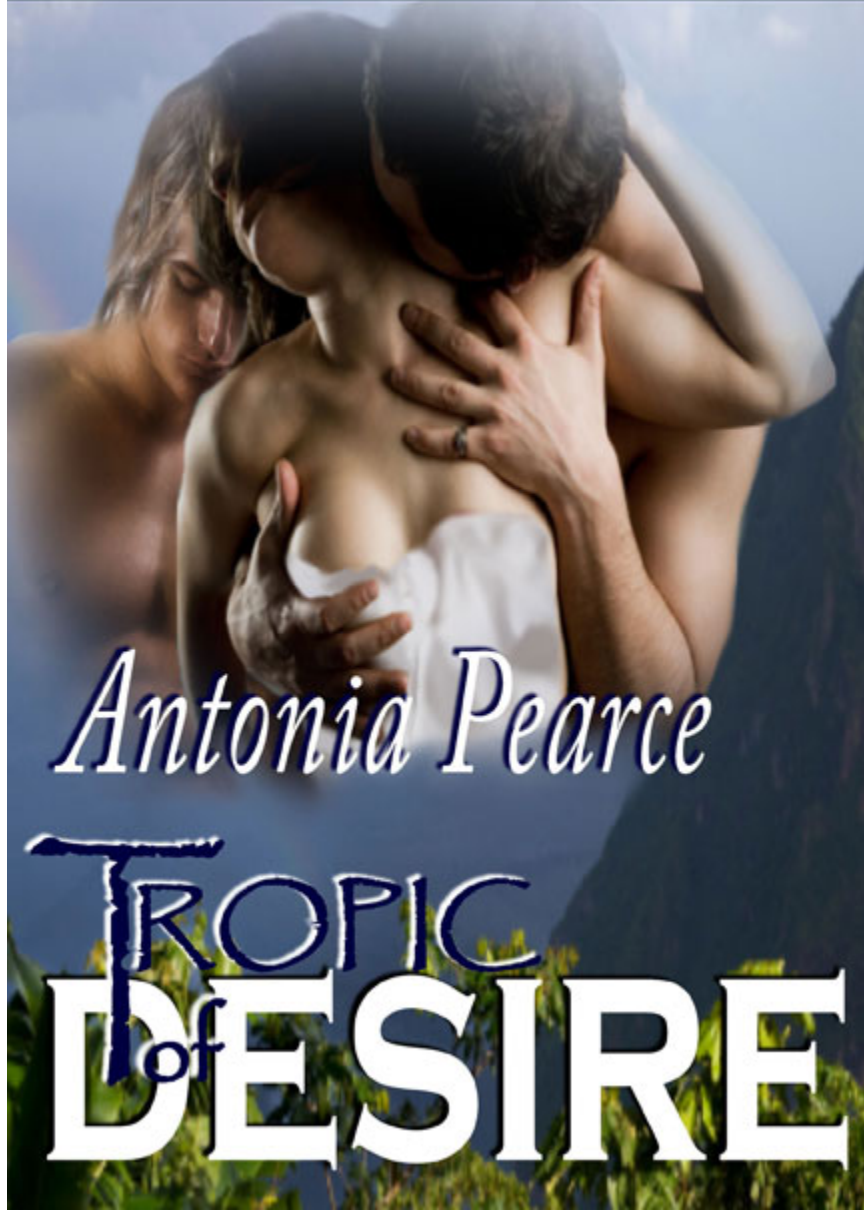


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Ménage Amour



Antonia Pearce

TROPIC
of
DESIRE

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MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

For all my writer friends who encouraged and critiqued, and for the island and people of St. Lucia, one of the most beautiful, exotic places on the planet.

TROPIC OF DESIRE

ANTONIA PEARCE

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Chapter 1

The big cat loped down the incline, lithe in the luminescent light of the full moon. She knew her fur, the color of cognac, blended well with the Saharan-shaded desert nestled between artificially irrigated landscapes. Most of the humans lay abed at this hour, even in this land of make-believe and glitz. From her feline perspective, these conditions provided the perfect opportunity for adventure. She explored her domain, enjoying the warm Santa Ana breeze, secure in her solitary trek and filled with the confidence of her kind.

Without warning, the atmosphere shifted. Alarm shuddered through her as she reached a shallow culvert. She skidded to a halt, drawing her head up and turning her nose into the wind, seeking the source of the threat.

There.

Overwhelming the faint salty tang of the sea in the distance and the noxious chemical odor of the local air, lay the pungent scent of blood—sweet and metallic.

Cautious, yet determined, the cat advanced. Her heightened sense of smell and the razor-sharp acuity of her glittering gaze led her straight to the spot where the human lay—a female, face down in a pool of her own blood. The tracks of a big cat and the scuffmarks in the dirt indicated she'd been dragged behind the clump of scrub brush and left to die after the attack. The mournful cat pawed at the human,

nudging her with her nose, seeking in vain for a response. She succeeded in rolling her over and the sight revealed would have sickened a human.

The cat embraced the tragedy of an innocent woman taken from her family and the anger that one of her own would kill and feed upon a human. A friend. For, while the woman's face, now mangled and bloody, stirred no recognition, the cat knew the familiar jogging attire. She raised her head and roared her agony.

A horrific possibility slid into her mind. Had *she* done this?

She couldn't remember. Fog shrouded even her recent past, as if she existed only in the moment.

* * * *

The "cat's" ancestral enemy watched from the top of the hill surveying the scene with malevolent satisfaction. This plan of vengeance worked with beautiful precision, just as envisioned. The real, vicious cats had been expensive to procure and ensuring the "wildcat attacks" had been complicated, but when one possessed the money, the contacts, and the will to make it happen, all possibilities existed. How delicious to see her leaving a bloody trail for the police to follow. The stress and harassment of a police investigation would be an added bonus. Of course, they had no knowledge of her true nature, the nocturnal feline transformation overtaking her, any more than she possessed. They could never assign guilt to her, but the certain tortured doubt filling her mind even now rewarded the effort the enemy expended with its own sweetness. The fear. The isolation. Above all the isolation. These comprised the goal. She must remain occupied here, and not travel to the island of her ancestors where the slim possibility of salvation existed. She must suffer the fate of her curse. As the cat turned to climb back up the hill, the enemy withdrew, careful not to alert the cat with sound or scent.

* * * *

Marc Des Marets pushed open the door to Sheridan West's Studio City photography gallery. Looking up at the sound of the alarm chime, Sheridan herself gave him a brief smile of greeting and motioned him to one of the leather chairs in the waiting area. She sat behind her desk, making notes in her planner as she spoke on the phone, and he took the time to observe her.

While not beautiful in the classic sense, she possessed a grace and a gentle manner that no doubt drew people to her like a magnet. Today, dark circles ringed her soulful brown eyes, fine lines bracketed her lush mouth, and she'd dressed in jeans, an oversized t-shirt and slides, rather than her typical business attire.

He'd been here three weeks, traveling from his home, the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, at the request of his brother, Simon, and the harpy he intended to marry, trying to get her to commit to photograph the wedding. Sheridan West, the best photographer they'd seen—he fully agreed on that score—must record the happy occasion. Nothing less than the best would do for Cecily, his brother's fiancée, and he'd never hear the end of it if he hired a lesser mortal for the position. Of course, he now realized "mortal" did not accurately describe her. As horrified as he'd been by his Simon's engagement, it brought him straight to Sheridan's door when all his years of searching failed. Fate perhaps chose to show mercy for a change, as he immediately recognized her. She, as the only descendant of her line, and he and his brother, as descendants of their family line, bore the vestiges of an original island curse. Her participation in a complex ritual represented the only hope for all three to break the bonds of that terrible curse.

He besieged her with phone calls, meetings, even flowers, in an attempt to persuade her to take the job. Admittedly, the flowers also carried a personal meaning, whether she knew it yet, or not. He'd wanted her from the moment he first saw her. From the moment he'd

realized her true identity and what she'd been to him in another lifetime. Disappointment and pain still gripped him at the lack of deeper recognition in her gaze as she met his glance again. Perhaps her memories would return once she knew the truth—as his returned once he accepted the shattering past. Her feelings for him could not have died with the generations. They must still exist somewhere within her heart.

His heart ached for her. He'd seen the paper that morning. A rogue cat killed one of her neighbors the previous night. He longed to comfort her, reassure her—he knew she not only grieved for her friend, but also worried about the manner of her death. He'd no idea how much she knew of herself and couldn't explain yet how *he* knew so much about her. He couldn't risk tipping his hand. She might run from him and the truths he represented.

Gaining her trust and ensuring she returned to the island she'd only known in another life must surmount every other desire. Even his desire for her, unless that desire provided the means to draw her back to the only place he could save her.

She finished her phone call and looked over at him.

God, he hated to see the pain and fear projected in her dark gaze.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Marc. Some final details to be worked out for another photographer's show here at my gallery next month."

"No problem at all. I'm early, anyway." He shifted in the chair and leaned toward the desk. You'd said you would think about whether you'd shoot my brother's wedding. Have you made your decision?"

"I... No. I can't. A second neighbor of mine has just been killed." As she spoke, a tremor shook her and she crossed her arms about her body, as if to still the motion.

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Thank you." She dipped her head and looked away a moment, blinking back tears.

When she'd composed herself, he cocked an eyebrow in query. "A *second* neighbor?"

"Yes. I live in the hills. It seems there are aggressive cougars lurking up there. The first attack occurred on a Tuesday, the day after you arrived. An elderly neighbor of mine, out walking just after dawn—" Her voice caught. "Such a sweet man. He only wanted to enjoy his retirement... Then, early this morning, they found my neighbor, Alice. She jogged every evening. I just can't understand it. She had two kids and a husband. She jogged along the same road so many times and made it home, for God's sake, but this time that...that monster grabbed her and dragged her off." Voice choked with emotion, she trailed off and reached in the desk for a box of tissues.

He wanted to put his arms around her with a desperation that swept over him like an emotional tidal wave. This wasn't the time. She didn't know about their previous connection, or the curse that held their family lines captive. She would though—if he could get her to the island, or maybe even sooner. The risk of triggering the monstrous effects of the curse by any sexual contact with her was moot at this point. She *must* be attracted to him too. That would explain why the shifting began after he arrived—and he had no doubt she'd begun to shift. He'd never believe she'd kill innocents, but whatever murdered those people, the confused guilt on her face each time she thought of it, spoke volumes to one familiar with the situation.

While struck by the same curse, her line suffered in a different manner than his and his brother's. Passion and love triggered animal shifting in certain females of her family, shifting they would not recall with the morning light. The female so cursed shifted more frequently until they switched permanently, if nothing broke the cycle. He must try to halt the process. Perhaps his old nanny, a powerful witch or sorts, could slow it temporarily until they could break the curse.

"Sheridan, I don't know what to say, other than I'm sorry. It would be a shock to lose any friend, but to lose two so close together

and in such a tragic way must be horrible.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe taking this job and coming to St. Lucia would be good for you. It can’t help to see the sites of your friends’ deaths every day.”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s very traumatic.” She shut her eyes and dabbed at the tears leaking out.

“Come to lunch with me. We’ll talk more about the job.”

She held her eyes closed for a time. He knew she considered his suggestion. The idea of getting away must hold some appeal. They both knew her career had gone well past the wedding photography stage, even the wedding of his brother and his bride—the Big Deal of the moment, according to television and tabloids.

“Yes.” She opened her eyes, her emotions under control, the professional in command once more.

Damn. She had grit.

“Let’s go to lunch. I think I am interested in your job offer.”

The tightness in his chest eased a bit. At least she’d consider it. They drove out to Marina del Rey in his rental. She’d refused every personal overture he’d made thus far, though he suspected not from lack of interest, so he decided to milk this opportunity—just in case it had to last him a lifetime.

They sat outside at a restaurant overlooking the harbor and enjoyed shrimp salads. Maybe, like many artists, she’d find a challenge enticing.

“I’ll be honest, Sheridan. This will be a tough assignment. My future sister-in-law is demanding, to say the least. She wants every moment of her triumph and her big show immortalized on film and she’s got very particular ideas.”

He supposed she must have caught his expression of distaste, or perhaps his words struck her as amusing. She came very close to spitting out her ice water.

“Ah, I see. A diva?”

“Yes, well, you said it, not me.” He laughed. Another word came

to his mind. “The upside is that you’d have your own suite of rooms. Our house is quite large and set on beautiful grounds right on the beach. We’ve a fabulous cook. We already discussed the fee and all expenses paid, of course.”

“Oh, yes, I have no complaints about the fee they offered. It’s not that, it’s—”

He could feel her objection building and an idea came to him to counter it. “One other thing to consider. I know that you actively promote up-and-coming photographers through your gallery. My brother and his fiancée *are* the media royalty of the moment. You can’t buy publicity like that. This would ensure interest in your gallery and any artists showcased there.”

She sat back, glimpses of the shrewd businesswoman reflected in her gaze, and she considered his words. “You must love your brother very much to go to all this trouble for his wedding.”

Though startled by her question, he had no trouble answering. “I’d do anything for my brother. He’s always been there for me and I want him to be happy.”

“I suppose if I had a brother, I’d feel the same way. Still, this massive effort on his behalf says a lot about you.”

She frowned, deep in thought, as he paid the bill. He had the vague feeling he’d inadvertently scored some points with her. Plus, he knew she hadn’t considered the potential benefit to others, in this case the fellow artists who showed in her gallery. Her altruistic nature hadn’t changed through all the incarnations.

“It’s a beautiful day. Let’s walk.” He held out his arm.

A moment’s hesitation, then she took his arm. He stroked her bare arm where it rested over his, pleased when she didn’t pull away, though he noted a pink tint to her cheeks. They strolled the docks, studying the rows of yachts moored in the harbor, enjoying the sun, the cool breeze and the sight of the beautiful blue water.

“It’s nice here, but nothing compared to St. Lucia, and I’m not just saying that because I’m from there.” He grinned, hoping he didn’t

seem arrogant. “It’s spectacular, that’s a simple fact.”

A small smile lit her face. “I don’t doubt that it is. Perhaps I *should* see it for myself.”

Mission accomplished. He’d persuaded her to take the job. Thank God. “You’ll come to the island then?”

She smiled. “Yes, I will photograph the wedding. I hope your brother appreciates your powers of persuasion.”

He laughed, absurdly pleased by her praise, as well as his success. “He may not yet, but I think that will change soon.”

His heart felt lighter than it had in weeks. “I’ve always loved the smell of the waterfront. I suppose, as a photographer, you focus on the visuals, which are stunning, but I adore the smell of the beach. Ever since childhood, you know—the salt in the air, the fishy bait in the buckets.” He eyed a particularly smelly bucket as they passed.

She laughed aloud. “I know what you mean. I—”

She pitched forward as her heel caught between the boards of the dock and would have fallen if he hadn’t caught her. He hauled her up against him and held her steady, staring down into her eyes. Her breath caught. He could feel the hammering of her heart as her breasts pressed against his chest. She had to know he wanted her. Her gaze spoke of desire, need—desperation for love and reassurance, but her shame and confusion ruled her choices. Fear also. It radiated off her, though he wasn’t sure of the source.

She pulled away.

“Thanks for catching me.” She took off her broken shoe and inspected it, refusing to look at him again. “My shoe wouldn’t have been the only casualty if you hadn’t been there.”

“I hope I’m always around to catch you when you fall.”

Her mouth fell open, and she turned to him. Eyes wide with surprise.

Could she really have missed his attraction to her, or think for some reason he wouldn’t want her? Subtlety might not work if she’d convinced herself there could be nothing between them. Perhaps he’d

persuaded her to do the wedding, but on a personal front, she'd erected a wall no ordinary man could hope to breach. He *must* win her trust. All three of their fates depended upon it: his, Simon's, and most especially hers.

They walked back to the car and he kept the pace slow, mindful of her damaged footwear, savoring the time with her. The sexual tension sparking between them made conversation difficult, especially as she seemed bent on fighting it. They barely spoke in the car on the way back to her studio. He hated the awkward silence between them and could think on only one way to make it go away.

He parked in the lot behind her building and escorted her to the back door of the closed studio. "May I see you inside?"

"I don't think—"

Gratified she'd finally looked at him again, he ducked his head, in faux sheepish realization. "I think I left my cell inside." He caught a skeptical arch to her brow, but she motioned him inside, locking the door after them.

He pounced as soon as the door closed, sliding her purse off her shoulder and pushing her with gentle insistence up against the hall wall.

"You didn't leave your cell did you?" The matter-of-fact statement lilted with enough pleased surprise to spur him on.

"No." He lifted her hand and turned her palm up, running his tongue back and forth along her life line.

She gasped, staring mesmerized as she watched without moving.

He paused long enough to gage her mood. "Do you mind? Shall I leave?"

"No-o-o..." The quiver in her voice morphed into yet another gasp as he ran his tongue up the inside of her arm. "I mean, I don't mind, but—"

He cut her off by pressing his lips to hers. He teased her mouth open with his tongue and that was his last coherent thought, as he tasted her for the first time in nearly two hundred years. The passion

of their shared past blended with the newness of this life, and the kiss caught them both up in its burning intensity. She surprised him with her aggressive response. She clutched at his shoulders and held him to her. Now she'd surrendered to her desire, he couldn't tell who seduced whom, as her tongue tangled with his. He pulled away from her mouth, to nip gently at her neck and slide his tongue along her pulse point. Her wild moans of approval drove him on.

“Marc...”

“Hmm...” To distract her from turning analytical about the situation, he slid his hand up under her loose t-shirt and unclasped her bra before kissing her again. Her breath came in ragged gasps and rather than push him away, she clasped him around the neck, her fingers twining in his hair. He caressed her back with lazy circles of his hand while she wiggled in impatience, attempting to twist herself to the side. Guessing what she wanted, he moved his palms forward to cup her breasts, squeezing lightly as she groaned her approval and pushed herself more fully into his hands. He rewarded her by flicking her distended nipples with his thumbs.

“Ah...”

“You like that?”

“Yes.” She just managed to utter the strangled word before he withdrew his hands.

He shushed her protest with his mouth, undid her jeans with a practiced hand, and slid her jeans and underwear down her thighs. He continued to kiss her as he kneed her legs apart as far as they would go with their cloth binding. His cock pulsed, swelling and pressing with painful force against the zipper of his own jeans. The temptation to free himself and fuck her up against the wall right then made him dizzy. He didn't dare risk scaring her off, or rushing something so important—making love to her would wait for another day, so he chose to tease a bit.

He slid his middle finger across the warm, wet lips of her pussy, teasing with light strokes back and forth. She moaned into his mouth

as she sucked on his tongue and tried to ride his finger. The sounds of their rapid breathing filled the narrow hallway at the back of the closed gallery as the scent of her arousal surrounded him, making him lightheaded. He broke the kiss, and pulled up her shirt with his free hand. Brushing her bra aside, he latched onto her exposed nipple—seeming to know where to find it without fumbling, even in the dim light. He licked and sucked upon her breast, savoring the sweet, salty flavor of her skin, and flicked his tongue over the firm peak. He laughed at her surprised gasp and leaned in for a playful bite, as she clutched his head to her breast.

“You like that, don’t you, sweet?”

“Yes.” Her voice, breathless and shivery, heightened the sensual mood.

He struggled to rein himself in as he slid a hand down the silky skin of her belly once more to explore her wetness. “You’re creaming for me, baby. Do you know how much that excites me?” He slid a finger inside her, and she moaned, tipping her head back against the wall and thrusting her hips toward him.

“Marc...” Her voice trailed off with a groan.

“Yes.” This time he recognized the plea for more. He kissed her again, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth—less gentle now as the arousal between them grew. He slid a second finger inside her and moved them about, learning her contours from the inside out. The faint tremors of her body increased as he gathered her moisture with his thumb and used it to massage her clit with gentle circles as he kept up his internal stroking. Her tremors grew stronger until she shook all over, her muscles strained to hold her pussy toward him like an offering, and she pressed herself down upon his invading fingers. He changed the motion of his thumb, sliding it upward under the hood of her engorged clit with just a slight increase in pressure.

She cried out against his mouth, pushing her pelvis hard against his hand as the spasms of her orgasm shook her. He held her in place as the lassitude of her release washed over her, bending to kiss her

neck and biting the sensitive triangle above her shoulder with more force than he intended. In remorse, he licked the spot to soothe it and she gasped, shivering at the thrill.

Without a word, she slid down his body, caressing him as she went. Confused at first, he tried to hold her up until she reached his zipper and carefully freed his cock. “Sheridan, what...”

On her knees before him now, she clasped the base of his shaft and took him into her mouth before he knew what was happening. Already on the edge of coming, the strong wet suction on his aching dick and her firm grasp soon pushed him to the brink. His body shuddered with uncontrollable need, and he pushed himself deeper into her mouth, seeking. She flicked her little tongue up against the underside of his cock, teasing, pleasing, and he found more intense sensation than he could imagine. He came in her mouth, shouting, the pleasure shooting up his spine and exploding in his brain with almost unbearable impact. He struggled to focus as she swallowed his come, moaning her own satisfaction.

