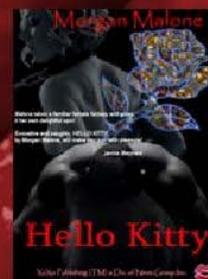


Sensual Treats

The Valentine Special Issue

Volume 2 - Special Edition

February 2011



 **xoxo PUBLISHING™**, a div of Ninni Group Inc

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Editorial

Welcome to the second special Valentine Issue of Sensual Treats Magazine. As promised, this entire edition is dedicated to XOXO Publishing™ and their wonderful authors.

XOXO Publishing™ and their authors have patiently sat with us and answered questions and let us pick their brains about their books and the publishing industry and how to survive it all. And we appreciate it. Please know that these are authors well known in the industry who took time out of their days and stories to help us bring to you their stories.

Notes regarding the content here – it is ALL the property of XOXO Publishing™ and their authors. All comments that are sent to us will be forwarded to the company and shared with the authors and staff. As always you can use our email: sensualtreats@gmail.com.

The ads in this issue all belong to XOXO authors, so take a peek at some of the wonderful stories told by these wonderful people...

Thank you, as always, for your interest and support. Now, let's meet the staff, then get down to business!

Heather and Denysé,
Sensual Treats Magazine

Meet the Staff at XoXo Publishing

These are the people who run the publishing house, and balance the many personalities that always comprise a successful and multi-genre publishing house:

Penny Adams is XOXO Operations Manager and Submission Editor. She is from Saskatchewan, and loves Matt Dusk.

Amanda Struz is XoXo Art Director and assistant to the publisher. She is from Toronto, and lives in Port Hope, Ontario and art is her passion. She is CEO of 9Clouds Marketing and Promotions.

Roche Patrick is VP of XoXo Publishing, he head the legal and accounting division.

Tina Brunelle is from Maine, USA and she is the XoXo Publishing Director and works with Gina promoting XoXo authors. Tina does a fantastic job at keeping all of our authors out there promoting.

Kim Seidel is from Pennsylvaniam USA and she is our book reviewer coordinator for XoXo Publishing and she is one of editors. Her passion is reading romances and book reviewing. She is the editorial director for May Eye Review Your Books.

Tim Watson has a Doctorate and teaches English. He is the head of our Editorial team and an editor at XoXo. He is from Toronto, Ontario.

Liz Mills hails from New Zeland she is XoXo Assistant, and is coordinator of all of our third party sales. Liz also hostes XoXo Pulse Radio.

Duane Vorhees is from Japan he teaches University and is one of our editors at XoXo.

Lenore Butcher is from London, Ontario and she is XoXo best selling author her Young Adult book, Dead Dogs, Girls and Ponies is in it second printing. Lenore is one of XoXo editors.

Audrina Leone is temporarily in our coop student program she is the assisting the Children and Young Adult division. She is a, *Ryerson University* student.

Krissy is XoXo Webmistress and she uploads and updates our website. Krissy is from Northern Ontario.

Sunnil is XoXo Webmaster and he is revamping XoXo website. He is from Toronto.

Gina Cianfarani, is XoXo publisher she is from Toronto, Ontario and is a certified publisher. She has been in the business all her life and teaches Italian and Creative Writing part time at a local school. She has setup a consultation business geared towards marketing, promotions and publishing for new authors and publishing houses.

Every company has a mission statement and a goal when they begin, so I asked CEO Gina Cianfarani what her vision was for her publishing house, she supplied me with an enlightening recent press statement:

XoXo Publishing™ a div of Ninni Group Inc.

**One of Canada's innovated leading small press. Presents Touch a Soul(TM)
– 2011 Literature Fundraising for Charity**

Gina Cianfarani, CP Copyright 2010 Reprinted with Permission

There isn't a day that goes by that reach inside my purse and donate a dollar or volunteer at a local hospital or fundraiser. This got me thinking how many people have wanted to donate money to a fundraising campaign they have seen on television or when at the mall? How many of us cannot help ourselves when we see someone in need?

I am sure that there are many more like me who feel that way.

While many of us readers still enjoy a good paperback novel, there are a growing number of people who are into reading books on their computer or on their electronic device.

Our website <http://www.xoxopublishing.com>, offers both paperbacks, e-books and Books on CD for sale, with stories ranging from Romance to Erotica to the Paranormal. We offer something for everyone.

“Our company mission is to let the reader explore a private place for reading pleasure, where they will be transported to a world of infinite possibilities.”

