. " I shivered. He pulled off his dinner jacket and placed it around my shoulders, his warmth spreading throughout my body. I turned to face him as tears pooled in my eyes again.

" Mark, I met a wonderful man tonight, but I get the feeling he's just toying with my emotions, not meaning a blessed word he said. "

" What did he say that upset you? " Mark questioned.

" That I reminded him of his Mother, the beautiful Countess Desiree'. He said that meeting me was one of the greatest pleasures of his life and he wants to see me later on this evening. "

“ What gives you the impression he doesn’t like you or doesn’t wish to see you tonight? In my judgment, any man would be a fool if he didn’t want to see or be with you at any given time. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. ” I leaned into Mark’s strong embrace, feeling peaceful and safe.

“ You have no idea how much your words mean to me, Mark. ”

We walked through the double French doors into the darkened ballroom. I glanced at my Indiglow watch dial; the Charity Ball had been over with hours ago. Our footsteps echoed down the dimly lit hallway, leading us to the front entrance.

We passed a floor length gilded mirror and I gasped at my dreadful reflection! My hair was a wet tangled mess and my smudged mascara left me looking like a prizefighter who’d just lost the title match to the underdog. We both burst out laughing. “ Guess what? ” Mark said. “ Don’t get me wrong, but you remind me of the song ‘My Funny Valentine,’ red and sweet like a candy heart. ” The rain had stopped and the air smelled fresh and clean as he walked me to my car. He bent his head close to my ear. “ I never want you to be sad, only happy. ”

Driving home in the swirling fog, I decided not to worry about Marcus or the ladies room incident. Turning on Foxglove Lane, I arrived at my condo and parked inside the garage; the previous owner had died under mysterious circumstances and since it had remained on the market for two years, I got it at a rock-bottom price. Selma, my black Persian cat with the yellow-green eyes met me at the kitchen door and purred loudly as she rubbed against my legs. “ Are you hungry, my sweet baby? ” She lapped up the milk in her bowl, then followed me upstairs to my bedroom.

I stopped in front of the hallway mirror; my beautiful dress sported white streaks where the red dye had washed away and my soggy shoes squished, leaving wet spots on the beige carpet. I removed my dress, glanced down and observed a red mark imprinted on my left breast shaped in the letter ‘M.’ I unhooked my lacy red pushup bra and removed my silky red panties, but saw no more traces of the dye on my body.

I turned on the hot water, adjusted the temperature and stepped into the

shower. The gushing spray relaxed me and my mind wandered off into left field. “ I need a man who can and will take full possession of my heart and soul, being with me throughout eternity. ” I rolled my eyes and finished washing, then climbed out of the tub. I toweled dry, gazing at the mark on my breast; I’d scrubbed and scrubbed, but the ‘M’ had become more pronounced. I put some soothing lotion on it, then crawled into bed and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I woke up at 9 am with a terrible migraine, hoping a caffeine fix would cure it. A voice inside my mind spoke from out of the blue. “ Dried willow bark tea will cure your headache and take care of the knots in your stomach. ” I didn’t question the hows and whys, but found a jar of the herbal tea in the cupboard and made myself a cup.

By the time I sat down to read my horoscope in the morning paper, I felt a hundred times better. Sagittarius: ‘You’re in for a major surprise today. Will the omens be good or bad? Only time will tell!’ I groaned and grimaced. The only surprises I ever received were of the unpleasant variety.

Back in my bedroom I shed my nightgown, but couldn’t believe my eyes. The letter ‘M’ was so red it appeared as if a surgeon had removed the outer layer of skin, leaving muscle and blood exposed. “ Maybe a reaction to the willow bark, ” I thought.

