

POST CARD



Santiago Sol
NIKI TURNER

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

Thank you to my family, who has endured multiple burned suppers; my dear friend Kristine, without whom I would never have had the opportunity to visit the wonderful nation of Chile; and to all my Inkies at Inkwell Inspirations who have stuck with me on this journey.

Praise for Niki Turner's Writing

With wonderfully descriptive phrases, well-drawn characters, and a page-turning plot, Niki Turner's *Santiago Sol* carried me to Santiago, Chile and, at the end, just a little sad that I had to return home. ~ Marian P. Merritt, author of *Deep Freeze Christmas*

I love to take a trip to somewhere new and exciting, and Niki Turner's *Santiago Sol* proved just the ticket. Prepare to enjoy the sights and sounds of this exotic locale along with plenty of action, intrigue, and romance. Throughout it all, the author weaves God's divine touch in a gentle way that will uplift both your heart and your spirit. ~ Dina Sleiman, multi-published author

Santiago Sol piqued my interest on page one and held it to the very end. All good short romance has strong characters and a satisfying love story, but Niki Turner's use of intrigue, unique circumstances, and well-written description gave this one something extra. Hop a plane with Tansy and be carried away by Chilean charm. You don't want to miss this adventure! ~ Paula Moldenhauer, author

1

Tansy Chastain cradled the elderly woman's frail hand in her own and waited for the raspy cough to subside. The skin under Tansy's fingertips was as thin and fragile as the pages of a well-loved Bible, a painful reminder that her friend's body was wearing out cell by cell. When the woman's breathing eased again, Tansy reached for the button to call a hospice volunteer, but the sudden strength in Eva's grasp stopped her.

"What is it, Eva?" Tansy met the woman's eyes, faded to the color of dust.

"There's a trunk in the attic. The key is taped to the inside of my jewelry box, under the lining."

Tansy pursed her lips, more concerned about Eva than the long-forgotten object the woman had rambled about all morning. It wasn't like Eva to be distracted during their interviews. She would talk, tell stories, and point out details she wanted to make sure Tansy included in her memoir, but she never rambled.

Tansy's assignment—writing former missionary Eva St. John's life story—had become a labor of love, and she cherished the hours they'd spent together. That the woman who had become both friend and spiritual mentor was now declining in health with such speed brought the sting of tears to Tansy's eyes. She blinked them back. "I can pack it up and ship it for you."

“No. It has to be delivered—” Eva started to cough again.

Tansy reached for a tumbler of water on the bedside table and held the straw to Eva’s lips until she was able to take a sip.

“It must be delivered to the patriarch of the Sandoval family.” The old woman squinted at Tansy. “No one else can know you have it. No one.”

“But Miss Eva, if it’s a family heirloom, surely anyone in the family would be happy to receive it back into their care.”

“It’s more than an heirloom.” Breath rattled out of the woman’s lungs. “It’s stolen property. I wouldn’t ask this of you, dear Tansy, and I understand if you feel you have to refuse, but I’m hoping you won’t. There is no one else to whom I can turn.”

Tansy inhaled. Underlying the sweet scent of the potpourri placed in every room at the hospice was the sharp antiseptic tang of professional medical care, a reminder that Eva’s time on earth was coming to a close.

The recent transfer to the hospice was surely to blame for the old woman’s anxiety. She had never seemed so insistent. Tansy stroked the old woman’s arm until Eva relaxed again.

Eva’s withered eyelids flickered shut, then opened again. “If it ends up in the wrong hands my family’s sacrifices will have been in vain, and you and those who should rightfully have it will be in terrible danger.”

Tansy grimaced. Traveling halfway around the world to return stolen property to a complete stranger was several thousand degrees outside her comfort zone. She rarely left town, much less hopped flights to

the southern hemisphere to plunge headlong into a decades-old family battleground. "I'll do it." Her heart started to pound as soon as the words left her lips.

The taut lines around Eva's mouth softened. "You are an answer to prayer, Tansy Chastain."

Tansy brushed the words aside. Answer to prayer or not, she would do this thing because she loved the old woman too much to disappoint her.

"Now help me sit up so I can see you properly," Eva said.

Tansy complied, lifting Eva's fragile form and propping her up with pillows placed behind her back and shoulders. When the woman was settled, Tansy leaned back in the hard plastic chair and picked up her notebook.