What makes XOXO Publishing so great? It's not just because we are a publishing company who sells books; it is because we love helping others.

XOXO Publishing has created a division specifically for helping others. “Touch a Soul” (TM) is a non-profit in which we feature fundraising paperbacks and e-books, where proceeds go to a charity of our choice or the author's. We feel it is important to help others when we can and as much as we can.

Last spring, our company put out an Anthology called “Tea For Mom and Me a Mother's Day Anthology ,” which was very successful. It combined a variety of short stories and poems. This book was featured at the Toronto Small Press Book Fair. Proceeds from the sales of this book went to the Breast Cancer Foundation.

The success of “Tea For Mom and Me, A Mother's Day Anthology” has prompted Touch a Soul(TM) to produce even more this year, allowing XOXO Publishing to help even more organizations. Who wouldn't want to donate?

As of right now, there are six fundraising projects in the works, in which \$1.00 per ebook sold or 75% to 100% of the sales will be going to charity. Authors from around the globe have become interested in producing stories, in the hopes of raising money for a variety of charities, and will donate a percentage of their own sales.

Books such as *Must I Remember* by Dr. Timothy Spearman, is donating all of his royalties to an African charitable organization, while author Brianna Martini is donating 100% to the Convoy for Cure (Truckers with Cancer) off her upcoming release *I'm Big, I'm Sexy and I'm Me*. Author Victoria C. Blake is donating a percentage of her royalties to a local woman's shelter, while author Amelie Court is allocating a percentage of Nobel her latest novella to the Human Society while over 20 authors are contributing all 40% royalties to The Peace Train project which Timothy Spearman and Gina Cianfarani TPTP leading the project along with Poetess Vivi Pruitt.

XoXo Publishing next project is to raise funds for an Orphanage via Unicef Canada, and third project underway is for the Cancer Society Ovarian and Prostate Cancer. We have a list being posted up on our website at <http://www.xoxopublishing.com> and on our Facebook page. To support a charity please buy one of our ebooks at <http://www.xoxopublishing.com/shop-online>. For further information please email the publisher at publisher@xoxopublishing.com.

It is not out of duty or obligation that we have created Touch a Soul(TM), but out of love for others, and our wanting to help. It is our way of giving back. We want make a difference in people's lives, no matter how big or small. If you wish to become one of our Touch a Soul Contributing author please email Gina at publisher@xoxopublishing.com Subject line: Touch a Soul™

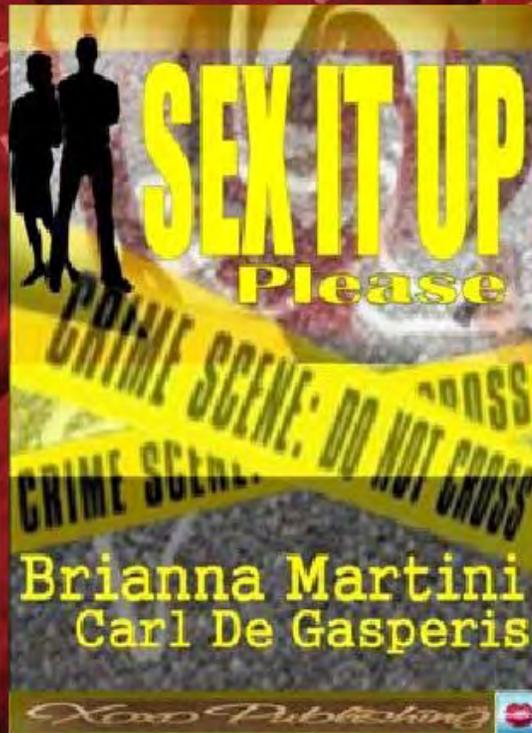
Look for more to come from Touch a Soul(TM) and XOXO Publishing(TM).





