

A photograph of a man's muscular torso, showing his chest, abdomen, and shoulders. He has three piercings: two on his chest and one on his navel. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his muscles. The background is dark and out of focus.

Changeling Press

IMPASSIONED
Kate Hill

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Impassioned

Kate Hill

The brutal serial killer Tonia helped put away for life has escaped. To protect herself, she takes a job as a housekeeper on the private island of Dr. Juan Gino Perez.

Mysterious and appealing, Dr. Perez intrigues her from the first, but she soon realizes that her new home might be as dangerous as the one she left.

The victim of another scientist's inhumane studies, Juan has bridged the gap between civilized man and primal beast. As if drawn by magic, he and Tonia can't restrain the lust between them. Her love might be his only cure. He's willing to risk anything -- even his life -- to keep her safe.

Willy the Carver's about to learn that hunting the beast's mate may be his last mistake.

Chapter One

Tonia thought nothing could be worse than being the sole witness to a brutal homicide -- until the man she helped put behind bars escaped. She knew few people had taken her testimony seriously. A former exotic dancer who had been on her own since sixteen didn't exactly exude credibility, even if she had worked her way out of the gutter. No matter what a person did, certain people refused to concentrate on anything but the past.

During the entire messy situation, she'd trusted one cop. One. Now he'd been injured in the line of duty and would be hospitalized for the next several weeks. Tonia had a gut feeling that with the murderer on the loose, she wouldn't last several weeks. After he'd been sentenced, the bastard had sworn Tonia would "taste his blade."

She shuddered. His threat terrified her because she'd seen firsthand the result of his fiendish work. How could a person emanate such evil? When she thought about the bloody mess that night in the alley, she could scarcely believe any human had committed such a crime. Even animals killed swiftly and only to survive. There was no reason for what he'd done, except his malevolent pleasure.

Now he was on the loose and no doubt searching for her. She didn't trust anyone to keep her safe, and she had more than just herself to worry about. Her presence at the shelter where she worked put everyone in danger. The women there had enough trouble of their own without the threat of a psychotic killer bursting in at any time.

Willy the Carver wouldn't be content with simply murdering her. He'd relish a bloodbath with those closest to her.

The ad for a housekeeper to work for a scientist conducting research on a private island seemed like a godsend. Willy the Carver would never find her there. To her surprise, Dr. Juan Gino Perez had hired her after only a few brief questions.

Now she sat in the back of a cab on her way to the airport where Dr. Perez's plane would pick her up. She knew traveling to a private island to work for a stranger was incredibly risky, but not as risky as waiting for a known homicidal maniac to slaughter her.

Sighing, she glanced at her bare upper arm, left exposed by her camisole top. Inked upon her skin was a man with two faces. One face was handsome and almost serene. The other was primitive, with heavy facial hair and animal-like teeth.

On New Year's Eve she'd visited a tattoo artist who had opened a shop not far from the shelter. Tonia had wanted a tattoo, but wasn't quite certain what to get. According to rumor, this particular artist took pride in knowing exactly what sort of tattoo a person should have. Some believed the woman had a magical gift.

Tonia had taken the chance and while the tattoo had unsettled her at first, she had grown to appreciate it. The artist had explained that it signified change, and now Tonia realized how well the tattoo suited her. She'd already had so many major changes in her life. This move to the island was just one more.

Before leaving the cab, she pulled on a light sweater and paid the driver. Dr. Perez's personal assistant, Dave, who piloted the private plane, approached her. He stood about her height, five foot five. Slim, yet wiry beneath his simple black pants and T-shirt, he gazed at her with calm, slanted eyes of deep brown. Despite his unimposing height, he exuded a calm confidence that was almost intimidating. He wore his long sable hair bound at his nape, had tiny gold hoop earrings in both ears and a simple gold cross around his neck.

"Good day, Ms. Jones," he said in a soft, clear voice and bowed his head. "I'm Dave. We spoke on the phone. The doctor is awaiting us, so if you're ready we'll leave now."

Tonia also bowed her head and offered a smile. "That sounds fine." He took her suitcase and set a swift pace toward the plane.

Almost too soon they arrived at the island. Though she knew only the doctor and his assistant lived there, the solitude didn't hit her until they landed. The only buildings in sight were Dr. Perez's mansion, a barn, and what appeared to be a storage house.

From the burgundy walls to the stone floor, the house screamed brooding masculinity. An archway to the left opened to an equally dark living room. On the right were two closed doors and straight ahead a long staircase at the top of which hung a painting of a nighttime jungle. "Juan!" Dave called. "We're here."

Several moments passed before the door nearest to Tonia opened.

Dr. Perez was nothing like she'd expected. Tall and lean, he had a sinewy body exposed to his advantage in dark green cargo pants and a chocolate brown tank top. The sharply defined muscles of his torso indicated a strong interest in fitness. Tattoos covered both his arms from shoulder to wrist. In the lobe of one ear rested a silver stud. In the same ear he had a helix piercing with a silver hoop. The outline of his nipples against the snug tank indicated they were pierced as well. His head was shaved smooth and he wore a neatly trimmed light brown goatee. At first glance he looked rather savage, but his angular features were actually refined. The uncommon beauty of his almond-shaped blue eyes nearly took her breath away. She'd never seen such long, thick lashes or such serenity in a man's eyes.

Dave made a polite introduction, but neither she nor the doctor paid much attention to him. They stared at each other, as if drawn by an unnamed force.

Tonia's heart skipped a beat. She'd never felt like this before. With her history, she'd become jaded about men, but in Juan's presence she felt like a girl again.

Once she recovered from her initial surprise and attraction, it struck her that he didn't look like a research scientist, or at least what she thought one should look like. Though she tried not to stereotype, she couldn't help feeling wary.

What if he wasn't who he said he was? She had verified that he was a licensed doctor, but that didn't mean he was safe. After all, Willy the Carver had worked as a computer programmer by day. Still, he hadn't *looked* unusual. His "normal" appearance had put his victims at ease before he lured them in for the kill.

“Welcome, Tonia,” Juan said, offering her his hand. Like the rest of him, his hand was long and slender, but also quite large. It swallowed hers, his grip snug and warm and his palms calloused. “Dave will show you to your room and explain your duties. You don’t have to start until tomorrow. Use today to acclimate yourself to our island. Lunch is in an hour.”

“Thank you,” she said. Despite his soft, tranquil voice, something about him unsettled her. Though he had no problem making direct eye contact, she couldn’t read his expression.

“Please excuse me. I have work to do in the lab.” He stepped through the door from which he’d come, but before closing it, he glanced at her. His brow furrowed the slightest bit before his expression turned serene again, then he disappeared behind the door.

Dave guided her upstairs and showed her to a spacious bedroom with a sitting area and a breakfast table in front of a picture window with an ocean view. “As you can see, the door can be locked from the inside,” he said, gesturing toward three serious-looking deadbolts. The door also had a peephole, as one might find on a front door. Strange. “We don’t have many rules here, but we do ask you to use the bolts at night.”

A new knot of fear formed in her gut, but she forced a smile and asked, “Why? Am I in danger?”

“Sometimes wild animals are brought here for research purposes. Should one happen to escape, you could be in serious danger.”

Her smile faded. “I see.”

“Sometimes the doctor or I might ask that you stay in your room with the door locked. When we do, it’s important that you heed us.”

“No problem.” Tonia wondered again if coming here hadn’t been a mistake. Then she thought about Willy the Carver and knew she had to give this place a chance.

Next Dave gave her a tour of the house and explained her duties. The basement, where Juan’s lab was located, was off limits. She would only be required to vacuum and dust his and Dave’s rooms once a week. Her job mostly entailed light cleaning and

cooking meals. Perks included use of Juan's extensive home gym and vast library as well as lots of free time to sunbathe on the private beach. He also offered good pay.

With the tour over, she returned to her room and freshened up in the adjoining bath, then rested for a short time on the big, comfortable bed. She couldn't help imagining sharing this bed with Juan. The man's unusual appearance and sinewy body turned her on so much that she wriggled a bit. Her nipples tightened and clit ached when she pictured him looming above her, his chiseled lips hovering over hers and those gorgeous blue eyes gleaming with lust.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Off limits. He was the boss.

A glance at the clock on the bedside table told her it was time for lunch. She stood, glanced at herself in the mirror, then made her way downstairs. Dave met her in the foyer and they walked to the kitchen where lunch was spread on the table. Juan approached with three glasses of iced tea. They sat down to eat.

Tonia thought talking to Juan might be difficult, but she found him quite pleasant.

"You have a degree in social work," he began. "What made you apply for this position?"

"To be honest I wanted a break," she said. "Your ad said this job is temporary, so it worked out very well for me."

"I see."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find this is a good place to relax and think," Dave said.

Juan looked at him almost sharply and raised an eyebrow. The men exchanged glances and Tonia felt another warning flag go up in her mind. "What exactly do you study, Doctor?" she asked.

"I'm researching animal behavior and the similarities between that and basic human emotions."

"That's very interesting." Tonia sipped her tea. "I don't mean this in a derogatory way, but how do you think this will help people?"

“Originally this island was owned by my mentor and adoptive father, Dr. Juan Gino Perez, Senior. He had hoped our research would help us to better understand fear and violence and possibly help us control those impulses in the criminally insane.”

A wave of dizziness swept over Tonia and she attributed it to yet another surprise. It seemed almost too much of a coincidence that Dr. Perez was researching the very type of person she was running from.

“Are you all right?” Dave asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I think the plane trip over affected me a little.”

“Then take the afternoon off and start tomorrow as I suggested,” Juan said.

Tonia tried to focus, but couldn’t keep her eyes open. She attempted to speak, but no words formed on her lips. She slumped forward against the table.

When she managed to open her eyes again, she found herself in Juan’s arms. He walked briskly down a long stone corridor. She moaned softly and tried to protest, but her limbs felt like lead.

