

Anchored Hearts

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Dedicated to those who, like Anamaría, are out there hustling, turning their dreams into goals that become reality . . . and those who love, support, and encourage them, offering a port in the storm of life where they can drop anchor and feel at home.

My port has always been wherever my mami and papi are.
Abrazos fuertes y amor profundo por siempre ser mi
querido puerto.

Chapter 1

“Mami, you’re kidding me, right?” Anamaría Navarro slowed her Honda Pilot for the red light at the intersection of White Street and Glynn Archer Drive and gaped at the dashboard screen as if her mom could see her shock.

“Nena, why would I joke about someone’s health and a mamá’s worry for her child? How could you think that of me?”

Anamaría bit back a frustrated sigh. Ay Dios mío, talk about exaggeration. The Cuban mami guilt coming through the line was thicker than the humidity enveloping Key West outside. And even late-April heat in the Keys was no-joke hot.

“We’re not talking about a generic ‘someone,’ mami, and you know it,” Anamaría pressed. “This is—”

“Exactamente. This is familia. So, you will go and help. Because it is what familia does,” her mami insisted.

¡Coño! Anamaría smacked the butt of her palm on her steering wheel as she mumbled another “damn!” She didn’t have to be video chatting with her mami to see the reprimand on her softly lined face. The parental disappointment and expectation were evident in the firm tone.

The light turned green, and Anamaría checked her rearview

mirror for traffic moving into the left lane next to hers. When she glanced forward again, her gaze caught on Key West Fire Department Station 3 nestled on the far corner. For a hot second she considered pulling into the station's parking lot. Whining to her brother Luis about their mami's unreasonable request.

But thirty years of living with and loving a Cuban mami told her that while whining to her brother might make Anamaría feel better, nothing would change their mother's mind.

Frustration bubbling, Anamaría flicked her blinker down to signal her intent, then executed a smooth U-turn.

"Mami, I already told you, I only have an hour and a half before I go into back-to-back-to-back workout sessions with clients. I was running home to make a protein shake and update something on my website. I don't have time to go play nursemaid."

Especially not to him.

Her gut clenched. Her heart fluttered the tiniest bit. Anamaría gritted her teeth, ignoring the reactions to the man she'd sworn to forget.

On the other end of the line, the maternal guilt factor upped the ante in the form of a heavy, downtrodden sigh. "That is plenty of time, nena. Elena is worried Alejandro's wounds may have become infected on his long trip home. You will put her fears to rest by checking his injury. This is nothing different than getting a call when you are at the station. Do you not want to help her?"

Anamaría bit down on the *not really* that sprang to her tongue. It would be a partial lie anyway. "Normally, I'd do anything for Señora Miranda. Pero esto—"

"*But this*, nothing. I know you and your good heart. You will go because she asked for you. Porque she needs you. Now tell me, how close are you to the Mirandas' home now? ¿Ya casi llegas?"

A surprised puff of air rushed from Anamaría. How the heck did her mami know to ask if she was almost there?

Annoyed, if somewhat bemused, Anamaría glanced at the dashboard display again where *La Reina* scrolled across the screen. Not for the first time in her life she wondered if her mami,

aka “The Queen,” had managed to implant a tracking device in her children at birth. Somehow, Lydia Quintana de Navarro had this uncanny ability of keeping close tabs on her four kids, even though they were all now adults.

“Sí, I’m about five minutes away,” Anamaría muttered as she continued heading south on Flagler. Ahead on her left, the red-and-white electronic marquee for Key West High School flashed with end-of-the-school-year announcements.

“Muy bien. I knew I could count on you to do the right thing,” her mom said, not even trying to hide her smugness. “Please be nice to Alejandro. Pobrecito must be in so much pain.”

Anamaría rolled her eyes. Poor thing? The idiot should have been more careful if he planned to hike the Puerto Rican rain-forest alone.

“I’ll be polite. That’s the best I can promise.”

The odds of her being nice to the man who had broken her heart were about as good as a snowball’s chance of surviving a Key West summer day. There was damn good reason why she hadn’t spoken to Alejandro Miranda for over ten years.

“Por favor, dile que sigo rezando por él,” her mom insisted.

“Mami, I’m sure he already knows that you’re praying for him.”

In fact, prayer chains had been activated throughout their comunidad the second news had reached them of Alejandro’s scary hiking accident a couple weeks ago. Despite his asshole behavior before and in the months after their breakup all those years ago, even Anamaría had murmured a few Our Fathers for his recovery. That Catholic school guilt could be a real revenge squasher sometimes.

Still, she had no desire to play messenger pigeon for the man to whom she had nothing left to say.

Fingers gripping her steering wheel, she made the left onto Bertha Street, then shortly after turned right onto Laird. Her breaths quickened the closer she drew to the house that had been her second home since eighth grade at Horace O’Bryant Middle School.

Well . . .

Except for those first few months after their breakup. When it'd been too painful for her to visit. To even drive down this quiet neighborhood street.

The same way it had been with so many other places around Key West. Memories attacking her in quick succession. Sharp cross-hook-uppercut jabs delivering blows as if she were a punching bag.

Gravel crunched underneath her car tires as she parked in front of the Mirandas' place. Her gaze cut to the cinder-block and peach-painted stucco privacy wall edging the single-story home's perimeter. Through the white-painted wood peep-through border at the wall's top she stared at the front door.

It had taken her a while, but she'd learned to deal with the sad expressions on many of the faces of the loved ones inside. The ones who, like her, had been left behind, forgotten, by the same hardheaded man whose presence, almost twelve years later, forced her visit today.

Annoyed by her current predicament, Anamaría jerked the gearshift to park, then wiped her sweaty palms on her leggings. She sucked in a deep breath, slowly releasing it like she would instruct a victim in danger of hyperventilating. When that did nothing to slow her mid-cardio workout pulse, she reached for her water bottle and took a hefty swig.

“¿Llegaste?” her mom's voice cut through the hazy memories trying to push their insidious way to the surface in Anamaría's mind.

“Yes, I'm here. I gotta go, mami. Te llamo más tarde.”

She chugged another gulp, certain that her promise to call later wouldn't stop her mom from bugging her before then. When it came to overstepping the boundaries of propriety and privacy with her children, her mom didn't baby-step over it. She freaking leapt.

All with good intentions of course. Lydia Quintana de Navarro lived and breathed for her husband and children, their extended *familia*, and their entire comunidad. That also meant when she

felt she knew what was best for someone, there was no shying away from letting them know it. Or from using her wily passive-aggressive skills to get her way, particularly with her kids and grandkids.

Like a truth teller affirming Anamaría's thoughts about her mom's meddling, her mom's voice stopped Anamaría seconds before her finger hit the *end call* icon on the dashboard screen.

"God has a plan for you, nena. I know He does." Her mami's tone softened with concern at the same time it sharpened with the conviction of her faith. "Dios te bendiga, mi vida."

Before she could reply to her mother's usual "God bless you, my life" farewell, the call was disconnected.

God has a plan for you. The sage advice replayed in Anamaría's head as she rubbed her thumb over the *AM Fitness* logo imprinted on the side of her water bottle. This—AM Fitness—had to be that plan. She sure hoped so, anyway, because it was her only focus now.

