



Hotel Amore

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This would be Hotel Amore's greatest challenge, Virginia Montgomery thought to herself as the elderly couple dragged themselves through the lobby entrance. Despite its romantic influence, Valentines Day always seemed to bring out the hard cases.

She smiled and crossed the polished marble floor. "Welcome to the Hotel Amore. I'm Virginia, Director of Customer Relations. You must be the Wallises."

The man stopped and mopped his brow, eying her suspiciously.

"I hope you had a pleasant flight."

"Worst I've ever been on." He hoisted his suitcase handle into a more comfortable position.

"Please, allow Theodore to get your bags."

"With his hand outstretched, no doubt. Thanks all the same, Missy, but this vacation has already cost me an arm and a leg. I'll get my own bags."

Oh yes, Amore's greatest challenge yet. "Our staff doesn't accept tips."

"Hmph. No tips, eh? That remains to be seen."

"Do stop complaining, Harold. The hotel is lovely. Everything I'd hoped it would be. I'm Phoebe Wallis." The elegant woman strode past her grumbling husband and took Virginia's hand. "Please ignore Harold. He feels like he's being cheated if he doesn't get to complain about something."

"I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Wallis. My staff is ready and waiting to make everything perfect. This is the most romantic hotel on earth. Some say it's magical."

"Damned waste of time, if you ask me. We've been married thirty-nine years. If she hasn't had enough romance yet..." He glared at Theodore as the bellhop skillfully whisked his bags away. "I don't know what more I can do."

"I guarantee you'll enjoy your stay." She handed them each a keycard, saving them the annoyance of checking in. "You're in room 214."

"Did you hear that, Harold? Two-fourteen. Valentines Day. It's divine providence."

"Bah!"

Virginia's smile never faltered. Harold Wallis wasn't the first grumpy gus she'd welcomed to the private island. "Won't you step into the bar for a complimentary Palomino? We make it with pineapple juice for a tropical twist."

"How'd you know the Palomino was my drink? There's something fishy going on here."

"Oh do be quiet, Harold. Come along."

Virginia watched them go, but stopped seeing them as her gaze passed over a bittersweet vision. She blinked, not allowing her eyes to stray back to the man that made her breath catch and her heart thunder.

It couldn't be him. Not here, a thousand miles from Massachusetts. She'd imagined it. He was *not* on Little West Cay.

"Virginia."

Her entire body stiff, pulse thrumming, she managed to drag her gaze to the wide open archway of the hotel's entrance. Her smile remained frozen in place.

Thomas.

The unwelcome ghost from her past strode slowly toward her, a heart-wrenching vision of pure decadence. Cream Dockers, a form-fitted cotton shirt and leather-weave loafers made him look like a life-long resident of the Bahamas. He even had a tan.

In the eleven months since he'd left her at the altar, Virginia had tried to change her memories of him into a smarmy, pencil pushing nerd. What a futile task.

If anything, he'd filled out with muscle, let his perfectly manicured hair grow a little too long around the collar, and now strode toward her with a debonair confidence he'd never possessed before. Obviously life without her had improved him.

Bastard.

"Hello, Virginia."

She increased her smile even as her anger ratcheted up to level-red. "Mr. Bennett."

The next instant, the blood rushed to her feet. There could only be one reason he was here. Of all the nerve! To add insult to the astronomical injury he'd already inflicted...

Virginia glanced past him left, then right. Where was she? She was probably blonde. He'd always had a flair for blondes. Was he on his honeymoon? Treating a new girlfriend? Or just flaunting his latest bimbo?

He glanced over her with a look so warm and longing her heart flip-flopped in her chest. "You look..."

Virginia didn't wait to hear more. She turned and stalked to the desk where she pounded his name into the keyboard.

Bennett. Single Occupancy.

She scanned the remaining reservations to be certain. Only one party had yet to check in; a Japanese couple celebrating their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary.