“Did you give her enough?” Dave asked, though she couldn’t see him. She guessed he walked behind them.

“She’s fighting it. I’ll give her an injection when we get to the lab,” Juan replied, his voice deepening then fading as Tonia sank into blackness.

Chapter Two

Juan strode down the long, narrow corridor in the basement of his mansion. Ever since his childhood this lab had been a source of intrigue and fear. His curiosity had prevented him from leaving when he should have. Now he was bound here. Unless...

Again Tonia stirred in his arms, but this time she didn't wake. Emotions churned inside him and he struggled to repress them. What was it about this woman that tested the self-control he'd spent years building? The feelings she roused endangered everyone. When he'd spoken to her on the phone, he'd sensed bringing her here would be a mistake, yet strangely, she had been the only person to respond to his ad.

He disliked bringing her here under false pretenses, but he had no choice. His experiments required fresh samples from an untainted human. As soon as he gathered them, he'd send her away.

They entered his main lab, where he placed her on the examination table. He and Dave acted quickly in gathering the necessary blood and skin samples, then while Dave immediately went to work, Juan picked up Tonia and carried her upstairs to her room.

When he placed her on the bed, she moaned softly and her eyes opened partway. "What... what's going on?" she murmured, her voice scarcely audible.

"Nothing," he replied. Impulsively he caressed her hair. Touching her like this was wrong. It was dangerous. Love and lust were as forbidden to him as anger, happiness, fear...

She weakly reached for his hand and their fingers entwined. "We know each other, don't we?" she asked.

His brow furrowed. The drugs could have made her irrational, but oddly he felt exactly the same way. When they'd first met earlier, he'd felt as if he'd been struck by

an electrical shock. Whenever he was near her he wanted to touch her and when he did he wanted...

No! Even if she felt the same way it was impossible. Until he found a cure, he couldn't risk a physical or emotional relationship with anyone. He even worried about Dave living here, though the black-haired scientist could certainly take care of himself. He'd also proven that he could handle Juan at his worst. Without Dave's help, Juan would have done away with himself long ago, not because he wanted to die but because of the danger he posed should he escape the island.

Tonia whispered too softly for him to hear, so he leaned closer. His heart skipped a beat. She was so lovely, though not in a conventional way. She had large, dark eyes, a softly rounded face and longish nose. Her lips were neither too thin nor too full, but perfect for kissing and since he'd moved nearer they were mere inches from him.

Instead of speaking again, Tonia touched a languid hand to his cheek, lifted her head the slightest bit and kissed him. It was the faintest touch, as she no doubt still felt weak from the drugs, yet the sensation was explosive. His heartbeat accelerated and he tingled all over. His cock swelled and ached and he longed to rip off their clothes and plunge into her soft, warm cunt.

He leaned closer, pressing her deeper into the pillows.

Tonia moaned and opened her mouth to his probing tongue. Her tongue met his and he groaned, relishing her taste and warmth. Somehow she seemed to draw strength from his kiss. She caressed his scalp. Then she locked her arms around his neck, pulling him even closer. Her full breasts pressed against him, arousing him even more.

Lust almost overwhelmed him and he nuzzled her neck. He tugged the scooped neck of her soft cotton top down and lifted her breasts so they spilled over the material. Using his thumb, he pushed aside her satiny bra cup just enough to expose her nipple. Moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue, he closed his eyes and let desire wash over him. It had been so long since --

No! This wasn't right. Not only was she drugged, but his emotions were quickly flying out of control. If he didn't get away from her --

“Please,” she murmured, tugging his head toward her breasts. She arched her back, practically forcing her nipple into his mouth. Her pelvis thrust against his stiff cock and she murmured, “Juan, please.”

Another thrill shot through him. She wasn’t so drugged that she didn’t know what she was asking and from whom. Yet this couldn’t be.

Why not? Take what you fucking want. Your territory. Your desires. Your rule.

It was the beast speaking, but the beast was so hard to resist. Impossible to resist when Juan’s emotions ran high. Why had he asked Tonia to come here? He knew it was a mistake.

Because even on the phone the sound of her voice aroused you.

His instincts told him to take her. Again his mouth claimed hers in a deep, rough kiss. This time when she moaned he detected a hint of fear and protest. His tongue thrust into her mouth fast and hard, like he wanted to fill her cunt with his cock.

Again she moaned. He could smell her fear and arousal and hear the pounding of her heart. His rapidly fading rational side made a final protest and he tore himself away from her.

“No!” he growled.

Tonia stared at him and through the drug-induced haze he saw terror mixed with curiosity. His teeth gritted and hands clenched into fists, he turned and strode out of the room. He ran down the corridor and two flights of stairs to the basement.

“Dave!” he bellowed.

“In the main lab.”

Juan grunted and approached his friend, though feelings of comradeship, gratitude and guilt quickly dissipated as other more primitive emotions took over.

“Dave,” he snarled through clenched teeth.

The black-haired man, who had been studying specimens under a microscope, turned to him with a look of concern.

“Lock me up.” Juan’s palms felt slick and he glanced down at his hands, noting he’d cut his palms with nails that grew longer and sharper by the second. “Hurry! Before I change my mind.”

Chapter Three

The next morning Tonia awoke just before ten. She apologized profusely for her late start, but Dave assured her it was no problem, especially since she'd been ill the day before. She still couldn't believe she'd actually passed out during lunch. Then she'd had the strangest dreams in which she and Juan had shared passionate kisses. They'd seemed so real that in the dream she caught the subtle aroma of his cologne, felt the warmth of his skin and lips and heard the raggedness of his breathing. In the dream she'd nearly come just from kissing him. Unable to resist, she'd rubbed against his stiff cock. If only they hadn't been separated by their clothes.

She paused in dusting the coffee table in the parlor and closed her eyes for a moment. How could she possibly live and work here if she developed a crush on her boss? Usually she didn't react this way to men, but something about Juan drew her to him. Not only was he incredibly attractive, but something deep and almost sad shone in his eyes. She'd spent enough time working with people in need of help to recognize the signs. Yet what could she do to help a man like him? He had money, education, a dream job and his own private island.

She opened her eyes and continued with her work. Juan had already been in the lab when she started work and for the past several hours Dave had been with him, so Tonia had been quite alone. It felt strange having no one around to talk to. She'd never done such solitary work and couldn't help feeling a bit lonely.

Passing by a floor vent in the hallway, she heard muted voices from the basement. Usually she didn't eavesdrop, but the sound of her name made her pause and strain to listen.

"Her samples were quite helpful," Dave said. "I'm still testing the antidote, but we'll probably need a few more fresh --"

"No. I want her gone as soon as possible," Juan said sharply.

Tonia was taken aback. What samples? And why had Juan decided to send her away? Maybe she'd said something offensive to him yesterday? Truly she couldn't recall much of what she'd said or done after sitting at the table. She'd taken a sip of iced tea and...

Wait.

A sick feeling broke over her. Had she been drugged? Juan and Dave had been kind and respectful, but she didn't know them.

"What if this is the solution to our problem?" Dave pressed. "Your attack yesterday proved that even with all our work, you still need a cure."

Cure. Was Juan sick? He certainly looked healthy enough. Most athletes would envy his body.

"If not for her it wouldn't have happened."

"And if it wasn't her it would be someone else, unless you plan on living here for the rest of your life."

"It's worked so far."

"Yeah, well I don't intend to spend the next several decades playing zookeeper."

"Then leave. You're not the one in chains," Juan snapped.

Several moments of silence passed before Juan said so softly she almost couldn't hear him, "I'm sorry. You've done more for me than I can ever repay."

"Stop it, Juan. You'd do the same for me. Besides, you prepaid when you saved my life. This isn't your fault. It's not Tonia's fault either. Maybe if this antidote works you and she --"

"I can't think about women right now. Even one as beautiful as Tonia."

Whoa. It had been a long time since someone had called her beautiful and actually seemed to mean it without wanting to see her strip down to her bare ass.

It felt strange being flattered but yet frightened of the same man.

Throughout the day she thought about the conversation she'd overheard. Earlier she'd been concerned about her attraction to Juan interfering with her job. It should

have been a relief to know he felt the same way, but the mystery of the men's conversation warned her of possible danger on this island.

That night she had dinner prepared by the time agreed upon, but neither Dave nor Juan appeared to eat it.

Tonia knew the basement was off limits, but the urge to investigate under the pretense of reminding her employers about dinner overwhelmed her. She *had* to go downstairs.

She left the kitchen and walked through the silent house. When she reached the basement door, she paused with her hand on the doorknob. Her heart pounded and her gut tightened. She *knew* she shouldn't venture down.

As if controlled by a force stronger than herself, she opened the door and made her way down the stairs. She moved slowly and quietly, almost like a prowler.

The basement was a maze of stone corridors with several locked doors. She wondered if the enormous place extended beyond the house's foundation. It seemed to go on for miles.

Rounding a turn, she heard Dave say in a soft, soothing voice, "Excellent. You're doing very well."

She followed his voice to an open door and peered into a dimly lit stone room.

Shirtless, his sleek torso gleaming with sweat, Juan sat on a mat, his legs crossed in a yoga position. His upturned hands rested lightly on his knees and his eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even. With the stoic expression on his handsome face and the perfection of his body, the image would have been almost beautiful, except for the dozens of needles piercing his flesh. She also noticed that, just as she'd guessed, his nipples were pierced with small silver rings. The sight of the rings through the stiff little buds sent a jolt of desire through her. His belly button was also pierced.

Dave knelt behind him. On a nearby stool rested a case filled with needles.

"You're doing excellent," Dave said. "You're controlling the pain. The beast --"

"He wants to rebel, but he's under my control," Juan murmured.

Dave selected another and said, "I think we should try one more. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Juan said, his voice scarcely a whisper.

