

BOOKISH MAGAZINE



JANUARY 2022

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The next issue will be published in April 2022

Bookish Magazines



Erika M Szabo

I write speculative alternate history fiction, romantic urban fantasy, historical suspense novels as well as fun, educational, and bilingual books for children ages 2-14



AUTHOR
WEBSITE



About me

I don't like average performance at anything.

When everyone said, "You're so smart and compassionate, you should be a doctor."

I said, "I rather be an excellent nurse than an average doctor."

According to my patients and coworkers, I have achieved that.

When everyone said, "Don't waste your time writing. Stick to what you know best."

I didn't quit because my grandma always said, "You're a great storyteller! The stories you come up with explaining why you shouldn't do the things you don't want to do, are amazing!"

Well, I became a writer because I wanted to write stories I like to read and create magical worlds, great characters, and many stories for every age group to enjoy. You decide if I'm an average or exceptional writer.

Visit my [WEBSITE](#) to see what I'm up to and read chapters from some of my books in this magazine.

I inherited some of my dad's artistic talent. However, I never put any serious work into developing my base talent. I'm an average painter, but I do [digital art](#) because I'm pretty good at it. Luckily, most of dad's artistic talent skipped a generation because my daughter, [Eszter](#), is an amazing artist.

Thank you for your support of me and my Indie author friends!

Happy New Year



In this issue:

Read chapters from great
English & Spanish stories
and check out the featured books.

Restless Heart



Romantic historical fiction

To escape her gloomy future, she sails to the New World with hopes for a better life.

What will her future hold? Will she find happiness?

EBOOK

Once they've arrived at the governor's home, which was the largest, two-story building farther away from the houses and stores, the servants led them around by side of the house to the back. A beautiful garden awaited them with flowering bushes lining the walkways. In the flower beds, they admired the patches of lavender and many more flowers and plants they were used to seeing in the summers in France. Most of the flowers seemed out of place given the harsh, dry land in one part of town, and the wild, dull-colored plants of the marshland on the other side.

"Welcome! Welcome! We welcome you, the Casquette Girls." A jovial, short-statured man, dressed in the latest French fashion greeted them and held his hands up in the air.

Men cluttered the garden holding plates or wine glasses, openly staring at the young women. They're examining us as if we were cattle or some merchandise lined up for them to choose from. Madeleine, feeling uncomfortable, inhaled deeply.

“What does he mean by Casquette Girls?” Marie whispered, leaning close to Madeleine.

“He means us. The Casket Girls. He’s just pronouncing the word differently. He seems like a pompous poser,” Madeleine whispered back.

The young women huddled together, but one by one, they have been whisked away in different directions, taken by the various men to talk to. Madeleine kept moving back to avoid being called out. She hid behind a large Azalea bush when she spotted the governor approaching Sister Augustine. She’d ushered Marie to meet the man halfway. “Sister, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” he offered with a wide smile while scanning the blushing girl from head to toe.

“Governor Perier, it’s an honor to be invited again. Thank you for allowing us to have the party in your home.” Mother Superior curtsied. “Your garden is as lovely as ever.”

The governor politely nodded, “Yes, yes. Thanks to my wife. It cost a fortune, though, having the plants and seeds brought from France.” He quickly turned and walked away when spotted an older man standing by the blooming bush where Madeleine tried to hide.

“Isn’t this a better lot than the last?” She heard the Governor snickering to the grey-haired man. As they walked away, Madeleine heard him say, “At least they don’t send us more prostitutes.”

Sister Augustine spotted Madeleine and with a swift hand gesture ordered her to come out of hiding to stand beside her.

“Mother Superior, how are you?” A lovely lady, dressed in a puffy, ruffled dress came up holding onto the arm of a handsome gentleman in uniform.

“Madame Catherine.” Sister Augustine curtsied.

“And who are these two beautiful ladies?” Madame Catherine smiled.

“May I present Mademoiselles Madeleine and Marie.” Sister Augustine motioned to the two girls, who both curtsied.

“This is Colonel Etienne.” Madame Catherine nodded to the gentleman.

He bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you, both."

Marie giggled and her cheeks reddened.

After the exchange of a few pleasantries, the colonel turned to Madeleine. "Mademoiselle Madeleine, I'm hoping you'll accompany me for a walk through the garden," he beckoned offering his arm.

"Uh... I can't very well leave Marie alone." Madeleine squeezed Marie's arm tighter.

"No, it's okay. I'll be fine." Marie pulled away. "Go."

Madame Catherine grinned. "Marie will come with me and meet more eligible men and chat with the ladies."

Colonel Etienne held out his arm for Madeleine. She reluctantly took it and half-smiled. "It's a most beautiful evening, don't you think?" he looked off into the swampy distance.

"The croaking of frogs, flapping of bird wings and the scurrying sounds of alligators frighten me more than I'd like to admit. Living in Paris all my life, I'm not used to being so close to swamps and unfamiliar animals."

The colonel nodded. "It wasn't easy getting used to the marshlands for me either, I must say. Have you seen much of the city since you arrived?"

"No, I haven't. Since we arrived, we have been staying with the nuns. This is the first time we've ventured out." Madeleine glanced back to see Marie surrounded by a few men. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course."

"On the way to the governor's house, we passed the jail and saw a man caged on the side of the building. Why is he in the cage?" Madeleine asked.

"Oh, the savage," the Colonel nodded, seeming to be uncomfortable. "They don't want to put him inside the jail with the others. These savages often carry disease and are unclean. He'll be hanged in the morning."

"Hanged?" Madeleine swallowed hard. "Why?"

“He was hunting on our lands and broke the treaty.” The colonel shrugged. “One less savage to worry about. Let’s not talk about such unpleasantries. It’s not a proper discussion for a lady. May I ask you a question now?”

Madeleine reluctantly nodded. She couldn’t believe they would hang him over such nonsense as hunting. He might have a family to feed, maybe hungry children, too. Savage or not, nobody should be punished for being hungry. The angry thoughts swirled in her mind.

“What made you decide to come here?” The colonel inquired.

“I had no other choice,” Madeleine said. She didn’t want to appear rude but also didn’t want to fully answer his question. “The nuns arranged for me to come.”

“I see.” The Colonel sighed. “I suppose you come from a poor family given that the King offered to put up a dowry for you. Although your purity is guaranteed, they don’t send us educated ladies in good standings, given the rough surroundings in which we live.”

“Excuse me?” Madeleine felt insulted.

“I mean women of wealth and status.” The colonel didn’t seem to think he had given any offense. “I’m sure the King provided a suitable dowry on your behalf.”

Madeleine no longer wanted to be near the man. He continued talking while her mind was swirling with thoughts of the innocent man in the cage and the future awaiting him, but after a few minutes, she couldn’t take it anymore and abruptly cut him off in mid-sentence. “I’m not feeling all too well in this heat. Please excuse me. I need to go.” Madeleine curtsied and rushed away before the colonel could say another word.

Making sure nobody was watching, Madeleine quietly slipped away and around the corner of the house found her way to the street. I couldn’t let them kill that man in the cage. I won’t! I must find a way to free him. It was dark, and she had no lamp to light her way, but there was enough light coming from windows. *I better hurry to find a way to free him and get back before they notice that I was gone.*

*Hugs - Love
and Great Karma*



Cindy J. Smith

ERIKA M SZABO

*When a love potion
made with haste goes
wrong*

The
POTION



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ERIKA M SZABO



*The Ancestors' Secrets
Book 1*

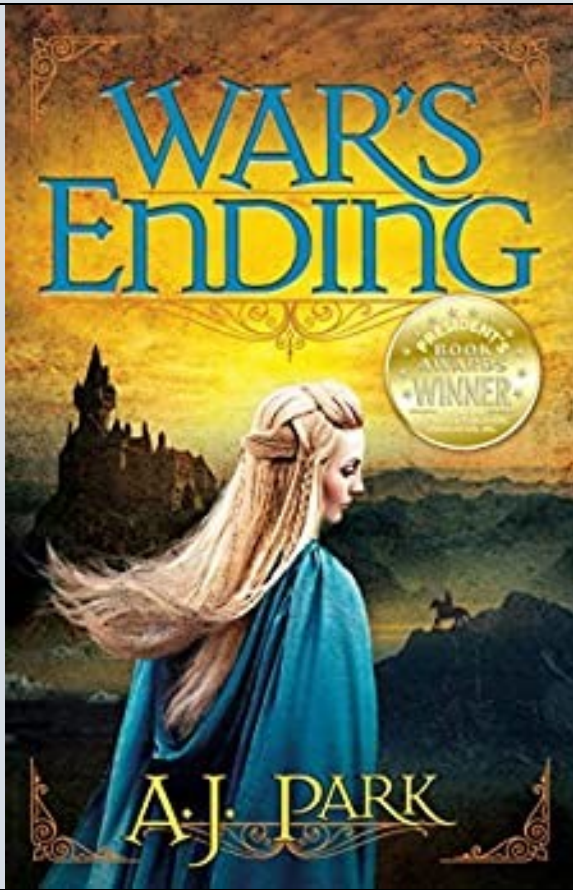
PROTECTED
by the
FALCON

Turning MISERY
Into MINISTRY



An inspirational story
of strength and faith.

War's Ending



YA fantasy

An abducted noblewoman. A mysterious horseman. A war that may destroy them both...

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

Ana loved the oak tree. She'd climbed it so many times that she had worn the bark on its limbs smooth from finding the same handholds over and over again. The late afternoon sun filtered down through the leaves and made a pattern of light and shade on her skin as she sat in the wide fork between the branches, hidden from sight. It was her secret place. Beyond the edge of the woods, she could see houses and bits and pieces of the fields where farmers brought in their harvest.

After living in the noise and rush of the inn, she enjoyed the quiet of the woods. Now, she heard nothing but the murmur of leaves in the breeze. Ana wanted to stay until the sun set, but Fergen expected her back soon to help with the dinner rush. It had been the same every night for the seven years she'd lived at the inn. Fergen, the kind old innkeeper, had taken her in, a child alone in the world, after her grandmother died.

Distinctive in the stillness, Ana heard footsteps beneath the tree. Was it one of the boys from the village? She peeked down through the branches.

Two strangers stood below her. Ana knew everyone in Bright Springs, and she'd never seen these men before. Silently, she watched them. They wore packs on their backs like they were traveling. The one with dark hair knelt on the ground, looking at something. The other had light hair that hung in unruly waves. "Are you sure?"

The kneeling man looked up from the ground. He frowned behind a short dark beard, and his brows were pulled together in worry. "The tracks are clear. They're here."

He stood, and Ana's eyes widened as she stared at the long blade at his side. No one in Bright Springs wore a sword. She'd never seen a weapon that big before.

"When?" The man with light hair rubbed the back of his neck.

"They look fresh. I'd say, last night."

"It's this town, then. It has to be. Everyone in this place is in danger. If they were here last night, they'll be here as soon as it gets dark. We have to find the girl before they do." He turned and took a step away.

The dark-haired man shook his head. "Not the town. Here. The tracks are everywhere around this tree." He pointed to several places surrounding the oak. He paused, looking down toward the inn. That was the way Ana had come. He bent down, examining the ground. "These tracks don't match the others. Someone walked here."

Peering down between the branches, Ana watched him. He examined her tracks along the path she'd taken from the inn into the woods. No one had ever bothered to follow her before. She wasn't important enough, unless it had something to do with her secret.

Ana wore a ring on her finger. On her deathbed, Grandmother had warned Ana never to tell anyone about it. The ring was like a part of her hand, and it wouldn't come off no matter what she did, so Ana had always worn a little strip of cloth tied around her finger like a bandage to hide it. It was a daily reminder of the secret, but she'd given little thought to Grandmother's warning until now.

The men followed her tracks a little way down the hill. Ana breathed a sigh of relief as they went away until they turned and came back to the base of her oak. "See the tracks there. They come right to the tree."

Ana pressed herself against the bark, out of sight, pulling her arms and legs close. These men were following her. Her stomach tightened. One of them was climbing now, and she heard his boots against the bark and the soft sound of his breath expelling as he pulled himself up. He had followed her into the tree and now he was going to find her. He soon appeared between the branches, and they stared at each other. Up close, he looked little older than the village boys who worked in the fields. His expression seemed friendly. And there was nowhere to go in the tree. He climbed fast, and she wouldn't be able to get past him.

"I'm sorry I followed you. Please, don't be afraid," he said. His voice sounded kind. "We're trying to find someone because she's in danger and needs our help."

Ana stared back at him. Could he know about the secret? Grandmother had been very clear that Ana should tell no one because it was dangerous. Something terrible had been following Ana years ago when she was a baby. Could it be the same thing that had left tracks all around her tree?

"Do you have a ring? Silver, set with a green stone?"

How did he know? Ana clutched her hand tighter to her chest. How could he know about it?

“No. This village is poor. No one has jewelry.” She looked into his eye as she spoke the lie.

He returned her gaze. “I know it’s a secret. But if you have the ring, you’re in danger.” He looked at her with serious gray eyes. “My name is Zarek. That’s Dane down there, and we came to help. What’s your name?”

“Ana.”

“I promise we would never hurt you, Ana. There are dangerous things in this world, and I’ve sworn an oath that when I find the girl with the ring, I will protect her and take her to safety. Do you believe me when I tell you we came to help?”

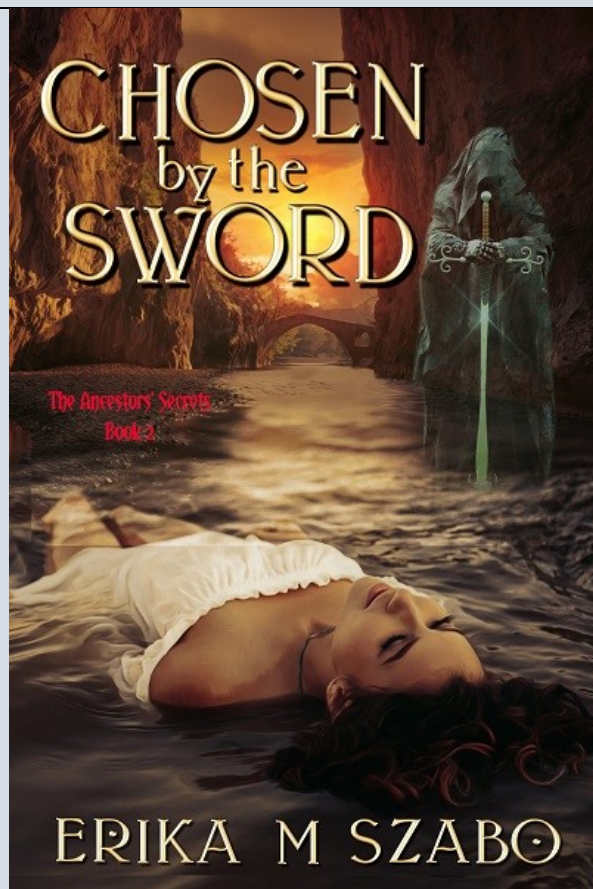
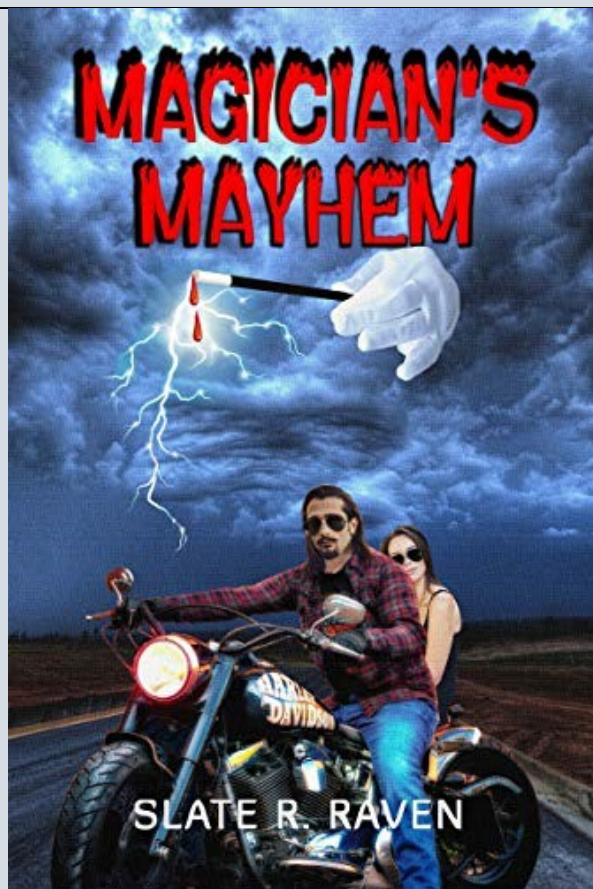
She looked into his eyes, reaching out with the extra sense she always felt when she was near someone. Ana could perceive the feelings of anyone close to her. That was how she’d known that Fergen would take care of her when Grandmother died. She’d known he would help. She could feel that Zarek would help now. Without that perception, she would never have trusted this stranger, no matter what he knew about her secret.

She stared at him for a long moment. “I believe you,” she said.

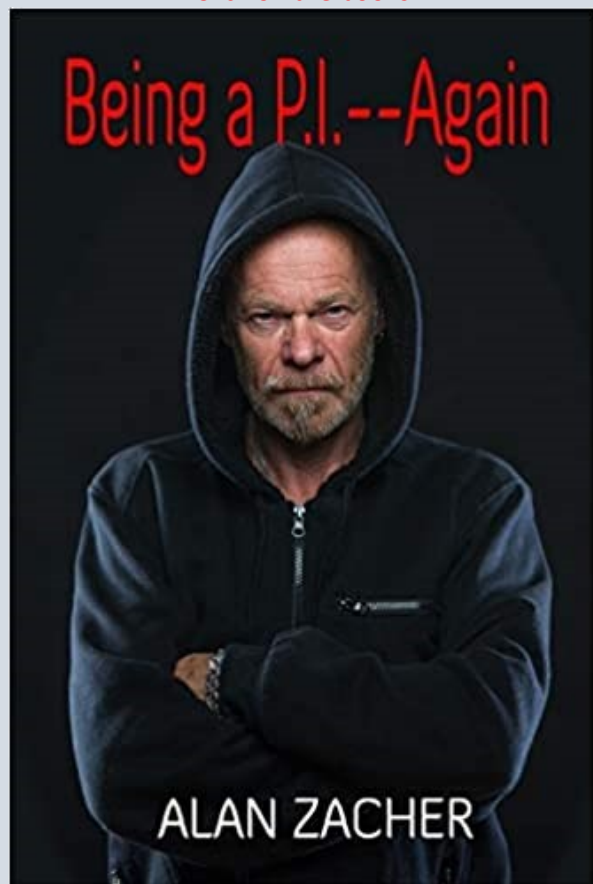
His eyebrows raised in surprise. “Then it’s true? You have no reason to believe me, unless you trust me because you have the ring and you can tell what I feel.”

She nodded, able to sense that he was afraid, too, maybe of whatever had left its mark around the tree. Ana nodded toward the ground. “What made those tracks?”

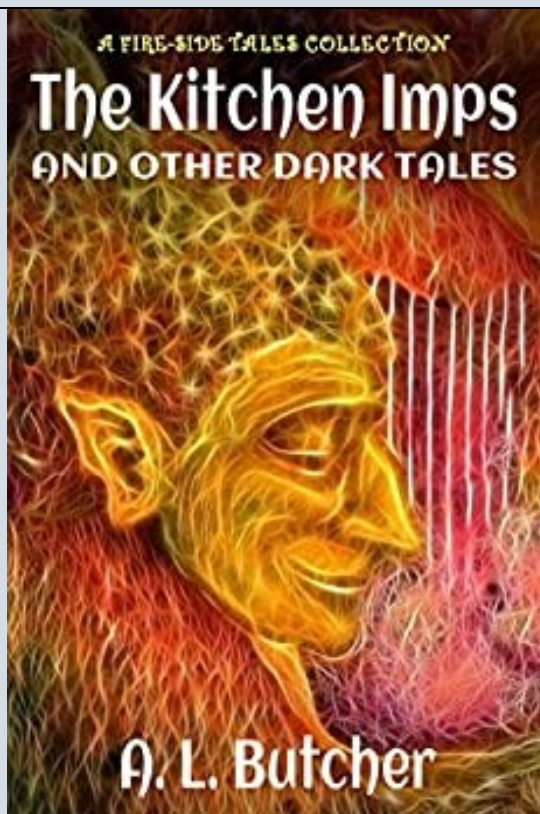
He looked back at her as if he didn’t know what to say. He cleared his throat. “They’re demons.”



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The Kitchen Imps



Naughty imps, missing socks, cunning thieves and baffled gods feature in this collection of short fantasy fiction.

[**EBOOK PRINT AUDIOBOOK**](#)

The strawberries cackled in their glass jar, around them were other, older condiments – sweet pickles, jams and spreads. Snickering, they shuffled forward, moving close behind a jar of elderly pickles. The pickle jar shuffled forward to make room, butting up against the sugar tin, which refused to move.

“I get used every day, thus I need to be within easy reach,” said Sugar, rather arrogantly.

Pickle grunted and edged further forward. “It not be me, it be the jam,” it sighed. “It be shoving.”

The strawberry jam hopped sideways along the shelf, looking for an easier target, and spied an old jar of sauce, dusty and forgotten. The lid was crusted with elderly tomato, dribbled along the glass and faded to musty brown, with a little sheen of furry mold. Untouched and unloved, it cowered next to an empty salt cellar and a dried-up mustard pot.

The shelf was narrow and overcrowded, and the strawberry jam looked down with a wicked gleam. It was much narrower here than the Big Shelf in the place where it had lived before the Hand had plucked it from its comfortable repose. The jam vaguely remembered the huge Mother Vat, from which it had been born, and many others with it, until the God Spoon had appeared and housed it in the Glass Jar so it could look out upon the world. The strawberries did not question what had been given to them; life in the field before this was not life, merely an existence. Jam! Jam was true life! Jam was purpose!

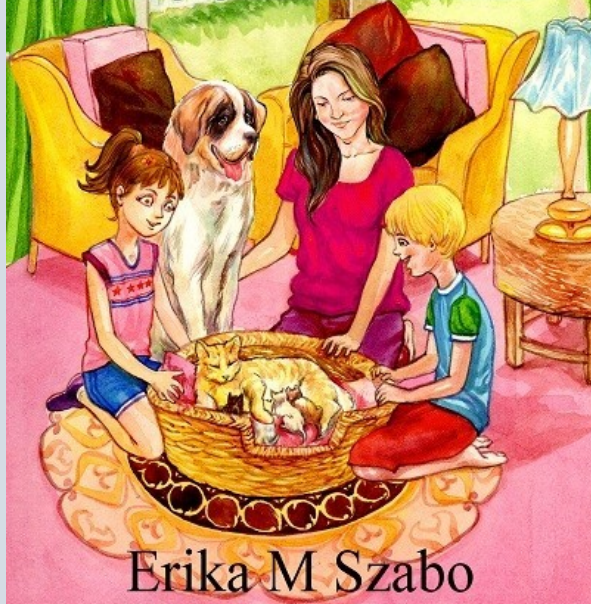
Shuffling and shoving, the jar slid in the grease which coated the shelf. With a mighty push it toppled the unfortunate sauce down to the flagstones far below, a gleeful chuckle shaking its lid. The bottle smashed and the elderly sauce splodged out its life upon the floor. As the wicked guffawing echoed in the quiet, midnight kitchen the other jars and tins shuffled closer to one another, hoping for protection.

The giant door opened, and the owner of the Hand entered the world of the Kitchen, seeing the poor sauce all over the floor. She looked around to find the culprit, for this was not the first 'accident' in recent weeks. The strawberries in the jar looked innocent and nodded towards the sugar, laying blame where none was due.

Once the remains of the sauce had been removed, the Hand grabbed the sugar and angrily deposited it at the back, leaving a nice space for the jam to move into. As soon as the owner of the Hand had gone, the jam, who was young and new, speedily pushed aside the other jars and settled triumphantly into the empty space, where it could see the world it was planning to conquer. Such a sweet, sweet world it was too.

