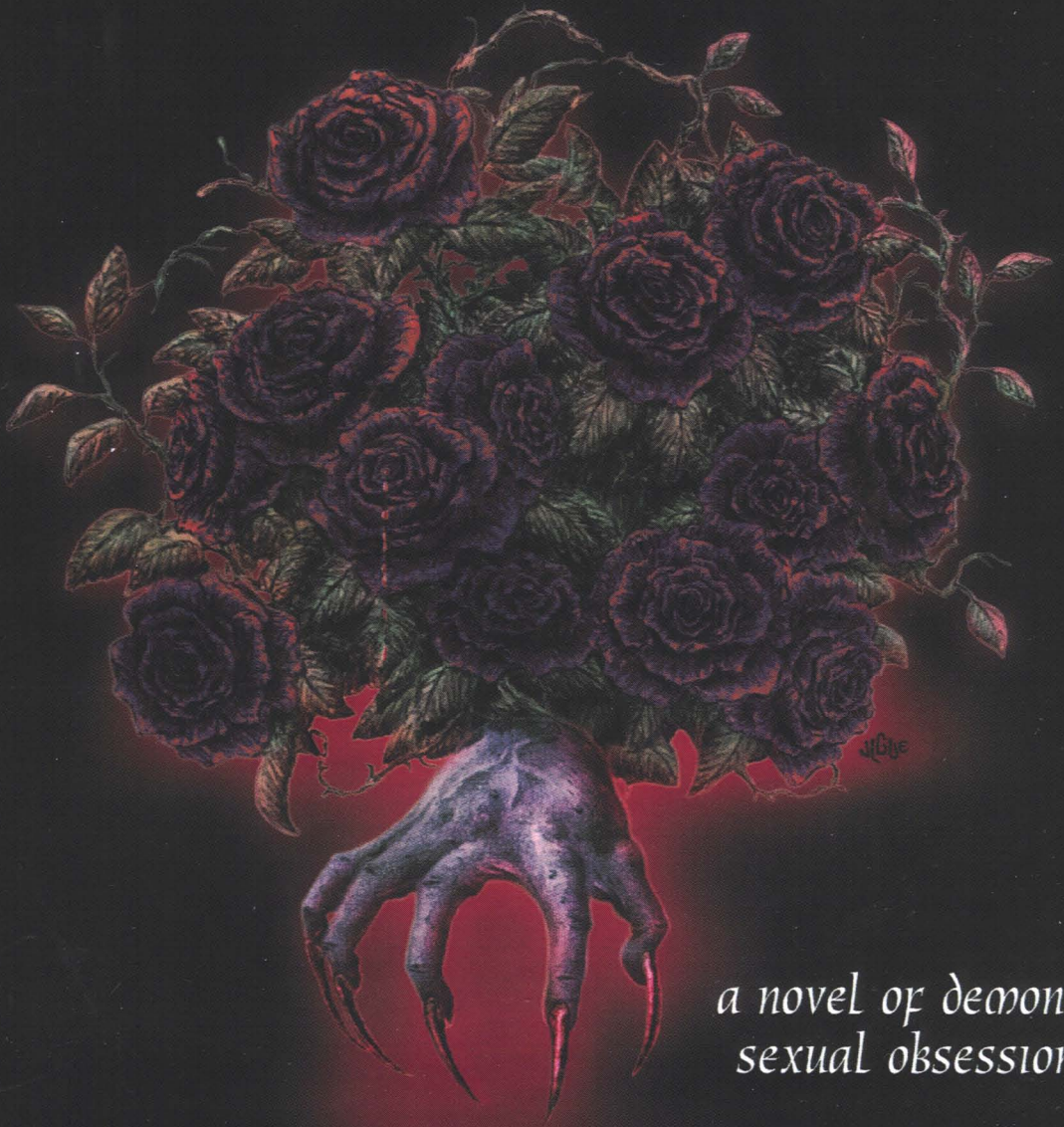


*CHRISTINE MORGAN*

# BLACK ROSES



*a novel of demonic  
sexual obsession*



**by Christine Morgan**

Published by:

Sabledrake Enterprises  
PO Box 30751  
Seattle, WA 98103  
<http://www.sabledrake.com>  
[sabledrake@sabledrake.com](mailto:sabledrake@sabledrake.com)

Copyright © 2003 Christine Morgan  
All rights reserved  
1<sup>st</sup> Printing – Summer, 2003  
Cover Art Copyright © 2003 Brian Vigue

ISBN 0-9702189-5-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other, except for brief quotations in printed reviews – without prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



“Theresa Zane! You’ve just flushed your marriage and career down the drain; what are you going to do now?”

Her voice rang horridly cheerful, as if she was an announcer asking the all-important question in front of thousands of screaming fans.

The only one to hear her was Jack. He looked up in acute feline disinterest before returning his attention to grooming. He was almost a year old now, how the time does fly. She’d gotten him in October of last year, when the lonely emptiness of the apartment became too much to bear.

Jack’O’Lantern. She’d named him after coming home one day to find the orange kitten curled up inside the pumpkin she’d carved for no reason other than because Lora always loved to have a pumpkin.

That was last year, though, and this was this year. August was past, September was passing, and the holiday season was looming like a juggernaut on the horizon. The world was speeding along out of control, carrying Theresa with it.

“Can’t afford to go to Disneyland,” she answered herself, and was unnerved at how frayed and shaky her voice was.

For a moment, she trembled on the threshold of tears, then got hold of herself. She hadn’t cried when Steven said he thought divorce was their only option, hadn’t cried when the judge gave him custody of Lora, so damned if she was going to cry over a cartoon show!

The phone rang, interrupted by the machine and her own recorded voice. “Hi, this is Theresa Zane. I’m happy with my long-distance carrier, I don’t participate in surveys, and when I want to make a donation, *I’ll* contact *you*. Anyone else, here’s the beep.”

*Beep.*

“Terri, hi, Suze here.”

Theresa picked up. "Hi, Suze."

She hated being called Terri, but Susan Marsh called all her clients by a nickname, and if some unwary person rejected the first one she chose, the next was apt to be particularly unpleasant. For example, Louis Corey, who wrote delightful books of children's poetry, would forever be known as Melon-Head. So Theresa put up with Terri, if not gladly, at least gratefully, considering the possible alternatives.

"You've heard the bad news?"

"They called this morning." Theresa sighed. "So much for *Lora and Ruff*."

"That producer has the brains of a gerbil, I swear to God. Never mind giving kids something to watch that's educational as well as fun; let's fill their wee little heads with singsong mush that has good marketing potential. If I ever see one of those cutesy-ass puppets of his in a toy store, I'll buy one just to roast it with a flamethrower."

Suze could usually get a smile from her, but today, Theresa's smiler seemed to be out of order. She managed a half-hearted sound that was meant to be a chuckle.

"So you listen to me, Terri, don't let that s.o.b. get you down. This isn't over yet."

She mumbled in all the right places as Susan went on, alternating between outlining plans for their next move and promising gaudy revenge on anyone who got in their way.

All the while, she searched her heart for enthusiasm and found zilch. The proposed show was dead in the water. She knew it, and Suze knew it too.

Ten books in four years, starting with *Lora and Ruff Go to the Circus* and ending with *Lora and Ruff Go to the Moon*. There would not be an eleventh book, and that was something Suze *didn't* know but Theresa did.

How could there be an eleventh book? Lora, her inspiration, was living with Steven and his new wife in Phoenix, and Theresa hadn't been able to write a word since.

The most ironic thing was that they'd broken up because of *Lora and Ruff*. It hadn't been the money. Of which there wasn't much, as her bank account could attest. It hadn't been the fame. See money, above. It had been the move. He wasn't willing to move to L.A., and she wasn't willing to give up her chance.

"Earth to Terri! Hey! You still there?"

"Here, sorry. I was woolgathering."

"You were moping."

"I was moping."

"Steven?"

"Lora. She starts first grade tomorrow."

There wasn't much Suze could say, and Theresa knew it. The Marsh kids were all grown, out of the house, and had as little to do with their flamboyant mother as they could.

It depressed Theresa even more to think of it. She ran through her female acquaintances in her head, trying to think of one, just one, that had a good relationship with her mother. She came up empty. Was it something all mothers and daughters had to face? Was it going to be like that for her and Lora? They were already off to a good start – her daughter's soft, heartbroken "Oh, okay," when Theresa had told her no, she wouldn't be able to come to the bus stop with her on her first day at the big

kid's school, had cut deep and close to the bone.

She'd vowed countless times over the years that she was never going to turn out like her own mother, but now she realized she didn't have to. She could lose Lora just as effectively through distance and perceived indifference as she could through criticism and harsh words.

After making the necessary conversational noises and hanging up, Theresa looked around her apartment and heaved another sigh. She'd been too busy to clean and then too stressed to clean. The evidence of her state of mind was everywhere. Ben and Jerry were her two best friends, and who ever believed that there were supposed to be four servings in one of those little tubs?

The frantic schedule of the past few months had made her drop several pounds, the comfort food of the past few weeks had put it all back on, so she was right back where she started. Lose and gain, gain and lose, like a merry go round and no matter how many times you went around, you never got anyplace.

"Story of my life," she muttered.

Jack's ear twitched at her as if to say, *hey, Theresa, I'm trying to catch a nap here, do you mind?*

She was sinking into a mire of self-pity. Justifiable, sure, here she was washed up at twenty-eight, didn't she have some right to feel sorry for herself?

But if there was one thing her mother had harped on that made sense, it was that there was no point in whining about what had happened. The question was, what was she going to do about it?

She suddenly knew that if she stayed indoors another minute, she was going to go bonkers.

Grabbing her purse, she was out the door and into the muggy slap of heat that passed for late summer in L.A. before she could talk herself out of it. There was a little park a few blocks away, squeezed between a junior high that could pass for a detention center and an office block that looked like an abstract sculpture. She headed for the park, stopping at the mini-mart on the corner to pick up a bottle of soda and a package of cookies.

Some of the schools had started already, but most – *like Lora's*, the nagging mother-voice spoke up in the back of her head – would start tomorrow. The playground was full of kids playing with desperate intensity, the last day of summer, the last day of freedom.

Theresa sat on a bench beneath a tree whose leaves were already curling into arthritic brown husks. She loved L.A., loved the gritty sprawling buzz of it, loved the variety and the mingled cultures and the busy energy of it all. Everyone seemed like they were going someplace fast. Up or down, becoming successes or nobodies, but they were going there fast. It was like a hub between all possible worlds. A drive of a few hours could take you to sunwashed beaches or ski slopes or panoramic high desert vistas where Joshua trees poked their bristly arms at the sky.

She loved it, but she felt a surprisingly strong hunger for the cool green of home.

Not Phoenix. That wasn't home now, hadn't been since the door of Steven's house had closed behind her for the last time. Even when she'd lived there, it had never really been *her* home; he had inherited it from his grandparents and she'd always

felt their presence, if not disapproving, *waiting* to disapprove.

Strange to think of Trinity Bay as home. She'd only lived there until she was nine. But it, more than any of the other places she'd stayed since her mother walked out on her father and dragged Theresa along for the ride, was what she thought of now as she watched the children laugh and yell under the hazy sunshine. Home.

She realized with bitter rueful amusement that this was what the whole Gen X hoopla was about. Here she was, twenty-eight, done with college and having no luck in either the job or marriage departments, heading home to live with her folks.

"Good God, I've become a statistic," she said, and laughed. Some of the nearest kids gave her wary looks much too adult – couldn't be too careful, those young/old eyes proclaimed, couldn't be too careful, there were psychos everywhere.

Would Lora's eyes look like that in a few years? Was that the fate of the kids of today, the heirs of the new millennium? Now, *there* was a cheery thought.

Home and Trinity Bay. Images like cozy slippers for the soul. Maybe what she needed was a fresh start, and what better place to do it than one of the few places she had been truly happy?

Her father had offered. When he'd first heard of her split-up from Steven, he'd made the offer and she knew it was sincere. If you need a place, honey, remember your old dad. Not made for form's sake or as a veiled barb, the way her mother would have said it. An offer made as if he really did want her there.

At the very least, she decided, she would give Dad a call. He might have changed his mind; it had been fifteen months and even in Trinity Bay, things changed.

It wasn't even inconceivable that he might have a new woman in his life and not need his style cramped by his grown daughter hanging around the house. After all, Travis Zane was still a good-looking fellow at age 60. His Native American ancestry gave him rugged, noble features and striking dark eyes. Women had always been drawn to him, which had been one of the things Theresa's mother complained about the most.

