

Chapter One

With negotiations for her contract at *All My Tomorrows* on spin cycle, Leila Hunter Standiford figured a week in sunny Mexico on the family sailboat would be just the thing she needed to soothe her jittery nerves. Besides, her sister was already aboard and the boat was docked in a swanky Ensenada marina. They could shop, swim, or lounge by the pool and drink margaritas. Her decision made, she threw a few items in a tote bag and hopped on a plane.

Even though her sister had been glad to see Leila, Katy Hunter was already making arrangements to go back to her job in San Francisco.

Home was *not* on Leila's agenda. Go back to L.A. so she could fidget while her producers dithered over her contract? What if they didn't give her the raise? What if they refused to sign the contract? What if her only movie deals were for supporting roles as somebody's mother? All she needed was a little shadowing along the planes of her face, and anyone would think she was fifty instead of thirty-eight.

No. She wouldn't go back. Not yet. Not when she had sun and sea and a boat to enjoy. She needed this vacation, and if Katy wasn't going to use the boat, then she would. She'd take a week, maybe two, sail down to Cabo. So what if she hadn't handled a boat for a few years? Gabe Alexander, who had lived south of the border for the last twenty years, said he'd help her sail. Even after Katy filled her in about his history, Leila thought him funny and charming, and besides, he offered to do the cooking. So, continuing in a long line of impetuous moves, she invited him along.

Now, after ten days cooped up in her small Westsail, they were on the east side of Baja, anchored in the bay of Puerto Felice. Leila had every expectation that Gabe would willingly find another place to stay, get a job, a life, anything, as long as she could move the boat into a marina and make arrangements to have it trucked home. But Gabe was procrastinating, probably because he didn't have the requisite passport.

With her frustration level rising, she stomped off to where the cruising fleet's dinghies were tethered like restless ponies.

Gabe, following behind her, grumbled something unintelligible.

Leila stopped mid-stride, anger rippling across her beautiful features. "I did all the grocery shopping so you could buy some decent clothes, and you come back with a shirt that smells like diesel?"

He lifted the collar and sniffed. "I guess the guy stowed them in his bilge. Did I tell you he sailed all the way from Hawaii in his catamaran?"

"And all he had left was the one shirt that screamed *tourist*?"

"Hey! I look good in this shirt. The color brings out the aqua in my eyes."

But attention was the last thing he needed, and they both knew it.

"And while I'm at it," Leila said, pointing at his long feet hanging over the run-down flip-flops. "I see you forgot the shoes."

"I can always get shoes tomorrow," he said, reaching up to scratch at his thick, sun bleached hair.

"And you need a haircut," she added. *Was he hinting that he might still be on her boat tomorrow? Fat chance!* At the steep ramp leading to the dock, she leaned back and let the cart slide down the uneven boards to land safely in front of her dinghy. She smiled, and the famous

Leila Standiford dimple momentarily appeared. But her quick smile soon disappeared in another frown.

"This humidity is unbearable," she said, wiping the sweat from her brow. "Isn't it supposed to cool down by the end of October?"

"A nice rum and Coke on ice will make you feel better," he said, loading the bags of food into the dinghy.

When Leila was comfortably settled in the bow, he gave the throttle a twist and sped through the anchorage.

As he nosed the dinghy up against the hull of her sailboat, Leila tossed a bow line over a stanchion and pulled down the boarding ladder. But instead of hitting the kill switch, Gabe left the little engine sputtering in protest while he stared across the water.

Squinting against the late afternoon sun, she followed his stare. There, penciled against the backdrop of thunderheads crowding the horizon, a splendid sailboat was silently gliding into the anchorage.

Gabe blinked out of his trance. "The kitten and bird are hungry, and we have ice to stow." *Since when did he have any interest in the animal crew?* There was some hidden purpose in this, she just knew it. "What, you got a date or something?"

"You said I should find someplace to live, didn't you? That Hawaiian who sold me the shirt? He said I should come by Harms' Way."

The mention of the sleazy locals bar knotted a stitch between her finely sculpted brows. Paradise Found had the same spotty ceiling and exposed wires as Harms' Way, but the resemblance ended there. Where the former was an open-air restaurant and bar catering to cruisers, the latter was higher up the hill on a poorly lit back street, and the main menu consisted mainly of booze, drugs, and girls.

"That dive?" She snorted. "They water the drinks, you know."

Gabe's indifferent shrug convinced her he was still sulking over her ultimatum — find new quarters today, or else. So why was she trying to distract him now?

