

THE LOVE SUCKS CLUB



BY BETH BURNETT

SUMMARY

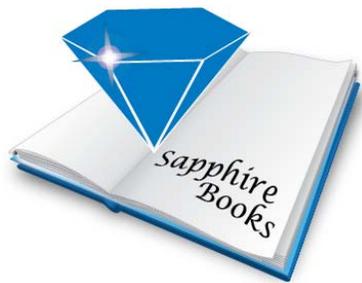
Tragedy and heartbreak drive Dana McComb to a Caribbean island where she sets about to becoming a hermit. Settling into numbness seems to be the only way to suppress the psychic visions that once showed her the death of her soul mate. A failed rebound relationship leaves her even more intent on losing herself in the loneliness of her isolated house on the hill. With her middle-aged, beef jerky obsessed Tom cat, Dana vows to live a life devoid of ups and downs. Making fun of her own state of mind, she and her best buddy start “The Love Sucks Club” which is really just a euphemism for sitting around bitching about their own bitterness about love.

Trying to stay wrapped in her own misery starts to fail when Dana's pesky younger sister and a host of other island misfits insist on poking into her best laid plans for comfort. When a new woman shows up on island, bringing back Dana's visions, she is suddenly besieged by night terrors, vivid hallucinations, and panic attacks. Half-convinced she's going crazy, Dana tries to shut out her past with increasing difficulty. Aware that it may be the only way to put her dead lover to rest, Dana begins a journey that could either shatter her life or save it.

THE LOVE SUCKS CLUB

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BETH BURNETT



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SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

The Love Sucks Club

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Dedication

Dedicated with great love to everyone who walks their own path no matter how twisted the road gets.

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Chapter One

A storm is rocking my windows as I claw my way out of sleep. An invisible hand wraps around me, squeezing all of the air out of my body. Clutching the side of the bed, I pull as much air into my lungs as I can. It's not enough. Heart pounding, I drag myself to a sitting position, arching my back to make more room in my chest. With one hand pressed against my heart, I force another deep breath. The pain in my jaw moves down the left side of my neck and into my left arm. Concentrating, I focus on making myself breathe steadily. The shadow voice from the dark place in my mind is convinced that I'm having a heart attack. My rational voice diagnoses a panic attack. It's been years since I've had one. Even when I was trying to extricate myself from my last shitty relationship, I was able to keep the anxiety at bay for the most part. Now suddenly, out of nowhere, I'm either having a panic attack or a heart attack and I'm torn about whether to call 911 or just try to breathe through it.

Several minutes of deep breathing dulls the panic enough to let me stand up. Stumbling into the kitchen, I stick my head under the faucet and let the cold water run over my head. The coolness brings me back to the real world and my heart slows down. Afternoon naps always seem like a good idea when I think of them, but sleeping in the heat always seems to give me nightmares. It isn't even storming. The sun is shining, as usual, and the day looks balmy. It seemed so real, but a glance out the window assures me that the ground is completely dry. It must have been part of my dreams.

Staring at the wall, I cast my mind back, searching for the memory of the nightmare. I'm not sure what I was dreaming, but I think Annabelle might have been part of it. I think I've survived as long as I have by avoiding thoughts of Annabelle. I lean back against the counter, opening a bottle of water. A few sips brings my head back to normal. I glance at my computer, debating whether to try to get some work done. Fuck it. I can't stay here all afternoon; I'll go crazy. Dropping a quick text to my buddy, Sam, I head down the hill to mingle with the general population at The Grill.

We have a small population and after a while, everyone starts to look and act exactly the same. There are really only three kinds of ex-patriots on this island. There are the drinkers; the ones who consider themselves on permanent vacation. My ex-lover falls into that category. I met her right after I moved to the island. Despite having come here to be alone, I was miserable and lonely. I had bought and moved into my awesome house, but I felt so alone there. My ex was a bright light. She seemed fun and full of life, but without the deeply imbedded craziness that came from Fran. For a time, our relationship was actually kind of blissful. I was new to the island and living it up. After all, the weather is amazing and the Caribbean water is clear and warm. My ex was fun while we were dating, but she moved in with me way too quickly. Once we were living together, the partying got to be too much. I mean, she fell into drinking her first beer at breakfast and doing shots at lunch, and I found myself in the ridiculous role of the harpy. I mean, I was constantly counting how many shots she drank and anticipating when she would either fall into alcohol-induced hypoglycemic tremors or pass out. My best friend Sam and I would sit together, watching her get drunk. Eventually, she would launch into a slurred argument

with someone at the bar about how much more she knew about whatever the subject was than the other person did and it was time to herd her out to the car and get her home.

The drinkers on this island are a pretty tight group, as long as they are drinking together. My ex has plenty of people she calls friends. That is, she has a lot of people who will sit at the bar and get drunk with her or come over to her apartment and get drunk with her, but no one who will just pick her up and take her to K-mart or go for a picnic on the beach. The drinkers are on permanent vacation. They work as many hours as they have to in order to keep themselves in booze, which is, fortunately for them, extremely cheap on this island. They meet up in the various bars along the beach and they spent long hours drinking and laughing and clinking glasses together and buying shots and talking shit about whoever passes out first.

