

Romancing Rebecca

by Amber Polo

CHAPTER 1

Rebecca turned the rental car off Interstate 17 and in fifteen miles saw the outline of Bell Rock: big, red, and bell-shaped, exactly as pictured in the glossy travel brochure. Unexpectedly her blood pumped in the same way it did every time she signed a celebrity client or won a big case.

Loud and clear, a voice in her head said, *He is close now.*

Rebecca didn't usually hear voices. Other people talked about paying attention to their consciences. One ex-shrink told her to get in touch with her inner child. Her mother reminded her to listen to her heart. She didn't have time. Activity and hard work quieted the voices in her head.

In a quirky vacation mood, she asked aloud, "Who?"

The reply popped into her mind just like an answer from someone in the back seat.. *The one we have waited for.*

Rebecca laughed. She was talking to herself and getting answers! She turned on the radio and played with the stations, ignoring the lingering memory of that voice she hadn't heard since her twelfth birthday. The voice she had treated like an imaginary friend and had called Little Rebecca.

Rebecca followed the signs from Highway 179 past shops and condos, turned right on a gravel road, almost missed the arrow pointing to Rouge Mountain Hotel Registration, and with a squeal, braked and slid into the back end of a white van parked at the hotel entrance.

An auto accident had kicked off her first vacation since law school. Her palms slapped the steering wheel of the black Cherokee rental and she looked up through the windshield at the word "Beloved" in gold script painted across the back of the van.

She knew the drill. Call the police. Find the owner. Then came the yelling, screaming, and

swearing. She fumbled in her bag for a cell phone and looked towards the cactus-flanked lobby entrance. Tree-shaded adobe-style cottages were spread out just like the brochure described. Every building she'd seen in this town was square and painted rusty red.

A tall man in white pajamas and a teenager in a baggy green jacket approached. She noted two potential witnesses.

Maybe she'd driven into a *Lord of the Rings* movie set by mistake. From what she'd seen so far, Sedona, Arizona had too many crystal shops to be a cowboy town or mountain biker paradise.

The closer the man in white came, the better he looked: tall, athletic build, smooth confident walk. She rolled down her window. Good, he was smiling.

"My..." he began.

"Your van?" she asked. His nod confirmed he owned the Beloved-mobile. Whatever did he deliver?

A New Yorker would have already turned the air black with blue language. But the guy with the great smile didn't seem at all upset. He pushed back a clump of sandy blonde hair and focused his deep blue eyes on her.

She stepped from the air-conditioned vehicle into desert air the approximate temperature of a pizza oven. One stiletto heel sunk into the crushed stone drive. Her body twisted, Armani sunglasses popped off, and she toppled drunkenly toward him.

He caught her and held on. The voice in her head sighed, *Oh yes*.

She'd get her balance in a minute. In the meantime, her cheek rested against his white silk shirt inches from a heavy gold medallion hanging in the middle of his chest, and ignored the edge that cut into her cheek. Despite the temperature, his body heat felt very, very good.

She inhaled the scent of cinnamon. "I just needed to catch my breath." That smell,, or the jolt of the impact,, must have made her a little dizzy. "I'm sorry," she said, indicating his Beloved van.

"No problem." He steadied her, still holding her arm.

She pulled back. She knew that as he bent to retrieve her glasses, he was checking out her completely impractical shoes, black stockings, and shiny black skirt that stopped high above her knees. He probably noticed she wore no camisole beneath the fashionable suit jacket. Confident she looked good despite six hours on an airplane and the two hour drive from Phoenix, her ringless left hand smoothed her severe black chignon.

When his inspection reached her face, their eyes locked.

The gawky kid, whose green elf jacket identified him as a hotel employee, examined the front of her vehicle and the back of the van. “Like, no damage, sir,” he said, self-consciously pulling at the ring that pierced his left eyebrow. “Just some black paint on your bumper. Shall I call the police, Mr. Paxton?”

“Of course not. Thanks, Josch.”

Josch moved Rebecca’s well-traveled, black leather luggage from the SUV onto a wheeled cart. She automatically snapped, “Don’t be so rough,” and grabbed the computer case and briefcase to carry herself.

