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LAURA IDING

Her Little Spanish Secret

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Her Little Spanish Secret

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Dear Reader

Like many of you I've spent years as an armchair traveller, learning about other countries and other cultures by reading rather than visiting.

Last year I had the tremendous opportunity to visit Seville (pronounced Sevilla), in Spain. My family and I had a great time, and when I returned home I had this story whirling around in my head about how an American woman falls in love with a Spanish surgeon.

Miguel and Kat originally meet in the US, when Miguel is an exchange student, but when they meet again Kat is visiting Miguel's home city of Seville. Sparks flash and the passion that they shared once before returns in force. But can they create a life together coming from such different cultures? Will true love conquer all?

I hope you enjoy reading Miguel and Kat's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. Don't hesitate to visit my website or find me on Facebook—I love to hear from my readers.

Sincerely

Laura Iding

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This book is dedicated to the Milwaukee WisRWA group. Thanks to all of you for your ongoing support.

PROLOGUE

Four and a half years earlier …

KAT had never seen so much blood—it pooled on the floor and stained the walls of the O.R. suite. Dr. Miguel Vasquez, along with two other trauma surgeons, had worked as hard as they could to stop the bleeding but to no avail. Their young, pregnant patient and her unborn baby had died.

After the poor woman's body had been sent to the morgue, Kat was left alone to finish putting the supplies and equipment away while the housekeepers cleaned up the blood. Only once they were finished did she head over to the staff locker room. Thankfully, her shift was over, she was exhausted. Yet as tired as she was physically, she was emotionally keyed up, and couldn't get the horrific scene from the O.R. out of her mind. They hadn't had a case like that in a long time.

After she changed out of her scrubs into a pair of well-worn jeans and a short-sleeved sweater, she found Dr. Vasquez sitting in the staff lounge, holding his head in his hands. He looked so upset and dejected that she stopped—unable to simply walk away.

"Please don't torture yourself over this," she urged softly, as she sank down beside him on the sofa close enough that their shoulders brushed. "Her death wasn't your fault."

Miguel slowly lifted and turned his head to look at her, his

eyes full of agony. “I should have called the rest of the team in earlier.”

“You called them as soon as you discovered her abdomen was full of blood and they came as soon as they could,” she corrected. “No one knew she was pregnant, it was too early to tell.”

“I should have examined her more closely down in the trauma bay,” he muttered, more to himself than to her. “Then we would have known.”

“Do you really think that would have made a difference?” she asked softly. “Even if the other two surgeons had been notified earlier, they wouldn’t have been able to come right away. Dr. Baccus said they were resuscitating a patient in the I.C.U. All of us in the O.R. suite did the best we could.”

He stared at her for a long moment, and then sighed. “I can’t help thinking about what I should have done differently. I know we can’t save every patient, but she was just so young. And pregnant. I can’t help feeling I failed her.”

She put her hand on his arm, trying to offer some reassurance. “If three of the best trauma surgeons in the whole hospital couldn’t save her or her baby, then it wasn’t meant to be.”

A ghost of a smile played along the edges of his mouth, and she was glad she’d been able to make him feel a little better. Because what she’d said was true. Everyone talked about Miguel’s skill in the O.R. He could have stayed here in the U.S. once his fellowship was finished, even though he’d made it clear that wasn’t part of his plan.

She reluctantly slid her hand from his arm and rose to her feet. But she'd only taken two steps when he stopped her.

"Katerina?"

She hesitated and turned to look back at him, surprised and secretly pleased he'd remembered her first name. They'd operated on dozens of patients together, but while she'd always been keenly aware of Miguel, she had never been absolutely sure he'd noticed her the same way. "Yes?"

"Do you have plans for tonight? If not, would you join me? We could get a bite to eat or something."

She wasn't hungry, but could tell Miguel didn't want to be alone, and suddenly she didn't either. Word amongst the O.R. staff was that Miguel wasn't in the market for a relationship since his time in the U.S. was limited, but she ignored the tiny warning flickering in the back of her mind. "I don't have any plans for tonight, and I'd love to have dinner." *Or something. !*

"Muy bien." He rose to his feet and held out his hand. She took it and suppressed a shiver when a tingle of awareness shot up her arm.

But she didn't pull away. Instead, she stayed close at his side while they left the hospital together.

CHAPTER ONE

"DOWN, Mama. *Down!*"

"Soon, Tommy. I promise." Katerina Richardson fought a wave of exhaustion and tightened her grip on her wriggly son. She couldn't imagine anything more torturous than being stuck in a plane for sixteen hours with an active soon-to-be four-year-old. She didn't even want to think of the longer flight time on the return trip.

Plenty of time to worry about that, later. For now they'd finally arrived in Seville, Spain. And she desperately needed to get to the hospital to see how her half sister was doing after being hit by a car. The information from Susan Horton, the coordinator for the study abroad program, had been sketchy at best.

"I can't believe the stupid airline lost my luggage," her best friend, Diana Baylor, moaned as they made their way out of the airport to the line of people waiting for taxis. "It's so hot here in April compared to Cambridge, Massachusetts. I'm already sweating—I can't imagine staying in these same clothes for very long."

Kat felt bad for her friend, who'd only come on this trip in the first place as a favor to her, but what could she do? Diana's lost luggage was the least of her concerns. "Don't worry, I'll share my stuff or we'll buy what you need."

"Down, Mama. Down!" Tommy's tone, accompanied by his

wiggling, became more insistent.

"Okay, but you have to hold my hand," Kat warned her son, as she put him on his feet. She'd let him run around in the baggage claim area while they'd waited for their luggage, but even that hadn't put a dent in his energy level. She was grateful he'd slept on the plane, even though she hadn't. Kat grabbed hold of his hand before he could make a beeline for the road. "Stay next to me, Tommy."

He tugged on her hand, trying to go in the opposite direction from where they needed to wait for a taxi. Thank heavens the line was moving fast. Her son was as dark as she was blonde and if she had a nickel for every person who'd asked her if he was adopted, she'd be rich. Even here, she could feel curious eyes on them.

"No, Tommy. This way. Look, a car! We're going to go for a ride!"

His attention diverted, Tommy readily climbed into the cab after Diana. They all squished into the back seat for the short ride to their hotel. "Hesperia Hotel, please," she told the taxi driver.

