

Island Affair

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Dedicated to *mi familia*,
those by blood and by choice,
whose boundless support fuels my desire
to create similar love-filled,
beautifully diverse
story worlds for readers.

Chapter 1

“Who the hell complains when their captain gives them time off? Oh, wait, you!”

“*Forced* time off,” Luis Navarro grumbled. Not that his older brother gave a rip about the clarification.

Sure enough, Carlos responded with a caveman grunt as he shoveled more of their *mami*’s black beans and rice into his big mouth. Luis glared at his brother from his side of the black leather sofa squared off in front of the big-screen TV in the lounge area at the Key West airport fire station.

The only reason Luis had volunteered to bring his brother’s lunch while Carlos pulled his shift with the county fire station was because Luis had expected the bonehead to commiserate with him. Not side with the damn Captain, who’d dropped his bomb earlier this morning. Right after Luis had finished his shift downtown with the city fire department.

¡*Coño!* Didn’t anybody see that time away from the job and the distraction it offered was the last thing Luis needed right now? *Damn* wasn’t nearly a strong enough word for his frustration.

“I should be so lucky that my boss made someone switch their Kelly day this month to give me a full week away from here,” Carlos protested around a mouthful of food.

“Will you pipe down? I don’t want people finding out about this.” Luis shot a pointed look through the open archway, past the high-top table in the eating area, and into the kitchen where another firefighter stood in front of the microwave heating up his own lunch. The guy normally worked at Station 17 up the Keys, so Luis didn’t know him well. No need for him to overhear Carlos and Luis’s conversation and spread the news from the city up through the county fire stations.

As the microwave hummed, the spicy scent of refried beans, onions, and bell pepper from a frozen burrito heating up filled the air. Luis scowled at his brother. The fact that Carlos, the ingrate, would have been stuck eating the same processed, frozen concoction if Luis hadn’t agreed to deliver their *mamá’s* freshly cooked meal upped the not-cool level of Carlos’s lack of empathy.

“What’s your problem?” Carlos complained.

Luis jutted his chin toward the dining-kitchen area where the sub had moved to the high-top table with his lunch. “I don’t want you fanning the trash-talk flames through the houses farther up the Overseas Highway.”

Carlos grunted again, though he reined in his caveman behavior by wiping his mouth with a paper towel instead of the back of his hand. “You think no one’s yammering about this already?”

Luis frowned.

“Right,” Carlos scoffed. “I guarantee you Soto’s been blabbing about what went down. You know him. Soto likes to kiss ass, trying to weasel his way into a Driver Engineer spot. Hell, I’d be surprised if he’s not telling people he and the Captain came up with the idea to swap your Kelly days. *Ese tipo siempre está hablando mierda.*”

Luis huffed a pissed-off breath. Carlos was right. Soto *was* always talking shit. Especially if it made him look better than someone else.

No doubt the little prick was spinning some tale about him being such a team player that he actually offered to switch his extra day off this month. ‘Cuz he cared about helping his fellow firefighter decompress, “get his head on straight,” as the Captain referred to it, after the accident Luis had worked several weeks ago.

An accident that was far too similar to and equally as senseless as the one that had altered Luis's life six years ago.

The idea of Soto using Luis's situation to paint himself in a good-guy color when the prick was anything but a team player at the station grated on Luis's already-stressed nerves.

His ire rising, Luis plopped back against the sofa cushion. He plunked his scruffy workbooks on the scarred wooden coffee table beside his brother's, tugging on his jeans leg to adjust himself. This damn situation kept getting rosier and rosier.

Thankfully it was a quiet day at Key West's small airport. A United flight had landed about fifteen minutes ago without incident. Another firefighter had ridden out to notch one of the five daily runway inspections, while another sat in the Watch Room listening to the control tower over the radio and keeping an eye on the runway. Carlos and the new guy rounded out the team of four manning this shift.

So far, Luis's visit hadn't panned out like he had anticipated. On top of Carlos brushing off the Captain's edict, the ungrateful jerk had barely mumbled his thanks when Luis showed up to deliver the glass container from their mom. Even though it meant Luis retracing his route this morning to make the ten-mile drive back down to Key West from Big Coppitt.

After his shift, he'd swung by his parents' house for the obligatory bi-weekly visual check-in, which under no uncertain circumstance could be lumped in with their weekly *familia* dinner. Luis had planned to make his morning visit short but sweet. Long enough to appease Mami's need to keep visual tabs on her kids, despite the fact that all four of them were adults.

Ever the dutiful son, he'd reached Big Coppitt Key and passed the turn to his house on Emerald Drive, where solitude and his boat, *Fired Up*, awaited in the canal out back. Instead, he made the next left onto Diamond Drive, heading to his childhood home. Praying he'd be in and out before news of his forced time off reached his parents.

The last place Luis wanted to be was sitting in his *mami's* kitchen, her henpecking him for details about what was new in his life. Not that he ever had anything special to report or that he'd want to keep secret. Except for today.

His *mami* possessed a something's-wrong radar the likes of which the US government would kill to possess. If—more like when—she got wind that his captain had felt compelled to sideline him, her worry gene would kick into overdrive.

Even now, safe from her watchful eyes, Luis cringed at the thought. Few things were more intense than a Cuban *mami* hovering over her offspring, hell-bent on making things better for them. Whether they wanted her help or not. Case in point, the multiple ways she consistently worked in a plea for him to make true peace with his little brother, Enrique.

No matter how many candles his *mami* lit after mass at St. Mary's, praying for her middle and youngest sons to reach an understanding. That wasn't going to happen. There were some things a man couldn't get past. Not Luis anyway.

