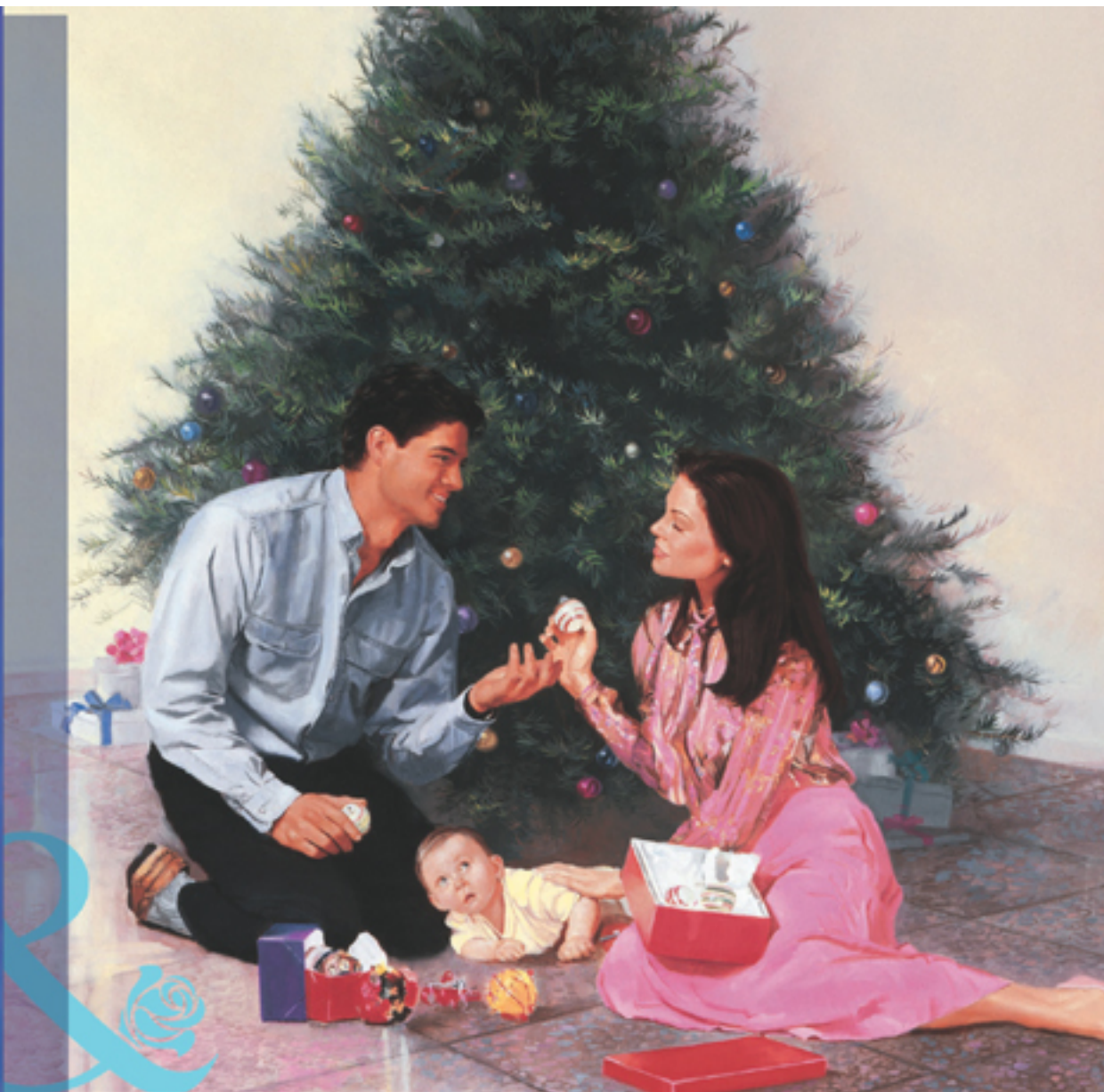


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A Baby For Christmas

ANNE MCALLISTER

Anne McAllister

A Baby For Christmas

«HarperCollins»

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THIS TIME, FOREVEROnce, he accused her of trading sex for a wedding ring... Carly knew Piran wasn't her Mr. Right. He'd rejected her innocent infatuation years ago, and he certainly didn't see himself as a doting husband and father! Now they had joint custody of a baby!But now Piran needed Carly's help: a baby had been abandoned on his doorstep. He fiercely denied he was a father... So whose child was it? Piran was determined to find out but, meanwhile, he was left holding the baby.And his paternal instincts were a little rusty! Forced into being a surrogate family with Piran, Carly began to wonder if Christmas had not only turned him into perfect father material - but an ideal husband, as well.

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“I’m not its daddy!”

Carly reached into the basket and scooped the baby up into her arms. “He has your nose.”

“He does not!”

“And his eyes are exactly the same blue as yours.”

“And hundreds of thousands of other people’s...”

“But he’s on *your* veranda.” Carly looked down at the baby. “Oh, dear. What if whoever left him doesn’t come back?” “I’m not keeping him!” “But he’s—”

“No, he’s not!” Piran insisted, as if, by repeating it often enough, he could convince himself that it was true. What in God’s name was he going to do with a baby?

ANNE MCALLISTER

was born in California. She spent long lazy summers daydreaming on local beaches and studying surfers, swimmers and volleyball players in an effort to find the perfect hero. She finally did, not on the beach, but in a university library where she was working. She, her husband and their four children have since moved to the Midwest. She taught, copyedited, capped deodorant bottles, and ghostwrote sermons before turning to her first love: writing romance fiction.

A Baby for Christmas

Anne McAllister



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CHAPTER ONE

IT DIDN'T even begin to look a lot like Christmas.

In fact as far as Carly could see, when the outboard power boat which served as Conch Cay's only ferry approached the boat dock, Christmas might as well not exist on the tiny palm-studded island with its haphazard rows of pastel-colored houses climbing the hills that made up the one small town on it.

There were no Christmas trees for sale on every corner as there were back in New York City. There was no tinsel garland strung along the eaves of the custom house the way there was in the Korean grocery where Carly stopped every night to buy food for supper. There wasn't even any Salvation Army bell-ringer calling out, 'Mer-r-r-y Christmas,' the way he did every morning right outside the publishing house where she worked so that she felt like Scrooge whenever she passed him. It might as easily have been June.

And thank heavens for that, Carly thought. Actually it was exactly what she'd hoped for, the one—the only good thing that coming to Conch Cay was going to accomplish in her life: helping her forget Christmas this year.

Most years she started December with fervent hopes for the holiday season. Most years she was a great believer in the seasonal joys espoused by popular songs, even if she'd rarely experienced them in her lifetime.

But this year she didn't want to think about them. Only three months after her mother's death, she didn't want to face Christmas with her stepfather and step-sisters out in Colorado, even though they'd invited her. She didn't want visual reminders of how wonderful last year had been.

Maybe in time she would be able to look back on that year without the bittersweet knowledge that her mother's recent marriage to Roland had made her happy again, but that her happiness had been so shortlived. Maybe in time she could go see Roland and the girls without thinking about what might have been.

Not now.

'Come home with me,' John, her sort-of-boyfriend, had suggested when she'd tried to explain her feelings to him.

But she hadn't wanted to do that either.

John was far more serious about their relationship than she was. He wanted marriage.

Carly had nothing against marriage. She wanted it too, someday. But she wanted love first. She didn't love John yet. She wasn't sure she ever would. And she certainly didn't want to increase his expectations about her feelings for him by letting him take her home to Buffalo for Christmas.

She didn't want to be in Conch Cay either.

