

ANN

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ROOT
OF
PASSION

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Dedication

I spend an excessive amount of time living in my head, caught in my own fantasy world, creating characters and constructing dialogue. My partner Amy is indeed the most patient person I know. She has endured many conversations where my attention drifts to my latest story and I'm reduced to a grunting, distracted blob. Yet, she still loves me and nurtures my creative side. I am a very lucky woman.

Acknowledgments

It is an honor to have Katherine V. Forrest as my editor, and I am truly grateful for her advice and insight. I am also thankful to Karin Kallmaker who made some key suggestions during the early brainstorming stages and helped the story evolve. And of course, without the continued support of Linda Hill and Bella, my words and ideas would just be a file in my computer.

An enormous thanks to all of the readers who continue to support the publishing industry by spending their hard-earned cash on our books. I certainly appreciate it. *Root of Passion* requires readers to ask, “What if?” and suspend their understanding of reality. It’s a novel of escape, and hopefully, in these hard economic times, you’ll think that’s a good thing.

“The wilderness holds answers to more questions than we
have yet learned to ask.”
- Nancy Newhall

About the Author

Ann Roberts is the author of *Furthest from the Gate*, *Brilliant*, *Beach Town*, and the Ari Adams' mystery series which includes *Paid in Full* and *White Offerings*. She lives in Arizona with her family.

Chapter 1

Somewhere in South America...

Margo wandered through the marketplace, past a gauntlet of vendors peddling everything from wicker baskets to fresh chickens. The haggling voices ranged from simple questioning to downright belligerence as the customers and sellers engaged in the inevitable tug-of-war bartering that was the staple of commerce in this part of the world. Margo understood little, since she didn't speak Portuguese. She lingered at a sweets stand, breathing in the pleasant odor of cinnamon. She didn't buy anything, having suffered a terrible case of food poisoning the last time she sampled some irresistible meat wraps from a street seller in Korea.

She ignored most of the wares and goods that surrounded her. She rarely purchased trinkets; however, when she did find

something amazing, she snatched it up quickly and became the envy of her friends back home, who couldn't believe the bargains she found during her layovers.

As a flight attendant for United Airlines, she traveled the world and enjoyed visiting the exotic locales, but she seldom stayed in any place for more than a day or two. Regions blurred together, and while she would never mistake Europe for the Sudan, if asked later where she'd traveled that week, she'd simply respond, "Somewhere in South America, Rio de Janeiro, I think."

Three of the other crew members had enticed her to join them as they explored Rio. At first Margo had balked, hesitant to be sandwiched in a Jeep between Connor the pilot and Jeanette the copilot. She was sleeping with both of them, but she was rather certain neither suspected the other was part of a romantic triangle. Her best friend Grace was appalled by her bed-hopping, but she was who she was—always playing the odds, if it served her purposes. She'd only found herself in a few tight situations, but she'd managed to avoid the vengeful type of girlfriend and boyfriend who would pour acid on her car or send her dead flowers.

Her luck was certainly being tested on this trip. She was floored when she learned she'd be working the same flight with both of her current lovers. Fortunately, Connor, a stately man approaching fifty, enjoyed a simple dinner and a romp in the sack while Jeanette was a wild woman whose evenings didn't begin until eleven. She could easily satisfy both of them, and her own fatigue was worth it. *Ah, the stress of bisexuality.*

She stopped and looked around, realizing that she'd absently turned a corner and the raucous noise of the vendors was behind her. Her co-workers were nowhere in sight and she was alone in a narrow alley, the buildings on both sides so close that shadows sheltered the cobblestones. All of the structures were decrepit, and Margo thought if she pressed her palm against the wooden frames, each building would fall into a heap, like tumbling dominoes.

Shabby windows stared at her, each pane covered with black

and white drawings—dark eyes preventing the sliver of sunlight to enter. Her morbid curiosity beckoned her to explore, and she glanced at each window that she passed. Some of the symbols she recognized—pentagrams, astrological signs, skulls and scythes, but most were mysterious and strange. None conveyed warmth or friendliness. She passed a large window depicting the grim reaper standing over a skeleton, his scythe pressed against his victim’s ribcage. She shivered and stepped backward, deciding to return to the main street and the comfort of the crowded marketplace.