Too stunned to move for a moment, and breathing like a racehorse, he held her up against the wall. When he’d recovered enough to move, he gently pulled her down to the hard floor, rolling her atop him, her jeans still pulled down to her knees.

“It’s a good thing you’d already agreed to come to St. Lucia, otherwise I’m afraid I’d have had to insist after this.”

“Marc...”

“Sheridan, don’t think I’ll let you pull away from me now.”

“But...” She tried to push herself up off him to make her point.

“Sheridan, you’ve got to understand one thing about me.” That diverted her. Intrigued, she paused in her struggles.

“What’s that?”

He rolled her over, protecting her head from the hard floor with his hand. “I *always* want the last word.”

Swiftly, he tongued his way down from her breasts, to her belly, to her pussy. He lapped at her cream, smiling as she grabbed his hair,

holding him in place, even as she protested and tried to move. His body held her legs as wide as the jeans would permit and she couldn't escape. "Marc, no. I can't."

"You can." He pushed a finger up into her, sliding in and out in time to her moans of pleasure.

"No. It's too soon. It won't work."

He took her clit between his teeth and nibbled.

"Ah... Oh, my god!" Her second orgasm roared through her, her legs stiffening and hips rising up off the ground.

When the last of her spasms faded, he lifted his mouth away from her and licked her luscious taste from his lips. "You see, love? I believe you gave me the last word." He smiled to himself, anticipating her arrival on their island. If nothing else, they'd share what joy they could. But now, more than ever, he was determined to break the curse. He'd do whatever he must to enlist the reluctant Simon to help. They *had* to save Sheridan.

* * * *

Two days later, after the constant torture of passing the tragic places her friends died, and staring at the bloodstains she hadn't quite been able to get out of her carpet, she'd packed her bags with great relief and headed to the airport to fly to St. Lucia.

This cream-puff job couldn't have dropped in her lap at a better time. Terrified she might pose a threat to a man she'd begun to care for, not to mention other assorted wedding guests and St. Lucia residents, she'd almost backed out. The reality of returning to her lonely house in the very locale where her friends had died and the knowledge Marc had flown home made her glad she'd decided to go. That and the fact that Animal Control and the local PD had set up a stake-out for the killer cats practically in her back yard.

She missed Marc with an intensity that stunned her. She longed

for the secure warmth of his presence and her body cried out for him in an overwhelming, primal way. She tried to ignore it, but she'd probably been in love with him since the first moment she saw him. Something about him stirred her in a way no guy ever had, and her libido seemed to take on a life of its own every time she thought of him.

The jarring bump of the water taxi as it zoomed over the choppy waves of the dark Caribbean strained Sheridan's already fatigued body. She wrinkled her nose at the noxious whiff of gasoline from the boat and willed away a resultant twinge of nausea. Or, perhaps the queasiness resulted from the memory of awakening naked in her bed, covered in dirt and blood with no memory of how she'd gotten there—on more than one occasion. The trauma of the gruesome mauling deaths of two of her neighbors and the bloody mountain lion prints leading straight to her bed afterward had been a bit awkward and sickening, too. The police had found the trail to her home and noted it. Thank God it hadn't occurred to them to look inside her house. At any rate, this had been an opportune time to leave her home in the Hollywood hills.

As the intense heat and sun of a mid-September afternoon bore down on her, she appreciated her sunglasses and the breeze the boat's rapid clip generated. She let go of her hold on the seat edges, reached around to support her aching back and almost bounced off the sticky vinyl seat of the outboard motorboat as it slowed with an abrupt lurch.

They must be approaching her destination, Belle Isle, the Des Marets' home, an historic former plantation on the north end of the Windward island of St. Lucia. A verdant, sloping hillside projecting out into the sea like a fearsome sentinel screened the property until they slowly putted around into the small, private cove.

She gasped in awe and the taxi operator chuckled.

"It is beautiful, is it not?" The lyrical, British, Received Pronunciation that flavored the speech of most of the St. Lucians she'd spoken with still surprised her, proof of the island's strong

British, as well as French heritage.

“Oh, it’s breathtaking.” She took in the view of the estate from the tourmaline water of the shallow cove to the natural gray volcanic sand beach that sloped upward to a beautifully landscaped and manicured hillside worthy of any botanical garden. A sprawling cream stucco plantation-style home capped the lush bluff overlooking the water. Just visible beyond, the ruins of a sugar mill and what appeared to have been the original plantation house called forth a sense of a different era. She shivered at the inexplicable melancholy the sight evoked. Several smaller buildings dotted the low hills on the far side of the cove. A stone path wended its way up from the beach, where a shaded open-sided cabana and an array of lounge chairs dotted the sand. Coconut palms and tropical plants bordered the compound.

“This property is very historical.” He cut the engine and the boat coasted as he guided it up to the small dock. “The Des Marets family, along with the Lingeaux family, who owned the plantation on the land we just passed, settled this part of the island. Another old family, the de Taschers, who owned the land just past Belle Isle, holds a special place in the heart of St. Lucians. No matter what the history books say, we St. Lucians know that Mademoiselle Josephine Tascher de la Pagerie, born there in 1763 and who lived there for much of her childhood before the family moved to Martinique, belongs to us.”

Sheridan frowned in puzzlement, aware that the man expected her to know what he meant. The name sounded familiar, yet she couldn’t quite place it.

“You may know her as the Empress Josephine of France.”

“Oh, of course. That’s fascinating. I had always heard her birthplace given as Martinique.”

The taxi operator shook his head emphatically. “St. Lucia, miss.” He nodded his head to the land beyond the Des Marets estate. “Paix-Bouche. The ruins are still there. They say on a quiet, moonlit night you can still hear the echoes of the little girl’s laughter. Along with those of the Des Marets and Lingeaux children she played with. Her

spirit returned here to the place she had been happy to seek solace from her broken woman's heart."

She didn't know what to say in response to that. She had a fascination for Napoleon and Josephine, for that whole era, in fact. While some considered Napoleon to be a military genius and some a monster, his love affair with Josephine remained one of the great romantic legends of all time. She shivered with the eerie sensation his words called forth in the midst of this sunny paradise. Still, no mountain lions prowled here, and that whole bizarre blackout thing retreated to its proper place, the stuff of her own crazy imagination, now that she'd distanced herself from home. Such darkness couldn't exist in this beautiful place.

The operator helped her climb out onto the dock and began handing up her baggage.

"Sheridan!"

She turned toward the beach at the sound of her name. A male figure emerged from the shaded cabana and approached the dock, ambling slowly through the fluffy sand. Marc.

She froze in the shock of instant awareness. She'd found him attractive from the moment she'd seen him at her studio in LA—what woman wouldn't? But not intimidating in any sexual way. His business suits, glasses, carefully groomed hair and simply being in his business "zone" had made him seem aloof. Proper. Non-threatening. That hadn't stopped her fantasies of him, her growing attachment and longing for more of what they'd shared in her studio, but the terror that began after they met altered her focus.

The tall, tan hottie that drew near resembled anything *but* the non-threatening, semi-nerdy gentleman she remembered, now that she saw him for the first time in his natural element. With a confident, almost dangerous air about him, his longish gilded bronze hair ruffled about his face in a rare, faint waterfront breeze. His unbuttoned, faded island print shirt revealed a hairless, exquisitely carved torso and abdomen. Worn jeans encased his long, muscular legs, giving only a

hint of the leashed masculine power their owner possessed. She'd felt that body pressed against hers, but this was her first opportunity to see him in all his glory. Her knees shook just a bit.

As he stepped up on the dock, she caught herself staring at his bare feet, coated in gray sand. She'd never thought about feet, one way or the other. Never thought them especially attractive, but she did now.

She remembered her manners just in time and clasped the large hand he extended. His grip sure and firm, he looked her in the eye and he saw her. The real her. She could feel a warm glow fill her as though he somehow learned her from the inside out and liked what he found. Sweat trickled down between her breasts and her bra grew constricting. Moisture pooled between her thighs. A blush heated her face.

Ridiculous. She didn't really know this man, despite their interactions in LA, and he wasn't likely to be interested in a drab nobody like her for more than a one-time thing, though she could swear she'd seen a flicker of genuine interest on more than one occasion. Brown hair and eyes, average looks, average size, average body, average personality. Such a man wouldn't take notice of her in that way outside of her imagination. It was just as well. She had her little problem to hide, anyway.

Hmm. Okay, so she wasn't "average," she was quite possibly insane, or some kind of bizarre murderous monster. That was even worse. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and moistened her palms as her heart rate increased. She'd fallen for the guy, practically screwed him in LA, and now it was like meeting someone new. Almost.

She'd return to thinking about him in a purely fantasy role. Reality scared her far too much. She zoomed in on the sexy feet again. She had to photograph this man. Head to foot. She could look and fantasize. No more than that.

"I'm glad you made it here safely, Sheridan." He smiled, warmth

radiating from his eyes and in the timbre of his voice. “I’d kiss you hello, but I’d prefer to save that for later in private.”

Sheridan struggled not to melt in a puddle before him. God, she’d missed him. She stared back down at his feet, a pleasant task and far less scary than looking him in the eye. She could already tell those eyes saw far too much. He knew she liked him, though maybe not *how* much, and he didn’t seem offended, but she’d prefer her privacy. She didn’t want him to know her fears, insecurities, and most especially not the fact that she might be some kind of freak. Unfortunately, he knew at least a bit about those first two items.

“I know it’s been a long trip from LA. We’re off the beaten track.” His comment, uttered in that smooth baritone with the gorgeous enunciation, required a response.

She dragged her gaze back up to his face. Slowly. Attempting nonchalance, she looked back at him and focused on his square chin with a hint of a cleft. She wondered what it would be like to lick that stubbly cleft.

She forced herself to meet his beautiful, intimidating sherry colored gaze. It should be illegal for a man to have eyelashes like that. He almost looked like he wore eyeliner, for heaven’s sake. “Yes, it’s been a long trip, but I’m glad I came. It’s gorgeous here. I’ve never seen any place quite like it.”

Her breath caught at the knowing she saw in the depths of his eyes, the slight quirk of his eyebrow, the satisfied curve of his sensuous, full lips. He knew. He knew the exact effect he had on her and it pleased him. She squirmed in embarrassment as the moment dragged on.

He laughed and the spell broke. He accepted her compliment, pride evident in the ringing tones of his voice. “Yes, St. Lucia is a magical place.” With a sweeping gesture, he looked toward his home before turning back to her. “Since you have traveled the globe to take your wonderful photos, I consider that an even greater compliment. I’m sure you will be happy here.”

Before she could consider that comment, which had an odd air of permanency to it, he smiled, revealing strong, white teeth and an intriguing dimple in his left cheek. How had she failed to notice that? He paid the taxi fare and began to gather up her luggage. "I'm afraid it's a bit of a hike up to the house."

She admired his exceptional ass as he led the way down the dock. "Oh, I don't mind at all."

She planned to enjoy the sights while staying here in paradise.

Ever the gentleman, he allowed her to take the lead as they reached the beach. Tingles sparked over her body, knowing he watched her all the way up the hillside.

A wrap-around porch surrounded the main floor of the home. Banana leaf ceiling fans swirled in lazy arcs and cushioned wicker furniture sprawled in cozy groupings. They mounted the stone steps up to the porch and she paused to turn and admire the spectacular view, inhaling the rich perfume of the flowers blooming in a riotous explosion of color and the salty tang of the ocean-kissed air.

"It's breathtaking."

"Yes. We never tire of it. Never tire of St. Lucia. Each time I come home, I appreciate it all over again. The porch has been a gathering place for my family for over 200 years. It is particularly popular this time of year, as it's the best place to escape the heat during the doldrums."

"Doldrums?"

He smiled. "A nautical term. The technical explanation is above my head, but essentially, our trade winds die down this time of year—the hottest, naturally, and it gets very still and very sticky. I've been trying to persuade my brother to install central air, but he's resistant. Tradition and all that, not to mention the historical nature of the house."

She studied the porch and the home. "Not the original porch or even the original building. It's clearly not over two-hundred years old, but parts look to be over a hundred."

“Ah, good eye. Yes. I couldn’t tell you the exact vintages, that’s my brother’s area of expertise, but you are very close. You’ll be relieved to hear that thanks to my grandfather, we do have running water and modern plumbing.” He grinned, his mischievous, inner little boy showing through.

She laughed. This appealing, playful side, one she hadn’t seen before, could unravel her willpower. “You heard the wheels turning in my head?”

“Pretty much. What is the expression I’ve heard on your American television? ‘It’s a girl thing.’”

She smiled back at him, forcing herself to look away from him when the pause became awkward.

Okay, girl. Get in. Take your pics and get the hell out of Dodge.

Scratch that. She’d just gotten out of Dodge. Maybe she’d better stay here for a while.

“Let me show you to your room. You can freshen up and then I’ll take you out to the pool to meet Simon and Cecily.”

“Sounds wonderful.” She’d really like to stretch out for a nap, but duty called. The bride insisted upon recording not only the actual wedding and official functions on film, but everything leading up to it as well. Thus, her mandatory presence in the family compound rather than a hotel. Not that she could complain, considering her stunning surroundings. The knowledge that Marc would be staying in the same house lingered in her hopeful brain as well. She must put those wayward thoughts out of her head. Why couldn’t she stop them from invading every weak moment?

Inside, they walked past a round table with an enormous arrangement of colorful tropical flowers and climbed the left branch of a graceful, curving twin staircase to the second floor. She inhaled the sweet, spicy aroma in appreciation. Her problems in LA already seemed distant and unimportant. She could get used to this.

They made their way down a long hallway lined on the left by an open, railed gallery overlooking the lower floor. Lovely oriental rugs

placed at regular intervals along the way muted their footsteps. Marc stopped before the last door on the right side of the hall, directly opposite the end of the gallery. Two other rooms opened off the end of the hall. Marc set down her largest suitcase to swing the door wide.

Sheridan gasped. She couldn't restrain herself. The huge, stunning room looked like something out of a movie. Light wood furnishings, embellished with elaborate carvings of pineapples and palm trees, obvious antiques even to her untrained eye, filled the room. A huge tester bed draped in coral silk brocade dominated the space, flanked by matching bedside tables. An escritoire with a dainty chair before it and an enormous wardrobe lined the opposite wall. Two sets of glass-paned French doors opened onto the upstairs common balcony. As Marc set down her luggage, she walked past the bed and the matching brocade chaise that sat next to it and opened the door to step out onto the balcony. The turquoise cove, flanked by tall palms and the deep teal Caribbean that stretched out beyond teased her photographer's senses. She ached to capture this island on film.

She'd reached a point in her career where she would never have agreed to do a wedding if she hadn't needed to get away. Of course, the huge paycheck, the tropical "vacation" and the fact that this was the wedding of the year, possibly the decade, hadn't hurt. The bride and groom represented the equivalent of a modern royal wedding. A handsome billionaire hotelier and a stunning British socialite with more magazine covers between them than any movie star, uniting to form the ultimate power couple. The setting couldn't be more romantic, and media the world over must be dancing in glee at paparazzi-fueled history in the making. Perhaps this place, and the excitement and challenge of this job, would help her to recover from the tragedy of the preceding weeks. She prayed it might also see an end to her spells, whatever their nature.

The possibility of dragging Marc into some sort of psychodrama or dangerous situation worried her terribly. The blue surf washed up on the beach in a calming, rhythmic melody, easing her nerves as the

salty air fluttered in through the balcony doors. Such a beautiful place must have healing powers.

“I’m glad you enjoy the view.”

The quiet voice from very close behind startled her. She flushed and turned to face him. “I’m sorry. It’s just so…”

He smiled. “It has that effect on everyone. Even I still feel it and this is my home.” He pulled her into his arms and bent his head, giving her a deep, thorough kiss. He ground his erection against her with a suggestive rhythm. Here she’d worried about a sort of awkward “morning afterish” reunion, and he’d just picked up where they left off—more or less. Just when she thought she’d pass out, he lifted his head, allowing her to breathe and to think again. “Welcome to St. Lucia.”

“Uh, that was quite a greeting.” She ignored the ringing in her ears and the tingling in her pussy. She wasn’t here for sex with her boss, even if she wanted it.

He flashed his perfect teeth. “I didn’t want to give you a chance to put that wall back up, or to forget how much we both enjoyed that time in your studio. I don’t intend to let you get away.”

He walked to the door, turning back to her as he reached the open threshold. He indicated an electronic box on the wall next to the door. “This is our household intercom. If you need anything, just press the button here to ring for Anna, our housekeeper. I’ll meet you down in the foyer in ten minutes. You are welcome to swim. We spend a great deal of time by the pool or on the beach. You did bring a bathing suit?”

“Oh. Uh, yes, I did, but I prefer to meet my clients for the first time dressed a bit more professionally.” *And a bit less half-naked.* Great, the bathing suit hurdle loomed. She thought of her paycheck and pasted a smile on her face. “I’ll see you in ten.”

He grinned. “Righto.”

Devil. He knew what she had on her mind again. She must be as transparent as glass. He saluted briefly and walked out.

She sprinted on tiptoes to the doorway to see where he went and reached the hall just in time to see the door across and down a bit from hers close gently. Shit! How could she sleep knowing *he* stayed in the room across the way? How could she resist sneaking into his room? That would require every ounce of willpower she could beg, borrow, or steal, and if he came to her? Forget it. She eyed the door at the end of the hall and wondered who slept in that room.

She shut the door and rummaged through her tote bag for her hairbrush and make-up. Wouldn't hurt to spruce herself up just a bit.

With her customary efficiency, it took her only ten minutes to change into a sundress and sandals and restore herself to her usual neat, if somewhat boring, style. She sighed. At times, a woman really, really wished she looked like a supermodel. She closed the door to her room behind her and began the long trek to the staircase.

Marc awaited her in the foyer, just as he'd promised. His eyes lit with obvious masculine appreciation as he looked up and saw her. The unmistakable source of the heat between them couldn't be anything other than sexual tension. She couldn't imagine what a god like that found to appreciate in her humble self, but the knowledge that he thought her attractive made her feel sexier than she ever had in her life.

He held out his arm with old-fashioned courtesy, placing his other hand atop hers as soon as she linked arms with him. His hand felt warm, dry and just a bit roughened. No metro-sexual girly man, despite his polished manners and cultured accent, Marc epitomized six foot two of pure alpha male. She longed to have those confident hands on her body again. How could the touch of a man's hand upon her own, a man she barely knew, and she refused to remember the studio interlude, send such erotic tingles all the way down to her toes?

They reached the back terrace, saving her from further speculation. Descending the steps, they walked out to the pool where several people lounged in swim attire. She'd no difficulty picking out Simon Des Marets. Tall and athletic-looking like his brother, his

features so similar they might be twins, though with much darker hair, he exuded the same aura of sex and intrigue. He looked over as they approached. Though mirrored designer sunglasses hid his eyes, the tightness of his mouth betrayed his displeasure. The resemblance did not extend to a good-natured disposition.

A fair blonde with a voluptuous figure displayed to perfection in a royal blue bikini lay on the chaise next to his. She leapt to her feet at their approach and squealed in girlish delight, her enormous white shades giving her a bug-eyed appearance. With a body and face like that though, it didn't diminish her attraction for the opposite sex. Her spectacular engagement and the adoring, puppy dog stares of the two male guests stood testament to that fact.

Ignoring Sheridan, she headed straight for Marc, stepping into his personal space. "Marc, I'm so happy you're back. We've been having the most dreadful, dull day." She pouted in pretty entreaty for the benefit of her spellbound audience.

"I'm sorry to hear it, Cecily," Marc replied, his tone even. His polite response sounded forced to Sheridan's ears. He took a subtle step backward, drawing her with him. "Surely the presence of all your closest friends and of course, your loving fiancé helps to alleviate the boredom."

Marc's acerbic comment put Cecily on the spot and forced her to agree. "Ah, well, yes. Of course. I adore my friends. And dear Simon, too."

She might have been describing a dimwitted elderly uncle. Pathetic, considering Cecily appeared no more than ten years younger than the media pronounced thirty-nine year old Simon. A very hot thirty-nine in his bathing suit. Handsome too, like his brother, though grimness radiated from him like sparks from a welding torch. She could feel that hidden gaze upon her. Forceful. Intense. Perhaps even disapproving, though she couldn't imagine why.

"Cecily, why don't you give Marc a chance to introduce our guest?" His voice, pitched a few octaves deeper than his brother's,

reverberated through her bones. She suppressed a little shiver. He scared her. Why, she had no idea, but he did. He fascinated her, too. She found herself curious about the nature of his relationship with his intended. Their body language screamed distance.