"Hesperia? *No comprendo* Hesperia." Their cab driver shook his head as he pulled out into traffic, waving his hand rather impatiently. *"No comprendo."*

Kat refused to panic and quickly rummaged through her carry-on bag to pull out the hotel confirmation document. She handed it to him so he could read the name of the hotel for himself. He looked at the paper and made a sound of disgust. "Es-peer-ria," he said, emphasizing the Spanish pronunciation.

“Esperia Hotel.”

Properly chastised, she belatedly remembered from her two years of high-school Spanish that the H was silent. Being in Spain brought back bittersweet memories of Tommy’s father, especially during their three-hour layover in Madrid. She’d briefly toyed with the thought of trying to find Miguel, but had then realized her idea was ludicrous. Madrid was a huge city and she had no idea where to even start, if he’d even be there, which she seriously doubted. He may have studied there but it was possible he’d moved on. “*Sí*. Hesperia Hotel, *gracias*.”

The taxi driver mumbled something unintelligible and probably uncomplimentary in Spanish, under his breath. Kat ignored him.

“Are you going to the hospital today?” Diana asked with a wide yawn. “I’m voting for a nap first.”

“I doubt Tommy will sleep any time soon,” she reminded her friend. “And, yes, I’m going to head to the hospital as soon as we get the hotel room secured. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to watch Tommy for a while.”

“I know,” Diana said quickly. “I don’t mind.” Kat knew Diana wouldn’t renege on her duties, seeing as Kat had been the one to pay for her friend’s airfare, along with footing the hotel bill. Kat hadn’t minded as she’d needed someone to help watch over her son. “Wow, Kat, take a look at the architecture of that building over there. Isn’t it amazing?”

“Yeah, amazing.” Kat forced a smile, because Diana was right

—the view was spectacular. Yet the thrill of being in Europe for the first time in her life couldn't make her forget the reason they were there. The knot in her stomach tightened as she wondered what she'd discover when she went to the hospital. Susan Horton, the director of the study abroad program at Seville University, had called just thirty-six hours ago, to let her know that her younger half sister, Juliet, had a serious head injury and was too sick to be flown back to the U.S. for care.

Kat had immediately made arrangements to fly over to Seville in order to be there for her sister.

She and Juliet hadn't been particularly close. And not just because of the seven-year age gap. They had different fathers and for some reason Juliet had always seemed to resent Kat. Their respective fathers had both abandoned their mother, which should have given them something in common. After their mother had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Kat had promised her mother she'd look after Juliet.

Juliet had gone a little wild after their mother's death, but had settled down somewhat after she'd finished her second year of college. At the ripe old age of twenty-one, Juliet had insisted on studying abroad for the spring semester of her junior year. Kat had been forced to pick up a lot of call weekends in order to pay for the program, but she'd managed. To be fair, Juliet had come up with a good portion of the money herself.

Kat felt guilty now about how she'd been secretly relieved to put her younger sister on a plane to Spain. But even if she'd tried

to talk Juliet out of going, it wouldn't have worked. Juliet would only have resented her even more.

How had the accident happened? All she'd been told was that Juliet had run out into the street and had been hit by a car, but she didn't know anything further.

Getting to the hotel didn't take long, although there was another hassle as she figured out the dollar to Euro exchange in order to pay the cranky cab driver. As soon as Diana and Tommy were settled in the hotel room, Kat asked the front-desk clerk for directions to the hospital. She managed to figure out how to get there on the metro, which wasn't very different than using the subway back home.

Seville's teaching hospital was larger than she'd expected and that gave her hope that Juliet was getting good medical and nursing care. Kat found her sister in their I.C.U and walked in, only to stop abruptly when she saw Juliet was connected to a ventilator. Her stomach clenched even harder when she noted several dark bruises and small lacerations marring her sister's pale skin.

"Dear heaven," she breathed, trailing her gaze from her sister up to the heart monitor. She'd done a yearlong stint in the I.C.U before going to the O.R. so she'd known what to expect, but had hoped that Juliet might have improved during the time it had taken her to make the travel arrangements and actually arrive in Seville.

A nurse, dressed head to toe in white, complete with nurse's

cap on her dark hair, came into the room behind her. Kat blinked back tears and turned to the nurse. “How is she? Has her condition improved? What is the extent of her injury? Can I speak to the doctor?”

The nurse stared at her blankly for a moment and then began talking in rapid Spanish, none of which Kat could understand.

Kat wanted to cry. She desperately paged through the English/Spanish dictionary she held, trying to look up words in Spanish to explain what she wanted to know. *“¿Donde esta el doctor? ¿Habla Ingles?”* she finally asked. Where is the doctor? Speak English?

The nurse spun around and left the room.

Kat sank into a chair next to Juliet’s bed, gently clasping her half sister’s hand in hers. Maybe the age difference, and completely opposite personalities, had kept them from being close, but Juliet was still her sister. With their mother gone, they only had each other.

She had to believe Juliet would pull through this. Her sister was young and strong, surely she’d be fine.

Kat put her head down on the edge of Juliet’s bed, closing her eyes just for a moment, trying to combat the deep fatigue of jet lag and her fear regarding the seriousness of her sister’s injuries.

She didn’t think she’d fallen asleep, but couldn’t be sure how much time had passed when she heard a deep male voice, thankfully speaking in English. She lifted her head and prised her heavy eyelids open.

“I understand you have questions regarding the condition of Juliet Campbell?”

“Yes, thank you.” She quickly rose to her feet and blinked the grit from her eyes as she turned to face the doctor.

His familiar facial features made the room gyrate wildly, and she had to grasp the edge of her sister’s side rail for support. “Miguel?” she whispered in shock, wondering if she was dreaming. Had thoughts of Tommy’s father conjured up a mirage? Or was it just the doctor’s Hispanic features, dark hair falling rakishly over his forehead, deep brown eyes gazing into hers, that were so achingly familiar?

“Katerina.” His eyes widened in surprise, and she couldn’t help feeling relieved to know she wasn’t the only one knocked off balance at this chance meeting. For several long seconds they simply stared at each other across the room. Slowly, he smiled, relieving part of the awkwardness. “What a pleasant surprise to see you again. How are you?”