Tonia flinched as Dave strategically placed the needle in Juan's flesh. Juan's brow creased and a look of pain passed over his face.

"Control it," Dave said.

"I'm trying." Juan's voice sounded strained and a muscle jerked in his cheek. His hands curled into fists.

"Easy," Dave told him. "Just a few more seconds and --"

Juan's eyes opened and his lips drew back in a snarl. His gaze flew to the door where Tonia stood. She gasped and stepped back quickly.

"We have a little spy, Dave," Juan said in the same deep, animal voice he'd used in her dream. "Tonia," he sang. "Come inside."

"No!" Dave snapped. "Tonia, if you're out there, get out of here. Go upstairs and lock yourself in your room!"

Tonia didn't need to be told twice. Her heart racing, she practically flew down the corridor, only to get disoriented in the labyrinth.

She turned a sharp left corner and nearly ran into a brick wall. Hurrying in the opposite direction, she prayed she'd quickly find the stairs.

"Oh please let me get out of here," she panted. And she didn't just mean the basement. She wanted off this crazy island.

A door stood at the end of the corridor. She tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Tonia! Oh sexy, silly Tonia," sang the deep, mocking voice. "Now where can Tonia be?"

Horrified, she ran back down the corridor -- directly into Juan's bare chest.

Except it wasn't Juan. The face resembled that of the handsome doctor, except it was distorted by an apish brow and shadowed by a heavy beard. His muscles were thicker than Juan's and the faint dusting of chest hair had been replaced by a thick mat

through which poked those stiff, sexy nipples. The silver rings gleamed, as did the piercing in his belly button.

He grinned, revealing his sharp, wolfish teeth.

Tonia gasped. She'd seen lots of weird things in her time, but this beat them all.

"What's the matter, Tonia?" He chuckled and grasped her shoulders. She fought, using every self-defense move she'd learned, but they only succeeded in spurring on his anger and strength. To her disbelief, his face became even more animal-like. His blue eyes glowed eerily in the dim corridor and he pressed her harder against the wall.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, touching the tip of his nose to hers. Again he smiled. The jagged points of his teeth glistened and she felt a bit dizzy. "Ah, Dr. Perez, what big teeth you have. The better to eat you with, Tonia."

He nuzzled her neck and a shiver darted through her, though strangely it wasn't simply one of horror or disgust. Despite his brutish behavior something about this savage man aroused her. He still carried Juan's sexy scent, though a bit stronger, and the fierceness of his eyes captivated her. His grip, though unbreakable, wasn't painful and he kissed her neck tenderly.

She should protest, but she didn't want to. This reminded her too much of her dream the night before and of the strange connection she'd felt the moment she and Juan had met.

Yet this wasn't Juan, was it?

He lifted his head and again their gazes locked. Winding her hair around his hand, he growled, "I want to fuck you, Tonia. Don't bother protesting because I know you want to fuck me too. I can smell it. I love the scent of your lust."

"I want you to back off, whoever you are," she stated with more confidence than she felt. One thing she'd learned was if she was serious about protecting herself, she needed to make sure people knew it.

"You know exactly who I am," he said and covered her mouth in a kiss.

Heavens, she wanted to respond, but knew something was terribly wrong here, including her strange connection to Juan and her desire for this... beast.

"I don't --" she began, but stopped mid-sentence and gasped as he sank to his knees in front of her and pressed his face against her crotch.

"Ah, the delectable scent of pussy. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've smelled something this sweet?" he purred.

"If this is your approach, then I see why there's no crowd around you," she said, and kicked at him. He caught her leg and stood again.

Pinning her hands against the wall and pressing his big, hard body close to hers, he whispered in her ear, "You shouldn't have come here and I don't believe for a moment you're here because you want a break from your previous job. You're hiding from something."

"What makes you say that?"

He pulled back slightly and again stared into her eyes. Wrinkling his nose the slightest bit, he said, "Call it instinct. Now I'm losing patience with you, Tonia. Are you going to undress or shall I do it for you?" He grunted and jerked against her, then spun around, clutching his shoulder.

Dave, blood dripping from a split lower lip, stood at the end of the corridor holding a dart gun.

"Sniveling little bastard!" growled Juan's evil twin. He bound toward Dave, halfway on two legs and halfway on all fours. A thick brown pelt sprouted over his entire body and his primal cries echoed through the basement.

Dave stood his ground and aimed the gun again. This time it struck Juan in the chest. He staggered and collapsed at Dave's feet.

"Sorry, my friend." Dave wiped the blood from his chin and squatted near the creature Juan had become. "I shouldn't have used that last needle. Too much too soon."

Chapter Four

"What the *hell* is going on here?"

Dave glanced at Tonia and sighed. "It's a long story, but since you've already seen our little problem, we have no choice but to tell you everything."

"*Little* problem? You call this a *little* problem? Juan is a fucking werewolf!"

"Not exactly. Before we continue, I need to lock him up." Dave rolled Juan onto his hairy back, stood and grasped him beneath the arms.

Tonia followed as Dave dragged Juan down several corridors, unlocked a door and pulled him into a large, unfurnished room containing a spacious barred cell. He locked Juan inside the cell, then turned to Tonia with a forced smile. "Well, I'm sure you have questions."

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she said, "That's an understatement."

"Let's go to my office. Sometimes it's best for Juan to be alone when he's like this." Dave paused a moment and narrowed his eyes. "Or perhaps not. I wonder how you were able to keep him so calm?"

"You call that calm?"

"Usually in that state he's completely volatile. The fact that he didn't try to harm you is frankly amazing."

Tonia's head spun. She'd just had the shock of her life, seeing a man transform into... she still didn't know what he was... and Dave talked to her as if it were a normal occurrence. "Would you please just tell me what's going on?"

"I'm sorry. You must be stunned. Come with me."

She followed him down another series of corridors and into an elegantly furnished office with polished wood furniture and a bookcase filled with books and a variety of pewter and crystal trinkets.

Dave offered her a comfortable chair, then sat behind the desk and said, "As you can see, Juan has a transformation problem."

"To say the least. How is this possible?"

"His adoptive father was a highly respected, though eccentric, research scientist. He bought this island to pursue his studies of the criminal mind. Seclusion was important to him because some of his research was, shall we say, unconventional. Juan worked with him quite closely and trusted him implicitly. We both did. Old Dr. Perez's obsession finally overtook him. He believed he had found a way to bridge the gap between man and his primal emotions -- man and animal if you will. Without informing Juan, he tested an experimental drug on him in the midst of an ancient ritual he had uncovered during his studies of the occult. Afterward, Juan changed."

"I'm sorry, but this is hard to believe."

"Except that you've seen it for yourself."

Recalling the conversation she'd overheard earlier, she asked, "Isn't there some kind of cure?"

"We've been searching for one. In truth, that's why we needed you here. Our studies require fresh blood samples. We can't acquire them by normal means for fear of someone finding out about Juan's condition."

"You drugged me yesterday," she said, angry, though she could understand their desperation.

"Neither Juan nor I are happy about it, but he's becoming desperate."

Leaning forward in her chair, she asked, "Can you cure him?"

"We're getting closer. The last serum seemed to help for a short time, then the affliction returned worse than before."

"You could have asked me for samples," she said quietly. "All the intrigue wasn't necessary."

"Surely you understand our need for secrecy?"

"You could have said you needed it for research. I probably would have accommodated you."

Dave nodded slightly. "I apologize, and I know Juan does as well."

"Well," she sighed. "Now that I'm here and I know what's going on, is there anything else I can do to help?"

Dave's brow furrowed and a smile tugged at his lips. "You're an amazing woman. Most people would be screaming to get away from here."

"I probably should be, but after seeing what happened to Juan I know you need help. I've been down and out so many times in my life that I can't turn my back on someone in trouble." Not only that, her strange connection to Juan made leaving impossible.

All this talk of magic lately, from the tattoo artist to the occult ritual that had made Juan a real-life Jekyll and Hyde, made her realize that supernatural forces might possibly be at work in the world.

Just thinking about the tattoo made her tingle, almost as much as when Juan -- or his beast -- kissed her.

"Are you sure you're all right with this?" Dave asked, brushing a lock of his long black hair behind his ear. She noticed that the cut on his lip had faded almost before her eyes.

"Why couldn't Juan use your blood for the experiments?"

Dave studied her carefully, then replied, "Because we need human blood. I'm not human."

Oh Lord. Now what? A nervous smile played around her lips. "You look human to me."

"I'm a Prowleryn -- a cat shifter. Old Dr. Perez was studying with an elder from my tribe when he discovered the magical ritual."

"Are you telling me you're cursed too?"

"Absolutely not," Dave stated. He looked almost offended. "Prowleryns are born shapeshifters. We change from man to cat at will and retain our mental capacity and personality regardless of our physical shape. What happens to Juan is an unnatural affliction."

Tonia's head spun. She could scarcely believe any of this, yet she *had* to accept Juan's disease. She'd seen the results first hand. "If you're a shapeshifter, will you show me?" she asked.

A smile tugged at Dave's lips. "Haven't you had enough excitement for one day? Besides, I'm not the problem. Juan needs help. Otherwise he will remain a danger to himself and anyone he encounters. He's considered taking his own life, but I've dissuaded him. Juan Perez is a good man, Tonia. If I have to stay here for the next fifty years to help him find a cure, I'll do it."

"You're a loyal friend."

"Juan once saved my life. I'm honor bound to return the favor, yet even if I wasn't I would gladly help him. On behalf of my friend, I thank you for your willingness to help as well. And --"

"Yes?"

"And I sense that you will be good for Juan in more ways than you know. Your ability to temper his beast is something I hope to study further."

Tonia nodded, unsure how to respond. She couldn't deny her link to Juan, but at the moment she couldn't acknowledge it, not to Dave.