She looked up to find him standing across from her at the massive granite counter. Dear God, had he always been so handsome? While the tan made the thin lines at his eyes more pronounced, somehow it made him even sexier. His blue eyes glittered magnificently against his sun-kissed skin.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake. This is a couples-only resort. You can't stay here alone."

He smiled wickedly, teasing her. "It's the only hotel on the island."

"I'm well aware of that, Mr. Bennett. Fortunately for you the plane doesn't depart for another half hour."

His twinkling smile remained, as if he had some naughty secret he wanted her to beg out of him. "Virginia-"

She picked up the phone. "Jonas, please send the van back to the front. Mr. Bennett will be returning to the airport."

He reached across the desk and depressed the receiver.

She squared her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bennett. This is a privately owned island, and rules are rules."

"After what we shared, you can at least call me Thomas."

She slammed down the phone, nearly smashing his removed-in-the-nick of time finger.

A million questions whirled through her mind, but what he said next rendered her speechless.

“I’m not leaving, Virginia. Not without you.”

“I think my boyfriend will have something to say about that.” She looked at Julio.

Her assistant manager placed one hand on his hip, and with the other waved a finger in her face. “Oh no you don’t. If I pretend to be some jilted female’s boyfriend to spite her ex one more time, Philippe will have my head. And not in a good way.” He whirled around and flounced off.

Heat crawled up her neck, but Virginia kept her cool. She snatched up the phone when it gave a single ring, knowing it was Jonas calling back. “The plane’s already gone, Miss Virginia. There’s a storm rolling in.”

She set down the receiver and took a deep breath while she brought up Thomas’s reservation. “They honeymoon villa?”

“I’m hoping to put it to good use.”

She issued an exaggerated sigh as she held up the room’s keycard. “What are you doing here, Thomas?”

He snatched it from her hand and hoisted the strap to his duffel bag over his shoulder. “Winning you back, of course.”

* * *

“Did you tell him I’m off duty?”

“I did, but he won’t speak to anyone else about the problem.”

“What problem, exactly?”

Angelique stuttered nervously on the other end of the line. “Um, he wouldn’t say. I’m sorry, Virginia-”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Virginia grumbled under her breath the entire trek from her tiny bungalow to the honeymoon villa. *Problem my ass.* She rapped on the door.

“Management.”

She nearly choked on her tongue when Thomas opened the door. He stood before her in a billowing white cotton shirt left unbuttoned and a pair of loose fitting white trousers slung so low on his hips she could see his tan went *all* the way down. He’d always been fit, but now he sported a six pack of rippling

muscle that made her mouth go dry. He looked like he'd stepped out of one of those Giorgio Armani ads shot in Greece.

"What's the problem?" she barked.

"There's vermin in my room." He stood back and held the door wide.

"Vermin?" She looked at the thatched palapa roof in time to see a small green lizard scurry out of sight. "It's a gecko. They eat insects."

"There are insects in my room?"

"You're in the tropics." She stepped inside and closed the door behind herself. "Thomas, please. Don't do this."

He strode across the room to the balcony. "Don't do what, Virginia? Fight for the woman I love?"

Virginia tramped away the longing for the life she almost had. There was a time when she loved this man so much she ached from it. Her entire world had revolved around him.

She still loved him, she realized. But she'd grown beyond the hurt he'd caused and learned to live life where she was the center of her own universe, not revolving around any man.

"You're not making this easy on me." He leaned on the stone balustrade of the curved balcony. In the distance turbulent clouds revealed the nearing storm, but the setting sun painted them magnificently in strokes of violet, chartreuse and gold.

"Did you make it easy on me?" she demanded. "I told you I was yours always and forever. You're the one who didn't say it back."

The day he'd left her, their wedding day, was the most painful of her life. Not because of the humiliation in front of her friends and family. Not because of all the expensive preparations and long-laid plans that were suddenly wasted. It was because her heart had been cleaved in half at the tragic news her fiancé did not love her as she loved him.