But at the moment it seemed like the least of several evils. And, if her boss was to be believed, the one that would at least help her keep food on the table when the holidays were over.

All she had to do, Diana had said simply, was 'help Piran St Just finish his book'.

The notion still had the power to stun her.

She hadn't believed it last week when Piran's younger brother Desmond had showed up in the office. He hadn't believed it when he'd found out that his ex-stepsister had turned out to be the assistant editor who'd done the line-editing on their last book.

But it had taken him barely two minutes to turn the circumstances to his advantage.

'Fate,' Des had proclaimed, looping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a hug. Then he'd turned to Diana, the editorial director. 'Don't you think so? After all, who better than Carly to go to Conch Cay and work with Piran in my place? Our sister—'

'Stepsister,' Carly had corrected him quickly. 'Exstepsister,' she'd added.

'Not really,' Des said. 'They didn't get divorced. Dad died.'

‘That doesn’t make us related,’ Carly argued, not wanting Diana to misunderstand her relationship to the St Just brothers.

But Diana hadn’t been listening to her. She’d been listening to Desmond. He, after all, was part of Bixby Grissom’s bestselling duo; Carly was merely an assistant editor.

‘She’ll do a lot better job than I would,’ Des had said. ‘And you know how much you’d like a book set in Fiji next.’

Diana had let herself be convinced.

Carly hadn’t. Not at first. She didn’t want to go to Conch Cay. She didn’t want to presume on her past relationship with the St Just brothers. Though she and Des had been quite happy with their sort-of-sibling relationship while their parents had been married, after his father’s death, she hadn’t seen Des. And she would happily have gone to her own grave without ever having to face his older brother again!

Once, when she was barely more than a girl and her mother had been married to his father, Carly’s starry-eyed fantasies had caused her to believe that Piran St Just was her one true love. The mere mention of his name had sent shivers of anticipation right down her spine.

Now the shivers were of an entirely different kind.

‘Come on, Carly, be a sport,’ Des had cajoled.

But ultimately it wasn’t Des she did it for. It was because she loved her job and wanted to keep it.

‘You do like working here, don’t you?’ Diana had said casually, but there was nothing casual about what she’d meant.

‘I’ll go,’ Carly had said at last.

And here she was. About to come face to face with Piran after nine long years. She wondered what he’d thought when Des had told him. He couldn’t be looking forward to it any more than she was.

But they would manage because they were adults now. That thought was the only one that gave her solace. In fact it gave her a small amount of perverse pleasure. She wanted Piran to know that she was no longer the foolish, innocent child she’d been at eighteen.

‘You sure he expectin’ you?’ Sam, the ferryman, asked her now as he cut the engine and the boat snuggled neatly against the rubber tires edging the sides of the dock. No one was there waiting, except two men sitting in the shade thwacking dominoes on to a table with considerable vigor.

‘Absolutely,’ Carly said. Of course he was expecting her. Hadn’t Des arranged it? ‘I’m sure Mr St Just phoned.’

‘Mr St Just don’t got a phone,’ Sam said.

‘Not that Mr St Just,’ Carly said. ‘Desmond.’

‘Ah.’ Sam’s dark head bobbed and he grinned widely. ‘Mr Desmond. What a rascal that man is. Where he be?’

‘In Fiji by now, I should think,’ Carly said. She shifted her duffel bag from one hand to the other. ‘But he said he’d call and tell you. To tell his brother, that is.’

Sam clambered out of the boat, took the duffel from her, then held out a hand and hauled her up on to the dock beside him before turning to the two men. ‘You, Ben. Mr Desmond, he call you?’

The man called Ben looked up and shook his head, a sympathetic smile on his face. ‘Nope. Didn’t phone me. He phone you, Walter?’

The other man shook his head too. ‘Nope. Ain’t never talked to Mr Desmond. But it don’t matter,’ he said to Carly. ‘You here to see Mr St Just—no problem. We drive you out to the house.’

‘Yes, but—’

It wasn’t a matter of being driven. It was a matter of arriving unannounced. Carly hadn’t expected Piran to pick her up. That bit of courtesy would certainly be beyond him. But she had at least expected him to know she was coming!

If no one else did, chances were he didn’t either.

Carly felt an increasing sense of unease. She hadn't been unassailed by second thoughts ever since she'd knuckled under to Desmond's pleas and her boss's not so subtle blackmail.

But now those thoughts were multiplying like bunnies.

She licked her lips. 'No one told you I was coming?' 'No, missy, not a soul. We been 'spectin' Mr Desmond all right. Mr St Just, he been yellin' where he is for a week now.' Ben chuckled and shook his head.

'He be in Fiji,' Sam said. 'Imagine that. Don't that beat all? Ain't Mr St Just gonna be surprised?'

Wasn't he just? Carly thought grimly. Which was exactly what she was afraid of.

But there was nothing else to do—except go home. And even if Des weren't half a world away, and even if her job didn't depend on her bringing back the book, she couldn't go home. She had nowhere to go home to.

She'd told Lenny, her downstairs neighbor, that he could put his divorced sister from Cleveland and her three children up in her apartment over the holidays. And since Lenny's family celebrated both Hanukkah and Christmas she was going to be homeless for quite some time.

Carly shut her eyes and wondered if maybe Christmas in Buffalo or in Colorado might not have been a better alternative after all.

'So, you want to go now?' Ben asked her, getting up and moving slowly toward a psychedelic van with the word *TAXI* painted on it.

Did she? No, she didn't. Did she have a choice? No, again. Though what Piran was going to say when he saw her was not something she wanted to contemplate.

'Let's go,' she said to Ben with more enthusiasm than she felt.

As little as she had been looking forward to the trip and seeing Piran again, she had been looking forward to seeing Conch Cay. And now, as Ben drove her up the hill through the narrow bumpy streets, she looked around, enchanted, taking it all in. It was every bit as lovely as she remembered it. When Arthur had first brought them here she'd thought it the closest thing to an island Garden of Eden she'd ever seen. Nine years later she had no reason to change her mind.

In a few minutes they left the small town where most of the islanders lived and drove up into the lush tropical vegetation that banked the narrow asphalt road that wound back up the hill toward the windward side. Every so often Carly caught a glimpse of a house through the trees and shrubs. In the distance, as they approached the ocean side of the island, she could hear the sound of the surf crashing against the sand.

She watched with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation for the turn-off on to the gravel that would bring them at last to Blue Moon Cottage, the St Justs' home.

'Mr St Just goin' to be that surprised,' Ben said as he finally turned into the rutted gravel track leading up to the house. 'Course I don' 'spect he'll be too mad. You a sight prettier than Mr Desmond.'

Which might have been a recommendation for another woman, but had never been for her, Carly thought.

She still winced inwardly every time she recalled her last painful encounter with Piran St Just. But now, as she got her first glimpse of the ice-blue house among the trees, she turned her back on that memory and drew herself together, mustering her strength, her determination, her maturity.

Good thing, too, for at the sound of the van the back door to the cottage opened and a man appeared on the broad screened-in veranda.

Carly hadn't seen Piran except on television and in photographs for nine years. It didn't matter; she would have known him anywhere.

He was tall, dark and unshaven. His hair was as black as night and wanted cutting, just as it always had. His jaw was hard and firm, and she saw it tighten when he noticed that the person Ben was bringing wasn't Desmond. His scowl deepened, but he didn't look angry. Yet.

Carly took a deep breath and pasted on what she hoped would pass for a cool, professional smile. Then she stepped out of the van, lifted her gaze to meet his eyes, and was chagrined to realize

she was glad she was wearing sunglasses so that he couldn't see how much the mere sight of him still affected her after all these years.

