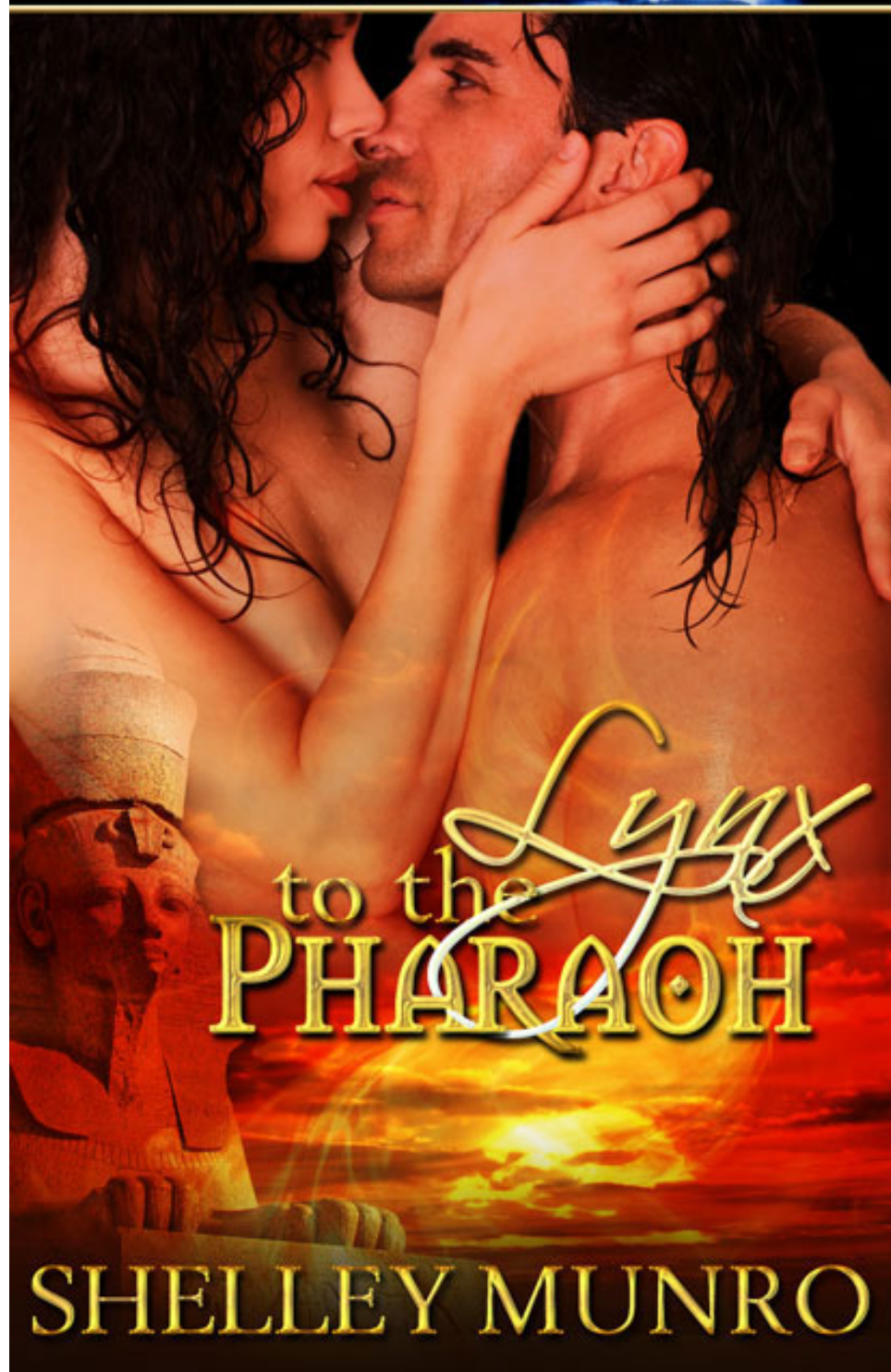


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



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Lynx to the Pharaoh

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LYNX TO THE PHARAOH

Shelley Munro

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Chapter One

Patria Oasis, Egypt, 1835

A blood-red moon shone over the desert, tinting the rocks and sand scarlet. An omen, the locals whispered as they bolted for their camel-skin tents, dropped the flaps and hid from the fearsome sight.

Sethmet Khalil stared into the night, sensing the upheaval in the air with every particle of his tense body. Muscles twitched beneath his skin, itching for the freedom of a nocturnal run across the dunes at the edge of the oasis. It was his normal routine, but tonight he resisted, testing the air. Listening.

Evil whispered from the shadows. Menace thrummed in the air, making the night birds jabber uneasily on their roosts. Sethmet sensed danger too but had no intention of running to hide like the villagers. His was a secret duty, sworn in blood many centuries ago and passed down through the generations from father to son. A sacred promise to the pharaoh to protect the tombs of the cat.

The wind picked up, sending the scent of exotic spices and perfumes swirling through the air. The papyrus reeds on the edge of the lake rattled, warning of the approaching storm.

With a loose-boned gait Sethmet walked from the oasis, past the caravanserai—the inn where travelers resided—and past the pens where restless camels were hobbled for the night. When the faint glow of lamps and candlelight faded, he rapidly stripped off his boots and stockings, coat, silk cravat, shirt and finally his trousers. He stuffed them under a rock he'd used in the past and stood for an instant to let the chill of the rising wind caress his body. His broad chest rose and fell and he let the cat take him, reveling in the pleasure-pain of the transformation from man to beast. Bones lengthened, stretched. Hands converted to clawed paws and a fine brownish-red fur formed on his

skin. Sethmet dropped to all fours, his large fur-tufted ears twitching with pleasure and the buzz of intensified senses.

As a caracal, he tested the air. Along with the storm and the myriad scents from the oasis, he smelled the campfires of the English tourists. Sethmet had visited them already in his position as family head, hiring out his guiding services in order to keep an eye on them—a case where his years of education in England helped. Amusement flicked through his mind when he recalled his loud protests about leaving Egypt. Now with a few years of added maturity, he recognized the benefits to both him and his family.

A burst of wind whistled over the hill. A sandstorm fast approached, allowing the bloody moon to play peekaboo behind the clouds. The air sizzled with tension, communicating unease and something out of tune with nature. His eyes scanned the vicinity for anything suspicious. He listened. Nothing. Apart from the coming storm, all seemed as it should.

Sethmet's slow trot hastened into a full-out run, just for the pleasure of feeling his muscles work and for the heady rush of air blowing through his coat. He rounded the end of a rolling dune, his sharp eyes picking up the Englishmen's camp at the base of the next sand hill. The tents rattled faintly, the white canvas billowing with the building storm. The flicker of a lamp caught his attention, moving slowly away from the glowing embers of the campfire. Sethmet checked the air, smelling for danger again and paused in surprise. Subtle perfume—flowers of the lilac. Woman.

Sethmet sat on his haunches, blinking while he considered this new development. It was unusual for Englishwomen to come to his family's oasis because it was so far from the big towns, several long days of riding camels that tested the temperament of a strong man let alone a delicate female. Perhaps she came with one of the local men. A wife or a lover. He hadn't seen nor smelled evidence of her in the camp when he'd visited earlier. Not that the Englishmen had welcomed him with open arms.

Secretive bastards. He knew they were treasure hunters, intent on raping the pharaoh's tomb. The greedy expression in their eyes when they thought no one noticed gave them away. No, they hadn't made him welcome. They'd conducted business, looking down their sharp English noses at him. Sethmet blinked, thoughts of the treasure hunters dissolving as the light moved farther away. The steady retreat of the light piqued his curiosity.

On the unprotected side of the dunes, the wind tugged his fur, blew particles of sand in his eyes, bringing discomfort. He never considered ending his pursuit because something inside the cat urged him to keep following the bobbing light. A flash of white petticoat told him he'd almost caught the woman. His heart beat harder, faster.

Would she take fright at seeing the cat? Probably. Shifting wasn't an option, not with an Englishwoman present. Nudity made them nervous. They didn't even like to look at their own bodies. No, shifting wouldn't work.

His ears flicked back and forth while he determined a course of action. Even if she had a link to the treasure hunters, the ones intent on finding the lost tombs, the approaching storm presented a danger to her. What was her protector thinking?

A powerful gust of wind, the dull roar of the swirling sands and the startled squeak from the Englishwoman made up his mind. Sethmet padded up to her swaying form, intent on herding her to safety.

Long ebony hair streamed out behind her while black skirts blew up and outward, baring her legs and white frilly undergarments. Her seductive scent filled his nostrils—flowers and woman. His heart jumped, astonishing both beast and man. The urge to shift and claim her sprang into his mind, shivered the length of his body. Suddenly, he wanted to sink into the warm softness a woman. This woman. The need to touch her velvet skin beat like an urgent drum inside his head. A soft snarl erupted in protest from his feline side.

The woman heard, despite the wail of the wind. She whirled, her blue eyes widening in astonishment.

But not fear, Sethmet thought with a sense of pride. He knew then this woman would be a worthy consort for the man who claimed her. Sethmet desperately wanted to be that man, envy bolting through him because he suspected it was too late.

Charlotte froze, staring at the big cat standing a foot from her. Its golden eyes fixed on her, unblinking and solemn.

"I hope you're not hungry," she whispered, not taking her eyes from the caracal. What had her stepbrother called them? That's right. Desert lynx. The cat prowled closer, and she trembled, unsure of whether to stay where she was or to run for cover.

In the flickering light of her lamp, the cat seemed big—huge—and heavily muscled. Its pointed ears appeared long because of the black tufts at the tips. Golden eyes gleamed with intelligence. Was it hungry? Or curious? Either way, uneasiness skittered through her veins, and she cursed her stupidity in thinking it was safe to walk alone at night.

Her husband would have scolded her soundly and shut her in her room for days in punishment with only bread and water to eat.

Charlotte squared her shoulders. Since her husband's death, she'd made decisions on her own, be they good or bad, facing the consequences too. She clutched her easel and paint box a fraction tighter. Perhaps painting by moonlight hadn't been such a good idea.

Charlotte scanned the sky, frowning before she glanced back at the still cat. Imagine capturing the beauty of the beast on canvas. Her gaze traced the muscular lines of the animal before clouds obscured the red moon and the scant light faded. A sigh escaped, the deteriorating weather defeating her urgent need to capture the scene in a painting.

"I...ah...think I'll go back to camp now," she said. "But I've no idea why I'm telling you." Charlotte sidled past the cat, and at the last moment, when she was almost clear, it moved to block her retreat. Her heart thudded. Was it her imagination or had the creature opened its mouth a bit wider? Charlotte tried to keep each breath even and

attempted to step around the caracal again, despite her knocking knees. "Good kitty. I don't have time to play now. Off you go, kitty. Back to your friends."

The cat's top lip curled upward and a hiss, scarcely louder than the wind, trembled in the air between them. Charlotte stilled then rapidly backed up without taking her gaze from the cat's golden eyes. "My, what sharp teeth you have. Very...ah...white." *So, she'd go back to camp the long way. She had her lamp. And she had all night.*

The wind rose, a strong gust sending her stumbling, her skirts flying up around her waist. Embarrassed, she fought to push them down and dropped the lamp. It rolled end over end, toppling down a slope with a loud clang. The flame flickered and blew out, leaving deep, pulsing darkness.

A cry of dismay escaped her. Charlotte bit into her bottom lip. Run or not run? Before she could decide, something brushed against her hip.

The cat.

Her mouth dried, and she fought to draw a shaky breath into her starved lungs. A sharp nudge against her thigh pushed her away from camp in the opposite direction. Off balance, her arms flailed. Her painting materials fell from her grasp and dropped to the ground. Charlotte scrambled to retrieve them, but another abrupt push moved her three unladylike steps before she could dig her heels into the shifting sands.

"My paints," she protested. "I don't have any more."

A brusque growl stopped further complaints cold. Her life was more important than her drawing materials. Another impatient shove forced her to move, but it was in the slow, uneasy gait of a blind person.

"How can I see where I'm walking?" Charlotte muttered crossly, coming to an immediate halt. The cat seemed to understand her difficulty and stepped so close to her she could have run her hand down the animal's back without stretching. Her fingers slid across the soft fur and curled into the cat's scruff for better balance. It surprised her that she wanted to stroke the beast, to feel the sensual slide of fur beneath her fingertips. Her heart jolted erratically and her breasts peaked beneath the stiff stays she

wore. Astonished by the unusual reaction, she missed her step and tripped over a partially embedded rock.

She hit the sand with a thump before sitting to rub her leg briskly. How could she see where she was going when she couldn't see her hand in front of her face?

The cat paused and prodded her with its head. Seconds later, she felt a damp sweep over her cheek. It was licking her, and the sensation was a little rough but not unpleasant. The wind howled, an eerie sound that raised the hairs at the back of her neck. The cat growled, following this with an insistent butt on her upper arm.

Charlotte pushed to her feet. The sand stirred, blowing in pounding waves like the ocean. It roared like a ferocious beast in a foul temper. A shiver crawled across her body at the fanciful thought and she started to worry about being in the open.

The cat kept moving steadily through the night without hesitation. Charlotte followed, wondering if she was wise to place her trust in a beast that could eat her for dinner as quick as look at her. She hesitated, her steps faltering and almost decided to turn back, to go with the survival instinct shouting she was a fool. Then the ground under her stout boots changed from sand to rock. Footing became easier. Unerringly, the cat moved through the darkness before stopping. The cat's low growl sounded as if it wanted her to do something.

"Kitty, I wish I could understand you," Charlotte murmured. "And I have to say you're very bossy."

The cat rubbed its head against her hip, giving a soft purr before shunting her toward what felt like a wall of rock. Charlotte held out her hand to stop herself from pitching forward and thumping her head. Her palm caught the edge of an overhanging rock then nothing.

"A cave," she said, not trying to hide her amazement. "Good, kitty." Charlotte stumbled into the dark cavern, fully trusting the cat now that it had shown her to a refuge from the storm.

Outside, the wind wailed. Sand whipped through the air and into the mouth of the cave. Charlotte moved cautiously, making her way deeper into the dark hole in the rock. Once she was out of the range of the wind and sand, she sank to the ground, settling on a sandy patch with her back against the rock wall. The cat sat beside her, a welcome warmth in the damp cave. Bone-deep weariness seeped through Charlotte. Her eyelids drooped after her adventure. Aware of her vulnerability, she fought her tiredness, but the soft breathing of the cat at her side lulled her senses and she fell asleep.

Sethmet guarded the woman throughout the night, content to doze at her side. When the storm passed, he stood and stretched. He studied the sleeping beauty, intrigued by her presence with the English. His top lip curled at the thought. Tomb robbers disguised as tourists. His gut instinct had never failed him before. His gaze drifted across her peaceful face. It was difficult to believe that a woman with the innocence of an angel could endanger his family with her greed. A part of the deception? Or the innocent she appeared?

Time would tell.

Sethmet *would* protect the tombs from robbers. He would not fail in his duty to his family and the pharaoh. Shapeshifting was part of their heritage. A gift they treasured and did not intend to give up lightly. If the woman was involved, he'd find out and deal with the matter. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to get to know her better. Sethmet ignored the jolt of pleasure to his cock, trying to tamp down the desire flooding his body, his mind. This was business, not pleasure.

Decision made, Sethmet prowled to the mouth of the cave and tested the air. With nothing to alarm him, he moved swiftly into the gloomy dawn. He paused at the spot where the woman had dropped her paints, but they had disappeared with the gusts of wind and swirling sand. No matter. His sisters had paints and books they could spare. He moved on, a silent sentry in the early dawn as he stopped to survey the tourists' camp.

Camped at the base of a dune, the English had escaped serious damage—a supply tent slanted drunkenly and some of the items left out overnight strewn the surrounding desert.

Sethmet loped back to his clothes. Acute anticipation pulsed through his mind, the like of which he'd never experienced before. Though eager to return to the woman, he didn't forget the caution that had become second nature. He paused by the rock where he'd left his clothes. Nothing disturbed the still of the storm-washed dawn, so he seamlessly shifted from caracal to man. He pulled on his clothes with a sense of purpose and haste. The chore of protecting the pharaoh's treasures and ensuring his comfort in the afterlife had taken an interesting turn. Sethmet's mouth lifted in a slow, feral grin. If the woman wasn't under the protection of another man, he could use that.

Use her.

Gain inside information and learn what the English were up to. She'd felt the simmering attraction between them even if she hadn't fully understood the implications, that they were compatible, should they want to take the relationship further.

Sethmet wanted.

His smile eased into intense and carnal. He prayed she was unclaimed by another male. A surge of heat shot straight to his groin. He'd teach her to call him kitty.

Sethmet ghosted through the oasis, his silent, rapid footfalls eating the distance to the villa on the hills at the opposite side of the oasis—the home his grandfather had built for his English bride. The mournful bray of a donkey broke the silence, reminding him it wouldn't be long before the locals stirred. As he hurried through the village, past the marketplace, the bathhouse and the gracious columns that decorated the square, he felt a trace of satisfaction and pride. The oasis of Patria was prosperous, the inhabitants happy yet hardworking. The gods and the pharaoh had been generous indeed.

A sleepy servant let him into the villa. Halfway across the marble floor, he paused and turned. "I would like food and drink to take with me when I leave again."

The servant nodded, more alert now, and hurried off to carry out the instructions, his leather sandals slapping out his retreat.

Restless, Sethmet wandered the villa before finally seeking his mother to take his mind off the tension simmering inside him.

“Son, you are up early.”

“Mama.” Sethmet smiled and bent to kiss both wrinkled cheeks before leaning against a pedestal, almost toppling the bust of the pharaoh standing proudly on top.

“Take care, Sethmet.” The wooden rocking chair his father had purchased in Cairo squeaked when she set it in motion. “You are restless this morning.”

Sethmet’s eyes widened fractionally then narrowed. He’d tried hard to hide his impatience to go to the woman. Obviously, his mother knew him too well, and despite her partial blindness, she’d sensed his turbulent emotions. The push and pull as he grappled to balance desire for the flesh and execution of his duties.

“Do not forswear love in the pursuit of justice, my son.”

A powerful shudder racked his body, and startled, he studied his mother’s face.

The red moon.

The storm.

And now his mother speaking of love and justice.

Mayhap, the arrival of the English woman was a personal omen, sent to try his devotion to protecting the pharaoh and protecting the pharaoh’s tomb. A test to see if he’d succumb to temptation.

Chapter Two

Once the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon, Sethmet gathered his basket of food from the kitchen and strode from the villa. The meeting would appear casual, yet it would be anything but since he'd planned everything while she slept. Sethmet had chosen to remain in the English style of clothing rather than his traditional *galabiyya*. The English accepted him more readily if he dressed and spoke like them, something he'd learned well from his father and subsequent experience. Veiled ridicule for wearing a full-length robe that looked like a dress wasn't the greeting he hoped to achieve. His thoughts drifted back to the woman and they turned carnal before he had time to blink. Hunger exploded inside him, a fierce desire for the woman. Questions of how she'd feel in his arms when their bodies joined and slid together, how she'd taste...