Eva nodded with apparent satisfaction.

"I took the liberty of having my attorney make the travel arrangements," she said. "There's a packet on my desk at the house with your plane tickets, traveler's checks, names, addresses, everything I could arrange from here."

"Is this why you kept asking me about my passport?"

A smile deepened Eva's wrinkles and exposed teeth that were still healthy and intact, if dulled by age. "I prayed you would be willing to take this on. And I'm praying that your journey will be safe and successful." Her lips thinned. "As long as you follow my instructions you should be fine. Remember, Tansy, the walking stick cannot be given to anyone except the Sandoval patriarch, and no one can know that you have it."

Tansy forced a smile and jotted down the last of the instructions. "My passport is blank, you know. I

don't even know why I applied for the thing."

Eva gave her a long, steady look before she replied. "For such a time as this, Tansy, dear."

Sebastian stared at the sparse, dying grass that covered his mother's untended grave. He was four years too late. He scuffed the toe of his Italian loafer against a crispy brown weed and re-read the name carved into the plain granite marker. "Darcy St. John Sandoval." No dates. No inscriptions declaring her a beloved daughter, wife, or mother. Sweat trickled down his spine in the oppressive Florida humidity. He slid trendy sunglasses over his eyes, his mind congested with unanswered questions. What would drive a woman to desert her only child, steal a precious heirloom from her late husband's family, and end up in a pauper's grave?

Sebastian made the sign of the cross before he turned away from the grave and pulled his keys from his pocket. Tiny hurricanes of dead leaves swirled around his feet as he walked back toward his rental car. He got behind the steering wheel and jabbed the key into the ignition. He could try to talk to his *abuelo* again. He grunted. Who was he kidding? Eduardo Sandoval would never relinquish the family's holdings to the grandson whose mother had committed an unforgivable crime, dishonoring generations of Sandoval tradition.

Sebastian slammed the black sedan into gear and pulled away from the curb. Fingers of gray-green Spanish moss brushed the sedan's roof in a silent farewell.

Tansy pulled into the driveway of Eva's Victorian house later that afternoon with her suitcase already tucked in the back of her ancient car. Inside the empty house, she added the packet of papers into her ratty canvas messenger bag and then headed for Eva's bedroom. The jewelry box was empty. Tansy ran her fingers around the interior until she felt the hard ridges of a key. Her brows rose. She'd half expected this to be a wild goose chase. She peeled back the emerald satin lining and removed the key from its hiding place, then climbed the stairs to collect the mysterious stolen object from the antique camelback trunk in the far corner of the attic.

Tansy dropped her bag and stuck the key in the lock. The key turned easily, and she felt the lock open, but when she tried to lift the lid, it wouldn't budge.

She trotted back downstairs to retrieve a crowbar. After fifteen minutes of wrangling, and with the back of her neck sticky with sweat, the lid yielded. Nestled in a frothy bed of pale pink tulle was a knobby black walking stick, its silver handle molded in the shape of a fox. The fox's bushy tail wrapped around the top of the stick. Tansy lifted the object and balanced it across her palms, noting its surprising weight.

If Eva's perceptions were true, the innocuous item had cost Eva her husband, and years later, her daughter. The possessor of the walking stick held great power in the Sandoval family, including the right to control the family's massive fortune. For Eva's family, the walking stick had brought nothing but grief and sorrow. In the wrong hands, she'd warned repeatedly,

it would bring danger to Tansy as well.

A door banged shut downstairs. Tansy jumped, clutching the walking stick against her body. Since Eva's relocation to hospice the household staff had been laid off. No one should be in the house.

Tansy held her breath, listening. Another thump followed by muttered curses jolted her nerves. Then the screen door slammed shut with a squeak and bang. Tansy crept toward the solitary window at the end of the attic and peered out.

An unfamiliar vehicle was parked next to her car in the narrow driveway. Two men came into view just below the attic window and Tansy pressed her forehead against the glass. They shook their fists and pointed fingers at each other in an apparent argument. Both had black hair and were dressed in dark overcoats. The heavier one opened the driver's door and motioned to the taller, leaner man, who turned toward the house and looked up. Tansy jerked back from the window, then leaned forward again. He was a handsome man, except for the venomous expression that marred his features.

