

Falling For A Stranger (The Callaways)

By Barbara Freethy

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From #1 NY Times Bestselling Author Barbara Freethy comes the third book in the popular Callaway Series, an emotional and suspenseful novel of love, family and dangerous secrets.

Ria is as sexy and sultry as a warm tropical night and as beautifully dangerous as the island drinks she serves at the beachside bar on Isla de los Suenos?The Island of Dreams. But Ria is not as carefree as she appears, and the pretense is wearing her down. One night she risks everything to escape from reality.

Drew Callaway is a former Navy pilot and rescue operative looking for his own escape from a life that has seen too much tragedy. Meeting Ria is like embracing the sun, and their single night together is life-changing. But the dream quickly fades when Ria is killed in a tragic accident at sea.

Months later, thousands of miles away from where they first met, Drew sees a woman who looks just like Ria. He can see that she's in trouble, and he can't walk away. He's going to save her whether she wants it or not.

Drew isn't afraid of a little danger, but can he risk losing his heart to a beautiful stranger?

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Editorial Review

Review

"I love the Callaways! Heartwarming romance, intriguing suspense and sexy alpha heroes. What more could you want?" --NYT Bestselling Author Bella Andre

"I adore the Callaways, a family we'd all love to have. Each new book is a deft combination of emotion, suspense and family dynamics. A remarkable, compelling series!" --Barbara O'Neal, author of How to Bake a Perfect Life.

"Once I start reading a Callaway novel, I can't put it down. Fast-paced action, a poignant love story and a tantalizing mystery in every book!" --USA Today Bestselling Author Christie Ridgway

"I love the Callaways and FALLING FOR A STRANGER just makes me love their family even more." --All Night Books

"I really love the Callaways and am looking forward to reading about the rest of the family and unraveling the grandparents' secret which we're learning a little more about in each new book. One of the greatest parts of FALLING FOR A STRANGER is making you believe in love at first sight. If you're looking for a great feel good read with a bit of action and mystery, this book is for you!" --The Book Momster

"I loved Aiden and Sara's story! Barbara manages to write so effortlessly, blending their stories together, so we learn where they have come from to get where they are now. Barbara manages to give us a good glimpse of the rest of the family too, without taking away from Aiden and Sara's story, leaving us with a little bit of mystery to be followed up on." --Harlequin Junkie for ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS

"Barbara manages to weave a perfect romance filled with laughter, love, a lot of heat, and just the right amount of suspense. I highly recommend So This is Love to anyone looking for a sexy romance with characters you will love!" --Harlequin Junkie for SO THIS IS LOVE

"Freethy has a gift for creating complex characters."--Library Journal

"Barbara Freethy is a master storyteller with a gift for spinning tales about ordinary people in extraordinary situations and drawing readers into their lives."--Romance Reviews Today

"Freethy's skillful plotting and gift for creating sympathetic characters will ensure that few dry eyes will be left at the end of the story."--Publishers Weekly on The Way Back Home

"Freethy skillfully keeps the reader on the hook, and her tantalizing and believable tale has it all– romance, adventure, and mystery."--Booklist on Summer Secrets

"Barbara Freethy brings a tender poignancy to mainstream romantic fiction." --Romantic Times on Daniel's Gift

"Freethy's story-telling ability is top-notch." --Romantic Times on Don't Say A Word

About the Author

Barbara Freethy is a #1 New York Times Bestselling Author of 41 novels ranging from contemporary romance to romantic suspense and women's fiction. Traditionally published for many years, Barbara opened her own publishing company in 2011 and has since sold over 4.8 million copies of her books. Nineteen of her titles have appeared on the New York Times and USA Today Bestseller Lists. In July of 2014, Barbara was named the Amazon KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing) Bestselling Author of ALL TIME! She was also the first Indie Author to sell over 1 million copies at both Barnes and Noble and Amazon.

An author known for writing emotional stories about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary situations, Barbara has received starred reviews from Publishers' Weekly and Library Journal and has also received six nominations for the RITA for Best Single Title Contemporary Romance from Romance Writers of America. She has won the honor twice for her novels Daniel's Gift and The Way Back Home. Barbara recently launched a new contemporary series, The Callaways, featuring a family born to "serve and protect". For more information, visit Barbara's website at www.barbarafreethy.com

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Ria Hastings was in the mood for trouble. It was a warm tropical night on Isla de los Suenos, a small island off the coast of Costa Rica, known for its white sandy beaches, water sports, deep sea fishing, and rum drinks. On one side of the island, several large estates sat on the rugged hillsides with spectacular views of the ocean. The rest of the town lived near the beach, where three hotels and a dozen restaurants competed for tourist dollars."