'Piran,' she said, grateful that her voice didn't betray her agitation. 'Long time, no see.'

His eyes widened momentarily, then narrowed. The hard jaw got even harder. '*Carlota?*'

Carlota. No one ever called her Carlota. Not even her mother whose fault it was that she was named that!

Her only consolation was that he sounded as if he'd had the air knocked out of him. He braced a hand against one of the pillars of the veranda and she noticed that his knuckles were white.

'You remember me, I see.'

He snorted. 'What in the hell are you doing here?'

'I gather Des didn't tell you?'

'Des?' He frowned. 'What about Des?'

'He sent me. Got my boss to insist, as a matter of fact.'

What? What are you talking about? Why the hell would he send you? Where'd he find you? The questions came fast and furious, but no more furious, obviously, than Piran himself. 'What are you talking about? Where is Des?'

'On his way to Fiji?' She meant it to sound like a statement and was mortified when it came out tentative enough to be a question.

'*What!*' There was no question in that exclamation, just pure disbelief. And even more fury.

Carly would have quailed before it nine years ago. Now she drew herself up to her full five feet six, determined not to let him intimidate her. 'Jim Taylor—you remember, your father's old cap—'

'I know who Jim Taylor is,' Piran snapped.

'Well, he bought a new boat and—'

'I don't give a damn about Jim Taylor's boat. Where's Des?'

'I'm trying to tell you,' Carly snapped back, 'if you'll kindly shut up and let me finish!'

Piran's mouth opened, then snapped shut again. He glowered at her, then finally he shrugged and stuffed his fists into the pockets of his shorts. 'By all means enlighten me, Carlota,' he drawled.

Carly took a careful breath, ran her tongue over parched lips and began again. 'Jim bought a new boat. He's sailing it out of Fiji, and he invited Des to go along and—'

'He *went*?' The drawl was gone. The fury was back.

'He said you'd understand that it was too good an opportunity to miss.'

'The hell I would! We have a commitment! A contract! Does he think the book is going to write itself?' Piran stalked from one side of the veranda to the other.

'No, actually he thinks I'm going to help you write it.'

He spun around and looked at her, poleaxed. 'You? *You* help me write it?'

Carly heard a soft chuckle and was suddenly aware that Ben was still there listening. No doubt the whole island would be hearing about this before nightfall.

'Let's not discuss this out here,' she said in a low tone. 'Let me get my bag and we can discuss it in the house'

'You're not coming in the house.'

'Piran—'

'You're not! I don't know what kind of stunt Des is pulling, but you're getting in the van and going right back where you came from.'

Carly heard Ben choke on his laughter.

Her cheeks burned. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she said fiercely to Piran. 'I didn't come all this way to have you send me back.' She turned and reached back into the van and grabbed her duffel bag. 'How much do I owe you?' she asked Ben.

'Eight dollar.' He was still grinning all over his face.

Carly ignored the grin. She took a ten out of her wallet and handed it to him. He tucked it in his shirt pocket. 'Thank you, missy.' He slid back into the driver's seat.

'What are you doing?' Piran demanded. 'Stay where you are.'

'Mr St Just gettin' pretty mad,' Ben said as he leaned out the window. 'You sure 'bout this?'

Carly wasn't sure at all, but she didn't see that she had any option. Diana had made herself perfectly clear: when Carly next appeared in the office, she was going to be carrying Piran and Desmond St Just's next bestselling true-life archaeological adventure. Or else.

But she wasn't going to be doing that unless she helped Piran finish it. There was certainly no way she could find Des now and make him take her place.

Besides, she thought irritably, how dared Piran make her seem like some sort of unwanted interloper?

'I'm sure,' she said.

Ben shrugged. 'It be your neck, missy.'

Undoubtedly it would. Carly took a deep breath. 'I'll be fine.'

Ben gave a quick salute and put the van in reverse.

Piran started down the steps. 'Ben! Where the hell are you going? Get back here! Ben! *Ben!*'

But Ben apparently knew that absence was the better part of valor—at the moment at least. The van putted away down the gravel and disappeared around the bend.

It was a full minute before Piran turned from staring after it to fix his gaze on Carly.

'Well, some things never change, do they, Carlota?' he drawled at last, looking her up and down.

Carly met his gaze levelly. 'What does that mean?'

'You're still a conniving little bitch.'

So the battle lines were drawn. It certainly hadn't taken long. If he'd slapped her face with a glove, he could not have challenged her more clearly. Nor could he have found a better means of making Carly dig her heels in.

For a single instant, before he called her that...that-she couldn't even let herself think about what he'd called her!—she'd almost felt sorry for Piran St Just. She'd almost regretted that his brother had deserted him, regretted that he'd have to make do with her help, not Des's.

But when he threw those words at her she thought, Serves him right, damned judgmental jerk.

She supposed she was a bit of a jerk, too, for having thought even for one moment that they could manage this without problems, that he might have changed his opinion of her.

Once—in the very beginning—he'd defended her. It had been the first time they met and she hadn't even known who he was.

It had happened a month after Carly's mother had married Piran's father in Santa Barbara. She'd met Des at the wedding, but she'd never met Arthur's much heralded elder son. Piran hadn't come to the ceremony, Arthur had said, because he went to university in the east.

But he was coming for spring vacation. Carly was going to meet him that very night. In fact, if she didn't hurry, she was going to be late.

She'd waited to leave the beach until the last possible moment, hoping that the small group of inebriated college students standing by the steps up the cliff would disperse. They hadn't. Instead they'd stood watching her approach, whistling and making lewd suggestions that made her cheeks burn.

She'd tried to ignore them, then she'd tried brushing past them and going up the steps quickly. But she'd stumbled and one of them had grabbed her and hauled her hard against him.

'Please,' she babbled. 'Let me go.'

He rubbed against her. 'Let's go together, baby,' he rasped in her ear.

Carly struggled. 'Stop it! Leave me alone!'

He shook his head. 'You want it. You know you do,' he said as she tried to pull away.

A couple of the other men hooted and whistled. 'I like 'em feisty,' one of them called.

‘Please!’ Carly tried twisting away from him, but he held her fast until all at once, out of nowhere, a savior appeared.

The most handsome young man she’d ever seen jerked the drunken man away from her. ‘Can’t you hear?’ he snarled. ‘The lady said she wants to be left alone.’

‘Lady? Who says she’s a lady?’

Carly’s black-haired savior stepped between her and the drunken student. ‘I say so,’ he said, his voice low and deadly.

The student gave a nervous, half-belligerent laugh. ‘An’ who are you? The Lone Ranger?’ He shoved Piran hard, so hard that he wobbled himself.

The next thing Carly knew the man was flat on his rear in the sand with her savior standing over him, rubbing his right fist.

‘It doesn’t matter who I am,’ he said. ‘Apologize to the lady. Now.’

The man’s jaw worked. He spat blood on to the sand and glanced around at his friends. They fidgeted and muttered, but they apparently didn’t see much point in fighting over Carly. Some of them backed up the steps. A few moved away down the beach. At last it was just Carly and the two of them left.

Finally the student struggled to his feet and glowered at the lean, tanned man still standing there, his fists clenched.

He didn’t move an inch. ‘Say it.’

The drunken student’s gaze flicked briefly to Carly. He scowled. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered in a surly tone. Then he fled.

Carly stared after him, shaking, still feeling the disgusting feel of his sweaty, sandy body pressed against hers.

‘Hey, you OK?’ The young man tilted his head to look into her eyes. He gave her a gentle smile. He had the most beautiful blue eyes and the most wonderful smile she’d ever seen.

‘F-fine,’ she’d mumbled.

‘It’s over,’ he said, and put his arm around her, drawing her close, holding her gently until she’d stopped shaking.