"I'm sure this has been a lot for you to absorb," Dave said. "Go upstairs and relax for a while. Juan is safe in his cell and when he returns to normal I'm sure he'll want to talk to you."

Tonia nodded and Dave escorted her through the labyrinth. This time she tried to remember which way to go.

Upstairs in her room, she stretched out on the bed but couldn't rest. Her mind spun and despite her terror and curiosity, she also felt powerful desire. It was a warm evening, so she shrugged off her shirt and tossed it aside. Wearing only her bra, she lay back down and glanced at her tattoo. The dual faces finally made sense to her, as did the rumors of the tattoo artist's magic. Others whose skin bore her work had said that she had drawn their soulmate upon them.

Was it possible that she and Juan belonged together? An ex-stripper and a man living under a curse? Yes, they were an unlikely pair, but that didn't mean they weren't meant to be.

Chapter Five

Eventually Tonia drifted to sleep and awoke a couple of hours later feeling unsettled. She almost wondered if she hadn't dreamed the outrageous events of the day.

The weather had cooled a bit, so she pulled on a camisole and a blouse. In the adjoining bathroom, she washed up and combed her hair. She'd just finished when someone knocked on her door.

"Tonia. It's Juan. May I speak to you?"

Her gut clenched and her heart skipped a beat. What should she do? Was it really Juan or that beast again? Then she remembered the peep hole in the door. She walked into the bedroom and approached the door. Staring through the peep hole, she saw Juan standing there. He looked normal, dressed in a blue tank top and jeans.

"Tonia, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said. "What about you? Are you okay?"

"Yes. It's safe to open the door."

After a moment's hesitation, she drew back the bolts. She swallowed hard and opened the door. Juan stared at her with his calm blue eyes, though she detected a hint of sadness behind them.

"Dave told me everything," he said. "I'm sorry you had to witness my --"

"Evil twin?"

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "I suppose that's a fitting description. I didn't mean to frighten you, but you shouldn't have been down there."

"I know, but dinner was ready and I got curious." She turned and stepped into the room. He followed her. "It's still so hard to believe."

"Sometimes it is for me too. You don't know how I wish to wake up in the morning and find it all a nightmare." He approached and touched her shoulder.

Tonia jumped a bit, but he didn't drop his hand. Instead he lifted it to her cheek. "It's very brave of you to agree to help me."

"I don't know why, but I feel like we're connected somehow. That's just as crazy as you turning into a... what exactly do you call it?"

"There's no technical name, as far as I know. I just call it my beast."

"Well I suppose every person has one. It's just that yours is more pronounced than most."

"That's an understatement."

Thinking about Willy the Carver, she said, "I know people with worse beasts. At least yours can be reasoned with."

"Not usually. There's something about you, Tonia. I don't know how to explain it, but the moment we spoke on the phone --"

"I know," she whispered and nodded, then closed her eyes briefly. "This is all so crazy. I came here to escape a madman and now --"

"What madman?" he asked.

She held his gaze and said, "You're not the only one with a horror story, Juan. I heard yours, so I guess it's only fair for you to hear mine."

Juan looked a bit surprised. He sat on the bed, his attention focused on her. "Please go on."

"I didn't come here to take a break from my job. The truth is I love what I do and never would have left if my presence hadn't put everyone in the shelter where I work at risk."

"How?"

Tonia recounted her role in putting the serial killer Willy the Carver behind bars, but she didn't stop there. She told Juan everything about her life, including her mother's neglect and how, at the request of her boyfriend-of-the-week, she had thrown

Tonia out of the house at sixteen. She talked about living on the streets for a short time before becoming an exotic dancer.

“Where was your father?” Juan asked when she paused in her story.

“I don’t know who he was,” she replied with a sigh. Tonia usually found it difficult telling people she knew very well about her past, let alone someone she’d just met. Yet just as she’d been unable to resist her attraction to Juan, she also felt comfortable telling him her life story. Though she had spoken to counselors before, she had never completely opened up to anyone. It actually felt good, especially since Juan listened attentively. Though he didn’t interrupt, the expression in his eyes offered understanding and comfort that she needed more than she’d realized.

The situation with Willy terrified her, but she’d tried to remain strong not only to bring justice to his victims, but to keep those at the shelter from knowing just how scared she was. Many of them had recently managed to escape abusive relationships. The last thing they needed was to know a serial killer might attack them to get to her.

“So in a way we were both orphans,” he said.

“I guess so,” she said, approaching the bed. “And we were both betrayed by people we should have been able to trust. You by your adoptive father and me by my mother.”

He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it. When he tugged her between his long legs, she didn’t protest, but slid her arms around his neck and leaned closer. Juan lifted his head and captured her lips in a tender kiss.

The passion burst between them and Tonia moaned softly. She tugged up his tank top and he raised his arms, allowing her to pull it off and toss it aside.

“You have such a great body,” she said breathlessly, kneeling between his legs so she could easily run her hands and lips over his sculpted chest and abs. Her fingertip teased his belly button piercing and she ran her tongue over one of his stiff nipples, then gently tugged the silver ring with her teeth.

Juan groaned, caressing her hair.

"What's with all the piercings and the needles earlier?" she asked, then ran her tongue down his breastbone and traced his sleek abs.

"Pain and control. Dave applies the needles to certain pressure points. If I control the pain, I control the beast. Strong emotions bring him... forth," he grunted with pleasure as she kneaded his crotch while again using her teeth to tug on one of his nipple rings.

"Strong emotions. Like anger?"

"Anger. Fear. Happiness. Even lust." He grasped her shoulders and held her at arm's length.

Tonia stared into his eyes and resisted the urge to squirm with pleasure at the lust burning in their blue depths. His eyes were normally so calm, but now they resembled those of the beast and it turned her on.

"I can't do this, Tonia. It's dangerous."

"Danger is my middle name," she whispered and pulled off her shirt and the camisole beneath. While she unhooked her bra, he studied her tattoo.

"A two-faced man," he whispered. "Human and beast." When he ran his fingertips over the tattoo, a jolt of raw desire shot through her and she knew by the way his breath caught he felt it too.

"Supposedly the artist who gave me this could match soulmates through her tattoos. It's a man with two faces. Do you think you and I --"

"I'm a man of science," he murmured, holding her gaze. "But I'm the last person who should deny magic."

What was happening between them?

At the moment she didn't care. All she wanted to do was fuck him. She shrugged off her bra and his gaze fixed on her full, pink-tipped breasts. He gently kneaded them and swept his hands over her nipples.

"Oh, Juan," she whispered.

"I don't know what it is, but I need you, Tonia, more than I've ever needed anything in my life."

"Me too."

He grasped her beneath her arms and tugged her onto the bed. She lay on her back while he stretched out beside her. One hand caressed her breasts while he took her nipple into his mouth. His warm, wet tongue swept over it and he sucked on it until she moaned with pleasure.

At this moment nothing existed except her and Juan.

His mouth moved to her other nipple and he licked and sucked it while rolling the other between his thumb and forefinger.

Tonia's pussy throbbed and her clit ached. More than anything she wanted to feel him deep inside her, but first --

She unzipped his jeans and his thick cock popped into her waiting hands.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, stroking the stiff, velvety shaft. She ran her thumb over the head and tickled the underside.

"Oh man," he groaned. "You have no idea how good this feels."

His words sent a new rush of desire through her. As much as she wanted to be pleased, she wanted to please him too.

For several moments while he sucked and teased her breasts, she stroked his cock. He grunted and thrust into her hands while she arched against him.

Then he grasped her hands and pinned them on either side of her head.

"Why did you make me stop?" she breathed.

"Because a few more strokes and I'd come."

He released her hands and nuzzled her neck. Tonia closed her eyes and stroked his shoulders and back, loving the way his muscles rippled against her palms. Through the haze of passion she remembered something.

She reached for her pocketbook on the beside table, and felt around until she found a condom. Not that she had expected to make love on this island, but she believed every woman should keep protection handy. No one ever knew exactly what would happen in life.

"Roll over," she murmured.

He paused, his blue eyes hazy with passion, then a smile tugged at his lips when he saw the condom.

"I thought we wouldn't be able to do it after all," he said. "I'm glad you came prepared."

"Yeah and I'm prepared to come," she teased.

He removed his jeans then stretched out on his back. She knelt beside him and rolled on the condom. No sooner had she finished than he gently pushed her onto her back and unfastened her jeans. He tugged them off along with her panties, then lifted her legs over his shoulders.

At the first touch of his lips and tongue to her clit, she gasped and arched her back. It felt so fucking good! Over and over he lapped, teasing her until her heart beat out of control and she hovered on the edge of the most fantastic orgasm.

A few more strokes of his hot, wet tongue and she came long and hard. Juan continued lapping until the pulsations faded, then he covered her body with his and filled her with a long, slow thrust.

"Oh fuck, do you have any idea how good this feels?" he whispered, his warm breath tickling her ear. "It feels like forever since I've been close to someone like this. All these years I couldn't allow myself to feel... *anything*. Do you know what that's like?"

She thought back to her days as an exotic dancer, selling her body to stay off the streets, numbing herself against an ugly world.

"Yeah," she whispered. "I do."

He paused a moment and met her gaze. The understanding that passed between them only made this experience deeper and more passionate.

Juan kissed her tenderly while at the same time filling her pussy with long, slow thrusts. She knew he must want to pump fast and hard, taking every bit of long denied pleasure, but he didn't. He teased her, pleased her and treated her with more gentleness than anyone ever had.

The first time she'd had sex had been a disaster. The times that followed were usually worse. Here with Juan she believed this was the first time she'd truly made love and it was beautiful.

Her passion built again and she clung to him.

"Juan, oh please," she breathed.

"Tonia," he panted, thrusting faster. It felt so good. She wished it could last forever, but within seconds another orgasm overtook her.

She gasped and writhed, her fingers biting into his rock-hard shoulders.