That and the house. Lois had hated the house from the word go.

Theresa sat up straighter on the bench, her eyes, which had drifted into a pleasant daydream half-close, now widening. A big beaming smile curved her lips, and a man who was walking past with an Irish Setter on a leash turned to walk backwards and return it with interest. Theresa barely noticed. Her mind was riffling through the pages of memory, looking for a name.

Glory. Yes, it *had* been Glory! And years later, she would name her own daughter Lora, never consciously seeing the connection until now.

Glory. Lora. Close enough for government work.

If Steven, practical Steven, knew that she had named their daughter after the imaginary friend of her own childhood, he would just about choke.

The more she thought about Trinity Bay, the more she convinced herself it was the answer. Drive up, stay with Dad for a while, get her head on straight and her life back in order. The change of pace, the change of surroundings, would be just what she needed to figure out what came next. The break might even jump-start her creativity. Could be there were more books in her; if not the continuing adventures of *Lora and Ruff*, maybe a novel.

*Black Roses*

She didn't want her last cookie. She was hungry for real food, something nutritious. A chef's salad, crisp veggies and lean ham and hard-boiled eggs. A big glass of iced tea with lemon.

Theresa brushed crumbs from her jeans and walked briskly back to the apartment, pausing to wave up at Jack on the windowsill before she backed her car onto the street and drove to the market. Fresh fruit, roast beef and Swiss for sandwich makings, milk, cat food, some yogurt, the salad fixings, and Hershey's Kisses because she was afraid her body might go into shock if she went cold-turkey from the junk and sweets.

Humming to herself, she wrestled the bags up the stairs and balanced them with one arm while she groped for her keys. Jack twined meowing around her ankles, adding a further obstacle as she tried to make her way to the kitchenette without a disaster. Mission accomplished, at the cost of one accidental tread on a declawed paw.

"Sorry, Jack!" She mollified him with a helping of cat food, holding her breath as she did so. She loved Jack, but she was never going to get used to the rank odor of his chow, or the gelatinous smack it made coming out of the can.

It had been a long time since she'd taken pleasure in cooking. A long time since she'd taken much pleasure in anything. Even the television show – she now saw that she'd thrown herself into it with such gung-ho energy not because she loved the idea (though she did) but because while she was focused on *Lora and Ruff*, she wasn't thinking about the real Lora, or Steven.

There was a framed photo of Lora on the table, and Theresa gazed at it while she ate. It had been taken the summer before last, just before she and Steven broke up. Lora in the backyard of the Phoenix house, by the pool. She had Theresa's hair, black as polished ebony, but she had Steven's clear green eyes.

Those eyes had been what first drew Theresa to him. She was sure they were contacts, wondering at that conceit in a guy who seemed otherwise modest. Steven Taylor, sandy-brown hair, a nice face, a decent body, soft-spoken. Unremarkable, except for those eyes. They'd dated for four months before she found out the color was true.

Steven had been good for her. She'd been a teen rebel, wild to break away from her mother and stepfather's strict, stifling rules. Steven had been the one to make her see how she'd been ruining her own future trying to get back at her mother. Looking back, she could hardly believe she had been that girl.

"What a difference ten years makes," she said to the picture, to Lora's bright smile.

What a difference, indeed! From feast to famine! She'd had exactly one date since the divorce became final, and that was with Susan's brother-in-law. A perfect gentleman until they were alone, and then he grew six more arms. She wasn't eager to jump back into her old habits; her self-respect had gone up too many levels for that.

Still, she missed having a man in her life. For that matter, she missed having a life! She'd thought earlier that the world was rushing along and carrying her with it, but the truth was, the world was rushing along and she was sitting like a lump watching it go.

\* \* \*

Over the next week, *she* rushed along and dragged the world in her wake.

Her father had been delighted at the prospect of her visiting, even staying for as long as she liked. She sensed a bigger relief in his tone than the occasion warranted, making her wonder if there was more going on than Travis was telling.

Suze had been aghast at the thought of one of her clients, even a suddenly less-than-profitable client, moving to a backwater town in the middle of nowhere. Of course, to the people of L.A., the Bay Area was Northern California, and anything beyond that was the great uncharted wilderness.

“What are you going to *do* there anyway?” Suze demanded. “Grow pot? Shoot film of Bigfoot? Chain yourself to a redwood to save the spotted owl?”

“Those aren’t the only regional pastimes,” Theresa said.

“Name another,” Suze challenged.

“Um . . .”

Her agent’s objections aside, the rest of the planning had gone swiftly and easily. Her furniture all fit into one medium-sized storage unit. She took her clothes, her computer, what books she couldn’t bear to do without, all her pictures of Lora, and of course a very indignant Jack in a plastic cat-carrier.

Driving at night would let her avoid traffic and the heat. Straight up I-5 – literally straight; if she had cruise control, she could have just pointed the car north and let it drive itself.

She wasn’t ready yet to explain to her ex-husband how the show that had been worth wrecking their marriage over had gone to TV Heaven. After she got settled, she could get in touch and maybe even convince him to let her have Lora up for Christmas.

But that was still a few months away. Who knew, it might not work out. She and Dad might get under each other’s skin in no time, and then she’d be back in freefall. For now, the thing to concentrate on was getting to Trinity Bay, getting the new start she needed.

I-5 north, long black ribbons of asphalt unspooling in the glow of the headlights. Big rigs droned along at seventy miles per hour. A few other cars, other travelers like herself. The moon sailed its slow, steady course toward the sea. Jack’s unhappy yowling finally became silence as he curled up and went to sleep.

Although she’d slept late that morning and loaded up on convenience-store coffee, the tedium of the drive worked a hypnotic spell. Soon Theresa was rolling down the window to scoop night air onto her face, cranking the radio in hopes of warding off the sandman. No good. The jaw-cracking yawns continued, and by the time she reached Redding, she was gritty-eyed and shaky. In no condition for the trek across Highway 299, a winding course through the mountains.

She pulled into a rest stop, let Jack out of the carrier so he could use the cardboard box of litter on the floor, reclined her seat as far as it would go, and pulled her jacket over herself like a blanket. She was dimly aware of the warm soft weight of a cat on her lap, and then she was out.

The blare of a horn jolted her awake, and for an adrenaline-shrieking moment she was sure she had fallen asleep at the wheel and dreamed parking at the rest stop. She uttered a little scream in the close confines of the car and jerked upright, spilling

Jack down by the pedals.

It was still dark. No blazing twin suns of an oncoming semi. Her car wasn't about to be flattened or run off the road. Theresa waited until her heart resumed a normal rhythm, then got out and winced at the stiff tingling in her limbs.

She hurried to the ladies' room, peed for what seemed like forever – all that coffee – and checked her watch. Quarter past four in the morning. She'd been napping for over an hour.

Not nearly enough, but she was wide awake now and might as well keep going.

The last time she'd gone across 299 was as a child of nine, terrified that her mother was going to crash them right through a guardrail and into the rocky river below. A child with tears of fear and confused grief streaming down her face.

*Thank God I didn't put Lora through anything like that,* she thought. *At least Steven and I parted on decent terms.*

Her mother had been married three times, divorced three times. In the great courtroom of life, the jury might still be out on whether or not men were shit, but as far as Lois Abbey-Marriott-Zane-Kowalski was concerned, the verdict was, "Guilty!"

That didn't stop her, however, from blaming Theresa for letting her own marriage fail. All men were shit, Steven was a man, therefore, Theresa must have been a bad wife. Logical. Sure. All the way.

Twisty mountain road. Close-hugging trees on one side, a steep drop on the other. Oncoming headlights were sudden and eye-wateringly bright, all the worse because they were so few and far between that her eyes readjusted to the dimness before the next set came beaming out of the darkness.

She drove with even more caution than normal, so much caution that she had to use the turn-outs several times to allow other vehicles to pass. It was as if she had an unseen passenger, a little girl clinging to her seatbelt with white-knuckled hands, crying because she already missed her father, her friends, her home.

The world lightened as the miles went by. The sky went from black to indigo to slate, and then to a soft pearl-grey. Now Theresa could see the towering redwoods, their shaggy rust-colored bark rising above the ferns and underbrush. Fog wreathed the tops of the trees, ghosted between the trunks in eddies and swirls.

Theresa rolled down her window and breathed the cool moist air tinged with sea spray. It revitalized her in a way the coffee couldn't have done. To smell the sea was to smell the unknown, the mysterious, the uplifting.

The sun rose as a bright spot in the uniform silver of the cloudbank. It shed a light at once alien and peaceful. Like being on Venus, if Venus were the misty paradise of imaginings instead of the steam-cooked hell it really was.

By the time she had descended toward the coast, the sky had gone a milky blue, and she knew the last of the clouds would burn off by noon. It would be one of those postcard-perfect days that belied the rumor that there was nothing but dreary, soggy weather behind the Redwood Curtain.

From 299, she got onto 101 north, past McKinleyville and Trinidad and Patrick's Point State Park. It was the overlap between the end of the tourist season and the beginning of the student season at Humboldt State University in Arcata, a few miles south, but at this hour, she still had the highway mostly to herself.

*Christine Morgan*

*Trinity Bay Next Right*, read the sign, and Theresa's spirits lifted. She took the off-ramp, noted a sign directing her to the North Valley Shopping Center – that was new, to her at least – and buttonhooked back under the freeway onto the rather too grandly named Trinity Bay Boulevard.

At once, the groves closed around her. Dense green in a thousand shades. If not for the gravel driveways disappearing through the tree trunks, and the mailboxes in clusters along the roadside, she could almost have believed she had been transported to the forest primeval.

Then she topped a rise, and the view opened up like a long-awaited gift.

To her right, a tumble of rocky islands clustered around a mammoth bulk of stone. Some were still partly connected by natural bridges shaped over the millennia by the ceaseless waves. That portion of the land curved inward, sheltering the bay, while on the far side the waves crashed and sometimes kicked sprays of foam high into the air.

From there, Theresa let her eye follow the gravel beach past the campground, which now featured cabins and a brand new motel. A small but modern-looking medical center stood at the edge of the town proper – quite a change from the days when Doc Kensington's large brick home had doubled as the office of Trinity Bay's only resident physician.

Agate Way, the old trestle bridge still standing, presumably now extended past Mill Road and led to the North Valley Shopping Center. The sawmill was out of sight of the town except for the sickly sweet-sour plumes from the stacks, which blew their nauseating miasma out to sea, or over town when the wind was wrong.

She recognized the combined elementary/high school, and the town square around the grassy plaza complete with a statue of some forgotten mariner. The business district clustered around the plaza, and from there homes spread out like ripples in a pond. Little had changed from the pictures she carried in her memory, though it all looked smaller. Which she should have suspected; it had been almost twenty years since she lived here, and her brief visits in the interim had not updated her mental image.

On the left, the south end of town, the land rose again into a bluff, and overlooking the town like some smug Midas was Seacliff. Theresa had once done a report on the house, the last assignment she'd turned in before her mother whisked her away.

Built in 1870 by redwood baron Jacob Cliffwood, Seacliff had gone through ups and downs in harmony with the prosperity of the town and the logging industry. It had begun as a six-room house, grand by the standards of the day, but ten years later in honor of the birth of his first child, Jacob had expanded and improved upon it. Each successive generation had made their own changes, and now it loomed with a proud majesty that nearly equaled that of the Carson Mansion in Eureka.

Theresa drove through town, around the series of one-way streets that framed the plaza, taking in the sights. The town-hall-slash-library was just as ugly as it had ever been; most of the shops seemed to have enjoyed a face lift in recent years. While the town didn't give the feeling of great prosperity, it seemed to be thriving in a quiet, companionable sort of way.

She turned onto Cliffwood Road, which had originally been the driveway leading

*Black Roses*

up to Seacliff. Her father's house had once been a guest cottage on the main estate, but the Cliffwoods had been forced to sell off many of their outbuildings and land during the Depression. Her grandparents had bought the house then, though Myra Cliffwood, maiden-aunt matriarch of the manor, hadn't been thrilled at the prospect of having the Zanes for neighbors. Thaddeus Zane had, after all, married an Indian woman.

There was a stubborn streak running through the Zane family, though, as Theresa could personally attest. They weren't going to let one woman's disdain drive them out of their home.

And in a way, Theresa supposed, her family got the last laugh. There might be no more Cliffwoods in town, but now another Zane was back in Trinity Bay.