A rusty hinge moaned behind her, and she turned to see an emerald green door, just slightly ajar. How did she miss that? She hadn’t noticed any doors along the alley, but she’d been focused on the artwork in the windows, so she rationalized that her eyes had absently tripped past it.

Naturally curious and not easily spooked, she opened the door slowly, and the scent of vanilla overwhelmed her. She smiled. It was exactly like her grandmother’s kitchen when she was a child. Grandma was always baking, and every Sunday when Margo entered the old lady’s house, happiness wrapped around her. It was probably the reason vanilla was still her favorite scent.

She navigated a short hallway into a room filled with dozens of shelves, each lined with rows of unique bottles, carafes and vessels filled with colored liquid. It was a stark contrast to the dreariness of the alley, and she turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees, gazing at the reds, blues, pinks, yellows and oranges. For a moment, she had the odd feeling that she’d stumbled into a Saturday morning cartoon.

She stepped toward a shelf and studied the beautiful containers that held the liquids. No two were alike—different heights, shapes and designs. Her eyes were drawn to a carafe shaped like a swan filled with golden fluid. The color embellished the fine cuts in the glass, and she automatically picked it up without thinking. It was heavier than she thought, and she wondered if it was carved from lead crystal. Her fingers traced the beautiful form and brushed against a metal band affixed to the bottom. It

was a label inscribed with the words, *Potion of Grace*.

She suddenly felt as if she was being watched. She whirled around, the swan nearly slipping from her fingers.

“Please don’t drop that. You could never replace it.”

She faced a goddess. The young woman, probably no older than twenty-four, wore a white gauze dress that clung to her curves, and Margo could see the outline of her firm breasts through the sheer material. Her eyes were dark, and her wavy black hair flowed over her shoulders. She studied Margo, saying nothing for a long time, as if she was sizing her up.

Eventually she smiled. “Welcome. I am Chayna,” she said softly, her English perfect.

Margo wondered if she was American, since there wasn’t a trace of an accent in her voice, but her rich olive skin suggested she was a native.

“Hello,” she said, replacing the swan carefully on the shelf. “This is a remarkable store. What’s in the bottles?”

“Everything a person could want.”

Too paranoid to reach for the carafe again, she pointed at the swan. “That one’s labeled *Potion of Grace*. What does it mean?”

“As the name implies, it helps those who are, shall we say, more likely to struggle with klutziness.”

She gazed at the bottle. “That’s why it’s displayed in a swan, isn’t it? Swans are very graceful.”

Chayna nodded. “Exactly.” She gestured to a shelf dominated by tall, thin bottles. “This section is reserved for self-esteem—improved confidence, candor and humor.”

Margo raised an eyebrow. “That little potion can help someone be funnier? Really?”

Chayna shrugged. “I’ve never had a complaint.”

“If that’s true, then I know about a thousand comedians who would love this shop.”

Both of them laughed and Margo’s gaze settled on a shelf behind the exotic saleswoman, to a heart-shaped bottle filled with rich, lavender liquid and two glass doves perched at the center.

“What’s that one?”

“Ah, that’s the Root of Passion.”

Chayna carefully lifted the bottle with both hands and placed it on the counter. She gently pulled at the doves, and Margo realized they acted as a beautiful stopper. She leaned closer, unable to believe what she was seeing. The contents were moving. She watched the lavender liquid swirl inside the bottle, and, for a moment, she could have sworn the deep red and cerulean blue separated and remixed.

“The Root of Passion pierces the heart and frees a person of his or her sexual inhibitions.”

She snorted. “I certainly don’t need that.”

Chayna arched her eyebrows. “Really?”

She gazed at Chayna, and a wave of heat surged through her. “No.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. You can’t buy anything in this store for yourself. It would be a waste of money. Do you see the sign?”

She glanced up to a simple white paper that hung above the doorway. *FOR A GIFT.*

“So people don’t buy anything for themselves?” she asked, unable to believe that such a rule existed.

“No, only to give to others.”

“How do you know? What if customers try to use it?”

“I know that the powers of the potions are affected by the receiver’s energy. You have been here and have one kind of energy. The potions won’t work for you as the giver; however, should you purchase one for a friend in need, he or she will feel the full effects.”