But he was getting ahead of himself. He wouldn't—refused to—act if the woman belonged to another male. It didn't matter how compatible or suitable the woman might be for a mate.

Sethmet entered the small cave cautiously, not wanting to scare her and start on the wrong terms. He scuffed out the paw prints he'd made the previous night and this morning, leaving only the woman's tracks and the new ones he'd made in human form. The early morning light spilled through the mouth of the cave, eliminating most of the shadows.

"Hullo!" he called. "Is someone in here?"

A feminine gasp sounded, caught by his acute hearing. When he rounded the bend in the cave, the woman was sitting with her back propped against the wall, her ebony hair tangled and tumbling loose around her shoulders. His heart gave an uneven pump while he looked his fill, tracing her full, pink lips, her apprehensive blue eyes and pale skin with his gaze. His eyes swept over her breasts, her trim waist and came to a halt on

her hands. Disappointment thumped to his gut, searing in its intensity. The Englishwoman was beautiful, and he wanted her more than ever, but she wore a wedding band on her left hand.

Charlotte blinked up at the large man who'd woken her. Nervous because of the way he towered over her, she scrambled to her feet. Sudden shooting pins and needles in legs cramped from staying in one place made her wobble precariously and cry out loud. The man moved so quick she didn't register until her hand tightened around his forearm. Warm skin greeted her touch along with a shudder of awareness at his stark masculinity. Now here was a man who could tempt her. Maybe, just maybe...

He was tall and lean with a build hinting at muscles beneath the fabric of his clothing. His dark, curly hair framed his head, unruly enough that she had the urge to smooth it with her hands and tug long strands from his queue. In fact, she acknowledged to herself her hands itched to stroke more than his hair. How odd! Charlotte jerked up her chin, wary yet enthralled by the striking stranger. It took her an instant longer to release the man's arm.

"I must have fallen asleep," she said, uneasy suddenly with the intimacy of the cave and the glow she could see in his tawny eyes.

What was wrong with her? After George's death, she didn't want to marry again. The experience had left her wanting and confused about why women sought marriage. She intended to remain a widow for the rest of her days.

"I need to return to camp before my stepbrother starts to worry." *Or loses his temper with me.* Charlotte wrinkled her nose at that thought. William's temperament hovered in uncertain territory these days, and his wrath was a sight to make a grown man or woman tremble. She didn't want to raise his ire. *All the more reason to hurry back to camp.*

"Let me escort you back." The stranger paused to smile and offer his arm. The flash of even white teeth pushed her awareness of his raw sexuality even higher, and nerves skittered through her. She felt unaccountably jumpy. But not frightened, she realized in puzzlement. How peculiar this strange sensation was...

"Your brother has hired me as a guide. I am Sethmet Khalil."

"Our guide?" Charlotte snapped her mouth shut when she heard herself parrot the man.

"That's right." He glanced down at his arm then back at her. One dark brow rose in silent mockery and Charlotte realized she'd been staring. Her gaze shot to her half boots before she extended her hand and placed it on the hard sinews of his forearm.

They strolled across the sand and rock floor of the cave as though they paraded in one of London's finest ballrooms.

"What made you decide to travel to Egypt?" he asked.

Charlotte paused and found herself wanting to tell the truth. "My husband died eight months ago. I wanted to have a break from London." A break from the sympathetic tabbies and the puckered brows when she so much as spoke to an unmarried man.

"Ah," he said.

Charlotte wondered what he meant by that since his face didn't yield a clue. The silence between them intensified. Charlotte swallowed and fought to think of suitable chitchat to fill the void. Aware of the social chasm between them yet desperately wanting to breach it, she blurted, "I saw a cat last night."

He paused inside the mouth of the cave and looked down at her with an impassive expression. The seconds dragged out.

"It was beautiful," Charlotte said, recalling the proud and sleek creature standing in the light of her lamp.

"Are you sure? There are no paw prints out here."

His voice was low, husky and it strummed along her nerve endings. Charlotte shivered when a picture formed in her mind. A naked man and woman rubbing their bodies against each other. A small gasp of shock emerged when she recognized their faces. His—Sethmet's—and hers. Heat pooled in her cheeks while nerves danced in the

pit of her stomach. This was so unlike her, yet she couldn't rid her mind of the truth. She wanted him to touch her, to remove her clothes and stroke her body. She wanted him sexually. The realization stunned her since intimacy with her late husband George had been anything but inspiring. Certainly nothing more than duty and the need to produce an heir. Charlotte inhaled sharply and struggled to regroup. It was fatigue, that's all.

"Perhaps the storm covered the prints, Mr. Khalil."

He grinned without warning. "Call me Sethmet." The accented words underscored his amusement.

"I am Charlotte." It seemed pointless to keep to formalities when she was so far from home. And with the way her mind kept drifting to intimacies featuring this man. "Lady Charlotte Webster."

"Lady Charlotte." Sethmet rolled her name, making it sound unusual. Exotic. "Come. It is early still. No one stirs in your camp. Would you like to watch the birds on the oasis and break your fast with me?" He indicated the basket he held in his other hand.

"How do you know I am staying at the camp?"

"A process of deduction since no Englishwoman has arrived with the camel trains during recent weeks. I would have heard the gossip at the caravanserai."

"Of course." Uncertainty made her pause. "I'm not sure I should go with you."

"I do not intend you harm," he said gravely.

But he wanted to kiss her, she thought. Touch her. The knowledge shimmered between them like a splendid secret.

Uncertain but tempted, she exited the cave at his side. Ribbons of color streaked the morning sky, a faint splash of orange and a deep pink. Charlotte sighed, feeling more at home in this foreign place than she'd ever felt amongst society in London. She strolled over the uneven rocks, conscious of the flex of muscles in his arm and the brush of his

trousers against her skirt. She shot a quick glance in his direction and discovered he was watching her with distinct interest and speculation. Temptation slithered through her and made her feel sympathy for Eve facing the apple. Seductive temptation indeed.

"Can we go past the camp first?" *Maybe that would be best. Safer.*

"If it would put your mind at rest."

Charlotte shook her head, aware she didn't want to do the right thing. She didn't know the man, and yet it didn't seem to matter. Instinctively she trusted him.

They slid down a short rocky slope and rounded the base of a dune. In the distance, the canvas tents were visible, framed against another sand dune. A faint plume of smoke rose, indicating the native cooks were awake and preparing for the day. If she returned now she'd have to go to her tent. It seemed a shame to waste such a beautiful morning. What her brother didn't know wouldn't hurt him...

"I'd love to visit the oasis," Charlotte said, ignoring the feminine pride inside warning her she would not look her best after sleeping in her clothes. And the knowledge that she shouldn't go anywhere with a man she didn't know. She risked another glance at him, and the silent gleam of approval in his eyes warmed her all over. This early in the morning, she couldn't blame the heat of the sun.

They passed the camp, and as Sethmet had said, no one stirred apart from the servants. Charlotte told herself her brother would never know. They arrived at the edge of the oasis more quickly than she would have liked. Countless questions trembled at the tip of her tongue. *Curious as a cat.* That's what George used to say, always in a chiding manner. Could she help it if she liked to learn new things and gain knowledge?

Sethmet stopped by the edge of the lake, in a small private spot screened from the main path, glad Lady Charlotte had agreed to accompany him.

A gentle breeze played a musical tune as it blew through the reeds. Not far from them a heron stabbed the water with its beak and came up with a wriggling silver fish.

He placed his basket down and helped Charlotte sit on a flat rock. Her lack of primping and fussing gained his approval, not that she needed to preen. Sethmet

opened his woven basket. He had to stop the urgent need to touch, to run his hands across her silky cheek. A bark of laughter escaped at the thought. No doubt the lady would slap his face at the presumption.

“Is something funny?”

“Not a thing,” Sethmet said. “Would you care for flat bread and cheese?” He spread a blue woven cloth on the ground beside them and set out the food. The instinct to serve and nurture Lady Charlotte, or Charlotte as he thought of her, came as a surprise. Most women ran after him, but being with Charlotte felt right. He didn’t feel pressure or hunted for matrimony. He wanted to protect her, even if she came from the English camp and was possibly an enemy.

Charlotte was no longer committed to a man.

Satisfaction swelled within Sethmet along with an urge to kiss her. Hell, he wanted to do more than that. He wanted to claim her as mate. The thought gave him pause because he knew nothing of her. Yet he didn’t worry overly. Swift courtships were normal in his family, and their decisive nature when taking a partner was one of the gifts that came with feline powers. Everyone in his family married for love. They might argue at times, but he had no hesitation about following his heart.

He glanced up from laying out the food and saw Charlotte studied him avidly. For an instant, open desire shimmered in her blue eyes before her lashes lowered to screen the emotion.

Sethmet acted on instinct, going with his gut. He leaned toward her and took possession of her lips in a slow kiss of exploration. When she didn’t object, he deepened the contact, sliding his tongue across her soft, pink lips and urging her to open her mouth so he could taste. She was so soft, tasted so sweet, and he wanted more.

Charlotte sighed, and he took advantage, delving into her mouth with raw need. God, he needed to touch her with more than his mouth. He needed it as bad as breathing. Without further thought, Sethmet gave in to the desire, entwining his fingers in her hair and cradling her head, drawing her even closer. Still, it wasn’t enough. He

trailed one hand down her back, pressing her against his chest so her breasts brushed his thin cotton shirt. Charlotte moaned softly. The low, throaty sound drew a shudder from him. So much. So fast. He shuddered again, his cock tight and heavy with need. His fingers trailed down her neck, tracing over smooth skin and coming to rest on a rapidly beating pulse at the base of her neck.

"I want you," he whispered. "I want to stroke your bare skin and kiss every inch until you're trembling with need."

Oh yes. Pure physical desire, the like of which she'd never known, kicked Charlotte in the belly. It was a primitive throb in her veins and she never wanted to stop touching this man. She sucked in a hasty breath as his mouth slid from hers and laid a trail of kisses down her neck.

Sethmet was a stranger, but she felt as if she'd known him forever.

He pulled away without warning, leaving Charlotte bereft and full of turbulent emotions. She didn't want to stop the magic, craving more of his touch, his kisses. "Please," Charlotte whispered, willing to plead for him to touch her again.

Sethmet smiled and raised his finger to his mouth in a gesture of silence. Approaching footsteps halted the unladylike begging trembling on her lips. She cast a panicked look over her shoulder in the direction of the noise. Surely it wasn't her brother?

A local woman bearing a stoneware urn balanced on her head came into sight. She froze upon seeing them and addressed Sethmet in a foreign tongue. He replied, and the woman giggled before stooping to fill her urn with water from the lake. She hurried off, but Charlotte noticed the intent curiosity in the woman's eyes when she glanced back over her shoulder.

"Would you care for some juice?" Sethmet's husky voice vibrated along her nerve endings, leaving moist dampness between her legs. Wonder made her gape at him since no man had touched her emotions in this way. It was as if they were already intimate, as if they'd known each other in another life. How was that possible?

“You are frowning. Perhaps you do not care for juice of the orange fruit?”

A faint blush suffused her cheeks. The burst of heat intensified under his dark gaze until she wanted to squirm.

Sethmet reached out to stroke one finger down her cheek. “We must eat, or I will give in to temptation and make love to you.”

His blunt words thrilled her when they should have shocked her senseless and forced her to run for the safety of the camp. God forgive her, but she wanted to make love to this man. Somehow, she sensed it would be powerful and moving and would change her life forever. Something told her this man would show her what she’d missed in her marriage.

Charlotte swallowed and moistened her lips. “What if that’s what I’d like too?” she blurted. This wasn’t wrong. *It wasn’t.*

Sethmet’s tawny eyes glowed. He didn’t answer her question but instead reached for her. His arms wrapped around her shoulders and he lifted her so she sat on his lap. “You should probably run,” he warned.

“No, running is the last thing I want to do.” Charlotte was enveloped by warmth and his exotic scent—a whiff of sandalwood and something else that reminded her of a cool English forest.

“Are you sure?” he whispered against her lips.

“Yes. I have never been as sure of anything.” That should have scared her, but Charlotte leaned into him, eager to taste him again. Their lips touched, their tongues sliding together in a slow, sensuous dance. Their breaths mingled and a sense of feeling alive exploding across her senses. She stirred restlessly, needing more.

“Sethmet,” she whispered against his lips. Charlotte tugged his cravat free from his collar and slipped one hand into the opening she’d created. Warm skin greeted her touch. She undid another two buttons, revealing more skin, golden and hot to the touch. Leaning forward, she pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his collarbone. His erection nudged her buttocks. Charlotte squirmed. Anticipation bubbled through her,

the sensation of rigid masculine flesh beneath her legs readying her for his possession. Her breath caught as she wondered what would happen next. Would she suffer disappointment again?

"I want to touch you, Charlotte."

He wouldn't get any arguments from her. His husky voice made her melt inside and long for his mouth to kiss the sensitive skin on her neck and breasts. Sethmet smoothed his hand under her skirt, tracing the tender spot behind her knee. Charlotte shuddered. "Yes," she said. "Oh yes."

Sethmet pushed the food aside and placed Charlotte on the cloth he'd spread out on the ground earlier. He leaned over her and stared down into her eyes, serious and intent. "I wish I could take the time to undress you. But this is not the time or place to linger."

Anyone could interrupt them. Charlotte knew she risked scandal and censure but didn't care. The taste of freedom was heady stuff. And she wanted to explore whatever this thing was between them because she'd never met a man who tempted her like Sethmet. "We have some time?" She thought she might die if he didn't touch her again.

He smiled then, a slow grin that spread across his lips and up to his eyes. "We have time enough for pleasure." Promise simmered in his voice, tightening her breasts and making her pulse speed.

The hand under her skirt traveled higher over bare skin until he met her drawers, drawing soft circles on her inner thighs. Higher and higher, his fingers moved until he cupped her warmth. She jumped, unused to tender touches in her private places.

"Easy," he whispered, wriggling his fingers in a special way that made her bite her bottom lip to stem her cry of delight. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to explore and give you pleasure. Is that all right with you, Charlotte?"

"I...um...yes." She wanted more of this sensation. She shouldn't be afraid. Embrace the naughtiness because she would never have another chance like this. "Please don't stop."

"I won't stop," he promised, the corners of his eyes crinkling in silent amusement.

One slender finger slipped through the slit in her drawers. He stroked the length of her cleft, dancing his fingers across her nub. Charlotte released her breath on a gasp. A shivered worked the length of her body. His touch felt so good, made her heart beat faster and her quim moisten. Her body's reaction brought a renewed rush of color to her cheeks. While it might be embarrassing, she couldn't regret this tryst. When she returned to London, she would lose this sort of freedom. She lifted her hips, silently pleading for more. Her eyelids closed, leaving Charlotte adrift in a world of pure sensation.

"Do you like the way I touch you, Charlotte?"

"Yes," she whispered. His finger circled her clitoris and shifted lower. He inserted a finger into her damp, feminine flesh. A squelch sounded, loud and undignified.

Charlotte flinched, her eyes flying open in consternation. George had liked to couple in complete silence with the lights off and removal of minimal clothing. He had never made her wet like this.

Sethmet laughed. "Do not feel embarrassed. You want my cock inside you. This is a good thing, my sweet, because it means our bodies will fit together perfectly. It pleases me very much. You please me."

He splayed her legs and bent over her. Charlotte wasn't sure what he intended. Her heart pounded and she tried to wriggle away.

"Stay," he whispered in his husky voice. "Let me taste you. Let me pleasure you."

Charlotte thought her heart might thump out of her chest as she glanced at Sethmet. His dark head bent and he stared at her spread legs. His finger thrust inside her again, an unhurried stroke across sensitive skin. Charlotte swallowed, aware, now more than ever, of possible discovery. Yet she couldn't stop. Halting was the last thing she wanted.

Then he licked across her tender flesh, dragging his tongue over her nub and setting fire to her nerves. A blaze of sensation arced through her veins. Charlotte bit her

bottom lip, trying to hold back the unladylike moan trembling at the back of her throat. Sethmet raked his tongue across her bud again.

“Let go, Charlotte. Come for me.” He cupped her bottom, lifting her to his mouth and sucking gently.

Instant pleasure shook her. “Sethmet.” Sweet agony spilled over Charlotte. She convulsed, a violent spasm of sensation streaking down her legs to the tips of her toes.

When she stilled, Sethmet lifted his head and smiled at her, a grin of supreme masculine satisfaction. “Tonight, Charlotte, we will disrobe and explore each other. We will touch and kiss. Tonight, will be even better than this.”

Charlotte wasn’t sure about that. How could he make her feel even better than she did now?

Chapter Three

Charlotte walked at Sethmet's side, intensely aware of their physical and mental closeness. The terracotta glow of the rocks near the dunes, the green of the plants surrounding the lake seemed brighter, the rich, loamy scent of the soil around the lake, the dryness of the sand and Sethmet's sandalwood musk richer and more intoxicating than before.

The plaintive grunts of camels filled the air when their masters bade them sit. A number of workers scurried around the campsite while members of William's group finished breaking their fast and sauntered off to their tents.

"Charlotte, where have you been?" William glared from his post outside the equipment tent.

"I was awake early and decided to take a walk. Mr. Khalil met me by the lake and escorted me back to camp."

Charlotte hoped he didn't notice anything amiss with her appearance. She'd tidied and fastened her hair with a strip of cloth. Sethmet had assured her she looked beautiful, but even so, she hoped evidence of what they'd been doing wasn't emblazoned across her face. Her stepbrother, as much as she loved him, liked to mix with those in his social circles. According to him, servants were there to serve and should remain in the background the rest of the time.

"I wish to leave in half an hour," William said, directing his displeasure at Sethmet.

"I am prepared to leave. I will check to make sure all else is in readiness." Sethmet bent from the waist in a subservient manner that drew a frown from Charlotte. An act. If ever a man was born to lead it was Sethmet, yet he was acting the role of servant. Uneasily, she wondered why he denied his education before deciding, in this particular case, the less attention he drew from William the better.

Sethmet dipped his head with a courteous nod and retreated, leaving Charlotte and her stepbrother alone.

"You mustn't wander away from the camp on your own. It's not safe with the savages who roam the desert."

Charlotte disagreed but knew better than to verbalize her opinion. "Where are we going today?" Anticipation stirred inside at the thought of exploring more of this mysterious land. And Sethmet, she thought wickedly. She couldn't wait to explore his muscular body, paying close attention to detail.

"We ride to explore the ancient ruins to the west of the oasis."

"That sounds wonderful," Charlotte said. "I must get my sketchbook." Unfortunately her paints were gone, no doubt buried beneath the sand. Sketches would have to suffice until she found a way to purchase new supplies.