\* \* \*

Christine Morgan



*So beautiful!*

*He watched intently as the woman got out of the car and stretched. The wind lifted her long black hair like a banner. Her shirt pulled taut across her breasts, her jeans molded the lovely outline of her hips and buttocks.*

*Oh, yes, very beautiful!*

*He wanted to go to her, touch her, but the distance between them was too great. His only choice was to watch. For now, at least. Soon, though, he knew there would be an opportunity for them to get to know one another. Intimately.*

*The door to the old guest house opened, and Zane came out. He greeted the woman gladly. Even from here, the observer could see the resemblance between them. Zane's daughter, then.*

*Jealousy twisted through him as they embraced, as Zane led her into the house and out of his sight.*

*He wanted her.*

*He wanted to know her every thought, her every secret desire. He would prove himself worthy of her love, and then she would be his.*

*Forever.*

\* \* \*

Theresa tried not to show how shocked she was at her father's appearance, but he nodded at her as if he knew just what was on her mind.

"Don't worry," he said, setting one of her suitcases at the foot of the stairs. "I haven't been sleeping well, that's all. I've already been to Doc Kensington – wait until you see the truckload of vitamins I'm on!"

"Isn't he retired yet?" Theresa asked, unlatching the cat carrier. Jack, who had pitched a literal hairy cat fit every time she put him in it, now crouched at the back

and refused to come out, staring with suspicious green eyes.

“Oh, Lord, no, wouldn’t hear of it. He’ll work ‘til he drops. By the way, his Danielle, your school chum, is still in town. She’s got my old job now.”

“What about you, Dad? What have you been up to?”

His dark eyes slid away from hers. “You’ve had a long drive. Let’s get your things inside. Once you’re settled, and have had a good nap, we can talk.”

Theresa considered pushing it.

Not sleeping well, he’d said. Okay. Was that all of it? No. Since she’d seen him last, just after Lora was born, his hair had gone from solid iron-grey to nearly pure white. His face was deeply lined, his skin an unhealthy color. He’d lost weight, too, and not in a good way. Always trim and muscular before, now his flesh seemed to hang slack on prominent bones.

She could have demanded answers, but she knew her father too well, and she was too tired. He was right. They could talk after her nap, and right now she felt she could nap for about eighteen hours straight.

“I had Mrs. Davis fix the big room up for you,” Travis said. “She comes in a couple of times a week to do the cleaning.”

“Your room? Dad, I can’t take your room!”

“I’m in there now.” He pointed through the long living room to the small door beside the kitchen. “Where your grandma used to sleep. It’s warmer, right by the fireplace.”

Theresa studied him, then looked at the stairs. Travis’ face was set in the familiar determined lines – hadn’t she just been thinking as she pulled up how stubborn the Zanes were? Possibly he couldn’t handle the stairs anymore, but wasn’t going to admit it. And it probably *was* warmer in the little room downstairs.

“Besides,” he went on, as if feeling he needed to add more, “I think you’ve outgrown the furniture in yours. Who knows, maybe Lora will come visit.”

“I hope so,” Theresa said. “She’d love it. I always did.”

“You used to play in there for hours,” Travis recalled, smiling. “Talking to your invisible friend.”

“Glory.”

“That was the one.” He chuckled. “You know, sometimes I think she’s still around, waiting for you.”

“If I’ve outgrown the furniture, I’ve probably outgrown my invisible friends, too,” she said, adding her laughter to his until her laughter turned into a yawn.

“Go on, Theresa. Get some sleep. I’ll have dinner ready –”

“Since when can you cook?”

“Since I had to learn,” he replied dryly. “I make a great salmon casserole.”

“Sorry, Dad, I didn’t mean –”

“I know.” He kissed her on the forehead, an unusual show of affection that silenced her with surprise.

She lugged most of her stuff inside, but only took her overnight bag and Jack upstairs. He still hadn’t ventured out, and his fur was puffed up like it did when he caught scent of a strange cat.

The master suite was at the end of the hall. The curtains were drawn back,

Christine Morgan

exposing windows with a stunning view of Seacliff, the bluff, and the bay. The ceiling was made of peeled logs, the floor was hardwood with a braided rug. Prints of horses adorned the walls – her father had never ridden a horse in his life, but loved them all the same.

She put the carrier down, figuring that Jack would come out when he was good and ready. Maybe giving him the run of the house wasn't such a good idea just yet. Let him get used to this room first, and then maybe he'd be up for some investigating.

There was a bathroom attached, small, but it had a jetted whirlpool tub and Theresa sighed in anticipation. She unpacked her overnight bag, brushed teeth that felt coated with fuzz after fourteen hours on the road, changed into the oversized flannel shirt that served as her pajamas, and crawled into the large bed.

She was asleep almost as soon as she pulled the goosedown comforter to bunch warmly around her shoulders.

\* \* \*

*Beautiful.*

*He hadn't seen such a magnificent creature in a long time. Far too long.*

*Watching her as she moved around the bedroom, as she undressed, only fueled the fire that burned within him.*

*He ached to see her up close, how she burrowed into the pillow and how her expression reflected the dreams of her sleeping mind.*

*Not yet. Not yet.*

*But soon.*

*He consoled himself with that thought. Soon.*

*She would be his.*

\* \* \*

Theresa woke once with the certainty that someone was in the room. Looking at her. Leering at her. She sat up with a gasp, clutching the sheets, and saw only Jack.

He wasn't sleeping, wasn't even sprawled in his customary lounging position, but was hunched at the foot of the bed, his eyes wide and fixed unblinkingly on the window. When he saw her, he twitched, sprang to the floor, then raced in a circle, leapt at the drapes, fell back down because he had no claws with which to grip, and scooted under the chair.

"Weird cat," she murmured affectionately, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

She woke much later, aware that whatever weirdness had gotten into the cat was now out. He was by the door, sniffing along the base, and Theresa could smell dinner. Salmon casserole, as promised.

Stiffness had settled into her bones. She sat up, feeling like everything was creaking. A twist of her back sent a series of crackles down her spine, and Theresa groaned in mixed pleasure and squeamishness.

Halfway to the bathroom, shrugging out of her flannel shirt, she paused. Her

*Black Roses*

skin was creeping into gooseflesh. It had gotten dark outside, not the dusty orange-tinted dark of LA but a soft velvety grey-black that pressed against the window. It was dark in her room too, only the rosy glow of a single corner lamp providing light, yet Theresa felt as exposed as if she'd been standing naked in the middle of a shopping mall.

Silly. There was no one to see her. The only house within sight was Seacliff, and Seacliff was dark. Dark, and empty. Had been for years. The last Cliffwoods had moved away even before Theresa and her mother left Trinity Bay.

Jack uttered an inquisitive mew from the door, as if to ask how long she was going to make him wait before letting him check out that fascinating aroma.

"Okay, okay." Theresa closed the drapes and got in the shower.

\* \* \*

*He would have to be more careful. She was observant, her senses keen. Like the prey, stepping lightly through the underbrush, that instinctively knows it has been scented by the predator.*

*There was plenty of time. She'd only just arrived.*

*Let her settle in, get comfortable. Let her feel welcome in Trinity Bay. She would stay. It was where she belonged. Here, with her father, with her unseen and as-yet-unmet lover.*

*The father might pose a problem. Travis Zane was a strong-minded man. He might be inclined to be protective of his only child.*

*If it came to that, if the old man was the only thing standing in the way . . . well, he could be dealt with.*

\* \* \*

Theresa now knew the truth of long-distance relationships. No matter how often letters were exchanged, no matter how many phone calls were made, you couldn't really know what went on in a person's life when you were most of a state away.

She was in the uneasy state of feeling both more at home and more guilty than she ever had before.

The first shock – the second shock, if you counted the haggard way her father looked, fifteen years older than his actual age – was when a minibus pulled up in front of the house bright and early Wednesday morning and tooted its horn.

Theresa was in the cozy brick kitchen hunting for sugar when the bus arrived. She looked out the window, read "Silver Grove" on the side, and frowned.

"There's my ride," Travis said, coming in with his empty breakfast plate.

"Your ride? To where? What's Silver Grove?"

"It's over by the hospital." He ran water over his plate and dried his hands. "I'll be back by three."

"Dad . . . what's going on?"

He replaced the dish towel and smiled disarmingly.

"Dad." She tapped her foot meaningfully.

"There's a day program at the old folk's home," he admitted. "Keeps me off the streets. After the heart attack –"

“Heart attack!”

“Kel McGuire and Doc Kensington teamed up on me,” he continued, as if he hadn’t noticed her outburst. “They wanted me to move in permanently, but I talked them out of it. On the condition I’d go play cribbage and Scrabble with the other old farts four or five days a week.”

“Heart attack, Jesus, Dad, when?”

“About a year ago,” he said indifferently.

Theresa leaned against the counter and dragged a stunned hand down the side of her face. A year ago, she’d been on the phone to her dad almost constantly, alternately giddy about the show and distraught about her divorce, and he’d said not a word. Guilt washed over her like dull heat. “Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“You had your own things going on, honey. I didn’t want to burden you with mine.” He patted her arm. “No wild parties while I’m gone, okay?”

An automatic smile, more of a grimace, twisted her mouth. It was the same way he used to say good-bye when she was eight years old and he was off to work.

“Dad . . .”

The horn beeped again.

“Got to go. If I’m late, Elsie takes my favorite chair.”

She stayed by the window, watching him emerge into the pale fog. He pulled his jacket on and settled it on his shoulders with the same flip-and-shrug she remembered from her childhood, but then he’d been on his way to Nate’s where he worked as a bartender. Not on his way to spend the day in some threadbare dayroom where the tube was always set to game shows and the bookcase was filled with large-print versions of Reader’s Digest.

As the minibus pulled away, Theresa pressed her forehead against the glass like she’d always done as a little girl. Bitter tears stung her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she was more upset at her father’s stoic, stiff-necked, old-fashioned pride – women and kids don’t need to know the troubles a man is facing – or her own lack of perceptiveness.

She recalled thinking how tired he’d sounded during some of their conversations. Tired. That was all. Now to learn he’d had a heart attack, that the Reaper’s cloak had brushed against him, and she hadn’t even known!

Guilt and shame, racing around and around like mechanical rabbits on the track of her mind. She hadn’t known, and when she finally did come to see her father, it hadn’t been to take care of him, but to flee her own problems and let him take care of her.

Selfish, thankless child! If the show hadn’t been canceled, she would still be in L.A., still chatting with him every so often on the phone, with no idea! Now she understood the relief with which he’d greeted her tentative request to move back to Trinity Bay. He would have never asked, not wanting to be a burden to her.

Her chest hitched once, and then she drew upon that same stiff-necked pride that she’d inherited along with her dark hair and eyes. She was here now, that was what mattered. She would be here for her father and herself, and things would work out fine for both of them.

With that resolve firmly in place, she did the breakfast dishes and tidied the kitchen, then lugged the rest of her things in from the car and started unpacking.

There was an old desk in the corner of the long living room, tucked back in a windowless corner by the stairs. It was away from the distractions of television and windows, a good place to write. Travis had assured her he used it for nothing more than a place to stack things he was procrastinating on putting away, so the desk was hers to use if she wanted it.

She cleared away the clutter, finding homes for most of it and putting the rest on the table so she wouldn't be able to forget to ask where it went. The desk itself was in good shape, a mammoth old fossil from the days before most furniture was made of pressboard.

One drawer stuck fast, one opened with a protesting squeal, and all the others worked just fine. In the bottommost one, she was startled to find a thick packet with her name on it, full of test papers and art projects from her school days.

From the kitchen windows, she saw a path winding into the redwoods that butted up against the property, bringing back more childhood memories. The shortcut to school, past the former gatehouse of the Seacliff estate.

She wondered if Mrs. Douring, the high school English teacher feared by generations of Trinity Bay teens, still lived there. April Cliffwood and her friends had lived in utter terror of the woman, and as April frequently baby-sat young Theresa before her family moved away, she had transmitted that fear.

But in the fertile mind of a child, Mrs. Douring with her dyed-orange hair and her pursed lips became a witch, and every day Theresa would scoot along the path with her heart in her throat until the house had come and gone.

She smiled a little at her own foolishness. Old, yes, and scary-looking, but not a witch.

After she set up her computer, she switched it on and pulled up a word processing program just to make sure everything worked. She sat and stared sourly at it, fearing that she would never use it for anything other than writing letters, then turned it off and decided to go for a walk.

A light sweater was all she needed. The morning chill was already lessening, though the day did not promise to be the blue-sky knockout of yesterday. Still, sunbeams slanted through the clouds and made shifting patterns of light and shadow in the woods.

