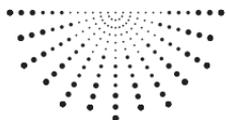


ONE WAY TICKET



TRICIA O'MALLEY

LOVEWRITE PUBLISHING

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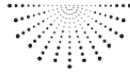
Editor: Jena O'Connor

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“If you are not willing to risk the unusual, you will have to settle for the ordinary.” – Jim Rohn

CHAPTER ONE



The door was locked.

Paige jiggled the handle, confused, because her boyfriend Horatio subscribed to an open-door policy. This welcoming attitude and willingness to trust others was what had originally drawn Paige to him. Sometimes she felt like his mother, trying to caution Horatio to protect his interests, but he'd just laugh, pat her on the head, and tell her she worried too much. If she pressed an issue, Horatio would pull her to bed and make her forget what had ever bothered her to begin with.

Maddening at times? Sure. But fun? It certainly was. It made the responsibilities that weighed heavily on her shoulders each day seem less of a burden and more a badge of honor. Especially when the other yoga students at the studio gazed her way, envy in their eyes, when Horatio wrapped his arms around Paige and insisted his students defer to her for all their scheduling needs. "In time, my goddess, in time," Horatio would say, soothing her worries away.

Finally finding her key, she unlocked the door and pushed it open, hanging her tote on a hook by the door. The front door opened directly into a small main living area, with a tiny but efficient kitchen done in white on white, tucked to the side. Two doors led from opposite sides of the main living area, each leading to generous sized bedrooms with attached baths. One of the rooms they'd converted into an office and Paige poked her head in there first. A sigh escaped her as she surveyed the mess of papers that had been dropped onto her desk while Horatio's remained immaculate except for his sleek little computer, a bowl of crystals, and a large framed photo of himself in warrior pose. Turning, Paige left the room and opened the door to their shared bedroom.

"Oh my god!" Paige gasped, her hand to her mouth, as she took in the tangle of limbs and...so much nakedness... on her bed. *Their* bed.

"Paige, my goddess, you're home," Horatio smiled to her from where he leaned against the cushioned headboard, one *she'd* picked out, and sliced a sliver of an apple with his ritual knife. He handed the slice of apple to one of the current teachers-in-training, Lily, who was curled at one side. On the other, Nadia, also an instructor in the same class, stretched languidly and smiled at Paige like she'd just inked the deal on a well-padded prenuptial agreement.

Everyone was naked.

"I *am* home. The...the door was locked..." Paige said, feeling stupid as they all stared at her like *she* was the intruder. Nobody made a move to get up or even exhibit

any type of chagrin. If anything, Lily looked annoyed at Paige for interrupting.

“It was? That’s odd,” Horatio mused, stretching his tanned limbs out – a spray tan, at that – and offered a slice of apple to Nadia.

“I locked it, Horatio.” Nadia batted her eyelashes up at Horatio while Paige tried to breathe through the murder fantasies currently playing out in her head.

“Now, Nadia, you know that’s unacceptable. Having an open-door policy is very important to me,” Horatio said, his voice stern, and turned to hand her piece of apple over to Lily instead. Pushing her lush lower lip out, Nadia picked at a wrinkle in the sheet.

“I thought it was for the best.”

“I’ll have to punish you, as you well know,” Horatio sighed, and laid his hand across her bum, spanking Nadia enough to make a small squeak emanate from her perfect doll-like mouth but not enough to leave a mark.

“Excuse me,” Paige said, drawing their attention back to her, “but what the hell is going on here?”

“What does it look like?” Lily giggled, winding a leg around Horatio’s and smiling up at Paige. It hurt to see them so casually wrapped around Horatio, but Paige couldn’t decide if it was because they were younger and bendier, or because Horatio was cheating on her, which probably said something about the current nature of her relationship.

Paige filed that thought away to examine more deeply on another day when she wasn’t confronted with a smorgasbord of boobs and butts on her favorite sateen sheets.

“Both of you...out!” Paige ordered, pointing to the

women, and it was a credit to her patience that she didn't grab for Horatio's ritual knife when they both looked to him for guidance instead of listening to Paige's command first.

"You look tense, my goddess. Why don't you join us?" Horatio asked.

"I'm sorry...what?" Paige stood there, mouth hanging open, feeling like she'd walked into a play that she didn't have the script for.

"Join us, please," Horatio said, his blue eyes crinkling at the corner as he smiled at her and patted the bed. "It will relax you."

"You can't be serious," Paige said, heart hammering in her chest, as her world tilted on its axis.

"Please, my goddess, join us. You'll feel wonderful after. I'm certain we can loosen that dark energy in your third chakra. I can feel it from here."