She tightened her grip on the bed rail behind her because her knees threatened to give away. “I’m fine, thanks.” She struggled to keep her tone friendly, even though for one beautiful night they’d been far more than just friends. Yet despite her fanciful thoughts during the Madrid layover, she hadn’t really expected to see Miguel again.

He looked good. Better than good. Miguel was taller than most Latino men, with broad shoulders and a golden skin tone that showcased his bright smile. His dark eyes were mesmerizing. If

not for his full name, Dr. Miguel Vasquez, embroidered on his white lab coat—she'd for sure think this was a dream.

She knew Juliet's condition needed to be her primary concern, but she had so many other questions she wanted to ask him. "I'm surprised to find you here in Seville. I thought you lived in Madrid?"

He didn't answer right away, and she thought she saw a flash of guilt shadow his dark eyes. She glanced away, embarrassed. She didn't want him feeling guilty for the night they'd shared together. Or for leaving so abruptly when notified of his father's illness. It wasn't as if they'd been dating or anything.

Neither was it his fault she'd let her feelings spin out of control that night.

When she'd discovered she was pregnant, she'd called his cell phone, the only number she'd had, but the number had already been out of service. She'd assumed he hadn't kept his old American phone once he'd returned to Spain. She'd looked for him on several social media sites, but hadn't found him. After about six months she'd stopped trying.

"I live here," he said simply. "My family's olive farm is just twenty minutes outside Seville."

"I see," she said, although she really didn't. Obviously, she hadn't known much about Miguel's family. She could hardly picture him growing up on an olive farm. She'd simply assumed because he was a Madrid exchange student that he'd lived there. She forced a smile, wishing they could recapture the easy

camaraderie they'd once shared. "How's your father?"

"He passed away three and a half years ago." The shadows in Miguel's eyes betrayed his grief.

"I'm sorry," she murmured helplessly. She'd known that Miguel had needed to return to Spain when his father had been sick, but she was a little surprised that he'd stayed here, even after his father had passed away.

During the night they'd shared together he'd confided about how he dreamed of joining Doctors Without Borders. When she hadn't been able to get in touch with Miguel once she'd discovered she was pregnant, she'd imagined him working in some distant country.

Why hadn't he followed his dream? He'd told her about how he was only waiting to be finished with his family obligations. And his father had passed away three and a half years ago. He should have been long gone by now.

Not that Miguel's choices were any of her business.

Except, now that he was here, how was she going to tell him about their son?

Panic soared, squeezing the air from her lungs. She struggled to take a deep breath, trying to calm her jagged nerves. Right now she needed to focus on her sister. She pulled herself together with an effort. "Will you please tell me about Juliet's head injury? How bad is it? What exactly is her neuro status?"

"Your sister's condition is serious, but stable. She responds to pain now, which she wasn't doing at first. She does have a

subarachnoid hemorrhage that we are monitoring very closely."

A subarachnoid hemorrhage wasn't good news, but she'd been prepared for that. "Is she following commands?" Kat asked.

"Not yet, but she's young, Katerina. She has a good chance of getting through this."

She gave a tight nod, wanting to believe him. "I know. I'm hopeful that she'll wake up soon."

"Katerina, I have to get to surgery as I have a patient waiting, but I would like to see you again. Would you please join me for dinner tonight? Say around eight-thirty or nine?"

She blinked in surprise and tried to think of a graceful way out of the invitation. She knew he was asking her out from some sense of obligation, because they'd spent one intense night together.

But she needed time to get the fog of fatigue out of her mind. Time to think about if and when to share the news about Tommy. Obviously Miguel deserved to know the truth, but what about Tommy? Did he deserve a father who didn't want him? A father who'd made it clear he wasn't looking for a family?

She didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry, but I'm sure I'll be asleep by then," she murmured, averting her gaze to look at her sister. "I just flew in today and I'm a bit jet-lagged."

She steeled herself against the flash of disappointment in his eyes. Juliet's well-being came first. And Tommy's was a close second.

As far as she was concerned, Miguel Vasquez would just have to wait.

Miguel couldn't believe Katerina Richardson was actually here, in Seville.

He allowed his gaze to roam over her, branding her image on his mind. She wasn't beautiful in the classical sense, but he'd always found her attractive with her peaches and cream complexion and long golden blonde hair that she normally wore in a ponytail. Except for that one night, when he'd run his fingers through the silk tresses.

To this day he couldn't explain why he'd broken his cardinal rule by asking her out. Granted, he'd been devastated over losing their patient, but he'd been determined to avoid emotional entanglements, knowing he was leaving when the year was up. He knew better than to let down his guard, but he'd been very attracted to Katerina and had suspected the feeling was mutual. That night he'd given up his fight to stay away.

But then the news about his father's stroke had pulled him from Katerina's bed the next morning. He'd rushed home to Seville. His father's condition had been worse than he'd imagined, and his father had ultimately died twelve painful months later. His mother was already gone, and during his father's illness his younger brother, Luis, had started drinking. Miguel had been forced to put his own dreams on hold to take over the olive farm, which had been in the Vasquez family for generations, until he could get Luis sobered up.

His visceral reaction to seeing Katerina again stunned him. He hadn't allowed himself to miss her. Besides, he only had three months left on his contract here at the hospital and he'd be finally free to join Doctors Without Borders.

And this time, nothing was going to stop him. Not his brother Luis. And certainly not Katerina.

He shook off his thoughts with an effort. Logically he knew he should accept her excuse, but he found himself pressing the issue. "Maybe a light meal after siesta, then? Certainly you have to eat some time."

There was a wariness reflected in her green eyes that hadn't been there in the past. He wondered what had changed in the four and a half years they'd been apart. He was relieved to note she wasn't wearing a wedding ring even though her personal life wasn't any of his business. He couldn't allow himself to succumb to Katerina's spell—he refused to make the same mistakes his father had.

"You've described my sister's head injury, but is there anything else? Other injuries I need to be aware of?" she asked, changing the subject.

He dragged his attention to his patient. "Juliet was hit on the right side. Her right leg is broken in two places and we had to operate to get the bones aligned properly. She has several rib fractures and some internal bleeding that appears to be resolving. Her head injury is the greatest of our concerns. Up until late yesterday she wasn't responding at all, even to pain. The fact that

there is some response now gives us hope she may recover."