She closed the door but didn't lock it and felt a qualm, making a mental note to herself to get a copy of Dad's key. True, this was Trinity Bay, not L.A., but even that didn't make her rest easy leaving the door unlocked.

Although the path beckoned, first she decided to go around the house and look at Seacliff. She hadn't really gotten a chance to admire it yesterday, so tired from her drive, and she'd often daydreamed as a child about living there, in the grand manor, having servants and money and cars.

There had once been a gravel walkway leading from the guest cottage to the mansion, but all that remained of it now was a long skinny depression in the grass. On the Zane property, things had been allowed to go back to their natural state decades ago.

She followed the former walkway, wondering what old Myra would think if she could see her family's pride and joy now. Those thoughts, though, derailed in a hurry

as she rounded a hydrangea bush half again her own height, exploding with bouquet-sized lavender blossoms, and got her first good, attentive look at Seacliff.

The place was far from abandoned. Her first impression was that someone must have hired a good caretaker to look after the place, but she gave up that line of reasoning quickly. The house just didn't have the desolate, unoccupied look she would have expected. Someone was living there.

Who would be living in Seacliff? The last of the Cliffwoods had moved away in early 1979 after Edward's nervous breakdown and his sister Barbara's death. The local kids, as well as their parents, speculated hungrily over which had come first – did her death make him crazy, or did his hidden insanity lead to her Christmastime overdose on sleeping pills?

April, Edward's daughter, had been seventeen at the time. She and her mother moved out. The last words April had had to say on the matter was that she was glad. She hated the house, and would be just as happy if she never saw it again.

But someone was living there now. Had the place been sold? Her father hadn't mentioned it, but then, Travis had never been one to pass around gossip. Or maybe he had mentioned it, and Theresa had forgotten. Possible. Especially if it had been recent.

That line of thinking brought back the guilt and shame. What else might he have said, that she might have missed? She was upset at him for keeping his health a secret; what if he'd tried to tell her, but she'd been so wrapped up in the misery of her own life that she hadn't heard?

She stood, wallowing in bleak emotions, staring blankly at Seacliff. *Who would want such a giant monstrosity anyway?* the part of her that wasn't occupied with making herself feel about *yea* big said to itself.

Seacliff was a mansion in every sense of the word. It was positioned to command a sweeping view of the town and the bay, and also so that the town could look up admiringly at its gables and chimneys and windows.

The central part of the house was three stories tall, topped with a domelike bubble of blue and green stained glass. Two-story wings angled back from the central section, giving the house the shape of a wide V. Theresa knew that a wrought-iron fence stretched from the ends of the wings to enclose the rear garden, which had once been featured in a magazine that couldn't say enough good things about its terraced pools and artful design.

Half of the stable had been converted to a six-car garage, and as she looked at it, one of the doors swung up. An engine roared once, then purred contentedly as a sleek black sports car backed out. Theresa could read the license plate: MYDLITE.

"Your delight, huh?" she murmured, raising an eyebrow.

The car started down the long, curved drive, then slowed as the driver saw her. A tinted window slid down and a man looked out at her.

"Well, hello," he said, smiling. Million-dollar smile, perfectly capped, bleached, and cultivated. God's gift to woman, from the tips of his toes to the top of his full, wavy blond hair.

Theresa scolded herself. Just because the man was forty-something and drove a car that was the epitome of "what are you trying to prove?" with a cutesy-ass – thank

you, Suze, for that piquant turn of phrase – license plate, just because he had gone to great pains to take care of his looks, didn't necessarily mean he was shallow and vain.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't know anybody lived here."

"Don't worry, I won't bust you for trespassing." His smile widened, and she felt herself give one in response, unwillingly.

*Next he's going to say he hasn't seen me around here before . . .*

"I haven't seen you around here before." He stuck his hand out the window. "Brad Thornton."

"Theresa Zane." She shook quickly, then let go. For some reason, maybe because he reminded her of too many slick people she'd known in the entertainment industry, the vibes he gave off seemed thinly coated with slime.

"Travis' daughter! I should have known! So we're neighbors. Your dad's quite a guy."

"He didn't tell me Seacliff had been sold."

An expression of sorrow so ersatz and schmaltzy that Theresa almost recoiled replaced Brad's winning smile. She resisted the urge to wipe her palm on her sweater.

"It belonged to my wife, April. She passed away three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Theresa said, and she was. Not for him, but for April, who had always been so bright and full of hope. April, who had wanted to be a professional dancer, who had dreamed of a life beyond Trinity Bay even before tragedy struck her family. "She used to baby-sit me."

"Ironic, isn't it?" He got out of the car – six feet and a little, a good bod that was only just beginning to get a little too cushy in the tushy – again, thanks, Suze – and around the middle. He looked up at Seacliff with undisguised pleasure. "She never told me about this place. I didn't find out until after she died. All she ever said was that she hated her family home. I don't see how anyone could hate a place as great as this."

"Well, you know," Theresa offered lamely.

"Yeah." He laughed. "I wasn't too wild about my hometown either. It's all a matter of what you're used to."

"I guess so." She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "It's a pretty house, though."

"I've been getting it fixed up. Thinking of turning it into a hotel."

"A hotel?"

"Sure, why not?" He spread his arms expansively. "Trinity Bay already thrives on tourism. Seacliff has its own indoor pool, plenty of guest rooms, a huge kitchen, riding and hiking trails right on the property. Can't you see it as a resort?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Come on in, I'll give you the tour, show you what I want to do. It's always good to get a fresh perspective."

"Oh, I can't," she said, not too hastily, trying to sound regretful. "I was just taking a break from unpacking, and everything's a shambles. I really should get back and finish up before Dad comes home."

"Rain check, then." He winked. "Dinner, maybe."

"Maybe," her mouth agreed, while her brain added something about Satan going

*Christine Morgan*

for a sleigh ride.

Brad folded himself back into the car, waved, and drove off. Theresa watched him go, now allowing herself the moue of distaste she hadn't dared show before.

She turned and went back to the house.

\* \* \*

*A spirit, an angel, a goddess upon the earth!*

*Up close, she was even more than he'd hoped. Her eyes, so dark the pupil was barely distinguished from the iris, making her look eternally wide-eyed and innocent. Her hair, the shade of black that gave blue highlights in the sun. Her cheekbones high and striking, her mouth lush, her neck as graceful as a doe.*

*Beautiful.*

*He was more sure than ever that he had to have her. She made all the other women look shabby and drab by comparison. There was a vitality in her, too. She was alive and awake in a way that so many of the others hadn't been.*

*He would have her. She was the one.*

*First, a gift to prove his love.*

\* \* \*



Few things were creepier than an underground parking structure at three in the morning.

Rows of cars stood with an abandoned air, their colors washed to weird dream hues by the orange glow of the overhead lights. Shadows collected in deep pools. The painted lines on the cracked concrete were a scabrous, peeling yellow.

The only sounds were magnified, a steady drip becoming a somber drum beat, the hum and rumble of street noises becoming the drone of a giant hive. The man's footsteps clacked and rasped.

The garage smelled as depressing as it looked and sounded. Ghosts of old exhaust, faint but discernible urine odors, rust and corrosion, with a sickly patina of gas and oil overlaying it all.

Not another soul in sight. The man was alone as he walked between the ranks of cars. He passed beneath a light that spat and flickered irregularly, and it turned his shadow into a jittering hanged man.

Normally, he wouldn't be bothered by the eerie solitude. Normally, he would stride carelessly to his car, toss his briefcase into the passenger seat, pop in a CD, and be on his way.

Tonight, he paused. He could see and hear nothing out of the ordinary. But something, some ill-defined sense, told him that he was no longer alone in the night.

He scanned the garage, listened intently. He wasn't afraid, not yet, but he was concerned.

He was a fit man, priding himself on eating well and going to the gym four times a week. He was confident that he could handle any physical challenge. The problem was that more and more criminals these days, some of them kids no older than twelve, carried guns and used them with impunity. A bullet killed a man just as dead no matter how often he used the Stairmaster.

*Christine Morgan*

Kids couldn't stay quiet this long. Even one kid, going it alone, would have moved or shifted by now. There was no hint of anyone nearby.

Still, that sense of being watched wouldn't go away. Worse, it quickly gave way to a sense of being hunted. That his life was in danger.

He had no enemies that he knew of.

The skin crept on the back of his neck. His gut and groin tightened apprehensively. He realized he was sweating, a cold fearful sweat. His mouth filled with bitter saliva.

He could see his car. Less than twenty steps away. A maroon Acura, only a year old, with all the extras. Safe haven.

He tried to take a step toward the car, but his feet did not want to move. The impulse of the prey was too strong.

His eyes began to ache from staring unblinking into the shadows, darting from one car to the next, not knowing which concealed the stalker but knowing that someone was there, perhaps even moving closer with uncanny silence.

Perhaps even behind him already. So that if he turned, he would find himself face to face with something out of his worst nightmare, nothing so simple as a man with a gun, something inhuman and horrifying.

A small whine, almost a whimper, escaped his throat. He heard it and understood that he had passed well beyond fear now, into the realms of keen terror.

The sound released him. He sucked in a huge gasp and ran for his car, briefcase slamming against his leg, groping for the keys.

Ten steps away. He triggered the remote that would deactivate the alarm and unlock the door.

Five steps. He heard a low, malicious chuckle.

Two steps, reaching for the door handle.

And he was yanked off his feet, one of them flailing to connect with the driver's side mirror hard enough to snap it off. His briefcase flew onto the car's roof and slid off the other side, snapping open and shedding a drift of papers.

He was thrust upward, his head slamming into the low ceiling, and then hurled to the ground. A scream died unvoiced when he was struck in the stomach. His right arm was pulled around behind his back, shoulder on fire with agony before it popped enormously and went numb.

Thrown again, this time into the side of a Blazer. He dented the door and rebounded. He caught the briefest glimpse of his attacker, a large dark form, before he was picked up by the ankles and swung into one of the concrete support posts. He was able to get his left arm over his face but still his nose exploded and his jaw sprung loose.

He landed on a smeary oil stain and a faded number 41. He couldn't scream, couldn't get up, couldn't even crawl. Blood was pouring down his chin.

"Please," the man said, or tried to, the word garbled by his ruined mouth.

A shadow fell over him.

\* \* \*

*Within every proud father beats the devious heart of a matchmaker*, Kel McGuire thought,

hiding a smile.

“ . . . as you’ve been such a help, with the shopping and the day program and all, I just wanted to show my thanks,” Travis Zane concluded. “Tomorrow at seven?”

Travis looked better already, healthier and happier than he’d been in months. In just a few days, his daughter had worked wonders. Kel was interested, but that interest was colored with the same exasperated chagrin he imagined many unattached men felt.

Especially in a town as small as Trinity Bay. When everybody knew everybody else, gossip and speculation had a way of getting around.

He knew that he was the object of much talk. Good-looking in an artistic and vaguely aquiline way that had been the bane of his school years, habitually neat, living alone – was he or wasn’t he? His name hadn’t been linked with any of the eligible women in town. His secretary, Nancy Ellsworth, was a blonde with the figure of a silver screen goddess, but she reported that he’d never once put a move on her. Was he or wasn’t he?

Kel wasn’t. He liked women just fine, thank you. He’d never put a move on Nancy, that was true, but she always neglected to mention her boyfriend. See a guy like that in the woods at night, and you’d be inclined to believe in Bigfoot. Kel was straight, but he wasn’t stupid. Rand Kostas was the sort who wouldn’t think twice about yanking off someone’s arm and beating him to death with it.

He regarded Travis Zane, knowing what the clever old fox was up to. Travis usually kept his own matters to himself and expected everyone else to do the same, even when his stiffnecked independence and refusal to admit to symptoms had very nearly killed him.

But Kel didn’t put it past Travis to try and fix him up with the daughter. Theresa.

According to the pictures, she was a knockout. Smart and talented, too, judging by her books. Two days a week, Kel worked as a counselor at the elementary school, so he was familiar with the adventures of *Lora and Ruff*.

Still, Theresa Zane was recently divorced, and Kel wasn’t sure he was ready to get involved with someone who had so many issues. It would be a little too much like work for comfort.

Then again, where was he going to find someone who *didn’t* have issues? He was never going to have a relationship untouched by his work, because he was a psychologist and social worker, and despite some persuasive arguments to the contrary, all people did have minds and personalities.

Then again again – over-analysis was one of his less endearing character flaws, something of which he was well aware but seemingly hopeless to change – it could be that Travis was just honestly trying to thank Kel for helping get his life in order.

