



ESTABLISHED 1959

CIGAR BARONS

Fine Cigars



Isabella



SUMMARY

Legends aren't built overnight. In fact, they take decades of hard work, long days, and selfless sacrifice—if one is lucky. Huerta Cigars is a result of the combined passion of patriarch Alejandro Huerta, who emigrated from pre-Castro Cuba to Nicaragua, and his sons Roberto and Manuel. Their unwavering dedication to their dream of producing the best cigars made for a success. Upon Alejandro's passing he left the cigar empire to his only daughter, Sofia, who took over the family business.

Sofia Huerta is Don Roberto's daughter, and she is making a name for herself with her own line of fine, boutique cigars. One late night phone call will change Sofia's life forever. Rushing to Nicaragua from San Francisco, her only hope is that it isn't too late to save her father.

Roberto Huerta, Jr. might be a Huerta in name, but his womanizing, drinking, and carefree lifestyle have kept him at arm's length from his father. RJ think's his father's freak accident will leave him as the rightful heir of the family empire. He couldn't have been more wrong.

A turn of events will pit brother against sister as they fight for control of the Huerta empire. Sometimes secrets and lies aren't the only thing living in the closet, and there is only one Huerta that can continue the family legacy of excellence in this romantic mystery with a twist.

In *Cigar Barons*, blood isn't thicker than water—it's war.

CIGAR BARONS

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ISABELLA



SAPPHIRE BOOKS
SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

Cigar Barons

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ISBN - 978-1-948232-84-5

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Sapphire Books Publishing, LLC

P.O. Box 8142

Salinas, CA 93912

www.sapphirebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition – November 2019

This and other Sapphire Books titles can be found at

www.sapphirebooks.com

Dedication

To my wife, Schileen.
She indulges my passions.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to:

All of the cigar smokers out there. I've never met a stranger at a cigar lounge, no matter where I go. They are a welcoming and fun group.

My editor, Heather Flourney. She works hard at making me look good.

Jennifer Fulton for her vision and advice.

Nicaragua for being a wonderful host country and the inspiration for this book.

Morgan Hill Cigar and Cigars LTD for a great place to smoke.

To my beta readers, Akemy and Terri. You gals rock!

May your ash be long and the smoke sweet!

Prologue

Vuelta Abajo, Cuba. July 1957

¡Revolución!

Alejandro Huerta wanted nothing to do with it.

He stood between the tobacco plants trying to ignore the whispers of discontent that invaded the orderly rows as the early morning mist retreated. Rumors of imminent rebellion had gone on for a year now. Fidel Castro's guerrillas made regular treks through the fields recruiting fighters for the struggle.

Their talk sounded good. The Cuban president, Fulgencio Batista, was a bastard—greedy, brutal, and corrupt. His regime killed anyone who stood in its way. His big money backers had plundered the country. Foreigners owned more land than Cubans, and the Americans were at the front of the line.

Castro would change everything for the common man. That was the promise.

Alejandro had overheard Don Miguel, the plantation owner, talking with other *jefes* about Castro's plans. The new revolutionary government would take over cigar production. Some of the big farms would be granted the honor of making Cuban cigars for the world. The smaller farms would be snatched up and merged into state-owned plantations.

Alejandro's father had long ago given up on his boyhood dream of buying more acres and turning the Huerta's miserable plot of land into a cigar plantation. But Alejandro had thought about little else since he first encountered the sweet, earthy aroma of cigar smoke floating from the shiniest car he had ever seen.

He was eleven years old.

After months of pestering, his father finally agreed that he could attend the schoolhouse on the Ferro plantation. He had arrived not long after dawn the next morning and spent the next hour watching a procession of servants march up the narrow path, holding umbrellas over the *jefe's* children. Just as the school bell rang, a long red car swished to a halt at the gate. Raindrops bounced from its gleaming hood, rivulets of water spun from its chrome wheels. Alejandro ran to the gate for a better look. When the back door opened, a puff of blue, fragrant smoke emerged, followed by a tall man in a pale suit and cravat—Don Ferro himself. He scooped the other occupant into his arms, a girl in a dress as green as tobacco leaves with the kind of sash Alejandro's older sister should have been buried in: white silk, huge bow, long ribbons floating behind.

She noticed Alejandro as the driver rushed to hold a big umbrella over her father, the most important man in the area. Peeking over Don Ferro's shoulder, she smiled, and Alejandro was instantly embarrassed by his baggy, threadbare white linen pants and shirt, hand-me-downs from his father, and his mud-caked toes perched like bird claws over the edge of leather sandals he had outgrown a year ago.

He felt out of place. He wanted to learn to read and write. He wanted to know about the world, and carry books home so that he could study at night. But in that moment he knew he would never fit in with the children of the plantation owners, in their fine clothes. Even the field boss's children wore proper shoes and socks and smelled of soap.

At lunchtime, he sat alone, watching his classmates open up wooden boxes filled with food as he unwrapped the cloth that held a chunk of cheese and bread. He was startled when the girl in the green dress came up to him. She extended her hand, a plump orange balanced on her small palm.

“Would you like it?”

If he was lucky, his mother gave him a piece of fruit occasionally, but times were lean for the Huerta family and there were five children to feed, not including himself.

The girl must have read his nervous hesitation as good manners, assuring him, “I don't want it. The peel makes my fingers smelly. My name is María . What's yours?”

Before Alejandro could reply, an older boy came up, plucked the orange away, and snarled, “Go beg somewhere else.” He shoved Alejandro off the bench so hard that a glob of half-chewed bread flew from his mouth as he landed on the wooden floorboards. Laughter erupted around him. He recognized a few of the mocking faces, boys from families almost as poor as his own.

Later, Alejandro learned the bully's name: Fernando Calderon.

He never got in any trouble. The Calderons were cigar barons.

A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek and Alejandro moved his thoughts back to the present. The anger never left him. It simmered beneath the calm face the world saw. It kept him up at night, making plans, and it kept him alert each day, waiting for his chance to pocket seeds from the plants he thought would produce the best cigars. One day he would plant them and watch the bright green leaves unfurl on land he owned.

He yanked off his weathered straw hat, pulled his bandana from around his neck, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The Ferro plantation spanned two hundred acres of red soil in a valley that trapped the humidity. The soil was so deep and rich in minerals and sand that he'd heard Don Ferro proclaim that only he could produce the best Ligerero tobacco. So dark, that when rolled the oils from the tobacco left the rollers' fingers coated in the black substance.