The other group on this island is the water people. They're generally athletic. They came for the diving and the snorkeling and the beach time. They tend to be younger than I am and extremely fit. They may also overlap into the drinker's group from time to time, but they spend the bulk of the time on the water, so drinking is a secondary activity for them.

The third group is the outcasts. They may all be here for different reasons, but the basic feeling is the same. They lost someone, or they're hiding from something, or they somehow fucked up their real lives so badly that moving to a barely populated island in the middle of the Caribbean somehow seemed like the only option left. Some of them have money and some of them are flat broke. They can be young or old. Most of them are white and male. Really the only common denominator is a pervading sense of gloom underlying the forced hilarity that comes when an unhappy person moves to an extremely beautiful place.

Sam and I didn't really fit into any of these groups, which is probably why we found each other. We became friends the moment we met. I'm pretty sure we were sisters in a past life. Honestly, I can't explain it any other way. We had that kind of "eyes met across the crowded room" kind of moments, but there was never any sexual chemistry. We simply knew, instantly and with utter surety, that we were destined to be friends.

Sam is perpetually single. She's been in love with some bitch back in the States for years, but the woman is supposedly straight. Every once in a while, she drunk dials Sam and promises her that underneath it all, she's truly in love with Sam. They talk sexy to each other for a while and Sam hangs up the phone believing that it is only a matter of time before Josie leaves whatever guy she's doing at the time.

Sliding into a chair at my favorite table, I glance around the restaurant. Every place around here is part restaurant, part bar, but this place seems to attract people who are more interested in having a meal and watching the waves than those who want to slam booze until they projectile vomit. Sam and I hang here for the excellent food and the view of the water. Our island doesn't get a lot of tourists, and the ones that do come are more hippie than hottie. Every once in a while, a hot chick in a bikini saunters past our regular perches, but for the most part, the denizens of this beach are families with children or young men throwing tennis balls for dogs. Sam has just wandered across the beach from the water and plopped onto the chair next to me.

"The sea is like bath water today," she says, shaking her head like a dog.

Wiping off the stray drops that land on me, I look out at the water. "Well, it is almost ninety degrees."

"The locals say that when the sea water is this warm in June, it means a bad hurricane season."

“The locals say everything means a bad hurricane season.”

Sam grins and sips her beer. “There’s a new woman on the island,” she says.

“I heard.”

“Heard she’s pretty cute.”

“Is she a dyke?”

“Who knows?” Sam shrugs, grinning. “If she’s straight, I might have a chance with her.”

Laughing, I toast her with my iced tea. “Straight women and gay men,” I chuckle. “They just can’t resist your charm.”

“It must be my gregarious personality.”

“Or something.”

I flag down our waitress and order a veggie pizza. Sam asks for another beer. She’s not a drinker the way the drinkers are, but she does enjoy a good buzz now and then. I, of course, don’t drink at all. That figures, doesn’t it? I lived with an alcoholic for ten years and I don’t touch the stuff. I suppose if I had ever been tempted to become a drinker, living with my ex would have cured me of that idea. Sam waves over Karen, a friend of hers from work. I don’t really know what to think of her yet. I’d like to say that if Sam thinks she’s cool, she must be cool, but I have to admit that sometimes, Sam is friends with the most useless women in the world. Karen is kind of sexy, in a culottes and polo shirt sort of way, so I’ve mostly written off their friendship to the possibility that Sam wants to sleep with her.

I give Karen a smile and a quick hello before turning my attention back to my notebook. I’m a writer. I always fancied myself as a cross between Robert Heinlein, without the nipple fixation, and Kurt Vonnegut, without the politics. Sam says I’m more like Danielle Steel for dykes. She’s a bitch, but dammit, she’s probably right. I’ve actually written several romancey type novels under my own name and they’ve done pretty well for dyke drama. The only book I’ve written that I considered serious was published under an assumed name and did shit for sales.

“Hey, Dana.” Karen pokes me in the arm. “Check out the new woman.”

I hear the guys at the other end of the bar muttering to themselves, but I don’t pay much attention. As I said, a new woman on the island is worthy of a press release. If she’s cute, every single lesbian and most males on the island perk up. If she’s not that cute, we still check her out. You know, there’s not that much excitement here and we have to entertain ourselves somehow. I shake myself out of my writing and look across the restaurant.

A tall, skinny woman is shaking water off herself at the top of the stairs from the beach. I don’t know if I’d call her beautiful, but she is cute. There’s something about her that I find appealing. Watching her throw a cover up over her bathing suit and lope over to the bar to place an order, I’m entranced. Her legs are long and on the verge of too skinny. Her elbows seem to poke out at ridiculous angles and as I look at her, one of them knocks into a bottle of ketchup and sends it flying across the bar. Sam is chuckling softly under her breath. We meet eyes and grin. The woman has short hair that falls over her face in the front and sticks up in little chunky spikes in the back.

“She looks like a teenage boy,” Sam whispers.