Marc led her forward toward the group. “Everyone, this is Sheridan West. She’s the award-winning photographer from Los Angeles we persuaded to photograph the wedding festivities.”

Simon stood and walked toward her, hand extended. He offered a brief handshake, firm and all business. “Thank you for coming, Ms. West. I’m Simon Des Marets and this is my fiancée, Cecily Towne.” Simon nodded briefly toward the lady in question, but his tone bore all the warmth of the iceberg that had sent the Titanic to the briny deep.

Cecily’s pretty, pink-glossed mouth gaped in surprise. She pulled off her sunglasses, revealing fine, light blue eyes. She studied Sheridan with a rather hard-edged glare. “You are Ms. West? I had no idea. You are not what I expected.”

Sheridan had “no idea” what Cecily had expected, but she knew an insult when she heard one. She couldn’t resist. “Really, Ms. Towne? You are exactly what I expected.” Shit. There went the job in paradise. Oh, well.

Marc made a suspicious choking noise.

The others froze in a tableau of shock. Clearly, while Miss Towne dished out the disrespect on a regular basis, her entourage hadn’t witnessed many a return salvo. Cecily flushed an unbecoming purple, but held her peace. Sheridan could almost see the wheels turning in that calculating brain. It would be next to impossible to secure a replacement photographer of Sheridan’s caliber on such short notice.

The older of the two handsome admirers of Cecily’s, the fellow couldn’t be more than thirty, cleared his throat with obvious chagrin. He rose from his chaise and approached, extending his hand and stepping into the uncomfortable breach. “Miss West, I’m Robert Holloway, a family friend. I’m so pleased to meet you. I’m familiar

with your work. You're very talented."

"Thank you, Mr. Holloway. That's very kind of you to say." The subtle reminder to Cecily that she could not afford to fire her no doubt served double duty as an apology to her. He might be a Des Marets family friend, but she detected a definite affinity for Cecily. The adoring glances toward her when he thought no one noticed gave him away, not to mention covering her butt when she screwed up.

"Not at all. Please call me Robert."

He motioned toward an angular brunette with a dark tan in a garish black and white striped bikini. "This is Cecily's best friend, Lady Selena Ludgate. Lady Selena, may I present Miss Sheridan West?"

Lady Selena pursed her already pinched-looking mouth and lowered her shades a fraction to study Sheridan over the top. "How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you." She always loved answering that rhetorical question. The woman couldn't have cared less to hear the answer. "Pleased to meet you, Lady Selena."

Lady Selena acknowledged the introduction with a sniff and pushed her shades back into place. She considered Sheridan beneath her notice and didn't bother to hide it.

Robert indicated the pouting young man still lounging with indolent rebellion. "This is our good friend Rupert Damien. You may recognize him. He's the lead singer for the band, Zero."

"Oh, of course. It's a pleasure to meet you, Rupert." She had never heard of Zero, but she didn't intend to follow their rude example. Much.

Rupert acknowledged the introduction with a glare, combing back a sweep of streaky blond hair with the be-ringed fingers of his right hand, before turning away to continue reading his magazine.

A charming bunch. All together, with the exception of Robert and the luscious Marc, they had the collective social skills of a wounded rhino. Okay, so this wouldn't be fun, but it beat the mess she'd left in

LA.

“Sheridan, I’m sure you’re tired after the trip. Why don’t you take the afternoon to yourself? You can rest or explore the island a bit.”

“Thank you, Marc. That sounds wonderful.”

“You are here to take photos, Miss West. I’d like a few shots of my friends and I around the pool first.” Cecily’s icy voice conveyed her determination to remain in control. The Queen issued her edicts. All others must serve her. She’d determined that the entire world should see a pictorial record of every moment of her engagement and wedding. Sentimental Sheridan would like to believe love motivated this desire, but cynical real-world Sheridan suspected ego. She supposed it wasn’t every day a girl landed an elusive billionaire hotelier. Even a wealthy, high society gal must be proud of the achievement.

Sheridan suppressed a snort. “I’d be happy to do that, Miss Towne.”

At a significant look from Robert, Cecily grudgingly said, “Oh, I suppose you should call me Cecily.”

“Of course, Cecily. It will only take a moment for me to get my camera.” She smiled with sweet insincerity, before turning to head back into the house.

Marc followed close behind. “I’ll walk you back to your room.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Sheridan protested as he drew even with her.

Marc leaned down, his warm breath just brushing her ear as he whispered into it. “Please don’t leave me alone with these people another moment. I can’t stand it.”

Sheridan shivered at his nearness, but couldn’t help a stifled laugh. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

She’d meant the comment to be cute and flip. His serious response surprised her.

“Yes. I know you will when the time comes.”

She pondered that puzzling statement the rest of the way to her

room, where he politely waited in the hall for her to retrieve her camera equipment.

The impromptu “candid” photo shoot took nearly an hour, with Cecily and Lady Selena, to a lesser degree, staging shots with frightening expertise, yet holding the process up with endless complaints. By the time Cecily and her minion pronounced themselves satisfied, her watch read after three.

Sheridan packed up her equipment, preparing to leave. Her need for some down time grew exponentially with each moment that passed.

“Miss West.”

She turned, startled at the imperious tone of Simon Des Marets. He’d said so little in the past hour, she’d forgotten the way he could wield that voice like a battle sword.

“Yes, Mr. Des Marets?”

“Drinks are served promptly at seven in the library. Dinner is at eight and we do dress for dinner.”

Panic seized her. She’d brought wardrobe enough to blend in, as any photographer must at this sort of thing, but... “Black tie?”

For the first time, he appeared amused. “No. Dress casual will do.”

“Thank you for telling me.” She smiled and nodded at Marc and made her escape. Almost.

“Miss West.” Crap. What now?

She stopped and half turned, certain her impatience showed through.

“Call me Simon.”

Summoning a smile, she nodded the affirmative. “Please call me Sheridan.”

She didn’t wait to hear his response, she just left. She needed a bed or a drink and a beach. Or maybe all three, in some sort of order. She just wasn’t sure which yet, but she imagined she could work that out by the time she got to her room.

Chapter 2

Thirty minutes later, clad in a conservative pink bikini, Sheridan spread her towel on a beach chaise and stretched out with a sigh as she enjoyed the gentle crash of the surf on the sheltered beach. Too keyed up to nap and in fear of sleeping through the “seven sharp” drink time, she’d opted for the beach, though for now she’d have to make do with bottled water rather than the tropical cocktail she’d dreamt of. In moments, the hypnotic sound of the waves and the warm afternoon sun had her on the verge of sleep. Damn jet lag. She shook her head to clear it and stood. A stroll on the beach would help.

Eyeing the far side of the cove, she decided to explore in that direction. Paix-Bouche lay beyond the point somewhere. She had no idea how far away, or where the boundary of Des Marets lands separated the two properties. Curiosity pulled at her and she went.

Meandering along the coast, at times stepping into the crystalline water to make her way around vegetation encroaching upon the surf, she wondered if she’d made a mistake. Nature ruled so undisturbed here. Man might never have set foot on this part of the island. Swatting at persistent insects out enjoying the sweltering stillness of the late afternoon and a fresh victim, she stopped long enough to wipe the sweat from her brow. She’d give it five more minutes. If she failed to come across anything interesting, she’d head back to the Des Marets beach and rough it.

She giggled aloud at the thought. Nothing rough about that place, except for its inhabitants. She pushed aside a clump of some unknown tropical greenery and stepped onto a gray sand beach. The ruins of a small, stone chimney rose above the surrounding emerald screen of

flora. An outbuilding, perhaps? Plantations had been like small, self-sufficient cities with numerous buildings besides the main house for housing, food preparation, stables, etc. This one seemed a bit far away from the main house, though.

She felt like an explorer discovering an uncharted land. Okay, a beach that hadn't been used in a while, but still the trek offered an enjoyable adventure. She stretched and reveled in the faint breeze that seemed to have carried her bug friends away. The salty smell of the ocean combined with the earthy scent of the nearby rain forest. She inhaled with pleasure. She could close her eyes and know she stood on a beach just by that unique, pleasant odor. Now, she knew what Marc had been talking about that day at the Marina. She loved it. Loved this island and this beach. She'd needed this gig, and she suspected it would help solve her problems.

Complete and absolute privacy and seclusion. What better way to recharge?

A glance at her waterproof watch told her she wouldn't have time to look around or enjoy her new private retreat today, but she planned to return the first chance she got.

* * * *

By the time she'd dressed and reached the paneled library where the family gathered for cocktails before dinner, Lady Selena had already cornered Marc and appeared to be assaulting him with a nonstop monologue of grave importance she feared he might not be able to hear—judging by the way she inched closer to him. Either that, or she hovered on the verge of biting him. Marc wore a hunted look, but stood firm, giving her a strained smile.

Cecily—a vision in a strapless red chiffon cocktail dress—sat ensconced on the leather sofa between Rupert and Robert, groupie bookends, each vying for the Golden One's attention. How amazing to see the arrogant, surly Rupert from the pool smiling like a choirboy

and putting himself out to be charming. The three ignored her completely, assuming they even noticed her arrival. She moved farther into the room, wondering where the fearsome Simon lurked.

As she came to a stop near a large antique desk in the corner, the palpable holes bored into her back provided the clue she needed. Simon stood directly behind her. The man had to think her a colossal gold-digger to generate such patent dislike. He surely couldn't know what she feared she might be. On the relative scale of badness, surely a murderess ranked a bit higher than a gold-digger.

She turned to face the dragon. The searing cobalt of his gaze might have knocked her over had she not braced her hand on the desk.

Why did those angry eyes have to be so blue?

He stood, elegant in silk khaki trousers and cream silk camp shirt, right next to the drinks cart. An ebony haired, blue-eyed god of a man who looked at her as though he wished her in Hades. Oh, well. She couldn't please everybody.

"Good evening, Simon." She smiled with bright insouciance.

"Good evening, Sheridan." He returned her smile with a polite facsimile of same.

"May I offer you a drink?" He gestured toward the fully stocked cart. "Would you prefer wine, a mixed drink, or beer?"

She'd prefer a root canal to this evening. She caught a flicker of a genuine curve to those sensuous lips of his. Could he read minds like his brother? Perhaps a tiny bit of humor did exist within the man. Somewhere. "I'll try one of those." She indicated bottles of the local beer in a bucket of ice. She couldn't wait to see the bluebloods' reaction to her crass choice of cocktail.

He opened the bottle and poured it into a tall glass. "Excellent selection. It's a wonderful brew." He handed it to her, taking care not to touch her. Or so it seemed to her. Such a handsome man, too bad about the stick up his butt.

He opened another bottle and poured himself a beer. He lifted his glass in her general direction, no longer meeting her gaze. "Cheers."

She returned the gesture. “Cheers.”

“Thank you for taking this job, Sheridan. I’ve seen your work. You’re a very gifted photographer.”

The sincerity ringing in his voice took her aback. She didn’t know what to make of this surprising man. “You’re welcome. It’s an exciting change for me and your home and St. Lucia are the most beautiful places I’ve seen.”

“Considering the sights you’ve photographed, that’s saying quite a lot.”

She took a sip of the delicious beer. Odd. She’d had virtually the same exchange with his brother earlier. “Yes. There’s a magic here. Something special and unique. I can’t describe it really.”

He smiled, a rueful quick arching of his brow. “I know what you mean. There is indeed magic here. Some good, some...not.” His customary frown returned with the last word.

“Dinner is served.” The ringing tones drew the immediate attention of all in the room.

A tall, regal black woman stood in the doorway, resplendent in brown Madras traditional island garb. She waited with practiced patience for the head of the household to respond.

“Thank you, Anna. We’ll be right in.”

Simon’s words conveyed a warmth she wouldn’t have imagined he possessed. A broad smile, as genuine as they came, accompanied the simple statements. The imperious Anna glowed.

“Anna, I don’t believe you’ve met Ms. West, our newest guest. She’s to photograph the wedding. Sheridan, this is Anna, our housekeeper.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Anna.”

The woman inclined her head. “Ms. West.” The austere sentinel returned.

Well, that greeting could frost her flakes. Anna apparently reserved the warm fuzzies for her Simon.

Clutching their drinks like drowning people clutched life

preservers, they all trooped down the hall toward the dining room. Marc caught up with her just before they entered. He leaned down, bringing his mouth close to her ear. “Anna isn’t really the dragon she seems. She’s just protective of Simon—us really—as our nanny, she practically raised us.” She’d no chance to reply as they split up as soon as they entered the stunning white and gold dining room. Anna directed the seating at the enormous table. As luck would have it, and as the newest guest, she’d seated Sheridan at Simon’s right.

Oh, joy. A very long dinner awaited.

* * * *

Simon surprised her. She had to admit it. Perhaps his pleasant dinner conversation resulted more from duty than actual enjoyment, but he proved himself quite knowledgeable about photography and they conversed with semi-amiable ease through the long dinner. He even refrained from glaring at her during the entire meal. A good thing, as Lady Selena, seated on his left, glared at her throughout and refused to contribute more than an occasional obligatory monosyllable. Even the numerous glasses of excellent Beaujolais, refilled with startling alacrity by the ever-present Anna, couldn’t blur the evil eye emanating from across the table.

As they rose from their chairs at the end of the dessert course, she caught her heel on the chair leg and would’ve fallen on her butt if Simon hadn’t caught her arm. Tingles shot up her nerve endings from the point of contact. Embarrassed, she turned to thank him with a smile plastered on her face, but discovered he’d resumed the fierce stare that he reserved just for her. His constant unspoken censure, for whatever reason, irritated the fire out of her. So much for the truce.

Gathering the tatters of her dignity, she walked around the table, seeking escape. She flushed anew as she caught the disgusted look Lady Selena tossed her way as she walked into the living room with Rupert, Cecily and Robert. Selena whispered into Rupert’s ear and the

two turned to her and snickered. Whatever. She'd stumbled. It wasn't a crime. She wasn't some drunk off the street, just a wee bit tipsy.

Simon had simply vanished. She didn't think it prudent of him to leave his lady alone with such ardent admirers.

Screw them all. She'd had a long day. She'd head upstairs to pretend they didn't exist. Except for Marc, of course. She headed down the hall. Maybe she'd just screw *him* if she got the chance. Boy, she must be tipsy.

"Can I walk you to the stairs?"

Speak of the handsome devil. Her fatigue disappeared in an instant.

"Yes, thank you." He grasped her arm and her heart flopped over in her chest and her hands went clammy.

"How did dinner go? I know Simon can be a bit prickly. You looked as though you handled him."

She laughed. Except for his dinner behavior, "prick" would've been the description of her choice for Simon. "He chatted the entire time and didn't say an unkind or scary thing. I don't know if I could've 'handled him' if he'd been mean. He doesn't think much of me and perhaps I wasn't his first choice as a dinner partner, but he worked hard to be polite. His duty as host and all that. Lady Selena on the other hand..."

Marc laughed aloud, then glanced around to see who stood nearby as they approached the staircase. "Forgive my brother. He has issues he's dealing with, but I have a strong feeling he'll be much better soon. The whole wedding thing will be resolved. I intend to see to it."

His intensity startled her a bit. She had to admit, perhaps because of his looks and his light, charming manner, she'd underestimated the depths of his character. She wondered what he meant about resolving the wedding thing. Probably just getting through it. If she ever married, she planned to elope.

"Don't give Selena, Rupert or even Robert a second thought. Selena's a dinosaur. She really would've been much happier with the

class system in place a couple of hundred years ago. Rupert's a rock star with far more looks and money than talent or brains. Robert's a good fellow, I suppose. Very close chum of Simon's and our families have been friends for literally centuries. Trust me, though. Not a one of them has any right or reason to cast a stone in your direction, so ignore any vitriol."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll do my best. We all have our 'issues.'"

They'd reached the foot of the staircase and he guided her into the curved niche, out of sight of anyone. Marc drew his arm about her and gazed down into her eyes. "Do you have 'issues,' Sheridan?"

"Of course. I'm not even sure what they are, to tell you the truth. I wouldn't recommend anyone get mixed up with me in any capacity at the moment."

"Whatever it is, it can't be that bad."

"You never know. I don't even know."

"I'm a big boy. I'm willing to take my chances. Besides, I have a feeling that whatever the issues are, there is a way to fix them."

Looking up into those beautiful eyes of his as he stared back at her with the earnest conviction of a young crusader about to head into battle, she found she wanted to believe him more than she'd ever wanted anything. With the warmth of his body brushing against hers, the strength of his arms about her and the courage of his convictions surrounding them, anything seemed possible. She offered no resistance as he lowered his mouth to hers, though her rational brain told her she should.

She sighed her contentment as he tasted her lips with slow thoroughness. His smile curved against her mouth and she smiled to herself in sheer joy. He used the opportunity to slide his tongue past her parted lips, exploring, plundering. She matched him stroke for stroke until they both breathed like marathon runners. He leaned close to her ear, his warm moist breath teasing her heightened senses.

"Invite me to your room and make a dishonest man of me." He punctuated this imperative by plunging his tongue into her ear,

igniting nerve endings and sensations she'd never known existed.

God. Even the man's voice and accent drove her crazy, not to mention the hint of humor. Guilt tore at her and conflicted with her desire. She shouldn't be doing this until she had herself straightened out. She pulled away and he let her go.

"I'm sorry. I'm exhausted and confused...I'm going to my room. Alone."

"I'll walk you." A flash of hurt shone in his gaze.

"No. Please, Marc." She shook her head, not even sure what she asked of him, but she didn't dare let him near her room. Her willpower wasn't *that* strong.

"I understand. I'll see you in the morning." He cast one last glance at her over his shoulder and headed up the stairs.

Not wanting to walk with him up the stairs, she decided to look for a powder room while she waited. The door on the right of the hall heading toward the drawing room seemed a likely choice. Grasping the handle, she opened the unlocked door and gasped at the sight that met her eyes

"Oh, my God." The two en flagrante delecto, Rupert and Selena, turned to gape at her. "I'm so sorry." She slammed the door shut, trying to clear her mind of the view of Selena bent over the counter as Rupert plowed into her from behind. Rupert's behavior didn't surprise her, though the icy Selena's earthy behavior surprised her. You just never knew about people and apparently this group had more than its fair share of secrets.

Maybe she fit right in.

* * * *

Up early the next morning, Sheridan dressed in shorts and a tank top over her bathing suit, grabbed her camera and beach bag and headed downstairs determined to explore a bit before Cecily got her claws into her. Who knew? Maybe she'd even run into Marc. She

located the breakfast room by trial and error and found only Robert and Anna inside. Robert looked up from his plate of eggs and sausage with a smile as she entered. Anna gave a nod, then exited with the coffee urn.

“Good Morning, Ms. West.”

“Sheridan, please. I hope you don’t mind if I call you Robert.”

“No, not at all. Come sit down. Anna will get you whatever you want for breakfast.”

Anna reappeared in an instant. Sheridan almost wondered if she’d been listening at the door to the butler’s pantry. “Coffee, miss?”

“Yes, thank you.” To the unspoken question in Anna’s eyes, Sheridan added, “Just toast please, Anna.” The housekeeper moved forward, filling the cup at Sheridan’s place setting, then left to procure the toast.

“I don’t think I’m going to be a favorite with Anna.”

Robert laughed. “Don’t worry. You’re new. She’ll get used to you. My family has been friends, neighbors and loyal supporters of the Des Marets for over two hundred years and she still looks at me as though she’s not quite sure I’m good enough.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Very protective of her boys is Anna. As far as she’s concerned, she’s part of the family and the old families of the island could give the Sicilians some competition. Loyalties run deep and grudges last forever.”

“Are you telling me they have vendettas?”

“I’m telling you that could be a mild word for the forces circulating beneath our polished veneer.”

She tried to prevent her jaw from gaping not only from the ominous words, but from the sharp tone she’d never heard from the amiable Robert’s lips.

In an effort to move past the awkward moment, she said the first thing that popped into her head. “Marc mentioned you when he discussed this job with me in LA. He really admires you. I could tell. He called you the best friend they had and the top solicitor on the

island. Everyone who is anyone consults you.”

He laughed, pleased by the praise. “That’s nice to hear. Marc and Simon and I have been friends all our lives. The three of us got up to quite a bit of mischief and enjoyed every moment.”

“I can imagine.”

He chuckled. “You don’t want to.” He glanced at his watch and looked back at her. “Aren’t you supposed to be down at the beach photographing Cecily and Simon riding horses?”

“What? Dammit! Somebody needs to give me a schedule so I know what I supposed to do.”

“I assumed you knew.”

“Uh, no. Thanks for clueing me in and very nice talking to you, Robert.” She stood and grabbed her gear. “See you later.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me too.” She hustled out of the breakfast room to make her way down to the beach. *Crap!* Well, she’d spend the day at the beach, just not quite the way she’d imagined. Maybe later. She had a job she’d come here to do and that should be her priority. Thank God, Robert said something. Apart from Marc, he’d treated her with the most kindness.