Alejandro's father said this was the best tobacco-growing land in the world. There was a time when the Huerta family owned a prosperous farm near San Juan y Martinez. Huerta ancestors had produced cigars for Spanish royalty. A hundred years ago, their farm was one of thousands supplying the cigar factories of Havana. Like most growers, they were forced off their land during the Ten Years' War and imprisoned in General Wyler's concentration camps. Alejandro's grandfather escaped and joined the *mambisis* to fight the Spanish occupation. The family had lost everything but their pride.

Now, according to Alejandro's father, Castro and his 26th of July Movement would finally take power from the hands of dictators and return it to the people. Alejandro did not

share his optimism. The history books he'd borrowed from the schoolhouse filled him with misgivings. Castro's promises were nothing new. From Lenin and Stalin to Chairman Mao and Mussolini, revolutionaries always claimed to bring the government to the people. Yet as soon as they seized power, they became despots, as evil as the regimes they had replaced.

Why should Castro be any different? And whether he became a benevolent dictator or another tyrant, the Huertas would still lose their farm, for the greater good.

The sky, blue as the ocean just north of him, promised another sweltering day. He had started work at dawn, hoping to beat the heat of the day. While others took a siesta, he would be meeting María for another writing lesson. The plantation owner's daughter had taken pity on him when his father pulled him out of school to work in the fields.

Alejandro glanced up when he heard voices drawing closer, still talking of Castro and the changes he would make to Cuba.

"I hear he is going to recruit virgins to roll cigars on their thighs. Oh, what I wouldn't do to work in that factory," a man said.

"Perhaps María will roll one for you on her thigh?" another said. A slap on a back echoed in the wet air.

"Didn't you hear? She's going to marry Fernando from the Calderon plantation. Don Ferro thinks that it will keep both plantations in the family and Castro will allow them to be one of the chosen cigar manufactures in Cuba."

"You mean Señora Ferro wants María to marry Don Calderon's son. I heard her tell one of the maids that a match between the families would cement their position as the only Cuban cigar manufacturers privileged enough to make cigars for export." So close to Havana, Alejandro was sure Señora Ferro could almost hear the tinkling of champagne glasses as the upper crust toasted their good fortune.

Alejandro was aware of Señora Ferro's lofty goals for her daughter, but María had downplayed the talk when they'd spoken. He knew her distaste for Fernando went as far back as his brief stint at school, when he'd pushed Alejandro off the bench he and María had shared for lunch. His blood boiled as the memory flooded back. He wished he'd punched the bastard, but knew his father would pay the price for his anger, and he'd brought enough trouble to his family when he'd pleaded for an education.

Alejandro had overheard the *jefes* talking of the possibility of the Cubatabaco, an organization that would oversee cigar production once the tobacco was grown and passed on to the government for cigar production. Whatever happened, it wouldn't be good for his family or his dreams. An imaginary clock was ticking down in his head. He didn't have time to waste.

The thought of María marrying someone else wasn't something he had given much thought to. He'd had a few fleeting daydreams of the beautiful woman being the mother of his children, but marriage to someone else? Never. He had to come to terms with the fact that she had a firm grasp of his heart, and any ideas of her mother giving María to Fernando just to build a larger empire... Well, that had to be stopped. Now.

Besides, why hadn't she told him? What would he do now? His future had never looked more bleak.

"Hey, Alejandro. Daydreaming again?" Someone shook his shoulder.

"Oh, I think you crushed his dreams of marrying jefe's daughter," another said.

The group laughed until a voice boomed behind them.

"Get to work, you lazy bastards. The day is getting away from us and we have this whole field to work. So, get your asses busy." The boss on horseback motioned his riding crop at the men. "Understand?"

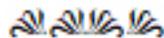
"Sí, sí," they all mumbled, weaving away from the swish of the crop.

The boss backed his mount up. "Alejandro, the jefe wants to see you later."

"Me?"

"Are you deaf? After dinner, don't be late."

"Yes, jefe." Alejandro nervously wondered why he would be called to the big house. In the meantime, he crouched down and went back to pulling tobacco worms from the plants. Don Ferro didn't import the pesticides some cigar plantations did. He'd said the cost outweighed the benefits as far as he was concerned. Alejandro had heard workers from other farms had become sick from the petroleum-based bug killers, so he was happy to pull worms, squish them dead, and move on to the next plant. It signified where he was on the pecking order of work. Lowest of the low, but it paid something he could send back to his family.



"If you drop that marble bust, I'll make sure you are cutting sugar cane." María could hear her father bellowing all the way up into her room. Moving to the edge of the stairs, she absently ran her fingers over the mirror finish of the mahogany rail of the balcony. Peering over the edge, she remembered a time when she'd press her face between the rungs of the stairs and wish she could go down to the massive parties her mother and father held—opulent, with music that played into the wee hours of the night as the liquor flowed and the laughing seemed never-ending. Tonight, though, she'd get her wish and join the festivities. Her leap into adulthood had come without any fanfare, without the customary elegance many of her girlfriends had when they turned seventeen. Her mother always seemed to be the center of attention and unfortunately, María was always shoved out of the way so her mother could bask in it.

"There is only one sun, *mija*. Your time will come," her mother said one evening when she locked María in her room. She couldn't fathom at her young age what her mother meant, but as she started to grow up, she slowly began to understand. While María always envisioned the world as her oyster after she finished school, including a trip to university, or a summer in Europe, she had a feeling something wasn't quite right for tonight's party. Her father was

taking many of the lavish furniture pieces out of the main rooms and squirreling them away so they wouldn't be seen. Her mother would be furious when she found out.

She let her fingers trail down the handrail as she descended, imagining she was a princess, or perhaps a duchess in some far-off land, as she admired the grand entrance of the plantation that had been in her family for generations. Looming columns flanked the huge gothic staircase. Its deep, thick, burgundy carpet cushioned each step she took. The massive paintings her mother had agonized over for months littered every inch of wall. Each one had been replaced several times until just the right painting had been selected. Her mother's intent was to represent the wealth and status for an owner of an estate the size of theirs. The marble floors were always polished to the point of being dangerous, if one wasn't careful. Overhead, the fan with blades the size of airplane propellers seemed to swirl lazily, its giant palm fronds barely pushing air around. Again, all for decoration. Whether it served a functional purpose or not wasn't the question; it looked beautiful. However, now it all seemed so...wasted.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but her recent trip to Havana with her uncle Luis had opened her eyes to a whole new world. It was alive and bustling with fashion, art, music, flair, and fun. She smoothed down the elegant black dress she wore, a gift from her uncle with strict instructions to wear it, and wear it often.