I pulled on a white t-shirt, grey sweat pants, and a red jacket, then laced my running shoes and headed to the park. The air was fresh and clean, cool and invigorating. The fragrance of pine trees and bayberry bushes reached my nostrils and I breathed deeply, letting their essence soothe me. There were only a few people out on the path around the lake. Ducks and geese flew low, creating a picture perfect setting as I strolled along the dirt track. Alarm signals went off when a black limo followed me on the street that paralleled the path. Adrenaline surged through my system and my heart thumped a thousand beats per second just before the driver rolled down his window and shouted,

“ Wait up there! It’s me, Gustav, Count Marcus’s driver. ” He motioned me over and I recognized his shock of white hair and his heavy German accent. “ The Count requests the pleasure of your company tonight and I’ve been instructed to pick you up at 7 pm sharp! ” He handed me a satiny-white oblong box, tied with a huge red velvet bow. “ Count Marcus asks that you wear what’s inside for this evening’s festivities. ” He rushed off, dust

blowing and tires screeching.

The burdens of my heart and soul were lifted and I raced home at breakneck speed. I took the stairs two at a time and placed the box on my bed, untied the bow, and stripped off the wrapping paper! Underneath red opaque tissue was the most feminine ball gown I'd ever laid eyes on. The lacy white taffeta dress had a heart-shaped bodice lined in red velvet. The material glimmered and sheened in the light as I spun round and round. The doorbell rang and I nearly jumped out of my skin, then rushed downstairs to see who was calling on me.

Being wary of strangers, I peeked through the gauzy window curtain at two ladies who'd positioned themselves on my porch. They looked harmless enough, so I opened the door to them. They both had jet-black hair and were stylishly dressed in current fashions. The lady with the Ray bans spoke up. " We were instructed to come here this afternoon and help you with your hair and makeup, taking extra care that your new ball gown fits perfectly. Count Marcus of Fredericksburg is having an intimate dinner party tonight and you're to be his guest of honor. "

I glanced at my watch, amazed at how fast the morning had flown. " Marcus is doing something this special for me? " A dazed look crossed my face. " Do come in, Ladies. "

They walked right on past as if they were the owners, and I was just another visitor. The woman with the sunglasses said, " My name is Valera Jesamain. My daughter Cecelia and I've worked many years for Count Marcus. " They appeared close enough in age to pass for sisters, rather than mother and daughter. " I'm going to style your hair and CeCe will polish and buff your nails. Why don't you go take a shower and we'll set everything up for you in your bedroom. " Valera's voice was smooth and cultured with a slight French accent.

I went to the bathroom and removed my sweaty clothes, then climbed into the tub. The hot water washed away the dirt from my body, but the mark glowed fiercely, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

I finished and walked into the bedroom. Valera said, " Remove your towel, please. "

Embarrassed, I stood before her in all my naked glory. “ I’ve never had anyone help me dress before. ”

She handed me new silk and lace underwear; a glacier white strapless push-up bra and matching panties. She pointed to the ‘M.’ “ I have a remedy for this small problem! ” She reached into a bag and lifted out three jars, then made an herb poultice and applied it to the mark. “ The dried burdock will help the swelling go down, the dried chickweed will draw out any infection, and the dried marigold petals will tone down the redness. Leave the preparation on for an hour and then we’ll use body make-up to cover any red that remains. ”

“ Can you really do that? ” I asked gratefully.

“ Yes; both CeCe and I are experts in this field. ” They left my room and I fell asleep to dreams of dancing with Marcus at the Charity Ball. Valera quietly roused me from my reverie and looked pleased as punch when she removed the poultice from my breast.

The mark was so faint I could barely see it and I sighed in relief, then gave Valera a quick hug. “ You don’t know what this means to me, Valera. ”

“ I think I do, Nancy. ” She handed me a cup of steaming liquid after she blended a dab of toner on the mark. “ I was named after the Valerian root that this tea is made from. Drink it to calm and compose yourself for this evening’s party. ”

I sipped while CeCe buffed and filed my nails. She glanced briefly at all the different colors of polish, then finally settled on one. “ Ah, this one will do quite nicely. ” Her smile was warm, but changed into a slightly evil grin as she applied the base coat.