"I've always loved you," he said as if he'd been reading her mind. "I just got scared." He stalked back inside the spacious villa, coming too close for comfort.

“By what? That you could no longer pick up floozy women whenever you felt like it?” She hated that there was hurt in her voice they could both hear. She wanted him to think she didn’t care.

“I never cheated on you, Virginia. I didn’t even date in the year-”

“Is that what this is about? You’re *horny*?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Well of course I am. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why are you, Thomas? What’s changed?”

“I was mugged.”

A pause hung in the air as she wrapped her mind around that.

“I was robbed at gunpoint at an ATM machine in Tremont.”

“My God.” As much as she wished his thick glossy hair would fall out and his perfectly straight teeth would turn yellow, she could never wish something so horrible on anyone, not even Thomas. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“You seem to have come through it.”

“This guy was waving a gun in my face, and all I could see was you. I knew if I died at that moment, I would never have the future with you we were supposed to have.” He stepped closer yet. His hands found her hips, and their touch sent her world off kilter. “I’m here to change that, Ginny. I’m here to fix this terrible mess I’ve made of things and spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

She breathed in the familiar scent of him and went careening back in time. She’d forgotten how wonderful his strong hands felt gliding over her. How her blood raced when she was pressed against him.

“I never stopped loving you, Ginny. I know you still love me, too.”

He drove his fingers into her hair and dragged her mouth to his. Virginia spiraled out of control, lost in the fantasy of reclaiming what she’d so tragically lost. He tasted magnificently of the Thomas she once knew, rousing bittersweet memories of the wonderful life they’d had in Boston. His skin was warm against fingers that had found their own way to his exposed torso. Tingles raced through her limbs and the need to refuse trickled away.

In the back of her mind Virginia knew to spend the night with Thomas would only confirm the choice that a catastrophic incident now made him

question. That to have her again would remove any lingering doubt his breaking things off had been right. That to have her again would simply satisfy an itch he wanted scratched.

That to let him touch her again would reopen that near fatal wound to her heart that had never properly healed.

But rational thought fled, and all Virginia knew was her need to feel him again, one last time.

* * *

For the past eleven months, Thomas had been walking around with a chunk missing out of him, like the final piece to a puzzle that had been lost. He snuggled closer, sliding across cotton sheets to press more of himself against the amazingly soft body next to him.

He'd known right away he'd made a ghastly mistake, and the only reason he hadn't gone running back, begging and groveling, was that he knew Virginia wouldn't accept him. That missing puzzle piece had grown larger with each day, week and month that passed, as though rot ate away at the edges of the hole. If he didn't get her back, that hole would grow until it finally consumed him, leaving nothing left.

Then he was mugged, and he realized he didn't care if there was nothing left, because life wasn't worth living if he didn't share it with Virginia. He hadn't died that day, but realized he'd been a little bit dead already.

It had taken him three months to find her. She'd left Boston almost immediately and none of her family or friends would help him. To locate her here, in this incredible hotel on this magical island where the only room available was the honeymoon villa, was nothing short of divine.

He snaked closer, twining his leg within hers. Last night had been a delicious reminder of the fantastic lover she was. He almost laughed out loud as he realized in all his missing her, very little of it had been about the sex. His memories of their bedroom escapades had played soft-focused and on low volume, but now he remembered just what an energetic and enthusiastic lover she hid behind her sweet smile and gentle eyes.

If last night proved anything, it was what a jackass he was. That he had nearly lost this magic was now painfully clear. She was his world.

"I'm not mad at you," she said.

He'd thought she was still asleep. His hand drifted to her breast, closed over it, and squeezed. "You should be. I don't deserve your forgiveness."

She drew a deep breath in, lifting the firm mound against his palm. "Yes you do. You only did what you had to. The fact it hurt me so badly doesn't mean it wasn't the right decision for you."

"God, Virginia. I'm so sorry."