The black and red script in a font meticulously selected because of its strong, energetic vibe indicative of the brand she sought for her burgeoning business reminded her of how far she'd come. Sure, it had taken her awhile, but she was finally in a good place.

Her heart had mended. Her conviction that she'd made the right decision by staying behind had solidified. Her anger at his mulish behavior had dissipated to mere indifference. Well, until his surprise return.

A surprise she refused to let derail her.

Ignoring her trembling fingers and the annoying jitters in her stomach, she tugged the keys from the ignition, grabbed her backpack, then left the safety of her vehicle.

Like many in this older Midtown neighborhood, the Mirandas' was a modest, single-story stucco house. Theirs was painted the same welcoming soft peach as the privacy wall, with dark gray hurricane shutters bookending the windows. Alejandro and his younger brother, Ernesto, had spent their entire lives here. Until their father, in a fit of anger Anamaría felt certain he'd never

meant, threatened to ban Alejandro from their home if he chose to turn his back on running the restaurant that was their familia's legacy.

Despite the threat, Alejandro had boarded that plane to Spain. Off to seek fame and fortune on his own terms. Without his father's blessing. Without her.

As she stepped onto the sidewalk, the humid breeze snagged a few strands of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail, blowing them across her cheek. She tucked them behind her ear and squared her shoulders, then paused in front of the wide wooden door nestled in the privacy wall's alcove. Overhead, sprawling bougainvillea with their deep green leaves and bright fuchsia flower petals climbed the slanted overhang in a colorful canopy. The sweet smelling vines offered shade to those who entered, but the plant's sharp thorns were as prickly and harmful as the memories of Alejandro she had struggled to uproot from her heart.

Shit, if she was honest with herself, she'd admit that the sweat dotting her upper lip was a nervous reaction to seeing Alejandro again after all these years, not the hot island climate. That didn't mean anyone else needed to know.

All she had to do was put on her game face. Channel her I-don't-give-a-damn attitude that challenged any sexist, chauvinistic firefighters at work to question her abilities when it came to saving their asses. Treat this visit like another routine 911 call. Alejandro, another random patient she might need to load in the back of her . . . or, *bueno*, his mom's sedan . . . for the short drive to the emergency room at Lower Keys Medical Center if need be.

So what if instead of her firefighter gear she wore exercise clothes, having come directly from a private workout with a guest at the Casa Marina Resort. Her sundress from church was a balled-up, wrinkled mess inside her gym bag. No way was she wasting twenty minutes driving to her place in Stock Island just outside of Key West and back to freshen up. Not for him.

She refused to care whether or not she looked her best for the man who had walked away from her so easily.

Straightening her spine, Anamaría reached for the weathered metal door handle.

Her plan was simple. Get in and out quickly. Keep chitchat to a minimum. Remain professional and focused on her job—not the man—while she checked Alejandro’s vitals and the pin sites of the external fixator keeping his surgically aligned tibia shaft in place while his compound fracture healed.

No doubt Alejandro had come back kicking and screaming. Metaphorically speaking anyway. That had been the general consensus during the conversation she’d tried to tune out around the table at her familia’s mandatory weekly dinner the other night.

Nothing short of desperation and the need for assistance with his daily care—with a heavy dose of maternal insistence, no doubt—could have finally brought the prodigal Miranda son home.

Anamaría figured Alejandro wanted to be back in Key West about as much as she wanted him here.

That would be . . . not at all. As in zip. Zero. Zilch. Nada.

If luck was on her side, her visit now would be a quick “all’s well” checkup. With Señora Miranda’s fears for her eldest’s well-being calmed, Anamaría could be on her way having fulfilled her duty, intent on maintaining her distance until he left again.

Because he would leave again. Everyone knew that.

Only this time, when Alejandro Miranda boarded his flight to wherever his photography skills took him, he would not be taking her heart with him.

After having decided almost two years ago to quit waffling and just do it—her younger brother’s wise, albeit borrowed-from-Nike, advice—she was finally taking steps to make her true career dreams a reality. Thanks to social media influencer mentoring from her brother Luis’s fiancée, AM Fitness had started getting more buzz, Anamaría’s platforms were accruing more followers and subscribers, and, most recently, a talent agent had offered her representation.

There was absolutely no time for distractions or strolls down a memory lane plastered with Dead End signs.

Alejandro Miranda was her past.

Anamariá's eyes were focused on the future.

All she had to do was get through this one awkward meeting. Then they could go their separate ways again.

A tiny pang of regret seared a hot trail through Anamariá's chest.

Stubbornly she stomped on the hurtful sparks like the dying embers of a careless fire. She didn't have time for regrets. Instead, shoulders back, head high, she pushed through the wooden door, ready to face the man who had shattered her once tender heart.

Sitting on the worn floral-print sofa in his familia's living room, Alejandro Miranda cursed the bad luck that had dragged his ass back to Key West. The island home he'd left behind over a decade ago, by choice and by force.

His mami sat on one side of him, his abuela on the other, their dark eyes pools of concern. Across from him, his sister-in-law, Cece, and two-year-old niece, Lulu, perched on the matching love seat pushed against the opposite wall, their gazes trained on him expectantly. His brother, Ernesto, leaned against the armrest, hovering at his wife's side, uncertainty pinching his brow.

Trapped by their intent stares and unspoken expectations, Alejandro jabbed his fingers through his hair in frustration. Being back in his childhood home made him think about that old copy of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* he'd found at a secondhand bookstore in London several years ago. The title had initially grabbed him, but it was the words on the pages inside that really resonated.

According to Wolfe, you could never return to your old life, your old ways, even your old hometown, and find things the same. Ha! The guy obviously hadn't tried going back to a Cuban *familia* rooted in tradition.

Sure, some things had changed. Cece and Ernesto had been about to start high school, barely making heart eyes at each other,

when Alejandro had flown the restrictive coop his papi ruled. Curly-haired, pudgy-cheeked Lulu hadn't even been a thought in her parents' pre-pubescent minds. Now they were a family of three, with another about to arrive. And he had missed it all.

But the old portrait of his papi, mami, Ernesto, and him, snapped at the Sears studio twenty-plus years ago, still hung in its clunky frame on the pale blue wall above the love seat. A throw-back you wouldn't find in any gallery that displayed Alejandro's prized photographs today.

Worse, the strange mix of disappointment and hope on his mami's, abuela's, and Ernesto's faces weighed as heavily on his shoulders now as it had back then.

Twelve years away and still he sensed their keen desire for him to quit shirking his responsibilities. To come back and work alongside his papi, preparing to take over the restaurant someday. A life sentence that would shackle Alejandro's dream of traveling and photographing the world.

It was the reason why he had stayed away for so long. Well, one of several.

"Your papi is sorry he couldn't be here to welcome you home," his mom said. She slid to the edge of the sofa, leaning forward to plump the leaf green throw pillows cushioning his injured left leg resting on top of the rattan coffee table.

"Por favor," he muttered. "Let's not pretend. If I hadn't been stupid enough to fall off that rock ledge in El Yunque and wind up in this damn—"

"¡Oye! Language!" Ernesto interrupted. He jerked a thumb at his daughter, busy murmuring something to the baby doll cradled in her tiny arms.

¡Carajo!

The second *damn* nearly slipped out before Alejandro swallowed it. He wasn't used to having a kid around. Unless they were the subject of his photograph, and then his camera kept him occupied and at a professional distance.

