

Chapter 1

Alex Quintana finished mopping the red tile floor of his family's restaurant. The late-evening silence eased the knots in his shoulders and calmed his worries.

A freak March snowstorm had made his sister and the cooks nervous, so he'd happily agreed to stay and close.

It wasn't like he had someone waiting for him at home.

A thumping sound broke the silence. Probably a truck with chains driving by, though surely the snow wasn't *that* bad.

He put away the mop and emptied the dirty water, then looked with satisfaction around the neat kitchen. That hadn't taken too long. Next, he walked out to the arched doorway between the two small dining rooms, making sure everything was clean there, as well. It had to be, for his abuela's 80th birthday party tomorrow.

Thump. Thump. Thump. It sounded like someone was knocking on the front door, pounding on it, really. But who?

He opened the door, and a gust of cold wind swept in. He peered at the woman who stood outside, arms wrapped around herself, barely visible in the blowing snow. Man, that had gotten deep fast. The whole world was white.

Below, he heard a whine and looked down. A dog? Tall, white and curly-haired, maybe a poodle, trying to push its way inside.

"Can we come in?"

Alex shifted to usher them inside. But, wait. The last three out-of-town women who'd showed up at the restaurant had been gold diggers. Was this woman another one? He stopped, blocking the door with his body, and studied her.

"Please, Mister! My dog is hurt."

She'd brought a dog and arrived in a snowstorm. Creative, at least. "Sure," he said with a sigh and stood back, making room for the woman and dog to enter.

He pushed the door closed against the wind and then turned to her. Red, wavy hair down past her shoulders, strong cheekbones, and big bluish-green eyes. Okay, a knockout, but still. "This wasn't the night to come out. How'd you know I was here?"

She didn't answer and he saw that her hands were red and bare as she knelt and ran them over her dog, brushing the snow off of him. Her teeth chattered when she looked up. "Do you happen to have a towel?"

"Bring him back here. It's warmer." Even if she was out to take advantage, he couldn't turn away a freezing woman and animal. He put a hand on the small of her back to guide her toward the kitchen. She pulled away.

But not too soon that he didn't get a whiff of the vanilla scent of her hair.

"We can dry off your dog. Get you both something to drink." He filled a bowl for the dog and put water in a kettle for tea. "Here, take off your coat. It looks soaked."

She glanced up at him, her eyes guarded, and then unzipped her jacket and handed it to him. He couldn't help but notice her amazing figure, just before he quickly turned away

to hang up her coat. "Do you want my jacket to wrap around you until you warm up?"

"No, it's okay," she said. "That's your coat. You're closed. I wouldn't have come here at all, but I was trying to get off the interstate and the back roads weren't plowed. My car slid into a ditch."

She was a good liar, he'd give her that. "How far back?"

"About a mile. And the car is way stuck."

"You walked a mile in this."

"Yes, and Bear's paw is hurt. I saw blood in the snow." She knelt beside the dog again, biting her lip.

"*That dog's name is Bear?*" It looked more like a giant, groomed mop. He'd have guessed a name like Fifi.

She grimaced. "His real name is Barrington. It seemed too pretentious for a dog, so I nicknamed him Bear."

"Why'd you come here?" Against his will, he was starting to believe her. "Nobody lands in Arcadia Valley by accident." He handed her a clean dishtowel to dry off the dog's paw.

She did so, gently. "The interstate is terrible," she said without looking up. "Cars and trucks all over the road. This was the nearest exit."

So maybe she wasn't a fangirl. She didn't even seem to recognize him. "I'm Alex Quintana," he said, to test out his theory.

She held out a hand to him with no sign of recognition. "Patricia Aiken. I was hoping I could get to a hotel. Is there one nearby?"

"There's the Sweetwater Motel. I think I have the number." He scrolled through his contacts. "Here it is." He read it out.

She fumbled in her pocket, pulled out her phone, and tried to punch in the numbers. When she asked him to repeat for the second time, he saw her rubbing pink fingers against the sides of her jeans. She was still cold.

"Hey, sit down over here." He pulled a stool over to the warmest spot in the kitchen, in between the big old oven and the heating vent. "I'll call and see if I can get you a room."

But when he reached the Sweetwater and explained the woman's situation, Chamu actually laughed. "We're full up and then some," she said. "Have you seen the roads?"

Alex blew out a breath. "I guess I could take her to Veronica's place." His sister didn't have a lot of space, but she'd gladly offer a couch.

"You cannot go anywhere," Chamu said. "One moment." There were voices in the background, the sound of a TV turned up loud. "Yes, all the roads in the county are officially closed, except to emergency vehicles. There is black ice underneath all this snow."

"Wow. Okay, thanks. Be safe." He ended the call and turned to Patricia, who was looking concerned. "You'll have to stay here," he said. "Actually, *we'll* have to stay here."

She looked around the kitchen, distress obvious on her face. "Oh, I couldn't..."

"The alternative is to walk a mile to your car and freeze there. Roads are closed." He offered a reassuring smile. "The restaurant's warm, and I'm sure I can dig us up some blankets."

"You're staying too?" She sounded appalled.

"Well..." He looked around. "I *could* go sleep in your car." And when she appeared to seriously consider the notion he waved his hand. "Joking! And I can't sleep in my SUV, because I let my sister drive it home. Her compact is out in the

parking lot, but this—” He gestured at his oversized self. “This body doesn’t fit into a tiny car, and I’m a *total* wimp about cold.”

She frowned and looked around the restaurant.

