

Amira Press
HALLOWEEN
SPOOKTACULAR

THE CURSE
OF THE
AMBER TOMB

Sarah J.
McNeal



The Curse of the Amber Tomb

Copyright © October 2008, Sarah J. McNeal
Cover art by Amira Press © October 2008

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious or used fictitiously. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Amira Press, LLC
Baltimore, MD 21216
www.amirapress.com

Edward met Kate at the airport, if you could call a dirt runway with a wooden shack on it an airport. Cameras, tripods, and other various photographic paraphernalia rumbled around in the back of his yellow, Defender 90 Landrover. Although Edward's golden brown hair was somewhat disheveled and he had the beginnings of a beard on his face, he was as handsome and charming as ever. She liked his casual appearance and those dark, mesmerizing eyes.

"Okay," she said as she threw her bags into the truck and plopped down in the passenger seat, "Tell me about the wall."

"Could you give that archeological brain of yours a rest long enough to say hello Edward. I sure have missed you. I can't wait to hop your bones and make hot, sweaty love with you." He winked before he added, "Okay. Fine. Here goes. First of all, this wall looks like any other stone wall except it's out in the middle of nowhere and it makes a strange sound but sometimes it just hums. There's a guy who goes there every day and stands facing it for hours like he's praying or something. The locals say he's been around as long as they can remember which would make him older than dirt, but I've seen him, Kate. He can't be more than thirty-five years old tops."

"You've been sipping too many martinis, Edward."

"Swear to God, Kate, it's all true." He grinned at her as they bounced along the woodland road stirring up clouds of dust as they went. After a moment of silence he said softly, "Have I told you how totally enamored I am of you?" Taking her hand in his, he smiled and ran his thumb across my palm. Electric jolts shot up her arm and sent her heart into a sputter.

"That's what you say to all the lady archaeologists." She giggled as she wove her fingers into his. She loved the way he made her laugh, the way his dark eyes lit up when he gazed at her but mostly, she loved the way he believed in her. He was her best friend as well as her occasional lover. When they were together, they had great conversations followed by very hot sex. Edward knew all the ways to please a woman. But the thing Kate liked most about making love with Edward was the tenderness and care with which he did it.

He liked to kid around about getting hitched but Kate wasn't about to take him up on any of his fictitious offers. Surely he knew that Kate would never marry—not him—not anyone—not ever. Kate knew it was possible that Edward might want more but she didn't want an intense relationship and he had always been willing to keep things light.

"What, you don't believe me?" he teased.

"I think it's basically a ritual you go through. You say the same thing every time we meet." She tried to pass it off lightly as if they were just kidding around. Even if he was sincere, and she knew he wasn't, they'd end up like her parents. Their love, if it had ever existed, had turned cold and bitter. They were both committed to their careers. Between

their bitterness and ambition, there was no room for her even when she was a child. Unless she excelled, they seemed to hardly notice she was there. It seemed important to them that she always achieve maximum success and recognition. That was why Kate wanted to find the greatest archeological discovery of the century. Then they would notice they had a daughter. But she didn't want to end up like them. She would never let Edward know how she really felt about him. Casually, she directed the conversation back to the safety of Edward's discovery. "So, tell me more about this wall. You told me on the phone that you think it's alive or something."

"Geez, so much for romance." The smile vanished and his eyes seemed darker when he glanced at her. "Well, it moans or maybe you could say it weeps. I finally got the guy who hangs around it to talk to me. His name is Armand. Besides the fact that he is as pale as a sheet, he is truly weird. He talks about death all the time. When I asked him about the sound coming from the wall, he said the sound is his beloved Drucilla's spirit calling to him."

"What? Like it's haunted by a ghost? You've got to be kidding me. Is he just repeating some old local legend?"

"He's totally whacked I tell you. The guy needs air. He says he was here when the first settlers from Europe arrived. Apparently, his kind came from the stars, don't you know. According to Mr. Whacko, Merlin and Rasputin were star people, too. He says there are only a few of his kind left now." Edward shook his head and chuckled. "Have you ever heard such crap in your life?"

There was a sudden turn in the road and Edward exclaimed with joy, "Ah, there's my little piece of heaven."

"So, this is the place you won in a poker game?" Kate was impressed. The log cabin squatted among the white pines and had a wide porch with a swing. She could imagine deer walking up to the porch and eating out of her hand. It was beautiful. But it was also a little disturbing as if it were the last outpost of civilization before entering a hostile environment.