Juan growled, an animalistic sound that sent a twinge of fear through her.

"Sexy bitch," he said in a deep, husky voice.

Oh shit. It was happening!

Her eyes flew open and she stared into the primitive face of the beast. Juan's gentle eyes turned fierce and a shaggy beard covered his handsome face. He grinned, a sinister twisting of lips that revealed his razor sharp teeth.

"And to think I hesitated before fucking you," he purred, thrusting faster and harder, yet to her surprise he didn't hurt her. "Are you afraid, little Tonia?"

"No," she replied.

"Yes, you are."

"I'm wary. That's not the same thing."

"I could kill you," he grunted, still thrusting into her drenched pussy. The tendons in his neck tightened and strained as he neared his climax.

"You could, but you won't," she said and surprisingly she believed her words. Yes, he was a brutal creature. Yes, he could tear her apart, but gut feeling told her he wouldn't harm her. He *liked* her. He *desired* her and deep inside he still felt a connection to her.

"You're a feisty little bitch, aren't ya?" he chuckled, then momentarily closed his eyes to better enjoy the sensations coursing through him.

"You've never made love, have you?" she asked softly.

"Of course I have."

"Juan has, but *you* haven't."

Again he grinned. "Interesting distinction." He slowed his thrusts and again closed his eyes, his breathing ragged.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to hold back."

"I *never* hold back!"

"You just did. I'm not afraid. I *want* you to give me everything."

His heavy brow furrowed and his gaze locked on hers. The savageness faded from his eyes, replaced by a questioning look.

"It's okay." She took his primitive face in her hands and whispered against his lips, "I want it all."

His mouth covered hers in a deep kiss and he thrust fast and hard. Tonia locked her legs around his lean waist and clung to him, opening her mouth to his probing tongue. She expected him to cut her with those sharp teeth, but he was surprisingly gentle.

His hard body stiffened and strained as he came. She held him tightly until he spent himself. He collapsed on top of her and with a soft grunt moved slightly to the side, so as not to crush her.

Tonia glanced at him. His eyes were closed and lips slightly parted as he rested. The beast was gone. Juan, the man, rested calmly in her embrace.

Chapter Six

If someone had asked Tonia in her days as an exotic dancer if she'd feel shy discussing her love life, she would have laughed. At the time she'd hardened herself to just about everything. Of course at the time she hadn't been in love. She'd sometimes wondered if she knew what love was, since she'd never truly experienced it.

Now, with Juan, she knew without doubt they were experiencing the first sparks of love. That's why she found it difficult to talk about their intimacy with Dave. Yet she knew it could be important in finding a cure for Juan.

Though their passion had prompted the change in him from man to beast, it was the gentleness and love between them that had kept his primal side under control. According to Juan, he'd reverted to his human form sooner than he ever had before.

"We believed all strong emotions incited the beast," Dave said after hearing their account of what happened in Tonia's bedroom. They sat in Dave's office in the basement, Juan and Tonia in comfortable chairs and Dave behind his desk. The Prowleryn continued, "But it seems happy emotions, no matter how intense, have the opposite effect. Juan, the mind control we've been practicing represses the beast, but Tonia's love is able to control him when he overtakes you."

Love. Now Dave had said it. Was love possible so quickly?

As if sensing what she felt, Juan said, "I never believed in love at first sight until now." He reached out and lightly caressed Tonia's arm. Though the thin fabric of her blouse concealed the tattoo, both were intensely aware of it. "Maybe your tattoo has something to do with it after all."

Dave's brow furrowed. "What tattoo?"

Tonia and Juan exchanged glances before she shrugged off her blouse, leaving only her camisole top.

His eyes narrowed, Dave rose from his chair and approached Tonia. He leaned toward her and gently grasped her arm as he studied the tattoo.

"The woman who did this supposedly practices magic," Tonia said. "I didn't believe it at the time, but now I'm not so sure."

"What kind of magic?"

"Lots of people who had their tattoos done by her claim to have found their soulmate."

"I suspect she's practicing a form of the mate marks ritual, an ancient magic that unites destined mates. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I don't think I am. Some Prowleryn elders know how to perform the mate marks ritual."

"Are you saying someone put a love spell on us?" Tonia asked.

"Not exactly. If it is some form of the mate marks ritual, then you and Juan are meant to be together. The ritual can only unite souls that are meant to be joined. Chances are you would have found each other anyway, if not in this life then in a future one. The ritual merely sped things up."

Tonia and Juan exchanged glances. Her heart skipped a beat, though this time not from fear. If the tattoo artist actually had the power to bring destined mates together, then it explained her sudden and strong attachment to Juan.

Again Dave rose and sat behind the desk. His dark gaze shifted from Juan to Tonia and he looked hesitant.

"What is it, Dave?" Juan asked.

"I'm not sure either of you will like this idea, but I feel it could be very important. Nothing except the failed serum has helped control the beast as Tonia has been able to. I suggest an experiment to study the beast's reaction to her."

"How?" Tonia asked.

"Juan, the next time you feel the change coming on, instead of having me lock you in the cell, we'll use the restraining chair. Once you're secure, Tonia can talk to or touch the beast in any way she feels comfortable to see how he responds."

Juan's brow furrowed and he shook his head. "It sounds too dangerous."

"You've never broken free of the chair," Dave reminded him. "And I'll be in the room with the dart gun. Tonia will be safe."

"I know I will be," she said, holding Juan's gaze. "You could have hurt me before, but you didn't, even though the beast was free. Lord, Juan, you were in my bed and you didn't so much as scratch me."

"But I wanted to devour you," he said. Closing his eyes, he shook his head. "It's like the killers from my father's studies. They wanted control over their victims and they had no control over themselves."

Tonia reached for his hand and held it snugly. Gazing into his eyes, she said, "But that's not you. Even when that... *thing* takes over, you're able to control it. You didn't want to hurt me, so the beast was unable to." She turned to Dave. "If you think studying us will help, then I'm willing to go for it."

"I still think it's risky," Juan said.

Tonia snorted. "Life is risky. I learned that a long time ago. I also know that some people are worth taking risks for. Like you."

* * *

The next day Tonia was preparing lunch when Dave burst into the kitchen and said, "Are you ready to take that risk we talked about?"

Apparently the beast was back.

She followed Dave to the basement and into a small brick room containing only a reclining chair. Naked, Juan's beast sat in it, thick iron cuffs securing his wrists and ankles. He wasn't in the full animal form, but in the primal man stage. Upon seeing her, a leering grin tugged at his lips.

"We meet again, Tonia. Did you miss me?"

"In a way," she admitted, approaching him confidently but cautiously.

"As you can see, I'm quite incapacitated," he said, then glanced toward his stiffening cock. "Of course some parts of me are harder to restrain."

"I can see that." She rested her hand on his hairy thigh and caressed it lightly. Even that slight touch made his cock twitch and harden more.

A jolt of desire tore through her and her fingers ached to feel his enticing erection.

"Suddenly shy are we?" he purred. "I assure you at the moment I'm quite docile, but I would so love to be petted."

"I guess I can oblige." She curled her fist around his cock and stroked him. The rest of him might look like the missing link, but his cock still felt like velvet in her hand. It throbbed and swelled as she stroked it.

The beast turned to Dave and said, "I know you like to watch, but do give us some privacy."

Tonia glanced at Dave and said, "It's all right. I'm sure we'll be fine."

The smaller man hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Call if you need me. I'll be nearby." He bowed his head and left the room.

Tonia turned back to Juan who grinned again and said, "Now that we're alone, let's get down to business."

"You must have really enjoyed yourself last time to risk changing back to your alter ego by making love with me."

"Oh I did. But this time I plan on being much more persistent, considering I'm at your mercy. Tease me, you sexy bitch." His fierce blue eyes bore into her. His look alone made her nipples tighten and tingle and her pussy ache.

"Mmmm," he said, then inhaled deeply. "I can smell your desire. The musky aroma from your soft, wet cunt. Are you going to ride me, Tonia? Ride me while I'm restrained in this fucking chair?"

"Maybe." She slowly undressed. It had been years since she'd called upon her skills as an exotic dancer. At this moment she used every sexy move she'd perfected to tantalize a male audience. It worked because somehow his thick cock swelled even more. The head looked ready to explode and she longed to run her tongue over it.

When she finished her striptease, she approached him, naked, and used both hands to caress his inner thighs. Her fingers fluttered over his cock before she grasped the shaft in one hand and his balls in her other.

"All those years as a whore didn't go to waste I see," he growled.

His words hurt more than she wanted to admit, but what had she expected? He was a cruel, savage beast and controlled himself as much as he could for her sake. His viciousness was bound to come out, for he was as evil as Juan was good.

"No, I'm used to pleasing animals," she retorted.

He sneered. "Touché. Let's see if your lips are as skilled as they are pretty."

Leaning closer, Tonia took his left nipple ring between her teeth and tugged rather hard. He gasped and growled.

"The bitch bites. I like that."

"I had a feeling you would." She swept her tongue over both of his tight, dark pink nipples, then kissed and licked her way down his hard belly. She dipped her tongue into his belly button and he growled again.

His legs were parted enough that she could easily reach his balls. She kneaded them in one hand while her other hand stroked his cock. Licking her lips, she leaned closer. Her warm breath teased his cock head for several seconds before she took it into her mouth.

"That's right. Suck it," he said, his voice husky with passion.

She swirled her tongue around the head then teased the sensitive underside before sucking him deeply.

The beast panted and writhed, every muscle straining as he tried to break free of his bonds. She lapped his shaft from base to head and back again, then continued sucking his cock head until she sensed by his ragged breathing and quivering muscles he was about to explode.

Tonia left him and reached for her pants.

"Where are you going?" he growled, his chest heaving and eyes aflame.

"Not far." She pulled a condom out of her pocket and opened the package.