“ Isn’t this way too bright? ” I asked.

“ I think not! ” She laughed out loud. “ I guarantee this Wicked Red will match the sash that goes with your gown. ” In the palm of her hand was a mid-sized red jewelry box. “ It’ll also match this present from the Count. ”

I removed the lid and gasped! Glowing red in the afternoon sunlight was a spectacular ruby necklace, its heart-shaped pendant encrusted with tiny

diamonds. Lying next to it on the white satin lining was a pair of matching heart-shaped ruby earrings.

While my fingernails dried, CeCe gave me a pedicure, painting each toenail in Wicked Red, then she showed me the pair of open-toed, white Italian leather shoes that Marcus had given me to wear. “ My two favorite colors, ” she giggled.

“ White and red; virginal, but passionate. ”

Valera fussed with my hair. “ We’ll keep it simple, pulling it back and letting Countess Desiree’s gold and ruby tiara hold your dark curly tresses in place. ” I felt honored that Marcus wanted me to wear an adornment that had belonged to his mother. I stepped into the magnificent taffeta dress and CeCe tied the red velvet sash behind me. She clasped the ruby necklace around my neck and put the earrings in my earlobes. They glowed as red as the blood which flowed steadily in my veins.

I walked over to the full-length mirror and the image that stared back was a glorious sight to behold. “ Oh, Miss Nancy, you could pass for Countess Desiree’! ” CeCe fairly shouted with joy.

Valera turned me this way and that. “ Yes, Count Marcus will be utterly amazed and delighted with your lovely vision. Now for the finishing touch; this very special lipstick imported all the way from Fredericksburg. ” As its crimson warmth came in contact with my mouth, a strange voice whispered, “ ‘My Queen of the Night.’ ”

A hard rapping at the door startled me and CeCe took it upon herself to rush past and answer it. Gustav stood there, hat in hand, his voice filled with reverence and awe. “ Countess Desiree’, it’s been an eternity since I’ve been in your presence; you’re more beautiful than ever. ” He immediately realized his mistake and bowed his head. “ I’m very sorry, but your appearance reminds me of the Countess before she left. Please forgive me? ”

“ Of course, Gustav, ” I told him kindly.

He pulled himself together rather quickly. “ Miss Nancy, it’s time to go. Count Marcus won’t appreciate me dropping you off any later than 8 pm. ”

Being pampered like royalty was definitely to my liking and I walked

regally to the limo, knowing I ruled the world as Queen. Gustav opened the door; I climbed in and was whisked away, like Cinderella to the Ball. The cityscape gave way to familiar countryside for a short period of time, but I was soon lost. Gustav turned right onto a gravel road that twisted through dark green pine and fir trees. Traveling up the winding hill, magic crackled in the air; the road ended on an outcropping of rock and a massive castle came into view. “ Where are we, Gustav? ”

“ This is Princess Sheridan’s Home. Count Marcus is visiting her while he’s on his business trip to the States and she’s been kind enough to offer him the premises for his dinner party tonight. ”

The castle was huge; greystone with rounded turrets, each individual one having red and white flags flying in the stiff breeze. “ Gustav, is this a fairytale castle where the prince and princess live happily ever after? ”

He laughed heartily. “ I failed to mention that it’s an exact replica of the Count’s Castle in Fredericksburg and that Princess Sheridan and the Count are related. ”

“ Related in what way? ” I was puzzled and my nerves were on edge after that comment.

“ It’s not what you think, Miss Nancy; they are sister and brother. ” I let out a huge sigh of relief and smiled within my heart.

It was cool and fragrant as I emerged from the limo and I pictured Prince Charming and Cinderella living in this cloudland castle. We walked to the front entrance and Gustav banged a circular brass knocker on the heavy wooden door. “ Good evening. ” Her voice was light and airy and she reminded me of an angel with her short blond hair and dark brown eyes.