It should have frightened her. He was as much a stranger as the drunken student. But she wasn’t frightened. She felt safe. Cared for.

She remembered looking up into his face right at that moment and thinking she’d found the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with—the man her mother had always told her was out there waiting.

She stammered, ‘Th—thanks.’

He smiled at her and ran his knuckles lightly down her cheek. ‘My pleasure. Always ready to help out a damsel in distress.’ He gave her a wink, then asked if he could see her home.

And that was when he found out whose daughter she was.

‘You live where?’ he asked her when she pointed out the house on the hillside.

‘The pink house. The great big one. Isn’t it lovely? We just moved in, *my* mother and I. She married a professor—’

‘Arthur St Just.’ His voice was suddenly clipped and short.

‘Yes. You know him?’

‘I thought I did,’ her savior said gruffly. ‘He’s my father. I’m Piran St Just.’

Her new stepbrother. The one she’d never met. The one, she quickly learned, who hadn’t come to the wedding not simply because he went to school in the east but because he objected so strongly to his father’s remarriage.

He thought Carly’s unsophisticated dancer mother far beneath Arthur St Just’s touch and he made no bones about it. In Piran’s eyes, she was no more than the gold-digging hussy who had trapped his unsuspecting father into matrimony.

While Des accepted his stepmother with equanimity, at the same time acknowledging that she wasn't quite what one would have expected Arthur St Just to pick for a wife, the same was not true of Piran.

And once he found out that Carly was the gold-digging hussy's daughter his solicitous behavior and gentle concern vanished at once.

Sue, always optimistic, encouraged her daughter to be patient.

'He doesn't understand,' she said softly to Carly more than once. 'Piran is young, idealistic, and his parents' divorce hurt him. He hasn't known love himself. He doesn't understand how it can happen. Give him time.'

Over the months to come Carly gave him that—and more. Even though, once he knew who she was, he treated her with cool indifference, she couldn't help remembering the first Piran—the gentle, caring Piran who was really there inside.

She told herself that Sue was right. She saw his dislike as a blind spot, one that time and proximity—and her love—would cure.

Until the night of her eighteenth birthday...when she understood finally just how determinedly blind Piran St Just really was...

She lifted her chin now and faced him once more. 'Think what you like, Piran. I'm sure you will anyway. I'm not going to argue with you.'

'Because you haven't got a leg to stand on.'

'Try not to insult me too much,' she suggested mildly, 'or you'll be doing this book on your own.'

'That's another thing. What's all this nonsense about you helping with the book?'

'I'm Sloan Bascombe's assistant editor.'

'The hell you say!' He didn't seem to believe for a minute that she did in fact work for his editor.

They glared at each other for a full minute. Impasse. There were a myriad emotions crossing Piran's face. Acceptance wasn't one of them. Finally Carly nodded once and picked up her duffel.

'Suit yourself,' she said, and turned to head back down the road toward town.

She'd gone perhaps twenty yards when Piran called after her. 'Tell me what Des said.'

She stopped and turned, but she didn't go back.

Piran stood where she'd left him. They stared at each other now down the length of the narrow rutted lane. His hands were still in his pockets, his jaw was thrust out, but there was a hint of concern—of doubt?—in his expression.

'I told you what Des said. Am I supposed to assume you believe me now?'

He shrugged irritably. 'For whatever difference it makes.'

'None to me,' Carly said with all the indifference she could manage. 'Rather a lot to Des, I gather. He was there trying to get an extension so he could go on the trip to Fiji when Diana told him I'd been the one to do the line-editing on your last book.'

'Sloan did it.'

'Sloan signed it. I wrote it. He has forty writers. He can't do everything for everyone. And I know more about archaeology than he does.' She took considerable satisfaction in telling him that and, at first, she thought he was going to object about that too. But finally he gave a negligent lift of his shoulders.

'Go on.'

'You know the rest. As soon as Des found that out, he asked if I'd come and work with you.'

'And you jumped at the chance?'

'Hardly.'

'You're here,' Piran pointed out.

'Not by choice. Diana made it abundantly clear that my job depended on it. Nothing, believe me,' she added after a moment, 'to do with you.'

‘Got over your infatuation, did you, Carlota?’ His mouth curved, but his smile was hard, not pleasant. ‘Or maybe it’s like I thought: you weren’t ever really infatuated at all, just money-grubbing like your mother.’

It was all Carly could do not to slap him. Abruptly she turned her back and started walking again. She had reached the main road before she heard footsteps coming after her.

‘Carlota!’

She walked faster. She knew she could let him insult her. It would be good for her, cleanse her, wash away all her childish hopes and dreams. But she wasn’t going to stand there and listen to him insult her mother!

Heaven knew Sue had had her share of faults. But she hadn’t been a bad person. She’d been as idealistic as she’d considered Piran to be. She’d just been far more confused. And foolish. And unlucky—until the last.

Carly was willing to admit all those things. What else could you call a woman who had married seven times in search of the perfect love?

But her mother hadn’t been evil. She hadn’t been conniving.

Never.

But there was no point in telling that to Piran. She had no intention of defending her mother to the likes of Piran St Just! He could go to hell as far as she was concerned. And he could take his book with him.

‘Carlota, damn it! Get back here!’

Carly hurried on. The day was hot and sticky for December. And while she hadn’t felt the heat much in the van, now her shirt stuck to her back. Rivulets of sweat ran down her spine and between her breasts into the waistband of her chambray trousers. She shifted the duffel from one hand to the other and continued on.

Heavy footsteps pounded after her. She ignored them.

‘Carlota!’

She didn’t turn around. She didn’t falter.

‘Carly, you stubborn witch, stop!’

A hand came out and snagged her arm, hauling her abruptly to a halt. Fingers bit into her skin, holding her fast.

She tried to jerk her arm away, but Piran wouldn’t let go. The pull on her arm was so strong he almost dragged her to the ground. She looked at him closely. He seemed winded. His dark hair clung damply to his forehead. His lean cheeks were flushed, but he was white around the mouth, and he was breathing heavily.

‘Let me go,’ she said again, trying to pry his fingers loose.

His chest heaved. ‘Only if you don’t start walking again.’

She just looked at him, making no promises.

His fingers tightened. She winced. He looked at his hand still biting into her flesh and frowned, but he didn’t let go. ‘We need to talk.’

‘I’m not talking—or listening—to anyone who insults my mother.’

A muscle ticked in his jaw. She could almost see the thoughts flashing across his brain, angry thoughts, disparaging thoughts. But finally Carly felt his fingers loosen reluctantly. His hand dropped and he shoved it once more into the pocket of his canvas trousers. He shrugged almost negligently. ‘Whatever.’

Carly pressed her lips together. She wanted to rub her arm, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

‘So talk,’ she said frostily.

Piran drew a deep breath, as if trying to decide where to start. Finally he lifted his gaze and met hers.

‘Let me get this straight,’ he said after a long moment, and she could still bear his disbelief. ‘You just happen to work at Bixby Grissom and you just happened to edit our book?’

‘More or less. As I said, Sloan has a lot on his plate, and since I know more about archaeology than he does he asked me if I would do your last revision letter for him and the last line-editing.’

‘Which he signed.’

‘He’s your editor. I’m not. And Des came to see him, but he was out with the flu.’

‘So Des just jumped at the chance to suggest you come in his place.’

‘I’m sure Des was just there to ask for an extension. But when he saw me a light bulb went off in his head. You know Des and his ideas.’

Piran grimaced. ‘Yeah, I know Des and his ideas. What I don’t know is why you agreed.’

