

South Beach Love

Caridad Piñeiro

"MAYBE YOU COULD EVEN GET a partner," his sister said as she yanked out a seating chart from the binder and started moving around the adhesive notes with people's names.

"A partner like my ex?" he said with a huff, earning a glare from Sylvia.

"Dina was a huge mistake you should have seen coming. She was just riding on your coattails and on top of that, she resented your success." Sylvia ripped a sticky note off one table to move it to another. At his questioning look, she said, "I heard the other day that these two friends had a fight a few months ago and aren't speaking."

"Maybe I should have known what would happen with Dina," he said, hating that his sister could be so right about a relationship she'd only seen from long distance while he'd been right there, up close and personal, and had still been so wrong. His bad judgment and fear of repeating it were the main reasons why he hadn't dated since the breakup. That, and all the work at the restaurant. But for the next few weeks he'd have the time to explore new recipes and possibly a new relationship.

Like taking time tonight to go hang out with Sara. As two chefs who appreciated talent. As two long-time friends and nothing more.

But even as he told himself he shouldn't pursue her, for a moment he was tempted to mention seeing Sara to Sylvia since he'd always trusted his sister's judgment. But he held back. Nothing could really happen with Sara since he had a life and restaurant back in New York. At the thought of it, he jumped up from the table with a worried, "I have to call the restaurant and see what's up."

He hurried back to his room, whipped out his smartphone, and speed-dialed his sous chef Amanda who answered on the second chirp. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“Fine, *jefe*. Ramon is doing a great job managing everything and we’re holding down the fort,” Amanda said.

“Are you sure you don’t need me for anything?” Tony asked, worried about his absence was impacting the restaurant.

“You’ve done a great job of training us. No reason for you to cut your vacation short, unless you’re homesick,” Amanda teased, and in the background, the familiar cadence of the chefs answering confirmed all was well.

If truth be told, he might be more homesick once he left Miami. Even with the *quinceañera* insanity, he’d had time over the last couple of days to meet up with a few old friends, visit some old stomping grounds, and hit the beach for some delicious sun and relaxation. “I’m glad everything’s going well. Keep me posted if you need anything.”

“I will and Tony...” She hesitated but then plunged on. “Lots of places have executive chefs who aren’t in the restaurant all the time. We’re doing well. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Amanda. I’ll try not to,” he said and went to swipe to end the call, but held off for a long second, almost wanting to ask yet again if things were okay. They were and he tried not to let his ego be stung too badly by the realization that they didn’t need him around. But then again, if he hadn’t taught his staff so well, they wouldn’t be doing such a good job without him.

Without me, he thought once more and reminded himself that as Amanda had said, some executive chefs worked at more than one place, planning menus, developing new recipes, hiring and training staff, and all the other things he’d been doing at his own restaurant. If things were going fine back in New York maybe there was no reason why he couldn’t think about a second location here in Miami.

One where he could be close to his family and old friends. Maybe one where he could even think about a relationship with someone. Maybe even Sara. The short time with her yesterday had been nice and he was looking forward to spending time with her tonight at her place's "family meal" after the restaurant closed. Maybe if it went well, he could get some time alone with her. He was still a little uneasy about the idea of getting involved with another chef, but his first impressions said that Sara was nothing like his ex.

He walked back to the kitchen to deal with his sister's almost frantic focus on seating arrangements. He dreaded being sucked into that part of the planning, but he had nothing else to do since they'd already had dinner and it would be hours before he would go see Sara.

Sylvia glanced up. "You're smiling, *hermanito*, Everything okay at work?"

"Couldn't be better," he said and, for the first time in a long time, he meant it.

Things were different here and as Sylvia had wisely pointed out, that meant he could be different as well.

And maybe that difference could include Sara during the time he'd be in Miami. But he also warned himself not to let it become more. He didn't want to hurt Sara when he went back to New York. He knew he needed to keep his distance from his friend's younger sister, but it was getting harder and harder to think of her as only that little freckled kid who'd tagged after them.

Sara was a beautiful, vibrant and talented woman. One who was hard to resist, but he'd do his best.