Cecily’s shrill demands rent the lazy morning air and led her straight to the couple.

They’d ridden to the far end of the beach with the cove’s peninsula in the background. It would have made a fabulous romantic shot except for Cecily’s comical and less than attractive seat.

“Why is this wretched horse thrashing around? We’ll never get a decent photo this way. That’s if that lazy photographer ever gets here.”

“Cecily, Belle will settle down as soon as you do *and* as soon as you stop sawing on her bit.”

As she walked down the steps, she saw Simon adjust Cecily’s reins with admirable patience, controlling his own bay stallion with obvious skill.

“I don’t know why you are so set on photos of us riding. You hate riding and horses.” He grabbed her and set her back on the horse as she almost bounced out of the saddle. The mare turned her head and tried to nip Cecily’s leg.

Good girl, Belle.

“Yes, but so many of my friends are equestrians and I wanted some sporty shots. *Platinum Magazine* loves sporty shots.”

“Cecily, this is our wedding, for God’s sake. I don’t appreciate you trying to turn it into a media circus.”

“Simon, must you always be a wet blanket? I love the attention. A girl doesn’t get married every day.”

“Good morning!” She cheerfully interrupted Cecily. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier. I had no idea about the specifics of the schedule. Perhaps you could discuss that with me later?”

Cecily had the good grace to look away.

“Cecily, you told me you’d notified Sheridan of her schedule.”

“I meant to. I thought I had. It’s just that I’m so busy with all the details of the wedding.”

“Cecily, between the wedding planner and your mother, you haven’t had to do a thing.”

“Shall we get started with the photos? Or would you prefer to do this another day?”

Please say “another day!” Please!

“Yes. We are going to do this right now. If we don’t, it will ruin the schedule.” Cecily strained to right herself in the saddle.

Damn.

She had no idea how she could manage to get a decent shot of this odd couple, but she’d have to try.

Simon met her eyes. Rather than the amusement or irritation she expected to see, he looked grim. Depressed even. As she began to shoot, he moved his horse in closer to Cecily, even putting his arm around her to disguise the fact he held her upright in the saddle. He couldn’t manage a smile.

Three hours and a full memory card later, she doubted she'd gotten a single photo that would please Cecily. What a way to waste a morning. She waved them off as they began their tortuous ride back to the stables and headed back up to the house for Anna's lunch. On the bright side, Cecily would be so sore, she'd more than likely spend the afternoon in the tub, soaking. Which meant that she would be free until dinner. A nice meal, some painful, polite conversation and in about an hour and a half she should be able to slip away for a break on the beach. At last. She hoped.

* * * *

The beach gods smiled upon her. Sheridan clambered over a low-hanging branch and stepped onto "her" private little sand beach, thanking them with silent gratitude. She surveyed the dark blue-green water, the clear sky and the exotic greenery. It didn't get better than this.

Complete and absolute privacy and seclusion. What better way to recharge?

On a sudden impulse, she decided to be daring and take her top off. She'd never sunbathed topless and no doubt, never would have the chance again. Boy, she'd really gotten wild and crazy now.

Sans top, she lifted her arms above her head and stretched out on the towel, enjoying the sensuous warmth of the late afternoon sun on her naked breasts. The accommodating sand molded to her and cradled her in comfort. She drifted in a pleasant fog, in and out of sleep, and thought of the beautiful Marc. Naked. Not for the first time, either.

She dozed for a while, she supposed, dreaming the most delicious dream. Marc caressed her breasts with hands, lips and tongue. He cupped them with his perfect hands, lifting them, testing their weight, then licked with bold strokes of his tongue over the most sensitive spots on each, before taking a nipple into his mouth, suckling on it

and teasing it with butterfly flicks. She moaned with wild abandon. Why not? In dreams, no one would intrude on her privacy. Her womb fluttered and her heart raced. She could smell the scent of man and subtle citrus spice aftershave. Her hips moved of their own accord. Lifting. Seeking. Encountering the steel hard erection of the fully dressed male lying atop her.

He groaned.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped.

That sherry gaze burned down upon her, into her soul, his expression a tortured mix of suppressed desire and patience. “Sheridan. Love.” He levered himself up on his arms. Waiting.

The breath left her lungs. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. She could only stare at his face. She knew that if she shut her eyes, she’d still be able to see him in precise detail. Even twenty, thirty years from now. Even if she never saw him again. This moment in time would define her life.

If she shut her eyes, would he still be there once she opened them again? Perhaps she’d just dreamed him up. She had to know, though. She shut her eyes. Hard.

He softly brushed his body against hers in an intimate caress and her eyes flew open. He still hovered over her, looking at her with infinite patience—his unspoken question evident in his gaze. Oh, that beautiful, searing gaze of his that made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. The importance of her decision resonated through her. Go or stay.

She could make only one choice.

When she did nothing, he lowered his mouth to hers with slow deliberation, watching her expression.

His moist breath brushed her mouth. She licked her lips in anticipation.

At that signal of her approval, he lowered himself upon her, clasped the back of her head with one hand and slid his other arm under her body, drawing her close up against him as he brought his

mouth against hers. He teased her lips open with feather strokes of his tongue and light nips with his teeth. When she opened fully, he thrust his tongue inside.

She grabbed hold with her lips and sucked him in. Her tongue tangled with his in a frenzy of explosive passion. She protested when he drew away, only to shiver and cry out in delight as he skimmed the tip of his tongue along her jaw line to her ear. He slid his hand down between their bodies and cupped her breast, his thumb tweaking the distended nipple.

“*Mon coeur*. I’ve wanted you so long. I didn’t think I could leave you that day at your studio and I’ve wanted you even more since then. There’s a connection between us. Please say you’ve felt it, too.”

“Yes.” She hadn’t meant to say the word, but it came out on a breathless sigh nonetheless.

A brilliant smile lit his face. “When I saw you, lying on my beach and stretching like a beautiful pagan goddess, I thought I’d go mad with desire. I’ve waited so long.” He leaned in close and his words, uttered on a fervent sigh into her ear, made her heart stutter and pierced her mind and senses with a flash of *déjà vu*. He nipped at her earlobe before descending to her neck, seeming to know the precise spot to attack with his considerable sensual skill. He almost had her to the point of climax from this alone, but stopped short.

“No. Not this way.”

She gazed in dazed frustration at him, not understanding why he’d stopped his magic or how he seemed to know her body better than she did. She wasn’t experienced, but could all women be so similar?

He slid down her body, kissing and caressing with teeth and tongue until he reached her bikini bottoms. He hooked his fingers in the sides and slid them all the way down and off.

He had her legs draped over his broad shoulders and his mouth on her pussy before she even realized what he intended. Raw sensation jolted through her as he possessed and pleased that most private part of her. He’d done the same thing in her studio, but despite the thrill of

that encounter, she gasped at the intensity of the sensation now. His intention grew clear in his actions, he meant no tame encounter, but a wild claiming. He sucked and drank from her. Devouring her like a savage. The pleasure coiled tighter within her womb until she thought she would explode. As he closed his lips upon her clit, he slid two fingers inside her wet sheath. That proved too much and she climaxed with an overwhelming intensity that left her shaking and weak. Her breath thundered in and out of her lungs.

Marc rose up over her, unbuttoning his shirt and lying down over her, chest to chest. Their racing heartbeats mingled and he bent his head to kiss her once again. "Taste how delicious you are." He held her head and kissed her thoroughly, holding her with firm insistence when she resisted. She'd never liked tasting her own body on a man's lips. This time, with him, it didn't repulse her, but sudden embarrassment had her pulling away out of habit.

He lifted up, frowning. "Let me have my way."

She hesitated, lifting up and trying to wiggle against him, but he didn't move a muscle, holding himself up, just out of her reach. "Yes." Anything for him to kiss her like that again. Anything to get him to do anything to her he chose.

He obliged, lowering himself onto her and kissing her with a fervent intensity and a desperation that reached into her soul. He pulled his mouth away to gaze into her eyes. "Tell me you feel the inevitability of this, from long before the first moment we saw one another. Tell me you sense it too. I need to hear it."

Surprised at the unexpected vulnerability in his haunted gaze and the slight tremor in his voice, she couldn't help but reassure him. "Yes." Her word, a whisper of a breath, resounded with fundamental truth through both of them. She wasn't sure what he meant about the attraction beginning before they'd seen one another. That didn't matter. From the first time she'd seen him, she'd known. She'd wanted, hoped.

Then her strange spells began. The bloody deaths near her own

home. She'd doubted herself, her sanity and she'd withdrawn. Kept him at arms' length while in Los Angeles. That all seemed so very far away here. With him.

She stroked his rigid cock through the fabric of his jeans. "Let me see you. Let me taste you." She hardly recognized the bold woman who spoke her desires aloud. She'd never taken a man in her mouth, never wanted to. Until now.

He smiled and the gleam in his eyes conveyed his pleasure at her enthusiasm as he stood to remove his jeans. He lowered the zipper and pulled them down his hips. His cock sprang free, rampant and unfettered. He wore no underwear. She found that sexy in the extreme.

Naked, except for his unbuttoned shirt, he straddled her, moving up until his knees reached her armpits. He leaned over her to grab his jeans and fold them up into a makeshift pillow to raise her head. His bobbing penis brushed her face and she used the opportunity to seize it with her mouth. He gasped and groaned in pleasure as she worked her tongue into the slit at the end, sucking at the pre-come that leaked from it then drawing him deeper into her mouth to tease the sensitive underside of his cock with the tip of her tongue. His shaft filled her mouth, had he been even a centimeter larger in diameter she would not have been able to accommodate him. She reached up and caressed his balls, already drawn up. She thought that meant he'd climax soon. She fought the disappointment. She never wanted this encounter to end, but she desperately needed to make him come for her. She bit down lightly on his silky hard shaft. With a shout, he exploded into her mouth, the salty tang of his essence filling her senses. With greedy persistence, she sucked and swallowed every drop she could get.

"Dear God, woman. You'll kill me." The glow of his tawny gaze and the pleased, rakish smile wreathing his beautiful face conveyed his willingness to die for the cause.

She smiled with feminine satisfaction. She loved the sexual power

filling her psyche whenever Marc drew near. For the first time in her life, she believed herself attractive. For the first time, she embraced her own sensuality that she hadn't even known she possessed.

He kissed her one last time, before rising and holding out a hand to help her up. "We have to get back to the house in time to dress for dinner."

She gasped. "Oh, God. I completely lost track of the time. I don't want to be late." The frantic worry over potential tardiness at the designated mealtime distracted them both from what could have been an awkward segue as they pulled their clothes on as fast as they could.

"Don't worry. If we hurry, we can still make it. My car is parked just beyond the cabin." He caught her hand and pulled her away from the beach.

"Cabin?"

His face shuttered, he answered with unusual brevity. "Yes." He indicated the chimney they approached. "These are the ruins of the cabin of Marie, a Des Marets nanny some two hundred years ago." He hesitated. "She came from Martinique and the people of the island believed her to be a voodoo priestess, or witch of some sort. She also served as the plantation's healer during her lifetime."

"That's fascinating." She eyed the crumbling foundations of the small building, overgrown and choked by local plants and vines. The sturdy stone chimney remained, a lone sentinel proclaiming the cabin's triumph over time. A chill gripped her as she walked past the spot where little but stone steps, floor, chimney and a few rotted timbers remained of what had once been a woman's home. Black scorch marks on stone and wood lingered from a long-ago fire. "The cabin burned down?"

"Yes, burned."

Sheridan, surprised at the unusually terse tone, said no more. Ever the gentleman, Marc helped her into his Jaguar convertible and they sped off toward the Des Marets home. She'd loved the beach, but something about that cabin gave her chills. It projected an odd

combination of comfort and terror. Perhaps someone at the plantation could tell her more about it.

The rare dark mood affecting Marc at the cabin lifted as the distance from the dwelling increased. On the short ride back to Belle Isle, he regaled her with tales of old St. Lucia and the sugar industry. He considered his brother the historian in the family, but he knew the history of his family and the island too. His passion for both vibrated in his voice any time he spoke of them. She wondered what it might be like to hear that tone in his voice when he spoke of her.

Marc parked in the drive and they rushed into the house and up the stairs, where they parted with a jaunty wave from him and an awkward smile on her part. They'd both have to hurry to be dressed and downstairs by seven.

In her room, she pulled a silk floral sundress from her suitcase and hung it over the door of the bathroom, hoping the steam would remove at least a few of the wrinkles and rushed into the shower. Thankfully she'd no time to worry about facing the gauntlet—as she'd come to think of Simon, Cecily and their friends—and certainly no time to think about the interlude she'd shared with Marc on the beach or the fact that she wanted more. A lot more.

* * * *

Once again, Sheridan found the players on their usual marks as she entered the library. At this point, she didn't care if she had to interact with Simon, the Guardian of the Drinks Cart. She wanted a beer. He would not intimidate her. Much.

“Hello, Simon. May I have one of those delicious Pitons?”

With a faint smile, he reached over and pulled one of the icy bottles from the bucket and popped the top. “Of course. How are you, Sheridan?” He poured the brew into a tall glass and held it out to her.

Her fingertips brushed against his as she reached for her glass. Oh my God, sparks, fireworks, you name it. What power tied her to these

Des Marets men? This wasn't her nature at all. At least this one belonged to another and she somehow knew he'd never cheat. Despite his disposition, he lived by an old-world code of honor. *Do not look directly into those blue eyes and you'll be fine.*

"I'm fine, thank you. Did Cecily recover from her horseback riding session?"

"I haven't spoken to her since then, though she appears to be in fine form." He glanced over to the couch where Cecily sat charming Rupert and Robert.

What could she say in response to that pointed comment? "Yes, she looks beautiful in that blue dress. Blue must be her favorite color."

He took a swallow of his Scotch on the rocks. "She knows she looks well in blue."

Marc waved from the corner where he stood trapped by Lady Selena.

"Um, I'll just go over and say hello to Marc and Lady Selena."

"Sheridan."

At her name, she turned back to face him, his eyes glittered and his mouth pressed into a tight line. "Did you have a pleasant outing on the beach this afternoon?"

Her face flamed. Did he know what she'd been doing on the beach with his brother? How could he? There had been a decided edge to his voice. Why would he even care?

"Yes, thank you. I had a very relaxing afternoon."

"I'm glad you had such a pleasurable time." The hard tone cut through the pleasant words and proved he meant the opposite.

She escaped to Marc's side. Selena stuck to his other side like a limpet and glared at her as if she could make Sheridan disappear with the force of her gaze. These weren't people, just caricatures.

Dinner passed in relative peace and she looked forward to some sleep. All this drama, not to mention the worry that she might sprout fur and claws at any moment, left her exhausted. She just had to make

it through coffee in the drawing room. They stuck to the old-fashioned ways on the island.

After the experience last night, she'd been reluctant to head to the powder room, but decided to risk it. As she walked down the hall, Cecily grabbed her arm and pulled her into the butler's pantry.

Fury twisted her pretty rose-painted mouth into an unattractive snarl. "Stay away from my man, bitch. I may need you as a photographer for my wedding, but after that—"

Sheridan's jaw dropped. "Cecily, I have no idea what you're talking about. Simon and I have barely exchanged three words since I arrived."

"Not Simon, you idiot. Yes, I'm marrying him, but you know very well that's not who I'm talking about. Stay away from him." She dropped Sheridan's arm and clacked off down the hall in her stilettos, a cloud of French perfume billowing after her.

Sheridan leaned weakly against the wall a moment to compose herself. Marc and Cecily? It couldn't be true. God, did these people play musical beds?

She headed out onto the veranda. To hell with coffee in the drawing room. To hell with the powder room. There'd definitely be someone or several someones in there, using it for purposes other than the norm. She knew the well heeled had played games after dinner for centuries. She'd just pictured something more like charades.

The cool sea breeze provided a soothing balm to her frayed nerves. She just couldn't catch a break. She plopped into a patio chair.

"I thought I might find you out here." Marc drew up a chair next to her.

"Have you been having an affair with Cecily?" The bald words slipped out of her mouth before she could catch herself.

His mouth dropped open. "I beg your pardon?"

"Cecily cornered me and threatened me with physical violence if I didn't stay away from *her* man. She wasn't talking about Simon, either. I know she's been after you."

“And you’re wondering if she’s caught me?”

“Yes.”

“No. I’ll admit that I met Cecily first, but I’ve never had any kind of physical relationship with her, though she’s been more than clear that that would be welcome. It’s one of the reasons I wasn’t thrilled when Simon told me he planned to marry her.”

Relief swept over her. Jealousy didn’t suit her. The idea of Marc with Cecily didn’t sit well either, but she believed him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to that conclusion.”

“I don’t mind. I’m flattered. I’m thrilled to make you jealous.”

“You are?”

“Oh, *yes*.” He rose and pulled her up out of her chair.

“Oh, no.” A wealth of meaning spilled from that single word “yes.” The implications proved too much for her to handle, but she realized it didn’t matter anymore as he towed her into the house at a rapid clip.

* * * *

Marc pulled Sheridan down the hall as fast as she could walk. He wanted her. Now. More than he’d ever wanted anyone. He’d known it the moment he walked into her LA studio and saw her for the first time, and his certainty grew every time he touched her.

That wasn’t all though. He’d seen Simon head upstairs to his room just after dinner. He’d taken to retiring earlier all the time as his less than loving fiancée partied into the wee hours downstairs with her court. Marc had a mission. Fortunately, it would be his pleasure and his joy, although overcoming his stubborn brother’s objections might prove difficult. Difficult, but not impossible, and his determination to succeed remained absolute. He loved her, the most beautiful woman he’d ever known, and he loved his brother. Their suffering must stop. Forever.

As he followed Sheridan into the suite assigned to mistresses of Belle Isle, Marc surreptitiously flipped the “On” switch on the

intercom connecting that room with the master's suite. Simon's room. Simon would be furious, but the damage would be done. The chink in his armor established.

She stood with her back to the open doors leading out onto the balcony. The bright moonlight backlit her, showing the outline of her shapely legs through the sheer silk of her dress. The cinnamon highlights in her hair gleamed in the low glow of the lamps as she walked toward him like a shy doe. He drew a shaky breath, inhaling her light floral perfume, blending with the familiar scent of the sea drifting into the room on a gentle breeze. Thank God, he'd spoken to Anna, their housekeeper, as soon as he'd arrived home. A witch of sorts, Anna's spell to slow the curse seemed to be working. She couldn't otherwise have remained in human form this long. Not after what passed between them in LA, and then this afternoon. Not the way he felt about her. Anna's power could only do so much though, and time ran short.

He pulled her close and kissed her with lingering sweetness as he reached up with one hand and unbuttoned the top of her sundress. The bodice slipped down between them, baring her breasts. He trailed nipping kisses along her jaw and down her neck, discovering an especially sensitive spot in the process. She moaned aloud. Muttering encouragement, he worked his tongue around the same place, eliciting further gasps and moans of approval. He licked and kissed his way down to her breasts, cupping and lifting them as he'd done that afternoon, before bending his head to suck one tight nipple into his mouth.

"Marc." She cried out her ecstasy, her need.

He lifted his head to answer. "Yes, my love. Yes. Let me hear your pleasure. Do you like it when I suck on your nipples?"

He demonstrated, yet again.

"Oh, God, yes." She clasped his head to her breast.

He treated her other breast to the same attention, his erection pressing with painful insistence against the confines of his trousers.

He ground against her soft heat, rubbing and teasing her clit. He could feel the moisture seeping through her garments and his. “You’re wet for me. Your honey is soaking your panties and I want it dripping over my fingers so I can slip them inside you, right before I tongue your pussy and eat up every drop. Would you like that?”

An incoherent moan her only response, he reached for the bottom of her dress. “Let’s get your clothes off. I want you naked.”

She stood with docile patience as he slid her dress off over her head. He pulled her panties down her hips and helped her to step out of them.

He stood, grasping her slim shoulders, looking his fill. His mouth dry as cotton, he slid his hands down toward her breasts with slow appreciation, just brushing them with a feather touch.

She shivered.

“God, you’re beautiful. Such perfect breasts. I could suck on those little rosy nipples for hours.” Moving lower, he skimmed her flesh with the backs of his nails and pads of his fingers. “Such a beautiful belly, so toned, yet rounded and feminine.” He applied his tongue to her soft skin, tasting the sweet salty flesh of his woman. Inhaling her unique scent. A wave of possessiveness engulfed him, but he fought it.

This time, in this life, they would triumph over the evil that surrounded them. He thrust his tongue inside her belly button, thrilled at her gasp of delight. After exploring there, he bent to run his tongue up the inside of each of her thighs. He could feel her muscles tremble and knew she wouldn’t be able to stand much longer. Drawing the alluring scent of her arousal into his nostrils and growling his own need in response, he skimmed the lips of her sex with a teasing flick of his tongue. She jumped, moaning aloud. He licked his lips, tasting her and remembering the feast he’d stolen on the beach earlier.