Paige's eyebrows almost hit her hairline.

"My chakras? You're concerned about my chakras right now?"

"Seriously, Paige, we've been meaning to talk to you about them anyway," Lily sniffed, and Paige zeroed in on her.

"I'm sorry...what?" Paige said, feeling like a parrot squawking the only phrase it knew.

"Your chakras. They've become a bit of a problem at the studio."

"It's bringing us all down," Nadia confirmed.

"I think I'm going to take a shower." Lily yawned and reached for a pink robe next to the bed. Paige's pink robe.

She'd saved for weeks for that robe and was pleased when she finally decided to splurge on herself.

"You and you," Paige said, finally jumping into action and grabbing each of the women's arms, "get out!" Pulling them unceremoniously from the bed, she bent and picked up discarded clothes, tossing them into the living room, and shoved the astounded girls from the bedroom before slamming the door in their faces.

"Hey! My iPhone's in there!" Nadia yelled.

Paige turned and locked the door.

"Not feeling like sharing? That's fine. You only had to say so, my goddess. No need to get rough with the girls." Horatio stretched before standing and turning toward the bathroom.

"Nope," Paige said, blocking his path and forcing him to step back until his butt hit the bed again. Looking up at her, he pinched his nose and sighed.

"Paige, I guess it's time I talk to you about this. It's something I should've brought up earlier..."

"*This* being the fact that you're cheating on me?" Paige crossed her arms over her chest and glared down at him. His golden hair was tucked into his usual man-bun and what she'd once thought was cute now looked like a good handle to grab and smash his face into something. Something hard, preferably.

"No, about your chakras... and your attitude. It's really bringing a cloud to the studio," Horatio said and to Paige's shock, he reached out and patted her arm. "I think you need to get some help. I've done what I can, but there's only so much you can work out during yoga. It might be best for you to find a counselor."

"I...what? You're saying this is *my* fault?" Paige's mouth gaped as she pointed from Horatio to the bed.

"There is no blame here," Horatio said, using his soothing yoga voice as though he was trying to calm an unruly dog.

"Yes, Horatio, there *is* blame here. On you, specifically, for cheating on me," Paige enunciated clearly, her body almost vibrating with anger.

"How can there be cheating? I don't cheat. I've always had an open-door policy," Horatio said, shrugging a shoulder and once more reaching out to run a hand down her arm. Paige pulled away from his touch, her mind scrambling as she tried to take in his words.

"Open-door policy to your teachings. To your classes. To your home for rituals or meditation sessions," Paige clarified.

"Yes, for that too."

"But not to your bedroom. *Our* bedroom."

"I never said that."

"Wait...are you telling me that all along..." Paige gulped a breath as her mind flashed back over the past two years. The other students eying her. The whispers. She'd always thought it was because they were envious of her relationship with Horatio. He was a charming man and he'd gathered admirers with ease. Paige had never begrudged any of his students for looking up to him.

"Paige, my goddess, you know I don't believe we're meant to be monogamous."

"I do?" Paige asked, incredulous. She most certainly did *not*.

"Of course. It's too restricting for our carnal nature.

We're meant to come together with others, to enjoy the beauty and union that can come from sharing in physical pleasure together. It's important to our chakras that we remain open and welcoming to all."

"I'm fairly certain our chakras can be healthy without my bed being a revolving door of partners."

"That's coming from a place of judgment, Paige. What did I say about that?"

"Judgment comes from fear," Paige said automatically and then clamped her mouth shut. How easily was this man leading her to his side in this argument? What a fool she'd been.

"Exactly. And we shouldn't judge others on their path. This is my path, Paige. I'm meant to share my love and my expertise with the world. It's what I'm here to do. Don't you see? That's why I'm so at peace with myself." Horatio smiled blissfully up at her, assuming Paige would understand.

"I suspect it's the multiple orgasms that have brought you calm, not some higher calling," Paige bit out.

Horatio recoiled as if slapped. "This is what I mean, Paige. Your attitude...well, it needs adjusting. I've tried, but I think it's best if you seek your help elsewhere. I've done all I can here."

"I'm sorry, what? You're...breaking up with *me*? Even though you are the cheater? And the liar?"

"I never cheated or lied. I've always been honest about having an open-door policy."

"A little clarification on what that meant might have been nice before I moved my entire world into yours!" Paige shouted, hands on her hips, fury raging through her.

No way was he going to deny her the righteous indignation she was due.

"I don't think I could have been any clearer. Open-door is pretty self-explanatory."

Paige's mouth fell open as she struggled for words. Had she been that blind? Was he in the right about this? Or was he just twisting it for his own benefit? Confusion raced through her as she stared down at him.