The foyer was small and had framed paintings on both walls. Each of the four pictures showed a different view of the castle from the air. The building sat like a jewel, nestled amongst the trees; grey, with glimpses of red and white, surrounded by various shades of green.

“ Gustav, I thought you said that Marcus and Sheridan were brother and sister. They certainly don’t resemble each other, ” I whispered.

Sheridan overheard me. “ Marcus and I are stepbrother and sister. My mother married the Count’s father soon after his first wife died. ” Her eyes saddened. “ He thought Marcus needed a feminine touch, but the poor man never got over Desiree’s death. ” She brightened up a bit. “ I want to welcome you to my humble home, Casa Sheridan. My friends call me Sher and I’d be honored if you would also, Nancy. ”

My frazzled nerves calmed down and I felt right at home. “ Follow me to the sitting room and I’ll introduce you to everyone. ” We walked down a long hallway past the library, the music room, and several other rooms that had been closed off. Sher said, “ I help Marcus manage the winery at Fredericksburg and I’ll be going back in two weeks to oversee the grape planting. My servants are closing the castle till my return in mid-October. ”

I hoped Marcus would be there, but saw no familiar faces in the crowd. My heart pounded with anxiety when all eyes turned their attention in my direction. They whispered and pointed their fingers at me. “ She’s the spitting image of Countess Desiree’. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was her. ” They all welcomed me with open arms and kisses on the cheek.

On silent feet, Marcus appeared at my side. “ My lovely Nancy, have you been introduced to everyone here? ”

“ Yes, I have. ” His frosty lips kissed the back of my hand and shivers of delighted dread slid down my spine.

“ Then may I have this first dance with you? ” Marcus led me into the Ballroom, gathered my hand in his, and guided me across the floor. The musicians played the Viennese Waltz and we flowed to the sound of the string quartet. Time stood still; our heartbeats filled the ballroom as the music faded into the distance.

Flickering candlelight brightened the room; everyone had disappeared except for the two of us. Marcus placed a crystal goblet of black liquid in my hand. “ Sip this cordial to cool you down. ” He smiled with no warmth, exposing his pearly white teeth. “ Let me explain the superstition behind this blackberry wine. In England, the legend goes that there are correct times for picking blackberries. When the devil fell from heaven, he landed on a blackberry bush, and any blackberries picked after Michaelmas (September 29th) will have the devil’s spittle on them. ” He leered at me, his voice filled

with arrogance. “ Guess when the berries were picked for this wine you’re drinking? ”

I looked at him uncertainly. “ After Michaelmas? ”

“ Of course, my Dear. ” He snickered. “ Drink up, then we’ll dance the night away. ”

The wine was sweet, cooling my dry throat, but warming on the way down. Marcus and I glided to the Viennese Waltz again, our bodies a romantic dance of love in motion. We were two shadows, spinning and whirling around the room, a musicale fantasy come true.

The violins and cellos dispelled the darkness as the quartet repeated the same strains from the beginning. I glanced around and saw couples dressed in 18th century finery. Was I hallucinating? I kept blinking my eyes, but the scene remained the same. Everyone clapped then began chattering as the music stopped. “ Marcus? What in heaven’s name is going on? ” Our minds linked and I heard his unspoken words.

Birth of Desiree’

Sipping on the delicious blackberry wine that he offered me
Made me smile in blessed relief
The taste was fruity sweet
As it cooled my parched mouth and throat

I exhaled a laugh while a velvet smooth sensation
This first privilege of feeling, a sense of elation
Euphoria surrounded me like a cloak
As the heady intoxication consumed me with bliss
My fantasies were occupied
By having his lips taste of mine with his kiss

When I had my fill, my eyes held a shine
The Count mentioned the superstition
The Legend behind the wine
“ In English folklore there are correct times for berry picking,
That all good women and men would apply
When Satan himself, was kicked out of Heaven