She turned back to the man in white. His shirt’s loose sleeves billowed like a poet’s. With the matching drawstring jogging pants, he looked like a role player in a Renaissance festival. “Thanks for overlooking the accident.” She automatically handed him her business card. She considered offering to pay the dry cleaning charges to have her mascara removed from his pajamas. “Mr. Pax—”

“—Tom.” He shook his head. “This was no accident.”

His eyes held hers until she turned. She walked towards the lobby absolutely sure he was watching her. The voice in her head said, *Oh yes, he is watching.*

An hour later Rebecca twisted open her liter bottle of Purely Sedona Artesian Spring Water, leaned toward the man sitting slumped against the tree trunk, and emptied the entire contents over his tousled blonde head. Water soaked his hair, cascaded over his face, and dripped down his white nylon

tank top. His eyes opened. He did not move, but kept speaking, “Beloved Beloveds. I come to tell you how to find peace. Listen...”

She wished he’d stop talking in that scary monotone.

“Embrace life. Love one another,” he droned. His blue eyes stared straight ahead and made the gorgeous man she’d met in front of the hotel look dull and—well—crazy. He’d seemed interested and interesting. On the way to her room she saw him again. Dressed for a run, his white running shorts left little to the imagination. He appeared to be the kind of guy who could make her Sedona vacation very interesting.

Hoping to meet him again, Rebecca hurried to her cottage, changed into running gear, and jogged down to the river. She found him. Leaning against a tall sycamore, babbling and definitely out to lunch, he looked more like a homeless loony than a prospective dinner date.

She leaned over and lightly slapped his face. “Tom...” No response. “Tom...” She slapped harder. Nothing. She smelled cinnamon again, sharp and strong like Wild Oats organic bulk spices, not like the kind that came in little Safeway jars.

Looking around for help—other guests, hotel staff, anyone—she called out, “Help! Down here!” The path couldn’t have been more than fifty feet from the hotel lobby, but she was afraid if she left him, he’d stumble into the river, hit his head on a rock, and drown.

She picked up three sheets of wet paper from the muddy spill left by her expensive bottled water and spread them on a rock to dry.

His left hand reached toward her. She pulled away and unzipped her cell phone from her fanny pack. She punched 911 while he continued his gibberish, “Beloved. Listen to the future. I have the knowledge you seek...”

“Right. Just hold on,” she told him. “Who made me Florence-what’s-her-name?” She looked into his eyes and used what she hoped was a convincing tone, “Help...will...be...here...soon.” He seemed physically okay, but in her opinion no one was home.

She gave the 911 operator the facts, “Rouge Mountain. It’s a resort. ‘Lush French ambiance in a desert oasis,’” she quoted the brochure. “You know it?”

“Oh yes, ma’am,” came the snippy reply.

Rebecca ended the call, but before she could punch in Hotel Security’s number, the phone rang. “R.J. here,” she answered automatically.

“Why has your phone been off?” Rebecca’s assistant, Heather, demanded in the irritating little voice that made her sound more like twelve years old than twenty-seven.

“Because I am on V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N!” she spelled.

“You are an attorney, not a doctor. No one can cover for you. Besides, the Unholy Three are restless.”

Rebecca knew Heather was referring to Babs Hemingway, Cleo St. Cloud, and Cora Ayne George—the three bestselling romance writers in the publishing world—and her biggest clients. “I can’t talk now. There’s this guy...”

“Really! Tell me more. R.J. Dumaurier, the most unromantic woman in the world, would never put off business for pleasure.”

“Stuff it, Heather. He’s sick or something. I’m waiting for the paramedics.” She snapped the phone shut and nervously patted her hair, confirming that the special gel still kept every hair slick to her head in her trademark Evita-esque style. Being on vacation did not mean she would look like a bed-head.

Struggling to remember basic first aid, she groped the man’s wrist for a pulse and found none. Kneeling a few inches in front of him, she remembered that handsome face, strong cheekbones, and perfect jaw. Now his face appeared soft and his voice flat as he talked on in strings of words that sounded like nonsense phrases from some boring sermon. “Damn, if he would only stop babbling.”

She held his hand, frighteningly cool in the mid-September heat, and felt his body shudder, watched his throat muscles tense, and his breath accelerate. She whispered, “Hold on. You’ll be fine.