He dipped his head in apology at his brother and Cece.

“If I hadn’t wound up in this position,” Alejandro continued, “I’d be on my way to Belize for my next shoot. Not . . .”

Not here, surrounded by the people he had let down. Girding himself for when his father came home from Miranda’s, their familia restaurant that was his pride and joy. The legacy Alejandro had spit on by walking away.

“Gracias a Dios que estás bien,” his abuela said softly.

Yeah, thank God he was okay. If “okay” meant slipping down a fucking waterfall and busting the shit out of his leg, then being forced to return to the home he could no longer claim as his to face the people he was destined to disappoint.

He squelched the sarcastic retort. It would only hurt his familia. Instead, he bit his tongue and sagged back against the worn sofa cushions. His leg ached, signaling the time neared for him to swallow another over-the-counter pain pill. He’d given a hard pass to the opioid and acetaminophen with codeine the doc had tried prescribing post-surgery in Puerto Rico. No way would he risk developing any sort of dependency or addiction. There’d been a time after his divorce when he’d come way too close to relying on the bottle to dull his thoughts. Years later, that flirtation with dependency still haunted him.

“How are you feeling, hijo?” His mami finger-combed his hair, a gentle caress that reminded him of times past. When he’d lain on this same couch or the double bed in his room and she’d soothed him when he was sick.

“Your face is pale,” she complained. “And you feel a little warm. Are you hurting?”

He shook his head, lying but unwilling to cause her more distress. His jaw clenched tightly against the ache radiating from two of the pin sites high on his shin, a couple inches below his knee.

“Kiss it better, ’Buena,” his little niece suggested.

Despite the fatigue and disillusion crushing him, Lulu’s cuteness drew his smile. Her pudgy cheeks plumped even more when she grinned back at him.

“I’m not sure that’s going to work, chiquita, but thank you for suggesting it.” He winked, pleased when a cute giggle burst from her mouth. She hugged her bald baby doll to her chest, twisting from side to side.

Her innocence reminded him of the toddler he’d photographed once in a remote Costa Rican village. Spending time with the villagers and volunteers as they toiled at constructing a rustic school building and the eco-brick steps leading up a slight incline to the site had been a humbling experience. One of many he was thankful for over the years.

Cece caressed Lulu’s curly hair, her expression gentle with maternal love when she looked over at him. “It’s good to see you, Ale. Even if it is like this.”

She thrust her chin at the Ilizarov external fixator with its four rings and multiple wires piercing his shin, holding his tibia in place. Lulu had already been warned to keep her distance from the cyborg-looking contraption after racing over to greet him and nearly bumping against the rings.

Carajo, just thinking about the agony her knocking into his leg would have caused made him wince.

“Gracias,” Alejandro replied to Cece.

He wanted to tell her it was good to be here. But they all knew it would be a lie.

Unlike them, he had always itched to be outside, not cooped up at the restaurant. He was more interested in seeing their small island from behind the lens of his camera. Capturing the beauty, wonder, and details so many missed in the busyness of life.

Making his own way in the world, not following someone else’s.

His eyes drifted shut on the past. The differences between them that still held true today. The differences that disappointed them, especially his father.

This visit was only for a short time. Until he was healed enough to have the external fixator rings and pins removed, allowing him more mobility. Then he’d be able to handle the stairs at his town house in Atlanta and he’d be fine on his own. As he had been for years.

Getting out of the wheelchair meant getting back to the job that gave his life purpose. And helped silence the occasional cry of loneliness that howled in the dark of night when his defenses were low.

“I still think we should have driven straight to the emergency room when we arrived here,” his mami said, concern lacing her words.

He swiveled his head on the back sofa cushion to meet her worried gaze. “Let me rest a few minutes; then I’ll remove the dressings and clean the sites. I’m sure everything’s okay. I’m just tired.”

“Bueno, I would feel better if you saw a professional.” His mami ran her fingers through his hair once again. The familiar gesture both soothed and left him longing for a simpler past.

“Don’t be silly. I’m fine,” Alejandro assured her.

“Humph, so I am silly for worrying about my son now, ha?” she demanded with a sniff. “That’s what you think of me?”

Arms crossed as he leaned against the far wall, Ernesto returned Alejandro’s exasperated grimace. They were familiar with this routine. When their mami was like this, you’d better pack your bags. Elena Miranda had a first-class ticket for you on a guilt trip you couldn’t avoid.

The fact that he’d held firm in not returning all these years, despite her heavy-handed attempts to lure him home, spoke of the yawning distance separating Alejandro and his father. The bridge connecting them having long been burnt to the ground.

“A mother should not want what is best for her children?” his mami droned on.

“I didn’t say—”

“Bueno, since you refused to go see the doctor, I asked someone to come see you.”

If he didn’t feel like death warmed over, he might have laughed at her over-protective nature. “Mami, few doctors make house calls anymore. Not the ones my insurance company will cover anyway.”

“I didn’t call a doctor. I called *familia*.”

Fatigue weighing on him, Alejandro slowly shook his head, not following. They didn’t have any physicians in their family. “What do you mean?”

Her brows furrowed, his mami exchanged a worried glance with his abuela, then shot a “don’t say anything” parental warning at his brother, who in turn threw an apologetic grimace Alejandro’s way.

Why did he suddenly feel like everyone else shared some kind of insider info he wasn’t privy to?

Unease slithered down his spine.

“We only need someone with medical experience to properly clean your wounds and tell me if I should make you go to the hospital,” his mami said. “When the physical therapist comes later this week, I can ask any new questions I have.”

“Someone with . . . wait. . . .” Alejandro shot a what-the-hell, how-could-you-let-her glare at his traitorous brother.

Ernesto ducked his head, a sure sign he knew what their mami was up to but refused to, or more like was wise enough not to, get in her bulldozing way.

“Mami,” Alejandro’s voice sharpened. “Who did you call?”

Her eyes narrowed at his gruff tone. A warning for him to curb his disrespect.

The stubbornness tightening his mami’s lips and the calming hand his abuela laid on his forearm answered Alejandro’s question as if the two women had spoken.

Dread descended like a dark storm cloud rolling in from the ocean.

“Por favor, tell me you didn’t—”

A sharp knock on the front door interrupted him. Before anyone could move, the hinges creaked in protest as the door slowly opened.

The rich, lilting voice that haunted his dreams, no matter how hard he tried to banish it, called, “Hola!” as Anamaría Navarro stepped inside.

“Anamawía!” Lulu squealed.

Dark curls bouncing, his niece hopped off the love seat. Her pink sandals slapped the gray and white tile as she ran with open arms toward the woman he hadn’t spoken to since their last uncomfortable Skype video chat over a decade ago. The night she unequivocally confirmed his worst fear, discarding him like chum tossed overboard.

Lulu’s skinny arms wrapped around Anamaría’s thighs in a tight squeeze. Joy lit his ex’s hazel eyes, sucker-punching him with vivid memories of her greeting him with a similar glee.

She bent to rub a hand on his niece’s back, her long dark ponytail swooping over her shoulder. “Hola, Lulu, this is a nice surprise.”

Lulu craned her neck to peer up at Anamaría, adoration dawning over her cute face. Damn if Alejandro couldn’t help but understand exactly how the kid felt. No matter how often he called himself a fool for yearning for someone who obviously hadn’t felt the same.

