

*Curious
Wine*



A NOVEL BY
KATHERINE V. FORREST

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KATHERINE V. FORREST



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About the Author

Katherine V. Forrest's 15 works of fiction are in translation worldwide. In addition to *Curious Wine*, she is the author of the lesbian classics *An Emergence of Green*, and *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, the first novel in her award-winning lesbian-feminist utopian trilogy, and her celebrated, award-winning eight-volume *Kate Delafield mystery* series. Her stories, articles and reviews have appeared in national and international publications. A highly respected fiction editor, she has worked with many published authors, has edited or co-edited numerous anthologies, and conducted seminars and taught many classes in the craft of fiction.

Honors and awards include four Lambda Literary Awards, the Bill Whitehead Lifetime Achievement from the Publishing Triangle, the Pioneer Award from the Lambda Literary Foundation, and a profile in *USA Today*. Senior editor at the storied Naiad Press for ten years, she is currently supervising editor at Spinsters Ink and editor-at-large for Bella Books.

She lives with her partner and their two personality-plus cats in the beautiful Southern California desert.

For Sheila
Who has made everything possible

*I had been hungry, all the Years—
My Noon had Come—to dine —
I trembling drew the Table near—
And touched the Curious Wine-*

-Emily Dickinson

The cabin was warm and bright with the light Diana Holland and Vivian Kaufman had seen from a distance on the winding mountain road, friendly yellow light radiating into a black night, onto glowing snow.

Liz Russo greeted them with shouts of welcome, a flurry of hugs for Vivian, a collecting of coats. Four other women were gathered around a huge blazing fireplace; one arrested Diana's attention immediately. She sat on the hearth, and rose as Liz Russo introduced all the women.

Lane Christianson, the woman Diana had noticed, extended a hand to Diana and then to Vivian. Tall and slender, she pushed blonde hair back from her forehead.

"Elaine?" Vivian said, smiling and holding her hand for a moment before releasing it.

“Lane,” she corrected. “Short for Mar-lane-a, as in Dietrich. My mother was a big Dietrich fan and she didn’t stop to think how inconsiderate it was to give me three syllables in each name.”

“Lane is nice,” Vivian said, smoothing and straightening the jacket of her plaid pantsuit.

Perfectly fitting deep green pants and a camel sweater clung softly to Lane Christianson. Diana, having already tidied her own sweater over her pants, reflected with amusement that an unusually attractive woman always seemed to make other women self-conscious, slightly defensive. She glanced at her admiringly but curiously; the other women wore jeans and sweaters or sweatsuits.

“I suppose I should be grateful for Marlene. Mother might’ve been a bigger fan of Hedy Lamarr or Pola Negri,” Lane said to Vivian. “What could you do with Hedy or Pola?”

The women laughed, and Lane smiled; to Diana the smile seemed cool, remote.

Vivian said, “Do all of you know Liz’s maiden name?”

“Sure. Taylor,” said Madge Vincent.

Diana said, chuckling, “You used to be Liz Taylor?” Lane laughed, a light silvery sound.

“Damn you, Kaufman,” Liz said, “I ought to pull your false eyelashes off.” She said ruefully to Diana, including Lane in her glance, “Imagine growing up with a name like Liz Taylor. I wanted to get married when I was twelve just to get rid of it.”

The women laughed. Liz asked Diana, “What would you like to drink? We’re out of vodka but there’s lots of bourbon and scotch and gin. A little wine, too.”

“Wine, if it’s white.”

“It’s white, but not exactly what they serve at the Beverly Hilton. My sons keep it here. Make yourself comfortable, dear. If you don’t like the wine you can join the drinkers. Viv, come on in the kitchen honey, let’s bullshit.”

The fireplace was surrounded by a long sofa, two armchairs, and a circular coffee table with drinks and a tray of cheese. Large corduroy cushions were scattered over a raised hearth. Diana decided to sit near the fire.

Madge Vincent said, “May we assume you and Vivian have a

good reason for wanting to live in your awful city?” An intense-looking woman of perhaps thirty-five, with disheveled shoulder-length dark hair, she sat on the sofa tapping her cigarette into an ashtray overflowing with long cigarette butts.

Diana settled herself on a cushion, smiled and extended her hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I bow to the superiority of your beautiful city. Especially since I’ll be outnumbered five to one when Viv leaves. It’s not really my fault, though. I can’t help it if I was born there. In beautiful downtown Burbank, in fact.”