Ria wiped a strand of blonde hair off her sweaty forehead. The temperature hovered around eighty degrees at just after midnight, and the beachside bar was packed with tourists. Ria had been tending the bar since seven, and she was ready to call it a night. She'd been hit on four times already, and while she was used to handling men who were a little too drunk or too interested in her, she was tired of wearing a polite smile, but she would do exactly that for another hour. She couldn't risk getting fired, nor could she afford to draw any attention to herself. She'd been blending into the local scene for months. Now was not the night to stand out.

As she wiped down the counter, her gaze caught on a man sitting at the far end of the bar. He'd arrived two hours earlier with a friend--a loud, charming, and now hammered, sunburned blond by the name of Tim. Tim had been doing tequila shots since ten and was now hosting a trio of beautiful girls at a nearby table. The man at the bar seemed to have no interest in joining his friend's party and had been nursing a vodka tonic for the better part of an hour. He also hadn't responded to any of the women who'd slid into the seat next to him, although his gaze had swung in her direction on more than one occasion.

He was an attractive man, athletically built, dressed in khaki shorts and a navy blue knit shirt. His dark brown hair was on the short side, and he had an air of discipline about him. Military, she thought. Just out or on leave, but close enough to his service that his body was still toned and on full alert.

She hadn't missed the fact that his gaze darted to the door almost as often as hers did, as if he were waiting for someone or didn't want to be taken by surprise. Maybe he was military intelligence.

That idea made her frown. The last thing she needed was military intelligence to show up on the island.

She told herself not to let her imagination run wild. A lot of ex-military guys came to the island to decompress and let off steam. Since the location had become a popular destination for bachelor and bachelorette parties, there was usually a good deal of action available for anyone who wanted to find it.

But this man didn't seem interested in escaping reality with alcohol or with women, so what was his story?

Glancing down at her watch, she told herself she had better things to worry about than a random stranger, no matter how sexy he was.

In a few hours, the plan she'd put into motion six months earlier would finally be launched. She'd gone over the details a thousand times in her head, and while she wanted nothing more than to go off by herself somewhere and review everything again, it was more important for her to maintain her usual routine.

The man at the end of the bar caught her eye again. There was something in his dark gaze that beckoned to her, a pull of attraction, desire, feelings that she hadn't allowed herself to feel in a very long time. She couldn't afford to answer his call. She was too close to the end to get sidetracked by a man, especially a man who set her nerves tingling with just one look.

On the other hand...

As two men approached the bar, she moved down the counter toward her fellow bartender, Martin, a twenty-two-year-old ex-Harvard dropout, who had come to the island to find himself. So far, the only thing he'd found was a love for tequila and bikini-clad girls.

"Switch with me," she said.

Martin's gaze moved past her to the men sliding into stools at the other end of the long bar. "Trouble?"

"I'd just prefer not to wait on them."

"Got it," he said.

She walked toward the handsome stranger. At this moment, he seemed the less dangerous choice, or at least, the less *obvious* dangerous choice. It had been a long time since she'd allowed herself to trust anyone.

"Can I get you another drink?" she asked.

His eyes were a deep, dark brown, and there were shadows in his gaze, things he'd seen, things he didn't want to see again, she suspected. But there was also courage and strength in his eyes, a resilient defiance. He might have been knocked down, but she doubted that he'd stayed down.

"Sure, why not?" he replied, with a lightness that was in contrast to his tense posture.

"I can't think of a reason. Same? Or do you want to change it up a bit? We have an island special you might like."

"What's that?"

"Beso de la sirena, otherwise known as mermaid's kiss."

"Do you see mermaids after you drink it?" he asked, a lighter gleam entering his eyes.

"Some men do."

"It sounds dangerous."

"You look like a man who could handle a little danger."

"And you sound like a woman who knows how to sell a high-priced drink to a tourist." A hint of a smile played around his lips.

So he was smart as well as attractive. "Guilty. So what will it be? Beso de la sirena or another vodka tonic?"