He watched, licking his lips, as she rolled on the condom.

Arousing him had turned her on so much that her cunt was soaked and her heart pounding with desire. She straddled him, bracing her hands against his hard, hairy

chest. Her fingers bit into the chiseled muscles as she slowly lowered herself onto his cock.

As she rode him, his hips jabbed upwards as far as the bonds allowed. She grasped his shoulders and kissed him, rocking faster upon him. Passion flared through her, the friction between them almost unbearable.

His primitive growls mingled with her moans of pleasure.

Tonia came first and her massive pulsations drove him over the edge.

They cried out, their heated bodies straining against each other until the final delicious seconds.

She melted against his chest, her eyes closed as she listened to his heartbeat slow. This time she felt him transform, felt his skin become smoother and his muscles change from bulky to lean.

"I'm sorry," Juan whispered against her hair.

She lifted her head, her brow furrowed as she met his gaze. "For what?"

"The things I said."

A smile tugged at her lips. "I won't hold what he says against you."

"Good. Could you do something else for me?"

"You bet."

"Ask Dave to let me out of this chair?"

Chapter Seven

Dave and Juan spent the next morning working on restraints for his bed. If lovemaking was part of their experiments, he and Tonia might as well be comfortable.

They had no idea how soon they'd test those restraints.

That afternoon Tonia carried a tray with tea to the main lab. Partway there, she heard Juan shout, "This is useless! All these years of study, from magic to medicine, and still nothing!"

"Will you calm down before our big hairy friend shows up?" Dave demanded.

"What's the difference if he appears now or later? I was a fool to think I could ever be rid of this thing!"

"If you calm down and help me we will find a cure. Maybe even today."

"That's shit and you know it! Worst of all, I've gotten Tonia involved. How could I have let that happen?"

"She's done more to control the beast in a few days than we've done in years."

Tonia couldn't help feeling a bit guilty because she also seemed to be the cause of his frequent changes recently. She both inspired the beast and in a way controlled him, but maybe she did more harm than good.

"You think I don't know that? It doesn't justify dragging her into this mess. I should have ended this long ago. Now I don't think I can. *He* won't let me. *He* wants to control me."

"Then don't let him. Calm yourself right now and get back to work."

"I can't!"

Tonia recognized the telltale deepening of Juan's voice and hurried into the lab. Juan, his clawed hands flexing at his sides, stood nose-to-nose with Dave.

"Juan!" she snapped.

Both men turned to her and she placed the tray on an empty table.

"I think we better restrain you," Dave said, grasping a dart gun. "Come on."

Juan shoved his way past Dave and rushed through the labyrinth. They chased him to his room where he tore off his clothes before allowing Dave to fasten his hands and ankles into the restraints on the bed. He'd just finished locking the last cuff on his ankle when the beast took over. Brown hair sprouted over him from head to toe and his muscles thickened as he changed directly to his "werewolf" form. He went into frantic spasms as he tried to break free of the bonds. Blood flew from his mouth as his sharp teeth cut his lips and he howled savagely.

"Juan, calm down!" Tonia said loudly and coolly despite her terror. She didn't fear for herself, but for him. "Listen to me."

The beast stilled, except for the heaving of his chest. His piercing eyes fixed on her, following her every movement as she approached and sat on the edge of the bed. She rested a hand on his furred chest and felt the pounding of his heart.

Most of the "werewolf's" heavy hair disappeared and she again faced the primal man. Blood glistened on his wrists from his struggles against the restraints. She touched his forearm and he jumped a bit, like an animal caught in a trap.

In truth that's exactly what he was.

"Will you be all right?" Dave asked.

"Yes," she replied, not taking her gaze from the beast who continued staring at her, growling softly.

She heard the door close as Dave left them alone.

Tonia rose and walked to the bathroom where she moistened a washcloth. She returned to the bed and cleaned blood from his chin and lips. Gazing at her with a sinister yet playful look, he caught her index finger ever-so-gently between his sharp teeth and she paused, her heart pounding.

If he lost his fragile hold on his self-control, he could easily bite off her fingertip. Instead he licked, then released it. She finished cleaning the blood from his chin.

"Scared you, didn't I?" he purred.

“Does that make you happy?”

“It strengthens your delicious scent. That makes me happy.”

“There are other ways to make my scent stronger,” she said, flinging the washcloth aside. She pulled off her tank top and removed her bra.

His gaze fixed on her breasts and he licked his lips.

Tonia stood and cupped her breasts. She swept her thumbs over her nipples, making them stiffen. She pulled up her skirt and then slid off her panties.

“Silk?” he said in his husky voice. “Let me feel them.”

She trailed the lavender panties over his belly, watching the muscles flex.

“Higher,” he said.

She brushed them across his chest and at the hungry look in his eyes, swept them over his face. His eyes closed and he growled. “I love your scent,” he said.

“I love yours.”

The beast grinned. “Let me taste your tits.”

Again she pulled up her skirt and this time straddled him. Bracing a hand on either side of his head, she leaned over him, her breasts hovering over his face. He lifted his head and captured one of her nipples between his lips.

Raw desire tore through her as he sucked and licked the taut button. Cupping her other breast with one hand, she moved it closer to his lips and he turned his attention to it.

While he teased her nipples, she slid a hand between her legs and rubbed her clit. She wanted to feel his thick, silken cock deep inside her, but first he had another request.

“Stick your fingers in your soft, wet cunt, then let me taste.”

Rising onto her knees, she did as he asked and slid two fingers into her pussy. She was drenched and oh-so-ready for him.

“Beautiful,” he purred. “Put your fingers in my mouth.”

She withdrew her fingers from her pussy and held them to his lips. His tongue slid over them then he sucked them while growling with pleasure.

Unable to wait a moment longer, Tonia reached for his nightstand drawer and took a condom from it. His gaze followed her as she rolled it on him.

“Good thing you brought condoms to the island, Tonia. After all, we wouldn’t want to start a family of little beasts, would we?”

She gave a snort of laughter and eased herself onto his rock-hard cock. Her neck arched and she closed her eyes, enjoying how he filled her so perfectly.

Then she rocked upon him, stirring their pleasure.

Her motions quickened as her passion grew and soon she burst in orgasm.

The beast roared and she heard loud snapping sounds. Her eyes flew open and she saw that he’d broken through the restraints. His clawed hands settled onto her hips before he rolled her onto her back, his cock never leaving her pussy.

Grasping both her wrists in one hand, he pinned them above her head as he took full control of their passion.

“Oh yes! Juan, yes!” she gasped.

He growled and pumped hard and fast.

Those wonderful pre-orgasmic sensations overtook her again and with a few more thrusts she came again. He joined her, howling with passion.

His body half draped over hers, they lay panting for several moments. When she gathered the strength, Tonia opened her eyes and found Juan’s blue eyes gazing at her. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Are you? How are your wrists and ankles?”

“I’m fine.” He cuddled closer and she closed her eyes, resting her cheek against the top of his shaved head. Within moments she drifted off.

* * *

Dave knocked on the door and Tonia stirred. Running a hand through her hair, she asked, “What time is it?”

Juan turned to the nightstand and glanced at the alarm clock. “Dinnertime. I’m starved. I almost forgot how making love works up an appetite.” He rolled her onto her back and covered her mouth with a kiss.

Tonia closed her eyes and opened her mouth to his gently probing tongue. She ran her fingers over his smooth scalp and caressed his shoulders and back, loving the warmth and strength of his body against hers.

Dave knocked again and Juan called, "Come in." He rose naked from the bed while Tonia covered herself with the sheet.

The door opened and Dave, wearing a white lab coat and his hair drawn back into a severe ponytail, stepped inside. He carried a vial of red-tinged liquid.

"Ready to test another possible cure?" he asked, then raised an eyebrow at the broken restraints. "I'd say you are."

The relaxed look faded from Juan's face, replaced by tension. He drew a deep breath, released it slowly and said, "Why not? Just let me get dressed first. If I react to this the way I have to others, I don't want to end up clinging naked to the toilet, vomiting my guts up."

A sad smile tugged at Dave's lips. "Good idea."

Tonia felt slightly sick as well. She hated to think what Juan had endured these past several years.

Juan pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, then took the vial from Dave's hand. He raised it in a toast-like gesture and said, "Bottoms up." He drained the contents in one swallow.

Tonia and Dave stared at him for several seconds.

"How do you feel?" Dave asked.

"Fine so far." Juan slid his feet into sandals. He gave a little snort of laughter and said, "You two are looking at me like I'm going to explode any second."

Tonia shrugged. "Sorry, but how would you feel if you were us?"

With a crooked grin, he said, "I'd rather be you than me."

"Well, I'll see you two downstairs," Dave said. "Shout if you need anything."

The Prowleryn left the room and Tonia stood and headed for the shower.

Before she stepped inside the bathroom, Juan caught her hand and tugged her to his chest. He kissed her and said, "Do you need someone to wash your back?"

"I think you better just relax until you know for sure there are no side effects from that medicine."

He playfully brushed his nose against hers and said, "You give such good advice maybe you should be the doctor."

"I'm fine with being the doctor's lover." She took his face in her hands and kissed him, then tugged away from him and stepped into the bathroom.

A couple of hours later, Juan and Tonia cuddled on the couch in the parlor while Dave sat reading in a nearby chair. Juan had noticed no side effects from the serum and said he felt no change.

"I think I'm going to turn in," Juan said and held Tonia's gaze. "Would you like to join me?"

"Of course."

"I'm going to stay up for a while longer," Dave said. "Shout if you need me."

"I don't think we'll need any help." Juan offered Tonia a sexy wink. He stood and swept her into his arms.

Grinning, she clung to his neck and said, "Are you sure you feel all right?"

"I feel great."

"She's right, though," Dave warned. "Be careful until we know for sure how the new serum reacts."

