

Spin Off

by Sárka-Jonae Miller

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Prologue

Alexandra Ford-Tanner sat in the first-class section of a Boeing 777 awaiting takeoff. Next to her sat her new wife, Becki, although “sat” wasn’t the right word since Becki’s excitement had her literally bouncing in her seat, the brunette’s newly straightened hair flying everywhere. The movement made the seahorses on her loose tank top appear to be dancing.

Alex smiled. In a few minutes, their plane would leave LAX and transport the newlyweds to Florida, and from there to Atlantis, Paradise Island for their honeymoon. Alex couldn’t wait to spend six days and seven nights with the love of her life, the most beautiful, sweet, and amazing woman she’d met in her twenty-seven years on earth.

She gazed at her bride. *Nothing can ruin this feeling*, she thought as she melted into the seat. *This is the happiest I’ve ever been.*

“Excuse me, Ms. Tanner?”

Alex turned her head to the right and looked at the male flight attendant standing over her. His boyish face was pinched with anxiety.

“That’s Tanner-Ford,” she corrected proudly, turning to momentarily face Becki. Her wife smiled broadly.

“Right. Could you please come with me?”

Alex frowned. *We’re just about to take off. What could this mean? I hope Mom and Dad didn’t bounce a check again.* Her parents had paid for the first-class flight to Nassau. It would be her first trip to the Bahamas, Becki’s second. *But you can’t use a check to buy airfare, can you?*

“Uh, sure,” she said as she nervously tucked her strawberry blond hair behind her ear. Alex started to gather her personal items. “What do you need us for? You don’t have a special honeymoon section of the plane, do you?” she joked, thinking that a Mile High Club Lounge wasn’t a bad idea.

Blank face. “No, ma’am, and I only need *you* to come with me. Please.”

Alex looked at Becki in confusion. She didn’t want to be separated from her bride for one second, but even with her legal training she couldn’t think of a way to refuse the flight attendant. *This better not be some prank concocted by Jan and Lisa*, she thought as she stood up. *Or my brother*. She didn’t think her friends would risk doing anything stupid with TSA around, but Stupid was her brother Jeremy’s middle name. *Still better than Cordelia*, she thought.

She followed the flight attendant toward the main door of the aircraft, getting suspicious looks from the other first class passengers. *I’m not a terrorist*, she wanted to yell but “terrorist” wasn’t a word people say on a plane.

When they walked off the plane and down the corridor leading back into the terminal, she started to get scared.

“Could you tell me what this is about? Is it my family? Did someone call?” She directed all of her questions toward the back of the flight attendant’s head.

Without turning around, he answered, “No, ma’am. We just need your assistance with something.”

“I’m not MacGyver. What do you need help with that the crew can’t handle?”

That got a laugh. The flight attendant slowed his brisk pace slightly and turned to look at her. Something in his smile told her two things: no one suspected she was a terrorist, and the flight attendant must have been born in the eighties because he was definitely hot for MacGyver.

"We, uh, actually require your assistance with your luggage," he said as he led her through a doorway and then down a flight of stairs.

"My luggage?"

"Yeah," he said, oh so helpfully.

Alex racked her brain, wondering why they would need her help with the luggage. She'd only checked one suitcase. It had those special TSA-approved locks, so she knew they didn't need her to unlock it. She hadn't packed anything strange, no prescription drugs, weapons, food...

The only things in there are bathing suits, sunscreen, some sexy lingerie, a couple of cocktail dresses to wear to dinner, and... OH MY GOD. Alex missed a step and nearly fell down the stairs as she realized why she was being escorted to the tarmac.

No, it can't be. How? No. But... No.

Her stomach churned. With every step, her anxiety grew. *This can't be happening.*

A few moments later, she was led outside to a pile of luggage. She assumed they were the last bags needing to be loaded. Sitting on the ground was one bag separated from the pile. She recognized her fiery red suitcase. The noise from the engines was present but not loud enough to drown out the sound that confirmed her worst fears, nor was it loud enough to cover the snickers of the baggage handlers.

The flight attendant finally looked her in the eye. "Ma'am, we're going to need you to open your bag and turn off whatever is...vibrating."