Watching her move, I shake my head. No, she doesn't look like a boy. She's slim and gangly, but there is something beautifully female about the curve of her jaw, the shape of her small ears, and the length of her neck. She turns from the bar with a bottle of water and for a second, our eyes meet. Hers are a rich hazel and I swear they have flecks of gold. Her lips curve into a warm smile, but I keep my face impassive and lower my eyes back to my notebook.

Karen doesn't miss a beat. "Why don't you go talk to her?"

"I'm happy here."

"You never talk to anyone," she answers.

"That's not true." Rushing to defend myself, I hold up my hand, marking off a list on my fingers. "I talk to my sister. I talk to Sammie. I talk to people. I buy groceries, I order stuff. Sometimes I even have to go to the office supply store and buy, you know, office supplies. That involves a lot of conversation because they never have exactly what I need."

Sam and Karen are laughing. "Forgive me," Karen mocks. "I had no idea you had such a rich, full life!"

Chuckling, Sam takes another sip of her beer. "Such an exciting life," she intones. "Going to the grocery store. Buying kitty litter. Someday, when you go on the Oprah show, you'll regale them all with the fascinating tales of your life in the Caribbean."

"Fuck off." I'm laughing, but a little irritated. I've only been single for nine months, after all.

"Oh come on, Dana." Sam's laughing, too, though she can tell she's hit a nerve. "You know I'm just messing with you. It took me six years to tell Josie that I'm in love with her."

"And look how well that turned out," Karen said, dryly.

I'm saved from answering by the approach of the new woman to our table. Sam smiles and Karen says hello, but her eyes are on me. I was right; her eyes are hazel and flecked with gold and lit with amusement and vitality. Her mouth is full and smiling. I keep my face impassive. There's no point in encouraging anyone into thinking I'm a nice person.

"I'm Esmé," she says, holding out a hand. I shake it briefly and nod. She shakes hands with both Sam and Karen before turning back to me.

"The men at the bar told me not to talk to you," she grins.

"They're probably right," I return. Holding my pen, I look pointedly down at my notebook before looking back at her. She doesn't take the hint.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Sam moves over and pulls up another chair. "Please, sit down," she says. Traitor. It's bad enough I have to deal with Karen at my table. Now I have to make small talk with a stranger. I glare at my best buddy for a moment before begrudgingly inching my chair over to allow Esmé space at the small table. Now we're crammed in and I have to move my notebook to my lap to keep it out of the small puddle of condensation from Sam's beer and Karen's vodka and whatever.

Esmé crosses her legs and takes a large sip of water. I try not to notice Sam noticing Esmé's legs.

"Where are you from," Karen asks.

“Chicago.”

“My kind of town,” Sam sings and the three of them laugh.

Grinning, Esmé sings along for a second. “Have you been to Chicago, Sam?”

“I have,” Sam responds. “I’ve been everywhere. But I’d happily go again if you want to show me the sights.”

“Chicago is an amazing place,” Esmé laughs.

“And I am an amazing woman,” Sam says. “We’re meant for each other.”

Sam is such a flirt; sometimes it drives me crazy. She says the most outrageous things sometimes and people just respond with laughter and joy. On the rare occasions when I try to flirt, women either look at me as if I am a psycho, or they laugh politely and change the subject. I don’t know if I’d call Sam smooth, it’s just that in comparison to me, she comes off like Barry White.

Karen interrupts. “So Esmé, did the guys at the bar tell you why you shouldn’t speak to Dana?”

Kicking Karen under the table, I glare at her. “Honestly, who gives a shit what they think?”

“I don’t,” Esmé answers. She pauses as the waitress comes around to bring refills and snacks. When the woman has moved on, she looks directly at me. “They said you’re crazy.”

“They’re right,” I say, at the same instant that Sam states, “They’re wrong.”

Karen and Esmé laugh.

Frowning, I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care what anyone thinks about me.”

“They said you believe that your dreams can tell the future,” Esmé says. “Do you?”

“It’s none of your business what I believe.”

“I’m not prying. I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“As I said, I don’t care what anyone thinks about me.”

She looks out over the water for a second. “I read *Annabelle Lies*,” she says after a moment.

Sam and I both pause, looking at each other. Karen looks from one to the other. “What’s *Annabelle Lies*?” she says, finally. “Is that one of your books?”

Sam nods. “It was written under an assumed name.”

“For a reason,” I growl.

Holding her hands up in a gesture of peace, Esmé nods. “I really don’t have any interest in outing you. I just wanted to let you know that I read it and it spoke to me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re one of probably about six people. One of whom was my publisher.”

“I read your other books, too, but I didn’t like them as much.”

“Well, as fascinating as this conversation has been, I’ve got things to do, so...”

She stands up. “I just wanted to introduce myself.”

Looking up at her for a minute, I’m almost tempted to smile. Instead, I ask, “How did you know that I wrote *Annabelle Lies*?”

She pauses. “Annabelle was my ex-girlfriend.”