A Basketful of Kittens

The BFF gang's kitten rescue adventure



Erika M Szabo

Hophop's Alphabet Tree



Erika M Szabo

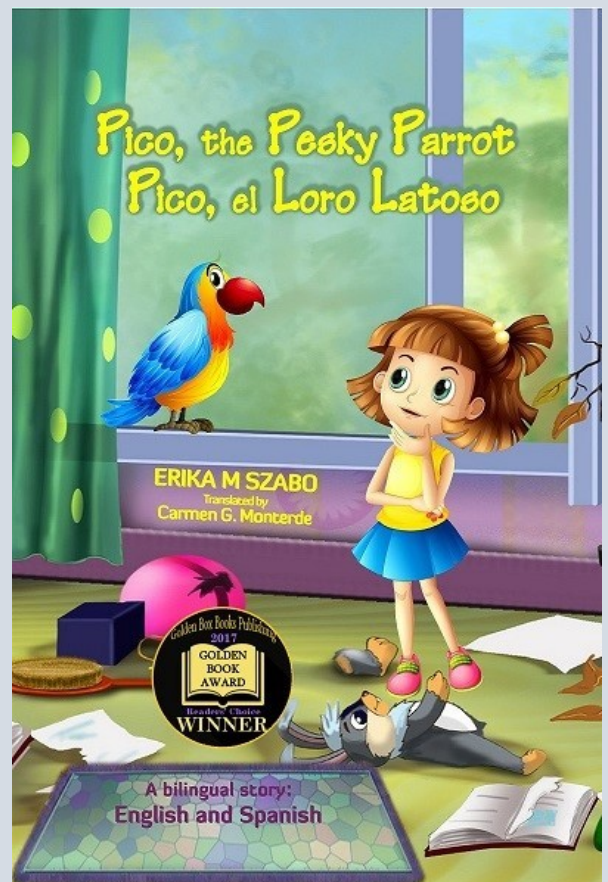
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Look, I Can Talk With My Fingers!



Written & Illustrated by
ERIKA M SZABO

Pico, the Peaky Parrot Pico, el Loro Latoso



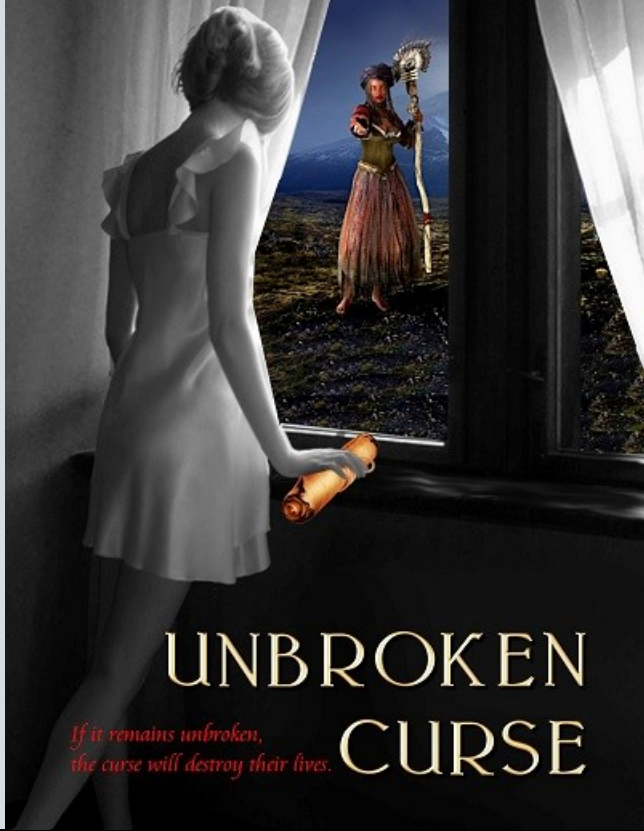
ERIKA M SZABO
Translated by
Carmen G. Monterde



A bilingual story:
English and Spanish

Unbroken Curse

ERIKA M SZABO



Alternative history suspense novella.

A curse of evil deed incites an unbroken chain of evil.

A powerful curse cast sixteen hundred years ago destroyed the lives of their ancestors for centuries. If it remains unbroken, the curse will ruin the lives of future generations as well.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

The old stone mill quarry in the mountains on the Northeast side of Hungary had been buzzing with activity for days. Archaeologists found 16th century artifacts the year before, but when they restarted the site in the spring and dug deeper, they'd unearthed an ancient burial site in the six-foot-deep layer. As the initial assessment estimated, this layer had been buried since the 5th century.

The excited murmurs of a group of archeology students at the bottom of the large, six feet deep hole sounded muffled. But when a lanky young man in dusty overalls ascended the stepladder and yelled out to the lead archeologist standing by the tent, his voice boomed, "Helen, you have to see this!"

A middle-aged plump woman with salt and pepper hair pulled into a tight bun froze for a second, and then started running toward the student. "What

did you find?" she wheezed, her chest tightening by the sudden excitement and anticipation.

"Come down and see!" The student hurried down the stepladder giving space to Helen to descend into the deep, large space.

"Damn!" she exclaimed when her shaky legs missed a step, but the young man broke her fall and steadied her on her feet. "Thanks," she mumbled.

"Look!" One of the female students pointed at the white horse skull poking halfway out of the soil. "Look at that beautiful bridle!" She looked up at Helen beaming with joy.

"It's magnificent!" Helen whispered. "The finest craftsmanship I've even seen." She carefully ran her fingers through dry, hardened leather. "The usage of gold and alloy of copper and zinc proves that this warrior had a funeral fit for a noble leader." She knelt by the skull and took the brush from her student. "I got this. You three start unearthing the rest of the skeleton," she pointed and added with a stern look on her face. "Be careful!"

The other two holes they dug days ago were occupied by students kneeling in the dirt, brushes and fine chisels in their hands. They carefully scraped away the dirt layer by layer. Next to them laid out on a weathered tarp were weapons, jewelry, and everyday items from around the beginning of the 5th century. They had been working in the hole since dawn knowing it would be too hot to work close to midday when they would be forced to take a break until around mid-afternoon.

What are they buzzing about? A gangly, middle-aged man in a security guard uniform peeked into the deep pit planting his feet firmly to the ground. Good! Them keep finding stuff is my job security. He straightened up with a grunt and turned to find his partner. That fool is sleeping again! He walked over to the tent and punched his stocky partner's shoulder who was softly snoring in a fold-up chair under the shade of the tall oak tree by the tent. "Hey, sleeping beauty!"

“Uh, what? Jesus! I ain’t sleeping. Just restin’ me eyes,” the balding man sat up straight and wiped spittle from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

“If they catch you snoozing, you can say goodbye to this well-paying cushy job,” the lanky man warned his friend.

“Yeah, yeah,” the heavyset man mumbled. “They’re in the holes busy brushing dirt off of old stuff. And who would come up to this place to steal anything, anyway?” He stretched his hands over his head and let out a loud yawn before reclining once more on the fold-up chair with obvious intent to resume his slumber.

“Just keep your eyes open! I’m gonna drive down to town to pick up the breakfast from the coffee shop.”

“Okay, hurry up. I’m starving.”

The tall man walked down the path between the thick bushes to the clearing where the archeological team parked their cars. Despite his promise, his porky partner’s chin dropped to his chest as soon as he was out of sight. I’ll just close me eyes for a moment, he thought. His breathing slowed as he fell asleep.

Jayden, a young American archeologist worked in the fourth pit alone. Although Helen wanted everyone to concentrate on the three holes they’d found the artifacts, Jayden convinced her to let him try the abandoned pit again. He pulled a crumpled handkerchief from his dusty overall’s pocket to wipe the sweat off his forehead. “Phew! It’s already hotter in this hole than in the witch’s oven.” He mumbled under his breath while he pulled a hairband off his wrist and tied his shoulder-length auburn hair into a man bun. “I should get a haircut.”

A few minutes later his chisel made a welcomed sound as it touched metal in the ground. Energized by the excitement of his discovery, he began the painstaking work of carefully scraping the packed dirt off the rusty handle of

an ancient sword. “Come on, beautiful! Show me your glorious body,” he whispered.

As he changed position and kneeled back down, a small black snake wiggled toward him from the dark corner of the ten feet wide hole. “Geeze!” he exclaimed and threw himself backward, not sure if the snake was poisonous or just an innocent garter snake that had fallen into the pit by accident. The moment his elbows hit the dirt and feet still up in the air, an arrow hit the exact spot he was kneeling a second ago with such force that the wide obsidian arrowhead nearly disappeared into the dirt with the shaft violently vibrating.

“What the hell!?” he cried out in fright and looked up. Six feet up at the mouth of the hole he saw his sister staring down at him holding a recurve bow. She let out a furious scream and disappeared. “Sofia? When did you... how did you get here? Wait!” He yelled and scrambled to get to the stepladder as fast as he could. “Sofia! Wait!” he shouted as he climbed out of the dig hole.

The stocky security guard woke to the high-pitched scream, jumped to his feet feeling confused and dumbfounded. “Hey! What are you doing there?” he yelled at the young girl running from the pit. She glared at the guard with a murderous expression on her face. Clenching her fists, she growled and ran toward the path between the thick bushes and soon disappeared from sight. The guard grunted and stomped after her as fast as his heavy body could move.

Jayden finally out of the hole looked around frantically but didn’t see his sister anywhere. His teammates climbing out of the larger pit ran toward him and looked at him questioningly. “What happened?” one asked. “What’s going on?” others shouted.

“A woman just tried to kill me! She fired an arrow into my hole,” Jayden said running toward the narrow path. He couldn’t tell them his suspicions without proof about the woman being his sister.

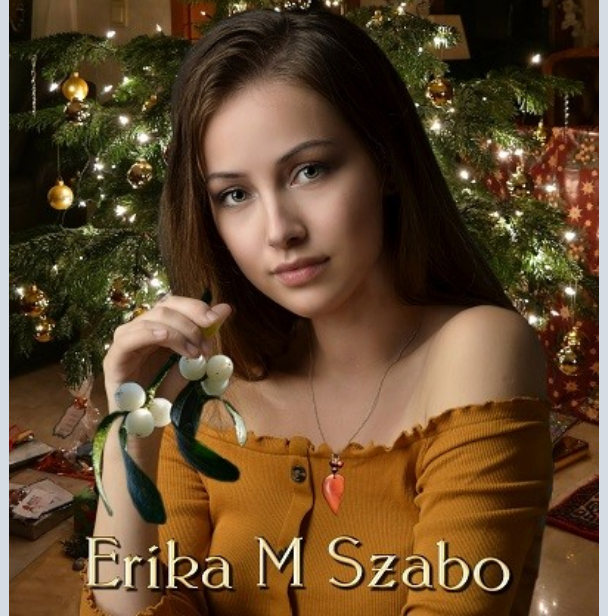
SNARES AND DELUSIONS



The Triptych Book 1

HM HOLTEN

Bittersweet Memories



Erika M Szabo

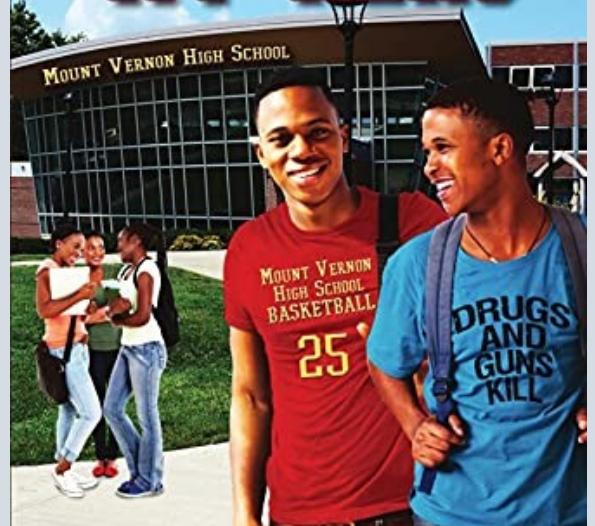
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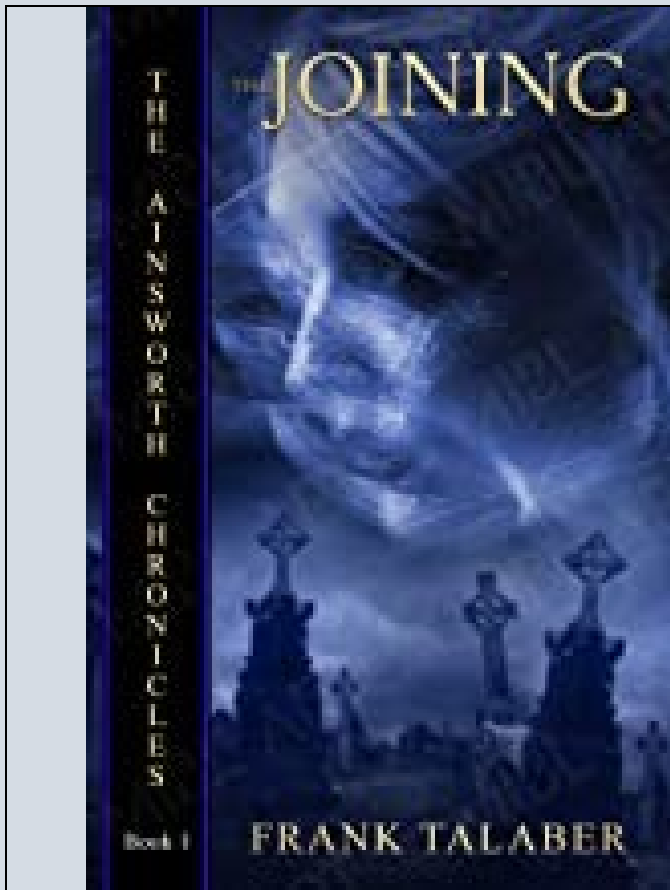
25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

JERALD LEVON HOOVER

MY FRIEND, MY HERO



Joining



Urban fantasy/crime thriller

The one saving grace was the great Empress High Tea that Agnes introduced her to and the fabulous scones that are to die for. Literally.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

Front deskman Samuel Desmond's eyes opened in horror as the wet, naked man thumped towards him bearing only a bath towel, a watch and the look of a man stepping into a warzone. The splodge of soapy footsteps echoed behind him as he thumped down the ornate front staircase of Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel.

"Sir, do you realize you are naked in our lobby, dripping soap and water all over our new and *very* expensive Isfahan rugs?"

The man thumped his hand on the counter. Water splattered. "I'm wet, pissed, cold and locked out of my room. Jake Holden, Blanshard suite."

Samuel looked down, bowing to the sheer anger seething in Jake's eyes, and clacked away on his booking computer. He hesitated a moment, pressed the button for the day manager and, summoning up his courage, turned back to Jake while water continued dripping onto the counter.

"It would appear you are not a registered guest. I would need ID to let you back into any suite."

Jake stepped back and opened his towel. “Does it look like I’ve got any ID on me?”

Samuel’s eyes widened in shock. “But I’m not allowed to let anyone in without ID.”

Jake re-wrapped the towel, leaned over and grabbed the clerk by the scruff of his neck, effortlessly pulling him over the counter, until all Samuel could see was the man’s watch. Mickey Mouse’s left hand stood at ten, his right at two.

“The only ID I got are these fingerprints and if you don’t let me back in my room your face is about to become an ink blotter. *Kapish?*”

Her private cellphone rang as Carol Ainsworth, ostensibly Day Manager, actually undercover cop on assignment, was about to bolt from her office in response to Samuel’s panic button. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected to find but a naked six-foot giant of a man yelling into Samuel’s face and half dragging him across the counter wasn’t on her list of possibilities, not in a world-class hotel.

Forgot to turn off my phone. Carol glanced at the text from her sister and the first word was

Urgent. She paused, her sister wasn’t a person to send idle chat.

“Urgent! Nathan has vanished.”

As she quickly texted back Samuel struggled to reach the buzzer.

“Will call ASAP.”

Carol turned off her phone and quickly marched over to the front desk. Her and her sister, Barbara, didn’t talk much but Barb was never one to overreact. Whatever happened to her nephew must be serious.

So much for a quiet first day on the job. Okay, calm down. One thing at a time.

“Yes, sir, how may I help you?” She dropped her hand to gain comfort in the holster she didn’t have on this assignment. *Damn it! Shouldn’t have listened to the morons telling me not to carry!* Her cop instinct took over,

mentally noting every detail of any possible importance. *White Caucasian, six two, light tan, light brown hair, Mickey Mouse watch on left wrist, ripped to the max. Probable weight lifter strung out on steroids. Jeez, I might as well be back on the skid rows of Vancouver! What the hell would a real hotel manager be doing right now?*

She tried to think of something, anything, she'd learned in the week of intense hotel management training they'd put her through in preparation for this assignment that might be of any possible use to her in this situation. As a street cop she'd just chop him across the back of the knees and slap the cuffs on him as he fell. Somehow that didn't seem like the way to treat a guest of this grand establishment. *Plan B's definitely lock him up and then ask questions, though.*

"I asked for the hotel manager," he growled.

Carol glanced around the newly refurbished lobby, with its gold balustrades and pastel shaded panels. Fortunately, no other guests were milling around this time of the afternoon so hopefully this wouldn't turn into a full-blown media fiasco. That was the *last* thing she needed, considering the guests who'd be arriving in the next little while.

"What seems to be the problem here?" She folded her arms in front of her.

"I said I asked for the—"

"And I, sir, *am* the hotel manager, and before I discuss anything with you, you will let go of my desk clerk." She caught the nearly imperceptible rise of his eyebrows. "And gently. The Fairmont Victoria Empress Hotel does not take kindly to hotel guests strolling naked in public areas, nor do we care to have them accosting our front desk staff." His eyebrow raised higher as he glared at her.

Carol had certainly handled bigger men. She stood her ground and glared back. If she hadn't been on assignment she'd have told him to drop the desk clerk before she shoved his eyebrows so far up his ass it'd take a laser scope to get them out, but since she was, she didn't.

The glare-down continued as Samuel's face turned redder. Finally, Jake broke eye-contact and glanced down at her name tag. Carol had established control. She allowed herself to breathe.

Time to press her advantage home.

"I *said* Let. Him. Go. And I'm not telling you a third time."

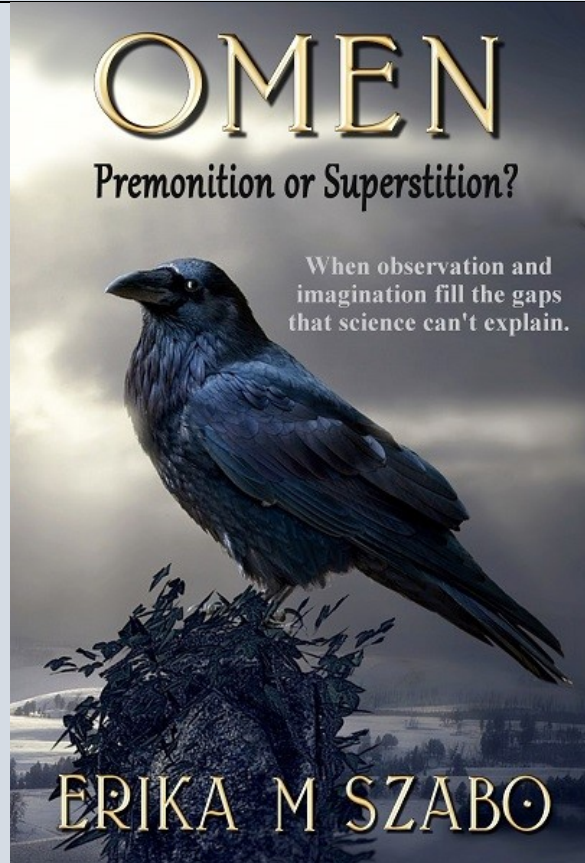
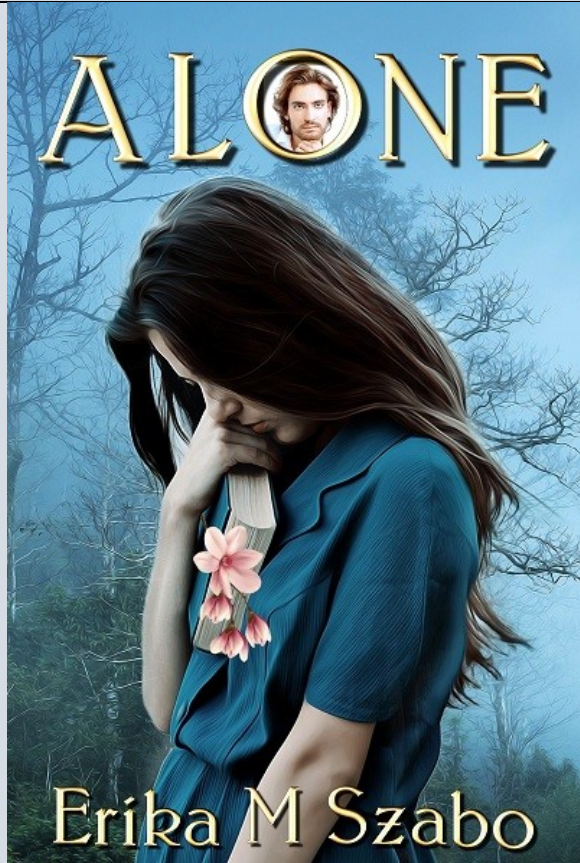
Jake lowered Samuel to the ground. "Sorry, didn't expect a skirt. I mean a female manager." And he certainly hadn't expected a gorgeous brunette. She even looked good in her standard designed-for-all-shapes-and-sizes corporate uniform. She wasn't intimidated in the least, not by his size or his state of undress. In fact, she was absolutely in control of the situation. Something very sexy in that. He liked his women assertive. Her eyes, though. Something in her eyes grabbed him right in the gut. Too much knowledge of the world and how bad it could be, that was it. He'd learned long ago to read people's faces in his career, it'd saved his life many times when undercover.

Something about this woman he knew almost nothing about stirred his blood and wearing just a bath towel probably wasn't such a good idea. Especially in light of what he *did* know about her. She was undoubtedly Canadian undercover detective on duty Carol Ainsworth. *Our file reports don't do her justice.*

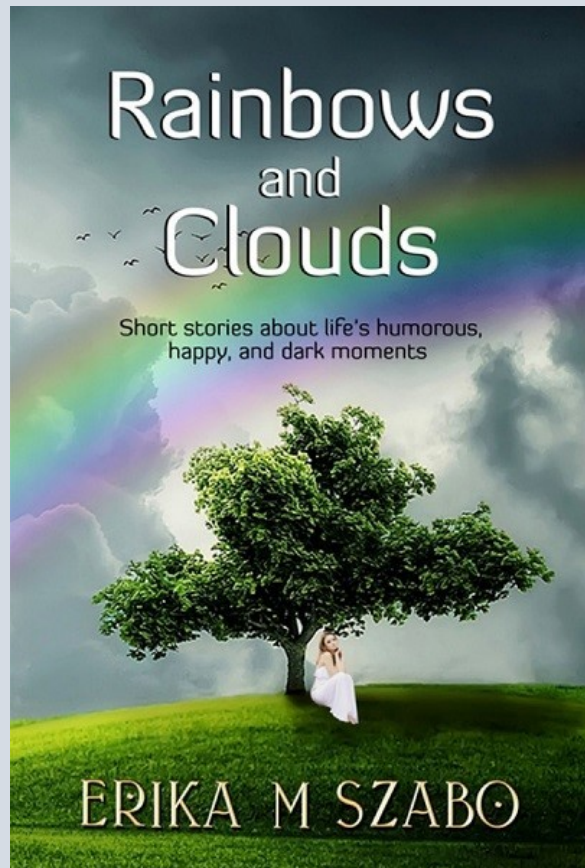
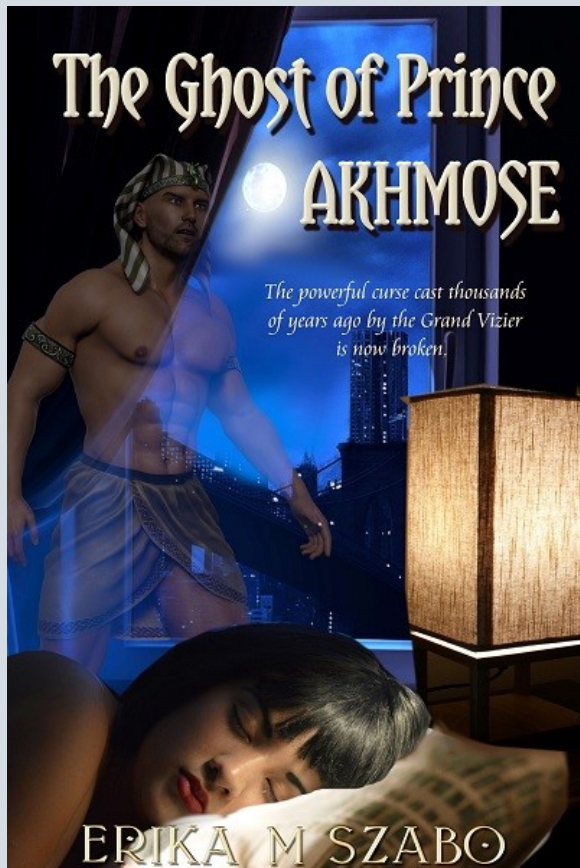
"Jake Holden, and you have my apology. I've been overstressed at work recently and decided to take a relaxing trip here." He extended his hand. It was partly the truth, he'd taken this assignment to get away from LA, a place where you always had to watch your back and no man was a friend. *Especially the crazy ones strung out on drugs.*

She made sure Samuel was breathing well on his own before she shook hands. The touch sent an erotic jolt through him. He glanced down and smiled. *No ring. Possibilities.*

"Apology accepted. Carol Moore, Day Manager of the Fairmount Empress Hotel." Carol studied Jake. She liked what she saw.