"You've a good soul, my goddess, but you need more help with clearing your chakras than I can give. It's time for you to move on. Your path will be lighter for it." Horatio nodded as though he was giving her a roadmap to happiness. He was so sold on his own guru status that he couldn't see he was being a condescending prick. Luckily, Paige wasn't so far gone that she couldn't.

"You're a fake," Paige said, and a storm cloud washed over Horatio's face. "*A fake*. A liar. A user. A manipulator. And you'll never get what you want, no matter how much you seek your path, Horatio. I've never seen dirtier chakras in my life."

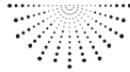
Not that Paige could see chakras, but she enjoyed the anger that roiled across Horatio's face.

"It's time for you to pack your things and go," Horatio said.

"Oh, trust me, I was on my way."

"Most of your stuff is packed for the retreat anyway. It shouldn't take long. I'm going for a swim in the meantime." Horatio stood, his tall lanky body hovering over hers before he bent to press a kiss to her head. "Be well, my goddess."

CHAPTER TWO



Frozen by what had just happened, Paige didn't even lash out as Horatio tried the door, annoyance flashing over his face when he found it locked. He turned the lock before he strolled out toward the pool. He would swim naked, Paige knew, and now she better understood why he got such a killer deal on this house from their female landlord.

His landlord. She wasn't even on the lease.

Paige railed at herself as she began to pace the room. What an absolute idiot she'd been. She'd let herself get swept away and now she had nothing. No job, no place to go, and no partner to help her. No family, either, for that matter. Which was maybe how she'd landed in this mess, but that was one particular wound she wasn't willing to open today.

"Breathe," Paige repeated to herself, over and over, like a mantra, as she collected her things and dumped them into duffle bags. One bag, already packed for their upcoming retreat to Poco Poco Island, held most of her

workout gear. There wasn't much else to add. For years now she'd been carefully saving her meager salary and living as a minimalist out of respect for both the environment and for the restraints of her budget. Now, looking at the two duffle bags and a hastily packed backpack, her stomach did a weird little dance. Was that all there was to her existence in this world?

"The office! Right," Paige said, refocusing on her breath before she did something stupid like taking Nadia's iPhone and smashing it against the wall. Reaching for her favorite sheets, which *she* had purchased, her hand paused as she took in the stains on the bed.

"Ew. Nope, nope, nope. Let them go, Paige." Though it killed her – those sheets had been procured from a sweet online sale at Neiman Marcus – Paige hauled her bags to the main room and stopped by the office to go through the stack of papers. Realizing she didn't need to take the work stuff with her, she paused for a moment and plopped into the chair, staring down at the itinerary for the upcoming three-week retreat on Poco Poco Island.

A tear dripped down her face and landed with a little plop on the glossy brochure that promised a retreat where one could get in touch with their inner yoga goddess. Since her inner goddess was currently contemplating ways to inflict excruciating pain in a slow, measured, and deliberate manner on Horatio, Paige didn't think the retreat was really up to the monumental task of sorting out the current mess of her life. Sighing, Paige buried her face in her hands and forced herself to breathe deeply for a moment before she committed several federal crimes and ended up in prison.

She was fairly certain that a jail cell would wreak havoc on her chakras.

Paige had met Horatio at a particularly vulnerable point in her life – when she'd found herself out of a job and with no family to rely upon – and she'd moved almost effortlessly into Horatio's life. Her own fault, really. Paige swiped the back of her hand across her cheek to stop another tear from dropping onto the brochure. While there had been a gazillion red flags, Paige had studiously ignored them as easily as she ignored the serving size recommendations on a bag of Doritos and had seamlessly moved her way from yoga student to girlfriend, homemaker, and business manager for Yoga Soulone. From day one, Horatio's needs had consumed her, and just like that, they were gone as fast as leaving an unattended bag in the subway.

Her eyes fell on the brochure again. Images of sunny skies, sandy beaches, and pretty striped umbrellas dotted the brochure that guaranteed a relaxing stay at Tranquila Inn on little Poco Poco Island in the Caribbean. Before she could second-guess herself, Paige picked up her phone.

"Tranquila Inn." A woman's voice, with a faint hint of a British accent, answered the phone.

"Yes, hello, this is Paige Lowry from Yoga Soulone in Santa Cruz. I'm calling about our upcoming retreat next week."

"Yes...about that..." the woman said, but Paige cut her off.

"I'm afraid we'll have to cancel the retreat."

"Oh really? Well, that's just silly." Paige pulled the phone back as laughter tinkled through the phone's

speaker. "But I suppose that's typical for the day I'm having."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Paige said, not sure what this woman was going on about.