Half an hour later, Sethmet helped Charlotte and the men of the party clamber aboard their camels. The train moved off with much protest from the animals called the ships of the desert. A laugh escaped Charlotte as she rolled from side to side and backward and forward almost as if she sat in a rocking chair. The beasts were not unpleasant to ride but they never ceased their noisy protests.

At the head of the column, Sethmet halted his camel and allowed the others to move ahead after indicating the direction they needed to travel. When Charlotte rode past, he nudged his camel into a walk beside her.

"Was your brother angry at you for leaving the camp?" he asked in a low undertone.

"He was worried," Charlotte said.

Sethmet looked across at her, his eyes glowing with an inner light. "You are safe here. No harm will come to you."

Charlotte blinked, finding the intense golden light of his eyes mesmerizing. Her breasts seemed tender while between her legs ached for the pleasure she knew he could

give her. Like an opium addict craving another pipe, she wanted Sethmet's full possession.

Charlotte wished they were alone. With William in this difficult mood, it would be hard to escape for private moments with Sethmet. A secretive grin swept across her lips. Hard but not impossible.

After riding the camels for half an hour, the ruins appeared as a dot on the horizon. The sun beat down strongly despite the fact it was still early morning.

"We should reach the ruins before midday to shelter from the worst of the sun," Sethmet said, reading her mind.

Charlotte wiped her brow, wondering why she'd taken the time to wash and change gowns before they'd left when she felt grubby already. At least her straw hat kept the worst of the sun off her face, but she feared freckles would appear soon. She glanced over at Sethmet and tried in vain not to blush. After the intimacies they'd shared, she should have hidden in shame. Instead, Charlotte couldn't wait for the night to arrive so she could explore Sethmet's body as he'd explored hers.

"William said we'd spend the day exploring and not start back until late in the afternoon when it is cooler."

"You'll have plenty of time to sketch the ruins."

"I hope I'm able to walk after riding a camel again. The ride to the oasis was bad enough." She patted the jewel-bright rug she sat atop. "I think I need more layers."

Sethmet laughed out loud, attracting a frown from her stepbrother. "I promise to massage your aches away with special oils. I'll enjoy it." His voice was low. Intimate. And it sent a shudder of desire skimming across her breasts and speeding to her lower belly. "So will you."

Charlotte concentrated on the steadily growing dot before them. If she focused on Sethmet, she knew she'd give away her growing infatuation. William wouldn't approve. Charlotte frowned at the thought. For some reason, he seemed intent on pushing her toward his friend Justin. While the man was polite, his company genial, he

didn't interest Charlotte that way. Besides, her period of mourning wouldn't end for several months, and she was in no hurry to find a man. She should feel guilty about her involvement with Sethmet yet she couldn't – not when he made her feel alive. Excited.

William glanced over his shoulder and gestured in an imperious manner at Sethmet.

"Duty calls," Sethmet said with dry humor. He guided his camel to the head of the train and waited for William to warn him away from Charlotte.

"Tell me about the ruins. Have they been explored?" William's eyes narrowed. "Excavated?"

"Patria Oasis is isolated," Sethmet said. "We don't have many visitors and the surrounding sites are undisturbed."

"So we will be the first?" William's voice grew sharp with excitement. "The first white men to explore the area?"

Sethmet shrugged. The man could interpret that in any way he wished. Several of the villagers who worked in the English camp as cooks and porters had approached Sethmet, complaining of the way the two Englishmen interrogated them about the ruins in the area and history of the oasis. Most pretended they didn't understand English and he didn't blame them. A high percentage of the occupants of the Patria Oasis spoke English because of their association with his family.

"That is correct." Sethmet's gut told him the man had a hidden purpose. He didn't trust the avarice in the Englishmen's eyes when they questioned him about the sites.

"You said there are other sites. Tell me about them."

Sethmet stiffened inside at the order, although he took care not to change his expression. "There are others," he acknowledged. "Most are in good condition and accessible. Some of the older ones are decayed."

"I want to visit them all."

Sethmet inclined his head. "As you wish." He could show the Englishman enough sites to keep him busy for months, perhaps years. However, the pharaoh's tomb would remain undisturbed. His family was proud of the shapeshifter powers bestowed on them by the pharaoh. They wouldn't part with the honor lightly, besides failure to protect meant unleashing the curse. A shiver walked Sethmet's spine when he thought of the evil curse. One mistake would be disastrous for his entire family.

Years ago, when his grandfather wore the cloak of protector, two men—traitors—had the life sucked out of them by the spirit who aided his family in keeping the pharaoh safe. Witnesses still spoke of the day in hushed whispers. The local children listened awestruck to the tale of when the traitors crumpled, their bodies desiccated and crumbling until they faded to nothing. Sethmet suspected the story had grown with the telling, but he held healthy respect for the pharaoh's powers. Death had not diminished them.

"My sister wishes to draw instead of exploring with the rest of us."

"I will arrange for a servant to help her," Sethmet said.

The Englishman's face had turned red in the sun and sweat dripped down his face. He slapped at a buzzing insect, his snarl of irritation startling his camel into a raucous protest. "How much longer?"

Sethmet smothered his amusement at the man's obvious discomfort. It would get worse by the end of the day, especially since there was no treasure here. "Ten minutes."

William had requested two separate parties and guides so they could cover the large site. This suited Sethmet. He arranged two of his most trusted workers to guide a group each through the temple ruins and the outlying buildings. Hopefully, they would keep William busy for several hours, leaving him alone with Charlotte.

Each group would assume he was with the other one, or at least that was the plan.

"Your stepbrother seems determined to see every site," Sethmet murmured, watching as the men and their helpers drifted after the guides.

Charlotte shrugged and picked up the satchel containing her drawing materials. "William spends a lot of time in Egypt. It has always interested him."

Sethmet directed Charlotte toward an avenue of sphinxes leading to a crumbling temple. The majestic beasts seemed to watch when they strolled past and stepped into the cool shade of the temple.

"Exploring?" The man's reputation as a tomb robber preceded him, but Sethmet wanted to know if Charlotte was involved. It would make a difference. Tension built inside while he waited for her reply.

A frown puckered her smooth brow and she hesitated. "I don't really know." An uncertain laugh escaped her, drawing Sethmet's attention to her pink lips. "Strange as it is, I've never really asked. I know he brings back a lot of souvenirs whenever he returns to London."

And sells them at a great profit, Sethmet thought.

The robbers pilfered the tombs, dragging the dead back from the afterlife, setting their spirits on an aimless journey in the world between. During life, the pharaoh had shared an affinity with the caracal, and the respect remained even though he now lived at rest in the afterworld. Together they worked to allow the dead the peace they'd earned in the afterlife.

"Would you like to set up here?" Sethmet asked as they stepped into a shady courtyard on the other side of the temple.

The friezes on the walls depicted cobras and figures of the gods in intense blue, green, red, yellow and browns. They dazzled the eye.

"This is perfect," she murmured, glancing around with a trace of awe. "It's so beautiful I don't know where to start. I only hope my skills do the scene justice."

"I'm sure you will." Sethmet helped her set up her easel and chair. He brushed a kiss across her cheek then straightened. "I'll bring you some water and food, but first I must check all is well with the others."

"Thank you." Charlotte smiled.

"I won't be long." Sethmet strode away to double-check the Englishmen were busy and would remain so for several hours. He hoped Charlotte worked quickly because he had a few scenarios in mind and they involved nakedness. His and hers. The heavy sensation in his loins brought a groan. Charlotte Webster had burrowed beneath his skin in a way no other woman had managed. Maybe it was her independence or maybe it was the way she called him kitty while showing not a shred of fear. He smiled ruefully. Charlotte took liberties no one else dared.

Sethmet attached himself to William's group, joining in time to answer one of the man's questions.

"This pyramid isn't like the ones we saw at Giza. Why are you taking us to this one? It doesn't even look like it's finished," William said.

"Elders in our village believe these are earlier versions of the Giza pyramids," Sethmet answered with a glance at the pyramid. Unlike the Giza pyramids with their triangular shape, these ones changed angle toward the top giving them a bent appearance. Hence the name bent pyramids. "The designs weren't perfected until those built at Giza."

"And you're sure no one has explored them?"

"There are so many areas to explore, so many temples within Egypt," Sethmet said. "And as I said earlier, our oasis is isolated. We do not see many visitors."

They circled the base of the pyramid and finally came to an opening. Sand covered most of it, creating a miniature sand hill at the side of the construction.

"Light the torches," William ordered.

One of the servants handed him a rush torch and William shone the light so it illuminated the dark area beyond.

"Bring the spades," William shouted. "I wish to explore the interior."

The man had taken the bait. Sethmet hid his satisfaction, lighting a second torch and handing it to one of his men. Several other men dug away the encroaching sand from the small opening. Inside a maze of corridors and rooms, designed to confuse tomb robbers, would keep William occupied for hours. The pharaoh had ordered them built while still alive and had buried members of his faithful servants here. Once each part of the burial chamber was full, he'd ordered the addition of the corridors and rooms. The dead were safe, despite William's presence. He would eventually interpret the hieroglyphs emblazoned on the walls and decide this pyramid held no secrets.

Satisfied William's attention was on his explorations, Sethmet left to check on Justin. He found the Englishman crawling into a passage, previously filled with sand. Sethmet stilled, calling up his feline senses. Nothing about the man's search alarmed the pharaoh, and Sethmet relaxed in the knowledge he would also be busy for several hours chasing a dead end. Nodding at his men, he murmured several instructions to the man he'd placed in charge.

Anticipation hummed through him with every step he took back toward Charlotte. This time they could disrobe and touch each other as they wanted to touch.

Rounding a corner, he spied her, and when he moved closer, he smelled her lilac scent. She didn't hear him coming, her concentration solely on the soaring columns, the colorful friezes and painted figures of the temple and her sketch. He smiled on seeing the frown between her eyes and the tip of her pink tongue poking through her lips. His heart skipped a beat and he longed to free her hair, dragging out each hairclip until the ebony locks hung around her shoulders like a silky scarf.

"Charlotte."

"Oh!" She started, the charcoal snapping when she squeezed it too hard in her fright. "Sethmet. I didn't hear you approach me."

He studied her sketch. With a few lines she'd managed to depict the graceful curves of the columns. "Do you draw people?" he asked.

Her blue eyes widened before her mouth lifted in a slow smile. "My governess used to tell me my strength lay in drawing people. Would you sit for me?"

Charlotte scanned his broad shoulders and chest, her gaze drifting downward to his strong legs and the bulge of his sex. Her tongue darted out to moisten dry lips. Yes, she wanted to draw him so she would have something to remember him by when she returned to the pointless social whirr that was her life in London.

Sethmet smiled lazily, striding over to her and halting close enough for her to reach out and touch without difficulty. "How would you draw me?"

"Reclining, I think." Charlotte tipped back her head to study him and felt the faint flush of heat crawl into her face. She lowered her lashes to screen her expression. "And nude."

"Really?"

"Yes," she whispered, feeling unaccountably shy. Would he agree? She couldn't think of a better way to pass the time, and it would give her a good excuse to study his body in great detail. His entire body, she thought, her gaze flicking down to his groin. Although she'd studied the statues and artwork in museums at home, she'd never had a chance to see a naked male at close quarters. The furtive groping by her husband didn't count because she hadn't seen much in the dark of his bedroom. No, she wanted to see Sethmet, a man in his prime.

"There's only one way I'd agree to that."

"What?"

"You would need to take off your clothes too."

"Here?" Charlotte heard her voice rise in consternation.

His chuckle broke the taut silence between them and conveyed his amusement. "That would be the fair thing to do."

A dare. It was clear from the light in his dark eyes he thought she'd refuse. Charlotte thought about his proposition. She'd already allowed him to touch her

intimately. Removing her clothes wasn't so different. She licked her lips again. "Would we do it here?"

"There's a small private courtyard not far from here. No one will interrupt us."

Charlotte nodded before she had a chance to consider the consequences. "I would like that." An ache pulsed to life between her legs, her clothes starting to feel too heavy and cumbersome for a hot day.

Sethmet picked up a basket he'd set aside earlier and held out a hand. "Come."

She scrambled off her makeshift seat and folded away her art supplies. After tucking them under her arm, she accepted his hand. His fingers curled around hers, strong and masculine and dark against her paler skin. It made her wonder if he was the same color all over.

He led her through an archway, the ravages of time giving the ruin a drunken appearance. They walked a few more minutes before she heard a familiar sound.

"Is that water I can hear?" she asked.

"Yes. There's a pool. I thought you might enjoy the cool water."

"How big is the pool?"

"I haven't visited here for a few months, but it used to be large enough to bathe."

When they rounded a large stone carving, Charlotte stopped. Sun glinted off the pool of water and several green plants grew around the perimeter. Some of the pillars and old statuary had toppled, but the ruins didn't spoil the surroundings at all. "Oh, it's beautiful." She turned back to him, her breath catching. He was beautiful in a masculine way, so proud and confident. Enticing.

Charlotte's breath eased out when she caught the expression on his face, the intent regard. Her body heated, her breasts becoming heavy. Sensitive. She watched Sethmet pull a blanket from his basket and spread it over a patch of soft sand, conveniently blown into the courtyard by the desert winds.

"You'll need to help me pull off my boots," he said, dropping to the woven blanket.

She stared at him for a long second, her heart pumping out three fast beats before calming. After toeing off her shoes, she stepped onto the blanket and approached Sethmet.

"Straddle my leg and pull." His lips quirked up a fraction at the corners, his eyes full of teasing and a hint of dare.

Charlotte never hesitated. She'd helped her husband remove his boots before. Turning to face his feet, she straddled Sethmet's leg, grasped his boot and tugged. After initial resistance, it slid off. She repeated the process with his other boot before turning around to face him. "Do you need any other help?"

"Are you offering to be my valet?"

She considered his question and smiled, liking the idea, the freedom to touch his body. "Yes."

Slowly he stood and closed the distance between them until mere inches separated their bodies. "I'm all yours."

Charlotte swallowed. Sethmet was a different proposition from her overweight, red-faced husband. This was a male in his prime, and she desperately wanted to explore his body. She inhaled, drawing in his masculine scent. Before she could hesitate, she lifted her hand and removed his simply tied cravat, letting it fall to the blanket, before starting on the tiny bone buttons that fastened his shirt. The fabric slid off his shoulders, baring his chest. Tanned with a faint sprinkling of dark hair, it was as muscular as she'd imagined. Charlotte wanted to see more.

She worked on his trousers, drawing them over his hips, unsurprised to see the lack of underwear. It was too hot for many clothes, and she'd considered dispensing with hers when she dressed for the excursion earlier this morning. Maybe tomorrow. Bending she unrolled his stockings before rising to her feet again.

"I hope my drawing skills do you justice."

"Do you want to draw me straightaway?" The desire in his eyes, along with the erection she hesitated to study for too long told her exactly what he had in mind.

"No, I think I'd like to take a dip in the pool." Indeed, the trickle of water and the small pool were very enticing.

"Let me help you with your clothing." Sethmet didn't wait for her reply. Instead he removed her clothing with an ease that told her feminine attire held no mysteries for him. When the final item dropped to the ground, he studied her body and lifted his hand to stroke one breast. The touch of his fingers sent a jolt of pleasure shooting through her veins. She gasped, mesmerized by his tanned fingers against the curve of her breast—the contrast in colors. As they both watched, her nipple drew to a tight crest.

"I'm going to kiss you there," he promised. "I intend to kiss every inch of your creamy skin. But first...come." He grasped her hand and tugged her toward the pool.

The courtyard was sheltered and private and made Charlotte feel safe, unencumbered by etiquette. She followed willingly, the prickle of something magic pulsing through her entire body.

The chill of the water shocked her, but Sethmet laughed at her wrinkled nose.

"Come," he commanded. Without warning he swung her into his arms and walked into the pool until the water came up to his thighs. "This is as deep as it gets." He set her down. "I have to kiss you."

His lips touched hers before she could reply. Their chests brushed, and she felt the brush of his cock. He nibbled her bottom lip and stroked the seam of her mouth, kneading the globes of her bottom with his large hands all the while. Never had kissing brought such joy and pleasure. Murmuring, she grasped his shoulders and tugged him closer. The surge and retreat of his tongue reminded her of the sexual act, the heaviness of her breasts and between her legs intensifying to an annoying ache. Groaning, she sucked on his tongue, enjoying the cinnamon taste of his breath, enjoying each of his touches.

Finally pulling away to regain her breath, she smiled at him. "Please let me touch and explore your body. I need to research for my drawing."

In answer, he sat in the water and grinned up at her. "Come down here and touch me where you will. I'm all yours."

Curiosity nibbled at her and she joined him immediately, sinking into the cool water. Cold. Invigorating. She adjusted to the temperature quickly and stretched out a hand to touch Sethmet's chest. Warm skin greeted her touch. Like the finest silk money could buy, her fingers slipped over his muscular chest. She glided her hands over the faint dips and curves while Sethmet watched her, a faint smile on his lips.

She laughed suddenly.

"You must approve."

"I do," she said, smiling. "I've never done this before." With a fingernail, she scraped across one of his nipples. Fascinated, she watched it harden and pull to a tight nub.

"Use your mouth," he suggested. "Wait, we'll move to shallower water first." He scooted back until most of his body was out of the water. Leaning his weight back on his hands, he closed his eyes and waited for her touch, his faint smile present again. She loved that smile. It induced her to behave wickedly. Wicked, she'd found, was fun.

She studied his body, his cock attracting her attention. The coolness of the water hadn't reduced its size in the slightest. Charlotte leaned closer and placed a kiss on his breastbone. He tasted fresh. A little salty. Nice. A bead of water ran down his neck. Fascinated, she followed its progress, the urge to pursue it with her tongue getting the better of her. She licked down his neck and across his collarbone. His pectoral muscles bunched under her tongue, making her giggle.

"Are you ticklish?" she asked.

"No. I'm enjoying your touch."

When she looked up, she saw his eyes were open again, the heat and fire in them stealing her breath. "Sethmet." His name was no louder than a whisper.

"Touch me, Charlotte. You don't know how long I've craved your touch."

Charlotte applied herself with zeal, at first telling herself her exploration was purely scientific and necessary so she could draw his form correctly. It was a lie. Sethmet was a gift for herself, something for her to remember later when the confines of London became too much for her. She stroked her fingers along his shaft, jumping a little when he groaned.

"Sweet mercy," she whispered, realizing the power she had over him. The moment she recognized that power, her stomach went all fluttery and the ache in her loins throbbed with renewed life. Her pulse roared in her ears when she bent her head and dragged her tongue along the same path her fingers had taken. Grinning, she splashed chilly water over his erection.

"If you're trying to cool me off, that's not going to work."

"No?"

"No," he said. "Take me inside your mouth."