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PUBLISHING™, a div of Ninni Group Inc



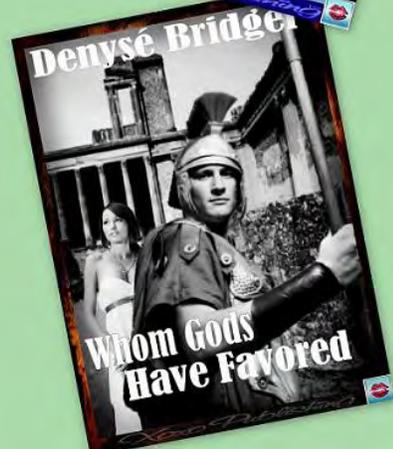
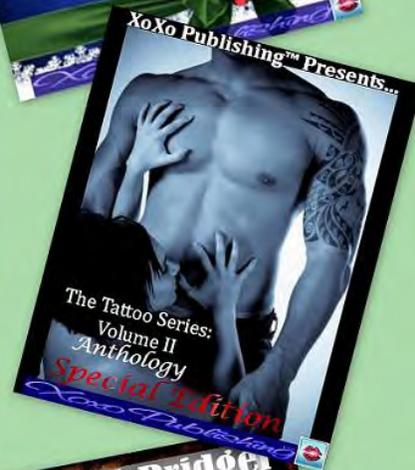
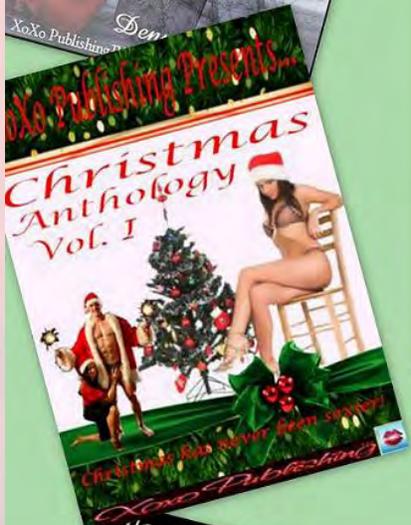
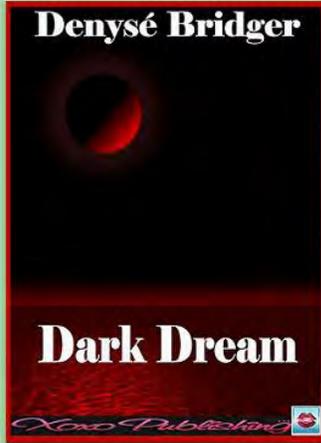
A murder has been committed this morning and two suspects are on the run. The church has been on lock down since this morning rush and the OPP, RCMP's are all standing by.

Father Nicholas and Sister Ginette of St. Andrew Catholic Church. If anyone has seen them please call the Police.

Blastette Fangu reporting for Cren News.

Sex It Up! Please
Carl DeGasperis
Brianna Martini

<http://www.xoxopublishing.com/shop-online>



I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing two XOXO Publishing authors, one new to the company and one who has been with them from the start. This wonderful new author shares her start to writing and here at XOXO as well as spills the details of her dream date. Please welcome Heather McAlendin writing as Eroica St. Finian to Sensual Treats Special Edition: XOXO and Valentine's Day.

How did you get started writing professionally?

I have been writing in some capacity my whole life. I was introduced to books at a very young age and writing poetry and stories seemed to be a natural extension of that. Four years ago I finally worked up the nerve to submit a manuscript to a small publishing company and to my delight it was accepted! I have never looked back and been very lucky to have a succession of independent and small publisher releases since then.

Tell us about your new release(s) with XOXO.

By the Spring of this year I will have four new releases with XOXO Publishing. Three will be erotic fiction entitled: "Ageless", "Sweet Desire" and "In My Dreams". The fourth is a full length suspense type romance I have called, "The Heir". All these stories take place in the fictional town of Maple Ridge. All these stories have strong characters who overcome hurdles to seek out love, desire and respect with the right amount of "heat" thrown in for good measure!

Describe your dream date (where, what, etc.).

My dream date was made reality a few months back by my wonderful fiancé, Scott. Without my knowledge he booked a honeymoon suite for us in Niagara Falls. We spent a wonderful weekend enjoying a Jacuzzi tub, drinking red wine; eating strawberry covered chocolates and when we decided to come up for air...went shopping!!! How more spoiled can a girl get?

How do you balance your everyday duties with your writing ones?

With the support of my fiancé and my son, I am lucky enough to pursue my writing career full time. It is a challenge to sometimes deal with "real life" when I'd rather be writing or fleshing out one of my characters. Like anything else, it is about balance. I try to keep to a writing schedule of 5 to 6 hours during the day. Once my teenage son gets home from school, it is back to being a Mom and making dinner, checking homework etc. I

consider myself very blessed.

How did you get started with XOXO Publishing?