I'm right here." She dropped his hand. She really didn't want to be here and crawled back a few feet, scraping her knees on the gravelly path.

He became, thank goodness, silent. While she watched, his head jerked back in one violent movement and his face altered. That weird, calm expression tightened and his face seemed to lengthen. His eyes became darker and sank deeper into his skull. A scar emerged diagonally across his weathered left cheek. Scar? The man she'd met earlier had no scar. Now she was definitely scared.

Slowly, like a computer morph, the man had changed. He now possessed a stronger jaw and broader nose, darker skin, and a five o'clock shadow. Even his hair looked darker—and longer.

"No way! I am imagining things." Talking to herself always helped her through stressful times. Oh yes, she was familiar with stress. But this was not one of those office emergencies she was such an expert at fixing.

His body shuddered again. His chest arched against his wet t-shirt and his shoulders strained, then fell back against that tree. On the next inhale, his chest expanded and his torso lengthened. His left hand lifted, he rubbed his eyes, looked around, and shook his head. Intense black eyes stared at her.

"Rebecca, my love," he said with a passionate sigh. "I have missed you so." His voice was deep and breathy, with some kind of Euro accent. He reached for her hand and looked at her with what she could only describe as adoration.

She heard that voice in her head say, *Beware, Thomas will save you.*

Rebecca said, "Not now." This guy needs help and her mind was playing games. But the voice would not be quiet. It said to the delirious man as if he could hear her, *You are Thomas but not Thomas.*

"Shut up," she told the voice. "I am trying to help this guy."

She smelled alcohol...possibly rum. Was he intoxicated? He squeezed her hand and rubbed his thumb familiarly across her palm. She pulled her hand from his frigid grip as if his palm was burning hot. She got to her feet and stumbled backwards. A sharp-pointed agave poked the back of her bare calves and she bounced forward.

A siren. The screech of tires and the next minute she heard voices in the parking lot. She yelled with relief, “Over here. Down by the river.”

Four bodies plunged down the path toward her. An EMT moved to each side of the man whose head now fell forward as he slumped into a catatonic state.

A woman in a starched brown police uniform straight-armed Rebecca away from him and opened her notebook. “Why is he wet?” she demanded. “Who are you?”

“R.J. Dumaurier. I poured water on him,” Rebecca answered. Seeing the officer’s disapproving look, she added, “I’m a lawyer. Not a doctor. How would I know what to do?” She rolled her eyes.

A black-suited man with a “Hotel Manager” name tag paced back and forth. “Officer O’Hara, both of these people are guests of my hotel. Guests!” He mouthed “guests” as if speaking the word aloud were taboo.

The officer ignored him, but spoke more politely to Rebecca, “Now ma’am, tell me your story.”

“I ran into him in front of the hotel.” Rebecca hoped the officer didn’t question her about that. What was Arizona law on not reporting an accident? She’d have to research that. “Later I noticed him as he was about to go for a jog. I went to my room, unpacked and changed. I came out to stretch my legs.” She didn’t tell Officer O’Hara about the sparks that flew between them. She wasn’t here to meet men. The voice in her head laughed. She was here to get over a man and have a good time—alone. She admitted that even if this man had a to-die-for body, his loony behavior was a turnoff. The voice said, *I doubt it.*

The hotel manager looked at Rebecca’s long legs and short jogging shorts, slid his eyes up to her tank top, and then back down to her expensive running shoes.

Both Rebecca and Officer O’Hara glared at him.

“I found him leaning against that tree,” Rebecca continued. “He was babbling. I emptied my water bottle over his head to...to wake him up. Then I employed my cell phone to call 911. Just the facts, ma’am.” She pressed her lips together, vowing to stop antagonizing the officer.

The officer did not smile. “Were you acquainted with this gentleman before today?”

“No. He introduced himself as Tom Paxton. That’s all I—”

The hotel manager groaned. “Tom Paxton is a world famous clairvoyant here for the Beloved Sedona Seminar and a guest in the Creekside Suite. And this woman is a New York attorney staying in Cottage 201.”

The man on the ground raised his head and opened his eyes. Ignoring the EMTs holding his arms, he struggled and stood. “What’s going on?” Shaking his head, he blinked his blue eyes and looked around. Then, spotting Rebecca, he smiled. “You’re the lady who hit me.” His voice was soft for a tall man. He stared into her eyes a bit too long before he turned to face the hotel manager and police officer.