"Yes, well, these things do happen," the woman agreed.

"I'm sorry...with whom am I speaking?"

"This is CeCe Alderidge, owner of this lovely establishment. And I'm having a bad day."

"Ah, well, that makes two of us," Paige said, pulling out desk drawers to see if she was missing anything to pack.

"Oh really? Do tell! I so love a good story," CeCe insisted.

Paige raised an eyebrow but decided to go for broke. "Well, you see, CeCe, I've been in a relationship with the owner of Yoga Soulonge for the last two years, and I run his business for him. I also live with him. Today I came home and found him in bed with two of our yoga trainees."

"Oh dear," CeCe sighed.

"Oh dear, indeed."

"And so now you are canceling the trip? I hope you don't let him take this away from you."

"I *am* canceling the trip. You see, CeCe, he told me my chakras were out of line, that we've always had an open relationship, unbeknownst to me, and then he broke up with me and asked me to pack and leave."

"Well, now, that's just plain churlish."

"Isn't it? I now have no place to live, no job, and no boyfriend. So, yes, it's been a bad day for me as well. What's your story?" Paige couldn't believe she was

unloading on this poor woman, but CeCe seemed genuinely interested.

“My events manager quit! Just up and quit, for no reason at all. With a high season full of retreats coming up. Can you imagine?”

“I can imagine that is quite stressful.”

“I’m in a right tizzy about it, I am.”

Paige heard ice cubes clinking in a glass in the background, as though someone was swirling their cocktail in the air.

“Well, I’m canceling the retreat for Yoga Soulone as they won’t have a coordinator to run it while on Poco Poco Island. That should ease some of your immediate stress.”

“Wait!” CeCe exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t see how it would work. I handle everything for Horatio. He’s going to realize that once I leave and this retreat will fall apart.”

“Forget Horatio. But, what a name, if I do say so myself. Anywho, darling, I’d love it if you’d come work for me.”

“Excuse me?” Paige said, pulling the phone away and then putting it back to her ear.

“Yes, yes, this is exactly what’s needed. You dropped into my lap at the most prolific of times.”

Paige wasn’t sure “prolific” was the correct word, but she didn’t have time to question CeCe as the woman rattled on.

“*You’re* a coordinator. I just lost a coordinator. You know yoga and all that...woo-woo stuff.”

“Woo-woo stuff?” Paige raised an eyebrow again. Oh, if only Horatio could hear this woman.

“Oh, please, my dear, don’t let me offend you. To each their own and all that. It’s how we make our money anyway. Say you’ll take it, please.”

“Take it...the job, that is? You’re offering me an events coordinator job at your hotel?”

“Well, we can’t really be called a hotel. Perhaps we are. A small hotel. A boutique hotel!” CeCe exclaimed. “And we’d love to have you come work for us. At least for the high season? See how it goes?”

“But...what about work visas? Residency? Can I just *do* that?”

“Of course, darling. Americans can come for six months at a time before they need residency,” CeCe said. “Wait, are you American? Where did you say you were from?”

“From the Yoga Soulone Studio in Santa Cruz, California.”

“Of course, lovely to meet you...”

“Paige.” Paige almost laughed.

“Paige! Perfect. Darling. *Please*. Help an anguished woman out? I’d be destitute without you.”

“Um...”

“Room and board are included, of course. We’re right on the water, with a lovely beach. I’m sure you’ve seen our brochure?”

Paige picked up the glossy brochure on the desk in front of her. Her tear had smudged the lettering on the front. Despite her current turmoil, the sandy beach with its striped umbrellas and colorful hammocks did look incredibly appealing. Or maybe it was because of her current

turmoil that it was even more appealing? Hard to say, really. Either way...

“You’ve got a deal, CeCe. When do you need me?”

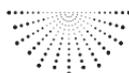
“Tomorrow?” CeCe asked and Paige shook her head and laughed.

“I’ll see about changing my ticket and email you with my details.”

“Perfect! Oh darling, what a serendipitous day it has been. Mariposa! Another martini please...”

Paige stared at the brochure as CeCe clicked off and wondered if she’d lost her damned mind or if, for once, things were actually working out in her favor.

CHAPTER THREE



Paige grabbed the seat in front of her as the plane lurched, dipping on the wind, her stomach dropping with it. She eyed the pilot, who mopped his face with a towel a few seats in front of her. Was he sick? Or was he just sweating this much because it was ungodly hot in this tin-can of an airplane currently hurtling toward a speck of an island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea? Tearing her eyes away from the pilot, she trained her gaze outside the window and focused on the propellers blurring as they moved. That didn't help either, Paige realized, as she eyed the screws holding the wheels of the plane on. It would just take one to pop off and the wheel would plummet to the crystalline water below them.