Chris Taylor said, “You knew Viv was born in San Francisco, didn’t you?” She was slightly pudgy, with graying hair and timid, anxious blue eyes. Diana had learned from the introductions that she was Liz’s sister.

“Yes. I’ve heard lots of stories about you and Liz and Viv all growing up together. I finally got to meet Liz a year ago Christmas. She came down with her husband for the holidays.” She smiled, remembering how much she had liked the Kaufmans: Liz, big and physical and warm-hearted; and her husband, a loud cigar-smoking gentle bear of a man.

“You heard they got divorced.”

“Yes, Viv told me. I felt very bad.”

“Twenty years.” Chris sighed. “We don’t mention George around Liz.”

Diana watched Millie Dodd, who sat cross-legged on the floor, lift from a well-padded case a guitar which had the high gloss of expensiveness, and lay it across her knees. “George and Millie,” she intoned in a hushed whisper, and struck the strings with an abrupt slash of her fingers, producing a dramatic thrumming of finality. She pushed at chemical blonde hair, a frizzy cloud around her face, and smiled in delight at her musical effect, blue eyes as ingenuous as a child’s. Diana thought she could be as young as twenty-five, as old as forty.

Millie continued a low pleasant strumming as Liz brought Diana her wine and returned to the kitchen. Diana sipped from the small heavy wine glass; with a shudder of distaste she placed it on the hearth and looked up to meet the amused eyes of Lane Christianson.

“Not exactly vintage.”

“A tad too much vinegar,” Diana joked, noticing an identical glass, almost full, beside her.

“More like the whole vinegar bottle. Maybe you’d like liquor.”

“I only like vodka.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll get us something when I’m out.”

Diana’s eyes lingered on Lane Christianson. Leaping firelight reflected gold highlights in her hair, which was shades of blonde and silk-textured, reaching just below the nape of her neck, framing her face and falling over her forehead. Cut in layers that shifted in pattern as she moved her head, her hair reminded Diana of a stand of autumn trees she had once seen in Utah with leaves like sunlit coins, blowing in the wind in changing colors of gold. In the firelight, the warm tones of her skin suggested the topaz she would become under a summer sun. Diana could not decide if her eyes were gray or blue. Lane sat relaxed, legs curled gracefully under her, but with her slender body erect and her shoulders very straight. Diana thought her beautiful.

“What do you do, Diana?” Millie asked.

“I’m a personnel representative for West Coast Title and Trust,” Diana answered, turning reluctantly away from Lane to the other women.

“Do you work with their customers then?” Chris asked.

“No, I hire people. I work a lot with Viv. Do all of you know she’s a supervisor? I’ve hired a lot of word processing people for her.”

“Ever hire somebody she hates?” Chris asked.

Diana was amused by the question. “She hollers once in a while. I make good choices, usually.”

“I imagine the worst problem is just keeping people on the job,” Lane commented.

“Yes.” Diana gazed at her again. “People drift from job to job, it’s amazing. I interview people in their early twenties with a dozen jobs already, they see no reason why it should be any different.” She asked with a prickling sense of expectancy, “What do you do?”

“I’m a lawyer.”

“Good for you.” She was gratified that this impressive woman had applied her intellect and physical gifts to a challenging profession.

“One nice thing about being in a group like this, I don’t have to have the adjective for a change. When I work I’m always the woman lawyer. Out of earshot, I’m sure I get other adjectives.”

The women chuckled. Diana asked, “Do you have your own practice?”

“I’m with a law firm. With five names. I’ll give you a card if you think you might need help sometime.” Her voice was light, her eyes animated.

“Do you specialize?”

“I work on the stupid messes our corporate clients get themselves into with civil rights violations.”

“That’s just great!”

“No, frustrating. Like trying to change the tides. We’ve had the Civil Rights Act since, ‘sixty-four, all the lip service anybody could ask for, all kinds of smoke and fire—and it’s shocking, the little progress. Bad as it is for women, it’s worse for blacks — most management people I know want them to go back to picking cotton.”

“I agree with you about women,” Chris said, “but sometimes I wish—mind you I’m just as liberal as the next person, I just wish that’s where the blacks had stayed. And those other people flooding into San Francisco these days, those...those...”

“Chris, get out of your time capsule,” Madge said. “This is nineteen seventy-eight. People have got to allow other people their own space.”