He couldn’t wait much longer. Rising up, he backed her up to the bed, and with gentle firmness, pushed her down upon it. He unbuttoned his shirt, watching her watch him, taking in every inch of

flesh he revealed to her. He unfastened his trousers and let them drop, revealing his naked erection beneath. She licked her lips.

He reached down to pick up his discarded slacks and pulled a handful of condoms out of the pocket and tossed them on the bedside table.

Her eyes widened at the quantity of foil packets.

He grinned, making a vain attempt to hide the feral nature of his smile as he ripped open one of the packets and slowly sheathed himself before her fascinated gaze. When she looked at him like that, he wanted to take her like a wild beast. He fought to keep that in mind.

He'd never experienced such overpowering emotions, impulses before in his life. More proof that the past still lived.

He clasped her ankles and pulled her hips to the edge of the bed, holding her legs up. He reached down with one hand and guided his cock to her slick entrance, pushing inside her with slow persistence as he held her legs apart. "Let me inside, my love." Her body gripped him like a vise, almost too tight, but so wet, he managed to get all the way in.

He waited, breathing hard, gauging her reaction.

"More. I want more." She lifted her hips and tossed her head in frustration upon the mattress. "Please, Marc."

"Yes, love. You'll have it all." He withdrew then moved into her, ever faster and harder. Her cries of delight filling his ears—and he knew—his brother's. When he sensed his orgasm nearing, he reached between them to fondle her clitoris with his finger. To his delight, only a few loving strokes accompanied by vigorous thrusts of his cock produced a powerful climax that shuddered through her. She cried out and her legs stiffened even as he kept thrusting through her orgasm, prolonging it. As her spasms gripped him, he joined her in crashing over the edge.

He collapsed atop her in exhaustion, their sweaty bodies plastered together, both breathing like bellows. He tangled his hands in her hair

and held her still while he kissed her like a madman. He thrust his tongue in her mouth as he'd thrust his cock inside her pussy moments ago and planned to do again this night. Just as soon as he recovered. He clasped her to him and rolled them to their sides.

“Oh, my God. I've never. I mean...”

“Shhh...sweet, I know. Sleep for now.”

Her eyes fluttered shut.

He smiled and looked over to the convenient intercom. He didn't intend for any of them to get too much sleep. He pulled her close and shut his eyes.

Marc awakened scarcely two hours later, aware that he had a raging hard-on. It took his sleep-fogged brain a moment to realize that Sheridan had his cock in her mouth, sucking with single-minded precision. She twirled the point of her tongue along the sensitive underside of his shaft and her fingers caressed his balls, already drawn up tight. His heart pounded and the breath whooshed from his lungs. “Dear God, woman. I'm about to come in your mouth.”

She merely hummed her approval and continued her work.

This wasn't his exact plan for the night, but a deviation or two from the blueprint never hurt. All thought stopped as sensation exploded from his cock, along his spine and straight to his brain. He shot his seed into her mouth, shouting with sheer sexual abandon and watched, fascinated as she swallowed every drop. She'd kill him with erotic excess inside a week. Fortunately, he couldn't think of a better way to go, or someone more worthy of dying for...again.

Chapter 3

Sheridan awoke with a start. She lay naked, and face down in a diagonal sprawl across the bed. She struggled to sit up, muscles she hadn't know she possessed screaming their objection. The full sun streaming in through the still-open balcony door told her she'd slept far later than she intended. Utter fatigue from the endless, incredible night with Marc left her feeling drugged and sluggish. Funny, she couldn't remember the last of it.

She clasped her aching head. The hangover didn't help. She drew her knees up under her, trying to gather her wits. Another noise drew her gaze to the balcony doorway.

Holy crap!

She froze in shock like a flounder packed in ice. There stood Simon Des Marets staring at her in apparent horrified disapproval, his brows drawn so tightly together they almost touched. She saw his gaze dip to note her breasts covered in love nips, her splayed legs and provocative position, before coming back up to study her mussed hair and kiss-swollen lips. Too late, she snatched the sheet up to cover herself. This time, his glare blazed icy blue fire. There'd be no more truces between them. He walked on without saying a word.

She lowered her head into her hands. Oh, my God. How could she have forgotten about the communal, wrap-around balcony? With the heat, there'd been no choice but to leave the door open, but she should've made some effort to be more discreet. That's what came from being so carried away in the moment. If she didn't die of mortification, he'd definitely fire her over this. Thankfully, she didn't need the money, but she wanted the excuse to be near Marc.

Something about this island drew her, too, something else pulled her to stay here.

She got up and shut the door, pulling the drape across. She had to get dressed, get downstairs with her camera and do the job they'd paid her to do. Glancing at the bedside clock on her way into the bathroom, she discovered in horror it read 12:30. Among other things, she'd missed not only breakfast, but lunch as well. Her stomach rumbled in protest. She'd see if she could grab something on her way to locate the "weddingites," as she'd come to think of them. Robert planned to throw a huge pre-wedding party for the happy couple tonight at a new restaurant in Marigot Bay. No doubt, she'd be busy snapping money shots of the beautiful people all night and wouldn't have much of a chance to grab a bite.

She giggled to herself. For a plain Jane like herself, she couldn't complain, not after a night like last night with a gorgeous sex god and a free vacation in stunning surroundings like this island. Not a cat in sight and no bloody deaths. Yep. She could ignore any slings and arrows the trolls shot her way, or a missed meal or two.

She stopped by the kitchen, thankfully empty, and discovered a basket of fresh pastries. Just the ticket. Grabbing a couple and helping herself to a bottle of water from the refrigerator, she walked through the breakfast room and out the verandah doors onto the back porch. As she munched her snack, she absorbed the view of the kitchen garden, the lovely manicured lawns and the aroma of rosemary from the herb garden just down from the steps. A light breeze blew through her hair. God, what a fabulous, peaceful place she'd discovered here.

The piercing soprano screech rent the placid air like a cannon ball. She almost choked on the last bite of croissant. *Bloody hell*. That had to be Cecily. She ran round the house in the direction of the sound, which, due to the sheer size of the structure, took a while. She burst out onto the patio above the pool, where the weddingites, all garbed in designer pastel garden party attire, the inimitable Anna and assorted catering types, all stopped their tasks and turned to stare as one. At

her. Oh, shit. She'd forgotten the garden party.

Cecily, surrounded by her posse and done up rather like a '30s movie star in white bias cut dress, white pumps and red lipstick, looked up from under her broad-brimmed, floppy white picture hat and spotted her.

"You!" She repeated the amazing screech, approaching Sheridan under full, angry steam. "Ms. West, you promised to be here on the patio in time to set-up to photograph my guests arriving! You've ruined it."

Sheridan drew breath to apologize, but Cecily wasn't done.

"I tried to tell that fool, Simon, we should hire my cousin, Sir Fredrick Hampton, who's not only experienced with the requirements of photographing society affairs, but has the knowledge and breeding necessary to move with ease in our circles. But, no. He and Marc insisted we hire you. Damned idiot! He's determined to ruin my wedding."

Shocked speechless for a moment, she drew herself up and faced Cecily. *Good God*. Had the woman actually just called her intended, Simon Des Marets—financial genius, an "idiot" in front of all these people? "Ms. Towne, I apologize for any inconvenience my late arrival caused. I'm afraid the fatigue of the trip caught up with me and I overslept." She knew Marc stood with Simon by the pool and refused to look his way. "There is no 'set-up' required since these will be candid shots. I also thought I'd photograph you saying good-bye to your guests as they left, too. Sometimes those photographs are better, as the guests are so much more relaxed than when they first arrive at a party."

Cecily narrowed her eyes, considering. Acutely aware of appearances, she had to concede the truth of this statement. "Very well. But, don't muck anything up again. You're fortunate my mother hasn't arrived yet. She is not nearly so forgiving." She surveyed Sheridan's attire. "Ms. West, the agreement stipulated that you would dress appropriately for each event so as to cause a minimum of

disruption. Ratty Capri pants and an old shirt simply won't do. Please change. Quickly!" She flounced off to return to her trio and prepare for her other VIP guests.

Sheridan shuddered at the thought of exposure to the future mother-in-law. She almost felt sorry for Simon the Terrible. She didn't imagine public humiliation or dreadful mother-in-laws figured prominently in his past, but his loose cannon fiancée would change that. "Well-bred" socialites didn't usually make scenes in front of a dozen people at their own parties. Then again, these days, maybe they did.

She raced back upstairs to her room. Throwing on stockings and a rather drab short-sleeved beige dress with a full skirt and low-heeled beige pumps, she picked up her camera and rushed back downstairs. Drab tended to blend in to the woodwork and that helped her to get good, natural photos.

She took up position just outside the verandah doors and hoisted her SLR digital camera, just in time to capture the arrival of the first guest, who happened to be a Cabinet Minister, and began recording the event for posterity.

The funny thing about photographing an event like this, apart from the occasional photo hog insisting on posing in some unnatural position with a fake smile while body hugging every VIP at the event, the camera and the person behind it turned invisible after a while and guests carried on as they otherwise would, never realizing the truths their behavior revealed. Or the fact that the photographer had ears.

Marc, of course, ever charming and the most gracious of hosts, fielded passes from half the female guests with the finesse of an NFL pro. He flirted with her often enough to keep her blushing and longing for some quality time alone with him.

Simon, civil and patient with his guests, particularly the elder family friends who'd known his late parents, kept a constant eye on Cecily, who drank a few too many glasses of champagne, went so far as to refer to Simon as "a bit of a cold fish" to the Minister of

Finance.

Rupert and Lady Selena disappeared after the first hour. Not that she blamed them.

Anna directed the soiree with the efficiency of a military general from behind the scenes. Judging by the ferocious frown she focused upon Cecily whenever necessity forced her out into the party, she bore even less positive feeling for her than for Sheridan.

Robert, urbane and genial, hovered close to Cecily. No doubt attempting to help his friend and legal client, Simon, with damage control. His swift intervention averted a major incident after a petulant, tactless Cecily referred to St. Lucia as “provincial” within the hearing of several St. Lucian government officials and half of the British High Commission.

Simon refused to look directly at her, even through the filter of the camera. Just as well, considering her humiliation that morning. She ended up with a number of profile shots of him. He had a rather glorious profile, so that worked. Of course, Cecily made sure she squeezed into as many photos as possible. God, looking at that absurd hat could drive a girl batty.

She snagged a champagne flute from a passing server. The guests had gone and Cecily et. al. had removed themselves, no doubt to begin primping. After three and a half hours on her feet shooting, she deserved a break before the big party that night. Wishing for more comfortable shoes, yet drawn by irresistible curiosity, she wandered across the lush lawn to the back of the house overlooking the sugar mill and the ruins of the old plantation house. This is where the wedding would take place. In a few days, an army of decorators would descend to set the fairytale scene, all under enormous tents to guard against the usual late afternoon showers.

She edged closer to the remains of the original Belle Isle. She didn't dare go past the smooth lawn in her flimsy shoes, but she got close enough to see the scorch marks. Yet another fire—not an unusual event in the days where all light came from flame of one sort

or another. An eerie melancholy swept through her psyche. She set the champagne down on the ground and lifted her camera to snap a few photos. She wondered what the home had looked like in its heyday. It must've been beautiful, though smaller than the current home.

She let her camera dangle from the neck strap and picking up her glass, headed toward the sugar mill in the distance. Constructed of stone, it appeared amazingly intact, considering its age. It had been vital to the operation of the plantation during the sugar growing days. She peeked inside. Enormous, rusted metal gears dominated the space. In her mind's eye, she could see the gears and wheels turning, almost hear the "clack, clack" as they rolled along at their task. She could smell the sweet, earthy scent of the sugar cane. She remembered. A young man's arms tight about her as she stood on this very spot, a breeze stirring her hair, the fluttering her long cotton skirt, his mouth upon hers, a passion squeezing her heart and filling her body with desire. But, oh, the guilt, for she belonged to another and she loved him too. Then the violent confrontation...

Her heart leapt in fear. She stumbled backward in her awkward pumps on the grass, almost falling.

"Such a great tragedy occurred here." The mournful words, intoned with such ominous finality startled her violently out of her reverie.

Sheridan swung around, her heart beating with abandon, to find the Des Marets' housekeeper. "Oh, my goodness, Anna. You startled me out of a daydream." She resembled a Queen with her tall, stately posture and her traditional Madras attire. A beautiful, yet somewhat scary, Queen.

"Forgive me, miss. I only meant to explain. I know you don't understand."

"Understand what, Anna?"

"The events of the past, miss. The requirements of the future." She walked toward the sugar mill and placed her hand upon the stone,

lowering her head for a moment as though in prayer. “A great tragedy occurred here, more than two centuries ago. The remnants of that tragedy still plague the Des Marets family and the de Beauvais family.” Anna looked toward her with an air of expectancy, as though that might mean something to her.

Clueless, Sheridan had no idea how to respond. “I’m very sorry to hear about that, Anna. Neither Marc or Simon has mentioned it.” She laughed. “Of course, Simon doesn’t approve of me, so he wouldn’t be likely to discuss sensitive family history with me.”

For the first time since Sheridan met her, a small smile blossomed upon Anna’s face. “Don’t give up, miss. I think the problem is that Mr. Simon approves too much.”

Before she could digest this astonishing and enigmatic comment, Anna turned and went back toward the house.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Marc. No wonder Anna, with her usual discreet professionalism had retreated. She must have seen him approaching.

A thrill raced up her body from the tip of her toes, all the way to the top of her head, disturbing her heart rhythm and several other areas of her body in between. She turned just as he approached and hauled her against him.

She looked up into his handsome face, inhaling his familiar scent. God. She got wet just looking at him.

He kissed her as though he hadn’t seen her in weeks. Thrusting his tongue inside her mouth and grinding his lips against hers with more intensity than technique. She liked it, reveling in this out-of-control version of his sexual persona. She responded in kind, clasping her arms tightly about his neck and grinding her pelvis against his growing erection.

He broke the kiss, breathing hard. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Not that it mattered.

“There’s an old maze, just on the other side of the plantation house.” He pointed to the far side of the burned-out ruin. “Do you see

those tall hedges?”

“Yes.” She’d heard of mazes. They’d been very popular as part of the intricate garden landscapes typical of 18th century English manner homes, but she’d never actually seen one.

He pulled her toward the green wall. As they got nearer, she still couldn’t discern an opening in the overgrown structure, but he seemed to know exactly where to go. Sure enough, a narrow opening existed in the side. They slid in sideways and her hand clasped in his, he led her through the paths, now barely passable, that had once been several feet wide. They came out upon a large clearing in the center. Though the family had permitted the maze itself to virtually choke itself out of existence, someone had tended this central area with diligence. A small, working fountain centered the space. Stone benches and statues of Grecian goddesses adorned the emerald lawn and in between those lay well-tended rose beds filled with stunning, fragrant lavender roses.

She inhaled the scent, awed by the beauty of the spot and the romantic soul of the man she’d no doubt had been responsible for preserving this place. A sense of familiarity and love wrapped around her like a warm blanket, like coming home after a long journey.

“Do you like it?”

“I adore it. It’s the most romantic spot I’ve ever seen.”

He smiled. She’d pleased him. More than pleased him, she could tell. His happiness spread through her, erasing the problems in their budding relationship—her fears about her strange spells, her concern for his safety, and the shame she never wanted him to discover—especially if she’d killed innocents or gone mad. Problems she’d later have to face alone.

He clasped the back of her head, bringing his mouth against hers, tasting her lips with the tip of his tongue until she opened to him, then plunging inside, exploring the contours of her mouth. With his other hand, he clasped her butt, pulling her tight against him.

“God, I thought that bloody party would never end.” He left her mouth to trace his tongue along the column of her neck.

She moaned aloud. “Ah, I didn’t think it would either.” She reached up under his loose silk shirt, skimming her hands along his broad, muscular back.

“So, did thoughts of me cross your mind, then?” He slid his hand up under her skirt partway, then back down and up again with slow, tortuous strokes of his fingertips, never reaching the spot where she needed him the most. He stroked a little higher between her thighs. “Did you drench your panties for me as you went about demurely photographing the conservative elite of the island? Perhaps thinking of doing all sorts of naughty things with me?”

“Yes.” He barely skimmed her pussy through the silk fabric of her panties. “Ah!”

”You’re wet for me now, sweet.” Claspng her tightly, he sank with her down to the grass. “I think we should do something about that, don’t you?”

He swallowed her agreement as he took her mouth in a punishing, feral kiss that threatened to stop her heart. Without warning, he bunched her loose skirt up and ripped her panties from her. He lifted up to stare down into her eyes as he unzipped his fly and freed his cock. She hadn’t seen this wild, unpredictable side of his nature before, this harder edge. He’d taken control over their sex play, even more so than last night and it scared her a little, yet as he positioned himself and thrust up into her, she acknowledged to herself how much it excited her.

“Open your eyes, love. I want to see your eyes while I’m fucking you.” It wasn’t a request, yet the pleasure he gave her flared with such intensity, she’d have done anything he asked. As soon as she met his eyes, she knew he understood her innermost thoughts, knew his effect on her. Instinct told her this man knew far more about her even than she did. It also told her she could trust him. Would he still want anything to do with her if he knew her darkest secret? How would he react if she attempted to explain she’d either lost her mind, or turned into some freak animal that killed innocent people?

He hitched his hips up, ramming into her faster, harder, deeper. “Do you like this, Sheridan? Do you like what I’m doing to you? I hope you do, because I think of this all day and night. I plan to fuck you every chance I get and in every place and position I can think of.”

That did it. “Oh, God, Marc. Oh...” Her orgasm rocked her, sending waves of searing pleasure through her body. She could feel her inner muscles spasm around him even as he fucked her through her climax. After a moment, he slowed his thrusts, pulling his cock almost all the way out of her.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, disoriented.

“I want you to come again. With me.” He laughed, his breath coming in gasps.

“I can’t. I just...No. I can’t.” He’d lost his mind, but she lost that thought as he bent to kiss her again. She grabbed his silky hair and held tight as he suckled at her neck and breasts and toyed with her clit, driving her upwards again until she shook with need.

“Lift your legs.” He showed her how he wanted them draped on his shoulders.

“What...?”

“Shhhh. Don’t talk. Just feel.” He slid his cock into her and took up a slow, steady rhythm as he fondled her clit, then slid his drenched fingers slowly down and back to tease the tight ring of her anus.

She jumped in shock.

“Did I hurt you?” He frowned, studying her face.

“No. No, I just...” she trailed off in embarrassment.

“Ah, sweet. Has no one ever touched you here?” He resumed his stroking.

“Um. No.” She began to squirm as the unfamiliar stimulation accelerated her arousal. She felt her cream leaking down to the very area he touched.

“I won’t do anything you don’t like, but with the right preparation, I think you might enjoy anal play very much. Will you trust me?”

“Yes.” She hadn’t finished the word before he slid his middle

finger inside her. She gasped at the unexpected sensation of fullness and a slight sting. Then he began to move within her again, building momentum with each stroke until they both burst into the stratosphere.

He collapsed atop her and they lay there a moment, struggling to get their heart rates back to normal.

“I hate to tell you this, my love, but we only have an hour left before we have to leave for Marigot Bay. We’ve got to hurry.”

“Oh, shit! The dinner! Marc, you keep doing this to me!”

“Yes, darling. I intend to continue doing it to you.” He smiled that wicked smile of his that ensured instant forgiveness. “In fact, when we get back from the dinner, I thought I’d come to your room—”

She cut him off. “Absolutely not. I’ve got to rest, Marc. I’m exhausted. I’ve hardly slept since I’ve been here and I have to be up early to photograph Cecily’s final wedding gown fitting. You stay in your own room.”

He smiled again as he helped her up and fastened his trousers. “We’ll see.”

Chapter 4

La Lune en Argent—The Silver Moon—which, it turned out, Robert partly owned, proved to be the most exquisite restaurant Sheridan had ever seen. Hollywood couldn't have designed a more romantic setting for a pre-wedding dinner party. Set into the hillside of the small bay, it shone from the soft gleam of thousands of little white lights strung about the trees and over the tables overlooking the water. Cream linen covered the tables, decorated with stunning floral and silver centerpieces and set with sterling flatware, and also draped the small gilt chairs. A skilled piano player at a baby grand tucked in a corner of the patio filled the night with the strains of classical and jazz music. The heat, the only flaw in the evening oppressed in the stillness of the sheltered location. She prayed it would cool off a bit, or all the principals and guests would appear sweaty in the photos.