“This place is plenty big. You can have one dining room, and I’ll take the other.” He gestured toward the front of the restaurant. “I’d only ask that the dog be your roommate, not mine.”

As he’d hoped, his gentle joking seemed to relax her.

The dog, who’d been patiently chewing on his foot, let out a whine. Leaning close, Alex saw more blood. “If he’ll let me, I can try to bind that up.”

“He’s really gentle. Thank you.”

Fortunately, the kitchen’s first aid kit was well stocked, and Alex found gauze and tape and antibiotic cream. He cleaned the injury in a small bucket of water while Patricia held the dog, and then wrapped the injured paw in gauze. Then he applied a light pressure bandage, leaving the dog’s toes free.

How many times had he bandaged himself or his teammates? This wasn’t so different. The momentary flashback to the camaraderie in the locker room or at the trainer gave him a pang.

“Mmm, the aroma of wet dog,” Patricia joked, wrinkling her nose.

That brought him out of his nostalgia. “Times ten. He has a lot of fur.”

“Goldendoodles tend to.” As she held the dog’s head, trying to keep him from chewing its paw, Alex studied her. Her wavy red hair was drying into a wild tangle of curls, her green eyes framed by long lashes. And she wasn’t a stick, but a real woman with curves. *Maravillosa*.

But he'd been proven an idiot before by trusting a beautiful woman. "You a sports fan?" he asked casually. "Been following the spring training news?" He watched her carefully for a guilty look.

"No." She looked down, her cheeks pink.

Aha. He leaned closer. "You sure about that?"

"I don't really follow sports," she admitted with an apologetic shrug. "I've tried, but I can't seem to keep the rules in my head."

"You're acting guilty."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Not you, too!"

"Me too, what?"

She blew out a breath. "Why does every single person have to follow sports? Is it a crime that I'd rather cook or knit or read?"

Her answer sounded sincere. In fact, it sounded like there was a story there, and against his will, he felt curious. "I have no problem with that." As a matter of fact, he found it refreshing.

"Not everyone feels the way you do." Her cheeks were still pink and she looked upset.

Wanting to take the pressure off her, he looked away, scanning the kitchen. And noticed the framed calligraphy print his mother had loved so much, from the book of Hebrews.

No olvidéis la hospitalidad, porque por ésta algunos, sin saberlo, hospedaron ángeles.

It was important to show hospitality to strangers, because you never knew when you might be entertaining angels.

The rosy-cheeked, wide-eyed woman in front of him did have the look of an angel, come to think of it.

And the memory of his mother, always so quick to offer food and drink to strangers, twisted at his heart.

When had he gotten so far away from that family tradition? So suspicious, so self-absorbed?

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out, half hoping Chamu was calling back with a miraculously-discovered room.

When the caterer of his grandmother's party appeared on the screen, he clicked into the call.

A cascade of rapid Caribbean-style Spanish flooded his ears with sounds different than his traditional Mexican dialect. "Slow down, *por favor*."

Accident... snow... wreck... cannot come... the meaning of the words hit him like a sledgehammer. "Are you all right?"

After getting assurance that yes, the man and his helpers were fine, Alex went on to the next most important issue. "You can't cater the party?"

Apologies tumbled over apologies, but the upshot was that it was true. There would be no caterer, no food from the fanciest Latin fusion restaurant in Twin Falls.

He should have listened to Javier and done everything locally when he'd realized that their own restaurant couldn't provide the caliber of party they wanted for their grandma's birthday. But no, he'd had to go overboard for his abuela, show that, despite his absence when it had counted, despite all his flaws, he was a good member of the family.

Managing the restaurant in Javier's absence wasn't achieving his goal of showing he could handle family responsibility.

He listened to a few more minutes of apologies, assured the man that it was all right, then ended the call.

His head sank into his hands. Maybe his family was right. Maybe he *wasn't* practical; maybe he couldn't succeed at anything but baseball.

What was he going to do now?

He checked the weather on his phone. Maybe they'd have to postpone the party. But, typical of spring around here, tomorrow's highs were in the forties. The roads would be clear by early afternoon.

Everyone would come, expecting a wonderful party. Most importantly, his grandmother.

He ran through possible helpers in his mind. Javier was still in Mexico, helping with a family crisis; he wouldn't be back until the party was in full swing. Their brother Daniel... No. Besides being a chiropractor and completely uninterested in the restaurant, he was recently widowed and struggling to keep things together for his twin daughters.

Little Veronica — who'd balk at the name, being twenty-five, only a year his junior — was an amazing hostess and waiter, charming everyone who walked through the door. But she was hopeless as a cook.

So that left the two cooks he'd sent home early tonight. Pablo was taking advantage of the fact that they'd closed the restaurant tomorrow, headed to visit his aunt and uncle in Portland as soon as the snow let up. And Maria had a party of her own to host; tomorrow was her baby's first birthday, and, of course, her entire extended family was coming over to celebrate. She'd expected to stay up most of the night cooking, anyway, had been glad to catch a break and leave El Corazon early.

He was just going to have to prepare the party food himself. No, he wasn't much of a cook, but how hard could it be, making enough food for thirty or forty people?

"Are you okay?" Patricia asked, her voice hesitant and much closer than he'd expected.

He looked up into sympathetic green eyes. "No."

"What's wrong?" Her voice had a musical lilt and the sound of concern.

"Oh, just a party for thirty-five tomorrow." He cocked his head to one side and studied her. "Can you cook?"

Read 'Sheltered Hearts'

in

Romance Grows in Arcadia Valley

<http://arcadiavalleyromance.com/books/romance-grows-in-arcadia-valley-sheltered-hearts/>