Gulping a breath, Paige hugged her purse on her lap and wondered again why she'd had to change her flights. Surely, another week couldn't have mattered that much, not when Tranquila Inn was hiring internationally? Instead, she'd rescheduled her flights. Because this was an

“off” day to get to Poco Poco Island, apparently, the travel agent had routed Paige through a sister island.

The travel agent had failed to mention she’d be offloaded from her air-conditioned jet to a six-seater prop plane, however. Grateful she’d decided to only bring her one duffle bag, for that was all the weight limit allowed on this small plane, Paige had tucked into her miniscule seat and closed her eyes for takeoff. Even she was surprised when the whirring of the engine threatened to send her to sleep, but that was more likely due to the last two nights of minimal rest. Paige had crashed at her friend Jane’s house, who’d kindly offered up her couch for sleeping. With three kids under the age of five, there wasn’t much that could be done about noise or sleep, but Paige had been grateful to have a place to stay anyway. Jane had been kind enough to stash the rest of Paige’s stuff in their shed out back, and with a quick goodbye, Paige had been off on her adventure.

Another dip in the plane ensured she’d not actually be able to fall asleep – what with the threat of an immediate and painful death and all – and instead Paige worked on her yoga breathing to calm herself.

“Not long now,” the man in the seat across from her said, the music of the islands in his voice. “It’s only a short flight.”

“Thanks,” Paige said, biting her lips together.

“Are you on vacation?”

“No, I’m headed to Poco Poco Island to work, actually,” Paige smiled.

“Ah, that’s nice. It’s a small island. I’m certain we’ll see you around. Where will you be working?”

“At Tranquila Inn.”

The man's eyes widened in his face and he slapped his thigh, letting out a loud laugh, before he nudged the man next to him and spoke quietly to him. His seat partner craned his neck to look at Paige, before shaking his head and murmuring unintelligibly.

“Is that a bad thing?” Paige piped up, eager for more information, grabbing the seat in front of her again as the plane took a particularly large dip.

“I'm sure you'll be fine. There, see? We'll be arriving now.” The man pointed out the front window and Paige was distracted by the small landing strip that seemed to be coming at them way too fast. Closing her eyes, she held her breath until they bumped across the tarmac, skidding to a stop much too haphazardly for Paige.

“All right, everyone!” the pilot boomed, startling Paige and the other three people on the flight. “Welcome to Poco Poco Island! If you live here, welcome home. If you're visiting, we hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Not if you're working for Tranquila,” the man next to her said, and everyone on the plane broke into laughter.

“Wait...what does that mean? What am I getting into?” Paige asked, but by then the pilot had opened the door and put a little stool on the tarmac for people to step down. She was the last off, and by the time she waited for the pilot to hand her the duffle bag he'd stored in the back, the other passengers were gone.

“Sir, is there something wrong with Tranquila Inn?” Paige asked the pilot, who had shaded glasses covering his eyes.

“Not at 'tall, miss. Don't let 'em get to you.” With that,

he disappeared to fill out a clipboard and motioned to a few people who waited on the tarmac, their luggage at their feet. It appeared the pilot and his plane would load up, turn around and go back to the other island – like a taxi – and she wondered how often people bounced around the islands that way.

Wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, Paige pulled her sunglasses from her purse and walked across the boiling hot tarmac toward the customs sign, regretting her choice of jeans. She'd already tied her cardigan around her waist, but there wasn't much else she could do but sweat and wait to get to her new home so she could change out of her long pants. It wasn't worth digging through her pack in the airport bathroom just to feel marginally cooler.

Breezing through customs, as she was the only one in line and the agent wasn't interested in making conversation, Paige walked to the front of the small airport and into the carpark. There, she shaded her eyes and looked around for a woman who would resemble one Ms. CeCe Alderidge. Not that she had any clue what this woman looked like, but she'd painted a picture of a free-wheeling older woman draped in a colorful sarong, or perhaps a wide-brimmed hat.

She never did respond to your email.

That thought had worked its way through Paige's mind more than once on the trip down, but she'd taken it with a grain of salt. Clearly the woman was overwhelmed, and likely managing everything on her own. She'd been very adamant about offering Paige a job and Paige had every faith she'd make good on it. Or was that Horatio's voice in

her head? She'd been second-guessing everything he'd taught her over the past couple of years, and one of them was that they were supposed to innately trust the good in people. But how could she trust the good in people when the person teaching her that lesson had lied? Well, in his version of events it wasn't lying, but Paige was not ready to entertain that version even in the slightest.