Sam exhales sharply. I grab my notebook and open it, trying to lose myself in my own work. I can feel the three women at the table looking at me. Worse, I can feel the eyes of everyone in the bar on me. A tunnel comes over my vision and I focus on my breathing. The words on the page blur together as I concentrate on just breathing in and breathing out. A loud hum starts to fill my ears and my head. I feel as if I can feel the eyes of everyone in the bar and everyone on the island. It feels as if they're all looking at me, they're all talking about me. My eyes close as a pressure fills my sinuses and the front of my brain. I'm half sure that I'm going to pass out.

"Dana. Hey. Dana." Sam has her hand on my arm.

Lifting my head, I blink at her. The humming is dissipating. My vision is still a little blurred but I can make out the concern on her face. Her dark brown eyes stare into mine. We have the same eyes. It's another reason that I'm sure we are somehow related. I never really considered us as looking alike. Sam is taller than me by about four inches. She has darker skin than I do thanks to some Native American ancestry. Her hair is dark brown with ever-increasing flecks of gray, just like mine, but hers is cut extremely short, almost buzzed, and mine is long and wavy. We're both outdoorsy types; we like hiking and swimming and such, so we're both pretty stocky. Sam is broad in the shoulders and slim in the waist and she works as a maintenance woman for a living, so her biceps are hard and kind of big. I don't work out and I make my living sitting on my ass with a notebook, so I'm a bit softer and rounder than she is. Still, one day when we went on a hike to an abandoned lighthouse, she took a picture of the two of us with our faces close together, and later, looking at the picture, I realized that we had the same eyes, the same nose, the same mouth, and the same basic facial structure. Trying to work it out, we both determined that while our fathers would probably have stepped out on their marriages, neither of our mothers were the type. Of course, we're both from Ohio, so maybe there's still a chance of some cousinery there somewhere. At any rate, even without a blood relation, Sam is my sister and the only non-blood I trust anymore. She's worried about me, so I make an effort to pull myself out of my state.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," I mutter. I give her a half-smile and look away.

She squeezes my arm one more time. "Thought you were taking off for a second there."

"No, I'm fine. Just a bit of a headache for a moment."

Karen pushes some water toward me. "You're probably dehydrated," she says. "I usually get headaches when I haven't had enough water."

Sam knows that I don't have a headache, but she takes the water from Karen and puts it into my hands. "Drink it."

As I take a big gulp, the last of the blurriness retreats from my vision and the hum in my head passes completely. Esmé is still standing over me. "I guess I should leave."

"Yes, you definitely should," I agree.

Karen holds out her hand. "It was nice to meet you."

"It was. I hope we meet again soon."

"Absolutely," Karen replies. "In fact, my husband and I are having our end of the summer blow out soon. Maybe you could come to that. It'll be a good chance for you to meet all of the other ex-patriots on the island."

"I'd love to." Esmé smiles at Sam, and turns to me. "I don't have any ill feelings toward you."

"You should."

She pauses for a moment. Leaning down to whisper in my ear, she says, "My dreams come true sometimes, too."

She walks away. Karen and Sam watch her go, but I keep my eyes on the table. Oblivious, Karen says, "Do you think she was surprised that I have a husband?"

"Why would she be?" Sam asks.

"Well, I'm hanging out with a couple of known homosexuals."

"Lesbianism is contagious," Sam laughs.

"You do look like a dyke," I say.

"How so?" Karen is affronted.

Sam snorts into her beer. "Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between soccer moms and LPGA."

Chuckling, I give Karen the once over. With her plaid culottes and her pale yellow polo shirt, I have to say that she does kind of have a lesbian golfer thing going on. The ever-present visor just adds to the image.

"Whatever." Karen takes her visor off and squints against the sun. "Lesbians always want everyone else to be gay."

"Hardly," Sam scoffs. "We only want the hotties to be gay."

"Calm down, Karen," I say, seriously. "I never said you were gay, just that you look gay."

Snorting again, Sam gives me a high five. Karen shakes her head in disgust and puts her visor back on.

"You two can have your little jokes. I need to get home anyway. Rick should be home soon and I want to cook him a nice meal tonight."

"Happy housewife," Sam chirps.

"I'd rather be a happy housewife than a miserable, lonely dyke who uses sarcasm to cover her sadness," Karen retorts before tossing a couple of dollars down on the table and walking out.

"Wow," I say, watching her go. "So which one of us is the miserable, lonely dyke?"

Sam shrugs. "Well, I'd guess it would be you. I mean, sure I use sarcasm as a defense mechanism and I haven't had sex in six months and I'm in love with someone who'd rather give a blow job than be with me, but hey, I'm not miserable."

"I'm not miserable. I live alone by choice."

"Yeah, but you haven't had sex in three years."

"Sad since I've only been single for nine months."

Laughing, Sam pops open another beer and reaches for some fries. "You do have an awesome best friend."

"The best."

"And you live in a cool house."

"With a cool cat."

She nods. "You have enough money to pay the mortgage, buy cat food, and occasionally rent a movie."

"I live on a beautiful island."

“Which only gets the occasional hurricane.”

“And I only run out of water in the cistern a few times a year.”

“And sometimes, the broccoli at the grocery store is actually green.”