“Tío Ale, tiene an owie,” Lulu announced. Like the Frankenstein contraption encircling his leg wasn’t clue enough.

“Yes, he does have an owie,” Anamaría answered. “A pretty big one. But your abuela and abuelita are going to take good care of him. Just like they do with you.”

“Will you come pway wif me soon?”

“I hope so. I need me some Lulu time.” Anamaría hunkered down and tugged one of Lulu’s curls, eliciting a sweet giggle from the child.

The closeness between the two—the niece he’d only seen the one time Ernesto and his family had visited him in Atlanta and the woman who’d basically said he wasn’t enough for her—felt like a poisonous lance in his side. He may not fit in here, but it was obvious Anamaría still did. Without him.

Holding her baby doll tightly against her chest, Lulu skipped back to her parents. “Anamawía gonna babysit me!”

“Not today. But we’ll see when, mamita.” Ernesto gave his daughter’s butt a nudge to help her clamber onto the love seat.

“Text me, Cece, and I’ll let you know when I’m free. I’m sure you two could use a date night before your bundle of joy arrives.”

Cece circled a hand over her huge, beach ball-sized belly that stretched the material of her yellow blouse. A tired smile tugged up the corners of his sister-in-law’s wide mouth as she murmured her thanks.

Anamaría sent Lulu a wink and rose from her haunches.

His shock at her arrival waning, Alejandro allowed himself to take in her figure, on gorgeous display thanks to a pair of form-fitting black leggings and a tight pink tank, the words *AM Fitness* in a black scrawling font across the front. With her matching black and pink Nike sneakers and slicked-back high ponytail, she looked primed for an athletic photo shoot. She could have easily replaced one of the models for the *Women’s Health* spread he’d shot in the Bahamas last year.

The active teenager he’d known and loved had matured into a vibrant woman. All lush curves and honed muscles, the latter no doubt hard earned from her work as a firefighter paramedic and fitness trainer.

Without acknowledging him, Anamaría made the round of hello kisses and hugs with Ernesto and his family, even tickling Lulu’s baby doll under the chin, eliciting another precious giggle from Alejandro’s niece.

His ex crossed to the sofa, the scent of the tropical lotion she had always preferred tickling his nose when she stooped to brush a kiss on his abuela’s wrinkled cheek. The two exchanged warm smiles as his abuela patted Anamaría’s hand with a murmured, “Dios te bendiga, nena.”

The age-old wish for God’s blessing may be a trite phrase easily tossed out by many. But in this house, with the mini altar in the far corner, its pillar candle lit during his abuela’s daily prayer of the rosary, words of blessing held weight. His mami had al-

ready stopped at their altar earlier, giving thanks for her answered prayers for his return.

Anamaría hugged his mami, waved off the offer of a drink, set her black backpack on the tile floor next to the coffee table, and finally, *finally*, turned to him.

His body tensed, but he fought to maintain a neutral expression. To hide the anger, lingering bitterness, and disillusion of their past. All the while he greedily cataloged the features he had conjured in his dreams.

Her oval face with its high cheekbones, expressive hazel eyes, and slightly pointed chin remained as beautiful as ever. The faint crow's-feet lightly raying out from her eyes, telltale signs of laughter and days squinting under the bright Key West sun, added to her allure. The serious slant of her full lips made him ache for the enticing grin she'd so readily flashed at him in years past. And now easily shared with others in his familia instead. The round dark brown beauty mark an inch below the right corner of her mouth made him itch to press a kiss to it. Only, he was no longer free to do so.

That right had been taken away from him the moment she changed her mind and chose to stay here. Refusing to follow him to Spain after her papi's health had improved as promised.

The fact that Alejandro hadn't been enough for her had gutted him.

"So, I hear someone needs a little medical attention." Hands fisted on her hips, Anamaría got down to business, not even wasting time with a hello. Fine by him. The faster they got this unwanted reunion over, the better.

"I'm good. No need for you to be here," he told her.

"Alejandro!" His mami's dismayed gasp was accompanied by a slap of his thigh. "No seas rudo!"

Anamaría smirked, the quirk of her lips reminiscent of times she had teased him for getting in trouble in the past. "No worries, Señora Miranda. Making house calls and dealing with occasional

rudeness is in my job description. Lucky for Alejandro, I'm in a generous mood."

Generous?

Please. It wasn't like she was the one who'd been wronged. Instead of the one who had reneged on their shared dream. Then pushed him away.

Seeing as how she was about to poke around the leg now throbbing like an alien had implanted itself under his skin and decided this was the perfect time to burst out, Alejandro kept his accusation to himself.

The sooner they got this over with and she left, the sooner he could go back to reminding himself that he was better off without any of the pressures and recriminations being back in Key West presented. Better off without her.

Anamaría bent to peer at his leg. Her cool hand touched his left knee above the top external fixator ring, a soft caress that sent heat searing through him. He tensed and sucked in a sharp breath.

Her intuitive gaze cut his way. Eyes narrowed, she stared back at him, ensnaring him like a helpless insect caught in a spider's silky web.

Something dark and primitive passed between them. Proof that while some things had changed in his absence, his instant reaction to the only woman he had ever loved remained brutally the same.

Lips pressed in an irritated line, Anamaría slid her glance away, breaking their connection as she leaned closer to peer at his injured leg. Her ponytail swung down to brush against his skin at the hem of his shorts. Lust made a beeline up his leg, straight to his crotch.

Fucking great. Annoyed, he folded his hands in his lap to cover himself.

"Okay, let's see what we're dealing with here," she said matter-of-factly, as if the spark between them hadn't singed her the same way it had him.

Shit, he already knew what he was dealing with. His own personal hell.

Her motions brisk, Anamaría unzipped her backpack, removed and opened a first-aid kit, then set it on the coffee table. She tugged on a pair of light blue medical gloves, the snap of the rubbery material against her skin loud in the quiet living room. Poor Lulu’s eyes widened with apprehension.

Anamaría straightened, her impassive expression grating on his frayed nerves. “You ready?”

Was she kidding? Of course, he wasn’t fucking ready. For a boatload of reasons he refused to admit out loud.

Unfortunately, there was no getting around this humiliation.

With a brisk nod, he braced himself for the discomfort her ministrations would bring—to his leg, as well as his traitorous heart.

Chapter 2

Heart pounding, Anamaría knelt in between the floral sofa and wicker coffee table, her chest even with Alejandro's elevated leg. Even knowing what she was walking into, she hadn't been prepared for what greeted her.

Alejandro's handsome face was thinner, his skin slightly jaundiced rather than the usual sun-kissed bronze she'd seen in the pictures he occasionally posted on social media. His usually clean-shaven, angular jaw sported thick scruff, evidence that he hadn't shaved in at least a week. Pain pinched the edges of his mouth and shadowed his dark eyes in a broody expression she should not have found appealing.

Doggedly, Anamaría willed herself to concentrate on "the patient" and calm the nervous trembles humming through her. Steady hands were needed here. Both to ensure she didn't cause him more discomfort when she cleaned his pin sites and to dispel any question about whether or not being near him again might be a problem for her.

It wasn't. Not in the least.

She empathized with anyone who was injured, especially this

badly. It was part of why she'd chosen her profession. And she was damn good at what she did.