It pleased her to no end that he'd already started calling, and leaving voicemails with questions about the business. Actually, *only* with questions about the business. She'd ignored every call, and in doing so, slowly took her power back. It would be baby steps for a while since she still felt shaky, but there was nothing like a new adventure to force her to keep moving forward.

Looking around and seeing nobody in particular who looked to be waiting for the occupants of this flight, Paige moved into the shade and cursed her choice of jeans once more. Dropping her pack at her feet, Paige pulled the hair tie from her wrist and bundled her mass of dark hair in a ragged knot on top of her head. Immediate relief greeted her as the breeze tickled the back of her neck, and she leaned against the wall to take in her surroundings.

"Taxi?" A man called to her from where he sat playing dominos at a rickety table on the sidewalk with another man.

"Um, maybe. I thought someone was supposed to pick me up, but now I'm not so sure."

"You let me know."

"Okay," Paige said, sliding her phone from her purse and turning it on. While it searched for data, Paige went back to observing where she'd landed. The parking lot of

the airport was small, maybe fitting thirty cars at best, and a ragged road brimming with potholes ran parallel to the airport outside the car park. Across the street was a small food truck, a pebble beach, and the bluest water Paige had ever seen. She immediately wanted to take off her clothes and dive in. The vibrating of her phone in her hand pulled her attention back from the water, and she looked down to see a few emails and text messages show up.

None of which were from Tranquila Inn.

“Sir?” Paige called, picking up her bag and striding to where the men continued their fierce game of dominos.

“You do need a taxi.”

“I do.”

“Where you headed?”

“I’m going to Tranquila Inn.”

“Oh, I can’t help you then.” The men’s eyes met over the domino board.

“What? Why?”

“Can’t do it.”

“Why not? You just asked if I needed one. Please...I don’t have any other option.”

“How you payin’?” The man, clad in jeans and a button-down, with not a drop of sweat on his face, leaned back to look at her.

“I can pay.”

“Did they say they’d pay?”

“Who? The inn?”

“Yes.”

“No, they didn’t. I will pay. I have cash.”

“Let me see it.”

“That’s...no, I’m not letting you see my cash. That’s

not a smart thing for a woman traveling alone to do," Paige huffed.

"She's right," the other man pointed out.

"Fine, fine. I'll take you. But you give me the cash before you get out or I will drive you right back here."

"Ohhh...kay..." Paige drew that word out. "How much?"

"Thirty."

"Is that the local price or the tourist price?"

"That's your price." The man looked her up and down.

"Listen, I don't have a lot of money and now I have no clue what's going on with my job at Tranquila Inn and I'd really like it if you were fair with me."

"Oh, you're working there? Hmm, okay, I'll do it for twenty. Mainly because you're going to need the money. Unless you talk to Jack. Make sure you talk to Jack. He's good for it."

"Who's Jack?" Paige asked, following the man as he grabbed her duffle bag and put it in the back of a truck before ushering her inside.

"You don't know Jack? You'll need to be knowing him if you plan to get by at Tranquila."

"Why's that?"

"You'll see." The driver shrugged and turned his reggae music up, bursting out of the parking lot at a speed that had Paige's pulse rocketing. Looking around for a seatbelt and seeing none, she clutched her purse on her lap and prayed, for the second time that day, that her death wouldn't be imminent. Since conversation seemed to be out, Paige gazed out the window and did her best to take in her new home.

The road they zipped along hugged the water until they got closer to town, where the brightly colored buildings clamored over each other for precious waterfront space. Shops painted in bright gold, brilliant blue, and hot pink were tucked next to restaurants and hotels, and for a small island there seemed to be a fairly vibrant downtown. All five blocks of it, Paige realized, as they cruised through the main drag and back to the winding road in a matter of seconds. That might take some adjustment, she realized, as she saw not a single sign for a Starbucks or a Jamba Juice anywhere to be found. Hotels lined the water on this side of the little town, and Paige eagerly read each sign as they passed, wondering which one was Tranquila Inn. Only when the hotels faded away, as did any other buildings, did Paige begin to wonder if the taxi driver was taking her for a ride.

“Sir? Is it not in that row of hotels?” Paige pitched her voice above the music, and the driver turned and just shook his head at her before continuing to drum the beat of the throbbing music on his steering wheel. Ten minutes later, as they wound along the island, the taxi driver took a sudden left and bumped the taxi down a road overgrown with bushes that slapped against the sides of the van. Paige’s eyebrows rose as her stomach did a weird little flip. Was this where he was taking her to kill her? Only when they turned a blind corner and rolled to a stop in front of a large thatched reception hall with a hand-carved sign proclaiming “Tranquila Inn” did Paige let out the breath she’d been holding.