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Last Rites



Paranormal fiction

A final showdown is coming and it will take more than the Sisterhood to face this epic battle between good and evil.

[EBOOK PRINT AUDIOBOOK](#)

The alarm went off at 5:00 am. Brandt leaned over and gave me a peck on the cheek. “Don’t get up, babe. I’ll grab a coffee on my way up to Cleveland. See ya round 6:00 tonight.”

I tried to lie there and go back to sleep but couldn’t. I was too excited to get my car as well as my freedom back. I also worried about Brandt and what his duties were with this Mike Gadson guy. I threw on my robe and headed into the kitchen to brew a cup of coffee. I wanted to call Mother but was aware of the two-hour time difference. I decided to have one cup, cruise social media, then give her a call.

As I perused over the Lakewood School District site, I noticed an ad for a homeschool teacher. *This would be perfect!* I needed to get all of my documents in order and send them off. Being temporary was perfect, as I wasn’t sure how long Brandt and I would be here.

The doorbell rang just as I was finishing up my call with Mother. It was the man with my car. I realized I still had my robe on but had no time to change.

And there it was—a shiny new silver Nissan in the driveway! The customer service man entered with one paper for me to sign. He had the dealership van waiting for him outside. I thanked him and stood in the doorway admiring my new ride.

The frigid February air didn't stop me from running outside to take a picture of my new ride. I shot it off to Brandt with a good luck message.

I rummaged through my few pieces of workout gear and then decided to head over to Mosquito Lake to get in a good run. I punched in the address to my dash navigator and was ready to roll. Being 9:30 am, few cars were on the road. I had missed the rush hour—however small that was for Cortland. I headed up Interstate 5 and was there in no time. My heart pounded with anticipation. I couldn't wait to get back to what I loved. The parking lot was pretty much empty except for two cars and a pickup. Shades of my last run in Sherman crept through my mind—no mysterious cars. This felt different—safer.

The air was crisp and smelled like pine. I picked up my pace, knowing I'd soon be losing this hoodie after a good sweat. The lake was beautiful. Most of the trees were still bare being late February, but a few still had sparse crimson leaves on them. The lake wasn't frozen, but the morning sun cast an icy shadow over it making it look like a huge shimmering sheet of ice. My breath was getting heavy as I rounded the first corner of the lake. I glanced at my Fit Right watch delighted to see I had already done two miles and my heart rate was 110. Not bad for being out of shape.

I spotted a park bench and stopped for a minute to pull off my hoodie and sip my water. Just as I set my water down, I heard birds cackling above. *Oh no! Here we go!* I watched them circle above me, trying to figure out if they were crows. Sure enough, they were. They looked a bit like ravens, but I knew ravens were rare in this part of Ohio. I resumed my run trying to ignore their caws. I received no message from them and finally realized they were simply plain crows. I reasoned I had most likely lost my intuitive connection with animals—one I'd greatly miss.

After another half hour, I was spent and headed back to the car. There was only one car left when I returned. I had no feeling of dread or fear. *Maybe this was the place I'd come to love and feel safe again?*

I clicked my phone back on. I had a message from Brandt. All was well and he'd be home by 6:00. It was 10:30. Still being early, I decided to head to the market to get something for dinner, and then home to work on my resume for the homeschooling job.

Heading home from the market I thought about Marta, Nina Santos's sister, and how proud she'd be of me for staying on my healthy eating track. I picked up organic asparagus, chicken and wild rice for dinner. Since Auntie informed me the Sisters were still keeping an eye on me, I hoped they'd report to Marta that I was doing well.

While preparing dinner, I glanced out the kitchen window at a small red fox that was out by the edge of the property line. He looked almost fake, like one of those statues for the yard. I dried my hands, threw on my hoodie. I wanted to get a better peek at him. I didn't want to scare him off, so I went outside the front door, staying light on my feet as I padded around to the backyard. He noticed me right away, and I froze when I reached the back patio. He inched closer as if he wanted to come my way. I wasn't going to move. I had the sense that he wanted to communicate with me. I watched his eyes, deep and chocolatey brown that they were. *'All is not as it seems,'* was the message coming through. I crouched down to his level, calling him over to me. He turned and ran back toward the woods.

Hmm, now how about that? His message rang loud in my mind as I headed back into the house. I sat on the sofa and closed my eyes, trying to decode this message. I saw him again in my mind's eye. I recited his message aloud. "All is not as it seems" *Hmm . . . I still had it!* And I was grateful for this gift.

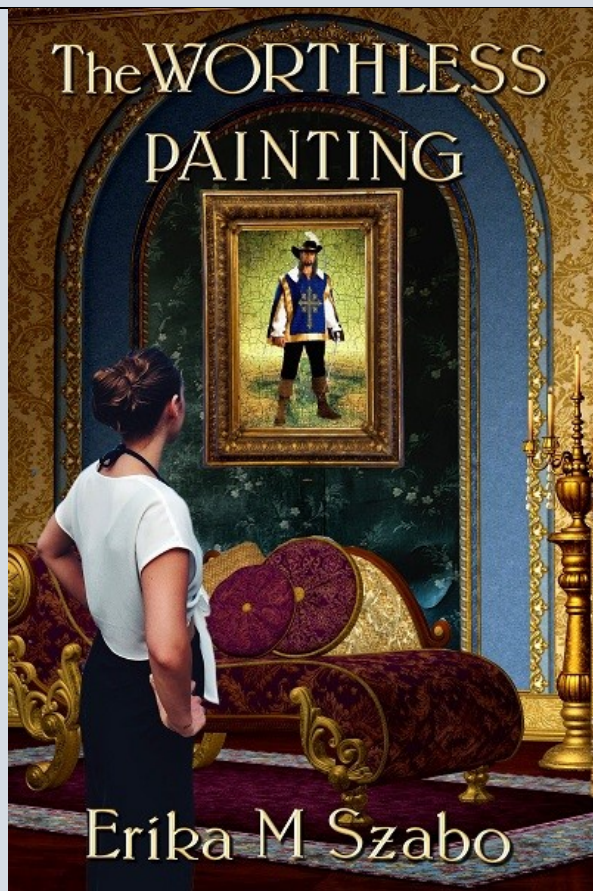
I had to wonder if this was intended for Brandt, or me? Either way, something was up. It was no surprise the way my life was going these past few years. What really had me was the fact that I was able to communicate

with him. I wondered why I wasn't able to do this with the crows at the lake. The thought of dinner brought me back to the reality of my kitchen duty.

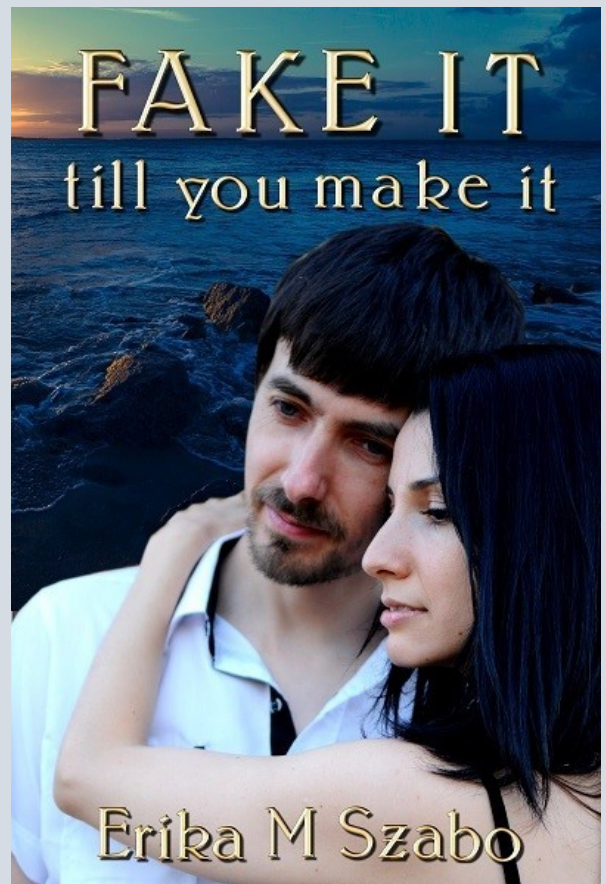
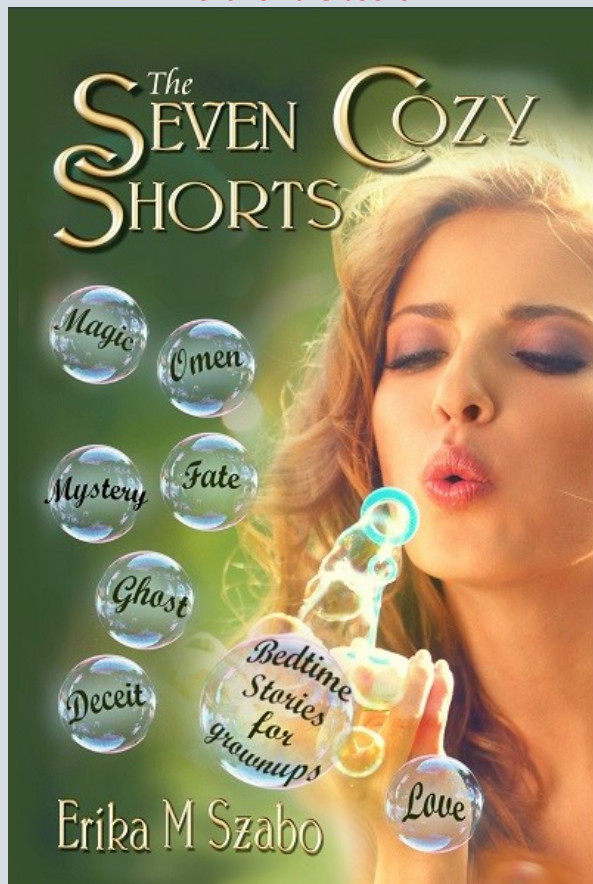
While dinner was cooking, I completed the application for the homeschool teacher assignment. Now it was a waiting game. It was almost 4:00. I wanted to shower and put something nice on for Brandt. Knowing this was a special day for him, I knew what he'd like, but I had no desire to serve him dinner in fancy lingerie. There were still serious questions to be answered: How did his day go? What did he have to do? Just what exactly did the fox's message mean? Hopefully, I'd get the first two questions answered this evening. As for the fox's message, I'd keep that to myself for now. I had some vague knowledge of its symbolism, according to Native American beliefs, as representing the practice of negative energy and sorcery. But like the coyote, he was also regarded as a Trickster, therefore, messages could be more complex. I'd dig into this deeper in the next few days.

My phone was pinging shortly after I jumped out of the shower. I had four new emails, one being from the Lakeview School District. *That was fast!* I couldn't help but wonder if one of the Sisters had arranged this. It seemed too odd. I had an interview tomorrow for the homeschool teaching position. I did my little happy dance right there in my towel. I ran into the closet, searching for the appropriate attire. I did have a few nicer dresses I'd saved from my previous teaching days. I pulled out a navy blue, knit, knee-length dress and black pumps. *Yep, this would work.*

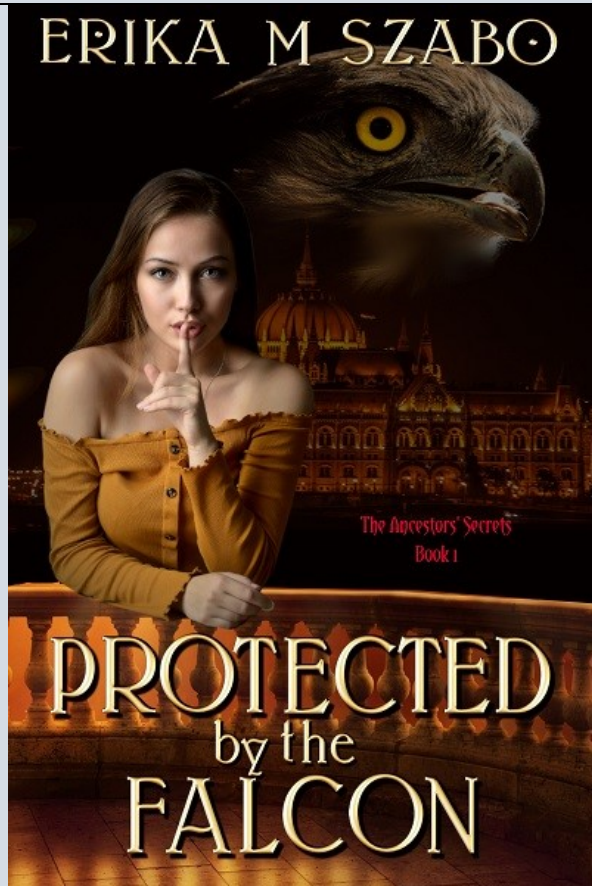
The smells of dinner wafted from the kitchen. I went to check on the chicken parm and started to boil the wild rice. Brandt would be home in an hour. I felt excited as my mood lightened with the promise of a new job. I rummaged through my lingerie drawer for a special outfit to wear at dinner. *Damn! I really needed to go shopping.* Not much there but a few pieces I'd picked up in Sherman. A red lace teddy seemed appropriate for a celebratory dinner. *I think I'll scope out that mall over in Warren after the interview tomorrow.* I wouldn't need more career wear if I was going to be a homeschool teacher, but I surely needed new jeans and tops, let alone more outfits to tantalize Brandt.



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Protected by the Falcon



Alternative history

Mystery, legends, obscure clan traditions and beliefs, life in a secret society, love, time travel

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Mora closed her eyes and began searching the complicated network of the Collective Memory, in her mind. She murmured under her breath, “The Elders took everything I valued in life from me, but they never found out I could read every word that is written by every gifted Hunor after they reach maturity. When they use the ancient letters given to them by the Ancestors and they mention the meaning of the flowers, their lives are open books for me.”

Mora’s prune-like face lit up, “Good girl, Adel. You are the servant of the Leaders and can’t talk to anyone about this, but you just wrote in your diary that the Elders are planning a meeting. Oh, I see. One of them is about to take her last breath, and they need to choose her successor. Hmm... could I use it to my advantage? We’ll see. There is another interesting sentence here; you are worried about your mistress, Csenge. She seems distant and unhappy. Let’s see what our Leader has been writing...” she scoured Csenge’s desk in her mind.

“What?!” Mora shouted angrily when she read Csenge’s note in her calendar, “The Chosen One, Ilona, is coming of age today.” Mora was furious, “I can get into the minds of those who are related to me, but I can’t get into the Elders’ meeting or see the Chosen One. I curse you Ancestors for taking away my powers, and I curse you for tearing me away from the arms of my beloved, Joland. We’ll be together again one day, my love. I’ll find a way, somehow...”

In her fury, Mora clawed a hole in her soft comforter, but then, she started seeing an unfamiliar handwriting in her mind. Someone, unknown to her was writing a diary with the ancient Hunor letters. Mora’s rage calmed instantly as she rejoiced, “Ilona’s diary! She must be the Chosen One that Csenge wrote about.”

In her mind’s eye, the ancient Hunor letters appeared as Ilona wrote them in her diary. *Dear diary, I’m supposed to keep a detailed journal from now on...*

Mora grinned, “That’s right, little girl. Keep writing.” Her prune-like lips curled into a cruel smile. Her castle was well hidden from prying eyes, deep in the woods on the mountainside. Nobody knew about its existence, only Zelda, her trusted servant throughout the centuries.

Mora didn’t allow anyone to see her in her miserable state, old and wrinkled. Her mind control ability helped her to make even Zelda see her in her youthful glory as she knew her so long ago, but she couldn’t completely conceal her body’s present state of old and wrinkled. The image of her old body shown in Zelda’s mind through the youthful picture Mora projected.

The soft humming of her rotating, air-filled mattress relaxed her and protected her withered body from developing bedsores.

The Royals and Elders were furious when they found out many centuries ago that Joland had shared the gift of eternal life with her and gave her the power to keep her body young. The Elders separated them, but they couldn’t make them mortal again. She has lived so many lifetimes, alone, because Joland was exiled to a timeline in the distant past. As his punishment, he couldn’t move forward in time with her. The Elders succeeded in taking away

the ability to rejuvenate her body, which became bones with wasted muscles and shriveled skin. Although her withered body was useless, the power of her mind allowed her to reach the remotest part of the world and beyond.

Mora prepared to channel her beloved, Joland, through time. Creating the connection between two dimensions would make her mentally exhausted for days, but she had to share the good news with Joland. She closed her eyes, began taking slow, deep breaths and concentrated her energy to break through the barrier between timelines with the power of her mind. She never let Joland see a mental image of her, old and withered. Therefore, she put a youthful picture of herself up as a shield. She only let Joland see her, as she was when they met, a beautiful, young woman in her glory. When she finally broke through the barrier of time, she saw Joland in her mind's eye. He was resting in his tent.

She reached out to him, *“My love, can you feel me?”*

Startled, he sat up on his cot, *“Yes! I can feel you and see you. My beautiful Mora, I miss you so!”*

“I have good news, my love, finally our time has come. I know who the Chosen One is. She was born in this timeline as it was foretold.”

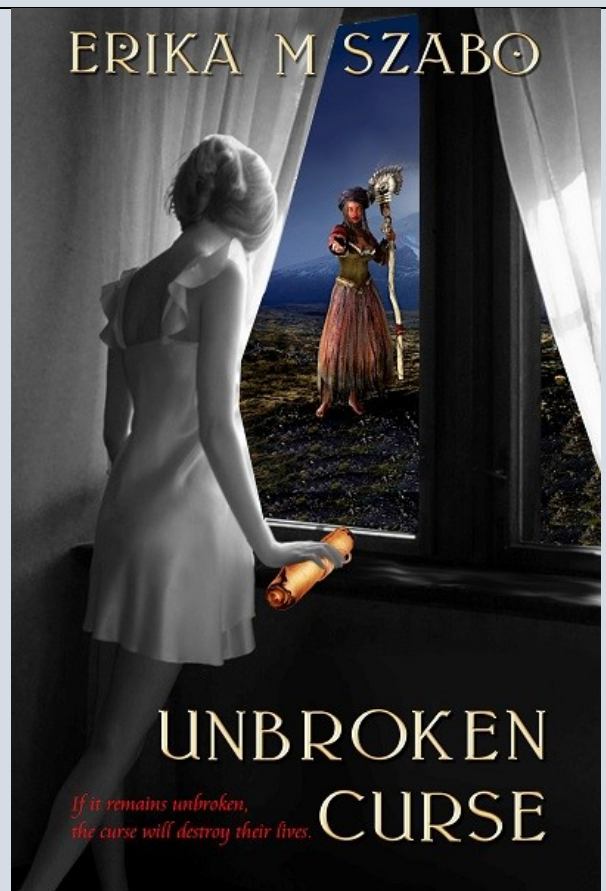
His answer came instantly, *“Your good news is most welcomed, my love. I’ve been waiting for this moment for centuries.”*

Mora’s dried-up body trembled with satisfaction. *“She’s following the traditions, which will give me a chance to stop her. When she comes to her full powers, she could interfere and make sure the child is born in your time, the fifth century.”*

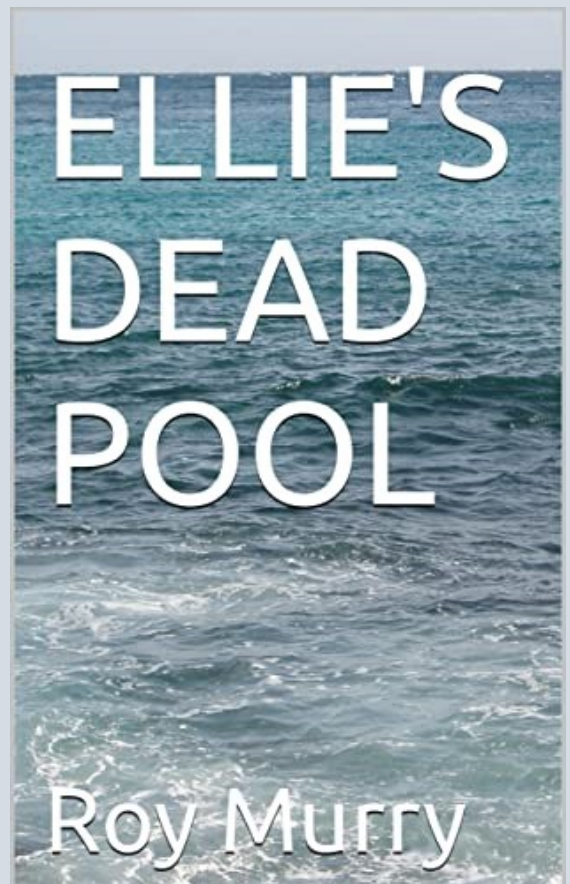
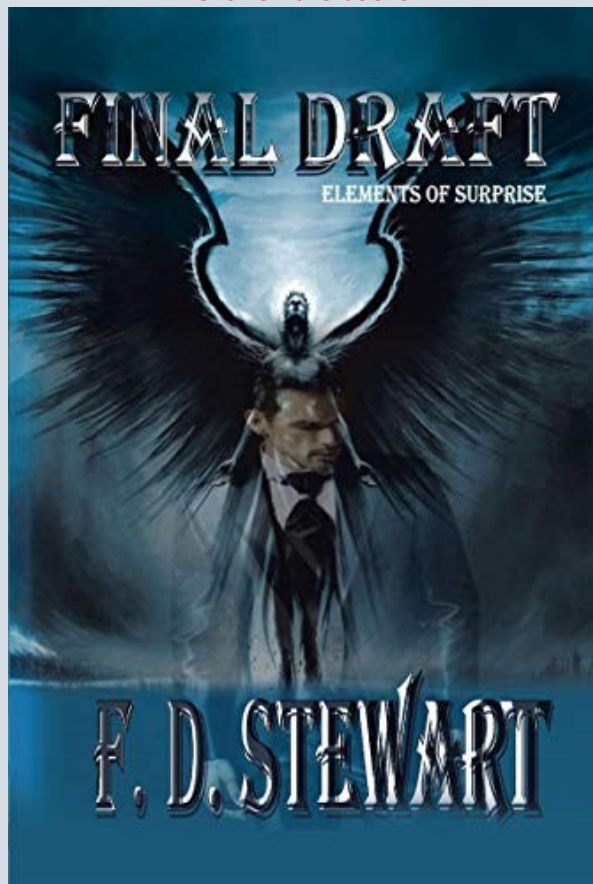
“We cannot let that happen. When the foretold date passes, and the child has not been born, the future as we know it will change, and we could be united again. Then, my love, we will rule the world together.”

“I’ve been waiting for this day for so long. I have trained the twins well. They will help me.”

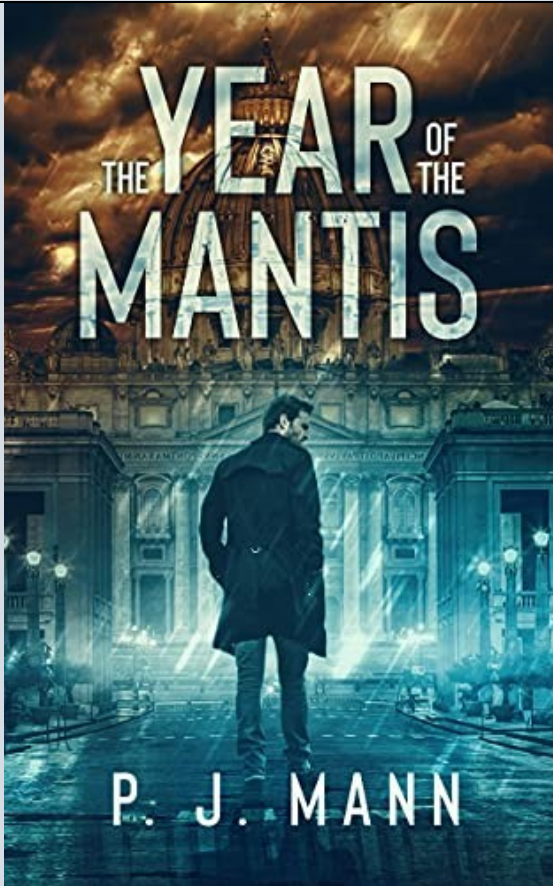
“Our future together will be worth the sacrifices you have made.”