"Vodka, hold the tonic." He pushed his empty glass across the bar.

She made him another drink, then tipped her head towards his friend, who was making out with a busty blonde. "Your friend seems to be ignoring you."

He shrugged. "I can't blame him. They're all very pretty."

"Yet, here you sit by yourself. No one here has caught your interest?" She wiped down the bar with a damp towel. As she spoke, she cast a sideways glance at the two men at the other end of the bar.

They worked as bodyguards for Enrique Valdez, one of the very wealthy men who made his home in the island hills. As much as she didn't want them at her bar, it was good that they'd come in; they would see her doing what she always did. She wouldn't raise any suspicion.

"I didn't say that," the man in front of her said.

"What?"

"You said there was no one here I was interested in, but that's not true."

Her heart skipped a beat at his direct gaze, and her pulse started beating way too fast. She'd made a point of not getting involved with tourists, or anyone for that matter, but this man was more than a little tempting. She'd been lonely on the island, living a life of pretense. But that pretense was crucial to staying alive. She couldn't let desire get in the way.

"Nice line," she said casually. "I've heard it before--about three dozen times."

He smiled. "I'll bet you have. But I'm the only one who meant it."

"Sure you are."

"What's your name?"

Her body tensed. "You first."

"Drew Callaway."

"Do you want to add a title before your name? Maybe Lieutenant or Captain," she suggested. He had the air of leadership about him.

He tipped his head, a gleam in his eyes. "Lieutenant."

"With the..."

"I'm in between services at the moment. Former Navy pilot, soon to be flying helicopters for the Coast Guard."

Navy pilot certainly explained why he exuded both discipline and recklessness at the same time. It also

probably explained where the shadows in his eyes came from.

"What tipped you off?" he asked curiously.

She shrugged. "I'm good at reading people. It comes with the job. Why did you leave the Navy?"

He didn't answer right away, a contemplative expression in his eyes, then said, "My time was up. I needed a change of pace."

"Where were you deployed?"

"All over."

"So you saw action?"

"Too much."

She gave him a thoughtful look. "It doesn't sound like you're making a huge change, moving from one kind of service to another."

"I still get to fly, which is all I ever wanted to do, but hopefully not with as many people shooting at me."

"I can't imagine that."

"No, you can't." He sipped his drink, then set the glass down. "Your turn..."

She cleared her throat. She'd been living on the island for six months, and in that time no one had balked at the name that was on her fake passport, a version of her real name. "Ria," she said.

"Pretty. Last name?"

Not important."

"A woman of mystery."

"A woman who likes her privacy."

"How long have you lived here on the island, Ria?"

"Long enough to know better than to get involved with tourists," she said with a brief smile.

"No exceptions?"

"Not so far. People come, they go. I'm still here." She paused. "What brought you to the island of dreams?"

A smile curved his lips, giving him an entirely different look, one that was even more attractive. She felt a knot grow in her throat.

"I dreamt about a beautiful blonde with big brown eyes," he said. "A full mouth, with soft kissable lips and a killer body." His gaze drifted down to her breasts. "I think I found her."

Her nerves tingled under his scrutiny and she had to fight the urge to cover her breasts, not that much was showing in her bar uniform, a coral-colored red tank top over white shorts. Most of the women in the bar

were showing more skin than she was.

"You're quite the flirt," she said lightly.

"Actually, I'm a little out of practice."

"Just getting out of a relationship?" she queried, unable to believe this man would have any trouble getting a date.

"I've been focused on other things. Staying alive, for one."

"I can see how that might be a priority."

"What about you?" he asked. "Are you involved with anyone?"

"No."

"Good."

"Why is that good?" she challenged.

He smiled. "Because I like you, Ria. What time do you get off?"

Her heart jumped at the hungry look in his eyes. "You're very direct."

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I don't have a lot of time."

"Where are you going?"

"San Francisco."

A wistful yearning filled her body. San Francisco was one of her favorite cities. And she'd been away for too long.

"I love San Francisco," she said. "I lived there when I was a child. My grandfather was a fisherman. He'd take me out on the bay every chance he got." She drew in a quick breath, realizing she was talking way too much. "What part of the city do you live in?"