“Let me see the money.” The taxi driver turned and looked at her.

“Oh, right.” Paige dug in her purse and pulled out a twenty, as well as a few bills for a tip, and a smile spread on the man’s face.

“A tip? That’s not common here. I like Americans.”

“Oh, well, thank you.” Paige made a mental note to learn the customs, though she doubted she’d get out of the habit of tipping anytime soon.

Without another word, the driver deposited her bag in front of the taxi, all but hauled Paige out, and tore away before she could rethink her decision. She took a moment to breathe, trying to let her chakras open or whatever Horatio seemed to think she needed, and surveyed her most recent life decision.

Tranquila Inn was comprised of a cluster of thatched cottages that spread out toward the sea, with the main reception area smack dab in the middle. With a high roof, an open-air design, and a scattering of wicker chairs with tropical patterned cushions, the reception hall was breezy and welcoming. Tranquila Inn seemed to live up to its name. Surrounded by green on three sides – the bush that the taxi driver had torn his way through – and the blue of the ocean out front, Paige could now understand why it was set further away from town. It was meant to be an oasis of sorts, she surmised, and picking up her bag, went to find the reception desk.

“Who are you?” A voice like a whiskey-soaked razor blade rasped at her from a cove of bushes by the entrance. Paige shrieked and dropped her bag, holding her hand to her heart as a man, who had previously been crouching, stood to study her.

“Oh my,” Paige breathed, looking him up and down.

He was easily over six feet, wearing a baseball hat, sunglasses, and no shirt. Paige had to gulp at the tanned muscles that rippled across his chest. For a moment, her brain slid sideways into a decidedly naughty image of a very sweaty and very sexy island romance, before she caught his scent on the wind from the ocean. Deodorant was obviously not something he believed in. Or cleanliness, for that matter, judging from the dirt and sweat that streaked across those lamentably stunning pecs. Sighing, Paige pushed her fantasies aside and smiled at him.

“Hi, I’m Paige Lowry. I’m looking for reception?”

“We’re not open yet.”

“Um, aren’t you a hotel? As in you’re always open?”

“Not until the first group of the season arrives.” The man turned as though to leave her, and Paige surprised herself by reaching out to grab his arm — a very muscular arm which Paige barely resisted squeezing. She dropped her hand.

“Wait. I’m not a guest. I work here. Can you direct me to the owner?” Paige assumed he must be a maintenance worker or the gardener, judging from his appearance.

“You work here.” It was said in the same tone as someone who’d just found a hair in their food.

“I...I do, yes,” Paige said, straightening as he took a long slow look. At five feet three and a quarter inches tall, Paige could credit yoga for keeping her muscular, but there wasn’t much she could do about her ample hips or generous bosom. Sometimes her curves got in the way during yoga, not like the much bendier Lily or Nadia—the two women she’d found in her bed not forty-eight hours ago. Sweat dripped down her back, her front – hell, even

beneath her boobs – but she held the gardener's eyes – well...his sunglasses – until he looked away.

And cursed.

“And what is it you'll be doing here?” the gardener asked, pulling gloves from his hands and slapping them once before depositing them into the back pocket of his shorts.

“I...well, CeCe hired me to be the new coordinator. She said you'd recently lost one?”

“We didn't lose her. She knew how to find her way out.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she wasn't lost. We told her to go. And it wasn't much of a loss considering she damn well couldn't even manage a spreadsheet.”

“Oh. Um.” Paige wasn't sure what to say to that. All she knew was that she wanted a shower and a change of clothes, like, yesterday.

“When did you speak with CeCe?” the man said, sighing.

“I'm sorry... who are you?” Paige finally said, trying to gain the upper hand on the conversation.

“The name's Jack. And you?”

“I'm Paige. I just told you that. Is my name that forgettable?” She clamped her lips together when she realized she'd said that last part out loud. A hint of a smile ghosted across Jack's face, and he shook his head once.

“Not at all. Okay, Paige. Welcome to our particular brand of crazy. Let's get you settled.”

“What does that mean? Are you the Jack the folks at the airport said to find?”

“That’s me, much to my annoyance,” Jack said, hefting her duffle bag like it weighed nothing. He strode through the empty reception area, following a gravel path that wound its way to a collection of smaller thatched huts.

“Wait, where are we going? Where’s CeCe?”

“I’m taking you to your room. I assume you’ll be wanting to change since you’re sweating harder than a whore in church, and then I’ll be taking you to Ms. CeCe.”