"Clothes should be fun. You should enjoy wearing them, mija." He swished his hand around and pointed to the women flitting through the fashion magazines that littered the boutique, none paying any attention to the gay man and his ingénue. "Do you think they care what a dress costs?"

She shook her head.

"Of course they don't. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because they have money and they spend it, mija. They know that something is in the wind. I mean, just look at this wretched place." He twirled a little, his jacket flaring out. "We all know that change is looming for Havana. So enjoy what you have, sweetie." He pulled at one of the dresses the clerk was holding up. "She'll try this one."

She was wearing that black silk dress now. The tight lines caressed her figure and she liked the way she felt in it. The hose and high heels were the addition to the package she'd tried to reject, but her uncle had insisted.

"Honey, you need to match, so you might as well get these now. Besides, when you mother was your age, she dressed like she was twenty. Don't let her tell you different."

Trying to stay out of the way of the servants, María sat up straight on the settee in the entryway as everyone bustled around her. Suddenly, she was the object of her mother's attention. "Sit up straight, mija. You need to present yourself as a lady. Remember, eyes will always be on you because of who your father is—a cigar baron." Her mother pushed on her lower back and pulled her shoulders back, forcing her chest out.

"Mother, please." She wiggled out of the pose.

“María.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed, boring right through María. “You are a Ferro. Act like one.” She raised her hand as if to strike María, but María turned her cheek toward the hand, taunting her mother. “You’ve always been an insolent child.” Her mother huffed and lowered her hand just as her father entered the room. They always seemed to be at odds lately, and she didn’t know why.

María saw her father barking orders at the staff, his signature cigar wedged between clenched teeth.

“Where is Alejandro? I called for him to come and help with the preparations.”

“He is on his way, jeffe.”

María smiled at the mention of Alejandro’s name. She hadn’t seen him lately and they’d seemed to be at opposite ends of the plantation when it had come to their lessons. María was looking forward to today’s lesson, but her mother had squashed it, announcing they were having an impromptu party.

María enjoyed their time together, as their conversations were more than the usual superficial niceties she had with Fernando and the other kids from the neighboring plantations. Her conversations with her girlfriends as they sat together reading glamor magazines touting the latest fashion craze in Paris or some starlet or actor were fun, but Alejandro talked of the future, starting his own plantation and his own line of cigars that would carry the Huerta name. He had dreams, and she liked them. Fernando, on the other hand, only talked about his car, his inheritance, and himself.

Boring.

She’d walked out on him more than once, exasperated. Men were such phonies, she had realized quickly in school. Macho, arrogant, and self-absorbed. Women were arm candy, valued only to have their babies and put on parties like the one her mother planned for tonight. María wasn’t going to be one of those wives. Havana held her interest with its university and nightlife. She wanted to live like her uncle. Endless festivities, friends, and travel.

“María, what are you doing here?” Her father bent down and kissed her forehead.

“Papa. What’s going on?” She pointed to the furniture leaving the grand room.

“Ah, I just found out we have a special guest coming tonight. So, your mother decided we should entertain and make a big production out of his arrival.”

“Who is it?”

His broad smile split around the cigar still wedged between his teeth. “I don’t know, mija. I guess even I am to be surprised.”

“Hmm, but why are you taking some of the furniture out of the rooms?”

“I’ve been told that we don’t want to look like we are flaunting our wealth.”

“But you’ve worked hard. Why should anyone care about our things?”

“Well it was your mother’s idea, and you know how she feels about her ‘stuff.’ It’s complicated, mija.” He cast a sideways glance at her mother.

María suspected she wasn't the only one confused. The more her father tried to explain, the more she knew her mother was up to something. Before she could ask another question, Alejandro stood on the porch, his figure casting a long shadow on the floor of the entryway.

"Ah, Alejandro. Finally."

Alejandro pulled his worn straw hat from his head and worried it in a circle as he looked past her father and at María. Bowing his head, he said, "Sir, Señorita Ferro."

"Come, come." He grabbed Alejandro's shoulder and twisted him toward the kitchen. "I need you to help with the party tonight."

"Señor?"

"Am I speaking Greek? I want you to help with the party we are having tonight. Get cleaned up and change into the clothes on the back porch." He looked down at his watch. "We have about an hour before guests start to arrive. Hurry."

María smiled and waved at Alejandro, who shrugged his shoulders and cast her a dubious look. Her stomach suddenly filled with butterflies as he winked at her. They'd always had something special between them that made her think silly thoughts whenever they were together. Her father followed him as he went to get changed, barking orders as he left the room.

"María, what are you smiling about?" Her mother's voice sliced through her.

"Mother." She slid off the settee and smoothed her dress, then pushed back a few curls that fell into her face.

"Where did you get that dress?"

"Tío Luís."

"Go and take it off. It's too adult for you." Her mother grabbed her and tried to steer her toward the stairs.

Jerking herself away from her mother's grasp, she stiffened. "Papa's already seen it and said it's fine."

"Really. Huh, where is he? Miguel? Where are you?" her mother bellowed.

Miguel emerged from the dining room. "Que?"

"You said she could wear this?"

"She's not a child anymore."

Before her mother could utter another word, the roar of an engine pulled everyone's attention to the front porch. María followed her parents out into the setting-sun-drenched porch just as a sleek red sports car pulled in front of the plantation. The tobacco fields framed the elegant vehicle. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she could see a mustached man in a beret slide out from the driver's side, swagger and confidence oozing out of him like oil on a hot pan ready to sizzle. From the passenger side, Fernando was grinning from ear to ear as he jumped from his seat.

"Don Ferro," he yelled. He ran his hand down the fender and grinned. "What do you think? Ché...I mean General Guevara..." He turned to the general and bowed. "My apologies, General."

“Please, Ché is fine. I love the enthusiasm of the young, don’t you?” He smiled a toothy grin, his moustache pulling at the corners. “Señora,” He lifted María’s mother’s hand and pressed his lips against it.

Fernando strutted over to Don Ferro and swept his hand wide. “What do you think? Quite a ride, no?”

María waited for her father to respond. She knew he wasn’t much into cars, and the rolling tin can, as he often referred to them, wouldn’t impress the Don. However, it was clear Fernando was smitten.

“María, come. Take a look.”