Brushing away the ominous feelings gathering in her gut, Kate laughed hollowly. "I can't believe there's a person still living in this world who would actually play poker with you. Man, you are one lucky guy. How do you do it? Is it something you learned from your parents in the circus?"

Edward laughed that deep, contagious laugh. "No, hon, playing cards doesn't have a lot to do with walking a wire. I used to play with some guys back at Carolina State. In fact, I won my first Yashica S L R camera back then with a pair of fours and three Jacks."

"Are you going to keep the cabin?"

“No way! It gets too cold here in Maine for a Southern boy like me. As soon as this gig is over, I’m going to put it up for sale and then it’s back to Wilmington, North Carolina and the salty smell of the ocean.”

The truck chugged to a stop in front of the cabin and they both got out and walked up the three steps to the wide porch and threw her bags on the floor as soon as Edward opened the door. “Let’s get started,” she said. “How far is it?”

“It’s a few miles down the road, thank God. After that we can walk down the trail and over the swinging bridge.” He pulled her up in his arms and ran his lips along the column of her neck sending tremors of excitement down her spine. “It’s kind of late to go digging around an old wall. The sun will be setting soon.” Running a large hand up from her hip to the tender space just below her breast, he ran a thumb across the nipple eliciting a groan from her. “How about we spend a little time getting reacquainted.”

“What have you got in mind?” She knew full well what he had in mind and suddenly, she was anticipating a diversionary romp among the sheets as well.

Edward took one of her hands from around his neck and brought it to his crotch where his thick erection pressed against the denim of his jeans. His lips took hers as his fingers gently squeezed first one nipple then the other causing them to jut out under the thin fabric of her tee shirt in hard points. She opened to the touch of his tongue running along the groove of her lips and the kiss deepened. Heat and moisture gathered between her legs with every stroke of his tongue as his fingers flicked and pinched her nipples. Backing her against the log wall, he ran a hand up her thigh where it joined at the apex of her pelvis.

“Jesus, it’s been such a long time,” he whispered in her ear, stirring a couple strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail where it was held with a plastic clip. He reached up and removed the clip allowing her hair to fall past her shoulders in a long curtain.

Kate lifted her arms as Edward divested her of her tee shirt and her bra. Her breasts bounced out of their confines with nipples taut and aching for his touch. The roughness of his tongue excited her even more as he rasped across each nipple then sucked hard. Leaning into him, she moaned with pleasure raking her fingers through the silky thickness of his hair. She had forgotten how good it felt to have his hands and mouth on her.

“I want to touch you,” Edward said breathlessly as his hands slid past the waistband of her jeans. She removed her hands from his hair and unzipped her jeans, stepping out of them as quickly as possible followed by the functional cotton panties she wore. Edward chuckled at the sight of her granny panties but was polite enough to keep any comments to himself.

He groaned hungrily as his fingers worked into the moistened cleft of her sex and found the little knot of flesh that made her hips lurch toward him in eager anticipation of what

was about to happen. “Even when you’re covered in dirt and bog water, you are so beautiful,” he said softly as if he were seeing her naked for the first time. “But, when you’re clean and smelling of fresh soap, God, I just want to eat you up.”

“Get your clothes off and get in the bedroom, dammit,” Kate demanded breathlessly rolling her hips to the movement of his hand.

“Yes ma’am.” He let her nipple pop out of his mouth allowing the air to cool and harden it until it was painfully engorged. Without further notice, he scooped her up and plopped her on the huge bed that was made of oak logs for posters reaching to the ceiling and covered with mosquito netting. Before she could make another demand, he stepped out of his jeans and tee shirt. She smiled remembering that he never wore underwear beneath his jeans. He was one hundred percent male sex appeal. The thick length of his cock stood up as soon as it was free of its confines.

He crawled up on the bed and pulled her hips toward him. “Open those lovely legs, Kate, because I’m going to lick and suck you until you say my name and beg for more.” She promptly opened her legs displaying her triangle of soft curls to him. He squatted on the bed, taking her legs over his shoulders and opened her labia with his hands and began to lick and suck her clit.

Squirring in delight, Kate reached down and found his heavy cock and grasped the length of it in her hand. As she stroked it, he bucked into her palm and a little moisture escaped the opening at the wide head. She used it to lubricate the head and teased the velvety tip with her thumb. Edward’s breath hitched. “Stop that or I’ll unload in your hand.”