This morning, despite the ants-in-his pants sensation that had him as jittery as a rookie on his first call, Luis had tried to play things off, reassuring her with a casual, "*Estoy bien*," when she asked how he was doing.

One look at her arched brow, right fist planted on her plump hip, and he knew she wasn't buying his "I'm fine" routine. He'd realized right then and there, he needed to get out of her kitchen, outside her radar range, ASAP. Or he risked her interrogation.

Hell, he was too ramped up to discuss the reasons and potential ramifications of the Captain's decision.

Too frustrated.

Too . . .

The word *scared* filtered through Luis's head like the devil had perched on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. Luis shook the evil antagonist off, ignoring the obnoxious voice and turning his ire on his brother.

"*Coño*, 'mano, the only reason I volunteered to bring your sorry-butt lunch was 'cuz I thought you'd side with me. Not Turner. You can't possibly think the Captain's right!" Luis glared at Carlos, who stabbed a piece of *amarillo* with his fork, then shoved the sweet plantain in his mouth. "Would you quit stuffing your pie hole for a minute and help me figure out how to change Turner's mind?"

"Maybe," Carlos mumbled around his food. "I think—"

A Tone Out rang through the speakers, interrupting Carlos. The series of low- and high-pitched sounds signaling an emergency, distinct for each firehouse in the county and city, alerted those on duty in seconds which station should be on the move. Within a couple notes of the Tone Out, the firefighters were either continuing about their business, like Carlos and the others here, or racing for their vehicle.

The walkie-talkie hooked to Carlos's belt squawked a message from Dispatch relaying information from a 911 call. The rescue unit from Stock Island, the key located immediately before the entrance to Key West, was needed at a residence where someone was experiencing chest pain. Knowing how the Battalion Commander over there ran his station, Luis figured the truck would also head out in support of the ambulance.

Dispatch quieted down, but an uncomfortable sense of dread lingered over Luis. As it had after every Tone Out that had sounded over the past few weeks. Especially when the call from Dispatch involved a car accident. Just like—

Tension seized his chest. The knot in his gut, the need to lash out at someone, something, had him jittery and on edge. He clenched his jaw, burying the unwanted responses. This would pass. It always did. It had to.

Running a hand down his face, Luis wiped the sheen of sweat off his brow. A check of his watch told him he should get out of the way here. Carlos and the other three men would need to start their daily medical and fire training as well as the extra duties required by the FAA since they were located at the airport. Luis wasn't getting any sympathy over the unfairness of his current dilemma anyway.

"You know what? Forget I said anything," he grumbled. "I don't know why I thought you'd understand."

Lifting his feet off the coffee table, Luis pushed up to a stand. The weight of frustration pressed down on him, squashing his anger, leaving him irritatingly tired. Tired of people telling him how to cope. Tired of hearing that he should seek professional help or he'd never move on.

He didn't need to sit down with a grief counselor. Forget having another chat with the fire department's chaplain. The best therapy for him involved pulling shifts at the station. Losing himself in the

rhythm of the day-to-day required duties and responsibilities. Fueling his body with the occasional adrenaline rush.

Carlos should understand. The adrenaline was a big part of what drew them all to the job. That whoosh of pulse-jumping excitement when you peeled out of the station, ready to help someone in need.

“Oye, come on. Don’t leave all pissed off.” Carlos set the glass container on the table as he stood. “I’m just saying, maybe some time out on your boat will do the trick. A little sun, fresh ocean air, dropping a line in the water. Yeah, that’s it! Go catch some fresh fish for us.” Carlos’s lips spread in a silly grin, his straight teeth a white flash against his deeply tanned face.

Luis gave his brother the finger on his way through the eat-in kitchen, heading toward the front entrance. Carlos followed, their boot heels thumping on the linoleum floor.

The other firefighter waved at Luis but didn’t look away from the baseball game on the small TV mounted on the wall above the table.

“Take the *Fired Up* out past the reef on the Atlantic. Troll for some mahi and bring home dinner,” Carlos persisted.

“I hope you get indigestion from wolfing down Mami’s food so damn fast,” Luis said over his shoulder as he pushed open the main door. Hot, humid air blasted him in the face. Early May and already the intense summer sun beat down, threatening to bake tourists and locals alike.

“Bite your tongue,” Carlos complained.

“Bite me!”

His brother barked out a laugh and jabbed Luis on the shoulder with a sharp punch. “Ohh, that mouth of yours. What would Mami say if she knew her quiet, saintly son talked like that.”

“Whatever.” Luis dodged Carlos’s second jab and stepped onto the landing. His brother followed him outside, but while Luis continued to the top of the concrete stairs leading to the parking area below the fire station, Carlos stayed behind.

“Hey, I know this isn’t what you want!” he called out. “*Pero . . .*”

Halfway down the stairs, Luis paused. “But what?”

He turned to find Carlos still on the landing, one hand wedged between the frame and the door so it wouldn’t close all the way while allowing them a bit of privacy.

They squinted at each other for a few heavy seconds. Luis watched his older brother weighing his words. Carlos's jaw muscles worked as he chewed on whatever advice he contemplated offering. Advice Luis probably wouldn't want to take. His brother's easy grin from moments ago had been wiped away by the serious expression now blanketing his face. He stared back at Luis with the same pursed-lips scowl he used when his young sons misbehaved in a way that might cause harm.

"But maybe it's time you took a step back from helping everyone else and . . . and thought about helping yourself."