I started writing and publishing erotic fiction on my own, as an independent author. I just was not getting the exposure I wanted for my work. I did some research on publishers producing erotic fiction and came across XOXO in my search. What impressed me was the fact that XOXO is a Canadian publisher who produces quality erotic fiction for its authors; as a Canadian writer, that fact is important. I sent in a piece of work and received an offer for publication.

What frustrates you most when you are writing?

It's hard when I have a wonderful idea; or what I think is a wonderful story line in my head and the words do not seem to flow. I can sit for hours trying to type and nothing works; the words are awkward but I know the idea is good one. I suppose it's writers block. Hate it!

What exhilarates you the most when you are writing?

I love it when a story or characters, being to “write” themselves. I know I am on the right track when the words flow and the characters define who they are and where they want the story line to go. Sounds a bit crazy...but as a writer the characters at times seem very real. I am very pleased when the storyline in essence completes itself.

Outline or seat of the pants? Why?

I work from the seat of my pants! Free form writing is natural for me and comfortable. I get my ideas down on paper and edit later. I find outlines too structured for what I want my work to accomplish. I get basic ideas about characters and places in my mind and then just write. If I focus too much on correcting while I write or staying with a guideline I find the characters and the work becomes static. So I go with the flow and it works...for me.

What are you working on right now?

I am writing a new paranormal fiction manuscript about the infamous Witch-hunter General Mathew Hopkins and also working on a fictional account of Jack The Ripper.

Where can our readers find you?

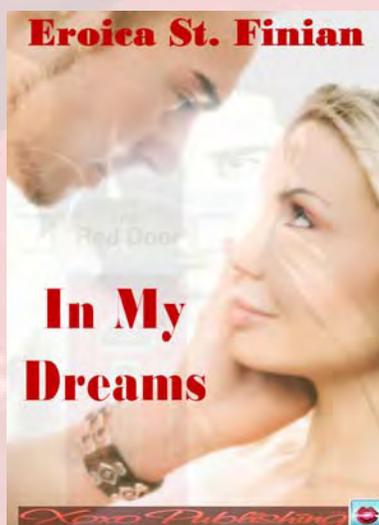
Any of my work can be found via the links on my website:
<http://www.mcalendin.com>

Two short stories about middle aged couples discovering that lust and love does not end after forty.

XOXO Titles:

**Ageless
Sweet Desire
In My Dreams
e Heir**

A young widow dreams of her deceased beloved. Can she set aside her sorrow to allow another man into her heart and her bed?



Sweetness From Heaven

Featuring Brianna's bestselling award winning
novella, *La Pirata, The Lady Pirate*
Francesco and Francesca Grimaldi great grandchildren.
By Brianna Martini
Copyright 2007

Futuristic Vampire Romance Dedicated to My Pirate I love you, always....BM

While the stormy ocean in Love Cove, Bahamas continue to rock the pirate ship, Tara could not believe it. One minute she is a bride kissing her husband, and the next minute, she is a grieving widow. Her once virgin shiny stain white pirate dress was splattered with her husband's warm blood. Her hands were stained red and a weapon lay at her bare feet. In fact, the offensive weapon was on top of her eighth toe, her missing eighth toe.

The land of paradise was now gone, so was the ship and her beloved husband....

She found herself being escorted by two Canadian secret service police as they handcuffed her and escorted her off the ship into a police car. She sat mutely in the back of the police cruiser as it sped downtown into the core of the City of Toronto.

Sighing out loud, she looked at her heavy bright emerald green pendant glittering in the sunlight with every deep breath she took.

A mysterious image appeared and then a bright prismatic flash exploded in the car.

"Oh gawd, I'm dead!" she cried out.

Fumes filled the car and darkened the windows as sparks continued to soar around and inside the vehicle, filling it with unknown effervescent energy. She moved her legs, then her arms, and finally the rest of her body. She seemed alive. Yet she moaned in pain as she twisted her neck to look at the police officer next to her. She subsequently realized her body was on top of the police officer and he was headless. "Oh my gawd, what a bloody horrible dream!" she screamed.

Squinting and trying to pry open her eyes, she shook her head and became fully conscious of the fact that she was not dead nor dreaming. The bloody sight around her was her personal hell. Both officers now lay dead, one in driver seat of the police cruiser and the second was the headless corpse she was on top of.

Again, Tara's loss of consciousness was profound. She opened one eye, then the other

and moaned in pain. She laid in a yellow chamber. The bed she was in was floating almost like a cloud. She was totally naked under some kind of reflective sheet. This was not a hospital room....