Forget that the last time they touched had been the night they'd said good-bye. Back when she'd thought he would change his mind about staying away for good. And he apparently thought she'd eventually be okay leaving everything behind. Their home. His familia. Hers.

Wrapped in a tight hug, she'd held on to him as they stood on the concrete seawall behind her parents' house in Big Coppitt Key. Above them, the midnight sky had sparkled with stars. A full moon shone its mercurial path over the dark open ocean at the end of the canal, disappearing in the distance. Just like he eventually would.

If she closed her eyes, Anamaría could sense the humidity and sorrow-laden air enveloping them. Smell the salty seawater mixed with the sweet scent of the bougainvillea trailing up the back stairs. Feel the harsh misery of her heart breaking.

Instead, she kept her eyes wide open, intent on doing her job, then getting the hell out of here.

Her fingers softly palpated the area a couple inches away from where one of the wires attached to the top ring on the external fixator pierced his skin. Two and a half weeks post-surgery, it was surprising to find bandages covering his pin sites. If there had been complications with healing, the surgeon in Puerto Rico wouldn't have, shouldn't have, let Alejandro travel.

"I'm assuming the bandages were placed here as a precaution to avoid germs during your trip home?" she asked.

When he didn't answer, she glanced at him from under her lashes.

Sweat beaded his upper lip and brow. Teeth gritted, his jaw muscles straining, he gave a jerky nod in response. Pain flashed like lightning in his nearly black eyes.

"Anamawía make Tío Ale better?" Lulu asked, her high-pitched voice breaking the tension filling the room as all the adults watched with varying degrees of concern.

“She’s going to try, mamita,” Cece answered.

Try being the operative word here. Based on the tension radiating off Alejandro, he was either really pissed to see her or experiencing a higher degree of discomfort than he should. Maybe both.

As for him being pissed, he’d have to suck it up. She wasn’t thrilled about their impromptu reunion, either. It had their scheming mothers written all over it.

But the pain from his injury . . . that she might be able to help. Not, however, with this particular audience breathing down her neck. All of them waiting for any sign that past hurts lingered. Or worse, a hint they’d been laid to rest and the potential for a new future for her and Alejandro still existed.

She’d bet her next Kelly day that her mom and Señora Miranda had already started praying a novena for the latter. And Anamaría, like most firefighters, wouldn’t bet her monthly extra day off on anything less than a sure winner.

Pushing aside the irritating thought of their mothers’ match-making, Anamaría turned back to her task. Not the person.

“Okay, everyone, while I’m sure Alejandro enjoyed the welcome home fiesta, we should move him to his room, where he’ll be more comfortable,” Anamaría announced. “After I finish checking his pin sites, Tío Ale needs to take a nap, like Lulu. Rest is important for his recovery.”

Plus, getting him to his room would allow them a small measure of privacy. Not exactly what she personally wanted, but necessary for her to do her job correctly. Instinct told her Alejandro wouldn’t answer her questions about his discomfort levels truthfully. Not in front of his worry-prone mother.

“Ernesto, can you help me?” Anamaría motioned toward the wheelchair parked in the combination dining-kitchen area.

It wasn’t easy, but after a few grunts of complaint peppered with muffled curses, Alejandro settled into the chair, his left leg propped up on the elevated footrest. A light sheen of perspiration covered his haggard face, and she almost felt sorry for him.

Irritated at her reaction, she shoved her first-aid kit in her back-

pack, then slung the bag over her shoulder to wheel him toward the back of the house and the three bedrooms. Señora Miranda followed close behind them.

As they neared Alejandro's old room, Anamaría slowed her steps, hesitating.

Memories assailed her. Evil interlopers sabotaging her bid to remain aloof.

Study dates, movie nights, long afternoons spent perusing the latest pictures Alejandro had taken around the island and discussing their lofty dreams. Quick stolen kisses and innocent touches, because the bedroom door always remained open—Miranda and Navarro house rules.

Their last year of high school, when they'd both been ready, they had taken advantage of the rare opportunities when they'd had this house or her parents' place to themselves. Or stolen clandestine hours lying on a blanket, making out under the stars in the stern of her papi's boat when he left it docked in the backyard canal overnight, ready for an early-morning fishing trip.

Señora Miranda scooted around the chair to push open Alejandro's bedroom door, beckoning them in. Anamaría steeled herself and crossed the threshold, stepping foot inside the sanctuary where she'd once woven her life's dreams. In her naïveté not realizing the fragility of the threads that tied her and Alejandro together.

Comfort and dismay crashed against each other as Anamaría's gaze trailed around his room. The space remained unchanged. A shrine to the son who had walked away without a backward glance.

The same navy comforter draped the double bed pressed up against the far wall underneath the window overlooking the side yard. The same sturdy wood dresser sat to the right of the door, the matching dark-stained desk and bookcase on the left next to the closet. On the nightstand, the same framed picture of her mugging for him and his camera before they left for senior prom. Her framed copy sat in a box shoved high on a shelf in her hall closet.

Señora Miranda rolled a black carry-on suitcase into the closet, then tugged the bifold door closed again.

Anamaría shut off the flood of useless memories. She had no time for foolishness.

“Okay, let’s get you into bed.” As soon as the unintentionally suggestive words left her mouth, Anamaría bit the inside of her lips, attempting to squelch an embarrassed curse.

“I don’t remember you being this forward,” Alejandro teased. He glanced at his bed, then back to her. Despite his lecherous smirk, his jaw muscles clenched, his discomfort obvious. Either at their awkward situation or due to his injury.

“Stop being a wiseass. Here, I can—”

“I’ve got it.” The veracity of his words was negated by his sharp hiss of breath when he grasped his injured leg to lower it off the footrest.

“Are you done being a tough guy?” she berated. “Let me help you before you hurt yourself.”

Señora Miranda stepped toward them, but Anamaría shook her head. If he was in as much pain as she surmised, he wouldn’t be much help getting into bed. The last thing they needed was the older woman injuring her back trying to heft his weight.

“Wait a second,” she ordered, reaching down to lower the footrest to make the transition easier. “Now, put your hands on my shoulders for support.”

Bending her knees, she lowered to a half squat in front of his chair, his right knee in between her legs. She gritted her teeth, ignoring her pulse blipping at the anticipation of him touching her again.

Several seconds ticked by without Alejandro making a move to follow her instructions. Anamaría glanced at him from under her lashes.

A deep groove etched the space between his brows at his stubborn frown.

She huffed, then matched him scowl for scowl. “Look, I carried a two-hundred-pound dummy over my shoulder down two

flights of stairs during drills yesterday. I think I can handle another dummy—”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

Palms up, Anamaría crooked her fingers in a “come on” gesture at him. The sooner they got this over with, the better.

With a disgruntled sigh, Alejandro set his hands on her bare shoulders. One of his thumbs slipped under her tank top strap to slide against her skin. Warmth seeped into her chest, and she barely kept her eyes from fluttering closed.

“Now, using only your right leg and my shoulders, push yourself to a stand. Do *not* put any pressure on your left. Got it?” she ordered.

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to,” he muttered.

He shifted, then froze on a hiss. His fingers dug into her shoulders, disgruntled pain filling his black-coffee eyes. His piercing gaze darted to his mom, then back to Anamaría in a silent plea for her to not say anything. Keep the degree of his discomfort a secret from his mom.