Across the tiny parking lot, on the other side of the chain-link security fence separating the public area from the runway and tarmac, the prop plane that shuttled tourists to the Dry Tortugas for snorkeling trips cranked its engine. The loud, sputtering noise mimicked the discord pounding through Luis's chest.

"There's no need to. I'm fine," he assured his brother. A refrain Luis had been repeating for years now. Whatever good it did. "I wish everyone else would get that through their heads."

To Luis's surprise, Carlos muttered an oath and moved to the top step. The fire station door clicked shut behind him. "Look, I get that you're pissed about the way the Captain handled things. But you've been simmering like Mami's old pressure cooker off and on for a while. That call a few weeks ago made it worse. I'm not saying you gotta fix things with Enrique, but—"

"Don't go there," Luis warned, an angry edge in his voice.

Carlos held up a hand, stalling Luis's argument. "I'm not. That's between you two. I *am* saying, you were dealt a raw deal back then. Sure, we handle things our own way. The thing is, as much as you'd like to think so, you can't save everyone. But shit, you're not even trying to save yourself."

His brother's plea slammed into Luis like a battering ram to the chest. It caught him by surprise, but not enough to shake his resolve.

"That's because I don't need saving."

He simply needed to keep his mind busy, distracted. That's what kept unwanted memories and thoughts at bay.

Carlos let out an exasperated huff as he rolled his eyes. "You've got a week off, use it to figure out how you can get out of your rut."

Hell, surprise us all by shaking things up a little. It'll do you good, my saintly brother."

Hands on his hips, Luis squinted up at Carlos, shocked by his unexpected, unsolicited advice.

Rut? What the hell?

"I have no idea where this unnecessary pep talk is coming from. Like I said, I'm fi—"

"Fine. Yeah, I heard you," Carlos interrupted. "I've been hearing you for years now. I'm just . . ."

Raising an arm to wave off his brother, Luis hurried down the last few stairs. "Okay, okay! I'm off to 'shake things up.' I'll catch you later. Don't pull a muscle climbing into your truck to inspect those runways. I know how demanding that can be on your old-man body!"

"Bite me!" Carlos yelled back, his typical laughter back in his voice. Seconds later, Luis heard the station door slam shut.

Chuckling at his brother's goodbye, he pulled his Ray-Bans from his T-shirt collar and slipped them on. He crossed the shaded area underneath the fire station to his dark blue Ford F-150 King Ranch pickup, parked in a spot next to the south end of the airport near the baggage claim area.

Shake things up. Get out of your rut.

Carlos's words taunted Luis with their infantile "I dare you" undertone. He blew out an irritated breath, then pushed the conversation aside when his attention was drawn to a group of rowdy college-aged kids piling into a taxi van nearby. Voices raised, they excitedly discussed barhopping plans while snapping selfies with their cell phones. Behind them, two middle-aged couples dressed in shorts and matching tropical button-ups awaited the next available taxi.

Luis fished his keys out of his front jeans pocket and watched passengers streaming out of the building. Some wearily dragging rolling suitcases. Most clutching cameras, island maps, sun hats, or some type of beach paraphernalia, their expressions bright with expectation.

So many people scrimped and saved for ages dreaming of visiting his hometown. They traveled for miles, vacationed for days, brought money to local businesses, then left. Poor souls.

He remained among the lucky ones who called Key West home. Always had. Always would. A Conch through and through.

The highs and lows of his life had taken place here, or somewhere within the stretch of Keys linked by the Overseas Highway. One of those lows, and the difficult aftermath it caused, had nearly pushed him to leave. Take a better-paying job at a firehouse on the mainland.

But no. His *familia* was here, had been for three generations. Even Enrique, the younger brother he now kept at a slight distance but would never shut out. *Familia* was *familia*. Good, bad, or indifferent. Their parents had tried to instill that loyalty in them. Unlike Enrique, if there was one thing Luis took seriously, it was his responsibilities.

Luis reached his truck at the same time a beat-up beach cruiser sedan pulled out of the passenger pickup lane. Its engine revved, then backfired. The shotgun sound startled Luis, along with several passengers who ducked for cover. His keys slid from his fingers, clanking onto the asphalt near the rear driver's side tire.

He bent down to pick them up, more of his brother's words echoing in his head. *It's time you took a step back from helping everyone else.*

Screw that. Helping was in Luis's DNA. It's what led him to graduate high school having already earned his EMT certification so he could immediately enroll in fire college in Ocala. Then straight onto a shift with the city.

No, what he needed was to find a way to kill the next seven days. If not, he'd go out of his mind, reliving the accident his truck had responded to several weeks ago. Consumed by the painful memories of another grim car crash the recent one had unearthed.

"What do you mean you're not coming? You promised!"

A woman's harried voice grew louder, her footsteps crunching in the gravel edging the airport sidewalk and the fire station parking lot. Crouched down behind his King Ranch pickup, Luis spotted a dainty pair of gold sandals and orange-painted toenails standing in front of his vehicle.

"Ric, you were supposed to be arriving thirty minutes from now." Several beats passed, punctuated by one sandaled foot tap-tap-tapping on the gravel. "Unbelievable. You can't possibly leave

me stranded like this. My parents are expecting both of us, and you know things have been tough for my mother. I just don't see how you could . . . uh-uh, this has been on our calendars for . . . you gave your word, that's why I'm upset. How could you do this?"

The mounting agitation punctuating the end of the woman's question snagged Luis's attention, even if her apparent distress already hadn't. He moved to stand, let her know the privacy she'd probably sought by stepping away from the other passengers hadn't been achieved. His left knee creaked in protest, and he put a hand on his bumper for support.