“You’re the famous Love Channel!” Officer O’Hara’s mouth opened in a toothy grin. “She...” She pointed at Rebecca with a humph. “...called 911. She thought you passed out.”

“I didn’t pass out. I was reading by this tree and just, well, just went into a trance.” He smiled as if it was a private joke. “I went into a trance!”

“How cool! I have all your books. Would you autograph my...” The officer searched her pockets, and finding nothing else, handed him her ticket book and pen.

Tom took the book, asked her name, and wrote on a ticket, “To Officer Trish: Thanks for the assistance. Peace and Love, Tom Paxton.”

She grinned like a teenager meeting her favorite rock star. “If Mr. Paxton says he’s all right, he is all right. No need to transport.” She nodded to the EMTs. “Take off.”

The hotel manager rolled his eyes as the officer looked adoringly at the blonde man. “Sedona!”

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Paxton?” the officer asked.

“I’ll be fine, if Ms. Dumaurier will stay with me for a few minutes,” he said in a quiet voice that dismissed the group.

After the others left, Rebecca told him, “I’m impressed. You must be a very powerful man.”

“I guess in Sedona I’m a celebrity.” He shrugged his shoulders and lowered his chin.

“What do you do?”

“I sleep with my eyes open and talk about stuff I don’t know much about.”

“I attend a lot of meetings that are exactly like that.” She laughed. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Just exhausted and hungry. I won’t be good company ‘til I get some rest. And...more water.” He grinned. “See you later,” he added hopefully and turned to walk up the path.

She watched the back of his white shorts, now covered with red dirt, until he was out of sight. She’d forgotten to return those muddy papers. She picked them up, saw they were an email, and let curiosity overcome good sense. She read the message.

To: TomPaxton@Beloved.com

From: ARIREBPaxton@STXEN.edu

Subject: *First Entry*

January 1, 1863 London.

(Illegible text) At usual parties, tea or sherry and a bit of something is served. Instead, we were directly ushered into the drawing room. Drapes were drawn and only one candle on the round table illuminated the eight chairs shadowed against brocade walls.

Let me say, I did most surely not want to come and did so only to please Uncle who wants me to get out with people my own age, which means he desires to find a suitable husband for dreadfully old, unwanted me.

At the table farthest from the entrance sat a pale young woman about my age wearing a black velvet dress, even more out of date than my conservative outfit. She did not smile nor acknowledge any of the party. Besides myself, there were three ladies and three gentlemen and a rotund man who seemed to be in charge of the entertainment. He nodded for us to sit and as we settled ourselves the candle

flickered. I almost giggled at the solemnity.

Rebecca stopped, feeling a little guilty reading someone's email. After all, there were laws. She decided to take the pages directly to the front desk and would have, but that niggling voice told her to keep reading. This time she listened and read on.

The man began a sing-song mumbling to the girl. I was thinking it was all very silly. I do not believe in these things. When a loud gurgle issued forth from the young woman's throat, her head was pulled back as if by some unseen force. Her body shuddered, rose from the chair, then slumped forward. (Illegible text) When she lifted her head I would not have recognized her as the placid child of a few moments ago. Her skin was, dark, her face quite lopsided. When she spoke from the side of her mouth, an extended Adam's apple moved up and down like a monkey on a stick.

But her words shocked me even more than her appearance, when a low raspy voice croaked, "Rebecca, ey, ey, so you've come to see your old nursemaid. (Illegible text) I saw your parents die, I did. And cared for you until I, too, left this earth."

I stood, mouth open while she continued. "I warn you. Your mother fears the dark man will harm you (Illegible text). Beware (Illegible text).."

I ran from the room. (End of First Entry)

So dear brother, this is the first entry in the diary. I'll send further installments. The transcribing is slow going, wedged in between my other research and teaching commitments. The diary is in awful condition and the early entries almost illegible. More later.