“Aw, who do we have here?” Ché said, pulling at the hem of his military uniform and straightening out the creases from the contortionist position she was sure he’d been in for a while. There weren’t any close towns as the plantation sat secluded from any bigger city, more due to its size than proximity.

Fernando tried to step forward, but María stuck her hand out and stopped him. She didn’t need him speaking for her, and it irritated her that he would assume such a position.

“María Ferro. And you are?” She stuck her hand out and waited for the man to accept it.

He was slender and handsome in a rugged, machismo sort of way. His moustache quirked when he took her hand and looked into her eyes. She was sure women threw themselves at his feet with that gesture, not to mention the excitement surrounding the fact that he was currently one of the most wanted men in Cuba right now. The insurgency was going well—at least the bits and pieces she’d heard forecasted that it would be a matter of months before Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara would overthrow the government.

Was that why he was here, to recruit? Suddenly, her mind raced to Alejandro. They were looking for strong backs and weak minds. While he definitely didn’t have a weak mind, he was young, determined, and could be vital to any attempted overthrow of the current regime. She needed to warn him. A wave of panic lanced through her. *Oh god*. This group wasn’t against conscripting anyone they felt would help their cause.

“Señorita, it is a pleasure to meet you.” He raised her hand to his lips and held it against her hand for far too long for her comfort, and clearly Fernando’s as well, as he tried to move the general away.

“General?” Fernando wedged himself between María and Guevara. “Perhaps, I mean, you’d consider letting me take my fiancée for a ride in your car?”

There. He’d done it. He’d marked his territory, and she was furious.

A sideways glance caught her mother beaming at Fernando’s declaration. There wasn’t an engagement; they had barely seen each other at school. She’d be damned if she married someone she didn’t care about, let alone someone who treated her like an object and not someone with a brain who could think for herself.

Bastard.

“I’m sorry, General, I need to help with the festivities. If you’ll excuse me.”

Turning on her heel, she didn't wait for a reply. Her mother guffawed behind her, struggling to say something, but with the general there, she'd mind her manners. Looking down at her hand, she wiped the back of it on her dress and writhed in disgust.

She needed to find Alejandro, and quick.

Chapter One

Present Day
Estelí, Nicaragua

Sofia ran her fingers over the huge lacquered humidor that sat on her father's desk. A simple brass name plate was etched with one word: HUERTA. It was the only adornment on the humidor. Its importance wasn't its size, but the wood that constructed the box. Sofia's great-grandfather had saved a few boards when he watched his small shanty be demolished. He'd built the rickety thing when he'd arrived in Nicaragua. All she knew was that her grandfather, Alejandro, hadn't intended to live in the wretched house as long as they had. According to the stories, her grandmother had conceived within days of their arrival, so the need for a roof over their growing family's head had been paramount. Lucky for him, the plot of land was cheap enough and that would be the start of the Huerta legend. Her father had built a small chapel on the site for his mother, the first extravagance in a life full of frugality. He'd been happy to witness the end of that part of his life and revel in the small success he was enjoying at that time. The humidor was the only reminder of his childhood he kept close.

Pushing the lid to the cedar-lined box up, scents of tobacco and cedar mixed, filling the air around her. Tears surfaced and quickly clouded Sofia's view of the contents. "Oh, Papa."

She caressed the toothy wrapper of a *Negrilla Diabla*, Bold She-Devil. The dark maduro wrapper earned the robusto cigar its name. The humidor was divided into thirds, with a third dedicated to his favorite Huerta cigar, The Reserve. Another third had her *Angel Blanca*, or White Angel, due to its Connecticut wrapper, and the last third held the *Negrilla Diabla*. The only cigar from her line missing from the humidor was her Conundrum, so named because it was such an enigma. Its traditional leather and creamy flavors at the start gave way to more chocolate and coffee undertones. She'd had a hard time branding it, so she went to the source to name it—her father. She'd shared a sample with him for his opinion. She'd never forget the look on his face as he smoked the first third. The creamy smoke eased out of his nose, and then he let the rest escape from his pursed lips.

"Well?"

Sofia held her breath as she watched him take another mouthful and hold it, his lips barely parting, letting the smoke escape, before he answered. "This is..."

She bit her lip and waited for the rest of his answer. He'd smoked thousands of cigars in his lifetime, so he was a consummate authority on all types.

"Got a delicate flavor that really..." He closed his mouth and pushed air through his nostrils. "It's very nice, mija."

"Nice?"

"It's..." He smiled. "It's very good."

Sofia controlled the urge to jump up and down at the compliment. Her father was known to be light on the praise, so a “very good” was great.

“It’s really a conundrum, mija. It has such complex flavors that are really delicate, yet grow bolder toward the end. A conundrum.”

“Then that’s what I’ll call it. Conundrum. Thank you, Papa.”

They had sat in companionable silence smoking a few Conundrums.

“What are these, Sofia?” Manny asked, lifting one of the Negrilla Diablas to his nose and sniffing. “Are these yours?”

She nodded, wiping at the tears threatening to fall. “Yes, this is the Negrilla Diabla—”

“Ah, Bold She-Devil. Nice.” Manny twisted the stick between his fingers, looking at the rounded triple cap, something that distinguished a Cuban cigar from others. “The size is perfect.” It was a Robusto size, a ring gauge that was small enough so that women didn’t think they were sticking a huge cigar in their mouths, but still big on flavors and guaranteed a good thirty minutes to smoke. She’d seen the oversexualized pictures in cigar magazines, models with big sticks in their mouths, or hands. Definitely a phallic symbol, she surmised, that appealed to the male gaze. She loved beautiful women, but had decided on more of a pinup-style label with a female devil and female angel on their respective cigars. Macho advertising wasn’t an uncommon image, but it wasn’t one she wanted to emulate in her own marketing campaign. Some of the new cigar companies were going with an urban, hip approach. She was leaning toward a sophisticated and polished package that promised being part of an exclusive community of like-minded individuals. She wanted to appeal to both men and women, their sense of style, and the cultural mystique surrounding the cigar industry. While she knew the romanticism of cigar history was important and robust, she also knew how cigar culture was evolving. Gone were the days of cigars being the sole property of wealthy men’s clubs filled with smoke and crystal tumblers filled with high-end bourbon, where talk entailed stocks, bonds, mistresses, and backroom deals.

No, the industry was bigger than that, and she was breaking through beyond those smoke-filled lounges—or at least her cigars were.