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The Year of the Mantis



Mystery

A murdered executive. Key suspects with bulletproof alibis. Can a headstrong investigator catch the killer before the trail disappears?

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

Remaining alone in the apartment, after Luciano and Giulia left, Maurizio walked toward the couch, waiting for the forensic team to reach the apartment from the garage to continue their search.

He started to analyze some details of the crime, beginning with the discussion he had with the two closest people to the victim. *The ex-wife, although she was the one to have a good motive, has a bulletproof alibi, the son didn't have any apparent reason to kill his father, he ruminated. He remained to live with him after the divorce; if there was resentment or desire to revenge for the offense to his mother, he would have also decided to stay with her. Yet, we need to confirm his alibi being close to the crime scene.*

He shuffled on his feet, as he finished writing in his notebook his first impressions. The door opening forced him to return from his thoughts, and Forensic Inspector Leonardo Romizi, leading the forensic team that reached the place, entered the apartment, glancing around. “You haven’t touched anything, have you?” he asked, noticing Maurizio’s hands not wearing the mandatory latex gloves.

“I was here writing in my notebook; I think I’ve done my work long enough to remember that detail.”

Forensic Investigator Romizi shrugged, “Just checking.”

“What are your first impressions? Is there anything interesting about the way Mr. Calvani was murdered?” Maurizio strolled toward Leonardo, placing the notebook in his pocket.

“Yes, and everything seems to point at a case that won’t be easy to solve. He was killed with a single shot to the head from a very close range. We found only one shell, meaning that the gun wasn’t a revolver,” he said, raising the clear-sealed bag which contained it. “We will have to perform the ballistic models to see from which position he was shot, whether the assassin was waiting for him in the car or outside of it. There are so many points on the dynamic that need to be clarified, and hopefully, the surveillance camera installed will for once be helpful to get more information about the killer.”

The rest of the team started to collect samples and items from the apartment, particularly from the studio, where Claudio was running part of his business life.

Suddenly an elderly woman in her sixties arrived, peeking from the door, hesitatingly looking around. “Ma’am!” Maurizio exclaimed, pacing toward her to avoid having an intruder. “This place is restricted now. You can’t come inside.”

“I’m sorry, but I live here on this same floor. You can’t pretend people won’t get interested in what’s going on here,” she protested, exiting the apartment. “What happened? Did you find the man dealing with drugs?”

Narrowing his eyes, trying to understand whether there was something to extract from her question, he walked her to a corner of the stairs. “Mr. Calvani was found dead this morning. Have you heard anything that can help us?”

The woman gasped, bringing a hand to her mouth. She could have guessed everything except something serious like a murder. “Detective, do you think there’s a murderer who can threaten all of us?”

“No, I’m certain this was connected directly to Mr. Calvani. You can be sure nobody is after any of the other residents in this building. But if you heard any noise, something strange, please don’t keep it for yourself, every piece of information can be vital, even the smallest,” he insisted, knowing she could have been the right person who keeps track of every move the people living on the same floor make, if not in the whole block.

“I am a person who minds her own business. I don’t put my nose in issues that don’t concern me,” she said proudly, inflating her chest. “Nevertheless, this morning, I heard Mr. Calvani returning later than usual. When he comes back in the night, the slightest noise echoes like a peal of thunder, and I got awakened by the slamming of the door.”

“Hmm... how did you know it was Mr. Calvani and not his son or someone else?” He knew the answer, but he always loved to tease a bit with those *I-mind-my-own-business* people who always know everything about everybody. In many cases, they were intrusive presences, but when a crime is committed, they could be a blessing for the Police. They are sometimes better than a surveillance camera because they hold information nobody else knows.

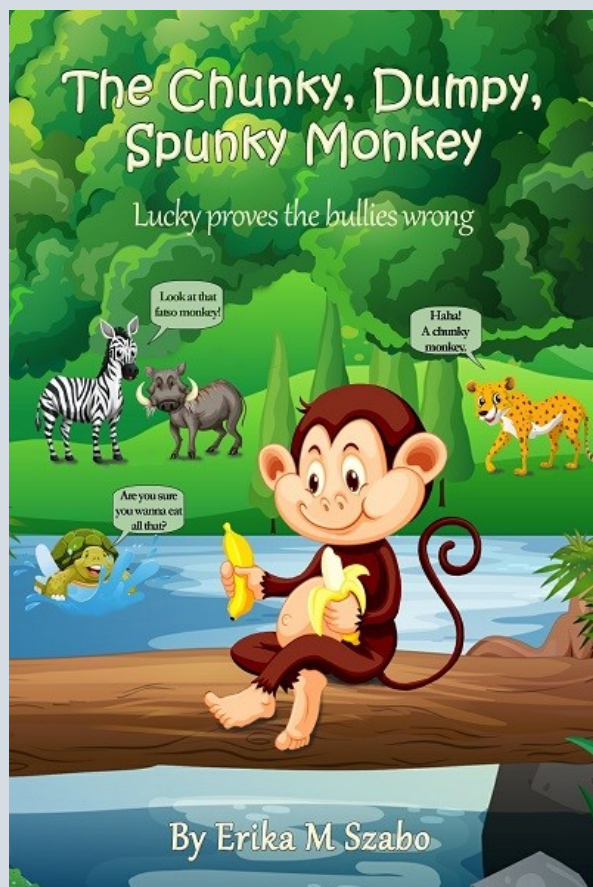
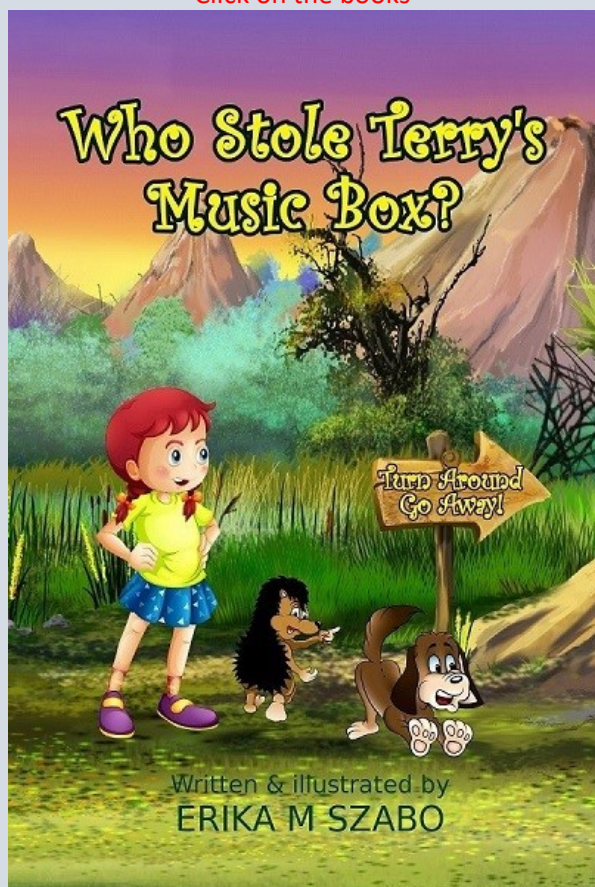
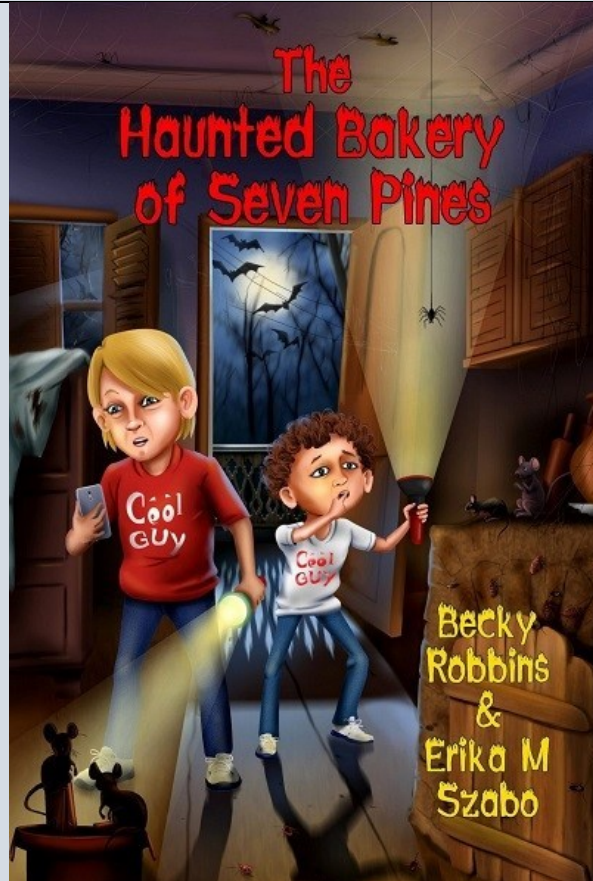
“Look,” she said, pointing at the door on the other side. “Here is Bruna’s apartment. She’s a friend of mine and lives alone. She’s not used to going out for clubs,” Her finger moved to another door. “There, lives the Magliani’s family. They go to work early, and they have two toddlers, so if they were going somewhere at that time of the night, they would have been together for some emergency.”

Maurizio’s face lightened, amused, “Yes, but it could have been Luciano, the son of Mr. Calvani...”

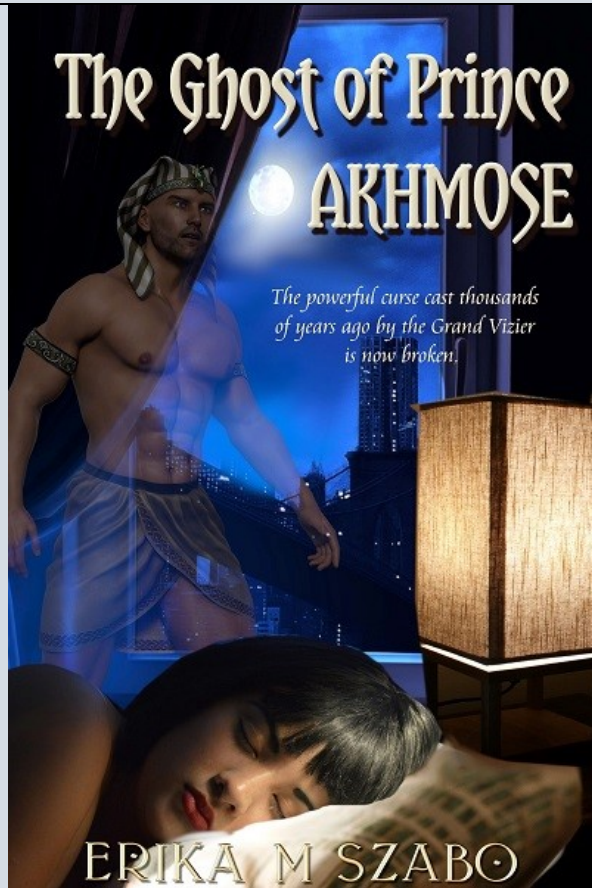
“No-no-no. No, sir!” She shook her head, closing her eyes. “The boy is going to university and goes to sleep early. He was listening to music and then switched on the TV, so he wasn’t the one who returned at the wee hours in the morning.” She got closer to Maurizio as to avoid being heard by indiscreet ears. “He came home at three o’clock, but after a few minutes, he got out once again, after receiving a phone call.



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The Ghost of Prince Akhmose



Supernatural fantasy

A young Egyptologist breaks the ancient curse and frees the ghosts of Prince Akhmose. Can Prince Akhmose finally cross into the afterlife? Or perhaps, because of the charms of the mortal woman, he doesn't want to

[EBOOK PRINT AUDIOBOOK](#)

Present time

The old church bell chimed twelve times, the sound echoed through the silent museum, weaving its way into Layla's half-dark studio. Akhmose stretched and sat up feeling groggy and disoriented. He looked around the large room that was lit by the full moon through the window. *Where am I? What is this strange place?* he thought, feeling confused. *How did I get here?*

He looked toward the window. The pale moon and the chirping sounds of the night birds and insects spoke of serenity. Akhmose stood up and started walking toward the window but felt as if he was walking on air. Looking down at his legs, he realized that his feet didn't touch the ground. Startled, he concentrated on standing with feet firmly on the ground. When he descended, he felt the floor under his bare feet. *What is going on? Am I dreaming?*

As his eyes adjusted to the moonlight, he looked around and saw a sarcophagus in the middle of the room. *How strange. This place doesn't look like a burial chamber.* He walked back to the sarcophagus and dropped his

hand to the surface, only to watch his fingers sink into the solid wood with no resistance. Yanking his hand back, he stared at the large sarcophagus in total confusion. He could see the face painted on the exterior, and at that moment, he realized that the sarcophagus was made for him. *But I'm not dead. I'm dreaming.* He sighed in relief. *That's it! This place is not a burial chamber and can't be the beautiful place of the afterlife, the Sekhet-Aaru. And besides, even if I were dead, the sarcophagus shouldn't be closed, not until my body was placed inside.*

“Where am I?” His voice echoed in the room, but it was only met with silence. Panic started to set in, not knowing why he was brought to this strange place. He buried his face in his hands and felt the smooth skin and muscles beneath. *My body feels solid and real, yet everything around me feels as soft as clouds. Why?*

His steps made no sound as he walked toward the walls. Shelves upon shelves were filled with papyrus rolls but they looked old and faded. He saw strange symbols painted on small paper squares, but he couldn't read them. None of the figures made any sense. He felt anxious and lost.

Then, he saw colorful hieroglyphics. They were so clear and real and beautiful. *Whoever painted them must have been schooled by a really great teacher.* He tried to unroll one of the papyri open, but his hands kept sinking into it. He gave up and turned away.

Suddenly, a bright light beam swept across the floor and then the walls. He froze as his eyes followed the light. Was it a sign? What caused this strange bright light? It looked to be as pure as the sun, but how could it be seen at night? Was he in the realm of the gods? Heavy footsteps approached, and he moved toward the sound. A large man in strange clothes held a torch that didn't burn with flames. *That's no torch with fire!* Akhmose decided. *How could they trap the sunlight in that small cylindrical object the man is holding?* The strange man looked old and worn, paying no attention to him. Akhmose crossed his arms and commanded, “Tell me what this place is!”

His face burned when the man refused to reply, or even glance in his direction. How dare he? He was Akhmose, brother of the Pharaoh of Egypt!

He took a step closer to the man trying to avoid the bright light. Standing in front of the man, he shouted, “Can you hear me?”

The stocky looking man didn’t even blink. *What’s wrong with this man? Those who own this place, why are they employing the blind and deaf?* Akhmose sighed and leaned against the wall. He had given up on trying to get the man’s attention. All his life, few dared to ignore him, and even fewer who were not punished for said transgressions.

His gaze was drawn to the moon and smiled. He was in a place where nothing was familiar except the moon staring down at him. He tried to relax and ease the building tension. *A troubled mind attracts confusion, but a level head draws the solution.* His father had told him many times and it had always worked for him. He tried to make it work for him, again.

The bright light from the stranger’s torch landed on him briefly, and he wondered if the light was meant to harm him. He jerked backward by instinct, but when the light swept his body, he felt nothing. No heat on his skin, no burns from the light. It was nothing like the sun. Lost in his thoughts, Akhmose didn’t notice the man walking in his direction. When the stranger was a foot away from him, he didn’t stop. Before he could move, Akhmose felt the man go through his body—it felt like a gust of cold air.

The stranger drew a sharp breath. “A window must be open somewhere. It’s drafty in here,” he mumbled and shivered. Akhmose watched in horror and couldn’t understand a word he was saying. The man shined his flashlight on the shelves and continued his monologue, “This place is giving me the heebie-jeebies. I wish I could get a normal day job.” He quickly turned and started walking toward the door.

Surprised, Akhmose reached out and touched the man’s arm. “What did you do? How did you do that? How did you walk through me?” He pulled back in horror as his hand and fingers sunk into the man’s arm.

The guard yelled in fright, “Who’s there? Is there anybody there?” His eyes widened as he looked around the empty room. He turned and ran as fast as he could, his footsteps echoing down the long hall.

Akhmose followed the man who spoke in a strange tongue. He saw another man walking toward them in the long corridor. Sharp light wavered from his torch as he moved his hand.

“Earl! There’s a ghost in here! I’m getting the hell out of here.” The stocky man pointed at Layla’s workshop with shaky fingers.

“Don’t be stupid, man!” The taller man shook his head and groaned. “What are you going on about, there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

The shorter man stuttered, “No? Then you never had one touch you.”

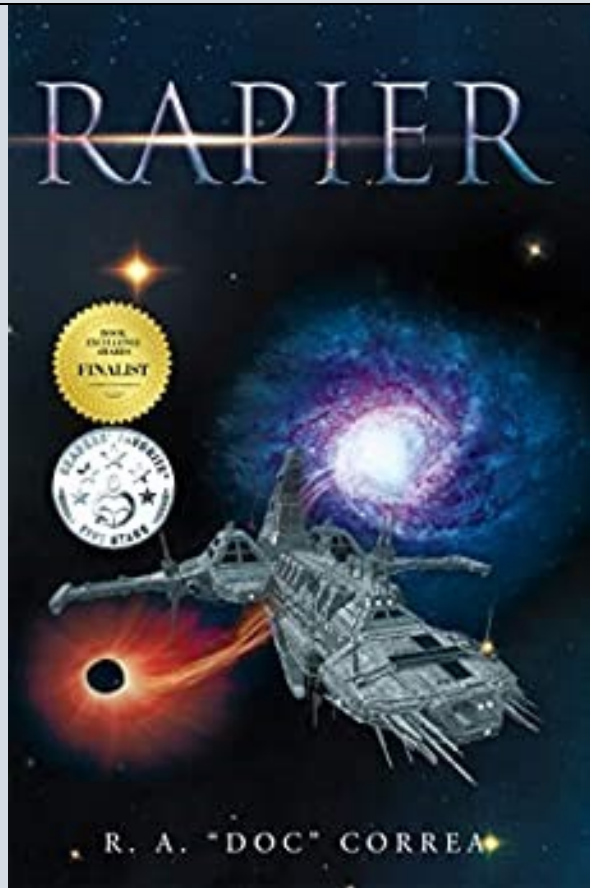
The taller man groaned and shivered. “Okay, let’s get out of here.”

I’m in a strange world and I don’t understand what these people are saying. Why am I here? Am I a ghost? Akhmose watched the men flashing their lights everywhere. He wondered who they were. They wore the same black outfit and looked more like watchers than thieves.

Akhmose shook off the uncertain feeling and began wandering. *I must find someone who speaks my language and explain to me what I’m doing here.* He walked from room to room and passage to passage until he came upon a large door. When he tried to grab the doorknob, his hand and arm floated through it. It was a strange experience. *Am I really a ghost? I can feel my body, but everything around me feels as if made of clouds.* Feeling more curious than scared, he pushed his foot through the thick door and when he didn’t feel pain or pressure, he rushed his entire body to find himself on wide, stone steps.

It must be a temple, Akhmose looked back at the building with tall pillars. He walked down the stairs and looked around in awe. Everything looked strange. He had never seen anything like it. The buildings were almost as tall as the pyramids and clustered together. He had never seen so many large buildings together. Marveling at the lights, shining from the top of long poles, he wondered. *There are so many people walking about. Why aren’t they sleeping? Only watchers and evil people move around after sunset. At least in the world, I knew.* Suddenly, he felt a rush of great power dragging him. Everything turned into a blur.

Rapier



Sci-fi adventure

Kathy Masters never expected to journey to the stars. When she does, she experiences the adventure of a lifetime.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

The *Rapier* moves cautiously through Russian space toward the US and Chinese sectors. As it approaches the border, it's detected by a Russian frigate. For five nerve-wracking days, the two ships play cat and mouse—the *Rapier* slipping cautiously away, the frigate trying to get eyes on it, both ships moving closer to contested space and other military units.

In this area of space, the Chinese and the Americans regularly have violent encounters, and when the shooting starts, ships of other nations in the area run like hell as both sides automatically engage ships they can't identify. Over the last nine years, about a dozen Russian ships had been lost, so the captain of the Russian frigate becomes as cautious as he can be. It gives the *Rapier* its opening to scoot out of Russian space and into American. Once several hundred kilometers into American space, the crew relaxes, and for a few days, everyone lets off steam.

This area had been overrun by the Chinese, but the Americans decided to fight for it, and they took it back. It's a topic the crew discusses in depth,

and the discussions all end with the same comments: why these people and not us, why fight for here and not Safe Port?

The *Rapier* eventually docks at Omega 4 Beta, more commonly called Reavers Cove. When the *Rapier* arrives, three pirate ships and another privateer are also docked there. One of the pirate ships is the *Raven*, captained by Black Jack Bartholomew.

The captain authorizes a shore leave rotation and strongly cautions the crew to avoid trouble with the other crews, reminding them that some of these people really are bad men. When it's Kathy's turn to go "ashore," the captain and Mr. Gibb are waiting. The captain says, "Come along, ladies, we have a special treat for you."

The five of them, Captain Black, Mr. Gibb, Kathy, Cindy, and Lien, head to the far edge of town, away from the docks. High on a cliff overlooking the sea is an old inn. It's a breathtaking setting. Here among some of the least trustworthy people in the galaxy is an island of tranquility with a lovely garden, a scenic overlook, and great food. For two days, no Chinese, no raids, no being hunted, just blissful peace.

Kathy and Cindy buy swimsuits and go down to the beach. Lien is too shy for a swimsuit; she sits under an umbrella on the beach, watching. The two of them splash around in the water, play in the surf, and swim a bit. When they come back to the shore, they see two men sitting on blankets, watching them. They're wearing shorts and Hawaiian shirts, sipping drinks.

It takes a moment, then Kathy realizes it's Captain Black and Mr. Gibb. They look totally out of their element, and for the first time since she's known them, they seem completely at ease. They wave Kathy and Cindy over, pour Kathy a drink, and give Cindy a soda. Kathy takes a sip; it's a strawberry margarita. Lien comes over and joins them. She has a Coke as well. Even Lien seems at peace. The five of them sit on the beach, take turns playing with Cindy in the surf, watch the waves wash in, muse as the clouds drift by, and watch the birds fly overhead. Well, the planet's equivalent of birds.

While the captain and Cindy are playing in the surf, Mr. Gibb starts talking to Kathy as Lien listens in.

“The captain and I used to be explorers—adventurers, if you will. Whenever we returned to Safe Port, we’d regale our families with tales of our adventures. Often my Aunt Jenny would be at these get-togethers.”

“Is that where the captain met her?” Kathy asks.

“No, they grew up as neighbors. At that time the captain and uncle Marty treated her like a little sister, the captain was eight years older than Jenny. After they graduated from school the captain was doing field work for the magazine he and uncle Marty owned, and aunt Jenny was often out on her own searching for subjects for her work, so they seldom saw each other. Then she was dating Uncle Marty, so the captain never approached her. She was six years older than my mother. I was eighteen then. I believe my mom was thirty-nine.”

“So your aunt was forty-five then.”

“Yes. Aunt Jenny was an adventurer in her own right. An artist, a painter, as I remember. Though Uncle Marty was in love with her, she was too much of a free spirit. For her, Marty was too uptight. Soon she stopped seeing him. But the captain, he fascinated her. All the adventures we had, all the exotic places, unknown animals. She just couldn’t get enough of him.”

“Oh,” Kathy replies.

Mr. Gibb grins at her. “Yes, she was a lot like you. Anyway, soon they started dating, and within a year, they were married. That broke Uncle Marty’s heart. But the captain and Aunt Jenny were so in love they were sure Uncle Marty would come to accept it.”

“She was kind of old to have a baby, wasn’t she?”