She remembered the way it felt when he'd used his mouth on her, the soaring pleasure and the resulting eruption into climax. The need to give Sethmet the same pleasure, the sense of flying out of his body, rushed through her. She grasped his cock and took him into her mouth, glancing upward at the same time. The approval on his face made her want to please him further. His taste didn't repel her, and she licked across the fat head of his shaft.

"That feels good, Charlotte. Very good."

His encouragement was all she needed to continue, but her curiosity helped too. She watched each of his reactions, learning what he enjoyed most. She stroked and licked, alternatively sucking as well. His cock seemed to grow bigger, small beads of liquid escaping from the slit at his tip. Charlotte lapped them away, tightening her mouth on him.

"Damn, Charlotte. You have to stop."

She lifted her head and smiled. "No." Charlotte ignored his strangled chuckle when she lowered her head again. This power was heady stuff. He groaned when she sucked

him, his hips jerking upward, pushing his cock deeper into her mouth. With a combination of sucking and stroking his erection, his groans grew louder, his large body shuddering with pleasure.

"Charlotte," he cried out, and seconds later, jets of semen spurted into her mouth.

Surprised, she started, jerking her mouth off his cock. Sethmet chuckled and she giggled too. "Sorry." She wiped her hand across her mouth.

"Come here," he whispered.

She went into his arms willingly, enjoying the brush of her breasts against the hard wall of his chest. Their mouths met, mated, awakening the hunger inside her to fever pitch. She clenched her thighs together, the tickle of desire intensified by the move.

"Sethmet, I need..." She trailed off, unsure of exactly what she needed.

"Soon, sweetheart." His accented voice seemed deeper and huskier than normal. He teased and stroked her body, taking small bites from her neck then laving them with his tongue. Gradually she became aware of his thickening cock. He moved down her body, rolling her nipple between finger and thumb, tugging to the point of pain before taking it into the warmth of his mouth.

Bolts of pleasure shot to her sex and she wriggled against him, desperately needing him to assuage the ache he'd caused in her body. It felt so good, as if she burned in flames, yet she felt safe in his arms, trusting him implicitly. "Please, Sethmet."

He parted her legs and moved over her. With a seamless stroke, Sethmet pushed inside her. He stretched her and at first it hurt, but he continued to kiss and pet her, murmuring soft words of assurance. Gradually she relaxed. The sense of rightness intensified, and she quivered.

"How does that feel?"

"Good," Charlotte said, an inadequate description for the pleasure that rippled through her every time Sethmet thrust into her quim. He quickened his pace, and the

coil of tension snapped, her sex pulsing rapidly with his next stroke. She sighed with the pleasure, holding tight to her lover.

Sethmet plunged into her body again, gave a raw and guttural groan, thrust hard then stopping, buried deep inside her body. He kissed her, and this time it felt different. The kiss was slow, their lips lingering. When they finally lifted their heads, they both smiled. Sethmet parted their bodies and gently washed between her legs before washing himself.

“Do you still want to draw me?”

When she summoned the energy, Charlotte wanted that more than ever. Sethmet had given her a gift today, showing her there were good men, men who cared about their partner’s pleasure. “Yes, please.”

“On the blanket or here at the edge of the water?”

Charlotte didn’t have to think about the decision because she wanted to draw his entire body. “On the blanket please.” Now, more than ever, she wanted to draw Sethmet. The future might be bleak, but she’d have memories from the past to sustain her. In the future whenever she looked at the drawing of Sethmet she would remember this slice of pleasure and the feelings of loneliness would retreat.

Chapter Four

Later that night, Charlotte crept from her tent, thankful it was set apart from the others with less likelihood of her being intercepted and questioned. From the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of movement. Her heart jumped halfway up her throat before she realized no one had discovered her subterfuge.

The cat.

"Hullo, kitty," she whispered, stepping toward it without fear. The cat was as large as she remembered, certainly big enough to gulp her down for a snack. "Good kitty."

The caracal turned up its lip in a snarl the second time she spoke. Charlotte stilled, suddenly diffident. The beast *was* wild. Perhaps approaching it wasn't the wisest idea.

They stared at each other for a long drawn-out moment. Intelligence glowed in the cat's eyes but not menace despite the show of sharp, white teeth. Charlotte exhaled slowly, letting her tense limbs relax, and glanced away from the mesmerizing cat to see if anyone had noticed her departure.

Not a soul stirred in the camp. Good. No curious, prying questions to answer. The cat swished its tail and stalked off. With one final glance over her shoulder to check the silent camp, Charlotte followed since the cat seemed to travel in the direction she wanted. She couldn't wait to see Sethmet again.

Up ahead, the cat broke into a loping run. Awed, Charlotte watched the leashed power of the beast. What would it feel like—running with not a care in the world? No expectations or restrictions. Charlotte sighed when the cat disappeared from sight. She wondered where it lived and hoped she'd see it again before she traveled back to England. Her fingers itched, the artist in her wanting to record the grace of the cat for the future when the restrictions of London became too much.

Aware of the passage of time, she jerked from her reverie and hurried to the edge of the oasis where they had arranged to meet.

“Sethmet?”

A shadow parted from a date palm. “Charlotte.”

Sethmet strode over to her, hugged her tight and swung her in a circle so her legs flew outward as they spun around. Finally, he let her stand on her own feet, maintaining his grip of her hand. “I am glad you came. I thought you might change your mind.”

“No,” Charlotte whispered, brushing a lock of hair from his face. “I want this. I want you again.” Heat tinged her cheeks. She should have felt like a fallen woman. Definitely wicked, but instead excitement pulsed through her body. She hungered for his possession and couldn’t wait to share more intimacies.

“Come,” Sethmet murmured.

Tugging lightly on her hand, he led her down a narrow, overgrown path she hadn’t noticed. Charlotte’s skirts brushed against the sprawling plants lining the path. In a nearby tree, a night bird called a strident alarm, and she heard the flap of wings before it glided over the water.

“Where are we going?”

“My family owns a small cottage here. I didn’t want any interruptions.” His voice throbbed with promises and sent awareness flooding to her core. “Here it is.”

Sethmet opened the wooden door of the stone cottage. He reached inside and produced a lamp. Seconds later, he ushered her inside and shut the door, locking the rest of the world out.

Charlotte looked around, interested in learning more about Sethmet and his family. The cottage consisted of two rooms, the simple wooden furniture impersonal and not telling her much about the occupants. Sethmet clasped her hand and led her into the second—a bedroom. He let her hand go and lit another lamp. A subtle glow filled the

room when he placed the lamp in a wall alcove and their shadows danced across the far wall.

Sethmet turned to her, his golden eyes intent. "Let me be your maid tonight."

Wordlessly, Charlotte nodded despite her qualms. They'd seen each other naked this afternoon. She'd sketched his masculine form, but the sensual freedom took some getting used to. George had never seen her naked just as she'd never seen him unclothed. Sethmet dealt with her buttons and the laces on her stays, sliding chemise fabric aside and exposing her breasts to his gaze.

"Beautiful," he said, brushing the back of his hand across one creamy curve. His fingers brushed across her nipple and tugged. Charlotte closed her eyes, clamping her bottom lip between her teeth to hold back her cry of pleasure.

"Let your emotions show, Charlotte. Don't hide from me. Open your eyes." The murmured words held a demand. *An order.*

Charlotte managed to lift her eyelids even though they felt as if they were weighted. She caught Sethmet's golden gaze and held it, savoring the innate approval.

"Do that again," she whispered.

"This?" Lazy humor sounded in his voice as he tweaked her nipple. Once. Twice. And a third time.

"Yes," Charlotte said, fighting the need to close her eyes again. A streak of pleasure shot from her breast to moist feminine folds. *More.* This man had worked magic with her body before. Call her greedy, but she wanted it again. She wanted more.

Sethmet tugged her skirts down. The stiff black fabric pooled at her feet.

Gathering her in his arms, he lifted her and walked over to the bed, leaving her black skirts of mourning sitting in the middle of the floor. She felt as if he'd removed the strictures of society, leaving her free to follow her desires. He set her down on the edge of the mattress and removed her boots, tossing them aside in a careless manner. A

gleam lit his eyes as he stared at her, his gaze traveling the length of her body and back to her face.

Charlotte shivered at the heat she saw in him, the strength and leashed power. This man could have any woman but he wanted her.

He sat beside her, the feather mattress depressing with his weight and rolling her against a muscled thigh. Sethmet unfastened her ribbon garters and peeled woolen stockings down her legs. The act of undressing turned into the most erotic experience Charlotte had ever participated in with a man. Sethmet drew her drawers down, pressing a soft kiss to each inch of skin he uncovered.

"You're perfect," he murmured, leaning back to look his fill. "I knew you would be when I first saw you."

"You saw me earlier today."

He laughed. "You were perfect then as well."

She should have felt awkward and exposed, but instead wantonness took possession of her body. Her skin tingled for want of his hands, his mouth. Between her legs, in her private, feminine places, moisture surged. An ache, deep-seated and tormenting, sprang to life. Charlotte stirred restlessly, wanting to demand he touch her with greater intimacy. But she didn't, years of rules and ladylike manners coming to the fore and bringing a return of shyness.

Sethmet cupped her face with his hands and kissed her deeply, sliding his tongue into her mouth, thrusting and withdrawing. The ache intensified. Charlotte splayed her legs, fidgety and impatient yet unable to ask for more. Cool air met warmth, and if anything, the ache in her quim deepened, making Charlotte want to beg for him to ease the hunger that tormented and teased her.

Rules be damned. She'd already asked once and remained alive to tell the tale.

"Please, Sethmet. I want...touch me."

"I thought you'd never ask," he murmured, leaning over her. Charlotte heard the masculine satisfaction but instead of shame, need soared higher. Stronger. "For you, Charlotte, anything."

Sethmet blazed a trail of kisses from the corner of her mouth and down her neck. Unhurried. Taking his sweet time. Charlotte murmured a soft protest. Too slow, her mind screamed, especially when fire scorched her body, spreading rapidly until she was a mass of smoldering flames.

Deliberate and leisurely, he kissed his way across her collarbone and across the curve of one breast. Charlotte swallowed, waiting, anticipating the heat of his mouth suckling her breast. Instead, he kissed the area surrounding her nipple.

"Too slow," Charlotte muttered, and she grabbed his head forcibly to place his mouth exactly where she needed it. What did she need with rules and shyness when the direct approach brought results?

A chuckle sounded, the warm burst of air sending a shudder the length of her body. Charlotte rasped a shallow breath as a tight coil of desire gripped her. Then Sethmet drew on her breast and licked circles across her tight nipple. One of his hands trailed across her belly and lower to the triangle of hair between her thighs. Charlotte bucked at the dual sensation—the suckling of his mouth at her breast and the teasing exploration of her moist cleft. The coil of passion wound tighter, stealing her breath, stealing her soul.

Slowly, Sethmet eased away. Charlotte made a sound of protest until she realized Sethmet had paused to strip away his clothing. His shirt dropped away, exposing his chest. He sat up to tug off his boots and stockings then opened the flap of his trousers. Seconds later, he stood before her, naked and aroused.

Charlotte gulped. She knew the mechanics of sex well, but the width of him, the length was imposing even though she'd seen him and felt his shaft this afternoon. Her gaze rose from his cock, up his waist and chest to meet his amused gaze.

"Like what you see?"

Charlotte's voice failed so she nodded. Her tongue slid between her lips, moistening the dryness away. The man looked fit and firm with not an inch of excess flesh anywhere on his body. Her trembling hand reached out to stroke the length of his shaft.

The first sensation was one of warmth then awe rose as Charlotte considered the inherent strength in him. Her hand curled around the breadth of his cock and squeezed.

Sethmet's sharp hiss of breath steadied her nerves and brought a grin. A deep shudder shook his body when she applied pressure and stroked his cock again. Pre-cum collected at the sensitive tip, and Charlotte brushed her thumb across the small drop, smoothing it away. Sethmet made a hungry sound at the back of his throat.

"No more," he said in a hoarse voice. "This afternoon should have sated me, but I want you more than ever."

Before Charlotte could protest, she lay flat on her back with Sethmet looming over her. A feral grin displayed white teeth and his mouth crashed down on hers. He surrounded her, and Charlotte reveled in the weight of him, the sensation of hard muscles against her softer curves. His erection pressed against her inner thigh. Charlotte shifted to align their bodies, and his cock slid deep into her quim. Sethmet murmured, stroking his tongue against hers in a quick punch of heat. Charlotte arched against him, meeting each powerful thrust of his body.

"I like the way you do that." Nothing less than the truth. She could become addicted to him if she weren't careful. Her heart thundered as the overwhelming sensations built. She shuddered and exploded in a fury of pleasure that licked through her veins for long, satisfying moments afterward.

A harsh cry rumbled from Sethmet. His hips pumped. Hard. Fast. Then he stilled, a moan squeezing past his lips. With his eyes closed and his head thrown back, he looked almost primal. A satisfied smile crept across her lips. She, Charlotte Webster, had made him look like that. Her husband had lied to her when he'd implied her coldness was the cause of their childless state. She didn't feel cold when she lay in Sethmet's arms.

"You look smug," he murmured, his golden eyes intense and mesmerizing as he stared down at her. Amusement lurked on his lips.

A soft gasp escaped Charlotte. She stared back, her hand creeping up to caress one lean cheek. Her fingers strayed to finger his lips. In that moment, he reminded her of a wild beast. He reminded her of the kitty.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she said, afraid of sounding silly, and to distract him, she kissed his neck. Hopefully, they could make love again because she was becoming addicted to his touch. She had a lot of memories she needed to store to keep the coldness at bay when she returned to England.

Chapter Five

Sethmet escorted Charlotte back to her tent just as the sun started to peep over the horizon. He held her close for a moment and brushed a kiss over her smiling lips.

“I’ll see you later, sweetheart.”

Charlotte smiled as he strode away, holding memories of last night close. The experience of making love with Sethmet would remain with her always. It was one she’d drag out during the endless round of society balls and soirees—one that would remind her of a few weeks of perfect freedom. Love, and the days where she blazed hot like a bonfire.

After spending time freshening up and changing into clean clothes, Charlotte sneaked a quick glance through the door of her tent. Daylight had arrived and servants scurried about the camp carrying out their duties. A flash of movement caught her attention. Charlotte stepped forward before halting to watch the heated discussion between William and his friend Justin. Justin wore a scowl. He seemed to digest whatever William said then stated his opinion forcibly, using his finger to drill holes in the air for emphasis. Curious, Charlotte crept past her tent and sidled close enough to eavesdrop.

“But the fact remains, we haven’t found anything,” Justin snapped in a hard, cold voice. “We had a deal and I expect you to stick to it.”

Charlotte wrapped her arms around her body to counter the chill Justin’s tone sent rippling across her skin. This didn’t sound like a fight between friends.

“I will. You have my word, but I didn’t expect to have so much bad luck,” William countered. “You have to admit the death of that worker was mighty peculiar yesterday. His entire body looked desiccated when we found him, yet we’d seen him alive an hour

earlier. Maybe there's something in this curse. This has never happened on any other expedition."

Charlotte clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp of shock. Someone had died? Why hadn't they told her last night at dinner? She hadn't noticed anything strange the previous evening, but she'd anticipated her rendezvous with Sethmet and her mind had dwelled elsewhere. It had been difficult to concentrate on dinner conversation with an evening of pleasure to look forward to. No, her brother hadn't mentioned a death. Her distraction hadn't been that bad. Charlotte strained to hear more, studying both men closely while poised to flee should the need occur.

Of the two, William seemed calmer, but Charlotte didn't intend to test her stepbrother's temper by being caught listening to their conversation.

"A curse. Bah!" Justin swept his hand through the air. "Nothing but superstitious drivel."

"You have to admit the way Martin was injured last night was damned spooky. He swears a cat attacked and clawed him when he was exploring the small temple on the edge of the oasis. Damned if the marks all over his body don't look like claw marks yet there were no prints on the ground when we went back to look at the temple. All we found were paw prints."

"Have you checked on him this morning?" Justin asked.

"I'm about to head that way."

"Had he been drinking the local rotgut?"

William shook his head. "He swears he hadn't drunk anything. I didn't smell any alcohol on him when I treated his wounds."

A sliver of fear crept down Charlotte's spine. Curious indeed, she thought, wondering uneasily if the caracal had something to do with the strange attack. It hadn't exhibited any signs of unpredictability during their encounters. The feline had saved her life. No, she decided. Her cat hadn't attacked Martin. Her kitty wouldn't harm her or anyone else. William and Justin showed signs of moving so she decided she'd better

make her presence known. She crept back to her tent and swished the canvas back loudly as though she'd just exited.

"Good morning," she said in a bright voice. Charlotte glided over to the two men, the epitome of the perfect lady. "Where are we exploring today? I swear my sketchbook is almost full, but there are so many interesting things to record."

"Good morning, Charlotte." Justin took possession of her hand and bent over it. At the last minute, he turned her hand over and pressed an intimate kiss on her wrist just above the pair of short gloves she wore. Under normal circumstances, if she'd met him in a London ballroom, his attention would have flattered her. With his cool English looks, blond hair, blue eyes and independent means, the man was a matrimonial prize. He left her cold. Instead, a man with golden skin, tawny eyes and dark hair made her blood sing. And strange pointy ears, she thought with a grin, that he hid under his hair. Sethmet had acted embarrassed when she discovered them, but she thought the imperfection cute.

"Good morning, Justin." Were they going to tell her about the death of the worker or about Martin's injuries?

"Charlotte." He retained her hand for longer than proper, his bold eyes sweeping over her in a familiar manner that made her uncomfortable.

As she tugged her hand away, Charlotte caught the satisfaction on her stepbrother's face and wondered at it. Despite his encouragement, she felt she'd managed to keep Justin's attentions at a distance.

A gong rang out, the dull sound vibrating through the campsite.

"It seems our meal is ready. This heat is parching. I am ready for a dish of tea," Charlotte said.

"I need to check on Martin first," William said.

"Oh? Is something wrong?" Perhaps she could have a career on the boards. She'd scarcely blinked at William's announcement, the inflection of her voice perfectly innocent.

William scowled. "Martin was attacked last night when he was exploring the oasis."

"But he's all right?" Charlotte asked. "Should I take a look at his wounds? Who would attack him?"

"Charlotte, I hardly think that would be proper," Justin said, his tone a shade shy of pompous. "William is taking care of Martin. He is not badly injured."

The three wandered over to the shaded area set aside for dining. Justin pulled out a chair for her. Charlotte subsided into the upright seat and smiled at Justin, thanking him for his assistance while inside she seethed. She felt as if she were a child, scolded for an infraction. Not a hint of her furious thoughts showed on her face. Charlotte knew better. Unseemly shows of emotion were grounds for solitary confinement and she had no intention of giving up her freedom and losing a chance of spending more time with Sethmet. Once settled, she accepted the tea the servant handed her with a smile.

William disappeared in the direction of the workers' tents while she and Justin exchanged small chat about the weather.