"I grew up in St. Francis Wood, but I'll be living south of Market starting next week. It's the hot area to live in now, right near the new ballpark." He paused. "You didn't answer my question, Ria. What time do you get off?"

She gave him a long look, feeling incredibly tempted. His eyes were so dark and intriguing, his features pure masculine gorgeousness. He had a mouth that looked really kissable, too, and a purposeful attitude that made her think he probably knew what to do with a woman. It had been a long time since she'd lost herself in a man's arms for a few hours. And despite the fact that he was a stranger, she had the strangest feeling that she could trust him not to hurt her. That was a dangerous thought, because she couldn't afford to be wrong.

"Ria?" he pressed.

"Do you think I'm that easy?" she countered.

"Not easy, but I think maybe you're important."

The serious note in his voice shot a shiver down her spine. She told herself not to get carried away. He was just trying to get her into bed. He'd say anything. She couldn't believe a word.

"Why on earth would you say that?"

"I don't know. Ever since I saw you I've wanted to talk to you."

"You didn't ask me what time I got off so you could talk to me."

"Well, that was one of the reasons," he said. "I'm not trying to insult you. If I had more time, I'd ask you out on a date. I'd bring you flowers and take you to an expensive restaurant and buy you a really expensive cut of steak."

"Is that your usual style?"

He gave her a smile. "I don't have a style. And while I would never profess to understand or know what a woman wants, I do have sisters, and they talk and complain a lot, especially when it comes to men and dating."

"How many sisters?"

"Three sisters and four brothers."

"Big family. Where are you in the lineup?"

"Fourth from the top."

"Otherwise known as the middle."

He tipped his head. "Yes. What about you? Big family?"

"No. I'm an only child." It was part of the backstory she'd made up before coming to the island; it was also partly true. "I used to wish I had a big family."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," he said dryly. "A lot of noise and chaos."

"And love," she suggested, feeling an ache that went deep into her soul.

Her family had always been complicated. Love, betrayal, divorce, death … She supposed that's what made up a life, but it seemed like she'd seen too much of the dark side of love.

"Plenty of love," Drew said. "Sometimes too much. Everyone likes to be in my business."

Despite his complaint, she could see the pride in his eyes when he spoke of his family.

"So, one o'clock, two?" he pressed, raising an eyebrow. "What time are you done here?"

"Two. But I'm not meeting you."

"Why not?"

"I'm not in the mood for a hookup."

"Aren't you? I've been watching you all night, and I'm good at reading people, too, Ria. You're a bundle of nerves. Every time someone walks through the door, you tense. Why is that? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

His words bothered her on two levels, one that he'd read her so well, and, two, that she'd given so much away.

"And I suppose you think I should release some of my tension with you?" she asked, ignoring his other questions.

"I think…" He paused, lowering his voice. "That you are a beautiful woman who knows what she wants and how to get it."

"Who said I wanted you?" she challenged.

"Your beautiful eyes say it."

"You're seeing what you want to see."

"Am I?" He cocked his head to the right as he regarded her thoughtfully. "What's holding you back, Ria?"

"I don't do random hookups. And I have to get up early in the morning. In the daytime I sail boats for Sea Charters."

"So bartender, sailor—what other talents do you have?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would like to know," he said with a grin. "Why don't you tell me? Or better yet, show me?"

She shook her head at his charming smile. When she'd first seen him, his expression had been tense, but since they'd started talking, he'd loosened up considerably.

"You're breaking my heart," he said, putting a hand to his chest.

"I doubt that. And there are plenty of women in this bar if you want company."

"I'm only interested in *your* company. You intrigue me."

"I can't imagine why."

"What brought you to this small island in the middle of the sea?"

She thought for a moment, then said the only word that came to mind. "Freedom."

He met her gaze. "Have you found it?"

"I'm close," she said. "When I'm in the middle of the ocean, no land in sight, nothing but blue water and the occasional seagull, I almost feel like I've escaped."

"Escaped what?"

"Nothing I care to share." She drew in a deep breath, trying to calm the tension running through her body,

that now had as much to do with her attraction to Drew as with her worries about the next day.

"I understand the desire to escape," he said.

"You do?"

"Yes. I first felt the walls closing in on me when I was a teenager. There were eight kids sharing four bedrooms and two bathrooms. It was always too crowded in my house, kids fighting, crying, yelling, so I'd leave whenever I could. And one day I ended up at the airport. I took a flying lesson, and I was hooked. There is nothing like the land falling away and nothing but blue sky in front of you to make you feel like the world just got bigger." He paused. "We're quite a pair. I need the big blue sky and you need the big blue sea."