“That’s what they thought. They even planned to adopt. But there was a surprise—some say a miracle—and Aunt Jenny got pregnant. It was a rough pregnancy because of her age, but with the captain’s help, she made it through, and little Mary was born.”

“How old was she when the Chinese came?” Kathy asks.

“Four,” Mr. Gibb responds.

“Oh my god,” Kathy says.

The captain and Cindy are returning, so Mr. Gibb changes the subject. The rest of the afternoon is spent frolicking on the beach. Dinner is excellent. The inn’s chef knows his business and could give Cookie competition.

After dinner, the five of them talk for hours, tell stories, talk about what they’d like to do when the contract is up, and express thoughts about the future. Even Lien participates. Later Lien, Cindy, and Mr. Gibb go to bed. The captain and Kathy stand out on the inn’s veranda. The stars are spread brightly across the night sky. Starlight causes the breakers to sparkle as they crash onto the beach.

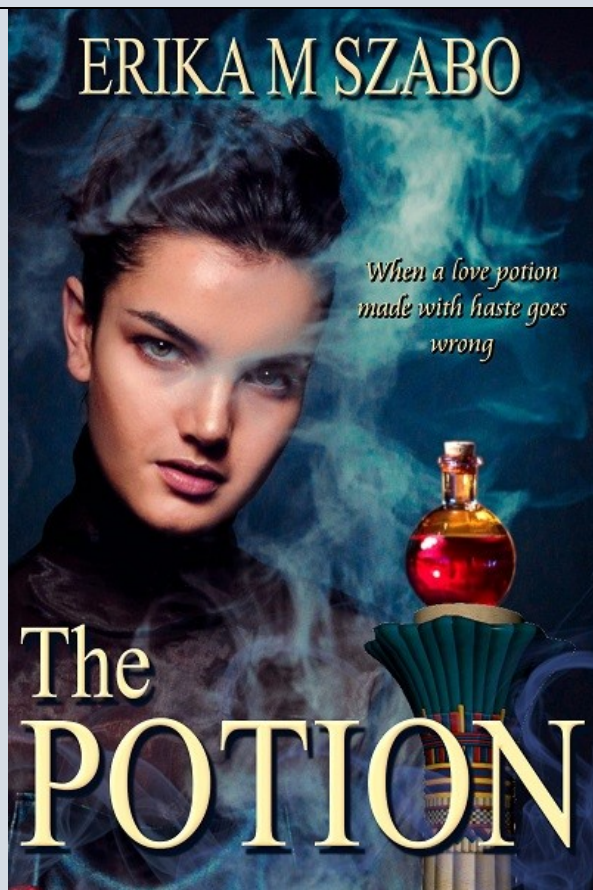
“Miss Masters, you light up the night better than the stars,” Captain Black tells her. Kathy blushes. She’s at a loss of what to say.

The inn’s sound system plays an old song that can be heard in all the common areas. Captain Black takes her hand and leads her to the middle of the floor. He takes her in his arms and guides her across it. Captain Black is an excellent dancer. Kathy feels she’s drifting above the floor, her feet barely touching it.

It gets late, and the Captain walks her to her cabin. He leans down and kisses her on the cheek, opens her door for her, bows, and says, “I had a lovely time, Miss Masters. Sweet dreams.” Then he turns and heads to his cabin.

Cindy and Lien are sitting on the bed. They start giggling when she comes in. Kathy’s face turns red as she enters the room, which just makes the other girls giggle harder.

The Potion



YA supernatural fiction

A potion made with haste out of jealousy puts Dorian into a coma, but the rare orchid that could save his life is fiercely guarded by werewolves in the forbidden forest. The journey that will test their loyalty and courage.

[EBOOK AUDIOBOOK](#)

When Olivia passed the entry exam and was accepted as an apprentice into the Coven, it was the best day of her life. Her father and grandmother had been preparing her since she was a little girl, despite the objection of her mother. Her parents were happy together and lived in harmony, except for occasional fights between them about the family tradition.

Her mother, Gloria, objected. “Why does she have to be a witch? I’m not, and we’re happy!”

“Because this is our family tradition, and you knew it when you married me. Remember?” Xavier, Olivia’s father, patiently replied.

“Why did you marry me? You knew I was different and never wanted anything to do with witchcraft.”

“Because the blue butterfly told me,” Xavier said.

“A what? Are you losing your mind?” Gloria asked, feeling alarmed and concerned.

“I never told you this...because I never wanted you to look at me the way you’re looking at me now.” He bowed his head and swallowed hard. He then looked into his wife’s eyes and continued, “My family is protected by guardians, and they communicate with us by making different colored butterflies appear to show us the right path. The blue butterfly they sent me the day I met you was to show me that we were soulmates.”

“That’s so sweet! Scary, but sweet. And yes, we are soulmates, darling. But I don’t remember seeing a butterfly,” she said, staring at her husband.

“Only we can see them. They function as detectors of people’s intentions. You’re a good, honest, and loyal person. That’s why the guardians showed me the blue butterfly.”

“Aw... But still, Olivia doesn’t have to be a witch,” she protested weakly, folding her arms across her chest.

“I told you before we got married that our children will join the Coven when they turn eighteen, and you agreed,” Xavier argued.

“Yes, but...but I was hoping you’d change your mind,” his wife replied in a quieter tone of voice. “Okay, okay! It’s just... I don’t have to like it.”

“You should be proud of her, honey. She did very well on the entry exam. She’ll be a great witch.”

“I’m proud of her, and I know she wants to follow in your footsteps. It’s just, I had a different future in mind for her. She loves science, and I was hoping she might want to follow that path.”

“And she will. She can be a great scientist or researcher, and a witch, too.”

Candice enjoyed being popular and never really wanted to become a witch, but because her grandmother insisted, she applied for the apprenticeship. Her mother was absent most of the time, following fleeting dreams and ideas. The only steady person in Candice’s life was her grandmother.

Although Candice passed the entry test, which made her grandmother happy, she was more interested in partying than studying spells and potions.

The idea of following the strict rules and studying all the time bored her, but her interest flared when she found out Dorian had joined the Coven as well.

She preferred partying with the athletic boys of the football team, but when she noticed that Olivia and Dorian were developing more than a friendship, she grew jealous of their closeness and quiet happiness. She wanted to be happy like them; she wanted him. She tried starting conversations with him, asked him to go to a party with her, and asked him to study potions and spells with her. Dorian gave her a polite excuse every time.

Feeling frustrated, Candice confided in her grandmother. “They’re spending all their free time together and started dating! How could he like her? She’s so plain and weird. Okay, she’s a caring person, but still. I’m a cheerleader and the prettiest girl in school. How could he not like me?”

“You’re the prettiest, love,” her grandmother cooed, hugging her. “He’s interested in her, so leave them be. There are other boys. Looks like the family curse follows you too like a shadow.” Her grandmother sighed.

“What curse?” Candice asked.

“We’re cursed with always wanting what we can’t have.”

“No, Grandma! I want him! I want him to go on a date with me, to return my feelings. I want to be his girlfriend, but no, he had to ask Olivia, sweet and boring Olivia. All she cares about is school and being boring. I’m popular and full of zest for life. What does she have that I don’t have?”

“Nothing, dear. She’s just a plain and boring girl, just like her grandma was. They make a good pair; Dorian is not an interesting person either. Even if he’d have asked you out instead of Olivia, you’d grow bored with him in no time.”

“No, Grandma. I want him! I’ll find a way to make him fall in love with me.”

“And, the family curse continues...” the old lady muttered under her breath, feeling sad and frustrated.

Etta's Fishing Ground



Women's literary fiction

Just as a whirlwind courtship derailed Momma's beat-poet dream of hightailing it to North Beach in the Fifties, a badass drifter veers Etta away from seeking haven in the artists' hub of Greenwich Village during the Seventies.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

A head turn and double take in reaction to an innocuous, inquisitive glance of her surroundings precluded Muriel from taking another bite out of her bacon cheeseburger. Medium-well, the way she ordered it. Blindsided. Swallowing a pulpy mixture of beef and curly fries, her mind calculated the whys and wherefores which didn't add up.

Sitting across from Muriel at a booth by the window overlooking an area of the restaurant's parking lot, and oblivious to his wife's drained complexion, Obie tore into a giant roast beef. Sliced thin and piled high on a grilled bulky roll. Medium-rare, the way he ordered it. Preferring to skip the amenities of conversation during dinner, or just about any day-to-day activity with Muriel, he kept his thoughts to himself.

Gawd, how annoying!

Her shrillness went through him like a dentist's drill. At least he salvaged all of his teeth through root canals and implants, which is more than he could say for Muriel. He shivered, unhinged by the mental cruelty of her slipping

under the covers after removing her dentures and depositing them in a glass on the nightstand.

Gawd, how disgusting!

Far be it from him to dispel what most of the diehards and blowhards he fraternized with thought of Muriel. *What a catch!* A financier's daughter and serial beauty pageant contestant during Nixon's administration. She could still work the room by plying her wares of rigid poise, contrived personality, brittle beauty, and artificial intelligence. Such a winning combo made her a customer-favorite, slinging hash at the State Line Diner, so named, when it moved to Foster in the '70s, until wiped out by fire on February 6, 2015. The charred remains of a local truck stop renamed Cherri's State Line Diner when it came under new management in 2010, became an eyesore, still under investigation. The date of its baptism by fire etched itself in Obie's brain because it portended Muriel's termination which impinged on a retired patrol officer's autonomy around the house.

Aw! Muriel wasn't to blame. Hell, by the time your sixties crept up on you, old age held you up like a bandit, robbing you of the goods that made you attractive and appealing to each other in the first place. Foster's Police Department alumnus, Obediah Smith, maintained his trim physique by frequenting the gym. Looked upon favorably by most females, including his old flame, Carolyn Farnum—Obie looked back, discreetly sizing up their composite sketches.

Thus far, no one compared to his wife's best friend, Etta. *Now, there was a catch!*

Hark! Muriel perforated the airspace between them by vocalizing. *Gawd dammit!* He begrudged making eye contact to acknowledge her breach of social etiquette as she craned her neck to get a better view above and beyond his head.

"Don't turn around," she cautioned. "But, you'll never guess who just came out of the bar and is walking toward the door, looking pleased as Punch!"

"You're right, Muriel. And, I've no intention of guessing either."

Before she disclosed her subject, Obie bit into the bottom portion of his sandwich. Muriel leaned forward, forcing him to look a gift set of knockers in the mouth. On their high horse, they strained against the fabric of a tank top, bolstered by a push-up bra.

“Keith!”

Well now! A horse of a different color!

He swallowed hard and hastily. As a result, a remnant of roast beef lodged in his throat. He guzzled most of his cola to wash it down. In the time it took to set the glass back on its coaster, Obie assumed a straight face. No need to tip off Muriel that she piqued his interest in Etta’s other half. As far as he knew, the bugger was supposed to be fishing all weekend along the Ponaganset River, 12 miles away from Chelo’s Hometown Bar & Grille at the Apple Valley Mall in Greenville. Muriel knew it too.

“He’s with another woman!”

Aside from spasmodic choking, Obie kept his lips sealed while harboring evil intent toward Muriel for failing to fulfill his needs. Gawd, give me liberty or give her death, and I’d be pleased as Punch!

Muriel leaned back against the booth, rattled by her vision. For Etta’s sake. He couldn’t bring himself to take another bite, addled by her admission. For Etta’s sake.

Keep your friends close. Keep your wife’s best friend the closest of all, if you genuinely care for her.

The silence he so coveted between them had come with a price at Etta’s expense, and grew burdensome in accordance with its discomfort. Assuming Muriel couldn’t identify the other woman, he counted on her providing a physical description, either voluntarily or with prompting.

As the roast beef under his nose turned cold, he sensed the four of them approaching the point of no return in the infrastructure of their friendship and the bonds of matrimony. His dire premonition mandated he nail down stats for future reference, if needed. Obie had a feeling he would.

To his relief, Muriel found her tongue. “She kinda reminds me of Etta.” Catching the implied accusation from her husband’s raised eyebrow, she set him straight. “It’s not Etta! She’s slender like Etta, but taller. She fixes her hair like Etta when she pins it up in a messy bun.”

Jack shit! That’s what Muriel’s thumbnail sketch was worth! Gawd, could she get any vaguer?

A former officer of the law who wrote many a narrative report, he dealt strictly with factual details. For instance, when conducting a routine traffic stop, he’d run information from a driver’s license through the dispatcher. With no such windfall forthcoming, Obie had to rely on his only eyewitness whose observations ran aground in generalities.

Taking in his wife’s sideswept, wavy bob with mahogany streaks, he sought to uproot a significant detail from a woman who tried too hard in making herself attractive. For all of her razor-edge chic, she missed the mark with him. Unlike Etta, who threw herself together like a vintage Hippie chick and transmitted the faint scent of lavender whenever she got close to you. So, in an attempt to snag a physical trait and downplay its importance, he feigned attentiveness to the petrified slices of roast beef, while pursuing a topic of interest.

“Is her hair color similar to Etta’s?”

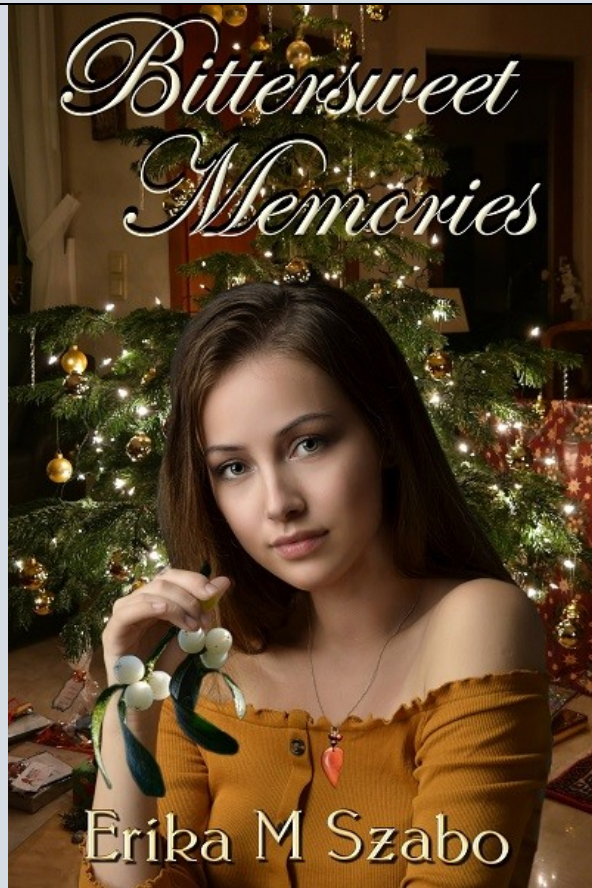
“No, I’d say it’s a honey-brown shade.”

For Gawd’s sake, the exact description he’d have used for Etta’s.

The meager margin for error eroding, he had to set the ground rules as soon as their waitress left the tab, and before Muriel used the restroom. He intended to tailor his remark to the unwritten code of ethics among guys—your friend cheats on his woman, you take it to your grave.

When both declined dessert, the waitress threw down the gauntlet and walked away. Face-off. “Muriel, this stays between us and goes no further. Nearly destroying Etta once in her lifetime should be enough for you!”

Bittersweet Memories



Sweet romance

Growing up in foster homes, Elana couldn't make emotional connections with anyone. Until she met Luca. Cruel fate allowed them a short happiness and tore them apart. Will they meet again?

[EBOOK AUDIOBOOK](#)

On that stormy Christmas Eve twenty-two years ago, a young woman trudged through the unforgivingly cold winds of downtown New York City with a bundle of rags held tightly to her chest. Glass beads of frozen tears clung to the exposed skin of her face. The woman, slightly dazed and clearly distraught, shuffled aimlessly through the snow that clotted the empty sidewalk.

She was uncertain how long she had been pushing her way through the whirling snow, but her raw cheeks were evidence of the stretch of time and the ferocity of the wind. To anyone driving by, she appeared to be just another homeless person: one of the city's many untouchables caught in the fierce weather, trying to find shelter. They'd give her a callous look and go about their business.

The woman, guided by her numb feet, walked, and walked until the dim light of a steeple shone through the fluttering blankets of falling snowflakes. Slowly, she approached the steps leading up to the door and stopped.

“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed, lightly rocking the bundle of rags from side to side. “I’m alone, and I have nowhere to go. You’ll be better off without me.” Her soft crying was captured in the air as tufts of tiny ice beads—dissipating clouds of unfathomable despair. They would momentarily hover about her face like a thin mask before being swallowed up by the passing gusts of wind from the barren street.

Slowly, she knelt and set the bundle of rags carefully onto the cathedral step. With warm tears running cold as soon as they leaked down her trembling cheeks, she traced her footsteps back down the street and disappeared into the storm. Never to return.

A few minutes later, a priest of the church stepped out onto the front steps. “Good Lord! It’s cold tonight,” Father Brown, a tall, middle-aged man murmured while tossing his long scarf over his shoulder. He shoved his boney hands into the pockets of his long coat and took a moment to silently view the whitewashed buildings with awe. They stood like monolithic snowdrifts, rows of naked windows gleaming with ice, like the eyes of a frozen spider.

Father Brown was on his way to a homeless shelter across town to help with the preparation of Christmas Day dinner. Having no family of his own, it brought him more joy to be surrounded by those in need than to be cooped up in the church all night watching old movies on the ancient black and white TV set in his bedroom. Though he rather enjoyed Jimmy Stewart’s performance in the classic film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, he’d seen the movie at least fifty times by now, and serving the unfortunate souls would be a better use of his time. The smiles on their faces, as warm and inviting as the turkey and mashed potatoes he was lucky enough to serve, was more than he ever could have asked for on this holiest of days. Pulling his hand out of his jacket to check his wristwatch, he realized that if he wanted to catch the late bus to the shelter, he’d have to get a move on.

Hurrying down the church steps, he nearly stumbled. He looked down and saw the bundle of rags resting on the bottom step. At first thought to be trash, the priest sidestepped to walk around the heap of clothing when, suddenly, he

heard a weak moan emanating from the bundle of rags, muffled by the layers. Curiously kneeling to get a better look, he nearly screamed when the rags began to shiver and move at his touch.

That's when he realized something living was wrapped up inside. Fearing the worst, he quickly scooped up the bundle and brought it into the protective walls of the cathedral. Clutching the rag bundle to his chest, he made his way to the nearest pew and slowly set it down, whispering a prayer. Under the glow of various lit candles and assisted by the borrowed white light of the full moon leaking through the stained windows, the priest quickly undid the bundle of cloths.

Lying inside the cocoon of dirty rags was a newborn baby. Still pruned, with dried blood covering her skin and matted hair, her blue eyes rolled listlessly, and dry lips slightly parted to expose purple gums and a swollen tongue.

"Sweet Mother Mary!" Father Brown gasped, reflexively tracing the holy symbol of the cross on his body as he raced his way back to his office. Once inside, his shaking hands grasped the phone on his desk and dialed 9-1-1.

"Yes, I need an ambulance sent to St. Patrick's Cathedral immediately," the priest begged, cold sweat breaking out across his forehead. "I have a dying newborn here. Please, hurry!" Abruptly ending the call, he raced back out to the pew and held the baby in his arms. It hurt his soul to look at the child, shriveled and clinging to life, but he forced his eyes to meet hers.

"Don't worry, little one," he said, cradling the dying baby tightly in his arms to keep her warm. "God is watching over you now."

The ambulance arrived at the church not ten minutes later, and the newborn was immediately rushed to a local hospital. The baby was at the brink of death. She was severely dehydrated, and hypothermia had set in, making her breathing shallow and heartbeat slow.

Unable to trace the parents or relatives of the baby, the hospital contacted child services and arranged for the little girl to be placed in foster care, once she was in better health.

Under the watchful care of doctors and nurses, after fighting a series of infections and neonatal abstinence syndrome because of the drugs she was exposed to in the womb, she slowly recovered. The nurses adored the tiny baby and held her in their arms, cooing to her as much as their busy schedule allowed. By the hospital rules her name was Baby Girl, but the nurses named her Elana.

She was cleared by the hospital a little more than three months later and was assigned a social worker and given an official name: Elana Smith.

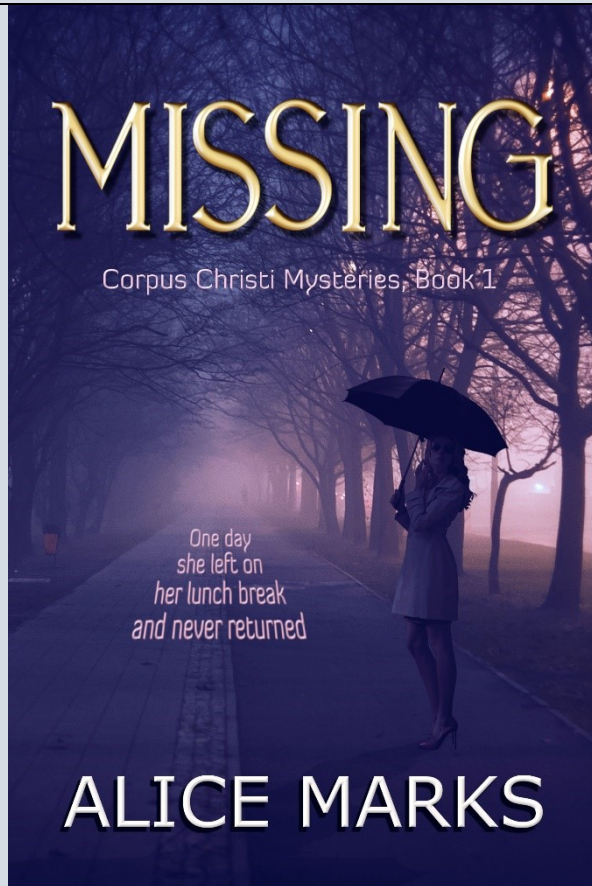
Elana spent the first ten years of her life in the foster care system, bouncing from temporary housing to temporary housing. She'd spent the first two years of her life in and out of hospitals when she'd have a chance to be adopted. Her tiny body fought the addiction to drugs she'd been fed in the womb by her mother, and her weakened immune system couldn't handle the series of infections without antibiotics and supportive treatments. Nobody wanted a sickly child and even most foster parents couldn't cope with the constant care she required.

Later, when she got stronger and healthier, even at a very young age, Elana learned the drill. She'd been through the system so many times by then that she got used to sleeping in different places every couple of months or so. New rooms, new families. Her life felt like a revolving door of shattered hopes and hidden disappointments. None of the families Elana was paired with were bad, and neither was she a bad child, but by the time either of them could make an emotional connection, unfortunate circumstances made her move on to the next foster home.

Her chance of being adopted by a loving family got slimmer and slimmer as she got older. Most couples who wished to adopt wanted newborns or children only a few months old.

When she was ten years old, she was paired with her foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Whelk. They were loving and caring people and had opened their home for many other children in the past. The older couple whose love knew no bounds, after long years of trying to have a child of their own, gave up and decided to help unwanted and unfortunate children.

Missing



Crime mystery

Dr. Linda wonders if she ever knew her best friend while her husband carries a secret. Did either have anything to do with Rhonda's disappearance? Why did the stepsister leave town?

[EBOOK PRINT AUDIOBOOK](#)

Sandra Lewis gazed at her fragmented reflection in the cracked bathroom mirror. She yanked the brown scrunchie from her ponytail and freed voluminous blonde hair. An obscenity escaped her lips. Sandra recoiled. Rhonda never would have used such language. *Not Rhonda*, she mused. *So refined with her season tickets to the symphony, her designer clothing and her preference for upscale restaurants.*

How Sandra had loved Rhonda and everything she'd accomplished and accumulated as a successful family physician. She began to cry as she grieved the loss of that amazing woman with the townhouse and BMW. Though Sandra always would miss Rhonda, the doctor had to be eliminated. She admonished herself to stop blubbering. Time to get ready. "I'm Sandra Lewis, I'm strong. I don't waste time crying."

Some time ago the woman had decided if she found herself in trouble, she'd head for the border as fast as possible. Though uneasy about Mexico's widespread dangers, Sandra knew staying in South Texas would be far more

hazardous. She refused to follow in her wretched father's footsteps, footsteps that led straight to prison.