All of this had gone through his head in a quick second. He grinned at Travis. “Sure, tomorrow’s great. What can I bring?”

\* \* \*

“Dammit, Jack!” Theresa groaned.

She’d heard of cats expressing themselves like this, but that didn’t mean she had

to like it. She got a handful of paper towels and cleaned up the mess, then went looking for the temperamental feline.

He'd awakened her from a dead sleep this morning by leaping onto her chest, fur standing on end, hissing. Too sluggish to react swiftly, she'd only just opened her eyes when his paw whipped out hard across her cheek. If he'd had claws, he would have laid her face open.

"Crazy cat," she said now.

The first day or two, he'd seemed okay, a little skittish getting used to his new environment. He had his litter box in the enclosed porch off the kitchen, a little privacy to take care of his kitty business, and he hadn't had any difficulty learning where it was. But this . . . this was no accident.

She went looking, but Jack must have known she was annoyed and had hidden himself too well. Either that, or he'd gotten outside somehow. All the windows were shut against the damp and the drafts, but he could have slipped out when Travis left for his day program.

Before checking, she ran the can opener. Although Jack's canned food came with a pop-top, and he'd never eaten from a regular tin can, that never failed to bring him running. Probably genetic.

She heard a rustling in the pantry, and opened the door.

A box of cereal fell right in front of her, loud as a guillotine.

Theresa jumped back and uttered a scream, instantly ashamed of herself. She'd slept strange, been woken badly, and hadn't cleared the cobwebs from her brain yet. But that was no excuse to go carrying on like some dippy schoolgirl.

Jack was on the highest shelf, peering down at her with glinting green eyes.

"What's the matter with you today?" She reached up.

He slunk backward, opened his jaws wide, and hissed through a mouthful of fangs.

"Jack!" Reproachful.

A dog would have had the decency to look guilty, but not so a cat. Jack swatted her fingers, then turned and bolted along the shelf, his furry haunches knocking over a row of boxes. More cereal, crackers, Malt-O-Meal, and a stack of raisin snack-packs went down like dominoes. The Malt-O-Meal opened and sprayed golden-brown across the brick floor.

Jack sprang from the shelf, fainted right, then shot around Theresa's legs on the left. He vanished into the living room, trailing back one plaintive, eerie yowl.

Theresa's pulse was racing. She was fully awake now, having shaken off the last of the lethargy that had followed her out of sleep. "What's gotten into you?" she called after Jack.

Another wavering yowl sent shivers up her spine.

"Crazy cat," she repeated, and set about cleaning up this mess too. "If someone doesn't straighten up and fly right, guess who's going to spend the night in his carrier?"

No answer. When she went back into the living room, there was no sign of Jack. None too eager for a repeat performance, Theresa decided to ignore him. He'd come around.

She set out for another walk. It was already becoming a daily ritual. She hadn't

done much walking in L.A.; few people did. In Phoenix, everybody with an ounce of sense stayed inside where it was cool. But walking here, beneath the redwoods, made her feel good. Cleansed. Healed.

She circled the house and started down the path through the forest. Time to see if she remembered the way to town, and if Mrs. Douring's place looked as scary as in her memories.

Just as the shadows closed around her, she paused. A feeling of watchedness slipped over her like an eddy of icy water. She turned in a slow circle and saw no one.

Maybe it was only Jack, watching her from one of the windows . . .

Her breath caught in her throat.

A pale shape was at the upper curved window.

Theresa stepped closer, and the angle shifted.

Only the light dancing strangely on the glass.

Chagrined relief made her chuckle at herself. The quiet of Trinity Bay was getting to her. She was accustomed to noise and bustle, and the lack thereof was making her jumpy. That was all. She'd get used to it soon.

Come to think of it, that was probably what was the matter with Jack, too. The apartment hadn't been right near a freeway, but there had still been the constant pervasive drone of city-sounds. Traffic, voices, sirens, the occasional gunshot. By comparison, the windy whisper of the trees and the low rhythm of the distant surf was a little spooky.

She continued on. Soon the old gatehouse came into view, and it didn't look like half the haunted house she remembered. It was far smaller – again, that trick of childhood's perception – and much less ramshackle.

A whimsical fence made of irregular pieces of driftwood bound together with woven hemp ambled agreeably around the house. The front path, of crushed stone that matched the river-rock fireplace, wound under an archway formed by two stumps that had been carved into totem-like shapes: an eagle on one side, a standing bear on the other. Balanced across the heads of the eagle and the bear was a gorgeously-polished slice of redwood burl with "The Forresters" burnt into it.

The yard was a hodgepodge of weeds, herbs, and wildflowers, the sort of thing Theresa had once heard Steven describe as a "Victorian garden." More wooden objects – a windmill, a skillfully-made bench, a birdhouse, others – decorated the yard.

A large shed had been added to the side of the house. Judging by the sawdust and chunks of wood laying around, it was the source of the creations. The door was open, and she could hear faint music coming from within.

Might as well introduce myself to the neighbors, Theresa thought, and went through the arch. Her shoes gritted on the gravel, announcing her presence to a gangly half-grown mongrel pup that came bounding in her direction. It was all big feet and lolling tongue, with one ear that stuck up and one that folded down, giving it a permanently inquisitive expression. It yapped once, then frisked happily around her legs.

A little girl looked out of the shed. She was nine or ten, with soft brown hair and big blue eyes, a pretty child except for the red speckles that marred her face. "Don't come closer; I've got chicken pox!" she announced.

"I've already had them," Theresa said.

"Who's that, peanut?" a man's voice asked.

"It's Mr. Zane's daughter."

Theresa grinned. "Word gets around, I see! Hi, I'm Theresa Zane."

"I'm Jenny Forrester, and that's Bingo. And this is my dad."

Like the puppy, Mr. Forrester was gangly and mongrelish, with big feet, though he lacked the lolling tongue. His hair was long, clean but unkempt, and a greying goatee lengthened his Ichabod Crane face. His jeans, flannel shirt, and Birkenstocks were flecked with sawdust and woodchips; his hands were overlarge, callused and nicked with old scars.

"Hey, good to meet you," he said.

She shook his hand, instinctively liking him. Forrester struck her, even on first glimpse, as being the sort of man who wandered through life in an amiable sort of daze.

"Moo-oom!" Jenny hollered. "Company!"

"I was just passing by," Theresa said. "I was admiring the woodcrafts, and heard the music."

"You like them?" Forrester beamed. "I make them. Sell them, during the summer."

The door opened, and an aproned woman came out. Pleasantly plump, honey-colored hair, a wide smile. Theresa recognized her at once.

"Sandy? Sandy Wright?"

"Theresa Zane!" Sandy hurried forward and gave her a hug that smelled of brown sugar and chocolate. "It's Forrester now; this is my husband Charlie. I was going to come up and see you tomorrow on my day off, and I was just making some cookies to bring for you and your dad. Come in, come in! It's been years! Oh . . . Jen's got the —"

"She told me. It's okay. I had them when I was two."

Sandy ushered Theresa into the kitchen, which was tiny but bright. Almost too bright. The yellow paint was just short of neon, softened by the potted plants that crammed every available surface. There were more examples of Charlie's work, from the handcrafted knobs on the cabinets up to the table, which was made from a slice of redwood balanced upon a gnarled stump.

Bingo followed them in and promptly tried to get at the cookies that were cooling on the countertop. Jen shooed him outside.

"Coffee?" Sandy offered.

"Please. I didn't know you were living here. What ever happened to going the long way around from Seacliff so you didn't have to pass this house?"

Sandy giggled, still sounding very much like the teenager Theresa had known. "Once Mrs. Douring retired and moved to Florida — yes, it's true, will wonders never cease! — there was nothing to be afraid of!"

"I'm going back out to the workshop," Charlie said, kissing Sandy on the top of the head, helping himself to a cookie, and meandering out in a way that suggested he only missed running into the doorjamb by pure luck.

"Can I watch TV?" Jenny wheedled. "Please?"

"What about that stack of homework Jerry brought for you?"

"I can do it later. Pleeeeeease?"

Sandy flapped a hand at her. "Go on, but I don't want you watching any of those talk shows." She sat down and looked at Theresa. "I swear, it's nothing but 'I Slept With My Wife's Gynecologist' and 'Eleven-Year-Olds Who Dress Like Whores' on television these days. I don't want to raise my kids in a bubble, but it gets harder and harder to keep that trash away from them."

Theresa began to laugh. "I remember when you and April and Claudia Haverley first got ahold of *Forever*, by Judy Blume."

"That wasn't trash!" Sandy protested, laughing too. Then she sobered. "Have you heard about April?"

"I met her husband," Theresa said, nodding. "Up at Seacliff."

"Him." Sandy snorted. "I never would have expected April to marry someone like that. He thinks he's hot stuff, all right. Half the women in town are nuts over him. He's got the mill going again, you know. Bringing in high-powered legal types from San Francisco to step on the environmentalists. He's even got plans for an offshore oil rig."

"Aw, no." Theresa tried to imagine that, and didn't like the picture.

Sandy fanned her flushed face with the hem of her apron. "Whew, I didn't realize how hot it was in here. Like I said, not April's type at all. But I guess she wanted someone more dependable, after the musician she was living with ran out on her when the baby was born."

"Baby?"

"Her daughter, Angela." Sandy's face darkened, and she dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "Such a terrible thing."

"What happened?"

"After April died, Brad and Angela moved here. She was my son Jerry's age. She was so pretty, too. Dark red hair, just like April. She was always so quiet. It must have been hard for her, losing her mom like that. We tried to bring her out of her shell, but last year, she . . . she . . ."

"Suicide?" Theresa asked softly.

"Why would a sixteen year old kid go and do something like that?" Sandy spoke with the futile tone of one who'd been over it a thousand times in her own mind and knew there was no good answer. "I know what they say, that teenagers make attempts to get attention. But this wasn't like that. She didn't tell anyone. Just did it."

"Oh, my God, Sandy, that must have been terrible for you!"

"It was worst for Jerry. He saw it happen. He was down on the beach that night. A bunch of the kids were having a party. He saw her running . . . running along the bluff. Then he saw her jump off."

"It couldn't have been an accident?"

She shook her head, fished a tissue out of the gaily-patterned box on the counter, and blew her nose. "He says she stopped, looked down, like she was trying to find the best place to do it. Then she just . . . jumped."

\* \* \*

Before going to bed, Theresa stood at her window, staring over at Seacliff. Brad Thornton hadn't seemed like a man who'd lost his wife three years ago, and he certainly hadn't seemed like a man whose stepdaughter had taken her own life less than one. Either he was doing a damn good job of concealing his grief, or he wasn't bothered at all.

Her skin crept over her flesh again, as if the window was a large eye, a giant's eye, peering in at her even as she looked out. She closed the curtains with a shudder.

There had been no new outbursts from Jack. He'd emerged from hiding about an hour after Theresa had gotten back from her walk, acting for all the world as if nothing unusual had gone on. Later, he'd even claimed her lap as she was trying to read. She was convinced all cats were members of FALL, the Feline Anti-Literacy League, because nothing proved more tempting to them as a napping-place than an open book, magazine, or newspaper.

Her father had come back in good spirits, all but springing off the minibus when it dropped him off. She wasn't sure what to make of his rather smugly-delivered news that they were having a dinner guest on Saturday.

That night, Theresa dreamed of a red-haired girl running across Seacliff's lawn, running in terror from a pursuing, malevolent, unseen presence. The thorny fingers of a rosebush, its blooms as dark as the sky above, clawed at her silken nightgown, snagging it. She pulled free with a desperate wail, slapping at the velvety roses.

The girl spun away from the rosebush and ran blindly until she reached the edge of the bluff, where flickering light leaped against the rock face from a bonfire on the beach below. Rock music – the dream was so vivid Theresa could even identify the song – and young laughter bounced up the bluff.

With tears pouring down her face, she threw a panicked glance over her shoulder, then dashed along the bluff until she was over a place where the sea had undercut the stone. No beach, just crashing waves driving with echoing, booming force. The girl paused, cast her eyes heavenward as if in prayer, and leaped.

"NO!" Theresa shouted herself awake in the dead of night, soaked with clammy sweat. The smell of sea spray and woodsmoke and roasting marshmallows filled her lungs. For a moment, she still heard the rock music, the laughter of teens turning into horrified shrieks.

Gasping, she fell back against the pillows. From downstairs, her father's voice called out in alarm.

She scrambled out of bed and met him at the bottom of the stairs. "It's okay, Dad. Just a dream. I'm sorry."