Blond head ducked down, cell phone pressed to one ear and a finger plugging the other, the woman faced the building, her back to Luis. A pale peach tube dress draped her slim figure. Cinched at her waist, the material skimmed her slender hips, falling to play peekaboo with a set of shapely calves.

"I was counting on you this week. I've already admitted how uneasy it can be for me spending time with my family. They're expecting . . . I'm not prepared to do this without . . . because you promised, that's why."

Whatever she heard on the other end of the line apparently didn't make her happy. She shook her head vigorously, blond waves swaying along the top of her pale shoulders. Hopefully she'd packed plenty of sunscreen. If not, her fair skin would burn under the intense Key West sun.

Luis edged closer to the front of his truck, intent on getting her attention, stop her from inadvertently revealing more personal information. Maybe offer her some assistance or local information if needed.

"Save the excuses. They don't matter. This trip is supposed to help boost my mom's morale after her chemo. Not cause more stress. You can't . . . No, I just should have known better than to count on you," she told whoever it was who seemed to have stood her up. "Whatever, Ric! We're done! *¡Vete pa'l carajo!*"

She jabbed her thumb at the tiny screen to disconnect the call, frustration dripping from her throaty groan.

Surprised by the blunt "go to hell" spoken in flawless Spanish, Luis was caught off guard when the woman spun on her heel to face him.

“Oh!” she gasped, eyes wide as she stumbled back a couple steps.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.” He held up his hands, palms facing her to signal he meant no harm. “I was getting in my vehicle but couldn’t help noticing your distress. You okay?”

Hands pressed to her chest, the woman bit her full lower lip and nodded. The worry pinching her brow and darkening her deep ocean-water-colored eyes told him differently. Her gaze dropped to the KWFD emblem on his gray T-shirt before coming back up to meet his. Straightening her shoulders, she dragged her rolling bag in between them, like the silver hard-sided suitcase was a buffer offering protection.

Not that she needed protection from him.

“My name’s Luis. Luis Navarro. I’m with the Key West Fire Department.” He held out his right hand to shake at the same time he jerked his left thumb over his shoulder at the elevated building behind him. “I was just visiting my brother, a firefighter with the county, here at the airport.”

The woman leaned to the side and rose up on her toes. Chin jutting up in the air, she craned her slender neck to look over his shoulder in the direction he pointed. Her oversized reddish-brown leather tote slid down her arm until its strap snagged in the crook of her elbow.

“Fire department, huh?” she murmured.

“Yeah, with the city. Finished my shift this morning; now I’m off for a few days.” Whether he wanted to be or not.

She lowered back onto her heels, eyeing him with guarded interest. One corner of her mouth hitched in a cute little half frown as she seemed to weigh her options.

Finally, she clasped his hand with her own. Strong, slender fingers wrapped around his in a firm shake. Her smooth palm nestled against his, cool and soft, and Luis found himself loath to let go.

“Hello, Luis Navarro, local firefighter. I’m Sara Vance, tourist.”

“Nice to meet you, Sara Vance, tourist.”

His teasing response earned him a husky chuckle paired with a full-blown grin that rounded Sara’s cheeks and sucker-punched him in the gut. She slid her hand from his to heft her big purse back onto her shoulder.

"Wow, talk about impressive service. I haven't even called nine-one-one and a rescue squad has arrived. Not that I need saving or anything. Because I don't." Her confidence nearly convinced him, but he caught the flash of worry washing over her face before it whisked away like a tiny wave on the beach's shore.

"You sure about that?" he asked.

"Um, yeah. I just need to, uh . . ." The humid breeze blew her blond tresses against her cheek, and she tucked them behind her ear with a crooked finger. "Reevaluate a few things, I guess. Yeah, that's all."

Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

Luis cocked his head, thinking about the conversation she'd just had with some guy who, by all indications, seemed like an absolute loser if he was dumb enough to leave her high and dry in the Keys.

Sara glanced down at the phone clutched in her left fist. Her short, manicured nails, painted the same orange as her toes, were a stark contrast to the shiny black case. The name "Ric" flashed across the screen, signaling an incoming call. Lips pinched with anger, she pressed the side button to ignore the call, then dropped her cell in her shoulder bag.

Fascinated by her resolve to jettison this Ric guy when doing so seemed to put her in some kind of pickle, Luis waited for her next move.

Chin tucked into her chest, she rubbed at her forehead, as if the reevaluating she mentioned caused her pain.

When several moments ticked by without a word from her, he stepped backward toward his truck, his helping-hand instinct telling him to do the opposite. "Well then, if you're all good, I'll head out."

He turned away, craning his neck to catch one last glimpse of her slender figure over his shoulder. She gazed down at the gravel scattered at their feet, her brow puckered, her bottom lip caught between her teeth once again. Far too often he'd seen a similar look of devastation on a person's face when he responded to a call. Loss, uncertainty. Their mind scrambling to make sense of the situation.

"Good luck and welcome to the island," he called to her.

The soft click of his automatic door lock made her flinch. Her chin shot up.

“Wait!” Indecision and desperation swam in the depths of Sara’s blue-green eyes. “I’m not. Not good, I mean. Actually, I’m more like . . .” Her voice drifted off as she jabbed her fingers through her hair in obvious frustration. “More like in a mess, actually.”

She winced as if the admission hurt.

Intrigued, Luis lifted his sunglasses to the top of his head, meeting her gaze.

Sara swallowed, took another deep breath, then squared her shoulders, like a rookie set to answer her first alarm. “Everything’s a wreck, and I’m about to disappoint my parents. Again. If your offer is serious, I could really use your help.”