“Then get inside me,” she gasped as she bucked and folded in heated spasms as he worked her clit.

Allowing her hips to rest back on the bed, Edward moved over her, nipping at her breasts, exciting them all over again. Her nipples grew large and rigid as he tongued each one and suckled with eager abandon. “Oh honey, you are too wonderful for my mortal heart.” He nudged the head of his penis into her opening then thrust his length inside her. She cried out in pleasure as he began to move his length in and then out in long, slow strokes.

Her body stretched with his thick length that seemed to fill her to capacity. Each thrust brought her closer and closer to the white heat she hungered for. She ran her hands down his smooth, muscular back remembering each muscle. Under her hands the muscles bunched and stretched as he began to pick up the pace moving in and out of her faster and faster until the heat of it made her burn. Closer and closer to the fire he took her, to her hot, burning release. Tighter and tighter the spring inside her coiled. The pleasure was unbearable. “It’s too much. Too wonderful. Edward. Edward.” She called out his name as her breath hitched and the white light burned across her skin.”

“That’s it, Kate, let me love you.” He groaned with one last thrust deep, deeper still and paused. The angular planes of his face caught in ecstasy, his dark eyes burned with inner fire as he spent himself inside her.

The warm wash of his seed splashed against her cervix and for one flicker of a second, Kate wondered what it would be like to have his child. Quickly, she pushed the thought from her mind and sighed with satisfaction and contentment as Edward lowered himself to the place beside her and gathered her into his arms. Neither of them spoke. Kate wrapped her arm over his side and held him close as he combed her damp hair quietly with his long fingers. The sun set. The room grew dark. The lovers fell asleep in one another’s embrace.

* * * *

Kate was awakened by the restless movements of Edward tossing in his sleep. He mumbled incoherently from time to time and a sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. She knew what would come next and her heart ached for him.

His dream was always the same. It was a replay of the horrible night his brother fell from the wire to his death during the family’s performance. Kate guessed that seeing Benjamin’s distorted body broken on the sawdust covered ground changed something deep inside Edward. He never performed on the tight wire again. In fact, he became afraid of heights. After leaving the family’s act, he became a commercial photographer. Kate often teased him telling him that he should do glamour shots instead of working in natural settings where heights and danger were bound to occur. Edward insisted that one day, he would get his old mojo back.

Kate knew Edward was about to awaken. She had experienced this with him often in the two years that she had started sleeping with him. She got up and made her way to the kitchen to get him a glass of ice water. By the time she returned, Edward’s mumbling turned to cries of anguish. Suddenly he sat straight up in bed crying out waking himself up. Kate went to him and gently touched his shoulder. The muscles tensed under her touch.

She spoke to him softly, soothingly, “Here Edward, drink this.”

His hand shook as he took the glass and drank. Kate had to help him steady his hand. “Some day, I’m going to beat this thing.”

She ran the back of her hand down his rough cheek then kissed him on the lips. “I know you will, babe.”

Edward’s mood changed as if he had been somewhere else and now he was back. He peered into her eyes and she saw the fire begin to burn. Grinning, he tweaked her nipple with his fingers. “I know just how to get my mind back to something pleasant. Ummm,” he groaned as Kate ran her hand along the length of his growing desire. “You can keep

that up if you want.” He sat the glass of ice water on the table beside the bed and turned to give Kate his full attention.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Kate bounced on the seat of the Defender as Edward drove down a winding road that took them deeper and deeper into the forest. It seemed that the day grew darker overhead as they made their way over the over grown, dirt road to the wall. The old oaks on either side of the seldom used road stood like imposing sentries with arms stretched over the narrow opening creating a cathedral. Though beautiful, Kate was disturbed by it as if the trees gave warning them not to go on any further.

Miles later, Edward braked as the road suddenly ended at the edge of a deep gorge. The only access to the other side was a swinging bridge made from ropes and boards precariously fitted together. Here and there a missing board exposed the drop to floor of the gorge. Kate wondered how Edward would ever make it over the rickety bridge that seemed like a mere wisp above a deep crevasse with a white water river below. The surging river seemed in a hurry to get away from this increasingly eerie place.