Katerina's pale skin blanched even more, and his gut clenched when he noted the tears shimmering in her bright green eyes. They reminded him, too much, about the night they'd shared. An intense, intimate, magical night that had ended abruptly with his brother's phone call about their father. She'd cried for him when he'd been unable to cry for himself.

"When can she be transported back to the United States?" she asked.

The instinctive protest at the thought of her leaving surprised him. What was wrong with him? He wrestled his emotions under control. "Not until I'm convinced her neurological status has truly stabilized," he reluctantly admitted.

Katerina nodded, as if she'd expected that response. "Are you my sister's doctor? Or just one of the doctors here who happen to speak English?" she asked. Her gaze avoided his, staying at the level of his chest.

"Yes, I'm your sister's doctor. As you know, I'm a surgeon who does both general and trauma surgery cases."

"Do any of the nurses speak English?"

Seville didn't have the same tourist draw as Madrid or Barcelona, which meant not as many of the locals spoke English. Miguel had originally learned English from his American mother, who'd taught him before she'd died. He'd learned even more English during his time at the University of Madrid. In fact, he'd earned the opportunity to live and study medicine in the

U.S. at Harvard University.

There he'd ultimately become a doctor. And met Katerina. He dragged his thoughts out of the past. "No, the nurses don't speak much English, I'm afraid."

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, as if she had a pounding headache. Once again he found himself on the verge of offering comfort. But he didn't dare, no matter how much he wanted to.

"I would appreciate periodic updates on my sister's condition whenever you have time to spare from the rest of your patients," she said finally.

The way she turned her back on him, as if to dismiss him, made him scowl. He wanted to demand she look at him, talk to him, but of course there wasn't time. Glancing at his watch only confirmed he was already late for his scheduled surgery. "I'd be happy to give you an update later today, if you have time at, say, four o'clock?" He purposefully gave her the same time he normally ate a late lunch, right after siesta.

She spun around to face him. "But—" She stopped herself and then abruptly nodded. "Of course. Four o'clock would be fine."

He understood she'd only agreed to see him so that she could get updates on her sister, but that didn't stop him from being glad he'd gotten his way on this. "I look forward to seeing you later, then, Katerina," he said softly.

He could barely hide the thrill of anticipation racing through him, knowing he'd see her again soon, as he hurried down to the

operating room.

CHAPTER TWO

"SO WHAT do you think? Do I really need to tell Miguel about Tommy?" Kat asked, after she'd caught up with Diana and Tommy at the park located right across the street from their hotel. The park was next to a school and seeing all the kids in their navy blue and white uniforms playing on the playground wasn't so different from the preschool Tommy attended back in the U.S.

"I don't think you should do anything yet," Diana advised. "I mean, what do we know about the custody laws in Spain? What if Miguel has the right to take Tommy away from you?"

The very thought made her feel sick to her stomach. "Tommy is a U.S. citizen," she pointed out, striving for logic. "That has to count for something."

"Maybe, maybe not. I don't think you should say anything until we know what we're dealing with. Miguel is a big important doctor at the largest hospital here. Maybe he has connections, friends in high places? I think you need to understand exactly what you're dealing with if you tell him."

Kat sighed, and rubbed her temples, trying to ease the ache. Lack of sleep, worry over Juliet and now seeing Miguel again had all combined into one giant, pounding headache. "And how are we going to find out the child custody laws here? Neither one of us can speak Spanish, so it's not like we can just look up the

information on the internet."

"We could check with the American Embassy," Diana said stubbornly.

"I suppose. Except that seems like a lot of work when I'm not even sure Miguel will bother to fight me for Tommy. During our night together he told me his dream was to join Doctors Without Borders. He made it clear he wanted the freedom to travel, not settling down in one place."

"Except here he is in Seville four and a half years later," Diana pointed out reasonably. "Maybe he's changed his mind about his dream?"

"Maybe." She couldn't argue Diana's point. She still found it hard to wrap her mind around the fact that Miguel was here, in Seville. She'd stayed with her sister for another hour or so after he'd left, slightly reassured that Juliet's condition was indeed stable, before she'd come back to the hotel to unpack her things. Seeing Miguel had made her suddenly anxious to find her son.

Tommy was having a great time running around in the park, chasing butterflies. As she watched him, the physical similarities seemed even more acute. She realized the minute Miguel saw Tommy, he'd know the truth without even needing to be told.

Although Miguel wouldn't have to see him, a tiny voice in the back of her mind reminded her. Tommy could stay here with Diana and in a couple of days hopefully Juliet would be stable enough to be sent back to the U.S. Miguel didn't need to know anything about their son.

As soon as the thought formed, she felt a sense of shame. Keeping Tommy's presence a secret would be taking the coward's way out. Diana was worried about the Spanish custody laws, but Kat had other reasons for not wanting to tell Miguel about Tommy. Being intimate with Miguel had touched her in a way she hadn't expected. When she'd discovered she was pregnant, she'd been torn between feeling worried at how she'd manage all alone to secretly thrilled to have a part of Miguel growing inside her.

She knew he hadn't felt the same way about her. Men had sex with women all the time, and lust certainly wasn't love. She knew better than to get emotionally involved. In her experience men didn't remain faithful or stick around for the long haul. Especially when there was the responsibility of raising children. Her father and Juliet's father had proven that fact.

She gave Miguel credit for being upfront and honest about his inability to stay. He hadn't lied to her, hadn't told her what he'd thought she'd wanted to hear. It was her fault for not doing a better job of protecting her heart.

Telling Miguel about Tommy opened up the possibility that she'd have to see Miguel on a regular basis. If they were raising a child together, there would be no way to avoid him. She would have to hide her true feelings every time they were together.

Unless Miguel still didn't want the responsibility of a son? There was a part of her that really hoped so, because then he wouldn't insist on joint custody.

Now she was getting way ahead of herself. Maybe she could tell Miguel about Tommy and reassure him that she didn't need help, financially or otherwise, to raise her son. She and Tommy would be fine on their own. The way they had been for nearly four years.

"Don't agonize over this, Kat. You don't have to tell him this minute, we just got here. Give me a little time to do some research first, okay?"