Teary in spite of herself, Sandra wished she could have kept Rhonda's car. *I've got to get past this. I'm lucky I found another car so quickly. It's 3:00 now; I should be on my way in a couple hours. All this will be behind me soon.*

The run-away needed to make certain preparations. From a plastic Wal-Mart bag Sandra took newly purchased barber scissors and sheared off her long tresses. As she checked out the short, feathered look achieved in spite of the flawed mirror, Sandra applauded her previous experience as a hairdresser. Removing a box of hair color from the same Wal-Mart bag, Sandra Dee Lewis transformed herself from a natural blonde to a natural-looking burnished toffee brunette.

"Now I don't look a thing like Rhonda. When they go looking for her, it will be a woman with long, blonde hair. I won't be mistaken for her and I can escape with ease!"

A vacant depression in the wall and a severed cord indicated it had housed a hairdryer. Sandra found she didn't need it. "Rhonda," she said, "I know the little patients love to feel your long ponytail. How they laugh when you flick it around and winny. But, girlfriend, being able to towel dry this 'do' is quite liberating!" Realizing she had referred to Rhonda in the present she added, "Not that it matters to you now."

Tears came, unbidden. "Oh, Rhonda, I'm so sorry." She sighed and summoned all her strength to do what had to be done next.

Sitting on the bed, she pawed through Rhonda's gym bag until she found a large envelope. She carefully read every word of the "Last Will and Testament of Rhonda L. Collins, M.D.". Rhonda had consulted a lawyer over three months ago during one of her spells of anxiety. She left everything to one described as her only relative, her sister, Sandra D. Lewis, with an address in Chicago, Illinois. No one in Texas but Rhonda had known about Sandra, and no one but Sandra knew the truth about Rhonda. The truth that ruined her.

The Chicago address belonged to Brian Cavendish. Sandra had used it for years because she always kept in touch with her old friend and one-time lover, now a married man. By the time Rhonda's estate would be settled years from now, no one would suspect the heir who lived in Chicago had anything to do with Rhonda's sudden absence in Corpus Christi. Her mind raced. *Someone's bound to remember Rhonda flew back to Chicago a few times. If her friends here find out about the will and its beneficiary, they'll know about her sister.* She continued to reassure herself. *Nonsense, girl, you're safe because no one ever met you. After all I pulled one over on Brian, brilliant Brian, eight years ago and he's never figured it out so why worry about anyone here.*

How she wished none of this had become necessary. It was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. Harder even than running away from home and never returning when she was fifteen.

"I blame that old bubble-headed Felicity," Sandra muttered, hands grasping her forehead with its throbbing pain.

Two separate voices in her mind bickered. *Someone in the office is bound to make the connection between the incident with Melanie's aunt and Rhonda's abrupt departure,* nags a quavering voice.

So what! Merely a case of mistaken identity," argues another surer voice.

The doubting frightened voice counters. *But you know how persistent that old bat can be.*

"Precisely why I did what I had to do," Sandra speaks out loud.

After that internal debate, one of many to come, Sandra's thoughts returned to the will. *I won't be able to collect what's rightly mine for a long time, but I'll be okay for now with the cash Rhonda got her hands on today. Good she tucked all that cash in the safety deposit box these past few months. A fantastic idea if I, who suggested it, do say so myself!*

Sandra dug in the gym bag again and pulled out the passport she needed for Mexico. Panic-struck when she saw the document belonged to Rhonda, she moaned, "I can't use this. They could have the border patrol looking for

her. I know I put mine in Rhonda's gym bag with the rest of the stuff from her purse." Pulse elevated, the panicked woman began a frantic search on hands and knees over the disgusting sour-smelling carpet. With no trace she again riffled through the gym bag and sighed with relief when this produced the needed passport. Using the barber scissors, she reduced Rhonda's to confetti. *No longer needed.*

She flushed this evidence down the toilet with more success than she had earlier when she tried to dispose of Rhonda's cellphone in a toilet at a Stripes convenience store. She remembered the incessant ringing as water swirled around the phone, refusing to swallow it.

At the same time as Dr. Linda Hernandez, Rhonda's colleague and best friend handed over a photo and a DNA laden hairbrush to the police department, Sandra overcome with headache and exhaustion, pulled down the spread and stretched out on the sheet. *It's not quite 5:30. I think I'll stretch out for a quick nap before my trip. Maybe get rid of this headache.*

The bolder Sandra voice persisted, *No! Hit the road. Don't waste any more time.*

But she's so tired, pleaded the other voice.

Ignoring the first voice, Sandra stretched out on the bed and wondered how a bed could be lumpy soft and hard at the same time. Suddenly she remembered that sensation. The mattress on the trailer house floor, the bed she had shared with her two little sisters in a no-count town in Arkansas. Sandra tried never to think about that part of her life, but the memory of the bed somehow comforted her. In spite of her nefarious deed, she had no trouble falling asleep.

Hours later she awoke with a start. The bedside clock, if right, said nearly 9:00. She switched on the television, listened to a teaser for the one station that had 9:00 PM news. A growling stomach reminds her how long it had been since she'd eaten. Noticing a card with the number for Domino's taped to the telephone, she ordered a small pepperoni and mushroom pizza, Rhonda's favorite. *You influenced me in so many ways. Dr. Rhonda.*

Hugs, Love, and Great Karma

Hugs - Love and Great Karma



Cindy J. Smith

Poetry

Too many people are feeling lost and disillusioned. Cindy believes that, despite the hate and cruelty that surrounds her, beauty can be found if we look for it. In this collection of poems, she shares her belief that a smile or a bit of understanding can change the world. One act of kindness, one smile, brightens everything it touches.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

SCRIBBLED WORDS

Scribbled words upon a page
Share wounds of my heart and soul
In hopes they give voice to hidden ones
That are keeping others from being whole

Scribbled words upon a page
Offering a glimpse inside my dreams
Showing the world has potential
It need not be as evil as it seems

Scribbled words upon a page
Using ink to cast a magic spell
So others will finally realize
Love and happiness inside them dwell

Scribbled words upon a page
Is all my verses truly are
Sometimes just a light in a window
Reminds us home isn't very far

PROMISE ME

Don't promise me forever
For it's something you don't possess
Don't promise me the moon and stars
You have no means to access
Don't promise me all your love
For it must be shared to grow
Don't promise me you'll never leave
People change as time passes I know
Promise me your here and now
It is all you can truly give
Promise me you'll help me find
Myself and the life I'm meant to live

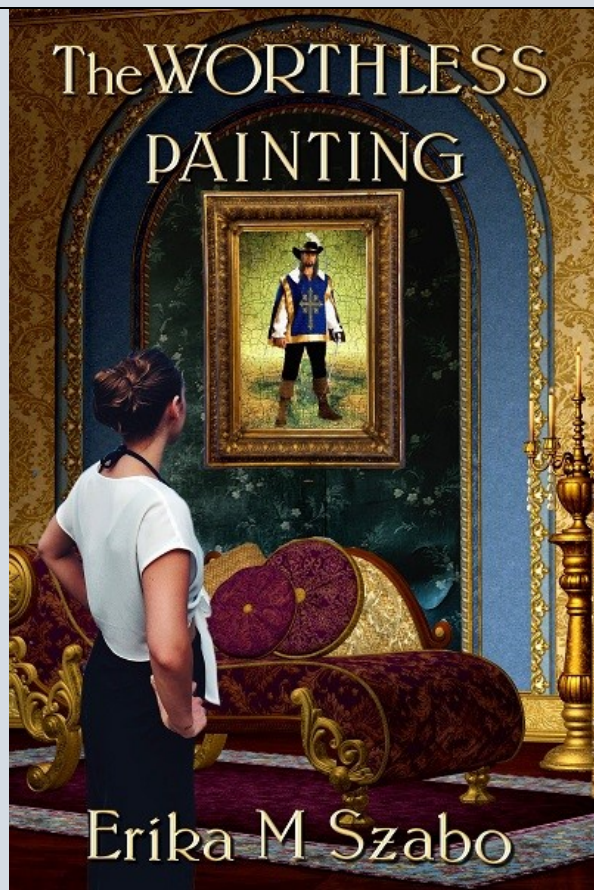
MAY THE SUN

May the sun rising at dawn reach inside of you
Lightening the darkness in your world
Its rays spreading warmth to melt the coldness,
The ice chamber that now encases your heart
As the pain of loss and betrayal breaks your will
May you find comfort and hope in its presence
Realizing it cares not what anyone says or does
It shines for all, free from the burden of self-doubt
The burden that weighs so heavy on your shoulders
Clouding your path to the future before you
May its brightness cut through the shadows
Guiding you to move forward, one step at a time
Your destiny lies ahead

STEPS

Every step you take whether confident or stumbling
Leads towards the reality that will become your future
Backward ones don't change the destination, just the time-frame

The Worthless Painting



Cozy small-town mystery

Danielle's life spins out of control when the snobbish woman brings a seemingly worthless painting into her antique shop. The town's future is threatened by the new owners of the Couture mansion when an unexpected visitor arrives.

[EBOOK AUDIOBOOK](#)

After changing in the backroom and making coffee to replace the one she spilled, Danielle stood by the wide window warming her fingers on the mug. She glanced at the bookstore that had a constant stream of people coming and going. Sometimes she wondered if she made the right decision by taking Sarah's advice. Although her store was slow, she had a lot of customers on weekends. So much so that Danielle changed her hours and closed the shop on Mondays and Tuesdays. The lull between customers, and the two days off, did give her time to do what she loved most, restoring antique art and paintings. Overall, it was a good decision. She was glad she had listened to Sarah.

When she finished her coffee, she walked to the well-lit corner of the store and pulled her long auburn hair into a ponytail. She put on her painting apron and sat down on the stool in front of her easel. She enjoyed painting landscapes as an amateur artist, and sometimes people bought her paintings when she displayed them in the store, which brought her a lot of joy. The painting was starting to come together but it was still missing something. The

composition was off, and Danielle couldn't figure out why. She stared at the canvas for a minute, sighed, and dipped her brush into the paint. Squinting her blue eyes in concentration she started to add details to the weathered oak tree, which was the focal point of her painting.

Sometime later the doorbell tinkled, and Danielle looked up from the canvas feeling disoriented. *Is it ten o'clock already? Then I've been painting for two hours.* "Good morning Mrs. Castle," she greeted her faithful customer with a smile.

"Good morning, dear. Did you get the furniture from the Couture house?"

"Yes, I did. There are some nice pieces, now I just need customers to buy them. Thank you for recommending me to the Couture family."

"Don't mention it, dear," Mrs. Castle waved her hand. "I stopped by after the funeral and talked to Gloria's daughter-in-law." She paused for a second and continued. "I never understood why that nice boy married such a persnickety person. His first wife, Elizabeth, was such an angel. Everyone loved her." She sighed. "Well, I heard from the real estate agent that she put the house on the market as it is, and I knew there was some nice furniture there, so I told her that if she doesn't want them, you might be able to sell some pieces."

"Her secretary called me, and I went up to the house on Sunday. I put everything in the storage room for now. Yes, I met her too." Danielle rolled her eyes. "When I told her that I couldn't pay her in advance, only as I sell things one by one and I keep thirty percent of the selling price, she said she didn't want any money. She just wants to get rid of the 'junk' before the new owners move in."

"Gloria, may she rest in peace, had some very valuable antique furniture and lots of paintings of the family. I guess her daughter-in-law packed up the valuable pieces to ship to France because I saw the truck up there." Mrs. Castle speculated.

"I'm glad they're not moving here, though." Danielle offered. "Everyone liked Gloria and her son, but this woman he married... stuck-up people don't

survive long in this town. I wonder who bought the house? We'll see," Danielle said and turned back to her painting.

The elderly woman nodded and started wandering up and down the crowded aisles of Danielle's store, as she did every week. Most of the merchandise was the same, but Mrs. Castle loved to browse while she chatted about her everyday life.

Danielle continued to paint and listened to Mrs. Castle's calming voice as she talked about the neighbor's cat leaving a dead mouse on her doormat. "I guess she was thanking me for the liver pate I made for her the other day," Mrs. Castle announced. "Betty always feeds her that awful store-bought cat food. The poor kitty was grateful, you should've seen her enjoying the liver pate. That reminds me, I'll stop at the butcher shop on the way home and make some more."

After she finished browsing and informed Danielle about her granddaughter's ballet recital in detail, just like every week, she handed Danielle a box of homemade cookies and headed toward the door. "See you next week," she said on her way out. Although she rarely bought anything, Mrs. Castle always told her friends about the treasures she'd seen in the store.

Danielle returned to her canvas enjoying the cranberry cookies. *These are delicious! I wish I had her talent for baking.* She stared at her painting feeling exasperated. The half-finished forest was giving her more trouble than her paintings normally did. She wasn't sure why the composition felt off. Briefly, she debated setting it aside and starting a new painting. *No. I'm not going to give up on it.* When she started the painting, she had a vision, and she was determined to put the vision on the canvas.

The chime of the doorbell broke her concentration. "I'll be right there," she called out. It was the mail carrier, Mr. Jones. He was an older gentleman with dark leathery skin from years of delivering mail in all kinds of weather. His mustache kicked up at the sides of his mouth when he talked, and it always made Danielle smile. Mail in hand he leaned on Danielle's counter. She knew he was ready to share some juicy gossip.

“Did you hear?” Mr. Jones asked with an excited twinkle in his eyes. “Some rich folks bought the old Couture mansion already. The house is haunted, I tell you. Since the old lady died, people hear weird noises coming from the house at night.”

“Nah, there’s no such thing as a haunted house, you know that.”

“I’m telling you, it’s haunted. The family put it on the market the day after the funeral and some rich people from the city bought it already. I saw the wife in the driveway this morning.”

“They live in France,” Danielle tried to trail the old postman’s thoughts. “I don’t think anyone in the family wants to move to a speck on the map town in New York from their mansions on the coast of the Riviera.”

“Is that so? How do you know?”

“Mrs. Castle told me. When Mrs. Couture’s son remarried, they moved to France, but Mrs. Couture refused to give up the house she lived all her life and stayed here.”

The doorbell chimed again, and they saw a middle-aged woman walking in. Danielle hadn’t seen her in the shop before. Her straight blond hair cut in a bob grazed her shoulders. Her designer handbag, shoes, and clothes all screamed of money. Danielle couldn’t imagine why she came to her small shop. Although she didn’t have too rare or expensive items, Danielle doubted a woman of her possible status would be interested in any pieces in her store.

“She’s the rich woman I was talking about,” Mr. Jones whispered as he leaned closer to Danielle. “The one who bought the Couture house.”

Standing by the door the woman pulled her designer looking sunglasses down her nose and peered around. “Are you the owner?” she called out looking at Danielle.

“Yes, I am.” Danielle smiled wondering what the rich-looking woman could be interested in a shop like hers.

“I’m Mrs. Van Bramer. I was told you’re the one who cleaned the junk out of my house. The builders found a painting, but it’s too pretty to throw it in the trash, so it’s yours if you want it.”

The 13th Hour, Again



Paranormal fiction

At the stroke of the thirteenth hour, Satan plans to impregnate a girl who turns thirteen on the day of Halloween to start Armageddon.

[EBOOK PRINT](#)

Three Sundays ago, on the thirteenth of October, 2019, at exactly thirteen minutes past 1:00 AM, a fiery meteor streaked across the chilly fall night sky in St. Louis, Missouri, hitting and totally destroying the block-long hospital of St. Alexius, or Alexian Brothers Hospital, as it was commonly called by the people of St. Louis.

Alexian Brothers Hospital had been the first hospital in St. Louis, founded and built in 1869 by Alexian Brother Bonaventure Thelen, a brother of a branch of the Franciscan order. The Alexian Brothers of the Alexian Brothers' order dedicated their lives to serving the poor and the ill. As the years passed, and as the population of St. Louis grew, more demand for medical treatment was needed. The hospital grew to its block-long status at 3933 S. Broadway Street, only a few miles south of historic Anheuser-Busch Brewery and still a few more miles south of downtown St. Louis.

Yes, the Alexian Brothers Hospital had a long and noble history with the city and with the people of St. Louis—even an infamous one, which shall be revealed shortly.

It was a most tragic event. 313 people were killed. 212 were employees of the hospital—doctors, nurses, technicians, aides. The rest of the people were patients—men, women and children of all ages and ethnicity: all of them killed, instantly vaporized, gone in a flash by the impact from that flaming Death star. All that remains there now is a deep crater; burned ground of black soot; rocks and boulders; the air for several miles around, thick with a smoldering fog, and an overwhelming stench of sulfur.

The entire city of St. Louis is in mourning, and receiving news coverage, help and condolences from around the world. This horror has affected the lives of many people, and the pain of it shall be felt for many years to come. But life goes on, doesn't it? It has to, regardless of the magnitude of the circumstances or suffering. Life endures, because man endures; and man endures, because life endures. What a topsy-turvy human comedy.

Five miles west of where Alexian Brothers Hospital once stood, in an old neighborhood, a block of old connecting business buildings built in the late 1930's stood. Above the long-shuttered dentist office that had been on the first floor, printed in large black block letters across the four tall, narrow, wooden-framed windows that faced the street below, read: **HURTS & MAYOR, PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS.**

Crusty, old, retired Homicide Police Detective James Hurts was happy with how those words in the window now read. Up until April of this year, only his name had been printed on the windows. But, one day in April, Tom Mayor had called Hurts and wanted to come back and be his partner once more—Hurts was beside himself with joy.

He wouldn't have freely admitted it, but when Tom had quit, Hurts began missing him terribly—and Tom's mother, Lill, too. Hurts, a consummate loner, street smart, and a man who prided himself on not being "bested" by any other man, had always liked Tom because Tom, although educated and having come from a "normal," loving family, was a "down-to-earth" type of guy who had, for most of his adult life, struggled with who and what he was in life.

Blood Hunters



Paranormal thriller

Bane Bloodworth is back! Once again, just like in book 1, Magician's Mayhem, something has unleashed the beast within—vengeance.

[AMAZON](#)

The morning sun shattered the night sky, ascending to its rightful place above the world. Glistening in the sunlight, the dew sent miniature rainbows against the fog-covered landscape. It was a very thick fog, so dense that stepping outside and walking a few feet forward, one could no longer see the building the person had emerged from. The sweet scent of spring was carried on the wind, yet it was far from its home season. Birds cried out from their branches, unable to find their nests, nor could they locate their loved ones. Their main problem was that the fog extended just over two miles above ground level. The outer border was a minimum of eighty-five miles away in every direction.

Although the sun had shot into the sky, it was cloaked and dampened by thick storm clouds made of charcoal silt. Where such weather had come from was open to speculation from all the newscasters. Meteorologists had predicted that the sky would be clear, and the temperature would be in the lower eighties. None of the many scientists that had arrived to examine the

phenomenon managed to deduce any reasonable explanation for the thick fog that strangled the entire county.

Walking out onto the deck, wearing a pair of broken-in blue jeans—zipped but left unbuttoned—Rokon stretched, scanning the fog for any breaks. He let out an impressed whistle and spun in a circle, checking how far out he could see, which was not a long distance to be certain. It would've been very easy for him to get lost out on the deck were it not from the noises of people waking and moving about inside the house. Rokon lit a cigarette and puffed on it blissfully, enjoying the strange weather as another miracle of nature. He was only halfway through his smoke when he was joined on the deck by Samantha.

She said nothing at first, her violet silk robe tied firmly around her body. With a grace and speed that left Rokon dazzled, she plucked the cigarette pack from his pocket and lit one off his already burning smoke he had in his mouth. Samantha moved into the soupy fog and disappeared from Rokon's sight, but her slipper-covered feet scuffed along the deck. Rokon then heard her climb onto a picnic table that had been created to match the weathered wood on the deck. He followed the sounds and sat down beside her.

“After coming out in the open with my love for him, I can feel it more intensely than I did before I spoke the words aloud. And I know he loves me; there isn't even a moment's doubt inside. However, I'm more than vaguely aware that there is a part of his heart I'll never own. It belongs to her, and it always will,” Samantha stated as though she were alone.

Rokon nodded mutely, thinking of an appropriate reply. As soon as he had hit upon one he felt would work, he drew a deep breath. “I've only known one person to shake him, to rattle his thinking, to send him into a complete shutdown, and that was his ex-wife. For all of that, it's fantastic to see him in love again. I never thought I'd live to see the day he'd open his heart and allow anyone else to walk in.” With a sad shake of his head, he flicked his cigarette butt over the railing he couldn't see and continued. “Believe me, he's

given you all of himself that he's capable of at this point. Be content with what he's giving, and maybe someday you'll have all his heart. Because you two deserve to enjoy all the happiness that will come from a melding of two hearts. The thing is, he never gave her all of his heart either.”

“That's very poetic of you. Ya see, I know you're not the hard-ass you pretend to be,” Samantha teased but then grew serious. “Bane and I had a long talk last night about the current situation. It was easy to see something was bothering him; it took me a long time to ferret out what it was. He said he didn't want to ruin such a miraculous night with such pain and sadness. Especially since it was about another woman that he had felt a loss over. To which I could only tell him that he was being ridiculous! If we're to be together, any pain he feels I feel, and that he can and must tell me everything. Communication is the life's blood of any good relationship.”

“You two are as meant to be together as anyone I've ever known. They were good together, there is no doubt about that, but you two have far more in common than they ever did. You shouldn't feel as though you have to compete with his ex-wife.”

“I don't. She was a ghost in his heart, and no one can compete with a ghost from someone's past. However, I don't think that the ghost resides in his heart anymore. It's something different now. Perhaps a matter of honor. But, if you are going to track down who did this, then I want in.” She held up a hand to stall his objections, which were clearly on their way. Though the fog made it hard to see her gesture, it did seem to give him pause. “Not only to watch his back and see that he comes home safe to me, but to show him I bear no ill will for the feelings he holds for her. Besides, at the end of the day, he comes home to my bed, to me.”

“Samantha, you know that isn't a decision I can make on my own. On the street, we have a warrior's code, and this is something I'd have to check with Bane on. I'll back your play as best I can, but the final call will rest with him. Believe me, I'm very impressed with your motives as well as your skills, so

I'll try to help as much as possible.” He rose to his feet, pacing the deck until Samantha got up and walked back inside the house with him. “It wouldn't be an issue if you two weren't a couple, you know that.”

“Yeah, you and your sexist bullshit about men and their ladies. That's fine, but I want your promise you'll champion my case for me.”

“You got it.”

Ten minutes later, Bane walked out of the bathroom fully showered and dressed, yet he hadn't dried his hair. He lit a cigarette and peered out the window, enjoying the fog as it smothered the house from all sides. A dangerous smile glanced back at him in the tinted glass window as Rokon moved up behind him. Putting a hand on his shoulder, Rokon simply nodded toward the deck. They walked out the doors with Samantha watching them carefully as they went.

“I know what you're going to say, so let's just skip the part where you tell me Samantha should go with us and go right to your reasons why I should agree,” Bane said, expelling smoke through his nose.

“Because she loves you for reasons that still have me baffled. Samantha is as good with a blade as most of the men we've trained over the years. Because she will keep us on our toes with her ability to see through your bullshit and bravado. She's a talented driver, the smoothest pick-pocket I've ever known, and would make a fantastic diversionary con-woman if the need arises...”

“You've been working on this, haven't you, running it around in your head?”

“Yeah, a little. Why did it sound rehearsed?”

MESSENGER

*When the Raven
calls, listen!*



Supernatural suspense

When her Raven spirit guide warns her of impending danger and after a brutal attack and the Raven's repeated warnings, she knows her life is in danger. Who wants her dead and why?

[EBOOK AUDIOBOOK](#)

Lauren slowly opened her eyes. The white ceiling tiles with fluorescent light fixtures told her exactly where she was. *I'm in the hospital, but why? What happened to me?* Slowly, she tried to move. Every part of her body ached. Her head throbbed, and when she slowly turned her head, she was able to see the IV pole with a pump attached by her bed. *My throat hurts. Was I intubated? My belly hurts as if I had surgery. Why can't I remember?* She touched the side of her head and felt a large, painful lump but no wetness in her matted hair. *No open wound, I must have fallen and hit my head. But why does my abdomen feel like it's on fire on the inside? Is my baby okay?* She screamed in her mind but knew it was safer for her not to make sudden movements or sit up, but she needed to know why she was in the hospital and what happened to her.

Before she could reach the call button, Marcia rushed into the room and called out to her with worry in her voice, "You must stay in bed! You've lost a lot of blood."

“What happened?” Lauren managed to croak out her question. She felt a sharp pain in her throat when she made sounds and could barely manage to move her swollen lips.

“I’m just glad you’re okay!” Marcia embraced her in a careful hug. “I went back to the office because I forgot my phone, and I found you on the floor unconscious and bleeding.”

