

** Excerpt **

Crimson Heart

Chapter One

Budapest, Hungary

The dark figure postured with command, stood between her and the access to the alleyway as Valerie made her way back to the hotel. His face was obscured by the dark shadows of the night, but as the heat of his warm exhalation breathed down upon

her, she immediately felt his commanding power wrap around her like an inescapable lasso of steel.

Valerie made a sudden movement to turn around and flee. As she did, the stranger slid his hand behind her back and pulled her into the alley, drawing her close to him. His strong arms enclosed her securely within his embrace.

Valerie opened her mouth and tried to scream, but nothing came out except for silent gasps of air. The stranger pulled her head back suddenly in an impassioned, intentional manner and then slowly ran his fingers across her throat.

In the dim, moonlit sky, all she could see was his intensely, hypnotic eyes, peering down into hers. She stood there, within his embrace, as if under his spell. And the longer she looked into his blue-green eyes, the more she could feel herself being drawn deeper into his desirous stare.

“You can never hide from me, Valerie,” he spoke evenly as his arm tightened around her. “I’ll find you.” He slowly ran his finger across her lips. His warm mouth then came down upon her neck ravenously.

Valerie trembled as she felt his teeth rip into her skin like sharp talons. She tried to scream once more, but when she opened her eyes, she found herself lying safely in her hotel bed. It was just another repeat of the cryptic dream that had been haunting her the past few months.

The familiar sound of street traffic coming from outside her fourth floor hotel room grounded her thoughts, pulling her back

to reality. The various sounds of everyday life in Budapest weren't much different than any other city, she thought, as an automobile horn suddenly blared. But as she held the leather bound journal in her hand, she knew it was in no way just another day for her.

Her being there at all was because of her late father's last wish. He'd arranged for her journey to Budapest long before he died. And because it was a significant arrangement for her father to have made, Valerie stepped away from her quiet, uncomplicated life, and engaged herself to the mystique of the 4,600-mile trip across the world to Budapest.

The morning earlier as she was about to board the plane in Pittsburgh, she was met by a messenger from the law firm handling her father's estate, and was given a large envelope. The messenger told her that they were instructed by her father to deliver this envelope to her only when she boarded the plane that would begin her journey to Budapest.

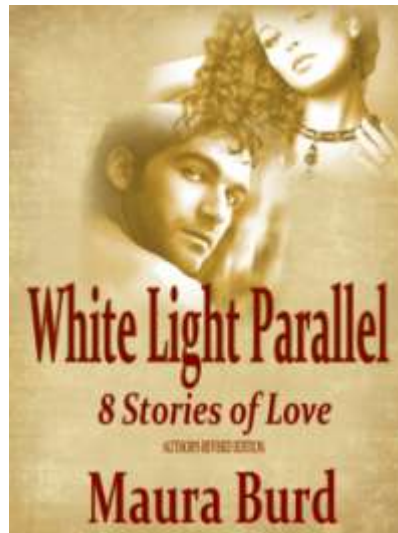
She looked inside the envelope, and removed an old leather-bound journal and a note. Valerie read the note again.

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