Picking up the Blanca Angel, she ran it under her nose. The Connecticut wrapper would give it peppery notes. The thought made her laugh. It should have been the Negrilla Diabla, but they were named because of their wrappers and not the flavors when smoked.

“And this one?” He pointed to the one she held.

“Blanca Angel.”

“White Angel. Fitting with the Connecticut wrapper. So, you have an Angel and a Devil. What are you saying, mija?” He gave off a belly laugh, picking up the Blanca Angel and sniffing it. “These are fantastic. Do you mind if I take one of each?”

“Not at all, Tío, please. I’d be honored to hear what you think about the line. I have one more, the Conundrum. I’ll have it sent over to you.”

“Conundrum. I like it.” He ran his hand across her shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. “Your father would be so proud.”

“Thank you.” More tears fell.

“Oh, Sofia don’t cry.”

“I didn’t know he had these in here,” she said, wiping at the tears.

Manny wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. He whispered in her ear, “He was so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” A few sobs let loose.

“Oh *mija*, don’t cry. We are Huertas, and Huertas are proud Nicaraguans. We face the demon and fight it head-on. We do not surrender to our grief. We use it to build us up and propel us forward.” Manny leaned back. “Conundrum, *por que?*”

Sofia smiled. “If you are fighting between the Devil...” She raised a *Negrilla Diabla*. “Or an Angel...” She held the other cigar in her right hand. “You have a conundrum. ¿Verdad?”

Manny gave of a raucous belly laugh so deep it shook his pony keg of a belly. “Si, Si. That’s very clever, Sofia. RJ, isn’t that clever?”

They both looked at RJ, who was pouring another liberal helping of rum. “Right, clever.” He soured after tossing back another mouthful.

“Hey *compadre*. Slow down. You still have guests out there, and I’m sure Lina is tired of making small talk.” Manny grabbed the bottle from the iron grasp RJ had on it. “Besides, we need to share some of Nicaragua’s finest rum with our guest. *Si?*”

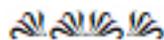
Sofia wanted to shake some sense into her brother, but his actions right now were one of the reasons their father didn’t trust RJ. Chances were he’d sell the business—or worse, lose it in a card game—putting all of them out on their asses. All of her father’s sweat equity, time, and money gone just like that.

“I’ll bring some Huerta cigars from our reserve collection. We should toast Father appropriately.”

“Agreed,” Manny said, spinning RJ in the direction of the door. “Come on, let’s celebrate the life of Don Roberto, huh?”

As the door shut behind them, Sofia plopped down into the huge leather chair reserved for the head of Huerta cigars. This was the view her father saw every day when he sat here, but now he would never see this again. Her heart seized at the thought and her mind flooded with all the good memories courtesy of her father. Now she was nearly an orphan, with only her grandmother left. It would be long before she took her place next to her parents in the family crypt. Sofia needed to steel herself when that time came. She buried her face in her hands, grief overtaking her. Just as she thought she’d controlled it, another wave washed over her. She stood, wishing she could give into it, but as Manny had said, Huertas pushed it down and used it to fight off the demons.

There was only one problem. Death was an evil mistress no one divorced.



Her brother's message had been cryptic. "Sofia...uh...there's been an accident...uhm...Father's fallen off his horse and he's in hospital. I think you need to get home, now." When she called him back it had gone to voice mail and RJ hadn't returned her call. A call to the house and a quick discussion with her grandmother had confirmed her worst fears. Her father had been hurt in a horse-riding accident and wasn't expected to make it.

Her race home from Tampa had been quick. She'd had just enough time to get a rented corporate jet, toss her bags on it, and command the pilot to take her home the quickest way possible. Her father lay in a coma—the prognosis...she couldn't even go there. She prayed as she'd never prayed before. She begged, she bargained, she even promised to convert if that would save her father's life.

"We're on approach, Ms. Huerta." A flight attendant offered a sympathetic smile and patted Sofia on the shoulder. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you." Sofia's mind was elsewhere. A hospital room. Her father on life support. She imagined standing next to him, his warm hand clasped firmly in hers. The beeping heart monitor. The squish, squish of the ventilator as it helped him breathe.

God, just get me there quick.

Don Roberto Huerta had been life-flighted to Managua, where he could get the best care money could buy. Looking down at the familiar landscape far below, Sofia calculated the time she had left to get to his bedside. Maybe twenty minutes. Forested land transitioned to tobacco fields and then to the cityscape of Managua. The plane skidded across the runway and taxied toward a waiting car. Julian, her pseudo-uncle, stood next to the company SUV. His stoic face gave nothing away.

Wordlessly, he opened the door to the backseat.

"How is he, Julian?"

He shook his head and looked away, obviously choked up. "Señorita Sofia..."

Fear crushed the air from Sofia's chest. She wondered if she was having a heart attack. "It's bad," she concluded flatly.

Julian lowered his gaze. His white knuckles confirmed the worst.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Sofia."

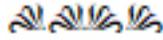
Stunned, she sank into the back seat. Her father was dead. How was that possible?

Beyond the noisy thud of her pulse pounding in her ears, she heard her bags being stowed, the driver's door closing, the tires gathering speed on the tarmac.

"What happened?" she asked numbly.

"They took your father off life support this morning. The doctor said he had no..." Julian tapped his head and mumbled something.

"No what?" When no answer came, she said, "Take me to my father, Julian. I want to see him."



Sofia tucked a few errant strands of hair behind her ear. The warm, moist breeze had picked up and Sofia could smell rain. The small chapel suddenly seemed huge in front of her. The golden flicker of candlelight danced through the windows taunting her, beckoning her to enter. Sofia stood frozen in place and wondered if she could handle seeing her father, dead. A man so loving and full of life when she left for her trip to the United States, now lay beyond the simple wooden doors, never to take another breath. The priest had honored her request and promised to leave the church open so she could pay her respects in private. Now, her lips quivered, her feet refusing to move forward as her resolve started to crumble. While Sofia had a reputation for being made of ice when it came to business—a reputation she wanted to maintain—her inner composition was far from cold. This would be the only time she could grieve her father in the way she wanted.

Privately.

