

Rosette

White Rose

*New
Beginnings*

Wendy Davy



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2010

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Natalie

Praise for Wendy Davy

On DRAKE'S RETREAT...

"The story flowed so well I couldn't believe when it ended...It is a great read, fun and well worth your time."

~ Brenda (The Romance Studio)

"Drake's Retreat is a well-written look at the opportunity one has to overcome their circumstances when they are willing to step outside their comfort zone...Read this inspirational romance for a warm-hearted look at the transformation that takes place when someone places God at the center of his or her life."

~ Night Owl Romance

Chapter 1

“You want me to do what?” Adam Peyton stood so fast he nearly knocked his cup of lukewarm, gritty coffee off his desk.

“I want you to go with Cora on her cruise.” Harry Steinbeck repeated his request across the phone line.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Adam ran a hand through his hair as he looked at his cup of caffeine. The idea of drinking it made him nauseous. “A cruise?”

“Yes. To the Caribbean.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you’re the only person I trust to keep her safe.”

Adam stilled. “Is she in danger?”

“There’s a slight chance she is.”

“What kind of slight chance?” The possibility of Cora being in danger made his stomach knot with apprehension as he paced across the length of the office.

“I’ll discuss the details with you in person.”

“Does she know you want me to go with her?”

“Not yet.”

“So she hasn’t agreed?”

“Not yet.”

“She won’t like it.”

Adam noticed several of his employees watching him and reached for his office door, shutting it with

more force than necessary. "The last time I saw her she threatened to strangle me."

Harry had the nerve to chuckle. "You're the head of my security team. I'm sure you can handle her."

"I'm used to being a bodyguard for people who actually want me to guard their body." Adam paced across his spacious office trying not to let the image of Cora's slender figure crowd into his thoughts. "Isn't someone else going with her?"

"No. The friend who planned on going with her cancelled at the last minute."

The thought of Cora going on a cruise alone when there may be danger involved spurred him to ask, "When?"

"Next week. She'll be gone over Easter. Her mother and I tried to convince her to stay home but you know how stubborn she is."

Adam knew all too well how stubborn Cora Andrews could be.

"She's coming to meet with me today at noon. I want you to arrive at my office at ten after twelve, that will give me adequate time to discuss the circumstances with Cora before the two of you get re-acquainted."

"Today?" The phone disconnected before Adam received a reply. He stopped pacing, sat on the edge of his desk, and ran a hand over his face. He slowly released his breath, wishing he had more than two hours to adjust to the idea of confronting the beautiful woman who had taken his heart several months ago and hadn't given it back since.

"He's ready for you," the secretary said, giving Cora a sympathetic smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks Mia." Cora rose from the oversized chair in the waiting area. The room held a striking resemblance to her stepfather's personality. It reeked of money and power. Everything exemplified

order, and the linear design gave the place a cold, detached feeling. No warmth radiated in the waiting area, and no warmth waited from behind the closed doors.

She straightened her skirt and smoothed her blouse. She slid a hand over her hair then admonished herself for being concerned about her appearance when she knew she couldn't live up to Harry's standards no matter what she did. After so many years, she knew she should stop trying. She took a deep breath and said a silent prayer as she opened the office door and stepped in.

The door *swooshed* behind her and closed with a snap. She strode up to the polished mahogany desk and perched on the edge of it.

"Harry." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"How many times do I have to ask you to call me Dad?" He spun toward her in his leather chair.

"About a million more should do it." A glimpse of irritation crossed his stern features, and Cora smothered a smile. She reached across the desk to pluck the cigar out of his mouth and crush it into the ashtray on his massive desk. "If Mom knew you were smoking this she would skin you alive." She brushed the remaining pungent odor away with a sweeping gesture. "You know what the doctor said after your heart attack."

He dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "I'm as strong as an ox. A little cigar now and then isn't going to kill me. Besides, it's the least of my worries right now." He steepled his fingers together. "Now, about why I've requested this meeting..."