He looked like she had almost sent him straight into another heart attack. "Must have been a bad one. Want to talk about it?"

"No, that's all right. I don't remember now," she lied. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, fine," he said, patting her reassuringly on the shoulder. "I'd forgotten how you used to scream at night."

"What?" Theresa frowned. "I used to what?"

"When you were about five. Nightmares. It made your mother crazy."

"What didn't?" she mumbled. More clearly, she asked, "Nightmares about what?"

"That's the funny thing. Your little invisible friend. During the day, you'd have

*Black Roses*

tea parties with her, and at night you'd be crying and saying someone was hurting her and locking her up in the dark."

She shivered as a faint half-memory came to her, then was gone. "This wasn't like that."

"Thought you said you didn't remember," he pointed out cannily.

"Enough to know it wasn't about Glory," she evaded.

"You want some cocoa?"

"No, thanks, Dad. I'm just going to try and get back to sleep. You should too. I'm sorry for waking you up like that." She kissed him on the cheek, then climbed the stairs and waited on the landing until she heard his door close.

Movement caught her eye. Jack, padding along the hallway. When he saw her, he hunkered down and hissed, then yawned and followed her into her room. She got into bed and he hopped up to stand on her chest, pushing with his paws.

"You're schizo," she said, petting him. He responded with an affectionate head-butt that squashed his cold nose into her eye.

"Okay, okay, I love you too." She convinced him to curl up on the other pillow, and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*



Sandy Forrester tossed and turned until Charlie, normally the most placid of men, dug his elbow into her amply-padded ribs and growled something into his pillow.

She kicked off the sheet. Normally, she slept with pajamas, socks, and the quilt. But tonight she was nude, and even the single sheet was too hot, stifling, scratchy. The only reason she had pulled it over herself was because she couldn't stand lying there with nothing at all covering her.

The fever was back. She could tell that much just by pressing the inside of her wrist against her forehead the way she did when one of the kids was sick. A weird sort of fever, too. No chills, no other symptoms. Just a burning restlessness.

If it was chicken pox, she was going to kill Dr. Kensington. She'd had the full range of childhood diseases when she was little, and he had assured her that nobody could get re-infected.

She got out of bed, pulling on a loose robe. No sleep tonight.

The house was quiet and dark, except for a faint line of light and low music from Jerry's door. Sandy tiptoed that way, knowing what she would find – he had fallen asleep reading again, studying his lines. Jerry was the star of the school drama club and had even played minor parts in college productions down at the university.

Meaning to turn off the light, she silently pushed the door open.

Surprise froze her in place and prevented her from making a sound.

Her son was in bed, but he wasn't sleeping. He was on his back with his eyes closed, caressing himself.

A sheen of perspiration broke over Sandy's skin. She wanted to turn away, but was held captivated by the sight. The thought that he might at any moment open his eyes and see her should have filled her with embarrassment, but it only made her breath quicken.

Drawn by some terrible compulsion, she stepped into the room. Her gaze fixed

*Black Roses*

briefly on a poster above his bed, some rock band or another. What caught her eye was a rose, floating in the foreground of the usual clutter of crazy-clothed musicians. A rose, black as midnight, with a red jewel gleaming at its center.

For some reason, the rose made her think of the most secret part of a woman's body. A flush spread upward from her loins.

Jerry's hand was moving faster now, the bedclothes rustling beneath him as his hips rocked in counterpoint. He was very close.

A noise escaped Sandy, a small whimper. Quiet as it was, Jerry heard.

"Mom! Jesus!" He scrambled to cover himself, turning beet red.

"You don't have to stop," Sandy said in a husky voice unlike her usual one.

The fever was racing, racing through her veins. She understood the heat now. It would burn her up unless she found a way to get rid of it. She dropped her robe, showing her body to her son without a twinge of shame.

"Mom!"

"Shh, honey," she crooned, approaching the bed. "Mama make it all better."

He gaped at her, but she could tell that his mortified horror was mixed with lust. His gaze traveled avidly over her breasts and the plump, blonde-furred mound between her thighs. Had he ever seen a naked woman before outside of a magazine? Had any of his schoolmates given him more than a peek and a promise? She didn't know, didn't care. All she knew was what she wanted.

She went to her knees on the bed, pulling the covers away. Jerry recoiled, but she reached out and took hold of him.

"God! Mom!" He threw his head back, his erection lurching at her touch.

Sandy ran her tongue over her lips. "Do you want me to?"

An inarticulate moan was her only answer. He was helpless, could only lay there as she lowered her head, her hair falling across his thighs and belly. She could smell his excitement. First smell, and then taste it on his skin.

She took him deep in her mouth. His back arched, his limbs stiffened, his fingers fisted in the sheets. Sandy slid her hand between her legs, amazed at how damp and ready she was.

It was over in a matter of seconds. They climaxed together, her busy stroking hand bringing her to the brink just as Jerry tensed, then shuddered in release and filled her mouth nearly to overflowing. She kept at it until he was drained, exhausted, then raised her head and gave him a slow, Cheshire-Cat smile as she licked her lips.

\* \* \*

Theresa woke Saturday morning to the secret sound of rain.

"Ugh."

She flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling. The mattress was far softer than the one she had in the apartment. Maybe that was why she kept waking feeling as if she'd just done a triathlon. Or maybe it was the change in climate, or a combination thereof.

All she knew was that if things didn't improve, she'd be paying a visit to old Doc Kensington. Which reminded her, she meant to call Danielle and set up a meeting.

They hadn't seen each other since they were nine years old, probably had nothing in common. Her father said Dani had his old job, which meant she was tending bar down at Nate's.

Tomorrow. Today, she had to help Dad get ready for their dinner date. Kel McGuire. The name sounded like it belonged to a ruddy-cheeked, beaming, twinkley-eyed Leprechaun of a man.

She rolled over and looked at the clock.

Ten-forty. Oof. No wonder she felt so dragged out. That was three hours more sleep than she was used to, even allowing for midnight wake-up calls like the one she'd had last night.

"No more of that," she told herself.

She tried to overcome the lethargy with a stingingly cold shower and plenty of caffeine, and it was at least partly effective. An hour later, she and Travis were headed for North Valley Shopping Center, where Tom's Market was surrounded by a bunch of smaller shops, including a pet store, Hallmark, and a cafe. Across the optimistically-named Mall Road, a new complex of apartments was advertising for renters.

"Pretty nice," she said.

"I guess the college kids don't mind the drive. Town's growing."

"You don't sound all that happy about it."

He shrugged and got out of the car. "You know what they say, change is bad except from a vending machine.

Theresa laughed and tied a scarf over her hair to ward off the worst of the rain, which by now was more of a heavy, constant mist that hung in the air.

"That Thornton, he's got some idea about turning Seacliff into a hotel. It's his land, his money, and if he wants to throw it down a hole, it's his business. I'm just worried he's going to get everybody's hopes up, then let them down and leave them in debt."

"Don't you think he can pull it off?"

Travis shrugged again and snared a cart from the corral in front of the market. "He's turned the mill around, I'll give him that. Whether it's a good idea or not . . . that's another thing. The foreman, Big Al Haverley, he raves about Thornton no end. Lots of men have jobs now that didn't before – women, too," he added hastily, giving her a sidelong amused glance.

"Oink, oink, Dad," she grinned.

"But the hotel . . . I have a feeling Thornton's going to be sorry. Seacliff isn't a good place."

"What do you mean? It's big enough, it's gorgeous . . ."

"Something's wrong with that house. Always has been. Everyone who's lived there has had more than their share of bad luck."

She stopped just inside the doors and looked at him. "That doesn't sound like the hard-headed Travis Zane I remember. Haunted houses, Dad? Come on!"

"Did I say haunted?" He paused, as if replaying their conversation in his mind just to assure himself he hadn't. "I said no such thing. Bad luck, that's all."

"Excuse me!" Sandy Forrester trilled brightly from behind them. "If you don't move, I'm going to run you right over!"

They turned and saw their neighbor, vivacious and sparkle-eyed under a jaunty red rain hat that made Theresa want to ask if she was on her way to Grandma's house.

"Sandy!" Travis said warmly. "Wonderful cookies, as always."

"Thank you, Travis." She dimpled at him like a coquette of sixteen instead of a woman of forty.

"How are the kids?" he asked.

A strange expression flitted across her face, and for a moment Theresa thought Sandy Forrester might turn and flee with all the devils of hell on her heels. But then it cleared, and she smiled, though it seemed a trifle forced.

"Jen's still a little spotty and itchy, getting underfoot and making me crazy. Jerry's . . . fine." She groped in her purse and found a grocery list. "How about you? Theresa, settling in okay? You look tired."

"I am. What's your secret, Sandy? You look great."

Again, that strange expression, gone so quick Theresa wondered if it had been a trick of shadows. "Yesterday, I thought I was coming down with a fever or something, but whatever it was is gone now. I guess I just needed a good night's sleep."

She twiddled her fingers at them and steered her way toward the produce department.

"A good night's sleep," Theresa murmured longingly. "That would be nice."

Travis, who had been watching Sandy go on her way with a perplexed frown, now turned it on his daughter. "I thought I was the insomniac around here."

"Oh, I'm sleeping," she told him. "Just wake up feeling like a herd of buffalo trampled over me."

"Not used to the bed yet, that's my guess," Travis said.

"Not used to my whole new life yet," she amended with a smile.

"You and that cat of yours. He tore the holy hell out of a throw pillow last night."

"Oh, Dad, I'm sorry!"

He winked at her. "That's okay . . . it was that one your mother made . . . I never quite had the nerve to throw it away."

"Jack is nothing if not helpful," Theresa said, giggling into her hands as she hadn't done since she was a child.

She remembered that pillow all too well. Sewing had never been one of Lois' strong points, and she'd made it worse by selecting lemon yellow and blinding turquoise to pick out her idea of a Native American eagle. Even at the tender age of seven, Theresa couldn't help but suspect that maybe her mother had made the horrible thing on purpose, knowing Travis would hate it but never dare say a word if he wanted to keep harmony in the household.

Still, even if Jack had done a public service by destroying the damn thing, it wasn't like him. Not used to his new life, sure, that was the probable reason, but a kitty check-up might be in order if he didn't mellow out soon.

"I'll broil the steaks," Travis said. "You're in charge of the salad."

"Your secret sauce? The ingredients of which you promised to reveal to your only daughter one day?"

*Christine Morgan*

"I guess today's that day," he chuckled. "Might as well pass it on while I still remember."

\* \* \*

Kel McGuire, Trinity Bay's one-man social services department, showed up promptly at five after seven, with a bottle of wine and a Dutch apple pie. The way he and Travis greeted each other told Theresa that there was genuine friendship between them, though they'd only met when Travis' heart attack and subsequent ill health had brought him to the attention of the Elder Care program.

Not the sort of man she might have expected her father to want her to meet. Evidently, the years had mellowed Travis from the days when he would have dismissed someone like McGuire as a sissy.

Kel was taller than Travis by an inch or two. He would have been gawky as a teenager, all shins and elbows and long bony legs, but now he was lean and carried himself with quiet agility. His hair was red, but coppery rather than the carrot-orange Theresa had envisioned. His eyes did not twinkle; they were the dark blue-grey of late twilight. His face had a foxlike handsomeness, his grin quick and infectious.

Certainly no Leprechaun, she thought. But then, no deliberate Ken-doll imitation like Brad Thornton either. She hid a grin.

"I'm so pleased to finally meet you," he said, taking one of her hands in both of his after Travis had divested him of wine and piebox and coat. "Your father's told me all about you."

"I wish I could say the same." She threw a rueful look Travis' way. "I had no idea he was attending any programs until I got here on Tuesday."

"I didn't want to worry you," Travis said.

At the same moment, Kel said, "He didn't want to worry you," and they both laughed.

"He wanted to go over my head, call you himself," Travis went on.

"At least one of you wasn't being stubborn," Theresa said. While she tried to match their bantering tone, she looked over at Kel and hoped that he could see the mix of contrition, concern, and thankfulness for his help behind her words.

His barely-perceptible nod told her that he did see, and that he understood. "Now that you're here, though, I've finally badgered him into signing a release. So we can talk about him all you'd like."

"Hey, now," Travis protested. "I invited you over for dinner, not a consultation. I'm sure you can come up with better things to discuss than me."

"He'd rather we talked behind his back," Kel confided. "It's all a ploy to get me to ask you out. Shall we humor him? Lunch next week? Jordano's, on the Bay?"

