

Chapter 1

Monday, April 21, 1902
Saint-Pierre, Martinique

The city of Saint-Pierre was in a joyous mood. It was the end of the sugar harvest, a time for celebration and revelry. Music and laughter filled the air. The stars lit up the heavens, and the moon shone resplendent over the bay, where schooners and steamers lulled gently in the breeze. The strains of biguine music echoed from the cabarets, and the odor of piquant Creole cooking wafted from the cafés that lined the waterfront. No one noticed that on the summit of Mount Pelée, a thick plume of black smoke was rising steadily, growing larger by the minute.

In a villa nestled on the slopes of the mountain, Emilie Dujon felt the earth trembling. A picture rattled against the wall, and a lizard scampered away in fright. A rumbling noise that sounded like distant thunder drowned out the crickets and tree frogs. Startled out of her reverie, she dropped her copy of *The Mysterious Island* and grabbed her binoculars. Focusing them on the summit, her eyes widened in surprise. Smoke and steam were rising from the lower crater, the one they called the Étang Sec. It grew in size and curled outward, like an enormous gray mushroom, before blowing leeward over Saint-Pierre.

Emilie lowered the binoculars and scanned the mountain for several minutes, feeling a clenching pain in her gut. A young woman of nineteen with amber eyes, chestnut-colored hair, and a grave but lovely face, she had been watching these occurrences almost daily, and now they were becoming more frequent and, by the looks of things, more serious. For years the experts had claimed Mount Pelée was extinct, but if that was the case, why was there so much ash and smoke?

She made a note of her findings in a notebook, and sat down in front of her vanity mirror to brush her hair and reflect on the matter. Emilie was by nature very observant. She loved to study the world around her and uncover its mysteries. She spent long hours riding her stallion over the hills and valleys of Mount Pelée; exploring her tropical world was where she felt most at home. She had a good grasp of West Indian geography, having studied it at the convent school of Saint-Joseph de Cluny, and she knew that volcanoes were formed by subterranean fires deep below the earth's crust. But a piece of the puzzle was still missing. Dead volcanoes do not emit clouds of smoke and ash. She wondered if there was something more to Pelée that the experts were not saying.

Tonight was supposed to be a happy occasion, a chance to forget her worries and enjoy herself. Her fiancé, Lucien Monplaisir, was taking her to a gala performance of *La fille du régiment* at the theater in Saint-Pierre, and she was thrilled. Normally Lucien had no patience for cultural events, but tonight he was making the sacrifice just for her. Emilie smiled, thinking how strange and wonderful it was to be in love. In the span of a few months, it had changed Lucien from a world-weary sugar planter into a refined gentleman. And soon she would be his wife. Just thinking about it sent a surge of warmth throughout her body, and she felt a tingling in her knees.

At eight o'clock, spectators arrived in top hats and tails and long muslin gowns and turbans knotted in the distinct Martinique fashion. While the musicians were warming up their instruments, a murmur of anticipation rose up to the private box seat where Emilie sat with Lucien and his younger sister, Violette.

Emilie was brimming with excitement. She smoothed out her muslin gown and gazed at her surroundings. This was her first trip to the theater in years. It was considered an unnecessary luxury ever since her father's plantation, *Domaine Solitude*, started to lose money. The concert hall was even more splendid than she remembered. It shimmered like a golden Fabergé egg. The chandelier glowed, spreading warm light over the frescoes that adorned the ceiling. Gazing over at Lucien, her heart swelled with pride. She could scarcely believe how she, the daughter of a modest cocoa planter, had captured the heart of the richest sugar planter in Martinique.

The lights went down, and the play began. The audience watched with rapt attention, including Emilie, whose eyes scarcely left the stage. Even Lucien, who normally grew bored after only a few minutes, seemed to be enjoying himself.

In the middle of the third act, Emilie looked up and spied an old school friend, Suzette de Reynal, sitting in the opposite box. She seemed to be gazing over at Lucien. Emilie lifted her opera glass, and to her amazement, Suzette winked at him. Stunned, Emilie held up her program and saw out of the corner of her eye that Lucien met her gaze and winked back in return. For several minutes she watched the two of them engaged in silent communication. Clearly this was not the first time. Before long, Lucien got up and mumbled something about needing a drink. Panic spread throughout Emilie's limbs, and her heart pounded. Surely it had to be a mistake. She got up and followed him outside, but Lucien was nowhere to be found. She searched for him through the crowd, and when she reached a potted palm, she froze. Ensnared behind the plant were Lucien and Suzette, locked in a passionate embrace.