“That’s easy for you to say, they’re buying property like crazy, those ... *perverts*.”

“Chris —”

“Madge, I don’t feel like arguing,” Chris said.

“Neither do I,” Lane said, her smile thin and tired. “I came up here to get away from all that.”

Diana asked in the awkward silence, “Are you in real estate, Madge?”

“More or less. I’m kind of itinerant.” She drew deeply from

her cigarette and reached for the ashtray. "What all of you do is a lot steadier than my profession."

"I thought real estate was booming. It certainly is in Los Angeles."

"That's the trouble." Madge extinguished her cigarette and ran her fingers through her hair. She inserted another cigarette between thin lips and smiled sourly at Diana as she flicked a tiny gold lighter. "Everybody and his brother are into it. I happened to meet Lane when her firm handled a problem for my agency. She's a good lawyer, but she cares too much and works too hard."

"Real estate isn't my field," Lane said, looking at Diana. "I was helping a colleague, I had to research everything. Which made me a poor lawyer who took longer to get things done," she added with a chuckle.

"She got here two hours before you did," Madge said to Diana. "Has to leave Wednesday. She was supposed to drive here with me two days ago to relax and ski for a whole week."

"Last minute complications, Madge. It happens."

"All the time to you, Lane."

Diana said, "What do you do, Millie?"

"I'm a nurse," Millie said, sipping what appeared to be a martini. "Chris and I live just down the street from each other. She's not really quite so narrow-minded as she seems."

Chris said tartly, "I work for a vice-president of Shell. You ought to hear his opinions."

"How long have you been with Shell?" Diana asked, anxious to change the subject.

"Twenty-four years this past month."

"Really? It sounds like you have a very responsible position."

"I worked my way up to it. I've been a secretary all my life and I've never felt the least bit apologetic about it."

"Why should you, if it belongs in your script?" Madge said.

Diana smothered a smile. Liz and Vivian came out of the kitchen arm in arm, carrying drinks. Feigning polite interest in the continuing conversation, Diana examined her surroundings.

The fireplace, floor to ceiling slab stone, dominated the cabin dramatically, and the major furniture was clustered around it. Dark wood paneling was warm and lustrous, blending with the rich brown shag carpeting. A curved breakfast bar separated the kitchen from the main room. Diana thought that the kitchen seemed unusually well-equipped for a cabin, with generous-sized cupboards and counters, a large refrigerator, an elaborate stove. In the dining area a tiffany lamp hung over an oval table surrounded by wicker chairs. A bookcase held games and cards and puzzles, a collection of paperbacks, and a matched set of books, probably classics. Off the dining area was a doorway, apparently to the back bedrooms and bathroom. A sturdy ladder leaning against one wall led to an open trapdoor in the ceiling.

Diana peered up at the trapdoor, imagining the beauty of the snow and trees she could see from above. Pain, sudden and sharp, unexpected, stabbed at her. Jack...the strength and warmth of his arms with all this cold and snow around them...

She started as Lane said, "Wait'll you see it up there."

"Can you see much out the window?"

"Only the universe." She smiled, then shook her head. "Liz says nobody likes to climb the ladder with luggage, so cabin rules are, last to arrive has to sleep up there. You can't imagine how incredible it is."

Diana looked at the trapdoor again, with a surge of anticipation.

Lane said, "Do you want to take your luggage up and see it? I'll help."

"Diana honey," Vivian called. "Time to take Vivian to her awful fate."

Diana waved at her. "I have to take Viv into town," she said to Lane. "She's staying at Harrah's with a friend."

"She is? Why aren't they staying here? Oh, of course. The friend's of the male gender."

Diana smiled. "Exactly."

Lane shrugged. "I wanted to come up here and get away from all that for a while, too. We'll go up when you get back, then. Or are you going to stay and gamble?"

"No," Diana said, deciding immediately. "I'll be back."

Liz helped Vivian into her coat. "Let's get you to your den of iniquity, my dear. I'm sure John is so excited he's had to put on his baggy tweeds. Is he any good at all?"

"Good for hours," Vivian crowed, tugging playfully on a curly lock of Liz's hair, light brown and shot through with threads of gray.

"Bullshit! How would you know? You couldn't last fifteen minutes these days, you old bag." Liz poked Vivian in the shoulder.