The small gravel crunched and popped under her high heels, each step louder than the last, until finally she reached the tile steps that led up to the church. She looked down at the red and blue serpentine pattern, boxed in by the cement grout, the pattern repeating until it finally met the wall of the church. She knew she was trying to distract herself as she admired the tile, but she knew what she had to do. She had to force herself to focus as she struggled to put one foot in front of the other until she stood before massive barriers between her and her father. Sofia jammed her purse under her arm, wiped her eyes, and stiffened her spine. She wrestled with the bulk of the door, heaving its weight against her shoulder. A sliver of light peeked out between the slabs of oak and leaked past the barrier, memories flooding past her with the smell of incense. She could see a younger version of herself in her youth kneeling on the prayer bench every Sunday morning. The door rested on her back, the weight of it pushing her farther into the church as if the hand of god was moving her toward her destiny. It closed with a thud behind her. The cool, cavernous interior was a sharp contrast to the warm, humid night that was being held at bay outside.

Eighteen pews lined the left and right sides, framing the large center aisle. She'd counted them repeatedly, squirming on those Sunday mornings. By twos, by threes, forward and backward, anything to keep her mind off the constant humming of prayers offered for the living, the dead, for good fortune, and penance that occurred the week before.

She recognized the large velvet clad confessional booth like a good friend, having spent a good many hours confessing her youthful indiscretions. The dark box with heavy curtains hid the occupant from the prying eyes of other church parishioners. Inside the dark room was a prayer bench and a pull screen opposite her face. When she knelt in front of it to confess her sins, she never saw the priest on the other side. Only hearing his voice was scary for a young child. All of this just so she could get a tiny wafer the next day. As she aged, so did her confessional sins. Hitting her brother, spitting in the fields, and when she had little to confess

she started to make stuff up. Then she had something to confess the next time she sat in the confessional. The guilt had been too much, so she finally had to come clean. The priest admonished her for lying and gave her six Our Fathers and twelve Hall Marys, then asked her why she'd made up sins to confess. She sat in the confessional and shrugged her shoulders. The silence finally weighed on the priest and he dismissed her. The truth was something she wasn't ready to divulge—at least not to a priest—and she wouldn't for years.

Her gaze traveled to her left and to the simple casket directly in front of her, just in front of the altar. A small wooden prayer bench sat in front of the casket. She'd expected to pay her respects at home, but RJ had them move their father from the house to the church for the funeral tomorrow. His reason was bullshit: he didn't want his kids disturbing their father, or accidentally knocking him over, or some other crap. If he acted like a parent, he wouldn't have to worry about accidents. RJ was an ass and his kids, well... She shook her head and pushed his family drama from her mind.

She was deliberately stalling.

A tight swallow, squeezing her lips together, she walked forward. The heady smell of incense burned her nostrils. A cold sweat swept over her body and the click of her heels on the polished tile cut through the silence of the church. The prayer candles were all lit, in memory of her father she was sure. Her chest heaved as she struggled to take a breath as each step moved her closer to her father. The lid had been left open and she could start to see his soft features. If she didn't know better, she would have just thought he was resting. She'd seen that face before. After a long afternoon in the factory, he'd catch a quick nap—resting his eyes, he often told her when she'd caught him in his office asleep.

Her hands rested on the end of the casket. At first, she could only stare at her father. She couldn't find anything wrong with him, and then she shifted her gaze and looked over his shoulder to the right side of his head. A dark bruise, trying to hide under a thin layer of makeup, had etched its way just behind his ear. Her stomach lurched and she fell to the prayer bench. She crossed herself and her head dipped, and her shoulder sagged under the weight of the final acknowledgement that her father was in fact, gone.

“Oh, Father,” she whispered. Her plea, soft as it was, echoed around her. She rose on her knees and reached for her father's hand and clutched it tightly. “What am I going to do without you?”

She rested her head on her arm and sobbed as she still clutched his hand. He'd been the one to encourage her to start her own cigar line, to tell her that the only way she'd be taken seriously was to work her way from the bottom up. He'd shared stories of his father's life in Cuba as a young man, and his migration from the communist state to Nicaragua and the culmination of that journey. His greatest accomplishment, as he was always asked and answered, was finding someone, the love of his life, that would marry a poor upstart such as himself and the beautiful children she gifted him. Her father felt the same way about her mother, and told Sofia many times she would feel the same way when she finally found the love of her life. *Doubtful*, Sofia thought, looking down at her father. He always said the same

thing whenever they talked about family: every Huerta was born with cigars running through their veins.

Thirty-five years wasn't enough. She felt cheated.

She stood and walked around the casket, then leaned down, kissed his forehead, and stroked his thick, graying hair. A tear fell on his face and then another, and another. Her throat tightened, almost choking her. Fear fingered its way into her thoughts. Whom would she turn to for advice, for help, for the fatherly hug he offered without judgment when she doubted her decisions?

Her head tilted back, and before she could stop herself she offered god a demented groan and screamed, "Why? Why would you rip someone so loved from their family?" A damnation was in order but her father, a godly man, wouldn't allow it, even in death.

"Why?" she said again as she threw herself over the casket, sobs spilling out of her.



RJ stood at the window of the church watching his sister expel her grief. He wanted to feel bad, but he just couldn't raise enough emotion. Besides, he was the one who'd had to make the tough decisions when the doctors broke the bad news about Don Roberto's brain damage. His father could have been kept alive by machines, but for what? He was not going to awaken and greet his daughter, so RJ could not see the point in delaying the inevitable. He looked down at his hand and let an evil grin cross his lips. He had held his father's life in his hands, and he took some satisfaction knowing it was a circumstance that the old man would never want to find himself in.

Sofia's hands, yes.

His, no.

A man's decision was left to the only man in the Huerta household and he had made it, whether Sofia liked it or not. She'd always been their father's favorite; now, she had no one. Through a cruel twist of fate, the playing field had been leveled and now they stood as equals. He would finally have an equal say in the business empire their family had built over two generations. Their holdings went beyond Huerta Cigars and the plantation established almost over three-quarters a century ago. There was a rum plant, and Crema, the ice cream company their father had started.

RJ had been a glorified errand boy for all of the companies at different times, but he'd shown his father he was leadership material. RJ had turned the rum plant around and made it into the profitable corporation it was today. Negotiating export deals with twenty different countries and a huge agreement with a big-box beverage company in the United States had seen it through the downturn in the world economy. Several other companies hadn't survived the crash, and RJ had seized on the opportunity to buy them for pennies on the dollar. Expanding Huerta's holdings and moving the needle on their influence in Nicaragua was all

his doing, not Sofia's, and he had to remind his father often. RJ had finally twisted his father's arm into admitting he'd been right and could handle a Huerta business venture. He had pressed his father to let him run Huerta Cigars, but the old man wouldn't relent. Instead, he'd cut RJ off from the business, telling him to be happy with what he had because it could easily be taken away.