“Is my baby alright? Please tell me I didn’t lose the baby!” Lauren cried out tears welling up in her eyes.

“The baby’s fine. By the way, I didn’t even know you’re pregnant.” Marcia looked at her accusingly. “You didn’t tell us.”

“No, I didn’t tell anyone yet, I wanted to tell Luke first. I just got the lab result back this morning.”

“Luckily, the knife missed the uterus when the attacker stabbed you, but the doctor said she had to take out one of your ovaries because it was badly damaged. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine—I’ll be okay. The baby is stable and nothing else matters.” Lauren sobbed.

“You’ll be okay. I’m here for you, and I’ll always be here for you, you know that.” Marcia whispered, stroking her shoulder.

“I know,” she whispered and tried to smile. “Is Luke here?”

“I called him while you were in surgery, he’s on his way. He knew about the baby…” Marcia’s voice trailed off into silence as she looked away.

Lauren looked up at her and was surprised to see the angry flash in her eyes. “What is it, Marcia? Tell me!” she demanded.

Hesitantly, Marcia replied, “It’s just… he just… his first question was, ‘Is she alive?’ which took me by surprise. Usually, when people get bad news like that, they worry and ask, ‘Is she okay?’ or something. And then he asked, ‘What about the pregnancy?’ and when I told him that the baby is fine, he just said, ‘I’m on my way’ and hung up on me. He just sounded so cold…”

“Everything will work out. He’s just in shock.” Lauren defended her husband. A tear trickled down Lauren’s cheek as she touched her belly. The baby she’d wanted more than she could put into words, was safe. “My side hurts when I breathe. Do I have broken ribs?”

“Yes, the doctor said you have two broken ribs and you’re lucky it didn’t pierce your lung. Also, your face is swollen, and you have a concussion from the blow to your head. You must stay in bed.” She warned.

“But what happened to me? All I can remember is falling and then blackness.”

“When I got back to the office, the door was ajar. I called the ambulance and police right away. The cleaning crew was working on the first floor and they didn’t see anyone. But the officer said the lock wasn’t broken.”

Lauren struggled to talk. “But only you, Kathy, and I have keys to the office.”

“The attacker might have picked the lock. The detective thought they were probably looking for drugs, but the keypad on the med room was intact and the lock on the crash cart wasn’t broken either.”

“I don’t understand. For whatever reason they broke in, they didn’t need to beat me unconscious and stab me,” Lauren whispered and then remembered that she was about to do a protection spell when the attacker stopped her.

“What can I do for you? I’ll stay with you.”

“No, go home. I’m sure Luke will stay with me. I’ll try to sleep. Maybe when I wake up, I’ll find this was nothing more than a horrible dream.”

Marcia stroked some strands of hair off Lauren’s forehead. “Anything I can do, call me right away. I’ll be here first thing in the morning.” She looked at Lauren with concern when she winced in pain. “I’m calling the nurse. You need pain medication.”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry. I’ll take as much painkiller as I can take safely. I can’t hurt the baby with strong narcotics.” Lauren managed a weak smile and changed the subject. “I’m glad you forgot your phone and found me.”

“You’re my best friend, Lauren. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Soon after Marcia walked out of the room, Luke stormed in and rushed to Lauren’s side. “Are you okay? Oh, my God! Your face looks all bruised and swollen.” He reached for her hand and lifted it to his lips.

“How did you find out about the baby?” Lauren managed to ask. “I was going to tell you tonight after dinner.”

“I saw the home pregnancy test in the bathroom, but I didn’t say anything. I waited for you to tell me when you were ready.” He stroked her arm gently.

“Are you happy about the baby?”

Before Luke could reply, they heard a man clearing his throat in the doorway. “Excuse me for the interruption, but I need to ask a few questions,” The lean man dressed in a dark blue suit wearing a gray tie, spoke. “I’m detective O’Connor.” He walked in and stood beside Lauren’s bed. “What do you remember about the attack, Dr. Bailey?”

“I don’t remember anything,” Lauren replied feeling a bit annoyed for the interruption. “It happened so fast. Oh, I remember a fist coming at my face and that I was falling. Everything turned dark and I don’t know what happened.”

“Did you see the face of the attacker? Do you remember the clothes they wore or any mark on their skin such as tattoos or birthmarks?”

“No. All I can remember is what I just told you. All I saw was a gloved fist as I turned. I fell and everything turned dark.”

“Can you think of anyone who’d want to hurt you?”

Lauren shook her head. “I don’t think so... wait, there was a man a few months ago who accused me of not doing everything possible for his wife. She had an inoperable, malignant brain tumor and passed away. He was bitter and angry but stopped the threatening calls a few weeks ago. I think he finally understood that there was nothing anyone could do to save her.

Libros en español



La poción



Una novela de fantasía sobrenatural.

Una poción de amor hecha con prisa por celos pone a Dorian en un estado de coma. Y una rara orquídea que florece solo una vez al año podría salvarle la vida, pero las preciosas flores están ferozmente custodiadas por Liam y su manada de hombres lobo. Los integrantes del Aquelarre tienen prohibida la entrada al bosque y los jóvenes aprendices se ofrecen como voluntarios para realizar el viaje que pondrá a prueba su lealtad y coraje. ¿Tendrán éxito?

[EBOOK AUDIOBOOK](#)

Cordelia, la suma sacerdotisa del Aquelarre Ravenwood, se paró frente al altar encendiendo las velas una por una. La habitación estaba oscura, y la parpadeante luz de las velas proyectaba sombras espeluznantes en las paredes. Su cabello estaba recogido en un moño, y su figura escultural se escondía bajo su larga capa encapuchada. Ella sostuvo los brazos en alto, recitando una oración.

Dama de la Luna

Permite que mi mente esté en sintonía

Necesito tu guía

Señor del Amanecer

Escucha mis humildes lamentos

Necesito tu guía.

Cordelia tiró de su larga capa, se dio la vuelta con tres copas de plata en una bandeja, y miró fijamente por un largo rato a las mujeres y al hombre, quienes estaban sentados uno al lado del otro con aspecto nervioso. Su expresión severa les envió profundos escalofríos a través de sus espaldas. Los alcanzó en pocos pasos cortos y se paró por sobre ellos antes de entregarles las copas.

— ¡Beban! —Su estruendosa voz llenó la habitación.

Olivia, una joven delgada de cabello oscuro; Candice, la rubia de figura atlética; y Dorian, un joven de cabello oscuro, intercambiaron miradas nerviosas. Tomaron las copas con las manos temblorosas, las llevaron a sus labios y bebieron el líquido rojo-rubí. Sus expresiones cambiaron. Parecían estar en un profundo trance.

La suma sacerdotisa observó al trío durante un minuto y luego preguntó:

— ¿Desean convertirse en aprendices del Aquelarre Ravenwood?

—Sí—, llegó la respuesta de los tres jóvenes acólitos al unísono.

— ¿Prometen seguir las reglas del Aquelarre y prometen practicar solamente magia blanca?

—Sí, lo prometo—, respondieron los tres.

— ¿Prometen ser leales al aquelarre y a sus miembros, y prometen no competir el uno con el otro o estar celosos de los demás?

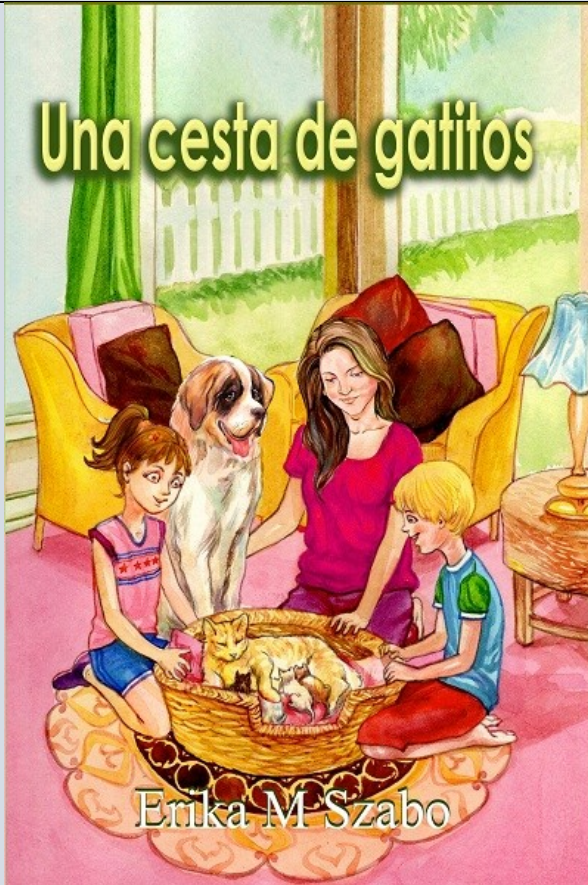
—Sí, lo prometo—, respondieron Olivia y Dorian sin dudarlo, pero la respuesta de Candice llegó un segundo después:

—Lo intentaré.

Cordelia respiró hondo. *Le daré una oportunidad porque su abuela es una de los Ancianos, pero la vigilaré de cerca.* Ella dio un aplauso, y los jóvenes acólitos salieron del trance, pareciendo un poco aturridos y confundidos.

—Bienvenidos al Aquelarre Ravenwood—, anunció Cordelia. —Ahora son aprendices. Será un largo camino, y los próximos meses no serán fáciles. Estudiarán y practicarán duro antes de que puedan convertirse en brujas y brujo. Buena suerte a todos ustedes.

Una cesta de gatitos



Bianca y Daniel decidieron ir a nadar al río cuando se enfrentaron a Mark y sus compinches de la manada de lobos. Descubre cómo Maní le dijo a Mark, en su propio idioma perruno, lo mucho que le desagradan los matones brutos.

[AMAZON](#)

Bianca y su mejor amigo Daniel, eran vecinos en un pequeño pueblo. Compartieron cumpleaños y crecieron juntos bajo la atenta mirada de Maní, el San Bernardo de Bianca. El enorme perro era su niñoero, compañero de juegos y guardaespaldas. Bianca y Daniel tenían muchos amigos, pero debido a que Maní nunca se alejaba de su lado, los niños en la escuela comenzaron a llamarlos a los tres *La pandilla de mejores amigos*.



El primer día de vacaciones de verano, Bianca y Daniel estaban emocionados por ir a nadar en el río cerca de su casa. Sus padres no se preocuparon, pues sabían que ambos niños eran nadadores fuertes desde que eran bebés, y Maní había sido entrenado para no dejarlos nadar demasiado lejos de la orilla. El perro siempre se quedaba en la orilla del río, vigilando atentamente a los niños.

—Me alegro de que la escuela haya terminado—, le dijo Bianca a Daniel mientras caminaban por la acera hacia el río con toallas en los hombros. Maní, como de costumbre, caminó con ellos permaneciendo cerca de Bianca.

—Yo también—, admitió Daniel a su mejor amiga con un suspiro. —No tenemos que estudiar o hacer la tarea durante todo el verano, y no tengo que lidiar con Mark. Dijo que pasará las vacaciones de verano en la casa de su abuela. Por suerte, está muy lejos en otro pueblo.

—Me enoja tanto que se esté saliendo con la suya lastimando a otros niños, y te ha estado molestando durante las últimas semanas.

—Mis oídos estuvieron zumbando durante días porque me golpeé la cabeza contra el escritorio—, reveló Daniel. —Y el maestro no me creyó cuando le dije que Mark me empujó, así que no se lo dije a mis padres. Es mejor mantenerse alejado del camino de Mark. Es muy fuerte.

—No entiendo por qué esos chicos pasan el rato con ese gran matón—, gruñó Bianca en voz baja, sintiéndose frustrada. —Los mete en problemas todo el tiempo.

—Mark le dijo a Peter que porque es fuerte y salvaje como un lobo y nadie puede meterse con él y sus chicos. Llamó a su grupo la *Manada de Lobos*. Pero creo que sacó ese nombre de una caricatura. Supongo que los chicos se sienten seguros con Mark porque es fuerte—, razonó Daniel.

—Sí, es fuerte y un gran matón—, resopló Bianca. —Cuando los tres golpearon al pobre Billy en el baño, Mark se rio y se burló de Billy porque lloraba. Afortunadamente, Peter corrió a la oficina del director y consiguió ayuda cuando los demás acorralaron a Billy en el baño.

—Y el padre de Mark no hizo que Mark se disculpara incluso cuando fue suspendido. Si alguna vez yo hiciera algo así, estaría castigado hasta los treinta años.

—Sí, yo también—, agregó Bianca enojada. —No conozco a los otros, pero Peter es un buen chico y también es inteligente. ¿Por qué está saliendo con Mark?

—Le tiene miedo, y parece que también lo admira—, dijo Daniel con un suspiro. —Dijo que su padre le dijo que se hiciera amigo de los niños más fuertes porque es muy pequeño. Consiguió su deseo porque Mark es el niño más fuerte. Me agrada Peter, pero si Scott y Aiden quieren pasar el rato con Mark, es asunto suyo.

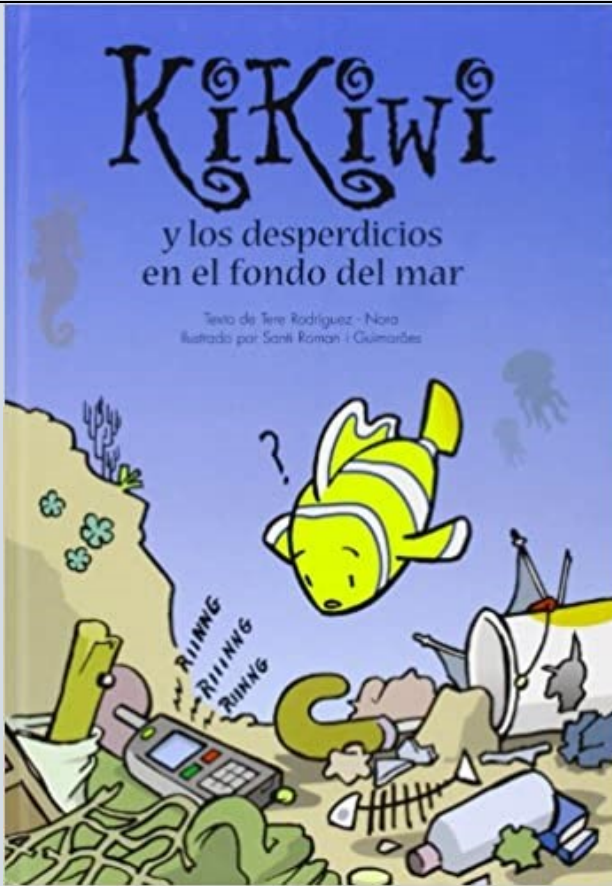
—Sí, lo es, pero deberíamos... —Bianca comenzó a protestar cuando el suave gruñido de Maní la interrumpió, y luego escucharon la voz burlona de Mark detrás de ellos.

—¡Oh, mira! ¡La pandilla de mejores amigos va a nadar con su estúpido perro! —Mark gritó.

Bianca miró hacia atrás y vio a Mark de pie con las manos en los bolsillos, rodeado por tres chicos más pequeños.

—Los tortolitos—, se rio Scott, uno de los amigos flacos de Mark, con una gorra de béisbol roja que era de una talla demasiado grande para su cabeza. Él miró al chico fornido con admiración.



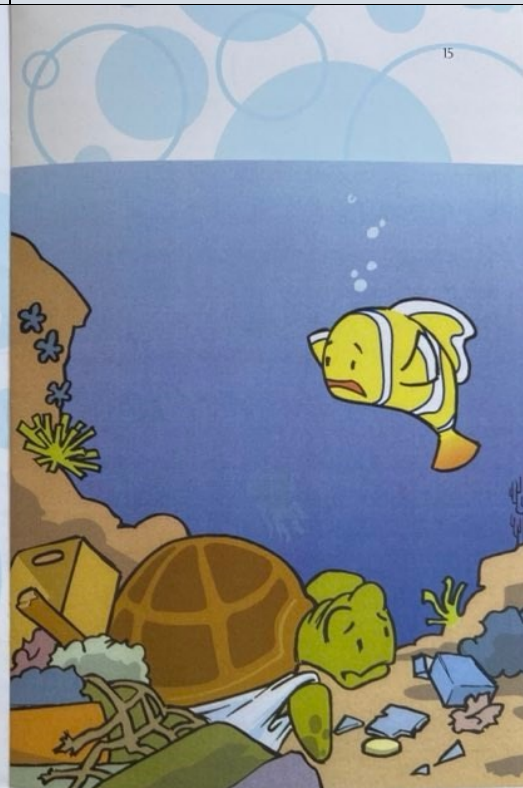


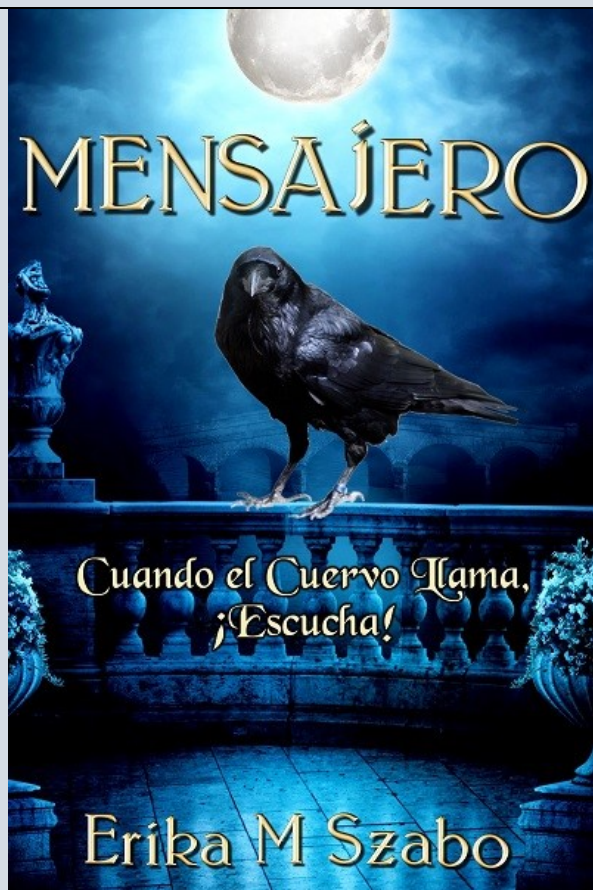
En este hermoso cuento que resulta la importancia del cuidado del medio ambiente, Kikiwi, el pez, no puede tolerar los desperdicios que ensucian el bello Mar Caribe. Junto con sus compañeros marinos, y la colaboración de sus amigos los niños, el pececito encontrará una solución para mantener limpias la playas y el mar.

[AMAZON](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08K1K1K1K)

“¿Qué haces ahí?”, preguntó Kikiwi algo asustado al ver que su amiga se encontraba atrapada en una especie de red.

“¿Qué es esto? ¿Dónde están las algas y los arrecifes? Todo está sucio y oscuro. ¿Qué son todas esas cosas?” Kikiwi no podía creer lo que estaba viendo. El fondo del mar se había convertido en un inmenso basurero, había desperdicios por todos lados.





Una acogedora novela de suspense sobrenatural

Lauren tiene todo lo que siempre había deseado. Gran carrera, seguridad financiera, esposo amoroso y amigos devotos. Cuando su guía espiritual Raven le advierte del peligro inminente, ella toma el presagio en serio. Alguien irrumpe en su oficina y después del brutal ataque y las repetidas advertencias del Cuervo, ella sabe que su vida está en peligro. ¿Quién la quiere muerta y por qué?

[**EBOOK AUDIOBOOK**](#)

Lauren conoció a Luke cuando hizo su rotación quirúrgica en el Hospital Presbiteriano. Luke trabajaba para un bufete de abogados que manejaba casos de negligencia médica y la interrogaba sobre una cirugía.

Estaba bien arreglado, encantador, guapo, y su sonrisa amable iluminó la habitación. La hizo sentir a gusto y había una atracción instantánea entre ellos. Después de unas cuantas citas, su relación floreció en un romance apasionado y en el Día de San Valentín, propuso. Lauren estaba feliz y contó sus bendiciones de haber encontrado al hombre perfecto. Aunque su abuela le preguntó en numerosas ocasiones si estaba segura de casarse con él, ella le aseguró que él es un buen hombre, y él la hace feliz.

—Su aura no está clara y sus vibraciones se sienten mal—, le dijo a Lauren.

—Pero ¿por qué la abuela? ¿Qué hizo? —

—Mi intuición me dice que no confíe en él, y no puedo controlar cómo me siento. Piénsalo bien, y no te apresures al matrimonio. ¿Cómo te sientes con él? —

—Lo amo, abuela. Confío en él, y quiero casarme con él. —

A pesar de los sentimientos amargos que dejó la advertencia de su abuela, Lauren no cambió de opinión. Su abuela cedió, pero insistió en tener un acuerdo prenupcial elaborado por su abogado que Lauren dubitativamente y Luke felizmente firmaron. Se mudó a su apartamento en el ático, y se establecieron en vivir una vida de casado aparentemente idílica. Pronto, comenzó a hablar de lo estresante que era trabajar para el bufete de abogados e hizo planes para el momento en que tendría suficiente dinero para comenzar su propio bufete de abogados. Lauren se rió y sacó su chequera: —¿Cuánto necesitas? —

Luke parecía estar sorprendido y al principio, protestó contra el uso del dinero de su esposa, pero pronto, felizmente cedió y alquiló un espacio de oficinas en un edificio de gran altura en la calle 84 en Manhattan. Lauren eligió Medicina Interna y abrió su oficina a cinco cuadras de la oficina de Luke.

Todo parecía estar bien durante los primeros años. Luke era ambicioso, y para hacer conexiones valiosas, organizaba fiestas cada dos meses más o menos en el lujoso loft de Lauren e invitó a personas influyentes. A Lauren no le gustaban las sonrisas forzadas y las interminables y nauseabundantemente y aburridas agradables, que parecían ser las mismas en cada fiesta. Su figura escultural dibujó miradas admiradoras de los hombres y miradas celosas de las esposas del trofeo. Estaba aburrida y a veces disgustada por los negocios que hacían entre cócteles, pero no podía decirle que no a Luke y soportarlo para complacerlo. Sin embargo, ella puso el pie en el suelo cuando Luke quería darle vida a las fiestas con cocaína y otras drogas populares de fiestas.

Más tarde Luke comenzó a ser imprudente y le confesó a Lauren sobre las malas inversiones que hizo y las decenas de miles que perdió en sus juegos de póquer mensuales con sus amigos. Lauren lo rescató cada vez, pagó sus deudas y lo perdonó a menudo recordando las sabias palabras de su abuela.

—Cada vez que perdones a un hombre, te amarás más, pero lo amarás un poco menos. Llegará el momento en que verás quién es realmente—.

Los últimos seis meses más o menos Lauren sintió una profunda frialdad que se filtraba lentamente en su relación. Era atento y cariñoso como de costumbre durante los breves momentos de las mañanas y las noches que se las arreglaban para pasar juntos, pero numerosas veces ella cogió el destello ansioso de sus ojos o lo notó mirando a nada. Al principio, pensó que era porque seguía sacando a relucir la idea de formar una familia, pero últimamente, sintió otra cosa. Se puso ansioso y a veces se espetó a ella cuando le preguntaba por su compañía. —Todo está bien—, diría, terminando la conversación.

No podía sacudir la sensación de incertidumbre que se deslizaba entre ellos y trataba de forzar cierta confianza en Luke. Después de una buena cena, ella mencionó, de nuevo, que es hora de formar una familia. Se alegró y su expresión se volvió frígida, pero sabiendo lo materialista que era, ella seguía enumerando sus razones. —Somos felices y tenemos todo lo que siempre hemos querido. Mi herencia nos proporciona seguridad financiera y además, ambos tenemos grandes trabajos. Creo que necesitamos un niño para unir a nuestra familia—.

—Tenemos mucho tiempo, ambos somos jóvenes. No tenemos que darnos prisa. Disfrutemos juntos de nuestra vida y de nuestra libertad. ¿No estás feliz? —

El coraje y la ira se apoderaron de Lauren y antes de que pudiera detenerse, se desdibujó a toda prisa: —Se acerca mi trigésimo quinto cumpleaños, y es hora, pero parece estar tan en contra de la idea de tener un hijo. Tal vez no estamos destinados a estar juntos. Esto no es suficiente para mí. Tal vez deberíamos divorciarnos y seguir con nuestras vidas por separado—.