She smiled. "Apparently, neither one of us is that good on land."

"Maybe we could be good together," he suggested.

She laughed. "You don't miss an opportunity, do you?"

He finished his drink then got to his feet. "I'm staying in the cottages. Number nine. The door will be open, Ria."

"I'm not coming." She wished her words were a little stronger, a little more forceful.

"Then I'll be disappointed. I turned down the mermaid's kiss, because I want yours."

"Another good line. You're full of them."

"I'm not a player."

"You've given me absolutely no reason to believe that."

"I know," he admitted. "You probably won't believe me, but I haven't done this in a while."

"So, why me?"

"You have a smart mouth, and you're sexy as hell. I'd love to see you with your hair down. I'd love to show you how good we could be together."

His husky tone sent another shiver down her spine. "How do you know we'd be good? You don't know me at all," she said, trying to maintain a strong defense against his charm. "We're strangers."

"For now. But what better way to learn about each other?"

"I'm not looking for trouble."

"There's a light in your eyes that says that's exactly what you're looking for."

She caught her breath, thinking he might actually be right about that.

Drew tipped his head and walked away.

She watched him all the way to the exit. When the door closed behind him, she let out a breath, wondering how she could possibly already miss him.

He was just another guy—only he wasn't, and she couldn't put her finger on why.

Maybe it was the seriousness that lurked just behind his smile. He wasn't like most of the guys who hit on her. Those she could handle. She knew they'd move on to the next woman before she could finish saying *no*. But Drew had left. He'd thrown down his invitation and walked out the door.

He was going to wait for her. He was pretty confident she'd show up, but he was going to be waiting a long time.

She turned her focus back on work. For the next hour, she served drinks, picked up empty glasses, and watched the minutes tick off the clock. Shortly before closing Drew's friend left with two women flanking him on either side. Apparently, he wasn't going to be alone tonight.

At two a.m., she wiped down the bar and closed out the register. She said goodnight to Martin and walked outside, the scent of flowers and sea all around her. She paused for a moment and drew in a deep breath of sweet and salty air. The heat of the night echoed the passionate need burning through her body, a need that had been lit by the sexy smile of a stranger.

She lived in a furnished rental three blocks away from the resort. The cottage where Drew was staying was only a hundred yards away.

Indecision made her hesitate for a long minute. She hadn't been lying when she told Drew she wasn't into hookups, but tonight she was feeling restless and reckless. She wasn't going to sleep anyway. She was too worried about the morning, and the reality of what she was about to do.

In six hours she could be dead.

She wasn't being a pessimist, just a realist.

Maybe she should spend those hours doing something that would make her happy, something that she never ever did. It had been a very long time since she'd thought of anything but the plan, the goal. Nothing else mattered but fulfilling the promise she'd made to her sister. But tonight, Drew had reminded her that she was a woman, and she was lonely and scared, defiant and determined—all at the same time.

It was the worst possible time to get involved with anyone.

On the other hand…

She pulled the band out of her hair and let the long waves flow loosely around her shoulders. Then she walked down the path to the cottages, her nerves tingling and tightening with each step.

She knocked on his door, turned the knob and stepped inside. The cottage was one big room, a small sitting area and a king-sized bed.

Drew sat on the couch. He was reading a book when she walked in. It looked like some sort of mystery novel. It was silly, but the sight of that book pushed her over the edge. She'd always found intelligence to be a turn-on, and this man was smart, maybe too smart. He'd read her pretty accurately so far.

But in a lot of ways, she liked his honesty. He hadn't set the scene with candles. There was no wine or champagne chilling. He wasn't trying to seduce her. He was just waiting…

After a moment he set the book down and stood up, his gaze meeting hers. Then slowly he walked over to

her. He made no move to touch her or kiss her. He simply looked at her with his shadowy dark eyes, and she felt an incredible pull. All her nerve endings tingled. There was electricity between them—a dark, dangerous attraction.

"I'm glad you came, Ria. Why did you?"

Such a simple question—such a complicated answer. She settled for the basic truth. "I want you."

The fire in his eyes flared. He put his hands on her waist. "I know the feeling."