She contemplated the theory. She couldn’t imagine how it would be any different if she were to drink a potion or give it to a friend, perhaps Grace. *Grace could certainly use the Root of Passion*, she thought. But the possibility of Grace, a surgeon, imbibing anything not approved by the FDA was unthinkable. Ironically, she herself would have no hesitation grabbing the bottle and swallowing a few mouthfuls. That realization confounded her.

Where is your sense of caution, Margo? You’re standing in a

ramshackle store in a foreign country talking to a woman who says she has magic elixirs that can cure the individual ills of society. Are you nuts? How about throwing back a few ounces of bleach, too?

“You seem drawn to the Root of Passion,” Chayna concluded. “Do you know anyone who might benefit from such a potion?”

“My friend, Grace. But I couldn’t get her to drink it. She’s a doctor.”

“Ah, I see your predicament, but I imagine with the right level of persuasion, she could be enticed to try it. And,” she added, shaking the beautiful bottle, “the root itself has its own magnetic qualities.”

They both watched the beautiful lavender swirl in the bottle. It seemed to move clockwise, and the effect was hypnotic. Eventually the liquid resettled, but Margo’s eyes remained glued to the bottle.

“Do you see?”

“Yes.” she nodded. “I’d like to buy some. What’s the price?”

“One hundred dollars for one vial. And I will only sell you one potion. Are you sure you want this one?”

She glanced at the shelves, but her gaze quickly returned to the Root of Passion. She’d just have to persuade Grace to try it. *It’ll be okay.*

“How much does she need to drink?”

“Just a sip whenever she wants to heighten her sexual senses or free herself of her inhibitions.”

Chayna went behind the counter and withdrew a small oak box. She undid the clasp, and Margo saw that the box was filled with sawdust, cushioning a vial. Once the liquid was transferred, she carefully replaced the vial in the box.

Margo stared at the large bottle, the contents swirling furiously from being upended. She watched until the reds and blues resettled into their lavender state, and she had an epiphany, a moment of clarity unlike any in her life. She saw a laughing face with dark ringlets dangling on her forehead—Rose. Amid her laughter was an air of surprise, for Rose had little to laugh about, and it was always unexpected when it happened. Margo

loved Rose's bright side.

"Are you sure you wouldn't give me one more vial? I'd pay you double."

Chayna smiled at what Margo was sure was a common question. "That would be against store policy."

She leaned over the counter, resting her hands on the beautiful bottle. "And, undoubtedly, you'd be fired for violating the rules."

Chayna placed her warm hands over Margo's. "I shouldn't," she said simply.

"But you will."

Her eyes narrowed. "I will, because I can tell that you *need* it. You *want* the first vial, but you *crave* the second." She came from behind the counter. Her lithe body stretched across the shelves, moving several carafes, obviously looking for something. The muscles in her back rippled underneath the sheer fabric of her dress, and Margo imagined her naked.

When she turned around, it appeared she held a small bicycle tire, and Margo was confused. She returned to the counter and Margo realized the tire was, in fact, a circular glass tube about a foot in diameter filled with black liquid.

She placed the tube in a wooden cradle and plucked the cork stopper from the top. Without a word, she withdrew a tacky souvenir that said, "Come to Las Vegas" in blue lettering, from underneath the counter. Carefully she poured a small amount of the liquid into the ceramic coffee mug.

She held up the mug. "Drink this."

Margo blinked in shock. "What?"

"If you drink this, I will give you another vial of the Root of Passion, for free."

She gazed into the mug and sniffed. Nothing. She swirled the liquid, hoping to elicit some similar reaction as the Root of Passion. Nothing. She glanced at Chayna, whose expression was unreadable.

"What is this for? What does it do?"

"You need it," she said.

I need it? What do you do now, Margo? This stuff isn't nearly

as appealing as the Root of Passion. Black equals death. Black equals darkness. What if she's feeding you poison? Just because she's incredibly beautiful doesn't mean she isn't capable of murder.

She glanced at the Root of Passion and the beautiful doves perched on the top. Everything suddenly seemed all right. She brought the mug to her lips, and, just as she had taken medicine as a child, she downed the liquid in two swallows. She grasped the counter and waited, worrying she would fall to the floor in a heap.

Chayna filled another vial of the Root of Passion and presented the box. "Your friend is very lucky to have you in her life."

As Margo handed over five twenties, she thought, *She's either lucky, or I'm a sucker for a gorgeous woman.*

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