“Where in Hades am I?” she screamed! No sound came out of her. She tried to shake her head, but could not move. She moved her fingers, waist, arms, and upper body, then her lower parts and her feet. She could move every part of her but her neck. She tried screaming again, and a woman dressed in an outlandish shimmering suit came running into her room, flashing something in her eyes and she suddenly fell back into a deep coma.

An old desiccated man moved his healing hands all over and under her body while the Circle of the Virgin Clan stood nearby. Tara lay near death. Francesco, tears flowed down his face as he watched his only female grandchild sleep for near eternity. The clan parted as the Lord of the Soramara came into the room, giving Tara the kiss of life and taking her with him. He flew into his chamberatic zoomership, placing her gently in his own sleeping compartment. He started placing a pulsating sheet over her until he thought about it and kissed her still warm lips.

Sweetness from heaven she is, he thought to himself. He covered her peaceful sleeping face. As Lord Soramara turned on the prismatic laser button, the spaceship took off to its unknown destination.

Tara dreamt she was so cold and a deep panic hit her as she stood shaking like a folio as she faced a series of murder charges, she knew would never be cleared of until got to the bottom of this fiasco. They escorted her into the maximum penitentiary for life. The security asked if she wanted something from her pile of clothes and belongings. She took her palm reader, and her green emerald pendant.

The doors closed behind her with a final soft click and she fainted. Lord Soramara put the ship into autopilot as he checked on his Tara. Since that kiss it has been on his mind: the softness of her skin, the tenderness of her lips and her gentle breath on his skin. He removed the pulsating sheet from over her face and body. He hoped that this new sciencologic human experiment would work. Besides his vamparic bite on her, which barely helped to keep her alive, he knew that more work needed to be completed. Lord Soramara took some silver concoction and injected it into the ultra thin IV attached straight to her heart, then proceeded to entwine the golden soul mate cord attached to her disintegrating cord. Nothing happened, not many vital signs were showing on his screen, so he let her continue sleeping.

Taking his pilot seat, he noticed that he was off course and now entering the asteroidic zone of the intergalactic Zumazuma. At full throttle, he zoomed past the meteoric showers. With each laser beam, he blasted the flaming suns, as he spun around the moons with the last forceful blast he had to declare emergency status and land on a solar star. Nothing would help him now on the ill-fated trip to his world.

Tara drifted in and out of a coma. She saw a yellow ceiling and nothing else. Not

recalling her past, no emotions, only that she was in an intermediate state. Closing her eyes, a tear slipped down her face onto the therapeutic headrest. Her subconscious cried out to herself to awaken her from her present state. More tears slid down her cheeks.

Looking out a transom, she saw darkness which is how she felt in her soul. Lord Soramara beamed himself into his corporate office, and become aware of Strega, his ex mistress sitting at his desk, puffing on his prized cigarillo that his great grandfather, Francesco, won along with the pirate woman, Francesca.

His voice boomed around the office. She sat there motionless, staring into the cosmosatic contact mirror in front of her. Lord Soramama, looked at the screen, seeing that the location was his chamberatic zoomership. His Tara was crying.

“Another lady, my Lord Soramara?” she asked him bitterly. “She seems to be in tears your woman, I pity her!...Did you already put a stamp on her heart?”

He did not respond, but beamed her to the outer world.

Upon searching his desk, he could not find the item he was searching for, the other half of his missing stone. Beaming his ex-mistress back, he fumed at her. Grabbing her arm, and twisting it, he looked at her straight in her eyes and asked her in a unpleasantly calm voice. “Where is it? Where is my sacred stone woman!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I have not seen any stone,” she responded, rubbing her bruised arm.

She was more than angry as she beamed herself out. “To hell with you man!” could be heard echoing around the room.

While his anger could be seen as energy around him, it started flowing from his hands on top of his desk, unsettling everything on it. He beamed her to hell this time, while beaming himself in the chamberatic zoomership with his beloved woman, his soul mate, his Tara.

La Pirata, The Lady Pirate and Sweetness From Heaven

Paperback and ebook Novel

Coming this Sept 2011 XoXo Publishing™ <http://www.xoxopublishing.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/XoXo-Publishing/258678558724>

Featuring Brianna's bestselling award-winning novella, La Pirata, The Lady Pirate



What would you do if you saw two Street Hip Hop crews face off?

Would you recover from a shooting, then go on to lead your dance group to victory; not only to save your training ground, but to find out who tried to kill you?

In a love triangle of lies, who would you turn to?