"I think you're both worrying for nothing. The worst that will happen is it doesn't reverse the curse. Hey, that rhymes." Juan grinned. He left the room and carried her effortlessly up the stairs to his bedroom, where he placed her on the bed and kissed her, then stepped away to undress. Tonia also undressed and within seconds they lay naked in each other's arms.

He took his time kissing her neck while he slid a hand between her legs and caressed her inner thighs. Then he brushed his thumb over her clit and eased his fingers into her pussy, exploring gently.

Tonia closed her eyes and caressed every inch of him she could reach. She relished the warmth of his skin and the hardness of his muscles. He took a condom

from the night table and put it on while Tonia watched and said, "We're going to run out. I should have brought more."

He winked. "When you and Dave take a supply trip to the mainland, we'll add safety to the shopping list."

When he braced his hands on either side of her head and covered her body with his, she opened her eyes and stared into his beautiful blue ones. These were Juan's eyes, untainted by the wildness of the beast. Smiling, she caressed his smooth scalp and kissed him.

She moaned with pleasure as he filled her, inch by magnificent inch. He pumped into her with slow, tender strokes. It felt wonderful! Sooner than she thought possible, orgasm overtook her. Again he covered her mouth with his, absorbing her cries and teasing her with his lips and tongue.

He brought her to two more breath-stealing orgasms before his ragged breathing and tightening muscles told her he was about to come too. She forced her eyes open and he stared into them. Lust glistened in their beautiful blue depths, but still no sign of the beast.

A few more perfect strokes and she came again. This time he joined her. His eyes closed and he groaned with pleasure, panting her name as he strained into her.

Then he settled beside her, holding her close.

A faint smile on her lips, Tonia gazed at him through half-closed eyes. Juan -- the man, not the beast. It seemed the cure had worked after all.

Chapter Eight

Over the next few days, Juan's beast didn't appear again, though he and Dave did everything in their power to draw him out. In lab tests, the serum had counteracted samples taken from Juan in his beast form. Though Juan tried not to raise his hopes, since past antidotes had failed, he couldn't help feeling confident that they had finally found a cure.

On a sunny morning after working out in his private gym, he looked for Tonia, who was reading in the parlor. "I'm going for a jog on the beach," he said, approaching her. Bracing a hand on the arms of her chair, he leaned down and brushed her mouth with a kiss. "Want to come with me?"

"Yeah." She closed the book and smiled at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I'm sweaty from working out." He chuckled.

"Yeah, and I like it."

"In that case." He returned her embrace and kissed her neck. Damn, she smelled so good and he loved the softness of her skin against his lips. When they returned from the beach, he intended to make love to her for a very long time. Or maybe he wouldn't wait but take her on the beach. That would be fun. He had an island all to himself, so why not take advantage of it?

Tonia changed into a black bikini that looked so good he almost decided to forget about the jog, but he didn't like to neglect his body. Besides, exercise always increased his sex drive.

On the beach while Tonia lounged in the sun-warmed sand he jogged along the shoreline, enjoying the coolness of the tide licking his ankles. Partway through his run,

dizziness overwhelmed him and he dropped to his knees. For what seemed like ages he sat panting, his chest tight and head spinning.

"Juan, what's wrong?" Tonia asked. He hadn't noticed her approach, but she knelt beside him, her hand on his shoulder.

Glancing at her through bleary eyes, he shook his head, unable to reply immediately. Finally, he said, "Dizzy."

"Just sit here and relax for a minute. I'm going to get Dave."

"No. It's starting to pass, but I think I better get back to the house."

This couldn't be a heart attack. He was in excellent health -- other than occasionally changing into a beast, of course. Even that had been under control lately, thanks to the new serum.

The serum.

Maybe in his desperation he had been too quick to believe there were no side effects.

* * *

Tonia sat beside Juan on his bed and gazed at their entwined fingers while Dave completed his examination. Since returning to the house, Juan's dizziness had faded. Though he said he felt better, he still looked terribly pale and weak to her.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

Dave cleared his throat and stepped back slightly, his dark gaze fixed on Juan. "And you've had no other symptoms?"

"I was a little sluggish yesterday and this morning, but I felt better after working out."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

"Feeling sluggish? Come on, Dave. Not everyone feels perfect every day," Juan snapped.

"You know better than to withhold information, no matter how insignificant it seems," Dave replied. "Not when involved with a study like this and especially not when your life could be in danger."

"I don't need a lecture. If I'm healthy then I'm going to take a shower and --"

"Good. Then if you're feeling up to it you can join me in the lab because we have to get back to work on another serum."

Tonia's brow furrowed and Juan said, "What? This one works. I haven't changed once since --"

"I'm not positive because I need to do more tests, but it looks like this serum is not only repressing the beast but poisoning you. You've had one dose daily, but we need to stop it."

An angry look passed over Juan's already tense features. "What if the beast comes back? No. I can't stop it."

"First of all, maybe the beast is gone for good and you no longer need any serum. Second of all, if you require the serum on a daily basis and it is causing physical problems, it could end up killing you."

"That's fine." Juan tugged his hand from Tonia's and stood. He paced the room. "I don't care anymore."

"Well I do!" Tonia snapped and leapt out of the bed. She stood in front of him, though he tried to avoid her gaze.

"So do I," Dave stated, an annoyed edge to his usually calm voice. "I didn't come this far with you to watch you kill yourself."

"I appreciate the pep talk, but --"

"What fucking pep talk?" Tonia demanded. "I fall in love for the first time in my life and he decides to commit suicide for what he believes is a noble cause? I don't think so!"

Juan's expression softened and the faintest smile touched his lips. Lifting a hand to her cheek, he gazed into her eyes and said, "That's another reason. I know it's fast. Maybe magic is involved and maybe it's not, but the feelings I have for you are real, Tonia. I haven't been able to feel in such a long time that I almost forgot what it was like. You more than any serum have resurrected my humanity. I'd rather die like this -- like a man -- than live another fifty years without emotions."

In a way Tonia understood his reasoning. She couldn't imagine living a life of total emotional repression to keep a monster under control. Like most people, she had a good side, a bad side and the ability to keep them in balance. For some, like Juan and even Willy the Carver, they had no choice. Either by birth or by accident, their ability to control their impulses had been eliminated. At least Juan had secluded himself, removing the risk of his inner beast destroying others.

Part of that seclusion meant avoiding any strong emotions, including happiness and lust. No wonder he was tired of living that way, yet she couldn't allow him to give up.

"Juan, listen to me," Tonia said, slipping her arms around his neck. "I know there has to be a real cure out there, one that will allow you to live normally again. It's just a matter of time --"

"I've been here for five years!"

"Then wait longer," she demanded. "We've just found each other. Do you want to give up now?"

"If I can die loving you and having a normal relationship with you -- making love, laughing, even arguing like normal lovers, then it's worth risking my life."

His words and the desperate look in his eyes tugged at her heart. "Juan, we can still have all those things. Remember, I have a way with your evil twin. He listens to me."

"For how long? I can't risk your life."

"And I won't let you sacrifice yours."

"Neither will I," Dave said softly. "I'm going to work and I need your help. Are you coming?"

Juan glanced from Dave to Tonia then back again. Finally he nodded.

"Yes," he said and brushed Tonia's mouth with a kiss. "I'm coming."

* * *

Though the dizziness didn't return, Juan felt annoyingly weak and tired for the rest of the day. He and Dave worked in the main lab. The Prowleryn kept careful watch over him and Juan tried not to let his friend's mothering annoy him.

He'd learned a lot about Prowleryns and knew that Dave was unusual for one of his kind. Rather than live among his tribe, he preferred to be alone. Or so he said. Sometimes Juan believed his reason for avoiding his own kind had more to do with disagreements of the past than with a genuine desire to live in seclusion.

He'd met Dave ten years ago when old Dr. Perez had introduced him to the Prowleryn tribe he'd studied with. Such an introduction was a great act of trust on their part. They allowed very few humans into their world.

When Juan and Dave met, they became friends almost immediately. Both had an avid interest in science and achieved medical degrees in the human world. Dave was smaller and lighter than most male Prowleryns and his gentle nature had caused difficulty throughout his life. When he was attacked and left for dead by two young Prowleryn warriors, Juan searched for him and cared for his wounds. Shame had prevented Dave from returning to his tribe, so Juan had tended him in a cave. Alone for several days, the men had secured their friendship and Juan invited Dave to his adoptive father's island.

Dave had returned briefly to his tribe to state his plans -- a great act of courage after what had occurred. When Juan returned home, Dave had joined him. Other than a few sporadic visits to his tribe over the years, Dave had lived in the human world. When Juan's adoptive father had brought about his affliction, Dave had dedicated his life to helping Juan find a cure. Juan wasn't sure what he'd have done without Dave these past five years.

Juan wasn't sure what time it was when his vision blurred, but he sat in a chair behind the desk where he'd been working and rubbed his bleary eyes.

"Why don't you call it a night?" Dave said, resting a hand on Juan's shoulder.

"I'm okay."

"No you're not. From what we learned today, the serum has caused significant damage."

"But it did repress the beast."

Resting his hands on Juan's shoulders, Dave stared hard into his eyes. "It's also killing you."

Shrugging his friend off, Juan strode across the lab to a shelf upon which rested several vials filled with black liquid. He picked one up and sneered. "This is what's killing me and has been since my loving father injected it into my body."

"Juan, do us both a favor and get some sleep. Besides, Tonia's probably worried about you. It's about time for her to check in on us again, so why don't you save her the walk and go upstairs?"

Juan sighed. Truthfully he could scarcely keep his eyes open.

"You're no help to me if you fall asleep at the desk," Dave pressed.

"Fine. I'll be back in a few hours."

Juan left the lab and made his way upstairs.

"Hey," Tonia said upon seeing him. Apparently Dave had been right about her being on her way down to the lab again. "How's it going?"