Bastard.

Now, one of them would have the opportunity to prove the old man wrong and he was certain once the will was read, he'd be victorious and Sofia would be out. She couldn't manipulate their father anymore. Those days were gone, and with them, her power. The business world was all about winners, and he would finally be able to prove to everyone he had what it took to lead Huerta to bigger things. RJ sat up straighter. He knew all eyes were on him. People would be coming to him for advice just as they had with his father. If they were lucky, he'd do business with them, but only if they paid him the respect he was due. The days of him being a doormat were over, and he was going to let the world know that fact once he assumed his rightful place on the Huerta throne. He wasn't above flaunting his newfound position under some people's noses. In fact, he would take great joy in watching them grovel, begging for his scraps.

As for Sofia, perhaps he would ship her off to the US to work on market expansion or send her on a publicity tour around the world—shit, he didn't want her acting like the company rock star. If she was lucky he'd let her keep her cigar brand, but only if she fell in line. Otherwise, he'd help her find a role she could live with. Perhaps he'd get her one of those little push carts for ice cream and she could hawk their product to tourists along the beach. Naw, that might be too good for her. He'd love to see her in an apron cleaning toilets at the factory. In fact, he'd pay to see her on her knees scrubbing the porcelain god.

RJ hesitated, tempted to stay in the church a little longer and revel in his sister's pain, but he had a speech to prepare for the funeral tomorrow. Once they'd dispensed with the will, he'd take his place as the rightful heir to the Huerta Company and then he'd dispense with his sister's nonsense.

About the Author

Isabella lives on the central coast with her wife, and three sons. She teaches college and in her spare time, which there seems to be little of lately, she is working on her writers retreat in the Sierra foothills. She is a GLCS award winner for *Always Faithful* and a finalist for *Scarlet Masquerade*. She also finaled in the International National Book awards and has two honorable mentions in the Rainbow Awards.

She also writes under the nom de plume - Jett Abbott. A darker, rogue who's a motorcycle enthusiast and loves people watching.

Like her fan page for the latest in news on readings, appearances and books.

<https://www.facebook.com/isabella.sapphirebooks>

or

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Check out Isabella's other books

Award winning novel - ***Always Faithful*** - ISBN - 978-0-982860-80-9

Major Nichol "Nic" Caldwell is the only survivor of her helicopter crash in Iraq. She is left alone to wonder why she and she alone survived. Survivor's guilt has nothing on the young Major as she is forced to deal with the scars, both physical and mental, left from her ordeal overseas. Before the accident, she couldn't think of doing anything else in her life.

Claire Monroe is your average military wife, with a loving husband and a little girl. She is used to the time apart from her husband. In fact, it was one of the reasons she married him. Then, one day, her life is turned upside down when she gets a visit from the Marine Corps.

Can these two women come to terms with the past and finally find happiness, or will their shared sense of honor keep them apart?

Forever Faithful - ISBN - 978-1-939062-75-8

Life is what happens when you make other plans, and Nic and Claire have just found out that life and the Marine Corps have other plans for their lives. Nic Caldwell has served her country, met the woman of her dreams, and has reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. She's studying at one of the nation's most prestigious military universities, setting her sights on a research position after graduation. Things couldn't be better and then it happens; a sudden assignment to Afghanistan derails any thoughts of marriage and wedded bliss. Another combat zone, another tragedy, and Nic suddenly finds herself fighting for her life. Claire Monroe loves her new life in Monterey. She's finally where she wants to be, getting ready to start her master's program at the local university, watching her daughter, Grace, growing up, and getting ready to marry the love of her life. What could possibly derail a perfect life? The Marine Corps. Will Nic survive Afghanistan? Can Claire step up and be the strength in their relationship? Or will this overseas assignment and a catastrophic accident divide their once happy home?

American Yakuza - ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

Luce Potter straddles three cultures as she strives to live with the ideals of family, honor, and duty. When her grandfather passes the family business to her, Luce finds out that power, responsibility and justice come with a price. Is it a price she's willing to die for?

Brooke Erickson lives the fast-paced life of an investigative journalist living on the edge until it all comes crashing down around her one night in Europe. Stateside, Brooke learns to deal with a new reality when she goes to work at a financial magazine and finds out things aren't always as they seem.

Can two women find enough common ground for love or will their two different worlds and cultures keep them apart?

American Yakuza II - The Lies that Bind - ISBN - 978-10939062-20-8

Luce Potter runs her life and her business with an iron fist and complete control until lies and deception unravel her world. The shadow of betrayal consumes Luce, threatening to destroy the most precious thing in her life, Brooke Erickson.

Brooke Erickson finds herself on the outside of Luce's life looking in. As events spiral out of control Brooke can only watch as the woman she loves pushes her further away. Suddenly, devastated and alone, Brooke refuses to let go without an explanation.

Colby Water, a federal agent investigating the ever-elusive Luce Potter, discovers someone from her past is front and center in her investigation of the Yakuza crime leader. Before she can put the crime boss in prison, she must confront the ultimate deception in her professional life.

When worlds collide, betrayal, dishonor and death are inevitable. Can Luce and Brooke survive the explosion?

American Yakuza III- Razor's Edge - ISBN - 978-1-943353-81-1

Luce Potter lives by a code of honor. Push her and she shoves back, harder. There's only one problem: Luce has just found out that revenge is a knife that cuts both ways. Now that her lover Brooke has survived the attack on her life, Luce has only one thing on her mind, and his name is Frank. Unfortunately, someone walks into her life that she didn't see coming. Brooke Erickson has survived an attack so brutal it's left a permanent scar on her soul. All she wants to do now is go home and finish recuperating with her lover, Luce Potter, by her side. An unexpected event puts Brooke at the head of the Yakuza family. Can she command the respect necessary to lead it through the crisis? Luce and Brooke's worlds are upending. Can each do what's necessary to survive and return to a new normal?

Executive Disclosure- ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

When a life is threatened, it takes a special breed of person to step in front of a bullet. Chad Morgan's job has put her life on the line more times that she can count. Getting close to the client is expected; getting too close could be deadly for Chad. Reagan Reynolds wants the top job at Reynolds Holdings and knows how to play the game like "the boys." She's not above using her beauty and body as currency to get what she wants. Shocked to find out someone wants her dead, Reagan isn't thrilled at the prospect of needing protection as she tries to convince the board she's the right woman for a man's job. How far will a killer go to get what they want? Secrets and deception twist the rules of the game as a killer closes in. How far will Chad go to protect her beautiful, but challenging client?