The phone rang, interrupting him.

Cora moved to sit in a chair opposite his desk. She removed her high-heeled shoes, tucked one foot under her and leaned her chin on her hand hoping to annoy him. She knew how he required professional behavior in his office. He demanded it of his employees, but he couldn't of her. She was tempted

to pop a piece of gum into her mouth and blow a bubble, but she decided to keep that irritant for another day.

She sat in silence waiting to see what the urgent request would be this time. Could it be another business related event he wanted her to attend? Maybe a last minute plea to keep her mother company while he went away on another trip, or her favorite, a lecture on what she was doing with her life, or rather, what she wasn't doing.

As Harry barked orders into the phone, she thought once again about pulling out a stick of gum to chew on. Even though tempted, she resisted the urge.

Disconnecting the phone call, Harry stated, "I'm sending a chaperone with you on your cruise."

His statement baffled her. "What?"

"Actually, he'll be acting more along the lines of a bodyguard."

"What?" She shouted this time as she shot up from her chair and stared at him waiting for an explanation.

He leaned forward and pressed a button on the intercom. "Mia, send Mr. Peyton in."

"Yes sir," Mia's voice crackled over the speaker.

"Peyton? Adam Peyton?" Cora sunk into the chair before her knees had a chance to buckle. She turned to face the door. The man who had haunted her dreams for months stepped through it, looking as fatally handsome as the first time they had met. She ceased to breathe and a rush of anxiety coursed through her veins as his silver-gray eyes landed on her.

He nodded as he said, "Cora." Then he smiled.

The man had some nerve.

She twisted back to face Harry and found her breath. "It is not going to happen."

"Oh, but it is."

She recognized the stubborn set of her

stepfather's jaw, and clenched her teeth in determination. "No, it's not."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Your mother and I have discussed your upcoming cruise at length. We've decided it would simply be unsafe for you to travel alone at this time."

"I can't believe this. You have no right to intrude upon my vacation, to...to...invade my privacy. This is *my* life. This cruise has nothing to do with you or Mom." She lifted her hands. "Isn't it enough that you control over a dozen different companies? Do you have to continue trying to control my life?" She took a deep breath trying to keep calm. It didn't work. She also tried to ignore Adam, who remained standing in silence behind her. That didn't work either. Even though she couldn't see him, his commanding presence filled the room, making it impossible to pretend he wasn't there.

Harry held up his hands in defense. "Calm down Cora. I have good reasons for this decision."

"You say that as if it's your choice. You say it as if it has already been decided."

"It is and it has. Mr. Peyton will keep you safe during your cruise and for as long after as I deem necessary."

"Safe from whom may I ask? The bogeyman stopped hiding in my closet a long time ago."

"I'm serious. I just made a profitable business deal that has ruffled some very powerful feathers."

"You always have threats. You make new enemies every day. What does that have to do with me?"

Harry sighed. "I have made my decision. Now, if you will excuse me, I have an important meeting to attend." He stood and then picked up his briefcase, effectively dismissing her and the topic.

"That's it? That's all you have to say?" She kept her gaze pinned on him.

"Yes. Mr. Peyton will meet you on the ship. His

stateroom will be located directly across the hall from yours.”

“I won’t let you do this Harry.” Cora stood and planted her hands on her hips.

“It’s already done. I will see you when you get back. Oh, and remember to send your mother a post card from St. Thomas. She loves that island.”

“Unbelievable.” Cora turned on her heel to leave. She snatched her purse from the chair and gave Adam a furious glare. “You agreed to this?”

A hint of a blush occupied his handsome face but his features remained unreadable. “It’s my job.”

Cora swept past him and out the door. She sensed him following behind her as she pushed the button to retrieve the elevator.