Shivering, all the children do speak with conviction
Any berries picked after Michaelmas (September 29)
Will have the Devil's spittle on them ”

His grin was shaped in Evil
His fangs glistening in the short-lived light
His voice dripping sarcasm
Freezing in its deathly chill

He said, “ My Dear, this wine that you drank
Will lead you to temptation, to places dark and dank
The fermented berries were picked after Michaelmas
They were cold with frost, glazed with crystaled ice ”

My thoughts flash red, with pulsing blood now are filled
There's a pricking at my neck; he claims his marriage stake
His name for me is Desiree', his heart's desire
No one left to hear my nightshade cries, burned with fire
T'is the everlasting death of me, cards of Life no longer in the deck
Desiree's birth this day he makes

Chapter 2

“ My beautiful Desiree', have you forgotten so soon? ” Marcus was so handsome, so regal; like a king amongst his loyal subjects. “ Don't you remember being married to me this very afternoon? You were the loveliest bride Fredericksburg ever witnessed. We're at our wedding reception, surrounded by family, friends, and guests. ” Instruments were being fine-tuned. “ I've instructed the musicians to play your favorite song, ‘The Viennese Waltz.’ This first dance belongs to us alone. ”

Marcus gathered my hand in his as he waltzed me across the floor. More of my memories came flooding back as we continued dancing. My family had all but disowned me and I was shipped off to a private girl's school in Europe. Circumstances changed and my Uncle Joshua properly introduced me to Marcus in the autumn of 1875; he'd just graduated from the University Of Fredericksburg and was to be my tutor. He was dashing and debonair, having his pick of any girl in the world, but he chose me. There weren't any serious suitors before Marcus, but I'd made a good friend

aboard my uncle's clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea; his name was Phillippe and although I was fond of him, I could never love him in the same way I loved Marcus. I never told my Father or my sister, Bethanie of our engagement or marriage, because I felt it was none of their concern and Marcus agreed.

I was happy with Marcus. He swept me off my feet in a whirlwind romance and we married one month to the day after we met; the very day that I turned 18, October 17th. It was the largest wedding that Fredericksburg had ever witnessed and Marcus spared no expense. I had no one close by to invite, but all of his friends and relatives were in attendance. He was dressed in a black mourning coat and black trousers, while I wore a wedding dress made especially for me in Paris; white satin overlaid with white lace and seed pearls sewn in rosette patterns on the bodice. My sheer lace veil was imported from Italy and the bridal bouquet held wine red roses and white baby's breath to symbolize passion and purity.

Marcus stood at the altar with an everlasting smile on his face and in his heart, waiting to hear the words, " I do, " fall from my virgin lips. I remembered this part of Heaven on earth; my birthday and wedding day combined. " I love you Marcus, " I whispered as tears of joy welled in my eyes. " You've made me the happiest woman in the world. "

Marcus kissed me soundly on my mouth, in full view of all the invited guests who'd become witnesses to the biggest surprise Fredericksburg had ever seen.

" Now is the first time for us to dance as man and wife. " Marcus led me into the Grand Ballroom and the string quartet played 'The Viennese Waltz.' With my hand in his, time drifted away. He guided me across the floor; we were the music, our bodies a dance of love in motion, gliding with no effort involved. Marcus whispered in my ear, " It won't be long until our wedded pledge of love unites us in heart, soul, body, and blood for all eternity, making me the most fortunate man alive. "

The early afternoon hours gave way to late evening; Marcus clapped his hands to gain everyone's attention. The waiters brought glasses of French champagne for each of the guests; he raised his glass and proposed a toast. " To the most beautiful and desirable woman in Fredericksburg. I've reserved all my love for you, my new bride. "

We drank and more was poured so I could offer a toast of my own.
“ To my husband Marcus, the man I’ve waited for all my life. ” We entwined our arms to drink and liquid happiness seeped from my eyes.
“ I’ll love you forever, Marcus. ”