Before she stepped onto the bridge, Kate thought Edward was trying to pull her back. A pressure much like a hand tugged at her shoulder. She thought she heard a whisper in her ear saying, “Don’t go.” One glance backward affirmed that it was not Edward. He stood a few feet back from her, his blanched face a study in fear and courage. Obviously her imagination was running wild. Kate squared her shoulders and moved cautiously across the bridge. Crossing the bridge was a daunting feat for Kate but, for Edward, it was an act of pure determination and bravery. With equipment strapped to his back, Edward stepped gingerly onto the first board of the bridge. Her heart ached for him as she watched his pale face, his white knuckles and the sweat on his brow as he fought against his inner demons. She didn’t speak to him, didn’t try to sooth or comfort him because she had found over the years that his concentration would be broken if she did and his terror would over-take him. So she watched him struggle in silence.

Immediately after stepping off the bridge, Kate saw the wall and it sent chilly spikes down her spine. The wall ran like a thread along the wooded, rolling hills. It was made of stacked stones, from the eighteenth century was Kate’s guess. From a distance it didn’t look that extraordinary but legend had it, according to Edward, that the wall lived and evil resided within it. Supposedly the evil within it devoured the souls of people who trespassed its boundaries. Kate found it interesting how legends seemed to always hold an element of truth no matter how wild and crazy they may have seemed. Real facts get lost over time and the retelling but an essential thread of truth is always there. The thought of any truth in the legend sent a shiver down her spine.

Edward stopped beside the wall at a place where it arched up high as if a massive door once stood there. “You can hear it best around here,” Edward mentioned as they made their way up to the arch.

The sound was like a deep, agonized moan. She could feel a strange warmth along the stones at the bottom of the wall about two yards from the arch. "I think I've found something, Edward."

He produced a small shovel from his pack. "Geez, isn't that sound eerie?" He asked as he handed her the shovel. Their hands touched for a moment. He shot her a white smile as if he knew the effect he had on her but she jerked her hand away to avoid contact with him. What she really wanted was to feel the warmth of his touch and his lips on her but she had to concentrate on the job at hand so she pushed these sexual fantasies out of her mind.

"It makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck," she said as she dug down into the rich, black soil. Using great care, Kate moved slowly lest she should unwittingly destroy an artifact with the shovel. Edward and Kate traded off digging and story telling as they worked. Telling stories helped keep their minds off the terrible moaning sound that seemed to be getting louder.

"Remember the Temple of Angkor built in 1171 AD and its walled city in Cambodia?" she asked as she watched the muscles in Edward's back work as he took his turn digging.

"Wasn't that Henri Mouhat that discovered it? Angkor was supposedly the largest religious structure in the world. What a shame it was all lost in the Viet Nam War." Edward looked up at the gathering clouds. "The sky's beginning to darken. We better hurry before it rains."

There was a change in the wall as he dug. Kate saw something smooth and yellow begin to appear where they were excavating. "I'll take a turn now, Edward. I see something just at the edge of where you've been digging." She stopped a moment and touched the hard yellow surface. "It looks like amber. How strange. All this granite and then a big ol' slab of amber." With even more enthusiasm, Kate began digging again.

He spoke as he took photographs of the mysterious yellow, coffin-size block and recorded the sound that was increasing in intensity. Edward reminded her of her favorite archeological find, Helen of Troy and the Trojan War. "Heinrick Schliemann proved the truth in the Greek myth. He found the walls of Troy and the golden mask of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks."

He leaned back stretching his back. Leaning for a moment on the shovel, he peered at Kate smiling. "Kind of funny," continued Edward with his story, "In discovering the walls of Troy, Heinrick missed the fact that he had shoveled his way through a Stone Age village, a much greater find." He resumed digging shaking his head as he added, "What a dope."

"Stop what you're doing!" a deep voice shouted from behind them. Kate swung around to face a tall man dressed in pre-Revolutionary War clothing with a black cape that billowed in the chilly Maine breeze. Midnight hair and strange yellow-green eyes with pale,

alabaster skin made up his countenance. He was handsome like a beautiful stone sculpture—cold, white and expressionless.

“You have no idea what you’re unleashing.” Armand grabbed the shovel from Kate’s hand snapped it in two and flung it to the ground at her feet.

“Who are you?” Kate was barely able to breathe as mounting fear pressed on her sternum.

“His name is Armand. Remember, I told you about him.” Edward slipped an arm around Kate, taking a protective stance as he pulled her closer to his side and away from Armand.