She shifted, and he dragged her closer so they were spooning. "It's all right, Thomas. I'm glad you didn't stay. It would have ended anyway, despite taking vows. We're both better off."

"No, it wouldn't have, and we're not better off. We're both hurt. And it's going to take a lot of healing to get over that. What's important is that we're on the road to recovery."

She pulled away and reluctantly he let her up. She found her panties, then her bra. The rest of their clothes were scattered across the room.

"Don't go." He smoothed the empty spot on the bed, still feeling her body heat.

"I have to work. You have a plane to catch."

He jerked upright. "I'm not leaving."

She stepped into her skirt, dragged it up long, luscious legs and zipped the side.

He jumped out of bed. "Marry me today, Virginia. I know you have a resident priest on the island to perform weddings. We already have our license--"

"No." She turned away and retrieved her suit jacket.

"How can you say *no* after last night?" *Dammit, this isn't going like I'd planned.*

"Thomas, you came here because you'd begun to doubt your decision. Absence made your heart grow fonder, but now you've seen me and you know nothing's changed. Last night was great, but its only purpose was to get me out of your system."

He crossed the room and grabbed her arms. "Nothing's changed. I still love you, and I still want to marry you. Please, forgive my stupid mistake. Put it

behind us and let's go on like we should." He looked deeply into her eyes.

"Married, together."

She gave him that famous, gentle Ginny smile, but this time it held pity. "You're wrong, Thomas. I've changed. I used to think I needed you to make myself whole, but I've learned to depend on myself. I don't need to be married to be happy."

She stepped back. He was so numb he didn't feel himself release her.

"I've found strength in myself I didn't even know I had, and I don't want to lose it. If you really want to show me you love me, you'll get on that plane and go."

* * *

"Ooh, girl, for someone seen sneaking across the grounds this morning in the suit she wore yesterday, you look pretty glum."

"Did you file this morning's checkouts yet?"

Julio frowned. "Don't get all up in mine just because your booty call didn't go as planned. I, for one, had a marvelous night and I'm not going to let your oh-woe-is-me attitude bring me down."

"I'm sorry, Julio." Virginia's stomach somersaulted. The fact she'd turned him down this time did not dampen the pain from losing him all over again. "Your Valentines dinner went well?"

"Fabulously well, thank you for asking. Philippe gave me a ring." He waved his hand to show her. "But I'm more interested in your story. What could you possibly find wrong with that gorgeous blue-eyed hunk of muscle?"

"That gorgeous blue-eyed hunk of muscle is the one who left me at the altar."

Julio feigned absolute horror. "*That* is Mr. Dickhead?"

"He came to try and win me back."

"And you told him yes, of course?"

She frowned. "Of course not. I don't want to be married to him." Another surge of nausea burned her gut.

"Hmm." Julio eyed her with exaggerated skepticism. "Mmm-hmm." He sashayed away and resumed up his filing. "Hmm."

She opened her mouth to defend herself, but changed her mind. She didn't need to explain herself to anyone. She wore her newfound independence like a medal, and she wasn't going to let anyone make her feel bad for it.

I don't want him back, do I? No, I don't.

Then why did she feel so wretched? She glanced at the clock. The plane had departed two hours ago. Virginia took a sip of cold water, but it didn't cool the burning briquette lodged at the apex of her ribs.

Giggling pulled her attention to the archway to the garden. Mr. and Mrs. Wallace strode in carrying tennis racquets. Their damp clothes revealed the rain had started. They walked arm-in-arm, heads close like smitten teenagers. She stared, barely able to believe it. Thank goodness the magic of Little West Cay had worked on someone.

"What?" Mr. Wallis barked at her. "You never saw people play tennis in the rain? Chicago is covered in snow right now. A little sprinkle on a balmy tropical day is like heaven to us."

Virginia smiled, while inside she felt like crying. "I'm glad the weather hasn't dampened your spirits."

The old man broke into a rare smile. "Much as I hate to admit it, this hotel is everything you promised."