And just like that, Luis knew his first day of forced time off was definitely about to get interesting and maybe help him “shake things up.”

Chapter 2

Sara Vance watched the firefighter's warm brown eyes closely. Hoping with all things good and right in the world—the likes of which the self-centered jerk Ricardo Montez was *not*—that she'd made the right move by blurting out her SOS.

Her sorority sisters would be throwing up red caution flags. Well, except for Wendy. She'd probably say it's about time Sara tried something wild and crazy. A column under which this idea definitely fell.

But right now, the clock on her parents' arrival was ticking. When it came to options, Luis Navarro might be her only viable one. She certainly couldn't think of anything else.

Her family was already in the air, somewhere between Phoenix and Key West. If she didn't find some way to pull herself out of the pit of quicksand she'd inadvertently created, before everyone else landed, this seven-day vacation with her parents, siblings, and their spouses was doomed before it even started. She refused to be the unwanted damper on the celebration of her mother's recent cancer-free diagnosis. Especially after her dad's rare edict demanding that they all clear their schedules and not cause any fuss.

"What's going on?" Luis asked. "You need a ride? Suggestions on a place to stay?"

Oh, if only it were that simple of a problem. “Probably the first, unless I take a cab. Got the second one covered. It’s a little more involved than that.”

Much more involved.

She speared a hand through her hair, despair threatening to override her nervousness. Along with her common sense.

Would Luis say yes to her outlandish idea? Did she really want him to?

Yet the alternative was to disappoint her mother, when the oncologist had ordered her to remove all stressors. Finding out that Sara may have fudged a little about how serious she and Ric had gotten wouldn’t go over very well. Not at all.

Which was why Sara needed Luis to agree with her request. For her mother’s peace of mind. As much as her own.

Cuidado con lo que pides.

Mamá Alicia’s voice whispered in Sara’s ear, as if her beloved nanny stood behind her, reminding Sara to be careful what she wished for. Mamá Alicia had always known the right answer, delivered in a mix of Spanish and English to ensure Sara learned both languages. She’d always given the best advice. Usually over hot chocolate and homemade *churros*.

Sara pictured the diminutive woman who’d once been a tiny but influential force in Sara’s life. Jet-black hair in a tight bun high on her head, floral apron tied around her thin waist, stern yet compassionate expression as she wagged a finger and spouted sage counsel. Or a needed reprimand. No doubt Mamá Alicia stared down from heaven now doing the exact same thing.

“So, when you say everything’s a mess, define *everything* for me,” Luis said, pocketing his keys as he strolled toward her.

Crossing his arms, he leaned back against the shiny silver front bumper of what Sara could only think of as a he-man behemoth of a truck.

Scanning the guy’s muscular biceps, broad shoulders, and wide chest, gloriously displayed thanks to the tight gray KWFD tee hugging his upper body, Sara figured the supersize-tired vehicle fit the man. All six foot plus of the raw power and masculinity he embodied should have been intimidating. Only, when she gazed into his

friendly dark brown eyes she couldn't resist believing the open honesty softening the serious expression on his tanned face.

"You want the short or the long version?" she asked.

His lips twitched like they wanted to crack a smile. "I'm in no hurry."

Too bad she couldn't say the same.

"Oh-kay then." Clasp ing her hands to keep them from fidgeting, she rested them on her suitcase's extended handle. This pitch had to be as convincing as the one she'd given when she nabbed the initial sponsor for her lifestyles blog. "I'm the first of my family members to arrive for our celebratory vacation. My parents, two older siblings, and their spouses should be landing in a few hours. Only, they're expecting to meet me at our Airbnb with my boyfriend. Or, um, potential fiancé."

"Potential?"

"Not really," she rushed on, worried she might be botching things before they even got started. "But my mother may have been *slightly* led to think otherwise . . . by me." Luis's raised-brow surprise had her quickly adding, "Under duress. And with good intentions."

A low whistle blew through Luis's lips, doing nothing to assuage her guilt over not setting her mother straight when she had leapfrogged from Sara's *would it be okay for me to bring someone?* to her own Sara's *finally serious about settling down* interpretation.

Sara's therapist had had a field day with that one. It was classic approval-seeking behavior. Sara knew it. Only, she hadn't stopped it from happening.

"And this boyfriend-fiancé would be the Ric guy you were talking to when I walked up?" Luis asked.

"Yes."

"The same dude who, if I heard correctly, isn't planning to show."

"The one and only." Irritation hardened Sara's tone.

Luis bobbed his head slowly. The corners of his mouth tilted down in a frown at the same time a deep V wedged itself between his dark brows. "Sounds like he deserved more than the 'go to hell' you gave him."

“You heard that?”

An embarrassed blush heated Sara’s cheeks at Luis’s, “Sure did.”

“Here’s the thing,” she explained, trying to lay the groundwork for her request. “No one in my family has met Ric. Or seen a picture of him. They all live back home in Phoenix. I’m the one who flew the coop, once I graduated university. Now I’m based out of New York. Ric and I met last December when I was in Miami for business, and we’ve been sort of dating long-distance since then. This trip was supposed to be his introduction to my family.”

Along with his being a buffer for her if her mother or sister’s pushy personalities risked setting off any of Sara’s disorder triggers.

She paused, letting the information she’d shared sink in. Luis scratched the light scruff on his left cheek. His hand slid around to rub the back of his neck, eyes narrowed as if he were contemplating her story. Eventually he folded his arms again and leaned against his truck. All with only a mumbled *humph* as his response.