"I find this heat very trying," Justin said. "You are brave to venture so far from civilization and endure our daily treks." He made it sound as if they traveled to the ends of the earth each day. Granted, there were no amenities and the company was limited since William wouldn't let her talk to the natives. She wasn't even allowed to speak to the workers they'd brought with them from England. Still, she wouldn't exchange this time for anything. Memories. At least she'd have her memories when she returned to staid and colorless London.

"It's not so bad," she said, maintaining a polite smile. "I enjoy drawing more than anything, and it is good to have new things to sketch."

"You must show me your drawings." His indulgent air told her he expected amateurish efforts.

Charlotte sipped her tea in lieu of answering straightaway. His transparent thoughts were a blow to her pride because this was one area where she exhibited talent.

"I could show you some of my sketches if you like." Apart from the ones of Sethmet. She must put those in a safe place. She'd forgotten in her hurry this morning.

"That would be lovely, my dear."

William rejoined them.

"How is Martin?" Charlotte was glad of her stepbrother's arrival, a buffer between her and Justin.

"As long as infection doesn't set in, he should return to work in a day or two."

"Are accidents usual?" she asked, fishing for details of the other man. Every time she recalled Justin and William's earlier discussion, a ripple of trepidation raced through her. An unexpected death was terrible at any time, but this man's death sounded peculiar.

"Not really," Justin said.

William and Justin exchanged a quick glance before applying themselves to eating the local cheese and flat bread that appeared with every meal.

They weren't going to tell her. Frustration curled her hands until her knuckles whitened. She wasn't a child and didn't need coddling or protection.

Sethmet strolled into the camp not long after, and Charlotte couldn't help staring at his lithe grace.

"Charlotte," William said, his tone sharp when he noticed her attention centered on Sethmet.

Charlotte's gaze snapped to her stepbrother, and her cheeks heated at being caught ogling Sethmet. If she wasn't careful, she'd give her interest in him away.

"Have you made the arrangements I requested?" William demanded as soon as he reached them.

Charlotte tensed, indignant on Sethmet's behalf. William spoke to Sethmet as if he were a servant with not an intelligent thought of his own. She knew otherwise. Sethmet

was cultured and witty. Educated. A secret smile lifted her mood. And he was her lover.

Sethmet dipped his head. "Yes, all is arranged as you desired."

"I trust there will be no mishaps today."

Sethmet shrugged carelessly, his dark hair falling over his forehead. "I have no control over the curse."

"What curse?" Charlotte asked, curious about the tension that took hold of her stepbrother.

Justin snorted in the background. "Superstitious rubbish."

"There's no such thing as a curse." William took a final sip from his dish of tea and placed it on the table. "Let this be an end to the discussion. Charlotte, if you're finished I'd like to have a word with you before we leave."

Charlotte opened her mouth to protest and glanced down at her dish of tea. She'd only had time to take a few sips. Surely there was time for her to drink more?

"Charlotte."

Sighing inwardly, Charlotte stood. She recognized that frosty tone and it didn't bode well.

William walked to the edge of the camp and stopped for her to catch up.

"I want you to be more courteous with Justin. He's important to this expedition."

Charlotte gaped at her stepbrother. He wanted her to what? She snapped her mouth shut while she wondered how to respond. Finally, she asked, "Exactly how courteous?"

"Don't take that tone with me. All I'm asking is for you to spend time with him. It's important he's kept happy since he's funded the expedition to search for the pharaoh's tomb..." William trailed off and commenced pacing—short lines back and forth in front of Charlotte. He paused and threw up his hands. "All the holdups are making things difficult in our search. If I didn't know better, I'd start believing in curses."

"Your search?" Charlotte stared at her stepbrother. "The pharaoh's tomb?" It sounded as if he searched for a long-lost tomb. He'd lied about sightseeing. "Let me get this straight. Lord Banning—Justin—financed our trip to Egypt."

"Yes, so I need you to play nice with him." William's hand curled into her upper arm with bruising intensity. "It's not much to ask."

Charlotte didn't recognize her stepbrother in this driven man. It was as if another being inhabited William's body. She glanced over at the assembled servants and the men leading the camels into camp for loading with supplies for the day's expedition. Sethmet directed the whole procedure with ease and authority. "We'd better go. We're keeping everyone waiting."

William grabbed her arm again. "Don't forget what I said, Charlotte, otherwise you'll be sorry." He laughed and there was no humor in the sound. "Hell, we'll both be sorry."

Charlotte yanked away from William and rubbed her upper arm. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Nothing," William reiterated. "The camels are ready. We need to go before the heat of the day descends."

She glanced at the camels, her heart leaping when she saw Sethmet striding along the train, soothing a fractious animal here, exchanging a comment with a worker there. Faint laughter sounded across the distance between them and a warm sensation wrapped around her chest. He was a good man. A gentleman despite what William and Justin might think to the contrary.

"Charlotte." William's sharp voice made her realize he'd caught her staring at Sethmet.

"Sorry, I was daydreaming." She attempted to rectify the matter without causing more harm. "I need to collect my hat and my drawing materials. I won't be long." Hurrying away, she headed directly for her tent. William was suspicious. She must take care or she'd ruin everything.

Half an hour later the camel train progressed around the base of the sand hills. William rode beside her, making sure she couldn't talk privately with Sethmet.

"Where are we going today?" she asked.

"The guide said there is a valley full of caves and unexplored crevices to the north. We will explore those today and, if necessary, we will stay overnight and continue in the morning."

"Overnight? But what about supplies? Why didn't you tell me or give me warning?"

"This is Egypt, Charlotte. You knew our days would be unpredictable. I warned you, yet you pleaded with me to let you join us on this expedition." William's eyes flared with temper, and Charlotte sucked in a hasty breath, alarm surfacing.

"You're right of course," she said hastily. The last thing she needed was for William to send her home. The idea of losing this heady freedom before she'd prepared to leave made panic jump around inside her. "I will abide by whatever you decide. If we have to stay away from the camp overnight you won't hear complaints from me." The thought of leaving Sethmet hurt even worse. He'd given her so much pleasure, shown her how it could be between a man and a woman, shown her the possibilities.

"I'm glad to hear it." William nudged his camel into a swift jog. It shot forward until he drew level with Justin.

Charlotte stared after her stepbrother. His behavior seemed strange lately, his temper more uncertain than usual, and his insistence on her cooperation with Justin worrying. There had been something perturbing in his eyes when he'd insisted on her treating Justin well.

"Are you okay?" Sethmet's whisper came from behind. "Your stepbrother seemed angry."

"He caught me staring at you." Shame filled her cheeks. If William lashed out at Sethmet it would be her fault.

Sethmet's camel caught up with hers. "You were staring at me?"

"Yes. I think I made William suspicious. I'm so sorry. You probably shouldn't talk to me today. Not in view of William." Anguish created a band around her chest, and it hurt to breathe. She hated the idea of causing trouble for Sethmet.

"Tonight I will come to you," Sethmet said. "Tonight we will be together, Charlotte."

"Tonight," she whispered, holding the thought to her like a talisman.

It took another hour to reach the valley. Perspiration covered her body, and Charlotte couldn't see an end to the heat. There were no trees or shelter in the long, winding valley. No water in sight.

They continued riding the camels until they were deep in the ravine, the temperature becoming increasingly hotter. The sky was a brilliant blue. Azure, she decided, wishing she had her paint box. The contrast of the terracotta-colored rocks and cliffs made for a magical sight. Charlotte's fingers itched to capture the scene.

Finally, they stopped. Sethmet aided William and Justin. When he stepped forward to help her dismount, Justin brushed him aside with a curt remark.

"I will help Lady Charlotte." Justin's hands lingered on her waist for too long. His warm breath whispered across her cheek, and she had to work hard to suppress her shudder of distaste. How could William expect her to show him favor when she found his arrogant manner objectionable?

Charlotte wandered away from the others while William and Justin arranged their workers into three groups this time. A trusted worker would lead the third. She heard Sethmet issue orders to the workers who were staying behind while William strode to her side.

"The guide has ordered the workers to erect a shelter for you. I want you to stay under the shelter until we return. Do not wander away because it is not safe. Do you understand?" William's eyes narrowed when her acceptance of his edict didn't come straight away. "*Do you understand?*"

"Yes, William. Of course I understand. I'll be here when you return for a meal after your explorations."

Already the workers had unloaded a pile of wood and supplies from the backs of the camels. Other workers prepared a ring of stones in which to build a fire.

"I will see you in a few hours," William said, unable to hide his eagerness to start his explorations.

Justin walked across the stony ground to join her. He raised his hand, and she fought to remain rooted to the spot and keep her face impassive when he dragged his calloused fingers over her cheek.

"Are you sure you will be all right here on your own?"

"I'm sure," she said. "I have my sketching materials. The workers will take care of me while you and William are exploring the caves."

His lips curled in disdain, but he didn't contradict her, turning away with another searing glance that skimmed her breasts and made her feel uncomfortable. She captured Sethmet's gaze. His tawny eyes and tight mouth held anger, and her heart skipped a beat. She didn't return Justin's interest. Surely he realized that.

Once the men left, Charlotte started to breathe easier. The sharp cry of a falcon captured her attention, and she watched it soar through the sky, envying the bird its freedom. Her independence, she was learning, was merely an illusion. She wasn't totally free at all, not even in Egypt.

"Lady Charlotte, the shelter is ready for you. Mr. Sethmet bade us prepare you some mint tea. We ready it now." The heavily accented English made her eyes widen in astonishment.

"You speak English." She'd heard both William and Justin speak with scorn because of the heathens inability to use the King's English.

"Yes, my lady. Many of us do."

And they pretended they didn't to both irritate and ignore William and Justin. She could hardly blame them. "Can I do anything to help you?"

"Thank you, but we are practiced in making camp."

"So I see." Charlotte smiled with gratitude and made her way across the stony ground to take a seat beneath the open-sided shelter.

The day passed quickly, and Charlotte spent the hours speaking with the locals and making swift sketches of them as they went about their tasks. Darkness had started to creep over the desert when the first of the groups exited the caves. Justin arrived back first with William and Sethmet arriving almost an hour later.

"Find anything?" Justin demanded, springing to his feet.

"Nothing," William snapped in disgust as he took a seat by the fire. "Not even a sign of a hieroglyph."

Charlotte surreptitiously searched for Sethmet and found him speaking with his workers. As if he sensed her glance, his head turned and his gaze bored into her. Warmth suffused her body immediately, her nipples pulling to tight nubs beneath her chemise. It felt as if he caressed her with his hands. She'd missed him today, worried about him being with William for the entire day.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Are we staying the night?"

"Yes. Yes, of course," William said. "It's dangerous attempting to cross the desert during the night. It's still warm so we will sleep in the open."

She bit back her instinctive retort and merely nodded, disappointment searing through her because she realized it would be impossible to spend any time alone with Sethmet. William would watch her more closely than normal, and she decided she'd retire to bed early this evening, pleading tiredness.

"Have the men set up our gear over there, away from the fire," Justin ordered, indicating a flat, fairly rock-free portion of ground.

Sethmet issued a string of orders in the local language, and the workers scurried to carry them out. The scent of a meat stew rose from the cooking fire to tempt the appetite. A worker rolled rounds of dough flat and cooked them in the fire. Combined with the stew, the bread would make a welcome dinner.

Justin and William were deep in conversation and ignored her for most of the evening, discussing their plan of attack for the following few days. They asked Sethmet a few questions but mostly disregarded him as well.

Straight after their evening meal, Charlotte stood. "I'm tired. It's been a long day."

When neither man moved, Sethmet rose from the rock he'd used as a seat. "I will escort you to the sleeping area."

Charlotte departed with alacrity before either William or Justin could change their mind. Away from the fire, Charlotte relaxed a fraction and leaned into Sethmet.

"I missed you today." His musky scent was both familiar and appealing.

Sethmet glanced at the fire and drew Charlotte behind an outcrop of rock near their sleeping area. "I missed you too. I missed kissing and touching you."

"You could kiss me now."

"So I could." His lips hit hers seconds later. Charlotte linked her hands behind his neck and held on to savor the experience. Knowing this was the only physical contact they'd manage tonight, she threw her heart and soul into the kiss. The velvet warmth of his mouth, combined with urgency, had them burning with need. Charlotte trembled and pressed against Sethmet. His hand skimmed down her back and came to a rest on one buttock, drawing her more firmly against his body. His hardness pressed into her stomach, and he lifted his head to trail kisses across her jaw.

"Sethmet," she whispered, tilting her head to allow him better access to her neck. "I wish we had more time."

"Patience, sweetheart." He pressed a final kiss to her mouth and stepped away from her.

Charlotte felt the lack of contact immediately. "Good night."

"Sleep well, Charlotte."

Charlotte removed her shoes and crawled fully dressed beneath the rough woolen blankets left by the servants. She took possession of the thin pallet at the far end, hoping William would take the one beside her rather than Justin. The man made her ill at ease, and she'd come to a decision to act with politeness yet attempt to keep her distance. She turned onto her side, listening to the faint chatter coming from the campfire and the odd grumbling from the staked camels. Overhead stars glittered like jewels at a society ball, and she fell asleep while counting them.

"Bloody hell," William said in a loud voice.

Charlotte stirred, holding back a groan. She pushed up to a sitting position, wincing at her stiff muscles and blinking in the bright morning light. "What's wrong?"

"Look," her stepbrother said.

Charlotte looked in the direction he pointed. A set of paw prints stood out in the dusty ground.

A worker let out a shriek. "Paw prints. The cat is stalking us."

"We are cursed," another shouted.

Justin leapt to his feet. "I'll go and calm them down before they decide to leave."

"Charlotte, hurry. I can't leave you here on your own," William said in an odd tone.

She stood and could see the tracks more clearly. They circled the area where she and the two men had slept during the night, but even more disconcerting was the clear impression in the sand. It looked as if the cat had spent at least part of the night resting mere feet away from where she'd slept.

* * * * *

Two weeks later

Charlotte rode the same camel she'd ridden during the other expeditions into the desert. Despite the blond camel's constant griping, Charlotte was becoming fond of the beast. It might not have the most pleasant teeth or breath, but her camel had character and was a definite flirt, fluttering long eyelashes at the other beasts.

Charlotte clambered onboard with the ease of practice, swaying back and forward when it fell into step with the rest of the train.

In front, William spoke with Sethmet. Justin caught her eye and halted his camel until Charlotte reached his side.

"Have I told you about Banning House?" he asked in a jovial tone, his blue eyes full of heat and lust.

Distinctly uncomfortable with his clear intent, she realized Justin had paid marked attention to her from the beginning. She'd been so preoccupied with the journey to Egypt and Sethmet she hadn't noticed his obvious interest.

"Ah, yes. That would be nice," she said faintly. Not that she had much choice in the matter.

With her stepbrother's words ringing in her ears, she forced a smile. Too bright, she thought with horror when Justin beamed back. William hadn't told her everything—she was sure of it. Knowledge was power, so George used to say when he'd arrived home after long meals at his club. Charlotte decided to ask William a few questions next time they were alone.

"Of course, my mother takes care of the household details for me. She's always saying it's time for me to settle down in England and raise a family."

All the more reason for her to avoid Justin despite his title. To her regret, her marriage had remained childless. George had visited her bed regularly, blaming her coldness and shortage of enthusiasm for his seed failing to take root. Now that she'd met Sethmet, she knew her husband's accusation held little truth. For Sethmet she had enthusiasm and more. Charlotte stroked her gloved hand across her camel's coarse coat, maintaining a placid smile all the while. Desire for a child was not a good enough

reason to bind herself to Lord Banning. George had left her comfortably situated financially.

In the small silence that followed, Charlotte risked a quick glance at Justin. His gaze swept her face to fix on her breasts. She froze and a small croak escaped before she could call it back. Justin raised his eyes to hers without apology. If anything, the heat in his eyes intensified.

"You must know how I feel about you, Charlotte."

Charlotte cleared her throat, desperate to dislodge the escalating panic inside. She did not wish to lose her freedom again so soon. "I am still in mourning, my lord. Justin," she added hastily.

Sethmet rode up to them. "Are you painting today, Charlotte?"

Never had an interruption been so welcome. Charlotte beamed at Sethmet. "Yes, I had thought watercolors." Due to Sethmet's generosity, she had access to paints again.

"Do you not have instructions to issue? Other things to do?" Justin snapped. "Lady Charlotte and I were having a private discussion."

"We have arrived," Sethmet said.

"Where? I see nothing but rocks," Justin snarled.

Charlotte scanned the horizon, seeing nothing except hills of terracotta rocks and another brilliant blue sky. Already the heat of the day made the cotton fabric of her lightest dress itch. They dismounted from their camels. Sethmet first before he aided both Charlotte and Justin.

"These are the tombs of a pharaoh," Sethmet said, his expression serious. "They are well camouflaged to deter tomb robbers."

Charlotte witnessed greed flash across Justin's face, the expression vanishing rapidly when he noticed her scrutiny.

"We'd better find something today," Justin snapped as he accepted a cool drink from a servant.

"We're all tired of chasing our tails," William said in an icy voice from behind them. "Let's hope today will be more successful."

Fury whipped through Sethmet. Inside, the cat snarled for freedom. Anger must have shown in his eyes because Charlotte's stepbrother took a step backward.

Of course, they'd find nothing here. And they'd leave Patria Oasis with nothing more than the possessions they'd arrived with. That was his job as guardian for the pharaoh. They would depart without some of their workers as well. A second man had died the previous day after he'd disturbed a viper and received a bite before they could kill the snake and save him.

"I believe you're taking us in circles," William snarled at Sethmet as they toured yet another site four hours later.

Justin peered cautiously at a rock before he moved it out of his way. "And everywhere we go those damn snakes seem to follow us. I've seen four today, and I don't like them."

Sethmet hid his amusement by concentrating on the crumbling pillars of the old temple. Of course he was taking them in circles, but now was not the time to confess. "I gave you a list of sites in the area. You decided which ones you wanted to explore." He paused, letting his merriment show. "My apologies, but I can't help the appearance of vipers. They come and go as they please. They're always a danger in the desert and many people die each year. You're lucky we haven't stumbled across any cobra yet."

"I don't know why we bothered with a guide." Red dust covered Justin's white shirt and black trousers and sweat trickled down his face. "Where is the pickax I put down a few minutes ago? I put it right there. Who took it?" Justin stomped around the vicinity, questioning every worker. No one had seen the pickax, and Sethmet presumed the pharaoh had spirited it away because he'd seen Justin lean it against the rocks. The tool wasn't there now.

Sethmet thought Justin had caught too much sun despite the top hat the man insisted on wearing. With his bright red cheeks and glittering eyes he appeared crazed.

William, on the other hand, looked like a desperate man. Sethmet thought the cat would do a little eavesdropping tonight before he met Charlotte. As always, his loins tightened at the thought of joining with Charlotte. They spent as many nights together as they could manage without raising suspicion, and the Englishwoman was becoming important to him. Sethmet didn't know if he'd be able to let her leave Patria.