"I'd like that." Theresa glanced at her father, saw him making a show of indignance but unable to mask his pleased smirk.

The steaks came out just right. She now knew the recipe for the Zane secret sauce, promising herself she wouldn't wait until she was sixty to share it with Lora. The salad was crisp and delicious, and the wine was very good.

Theresa was content to let them carry most of the conversation, but didn't feel

excluded even when they talked about people she didn't know. It was a peek into her father's life, a glimpse beyond the front he felt compelled to put up around family.

After dinner, they took their pie into the living room and sank into the deep chairs around the fireplace. Jack appeared and made a few tentative sniffs at Kel, then apparently decided he passed inspection and jumped into his lap.

"They always know," Kel said, shaking his head. "They always know who's allergic."

"I'll get him --" Theresa offered, starting to stand.

"I don't mind. I *like* cats, that's the curse of it. Much better than dogs. And don't even get me started on birds. My big sister had birds, and to this day, even a cuckoo clock makes me shiver." He petted Jack, who took that as an invitation to crawl onto Kel's chest, drape his forepaws over Kel's shoulder, and bury his nose in the hollow under Kel's ear.

"He'll drool," Theresa warned. "And if he had claws, he'd be filling your neck with pinholes."

"I can feel him kneading, all right." He raised his hand and a drift of orange and white hairs floated onto his slacks. "Shedding, too." At Theresa's look of dismay, he smiled. "Really, it's okay. What's a little sneezing among friends?"

"Think I'll head off to bed," Travis said.

Theresa suspected this sudden pleading of weariness was a ruse -- hadn't her father just this morning mentioned insomnia? He'd always been a night owl, which was one reason why the six-to-two shift at Nate's had suited him so well.

If ploy it was, this time it failed. Kel checked his watch, started at how late it was, and disengaged Jack. True to form, beads of saliva stood like jewels in Jack's whiskers, and there was a sizable damp patch on the back of Kel's sweater. Not to mention a wide swath of cat hair down the front.

"I'm really sorry," Theresa said, brushing ineffectually at him.

"Like I said --" was as far as Kel got before he sneezed, three in quick succession, not window-rattling bellows but severe enough to cause his body to jerk and his coppery hair to tumble over his forehead. It gave him a boyish look that would have been appealing if he hadn't at the same time been wiping his red-rimmed eyes.

"Might have to call in sick tomorrow," Travis teased.

"Never." Kel blew his nose.

"Never is right. You know, Theresa, the man has not missed a day of work in five years? They gave him an award."

"A paid day off," Kel said. "How's that for ironic?"

"No vacations?" Theresa asked.

"I live in paradise -- where would I go for vacation?" He retrieved his coat from the pegs by the door. "Thank you for dinner. I think that's the most relaxing meal I've had in months."

They walked him onto the porch. Theresa could see a single light burning on the second floor of Seaciff, diffused by sheer curtains.

"I'll see you Monday," Travis said, and shook Kel's hand firmly.

"Bright and early," Kel confirmed. He turned to Theresa, shook her hand too. "Lunch, don't forget. Shall I call you?"

"Please do. My schedule is pretty flexible. Unless Dad expects me to get a job."

Christine Morgan

That's what he used to tell me when I was little. Nobody over the age of eighteen was going to live under his roof without earning their keep."

"You didn't think I really meant that, did you?" Travis winked. "Besides, it sounds like you're doing pretty well." He grinned at Kel. "Been here almost a whole week and she hasn't hit me up for spending money yet."

"I can last a while," she said. "That is, provided this Jordano's place isn't too expensive. Is it the one down by the marina?"

"Wait, wait!" Kel protested, smiling. "I may not be chivalrous enough to open doors for a woman, but I'm not a barbarian! When I ask a woman out, I don't expect her to pay her own way."

"What *do* you expect?" She hadn't meant it to come out so flirtatious, but there it was, hanging between them.

He laughed warmly. "Just the joy of her company, I assure you. And that she'll pick up the check, if she asks me out the next time."

\* \* \*

Sandy Forrester lay wakeful.

It wasn't from fever this time, at least not fever with any physical cause. This was a burning in her blood born not of lust but of guilt and shame.

How could she have done what she'd done last night?

She didn't even *like* oral sex!

Didn't she?

Always before, it had seemed like something tedious, a selfish request on the part of a self-centered man. That was one reason why she'd married Charlie. When it came to sex, he could take it or leave it, and never made any demands.

No, Charlie wasn't like any of the boys she'd dated in high school. Boys who felt that a kiss was an entitlement to the whole package, ready or not. Their reasons and arguments, always sounding so petty and pouty, but making a girl feel obligated. *If you loved me . . . a way to prove our love . . .*

It wasn't that she objected to sex. Not at all. It could be quite pleasant. But she just didn't hold with the idea that it was a man's right. Especially not when it came to using a woman's mouth.

So what the hell had she done?

And with Jerry! Her own son!

She could still taste him. She must have brushed her teeth half a dozen times today, chewed a whole roll of mints. Even now, under that cool tingly sensation, she could taste the salty sweetness of him. Could still feel her lips sliding, up and down. Her tongue circling. Her throat opening to accommodate, though she'd never been able to do that before without gagging.

Sandy moaned in anguish, pressing her closed fists against her eyes. Red starbursts bloomed in that interior darkness, but it wasn't enough to blot out the image of Jerry, his face contorted in mixed shock and ecstasy as he stared unbelievably down at her.

Her own son!

They hadn't spoken. When it was done, when she rose from his narrow bed with

her smug smile, she'd just turned and silently gone back to bed. There, lying in the darkness beside Charlie, she had caressed herself until the soft explosion shivered through her again, making her flesh clench in delicious spasms.

Then, exhausted, she'd fallen asleep, and awakened to find the fever gone. Awakened brimming with energy, so much so that she nearly bounded out of bed.

Energy? Mania, more like.

She'd been in the kitchen cooking long before anyone else woke. Usually, her job waiting tables at Jordano's left her not caring if she ever served another meal, so Charlie often did most of the cooking, bringing his absent-minded but somehow thorough skill to it. Breakfasts in particular were typically of the cold cereal and toast variety, which the kids made themselves. Baking, such as the cookies she'd been making when Theresa Zane visited, was about the only culinary task Sandy really enjoyed.

It had been different today. Her usual morning ritual of sitting by the window with a cup of coffee, staring absently out at the fog and the forest and the occasional wandering wildlife until the caffeine kicked in, did not appeal. She felt that if she sat still too long, the manic energy that filled her would release itself in sparks jumping from her skin.

By the time the rest of her family appeared at the table, she'd whipped up a platter of waffles, fried ham, and a heap of scrambled eggs.

Seeing Jerry, though, broke through her like lightning. He shuffled into the kitchen same as always, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt advertising the Shakespearean Festival in Ashland, Oregon. His brown hair stuck up in unruly sleep-spikes, his eyes were bleary, he was smacking his mouth like a hound dog with a jawful of chewing gum . . .

. . . and he was the most gorgeous thing she had ever seen.

Sandy's hands had started shaking so badly that she spilled coffee, then knocked the cup on the floor as she went to wipe it up. Her son seemed to walk in light, an angelic radiance.

He'd looked at her, and she tensed, knowing that now it would begin. The shocked accusations and questions. The horrified tears. Ruination. Downfall.

But he'd only said, "Morning, Mom," and fallen upon the breakfast like a starved thing.

Not a word.

Not one word.

Like it had never happened.

Like it had been a dream.

Then again, Jerry was an actor, with a rare talent that would someday make him a star. If anyone could hide his feelings, it was her son. That had to be it. Hiding it, for the sake of family peace, maybe unable himself to believe it had happened.

She'd turned from the sink, and caught him looking at her. Looking at her with a knowing, lascivious smile. At that, Sandy had cried out, dropped a plate. Shards of crockery sprayed across the floor, cutting her ankles.

And Jerry had been all innocence once again. Concerned. "Jeez, Mom, did you hurt yourself?" Kneeling to pick up the broken plate, to dab her wounds with a dishcloth, his head bobbing just in front of her thighs.

*Christine Morgan*

It had been all Sandy could do to keep from screaming. She was sure she was going crazy. After breakfast, Jerry had gone out, thank God. Every time she set eyes on him, that same awful mix of lust and shame and dread whipsawed through her.

Charlie and Jenny hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, except to compliment her on the food. Then Charlie wandered out to his workshop, and Jenny settled in front of the television to watch cartoons, leaving Sandy alone with her churning emotions.

The mania hadn't left her. She began with cleaning the kitchen, but from there went on a spree that took her through the entire house. By the time she left for the grocery store, she was feeling bubblier and giddier than she had since high school. The way she'd felt when she'd developed a crush on some new boy.

She'd spent the day in a flurry of anticipation and fear, waiting for Jerry to come home. She had to see him again, never wanted to see him again. They could not go on as if nothing had happened. They had to at least talk about it.

*Talk about it? What to say? Ask him if he liked it? Ask him if he wanted seconds?*

*No! Horrible idea! Revolting!*

Yet it sent a pulse twanging along her nerve endings.

The entire day had gone like that. Jerry brought Gary Haverley home for dinner, and she could tell just by looking at them that he'd told his best friend all about it. Those sly, sly grins. Evil and strange.

It had been a relief to escape to bed, or so she'd thought. But here it was, nearly midnight, the hour of the rose. Nearly midnight and she couldn't sleep.

She considered waking Charlie, but rejected it right away. It wasn't him she hungered for.

God help her, she wanted Jerry. Not just to taste him this time but to get astride him, pump her hips, feel him thrusting up into her.

Sandy rose from her bed, hearing her own helpless, trapped whines as she made her way through the darkened room and down the hall. She paused outside of Jerry's door.

This was wrong. This was evil.

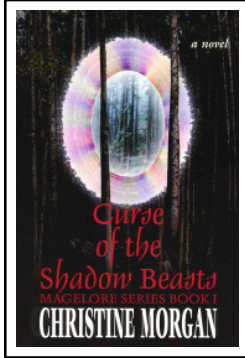
She couldn't let herself do this.

There had to be another way. A way to free herself from this torment.

\* \* \*



*The MageLore & ElfLore Trilogy  
by Christine Morgan*



**Curse of the Shadow Beasts – MageLore Book I**

They come from beyond the walls of nightmare, hideous creatures bent on seeking and slaughtering, leaving only death and misery in their wake.

Arien Mirida knows them only too well. He has faced them before and witnessed their evil, and fears that their hunger can never be stopped.

Cat Sabledrake is about to meet the horror, when a deadly dream becomes deadlier reality.

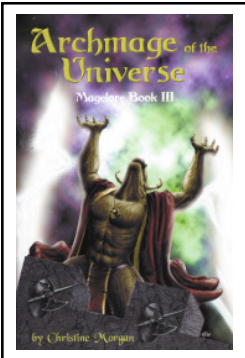
\$11.95 • 1-56315-188-X • 182 pages

**Dark of the Elvenwood – MageLore Book II**

They are the Morvalan, elves in the service of a god of destruction. To further their war against humanity, they have joined forces with the minotaur wizard Solarrin. Together, they have hatched a plot to bring about the downfall of the Northlands.

Four reunited companions are all that stand between the Morvalan and success. But as Cat, Arien, Greyquin and Alphonse brave the dangers of the woodlands, a worse peril threatens the very home that they left to save.

\$11.95 • 0-9702189-0-7 • 272 pages



**Archmage of the Universe – MageLore Book III**

He is Solarrin. Once his body was as twisted as his mind. Now inhabiting the form of a minotaur, his physical and magical prowess are without equal.

The young Highlord is his pawn. The city of Thanis is under his control. His next move will plunge the Northlands into war.

The only ones who will stand a chance against him fled on a foolish quest – to bring his predecessor back from the dead.

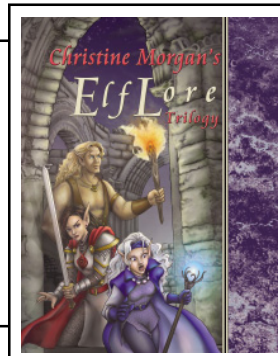
\$11.95 • 0-9702189-1-5 • 292 pages

**The ElfLore Trilogy – All 3 books in 1 volume**

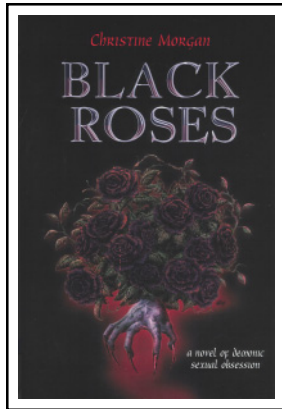
Set 20 years after the MageLore books, the ElfLore Trilogy follows the story of the next generation as they seek to find their place in a world recovering from a devastating war.