"I guess," she agreed doubtfully. Diana was clearly concerned, but she was confident that Tommy had rights as an American citizen. "I won't do anything right away, although I really think I'm going to have to tell him eventually. I tried to call him when I discovered I was pregnant, even tried to find him on all the popular social media websites. Now that I know he's here, I need to be honest with him."

"Then why do you look like you're about to cry?" Diana asked.

"Because I'm scared," she murmured, trying to sniffle back her tears. "I couldn't bear it if Miguel tried to fight for custody."

"Okay, let's just say that the Spanish law is the same as the U.S. regarding joint custody. You mentioned he wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but we both know that doesn't always mean much. Miguel might be married or seriously involved in a relationship. Could be the last thing on earth that he wants is to fight for joint custody."

"You're right," she agreed, even though the thought of Miguel being married or involved with someone didn't make her feel

any better. “Okay, I need to get a grip. Maybe I’ll try talking to Miguel first, try to find out about his personal life before springing the news on him.”

Diana nodded eagerly. “Good idea. Meanwhile, I’ll see if I can call the U.S. embassy to get more information.”

Kat nodded, even though deep down she knew she’d have to tell him. Because Miguel deserved to know. Besides at some point Tommy was going to ask about his father. She refused to lie to her son.

The spear in her heart twisted painfully and tears pricked her eyes. As difficult as it was to be a single mother, she couldn’t bear the thought of sending Tommy off to be with his father in a far-away country. Although she knew she could come with Tommy, no matter how difficult it would be to see Miguel again.

If Miguel was truly planning to join Doctors Without Borders, maybe all of this worry would be for nothing. She and Tommy would go back home and continue living their lives.

Tommy tripped and fell, and she leaped off the park bench and rushed over, picking him up and lavishing him with kisses before he could wail too loudly. “There, now, you’re okay, big guy.”

“Hurts,” he sniffed, rubbing his hands over his eyes and smearing dirt all over his face.

“I know, but Mommy will kiss it all better.” Holding her son close, nuzzling his neck, she desperately hoped Miguel would be honorable enough to do what was best for Tommy.

Kat returned to the hotel room to change her clothes and freshen up a bit before going back to the hospital to see Juliet and Miguel. She'd left Diana and Tommy at the local drugstore, picking out a few necessities for Diana to hold her over until her luggage arrived. They'd also picked up two prepaid disposable phones, so they could keep in touch with each other. After fifteen minutes, and with the help of one shopkeeper who did speak a bit of English, they had the phones activated and working.

The metro was far more crowded towards the end of the workday, forcing her to stand, clinging to the overhead pole.

At her stop, she got off the cramped carriage and walked the short distance to the hospital. The temperature had to be pushing eighty and by the time she arrived, she was hot and sweaty again.

So much for her attempt to look nice for Miguel.

Ridiculous to care one way or the other how she looked. Men weren't exactly knocking down her door, especially once they realized she had a son. Not that she was interested in dating.

She hadn't been with anyone since spending the night with Miguel. At first because she'd been pregnant and then because being a single mother was all-consuming. But she didn't regret a single minute of having Tommy.

In the hospital, she went up to the I.C.U. and paused outside Juliet's doorway, relieved to discover Miguel wasn't there, waiting for her. Her sister had been turned so that she was lying on her right side facing the doorway, but otherwise her condition appeared unchanged.

She crossed over and took Juliet's hand in hers. "Hi, Jules, I'm back. Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me."

Juliet's hand didn't move within hers.

"Wiggle your toes. Can you wiggle your toes for me?"

Juliet's non-broken leg moved, but Kat couldn't figure out if the movement had been made on purpose or not. When she asked a second time, the leg didn't move, so she assumed the latter.

She pulled up a chair and sat down beside her sister, glancing curiously at the chart hanging off the end of the bed. She didn't bother trying to read it, as it would all be in Spanish, but she wished she could read the medical information for herself, to see how Juliet was progressing.

She kept up her one-sided conversation with her sister for the next fifteen minutes or so. Until she ran out of things to say.

"Katerina?"

The way Miguel said her name brought back a fresh wave of erotic memories of their night together and she tried hard to paste a *friendly* smile on her face, before rising to her feet and facing him. "Hello, Miguel. How did your surgery go this morning?"

"Very well, thanks. Would you mind going across the street to the restaurant to talk?" he asked. "I've missed lunch."

She instinctively wanted to say no, but that seemed foolish and petty so she nodded. She glanced back at her sister, leaning over the side rail to talk to her. "I love you, sis. See you soon," she said, before moving away to meet Miguel in the doorway.

As they walked down the stairs to the main level of the

hospital, he handed her a stack of papers. “I spent some time translating bits of Juliet’s chart for you, so that you can get a sense as to how she’s doing.”

Her jaw dropped in surprise and for a moment she couldn’t speak, deeply touched by his kind consideration. “Thank you,” she finally murmured, taking the paperwork he offered. Miguel had often been thoughtful of others and she was glad he hadn’t changed during the time they’s spent apart. She couldn’t imagine where he’d found the time to translate her sister’s chart for her between seeing patients and doing surgery, but she was extremely grateful for his efforts.

He put his hand on the small of her back, guiding her towards the restaurant across the street from the hospital. The warmth of his hand seemed to burn through her thin cotton blouse, branding her skin. She was keenly aware of him, his scent wreaking havoc with her concentration, as they made their way across the street. There was outdoor seating beneath cheerful red and white umbrellas and she gratefully sat in the shade, putting the table between them.

The waiter came over and the two men conversed in rapid-fire Spanish. She caught maybe one familiar word out of a dozen.

“What would you like to drink, Katerina?” Miguel asked. “Beer? Wine? Soft drink?”

“You ordered a soft drink, didn’t you?” she asked.

He flashed a bright smile and nodded. “You remember some Spanish, no?” he asked with clear approval.

"Yes, *muy poco*, very little," she agreed. "I'll have the same, please."

Miguel ordered several *tapas*, the Spanish form of appetizers, along with their soft drinks. When the food arrived, she had no idea what she was eating, but whatever it was it tasted delicious.

"Do you want to review Juliet's chart now?" he asked. "I can wait and answer your questions."

"I'll read it later, just tell me what you know." She wanted to hear from him first. Besides, there was no way she'd be able to concentrate on her sister's chart with him sitting directly across from her.