“You must stop now before it’s too late. You must not open the tomb of my beloved Drucilla,” Armand insisted in his undefinable accent. His voice had become threatening.

Edward moved over to stand between them as Kate argued with the mysterious figure. “This could be the discovery of the century. What harm can there be in uncovering the truth?”

Armand turned to Edward and spoke in a voice low and foreboding, “You are about to unearth a horror to humankind I cannot begin to describe.”

“Are you saying your beloved Drucilla is the horror we might set free?” Kate asked.

His yellow-green eyes looked deeply into hers. “That is precisely what I am saying.” He turned and knelt beside the yellow coffin and sighed. Reaching out a hand he touched it reverently. “I miss her beyond compare. What good is immortality? I live among the ghosts of those she killed. They haunt this place--waiting. They are not company for me. Without her I am alone. Were my heart not here with her, I could leave this place. I could go home.”

“What happened?” Edward asked softly as he sat down beside Armand and made a place for Kate with his jacket.

“Perhaps,” Armand said, “If you learn the truth, you will understand and leave her tomb in peace.”

“What is the truth?” Kate asked.

“Our kind came here to make a settlement long ago. All was peaceful and happy until humans came. Humans fascinated Drucilla. They were so much like us, yet different. Her tastes could be exotic. She broke a taboo and tasted blood. Though she knew it was forbidden, she could not help herself. Soon it became an addiction. She became something perverse, even evil. The killing became bizarre and frenzied.” He leaned his back against the wall as he stroked the amber coffin. She would be tortured to death for

such a crime in our world. Still, I loved her. I could not find it in my heart to punish her as I was ordained to do by our law.”

Armand rose to his feet and caressed the golden block with his long fingers. His voice broke with emotion when next he spoke. “I cast a spell upon her and encased her in this amber tomb. She is neither dead nor alive, only caught in the labyrinth of time and space. If the case is cracked she will escape. I stay here to keep her company, to protect the humans from her and her from the spirits of murdered dead.” He leaned down and laid his cheek on the tomb. “This place is cursed now. The spirits of the dead wait to claim her. They would tear her to shreds and anyone who tries to stop them.”

Glancing at Kate and Edward, he asked, “Can’t you feel their presence?”

Kate remembered the feeling she had approaching the bridge as if someone were pulling her away from it. She nodded her head. “Yes. I have felt them.” Kate touched Armand’s hand for just a moment admiring his devotion to his beloved. “No one has ever loved me like that,” she said.

Edward laid his hand on her shoulder. “Kate, I...”

“Look,” she cried in amazement, “you can see her in the transparent amber.” She could have been sculpted by Michael Angelo. Rippling waves of blond hair fell around her shoulders and down the length of her slender body. Her dress was richly jeweled and embroidered. She reminded Kate of the legendary Guinevere, Arthur’s queen. Kate waved to Edward who was already poised with his camera.

“Look,” she whispered in awe.

Kate heard the whir of the camera several times when Armand suddenly glanced up as if awakening from a dream. He looked at Drucilla’s suspended body as if he saw a vision.

“I want her back,” he whispered.

Perhaps it was just her imagination, but Kate thought she saw Drucilla breathe. There was the sound of distant thunder. She smelled the rain on the quickening breeze. “Edward, I think she’s awake,” she cried.

Edward squatted beside her tomb and Kate looked on as his camera flashed. It was then that she saw her move. Armand must have seen it, too.

“Stop!” Armand cried, “The light will weaken the spell and she will be set free. We must put the earth over her tomb quickly.”

As the storm gathered around then and the sky became like night, they all witnessed the struggling movements in the amber tomb. They quickly began to shovel the earth over it but it was too late. As a flash of lightning spread its fingers across the sky, the amber split

and Drucilla stood before them with tendrils of her hair dancing on the wind. She kissed Armand and smiled at Kate and Edward. "I have such a hunger," she said over the sound of the increasing velocity of the wind.

"Run!" Armand commanded. "Don't stop until you cross the river. She won't cross water." He flung his arms around her and struggled to restrain her. Greenish apparitions gathered around and took on the appearance of people in ancient clothing. They moved closer and closer to the struggling woman in Armand's arms.

The sky cracked open and rain poured down as Kate and Edward ran. Thunder shook the earth. Edward took Kate's hand and pulled her after him. They got to the gorge but the bridge hung damaged by the wind. All that remained was a rope and a few dangling boards. The river roared below in a sweeping surge of deadly white water.