William stomped away, picked up a stone and tossed it at the end column. It smashed against a frieze of Egyptian gods decorating the columns and bounced off to hit a servant. William ignored the servant's pained cry and picked up another stone. "Nothing! There's fuckin' nothing here except empty ruins."

"Take care where you're aiming." Sethmet clenched his fists and glared at William, allowing the Englishman to see his anger.

Charlotte stepped between them. "It's getting late, and we're all tired. I'm ready to go back to camp." She sent her stepbrother a measured glance and strode across the stony ground to where her camel waited.

Amusement replaced Sethmet's fury while the two Englishmen started to mutter between themselves. Finally, they stomped over to their camels.

Sethmet followed more slowly, his mind on Charlotte. Every time he'd tried to speak to her during the last two days either William or Justin had interrupted. Sethmet intended to meet up with her tonight—one way or the other.

* * * * *

Charlotte retired to her tent earlier than normal to escape Justin's pointed attentions. No matter how politely she rebuffed him, he kept forcing his company on her. In the end she had to leave before she bit off the tip of her tongue.

She stripped off most of her clothing and lay on her pallet. Night approached, leeching the heat from the air and leaving blissful coolness. It was still too early to meet with Sethmet. Charlotte sighed and closed her eyes, thinking of the caracal. She hadn't seen it lately but sometimes, in the morning, there were paw prints near her tent like the

ones they'd found after spending the night in the valley. Instinctively, she scuffed them out so no one else would see and start whispering about the curse. Her little secret. It thrilled her to know the cat watched over her.

"My good luck charm," she whispered, not feeling frightened in the slightest.

Charlotte picked up a pillow and hugged it to her chest. She wished it were Sethmet she held in her arms. An intolerable ache only he could quench burned strongly within her. She stirred restlessly, rubbing her thighs together and clenching her vaginal walls tight. The sweet throb only intensified. She'd have to wait for Sethmet. She closed her eyes, and instead of picturing woolly sheep like her nanny had suggested, she imagined graceful caracals. Charlotte started counting, her eyes growing heavy...

The night air chilled Charlotte, but her thick coat kept the worst of the frigid air at bay. Sand tickled beneath her paws. A soft cough alerted her to the presence of another.

She turned, flicking her ears and scenting the breeze for signs of danger. She relaxed when a larger cat padded up to her and affectionately nuzzled her neck. Pleasure rippled through her body. The caracal nudged her sharply, leaped forward then halted to look back expectantly. Her ears twitched, and she bounded after the male. The wind whistled through her fur, the scents of the oasis registering before she gave in to the sheer pleasure of running free.

"Charlotte."

The loud whisper intruded on her joyous scamper along the sand.

"Charlotte."

A hand traced down her cheek. Charlotte's eyes flew open. A dark shadow loomed over her. She opened her mouth to scream but a hand across her lips contained the sound.

"Shush. It's me."

"Sethmet?"

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"Of course not. What if someone sees you? I thought we were meeting at the cottage."

"Fret not, sweetheart. Everyone is asleep." Sethmet lifted her face for his kiss.

One taste of his seductive mouth and every thought of protest faded. "Besides," he said slyly, "the idea of discovery – of being discovered brings a thrill all of its own."

"You don't need to worry about your reputation." Charlotte tried to sound stern and failed dismally. The wretched man was right. The risk of exposure had her hot and bothered and throbbing for his possession.

"We can go to the cottage if you wish, but why waste time?"

In the inky blackness of the tent, Charlotte couldn't see a thing. She wished it was light enough to see his face, to see his expression and if his mouth and eyes matched the humor of his voice. He wasn't a man who smiled a lot, but when he did, it was compelling.

"You still have your stays on." Nimble fingers skimmed down her side to cup her bottom and pull her flush with his body – his erection. "And your drawers."

"You have more clothes on than me," Charlotte pointed out, even though she couldn't see to confirm.

Sethmet stood and moved away from her. Instantly, Charlotte wanted to recall her words and draw him closer.

The rustle of clothing sounded. Charlotte bit her lip, her heart jumping with acute expectation. Her hands went to the laces on her stays.

"No, let me," he murmured. "I like to undress you."

Charlotte's heart beat even faster. In the last weeks she'd become addicted to waking up with a warm, naked body curled around her smaller frame. And when they weren't sleeping – well, she'd become obsessed with making love with Sethmet as well.

The thought made her pause. Returning to London and slotting into the old routines would present difficulties. Her spirit rebelled at the idea of forcing herself into the old mold she used to inhabit. Yet, there was no alternative. Charlotte knew that too.

"What's wrong?"

"I was thinking about going home," Charlotte confessed.

"You want to go home?"

Charlotte hugged Sethmet fiercely then pulled away to lay her cheek against his naked chest. "Of course I don't! I love the freedom I have here. I like being independent and answering to no one." Charlotte paused, wrinkling her brow. That wasn't quite true.

George had left William as executor of his estate. Whenever she wanted money, she had to obtain it from her stepbrother. And then there was the fact he wanted her to cultivate Justin's friendship. In truth, the freedom and independence she had at the moment was just an illusion. "In fact, I like it so much in Egypt I dreamed I was a caracal running across the sand. Isn't that strange?"

He froze, his fingers tightening to the point of pain on her upper arms. "A caracal?"

"Yes." She didn't care if he thought her strange.

"That sounds like a wonderful dream," he said finally. "It means Egypt has grown under your skin."

Charlotte didn't think that was it at all. It was Sethmet who had grown under her skin, seducing her with his loving and smiles.

He kissed her hard, and she knew instantly this would be a swift loving. The thought excited her. He swept off the last of her garments and touched her between the legs, giving a grunt of masculine approval at her readiness for him.

"On your hands and knees," he ordered.

Charlotte followed his orders automatically, trusting him implicitly. George had taken her this way. It had made her feel used and dirty, like an animal. With Sethmet,

she felt intrigued. She shivered slightly while she waited for him. The sleeping blankets rustled faintly when he moved behind her. Charlotte felt his heat first then the roughness of his palms when he smoothed them over her flanks. He kissed her buttocks, taking small nibbles from her. His touch made her giggle.

"Hush," he whispered. "We mustn't attract attention."

Knowing he was right, she bit down on her bottom lip to maintain silence.

Sethmet cupped her heat with one hand and reached for a breast, the twin sensations bringing a sigh of pleasure. He'd slowed the pace, and while she enjoyed his touches, she desperately needed his cock filling her to assuage the ache inside her body.

"Sethmet," she pleaded. "Please. I need you now."

His hand dropped away from her breast, his weight shifting, then she felt the stretching as he pushed into her quim. A sigh escaped as she enjoyed his invasion, her belly muscles tensing for an instant and wringing an answering cry of pleasure from him.

Once his cock was fully seated, he leaned over and kissed the space between her shoulder blades, kneading the soft flesh of a breast with his hand.

"I love the way you feel when I'm deep inside you," he whispered next to her ear. "A man could die happy feeling surrounded like this."

"Yes." She could die happy with him inside her. She would hate leaving him.

He started to move with hard, digging strokes. His finger slid across her clit, teasing and pushing her high. Lust lanced through her body, and she pushed into him, inviting his hard flesh to invade her. His thrusts grew swifter. He groaned and froze, embedded deep in her body. She felt his pulsing as his seed spurted into her.

"Sorry, sweetheart."

"What for?"

"For not giving you pleasure." He pulled free, and she turned to face him.

“That’s not true. You have given me more pleasure than I’ve ever had in my life.”
And sweet memories. Lots of wonderful memories.

“Come here,” he whispered gruffly. He kissed her slowly, their lips lingering while his hands wandered her body. Her breasts. Her hips. Her belly. And finally between her legs. His fingers whispered across the hard nub of her clit. Slowly, he built her pleasure until she writhed in his arms, exploding with erotic fury.

Oh yes. She had pleasure. Indescribable pleasure. If only time would slow...

Chapter Six

"Didn't you sleep well last night? You look like a mouse dragged in by the housekeeper's cat." William's intense eyes seemed to pierce right through her. Charlotte fought to keep her composure. He couldn't know about her and Sethmet. And she wasn't surprised she looked tired given the little sleep they'd had the previous night.

"I'm fine," Charlotte said. No, he seemed preoccupied. It was something else troubling him. She glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone stood within hearing range.

A servant stoked the fire while another prepared bread rounds to cook on the hot embers. Justin sat on a chair outside his tent while his valet shaved him. In the distance, a camel called. No doubt, the camels were on their way from the oasis, ready for the day's expedition.

"Justin has asked me for your hand in marriage and I've accepted." William's blunt words hung in the air between them. They stared at each other. "Did you hear me?"

"I am not marrying Justin." The idea of the man touching her intimately sent a shiver of distaste surging through her body. Charlotte folded her arms across her chest in a protective manner. "I refuse."

William pulled a face and placed a hand on her shoulder. "At least think about it. Help me out."

"William, I don't want to marry again." Charlotte met and held her stepbrother's gaze, trying to make him understand. "Not straight away. I went from the schoolroom to marriage with no time in between. I want to enjoy my independence, and with the inheritance George left me, I have that luxury."

William glanced away, and Charlotte's heart skipped a beat. Was that guilt she'd seen? "What aren't you telling me?"

"There's no money left."

Something in his tone raised alarm. "What...what are you talking about?" One look at his stark face made her breath catch. "What have you done?"

William nailed her with a glare. "You will marry Justin as soon as we return to England. The arrangements are made, and I expect you to act civilly to him. He's a friend and soon he'll be a member of the family." And before Charlotte had a chance to refute his orders, William stalked off.

"William, wait!" Servants looked up from their tasks to stare, but Charlotte didn't care. She chased after her stepbrother and grabbed him by the forearm. "Stop. You can't order me to marry Justin and walk off without explanations."

"You want explanations. Fine. I'll give you explanations. I have debts—debts that need paying."

Gaming debts, according to London gossip. Charlotte eyed William uneasily. She'd thought he'd stopped gambling. Evidently not. "Use my money to pay them off. You're welcome to it. My wants are simple. I don't need much."

William's laugh raised the hairs at the back of her neck. Not amused and with a shade of bitterness, it sent her stomach swooping with fear.

"What have you done?" she whispered.

"Your money has gone. Every penny."

"The house in London. The...land in Kent?" Growing horror brought a stammer to her voice. It couldn't be as bad as it sounded. It couldn't.

"Mortgaged to the hilt," William confirmed. Not a trace of remorse showed on his pale face. His eyes were unrepentant. "If only we could find the pharaoh's treasure."

"You could have told me."

"You couldn't have done anything," he pointed out cruelly. "George gave me authority over you and your assets. I used them as I saw fit."

Charlotte's legs trembled so much she knew she had to sit before she fell.

Somehow, she found herself over in the area of the campsite they used to dine. The canvas shade flapped in the gentle breeze. Charlotte stepped under the shade and fell onto a wooden chair. Without money she was powerless, dependent on her stepbrother's largesse. Charlotte shot a resentful glare at William. He'd manipulated and used her to further his own means. Even though he'd confirmed he searched for treasure, she hadn't believed he was an unscrupulous tomb robber who removed every piece of value from the dead, leaving nothing to comfort them in the afterworld. The scientific papers he'd spoken of were probably fiction too. Either that or he stole them.

Tears formed at the back of her eyes and a lump of regret and intense sorrow threatened to close up her throat. Independence for Charlotte Webster was nothing but a dream now. She'd have to marry – it was either that or starve.

William stormed over to join her. He sat opposite and gestured for a servant to pour tea for both of them. When the servant left, he quirked a brow at her in silent mockery. If William expected her to follow blindly wherever he led, he was in for a shock.

A sudden thought occurred, and she turned her narrowed eyes on him. "If I refuse to marry Justin what happens?"

"Ah, my dear." William reached across the table to grip her chin with a cruel pinch of fingers. "But you will marry Justin. I've given my word, and a man's word is sacrosanct."

Charlotte jerked from his touch, the burn of temper fuelling her determination. Somehow she had to resist her stepbrother's efforts to tie her to Lord Banning. "The camels have arrived for today's expedition." When in doubt change the subject. Besides, she needed time to think, time to plan.

"This discussion is not over," William warned.

"I'm a widow capable of making my own decisions." Charlotte didn't wait for his reply but rose and made a dignified exit, trying to ignore the wave of helplessness threatening to swamp her.

Sethmet appeared from behind the supply tent. "What's wrong?"

Embarrassing tears flooded her eyes. She wiped them away angrily and wondered why nothing was ever easy. "Nothing," she murmured. "I'm looking forward to today's sightseeing. I'm almost ready. I just need to collect my hat and drawing materials."

Charlotte turned away before Sethmet could comment on her distress. Her attempts to hide her emotions in the English way had failed dismally. Tears started to fall in earnest.

She quickened her pace. The irony of the situation didn't escape her, especially since she'd been congratulating herself on her independence. In one strike, every scrap of freedom she'd possessed had disappeared.

"Charlotte, what is it?" Sethmet curled his hand around her upper arm and dug in his heels to stop her retreat. Gently, he turned her to face him, his face a picture of concern. "Let me help you."

Charlotte shook her head. "I...I've had some bad news," she murmured finally. Although she treasured the time she spent with Sethmet, she'd known it had to end. Charlotte had to stand alone—there was no one else to rely on. "There's nothing anyone can do to help."

"You there!"

The fury in William's voice made Charlotte jump.

"Our equipment tent has been broken into. Summon all the servants. I want to question them."

"We'll talk later." Sethmet inclined his head and stalked off to arrange an immediate meeting. He resisted the urge to comfort Charlotte. Something had happened. He'd seen her talking with her stepbrother and suspected William had upset her. It didn't surprise him. The man was a selfish bastard. Greedy too. Sethmet knew William and Justin had been leaving camp late at night to check sites he hadn't taken them to yet.

Sethmet's mouth lifted in a sneer. He wagered the two men wouldn't like the surprise he had in store for them. The minute the Englishmen had started searching on

their own they'd crossed a line. Sethmet wasn't about to let his family suffer because of the pharaoh's curse.

The servants stopped their chores and milled about the center of the campsite in an uneasy silence. Sethmet stood in full sunlight, his eyes watchful while William and Justin consulted in a private huddle.

Charlotte hurried to her tent. She disappeared inside, but her soft sobs were clearly audible to him. Sethmet had to force himself to hold ground, not to go to her and offer comfort. It was difficult when he felt as if his heart had been ripped from his chest.

William and Justin walked over to him, indicating they were ready.

"Who sorted the equipment and put it away last night?" William strode up and down the line of servants, glaring at each of them until they shuffled uneasily. "Answer me. Who put away the equipment?"

Several of the men eyed each other before one stepped forward. He muttered in a low voice.

"Speak up, man," Justin snapped.

Sethmet stepped forward, ready to take the brunt of the men's anger. "He doesn't speak English. Let me question him."

The quiet sobs continued to distract Sethmet, making it difficult to do his job and concentrate on protecting the pharaoh. Sethmet could smell her lilac scent on the breeze. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. He didn't have the right to go to her and offer comfort. Their worlds were oceans apart. He had to remember that.

"Question him," Justin demanded, breaking into Sethmet's unhappy thoughts.

William thrust his face close to the man who'd stepped forward. His cheeks and neck had turned bright red with anger and a nervous tic throbbed in his jaw. "Ask him what he did with the barrel of gun powder."

Sethmet met William's anger with a hard stare. "What would a party of tourists want with a barrel of gun powder?" Tomb robbers, he thought in disgust, his suspicions

reconfirmed. "If you're looking for treasure, you're at the wrong oasis. There is no treasure here."

"I have information to the contrary," William spat, "and I don't intend to leave without finding it."

"Despite the cursed bad luck you seem to be having? The death of two men. The disappearance of equipment. It's true that others have sought treasure at Patria, but they have left broken men. I don't know why men insist on coming here. There is no treasure, only death to those who search."

"Ask the man what happened to the gun powder," William insisted, not backing down despite his lies. Sethmet fired off the question. The man shifted his weight and looked guilty, but Sethmet felt it was because of William's incensed behavior. He nodded when the man finished and ran his gaze across the rest of the men assembled for William's interrogation.

A loud scream rent the air. The servants burst into excited jabber. Sethmet heard the word, curse mentioned more than once. Another scream galvanized Sethmet to action.

Charlotte.

He sprinted to Charlotte's tent. Just as he arrived, Charlotte lifted the tent flap and stepped outside.

"Lady Charlotte, you're all right," Sethmet said with relief. He had to forcibly remind himself not to embrace her in public. Not touching her was difficult but seeing the dried tear tracks on her face was even harder.

"Who screamed?" Unhappiness hovered in Charlotte's blue eyes. "Is someone hurt?"

Sethmet glanced away and hoped he hadn't given his concern for Charlotte away with his mad sprint to her tent. He suspected her stepbrother would make things difficult if he knew of their relationship. "I don't know. I thought it was you."

A third scream, long and high with panic, directed them to a petrified woman servant.

"What is it?" Sethmet's sharp tone seemed to pierce the woman's panic.

With a trembling finger, she pointed. Sethmet saw the pottery flagon she'd dropped in her terror. Wet sand surrounded the vessel while a short distance away two scorpions scuttled across a pair of sandaled feet. The soles of the feet pointed upward as if the man were buried head first in the sand, his feet the only visible part of his body.

Charlotte came to stand at his side. "Do you know who it is?"

Sethmet shook his head. "Dig him out," he directed several of the milling servants.

"All this is a distraction," William snarled. "I will find out who stole my equipment, and when I do that man will suffer."

Sethmet squatted beside the buried man. He caught a whiff of gunpowder.

Standing, he strode around the man. The scent grew stronger. "There's your gunpowder."

Sethmet said pointing to the thin black trail that led from the dead man into the desert.

William cursed and whirled about. "You there! Go and get a spade. We can still use the powder if we collect it again.

A gust of wind appeared from nowhere, whistling and whipping *galabiyyas* around the servant's legs, sending sand and gunpowder swirling through the air.

The wind disappeared as quickly as it appeared. And the silence that remained was so complete and unexpected, it raised hairs at the back of Sethmet's neck. The pharaoh. Even from the tomb, his spirit aided Sethmet and his family in their task.

The servants glanced at each other in uneasy silence.

"The curse," one of the more daring whispered.

"This is ridiculous," Justin drawled. "I say we go on with the day's excursion."

"We must do something for this poor man first," Charlotte protested.

"He's nothing to do with us. Come, Charlotte." William crooked his arm and waited with clear impatience.

Sethmet caught Charlotte's hesitation and liked her for the sensitivity she showed for a man she didn't know.

"No go," one of the servants cried. He broke from the group and ran without looking back.

"Come back," William ordered. He turned to Sethmet. "Do something. You're in charge of labor. Get them ready for departure."