"For tonight," she added. "That's all I can give you. I need you to know exactly where I stand."

"All I care about is that you're standing here in front of me. You're beautiful, Ria. And I want you, too."

Her stomach clenched at the desire in his gaze. And then he was done looking. He pulled her in for a kiss.

He tasted as intoxicating as the vodka she'd served him, and he kissed like a man who hadn't had a woman in a long time. She met his demanding mouth with the same sense of urgency and need.

A part of her called for caution, but she couldn't listen to that voice anymore. For a few hours she was going to just be a woman, the woman she used to be, the woman she hoped to be again some day.

They knew nothing about each other, and yet there was a connection between them that went far deeper than the touch of their mouths. Something inside of her recognized something inside of him. What that was, she had no idea.

But she didn’t want to analyze or worry. That's all she'd been doing for months. She just wanted to lose herself in Drew, to be a woman with no past, to reach that elusive moment of complete and utter freedom. Because there was a good chance in a few hours, her future would be over, too.

* * *

Drew woke up just before dawn to the feel of a warm breeze coming through the open window and the sound of the birds singing in the trees outside. For the first time in a long time he'd slept a dreamless sleep. The nightmares from the past eight years had receded in his mind. There were no explosions, bloody scenes, screams of pain and anguish—no more horror or grief.

Instead, he felt a hazy, happy feeling, as if everything was suddenly right with the world. He was completely relaxed with an ease that came after great sex and a hard, deep sleep. He almost didn't want to wake up, to face the day, to have to think about the decisions he'd made regarding his past and his future. He just wanted to stay in this warm, wonderful place, the place Ria had created.

God! What a woman. So beautiful with her shoulder length silky blonde hair, brown eyes, sunburned nose, and a mouth just made for kissing. She'd brought a light into his life, a beauty that he hadn't seen in a while. She'd been passionate, generous and fun. They hadn't just made love; they'd laughed, and they'd talked, and the sound of her voice had warmed him.

He'd come to the island to relax, to recharge, to find his smile again, and he'd found it in her arms. She'd

smelled like orange blossoms, like the flowers surrounding his beachside cottage, and he'd felt like he could breathe in her scent forever, and forever wouldn't be long enough.

That thought jolted him awake. He didn't think of women in terms of forever. Having just himself to worry about was a lot easier than having to worry about anyone else. But that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the time they had together.

He rolled over on to his side, reaching for the soft curves he'd explored for the better part of the night.

Ria wasn't there.

He sat up abruptly, realizing how quiet the cottage was. The bathroom was empty, and while his clothes were still tossed on the floor, Ria's were gone. There was no sign of her white shorts or pink tank top. No sign of the lacy pink bra and matching thong he'd peeled off her body just a few hours earlier.

He felt a wave of disappointment. He was leaving this afternoon, but he'd thought they'd have a few more hours together. He wanted to know more about her. He wanted to talk to her, at least to say goodbye. What a strange feeling that was. He was used to leaving first, to avoiding morning-after conversations, but this time Ria had beat him to the door, and he didn't like it.

He flopped back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. Memories of the night before flashed through his mind. The heat between them had burned all night long. It had been a long time since he'd felt—swept away. He'd always been one to over-think, over-analyze, but last night his body had completely taken over. He hadn't given one thought to what would happen next, until now.

Now, it was obvious nothing would happen. Ria was gone. He should be happy about that. No goodbyes, no messy emotional scenes, no promises to call or keep in touch. It was in actuality the perfect morning after a one-night stand. The only problem was that he didn't want it to be over yet.

He told himself it was better this way. He was starting his new job on Tuesday, a job thousands of miles away from this island. The next phase of his life was about to begin, and he needed to be looking forward instead of backward.

Getting up, he headed to the bathroom and took a long shower, trying to drive Ria out of his head. But as he soaped up, all he could think about was the way she'd touched him, kissed him, smiled at him, and cried out his name as they'd climaxed together.

Damn! He turned the water temperature to cold and stayed under the spray until he was freezing. Then he stepped out of the shower, dried off and got dressed. He threw the rest of his clothes into the duffel bag and glanced around the cottage to make sure he wasn't leaving anything behind.

He couldn't shake the feeling that what he was leaving behind was the one and only woman who'd touched his soul, and he didn't even know her last name.