“Oh because you’re fresh as a daisy?” Whoops, Paige thought as Jack paused and leveled a look at her. Paige pasted a bright smile on her face and he swore softly under his breath and shook his head.

So much for making a good first impression, Paige thought. But she wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t like this man was all well-appointed himself.

“Let’s go.”

“Thanks, I guess?” Paige said, not sure she was particularly welcome, and made a note that Jack should definitely not greet any of the incoming guests if this was his attitude.

“Here you are. Key’s in the door. There’s a safe in the closet for valuables and your passport. Please try to only run the air conditioning at night. Not like it even works most of the time. There’s no hot water.”

“No hot water?” Paige stopped at the door to the little hut. Painted a bright white, with a palm thatched roof and bright blue shutters on the windows, it seemed simple, happy, and like it would catch the ocean breezes...if she ever opened her windows to this heat.

“You need hot water in this humidity?” Jack gestured with one hand.

"No, I suppose not."

"I'll wait."

"But...I wanted to take a shower."

"Take a shower after. I don't have time to babysit you right now."

"Gee, thanks," Paige bit out and moved into the hut. It had one small room, with a tiny bathroom attached. There was a double bed, a dresser, a small television, a fan, and an air-con unit on the wall. The room was sparse, with little in the way of frills, but frankly, Paige was simply happy to have her own space. Dumping her duffle on the bed, she dug out an airy dress in crimson and changed quickly, cringing at the dampness of her bra. Opting to change that as well, Paige ran a stick of deodorant under her arms and adjusted her hair. Grabbing the key, she locked the door behind her and met Jack where he lounged against a palm tree.

"Pull the shades next time."

"Excuse me?" Paige said, heat lashing her cheeks. "Did you just watch me change?"

"I looked away. Others might not."

"What others? You said you were closed."

"Fine, keep 'em open. I enjoy a peep show on occasion." Jack shrugged and turned, Paige stumbling after him to keep up on the path that curved between the palm trees and around the back side of the reception hall.

"Is there a reason you're being rude to me?" Paige asked, feeling bold.

"You're about to find out," Jack murmured.

"Great, lovely, so happy to be here. You know, as your

new coordinator, I hope this isn't how you greet all your guests."

Jack said nothing as they turned to what looked to be a bar and hangout area. Little tables clustered around a curved bamboo bar where a luscious knockout of a bartender stared daggers, and a couple, dressed for yachting, turned to look at them.

"Well, Jack, who's this? Do you have a new friend?"

The woman was likely to be in her late forties, but it was hard to tell as she may have had some discreet work done. She gave Paige the once-over. This must be CeCe, Paige thought. Dressed in fitted white skinny jeans, a wrap-style fuchsia silk blouse, with a chunky gold braided necklace at her throat, CeCe looked rich, crisply beautiful, and three sheets to the wind. She stumbled a little as she stood from her chair, and the man next to her, handsome in a private school sort of way, grabbed CeCe's arm to steady her.

"I'm Paige Lowry," Paige said, smiling at her.

"That's nice, darling. CeCe Alderidge. And this handsome chap of a man is Whitaker Alderidge, though we call him Whit. Won't you join us for happy hour?"

"I...I'm not sure?" Paige looked from Jack, who said nothing, back to CeCe.

"Don't you drink, darling? Why, everyone has to drink on an island. You can't have happy hour sunsets with none of the happy, no?"

"I'm Paige. Your new employee. You hired me to be your new coordinator?" Paige supplied before CeCe could commandeer a drink for her. She wasn't sure that drinking on her new job would go over all that well. Silence fell on

the group as they all turned to look at CeCe and then back to Paige. Confusion crossed CeCe's face, before a wide smile broke out.

“Did I now? Fancy that!” CeCe threw her head back and rocked with laughter, almost falling over before steadying herself on the bar. “Well, in that case, you're definitely entitled to a drink.”

Goddess help her, she needed one, Paige decided as she watched Jack slink away, shaking his head. Just what had she gotten herself into?

AFTERWORD

I had so much fun writing this book. I know that a lot of readers love my series, but once in a while I love to write stand-alone books because I have a story in my head that won't leave. This is one of those books. It really has been such a tough year globally, and I find myself gravitating toward light stories that help me escape to other worlds. I hope that this book provided you with an escape and that you were able to steal a few moments of calm as you enjoyed island life with Paige and Jack. And...just remember to take life poco poco when the going gets tough. Slow it down, take a deep breath, and try living life on island time for a little bit. You'd be surprised how much fades away when you do and you'll find that the things that matter get done and the things that don't? Well, they never much mattered at all. Sparkle on! -Tricia

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