Caught up in the scheming of manipulative elves and the plots of dark warriors, Ariana Mirida and Mischa Narrin are forced to fight for their lives as they get caught up in the struggles for the Emerinian throne.

\$39.95 • 0-9771005-1-0 • 636 page hardback



*The Trinity Bay series  
by Christine Morgan*



**Black Roses – Trinity Bay Book I**

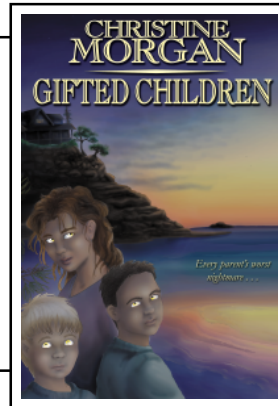
He is the man of their dreams – literally. He feeds on the sleeping minds of the women of Trinity Bay, making them believe their most forbidden fantasies are coming true. Now he has chosen the one woman he intends to be his, no matter how many people must die. Theresa Zane, newly returned to her childhood home, is drawn into a century-old mystery of sex, death, and the ominous haunting of the power behind the black roses.

\$14.95 • 0-9702189-5-8 • 300 pages

**Gifted Children – Trinity Bay Book II**

The children of Trinity Bay are like any other American kids. Lora Blake has a way with animals. Toby Edwards is the class brain. Jenny Forrester can talk her friends into anything. But in the innocent gifts of these children and others like them, someone has seen a gift of terrifying potential. Seacliff, the house on the hill, has a new secret.

\$16.95 • 0-9702189-9-0 • 372 pages



**Changeling Moon – Trinity Bay Book III**

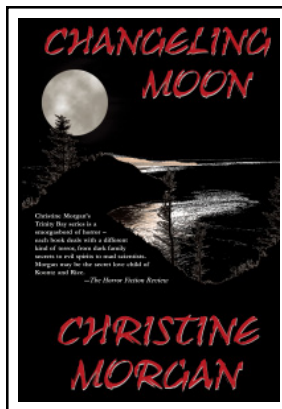
For thousands of years, they have lived among us. Their abilities have given rise to our oldest legends and our deepest fears.

They are changelings. Shape-shifters. Hunters. Creatures of the night. Ruled by the moon, and by their own savage hungers.

To them, we are prey.

Now they have come to Trinity Bay, where one troubled young woman will be caught in the midst of their deadly conflict.

\$14.95 • 0-9771005-0-2 • 284 pages



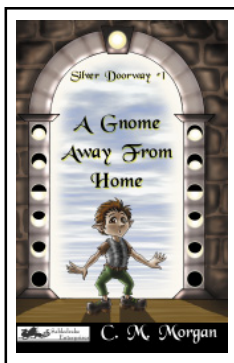
*The Silver Doorway series*  
by C. M. Morgan

Life is complicated for the Broderick kids. They've just moved to a new neighborhood. Their parents are having problems. Mom is always busy with work, Dad is always busy on his computer. Half the time, it seems like they forget they even have children.

The kids are having problems too. Twelve-year-old Katie doesn't like having to take care of little brother Sam. Katie's twin Kevin is only interested in sports, and is mad at Mom and Dad. Eight-year-old Sam can't stand being bossed around by Katie.

The rest of the family thinks Dad's sister, Aunt Ellie, is weird. But when the kids discover a secret room in Aunt Ellie's basement, and a glowing silver doorway that leads to another world, they realize how weird their aunt really is.

Other kids sometimes come through that door. Kids from a world where magic is real, and so are gnomes, elves, goblins, and dragons. They come through the door looking for help from a good sorceress. Instead, they get Katie, Kevin and Sam.



**A Gnome Away From Home – Silver Doorway #1**

Marky of Gnome Keep is lost and alone. He can't find Pip, his puppy. He can't find his way out of the woods. To make matters worse, some giant owls have decided to have him for dinner.

When Dad doesn't show up to get them after Kevin's game, the Broderick kids decide to walk to Aunt Ellie's house. She isn't at home, so they use the spare key.

A sneeze leads them down to the basement, where they follow a little gnome back through the door . . .

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-2-3 • 104 pages

**Dwarves in the Dark – Silver Doorway #2**

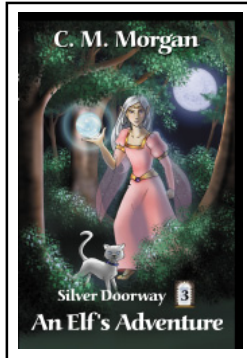
Stone Hammerfine and Sam Broderick might be from different worlds, one of them a dwarven boy and one of them a human boy, but they have something in common. Mean, bossy sisters!

Sam decides to prove he's not a baby by going off to find Stone all by himself. But when giant spiders want to tie them up in webs, and robbers with axes chase them through the dark tunnels, Sam and Stone wonder if maybe this time, just once, they should have listened to their sisters after all.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-3-1 • 104 pages



Silver Doorway books are written for younger readers, ages 7-12.



### **An Elf's Adventure – Silver Doorway #3**

The world on the other side of the Doorway is a dangerous place, full of giant owls, spiders, goblins, and robbers. So, just in case, Kevin gets a lesson in how to use a sword from Aunt Ellie's boyfriend, Cal.

The kids are spending the whole week with Aunt Ellie, when someone comes through the Doorway. She is the most beautiful girl Kevin has ever seen. She's an elf, able to cast magic spells, and she is on a quest for an enchanted cup that will make her divorcing parents fall in love again. She needs help. She needs someone to protect her.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-4-X • 104 pages

### **Dragon on the Loose – Silver Doorway #4**

Katie thinks that she is going to have a peaceful day. Her brothers are playing video games. She is spending a pleasant afternoon reading . . . until she gets a phone call from Aunt Ellie's cat.

With Ellie gone, Chester knows that there are only three people he can turn to for help. There is no time to waste! A baby dragon is on the loose in Luna Park!

And catching the baby turns out to be just the start of their problems. They have to take the baby home to its mother, but where is its mother?

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-7-4 • 104 pages



### **Orcs Ahoy! – Silver Doorway #5**

Sam Broderick thinks he's got it bad.

That is, he does until he meets Druush. Druush has it a lot worse.

Chagro, the fiercest warrior in the Empire of Gerosh, wants to marry Druush's mother. But before he can, he has to get rid of one thing – her son.

The people of Gerosh are seagoing orcs – strong, tough and blood-thirsty. On his own, there is no way Druush would survive. He needs help. He needs a way to convince the emperor to spare his life.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-8-2 • 104 pages

### **The Alchemist's Girl – Silver Doorway #6**

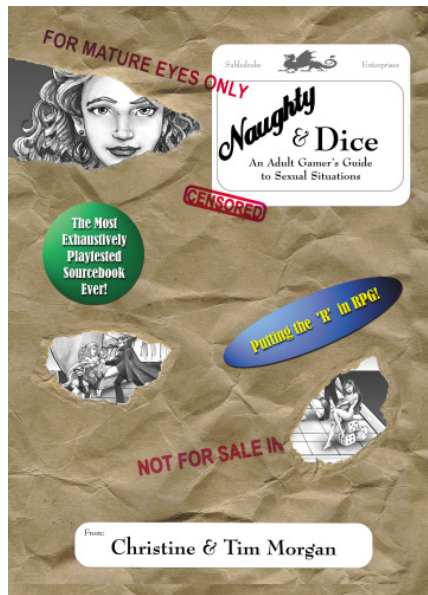
After all of their adventures, keeping the secret of the Silver Doorway has been difficult. But it becomes impossible when hostile wizards from the other side send their magic against Aunt Ellie and Chester.

Katie, Kevin and Sam must find help on both sides of the Doorway in order to rescue their Aunt, but can they do it in time?

*Coming in May, 2007*

\$6.99 • 0-9771005-2-9 • 104 pages

## Roleplaying Games



### Naughty & Dice: An Adult Gamer's Guide to Sexual Situations

Written by Origins Award nominated author Christine Morgan and 20+ year gaming veteran and game store manager Tim Morgan, *Naughty & Dice* takes a light-hearted yet serious look at the topic of sex in RPGs. The tone of the book is centered around themes of tolerance and respect. It is recommended for mature readers, and is easily adaptable to any roleplaying game system.

*Naughty & Dice* includes chapters on:

- instructions for factoring a character's "Sexuality" statistic.
- rules for sexual gifts, drawbacks and abilities.
- character types and adventure ideas.
- pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases.
- enchanted items, spells, potions, and types of sex-related magic.
- an overview of sex in history, mythology and folklore.
- genre-specific looks at horror, aliens and fantasy races.
- OGL conversions, feats and classes.
- and much more!

\$19.95 • 0-9702189-6-6 • 108 pages

Available in March 2007  
through Key20 Games!

## Simulacrum RPG

And look for *Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil* featuring the **Simulacrum Roleplaying System**, by Tim Morgan, coming in 2007 or 2008 from Sabledrake Enterprises. We're still working on the final size and price, but check out <http://sabledrake.com> or <http://SimulacrumRPG.com> for updates, demos and up-to-date information.

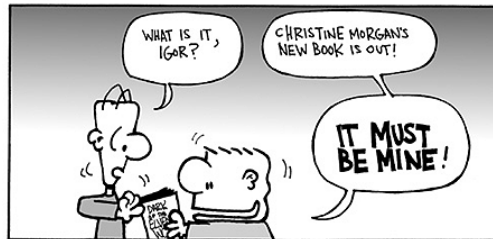
### Tell No Tales

The latest hot reality television program is in the works, blending historical re-creation with physical challenges, mental strategy, and emotional manipulation. On the Caribbean island of Veradoga, a dozen contestants and the show's production team get more than they bargain for when world events and the island's haunted history combine to make it anything but a game.

\$TBA • 0-9771005-3-7 • ??? pages

Coming  
in  
July,  
2007

*Christine Morgan*



Artwork © John Kovalic.  
All Rights Reserved.  
Used with permission.

In addition to the works presented here, Christine Morgan's writing has appeared in many magazines and story anthologies.

"Coppers, the Alchemist" in *Pyramid Magazine* #17.

"The Reaching Wall" in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine* #14, Vol 2.

Several entries in *GURPS Villians*.

"The Dawn of the Living Impaired" in *The Book of All Flesh*.

"Seven Brains, Ten Minutes" in *The Book of Final Flesh*.

"I Am . . ." in *Leather, Lace & Lust*.

"Safe Sucks" in *Closet Desires IV*.

"Monsters" in *Path of the Bold*.

"Don't Look Back" in *Fear of the Unknown*.

"Death and the Scream Queen" in *Hell Hath No Fury*.

"Easting for Two" in *Dreaded Pall*

and coming soon . . .

"Family Life" in *Aim for the Head*.

Sabledrake Enterprises keeps a few copies of most of these in stock and we can fill orders on a first come, first served basis for anyone interested.

Visit <http://www.christine-morgan.com> for the latest information.





**Sabledrake  
Enterprises**  
*Order Form*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ **Sabledrake Enterprises**  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ **PO Box 30751**  
 \_\_\_\_\_ **Seattle, WA 98113**  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_  
 State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ **425-317-9241 phone**  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ **772-673-2381 fax**  
 E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ **sabledrake@sabledrake.com**

Quan	Item or SKU	Price	Subtotal
<b>Shipping (\$3.50 for US Media Rate)</b>			
<b>TOTAL</b>			

**Item Recap:**

Curse of the Shadow			A Gnome Away		
Beasts	SDK 1880	\$11.95	from Home	SDK 8923	\$6.99
Dark of the Elvenwood	SDK 8907	\$11.95	Dwarves in the Dark	SDK 8931	\$6.99
Archmage of the			An Elf's Adventure	SDK 8940	\$6.99
Universe	SDK 8915	\$11.95	Dragon on the Loose	SDK 8974	\$6.99
The ElfLore Trilogy	SDK 0510	\$39.95	Orcs Ahoy!	SDK 8982	\$6.99
Black Roses	SDK 8958	\$14.95	The Alchemist's Girl	SDK 0529	\$6.99
Gifted Children	SDK 8990	\$16.95	Naughty & Dice	SDK 8966	\$19.95
Changeling Moon	SDK 0502	\$14.95	Tell No Tales	SDK 0537	\$1BA