"Edward, we're not going to make it," Kate cried as fear snaked up her spine. They were trapped. Behind them death approached in the form of a hungry visage of ancient terror. Before them was nature at its worst with nothing but a few shreds of rope to get them to the other side and safety. It was impossible.

He held her close an instant. "Yes we are, Kate. I'm going to tighten the rope up and I'll walk us over to the other side."

"I don't think I can do this. Besides, aren't you terrified of heights? You could hardly get across the bridge before it was damaged. How will you do it?" She felt her voice pitch upward in hysteria. "There's no way we can make it."

He took both her arms in his hands and peered into her eyes. The wind whipped through his hair and rain dripped from his chin. "I think our choices are a bit limited, honey. Personally, I don't think I want my blood sucked out by that thing and I don't want to be torn to pieces by angry ghosts either." He chanced a glance at the daunting challenge before them and added, "Don't give up on me. I'm afraid all right but the trick is to do it anyway."

Once he had the rope in place and tightened, he called to her, "Its show time. Come on, Kate; climb up on my back. All you have to do is hold on. Don't squirm around or I'll lose my balance."

Kate looked back to see Drucilla making her way toward them with Armand close behind followed by a horde of ghosts intent on revenge. "Oh God, Edward, we're going to die."

"Trust me, hon, I used to do this as a kid. Scared or not, I could do it blindfolded."

Kate held on to him like an opossum baby. Far below, the water charged its way along its twisted path. There would be no way they could survive if they fell. There, behind them on the bank, was Armand holding his struggling monster bride tightly in his arms as

spirits gathered. Their faces gleamed white in the flashes of lightning that ripped the dark night.

“You’re the only person in the world I would trust to walk a tightrope with,” Kate said clinging to him like a vice. “What would I do without you?”

“Having a revelation at this moment isn’t exactly the greatest timing, Kate, but, if this is a proposal, I accept.” He staggered a moment and she held her breath for one terrifying second as he struggled to regain his footing.

They got to the other side and Edward cut the rope that flew like a coiled snake into the air then down below to be eaten by the angry river. They glanced back and saw Drucilla and Armand on the other bank. The swarm of ghosts screamed out like wild banshees as they took hold of Drucilla. They carried her away before Armand could stop them. Drucilla’s screams rose up over the shrieks of those who were destroying her.

Then was nothing but the sound of the wind. Armand’s face was riddled with sorrow as he held a sword that glistened high above his head. “Lord of fire I evoke thee. Take me to the place of spirits. Let me be in peace at last.”

Lightning struck like a white, jagged claw on the sword in Armand’s hand. There was a deafening roar. For a moment bright light illuminated the black sky. A cloud of smoke swirled up to the heavens. Armand vanished.

“Damn it,” Kate exclaimed as she pushed back her rain-drenched hair, “There goes my greatest discovery.”

“Armand is free now. The spirits have gotten their revenge,” Edward said setting her down as they arrived on solid ground.

“There’s still the amber coffin.”

“Leave it alone, Kate.”

“And there are probably bones and some artifacts from the village that used to exist inside the wall. She smiled to herself. “I think I can still pull this together.”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Edward interrupted her.

“What?” She asked impatiently. Ideas were spinning in her head. “My parents are going to be proud of me yet.” She leaped into the passenger seat of the Defender.

Edward opened the sturdy door on the driver’s side, seated himself and turned over the engine. Silent for a few minutes while he maneuvered the Defender back onto the slippery, muddy road, he then spoke again with anger etched in his voice.

“I can’t do this any more, Kate. I follow you around like a lost puppy on one dig after another because you want that one great find that’ll make your parents proud of you. I’ve turned down great shoots just so I could be with you. You hardly notice I’m around.”

He took a deep, ragged breath. "I’ve been in love with you for years. You never believe me when I tell you that maybe because I always act like I’m kidding because I don’t want to scare you off. I have always hoped one day you would look at me the way you do when you find a great artifact but I know now it’ll never happen. I can’t be like Armand in his eternal devotion.” He raked his fingers from one hand through his rain soaked hair. “I’m human. I have just this one short life. I wanted to spend it with you, Kate.” He peered at her with such intensity she could barely breathe. “I now see that’s impossible. You can stay here at the cabin as long as you want to work on your find. I’ll arrange for someone to bring you a rental car when I get to town. I’m going back to Wilmington in the morning.”