Nodding, I smile at her. “So how bad can my life actually be?”

“I mean, just because we started a group called The Love Sucks Club.”

“Well, love does suck.”

She nods, “I’m not saying it doesn’t. I’m just allowing as to how some unenlightened people might consider us bitter because of the name of our club.”

“Karen has the best husband in the world. She can’t possibly understand.”

“I think Karen is just frustrated because she’s a closet lesbian.”

“You really do think everyone is a closet lesbian. You need to focus on dating actual lesbians and you’ll soon be able to tell the difference.”

She waves her hand in the direction of the door. “Drinkers, ten ‘clock.”

Since I like to watch the beach, my back is to the street entrance. Pretending nonchalance, I keep my eyes on Sam, resisting the urge to look over my shoulder. “Is Voldemort with them?”

She scans the group quickly. “Nope, but her new girlfriend is. Maybe we should go.”

“Fuck that. They’re not scaring me off.”

“I didn’t say anything about being scared. I just don’t want to have to deal with she-who-shall-not-be-named today.”

Grinning, I roll my eyes. “It’s so mature to call her Voldemort, isn’t it?”

“Mature or not, it’s hilarious, and totally appropriate.”

“Remember that time I was talking about her to Barb and I referred to her by her actual name and Barb was like, who the hell are you talking about?”

She shakes her head. A shrill scream from the bar catches my attention and I finally have to look. A group of the drinkers are doing shots at one end of the bar. The bartender, Dave, is doing a shot with them. The bartenders on this island are a strange bunch, too. Some of them are just doing their jobs and trying to make a living. Some are just doing it to get as many free shots as they can possibly get. Although The Sunrise Grill usually hires competent bartenders, Dave is the latter, obviously. Now that the drinking crowd is here, he is going to be absolutely worthless in an hour. We might as well head out before the service goes completely downhill. Voldemort’s new girlfriend, a chubby woman with humongous breasts that always seem in danger of falling out of her shirts, is doing a dirty dancing slide down some dude’s body as he chugs a beer. A couple of the other drinkers are cheering her on. One guy is standing behind her, spanking her ass as she gyrates against the other dude.

Sam snorts again. “Did you ever wonder how someone can go from being involved with you to being involved with her?”

“No, but I do wonder how one body can support that much weight in makeup and still carry those breasts around.”

“Nice. I still can’t picture them together.”

Watching Mandy, the new girlfriend, I shrug. “All Voldemort ever wanted was to drink and have fake, alcoholic fun with other people who want to drink and have fake alcoholic fun. I think she got exactly what she wanted this time.”

Sam hands some cash to the waitress and stands up. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

We walk out past the drinkers who call out to us as we pass. Mandy turns as I walk by and wiggles her fingers at me. “Oh, hi Dana,” she simpers.

I give her a fake smile and turn away. Sam puts her arm around me as we hit the door and leaves it there until we reach the parking lot.

At the car, I wriggle out from under her arm and cross my arms. “What the hell was that about?”

She grins. “Voldemort has told the whole island that you two broke up because you were having a fling with me. Might as well let her keep believing it.”

“Voldemort and I broke up because she’s a raging alcoholic who can’t do anything but drink and argue about how superior she is to everyone in every single way.”

“I know that. You know that. And probably most of the sane people on the island know that.”

“Are there any?”

“How anyone could believe that we’re lovers is beyond me anyway,” Sam says.

“Yeah, butch on butch—totally weird.”

“It’s your long hair. Throws ‘em all off.”

I toss my hair in an exaggerated hair model pose and bat my eyelashes. “Do I look feminine now?”

“Yeah, about as feminine as Chuck Norris.”

“Glad you didn’t say Chuck Heston.”

“Soylent Green is people,” she yells, shaking her fist in the air in a lovely Charlton Heston impersonation.

Sam sees me into her beat up pickup truck and drives me home. Most of the money from my royalties went into this house. It sits up on a hill, high above the village and the beach. The house itself is kind of small. It has two standard sized bedrooms and a decent kitchen. The living room area is rather large. The defining feature of the house is the wall of windows that looks out over the hanging deck and consequently, the ocean. When the weather is nice, I can sit in my favorite chair for hours, mesmerized by the waves. Sometimes, when they crash hard enough, I can hear them all the way up here. After Sam leaves, I plant myself in my chair, and stare out at the ocean. I’m trying to focus my thoughts on my latest novel, but for some reason, Esmé keeps popping into my head. Even if she knew Fran, the woman on whom Annabelle was based, how could she have known about me? As far as I know, Fran didn’t talk about me to anyone. Fran certainly never mentioned Esmé while we were together. Hell, she never mentioned anyone from her past. It was only after she died that I realized how little I had known about her while we were together.

I pop back inside to make myself some hot chocolate and retire back to the deck to watch the waves. Frank, my huge Maine Coon cat jumps onto my lap, nearly causing a muscle spasm in my thigh. I push him into a prone position and pet his massive head. He chirps at me and goes to sleep. Trying to clear my mind of

thoughts of Esmé and Fran and Voldemort and Mandy, I have to laugh a little. How does a self-proclaimed loner find herself having to deal with so many women at one time? I take another sip of cocoa and force my thoughts back to my latest novel. Maybe I can just hibernate up here for the next couple of years. Sam can bring me groceries and cat food. Sighing, I give up trying to focus on my work and let my head fall back against my chair.