Chapter 1

Dr. Lisa Ellis stood up, shell-shocked as the projectile vomit that had landed on her new blouse and lab coat slid toward the floor. *What comes up must go down*, she thought to keep herself from cursing in front of the sick five-year-old and her mother.

I love kids, I love kids, I love kids, she chanted in her head as she took a deep breath. This had been her mantra since the first day of her pediatric internship three years ago. Her dream of being a pediatrician had been realized when she finished her residency and been offered a fellowship at the Los Angeles Children's Hospital. *This is what I wanted. I love my job.*

Lisa put on her sweetest smile and reassured little Suzy that it was okay and everything was going to be just fine. She then reassured her mother that Suzy's vomiting was the result of a mild case of food poisoning and not the Ebola virus.

"But I read online that a new case of the Ebola virus was found here in the US. Are you sure, Doctor Ellis?"

Lisa looked the scared woman in the eyes and said kindly, "Yes, Ms. Abrams, I am sure Suzy does not have the Ebola virus. She just ate something that didn't agree with her. It was probably the shellfish you mentioned." *Who gives their kid shellfish for lunch? Only in LA.*

She continued, "Give her plenty of fluids, water or juice, not soda or milk, and she'll be feeling much better soon. It's also best to avoid solid foods and dairy products, so maybe try some soup or applesauce. Symptoms usually last no longer than a day or two, but if she gets worse or she doesn't feel better in a couple of days, please bring her back. Also, if see any blood in her feces, bring her back immediately. Diarrhea is normal, but if her stools are bloody,

black, or a maroon color, give us a call.” *At what point in my life did diarrhea become normal?*

Lisa didn’t get vomited on much anymore, not since her stint in urgent care at Rady Children’s Hospital. It was just her lucky day that she’d been called in to consult on Suzy’s stomach troubles.

As Lisa said goodbye to the adorable little puke machine and her posh mother, she wondered if it would be rude to send an intern to her house to pick up something else to wear. Her appearance hadn’t been a concern for most of her life, but since things had gotten serious with Sam and she’d gotten a job that paid more than a living wage, she had started dressing a little nicer.

And now my gorgeous blouse has bits of vomit on it, and I have nothing else to wear. She sighed. *If Sam lived here instead of San Diego I could ask him to drop something off.* Her boyfriend, Sam Carter, was perfect in every way, except for two things: his inability to be in two places at once and his resolution not to get married until after he’d finished his residency. His residency would have ended with Lisa’s, but he was asked to be the Chief Resident of Internal Medicine, an offer no one would refuse.

As she cleaned up her blouse and coat as best she could in the washroom, she reminded herself that she and Sam had promised each other that their relationship wouldn’t be an obstacle to their careers, but when Lisa had applied for jobs after her residency, Sam had definitely been a factor in her decision to stay in Southern California instead of pursuing her original plan to work at St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital in Tennessee.

Ugh, I’m going to have to wear scrubs. Most doctors wore scrubs nowadays, but Lisa did her best to avoid it.

She pulled out her phone and texted her boyfriend, something she had been doing almost hourly since leaving San Diego a couple of months ago. So far, the couple was managing the distance and busy schedules, but while the move had made Lisa more determined to take their relationship to the next level, Sam seemed less interested, which only made her chase him.

She texted, “I got puked on by a five-year-old whose projectile vomit rivaled the acid spitting abilities of the Dilophosaurus in *Jurassic Park*.”

Moments later, she received an answer. “I love you.”

She sighed and looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. “Why is he so perfect?” she said aloud. Before she could type back that she needed a hug, he texted, “*hug*.”

Lisa rolled her eyes. She wrote back, “You’re too perfect.” She was smiling.

He replied. “Yep.”

She laughed and went to find some puke-free scrubs to wear. After she’d gotten changed and returned to her patients, the sweetness of the moment resided and she missed Sam even more. He was constantly doing things to show that he cared despite the miles separating them, but after every gesture and every visit she ended up missing him more.

She finished her shift on auto-pilot, distracted by thoughts of Sam and dinosaurs, and then drove to the airport to pick up Jan.

Jan Weston-Montri shifted uncomfortably in the office chair while she waited for the US customs officer to return and deliver news of her fate. Since childhood, her parents had traveled with her all over the world in an attempt to make her “cultured”. As a young girl, she developed a fear of the stern-looking customs officers.