‘I told you—because I like my job. And because I wasn’t sure how much longer I’d have it if I didn’t. It certainly wasn’t because I was ecstatic about seeing you.’

Was that a flush making his cheeks darker? ‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he said gruffly after a moment.

She waited, the sun beating down on her back, but he didn’t say anything else. He just shut his eyes. His jaw tightened.

‘So,’ Carly said finally, ‘do I stay or leave?’

He sighed, then opened his eyes. ‘Like you I have no choice. What else can I do if we’re going to turn the book in on time?’

‘Des said you had a draft.’

‘Des is ever an optimist.’ His tone was dry. ‘I have a very rough draft—the operative word being “rough”. I was counting on Des to shape it up. He’s supposed to be here,’ he muttered again.

‘Yes, well, he’s not. I’m it. Unless you want to plead with Diana for an extension.’

Piran shook his head. ‘It’s in the schedule. Promo’s being done. You know that as well as I do.’ All at once he muttered, ‘God, it’s hot. I need to sit down.’

And he did, right there at the side of the road, pulling his knees up and dropping his head between them.

Carly stared at him, astonished. Then she bent down to look at him more closely. ‘Are you all right? Piran?’

He didn’t answer. She could only see the shallow rise and fall of his back.

‘Piran, for God’s sake, what’s wrong?’

He lifted his head. His face was white. ‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’ she mocked. ‘You’re just resting?’

‘Just resting,’ he agreed, his voice hollow. Carly could see sweat beading on his forehead and upper lip.

‘You’re sick.’

He shook his head. ‘I had a diving accident a while ago. No big deal.’

As far as Carly could recall from the days when she’d been a part of the St Just family, there was no such thing as a diving accident that was ‘no big deal’.

‘What kind of diving accident?’ And why hadn’t Des told her? Trust Des to stick her with Piran who was ill as well as harsh, fierce and moody.

Piran gave a quick shake of his head and straightened, putting his hands behind him and leaning back, dropping his head back so that now her eyes were drawn to the long column of his throat, the strong jut of his chin and the quick rise and fall of his chest.

‘What kind of accident?’ Carly repeated.

‘Had to come up too fast.’ He sighed. ‘Damn, I hate this.’

‘Then don’t run after people,’ Carly said, taking refuge in gruffness. She wasn’t about to let him think she was concerned.

Piran’s mouth quirked. ‘I’ll try not to.’

‘Why’d you do a stupid thing like that? Come up too fast, I mean.’

‘Cut myself. Lost a lot of blood.’

‘Blood?’ Carly looked at him, aghast.

‘Gashed my leg on some coral. Not a bad wound, but there’re sharks out there sometimes...’

His voice trailed off. He didn’t have to finish; Carly knew exactly what could have happened. She felt sick.

‘There were two of us,’ Piran went on. ‘The other guy wasn’t cut, but he couldn’t stay down either without me. And they only had one decompression unit. He showed more effects, so they put him in.’

‘You could have died!’ The words were wrung from Carly in spite of herself. She couldn’t have stopped them if she’d tried.

He slanted her a glance. ‘Wishful thinking, Carlota?’ She glared at him. ‘Sometimes you’re such an ass, Piran.’

He looked at her quizzically. ‘Am I?’

‘Yes,’ she said tersely. ‘Come on.’ She held out a hand to him.

He scowled. ‘I don’t need your help.’

‘Fine. Sit there forever. I don’t care.’ She turned away.

‘Carly!’

When she looked back he was glowering at her. He reached out a grudging hand. She hesitated, then grasped it. And there it was—the jolt she always felt when she touched Piran St Just.

She pulled him to his feet and let go at once.

‘Thanks,’ he muttered.

‘Don’t mention it.’ She turned away again, but she didn’t start toward the house until he did. Then she fell into step beside him, watching him worriedly out of the corner of her eye, half expecting him to topple over any moment.

‘I’m all right now,’ he said as they reached the veranda. ‘I’m not going to croak on you.’

‘What a relief.’ She waited until he’d climbed the short flight of steps, then she picked up her duffel bag and started into the house.

Piran stopped at the door and turned back to face her. ‘I’ll work with you, but that’s it. You’re not staying here.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You can stay in town.’

‘Des said—’

‘The hell with Des!’

‘Well, fine. You want me to stay in town? I’d be de lighted. But you’re paying for it. Diana certainly isn’t going to give me my expenses for something that’s above and beyond my duties. And I’m not about to pay for them!’ She was so angry that she didn’t give a damn if he still thought she was money-grubbing!

Piran dug in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He peeled off several large-denomination notes and handed them to her.

‘You can take the bicycle. There’s one along the side of the house. Leave your bag here. When you find something, send Ben back out to get your bag.’ He turned away and he probably would have gone right in and shut the door in her face if she hadn’t spoken up.

‘No. Not now.’

‘Wha—?’

‘I’m hot, and I’ve been traveling since dawn. I seem to remember your father once saying that the St Justs were famous for their hospitality. I would like a moment to catch my breath and have a glass of water.’

At the remark about his father Piran turned sharply and shot her a hard glance. Then he grimaced and rubbed his hand against the back of his neck. ‘Oh, hell, all right. Come on.’

CHAPTER TWO

GRACIOUS he was not, but Carly was every bit as tired and hot by that time as she'd said she was, and she was too annoyed to care what Piran's tone of voice conveyed.

She followed him in.

Nothing inside Blue Moon Cottage had changed at all in the intervening years. The walls were still white and cool. The *terrazzo* floors gleamed. The white wicker sofa and chairs with their bright blue and green patterned cushions still encouraged her to come and sit a while. The mini-blinds were open to let in the air, but slanted to cut down on the afternoon sun, and the outside vegetation filtered away most of the heat. Overhead a fiveblade fan circled lazily.

It was the only place where Carly had spent any time while she was growing up that she remembered missing after they'd left.

In spite of having to see Piran again, she'd been looking forward to coming back just to see if the charm remained. It did. Though whether that was a good thing or not she wasn't sure.

'I know where the kitchen is,' she said to him. 'I'll just get a drink. You can go rest.' He still looked pale.

He ignored her. 'I'll rest when you're gone.' He headed for the kitchen. 'I've got iced tea if you'd rather,' he said over his shoulder, and Carly wondered if he only said it because of her comment about the St Just hospitality.

'Thank you. That would be lovely.'

He nodded, went to the refrigerator, poured her a glass, then poured another for himself. Then he nodded toward the deck on the ocean side of the house. 'You can drink it here or we can go out there.'

'My, you are being hospitable,' she mocked.

Piran's jaw tightened, but he didn't rise to the bait and Carly felt faintly guilty for riding him.

She took her glass of tea and went out on to the deck. The view above the trees was of more than a mile of deserted pink sand beach. The first time Carly had seen it, she hadn't believed it was real. She'd thought Arthur St Just must have had the sand specially dyed and trucked in.

Des had laughed, but Arthur had patiently explained to her about the local corals, about how much time it took for the coral to grind down into the fine, powdery sand, how this sand was pink because that was the color of the coral.

Later that day he'd taken them down to the beach and had even built a sand castle with her and Des and her mother. Piran had come by and looked down his nose at them.

Carly remembered that Arthur had invited his elder son to join them, but Piran hadn't bothered to answer. He'd walked right past them and never said a word.

He wasn't saying anything now either. He stood leaning against the railing of the deck, holding his glass of iced tea, not looking at her, staring instead at the expanse of sand and water.

Carly took the opportunity to study him. He'd been twenty-five the last time she'd seen him in person, lean and gloriously handsome, in the prime of young manhood. Full of charm and charisma and promise.