Anamaría answered with a faint, affirmative tuck of her chin. “Okay . . . one. Two. Three.”

His muffled groan punctuated the end of her count as he shifted his weight onto his right foot and bent forward. The muscle in his thigh flexed with the exertion and she grasped his waist to both steady and support him. The hard jut of his hip bones pressed into her palms, proof of his recent post-accident weight loss.

Hunched over, he pressed the side of his face against her temple, his breathing labored. The urge to hug him closer, give thanks that the idiot was actually safe, consumed her. This close, his woody, patchouli scent assailed her senses, setting her body tingling in places it had absolutely no business tingling.

Jaw clenched, she ignored the traitorous reactions, focusing on the task at hand.

Together they shuffle-twisted toward the mattress in a move that had them imitating two middle schoolers at their first dance,

awkwardly holding each other at arm's length. Leaving room for the Holy Spirit between them, like the nuns at St. Mary's used to warn the students.

With his fingers still clenching her shoulders, she guided his hips, turning him so he could sit on the edge of his bed. Without impressionable little Lulu around to hear, Alejandro didn't bother whispering his curses as he pushed himself farther onto the mattress while Anamaría carefully held his injured leg aloft.

Señora Miranda slid several cushiony pillows beneath his knee, careful of the top Ilizarov ring. She hovered over her son, mumbling prayers and Spanish platitudes about her precious *niñito's* misery. Typical Cuban mami hovering, no matter her children's ages.

Seizing her window of opportunity, Anamaría put part one of her impromptu plan into action. "Señora Miranda, would you mind bringing Alejandro some water? It's important for him to stay hydrated."

"Ay, sí, I will get it right away. Anything else, *nena?*" his mom answered.

"Maybe a small snack. I'm sure he'll need to take his pain medicine soon. Right?" She directed the question to Alejandro.

Lips pinched with obvious discomfort, he nodded.

"¿Un sandwich de jamón y queso?" his mom asked.

"A ham and cheese sandwich would be great. Grilled, maybe?" Anamaría suggested, intent on getting his mom out of the room for as long as possible.

Not that Anamaría had any keen interest in being alone with him. But something wasn't right, and he'd made it clear he didn't want his mom to know.

As soon as the older woman left and the slap of her Kino sandals on the tile floor faded, Anamaría leveled a stern stare Alejandro's way.

"Truth. On a scale of one to ten, what's your pain level?"

"One," he grunted as he pushed his hands into the mattress

and tried shifting his position on the bed. His sharp intake of breath and full-body wince belied his answer.

“Try again, and don’t bullshit me. After what you’ve been through, this is no time to play he-man.”

“I was always more of a Batman fan, remember? You know, dark and dangerous. Lots of toys to play with.” His full lips twisted in what resembled more of a sneer than his cocky grin. The angles and planes of his haggard yet still remarkably handsome face taut with anguish.

Heaving a beleaguered sigh, Anamaría set her backpack on the low dresser.

“Look, cut the crap, okay? It’s obvious neither one of us really wants to be here.” Her back to him, she unzipped her bag, purposefully keeping her gaze away from the square mirror hanging on the eggshell-painted wall over the dresser. “Me, in this room. And you, anywhere on the entire island. But we can’t change that, so don’t make it any harder or more uncomfortable than it needs to be. Let me do my damn job and appease your mother, then we don’t have to see each other again. Deal?”

The words sliced her throat like shards of her broken heart forcing their way up. She reminded herself of her vow to no longer allow a ghost from her past to haunt her present.

“You look good,” he said, his voice gruff.

Her stupid heart tripped, then lurched into a higher gear. She clenched her fists, cursing the injustice of her reaction to his words.

Unwilling to let him see the effect his too little–too late declaration had on her, Anamaría ducked her head, pretending to search for something inside her backpack.

“Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you look like death warmed over,” she countered.

If death sported a week’s worth of sexy scruff covering a square jaw and highlighting his angular cheeks and full lips, plus a head of thick black wavy hair, windblown and mussed in a carefree style some paid hundreds of dollars in hair product to achieve.

Not that she had noticed or anything.

Behind her, Alejandro gave a hoarse chuckle. The raspy sound sent an unwanted shiver of awareness skittering down her spine.

“What are you talking about? I just got off a cruise,” he complained.

“Practically a stowaway. Leave it to you to hitch a ride on a cruise ship because you’re not medically cleared to fly.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

And he’d obviously had no will to return home until he’d been forced.

She’d known this already. Still, hearing his confirmation hurt. Not that she’d let him know.

Shoving aside her wallet inside her backpack, she grabbed the first-aid kit. “Well, unlike the rest of the passengers, you neglected to disembark with a relaxed smile and new tan lines. And that souvenir of yours . . . it kinda blows.”

“I didn’t bring this contraption on my leg home by choice,” he mumbled. “Believe me, I’ve been better.”

That made two of them.

A peek at his reflection in the mirror found him hunched forward, tracing a finger along the top Ilizarov ring.

“I’m wondering, is this is a new look or were you already going for gaunt and haggard before you went and slipped off that rock ledge while you were . . .” She set the kit and the bottle of sterile water on the dresser top. “Exactly what *were* you doing in the El Yunque National Forest, climbing up the side of a waterfall, alone, anyway?”

When he didn’t answer, she glanced in the mirror again, surprised to find him staring back at her.

Dark eyes hooded, he lay sprawled on top of the comforter, a white-and-navy-checked pillowcase covering the pillow tucked behind his back, matching the two under his knee. His lanky frame was too thin. His skin too sallow. And damn it, his magnetism too strong.

A couple months ago, his image on her cell phone screen had appeared larger than life. Mimicking the photographs that made

him a sought-after talent. Broad shoulders and chest evident under a formfitting gray tee tucked into a pair of black jogging pants cinched at the ankles. Muscular arms looped around a young guy on his left and a strikingly beautiful woman on his right, Alejandro shot a cocky, confident grin at whoever snapped the photo captioned “Ready to celebrate a successful shoot on location at El Morro, Viejo San Juan, Puerto Rico” followed by the camera and Puerto Rican flag emojis.

He didn’t post pictures of himself very often. When he did, she occasionally allowed herself a glimpse. Or two. Nothing more.

Even then, she couldn’t help noting the laugh lines radiating from the corners of his nearly black eyes. The faint grooves on either side of his mouth. Testaments of the laughter in his life. The joy he found wherever he was and in the people he spent time with.

The fact that she wasn’t one of them shouldn’t . . . couldn’t . . . *didn’t* bother her. Not anymore.

The mystery woman’s infatuated expression as she gazed up at him meant nothing to Anamaría. Her life and his had been separate for a decade. No longer the inseparable duo their classmates, familia, and friends had dubbed them.

He kept himself busy off photographing the world. Making a name for himself. Cavorting with people from all walks of life—celebrities and up-and-comers, hardworking villagers and unsung heroes in communities across the globe.

She was the one who had stayed in place. Marking time without realizing it. Unable to fully commit to either of the two serious relationships she’d been involved in. Silencing her secret dreams for too long.

But she was done with that. Over the past two years, she’d put her dating life on hold to dive 110 percent into her business. Now *she* was going places, too.

“When I set off to explore El Yunque, it was not with this outcome in mind.” He gestured at his leg.