"It's going nowhere. Again," he said, unable to keep the bitter edge from his voice.

"You look like you could use some rest."

"I wish you and Dave would quit telling me to rest. You're making me feel like a ninety-year-old man."

"Really? You look more like a hundred," she said with a teasing grin.

A slight smile tugged at his lips and he took her in his arms. "I'm sorry if I've been snappy."

"You've got reasons." She hugged him tightly. "Let's go to bed."

"Sounds great, but I don't know how far we'll get."

She chuckled and together they walked to his room.

Despite how his thoughts churned, Juan found that he couldn't stay awake for long and soon drifted to sleep, Tonia snug in his arms.

* * *

Juan awoke to Tonia caressing his face.

"Wake up," she said softly. "Dave has to talk to you."

Blinking, Juan glanced around the room. Sunlight bled through the edges of the drawn curtains and he realized he'd slept through the night. Tonia, wearing a white sundress, her long, dark hair draping her creamy shoulders, sat on the edge of the bed. Dave stood nearby.

"What time is it?" Juan muttered, glancing at the alarm clock. He sat up straighter. "One o'clock? In the afternoon?"

"It's not a crime to sleep late, you know," Tonia said with a slight smile.

"Especially not with how you must be feeling lately," Dave added. He held a vial of familiar black liquid in his hand. Offering it to Juan, he said, "You need to drink this."

"Are you nuts? That's the stuff that brought on the beast in the first place."

"Yeah, and if I'm right it's the only thing that will keep you alive now. A large enough dose of this should counteract the serum. Now I suggest we go to the cell because once you drink this it should bring on the change immediately, just like the first time."

"No." Juan rose from the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Tonia grasped his arm. "Juan, you have to --"

He glared at her. "I'm sorry, Tonia, but you're not talking me into this. I am *not* going to drink that. I said it before and I'll say it again, I'd rather live as a man for a few days than become that monster again. End of conversation."

Juan stepped into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

* * *

"Shit, Dave, now what are we going to do?" Tonia snapped. She paced the lab where Dave still worked relentlessly, while upstairs in his bedroom Juan was now too sick to move out of bed.

"I can't find a cure overnight," Dave stated. "The only chance he has right now is to accept the original --"

"He refuses."

"Keep talking to him. Try to convince him."

"He won't listen to me. Dave, I wish I had never come here. This is my fault."

"Don't be ridiculous. Juan is being unreasonable. Your blood was an important ingredient to the antidote and it's greatly helped our studies, but I need fresh blood from another source. I've placed an ad for a gardener in the mainland newspapers. Hopefully someone will respond soon and we can get fresh samples, but we need Juan alive and healthy. He cares about you, Tonia, and eventually he'll listen to you. You have to keep trying."

"All right, but I don't think anyone is going to change his mind."

Chapter Nine

Willy the Carver sat in the tattoo studio. He'd heard stories about this particular artist incorporating magic into her designs. Not that he necessarily believed in that shit, but he'd also heard the artist was his type of woman. She liked weirdness and pain. Maybe after she finished his tattoo, if she turned him on, he'd offer her a taste of his blade.

He picked up a newspaper and flipped through it, pausing in the classified section where an ad was outlined in purple.

Interesting. Someone was looking for a gardener to work on his private island. No experience necessary.

A private island. That would be the perfect place to hide until things cooled off about his escape. Right now everyone was looking for him. He'd intended to leave town sooner, but not before paying back that brown-eyed bitch for testifying against him. He could almost feel her blood on his hands. He'd intended to fucking bathe in it. Unfortunately she'd left town, but that wouldn't stop him. Nothing or no one ever stopped him from getting what he wanted and Willy the Carver always kept his promises. He'd sworn Tonia would taste his blade and he'd be damned if the bitch would make a liar out of him.

Still, a few months chilling on a private island would be just what he needed to collect himself and plan.

The tattoo artist stepped into the room and Willy actually licked his lips at the sight of her. She was tall, lean and mean with dark skin, wild black hair and eyes that told stories even filthier than the ones he'd lived.

"This way," she said, beckoning him with her bejeweled finger. She turned and her backless dress revealed a snakeskin pattern tattooed down her supple spine.

Willy grunted with desire, but before following her, he tore the ad out of the paper and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans.

* * *

Tonia sat beside Juan on his bed, staring at him as he slept. She'd never seen anyone so pale. Over the past few days, he'd scarcely eaten and seemed to weaken by the moment.

A small glass bottle filled with the black liquid rested on his bedside table, though he hadn't so much as glanced at it. She and Dave had contemplated forcing him to take it, but knew it had to be his choice.

Dave tapped softly on the door and stepped into the room.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm back with the new... uh... gardener," he said with a pointed look.

Tonia sighed and nodded. The previous day a man had responded to the ad and seemed just as anxious to work on the island as they were to have him here.

"Hey, Dave, where is the tool shed around here --" said a smooth male voice Tonia would never forget.

She momentarily forgot to breathe as Willy the Carver stepped into the room.

Their gazes locked and a savage grin twisted his lips. Before anyone could react, he grasped the back of Dave's neck and smashed his face into the nearby wall. Taken by surprise, Dave staggered and Willy picked up an ornate floor lamp and struck Dave hard over his head. The smaller man sprawled flat on his face, unconscious.

Tonia, who had momentarily frozen, leapt out of bed.

"Whoever would have thought I'd find you here?" Willy chuckled. "I guess you can't cheat fate, bitch. I said you'd taste my blade and you will, but after I taste you first."

Despite her horror, Tonia had every intention of fighting him to the death -- preferably his. She picked up one of the chairs by the picture window near the bed and swung it at Willy as he leapt at her.

He raised his powerfully-muscled forearms and the chair seemed to bounce off them. She screamed and fought him with every bit of strength. Her knee jabbed between his legs and he grunted in pain. Knowing she'd hurt him spurred her on and she clawed at his eyes, but he grasped her wrists and shoved her so hard against the window that the glass cracked. At the moment she didn't know or care if she'd been cut, but she just kept fighting.

A primal roar made them both pause.

Juan's evil twin rose from the bed and Tonia caught sight of the glass bottle, smashed on the bedside table.

Beneath his caveman-like brow, his blue eyes glistened with a murderous look and he grinned, revealing his wolfish teeth.

"Look, dear, we have a guest," Juan purred, striding toward her and Willy.

"What the fuck are you?" Willy demanded.

"Tell me, Tonia, did you invite his advances?" Juan continued, his clawed fingers flexing at his sides. A low growl rumbled in his chest. "Or is he being a naughty boy?"

"He's being naughty," she replied, the tremor in her voice one of repressed laughter instead of fear. She wasn't sure if she was laughing from anxiety or relief.

"Then a naughty boy needs to be punished." Before Willy could react, the beast's hands lashed out and grasped him by the shoulders.

Willy bellowed in pain as the sharp claws tore through clothing and flesh. He dropped his hold on Tonia just before Juan flung him across the room and through the glass doors of the balcony.

Growling again, Juan sprang onto the balcony. Willy painfully pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

"Here, let me help," Juan snarled, grasping the front of Willy's shirt and dragging him to his feet.

Willy struggled, but the beast was far too strong. With a grunt, Juan hurled Willy over the balcony, then jumped off as well.

Her heart pounding, Tonia also headed for the balcony, but a groan from Dave drew her attention. She turned to him and started to approach, then stopped when black fur sprang from his flesh. His human face elongated and his supple body stretched and strained as he shifted into a big feline. He bounded across the room, sailed over the broken glass and jumped off the edge of the balcony.

"This is a fucking madhouse," Tonia whispered and hurried outside.

She glanced toward the ground below where Juan's beast stood over Willy the Carver's dead body, the big black cat circling them.

* * *

"How's it going?" Tonia asked, stepping into the lab where Juan and Dave were hard at work on a new cure.

"Okay," Juan replied, turning to her. Since Willy's appearance a few days ago, he'd been quiet and withdrawn. She knew he wanted to keep the beast under control, but she sensed something more troubled him.

"I'm going to get a cup of tea," Dave said. "Anyone want one?"

They refused and he left them alone in the lab.

Juan turned to make a few notes and Tonia stood behind him, massaging his neck and shoulders. "Talk to me."

"I killed a man, Tonia. I know the bastard deserved it, but what bothers me most is I think I enjoyed killing him. I know the beast did."

"Juan, look at me."

He turned and met her gaze. The pain in his beautiful blue eyes made her ache inside.

"You took Willy's life, but he took dozens of innocent lives. If he'd lived I know he'd have taken more."

"That still doesn't change what I did."

"What were you supposed to do? Let him kill me?"

"Of course not."

"Juan, you swallowed that black stuff to save my life. You were ready to die before changing into the beast again, but you did it for me."

"I... I love you, Tonia. Whether it's magic or love at first sight or whatever, it's the truth."

"I love you too."

"It's not that I feel Willy is any big loss, it's that I don't know what will happen next time. There are no more serial killers on the island. What if next time I kill you or Dave?"

She shook her head. "That won't happen."

"How do you know? The beast is totally unpredictable."

"But he's still you. You care about me and Dave and I know in my heart you would never really hurt us. Neither will the beast. And you know, there's something sexy about him."

Juan wrinkled his nose. "You think so?"

"Yeah." She grinned and slipped her arms around his neck. Standing on tiptoe she spoke against his lips. "But you're sexy too."

He caressed her hair. "It's good to know I don't always need to sprout fangs to turn you on."

Tonia's eyes slipped shut as he covered her mouth in a deep, tender kiss. Even though she no longer had to hide from Willy, she had an even more important reason to stay on this island. One day she knew Juan would find a cure, and while he searched she'd stay by his side -- the one woman who could tame his beast.

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, www.myspace.com/katehillromance, or join her newsgroup at groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill. Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at www.amazon.com.