He took his time, sipping his drink, before answering. "Juliet has begun moving around more, which is a good sign. She will likely start to intermittently follow commands soon. We have done a CT scan of her brain earlier this morning and the area of bleeding appears to be resolving slowly."

She nodded, eating another of the delicious *tapas* on the plate between them. There were olives too, and she wondered if they were from Miguel's family farm. "I'm glad. I guess all we can do right now is wait and see."

"True," he agreed. He helped himself to more food as well. "Katerina, how is your mother doing? Wasn't she scheduled to have surgery right before I left the States?"

She nodded, her appetite fading. "Yes. The result of her surgery showed stage-four pancreatic cancer. She died a couple months later." Despite the fear of being a single mother, at the

time of her mother's passing, her pregnancy had been one of the few bright spots in her life. Things had been difficult until Juliet had gone off to college. Thankfully, her friend Diana had been there for her, even offering to be her labor coach.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, reaching across the table to capture her hand in his. "We both lost our parents about the same time, didn't we?"

"Yes. We did." His fingers were warm and strong around hers, but she gently tugged her hand away and reached for her glass. She tried to think of a way to ask him if he was married or seeing someone, without sounding too interested.

"I have thought of you often these past few years," Miguel murmured, not seeming to notice how she was struggling with her secret. He took her left hand and brushed his thumb across her bare ring finger. "You haven't married?"

She slowly shook her head. There was only one man who'd asked her out after Tommy had been born. He was another nurse in the operating room, one of the few male nurses who worked there. She'd been tempted to date him because he was a single parent, too, and would have been a great father figure for Tommy, but in the end she hadn't been able to bring herself to accept his offer.

She hadn't felt anything for Wayne other than friendship. And as much as she wanted a father for Tommy, she couldn't pretend to feel something she didn't.

Too bad she couldn't say the same about her feelings toward

Miguel. Seeing him again made her realize that she still felt that same spark of attraction, the same awareness that had been there when they'd worked together in the U.S. Feelings that apparently hadn't faded over time.

"What about you, Miguel?" she asked, taking the opening he'd offered, as she gently pulled her hand away. "Have you found a woman to marry?"

"No, you know my dream is to join Doctors Without Borders. But I can't leave until I'm certain my brother has the Vasquez olive farm back on its feet. Luis has a few—ah—problems. Things were not going well here at home during the time I was in the U.S." A shadow of guilt flashed in his eyes, and she found herself wishing she could offer him comfort.

"Not your fault, Miguel," she reminded him, secretly glad to discover he hadn't fallen in love and married a beautiful Spanish woman. "How old is Luis?"

"Twenty-six now," he said. "But too young back then to take on the responsibility of running the farm. I think the stress of trying to hold everything together was too much for my father." He stared at his glass for a long moment. "Maybe if I had been here, things would have been different."

She shrugged, not nearly as reassured as she should be at knowing his dream of joining Doctors Without Borders hadn't changed. She should be thrilled with the news. Maybe this would be best for all of them. He'd go do his mission work, leaving her alone to raise Tommy. Miguel could come back in a few years,

when Tommy was older, to get to know his son.

All she had to do was to tell him the truth.

Diana wanted her to wait, but she knew she had to tell him or the secret would continue to eat at her. She'd never been any good at lying and didn't want to start now. She swallowed hard and braced herself. "Miguel, there's something important I need to tell you," she began.

"Miguel!" A shout from across the street interrupted them. She frowned and turned in time to see a handsome young man, unsteady on his feet, waving wildly at Miguel.

"Luis." He muttered his brother's name like a curse half under his breath. "Excuse me for a moment," he said as he rose to his feet.

She didn't protest, but watched as Miguel crossed over towards his brother, his expression stern. The two of them were quickly engrossed in a heated conversation that didn't seem it would end any time soon.

Kat sat back, sipping her soft drink and thinking how wrong it was for her to be grateful for the reprieve.

"Luis, you shouldn't be drinking!" Miguel shouted in Spanish, barely holding his temper in check.

"Relax, it's Friday night. I've been slaving out at the farm all week—don't I get time to have fun too? Hey, who's the pretty Americana?" he asked with slurred speech, as he looked around Miguel towards where Katerina waited.

"She's a friend from the U.S.," he answered sharply. "But

that's not the point. I thought we had an agreement? You promised to stay away from the taverns until Saturday night. It's barely five o'clock on Friday, and you're already drunk." Which meant his brother must have started drinking at least a couple of hours ago.

"I sent the last olive shipment out at noon. I think you should introduce me to your lady friend," Luis said with a sloppy smile, his gaze locked on Katerina. "She's pretty. I'd love to show her a good time."

The last thing he wanted to do was to introduce Katerina to his brother, especially when he was intoxicated. Luis had been doing fairly well recently, so finding him like this was more than a little annoying.

What was Luis thinking? If he lost the olive farm, what would he do for work? Or was this just another way to ruin Miguel's chance to follow his dream? He was tired of trying to save the olive farm for his brother while taking care of his patients. He was working nonstop from early morning to sundown every week. It was past time for Luis to grow up and take some responsibility.

"Go home, Luis," he advised. "Before you make a complete fool of yourself."

"Not until I meet your lady friend," Luis said stubbornly. "She reminds me a little of our mother, except that she has blonde hair instead of red. Are you going to change your mind about going to Africa? She may not wait for you."

Miguel ground his teeth together in frustration. “No, I’m not going to change my mind,” he snapped. He didn’t want to think about Katerina waiting for him. No matter how much he was still attracted to her, having a relationship with an American woman would be nothing but a disaster. His mother had hated every minute of living out on the farm, away from the city. And far away from her homeland. He was certain Katerina wouldn’t be willing to leave her home either. “Katerina’s sister is in the hospital, recovering from a serious head injury. She’s not interested in having a good time. Leave her alone, understand?”

“Okay, fine, then.” Luis shook off his hand and began walking toward the bar, his gait unsteady. “I’ll just sit by myself.”

“Oh, no, you won’t.” Miguel captured his brother’s arm and caught sight of his old friend, Rafael, who happened to be a police officer. “Rafael,” he called, flagging down his friend.

“Trouble, amigo?” Rafael asked, getting out of his police car.