Emilie's face burned in anger. Time seemed to stand still. She took a few steps backward and fled to the safety of her seat. She willed herself to remain calm, but it took all the determination she could muster. Tears welled in her eyes. How could she have been so blind? How could she have been so naive? She blamed her own trusting nature. She was sure she had failed to see the clues that were there all along.

When Lucien returned to his seat, he put his hand on Emilie's shoulder, but she stiffened at his touch. All at once, she lost interest in the play. She lost all interest in Lucien. And then a great feeling of dread came over her when she realized that the wedding invitations had already been sent out. Perspiration beaded on her forehead. She tried fanning herself, but nothing could quell the anxiety and dread that had taken hold of her.

In the midst of her turmoil, a great rumbling noise filled the hall. The chandelier swayed, and the entire theater shook. Panic erupted in the audience. The rumbling noise grew louder, and the shaking intensified. The actors looked around in confusion. When a piece of scenery fell midstage, they shrieked and ran backstage in terror. And then, to everyone's horror, a marble statue fell into the audience, giving rise to mass panic.

Emilie gasped in fright. Someone yelled, "Earthquake!" and all at once everyone jumped out of their seats and raced toward the exits. The musicians fled the orchestra pit like wasps from a burning nest, and the once-cheerful hall turned into mass hysteria. People were shouting and jostling each other in their haste to escape. An old woman cried out, and an elderly man in a black suit and tails struggled to protect her as they were shoved aside in the melee.

Lucien grabbed Emilie's hand and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." He pulled her and Violette through the crowd, and they hurried down the marble staircase. They raced through the courtyard, down the stairs, and out to rue Victor Hugo, where the carriages were waiting. After they climbed inside, the driver proceeded north on rue Victor Hugo, dodging frightened residents and spooked horses. Emilie's heart raced and she felt as if she was having a nightmare. *Boom!*

An explosion like cannon fire rocked the carriage. In the distance, the mountain appeared to be glowing. The blast was followed by a loud rumbling noise and tremors that shook the earth.

The horses whinnied and reared, and the elderly West Indian driver struggled to control them. "Ho! Ho!" he cried, pulling on the reins. Emilie feared the ground would split open beneath them, swallowing them up. Even Lucien looked terrified. The gas lamps swayed, and roof tiles smashed to the ground. A swarm of people hurried past their carriage on their way to the cathedral, crossing themselves and uttering prayers out loud.

Emilie's muslin dress was soaked with sweat. Heat and humidity hung in the air like a wet blanket. She glanced over at Lucien, but he was staring at the smoldering volcano with a mixture of fear and awe. *Dear God, she prayed, please don't let me die together with Lucien. Not here, not now.* Shutters flew open as fearful residents peered out into the darkness. A few horses broke free of their reins and were galloping down the street, chased by their furious owners. How quickly panic took over the frightened residents.

The carriage ground to a halt. Emilie pushed open the carriage door and scrambled outside. Lucien and Violette joined her, and they stood by the side of the road, watching the scene unfold before them like spectators to a disaster. Ash and volcanic dust rained down on their heads while the ground continued to shake.

"We really must get out of here," said Lucien as the party climbed back into the carriage.

The driver cracked his whip, and the horses trotted across the stone bridge that crossed the rivière Roxelane and then proceeded north for several miles along the coast before turning east onto a dirt road bounded by coconut palms and bamboo that led to the tiny hamlet of Saint-Philomène, where Emilie's father's plantation was located. As they climbed the western slopes of Mount Pelée, an ominous smell filled the air. It was not a burning kind of smell, like the occasional fumes that drifted down from the Guérin sugar factory across the savannah, but a different kind of smell, like rotten eggs. Emilie pressed her handkerchief to her nose and mouth. Lucien slipped his arm over her shoulders, but she again stiffened at his touch. As the carriage made its way down the dirt road, an uncomfortable silence followed, during which time Emilie pondered her dilemma. She had to find a way to break off her engagement without causing a scandal. But it would not be easy. No young woman of her social class had ever broken an engagement and survived the resulting gossip and slander. The scandal would crush her parents and brand her a social outcast. Her mind raced as she searched for a solution, but it seemed hopeless. She gazed up at the summit of Mount Pelée, but an ominous film of clouds blotted out the moon, reducing her world to utter darkness.