He'd been working on his Ph.D. in archaeology at Harvard during the year, diving with his famous father during the holidays. And when he hadn't been diving he'd been squiring some of the world's loveliest women to trendy nightclubs and fast-lane parties.

As far as Carly could see, he'd fulfilled all those promises. He'd got his Ph.D. He was now, at age thirty-four, an internationally acclaimed expert in the field of underwater exploration and recovery of artifacts. He and Des had written three books to date about the family's escapades.

Or perhaps, Carly amended, Des had written the books. But it was Piran whom one saw on the televised documentaries. And it was Piran who still had all the charm, all the charisma, and all the ladies hanging on his arm.

She knew she wasn't the first woman to succumb to Piran St Just's incredible charm. And she hadn't been the last, either. She'd kept track of the number of beauties who'd been seen with him throughout the years. It hadn't been difficult.

Piran St Just attracted notice wherever he went. And, as she looked at him now, it wasn't hard to tell why.

He might be older now, but his thirty-four years sat well on him. The smooth, tanned skin of youth had weathered beautifully. The paleness of his complexion at the moment was simply a result of his illness, nothing to do with the man himself. There was a network of fine lines around his eyes, but they only called attention to their piercing blue. Just as the strong bones of his cheeks and jaw and the grooves that bracketed his mouth gave his face a sort of cragginess that spoke of battles fought and won.

Pity he didn't have a potbelly or slumping shoulders, Carly thought. He would be easier to ignore if he weren't so obviously gorgeous.

But from what she could tell the belly beneath the thin cotton T-shirt was rock-hard. And if his shoulders were slumped it was only because of the way he leaned with his forearms resting on the railing as he stared out to sea.

Yes, he'd aged well. Damn the man.

She took another sip of her iced tea.

Piran turned his head to glance at her. 'Finished?'

Carly looked at him across her barely touched glass. 'Not quite. Don't feel you have to entertain me, Piran. Go do whatever it is you were doing before I came. I'll drink my tea and I'll go.'

He hesitated, as if he was afraid to leave her alone for fear she might dig in or something. But finally he straightened up. 'Fine,' he said shortly. 'I'll see you tomorrow morning at nine and we can go over what I've got.'

So saying, he drained his glass, carried it back into the house and disappeared into one of the bedrooms. The door shut with a firm click after him.

Carly breathed far more easily when he was gone. She rubbed her fingers along the soft weathered wood of the railing and rued the dreams she'd once had about making Blue Moon her home—about making Piran St Just love her.

It was hard to imagine she'd been such a naive little fool.

Well, she was a fool no longer. And it was probably just as well she wasn't going to be living here, given that he still seemed to be able to make her respond to him. She certainly didn't want him to know it.

The only thing she regretted was not getting to spend the time at Blue Moon. It was every bit as lovely as it had ever been. It might be easy enough to give up her dreams about Piran, but it would be harder to relinquish the ones about Blue Moon.

She finished her tea and put the glass back in the kitchen. Then she let herself out and found the bicycle, wheeled it back to the road and climbed on, avoiding the ruts as she pedaled slowly toward town.

Piran listened until he was sure she was gone. He lay on his bed, cursing his weakened condition and the twist of fate that had brought Carly O'Reilly into his life once more.

Only when he heard the rattle of the bicycle disappear into the distance did he allow his body to sag into the mattress and breathe deeply.

But still, he couldn't believe it.

God, what could Des have been thinking of?

Well, there was no point in even asking that question.

When had Des ever thought at all? Smart, clever, witty Des somehow *never* saw what was right under his nose—which was how much Piran hated Carly O'Reilly. And how much he'd once desired her.

It had nothing to do with liking. Never had. Never would. No, that wasn't true.

In the beginning, the first time he'd seen her, he'd liked her on sight. He'd left his father's house after the first of several fights he and Arthur had had. He'd been fuming at the way his father seemed like a besotted teenager around his new wife, a wife that Piran thought was far beneath him. And nothing had taken his mind off it until he'd spied a lovely smiling water nymph with waist-length dark hair and long, coltish legs.

He'd watched her swim, then he'd watched her come back up the beach and stretch out on her towel in the sand. She'd lain on her stomach looking up at the cliff and the bench where he sat. She'd fidgeted, looked up, looked away, looked up again.

Piran had watched her, intrigued, running over various lines, trying to decide on the best one to use for meeting her, when she'd got up and started up the beach toward the steps that would bring her up to where he was.

And that was when she'd met the students at the bottom of the steps. He'd watched her smile at them. He'd heard them speak, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. She'd smiled again. Then, as they'd closed around her, he'd momentarily lost sight of her. He'd got to his feet quickly and started down.

He'd been furious to reach them and discover a shy, innocent girl being preyed upon by hooligans. He hadn't hesitated to step in.

He remembered as if it were yesterday—the drunken shove, the satisfying smack when his fist had connected with the drunk's jaw, the adoring gray eyes that had looked up into his.

His hands, clenching now, remembered too. They could still feel the petal-softness of her skin as he'd held her briefly in his arms. The same softness they'd felt when she'd reached out her hand to help him up less than an hour ago.

In scant moments he'd become her hero. And he'd wanted to be her hero.

Until he'd found out whose daughter she was.

Then he'd felt as if he too had been duped. Her innocence hadn't seemed so innocent any longer. Her shyness had seemed calculated.

It had made him furious then because he'd seen it for what it was.

Pure animal magnetism. Sexual chemistry. Hormones. Exactly the same things that had drawn his poor foolish father to Carly's gorgeous shallow mother.

Piran was damned if he was going to let it happen to him!

And so he'd stayed away as much as he could.

Probably he'd only seen her half a dozen times over the not quite two years of his father's marriage to Sue. But every time he had Carly had changed. She'd grown more desirable than ever.

Her curves developed. Her eyes sparkled with tantalizing laughter and heady promise. Her lips grew full and tempting, just made to be kissed.

But Piran had refused to kiss them. He wasn't weak like his father. He knew there was more to a woman than a pretty face.

Ever since he was a tiny child, he'd idolized Arthur St Just, had grown up wanting to be just like him. He'd even taken his father's side in his parents' divorce.

In his eyes, Arthur St Just could do no wrong—until he'd met and married, in the space of a few short weeks, the blowsy, beautiful dancer Sue O'Reilly Delgado Gower Tremaine.

God, Piran thought, his fist clenching at his side and pounding on the mattress, even now he could remember the litany of her names!

Carly had told them to him once—recited them, actually, her wide gray eyes watching for his reaction. He'd gritted his teeth then. He gritted them now.

He couldn't believe his father had fallen for a tramp like Sue—a dancer, for heaven's sake! A woman with no education, no background, nothing—except a daughter.

Carly.

Carly, whose laughter and smiles and serious silvery eyes had tempted him increasingly each time he'd seen her, until at last, on her eighteenth birthday, he hadn't been able to resist what she was offering.

Or what he thought she'd been offering.

To his everlasting shame he could still remember how ready he'd been for her. God, yes, he'd been ready! More than ready, he recalled with chagrin even now.

In another few moments he would have fallen completely under her spell. But then she'd opened her mouth and he'd found out that she hadn't really been offering at all. She'd been trading—just like her mother.

Sex for marriage.

Piran might be one kind of fool, but he was never going to be the fool that his father had been. Marriage to Carlota O'Reilly had never been on the cards.

'Marry you? You must be kidding!' he'd said, incredulous. And he'd turned away from her stricken look.

He'd never seen her again after that night. Not even at his father's funeral. He'd missed it, made up an excuse, hating her because he felt he had to, because he knew she would be there.

After that he'd put her—and her mother—out of his mind. He hadn't thought of her in years. And yet the moment he'd seen her this afternoon he'd recognized her at once.