"They don't water the beer, Leila. They wouldn't dare, and unless you have a better idea of where I might find cheap lodging, Harms' Way is it."

Unable to think of any reason why she should argue with his choice at this late date, she swung back to look at the new arrival. She counted the white sails: headsail, staysail, a mizzen, and a mizzen staysail, all flying together in a synchronicity that made her heart soar.

"Must be sixty feet long. She looks like one of those old racing yachts out of the thirties. See the bowsprit? Now follow the hull back — that toothpick contraption hanging off the stern is called a boomkin. Combined with the bowsprit, she can carry a lot more canvas, allowing her to claw off a lee shore or beat the hell out of the competition."

"And if the captain doesn't put on the brakes," Gabe said, "we're going to be wearing all that canvas."

Leila tilted her head, judging distance and speed before the yacht came too close for comfort. Just as she drew a breath to yell a warning, the bow turned smartly into the wind, and the helmsman gave them a quick salute. As the headsails disappeared on their wire stays, the yachtsman turned the wheel hard over, back-winding the main. From where she sat, low in her dinghy, the other boat appeared to be suspended in the air, silent and motionless.

As the yacht drifted back, Gabe asked, "What's he doing?"

Leila, in awe of the captain's chutzpa, replied, "I think—yes, hear that sound? He's released his anchor and using the mainsail to snug it down. Our dad taught my sister and I how to do it, but I don't think I'd try it in a crowded anchorage. I wonder if he even has an engine."

"No engine? Is that safe? The Panamanian freighter I went south on had a roomful of engines and it took two miles to come to a complete stop."

"It's a sailboat, not a freighter, Gabe, and the captain is obviously a pro."

Gabe pointed at the lone man racing to lower his sails. "And where's his crew?"

"I don't know and it's none of our business." She lifted a couple of grocery bags up onto the deck. "Come on, we better get this food into the fridge before it cooks itself."

Gabe hastily tossed up the bags and then announced he was leaving for Harms' Way.

"Now? I thought you were going to make me a drink?"

He held onto the boarding ladder and grinned up at her. "Just say the word and I'll stay. We can drink wine all night and roll around in your bunk."

"Don't be ridiculous," she waved him off. "I'm just warning you to be careful, that's all."

Still shaking her head, Leila went below, stripped off her sweat-soaked dress, and enjoyed the luxury of a cool shower in her tiny head/shower combination. She could hardly wait to be home again where she could turn around without bumping her elbows.

Refreshed from the shower, she left off the bra, put on a clean, loose blouse, and stepped into a pair of khaki shorts.

The kitten was in the main saloon batting a small leather ball around the floor and ignoring the yellow-eyed stare of the nearly bald parrot. The parrot looked up from tracking the kitten, chirped a soft greeting, and edged along his perch. When she reached the galley, he plucked at the bars of his cage like the strings of a banjo. "*Cena, querido! Cena!*"

The feminine voice calling her sweetheart to dinner was the reason Leila originally thought the bird was female. Her mistake. She knew nothing about parrots until the local vet told her that, when a parrot's mate dies, it will drop its feathers in a display of grief. This parrot had lost his mistress, and according to the vet, the molt appeared to be permanent. Recently, however, his feathers appeared to be growing again.

She shook her finger at him. "Will you give it a rest? Nobody here to feed the kitten but me, is there?"

As if agreeing with her, the bird's head bobbed in time with her finger. But when she turned her back to him, he sang in Leila's cheerful soprano, "Here, kitty. Here, kitty, kitty!"

Leila whirled around. "Stop that, you devil!"

His gaze dropped to inspect something on his feet.

She turned away so he wouldn't see the laughter in her eyes. How many times had she seen a woman pretend to examine her manicure to avoid meeting the other person's eyes? She should take him to Hollywood — he'd fit right in.

In spite of her amusement, she had to show him who was boss, or he would never give her any peace. When she finished feeding the kitten, she pushed the sleeve of her shirt down over her wrist and opened the cage. He stepped onto her arm, bobbing agreeably.

She nodded back. "Yeah, yeah, you're all sweet and happy now, aren't you?"

Climbing the companionway, she let him waddle onto his platform, then loaded up his cup with sunflower seeds.

"You good now?"

He bobbed in agreement, and she could've sworn his yellow eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He was happiest outside under the canvas-covered bimini, where there was shade for the soft pin feathers dusting his wrinkled skin and shelter from predatory sea hawks.