Was he just going to walk away?

The question ran around and around in his head.

He finally came up with an answer—*no*.

He had a few hours before his plane left. He would find her, talk to her, maybe get her phone number. Walking outside, he paused, realizing he didn't know where she lived, and the bar/restaurant where she

worked didn't open until lunchtime.

Then he remembered that she'd told him she was taking out a boat charter in the morning. He felt marginally better realizing that she'd left early to go to work. Someone at the marina would be able to help him find her, or at least tell him when she'd be back.

The dock was only a short walk away. Colorful sailboats and well-worn fishing boats filled the slips. In the distance was an enormous luxury yacht. He wondered who that belonged to—someone with a lot of money. Probably one of the people who lived in the mountaintop mansions that he'd noticed while bodysurfing the previous day. It would be nice to have enough money to have a home on an island. He didn't see that in his future.

Near the entrance to the pier was a small building with a sign that read Sea Charters.

He entered the building and stepped up to the counter. A young Hispanic man with a nametag that read Juan greeted him with a friendly smile.

"Hola, Señor. How can I help you?" Juan asked.

"I'm looking for a woman. Her name is Ria. Do you know her?"

"Si," Juan said with a nod. "Ria is a beautiful girl, very popular with the customers."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

Juan glanced down at the large calendar on the counter. "A few hours. I have other guides available if you want to go out."

"No," he said, tapping his fingers restlessly on the counter.

So that was that. Ria was out on the ocean and probably wouldn't be back before he had to catch his plane.

"Do you want me to give her a message for you?" Juan asked, a curious gleam in his eyes.

Drew thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. What the hell was he doing? It was a hookup. That's all. He needed to let it be.

"No, thanks."

As he walked out of the office, a thunderous boom lit up the air, rocking the ground under his feet. He heard a gasp from a group of tourists on the pier. Then the door opened behind him, and Juan rushed out. Together, they looked toward the sea. Over the curve of the nearby hill, they could see smoke racing toward the sky.

"What was that?" Drew asked.

"I don't know," Juan said. He ran down the pier toward the Harbormaster's office, and Drew decided to follow.

A crowd of people gathered outside the office. Rumors were flying, all centering around a boat explosion.

Drew's stomach turned. It was crazy to think the explosion had anything to do with Ria, but he had a really bad feeling in his gut.

"Juan, I've changed my mind," he said. "I need to rent a boat."

The other man looked reluctant. "Better to wait. We should stay out of the way."

"I do search and rescue for the U.S. Coast Guard." He pulled out his wallet and all the cash he had. "I need a boat."

Juan's greed won out. "I'll take you."

It took several minutes for them to launch a boat and maneuver their way through the harbor, as more than a few people had had the same idea and desire to help. It seemed to take forever to get past the breakwater, the reef and then around the island hills.

A good thirty minutes had passed by the time they reached the burning vessel, or what was left of it. It had been completely blown apart, with nothing but fiery debris floating in the water while divers began to search the ocean for survivors.

Drew's chest was so tight he could barely get the words out. "It's not the boat Ria was on, is it?"

Juan's somber gaze said it all. Drew stripped off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Juan asked.

"I'm going to find her."

"There's nothing left of the boat."

"She could have jumped off before the explosion. How many other people were on the boat?"

Juan shook his head. "I don't know. She made the reservation—probably one or two. I didn't see them board. They left before I got to work."

Drew looked at the debris field and couldn't imagine how anyone could have survived, but he wasn't going to give up without a fight. This is what he did—he saved people. And he was going to save Ria.

He kicked off his shoes and dove into the water. It was a strange feeling to be the one in the water when he was usually the one flying the helicopter that launched rescue swimmers into the sea. For the first time in a long time, he wasn't hovering above the scene, he was right in the thick of it.

For almost two hours, he searched for Ria, but he couldn't find her. He couldn't find anyone.

When a shiny piece of gold floated by him, Drew could no longer deny reality. It was Ria's necklace, the one he'd tugged at with his teeth as it lay in the valley of her breasts. He grabbed it and swam back to the boat. He felt completely exhausted and overwhelmed by unexpected emotion and a terrible certainty.

He stared at the gold heart with the emerald stone and knew that Ria was gone. Beautiful, sexy Ria was dead. He was never going to see her again. One night was all they would ever have.

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