What would your life be like after a showdown like that?

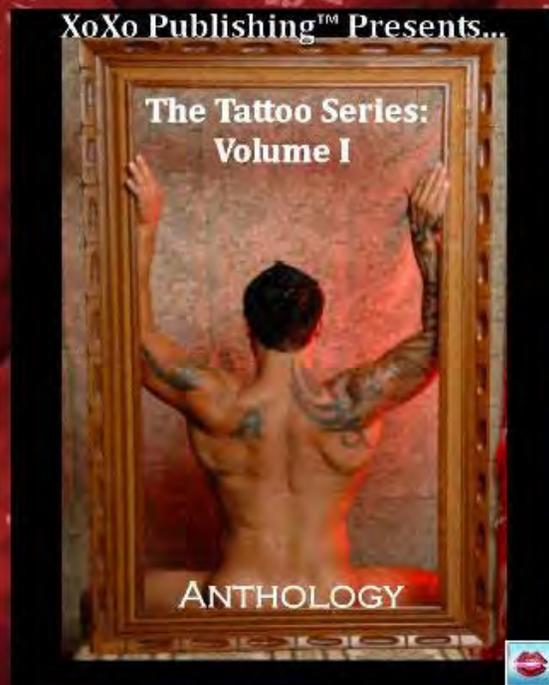
A confrontation that could tell you who tried to kill you, and disband the very people who were behind the attack: would it be worth the risk of you losing a crew that you had built up yourself with your own bare hands?

Welcome to Ambers life in 'Freedom Is Earned' where its all about the Streets and what you have to do to survive?

Can you heart take the heat?

The Highlander With The Ink

'In a town that was small and full of hot headed Highlanders there is a nurse who has a tattoo that is about to change her life. Nancy was a nurse who had recently graduated from the Nursing Program who decides to take a year off for herself after her father dies leaving her very well off. What Nancy finds in Immortal Thor is going to turn her world upside down as he is looking for a wife and she just happens to be the perfect fit.'



For the second XOXO author interview I got the chance of a lifetime. My dearest friend and co-owner of Sensual Treats, Denysé Bridger, veteran author, publisher and mentor agreed to let herself be interviewed. Below are some of those questions I always wanted to have answered, and now they are. Thank you Denysé.

How did you get started writing professionally?

I entered a contest that someone suggested to me, and won a contract that led to a lot more very quickly. I got established within six months, honestly, and from there have never looked back. This was the Amber Heat Wave contest, which is still held at Amber Quill Press annually, I believe? I had decided not to enter, then at the last minute – 48 hours before deadline – the idea started screaming at me, so I did it, sent it, and then got the email a few weeks later telling me I'd won a contract!!

Which of your heroes is your personal favorite? Why?

I think my favourite hero is Michael Devane. He is not a typical hero in any regard. While romantic and passionate, he is also an opium addict with a shadowed/troubled past. He is clairvoyant, and haunted by the Jack the Ripper case, a case in which he was part of the team of investigators. So, he's very special to me, brilliant but also very human and flawed.

You have a love affair with all things Italian. What created that?

It seems to me that I was born in the wrong place as well as the wrong era, so who knows? As far back as my memory will take me, Italy had played a prominent role in things I am drawn to. The language is like music to me, the food and wine can bring peace to the craziest of days and moods, and the place itself brings me to tears just looking at it in pictures and video – I feel like I'm looking at home... even though I've never been there.

Describe your dream date (where, what, etc.)

Easy one.... Cooking a wonderful Italian meal with my date, drinking wine while we chat and prepare dinner. Then settling in with a good adventure movie, enjoy the dinner, the company, and the movie. After that, maybe a nice walk, late, so it's quiet. For me, that kind of peaceful evening is a dream.

How do you balance your everyday duties with your writing ones?

I just constantly jump back and forth – some days it works, some days it's a moderate success at best.

How did you get started with XOXO Publishing?

Tina Brunelle, the Media Director and Promotions Manager, is a long-time friend, and when she went to work for XoXo, she asked if I'd consider submitting. I did, and I've since had four or five titles released, and at least four more coming in the next few months. It's a great company to work with, and there are some great talents here.

What frustrates you most when you are writing?

Constant interruptions, though they're not as bad to my concentration as they used to be. I've reached a point where I can write in the middle of chaos, and leave in the middle of a thought and come back to it, so I guess that's a good thing.

What exhilarates you the most when you are writing?