The guests of honor, the other weddingites, Marc and Robert stood in an informal receiving line, halfway between the dock and the parking lot in order to greet the guests who'd arrived via either route. Cecily, stunning in a cream silk halter sheath nearly brushing the floor, exerted herself to be charming. No wonder. The guest list included glamorous rich and famous types who either lived here full time, owned homes here or had jetted in to attend the wedding of the year. They were much more Cecily's style, despite her protestations of breeding, than the conservative Establishment at the garden party earlier. Next to her stood her mother. Yes, the much vaunted Mrs. Albert Lexton-Smythe had arrived at last. A widow, having buried two husbands since Cecily's late father, her deceptively harmless short, rotund physique lulled her victims and allowed her to approach

within striking distance. She possessed a sweet face and the tongue of an adder. Sheridan feared her.

Sheridan made sure she got lots of shots of the pristine table setups and the guests arriving. Simon appeared strained and tired through the lens of her camera, though he did his social duty.

As the evening progressed, Sheridan captured the delectable-looking mixed Caribbean and French cuisine, though lamentably had no time to sample it herself. The obligatory champagne toasts followed the meal, and then a jazz quartet set up to play for dancing. Simon and Cecily danced the first dance alone on the small cleared space—their turn about the floor didn't resemble a lovey-dovey, cheek-to-cheek dance, but passed for appearances and photos. As the engaged twosome walked off, other couples rose to take to the floor or mingle as they chose.

She decided to take a quick break to catch a breath of air. Hoping for a bit of a breeze, she headed down to the dock railing. Across the bay, dozens of yachts sat moored in rows, a lovely sight in the moonlight. She raised her camera to try to capture it.

"You haven't eaten anything, or taken a break all evening, Sheridan." The censure in the rough baritone alone would've been enough to identify the speaker behind her.

She turned toward him, flabbergasted that he'd even noticed such a thing. Why would he even care? "I haven't had a moment, Simon. If I'd slipped away even for a second, I might've missed an important shot and I can assure you your fiancée wouldn't have been pleased."

A bitter laugh erupted. "It isn't possible to please my fiancée, Sheridan. Don't make your professional decisions based upon what might please her. No matter how excellent a job you do—and I'm sure it will be excellent—she will find fault in the end."

Did he just compliment her? Stunned for a moment, she stood speechless, remembering Cecily's comments that Marc *and* Simon had insisted on hiring her to do the photos. Okay, so he'd admired her work, but disapproved of her at first sight and the knowledge that

she'd begun an affair with his brother did nothing to improve his impression. Too bad about that. She didn't intend to stop her relationship with Marc. Any man about to marry a woman who thought very little of him, and didn't care who knew it, needed to focus on his own problems. She'd yet to hear a civil discussion between them and Cecily had picked a ridiculous argument on the drive down from Belle Isle.

They didn't even share a bedroom. Anna had supplied that information—why she had no idea. Cecily slept in the opposite guest wing of the house, along with Lady Selena, Rupert and Robert. Sheridan doubted the sleeping arrangements protected Cecily's "maiden virtue," she almost snorted aloud at that comical idea, or that they reflected Simon's preference. A recipe for marital disaster if she ever saw one. Underneath the powerful air of authority Simon projected, she sensed a deep vulnerability and the stress from his current situation radiated from him in palpable waves.

"I'm sorry." He closed his eyes a moment, then looked with steadfast intensity across at the marina. "Duty and privilege are double-edged swords."

They'd connected on some deep emotional level for the first time and he permitted her to see his true self. The power of it shook her and she intuited his meaning in an instant. "I think you're taking too much responsibility upon yourself. There's no shame in admitting a mistake."

"There is when one waits too long."

His pain rolled through her like a dark, knife-edged tide.

"If you'll excuse me. I need to see to our guests."

After that abrupt dismissal, he turned back toward her, not looking directly at her. "Please do take a break, Sheridan. We don't want you fainting on us in this heat."

"Um. Yes, all right."

With that, he walked off, game face firmly in place.

She knew the next time she saw him he'd return to his surly

disapproval, as though this exchange never happened. She shook her head at the oddness of men in general and this one in particular.

A bathroom break wouldn't be a bad idea. She headed up the hill to the small building on the top patio terrace housing the restrooms. Good thing she'd worn her low-heeled sandals, instead of the higher heels she'd considered, with all the standing, walking and climbing.

God, the heat, too. Even in her sleeveless silk sundress, the sultry night closed about her, oppressive and cloying. Even the scent of the floral decorations, which she loved on most occasions, bordered on sickening. Through the trees, she could see paparazzi hovering. Smoking and sitting on their cars. Waiting to get their own money shots as the guests left. They'd have invaded the party except for the security detail Simon hired for that purpose. She shook her head as she put out her hand to open the green louvered door to the bathroom.

"Ahhh... Yeah, baby. Like that."

"Fuck! You are so freakin' hot."

"Oh, baby. Every time I see you, I want you to fuck me. Ahhh, harder..."

She recognized those voices. Without conscious thought, she walked around the little building. Sure enough. Cecily stood bracing herself against the wall, dress hiked up over her hips, as Rupert, his pants down about his ankles, screwed her from behind.

Sheridan couldn't move. Shock paralyzed her. The couple didn't even notice her—so involved in their encounter they continued their activities.

Until the flashbulbs shot off.

Cecily's trademark screech ripped through the excited chatter of the photogs. The couple scrambled to right their clothes and get away. They ran, paparazzi after them, until the ineffectual security finally stepped in and drove the photogs back.

The commotion brought Simon and Marc running up the hill. They hadn't seen, but they weren't stupid. A word from the chief of security into Simon's ear confirmed the truth, she had no doubt.

He looked up and she caught his eye. He looked away, but not before she glimpsed the utter humiliation in his gaze. Not only must he deal with positive proof of his fiancée's infidelity, but soon the entire world would view it in full color in the tabloids. Marc's lips compressed in grim disappointment, his gaze somber, but unsurprised.

They went back to their guests, none of whom had any idea what just occurred, other than the paparazzi had invaded their gathering. Not an unusual event to most of them. The dreamlike setting so enjoyable only an hour ago now seemed sour and unpleasant. The magical, muted glow of the lights was merely a screen for the dark underbelly of the fairytale.

Another hour passed before the principals in this drama made their escape. Cecily, Rupert, Lady Selena and the dreaded mother rode in another vehicle. Thank God.

The long, silent ride back to Belle Isle on the northern end of the island along St. Lucia's tortuous narrow, winding roads proved excruciating. No one knew what to say. Robert, informed with brief discretion by Marc, appeared angry. His brows drawn together, mouth compressed. Not only had his best friend suffered a terrible humiliation, he knew the reality of the future embarrassment and could do little, even as the family solicitor. The brothers sat next to one another in silent commiseration.

As Simon had instructed, their driver pulled round to the service entrance. He'd informed the other driver to discharge his passengers at the front of the home in hopes of avoiding contact, she suspected. They climbed out of the van. Marc, with gallant forethought, waited for her and held out his hand to steady her as she stepped down. The mere touch of his hand shot lightning through her body. He pulled her close, the familiar gleam in his eye. She held firm, resisting her own desires as well as his. She had much to think about. How could she be so into Marc and so fascinated by his brother at the same time?

"Good night, Marc. I need to sleep. To think."

"I understand, love. I'm sorry you witnessed the denouement of

this situation.” He slid his hand down her arm and back up caressing her with his fingertips. “I’ll see you in the morning. My door will be open if you change your mind.” This last he added with a hint of his former cheekiness.

His brother’s humiliation hurt him and she knew he didn’t want to be alone, but exhaustion claimed her. If she went to him, there’d be little sleep. She gave him a tender smile and skimmed his stubbled face with her hand, almost changing her mind at the feel of skin. Somehow, she mustered the willpower to turn and walk away.

She found the back stairs just the other side of the kitchen. Thank God, she didn’t have to risk running into the weddingites. She didn’t think she could handle that now. Straight to bed for her.

When she reached her room, the warm glow of the bedside lamp surprised her. She’d thought she’d left that off. Shrugging, she set her purse and camera on the dresser and stripped out of her sticky silk dress and undergarments. Rifling through her suitcase, she pulled out an old t-shirt and pulled it over her head. As she walked toward the bed, the lamplight illuminated an object on her pillow. A jeweler’s box. Her heart stopped for a second in a girly fantasy, then sanity returned. The flat, rectangular box would hold a necklace. It must be from Marc, of course. He really did have a romantic soul. She picked up the box and snapped it open. The smallish gold pendant on the fine chain gleamed against the red velvet, but she couldn’t quite identify it. An animal of some kind. Holding it closer to the light, she angled the box for a better view.

The room spun.

A cougar. Someone knew her innermost secret, her greatest fear, and chose to taunt her in this hideous fashion. Dear God, she hoped it wasn’t Marc, or Simon.

The room shimmered then faded before her eyes as she dropped to the floor.

* * * *

Marc tossed on his bed, unable to find a comfortable position. The events of the evening ran through his brain in a terrible rewind. Simon hadn't even wanted to speak to him, going straight to his study and no doubt, the whiskey decanter. Since their parents died in the fire, Simon, only twelve at the time, struggled to be the strong one. Their uncle had been kind to them, raising them and running the family businesses, until he, too, died in a tragic accident before he turned fifty. Then, Simon took over, devoting himself to Marc and the family holdings. Cecily represented part of that perceived duty. Perhaps he'd been attracted to her, even fond of her, in the beginning, but her mask slipped as soon as she had the ring on her finger. Simon might not love her, but she represented an ideal and those photos would be on every tabloid in the morning, a horribly humiliating end to a dream. Marc had no doubt Simon would finally show her, and her vapid friends, the door.

He wanted Sheridan. He more than wanted her, he missed her. He wanted the comfort of her presence, her companionship. But then, he loved her. Throwing back the covers, he got out of bed and grabbed his jeans, pulling them on. He padded barefoot along the balcony to her room. The door stood open, which didn't surprise him with the heat. The sight of the t-shirt on the floor, ripped to shreds set alarm bells off. Then he noticed the jeweler's box on the bed. He shifted the box under the light to see the pendant on the necklace. When he did, icy fear shot down his spine and through his heart like a dagger. He could think of no innocent reason anyone would give her the golden cougar, a far too unusual motif.

Someone knew her secret and that individual's intent could be nothing other than malevolent. Not only did they have the curse and the upcoming deadline to face, they had a predator stalking Sheridan and judging by the condition of her t-shirt, the stress of seeing the necklace, realizing this, had voided Anna's protective spell. Sheridan had begun to shift.

Sheridan wandered out there somewhere, alone and confused. Marc clutched the box and grabbed the t-shirt. He had to talk sense into Simon and he had to find Anna. Now.

He ran downstairs to Anna's room and pounded on the door. She answered some moments later, clutching a cotton robe about her.

"Mr. Marc! What is it?"

"God, Anna. Someone knows about Sheridan. About the curse. I went to her room and found this on her pillow." He showed her the necklace.

"*Non, non. Le Bon Dieu.*" She shook her head in disbelief. "This can't be happening. Who could know?"

"It's worse than that. She meant to go straight to bed and she's not in her room." He lifted the shredded shirt. "I found this on the floor. I think she's shifted, Anna. I think the necklace interfered with your spell. Is there anything else you can do?"

Her ebony gaze met his with grave honesty. "I can try, but I think it is not possible to halt the curse again. We must speak to your brother. He must help us. We'll find her. She'll be all right and by dawn, she will return to herself. Until the spell becomes permanent upon the anniversary, she will return to herself each morning at dawn. Where is your brother?"

"The study."

They headed through the kitchen toward the main part of the house, then burst in upon him as he sat sprawled in a leather club chair before the fireplace, just about to take a swig of the whiskey straight from the crystal decanter.

They stared at one another in shock.

In spite of the extreme gravity of the situation, Marc could not help but fixate upon the sight of his eminently proper, fastidious brother drinking directly from a liquor decanter.

Anna, with her customary efficiency, took charge. Grabbing the decanter right out of Simon's hand and setting it on the table, she pointed her finger at him.

“We need you to be sober and clear headed. We have a grave situation and only you can help to set matters right. It’s time you faced up to what is, set that Cecily nonsense aside and do what is necessary.”

He stared at her in shock. She’d never spoken to him with quite that tone, Marc knew. He could see that fact alone conveyed the gravity of the situation, even to his brother’s inebriated brain. Then he locked gazes with Marc. His eyes narrowed in fury as he stared his brother down. “You bastard!” He leapt up from the chair in a flash, charging Marc and slamming him against the far wall. “You bloody bastard. That night? Making *me* listen while you—”

“Careful, Brother. Anna’s in the room. Just what did I *make* you listen to? You could have left at any time if the sounds offended you. Turned off the intercom in your room. You didn’t, did you?” Simon’s silence provided the answer he’d expected.

“We don’t have time to argue about that now, Simon. We’ve a serious problem to deal with.”

The gravity of Marc’s tone cooled Simon’s anger like a bucket of ice. “What is it?”

“It’s Sheridan.” Marc ran his hands through his hair, prepared for the usual disbelief and unpleasant battle.

Voice thready with terror, Simon paled beneath his tan. “What’s happened to her?”

“I know you don’t believe in the reincarnation or the curse. But, *we* believe she is the reincarnation of Lysette de Beauvais. We believe a powerful witch cursed her to be a cat shifter, that this curse strikes the elder female of each generation of the de Beauvais family line, that it’s triggered by true romantic love or true passion. You’ve heard all this before, but Anna had managed to conjure a spell that counteracted the curse, just enough to slow the progression, until Sheridan saw *this* in her room tonight.” Marc ripped the little gold cat from the box and held it before Simon, who reached out and clasped it reflexively to study it. He cursed.

“Yes, someone else knows about the curse. I don’t think they mean Sheridan, or us, well. There’s something else.” He held out the t-shirt. “I found this in her room, next to her bed. I think she’s shifted.”

Simon grabbed it, staring in wide-eyed horror at the shredded condition of the garment and bringing it to his nose, inhaled her scent.

Marc and Anna exchanged glances. They knew he loved her and they knew *why* he loved a woman he’d just met with such passionate intensity. After all, he’d loved her beyond all reason, and planned to marry her in another incarnation. The knowledge remained in his subconscious and the emotions of his soul. He would realize this on his own soon, but they’d run out of time. Marc and Anna both tried over the years to tell him the details of the curse—to convince him to help them set things right, but he refused to hear them out and so only knew bits and pieces.

Simon lowered the shirt. “Dear God, she’s out there alone? Possibly with someone after her?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “She’s less vulnerable in her present state, though unused to the open terrain. She will return to herself at dawn after each episode, at least until the anniversary. This is her thirtieth year. If we do nothing to break the curse, she will remain in that state forever and your family will suffer each generation, too, as it has since my ancestor, Marie, invoked the curse. I will do everything in my power to right the wrong she did in her moment of madness, but I cannot remove the curse.” Anna cast a severe gaze upon Simon. “You and Marc must do that. Yes, you’ve heard the stories—at least some of them, but they’re more than stories. You are the reincarnation of the brothers originally involved with her. The three of you must break the curse together.”

“No. We’ve discussed this before, Anna. That is too much to ask. What else can we do in the meantime?”

“Not very much. She may not remember us while in her present state. She is part cat, part Sheridan West, part Lysette de Beauvais.

Because of the curse, she will be confused—uncertain whom or what she is while shifted. This is also why she remembers nothing when she returns to human form. I think this prevented the stricken de Beauvais women from breaking the curse. They could not remember, did not have the knowledge they needed, therefore remained under its spell. If we attempt to track her, it may simply scare her off and result in injury. She must return to the house on her own.”

Marc grabbed the liquor decanter and took a swig for himself. “I guess that means we wait.” He took another swig. “We can’t have outsiders around, Simon. So when do you plan to boot Cecily and her carnivorous entourage out of our house?”

Simon sighed, sinking down in his chair. “Actually, I spoke to them before they got into the van to return to Belle Isle. I broke off the engagement with Cecily right in front of her mother and told the lot of them I wanted them all out by afternoon tomorrow, or actually I suppose it’s today.”

“How did they respond to this news?”

“Cecily spewed trite excuses, begged me for forgiveness. When that didn’t work, she turned threatening, vowed revenge. Her mother finally shut her up. I almost feel sorry for her. She ruined her Mama’s fondest hopes and “Mama” is a frightening woman. Rupert just glared at me as though I’d offended *him*. I do hope they go quietly. As we have much bigger problems, I suppose it doesn’t matter, just so long as they go.”

“I doubt they’ll go quietly, but you’re right. We’ve far more serious problems to deal with.” Marc only hoped that Simon would deal with them when the time came.

Simon jumped to his feet, pacing with jerky steps before his brother. “So that will leave us with just us and Robert in the house.”

Marc scrubbed his hand across his face in weary reluctance. “Simon, I know he’s a good friend of yours, but we have no way of knowing who put that necklace in her room. How can we rule anyone out, no matter how much we trust them? Until we’re sure, I think we

should keep everyone away from the house. We can't risk anyone seeing anything...unusual, either. It isn't as though his own house isn't just down the road anyway."

"You know, I still refuse to accept any of this nonsense you and Anna keep peddling. It's just complete bollocks. It has to be." He dragged his fingers through his hair and continued to pace.

"Possibly, and probably Robert has nothing to do with any of this. I'm sure he doesn't. God, I've known him my whole life. But are you really willing to take any unnecessary risk with Sheridan's life? Or risk having anyone see something they shouldn't? Your mind may have difficulty accepting this, but your heart doesn't. I've seen the way you look at Sheridan. Some part of your soul remembers her as her past self. I know you'd do anything to protect her."

Simon sat heavily on the couch, staring without seeing into the unlit fireplace for a moment, no more. "I'll ask him to go back to his house first thing in the morning. Make up some excuse about wanting to be alone in my humiliation."

"Good. Now I think you should listen to Anna. You should know the particulars of the curse, just in case you change your mind.

"No."

Marc pounded his fist against the mantle. "Damn it, Simon, do you really think your ignorance will change anything? Trust me. You'd figure it out all too soon, but well past the time to do anything to fix it."

"I can't face it, Marc."

"This isn't like you. You're the big, responsible brother. 'Solve the problem before it gets worse.' You've told me that more times than I care to count.

Anna stepped forward, kneeling before Simon. "Mr. Simon, we've tried to explain before, but this time you *must* listen with an open mind and heart. You must accept the reality of reincarnation at last. It is fact."

Simon sat, stony faced, refusing to look at Anna. She sighed and

then began to speak the same words she'd spoken to Marc—and to Simon so many times with less success. “You’ve heard the stories of your ancestors—twin brothers who loved the same woman. You recall, that in a fit of jealousy, the elder brother killed the younger and then himself. The woman, to my shame, died at the hands of my ancestor. The two died in the fire at the cabin that very night. Marie, my ancestor, a woman of Martinique, possessed many powers of magic. She’d always used that power to heal, but in her grief over the boys she raised, in her sudden madness, she turned diabolical.

“Firstly, she blamed the woman, Lysette, and secondly, she blamed the elder brother, Armand. She set about to impose a complicated curse upon both family lines, in truth, to impose as much suffering as possible before eventually ensuring the demise of both houses. The Des Marets family line would suffer undue tragedy each generation in recompense for the boys’ sins. The de Beauvais line, Lysette’s line, she cursed even more cruelly. The eldest female of each branch of each generation would turn into the form of a beast during the night upon first experiencing true love or passion. She would have no memory of this with the dawn’s light and her condition would worsen until she lost her humanity permanently and simply ‘disappeared.’”

Simon shifted in restless disbelief. “These kinds of things don’t exist in the modern world.”

Marc scoffed at his resistance. “Of course they do, Simon. Belief in the paranormal is more commonplace now than ever and evil exists, I promise you. Don’t tell me you can’t feel it still lurking in the dark places of our island.”

Simon shook his head in denial, but the movement lacked conviction. “Is there no way to stop this?”

“There is one possibility. Perhaps more to taunt those afflicted than expecting the possibility of success, Marie offered one improbable ritual to lift the curse. The descendants, and in this case, reincarnations, of the original three players, must ‘join together as

one' in the carnal sense. They must do this upon the site of the original transgression, no later than midnight on the eve of the thirtieth year of the female's life."

"Think about it, Simon. Think about the fate of our family line. More importantly, think of Sheridan's fate if this curse is not broken by midnight two nights from now. You have the power to help stop it. If you will."

Chapter 5

The cat crept through the dark vegetation, lonely in the midst of the night. Her destination fixed with firm certainty in her mind, but not the precise route or the reason behind the journey. Emerging into a small clearing, she explored her surroundings. The burned out ruins of the cabin filled her with a sense of familiarity, both comforting and frightening.

She jumped up the steps to the old floor. In her feline mind, memories from another being, long dead, stirred. The scorch marks retreated from the stone. Wooden walls rose to be covered by a roof and timbered ceiling. Colorful rag rugs covered the stone floor. The few simple pieces of furniture—a bed, small table and chair—nearly filled the available space. The golden glow from the oil lamp filled the dark corners of the dwelling. A smiling, mocha-skinned woman handed sweets to the handsome dark-haired boy sitting upon the neatly made cot next to a little girl in a yellow dress with long, full skirts. The cat couldn't see the face of the little girl, only what the little girl could see. She viewed the room through the little girls' perspective.