And wanted her just as much as ever, God help him.

'What do you mean, there's no room at the inn?' Piran glowered at her from the doorway. The passage of four hours hadn't improved his mood any, that was certain.

'I was speaking metaphorically,' Carly said. She drooped on to one of the wicker chairs on the veranda, feeling as if she'd been dragged backwards through the mangrove swamp. 'There are no rooms available in Conch Cay.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Of course there are.' Piran shoved a hand through sleep-tousled hair.

To say that he'd been unhappy to see her come back would be something of an understatement. He'd said, '*You!*' in a horrid voice and fumbled to fasten the top button of his trousers.

Carly had watched with undisguised interest. 'Perhaps you were expecting someone else?' she'd suggested, and fluttered her lashes at him, irritated that he would disbelieve her about a thing like this.

'I was taking a nap,' he'd retorted stiffly.

'Oh. Right. Sorry to disturb you.'

'You're not,' he'd said, which was the absolute truth.

He said now, 'What about Maisie Cash's house?'

'The Potters are there from Phoenix for the holidays,' Carly recited from memory.

'It's not the holidays yet.'

'Tell that to the Potters.'

'Well, what about the Kellys?' he said impatiently. 'They take in visitors.'

'Lots of people take in visitors, Piran. Tourism is the prime industry on the island.'

'I know that. So—'

'So Conch Cay has a bumper crop. It might not look like Christmas out here, but everyone is here to celebrate it. I stopped at the grocery. Old Bill gave me a list.'

'And?'

'And they were all full.'

'You can't have looked everywhere!'

Carly unfolded the list and shoved it at him. 'Then you look. I've looked until I'm ready to drop.' She lay back on the floor of the veranda and closed her eyes.

Piran muttered under his breath. He prowled up and down the veranda, then stood glowering down at her.

Carly opened one eye. 'And don't tell me to go over to Eleuthera and take the launch back every day, because I won't.'

He muttered again and paced the length of the veranda once more. 'I suppose that means you expect to stay here?'

'Unless you have a better idea, I don't see any other option.'

'Go home.'

'We've been through that already.'

Piran made a furious sound deep in his throat.

'What's the matter really, Piran? Are you afraid I'll take advantage of your virtue?'

He let out an explosive breath. 'Maybe I'm afraid I'll take advantage of yours?'

'I didn't think you thought I had any virtue.'

His teeth came together with a snap. 'Don't bait me, Carlota. If you want to stay here, don't bait me.'

'I have no intention of baiting you,' Carly said hastily.

'Good. Remember that. This is work. That's all.'

'You're damn right it is,' Carly said, incensed, sitting up and glaring at him. 'And you're a jerk if you think I want it to be any more than that!'

He met her gaze. 'Just so we understand each other.'

'We do.'

The look went on...and on. Finally he nodded curtly. 'Use your old bedroom. But leave me alone. We can start work in the morning.'

She was surprised Piran remembered which bedroom had been hers.

Or maybe he didn't, she thought when she finally got up and made her way toward the small bedroom next to the kitchen. Maybe he just assumed that she would remember and didn't care as long as it wasn't anywhere near his.

It wasn't. It faced away from the ocean, bordering the narrow drive up which she'd come. The room Piran was using had been her mother's and his father's the last time they'd come here. It was on the other side of the house with access to the deck and the stairs to the path leading to the beach.

Bigger and airier than hers, it also had a lovely view across the treetops toward the ocean. But the small back bedroom with the narrow wicker bed and freestanding cupboard in which to hang her clothes suited Carly just fine.

She opened the windows and got a cross-breeze almost at once. But to aid its movement she turned on the overhead fan. Then she put her things away, slipped off her sandals and lay down on the bed.

She only intended to rest her eyes for a moment. Then she would go out and walk on the beach in the waning summer light. She would dig her toes in the sand and wade in the warm Caribbean water. She would savor the moment and appreciate the parts of Conch Cay she had no trouble enjoying. In just a few minutes she would do that...

It was pitch-dark when she woke up.

It took her a moment to remember where she was. Then it came back in a rush.

Des. Diana. The book. Piran. Christmas. The long trip by taxi, plane, taxi, and boat to Conch Cay. Piran's less than enthusiastic welcome. Her fruitless search for a room. Her return to Blue Moon Cottage. Piran's reluctant agreement to her staying with him. Piran. Always Piran.

Carly rolled over and tried to forget him, tried to go back to sleep because it was obviously quite late now. But she wasn't tired enough to go back to sleep, and trying not to think about Piran only insured that she would.

Finally, after she'd tossed and turned for half an hour, she got up and put her sandals on, then padded through the silent house.

The lights were all shut off and the door to Piran's room was closed. She didn't know the time, but figured that it must be sometime after midnight.

Quietly she slid open the door to the veranda and padded out. A swath of silvery moonlight spilled across the ocean, lighting her way as she went down the steps. At the bottom she found the narrow path that led through the trees down the hill to the beach.

Before she was more than twenty yards along the path, she heard a rustling sound in the brush and saw a dark, slithering shape. Swallowing a scream, she stopped dead right where she was.

There were snakes on Conch Cay. She remembered Des showing her the marks they made in the sand which had looked to Carly like the imprints from bicycle tires. But she didn't know what kind they were and she didn't know if any of them were poisonous.

It wouldn't do to get herself bitten by a snake the first night she was here. Piran wouldn't be in the least bit understanding.

The rustling noise stopped and eventually Carly went on. She moved on carefully now, watching her every step, doing her best to make sure she didn't step on anything alive and capable of objecting.

She didn't notice when the path curved and the beach came into view. She didn't see the lean masculine form that slowly rose out of the water and made its way across the narrow sand beach toward the trail.

She didn't see Piran at all until it was too late, until she ran right into his bare wet chest.

'Ooof!'

'Bloody hell!' Hard fingers came out and grabbed her arms.

'P-Piran?'

'Who'd you think it was? The Loch Ness monster?' His fingers were still biting into her flesh as he snarled at her.

Carly looked up into hard eyes, then down at a shadowed but all too evident masculine nakedness, and finally, desperately, away into the jungle brush.

Snakes seemed suddenly far preferable.

'What the hell are you doing out here?' he demanded.

'G-going for a walk.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'I couldn't sleep.' She tried twisting away from him. 'Let me go.' Finally she managed to pry his fingers off her arms. Then she wrapped her arms against her chest, keeping her eyes firmly averted the whole time. 'I certainly wasn't looking for you, if that's what you think!'

Piran made a sound that could have been a snort of disgust or disbelief. 'You shouldn't be out walking now. It's almost two. It's dangerous.'

'You're out,' she said. Of course maybe that was why it was dangerous, she thought a little wildly.

'It's not dangerous for me.'

'How's that for the double standard?' Carly said bitterly.

'I don't make the rules, Carlota. But I can tell you what they are.'

'I'm sure you can,' she said. 'It's not fair,' she complained after a moment.

'Tell me about it,' Piran muttered under his breath. Then he said, 'No one ever promised that life would be fair.'

'Save me the time-worn platitudes.'

He reached for her arm. 'Come on, Carly. Let's go.' She tried to shake him off. 'I said, I'm going for a walk.'

'No, you're not.'

'Yes, I am.' It was sheer stubbornness on her part and she knew it. But she was determined not to let him have the last word, not to allow him to tell her what to do.

She wrenched away from him and started down the path toward the beach at a run.

She'd got perhaps five steps when he caught her. With one hand he spun her round, then grasped her around the waist with both hands and flung her over his shoulder.