Love from your favorite sister,

A

No longer interested in exercise, Rebecca headed back up the path. The diary's writing style

reminded her of second-rate historical romances by authors she'd rejected as clients. The temperature must have been ninety in the sun as she walked along the path back to her cottage, but the words in that email brought goosebumps to her arms. These few paragraphs chilled her more than any novel she could remember. She waved the second page, which had soaked up more of the red mud. When it was dry, she'd leave them both at the front desk for the puzzling Mr. Paxton, regardless of what the voice in her opined.

Tom was sorry to leave the woman with the large chestnut eyes and delightful wide mouth, but he was too exhausted to talk. He couldn't have made a great impression babbling against that tree. Had he drooled?

He remembered her long legs sliding out of the black SUV as if it were a limo and discovering the eyes behind those dark glasses were as enchanting as the rest of her.

She was so intense and shaken by a silly little bump, he knew before he read her business card that she was a New York lawyer. New Yorkers got upset about everything. Despite that protective black power suit and the aggressive attitude he disliked in women, he felt pulled toward her luminous personal energy. He was the expert on essential energy and this woman's essence fascinated and attracted him.. He recognized that she was good and beautiful inside, despite the fact that her lacquered hairstyle reminded him of Princess Leia from *Star Wars*.

Seeing her in short running shorts and a skimpy top made it hard to concentrate on the inner woman. He imagined a little food and vacation relaxation would soften her thin, intense edge. She arrived with a lot of luggage, so she must be planning a long stay. Maybe the Sedona workshops wouldn't be so bad after all.

If only he could learn to control these trances.

Romancing Rebecca The Rose Excerpt

Above the flow of water over river stones, Rebecca heard noises from the hotel kitchen. She turned and in the dim light watched a man in a white coat approach. She sat straighter and was about to stand to greet him when she recognized the senior wine steward carrying a tray.

"Miss Dumaurier. A gentleman requested this for you," he said with a formal bow, but a knowing smile.

"What gentleman?"

"The gentleman said, 'If the lady asks, tell her an admirer.'" The waiter placed a delicate crystal wine glass and a linen napkin on the small wooden table next to the bench, announcing, "Champagne, 1988 Krug Clos du Mesnil." He added, "Our finest," to be sure she understood, then turned and retreated up the path.

Rebecca lifted the wafer-thin tulip glass to her nose and inhaled the distinctive smell of the legendary wine, allowing its bubbles to tickle her nose. A sip, just a sip. This was a business meeting. Yet, she couldn't deny herself a taste of the most expensive champagne ever imported.

"Excellent," she whispered.

"I am so happy that you like it," said a deep, very male, voice behind her.

Startled, she began to turn, but the voice she recognized from the phone message said, "No. Rebecca, please stay where you are. For now."

"Yes, but why can't I see you? I'm not used to business meetings in the dark."

He laughed. "Much business is conducted that way. My dear, you enjoy your champagne and I will tell you my story."

"This is so weird! I mean...irregular."

"Perhaps, a little romantic?" His voice, like warm honey, made her heart beat faster.

She ignored the heat, which felt a lot like desire. "Your message suggested a copyright dispute. Tell me the facts."

"Ah, of course, business first. Well then," he sighed. "I wrote a...let us say...a book. An unscrupulous editor obtained possession and after cutting, adding, and totally distorting my meaning and intent, published it."

"I want what is mine."

"How many copies have been sold?"

"A million...maybe more. Fifty editions, counting translations and foreign rights. I am willing to forget about the TV series if they cease all rerunning of films immediately."

"Mr...Max, you are talking big money. Only a few authors ever have that kind of success. Who is this author?"

"I am the author. Will you take my case?" the velvety voice asked.

She felt breath warm on the back of her neck. She had to see him. She didn't think she could prevent herself from turning around one more minute. "Yes," she whispered.

"Good. The deal is made. I will deliver the documentation to you, soon. But now..."

Rebecca felt a hand rest on her shoulder, cool and strong. A shiver of excitement ran through her body. Unconsciously, she leaned toward his hand, deepening the touch.

He released her and brushed the back of his hand lightly against her neck and cheek. His voice trembled. "Enjoy your champagne, Rebecca, my dear."

She turned. Fine hairs stood away from the back of her neck. Trees rustled in the evening breeze and the creek bubbled past. That spicy sweet smell lingered in the air, but no one stood behind her. On the table beside the wine glass lay a perfect long-stemmed red rose.