"You want a screwing contest?" Vivian shouted. "You just let me know, you broken down old broad!"

Chris said resignedly, "Always they talk like that. Even when we were kids. Worse."

Diana shrugged into her jacket, smiling, noticing Lane's grin.

Vivian said, "Try to be nice to my Diana, Liz. She's a very delicate child these days."

Diana, furious, stared at Vivian.

"What do you mean, delicate?" Liz asked, looking from Diana to Vivian with amused, interested dark eyes. "Is she pregnant?"

Diana laughed in spite of herself, and Vivian said, with a soothing glance at her, "She just needs rest and relaxation from all the cares and worries." She addressed the group. "Will I see all of you again at the casinos?"

"We'll be in," Chris said.

Outside the cabin, Diana turned on Vivian. "How dare you do that to me. Liz I barely know, those other people are total strangers. I should've known better than to come up here, I knew this was a hare-brained —"

"Honey, I haven't said anything much —"

"Anything *much*? You talked to Liz on the phone, set this up. How *much* did you tell her?"

"Nothing much at all, honey." Vivian climbed into the car. "Don't be mad at Vivian who loves you. Just let yourself enjoy this, Diana. Isn't the cabin marvelous? God, I'd be enjoying that great fireplace and that fabulous view right along with you if it weren't for John being up here. And Liz, God love her. There's nobody quite like Liz."

“They’re skiers,” Diana said sulkily, slamming her car door. “They’ll nag me to try it again. Skiers are like that. I *hate* skiers.”

Vivian reached to her, took her hand. “If you really don’t like them, really don’t want—”

Diana squeezed her hand, released it. “I didn’t say that. I just meant—”

“They seem like very nice people. That Lane’s a knockout. If you like slim gorgeous women,” she added humorously.

Diana chuckled. “She’s a lawyer.”

“God, even more disgusting.”

Diana started the car. “Madge and Millie seem okay, but Chris — it gets harder all the time for me to be around intolerant people.”

“Don’t mind Chris. She’s just a pathetic old maid, dried up inside and out. She was a boring old woman by the time she was nine, take it from Vivian. Too bad you won’t try skiing just one more time. If I had your body I’d live in ski clothes. It’s a better way to meet men than on a stupid golf course.”

Diana said wearily, “I don’t play golf anymore.” She changed the subject. “God, it’s black up here.”

“You haven’t played golf in six weeks, to be exact. You’ll have to come out of the convent sometime, dearie. Just to take care of the bodily necessities. How long do you think you can go without sex?”

“Forever,” Diana said grimly.

“Not you. You’re not that kind of woman. You need somebody loving you.”

“Wrong. After Tommy I didn’t have sex or even want it for months and months, more than a year. The whole time I lived with Barbara. Everybody I dated got only the pleasure of my company.” Diana squinted through the darkness, her headlights picking up walls of snow sheared into stratified layers by snow plows, and the symmetrical shapes of pine trees.

“Not wanting sex isn’t a bit strange after what you went through with that drunk. I was like that after Joe the schmo. But it’s easier to do without in your twenties. Women need it more when they get older. Forty-two isn’t such a bad age, either, I can tell you. Although I wouldn’t mind being thirty-three again.”

“Thirty-four.”

“Thirty-four. You’re so attractive. I don’t even like to let you near John, if the truth be told. Though he tells me he prefers his women well-padded, thank God. I’ll tell you now that it’s over with Jack, at least I hope it’s over, I don’t know what you saw in that piece of male fluff. Good-looking, yes, but that’s all. Not much wonder he’s done everything but throw himself under the wheels of your car to get you back. He’ll never have anything like you again.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Diana said evenly, steering the car carefully around the curves, watching for ice patches in the road.

“Anymore? You haven’t talked about it at all. I don’t know what you think friends are for. You’ve done your mourning for him, six weeks is more than he deserves. But no, nine hours to Tahoe and all I get is your long face. I felt like stopping the car and performing a mercy killing.”

Diana laughed.

“That’s better. Are you still taking the pill?”

“Yes Viv. Yes, mother.”

“Jason at work is panting after you.”

Diana shrugged.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He bores me.”

“So why are you taking the pill, my little nun in a convent?”

Irritated, Diana did not answer.

“Well, it’s intelligent, whatever your reason. You might meet someone up here.”

“If I do, I don’t intend to hop into bed with him.”

“Phooey. I was in bed with John two hours after I met him.”