Apparently, he was the living, breathing version of the strong and silent type. That could actually work in their favor. *If* he agreed to her admittedly bizarre plan.

Uncomfortable, Sara toed the gray chunks of gravel with her right foot as she continued. “My family’s . . . different from me. High achievers. Type A, to the extreme. All successful doctors busy saving lives. While I . . . I’m . . .”

Her ability to form words failed her as her old nemesis self-doubt poked its head out of the dark hole where she doggedly tried to keep it buried. Its beady eyes bore into her psyche like a mangy prairie dog refusing to stay underground.

Luis’s dark gaze slowly traveled from her head, down to her toes, and back up again. Heat spread through her as if he’d physically touched her.

She was used to people watching her, taking pictures at conferences and speaking engagements. Some were looking to find fault. Plenty others were awed. In her line of work, she invited the interest. The more likes and shares and followers, the better.

And yet, with Luis, his perusal felt different. Personal.

Her request would make it even more so.

“While you, what?”

His deep, warm voice rumbled over her. It reminded Sara of lazy mornings snuggling in bed after a night that left the sheets tangled and bodies sated.

She shivered at the seductive image. Then quickly reminded herself she had no business entertaining such thoughts. Not when she was about to make him what she hoped to consider a business proposition.

Well, crap. *Proposition* wasn't quite the word she wanted to use. It sounded suggestive. Too lurid. Too—

Doubts screamed like banshees in her ears. Pressing a hand to her forehead, Sara squeezed her eyes shut, grasping for one of the tools she had learned in therapy when her mind threatened to spin out of control. Positives. Think about the positive angles here.

She ran a successful small business. Hired people for short-term contracts all the time. Granted, they were typically photographers or stylists, but the role of a fake boyfriend could potentially be considered along the same lines as an extra in a photo shoot. Couldn't it?

Oh my god, what the hell was she thinking?

"Sara, how are you different from your family?"

Luis's soft question broke into her mental downward spiral. The kind of spiral that had gotten her into trouble in the past.

Lowering her arm, she peeked at him through her lashes.

He'd crossed his jeans-clad legs and relaxed against his truck's front bumper. One dusty black work boot rested heel to toe on top of the other. A man with time on his hands, if what he'd said earlier was true.

In spite of her undoubtedly odd behavior, his whole demeanor remained calm, patient. It vibrated off him, weirdly quieting her misgivings.

"How am I different?" she repeated his question, keeping the *let me count the ways* to herself when he nodded.

For someone who projected confidence and poise to those who followed her career, it was uncanny how easily talk of her family could suck those traits right out of her. It didn't, however, mean she couldn't fake them when needed. She'd had plenty of practice with that over the years.

Tossing her head so the humid breeze would comb her hair out

of her eyes, Sara answered, "Let's just say, unlike my family, the closest I ever came to being a doctor was the Halloween I dressed up as a sexy physician for a sorority social my sophomore year at Arizona State."

After a stunned second, Luis threw back his head and laughed. The deep, throaty sound startled a white and gray pigeon pecking the ground nearby. The bird flew off, wings flapping as it soared over the cream stucco building.

A nervous giggle pushed up Sara's throat. She pressed her fingers to her mouth as if that would stop the awkward sound from escaping. Luis's laughter slowed to a deep chuckle. His dark eyes sparked with amusement. The crow's-feet crinkling their corners merely added to his rugged charm.

"I'm sorry." He knuckled the moisture from one of his eyes. "Really. I'm not laughing at you. I just did not expect you to say that."

"Believe me, my highly respectable parents, one of whom is Chief Pediatric Surgeon on medical leave and the other Chief Cardiothoracic Surgeon, both at Phoenix General, did not find the pictures too amusing."

Luis tucked his thumbs in his front pockets, one dark brow quirked at an angle she found oh, so sexy. "I'm betting you looked pretty hot in that outfit, though."

"Damn straight. It won me best dressed at the party."

His answering chuckle loosened the knot of stress tightening her chest. If all else failed, she could thank Luis for the momentary distraction that had quieted the negativity in her head.

Angling her body to the side, she stared off in the distance, past the parking garage in front of the tiny airport. Across an expansive grassy area, a small redbrick fortress lush with vegetation sat on the edge of the main road that butted up against the open ocean. A sailboat floated on the water, a lone figure standing near the mast. The white sail billowed in the breeze as the ocean wind pushed the boat farther away.

The idea of sailing off into the sunset, not facing her parents' . . . really, her mom's . . . disappointment and guilt held intense appeal. She was so tired of chasing her mother's approval. Angry at the un-

healthy decisions that chase had led her to make. And yet, the longing for that approval remained. Needing that validation was what had first driven her to start—

No!

Shaking her head, Sara halted thoughts of her disorder and the circumstances that led her to think those decisions were the answer. They no longer held sway over her. Sure, she may have backslid a little while her mom was going through chemo. Fear of losing her, of never having another chance to make her proud, had triggered the beginnings of a spiral. But no one other than Sara's therapist knew about the slipup. She planned to keep it that way.

"So, your medically-inclined family is about to descend and your boyfriend—"

"*Ex*-boyfriend," she emphasized, swiveling her head to face Luis again.

He met her gaze, his features set in that serious, calm expression she was coming to associate with him.

"Your *ex*-boyfriend"—he added the same emphasis she had—"is a no-show for the fun. Not sure I'm seeing the gravity of the situation. Sounds like the guy needed to be cut loose anyway."