I don't know if anything does "exhilarate" me anymore. Finishing the story is always a good feeling, but I suppose the most exciting part of it all for me is when the idea emerges, and the story starts to shape itself and become real – I love the writing part of things, and often times the editing part of it – the rest is just part of the job. I even forget release dates nowadays.

Outline or seat of the pants? Why?

Outline for longer pieces, sometimes for shorter ones, too. It depends on the complexity of the plot and the story that I want to tell. I never let characters take over my stories, I know what I want to create, and I do it. Sometimes the characters get more verbose than I thought they would, but good dialogue always enhances a story, so I let them talk, but not wander off the page to play in places I don't plan on going.

Seat of the pants is a great way to write vignettes or short pieces that have a lot of intense punch to the emotional core of them. They are driven by strong characters and they dictate the moment being captured by the short story.

What are you working on right now?

Apart from interviews? I have 7 more once we're done with this one. In creative terms, I am rewriting a best-seller that's been dropped from another publisher I am no longer with; I've got a new werewolf story in the works; a vampire tale that sprang to life a couple of days ago; assorted short stories; and two new novels that I want to write. One is a contemporary romance, the other a major fantasy novel.

Where can our readers find you?

To name a few places:

WEBSITE: <http://www.denysebridger.com>

BLOG: <http://fantasy-pages.blogspot.com>

Sensual Treats Magazine: <http://www.sensualtreats.webs.com>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/denysebridger>

MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/denysebridger>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/denyse.bridger>

Facebook Fan Page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Romance-and-Fantasy/458701180391>

Amazon Author Page: <http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B003LUHE96>

XOXO Titles:

FAVOLA

A WHISPER OF HUMANITY

DARK DREAM

WHOM GODS HAVE FAVORED

REBEL HEART

BEYOND THE GATEWAYS

DANCING IN THE SHADOWS

BLOOD WINE AND PALE ROSES

ONE MOMENT OF ETERNITY – TATTOO ANTHOLOGY VOL. II – SPECIAL EDITION

CHRISTMAS ANTHOLOGIES – SWEET AND SEXY

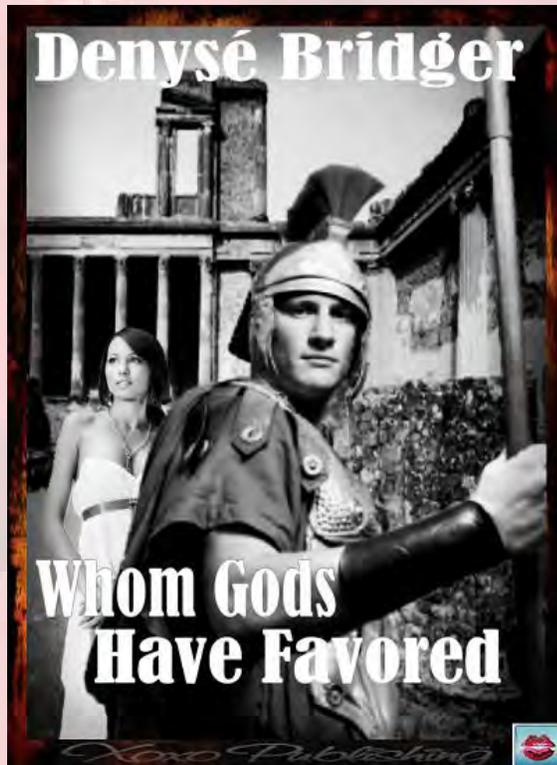
VALENTINE COLLECTION: A SWEET SEDUCTION written with my partner in Rome.

Some of these titles are coming soon, other are on the website now, just check the author listing for what's available:

<http://www.xoxopublishing.com/our-authors/index.html>

Enter a world of Romance and Fantasy....

www.denysebridger.com



This is an EROTIC/VAMPIRE historical..... it's set in Ancient Pompeii, mostly, and moves into modern time..... it contains a great deal of sexual content, and historical accuracy about the decadence of the Romans of that era. It was fascinating to write, and as you can see, the cover is a stunner..... I hope your curiosity will be piqued, and you'll consider adding this one to your collection - the reviews are amazing... and I think you'll find it a satisfying read!!!

WHOM GODS HAVE FAVORED

by Denyse Bridger

Available now from XoXo Publishing:

Blurb:

Pompeii lies complacent and decadent in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, the populace thriving on their depravity and their hunger for blood and Games. Within the elite aristocracy, games of another type are being played, deadly secrets are a threat to more than status, and conspiracy is a way of life for those who are unhappy.