Luke se encogía de nuevo con el miedo parpadeando a través de su cara hermosa. —No, cariño. Te amo y haré cualquier cosa para hacerte feliz—. Se puso de pie y corrió hacia Lauren, abrazándola fuertemente. —Tienes razón.

Empecemos una familia, pero esperemos un poco más. Tal vez hasta el año que viene.

Aunque Lauren sintió la distancia entre ellos a medida que pasaban las semanas y los meses, ella calmó sus crecientes preocupaciones y preocupaciones. *Todo va a estar bien cuando llegue el bebé. Los niños unen a las parejas.*

Cuando su DIU se cayó, lo tomó como una señal y no lo reemplazó. No podía evitar esperanzarse y preguntarse. *Tal vez llego tarde*, pensó, todavía sin estar dispuesta a creer incluso después de la prueba positiva de embarazo en casa, pero esta mañana el laboratorio lo confirmó. El sentimiento feliz suprimió su ansiedad por lo que Luke dirá. *¡Voy a tener un bebé!*

Lauren estaba junto a la ventana abierta de su oficina del segundo piso. El sol estaba a punto de ponerse y pintó la parte superior de los árboles en el parque al otro lado de la calle con luz dorada. Sacudiendo su largo pelo bronce de su coleta constrictora, ella disfrutó de la hermosa vista después del agitado día de tratar a los pacientes con todo tipo de problemas. Bebió su té, se apoyó en el marco de la ventana y vio a la gente corriendo sobre la acera. Un grupo ruidoso de adolescentes estaban disparando aros en el patio de recreo del parque mientras que un rebaño de palomas luchaba con una ardilla molesta que estaba a punto de robar las sabrosas semillas, cortesía de la señora Wilkins. La anciana alimentaba a los pájaros todos los días, esté lloviendo o soleado.

—Lauren, Marcia y yo nos vamos. ¿Debería llamarte un taxi? — Kathy, su atractiva recepcionista pelirroja con piel pecosa llamó para que abrieran la puerta. Su cabello rizado y largo volteó mientras se volvía hacia Marcia, su regordeta enfermera rubia, que apareció a su lado.

Lauren se volvió a mirar a sus mejores amigos desde la escuela secundaria. Cuando Lauren se presentó a la escuela de medicina, trató de convencer a Marcia para que también aplicara.

En busca de la paz



A pesar de que Clara ya estaba acostumbrada a las ingeniosas preguntas de su hermano menor, esta pregunta la tomó por sorpresa. Ella nunca había pensado sobre el significado de la palabra paz. Nadie le había hecho tal pregunta.

Luego de pensar un poco sobre el tema, trató de explicarle a André como mejor pudo:

- Verás, la paz es cuando uno vive tranquilo, en armonía con los demás, sin temores ...

Mientras tanto, André escuchaba a su hermana muy atento, pero la explicación no le convenía del todo. Continuaba con la duda. Él quería saber qué es la paz. También quería sentir la paz.

En busca de la paz

Texto de Tere Rodríguez - Nora
Ilustraciones por Aleix Gordo



André, un niño sabio, busca la respuesta a la pregunta: ¿qué es la paz? Quisiera saber en qué consiste la paz y cómo se siente. La respuesta le llegó una noche en un sueño en donde aparece el abuelo. El abuelo le explica que la paz es algo maravillosa y que uno la puede experimentar cuando se siente seguro, salvo, y protegido en su entorno.

[AMAZON](#)

Las estrellas de los Reyes Magos

Las estrellas de los Reyes Magos

Texto de Tere Rodríguez-Nora

Ilustraciones por Walter Torres



It was a beautiful night. The sky was clear and full of stars. Benjamin could distinguish three in particular that twinkled more than the others. With the help of his grandfather, Benjamin discovers the magical story behind these stars and the tradition of the Day of the Three Kings.

[ORDER FROM THE AUTHOR](#)

Era una noche preciosa. El cielo estaba claro y repleto de estrellas brillantes. Benjamín, como de costumbre, observaba por la ventana. Era lo que más disfrutaba cada vez que iba de paseo en el auto.

Entre las estrellas pudo distinguir tres que estaban una al lado de la otra. Según se movía el auto, también se movían las estrellas.

—Esas estrellas me persiguen —pensó Benjamín.

Era como si las estrellas también fueran a visitar a los abuelos.

—¡Qué estrellas tan brillantes! —continuó pensando—. ¡Qué bonitas se ven una al lado de la otra!



El abuelo no podía creer que Benjamín se hubiera fijado en esas estrellas y le dijo:

—Esas estrellas las conocemos como las estrellas de los Tres Reyes Magos.

—¿Estrellas de los Tres Reyes Magos? —preguntó Benjamín.

—Las llamamos así porque están una al lado de la otra. Nos recuerdan a los Tres Reyes Magos que siguieron la estrella de Oriente hasta llegar donde estaba el niño Jesús. Aparecen en nuestros cielos en la época navideña. Pertenecen a la constelación de Orión —contestó el abuelo ante la mirada atenta de su nieto.



El árbol del alfabeto de Hophop

El árbol del alfabeto de Hophop



Erika M Szabo

Un libro de imágenes divertido y educativo para niños de 2 a 7 años.

Hophop, el conejito, está triste porque no puede leer su libro.

—Oh, vaya. ¡Yo te enseñaré!—Ollie contestó al instante.

—¿De verdad?—Hophop sonrió grande y brillante.

—Comencemos desde el inicio, es muy sencillo.

Podrás leer en un suspiro.

Ollie, el búho sabio, le muestra todo el alfabeto y le enseña a leer de forma divertida.

[AMAZON](#)

A las **U**rracas les gustan las cosas brillantes. Las **V**acas de las granjas son sus habitantes.



La concha de mar púrpura

-About the Book-

On her first trip to the sea, a lovely girl realized how much garbage people leave in the sand and decided to clean up the beach with her mother. After collecting sodas and wraps, they found a purple shell, which they received with joy as a reward for such a laudable task.

This tale contains facts and questions to take care of our planet, our common home.

-Acerca del libro-

En su primer viaje al mar, una niña encantadora se dio cuenta de la cantidad de basura que la gente deja en la arena y decidió limpiar con su madre la playa. Después de recoger sodas y envolturas, encontraron una concha púrpura, la que recibieron con alegría como premio de tan loable tarea.

Este cuento bilingüe contiene datos y preguntas para cuidar nuestro planeta, nuestra casa común.



<http://www.luzdelmar.com>



ON AMAZON

La concha de mar púrpura nos invita a tomar consciencia ecológica para proteger las playas.

Once upon a time,
there was a **charming** girl,
gentle and brilliant
as her name states.
Her mother surprised her
with a trip to the beach.



Había una vez
una niña **encantadora**,
gentil y brillante
como su nombre indicaba.
Un día su madre la sorprendió
con un viaje a la playa.



Recuadros agrídulce

Recuerdos agrídulces



Novela dulce romance

Nacida de una madre drogadicta y abandonada en los escalones de la iglesia, la vida de Elana fue una puerta giratoria de esperanzas y decepciones destrozadas. Hasta que conoció a Luca. Pero el destino cruel los destruyó. ¿Se encontrarán de nuevo?

[EBOOK](#)

En esa tormentosa víspera de navidad hace veintidós años, una joven caminaba a través de los implacablemente fríos vientos del centro de la ciudad de Nueva York con un manojo de trapos apretados en el pecho. Gotas de vidrio de lágrimas congeladas se aferran a la piel expuesta de su rostro. La mujer, ligeramente aturdida y claramente angustiada, vagaba sin rumbo a través de la nieve que apuntaba a la acera vacía.

Ella no estaba segura de cuánto tiempo había estado abriéndose camino a través de la revoltosa nieve, pero sus mejillas crudas eran evidencia del tramo de tiempo y la ferocidad del viento. Para cualquiera que pasara, parecía ser sólo otra persona sin hogar: uno de los muchos intocables de la ciudad atrapada en el feroz clima, tratando de encontrar refugio. Le darían una mirada insensible y seguían en sus asuntos.

La mujer, guiada por sus pies entumecidos, caminó y caminó hasta que la luz tenue de un campanario brilló a través de la manta de sofocada de copos

de nieve que caían. Poco a poco, se acercó a los escalones que conducen a la puerta y se detuvo.

—Lo siento mucho —sollozó, meciéndose ligeramente el manojito de trapos de lado a lado—. Estoy sola, y no tengo adónde ir. Estarás mejor sin mí —. Su suave llanto fue capturado en el aire como mechones de diminutas cuentas de hielo, disipando nubes de desesperación insondable. Ellas flotarían momentáneamente alrededor de su cara como una máscara delgada antes de ser tragado por las ráfagas de viento que pasan desde la calle infértil.

Poco a poco, se arrodilló y puso el paquete de trapos cuidadosamente en el paso de la catedral. Con tibias lágrimas volviéndose frías en cuanto se filtraban sobre sus mejillas temblorosas, ella volvió sus pasos por la calle y desapareció en la tormenta. Para nunca regresar.

Unos minutos más tarde, un sacerdote de la iglesia salió a los escalones delanteros. —¡Dios mío! Hace frío esta noche —, Padre Brown, un hombre alto, de mediana edad murmuró mientras tiraba su larga bufanda sobre su hombro. Metió sus manos deshuesadas en los bolsillos de su largo abrigo y tomó un momento para ver en silencio los edificios encalados con amos. Se elevaban como derivas de nieve monolíticas, filas de ventanas desnudas relucientes de hielo, como los ojos de una araña congelada.

El padre Brown se dirigía a un refugio para personas sin hogar al otro lado de la ciudad para ayudar con la preparación de la cena del día de Navidad. Al no tener familia propia, le traía más alegría estar rodeado de los necesitados que estar encerrado en la iglesia toda la noche viendo películas antiguas en el antiguo televisor en blanco y negro en su dormitorio. Aunque disfrutaba de la actuación de Jimmy Stewart en la película clásica *It's a Wonderful Life*, película que había visto al menos cincuenta veces hasta el momento, servir a las almas desafortunadas sería un mejor uso de su tiempo. Las sonrisas en sus rostros, tan cálido y acogedor como el pavo y puré de papas que tuvo la suerte de servir, fue más de lo que nunca podría haber pedido en este día tan sagrado. Sacando su mano de su chaqueta para revisar su reloj de pulsera, se dio cuenta de que, si quería coger el autobús al refugio, tendría que moverse.

Apurado por los escalones de la iglesia, casi tropieza. Miró hacia abajo y vio el paquete de trapos descansando en el paso inferior. Al principio pensó que era basura, el sacerdote caminó alrededor del montón de ropa cuando, de repente, oyó un gemido que emanaba del haz de trapos, silenciado por las capas. Curiosamente arrodillado para obtener una mejor mirada, casi gritó cuando los trapos comenzaron a temblar y moverse a su toque.

Fue entonces cuando se dio cuenta de que algo vivo estaba envuelto por dentro. Temiendo lo peor, rápidamente recogió el paquete y lo llevó a las paredes protectoras de la catedral. Agarrando el bulto de trapo contra su pecho, se dirigió al banco más cercano y lentamente lo puso abajo, silbando una oración. Bajo el resplandor de varias velas encendidas y asistido por la luz blanca prestada de la luna llena filtrándose a través de las vidrieras, el sacerdote rápidamente deshizo del haz de telas.

Acostado dentro del capullo de trapos sucios era un bebé recién nacido. Con sangre seca cubriendo su piel y pelo mate, sus ojos azules miraban al azar, y sus labios secos ligeramente separados para exponer las encías púrpuras y una lengua hinchada.

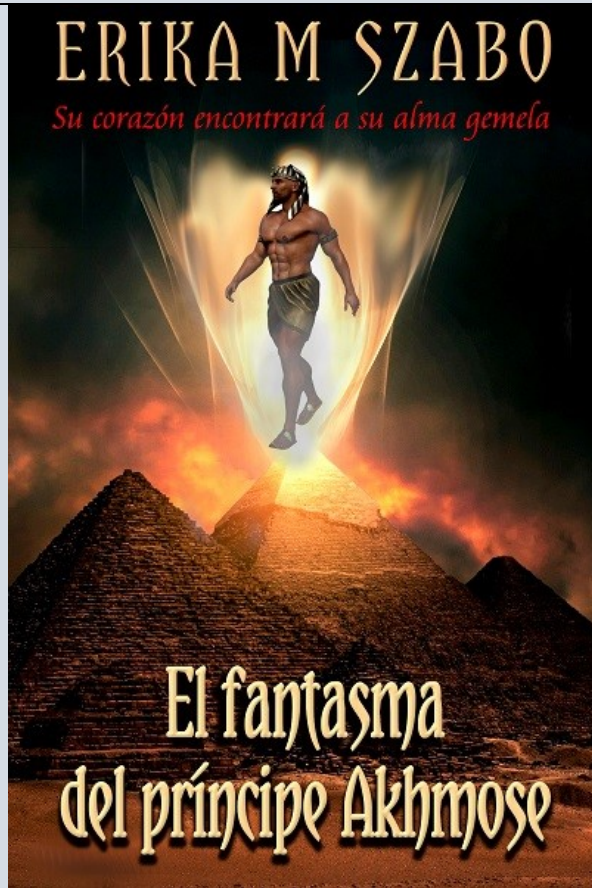
—¡Dulce Madre María! —Jadeó el sacerdote, trazando reflexivamente el santo símbolo de la cruz en su cuerpo mientras corría su camino de regreso a su oficina. Una vez dentro, sus manos temblorosas agarraron el teléfono en su escritorio y marcaron 9-1-1.

—Sí, necesito que me envíen una ambulancia a la Catedral de San Patricio inmediatamente —, le rogó el sacerdote, con un sudor frío que se le derramaba en la frente. —Tengo un recién nacido moribundo aquí. Por favor, ¡dense prisa! —. Final de la llamada, corrió de nuevo al banco y sostuvo al bebé en sus brazos. Le dolió el alma mirar a la niña, arrugada y aferrándose a la vida, pero obligó a sus ojos a encontrarse con los suyos.

—No te preocupes, pequeño—, dijo, acunando a la bebé moribunda firmemente en sus brazos para mantenerla caliente. —Dios te está cuidando ahora. —

La ambulancia llegó a la iglesia no más de diez minutos más tarde, y la recién nacida fue llevada inmediatamente a un hospital local.

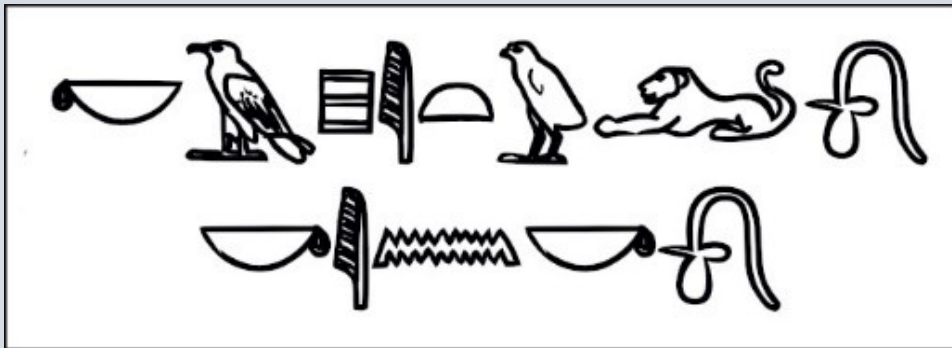
El fantasma del príncipe Akhmose



Un joven egiptólogo rompe la antigua maldición y libera a los fantasmas del príncipe Akhmose. ¿Podrá el príncipe Akhmose finalmente cruzar a la otra vida? O tal vez, debido a los encantos de la mujer mortal, no quiere...

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Capítulo cinco



Época actual

La vieja campana de la iglesia sonó doce veces, el sonido resonó a través del museo silencioso, haciendo su camino hacia el estudio medio oscuro de Layla. Akhmose se estiró y se sentó sintiéndose aturdido y desorientado. Miró alrededor de la gran habitación que estaba iluminada por la luna llena a través de la ventana. *¿Dónde estoy? ¿Qué es este extraño lugar?* él pensó, sintiéndose confundido. *¿Cómo llegué aquí?*

Miró hacia la ventana. La luna pálida y los sonidos chirriantes de los pájaros e insectos nocturnos rompían la serenidad. Akhmose se puso de pie y comenzó a caminar hacia la ventana, pero se sentía como si estuviera caminando en el aire. Mirando hacia abajo a sus piernas, se dio cuenta de que sus pies no tocaba el suelo. Sorprendido, se concentró en estar de pie con los pies firmemente en el suelo. Cuando descendió, sintió el suelo bajo sus pies descalzos. *¿Qué está pasando? ¿Estoy soñando?*

A medida que sus ojos se ajustaban a la luz de la luna, miró a su alrededor y vio un sarcófago en el centro de la habitación. *Qué extraño. Este lugar no parece una cámara funeraria.* Caminó de regreso hacia el sarcófago y dejó caer su mano a la superficie, sólo para ver sus dedos hundirse en la madera maciza sin resistencia. Quitando la mano de un tirón, miró al gran sarcófago en total confusión. Podía ver la cara pintada en el exterior, y en ese momento, se dio cuenta de que el sarcófago había sido hecho para él. *Pero no estoy muerto. Estoy soñando.* Suspiro de alivio. *¡Eso es! Este lugar no es una cámara funeraria y no puede ser el hermoso lugar de la otra vida, el Sekhet-Aaru. Y además, incluso si estuviera muerto, el sarcófago no debería estar cerrado, no hasta que mi cuerpo fuera colocado dentro.*

— ¿Dónde estoy? — Su voz resonó en la habitación, pero sólo fue recibida con silencio. El pánico comenzó a invadirlo, sin saber por qué lo habían traído a este extraño lugar. Enterró su rostro en sus manos y sintió la piel suave y los músculos debajo. *Mi cuerpo se siente sólido y real, sin embargo, todo lo que me rodea se siente tan ligero como las nubes. ¿Por qué?*

Sus pasos no hicieron ningún sonido mientras caminaba hacia las paredes. Estante sobre estante estaba lleno de rollos de papiro, pero parecían viejos y descoloridos. Vio símbolos extraños pintados en pequeños cuadrados de papel, pero él no podía leerlos. Ninguna de las figuras tenía sentido alguno. Se sentía ansioso y perdido.

Entonces, vio jeroglíficos coloridos. Eran tan claros, reales y hermosos. *Quien sea que los haya pintado debe haber sido educado por un gran maestro.* Trató de desenrollar uno de los papiros, pero sus manos se hundieron en él. Se rindió y se dio la vuelta.

De repente, un haz de luz brillante barrió el suelo y luego las paredes. Se congeló mientras sus ojos seguían la luz. ¿Era eso una señal? ¿Qué causó esta extraña luz brillante? Parecía ser tan pura como el sol, pero ¿cómo se podía ver por la noche? ¿Estaba en el reino de los dioses? Pasos pesados se acercaban, y se movió hacia el sonido. Un gran hombre con ropa extraña sostenía una antorcha que no ardía con llamas. *¡Eso no es una antorcha con fuego!* Akhmose decidió. *¿Cómo pudieron atrapar la luz del sol en ese pequeño objeto cilíndrico que el hombre está sosteniendo?* El extraño hombre parecía viejo y desgastado, sin prestarle atención. Akhmose cruzó los brazos y ordenó:

— ¡Dime qué es este lugar!

Su rostro enrojeció cuando el hombre se negó a responder, o incluso mirar en su dirección. ¿Cómo se atreve? ¿Era Akhmose, hermano del faraón de Egipto! Dio un paso más cerca del hombre tratando de evitar la luz brillante. De pie frente al hombre, gritó:

— ¿Me oyes?

El hombre de aspecto corpulento ni siquiera parpadeó. *¿Qué le pasa a este hombre? Y los dueños de este lugar, ¿por qué están contratando a ciegos y sordos?* Akhmose suspiró y se apoyó contra la pared. Se había dado por vencido a tratar de llamar la atención del hombre. Toda su vida, fueron pocos los que se atrevieron a ignorarlo, y aún menos los que no fueron castigados por dichas transgresiones.

Su mirada se sintió atraída por la luna y sonrió. Estaba en un lugar donde nada era familiar excepto la luna mirándolo fijamente. Trató de relajarse y aliviar la tensión formada. *Una mente problemática atrae confusión, pero una cabeza despejada atrae la solución.* Su padre se lo había dicho muchas veces y siempre había funcionado para él. Trató hacerlo funcionar, una vez más.

La luz brillante de la antorcha del extraño aterrizó sobre él brevemente, y se preguntó si la luz estaba destinada a hacerle daño. Retrocedió hacia atrás con un brinco por instinto, pero cuando la luz pasó por su cuerpo, no sintió nada. Sin calor en su piel, sin quemaduras por la luz. No era nada como el

sol. Perdido en sus pensamientos, Akhmose no se dio cuenta de que el hombre caminaba en su dirección. Cuando el extraño estaba a un paso de él, no se detuvo. Antes de que pudiera moverse, Akhmose sintió que el hombre atravesaba su cuerpo, que se sintió como una ráfaga de aire frío.

El extraño respiró bruscamente.

—Una ventana debe estar abierta en algún lugar. Está frío aquí—, murmuró y se estremeció. Akhmose miraba horrorizado y sin poder entender ni una palabra de lo que decía. El hombre iluminó con su linterna los estantes y continuó su monólogo: —Este lugar me está dando escalofríos. Ojalá pudiera conseguir un trabajo normal. —Rápidamente se dio la vuelta y comenzó a caminar hacia la puerta.

Sorprendido, Akhmose extendió la mano y tocó el brazo del hombre.

— ¿Qué hiciste? ¿Cómo hiciste eso? ¿Cómo caminaste a través de mí? — Se retiró horrorizado cuando su mano y sus dedos se hundieron en el brazo del hombre.

El guardia gritó de miedo.

— ¿Quién está ahí? ¿Hay alguien ahí? —Sus ojos se ensancharon mientras miraba alrededor de la habitación vacía. Se giró y corrió tan rápido como pudo, sus pasos resonando por el largo pasillo.

Akhmose siguió al hombre que hablaba en una lengua extraña. Vio a otro hombre caminando hacia ellos por el largo pasillo. La luz cegadora de su antorcha oscilaba mientras movía la mano.

— ¡Earl! ¡Hay un fantasma! Me largo de aquí. —El hombre corpulento señaló el taller de Layla con los dedos temblorosos.

— ¡No seas estúpido! —El hombre más alto sacudió la cabeza y se quejó. — ¿Qué estás diciendo? No hay tal cosa como fantasmas.

El hombre más bajo tartamudeó.

— ¿No? En ese caso nunca te ha tocado uno.

El hombre más alto se quejó y se estremeció.

—Bien, salgamos de aquí.

Estoy en un mundo extraño y no entiendo lo que esta gente está diciendo. ¿Por qué estoy aquí? ¿Soy un fantasma? Akhmose vio a los hombres iluminando por todas partes con sus luces. Se preguntó quiénes eran. Llevaban el mismo traje negro y parecían ser vigilantes más que ladrones.

Akhmose se quitó de encima la inseguridad y comenzó a vagar. *Debo encontrar a alguien que hable mi lengua y que me explique lo que estoy haciendo aquí.* Caminó de habitación en habitación y de pasillo en pasillo hasta que se encontró con una puerta grande. Cuando trató de agarrar el pomo de la puerta, su mano y su brazo pasaron a través de él. Fue una experiencia extraña. *¿De verdad soy un fantasma? Puedo sentir mi cuerpo, pero todo lo que me rodea se siente como si estuviera hecho de nubes.* Sintióse más curioso que asustado, pasó su pie a través de la puerta gruesa y cuando no sintió dolor o presión, rápidamente pasó todo su cuerpo para encontrarse frente a unas escaleras anchas de piedra.

Debe ser un templo, Akhmose miró hacia atrás al edificio con pilares altos. Bajó las escaleras y miró a su alrededor con asombro. Todo parecía extraño. Nunca había visto nada igual. Las edificaciones estaban juntas una al lado de la otra y eran casi tan altas como las pirámides. Nunca había visto tantas grandes edificaciones juntas. Maravillado ante las luces, que brillaban desde la parte superior de los postes largos, empezó a cuestionarse. *Hay tanta gente caminando por ahí. ¿Por qué no están durmiendo? Sólo los vigilantes y la gente malvada se mueven después de la puesta del sol. Al menos en el mundo, yo sabía.* De repente, sintió un poderoso tirón arrastrándolo. Todo se convirtió en un borrón.

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