The fury in William's voice made the servants edge away. The wind whistled across the open sands again and a final blast sent the sand flying through the air.

The curse.

Eyes rolled in fear, showing the whites, and as one, the servants turned and raced for the safety of the oasis.

"Wait, damn you!" William hollered.

Justin shrugged. "Let them go," he said as he carefully inspected his fingernails. "We don't need them. There are other ways."

"We can visit this new site without the servants," William said.

"It is a long journey and will require two nights away from your camp."

Sethmet tried to gauge how hard to dissuade them. The two Englishmen were determined to visit the site they'd heard about, but he didn't want to refuse in case they went without him. The site was uncomfortably close to the pharaoh's tomb. Sethmet wanted to go along so he was on hand to act should the men discover the tomb. Yes, there were traps laid for the unwary explorer but they weren't foolproof. He needed to supervise and carry out his duties to the pharaoh. While the pharaoh still retained powers, they seemed increasingly erratic with the passing years. It seemed the longer the span of years since the pharaoh's death, the more diluted his magic.

"Do you think the journey is wise?" Charlotte asked. "Without servants it will certainly be difficult."

"You don't have to go," Justin pointed out.

William glared at his friend. "She can hardly stay here alone without a chaperon."

Sethmet watched the two men silently communicate. William continued to glare until suddenly the scowl transformed into a grin. He didn't like that smirk. It boded ill for Charlotte. That settled things. He couldn't leave her on her own with the two men.

"If you are willing to wait until tomorrow I will arrange supplies and servants for the expedition to Zuweila Oasis."

The men glanced at each other and seemed to come to a decision.

"Tomorrow will be suitable. Charlotte, come," William said.

Charlotte stiffened. Her beautiful mouth firmed and she cast a beseeching look at Sethmet.

Sethmet's lungs constricted. He wished he knew what was going on with the men and Charlotte. He couldn't be everywhere at once. Although he'd patrolled the camp as much as he was able, he hadn't discovered evidence of a traitor until the pharaoh had pointed the man out by killing him. Now it was up to him to discover if the traitor had worked alone to help the Englishmen or if there were more in the oasis. He must concentrate on protecting the pharaoh instead of his lust for Charlotte. Even so, Sethmet gave her an encouraging nod, trying to tell her with his eyes that he would watch over her and keep harm away.

Icy cold slid over his face then as another thought occurred. If Charlotte had deceived him and she was in league with her stepbrother there might be nothing he could do to save her from the pharaoh's wrath. The notion was like a swift kick in the gut and just as painful.

Chapter Seven

Darkness closed in once the sun sank beneath the horizon, and Sethmet paced, waiting for the camp to settle. Impatience battered his best intentions, and he dragged off his clothes. After thrusting them under a tree at the edge of the oasis, he let the change take him. Tendons and sinew twisted, bones lengthened and his jaw transformed. The pain of the change balanced on the fine edge of pleasure. Sethmet shuddered, the rush of enhanced senses a rich, sensual experience he never tired of. The cool night breeze ruffled his fur as he padded across the sand to the English camp. Without conscious thought, Sethmet prowled straight to Charlotte's tent.

Her soft breathing both reassured and called to him. The desire to go to her, shift into human form and sink his cock deep into her warmth nipped at his self-control, dividing his loyalties. Sethmet's chest rumbled in a low growl of conflict. His tail swished in agitation before his loyalty to the pharaoh and his family overruled his heart, and he turned to patrol the camp. His gut told him more danger lurked. Learning the identity of the dead servant had yielded few clues since the solitary man had been from Mut, the closest town. Men often left the caravans to take a break at Patria Oasis.

That was the problem—at any given time there were many strangers present. Sethmet knew most were honest men, but some, who had no loyalty to his family, had hidden motives and these were the ones who presented a challenge. Perhaps he should let gossip do his job for him—let the servants' superstitions and natural fear spread alarm. That would work, and yet, Charlotte would leave when her stepbrother left. He'd lose her. Sethmet paused to scent the air.

Lilacs.

Charlotte.

Sethmet found himself outside his lover's tent again, his heart jumping and every sense attuned to each move or sigh she made. He snarled low and deep and determinedly padded over to William's tent. A lamp burned inside, sending shadows playing across the canvas. The light outlined two silhouettes and the tinkle of glasses told Sethmet that William and his companion were drinking. His ears twitched when he raised his head to the breeze. The peaty fumes informed him they drank whiskey.

Sethmet stalked closer, sitting quietly to listen.

"I tell you the man is stalling us."

Sethmet's lip curled in disdain. Of course he was bloody stalling them. With luck, the boiling temperatures of mid-season would drive them homeward. But then again, perhaps not. William looked increasingly desperate, his temper uncertain and boiling over at the slightest infringement of camp rules.

"I have the map," William countered. "It's not perfect but there are not many sites left to check. Once we find the site with the two hills and the temple of the cat, we will know where to commence our dig."

"I don't know why you didn't ask the guide straight out. We're paying him enough. We've bought his loyalty."

"I did." William's tone was sharp as if his temper balanced on a pinnacle. "The man told me there were many temples dedicated to the cat around here. Damn me if he wasn't correct. All the sites we've visited so far have had some of the features on the map, enough to warrant a search."

"But not all."

"No."

A glass clinked against a bottle, and Sethmet heard the whiskey sloshing into a glass.

"Ask the worker on our payroll for more details. Offer him more money," Justin said. "He has to know more. I bet he's holding out on us."

"I have asked the worker. He's frightened. This damn curse and the death of his friend has put the fear of God into him."

"What about if I ask the guide? *Sethmet*." Justin's voice held mockery when he said Sethmet's name. Sethmet growled, a low warning sound vibrating through his chest at the slur.

"The damn man is too full of himself, if you ask me. He's a bloody servant and he acts like a titled lord. You can try, but I don't think it will make a difference. I asked him early when we first arrived."

"What did he say?"

"He said that while the money I offered was an attractive incentive, he couldn't accept. The bloody man had the effrontery to say he'd lived in Patria for most of his life and knew of no treasure. It simply didn't exist, so I would be foolish to pay him."

Justin barked out a laugh. "Upstart."

Interesting, Sethmet thought, but it didn't help him in weeding out the traitor.

"Have you talked to Charlotte? Will she accept my offer?"

The lustful note in Justin's voice made Sethmet tense. Had that been the cause of her upset earlier today? His twitching ears signaled his disquiet, his rush of jealousy. Sethmet stood and prowled a circuit around the tent in an effort to soothe his rising agitation.

"She has some silly notion of enjoying her independence," William drawled. "But don't worry, she'll come around."

"Did you highlight the monetary incentives?"

"Oh yes. Believe me, I pointed out the benefits to Charlotte."

William sounded determined to wed Charlotte to his friend. The idea of Charlotte married and sleeping in the same bed as the Englishman ratcheted his jealousy up another notch.

To hell with it. He'd learned most of what he needed to know. It was as if a giant timepiece ticked away the time before Charlotte left. Soon she'd be lost to him. Sethmet padded to her tent and, after a quick glance to check for prying eyes, shifted to human form.

After untying the laced door of the tent, he crawled inside, desperate to exert his claim on Charlotte.

Firm lips caressed hers. Charlotte's eyes snapped open, her heart galloping, not in terror but in expectation. She recognized his familiar scent of sandalwood and wild sage. "Sethmet," she murmured arching against his solid, muscular body. Her hands squeezed hard buttocks. Naked buttocks. A laugh bubbled from her lips. "Where are your clothes?"

"I was in a hurry. I wanted to speed things up."

Charlotte's heart pumped out two rapid beats before she caught her breath. Already, moisture gathered between her legs in readiness for his possession. Charlotte pushed against his chest, struggling to free her arms from her voluminous cotton nightgown. Skin. She wanted to rub against him like a cat. Charlotte ached. She fought to free herself from the constricting cloth and managed to trap a lock of hair. A pained cry escaped.

"Hush," Sethmet soothed in the smoky, accented English that never failed to heighten her arousal.

Minutes later, she was free and running her hands down his flanks. "Now," she urged. "Hurry."

Sethmet turned, flipping over on his back and lifting her at the same time so she straddled him. "Ride me," he murmured. "I want to see your breasts and watch your face while you come."

Charlotte thrilled to his sensual words. She laughed breathlessly while her hand cupped his testes and then his cock, feeling the shape and the strength of him.

"It's dark. You can't see me when it's this dark," she whispered, positioning his erection at the entrance to her quim. She sank down, savoring the tight fit, the stretching, the promise of the joining.

"I can see you. I have very good eyesight." And to prove it, he said, "You have a small brown mole on your right breast."

She sank to the hilt and paused to torture both of them. A ripple swept through her, urging her to hasten the pace.

Sethmet gripped her hips with both hands. "Ride me, Charlotte. I need you."

Charlotte lifted and sank back down. To be needed – that was special. No one had ever needed her before. She quickened her pace, rising and falling until they both gasped.

Ripples of pleasure streaked through her body. Below her, Sethmet stiffened. Deep inside, his seed gushed. Charlotte slumped forward, and Sethmet closed his arms around her, drawing their sweaty bodies together.

She closed her eyes, attempting to hold on to the pleasure and the closeness. Instead, shadows intruded. She would have to return to England and marry – probably Justin. No wonder her dreams were of cats running free in the desert. Charlotte craved a life she would never have and it had spilled over into her dreams.

* * * * *

When Sethmet arrived at camp to head the overnight expedition to Zuweila Oasis he found the place in an uproar. A group of servants formed a tight-knit group near the cooking fire. Steam rose from a pot suspended over the glowing embers, but that was all that had occurred in the way of breakfast preparations. William screamed orders, punctuating them with waving arms and insults. Everyone ignored him. Instead, the servants cast frightened looks over their shoulders and muttered between themselves.

Sethmet bit down on his tongue to suppress his grin. He had a fair idea what the fuss was about.

"About time you arrived," Justin snarled. "Tell the natives to get to work."

Sethmet bowed, his lips quivering as he battled the need to laugh out loud. "Certainly, my lord."

Sethmet strode forward and the servants parted, fanning out in a semicircle around him. "Why have you stopped preparing for the journey to the oasis?"

The men fidgeted and stared at their sandaled feet.

It was clear none of them were willing to speak first so Sethmet scanned the faces and picked. "Bahar?"

Footsteps, the swish of stiff fabric and the scent of lilacs told him Charlotte approached. Despite his worries about taking the Englishmen so near the pharaoh's tomb, Sethmet was looking forward to spending more time with her.

"What's going on?" Charlotte's soft voice sent a frisson of awareness through Sethmet.

He cleared his throat. "That's what I'm trying to find out. Bahar?"

"Ghost cat," the man whispered, glancing over his shoulder as if he expected the mythical beast to pounce on him.

"A cat?" Charlotte stepped close enough that Sethmet could feel the heat from her body. "What did it look like?"

Bahar paled. "Bad omen, missy. Not see cat. Paw prints all around camp." A shiver swept through his thin frame. "Bad, bad omen."

The muttering started again.

"What's the man talking about?" Justin demanded.

"He's right about paw prints," William muttered. "They're all around my tent—as big as my hand. They look like cat prints to me, the same ones we've seen before."

"There are big cats around here," Sethmet said, smiling at Charlotte. "And of course, the cat is a sacred animal in Egypt. There are many temples dedicated to the cat."

"I don't care about bloody legends," William snapped. "I want to get moving."

The man's sweaty face and red cheeks showed clear strain. It wouldn't take much more to push him over the edge. Sethmet offered a placating smile. "And you will," he promised. "Leave it to me."

It took all of Sethmet's persuasion to get the workers to carry out their normal duties let alone prepare for the expedition.

"The ghost cat seeks prey," one muttered, his arms flapping so much he reminded Sethmet of a stork trying to fly. The wind aided the vision in his mind's eye when the man's cotton *galabiyya* snapped in the persistent breeze. Sethmet lifted his head. A storm was coming—he smelled it in the wind. The pharaoh was agitated and showing it with the powers he had at his command.

Never fear, my pharaoh, Sethmet pledged silently. I will keep you safe – no matter what the cost. He must think of his family first and keep them safe from repercussions if things went wrong during the next two nights and the Englishmen found the tomb.

It was a dangerous game he played since a cornered man was a desperate foe.

William paced, increasingly edgy. Justin, on the other hand, remained the arrogant Englishman, ordering the workers around, sending them on countless trips to his tent for items he simply couldn't do without.

Finally, they were ready. The workers still squawked like agitated birds.

"The ghost cat will come. We will die in our sleep," one intoned.

Sethmet resorted to guile. He gestured them together to listen. "It is broad daylight," he said. "If the cat follows we will see for we travel across the flat where there are no dunes."

They digested the information.

"This is true."

"The master is right. We will be safer if we leave the oasis."

Several of them nodded agreement.

"Good," Sethmet said. "I will help the Englishmen mount the camels." A smile hovered on his lips as he turned away. He wondered what they'd think if they knew the ghost cat traveled with the camel train and would stalk the campsite tonight.

* * * * *

Charlotte thought the servants seemed happier as they set up camp for the night.

The man stirring a stew over the fire hummed while another squatted by the fire and tapped on a goatskin drum. However, all was not well with William and Justin, who spoke in low undertones.

"Is there a problem?" she asked, finally tired of them ignoring her. It wasn't as if she could talk to Sethmet, despite preferring his company. The power her stepbrother had over her future frightened Charlotte. He'd already gambled away her money.

Charlotte suspected there might be worse in store since they kept glancing at her between spates of muttered conversation. "What is wrong?" she repeated, shifting uncomfortably. Her entire body ached tonight. "Do I have a smut on my nose?"

"Of course not, my dear." Justin stepped over to her and claimed possession of her hand. He pressed a lingering kiss to her wrist, his eyes glowing with lustful heat. "We were merely discussing business. Nothing to worry your pretty head about."

If she'd worried earlier she might have prevented William from spending her inheritance. Charlotte reclaimed her hand and resisted the urge to wipe it on her gown.

"It's getting chilly," she said. Outside the U of white rock formations protecting the campsite, the wind whistled, sending fine white sand swirling into the air. Charlotte shivered. The white desert was a lonely, ghostly place. "I think I'll get my shawl."

A shout rang out to announce dinner was ready. Justin and William ceased their secretive talks and joined her near the fire to dine on bowls of meat and bean stew and hot bread still warm from the fire. Between bites, Justin stared at her, bringing intense discomfort.

Sethmet and the servants dined separately, the chatter and laughter coming from their group making her aware of her isolation.

Charlotte exhaled with relief when the meal finished. William and Justin continued to speak quietly between themselves. Charlotte wasn't sure she wanted to know what they were discussing, but she still picked up several words. Treasure and marriage among them. She stood, deciding she'd had enough. "Good night."

William and Justin broke off their conversation. Justin stood and Charlotte moved quickly so the makeshift table sat between them.

"Good night, my dear."

Charlotte nodded and hurried off. The man made her feel distinctly uncomfortable because of the way he eyed her as if she were a tasty slice of roast beef. She quickened her pace before Justin decided to escort her to her tent. She peered through the gloom, trying to see if Sethmet waited for her. To her acute disappointment, he was busy instructing the servants. She heard his low, husky tones and sighing, lifted her tent flap and stepped inside. Probably for the best, she thought. The aches in her body from the camel ride seemed bone-deep. It was either that or the dry climate was disagreeing with her and she had caught the ague. Charlotte frowned in annoyance, knowing she didn't have time to get sick. It would leave her vulnerable and that was a situation she disliked heartily.

Charlotte undressed slowly, the persistent aching in her bones making her wince when she raised her arms. She felt her forehead in the way her governess used to when Charlotte was pretending she was sick. A soft chuckle escaped at the memory. Fishing and exploring the woods with the neighboring children had seemed much more fun than practicing her French and needlework. Nothing wrong with her temperature, she decided.

Perhaps she would feel better in the morning. Charlotte drew her nightgown over her head. A shaft of pain shot the length of her body, and a moan squeezed past her lips.

Charlotte lay on the pallet, but the noises from the campsite seemed louder than usual. She could hear the low murmur of William and Justin talking together, probably in another huddle. Dishes clacked together while the servants cleared the remains of dinner away and the persistent *bang-bang* of the drum reverberated inside her head. A man spoke in their native tongue, the voice familiar and reassuring. Sethmet, she thought, her heart aching in time with the throb shaking her body. Suddenly, her breasts and nipples felt tender and swollen, the weight of her nightgown too much for her to bear. She shifted fitfully, trying to relieve the ache, but it intensified, transforming into excitement. Charlotte twisted and turned until her nightgown worked up, baring her legs to the air. Charlotte's heart pounded, her mouth dry and her body on fire. Where was Sethmet when she needed him? She moved yet again and an arrow of heat shot to her core. Unbidden, her hand glided across her belly then lower to tangle in her pubic hair. She swallowed, desire overwhelming her. Tempting.

Her hand crept lower still, sliding across slick feminine folds. A jolt of pure, heady sensation arced through her body. The gentle rotation of a finger drew a moan from her tight throat.

Molten fire licked through her veins, yet she felt empty and alone.

She wanted Sethmet.

Her finger stroked, massaged, building the sensation until her pulse raced and urgent hunger jerked her hips.

Sethmet, where are you?

Suddenly, unsteady footsteps outside her tent stilled her hand. Charlotte bolted upright on the pallet. The footsteps halted outside her tent and a light shone, casting shadows against the canvas. Her stomach clenched tight. Sethmet? Harsh breathing and a whiff of tobacco and snuff answered her silent question. Not Sethmet. He never brought a lamp. A flicker of apprehension swept through Charlotte when the ties that kept the flap closed were tugged open. The flap lifted and even in the darkness, Charlotte could identify the man.

Chapter Eight

"What are you doing in here? Wait!" Charlotte sprang off her pallet and held a hand in front of her body. "Don't come any closer. Leave now and we'll forget this ever happened."

Justin held his lamp up so he could see Charlotte more clearly. "But my dear, that's no way to greet your future husband." He stalked closer. Setting the lamp aside, he grabbed her, planting a punishing kiss on her lips. "I have William's permission to take this step." Triumph shone in his eyes as he kissed her again and groped one breast with bruising force.

Alarm yielded swiftly to anger. Charlotte softened her body, melting against his chest. "Justin," she cooed, batting her lashes at him. She would deal with her stepbrother later.

The man puffed up like a proud peacock. "I knew you'd see sense," he drawled. "I need an heir straightaway. No sense wasting time."

"Oh Justin." Charlotte sighed and simpered up at him. *Pompous toad.*

Justin let her go and stepped back, his gaze traveling the length of her body. "You are very beautiful, my dear. Of course, I know you were married for some time. It's possible you may not be able to bear children. I must have an heir."