Lucius has long been exalted as a warrior without peer. Adored and coveted by men and women alike, he is blind to the plots that are thickening around him. While total control is his on the bloody fields of war, on the battlefield of the heart, as he is about to discover, even the strongest man can be deceived by his ignorance.

Watching over it all is the majesty of Vesuvius, sputtering smoke, promising retribution. In the midst of the looming destruction, an ancient evil emerges, and will claim not only a celebrated general of Rome, but the slave girl he has slowly grown to love and cherish. A girl who will follow him into hell itself?

Excerpt:

Pompeii—Under the rule of the Emperor Vespasian

“The Emperor is most pleased with your progress, General,” Proconsul Flavius noted as he strolled the market streets with Pompeii’s illustrious hero. They proceeded without impediment as the people of the busy city cleared a path for them.

The general, Lucius, smiled, pleased by the undercurrent of fear that marked his passage. He enjoyed the power his position gave him, and the recognition of it came in various forms. Even the proconsul wasn’t entirely at ease with him.

“And well he should be, Proconsul. Resistance is crumbling. Another victory and

Gaul will truly be defeated.”

They had reached the slave market, and Lucius stopped as a scream rose above the usual noises of the area. He felt an unwelcome empathy for the terror he heard in the voice, and was annoyed by the surprising emotion.

The slave-dealer’s bellow rang out and drowned the girl’s frightened shrieks. Unconsciously, Lucius turned to look at the raised platform that displayed the slaves being auctioned off to the highest bidders. The dealer slapped the girl across the face and silenced her before he turned his attention to the gathered buyers.

“...I’m told her name is Xina,” the dealer called out. “Not part of my shipment, good gentlemen, but a last minute addition. Seems she knifed a soldier last night when he refused to pay a fair price for her.” He laughed lewdly and hauled the girl forward so the crowd could look more closely at her.

Despite her obvious desire to remain immune to what was happening to her, her cheeks flamed scarlet when the slaver tore open her gown and left her nakedness displayed for the eager bidders. Almost immediately voices rose and purses were offered. Lucius watched as she closed her eyes and tears spilled from the corners.

“She is a beauty,” the proconsul observed with a laugh. “And a dangerous one, at that.”

Lucius laughed with the shorter man, but his gaze was drawn back to the girl. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen, if she was that old. The trader knotted his fingers in long waves of light brown hair and pulled the concealing mass away from her body so the view was unobstructed. Her eyes stayed closed, but her chin lifted and she stood with proud defiance as the raucous bids and laughs continued.

A slow, indolent sweep of her body stirred more than curiosity within the general. His gaze caressed golden flesh, noted the smooth swell of full, brown tipped breasts, the small waist that flared into sensuously rounded hips. Firm, curved thighs were topped by an enticing triangle of sand-colored curls, and the ties of the sandals she wore twined around well-shaped calves like serpents lazing in the sun. Slender arms were tensed, muscles quivering with the effort to mask her fury, and her small hands tangled in the folds of her shredded gown where it hung limply from her shoulders.

“Who is she?” Lucius asked, surprised by his own interest when the proconsul stared up at him, clearly startled by the query.

“You don’t want that one, Lucius,” he advised. “Nydia would destroy her overnight.”

The general smiled again, but let his expression grow icy. The glitter of carefully controlled, lethal rage created a distinct shudder of terror within the Proconsul of Pompeii.

“You haven’t answered my question, Proconsul,” he whispered, his tone cool.

“Xina is the daughter of one of Boudica’s whores,” the other man supplied after a moment’s thought. “She’s been in the brothel since the day of her birth.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow and waited for the official to finish his narrative.

“Her brother, Plautus, is the current champion of Pompeii. Her mother died recently, while Plautus was away from the city, and Boudica decided it was time for the girl to earn her keep until her brother’s return.”

“That woman should be fed to the crowd during games,” Lucius muttered grimly. It was quite clear that Xina was not a common whore, despite her background. Not that it mattered, he mused. Before he was through with her she’d be well versed in a great

number of arts necessary to a whore's survival.

Without warning, Lucius strode into the crowd and headed toward the auction block. He yanked a purse from his belt, threw it toward the dealer, and continued onto the platform. The crowd rumbled with subdued irritation, but none dared defy Pompeii's most renowned general as he took the girl by the arm and led her from the marketplace.

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