"That he did. Only, I'd been hoping he'd stick around until after this trip to appease my family. Assist with covering up a minor lie of omission I may, or may not, have slipped my mom."

The sting of guilt had Sara making a quick sign of the cross. Her practice of the faith Mamá Alicia had instilled in her, another area that set her apart in the Vance scientifically minded household.

"The plot thickens," Luis mused. "Tell me, are we still on the short version of your story, or have we moved into the longer one?"

Sara shot him a playful *are you kidding me?* glare.

The grin he flashed transformed his angular face from ruggedly handsome to boyishly charming.

Oooh, he was dangerous, this one. Far more attractive and appealing than she should be getting involved with right now. What she had in mind was temporary. A few days. Maybe a week, tops, if they didn't pretend he had to leave early on business.

If anything, this mess with Ric was a sign she should sideline her dating life and focus on her career. A big change was around the corner if she could get everything to fall into place. And she would.

First, she needed to get through this week, without upsetting her mother, which would annoy Sara's older sister, inevitably disappointing her father, and basically ruining everyone's vacation. Making Sara feel like persona non grata within her family. Again.

Off to her right, a large passenger airplane rumbled down the runway, a glaring reminder that she had less than three hours to figure something out.

The ticking clock forced her hand, precipitating her bold plan.

"Long story short. Or longer," she said, once the plane had lifted off and the jet engine noise faded. "In my family's eyes I've never really been thought of as capable of living up to the Vance potential. Things that came easily to my siblings were harder for me, academically speaking. In my mother's words, sometimes expectations have to be lowered. You know, to avoid disillusion."

She waited for the telltale disquiet to flare. The burning deep in her belly that usually spurred panic clawing at her chest, sucking the breath out of her. Pushing her to make those bad decisions.

Only, the burning didn't appear. A dull ache pressed on her heart. Painful, but manageable. She sucked in a cleansing breath like she'd been taught. Finally able to subdue the trigger.

It had taken her a long time to reach a place where she could talk, even think, about the memories and behaviors that had originally spawned her symptoms without fearing the unhealthy repercussions she brought on herself. Kudos to her therapists, and Sara's own hard work, for her ability to speak so frankly with Luis now.

"That's gotta hurt," he said. "I mean, no kid, even an adult one, gets feel-good vibes from a loved one who's busy drawing attention to their shortcomings rather than their talents."

She nodded.

Luis rolled his lips together, compassion evident in his gentle expression.

"They don't mean it in a hateful way," Sara explained, knowing she wasn't supposed to make excuses for others, but also aware of her own role in their messed-up family dynamics. "I know my family loves me. They just don't 'get' me and what I do. Happens with a lot of people." Elbows bent, she spread her palms up and gave a self-deprecating shrug. "I mean, I'm not a physician, but I'm sup-

porting myself with a successful small business. One I'm working on expanding in the near future. So, it's all good."

"What exactly is this non-potential-reaching career of yours?"

"I'm a social media influencer."

A confused frown wedged Luis's brows together. His head tilted like he was trying to make sense of something, and she practically heard his unspoken *buh?*

"I have a fashion, beauty, and lifestyle blog that's tied to my own YouTube channel and Instagram," she clarified. "We hit over five hundred thousand followers earlier this year."

He blinked, but his lack of recognition remained obvious.

Interesting.

Sara tucked her hair behind her ear, considering Luis in a new light.

With most people, at this point they'd start peppering her with questions, often asking for tips on taking selfies. If they followed her, there was typically a favorite post, product, or location they wanted to know more about. Of course, there were also those angling to see how her name recognition could help them in some way. She'd learned the hard way to steer clear of them.

The idea that Luis didn't fall into any of those categories added another notch in his favor. A small measure of relief for her nervous qualms over the request she sought.

"I guess tough-guy firefighters with monster trucks aren't really my target demographic," she admitted. "So, it's doubtful you would have seen my Insta ads or promo come across your feed."

He shook his head. "Naw, I don't have a feed. I'm not really into social media. Too much hype and oversharing."

"Great," she muttered. "You'll get along marvelously with my family then."

"Meaning."

"In their eyes, my career lacks stability." She waved a hand nonchalantly, as if their disregard didn't matter. She knew better. "They think it's time I settled down. Found a partner with a more reliable career. Preferably someone who meets with my parents' approval, who they think can take care of me. Which I don't need but does lead to my current predicament. And you."

She tipped her head toward him.

Luis squinted up at her. The strong and silent bit she'd found appealing earlier now had her anxious and uncertain. The man's even-keeled demeanor made it very difficult to tell what he thought about the gross amount of oversharing she'd practically word vomited at his feet.

Rolling her suitcase off to the side, Sara stepped closer to him, desperation pushing her to up her persuasive game. "Here's the bottom line. My invincible mom has been battling a nearly invincible foe for a while now. But she finished her chemo and was recently declared 'cancer-free.' Her doctors have ordered rest and relaxation. Two things she's not the best at doing. Ever. For some reason this health scare has made her up the pressure on me to find someone steady and reliable. Someone I would invite to a family vacation celebrating my mom's good news. Someone, maybe like—"

She broke off, her bravery suddenly failing her.

Instead, she pleaded with her eyes, her gaze locked with his. Praying the good-guy vibes Luis Navarro emitted were for real.

Over in the secure area of the airport, voices called out. Two airport employees sauntered past on the other side of the chain-link fence. Sara followed them until they moved out of sight, mainly because she was losing her nerve here.

The gravel crunched under Luis's boots, his long shadow stretching across the ground as he rose to his full height. Even at five foot nine she had to tilt her chin to meet his gaze.