When the pair drove away, she pulled the pink tulle out of the trunk, realizing as she did that it was a vintage party dress, something from the 1950s or '60s, perhaps. She shrouded the walking stick in the fluffy skirt and jogged back downstairs and out to her car, where she popped the trunk, shoved the stick and the dress into her large suitcase, and slammed suitcase and trunk shut.

Adrenaline coursed through her arms and legs as she drove to the airport, glancing frequently in the rearview mirror for a black sedan or any sign she was being followed. She parked in the long-term parking

lot and hoisted the suitcase out of the trunk, then stopped.

The terminal, with its strange tent-like peaks, an artistic impression of the Rockies, loomed ahead.

Tansy's stomach lurched. She hated to fly, and the series of flights from Denver to Santiago was a doozy, even for a seasoned traveler. The first leg of her trip would take her from Denver to Miami. From Miami, she would catch a connecting overnight flight to Santiago. She was looking at somewhere between fourteen and eighteen hours in the air, depending on the blessing, or curse, of the jet stream.

2

Tansy stumbled twice as she headed down the Jetway onto the plane that would carry her to Santiago. The blustery flight between Denver and Miami had strained her nerves. On arrival in Miami, a harried airline employee had explained that the flight was overbooked, but for a hefty fee she could upgrade to business class. Or wait for the next flight—the following day. Tansy grimaced and counted out a wad of traveler’s checks. The attendant smiled, assured her she’d be much more comfortable in business class, and handed her a new seat assignment.

She was the last passenger to board. She hefted her carry-on into the overhead bin and sat down to buckle her seatbelt as the flight attendant moved down the aisle, checking the latches. Tansy leaned over to shove her messenger bag under the row in front of her, then sat up and surveyed her sleeping seatmate with a sidelong glance.

He was cocooned in a blanket that was pulled up almost to his nose. His eyes were hidden under a sleep mask, and she could see a bright yellow earplug poking out of one ear.

At the front of the cabin, two flight attendants began to review the plane’s emergency instructions, including directions for using the seat cushion as a flotation device in case of a water landing.

Tansy felt a sudden, and vicious, twinge of envy

for her neighbor's sweet slumber.

She pressed her head against the seat and practiced slow deep breathing in an attempt to settle her nerves. The takeoff had been smooth, and she had a lovely view of the setting sun through the window over her sleeping neighbor's reclined seat as the plane carried them out over the Gulf of Mexico, but she couldn't relax.

It was a relief when one of the flight attendants announced the dinner service. Tansy needed a distraction. She dropped her tray table and waited. When her food arrived, she arranged and rearranged the flatware, aware that her appetite had disappeared.

Her seatmate grumbled and turned his head. It was the first time he'd so much as flinched, and she turned to look at him. The sleep mask had slipped off, and the blanket had fallen to his chest.

She took in the tousled dark hair, thick black lashes, and generous lips. His firm chin and jaw were coated with dense black stubble. She didn't think he was much older than she was, but he had the look of wealth and power. He wore a dark suit over a crisp white woven shirt. He'd loosened the knot of a silky platinum-gray tie and undone the top button of his shirt. This was not a man dressed for leisure travel. Was he going home to a wife and children in Chile, or leaving a family behind in the U.S. while he traveled for work?

Tansy's fingers drummed against the tray, her imagination running free. Work on Eva's memoir had taken up time she would otherwise have devoted to

fiction, either reading or writing. Not that she'd minded the labor. Helping Eva was a worthy task, and Tansy was grateful both for the work itself and for the time she had been able to spend with Eva St. John.

"Are you going to eat that?"

The growl startled her, and she jerked out of her reverie. Her neighbor's eyes were open. The silvery-gray irises were almost the same color as Eva's mercury glass collection.

"I'm not very hungry. You're welcome to it," she said. She hadn't touched the smoked salmon, roasted zucchini, and stewed artichokes offered as an appetizer.

"Thank you." He flipped down his own tray with practiced ease, and slid her plate across. He ate like a polite linebacker. He chewed with his mouth closed and used his napkin, but he was focused on the food.

The flight attendant paused at their row, looking concerned. "I'm sorry, sir, you were sleeping when I came by earlier. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water, *por favor*," he replied, smiling at the woman. Tansy twitched. He was a handsome man asleep, stunning when his eyes were open, and downright gorgeous when he smiled. She swallowed and bent to drag a fat paperback novel from her bag. She couldn't, however, concentrate on the words.