Mrs. Wallis swatted her husband and beamed at Virginia. "It's truly lovely here, dear. The wind has only served to stir up the delightful aroma of tropical flowers." The woman paused. "Though I feel compelled to mention there are two men on the beach who look like they might be in some danger. That surf is coming up rather violently. Perhaps you should send someone out to urge them in."

"Two men? Are they fishing?"

Mrs. Wallis tapped her chin. "Actually, it appeared the priest was performing a wedding. Though the bride must have cold feet because the groom was alone."

Oh no. Virginia bolted through the archway and across the pool deck to the beach.

"Oh my God." She kicked off her heels and ran across the sand. "Thomas, what are you doing?"

"I told you, I'm not leaving without you." He wore the tuxedo he was supposed to be married in a year ago. It clung to his muscular frame so perfectly it barely rippled, but Father Luke's hair flapping wildly in the wind revealed the ferocity of the rising storm. Both were soaked, as now was she.

"Come inside, please! It's dangerous out here."

"Marry me, Virginia. I love you, and you love me."

"Can we talk inside?" She pulled on his arm, but he wouldn't budge.

"Is there to be a wedding today, or not?" Father Luke snapped.

"I'll stay out here all night if I have to."

"Well I surely won't. This is ludicrous." Father Luke closed his bible. He started back up the beach unsteadily, and Virginia took his arm.

"I'm sorry, Father Luke. I didn't know about this."

"It's all right, dear. It all sounded terribly romantic, before the storm of course, but I should have realized you of all people would never allow yourself coerced in such a way."

His words struck her more powerfully than the driving rain. Had she really become so forbidding she was now known as a ball buster? All she'd wanted was to be independent.

She glanced over her shoulder. Thomas stood near the bubbling surf, watching her go with a forlorn expression. Behind him, the clouds were as dark as industrial smoke. A giant wave crashed down behind him and swirled around his feet. He struggled against the ferocious tow pulling him out to sea. Another wave crashed over the first, and Thomas was knocked to his hands and knees. He clawed the beach to fight the powerful drag.

Her heart jumped into her throat. She couldn't lose him again, not this way. In that moment, she understood nothing was lost if she wanted to save it. And she did. With all her heart, she did.

She raced to the water's edge and grabbed his arm, digging her heels against the water's powerful pull. Thomas scrambled to his feet and they ran from the next wave.

Halfway up the beach he pulled her to a stop. "I love you, Virginia. I don't want to live without you. If you don't want me, then just leave me out here."

"No I won't! Thomas you fool, I love you too!"

“You do?” He stared back with a mixture of hope and surprise.

She threw her arms around his neck. “Of course I do. Now won’t you please come in before we both drown?”

When she eased back he grabbed her hand and slid her ring back on her finger. “Marry me first.”

She glanced back up the beach. Father Luke still stood on the steps, watching them.

“All right. I’ll marry you!”

“You will?” Excitement filled his face.

“Yes. Yes! I’ll marry you, Thomas Bennett.”

He hugged her and spun her around.

“Father Luke, can you do this quickly?” she shouted over the wind.

The priest grinned as he stepped carefully back down the beach.

“Thomas Bennett, do you take this woman as your lawfully wedded bride?”

He squeezed her hand. “I do.”

“Virginia Montgomery, do you take this man as your lawfully wedded husband?”

She smiled through her tears. “I do.”

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Father Luke snapped his bible shut. “I’m going inside.”

Thomas took her in his arms and kissed her gently on the lips.

Despite the storm, she heard his whisper. “Always and forever.”

An hour later, to the bafflement of meteorologists worldwide, the storm over Little West Cay simply vanished.

About the Author

Pamela Fryer loves stories of hopeless love risked, forbidden passion stolen, and second chances taken. To learn more about Pamela visit her website at www.pamelafryer.com or her Samhain author page at <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/pamela-fryer>.

Titles by Pamela Fryer: The Midnight Effect