Chapter Two

I'm a hermit. It isn't that I don't like people; it's just that I don't like them a lot. So I had to set some boundaries when it came to my time. Mainly, don't expect me to show up at every function, don't be surprised if I don't answer my phone, and don't ever come to my house without calling first. With those rules firmly in place with everyone in my life, I am pretty much guaranteed privacy whenever I want it. Except now. My doorbell is ringing and I haven't invited anyone over. That can only mean one thing. Susannah.

I moved to an island to become a full-fledged hermit. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Not only did Sam follow me, my sister decided that she couldn't live without me. After our mother died, she did her time trying to take care of our dad, but eventually she decided that she needed to be closer to me. Now, she's leaning against the wall outside my front door. I give her a fake snarl before hugging her with one arm and relieving her of a bag of doughnuts with the other. Susannah doesn't believe there should be boundaries between sisters. She thinks our blood relationship means she can show up at my house whenever she wants, eat the food out of my fridge, raid my closet for something new to wear, and hang out all day.

She waves in the direction of the herd of peacocks that live in my yard. "Peacocks are so cool."

"They're not cool. They're a nuisance."

She shrugs and caws at the birds before stepping inside.

"Come in," I say, ushering her to the kitchen. "But you can't stay long. I have a story due soon and I want to finish it today."

Waving her hand, she dismisses me. "I'll be quiet when you start working. You won't even know I'm here."

"I will know. That's the point."

"They're working on the street in front of my apartment. The noise is unbearable. I'm just going to hang on your porch and get some sun."

Sighing, I gather up some papers and offer her a seat at the counter. "Why don't you go hang at the beach and get some sun?"

"Because I won't have a comfortable place to take a nap when I'm tired of it?"

Giving up, I pour water for both of us and sit down across the island from her. "Is that my shirt?"

She looks down at herself. "Uh, I guess. Yours or Olivia's."

"Please, we hardly have the same fashion sense. And that isn't pink."

"Don't be so judgmental. Not everything she owns is pink."

She's successfully sidetracked me once again. I don't get it. My straight sister, who is about twenty pounds thinner than I am and about a million times more girlie, still manages to steal my clothes on a regular basis. Her boobs are a lot bigger than mine, so maybe it evens out. At any rate, she's got that new man glow that I've seen so many times before. "So, who's the new man?"

She grins. "His name is Thomas and he's very sweet."

“Married?”

She pauses. “No, definitely not.”

“Definitely not as in you know for sure, or definitely not as in you don’t know for sure?”

“Jeeze, Dana. Give me a break. He’s not married, okay?”

“I’m just sayin’.”

“Jack told me he was single. How was I supposed to know?”

My sister has a habit of dating the world’s most obnoxious men. Jack was actually a pretty good one in comparison to most of her boyfriends. The one before that was a wanted felon.

“Anyway,” she ignores my pointed silence. “Thomas is a sweetheart. He works at the bank and he’s friends with Lori’s brother.”

“Aw well, I didn’t realize he came with a pedigree.”

She ignores me to answer her cell phone. Giving her privacy, I go back to the porch and position myself in front of my computer. With Susannah around, I have to take every moment I can possibly get. She follows me out a few minutes later and stands awkwardly in the doorway. Pretending that I don’t realize she’s there, I continue to type, letting her squirm. Finally, she clears her throat.

“What, Susannah?”

“Olivia blew a tire on the Frank Court Highway. We need to go help her.”

Tapping my fingers on the side of my keyboard, I count to ten. Olivia Parker is the very embodiment of everything I dislike about human beings. She is filled with nothing but drama. Everything that happens is cause for horrific tears and weeks of bitter complaint. She and Sam had sex once, many years ago, and to this day, she still complains that Sam didn’t call her after. In Sam’s defense, she said that Olivia complained so much during the act that Sam almost called it off at the midway point. I still have vivid and terrifying memories of the time that she twisted her ankle on the beach in front of The Cottage. The horrified owner probably still has nightmares about her berating him about the slippery rocks in front of his restaurant. Suppressing a shudder, I try to reason with my sister.

“Go get her. Take her to that tire place on Front St. Tell Hank that you need to buy a new set of tires, but you don’t know how to put on a spare to bring it in. I’m sure he’ll send someone back with you.”

“Come on, Dana. You know she doesn’t have the money to buy new tires now. We just need to go put the spare on so she can take the old one in to get a patch.”

I don’t know why I’m bothering to put up a fight. Somehow Sam and I have become the handymen for every single woman on this island. Not for the first time, I’m lamenting the shortage of capable men in our lives.

“Wait a minute. What about your new beau?” I’m grasping at straws because I really don’t want to leave my house today.

“Please. I just met him. I can’t call him to fix my best friend’s tire. Not until we’ve been dating for a couple of months at least.”