“Would you mind taking my brother home?” He grabbed Luis’s arm, steering him toward the police car, but his brother tried to resist. Luis almost fell, but Miguel managed to haul him upright. “I would take him myself, but I’m on call at the hospital.”

“All right,” Rafael said with a heavy sigh. “You’ll owe me, my friend. Luckily for you, I’m finished with my shift.”

“Thanks, Rafael. I will return the favor,” he promised.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Rafael muttered with a wry grimace.

Miguel watched them drive away, before he raked a hand through his hair and turned back towards Katerina. As if the fates

were against him, his pager went off, bringing a premature end to their time together.

"My apologies for the interruption," he murmured as he returned to the table. "I'm afraid I must cut our meal short. There is a young boy with symptoms of appendicitis. I need to return to the hospital to assess whether or not he needs surgery."

"I understand," Katerina said, as he paid the tab. She gathered up the papers he'd given to her. "Thanks again for translating Juliet's chart for me. I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow."

"Of course." When she stood, she was so close he could have easily leaned down to kiss her. He curled his fingers into fists and forced himself to take a step backwards in order to resist the sweet temptation. "I will make rounds between nine and ten in the morning, if you want an update on your sister's condition."

"Sounds good. Goodbye, Miguel." She waved and then headed for the metro station, located just a few blocks down the street.

Back at the hospital it was clear the thirteen-year-old had a classic case of appendicitis and Miguel quickly took the child to the operating room. Unfortunately, his appendix had burst, forcing Miguel to spend extra time washing out the abdominal cavity in order to minimize the chance that infection would set in. Afterwards, he made sure the boy had the correct antibiotics ordered and the first dose administered before he headed home to his three-bedroom apartment located within walking distance of the hospital.

It wasn't until he was eating cold leftover pizza for dinner that

Miguel had a chance to think about Katerina, and wonder just what she'd thought was so important to tell him.

CHAPTER THREE

"LOOK, it's a shopping mall!" Diana exclaimed. Then she frowned. "I almost wish my luggage hadn't shown up this morning, or I'd have a good excuse to go buy new clothes."

Kat nodded ruefully. She was surprised to find Seville was a city of contrasts, from the modern shopping mall to the mosques and bronze statues straight out of the sixteenth century. "A little disappointing in a way, isn't it?" she murmured.

"Hey, not for me," Diana pointed out. "I mean, the history here is nice and everything, but I'm all in favor of modernization. Especially when it comes to shopping."

They'd walked to a small café for breakfast, and found the shopping mall on the way back to the hotel. "Maybe you can explore the mall with Tommy this morning while I'm at the hospital, visiting Juliet."

"Sounds good. Although don't forget we plan on taking the boat tour later this afternoon," Diana reminded her.

"I won't forget," Kat murmured. Sightseeing wasn't top of her list, but it was the least she could do for Diana as her friend spent a good portion of every day watching her son. Besides, sitting for hours at the hospital wasn't going to help Juliet recover any quicker.

"Here's the metro station," Kat said. "Call me if you need anything, okay? I'll see you later, Tommy." Kat swept him into

her arms for a hug, which he tolerated for barely a minute before he wiggled out of her grasp.

"We'll be fine," Diana assured her, taking Tommy's hand in a firm grip.

"I know." She watched them walk away towards the mall, before taking the steps down to the metro station to wait for the next train. Despite the fact that she still needed to break the news about Tommy to Miguel, she found she was looking forward to seeing him again. Last night, before she'd fallen asleep, Miguel's words had echoed in her mind, giving her a secret thrill.

I've thought of you often over these past few years.

She doubted that he'd thought of her as often as she'd thought of him, though. Mostly because of Tommy since he was the mirror image of his father. Yet also because Miguel had taken a small piece of her heart when he'd left.

Not that she ever planned on telling him that.

She needed to let go of the past and move on with her life. Whatever her conflicting feelings for Miguel, she couldn't afford to fall for him. They wanted different things out of life. She wanted a home, family, stability. Miguel wanted adventure. He wanted Doctors Without Borders. He wanted to travel. The only time they were in sync was when they had worked as colleagues in the O.R..

And, of course, during the night they spent together.

Walking into the hospital was familiar now, and she greeted the clerk behind the desk in Spanish. *"Buenos dias."*

"Buenos dias," the clerk replied with a wide grin. One thing about Spain, most people seemed to be in a good mood. Maybe because they had a more laid-back lifestyle here. She found it amazing that the shops actually closed down for three hours between noon and three for siesta. She couldn't imagine anyone in the U.S. doing something like that.

Yet if the people were happier, maybe it was worth it?

Kat took the stairs to the third-floor I.C.U., entered her sister's room and crossed over to the bedside, taking her sister's small hand in hers. "Hi, Jules, I'm back. How are you feeling, hmm?"

She knew her sister wasn't going to open her eyes and start talking, which would be impossible with a breathing tube in anyway, but Kat was convinced patients even in her sister's condition could hear what was going on around them, so she decided she'd keep up her one-sided conversation with her sister.

"Seville is a beautiful city, Jules, I can understand why you wanted to study here. I wish I knew exactly what happened to you. No one here seems to know anything more than the fact that you ran into the road and were struck by a car. Can you hear me, Jules? If you can hear me, squeeze my hand."

When Juliet's fingers squeezed hers, Kat's knees nearly buckled in relief. "That's great, Juliet. Now wiggle your toes for me. Can you wiggle your toes?"

This time Juliet's non-casted left leg moved again. It wasn't wiggling her toes, exactly, but Kat was still thrilled at the small movement. Her sister was truly doing better. Juliet would

probably only follow commands intermittently, but each day she'd improve and do better.

Exactly the way Miguel had assured her she would.

"Good job, Jules. I'm so glad you can hear me. You're still in the hospital in Seville, but as soon as you're better, you're going to be sent to an American hospital back home. Can you understand what I'm saying? If you can understand me, squeeze my hand."

Juliet squeezed her hand again, and relieved tears blurred her vision. Her sister was going to make it. Juliet might have a long road to recovery ahead of her, but she was going to make it.

"Katerina?"

At the sound of Miguel's voice she whirled around and quickly crossed over to him. "She's following commands, Miguel!" she exclaimed. "She's starting to wake up!"