The cat shook its animal head in confusion. The scene shifted. The interior of the cabin appeared less colorful and even smaller. The mocha-skinned woman no longer smiled. She'd aged, her ebony hair turned grey, lines covered her face and her expression of utter hatred frightened the cat. She advanced upon the cat, screaming in a language the cat couldn't understand with her arm raised in threat. The cat saw the knife in the woman's hand, its blade gleaming in the light from the single lantern. The cat tried to run past, but the woman

caught it, her strength overwhelming as they struggled. Breaking free, the cat fell backward against the table. The scent of spilled lamp oil filled its nostrils seconds before the flames consumed her.

She screamed in terror, running without direction into the night, desperate to escape the searing pain. The cat slowed eventually. She no longer felt the burn. Instinct led her onward to some place else she knew she needed to visit, some place close—the cat could sense it. She turned her sculpted nose into the wind, but could discern nothing out of the ordinary in this tropical environment so familiar, and yet, so alien. She pressed on, the desperate importance of her mission filling her with determination. The first faint blues and lavenders of dawn lit the sky as dawn approached. A mill. She had to get to the mill. Her legs grew heavy, her pace dragging. The cat stumbled and fell. She tried to get up, but oblivion overcame her.

* * * *

“Good Morning, Robert.” Simon picked up a plate from the serving table set up on the verandah overlooking the pool.

“Good Morning, Simon.” Robert, who’d been eating his own breakfast, looked up at Simon’s greeting and watched him select his own meal from the buffet. “I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

Simon met his old friend’s sympathetic blue eyes and experienced a momentary instant of guilt at his deception. However, he did still feel the necessity for it. “I feel like a complete ass, Robert. How could I have been so blind?”

“You’re an honorable man, Simon. It simply wouldn’t occur to you that your fiancée would betray you right before your wedding, not to mention, under your own roof. I saw the lot of them leave early this morning. Presumably the wedding is off?”

“Yes. Is there anything we can do to quash the scandal? If we could get the photographers to sell us the photos...”

“Simon, you know very well those photos are already on the

covers of the tabloids. I'd brace myself. I suspect video footage will show up, too."

"Good God." He set his fork down and rested his forehead in his hand. "I've screwed up royally, haven't I? I thought I'd found a gem for a wife and it's all turned to shit. I'll be a laughingstock."

"Simon, don't be so hard on yourself. Cecily is young, beautiful, well bred. It's perfectly understandable that you'd want her. Any man would."

"I'm having a bit of difficulty dealing with all of this." He swept his arm to include the preparations for the wedding, the tents and chairs set up, the extra buffet tables for the reception. "I think it'd be easier on me if I had a bit of time alone to cope."

Robert took his meaning at once.

"I really would rather stay. I think it'd do you good to be surrounded by your true friends at a time like this."

Simon struggled to hide his surprise his friend didn't acquiesce in his typical gracious fashion. He didn't doubt his motives, but it made things far more awkward. "Thank you for thinking of me. You've always been a true friend and I appreciate that, but I absolutely feel a need to be alone."

Robert's brows rose in surprise. Well they should, Simon had trusted him implicitly his whole life and he'd never questioned his wisdom.

"Of course, I'll pack after breakfast and return home. I'm just a phone call away if you need me."

Simon stood. "Sorry. I suppose I'm not as hungry as I'd thought." He held out his hand to Robert, who'd also stood and shook his hand. "Thank you, Robert."

"Don't worry. Things will work out as they should."

"Good-bye for now. Think I'll go lie down." As he headed into the house, Simon reflected on the odd phrasing of Robert's last comment.

* * * *

Less than an hour later, Simon watched from a window in the guest wing overlooking the car park as Robert climbed into his BMW and drove off for his own home. He headed down the hall to the family wing, to the door of Sheridan's room and tapped lightly. When he received no response, he opened it. She lay in a sprawl on the bed, naked, covered in dirt and bits of vegetation and a few angry looking scratches.

He wanted to alert Anna or Marc, but what could they do without traumatizing Sheridan? Better to let her awake on her own and assume no one knew she'd been traipsing about the countryside naked.

Jesus. How she'd crept in without anyone seeing her, he'd no idea. There had to be a more logical explanation than the hocus pocus Anna and Marc kept spouting. Some bizarre sleepwalking ailment, perhaps. He'd make some calls and get the top specialists in to see her. Curses didn't kill people in the twenty-first century, for God's sake. He did love her. Had since the first moment he saw her. He had no logical explanation for that either. Her relationship with his brother didn't even matter. He wanted her too. Listening to her in the throes of passion over the intercom had almost killed him, and he *would* do anything to protect her.

He shut the door quietly. No matter that it wasn't yet ten, he needed a Scotch and some boring paperwork. Perhaps then, he could find his center again. He headed to the stairs and the sanctuary of his study.

* * * *

Sheridan, clean after considerable scrubbing in the shower, applied antiseptic and a bandage to the last of her many scrapes. Shit! What had she done? Rolled in the dirt? Run naked through the forest?

Yes, she supposed she probably had—as some kind of freaking cat shape-shifter. Either that or somebody had done one helluva hypnotic suggestion number on her. Her head pounded. She hadn't had any alcohol since her second night here so she couldn't be hung over. Couldn't write all this off as some drunken escapade.

With Cecily gone and the wedding off, she'd finished the job. Refunding her fee didn't bother her at all. She could go back to her own home, alone, taking her freakish problem with her, before she hurt someone. Ignoring the pain in the region of her heart at the thought of leaving Marc, and yes, even Simon, she went to find someone to accept her resignation.

After the hubbub of the last few days and the constant stream of guests, the house seemed eerily silent. She headed for the kitchen and found Anna baking bread. As Sheridan entered her spotless domain, Anna looked up. Her gaze, to Sheridan's surprise, had a much softer edge to it. Why, she almost appeared friendly. The gentle smile nearly knocked her over. She'd not been aware the woman could smile.

“Anna, have you seen Marc or Simon? I need to let them know I'll be leaving.”

The woman's eyes widened large as saucers. “Leaving, miss? No, no. You mustn't leave.”

Surprised by the panicked tone to the ever-composed woman's voice, she tried to explain. “Anna, Marc hired me to come here and photograph a wedding and now the wedding is off.”

“Oh, but I'm sure Mr. Marc would be heartbroken if you left. With his poor brother's disappointment, I'm sure he'd want the support of his close friend. I'm sorry, miss, but I've noticed that you and he have become close.”

Sheridan flushed, the heat creeping up her neck to her face. “Yes, Anna, but...”

“The Autumnal equinox is tonight. This is a very important date for this family. Please talk to Mr. Marc. You must stay for that if you care about him at all.”

“All right, Anna. I need to speak to Marc anyway. Do you know where I can find him?”

“He’s out at the car park, miss. I believe he’s getting ready to go into town on an errand.”

Frustrated and confused, Sheridan hurried out to the driveway. Why in the hell did a woman she’d been certain hated her suddenly want her to stay with Marc, to remain for this Harvest Festival, Equinox, or whatever? It made no sense. She sped up to a slow jog. With her luck, she’d miss Marc and she really wanted to get this settled now. Otherwise, she might not have the courage to leave.

She caught him as he got into his car. “Marc.”

He looked up, his gaze lighting to molten gold as he saw her. “Sheridan. Love. Are you all right?” He closed the distance between them.

She looked up at him as he clasped her arms, wincing as he brushed against one of her many scrapes.

“Oh, God. Your arms. We must get Anna to put some antiseptic on these so they don’t become infected.” He clasped her hands, concern evident on his face.

“No. Thank you. It’s okay. I found a first aid kit in the bathroom and took care of it.” Her heart squeezed a bit at his caring words. Her eyes stung, but she refused to shed tears. She’d handle her problems on her own like a big girl.

“Marc, you hired me to photograph Simon’s wedding. There isn’t going to be a wedding now, so you certainly have no need of a photographer. I think it’s best if I leave. I have some personal issues I need to deal with, too.”

His brows drew together in a furious, hurt frown. “No need? What about us? What about my need for you? Doesn’t that count? Jesus, Sheridan. I thought we’d gone far beyond photographer and client.”

“Of course we have Marc. It’s just that I think I need to have some time to myself to sort things out.”

“Whatever you’re going through, love, I want to help you. I

thought you liked it here. I thought perhaps even grouchy Simon had grown on you.”

She laughed at the all-too-accurate description of her impression of his brother. “I love it here, Marc. That’s not the issue. There are things about me you don’t know.”

“Please, Sheridan. Please stay at least through tonight. It’s a very important anniversary for our family. The Autumnal equinox and all that. Please. I insist.”

She sighed. “I’ll stay until tomorrow, then.” She pulled her hands free and backed away from him, looking away. “I’m sorry, Marc.”

“Don’t be sorry. We’ll find a way to work things out. Look, this errand can’t wait, but when I get back, we’ll have a long talk. I have some things to tell you.”

That brought her gaze back up to his. “What things?”

He smiled that gentle smile that never failed to speed up her heart rate and curl her toes. “We’ll talk when I get back. What I have to say may take some time.” He got into the car and with a final wave, drove off.

Crap. That left Simon. He technically had hired her, so she needed to speak to him, if she could find him. She’d start with his study—Marc told her Simon usually spent his time there. She turned and began the long walk through the enormous house.

The heavy wooden door to the study hung ajar. She rapped as loud as she could, but her knuckles barely made a sound on the rock-like wood. He must have acute hearing, as he immediately acknowledged the gesture.

“Enter.”

She pushed open the heavy door and the sight meeting her gaze had her mouth dropping open in shock. Prim, proper, irascible Simon had morphed into a dark sex god, lounging behind the desk in his leather chair, jeans clad legs and bare feet propped up on the desk, white shirt half-undone, hair mussed as though he’d just run his hand through it, or just gotten out of bed—and not to sleep. He clasped a

glass of whiskey, from which he sipped on occasion, as he looked her up and down with a hot, sensual gaze. A gaze that did funny things to her insides and other parts as well.

Oh my God. Had the pods gotten Simon? Had he gone round the bend in his heartbreak over his broken engagement? “Simon, are you feeling okay?”

He smiled. She supposed the concern in her voice pleased him and he confirmed her supposition. “I’ve never felt better, Sheridan. Do you truly care?” He lowered his feet from the desk and stood up. She’d never noticed his height. Even Marc stood a couple of inches shorter. He advanced toward her and she found herself breathless. “Yes, of course I care, Simon.” Sexual tension buzzed through the room like a swarm of bees. She fought the urge to take a step back, or maybe a step forward...

“I’m so glad to hear that. I’m just wondering the extent of this ‘caring’ you have for me.” He closed the distance between them. “Drink?” The word more an order than a question, he held his own glass to her lips and when she didn’t pull away, he tipped the end up and she obediently swallowed some of the fragrant whiskey.

The idea of drinking out of his glass almost made her hyperventilate. When had Stodgy Simon morphed into an edgy sex idol? He set the glass on a side table and slid his arms around her. Her chest seized up. How could she think of doing this to Marc? She loved Marc. She loved him, but she wanted his brother desperately. What was wrong with her?

“Simon...”

Lowering his head, he fit his mouth to hers before he ran his tongue across her lips. “Mmm. I love the taste of whiskey. On you.”

If her heart beat any faster, she’d pass out. She stretched her arms up to circle his neck, clinging for support since she didn’t know how much longer her wobbly legs would hold her up. She should walk away, but she couldn’t separate herself from him. Every square inch their bodies touched, electric tingles sizzled. He kissed her, gentle and

coaxing at first with his lips and tongue, and then when she made no attempt to pull away, he went in for the kill, thrusting his tongue inside her mouth, grinding her against him. He clasped her ass and rubbed his rigid erection in sensuous abandon against her mound. She moaned in delight. She'd yet to achieve her goal in coming to his study, but all of a sudden, she'd only one question on her mind. She pulled back, breaking their lip lock.

"Simon, I thought you hated me, disapproved of me. You kept giving me that disgusted glare every time you looked my way."

He laughed. Dear God, she'd never heard the man laugh before, but she thought she'd do anything to hear such a wondrous sound again.

"Woman, you saw lust, not disgust. I wanted you from the moment I first saw you, but Marc got there first. More importantly, my engagement meant something, at least to me." He shrugged with rueful acceptance. "Every time I saw you, I'd get a hard-on. It became awkward trying to hide it, let me tell you. I felt so guilty for wanting you." Bending, he ran his tongue up and down the sensitive side of her neck, nipping at the tender juncture of neck and shoulder.

"Ahhh. Simon, that feels soo good." He smelled so good, too. Man, after-shave, and whiskey. She pushed him away. "I just can't do this. There's something I have to tell you."

"I know about you and my brother, Sheridan. Don't feel guilty because you're attracted to both of us. There are forces at play here that neither one of us could understand. Trust me when I tell you that Marc won't mind."

"Simon, you've been drinking, you've just been hurt terribly, you're not thinking with a clear head. I don't want you to do something you'd regret. Oomph!" Proceeding to kiss her silly, Simon showed her the full meaning of the expression. She couldn't have mustered a coherent thought if her life depended upon it.

He explored her mouth with lips, teeth and tongue as though he owned it, an aggressive edge to his loving. He took what he wanted,

not that she minded. Sliding kisses down her neck, he suckled and bit on the most sensitive spot until she knew she'd be sporting a hickey later. He slid his hand inside the cup of her bra clasping her breast. She hadn't even noticed him unbuttoning the top of her dress. He flicked her tender nipple with his thumb, until, encouraged by her groans of delight, he undid the front clasp of her bra. Her breasts popped free and his mouth found her nipple before she'd a moment to catch her breath. Sensation shot straight down to her womb. Dimly, she felt his arm move to sweep the papers off his desk before he pushed her back down on it.

He pulled the front of his shirt open and buttons flew about the room, pinging where they landed. Dear God, he planned to fuck her right on his desk in the middle of the day and she'd let him. He followed her down and continued to lave her breasts and suck at the diamond-hard nipples. She tried to stifle her cries of pleasure and didn't succeed. She wanted to explore his chest, run her fingers over those hard, defined muscles covered with a light dusting of hair. She didn't get the chance. With one hand, he caught her wrists and pulled them up over her head, the other he slid up under her skirt. Grasping her panties, he ripped them from her before sliding a finger straight up into her wet pussy.

"Ahhh. Simon." He held her helpless to do anything but enjoy the sensations he created. The experience, unlike any before, drove her arousal to new heights. She gasped for air and lifted her hips, seeking more.

"Like that, do you? How about this?" He slid a second finger up into her and began to massage her internally.

"Ohhh. Dear God." Heart failure couldn't be far off. What'd happened to Grouchy Simon?

As though he knew her thoughts, he chuckled softly. "I don't think I've ever been so hard in my entire life. There's just something about you that drives me wild." He teased her slick clit with gentle circular strokes as he continued to explore her with his fingers. He

drew a nipple into his mouth and sucked hard on it as he slid a third finger up inside her sheath. The orgasm ripped through her, sharp, intense and long. She cried out, loud enough for anyone in the house to hear—they hadn't even shut the door to the study—but the intense pleasure caught her so by surprise, she just couldn't help it. He kept up his play, extending her pleasure.

Standing, once her inner contractions slowed, he grabbed hold of her ankles, pulling her to the edge of the desk and propping her knees up with her legs spread wide. He gazed into her eyes, so intent, so serious all of a sudden as he reached down and unzipped his jeans, pushing them down around his thighs. His cock popped free, huge and purple in its engorgement, the tip flaring in a delicate arch.

Her mouth watered. She couldn't decide whether she wanted him in her mouth or inside *her* more. He made the choice for her, fitting his cock to the opening of her pussy and thrusting all the way inside as he hefted her hips up and forward. The shock nearly stopped her heart, the pleasure so intense she screamed aloud. She strained toward him, meeting him stroke for stroke, unable to control her loud moans.

"Mr. Simon, is everything all right? I heard a scream..." Anna froze where she'd stopped, just inside the study, jaw agape.

Simon paused and calmly looked toward her, a rare smile lighting his face. "Everything couldn't be better, Anna."

Taking in the tableau before her, she lowered her gaze and turned around. "Please forgive me for intruding." With that, she walked out, closing the door behind her.

Horrified, Sheridan scrambled to sit up, her cheeks red hot, but Simon's restraining hand on her chest, and his still-hard cock buried inside her held her in place. Guilt for betraying Marc ate at her, tightening her gut. Anna would tell Marc, and she didn't want her weak moment to hurt him. "Simon, please let me up. I've never been so humiliated in my entire life."

Simon stroked her breasts with smooth reassurance. "Relax, darling. Shhh. It's all right."

“Simon, what must Anna think of me now? I don’t think she liked me from the first. She knows I’ve been seeing Marc and now she catches me with you.” She swept her arm to indicate the paper-strewn study and their joined bodies. “Like this.”

Simon moved within her again, pulling his cock almost all the way out of her, before sliding all the way back in. Her breath hitched. He didn’t intend to stop and her body refused to make him stop.

“Simon.”

He paused again. “Darling, it’s okay. I don’t know why you think Anna’s never liked you. Trust me. Nothing could be further from the truth. I can also assure you seeing us together thrilled Anna.”

“Oh, right. Simon, that’s just not natural. I’m getting the distinct impression that there’s something going on around here and I’m the only one not in on the joke.” Her voice rose as her anger and her arousal built. She hated being played by a man, or men. “It’s not a nice feeling.”

He met her gaze head on. Hurt flashing for a brief instant. “This is no joke, Sheridan.” He thrust into her again, picking up a rhythm slow and steady enough to stimulate and frustrate at the same time. No matter how she strained against him, he refused to pick up the pace, and thus punishing her for doubting him.

On the edge of yet another low moan, she glared at him. “Let me go.”

“You can go any time you want. All you have to do is pull away.” He looked down to where their bodies merged. “Can you do that, Sheridan?”

Of course, she couldn’t. Instead, she strained against him further. “Please, Simon.”

“Tell me what you want.”

“Fuck me harder, faster. I can’t stand it, Simon. Please.”

“Look at me.”

She looked up, meeting his deep blue gaze that glowed with its icy fire. The intensity she read there made her gasp. He hammered into

her, granting her wish until the world fell away as climax after climax blasted through her, leaving her shaking. She watched as he came, shuddering and calling her name and the erotic sight brought her so close to the edge again the touch of his hand brought her yet another orgasm. He collapsed atop her as they both recovered. She lay there, hating to admit to the contentment that flowed through her. When she'd recovered to the point she thought she could walk, she pushed at him and he let her up.

She couldn't look at him as she pulled her clothing back into place. She needed time alone to think.

"I'll carry you." His deep voice curled around her from where he still sat on the edge of the desk.

She flushed. "No. I can walk." *Probably.*

"Sheridan—" She ran from the study, anxious for the solitude of her own bedroom. She couldn't take much more of this. A bit on the stoic side, she'd never really cried much, but she planned to change that policy.

Chapter 6

Slamming her door behind her, she threw herself across the bed. Jesus, she'd turned into some kind of slut. Sleeping with one man, then with his brother and she'd developed feelings for both. Strong feelings. She couldn't forget her other huge problem, which as far as she could tell, started the day Marc Des Marets had walked into her LA studio. Quite a coincidence, but then gorgeous men always brought trouble. Two gorgeous men doubled the trouble.

A sharp rap at her door brought her up to a seated position. The damned man wouldn't have followed her up here, would he? The door opened without a pause for a response.

The taciturn housekeeper walked in, bringing an air of excitement along with her customary grave expression. "Anna?"

"Miss." Anna smiled, no beamed, at her. She'd about lost patience with these people and their freaky mood swings.

"I'd prefer to be alone, Anna."

"Yes, miss. I know, but I must tell you some very important things. You must know the truth before it's too late.

This ought to be good. "Okay, Anna. I'll listen." She indicated the chair opposite the bed. "Please, sit."

Anna ignored the chair and sat beside her on the bed, taking her hands in hers. Surprised, she fought the impulse to pull away. Not at all sure she wanted to hear what Anna had to say, but too curious to leave, she kept her gaze trained on her.

Anna ducked her head. "Miss, I'm so sorry I interrupted...I didn't know..."

"Anna, please let's not discuss that any more."

“Miss, I will explain everything. Don’t be embarrassed or feel guilty about that. It is right to embrace your fate. You see, in the fall of 1789, handsome twin Des Marets brothers managed these lands. Their parents spent much of their time traveling the Continent with their youngest son, Henri. The father held a title as an hereditary count and he and his countess spent much time at court in England. The terrible troubles rocked their native France and they worked behind the scenes to rescue relatives, friends, anyone they could. The boys’ old nurse, Marie, a woman from Martinique, rumored to be a witch, raised the boys. She loved them very much, and they her.