Charlotte's anger almost choked her. She took a slow, deep breath, her eyes narrowing. "So, you would like to spend time with me before we return to England." William deserved a slow punishment. Not only had he frittered about her money, he'd practically sold her to Justin without a care for her feelings on the matter. Yes, she would think of a fitting punishment for her stepbrother, something dire to make him suffer.

Justin advanced on her again, a hot look in his blue eyes. "I'm glad we understand each other, my dear."

Charlotte forced a wide smile. *Come a little closer, Lord Banning.* She slid her hands down her hips, holding the fabric of her nightgown against her body so her shape showed through.

"I'm so glad you're being sensible about this." Justin reached for her, and Charlotte raised her head. She heard the faint sound of footsteps outside the tent, but then the moment she'd hoped for happened. His eyes slid shut and she struck, jerking her knee upward into his groin with all the force she could muster. He dropped to the ground like a felled tree, giving a pained groan that came from deep in his chest. Charlotte stared down at him with disgust and resisted the urge to kick him while he was down. If her bones hadn't ached so badly she just might have followed through on the impulse.

A growl sounded just outside the tent.

"Kitty?" Pleasure suffused Charlotte. She rushed toward the flap and lifted it to see the snarling face of the caracal, its ears twitching in agitation. The tense set left her shoulders because instinctively she knew she was safe from Lord Banning now. The caracal turned and loped off then stopped to glance back as if he waited for something—something he wanted her to do.

Charlotte glanced over her shoulder and without another thought limped from the tent, determined to find somewhere else to sleep tonight. Kitty would help her find somewhere safe. She hurried to catch up to the cat, every muscle throbbing, each of her bones sore and tender.

The cat paused as if to make sure she followed. It picked up its speed, breaking into a trot, leaving the camp behind. Charlotte tried to follow. She stumbled, a wave of nausea sweeping through her belly. Her heart thundered. She had to go with the cat. She had to follow. For some reason, it seemed imperative she kept the caracal in sight.

Charlotte struggled to her feet despite the pain spearing through her. A whimper sounded, soft and forlorn in the darkness. The agony suffused her from the top of her head to her bare feet. She scrunched her toes into the sand, and her hands clenched while she rode out the pain. Unexpectedly, the sensation changed. A wave of pure, heartrending pleasure poured over her in waves. She balanced on a knife edge, sometimes pleasure and sometimes pain. Her skin glowed hot and sensitive as though it might pop and it felt as though her bones stretched on a rack. Her cotton nightgown was an unbearable weight on her sensitive skin. With shaky hands, she drew it off and let the breeze cool her heated body. Another sudden wave of pain sent Charlotte to her knees.

The sand beneath her hands and feet sent a whimsical notion through her confused head.

Sounds bombarded her—a man snoring, the crackle of the campfire, the sleepy yawn of the man who tended the camels and the soft snarl of the cat. The urge to run was a siren song—it lured her much like the cat drew her awe.

A growl attracted her attention. The caracal stood in front of her with its ears twitching and tail swishing. He padded closer and rubbed his head against her shoulder.

His rough tongue licked across her cheek before he padded away then turned back to wait.

Charlotte desperately wanted to follow. She crawled, tensing, expecting pain, but it didn't come. Confused, she glanced down to see she'd changed into a cat much like Kitty.

A dream, she thought hazily.

Charlotte moved smoothly after Kitty and broke into a run, slamming into his muscled shoulder. He let out a surprised grunt, gave her an affectionate nudge and swatted her with his paw.

Growling, she raced off, stopping abruptly to see if he followed. He did. Kitty loped easily at her side, keeping pace as she ran and ran and ran. The freedom was like a heady tonic. The wind ruffled her fur as she ran while her sharp eyes picked up small creatures that scuttled away at their approach. Gradually, her pace slowed, her sides rising and falling with exhaustion. Kitty kept pace the whole time and slowed when she did. He licked her muzzle and her face, rubbing against her until she quivered. His eyes glowed as he gently shunted her in another direction.

Different sounds—human noises—made her hesitate even though she couldn't see the camp because of a rocky outcrop. The scent reached her at the same time—men snoring, their sweaty bodies tossing and turning as they slept. Stealthy footsteps wandered through the camp. Without warning, Kitty slammed into her shoulder, forcing her to stop.

Startled, she froze. Kitty prowled in front of her. A mist shimmered around the cat and before her stunned eyes, he transformed. Seconds later, Sethmet stood before her, proudly naked.

"Change, Charlotte," he murmured, his voice low and seductive. "Concentrate. Picture legs and arms in your mind and the change will happen."

Charlotte fixed on his words and concentrated as Sethmet instructed. Pain tinged with pleasure rippled across her skin. She shuddered inwardly as her body transformed back to human form. Sethmet caught her close when she stumbled. Chest pressed to breast, and Sethmet stroked her back, murmuring in a low, soothing tone.

"I'm sure you have questions," he said.

Charlotte lifted her head to study him closely. "You're Kitty. That wasn't a dream."

Sethmet scowled. "I am *not* a kitty. Come. I'll grab my clothes, and we'll talk in your tent."

Her lips twitched in amusement at his clear pique. "What about my nightgown? And what if Justin is still in my tent?" Justin and William would both be furious with her. Her good mood dispersed a fraction despite her residual fury with them.

"I'll kill him," Sethmet snarled. "You are mine."

Charlotte opened her mouth to hotly dispute his ownership then snapped it closed again. Perhaps there was something in his claim. And he was right – she had questions.

Lots of them.

She had changed into a cat. A caracal. She'd run free just as she'd dreamed during the last few weeks. Her mind struggled with both excitement and horror while she followed, trusting him implicitly.

"I might exact my revenge anyway," he muttered, turning to her and halting their walk to the tent. His eyes glowed hotly as his gaze wandered across her bare breasts. "He touched you." Raw, savage anger burned in him, and she had no doubt Justin was in extreme danger.

Charlotte placed a placating hand on Sethmet's breastbone. "I dealt with him myself. He won't forget it in a hurry, although I have no doubt both he and William will be angry. What just happened? I turned into a cat like Kitty."

Sethmet glared. "Don't call me that."

Charlotte ran her hand across his shoulder and down his biceps. She stood on tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. Instantly, Charlotte forgot every one of her questions. Sethmet's arms came around her and he took over the kiss, ravaging her mouth. Tongues dueled, mouths mated and his cock swelled against her stomach.

"My mate," Sethmet said, cupping her bottom and lifting Charlotte so her legs parted and curled around his waist. His hands glided in a long and luxurious stroke down her back while he nuzzled at the smooth skin of her throat. Sethmet led Charlotte into a world where sensation ruled, and he was everything to her.

His hand probed slick feminine folds, strumming her swollen clit, driving her higher. Deeper. One finger slipped inside and thrust slowly. Charlotte trembled as he feasted on her mouth and pumped his finger in and out. A violent spasm of pleasure streaked the length of her body, making her gasp.

"Harder," she moaned.

"Not with my finger," he said, slipping his finger from her tight channel. "I want to feel you clutching my cock." Holding her firmly, he placed his erection at her entrance and slid home, stretching her, filling her. He gripped her hips with both hands, his strength evident from the ease in which he lifted her so effortlessly. The spicy tang of arousal surrounded them. Flesh slapped against flesh. Frissons of excitement pounded Charlotte, and her entire body shuddered on the cusp of orgasm.

"Touch your breasts," he ordered. "Pretend it's my hand caressing you. Tug your nipples."

Charlotte hesitated a fraction before following his instructions, gliding her hands across her breasts and plucking at her nipples. Each tug sent a corresponding twinge surging to her clit.

Sethmet thrust harder. Quicker. The simmering pleasure gathered momentum, growing bigger, pushing her higher until it spilled over. Hard, pulsing waves swept through her quim, gripping Sethmet's cock. Sethmet groaned, thrust again. Once. Twice. Then he stilled, clutching her tight to his chest.

He dipped his head, pressing his forehead against hers. "You're my mate, Charlotte."

The possessive tone made her smile. "Maybe." When she received some answers. His declaration brought pleasure and anticipation while Justin's avowals disgusted her.

A growl vibrated deep in his chest. "Time to talk." Sethmet pulled away and let her slide down his body to stand on her own feet. He clasped her hand and started for camp. "My family comes from a long line of shapeshifters. We are guardians. We protect the pharaoh's tomb from people like your stepbrother."

"But that doesn't explain what happened to me tonight. Will it happen again?"

"Would you like it to?" he countered, his expression telling her nothing.

Charlotte thought of the restrictions she faced in her everyday life with the *ton*.

The freedom she'd experienced since being in Patria Oasis had made her realize what a pointless and aimless existence she led in London. And meeting Sethmet had opened her eyes in regards to the men she met in the ballrooms and private parties. They were like plain copies and imitations of the real thing.

"I...yes." Charlotte nodded. "Yes, I'd like to run free again."

"With the secret of the cat comes responsibility." Sethmet met her gaze and held it, his dark eyes serious and a trifle grim. "There are disadvantages."

"What disadvantages?"

Sethmet studied Charlotte closely. His heart still pounded from their lovemaking. He had climaxed yet he wanted to repeat the experience. But most of all he wanted to know what Charlotte intended to do. He loved her—she was his mate, but he didn't wish to hold her like a caged bird, not if she didn't wish to remain in the oasis. "Do you wish to return to your home in England?" *Great. Smooth. Very polished.* But he waited anxiously for her reply, admitting the truth to himself even though he didn't say it. He'd rather cut out his heart than let Charlotte leave.

When she shivered, he said, "My clothes are under the rock to your right. Put my shirt on."

Charlotte stooped to tug the clothes from underneath the rock. She handed the trousers to Sethmet and watched while he stepped into them.

Sethmet couldn't restrain his grin. His brows rose. "My turn to watch now."

A gun blasted through the silence of the night.

Sethmet started to run. "Stay there," he shouted over his shoulder. Seconds after his order, he heard footsteps behind him.

"I am not staying put," she muttered.

"Someone's shooting in the camp. You must keep safe."

"What about you?" Charlotte demanded.

Sethmet rounded the base of the white outcrop at a sprint. The blood moon peeped from behind black clouds, casting a ghostly crimson glow over the tents. Servants milled around in terror, jabbering at the top of their voices.

"What's going on?" Sethmet demanded.

"A gun!" One of the servants pointed at the cook.

"He shoot," another said.

The wind roared and whistled through the campsite. Canvas snapped and *galabiyys* flapped wildly. Then the wind stilled. An uncanny silence left the men staring at each other uneasily.

"The ghost cat," someone whispered.

"I heard gunfire. What the devil is going on?" William's bed cap sat askew on his head while he glared around the terrified servants.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Sethmet said. He watched Charlotte dart behind William's tent and head for hers.

Justin limped up to them. "What's the melee about?"

Sethmet's eyes narrowed on the pale and drawn Englishman. If he had his way, the man wouldn't have walked from his tent.

"The ghost cat. He is controlling the wind," a servant said.

"But not the guns," William snapped, holding up his lamp and shining it around the circle of faces. "Who fired the gun?"

"What is going on? Why is everyone awake?" Charlotte said.

Sethmet turned in her direction, willing her to step next to him so he could keep her safe. She smiled faintly, as though she could read his mind, and sashayed up to him, stopping at his side. Sethmet exhaled slowly, feeling easier now that she was here and stood beside him.

"I thought I heard a gun," Charlotte added.

William spun away. "I'm going back to bed."

Two shots rang out in quick succession. A servant dropped to the ground and a high-pitched scream echoed through the campsite.

"Ghost cat!"

The servants scattered in all directions, fleeing as if they ran for their lives.

The injured servant crawled behind a tent.

The wind picked up again, the mournful wail sounding eerily like a man crying.

"Come back here, dammit!" William roared.

"The shots are coming from over there," Justin said.

"It's the cook," Charlotte whispered in his ear. "Can you see him? He's still got the gun."

"I see him," Sethmet murmured, wrapping his arm around Charlotte's waist and discreetly placing her behind him. A bullet would have to go through him to get to Charlotte.

The servants came swarming back into camp like frightened children.

"The ghost cat surrounds the camp," a servant said.

Another servant shuddered, rolling his eyes wildly. "The cat commands the wind. There is nowhere to run."

"Don't be silly," William yelled. "There is no cat. It's a man with a gun. Take cover."

Another shot rang out before anyone could move. William clutched his chest, and red bloomed on his white nightshirt. Blood dripped down his hand and arm and he dropped to the sand.

"William!" Charlotte raced to his side and sank to the ground to check his chest.

The cook staggered closer, dropping his gun and waving his hands wildly. His hair stuck up, giving him a crazed look. "Forgive me," he cried. "My finger did not mean to pull the trigger."

As he spoke, the wind sent a mournful wail echoing through the campsite. The camels bellowed and snorted from the other side of the outcrop. Several of the servants cried out in terror, backing away and calling to the gods to protect them. A wave of sand rose up from the ground, racing toward the cook.

"Traitor!" The word boomed through the campsite, loud and eerie, echoing for long moments afterward.

"Oh!" Charlotte cried out in terror. The servants repeated her cry of fear, several falling to their knees in frantic prayer.

Sethmet watched, the hairs on his arms and legs prickling even though he suspected the pharaoh was the source of the voice. As he watched, the sand engulfed the man. His frightened shrieks battled with the wail of the wind. Then the cook's body disintegrated, starting from his feet and rising upward until only his terrified face remained. Gradually, his face faded away, his pained screech reverberating for long moments afterward.

"What...what was that?" Justin's terror broke the horrified silence.

"Ghost cat," one of the servants moaned. "The curse."

Justin's head snapped from side to side as if he looked for a tangible source. "It won't come back?"

"I don't know," Sethmet said, but even as he said the words, the cry of the wind intensified. The sand rose up, swirling up like a funnel and racing toward Justin.

"No! No," he shrieked, backing up then turning to flee. "I had nothing to do with him. I am innocent."

The sand wave raced after him, catching him and engulfing him. His petrified screams faded while his body dissolved in front of their eyes. The sand wave dropped, dispersing on the desert, and the wind disappeared, leaving an uneasy silence behind.

"Sethmet?" Charlotte's frightened voice drew him.

"It's all right, sweetheart. How's William?"

A tear rolled down her pale cheek. Even though William had treated her badly, he was all the family she had left. "He's dead."

Chapter Nine

Charlotte was thankful for Sethmet's calming presence. He spoke to the terrified servants and gave them instructions before leading Charlotte to her tent.

"Come," he murmured, his arm propelling her forward into the tent. "You need some sleep before we return to Patria in the morning."

Panic nipped at Charlotte, and she clutched at Sethmet. "Don't go. Don't leave me."

"I will never leave you," he promised, and Charlotte took comfort, sensing the truth of his words.

She lay down on her pallet and shifted to allow Sethmet to join her. She went into his arms and snuggled against his chest. "What happened? I was there and I still don't understand."

Sethmet hesitated. Charlotte saw it clearly. "The truth, if you please."

"The pharaoh felt threatened. His tomb is nearby. Sometimes his powers are erratic, but tonight they worked. He killed to keep his tomb safe, and if he hadn't, I would have," he added in a hard voice.

Charlotte stiffened, pushing away from his chest to study his face. "I thought you said you and your family were guardians." The tone of his voice told her he spoke the truth about killing. She wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"That is true. I am the guardian, but the pharaoh sometimes acts on his own and takes vengeance." Sethmet pressed a kiss to her bare throat. "In this case I am glad. I wouldn't have wanted you to know I'd killed your stepbrother for attempting to rob the pharaoh's tomb."

"But we are safe?" Charlotte hated the uncertainty in her voice, but it wasn't every day a woman witnessed two men disintegrating before her eyes or changed into a

desert lynx. Or learned the man she loved would kill to keep the pharaoh's secrets intact. *The man she loved.* Her tense body relaxed when she acknowledged the truth to herself.

She loved him and could forgive him anything. She trusted Sethmet, and always had since the first moment she met him. He treated her far better than her stepbrother ever had.

"We are safe. I promise you." Sethmet's arms clasped her tight then he raised her chin with his fingertips and kissed her slowly. Deep, almost as though he wanted to seal his promise. Her lips moved under his, and she opened her mouth to taste him. Instead of seduction, he gentled the kiss and pulled away to look at her.

"I have no family left in England. And no money," Charlotte blurted. "William spent all my money. I have nothing."

Sethmet tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled at her, tenderness in his eyes. "You have me, Charlotte. I love you. Stay with me in Patria. Be my mate."

"You love me?" Wonder bloomed along with hope. Could it be her destiny to stay in Egypt with Sethmet?

"I love you, Charlotte. I don't want you to go back to England. I'd only have to follow you."

Charlotte found herself smiling, her decision made in a heartbeat. "I love you too. I would like to stay here with you. I feel more at home here than I ever did in London."

"Wait." Sethmet placed his fingers across her mouth. "Let me tell you a little more of the guardianship before you make your decision for there will be no going back."

"This sounds serious," Charlotte said gravely.

"It is. As guardians of the pharaoh's tomb, we receive the power to shift into feline form, but that comes with a price. If any member of our family should ever turn traitor or fail to keep the tomb safe, we lose our ability to shift."

"Everyone in your family?" Charlotte asked.

"Everyone, no matter what his or her age. No matter if they are innocent or guilty. And worse, the traitor will die and our family will suffer from a curse." Sethmet sought her gaze and held it. "We will die horribly."

Charlotte shivered, remembering the expression on Justin's face before he faded from sight. His face had showed terror and extreme agony. She never wanted to die that way. She inhaled deeply and asked the final question that had been bothering her. "I don't understand how I was able to shift like you. I am not family."

Sethmet smiled then, his teeth dazzling white even in the dark tent. Her eyesight and hearing had improved since she'd gained the ability to shift. But she still didn't understand. It appeared Sethmet did.

"You carry my child. Our child, Charlotte."

Charlotte gasped. She pulled away from Sethmet, a trembling hand creeping to spread over her abdomen. "A baby?" Wonder, excitement and uncertainty swept through her.

"Are you pleased?" Sethmet asked.

A tremulous smile sprang up on her lips spreading to pure joy. "A baby. I thought...I thought I was barren." Tears of happiness fell unchecked down her cheeks, and she wiped them away impatiently. "A baby. Oh Sethmet."

"So, you'll stay here with me despite the danger of dying because of the curse? Our children dying?"

Charlotte smiled and stroked her hand down Sethmet's cheek. "We will make sure we serve the pharaoh well. The curse will not trouble us or our children."

"Charlotte." Sethmet pressed a tender kiss to her forehead then lowered his head to move his mouth over hers, devouring her softness.

She leaned into him, her lover, her mate. A sense of rightness and wellbeing flooded her. Her smile widened and held confidence. "I love you, Sethmet. And I would be honored to join your family."

Freedom. A home and family too. Her smile turned misty.

A life with Sethmet was a dream come true. She could think of no better future than one with her desert cat.

About the Author

Shelley lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience), a year-long adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes *grin*), being walked by the dog and curling up with a good book.

Shelley welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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