Surviving Reagan - ISBN - 978-1-939062-38-3

Chad Caldwell has finally worked through the betrayal of her former client and lover, Reagan Reynolds. Putting the pieces of her life back in order, she finds herself on a collision course with that past when she takes on a new client, the future first lady. Unfortunately, Chad's newest job puts her in the cross-hairs of a domestic terrorist determined to release a virus that could kill thousands of women. Reagan Reynolds has paid for her sins and is ready to start a new life. Attending a business conference in Abu Dhabi gives her the opportunity to prove to her father and herself that she's worthy of a fresh start. Her past will intersect with her future at the conference when she accidentally comes face-to-face with Chad Caldwell. Time is running out. Will Reagan confront Chad? Can she convince Chad she's changed, or will death part them forever?

Broken Shield - ISBN - 978-0-982860-82-3

Tyler Jackson, former paramedic now firefighter, has seen her share of death up close. The death of her wife caused Tyler to rethink her career choices, but the death of her mother two weeks later cemented her return to the ranks of firefighter. Her path of self-destruction and womanizing is just a front to hide the heartbreak and devastation she lives with every day. Tyler's given up on finding love and having the family she's always wanted. When tragedy strikes her life for a second time she finds something she thought she lost.

Ashley Henderson loves her job. Ignoring her mother's advice, she opts for a career in law enforcement. But, Ashley hides a secret that soon turns her life upside down. Shame, guilt and fear keep Ashley from venturing forward and finding the love she so desperately craves. Her life comes crashing down around her in one swift moment forcing her to come clean about her secrets and her life.

Can two women thrust together by one traumatic event survive and find love together, or will their past force them apart?

Scarlet Assassin - ISBN - 978-1-939062-36-9

Selene Hightower is a killer for hire. A vampire who walks in both the light and the darkness, but lately darkness has a stronger pull. Her unfinished business could cost her the ability to live in the light, throwing her permanently back into the black ink of evil.

Doctor Francesca Swartz led a boring life filled with test tubes, blood trials, and work. One exploratory night, in a world of leather and torture, she is intrigued by a dark and solitary soul. She surrenders to temptation and the desire to experience something new, only to discover that it might alter her life forever.

Will Selene allow the light to win over the darkness threatening the edges of her life? Two women wonder if they can co-exist despite vast differences, as worlds collide and threaten to destroy any hope of happiness. Who will win?

The Gate - ISBN - 978-1-943353-93-4

Valhalla is for warriors that die in battle. What of those who don't have a hero's death? Where do they go? The inter-world is in chaos and has become the heart of the battleground in the war between Paladins and Gatekeepers. Harley doesn't know it yet, but she's at ground zero. A night of drinking, to forget a cheating girlfriend, is about to change her life forever. A birthmark—or a birthright—sets her on a direct path to a woman who claims to have known her for centuries. Not ready to accept her Paladin mantle, she needs proof—and that proof is out to destroy her. A protector by birth, Dawn was bred to preserve the delicate cycle of life and death. Protecting a Paladin is to be mated for eternity, usually without the sex, but Harley's allure is universally compelling. Harley's rise in status to The Chosen complicates things further as Dawn finds herself fighting for her own heart, as well as battling her biggest nemesis and brother, Lucius. Lucius, lord of the Gatekeepers, is out to kill souls moving to their next life. He wants Harley in his corner and he isn't about to let a little sibling rivalry stand in the way, no matter what it takes. Harley find herself caught up in Lucius's tempting promise of power, but cannot shake the soul-tugging love she feels with Dawn. Will Dawn convince Harley in time to embrace her Paladin destiny and save the souls looking for their gate, or will Lucius be able to sway Harley to throw in with the Gatekeepers?

Twisted Deception - ISBN - 978-1-939062-47-5

There are two types of people who can't look you in the eyes: someone trying to hide a lie and someone trying to hide their love.

Addie Blake's life isn't black and white--more like a series of short bursts of color that sustain her until the next eruption. She isn't a ladder-climber in the corporate world. Instead, she works long hours at the office and even at home, something her mechanic girlfriend, Drake Hogan, can't stand. If Addie can't focus on Drake, then Drake finds arm candy that will. After a long week of late nights and a series of text-messaged demands, each one a bigger bomb than the last, Addie has had enough of her Motor Girl.

Greyson Hollister inhabits a world where everything is either black and white, or money green. She's a polished, certified workaholic. As head of Integrated Financial, she has built the ladder others want to climb. Now she intends to attend a business mixer to confront a rumormonger and kill merger rumors involving her company.

Detective Nancy Hill, the lead detective on the Elevator Rapist task force, has just been called in to investigate an attack at Integrated Financial. She can't quite put her finger on it, but something doesn't add up with this latest assault, and Greyson Hollister isn't exactly lending a helping hand.

A storm's brewing on the horizon. Can Addie and Greyson weather it, or will it blow them over?

Writing as Jett Abbott

Scarlet Masquerade - ISBN - 978-0-982860-81-6

What do you say to the woman you thought died over a century ago? Will time heal all wounds or does it just allow them to fester and grow? A.J. Locke has lived over two centuries and works like a demon, both figuratively and literally. As the owner of a successful pharmaceutical company that specializes in blood research, she has changed the way she can live her life. Wanting for nothing, she has smartly compartmentalized her life so that when she needs to, she can pick up and start all over again, which happens every twenty years or so. Love is not an emotion A.J. spends much time on. Since losing the love of her life to the plague one hundred fifty years ago, she vowed to never travel down that road again. That isn't to say she doesn't have women when she wants them, she just wants them on her terms and that doesn't involve a long term commitment.

A.J.'s cool veneer is peeled back when she sees the love of her life in a lesbian bar, in the same town, in the same day and time in which she lives. Is her mind playing tricks on her? If not, how did Clarissa survive the plague when she had made A.J. promise never to change her?

Clarissa Graham is a university professor who has lived an obscure life teaching English literature. She has made it a point to stay off the radar and never become involved with anything that resembles her past life. Every once in a while Clarissa has an itch that needs to be scratched, so she finds an out of the way location to scratch it. She keeps her personal life separate from her professional one, and in doing so she is able to keep her secrets to herself. Suddenly, her life is turned upside down when someone tries to kill her. She finds herself in the middle of an assassination plot with no idea who wants her dead.