I knew eventually they’d arrest me. Looks like today is the day, she thought. I’ll be locked up forever because of some stupid tea. And I’m a coffee drinker!

Her best friend Lisa had begged her to bring back some bizarre tea for her boyfriend when Jan returned from her most recent trip to Thailand. Sam claimed it had amazing cold-fighting properties and was unavailable online.

The only thing magic about this tea is that even customs has never seen it before. They're probably testing it now for explosive materials or poison. I'll be arrested on suspicion of terrorism and never see my hot husband again. Or Starbucks!

Jan continued to fidget in her seat. *This is all Pan's fault. And Becki's. If he had come back early with me, I'm sure he could have told the customs people what this was. They allow customs offenders conjugal visits in prison, right? At least once a week. Any less would be cruel and unusual punishment, right?*

And if Becki hadn't insisted I fly home at least two weeks before her wedding for bridesmaid's duties, I could have flown back later with Pan. Not that I mind bridesmaid's duties. But how much is there really to do?

She felt like she'd been sitting in the tiny office for a million years since the gruff customs officer had discovered ten boxes of the odd-looking tea with small, light colored clumps instead of leaves. Jan hadn't been able to tell him what it was because she'd only been given a brand name in Thai. Her ability to speak and understand Thai had improved greatly in the past few years, but she still couldn't read the language. Her husband had gotten the tea for her and packed it among her many suitcases.

The door finally opened, causing Jan to jump with surprise. The middle-aged, portly man took his time squeezing himself behind the desk while Jan waited anxiously for him to tell her how many years she was going away for.

"Mrs. Weston-Montri, after performing certain tests we have determined that the substance we found in your luggage was tea."

DUH!

He continued. "Bamboo tea."

Are you kidding me? That explains the color. Why didn't Lisa just tell me she wanted bamboo tea?

"We apologize for the inconvenience, but in the future it would be helpful if you could identify the items you're bringing with you

into the United States. We at LAX take the safety of our patrons and our country seriously.”

Jan bit back many nasty remarks trying to claw their way out of her mouth and simply said, “Thank you. May I go, please?”

Sigh. “Of course.”

Jan got up and prepared to scamper away before she remembered, “And my tea?”

The officer gave her an irritated stare. “It will be returned to you with the rest of your luggage back in the terminal.”

Jan imagined her entire Gucci luggage set taking up what little space there was in the office, no longer feeling annoyed that she’d had to leave it. Plastering her best fake smile on her face, she thanked the officer and got the hell out of there.

As soon as she retrieved her belongings, she quickly walked out of the customs area to a spot where she got cell reception. She had three frantic texts from Lisa.

“Where are you?”

“Where are you!!!”

“WHERE ARE YOU!”

“Jeez, calm down,” Jan said to her phone as she exited the building, pushing the luggage cart. She wished her business manager, Marella, had been able to pick her up, but since they’d opened a second spa location downtown and were considering opening a third, Marella was even busier than Lisa.

Before Jan could call Lisa or answer her texts, Jan spotted her friend on the sidewalk. Lisa was waiting for her, foot tapping impatiently, arms crossed, a maniacal gleam in her eye. *Check, check, and check. Looks like Lisa is in meltdown mode.*

Jan put up her hand before Lisa could say anything. “Before you ask where I’ve been I’ll let you know that I was pulled out of line by customs and dragged into their interrogation room (*well, sort of*) because of your stupid tea!”

Lisa’s arms fell to her side. “What?”

"Yeah, that tea you made me bring you, for Sam, looked suspicious. And since I didn't know what it was and the text wasn't in English, the customs people had to cut open a box and have it tested."

Lisa blushed. "Oh. Sorry. Thanks for doing that, getting the tea."

"Uh huh," Jan said, pretending to be pissed for just a moment longer until she was sure Lisa had forgotten her annoyance at having to wait.

Lisa finally stepped forward and gave Jan a hug. "I'm so happy you're back. You've been gone forever."

"I've been gone two months. It just feels like forever because you've gotten to handle all the wedding stuff by yourself. Aren't you thrilled Becki made you maid of honor?"