“Accidents like yours rarely are. But I see them all the time on

the job,” she answered, relieved to return her focus to his injury. Not their broken past.

“The rainforest has been hit hard by hurricanes in recent years. I wanted to document some of the change.”

Anamaría stepped toward the bed. “We’ve had some harsh years with hurricanes here in the Keys, too. Big Pine really took a beating from Hurricane Irma.”

“Yeah, I saw video and images online.” Alejandro shook his head in commiseration. “Thankfully, El Yunque’s slowly coming back to life. When I finished my job in Puerto Rico, I stuck around for a bit before I was supposed to move on to Belize. That day, I planned an easy hike. Thinking I’d unwind to the coquí singing their high-pitched frog song from the trees. A cool mist on my face from the rush of water tumbling over the rocks. Then I spotted an iguaca.”

“Huh? You mean, an iguana?”

“No, it’s my tibia that’s banged up, not my head.” The corners of his wide mouth curved in a teasing grin she nearly found herself returning.

“An iguaca,” he enunciated the word. “It’s Taino for ‘parrot.’ Because of the efforts of those working at the Iguaca Aviary, the endangered Puerto Rican parrot population has started increasing. Still, you don’t see many. And when you do . . .”

“You can’t help but capture its photograph,” she finished, knowing him almost as well as she knew herself. Or so she’d once thought.

The reminder was a sobering one.

His camera had been like an extension of his hands. Always there, somehow finding the perfect moment, a beautiful or moving image the average eye may have missed, but his never did.

“So, you were snapping pics of this endangered bird and decided you could fly off the edge of the waterfall along with it.”

“Well, it wasn’t quite—”

“Only, gravity had other ideas,” she said, barely quelling the stark fear tightening her chest at the image of him toppling over

the mottled gray and black rocks, his blood mingling with the water spilling off the jagged, slippery surface.

Driving an ambulance, she had witnessed her fair share of death and carnage, far too often the result of foolish thinking. She didn't have to rely on her imagination to conjure any number of potential accidents when a daredevil like Alejandro went hiking on his own. The idea of him or any of her loved ones being the victim on a call she responded to at the station made her blood run colder than the springs she'd once tubed down in Central Florida.

"Not quite," Alejandro countered. "I followed the parrot up a rock ledge I'd seen another hiker traverse. Actually got some incredible pictures of him in flight. A few other beauties with him perched on a tree limb." He arched an impudent brow, far too sexy for someone in need of a bath, a shave, and a fatten-me-up Cuban mami meal. "I was feeling pretty satisfied with my Spidey climbing talents. Right up until my damn foot slipped and my non-superhero status became clear."

A laugh bubbled up her throat at his self-deprecating grumble and perturbed grimace. Anamaría slapped a hand over her mouth to smother it.

"The only good thing was that I managed to save my camera from any damage." He cradled his hands to his chest as if protecting a priceless object.

Anamaría snorted in disbelief as she sat on the edge of his bed facing him, careful not to bump his leg. "So, your camera's fine, but your tibia shaft didn't fare nearly as well. Why does that not surprise me?"

"Hey, anything for the best shot." He spread his hands wide, his shoulders rising and falling with a shrug. "You know how it is. No pain, no gain."

"Uh-uh. That's my line as a fitness instructor," she countered. "Sounds much better when I say it."

"Depends on your perspective."

"And we've always had different ones." Coño, the jab slipped out before she could stop it.

Tension snapped in the air. The old accusation hung between them like overripe mangos left to rot on the branch.

“Forget I said that,” she offered, raising a hand to stem any argument from him. “It does no one, least of all us, any good to go there. The past is . . .”

“The past,” he completed her thought when she let her voice trail off.

Regret and the staunch determination to ignore it warred inside her wounding her with each strike.

Alejandro’s sober gaze ensnared hers. “I had no idea she called you. If I’d known what she was thinking, I would have—”

“Been unable to stop her,” Anamaria interrupted. “She’s a force of nature, that woman. Much like my mami.”

“Dios mío, deliver me from meddling mamis. One of many things I don’t miss about Key West.” His head dropped back to thump against the wall behind him.

If she were a glutton for punishment, she’d ask what the other “many things” might be. But there was no need to confirm her place of honor on his undoubtedly long “don’t miss” list. That fact had become cruelly apparent the second she’d found out about his marriage to some swimsuit model. Less than six months after his and Anamaria’s final video chat.

Dios, she would never forget the day her mom had sat her down at the familia dinner table. Her mami’s face shadowed with remorse. Brown eyes shiny with unshed tears. Her hands twisting with unease, afraid of how her baby girl would react.

The news of Alejandro’s new wife had hit Anamaria like an unexpected backdraft, a whoosh of heated air and flames blowing over her. Incinerating her silly adolescent dreams and young love until they were nothing but a pile of smoke-tinged ashes.

Not that Alejandro needed to know how decimated his actions had left her. Or the errant choices she’d made in the ensuing years.

Her days of self-sabotage, of unwittingly falling into the trap of holding herself back, were over. She had her eyes on the future now. Not the past.

“Yeah, well, get used to that meddling and hovering,” she warned him, scooting a little closer to peer at his injury. “If you’re stuck here while you convalesce and get back on your feet, odds are that’ll be at least a couple months. Longer if you’re hardheaded and don’t take care of yourself or follow your doctor’s orders. Like I’m guessing you haven’t been?”

His bland expression didn’t fool her.

“Thought so,” she muttered.

“Believe me, I’m not pleased about having to drop or postpone my bookings for the next few months. I should be enjoying Belize. Not cooped up here. And after my mother’s move today, I am all for doing whatever it takes to speed up my recovery and get the hell out of here.”

Of course he was. Leaving “the Rock” had always been his goal. She’d simply thought he meant to eventually return, and not by force.

Her mistake.

“That’s news I’m sure your doctor will approve of.” Opening the first-aid kit, Anamaría set a handful of cotton balls on the lid, adding medical tape and gauze to the supplies. “Let’s see what we’re dealing with. That way we can make sure you’re back out there snapping the next Alejandro Miranda award-winning photograph as soon as possible.”

“So, you heard about those . . . the awards?” he clarified when she tilted her head in confusion.

“Por favor.” She rolled her eyes at his failed attempt at modesty. “The way news travels around this island? In our comunidad? Who didn’t hear, whether they wanted to or not?”

He waved off her backhanded praise, but his lips curved in a cocky tilt she would have tickled into a howl of laughter in the past. Not today, though.

“I’m surprised they didn’t hold a freaking parade,” she went on. “Although it probably would have been awkward when the guest of honor didn’t bother showing.”

His playful grin dissolved. Lips pressed together in a tight line, he rubbed a hand at the scruff on his cheeks, looking oddly uncomfortable with the truth.

A sliver of guilt for her rudeness pricked her conscience. A bigger person would congratulate him on his success. Compliment his magazine covers, gush over the breath-taking, cinematic images he'd taken across the world.

She wanted to be that kind of ex. Given a little more time to get used to having him home, grudgingly, she might get there. Maybe. At least, she could pretend better.

Bending her head, she concentrated on an easier task, carefully removing the medical tape that attached a piece of gauze around one of the pin sites.

"How 'bout we try this again," she suggested. "Truthfully, how's your pain?"