Diana glanced at her friend in amusement. “John’s lasted longer than any of your other...enthusiasms, I will say that.”

“Why shouldn’t I do what I feel like doing? All the men do. I’ve done my biological duty, I’ve produced a child. Now my vagina’s strictly for fun. Nothing is forever, Vivian’s learned that much after her two disasters. Wait’ll you hear the joys of divorce San Francisco style from Liz. Twenty years, for God’s

sake. If I ever thought two people would go to the undertaker together it was Liz and George. Till George leaped out of his shorts over some hot blonde thing in his office. God, men can be such bastards, such pricks.”

Diana had reached the intersection of Highway 50, and she waited for an opening in the Saturday night traffic streaming toward the casinos.

“You need a love affair, Diana. A good love affair.”

Diana pulled onto the Highway. “I had one. Jack was more fun than anyone I’ve ever known. I never knew what he’d do next. He was like a man-child to me.”

“I’m sure,” Vivian said with ill-disguised sarcasm. “I mean a real love affair. Mind-blowing sex, all you do is go to bed and come till you’re vanilla pudding.”

Diana laughed. “Viv, you’re bad.”

Vivian grinned lasciviously. “It’s good to be bad.”

“I can’t believe how built up it is now,” Diana said, gazing at glittering blinking miles of neon along Highway 50.

“I always thought your feeling for Jack was more protective than anything else. I can’t imagine him burning up the sheets.”

Diana sighed. “You have a one track mind tonight.”

“I’m just used to all your little tricks by now, how you change the subject.”

“You’re straying into private territory, that’s all. I loved going to bed with Jack.” She added affectionately, “I’m just not the blabbermouth you are.”

“How would you know if he was any good? You’ve had precious little experience for this day and age.”

“Viv, we’ve been through this before. I don’t think experience is important. I just don’t. I didn’t need the three men before Jack to know how good it was with him.” The dark tower of Harrah’s came into view. She stared curiously; the hotel had been built since the last time she was here.

“Three *men*? Your marriage hardly counts. It’s a wonder you didn’t leave that drunken fool of a Tommy still a virgin. And that McDonnell-Douglas engineer— At least tell me this, Diana. Was Jack that good in bed? Really?”

“Yes, for me. Really.”

“Men are really good in bed when they want more than their own pleasure, when they really, really love women. That makes them sensitive.”

“Jack was sensitive. He loved women.”

“Was that it, Diana?” Vivian asked softly. “Were there other women?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Diana bit off the words.

“You’re the most honest person I’ve ever known. Too honest, you never spare yourself anything. You’re so quiet, you look so tired all the time — I know you’ve got to work this through but don’t exhaust your strength when you have friends who love you and want to help.”

“Thank you, Viv,” Diana said, tears stinging her eyelids.

She knew she had no choice but silence. How could she explain, justify her feelings to anyone? There had to be something wrong with her. How else could she explain the coldness she had discovered in herself after five years of loving Jack Gordon?

She could not forgive him. After six weeks, she could not even consider forgiving him. Agonized by his absence, she had been sullen and waspish in his presence; he had called, rung the apartment buzzer, accosted her in the apartment garage and at her office. Her mind shuttered from him, angry at his hurt, she had refused to listen, turned away repelled when he tried to touch her. Every shred of feeling for this man she had loved better than any other in her life had vanished.

There was more evidence: You never wanted children, she accused herself. Yes, Tommy was a drunk, but that had been an excuse. She had been happy when Jack declared that he wanted only her; living with him unmarried had given her the excuse to avoid discussion or admission that she did not want children—that there was a cold and unloving core in her, that there was something wrong with her.

With Vivian’s luggage in the care of a bellman, Diana kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Vivian held her at arm’s length. “Aren’t you going to stay? And play? Say hello to John?”

“You and John will have your own hellos to take care of,” Diana teased. “I’ll be here in the morning.”

“Liz won’t have a phone in that place, she thinks she’s roughing it. All it does is make things awkward.”

“I’ll find you, don’t worry.”

“Why not stay and play?” Vivian coaxed. “You can’t meet — I mean, you’ve got to get out and around and —”

“The cabin was your idea, remember? If I’m going to be spending the next four days there, I’d better be a little sociable, don’t you think?”

“You’re right, honey. But get out of there as much as you can. Nothing interesting can possibly happen in a cabin full of women.”