"Co-maid of honor," Lisa answered.

"Yes, and how much help has Caitlin been?"

"No comment."

Becki hadn't been able to hurt her big sister's feelings by making Lisa her maid of honor, but her sense of fairness hadn't allowed her to name Caitlin maid of honor knowing Lisa would be doing most of the work. Alex the almost-lawyer had suggested the co-maid of honor solution. She'd made her brother the best man.

Lisa grabbed a couple of Jan's bags from the cart and the two headed to the parking lot.

"So, how was Thailand?"

"Amazing, as always. I miss Pan already."

Lisa gave her a look.

"Oh stop," Jan chided. "Sam's only in San Diego, not Bangkok."

"With our work schedules and everything I'm doing for the wedding, my boyfriend may as well be at the North Pole," Lisa snapped. "I'm sorry," she quickly added. "I'm just a bit overwhelmed."

Jan was relieved when they reached the car and could turn their attention to somehow loading Jan's many suitcases into Lisa's compact car.

As Jan was shoving the last suitcase into the Prius' trunk, a yawn escaped. Lisa immediately went into high alert.

"Jan, please tell me you didn't sleep on the plane and are just waking up? We have a hundred things to do tomorrow, and if you're jet lagged..."

"Yes, Lisa, I'm fine. Let's make a quick stop at Starbucks though."

Lisa smiled for the first time. "You just got back from Thailand, the country that you say has the best coffee in the world, and the first thing you want when you get home is Starbucks?"

Jan shut the trunk and walked to the passenger door. She shrugged. "I might as well start acclimating now."

"Fine, but you're getting decaf."

"Yes, Mom."

Lisa just shook her head.

After swinging by Becki's place to pick up Jan's dog and then dropping them both at Jan's, Lisa headed home alone, thinking how sad it was that she was actually excited to see her cat. The fluffy tabby, Reminder, met her at the door of her one bedroom apartment. It was tiny compared to most people's standards, but to Lisa it felt like a palace. She'd grown up in a small two bedroom apartment sharing a room with her sisters. When she had moved out, Lisa had lived in a tiny studio apartment before moving to LA.

Reminder meowed at her in greeting, and Lisa bent down and scratched the top of his head as she kicked off her shoes. She'd left Sam's tea in the trunk, not seeing the point of dragging it all up to her place when he could more easily transfer it to his car when he came up for the wedding.

Reminder licked the back of her hand, demanding her attention as he gave her the welcome home kisses that had been a ritual for years. Lisa then walked into her kitchen to start the coffee (*decaf*) brewing before collapsing onto the couch. It, like most of her furniture, was from IKEA and had been assembled by Sam. For the first time in her life, she was making a decent salary even with student loan payments taking up a considerable portion of her paychecks, but even so, a lifetime of scraping by kept her from splurging on luxuries like couches from Pier One.

"At least we're able to get new furniture now instead of shopping at Goodwill," she said to Reminder, who spryly jumped onto the couch and got comfortable on her abdomen.

She started petting him, still amazed that her once enormous feline had slimmed down to two-thirds his size after she'd switched to feeding him an indoor formula food with reduced calories.

"Now if Sam and I ever get married, we'll be able to buy any furniture we want. You know, when there's peace in the Middle East, Americans adopt a healthy diet, and hell freezes over." The sound of her coffeemaker beeping distracted her from the issue that had been gnawing at her for months, growing in intensity since she'd moved to LA.

She poured herself a cup of decaf, fair trade, hazelnut coffee and took a long sip. Coffee always made her feel better. She walked back over to her couch and sat down. Reminder immediately curled up on her lap. She smiled down at him. He seemed lonely. She had considered getting him a playmate, but two cats seemed one slippery slope away from turning her into the crazy spinster cat lady.

She pushed away the thought that had been popping into her head since reaching the final stages of planning Becki's wedding: *How did my "boy crazy" best friend and my "didn't know she was a lesbian" best friend both end up heading down the aisle before me?* A pang of guilt hit her for judging her two besties. *It's been a long day*, she told herself. But the thoughts wouldn't stop. Becki and Alex

had been dating only a little longer than she and Sam, and Jan had been on an extended break from dating when she met the love of her life.