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Chapter 2

An hour after the cruise liner left port, Adam lingered in the shaded area of the sundeck watching Cora settle into a lounge chair. The warm sunrays streamed down to cover her already tanned skin. He tried not to notice the length of her slender legs or the rest of the curves the one-piece swimsuit revealed. The task turned out to be impossible for him, and for a number of other men scattered around the deck. He took a deep, calming breath and pushed away his sudden spike of jealousy.

He scanned the area, watching the carefree crowd and looking for any potential danger. When a young man approached Cora, Adam's heart did a sudden leap in his chest. Without hesitation, he moved across the deck to stand beside her. Crossing his arms, he glared at the tough looking guy who wore a muscle shirt, obviously proud of his large biceps.

When the man caught a glimpse of Adam, his blue eyes widened, and his bravado wilted. "Sorry dude. I thought she was alone."

"She's not. Tell your buddies too." He indicated a group of guys behind him watching the scene.

The man stepped back, knocked into another sunbather and nearly fell on his rear, earning a loud burst of laughter from his friends.

"You're in my sun," Cora said, flipping over to lie on her stomach as if completely oblivious to the

conversation that just went on above her.

Satisfied the man wasn't a threat, Adam looked down to address her. His heart rate increased further as a completely new set of curves assaulted him. He cleared his throat as he eased into a lounge chair next to her. "That didn't take long."

"What didn't?" she mumbled as she rested her cheek on her arms.

"For the first man to come along and try to pick you up."

"What makes you think he was the first?"

He clenched his teeth and swallowed down his rising jealousy. "It's no wonder Harry sent me with you. If someone were looking to harm you, it would be easy for him to find you. He'd just have to follow the other men's stares."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Adam."

"No? I'm usually not a jealous man. It's a new feeling for me."

"Why *are* you jealous?"

"Because I still think of you as being mine."

Cora took a deep breath as she rose up on her elbows. "How can you think of me as yours when you tried to keep who you really are hidden from me?"

Adam swung his legs over the side of the chair. He leaned forward and ran his hands through his hair. "When I asked you out, I had no idea you were Harry's stepdaughter." He gave another harsh glare to more men who slipped covert glances at Cora, and scooted closer.

"No. But when you found out, you should've told me you work for him."

"I told you why I didn't."

"Tell me again. Maybe this time I'll understand."

He shook his head. "I was afraid you would reject me along with everything else that has to do with Harry."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Then why did you turn me away when

you found out?"

"We had been dating for two months. Two months! You knew how much I resent Harry's intrusion on my life." She sat up and yanked her swimsuit cover-up over her head. "Yet, you pretended not to know him. Do you know what kind of fool I felt like when he introduced you to me at the company Christmas party? You're the head of his security team, Adam. You should have told me."

"I should have. But I'm telling you again why I didn't. I didn't want to risk losing you."

"You lost me because you kept the truth from me." She stood.

He stood with her, close enough to catch a light scent of coconut sunscreen on her smooth skin. He swept his gaze over her and had to resist the urge to rub in a white patch of the lotion that remained visible at the base of her neck. He swallowed and looked into the mirrored lenses of her sunglasses. He knew if he could see her light-green eyes, he would see them blazing with fury.

He finally said, "No, Cora. I lost you because you rejected me along with everything else connected with Harry Steinbeck."

She threw her hands up. "I don't have to listen to this."

"You don't listen to anyone do you?"

"I'm leaving." She took a step away.

"Not yet." He caught her arm. "I want to know where you are at all times during the cruise."

"Why? So you can follow me everywhere?"

"So I can keep you safe. It didn't take me long to find you this time. But I'd rather not spend the rest of the cruise trying to hunt you down."

"You can't tell me what to do." She squared her shoulders and jerked from his grasp.

"I know I can't. That's why I'm asking you. Please, Cora." He lifted his hand to lift a tendril of her loose, honey-blond hair away from her mouth.

“Help me keep you safe.”

Indecision crossed her features before she stiffened. “I’m not asking for your permission before doing *anything*. If you want to keep me safe, you figure out how to do it. It is your job, remember?” She turned and stormed away.