"You can't possibly be thinking what I think you're thinking. Are you?" Disbelief colored his tone, stamped his angular features.

Sara stared back at him, resolute in her bid for him to say yes. "I need a pretend boyfriend for the next seven days. Maybe less if we invent some business trip you suddenly have to take. This will keep my family off my back, and allow my mom to have the relaxing, stress-free vacation she deserves and needs. The one my dad, who is never the heavy when it comes to my parents, practically threatened the rest of us to attend. At the end, they'll all fly home to their busy lives in Phoenix." She flung out her arm, emphasizing her point. "And I'll head back to New York. After a few weeks, I'll simply tell them things didn't work out with Ric and me."

Luis scrubbed a hand over his closely cropped hair, the muscles in his arm rippling with the motion. “Wow, you’re actually serious.”

“Yes, I am.” Seriously tired of being the bane of her family’s expectations.

“*No puedo creer esto*,” he murmured.

That made two of them. She was having a hard time believing she’d concocted this crazy plan herself.

Luis shook his head. She hoped more in disbelief than in rejection of her idea. “This is like something out of a movie my kid sister would watch.”

Probably *The Wedding Date*. Sara had seen the rom-com multiple times. Only, her real-life version didn’t involve a male escort and a huge family wedding, thank God. And she certainly wasn’t counting on the Hollywood-style romantic comedy ending.

“What if we think of this more as a business transaction?” she suggested, rushing on before he could flat out reject her. “I hire local photographers and stylists all the time when I’m traveling. This could be the same. A simple contract job, and I’ll pay y—”

“Eh-eh-eh!” Luis swiped a hand in the air between them, effectively stopping the flood of words pouring out of her mouth like a hose without a spigot on the end. “I have never been paid to spend time with a woman in my life. And I do *not* plan to start now.”

Sara blanched, embarrassed by the crassness of her offer when he put it like that. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

His mouth a grim line, Luis stared at her for several heart-stopping seconds before turning to gaze out at the strip of runway visible between the fire station and airport on either side of them. The muscle in his square jaw tightened, and Sara cursed the nervousness that had made her blurt everything out so rashly.

God, she needed him to say yes.

She could not spend the next seven days feeling as if once again she’d brought worry and discord into her family circle. It was one thing to be the person who didn’t fit in. The surprise baby born thirteen years later who sometimes wondered if the stork had dropped her on the wrong front porch. The child raised and mothered by a nanny because of her parents’ time-consuming jobs and her siblings off at college before she even hit kindergarten. But it

was quite another to be the adult child stressing her parents out because of her eating disorder. The one who, even now, after years of therapy, still couldn't seem to get her personal life on track.

She might not make it through this vacation without backsliding under the pressure of not measuring up, and that was simply not an option for her. No, she'd do whatever it took to convince Luis to say yes.

"You already mentioned that you have a few days off," she said, working to keep a measure of calm. A little less *the sky is falling* doom in her voice. "I'm not sure how many that is or if you have other plans. But, as crazy as this sounds, and I will admit that it does, I'm asking. I *have* to ask. Would you consider pretending we're a couple? Just while I'm in town."

The intense, squinty-eyed look Luis slid her way had probably caused men twice her size to cower. Not her. She didn't have the luxury of backing down.

"If you're not comfortable with me paying you for your time, how about if I make a donation to a fund the fire station supports? Or something along those lines? I know I'm asking a lot. So, I'm willing to do something in good faith as a thank-you. That's only fair."

He shook his head, and Sara's heart sank. Without thinking she grasped his forearm, anxious to reach him. "Luis, please," she whispered. "I wouldn't ask this if I wasn't desperate for your help. Please, don't say no."

Something flared in his eyes at her ragged plea. Something dark and intense. Conflicted. The muscles in his arm flexed under her fingers as he clenched his fist.

"I'm not saying no to you," he finally answered. "More like to the sane voice in my head telling me there are a hundred reasons why this is a terrible idea, and only one that makes it right."

For the first time since Ricardo had bailed on her, the sinking sensation in the pit of Sara's stomach changed course and buoyed.

"And that one reason is?" she asked, hesitant. Hopeful.

Luis covered her hand with his, sandwiching it between his callused palm and muscular forearm. Strangely, the warmth of his skin soothed her rattled nerves.

"While I may not be my *familia*'s wild child—that role is easily

filled by my idiot younger brother—I understand the pressure and guilt that comes with disappointing your parents. Even when it's someone else's fault or beyond your control," he said. "You're asking for seven days, and it just so happens that's exactly how much time off I have."

Elation shot through her like the starting pistol at her last half marathon.

"Are you for real? You'll do it?" she asked, her heart racing.

He dipped his head in answer. "You need help, and I need some way to fill the empty days off ahead. Sounds like a win-win if you ask me."

Yes! He said yes!

Euphoria fireworked inside her, brightening the dark sky that had loomed over her family's vacation. Sara squeezed Luis's forearm with gratitude, a rush of thank-yous tripping off her tongue.

Mamá Alicia's voice wormed its way through Sara's head, a stern warning dampening her glee. *Cuidado con lo que pides*.

Sí, Mamá Alicia, Sara silently promised, she'd be careful what she wished for. But this was a prayer answered. No way could she be anything but thankful that she'd crossed paths with Luis Navarro.

Granted, convincing her family wasn't going to be easy. Especially given that she and Luis had so little time to learn everything they possibly could about each other.

It was no small feat. But something about her hunky, serious but sweet lifesaver told her they'd be fine.

"Okay then," she told Luis, "let's do this."