'Piran!' she shrieked as she pitched head-first, then stopped abruptly as her midriff lodged against his shoulder and she hung flailing upside down. 'Piran! Damn you! Put me down!'

But Piran only turned and strode back up the path with Carly slung over his shoulder like some bag of old clothes.

'Piran!'

She twisted and smacked him, her fists coming into contact with hard wet flesh. She opened her eyes and found herself staring down at a pair of lean, hair-roughened thighs and bare, muscular buttocks. She hit them. Hard.

'Damn!' He twisted and tried to catch her hands.

Carly kicked her feet, kneed him in the chest, then slapped him again, hoping the blows stung his wet skin.

'Stop it! Damn it, Carly!' He made it to the veranda, but he stumbled on the steps, and they both went down, a tangle of arms and legs, cool droplets of water and heated flesh. Carly landed face down between the backs of his thighs. It took only an instant's exposure to the hard warmth of his body to have her scrambling to her feet.

'I can't believe you did that!' she railed at him. 'Talk about cavemen!'

He was slower getting up. He winced as he pulled himself up and Carly noticed for the first time the angry scar on his leg. 'Are you all right?' she asked him.

'What do you care?' He snapped a towel off one of the lounges and knotted it around his waist, but not before she'd had a chance to glimpse definite signs of masculine arousal.

She swallowed and averted her eyes. 'I—I don't, actually.'

'I'm not surprised.'

They stared at each other. Piran's gaze was hard and angry, and any arousal that he might feel, Carly knew all too well, was unwanted.

So what else was new? He'd wanted her nine years ago, and he'd hated himself for it.

She glanced back at him and saw a muscle in his jaw tick in the moonlight. She thought he looked very pale. She felt a fleeting stab of guilt, then squelched it immediately. He hadn't had to carry her! He hadn't had to interfere at all.

She said as much.

'Just my chivalric nature, I guess,' he said through his teeth.

Carly remembered when he really had been chivalrous. That memory, sweet as it was, somehow hurt more than all the other painful memories did.

'Don't bother,' she said shortly.

Their eyes met and clashed once more. Piran ran his tongue over his lips.

'Fine,' he said harshly after a long moment. 'Go for a bloody walk if you want. Drown yourself if you want. I don't care what you do. I don't know why I bothered.'

CHAPTER THREE

TO SAY that she slept badly was no exaggeration. It was close to dawn before Carly did more than toss and turn fitfully in her bed, her mind still playing with the image of Piran's naked body and the press of his flesh against hers. When at last she did sleep, her dreams were no less alluring and no more restful.

She was reminded all too much of the night of her eighteenth birthday—the last time she'd been held in Piran St Just's arms—the time she'd found out what he really thought of her.

For years she'd turned away from that memory every time it surfaced. She'd blotted it out as soon as she could because it had hurt so much.

But now she forced herself to remember. She had no choice. She needed to remember if only to protect herself from being drawn once more into the fanciful dreams that once upon a time had brought her down.

She'd certainly had her share of dreams about Piran in the days just before her birthday. She'd been living with her mother and Arthur in his home in the hills above

Santa Barbara—the low, Spanish-style house she'd pointed out to Piran the day she'd first met him.

It was indeed a lovely house, built to blend in with the surrounding hillside, its gardens half wild. The latter weren't as wonderful as the wild areas surrounding Blue Moon on Conch Cay, but Carly had loved to ramble through them just the same. She'd loved to sit on the bench beside the bougainvillea and look out over the city lights and the boats in the harbor at night.

Every night she would go there and sit, dreaming of Piran sitting next to her, of Piran touching her, holding her, kissing her.

She'd never really stopped dreaming of him after their first meeting. Perhaps she'd been foolish—no, there was *no perhaps* about it. She had been foolish. But in those days Carly had been as big an optimist, as big a dreamer as her mother.

And Piran, even though he clearly disapproved of his father's marriage, still fascinated her.

She knew there was more to him than his silent, brooding disapproval. She remembered his gentleness. She remembered his touch. And, even though he was silent and stern whenever he was around her afterwards, she wasn't unaware of the way he watched her.

Carly might not have been sophisticated in those days, but even she knew when a man was interested. And Piran's smoldering gaze was a sure sign that he was. Whenever he came home, or whenever he joined them at Blue Moon or in New York, he watched her with an intensity that tantalized her at the same time as it unnerved her.

Carly watched him too, avidly trying to understand him, to attract him. Even at eighteen and hopelessly naive in the ways of love, she sensed a connection between them. It was tenuous, but it was very real. It had been from the first moment.

At least it was to Carly. She wanted Piran to see that, too.

When Piran came home for Thanksgiving he watched her. At dinner she caught him studying her out of the corner of his eye. On Friday, when Arthur took them to the botanical gardens, Carly noticed Piran keeping an eye on her.

And Sunday morning, before his plane left for Boston, he even went for a walk on the beach with her. He didn't say anything. They just walked. Every now and then Carly ventured a comment, which was met with a monosyllabic response, as if he was as tongue-tied as she was.

He loves me, she thought, and tucked the words away in the depths of her heart to take out and savor again and again.

They tided her over until Christmas, when she and Sue and Arthur and Des flew down to the Bahamas and met Piran at Conch Cay.

She watched Piran closely to see if he was still interested in her. It didn't take long to decide that he was.

There were more discreet glances. More tense, tongue-tied encounters. Another walk on a different beach.

She wanted to know about the cannons on the headland, and Arthur said, 'Piran knows. He'll tell you. Take her down there and explain to her, Piran.'

So Piran did. He didn't say much all the way down the beach. It was a cool, blustery day and he jammed his hands in his pockets and walked steadily, barely glancing her way. But he was as aware of her as she was of him. She knew it because when the sleeve of his jacket brushed her arm he sucked in his breath and flinched away.

As they walked, she picked up shells, asking if he knew what they were. He did, and Carly saved them. She asked him everything she could think of about the cannons, making their excursion last as long as possible. And finally she got him talking about his courses and his field work in archaeology.

She was fascinated, hanging on every word, wishing that someday she might get to go on a dig or underwater expedition with him. She didn't dare say so. Not yet. But she began to dream.

On the way back he stopped and picked up a piece of something shiny and red. She'd never seen anything like it before. He told her it was sea glass, smoothed now by years of being tossed about in the waves.

'Can I hold it?' she asked.

'You can have it if you want.'

Carly wanted. She put it in her pocket with the shells, rubbing it between her thumb and her forefinger all the way home. She knew that whenever she looked at it she would remember this day with Piran.

She must have daydreamed more than a hundred happy scenarios between them after he went back to school. In every one of them Piran came back and saw at last that she had become a woman. He cast aside the cool indifference or faintly disdainful tolerance with which he'd habitually treated her. He started treating her as the woman he loved.

Carly wanted it to happen so badly that she came to believe in it. It would happen, she decided, on her eighteenth birthday.

And when Arthur got a letter from Piran in March saying that, yes, he would be coming for the Easter vacation, she was certain it was true.

He came. She went with Des to meet him at the airport and for a moment she thought his eyes lit with pleasure when he spotted her there. But if they had the fires were banked by the time he was close enough to shake his brother's hand.

He didn't shake hers. He did, however, look at her mouth with a hungry, almost desperate gaze.

He loves me, she thought again. And she hugged the knowledge to herself, happy beyond belief.

From the moment they met at the airport, he didn't take his eyes off her. Everywhere she went, he watched her. Every time she looked up, he was there.

On the night of her birthday she barely ate her dinner, so aware was she of the dark, brooding young man directly sitting across the table from her. Arthur and her mother spoke to her frequently, encouraging her to talk about her plans for the summer, about the classes she would take at university in the fall. But Carly could barely form words.

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