“The boys, as you can imagine, enjoyed extreme popularity within St. Lucian society. Many esteemed French families settled here on plantations and as custom dictated, both young men selected brides worthy of their station from amongst these families. The elder brother, Armand Des Marets, chose his childhood sweetheart, Lysette de Beauvais. He proved fortunate in his duty, as for him, the match brought true love. Those two shared a bond and a passion beyond description.” Anna sighed, her face heavy with sadness, as though the events had just occurred. She released Sheridan’s hands and clasped hers together.

“Poor Jacques, the younger twin, did not fare as well. His family arranged an engagement for him with a neighbor, Isabelle Rousseau. Beautiful, yet cold and quite vain, she and Jacques didn’t care for one another, yet she wished for the status marriage to him would secure for her and he intended to do his duty.” Anna rose and paced to the open doorway. “Unfortunately, he loved only Lysette de Beauvais.” She turned and gazed at Sheridan.

Every time Anna mentioned Lysette, she looked at her with that same air of intent expectancy, as though the name should mean something to her. When she said nothing, Anna continued her story.

“As the wedding of Armand and Lysette approached, Jacques turned despondent. Heartbreak warred with honor within him. He begged Lysette to meet him in the sugar mill, intending to persuade

her to run away with him to America. Though she loved Armand with deep intensity, she loved Jacques, too. They'd been her friends her entire life, her world. When he set out to seduce her, she could not resist."

"This is very interesting family history, Anna. I don't understand why you're telling me all this, though."

"Please, let me finish. You will understand soon."

"Of course. Go ahead." What else could she do? This story held such importance for Anna. It also affected Marc and Simon. She settled back on the bed.

"Isabelle Rousseau suspected Jacques' intentions and alerted Armand in Marie's hearing. They refused to believe her tale, knowing her spiteful nature. Discovering that Jacques wasn't in the house as expected, the three went in search. They caught the lovers in the sugar mill. Armand, crazed with jealousy and hurt, attacked his beloved brother Jacques. Jacques, filled with guilt and grief, didn't fight back. Marie tried to intervene, but she proved no match against such a strong man in the frenzy of betrayed rage. Jacques died at the hands of his brother, who choked the life out of his own twin."

Anna paced the room, wringing her hands in distress. The emotions of the past haunted this island, and took on life in the present. They held Anna within their grip, and now claimed Sheridan, too. The rage, grief, and overwhelming guilt slowly pulled away the curtain veiling the thoughts and visceral reactions of those long-gone, yet ever present. Her heart beat faster as the tragic tale continued.

"Marie, mad with grief over these events, turned on Armand and Lysette. She cursed the Des Marets family to suffer extraordinary tragedy each generation. She cursed Lysette and the de Beauvais women descended from her line to 'walk the earth neither beast nor woman. A creature no man would desire.' Any time a descendant of Lysette's line discovered true passion or love, she'd begin shifting into the form of a cat, returning to herself at dawn, with no knowledge of her experience. These episodes would continue with increasing

frequency while she stayed with her beloved, until the woman became the cat always.”

“Dear God. That’s been happening to me. But, I’m not descended from a de Beauvais family in St. Lucia.”

“How do you know? Have you traced your family? So many don’t know their origins. Lysette de Beauvais had a younger sister who married later and left the island. For America.”

“No.” The terrible truth sank into her bones.

“That’s why my black-outs began after I met Marc.”

“Yes.”

“There’s more, child. This curse will continue until it is broken or until the last de Beauvais woman has died. You are the last of your line, are you not?”

“Yes, I do know that much.”

“One chance exists to end the trauma for both families. The victims may break the curse if the two brothers of the Des Marets line and the female descendant of the de Beauvais line unite, physically, as one, at the site of the tragedy prior to its anniversary and no later than the thirtieth year of the last remaining de Beauvais woman.”

“You’re saying *I* am that woman. Since I’m now thirty and this is the anniversary, Marc, Simon and I must...join together in the sugar mill?”

“Yes. Before midnight.”

“What happens if we don’t break the curse?”

“It becomes permanent. Tragedy will follow each generation of Des Marets as it has since that time. You’ll shift more and more often, until you become the cat, losing all of your human self. Forever.” She paused, her calm face and matter-of-fact tone at odds with the fierce intensity of her gaze. The bizarre, the macabre, to her simply represented the reality of island life. “You must also know that you are more than the descendant of Lysette, you are her reincarnation.”

“Oh, Anna. This is too bizarre. It can’t be true. I don’t even believe in reincarnation, and that I must ‘join’ with both Simon and

Marc at once on the very spot of Jacques' death? No.”

“The curse is what it is. Perhaps Marie wanted the souls of Jacques and Armand to learn to share the very person who drove them apart. To set aside jealousy and possessiveness, for love. Or, in her rage over the loss, she wanted to make it as difficult as possible to remove the curse and in a manner befitting the crime. We will never know for sure her intentions. In her state of mind, she may not have known. The fact remains that curse is real. I can't make you believe in reincarnation, either. Whether you believe or not, it is fact.”

Dread gripped her as the concept triggered memories of fire and searing pain. “Anna, what happened to Lysette?”

“She followed Marie back to her cabin, intent on begging her forgiveness and persuading her to rescind the terrible curse. Marie, still in her maddened state, attacked the woman she'd loved like her own daughter. In the struggle, they knocked the oil lamp off the table. Lysette's long skirts caught on fire. Armand, who'd gone after her, tried to get them out, but the flames beat him back. My ancestors said in their last sight of them, Marie clasped the screaming Lysette to her breast. Whether to comfort her in her agony or to prevent her escape, we'll never know.”

A cold chill swept down her spine. “Armand?”

“He returned to the sugar mill for one last look at his brother, and then he threw himself from the bluff to the rocks below.”

“So, Simon and Marc must be descended from the younger brother, Henri.”

“Yes. The parents fell victim to the curse and Madame Guillotine, but young Henri managed to escape and return home.”

“If I'm Lysette, then Simon must be Armand and Marc must be Jacques.”

“Yes.”

Shock and grief set her to shaking, yet Sheridan couldn't assimilate this preposterous tale. Things like this didn't happen. “How do you even know this, Anna?”

“I am the descendant of Marie’s brother. He witnessed much of what took place. The story has been handed down from generation to generation. We’ve made it our mission to right the wrongs our ancestress did in her time of madness.”

“Do Marc and Simon know?”

“Yes, and Marc’s willing to break the curse. He knows it must be done. Simon refuses to believe, refuses to participate in the ritual. For him to accept the truth of this and do what must be done, he must accept that he’s Armand. That as Armand, he killed his own brother. I believe this is the reason he can’t accept this.”

Something clicked in her mind, a doorway opened and vague memories floated in. Lavish parties, muted laughter, and the scents of tallow, sweat, and pomade. The decadent swirl of multi-hued gauze gowns about a polished wooden ballroom floor. A tall man with a serious countenance, save when he glanced at her, warmth glowing in his gaze and his lips curling up in a brief smile. Another man, so like the first in appearance, yet so light-hearted as he embraced her. And her heart swelling with love, contorting with guilt... No. She didn’t want to believe, but she couldn’t deny what her heart remembered. “There must be a way. I’ve got to talk to Marc as soon as he gets back. I have to figure out a way to get Simon into that mill. This has to stop, Anna.”

Anna took her hand, clasping it with firm resolve. “Yes. You can do this.”

* * * *

Sheridan waited for Marc downstairs. Nerves churned in her gut. Apart from all the other issues, she’d have to confess to him what she’d done with his brother. Anna believed he wanted her with both of them, but what if he despised her for cheating? As soon as he drove up, she ran outside to greet him. He stepped out of the car and the expression on her face must’ve told him she knew the truth. He held

out his arms to her and she threw herself into them. She hadn't even noticed the tears she'd shed until he bent to kiss them away.

"You know?"

She nodded. "Anna told me the whole story. I couldn't believe it at first, didn't believe, but..."

"I know. The rational mind cannot accept, yet the heart remembers. She first told me the year I turned eighteen. I thought she'd gone round the bend and I grew up on the island where paranormal is normal. I did research and found historical evidence to support much of the story. The other things, the curse, your shifting, the way we must remove the curse—those all took me years to accept. Simon never has."

"Marc, I've got to tell you something. About Simon..."

He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "What is it, love? You can tell me anything."

The tears flowed again. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen. I just went to his study to speak to him, but he acted so different. I couldn't stop myself..."

"Shhh, darling." His warm hazel eyes met hers. She saw nothing but loving acceptance and gentle amusement. "It's okay. I'm happy you've been with Simon. You know about the curse, so you must know that we three need each other." He placed a hand on either side of her face and bent to kiss her with gentle reassurance. "We can remove the curse with your cooperation. Your encouragement will persuade him eventually, but I don't know if we have enough time. He'd do anything for you, but he cannot accept the reality of the curse."

"I've got to find a way to get Simon to the mill tonight. If he doesn't believe in the curse, he shouldn't refuse a tryst in a romantic mill, if I tell him it's my fantasy. Should he?"

"No. He wants you so badly, he'd take you anywhere you let him. You're talking about deceiving him, though. Tricking him into participating in the ritual. He might not forgive us."

“It would break my heart if he didn’t, but we’ve got to at least try.”

She looked up at Marc, threading her hands through his hair. “It isn’t as though we could force him to do anything. Do you think he’d refuse if he had that, um, opportunity?”

His lips curved upward, and he leaned down and kissed her tenderly, exploring her mouth with his clever tongue then broke the kiss, his tawny gaze heated. “No. He won’t refuse.” He caressed her back, his hands sliding down to her butt, claspng it with a firm grip and pulling her against him. “Darling, do you understand what we will do during the ritual?”

She ducked her head. She had an erotic image in her head of how it would have to be. “I think so. I’ve never...I mean, I don’t know if I can...”

“Does the idea intrigue you? Both of us, at once?” He ground his steel-hard erection against her.

She gasped as he rubbed across her clit, decadent images shifting through her head. “Yes.”

“Good. It intrigues me, too. Don’t you worry about Simon. He’ll give in without a fight when the time comes. Now, we don’t have much time to prepare you, but I’ll do everything I can to make it the joyous experience it should be.”

“What do you mean?”

He pulled her with him toward the house. “I’ll show you.”

* * * *

At nearly six o’clock, Sheridan walked down the hall to Simon’s study, the sun just setting. Anna hadn’t even bothered with dinner. Too nervous to eat, they’d all sat together in the living room, alternately pacing and sitting, speaking of anything other than the topic uppermost in their minds. Simon told Anna that afternoon that he wouldn’t be joining them for dinner anyway. They’d all realized

his effort to avoid them and the anniversary.

She smoothed her palms in nervous distraction down the front of the sensuous deep blue silk charmeuse cocktail dress she wore. By far the dressiest and sexiest garment she'd brought, she never thought she'd have the chance to wear it. Tonight seemed the appropriate occasion. Apart from her high-heeled pumps and the diamond drop earrings Marc gave her that afternoon, she wore nothing with or under the dress. It clung in to her, leaving little to the imagination.

Taking a final deep breath, she knocked on the study door.

"Enter."

She pushed the door open. Once again, he lounged in his chair, nursing a scotch. Her mouth went dry at the look of him. Since Cecily's departure, he'd taken to dressing down. The jeans and untucked dress shirts he now favored suited him. This shirt even matched the blue of his eyes. She walked into the room, trying for graceful and sexy in the unfamiliar heels. "We never finished our...discussion this afternoon. I want to. Now."

His mouth dropped open for a moment, and then a look of undisguised sexual want stole across his face. He got up from the chair and came around the desk to where she stood. He reached for her, but she dodged him.

"Not here. There's a place I've found. I want you to go there with me." She took his hand and led him out the back of the house and across the lawns. Terror had her heart pounding. What if he pulled away? Refused to go? She'd pretend she didn't know, but she could feel the bond between them growing. He knew her intention, she could see it in the half-angry, half-resigned glint in his gaze, and he still went. She stole a glance at him. A muscle twitched in his jaw as he tensed it, but the gaze he turned upon her burned with desire.

They stopped before the door of the ancient sugar mill. Light from dozens of candles filled the room with a glow like goodness and love. A velvet-covered duvet lay on the floor in a cleared space next to the gears with dozens of pillows covering it. She turned to see his

reaction, not letting go of his hand, lest he leave. It broke her heart to see the fear in his gaze. Yet, along with that, desire glowed. “Please, Simon. Come love me.” She trembled with a dizzying mixture of nerves and arousal as she reached up to slip one shoulder strap off. The flare in his eyes encouraged her. She stepped back into the mill. He followed, his gaze intent upon the bodice of her dress as she slipped the other strap down and the dress slid to her waist.

“You are so beautiful.” Simon closed the distance between them and reached out to cup her breasts before he leaned in and kissed her. He tasted of whiskey and Simon and she savored the closeness. She’d never dreamed she’d want to share so much with two men, but the rightness settled with unmistakable surety about her heart.

Finally, he broke the kiss and bent his head to take her nipple into his mouth, licking and suckling with delicate finesse that nearly drove her mad.

“Ahh, Simon.”

Her cries of pleasure fueled his need, and he turned feral, unzipping her dress, almost ripping it in his haste to pull it from her body. He looked his fill, pulling his shirt off, heedless of the popping buttons and quickly stepping out of his jeans. She sank to the duvet, licking her lips at the sight of his beautiful cock rising hard and hot—for her. That, more than anything, drew her belly tight and sent moisture drenching the empty place she so badly wanted him to fill. This wild side of him she’d experienced in the study, affected her with overwhelming intensity, freeing her wanton urges, suppressing her inhibitions, and she wanted more. She held out her arms and he covered her, kissing, licking, sucking his way down her body until that glorious moment when his mouth caressed her pussy. He thrust his tongue inside her with aggressive possession.

“Oh, God. Please, Simon. Please, fuck me.”

He levered himself above her and thrust into her roughly. Penetrating deep. Over and over. Her screams of delight echoed off the ruined stone walls.

He startled her when he rolled her over on top of him, now pulling her down hard on his shaft. The new position stimulated a sensitive spot inside her and her orgasm rolled through her, first as a gentle wave, then an explosive burst of pleasure. He continued to fuck her through the spasms, pulling her down to whisper in her ear, "Marc is here, darling. Just relax."

"What?" Still disoriented, the sensation of the cool gel applied by a strong masculine finger to her tight anal opening startled her. Simon held her firmly in place, crooning words of love and comfort. Marc spread her legs wider and she felt the tip of his penis just start to push into her delicate entrance. Fear of the unknown simmered just beneath the surface of her consciousness, yet curiosity and visceral longing proved far stronger as the idea of what they would do sent a fresh flood of desire through her. Her nipples hardened and she moaned.

"Stop right now, or I'll shoot Marc."

The three froze in shock. Simon's face went pale as death as he gazed past her and Marc. "Robert. What are you doing?"

"I should think that would be obvious, Simon. I'm preventing the ritual. I want the curse to stand. I want the three of you to separate. Now."

Marc stood up and helped Sheridan to stand.

Simon stood up and pushed Sheridan behind Marc. "You know about the curse?"

"Of course, you fool. I am descended from the line of Isabelle Rousseau. You recall Isabelle, don't you Marc? The spurned fiancée of Jacques Des Marets? Whom you discarded in favor of that trollop." He waved his free arm toward Sheridan, the fire of madness in his gaze. "My family has hated yours for generations. I had such a lovely plan in place to destroy you, Simon. I started an affair with your charming, yet promiscuous fiancée. You and Marc would die tragic deaths and she would of course, inherit the money and marry me. I had a tragic accident planned for her, later." He laughed at his own cleverness.

“Oh, and my dear Sheridan. I had such fun with you. Arranging those cat-mauling deaths by your home to upset you. Making you think you’d killed your own friends. I’d even hoped the police might harass you. Apparently they are not enlightened enough to accept the existence of cat shifters. Too bad.”

Holding the gun steady on them, he grabbed Sheridan’s arm from behind Marc. “On with business. I’m sorry, my dear. You’ve been entirely too much trouble and expense to me. A bullet’s too merciful for you. I think you’ll take a bit of a jump off the bluff.” Her heart raced in terror, not only for herself, but for Simon and Marc. She knew he intended to kill them next. He jerked her by the arm, hauling her out the door of the mill.

“No,” Marc and Simon screamed as one.

Robert turned them both around to face Simon and Marc and held the gun steady on them as he backed himself and Sheridan toward the bluff edge, where jagged rocks waited below.

A rifle shot rang out and the gun flew from Robert’s hand as he screamed in pain. Sheridan whirled and saw Anna stood on the lawn, rifle on her shoulder.

Simon rushed forward, tackling Robert and knocking him to the ground. He got in several good punches, but with the crazed strength of a lunatic, Robert got back to his feet. He grabbed Simon and struggled with him, punching him and trying to edge him closer to the cliff. Simon managed to turn him at the last second and his own momentum carried him over the edge to his death.

In utter shock, legs shaking so hard they almost failed to hold her upright, she waited as Simon approached and took her in his arms, holding her tight for a second.

“Now. You must hurry!” Anna pointed to the sugar mill.

“I’ll carry you, love.” Marc swept her up in his arms and carried her across the lawn, laying her down upon the velvet.

She cried her fear, her want, her need and the tears flowed freely, yet it didn’t diminish the desire, sharpened to a razor’s edge by their

close brush with death. “Simon. Hurry.” She reached out her arms to him and he went to her, as he always had, as he always would. Plunging inside her, ramming hard and deep, he sought to place his stamp upon her, mark her as his, theirs forever. He rubbed her clit, using their shared juices to smooth the action, and urged her closer to her peak. He worked until she hovered on the brink, shuddering and gasping, then he stopped. This time, when he rolled her over, the anticipation drowned out the fear and she felt nothing but want as Marc prepared her. Simon cupped her breasts, teasing and pinching her taut nipples to further arouse and distract her. Marc slid ever so gently inside the tight ring of muscle, his cock begging entrance and her body slowly granting it. The initial sting soon wore off as the dual penetration fueled her pleasure. The fullness drove her to shivering ecstasy, unlike anything she could imagine. She’d totally surrendered herself to these two men, given them all control. Marc slid in a bit further with each thrust, until she could accommodate the length of him.

“Marc. Oh, God.”

“Does that please you, my love?”

“Yes. Oh, yes”

The pleasure and the sting blended to sheer delight as she surrendered herself to their control and the onslaught of the plundering cocks.

Simon grabbed her hips and thrust upward, deep and fast.

“Ahhh. Simon, that’s so good.”

Marc plunged into her ass, quickening his pace and timing his thrusts with Simon’s. “How do you like that, baby?”

“Good.” She could hardly speak, she could only feel the onslaught of sensation and enjoy it.

Marc laughed in delight. “It’s all for you, my darling. And there’s so much more that we can share together. Turn yourself over to us. Come for us, love.”

“Yes. Oh... Yes.” The words and the idea of surrendering to them

catapulted her into the most explosive climax of her life. She shook in reaction, spasms rocking her body, as they continued to drive through her orgasm.

Both brothers crooned their approval. They took all she had to give and gave her all as they came inside her, shouting their joy and triumph. The three collapsed upon the makeshift bed with Sheridan sandwiched in between. Too weak to move, she doubted she'd be able to walk in the morning, but she'd experienced a loving glory few ever did. She wondered what she'd done to deserve such a gift. The love of two wonderful men, the treasure of a lifetime—of centuries, in this case—lay within her grasp to keep. She prayed she could hold onto this joyous life she'd never dreamed she might possess.

“Marc, Simon. Just in case the ritual didn't work, I want you both to know how much I love you.”

Marc's assured tones soothed her fears. “It worked. I know it did.”

“I believe it worked, too.” Simon kissed her. “You know I don't believe in much. But, I believe in you and my brother. I believe it will be all right.”

“We love you, Sheridan. Will you stay with us?”

She turned to Simon, unsure of his feelings.

“Yes, stay, Sheridan. Always.”

She smiled at her men. The two loves of her lives. “Of course I'll stay. This is where I belong. I wouldn't mind a demonstration of the 'more to share' Marc mentioned though, to seal the deal.”

“I think we can handle that. Can't we, Marc?” Simon lay her back on the pillows and together the brothers loved her again, guarding her forever against the terrors of the night.

THE END

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Antonia Pearce has been writing for five years and has completed numerous short stories and several romantic novellas. She is currently hard at work on another erotic romantic suspense novella with paranormal elements and a mainstream fiction novel. She has worked in healthcare and also spent several years in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles. Her diverse career history has given her plenty of story ideas for her books and the opportunity to meet many interesting real-life characters! She feels reading a good book is one of the great joys in life, and writing one is one of the greatest, and most enjoyable challenges. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at Antonia@AntoniaPearceRomance.com.



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