As a last ditch effort, I pick up my cell and call Sam.

She answers sounding happy. “Hey-O!”

“Sammie. I need a favor.”

Suddenly leery, she pauses for a hit of her cigarette. “What?”

“Our mutual friend Olivia has a flat tire and is in need of assistance.”

“Aw shucks.” She feigns disappointment. “If only I wasn’t in the middle of a project at work, I would so do it. Gosh, I wish I could be there for you on this.”

“Whatever, ass.”

“I’d love to help.”

“And I’d love to be able to pawn her off onto you.”

Laughing, she says goodbye and I follow Susannah out the door.

Sliding behind the wheel, she glares at me. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“What wasn’t very nice?”

“Making fun of Olivia with Sam.”

“I’m not a very nice person.”

“Olivia is a wonderful woman and you and Sam are always assholes to her.”

“Olivia is not a wonderful woman and Sam and I are not assholes to her. We simply choose not to be in her company for longer than is absolutely necessary.”

She ignores me as she starts maneuvering the dirt road from my house. With a deep rut on one side and overgrown brush on the other, my road can be damn near impassable in some cars. During the rainy season, Sam loads cement into the back of her truck, and even then, it doesn’t always make the hill. It has been inconvenient at times to have to trek two miles up a mud road on foot, but it’s worth it to me to live in a place that discourages visitors.

When we make it to the paved road, Susannah sighs. “I really wish the government would pave your road.”

I watch her guide the jeep over a particularly huge rut in the road. “Why would they? I’m the only one at the top of it and I don’t raise a fuss. Why spend the money for one quiet taxpayer?”

“There’s shovel guy,” Susannah says, laughing.

“The road is paved most of the way to his driveway. Plus, I don’t think he really cares that much about modern conveniences.”

“Either way, it’s a pain in the ass.”

“You have a jeep.”

“Yeah, and it used to look pristine before I had to drive to your house.”

“I moved to the top of a hill to discourage visitors.”

She smiles. “Nothing can keep me from seeing my loving sister. Even if I sometimes have to drive you to the grocery store.”

“Small price to pay for me paying your cell phone every month.”

She nods. “Yeah, good point.”

Stopping behind a herd of goats that are blocking the road, Susannah grimaces. "Sometimes I think about moving back to the States."

"Hey ladies." A group of men in a pickup truck swerves around us and pushes forward into the goats. One of the goats is hit by the truck and the rest run, bleating, to the sides of the road. The truck roars through and a beer can hits the hood of the jeep as the truck roars off. Susannah flinches as the can bounces up onto the windshield and off the side. She looks at the goat in the road in front of us.

"Dana, go see if it's dead."

There's no point in even arguing. Stomping toward the possibly dead goat, I pause for a moment to glance back at my sister. She's staring straight ahead, blinking furiously. I know what that means. She's on the verge of tears and if this goat is dead, the rest of her day will be ruined. Approaching the goat cautiously, I stare at it for a few minutes trying to see if it is breathing. Another goat, embolden by curiosity or perhaps hunger walks up to me and starts chewing on my shorts. I yank the fabric out of its mouth and reach down for the other goat.

"Meh!" It rears its head up and bleats in my face. Half-screaming, I fall back, tripping over the other goat. Sitting on my ass in a pothole filled with mud, I glare back at the jeep. Susannah is indeed in tears, but this time, it's because she's laughing too hard to hold them in. Both of the goats have run back to join the herd at the side of the road making their annoying little goat noises. I make a mental note to stop sending money to PETA. This is all Olivia's fault. I yank myself up and angrily brush as much mud off my shorts as possible. Fuck it, anyway. If Susannah's jeep seat gets ruined, I won't shed a tear.

She's still laughing as we pull past the goats and onto the main highway in town. Of course, when I say highway, I really mean a big paved road with a high speed limit, several traffic lights, and potholes that are only slightly less dangerous than the ones on my road. Susannah tools along watching the side of the road until she sees Olivia's little red Ford Focus. A Focus. Seriously. She might as well just drive it off the side of the road and leave it there. Half the potholes are as big as the car.

We pull up and Olivia tears over to Susannah. She throws her arms around my sister, crying.

"Oh thank Gawd you're here. I thought I'd be stuck on the side of the road forever."

"Yes," I intone. "I can't imagine the terror of being stuck on the middle of the road a mere thirty feet from the closest restaurant."

Both women ignore me as Susannah consoles Olivia. As she sobs uncontrollably, I watch them for a few moments, shaking my head. Olivia is about five-four and blonde. Her golden shoulder-length curls are glistening in the sunlight and her slender arms, a deep brown from all of her beach time, seem to glow. She has the most vivid blue eyes and long, dark eyelashes. She's kind of hot, in a false innocence, batting her eyelashes, annoying kind of way. It still amazes me that Sam had sex with her. I mean, I know she loves straight women and all, but did she have to pick one that was such a pain in the ass? Still, to give her credit, Olivia is good-looking, Sam likes blondes, and maybe she hadn't talked yet before Sam took her home that night.