“Why is everyone getting their happy ending while I get an empty apartment?”

Reminder started to purr. “Yes, I know I have you, but it’s not the same.” She felt silly talking to her cat, but she did it anyway. “I lost both of my sisters, and yeah, my parents are still together, but we haven’t been a real family since Kaylie and Maryann...passed away. I just want to have a family again. And I love Sam. And he loves me. But how much longer am I supposed to wait?”

“Meow?” said Reminder.

After watching some TV and eating a tofu salad, Lisa dragged her tired butt to bed. She sent Sam a goodnight text and tried to get some sleep. She rolled onto her side and put a pillow between her knees to align her hips and spine. But for the first time in a long time, Lisa couldn’t fall asleep. She tossed and turned. She tried progressive muscle relaxation. She tried getting up and walking around. She tried turning on a fan to lower the room temperature. She even double checked that she’d made decaf coffee. *I haven’t had trouble sleeping since Maryann and Kaylie died.* She tried everything she’d learned about treating insomnia, but she couldn’t fall asleep. *Some doctor I am.*

“What is bothering me?” she said softly to herself. “It can’t be Sam. I’ve been missing him for months. It can’t be the wedding. We’ve been in countdown mode for two weeks now. Jan’s back from Thailand, safe and sound. None of my patients have taken a turn for the worst. What happened today that could be causing this?”

She thought back to waking up that morning. She’d felt excited about another day working with kids. She’d eaten her usual

breakfast of a fruit smoothie and half a bagel with peanut butter. Besides the projectile vomit, her work day had been typical and rewarding. She'd helped a lot of kids and calmed several parents. There'd been no unusual stress at work. She'd talked to Becki during her lunch break, which was an almost daily occurrence due to Becki's wedding needs. The only thing memorable was Becki saying that since the wedding was right around the corner, she'd started getting together some adoption information to show Alex when they got back from their honeymoon.

But I always knew they'd have kids. Becki has "Mom" written all over her. Though if anyone would be a natural parent it would be a pediatrician, right? Oh no. Lisa realized for the first time that she was thirty years old, like actually thirty. An unmarried thirty-year-old woman whose best friend just said she was taking the first step toward starting a family might feel...

"I can't believe I'm jealous!"

Chapter 2

Alex stared at her California Bar Exam books as if they'd been translated into Greek while she'd been in the bathroom. She was studying at the UCLA's Hugh and Hazel Darling Law Library, her home away from home whenever her fiancée's wedding planning made studying impossible. She loved Becki; she loved her so much that she'd leave their apartment whenever Becki got crazy to guarantee that she'd still want to marry her. Sometimes, she'd take Jan's dog for a walk, but since Jan returned, studying at the law school was Alex's only escape.

To be fair, her fiancée had done most of the wedding planning for their February 14 nuptials while Alex had juggled law school and an internship before going into full-time study mode for the bar after graduating from the UCLA School of Law. Her Bar Exam Review course had been helpful, giving Alex people to compete against, at least in her mind. The former lacrosse star thrived on competition.

Too bad they didn't cover how to study, provide emotional support to a fiancée, and find time to go to a dress fitting, she thought, remembering the course fondly. She'd barely had time to find a dress, and had already rescheduled her fitting three times. *I should have gone with the pantsuit.*

Exasperated and missing her crazy girl, Alex shut the books and dragged herself home. Becki met her at the door of their apartment. She gave Alex a huge "welcome home" hug. At 5' 3", Alex was two inches shorter than Becki. They liked to joke that they were the same heights as Rachel and Santana from *Glee*, adding "except we're both lesbians." It made hugging very comfortable, especially when Becki was barefoot, as she was then,

because Alex generally opted for sneakers or sandals. Her fiancée's inner Valley Girl had reemerged when she moved back to LA, but the amount of time she spent on her feet for work demanded low heels.

Alex didn't do heels, even short ones. *One thing I love about Cali: the year-round sandals.*

"Hi, sweets. How was work?" Alex asked when Becki stopped hugging her long enough to let her through the door. She kicked off her shoes and collapsed onto the overstuffed white couch. Becki followed her into the living room. Alex lifted her legs so that Becki could sit on the couch too, and then rested her legs on Becki's lap.