He kissed me on the lips in front of everyone, then took my hand and winked. “ My family and friends, it’s close to the midnight hour. In honor of my wife, I’ve renamed our home Castle Desiree’. My bride and I will take our leave of you now. ” We walked a few steps and Marcus turned around.
“ Please continue with the reception and merrymaking, though. ”

He led the way upstairs to the rooms we’d share as man and wife. I thought, this is my home now, the castle of my dreams. I couldn’t ask for more, but I was wrong. The bridal suite was my fantasy come true. The canopied bed was made of rosewood, its strongly marked grain giving off a reddish hue. The sheets were pure white satin, cool and inviting, the cover a deep burgundy that matched the canopy. “ Marcus, how did you know that these are my favorite colors? ”

He laughed. “ I have my ways. ” He handed me a goblet of wine as he raised his in a toast. “ Desiree’, you’ve managed to capture what no other woman has or ever will; all my love. ” We drank the intoxicating cordial and Marcus held me close to his strongly beating heart. “ This is the moment we’ll come to know one another in the way a man knows a woman. ”

“ Marcus, you certainly know how to win a girl’s heart. ” There was no warmth in his kiss as we tasted each other’s sweet nectar. Our tongues danced a tangoed waltz that only the two of us would ever share.

He slowly turned me around, untying the red velvet sash at my waist, bending towards my neck while pushing my hair aside. His mouth felt like Antarctic ice as his lips came into contact with the warmth of my skin; scalding me, leaving me breathless while my burning blood smoldered. His hands deftly unbuttoned my wedding day/birthday gown and my body trembled in that one embraced moment because I didn’t know what he expected from me. His frozen fingertips explored my back in icy caresses from my shoulders down to my waist, yet my body reacted as though red-hot coals had seared me. He slipped the silky material the rest of the way off my body and it landed at my feet in a soft whisper.

“ My Darling, you please my eyes when you blush in Red-blooded passion. ” His lips of steel offered no body heat as they found their way to the bare skin on the upper part of my left breast; I felt a moment of pain and then exquisite pleasure as my heart’s life force formed the letter ‘M’ in that exact spot, his brand on me, telling the world that I belonged to him, now and forever. Marcus gazed deeply into my soul, his fangs and lips now hot with and from my blood. He offered me a cup of bright red liquid, a concoction tasting like sweet honey from the bees and salty Atlantic Ocean waters. His fate rested in my hands as I received his heart and blood; all of his thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, and desires raced through my veins, revealing themselves to my soul. Our minds linked together; I had to willingly supply Marcus with my innocent life force each and every day or he would cease to exist.

His blood was good to the last drop, and I craved to have his body join with mine, becoming the one flesh of man and wife.

“ Marcus? ” My voice cracked with nervousness and my shaking hands made it impossible for me to undo any fastenings. His fingers quickly went about their duties and I assumed this wasn’t his first experience with unlacing corsets. His eyes never left mine as he removed the rest of my clothing; my naked glory, which no man had ever seen or touched, was displayed for my loving husband.

He drew me close, stroking my back as his lips and tongue leisurely explored my mouth at great length, and then his bruising passion demanded that I give my very essence to him. Tidal waves of delight coursed through my body, leaving me with no resistance to his physical advances. I tasted his warmth, savoring all the sweetness his mouth had to offer. My breathing came in short gasps as the minutes ticked by. When he withdrew from my lips, I felt abandoned, all alone in the world. “ Marcus, don’t leave me like this, ” I moaned low in my throat.

“ My Darling Desiree’, you must provide me with more of your own life force. ”

“ Marcus, all of me belongs exclusively to you; take what you want. ”

He smiled sadly. “ Sweet Wife, I need just enough nourishment to stay warm and fan the flames of desire you have for me. ” I grew weaker as Marcus fed from my breast, but my body was overwhelmed with rising passion.

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