

ALL THE BROKEN GIRLS by Linda Bond

EXCERPT

I'm running fifteen minutes late after driving my Abuela Bonita to her doctor's appointment. But that's not bad, actually, for Cuban time. Of course my statement high heels click on the uncarpeted floor like my abuela's disapproving tongue and all I can think of is that silly commercial with the tagline "Wanna get away?" Except I can't escape. It's my first day back at the TV station after two weeks at home with no work and no pay. I'm still on probation, and I need this job like I need water and air.

Speaking of which, the thought makes me notice how parched my throat is and I'm afraid my voice will crack when I talk. My lungs are so empty I'm not sure I can deliver any story pitches, even if my job depends on it.

Which, it does.

Reporting is in my blood.

But my paycheck—also a necessity.

I rub my right wrist. The red rope bracelet is there. The pea-sized, black gemstone dangles from it. I roll the azabache charm between my fingers, silently going through my routine: twist the stone three times to the right, three to the left. Six times in all. My lucky number. I swear I'll never go to a crime scene again without the charm. I've learned my lesson. *Asi es. Truth. That's how it is.*

I pull out the chair across from Mr. Payton and accidentally scrape the floor. It's loud. *Que escandalo!*

More stares cut my way. The air conditioning kicks up a notch, but that means nothing to the sweat rolling down my back, sliding into the most inconvenient places. I ignore the wet tickle and stand even taller before taking a seat.

My boss drills me with that intense stare that says everything he's not allowed to vocalize for fear Human Resources will reprimand him. "Thanks for joining us, Ms. Alvarez."

"Had to drop off my grandmother at her doctor's office. She doesn't drive." I sit and twist the water bottle on the table until the label faces me. I look at El Jefe and force the corners of my mouth up. Abuela Bonita always told me, no matter what's going on inside, you can win over the world with a warm smile.

“Let’s continue.” Mr. Payton looks at Paul Johnson, our political reporter.

Paul clears his throat. “As I was saying, the governor is going to hold a press conference on the opioid crisis at a local...”

I cross my ankles to keep my leg from bouncing. It’s clear my boss doesn’t trust me anymore. Not since my serial killer story got the station sued.

I catch the ambitious, crime reporter wannabe eyeing me from the right corner of the room. Bet she’s dying to know what happened to warrant my suspension. *She probably already knows.* Secrets don’t stay secrets for long in a newsroom.

What the hell had gone wrong?

Abuela Bonita calls it mala suerte. She insisted I wear the azabache bracelet today to ward off the bad

luck following me. I find the charm again and twist.

I will fix this. Don’t know how. But I will repair my damaged reputation.

“Alvarez?”

I flinch in my seat.

“You have anything to add to the meeting?” El Jefe taps his engraved pen on the table in a slow, rhythmic pattern.

“Well, Mr. Payton.” He likes it when we use his last name. “I thought I’d do a feature on a young girl in New Tampa Hospital who needs a kidney transplant.”

“That from the crime beat reporter?” I hear the words he isn’t speaking.

“I know.” I answer in my head. *“Eleven Emmys, and I still messed up that last crime story, didn’t I?”* Out loud I say, “She’s an artist—truly amazing gift— and she’s willing to auction off her paintings to raise money so people can get tested to see if they’re a match. We could save her life by sharing her story.”

My boss nods but says, “Busch Gardens is showing off a new baby sloth this evening.”

My cheeks burn. I sit back. The heat floods down into my chest. “A baby sloth?” I’m pretty sure this is what a public castration feels like.

“We have enough crime, corruption, death, and destruction today. We need something positive after Weather. Sloth baby it is. Can’t go wrong with baby animals,” he says.

Can’t get the station sued again, you mean.

“You’re on that, Alvarez.”

“Gracias.” I close my eyes and visualize a sloth picking at El Jefe’s bushy, needs-to-be-cut eyebrows

with those two big claw-like toes. In slow motion, of course. “If our viewers see what I’m envisioning, they’re going to love it.” I smile. Warmly.

Whatever. It will keep me employed for at least one more day. My sister Izzy and Abuela are counting on me.

My phone goes off. I look down, fumbling it as I try to flip off the ringer. “Sorry. Sorry.” It’s not someone calling. It’s my home RING security camera alerting me. My pulse takes off like an F-16. *Someone is at our front door.* My heart stalls. And falls.

“An important source?” El Jefe asks.

A scoff from the right corner of the room. “Baby sloth police calling?” Crime reporter wannabe gets the room laughing.

Wannabe must have missed her café *con leche* this morning. I join the laughter and wink at her, despite the slow scalding heat I’m feeling. Abuela Bonita also taught me you get more with honey than vinegar. “No. No. Sorry.” Just my sister’s boyfriend of the week, who is not supposed to be at our house. I shake my head.

“Alvarez?”

My spine straightens. “Yes?”

“You can take the new photographer, Chris Jensen.”

That pulls me back to the moment. “But I always work with Orlando.” A big eyeball fills the RING camera at the front door, but it isn’t Izzy’s new boyfriend. His eyes are as blue as the Florida sky. Isabella’s are dark brown, so dark you can’t tell where the pupil ends, and the iris begins. Izzy pulls back and yells at the RING camera, “Stop spying on me! *De conseguir una vida!*”

My younger sister is telling me to get a life of my own.

Snickers flicker across the room.

Every hair on the back of my neck rises. The audio on my iPhone is still on. *Wanna get away?*

I glance at my friend Kiara. She smiles and shakes her head. I appreciate her support. Time to turn the sound off my iPhone.

“Everything okay?” El Jefe’s features remain constant. He doesn’t chastise me for my sister’s outburst, even though she interrupted his busy news meeting.

“Yes sir, I’m fine.” *Wait till I get home, Isabella Alvarez!* “I’m fine.”

He nods, but his eyes narrow.

I sit through one of his nerve-wracking, wish-I-knew-what-he’s thinking pauses.

He says, “You can take Orlando.”

I exhale.

El Jefe is throwing me a peace offering, I think. Or maybe he believes I can't even handle an animal story with the newbie photog, so giving me Orlando is like tossing out a safety vest.

Wow.

Two weeks ago, I would have rolled my eyes at the insult of such an easy, nonrelevant assignment. I would have been deeply offended by the shade of making sure I had a veteran babysitter with me.

Tonight, I'm grateful for it.

Even though I know I can't possibly screw up a baby sloth story, right?