I grumble to myself as I reach in and put on the parking brake. The ground looks stable enough, so I slip the jack under the car and raise it a bit. Olivia is still crying on Susannah's shoulder. I'm going to cry if I can't get these friggin' lug nuts off.

“...and next thing I knew, there was a loud noise and the wheel started jerking in my hand,” I overhear Olivia stuttering to Susannah. I can’t handle this. Everyone in the world has had a flat tire. Trying to ignore the women, I finish taking off the old tire and putting on the spare. I throw the old tire into the trunk and turn to my sister and her best friend.

“You’re set. Drive over to Hank’s and he’ll tell you if he can patch the old tire. If he can, it will cost about ten bucks. If he can’t, he can sell you some retreads for a decent price.” I turn to Susannah. “Take me home.”

“No, you can’t!” Olivia looks stricken. “I can’t go there by myself. They’ll eat me alive.”

Before I can even open my mouth, Susannah has her arm through Olivia’s arm and they’re walking toward the Focus together. “I’ll ride with Olivia and you can follow us in the jeep.”

Fuming, I throw the jeep into drive and head over to Hank’s place, not bothering to wait for the women to get themselves situated. For all I know, Olivia has to reapply her eight pounds of lipstick before she goes to see the car dudes.

Pulling into the garage, I raise a hand at the guys and look around for Hank. He spots me first and heads over, wiping his hands on a rag that’s covered with oil, grease, and who knows what. He holds his hand out and I shake it.

“You need something? Your sister’s jeep got a problem?”

“No, her friend had a flat tire. I put the spare on and she’ll need a patch.”

The Focus pulls in and I wave at Susannah and point at Hank. She gives me a thumbs up, so I leave her keys in the jeep and head down the road. I figure I’ll walk over to The Sands, a high end resort where Sam is the head of maintenance. She can give me a ride home when she gets a break.

A car pulls up next to me and I look in the window. Esmé. Nodding to her, I keep walking. She pulls abreast of me again and sticks her head out the window.

“Where are you going?”

“Not far enough to need a ride.”

“Come on.” She laughs. “Don’t be scared. I don’t bite.”

“I’m not scared,” I mutter. Coming around to the passenger side, I let myself in and slide down in the seat. It’s a decent enough car, but small. What is it with these women driving these tiny cars? “You’re going to have to be careful on these roads,” I say. “The potholes have been known to swallow buffalo whole.”

“I didn’t realize there were buffalo on the island,” she grins.

“There aren’t. They were eaten by the potholes.”

I direct her to The Sands and fall silent, staring out the window. I can feel her glancing at me from time to time, but I pretend not to notice. Finally, she breaks the silence.

“So, do you want to talk about your dreams?”

“Nope.”

“About Fran?”

“Not a chance.”

“The price of tea in China? Wow, you would make a fascinating subject for a talk show.”

“I’m a fascinating woman,” I say, dryly.

She chuckles a bit and stares out the windshield for a couple of minutes. “You know, I loved Fran, too.”

“I don’t know you.” This woman is presuming a lot. “I don’t know anything about you. How do I know you even know Fran?”

“I know she used to laugh in her sleep. I know she had a tattoo of a butterfly on her left breast. I know that she thought orange cats were the best animals in the world.”

“You could have gotten that from my book,” I grumble.

“I know she used to stare at the stars and talk about whether or not her family was ever going to come back for her.”

Pausing, I stare out the window. That part wasn’t in the book, and as far as I know, no one except me knew that Fran thought she was from another planet. I can feel my ears start to buzz and I’m sure an attack is imminent. Blinking hard, I try to talk myself out of it.

“So, Esmé,” I say loudly to combat the buzz. “What made you move to the Caribbean from Chicago?”

“There wasn’t anything left for me there. My lover left me for another woman. We’d been together for seven years. I think she was my rebound from Fran.”

“How long were you and Fran together?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want the answer.

“Ten years.”

I look at her, not sure I can believe that she’s old enough to have had at least seventeen years worth of relationships. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“So you and Fran were pretty young.”

“We were pretty young.”

She pulls up in front of The Sands and stops the car. “Are you going in for lunch?”

“No, I’m just going to get a ride home from Sam.”

“I can take you home.”

“Not in this car, you can’t.”

Standing outside of the front door of the hotel, I watch her drive away. She glances back once and I slowly raise my hand. My ears are still buzzing, so I sit down in the lobby and ask the front desk clerk to page Sam. The tunnel comes down over my sight and I can see Esmé and Fran, young and troubled, clinging to each other, both of them with tears in their eyes. I don’t know whether it’s a vision or my imagination, but I’m drawn to Fran’s young face, her light brown eyes and her pale skin. The shock of red hair, curly and full, was just as beautiful in this vision as it was years later when she came into my life. The vision darkens and for a second, all I can see is Esmé. I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, looking back at her. Her face is deathly white and there is a trickle of blood coming out of her mouth. As I slowly become aware that Sam is holding my shoulders and shaking me gently, the tunnel lifts from my sight. Sam’s face, full of love and concern is inches from mine.

“Sam,” I whisper. “I just can’t do it again.”