He caught her close in a warm hug. "I'm glad," he murmured, his mouth dangerously close to her ear.

She wanted to wrap her arms around his waist and lean on his strength, but she forced herself to step away, putting badly needed distance between them. What was wrong with her? It wasn't as if she'd come to Seville in order to rejuvenate her feelings for Miguel. Better for her if she kept him firmly in the friendship category. As if their one night together had been an aberration.

One that had produced a son.

There was no reason to feel as if being around Miguel was like coming home. Truthfully, she'd never been farther from home.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her tears on the back of her hand while searching for a tissue. “I didn’t mean to get all emotional on you.”

“Here.” He grabbed the box of tissues from the bedside table and handed them to her. “Don’t apologize, I know how worried you’ve been.”

She blew her nose and pulled herself together, forcing a smile. “I hope this doesn’t mean you’re going to send Juliet home right away, are you?”

“Not yet. I would like your sister to be completely off the ventilator and more awake before she’s transported back to the U.S.”

“Sounds good.” She was relieved to know they wouldn’t have to leave Seville just yet. Especially as she hadn’t told Miguel about Tommy. A wave of guilt hit hard. Should she tell him now? No, this wasn’t exactly the time or the place for a heavy conversation. Besides, Miguel was working, making rounds. No doubt he had many patients to see.

She was about to ask him what time he got off work when he reached over to take her hand in his. “Katerina, will you have dinner with me tonight?”

She hesitated just a moment before nodding her assent. Wasn’t this what she’d wanted all along? A good time and place to tell him about his son? A quiet dinner with just the two of them would be the perfect time to give him the news. “Yes, Miguel. Dinner would be wonderful.”

“Excellent,” he murmured. His gaze was warm and she had to remind herself this wasn’t a date. Her son’s future was what mattered here, not her roller-coaster feelings for his father.

“What time?” she asked.

“We’ll go early as I know you’re not used to our customs yet. Shall we say eight o’clock?”

A wry grin tugged at the corner of her mouth because eight o’clock wasn’t at all early back home. “All right. Where should I meet you?”

“I will pick you up at your hotel. Which one are you staying at?”

“We—I’m at the Hesperia hotel,” she said, using the correct Spanish pronunciation while hoping he didn’t catch her slip.

“Excellent. There is a wonderful restaurant just a few blocks away.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry, but I need to finish making rounds. Did you have any questions about the chart copies I gave you?”

She’d read through his entire stack of notes early that morning, before Tommy had woken up. “I noticed her electrolytes keep going out of whack—do you think that’s because of her head injury?”

“Yes, brain injuries cause sodium levels to drop, but try not to worry as we are replacing what she’s lost.”

She’d noticed the IV solution running through Juliet’s IV was similar to what they’d use in the U.S. Except for the equipment being a little different, the basics of medical and nursing care

were very much the same.

"Thanks again, Miguel, for everything," she said in a low voice, trying to put the depth of her feelings into words. "I'm so relieved to know my sister is in such good hands."

"You're very welcome, Katerina. I'll see you tonight, yes?"

"Yes," she confirmed. After he left, she walked back and sat down at her sister's bedside.

She was lucky that Miguel was here. Not just because he spoke English, which was a huge help, but because she knew he was an excellent surgeon.

Ironic how fate had brought her face to face with Tommy's father after all these years. Her previously suppressed feelings for Miguel threatened to surface and she took a long, deep breath, ruthlessly shoving them back down.

She needed to protect her heart from Miguel's charm. And even more importantly, she needed to preserve the life she'd built with her son.

Miguel finished his rounds and then took a break to call his brother. Unfortunately, Luis didn't answer the phone so he left his brother a message, requesting a return phone call.

He rubbed the back of his neck, debating whether he should go out to see his brother after work or not. He should have time before dinner as he wasn't on call this evening. But at the same time, going all the way out to the farm and back would take at least two and a half hours, and he didn't want to be late for his dinner date with Katerina.

Miguel was pleased Katerina had agreed to see him again tonight. He felt the need to make it up to her for leaving so abruptly after finding out about his father's stroke. The night they'd spent together had been incredible. There had always been the hint of awareness between them while working together in the operating room. At times it had seemed as if Katerina could practically read his mind, instinctively knowing what he'd needed before he'd had to ask.

He'd been tempted to pursue a relationship, but had told himself it wouldn't be fair since he wasn't planning on staying. Maybe if things had been different …

No, he'd made his decision. He'd already given notice at the hospital that he was leaving at the end of the academic year, which was just three months away. He'd first heard about Doctors Without Borders in Madrid from one of his colleagues. He'd quickly decided that he wanted to join as well once he'd finished his training. He'd known early on he didn't want to stay on his family's olive farm. He'd wanted to travel. To learn about other cultures. He'd jumped at the opportunity to study in the U.S. and now couldn't wait to join Doctors Without Borders.

So why was he torturing himself by seeing Katerina again? If he had a functioning brain cell in his head, he'd stay far away from her until her sister was stable enough for transport back home.

Katerina wasn't the woman for him. He knew he shouldn't measure all women against his American mother, but after living in both cultures he understood a little better why his mother had

reacted the way she had. The two lifestyles were very different. Maybe if the olive farm hadn't suffered two bad years in a row, there would have been money for vacations back in the U.S. Would that have been enough for his mother? Or would that have only emphasized her loss?

Truthfully, he couldn't understand why his mother just hadn't purchased a one-way ticket to New York and returned home if she'd been so desperately unhappy here. Instead, she'd stayed to become a bitter woman who'd made all their lives miserable. Until she'd unexpectedly died of an overdose, which had been determined to be accidental rather than a suicide attempt.

Miguel shook off his dark thoughts and concentrated on his patients. He loved everything about being a surgeon. There wasn't nearly as much trauma here in Seville as in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but he didn't mind. One thing he never got used to was losing patients.

Especially young patients. Like the twenty-five-year-old pregnant mother they'd lost during his last shift in the U.S.

After finishing his rounds on the adults in his case load, he made his way over to the children's wing, which happened to be in the oldest part of the hospital. He wanted to visit Pedro, his young appendectomy patient. The young boy would need to stay a few days for IV antibiotics before he could be discharged.

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