After five minutes of watching Devil noisily pick through seeds, she shifted her focus over the sunlit water to a palm tree lined walkway. The footpath, or *malecón*, as the Mexicans call it, was a favorite with locals for their Sunday evening *paseos*. It was also the route Gabe took to Harms' Way.

She knew fretting at Gabe's decision to spend his evening at the seedy joint was a waste of breath. But she and Katy shared a sense of responsibility for their erstwhile friend. And that responsibility was drilled into them by their father, Judge Roy Hunter. *Do what you say you're going to do, and always finish what you start* — rules written in indelible ink behind their eyeballs. Katy took their father's lessons to heart as a respected detective in the San Francisco Police Department, while Leila won Emmys on daytime TV as America's favorite lying, cheating, husband-stealing bitch.

Besides, lecturing Gabe to be careful on shore was pointless — she might as well have been lecturing the seagulls. Which reminded her to shake a rag at the gray and white rats-with-feathers roosting on her spreaders.

"Beat it, you damn freeloaders!" A lethargic flapping of wings, and five additional white polka dots bloomed on her canvas as the seagulls lifted off to find another place to roost. She wasn't sure who she was more angry at — the seagulls or Gabe. Freeloaders, all of them.

The tinny sound of a two-stroke engine distracted her from the pesky seagulls. A Zodiac, one of the more expensive rigid inflatables, was sputtering slowly through the anchorage, a lone sailor in a ragged T-shirt at the tiller. She wondered why the sailor would choose an underpowered outboard when the dinghy could easily accommodate 70 horsepower. The driver, his bronzed, muscled arm draped over the tiller, ignored the smoking, sputtering engine as he steered against the afternoon tide.

Leila yawned and considering a late afternoon nap, leaned out over the railing to shake the dust off her rag.

The passing sailor lifted his billed cap, revealing pale skin where the cap covered a high, patrician forehead. Dark hair curled neatly around his ears, and a long nose hooked over a thick, short beard. His overlong hair and ragged T-Shirt did nothing to diminish his handsome and expressive face. Suddenly, she wanted to hear if his voice was as nice as he looked.

She called, "Thanks for slowing down. We seem to pitch and yaw every time one of the fishing boats comes by."

He cupped an ear to show he couldn't hear over his sputtering engine.

Something lit in her breast, and, on impulse, she leaned out over the stanchion. "You just come off that pretty white ketch?"

He pushed the tiller over, circling back to slide along her hull until he was looking up at her. "Sorry?" His frank appraisal reminded her that she'd eschewed the bra after her shower.

She blushed and jerked the blouse to her chest. "I said, 'Is your engine dead?'"

His grin went wider, his white teeth glinting in the late afternoon sun like unsheathed knives. *Pirate*, she thought, laughing to herself. *And I bet he's got a wicked sense of humor too.*

In an attempt to hide her blush, she plowed on. "The anchorage is between the green buoys —" she said, pointing, "you pay three dollars a day and Gustavo will give you a key to the shower, pick up the garbage and laundry and deliver drinking water — but you can drink the city water — we do."

Though his smile held, she could've sworn she saw disappointment flicker across his eyes, and it made her blush again. *He thinks I'm married? Oh, God, why do I care what he thinks?* Unable to stop herself, she blurted, "That is — my crew and I, we drink the local water."

His smile only deepened. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

She gulped back a laugh, mumbled something about work, and retreated into the shelter of her cockpit. Fanning herself with the rag, she giggled quietly while his ancient two-stroke pattered away. *Must be the heat. Reminds me of that movie set in Morocco when I very stupidly fell in lust with my pirate-playing co-star.* Of course the actor was good looking, but so stupid he had to have his lines fed to him.

With the sun dropping behind the mountains, café doors were flung open to the cooling air. Fresh fish, caught today, sizzled on hot grills. Whole fish dinners could be bought for only a couple of dollars. Leila's mouth watered at the thought of dessert. She was especially fond of the Mexican version of ice cream, which was full of ripe fruit and frozen into thick bars. But since Gabe took her dinghy, she could forget about any of those treats. She put away thoughts of dinner out; after all, just having a few hours to herself was reward enough.

She leaned against the cushions and listened to the water lapping at her hull. Taking Gabe Alexander out of Ensenada was going to work. He would find a room in town and he'd stay put, right where he belonged. Then, she could honestly tell her sister there was nothing to worry about.

It was the least she could do — after all, Leila owed Katy her life.