A puff of warm breath teased the tendrils of hair that had escaped her ponytail as Alejandro blew out a weighty sigh. "Is there some kind of doctor-patient confidentiality? I have a rep to protect."

"Quit being a smartass," she grumbled, shooting him a droll glance before pulling back another piece of medical tape. "Come on, fess up or I can't help you properly."

"Fine. But my mom worries enough as it is, so whatever we don't have to tell her, let's keep it that way." He waited for her nod before continuing. "It's holding steady at a seven."

"That's not good."

"Ha! You're telling me," he grumbled, wincing when she gently palpated his skin around the top pin sites.

"Oh, believe me, I haven't even begun my bad patient lecture." And she planned to relish every word.

Ten minutes later, Señora Miranda had yet to return with Alejandro's snack. His mood had lightened based on his irreverent quips, and Anamaría had finished cleaning each of the pin sites, relieved to find most of them healing well. One at the top of his

shin was a little more tender than the others, not that his tough-guy act had let him admit it. She'd had to pester him for info. About that and his refusal to take stronger pain relievers.

"You have got to stay on top of your meds," she warned him. Not for the first time. Unfortunately, his hardheaded nature had failed to mellow with maturity. Reminding herself to stay in paramedic mode was all that kept her from throttling him in frustration. "If you don't, you're only chasing the pain and the medicine won't be able to do its job. It's basic first aid one-oh-one."

"Has anyone told you, you have a remarkable bedside manner?"

"Stop it," she grumbled, fully aware his teasing was a diversionary tactic.

Head tipped back to rest against the wall again, he eyed her under hooded lids. "I'm sure everyone you help sends your boss glowing reviews. Am I right?"

"My Captain," she corrected with a reproachful glare. "And flattery won't stop me from lecturing you."

He flashed her another tired grin, this one tinged with chagrin because he knew he'd been caught.

"Or stop me from siccing your mom on you if necessary." So much for remaining impersonal.

Where was his mami anyway?

Anamaría would lay money on odds that the older woman was purposefully taking her time grilling that sandwich, intent on leaving them alone in the bedroom as long as possible. My, how times had changed. In many ways.

"Hey now, play fair," he complained, nudging her knee with his fingers.

Irritated by his ability to so easily fall back into the banter they had once shared, pecking away at her steadfast resolve to keep him at a distance, Anamaría tugged off her medical gloves with a snap. She dropped them along with the other trash in the plastic waste bag she had brought, then jerked the ends closed in a tight knot.

"I'm not playing," she argued, her frustration hitting its limit.

“This isn’t funny. You didn’t have to witness the palpable fear on your mom’s face when she told us about your accident.”

He blinked, clearly taken aback by her brusque tone. “Hey, I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t hear the tremble in your abuela’s voice when a group of us gathered at the Grotto after mass last Sunday to pray a healing rosary in your name.” Anger spiked and Anamaría gave it free rein, slamming her first-aid kit shut. “Or try to answer Lulu’s questions about why her ’buela was so sad.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“I don’t think you do. You never have.”

He reared back at her accusation, banging his head against the wall and wincing in pain when his left leg slipped off the pillow propping it up.

Remorse flooded through her.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” he ground out, pushing her hands away when she tried to help him readjust his position.

She should stop pushing.

Back away from this argument.

Leave before she said too much.

But the words she’d kept bottled inside flowed from her like water from a fire hydrant cranked open on the street. “It means, how do you think they felt that time you were nearly trampled by a bull in Spain? Or when you had that hang-gliding fiasco somewhere in South America?” She gripped the plastic kit tightly to keep herself from grabbing his shoulders and shaking some sense into him. “Or the moped accident in Thailand? Or, let me see, what else was there? Oh, the—”

“I said, I get it,” he repeated, impatience hammering his words.

“Are you sure?” She jerked her head, punctuating her question, and her ponytail swished over her shoulder.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Jaw tight, lips pressed in an angry line, he glared back at her.

“Do you really understand how your actions affect those who love you?” Those who also longed for him to come home. A group she no longer belonged to. For her own good.

Her question hung between them, challenging him with its truth.

Several tense seconds later, his shoulders slackened. His dark eyes shifted, becoming deep cesspools of disappointment and . . . was that regret?

No. No way would she let herself fall for that.

“Yes, I do,” he murmured. “Believe me, I understand how the people we love are often the ones who hurt us the most.”

Wait, was that some kind of dig at her? Indignation burned deep in her chest, scalding her heart. Questions screeched like bitter banshees in her head. Crying out for answers.

Why, in all these years, had there been no effort on his part to make peace with his father?

Why had he walked away and never looked back? Then stayed away for so damn long?

Why hadn't she, their comunidad, their island, not been enough as his home base? A safe port to drop anchor after his travels.

Why? Why? Why?

The question reverberated in her head, yet she refused to ask. Refused to care about the answers anymore. They didn't matter. Couldn't matter.

Alejandro laid a hand over one of hers. She flinched, surprise catching her breath. A rough callous on his palm scraped her skin, and prickles of awareness skittered up her forearm, arcing across her breasts.

“I didn't mean to cause them—*anyone*—any distress,” he said.

His face pinched with contrition, he squeezed her hand, as if willing her to believe him.

She tried. Part of her wanted to. But her sense of self-preservation wrapped around her like a force field, protecting her battered soul.

“I'm not the one you owe that apology to,” she said. “You and

I were done a long time ago. We've both moved on. But your familia, that's—"

"Ay, look at you two." Señora Miranda swept into the room carrying a serving tray with two plates and bottles of water. "It makes my heart so happy to see you together again."

Anamaría hopped off the bed as if she and Alejandro were still two teens, caught in the middle of something illicit.

"Mami, no te metas," he cautioned.

"Don't get in the middle of what?" His mother's wide-eyed expression telegraphed the opposite of innocence.

As Anamaría shoved her supplies inside her backpack, she caught Alejandro's resigned gaze in the mirror. They might not agree about the past, but it was obvious they agreed on one important point in the present: They were not happy about their mothers entertaining the idea that the two of them might reconnect.

That ship had sailed. And, like the famed *Atocha* Spanish galleon of centuries past, it had crashed against the Keys' ocean reef, sinking to the sandy depths. Buried in a watery grave. Only there was no sunken treasure to recover here. Despite the gleam in Señora Miranda's eyes.

"Come, I made you un san'wich, también, nena." She waved Anamaría over to the bed. "Your mamá told me that you met a client right after mass this morning, then came straight here. Tienes que tener hambre."

No, she wasn't hungry. More like frustrated. By his presence. By her inability to remain aloof. She didn't need to eat. What she needed was to get out of here.

And yet she couldn't be rude and refuse his mom's invitation. Based on the triumphant gleam in the older woman's eyes, Señora Miranda had counted on Anamaría's ingrained manners.

His mom patted the edge of Alejandro's bed, indicating Anamaría should sit.

He hitched a shoulder, the twist of his lips miming that there was no use arguing.

As she stared at the insistent mother and insufferable son, a flashbulb flicked on inside Anamaría's head, blinding her with clarity.

Dios mío, she might be in deeper trouble than she had anticipated. One meddling Cuban *mami* was hard to outwit. Two teaming up?

This called for reinforcements. As in, her brothers and their partners.

First, she'd have to finagle her way out of this impromptu, unwelcome lunch date with her hardheaded, sinfully sexy, wanderlust-driven ex.