"It was okay. One of my home visits stood me up again. I know she's got some health issues, but I wish she'd at least call first."

Alex gave her fiancée a sympathetic look, though her eyes burned from staring at text all day. "I'm sorry, sweets. But the work you do helps a lot of people. Sadly, not everyone is going to want to take advantage of that." She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. "How are things with your boss?"

"All right," Becki said.

If Becki says "all right", that means "not well". "Still micromanaging?"

"She's not too bad," Becki said, always one to give a positive spin.

Alex opened her tired eyes and repositioned her head, not wanting to give Becki the impression that she wasn't listening or didn't care. "You could say something to her." Confrontation was not Becki's strong suit. *"Kill them with kindness" is more her style.*

"I will, if I need to."

Alex smiled, but she doubted it looked real. Fortunately, Becki wasn't great at reading social cues. "If we were in Texas, you could just shoot her," Alex joked, knowing that Becki loved Texas stereotypes. She'd actually asked Alex to dress up like a cowgirl once, and not for Halloween.

"But, enough about work. It's the weekend now, and we've got tons to do for the wedding tomorrow." Becki practically squealed with joy. Actually, she did squeal with joy. Alex brought her hands up in fists and shook them to mirror Becki's excited movements. She didn't have the energy to bounce in her seat, though. *How does a thirty-year-old have so much energy? I'm younger, but I can't keep up.*

"I can't wait to marry you," she said in lieu of bouncing.

"Me neither," Becki said. "Now, you rest, I've got some things I need to go over with Lisa. I'm going to call her right now, and if we need you, I'll be back."

"Great," Alex said, grateful to be considered but mostly wanting to rest. "I'll be right here if you..." her voice trailed off as her eyes closed.

The next day, Becki woke Alex up bright and early. "We have a ton of things to do," she said, her face a few inches from Alex's. Alex hadn't opened her eyes yet, but she could feel Becki's breath on her skin. It was mildly arousing.

Alex opened her eyes and stared into Becki's brown ones. She gave her the smile, the one that said "you're beautiful" without words.

Becki rolled her eyes. "You are not distracting me with sex. We have two weeks until the wedding and a zillion things to do. Now get up, get dressed, and let's go," she said, pushing on the mattress as if to bounce Alex out of bed.

Alex felt more rested than she had in months, but the thought of driving all over LA on various wedding errands had her highly-trained legal mind spinning to produce a reason why they needed to stay in bed.

Brain's got nothing. Plan B. She reached up, grabbed both sides of Becki's face, and pulled down. As she put her lips on Becki's, she

snaked her arm around Becki's back and pulled her onto the bed. She heard protests but knew they were half-hearted.

"Oh hush. If you hadn't wanted me to kiss you, you shouldn't have worn that gray dress you know I love."

"It's conservative! I wear this to work," Becki argued.

"It's tight and has a naughty secretary vibe," Alex said.

Becki giggled and kissed her. "I'm not supposed to look naughty. I'm a social worker. I need to look respectable."

Alex pulled down the zipper on the back of Becki's dress. "I respect you," she said. She nuzzled Becki's neck and kissed her way up to her earlobe, finding the spot that drove Becki wild. "I'll show you how much I respect," she whispered. Becki shivered.

After what seemed too quick, Alex got out of bed and headed to the shower—alone. Becki lay on her stomach wearing a satiated grin and nothing else. Alex had to tear her eyes away from the voluptuous sight. Unlike her partner, Alex wasn't satisfied.

She hopped into the shower and considered for the hundredth time how she could possibly tell the love of her life that what they did in bed sometimes seemed more like foreplay than the main event.

"Hurry up," Becki's perky voice intruded on Alex's thoughts. "We're going to be late now. I'm telling the caterer it was all your fault." Alex could hear the smile in Becki's voice. *She's always so sweet and playful. Why can't she be just a little more open-minded?*

"Coming," she yelled. Becki's giggles revealed that her mind was in the gutter. "Not what I meant," she called out, and frowned.

Read more of the sexy adult romance, [Spin Off](#), on [Amazon](#). The entire book will be free for kindle very soon. I'll post the date asap on my [Facebook page](#).