They drove the rest of the way back to the cabin in silence. The cold rain and clouded sky matched her dark mood. They slept apart, Kate in the bed, Edward on the couch. He was gone before she awoke.

The silence weighed heavy on her heart. There was no more laughter or careless banter. She missed his voice, his presence. She knew then what she should have known all along. She wasn't going to tell anyone the truth about the curse of the amber tomb or the mysterious wall. Her one great archaeological discovery turned out not to be so important after all. The greater discovery was in her own heart. Kate knew what she had to do now. She had to find Edward and tell him the truth about how much she loved him.

She hoped he could forgive her. She had been so blind and so stupid. But, now that her eyes were open, she wanted nothing more than Edward and, by God, she was going to get him back. Once she had him, she would never take him for granted again.

Hurriedly, Kate packed her bag and went to sit on the porch and wait for the rental car Edward promised to send for her. The cabin didn’t seem so pleasant any more and the view of the forest seemed silent and uninteresting. A sound of an automobile churning up dirt got her attention. The rental car was on the way.

But it wasn’t a strange car pulling up beside the cabin. It was a yellow Defender 90 with mud all over it and a familiar figure at the wheel. Kate’s heart quickened in her chest as the door flung open before the truck came to a complete stop and a disheveled Edward took long strides toward her with something wrapped in his jacket.

As soon as he got within reaching distance, Kate flew into his arms. “I’m sorry, Edward. I am so very, very sorry. I don’t...”

“I’m sorry, too, baby. I’ve been such a jackass.” Edward laid his cheek on the crown of her head for just a moment then pulled out of her embrace and handed her the object wrapped in his jacket. “This is a make-up present. I couldn’t sleep thinking about you in

this place by yourself or you trying to cross that rope to get back to the wall.” He ran a thumb along her jaw that sent heat along its path. “So I got up before daybreak and brought you back this chunk of the amber tomb. I hope it’s enough for your research and proof of your discovery. I would never...”

Kate stopped him from speaking further by placing an index finger to his lips—lips that she yearned to kiss. “It doesn’t matter now.” She placed the amber on the porch and stepped back toward Edward. She took his hand that swallowed hers and peered up into his dark eyes. “All that matters is you. It’s you I need—you that I want. I love you, Edward. I always have but I just couldn’t say it and I couldn’t let myself believe that we could work out differently than my parents.” She took her eyes from his afraid to see what his reaction might be. She was putting it all out on the line. There was a good chance he could reject her. She would deserve it.

His hand clasped her chin and turned her face toward him. “Are you proposing, Kate?” A white grin spread across his face and he chuckled when she huffed a breath of disgruntlement over his casual reply. In the next instant, his mouth covered hers in a searing testimony of his feelings. Moments later, he lifted her off the ground and carried her to the truck where he placed her in the passenger’s seat. He went back, got her bag and flung it into the back then turned to Kate with a solemn expression. “I don’t want an affair. I love you too much to accept only an affair. I want a marriage. Will you marry me and be my wife, Kate?”

Kate threw her arms around his neck and kissed every inch of his bearded face. “Yes, Edward. Yes. Yes. Yes.” She couldn’t stop herself from giggling with joy.

He pulled back, buckled her seatbelt for her then squeezed her hand before he started the engine and guided the Defender away from the cabin. “Then it’s off to Wilmington, North Carolina and a preacher.”

Clouds of dust swirled behind the Defender 90 as it sped away from the dark forest and any spirits that might still dwell along the wall and the amber tomb.

The End

About the Author

Writing brings Sarah McNeal joy and fulfillment as nothing else can. Inspired by the story of her uncle, *The Violin* is the first in a series of books by her revolving around musical instruments. Future installments are to include *The Piano* and *Harmonica Joe's Reluctant Bride*.

Drawn to writing fantasy and time-travel fiction particularly, she has created a magical place called Valmora, where winged people with various magical abilities are in constant struggle with the evil forces of the Dark Isle. Readers can lose themselves in this world in *The Dark Isle* and *Lake of Sorrows*. A one-time nonfiction writer who has written for *The Charlotte Observer* and for the CMC Mercy Hospital, Sarah loves creating magical worlds and characters who strive to make a difference and invites readers to love them as she does.

Visit Sarah on the web at www.sarahmcneal.com.