It was going to be a long flight.

He polished off the salmon, dabbed at his mouth with the linen napkin, and took a long pull from the bottle of water the flight attendant had delivered.

"So what takes you to Chile?"

Tansy's mind tumbled. She thought of the walking stick stowed in the baggage compartment and her bizarre mission to return stolen property to a well-to-

do Chilean family on behalf of an ailing old woman.

Nope. Not sharing any of that with her attractive seatmate. Even if Eva hadn't forbade her to tell anyone. "I'm a writer. I'm gathering research material for a book," she said. It was mostly true.

One dark brow winged upward. "What's it about?" Either he was interested, or bored.

Tansy decided she didn't care. Talking kept her mind off flying. "It's the memoir of a woman who lived in Chile during the 1960s. She lost her husband during Pinochet's military coup in 1973."

"A black mark on the soul of my nation," he said, shaking his head. He speared a bite of artichoke.

"After she returned to the United States, she campaigned to reconnect families separated by war and violence. She traveled to Cuba, Cambodia, Vietnam, Haiti..." Tansy waved her hand. "She's an amazing woman." There was no need to tell this man Eva's daughter had stolen a family heirloom, and Tansy was supposed to return it.

"And will you visit all those other nations for your research as well?"

"Definitely not." Just the idea made Tansy a little queasy. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

"So you've never been to Chile before?"

"This is my first time out of the United States." Tansy knew she was breaking some traveler's code of wisdom, but his demeanor was soothing, and he was a much better distraction than the appetizer.

"Are you taking a tour?"

"No." Tansy hesitated. Thanks to Eva's attorney, she had the address of an *aparthotel* and some possible contacts for the Sandovals. Other than that, she wasn't

even sure how to get through customs. She brushed hair from her face to hide her shaking fingers and announced in what she hoped was a breezy, confident tone, "I'm just going to 'wing it,' as they say."

Sebastian's mouth tightened. He'd seen her hands shake, noticed the way she tensed every time the plane shuddered or groaned or bumped through turbulence. It was part of the reason he'd engaged her in conversation. In his experience, distracting the poor souls he encountered who were afraid of flying was often the only way to ease their constant tension. Now he wondered if her trip would end in a greater disaster. For the most part, Chile was a safe nation in terms of violent crime, but he doubted this young woman would make it from the baggage carousel to a taxi with all her belongings intact.

"¿Hablas español?"

She faced him, and he acknowledged with surprise the sudden, low hum of attraction. He'd already appreciated the swing of her hair—a rich, buttery shade of caramel with golden highlights—and the delicate shape of her profile, but he hadn't paid much attention otherwise. Sebastian had dated Brazilian models, Argentinian heiresses, and a few Mexican television stars, but he'd never been drawn to any American women, due, he surmised, to a lifetime of negative references to his American-born mother.

This woman was pretty in a quiet sort of way. Not the sultry beauty he was usually attracted to. The wide eyes she turned on him were a bright, quirky hazel, the kind that reflected everything from her feelings to her

fashion choices. They were set in a pixie face with small features and smooth, pale skin. Her cheeks were flushed—because she was nervous, or too warm, he didn't know—but the effect ratcheted the hum into a buzz at the base of his skull.

"I don't," she replied. "I took two years in high school, but it didn't stick with me. I think you have to be around a language all the time to really become fluent in it."

He had to blink twice to remember what he'd asked her.

"I'm sure it will be all right. America tends to be the only country where its populace speaks one language," she continued.

The flight attendant returned, this time to present options for the main course.

Sebastian chose the beef, with a glass of Chilean Merlot. He'd been raised on a vineyard. Not having wine with dinner was tantamount to blasphemy.

She selected the beef entrée and a soda, and when the flight attendant moved down the aisle she faced him and grinned. "You're a miracle worker! I think I've found my appetite. I hate to fly, and you distracted me. Thank you."

"*De nada*. You've made an otherwise boring flight more enjoyable."

The flush on her cheeks deepened to a dark rose, and she fiddled with her napkin. "What about you? Are you headed home?"

Home. The word slammed into his gut like a cannonball. His quest had been an abject failure. Of his grandfather's two qualifications for claiming his inheritance, Sebastian was stymied on both counts. The walking stick was still missing, and Sebastian was still