

Chapter One

Javier Quintana raked his fingers through his hair and tried to concentrate on the laptop in front of him and the stack of bills beside him. The empty dining room of El Corazon provided no distraction.

The restaurant wasn't going under...at least not yet. But it was definitely in the red.

He looked up at the portrait of his mother and father on the wall. They'd started the restaurant as newlyweds. All four of the kids had grown up there, hanging around, helping, doing homework at this very table, moving back into the kitchen when the dinner rush started.

Now, there wasn't much of a dinner rush.

Secrets of the Heart by Lee Tobin McClain

He'd promised his father, and then his mother, to keep the restaurant in the family, to keep it going.

The cold, dry bills and papers around him seemed to crush the colorful, happy place his parents had made.

Behind him, the restaurant's front door opened.

"We're closed," he called without looking up.

"Hello?" The voice sounded like... No, it couldn't be. He straightened his shirt as he strode through the entryway to the door.

And froze.

Molly?

In a flash he was eighteen again, in love with his whole young heart.

He blinked and refocused his eyes. Yes, Molly Abbot stood there, framed by the golden light of a late-August day.

His heart stopped, stuttered, and then settled into pounding, hard and fast.

She was even more beautiful than she'd been in high school. Big eyes, cornsilk blonde hair full around her shoulders. She was still a tiny little thing, dressed professionally now, but with the big, dangly earrings she'd always favored.

Yes, it was the same Molly he'd loved. The same Molly who'd betrayed him.

Anger drew him up to his full six-two, and it was only his wired-in manners that prevented him from slamming the door in her face, shutting out the beauty and the pain.

"Hey, Javier, it's definitely been awhile." She seemed to be looking past him into the restaurant.

He crossed his arms and clenched his jaw.

"I was supposed to meet you guys here... Veronica said you knew all about it. Maybe I'm a little early?" She checked her watch. "I can come back when everyone's here. I don't want to be a way from my daughter too long--"

What meeting was she talking about? And how could she have the audacity to talk to him about her daughter?

He tried to school his face, to focus on the chirping birds and crickets, the hot air pushing its way through the open door behind her and into the restaurant's air-conditioned coolness. From the parking lot, the sweet aroma of pineapple weed blew in.

"Or, maybe this is a blessing." Her hand came up to twist her hair. "Maybe we can talk a little."

He still hadn't said one word to her and she seemed to realize that, finally. She looked down at the ground, or maybe she

was just checking out the way the parking lot's dust had taken the shine off her designer shoes.

"Can I come in?"

No.

No way.

He stepped back to let her pass. Why was she here? Why, after all this time, and acting like she belonged here?

She walked in and did a turn around the dining room, totally calm. Analytical, almost. "The place still looks the same."

All the love and all the pain he'd felt about her surged up at her words, covered over with a glaze of terrible, terrible hurt.

This was nothing to her. She felt nothing.

He swallowed down his emotions, trying to make way for some civilized words to pass, but he couldn't quite get there. "Don't try to make small talk." He knew his voice was harsh. "You're not welcome."

She looked at him full on then, met his eyes with her blue ones. She didn't look ashamed. More like surprised, and maybe a little angry.

Car doors slammed in the parking lot, and a few seconds later his brothers and sister pushed into the restaurant. "Hey, Javier! We're here!"

"Molly beat us!" Veronica reached out and hugged Molly, which felt to Javier like a betrayal. "Hey, girl, how are you?"

"Sorry we're late, we would've been on time if it weren't for lover boy here." Daniel punched Alex in the arm.

Alex held his hands up like stop signs. "Hey, I had to help my girl move into her new apartment. What else does a fiancé do?" He seemed to be trying to keep a silly grin off his face, but it wasn't working.

A slight feeling of satisfaction pushed past Javier's distress. It was good to see Alex so happy. One of his siblings had found a good woman, at least.

They'd come to a stop in a semicircle around him, all quieting down a little. Javier was the oldest brother, and since Papa had died, he'd been the head of the family. They treated him with respect rather than the clowning around they did with each other. But right now, his brothers and his sister had identical guilty looks in their eyes.

He couldn't bear to look at Molly, to try to dissect whatever she might be feeling.

He cleared his throat. "What memo did I miss?"

Veronica stepped forward and put an arm around him, leaning her head against his shoulder. "We're kind of doing an intervention."

"We know how hard you've been working," Alex began, and then broke off. Despite having been a big deal major league baseball player, he tended to defer to his older brothers.

"And we know the restaurant isn't doing real well." Daniel perched on the edge of a table, looking around the room. Whatever they were up to must be serious, to get Daniel to actually come to the restaurant in the first place, and to leave his twins behind in the second place, dedicated single dad that he was.

"I want to help, but once I start school and this new job, I won't have much time," Alex said.

Daniel twisted his head from side to side and pushed clasped hands out in front of him, stretching his neck. Chiropracting on himself. "I have no life as it is, what with the girls and my practice. You already know I'm no use to you."

"And even though I'm here every day, I can't figure out how to fix whatever's wrong with El Corazon," Veronica said. "Plus, you turned down the other two consultants we brought in..."

It was true. He had. They'd been idiots. "Get to the point," he ordered his siblings.

"We kind of decided something on our own," Veronica said.

“Took it to a vote,” Alex said, “and all three of us agreed, so... “ He trailed off.

“We went ahead and hired Molly.” Daniel said, his voice firm. He put an arm around Molly’s shoulders.

A flush of angry heat rose in Javier’s face and neck, whether because of the idea that they’d hired her, or because of Daniel touching her, he couldn’t say for sure.

“She’s a food entrepreneur,” Veronica explained, “who knows all about the fresh-food movement.”

“She turned around three restaurants in Cleveland.”

“One of them’s a traditional Mexican place.”

“And she knows El Corazon, because she practically spent high school here.”

Which was exactly the problem. She’d humiliated him in front of the entire town.

She shrugged out from under Daniel’s arm and held up a slender, delicate hand, looking from Javier to Veronica, Daniel, and Alex. “Hold up. I thought Javier knew about this and agreed to it.”

His siblings all started to talk, but she put a hand on her hip and shook her head. “From the preliminary research I’ve done, he’s the main manager and the rest of you are only peripherally involved, Daniel not at

all." She frowned severely at them. "And you sprung this on him?"

"You know how he is, Mol." Alex lifted his hands, palms up.

"Stubborn and bull-headed," Veronica added.

He was watching her—he couldn't help it—so he saw the emotion that flashed across her face. She did know how he was.

Something else flashed: the small silver cross around her neck, the same one she'd worn back when he'd known her in high school. He remembered touching it when he'd kissed her. It had reminded him of her purity and kept him from going too far.

She hadn't held to the same rules with the next guy, obviously.

"I want her out of here."

She raised her eyebrows and looked at him steadily for a few seconds, then looked around at his siblings. "So I'm going to go back to Uncle Dale's house and help my daughter get ready for the first day of school." She paused, and then spoke again. "We do have a back-out clause in the contract, but I hope it won't come to that since I've pulled up stakes and moved." She gave Javier a cool glance. And then, her back straight, she stalked out of the restaurant.

Immediately, his brothers and sister started talking.

"That was so rude!" Veronica slapped his arm.

"No way to talk to a lady," Alex scolded.

"We can't afford her back-out clause." That was Daniel, his worry lines—perpetual with him since the loss of his wife—deepening in his face. "If we don't hire her, I don't know what else we can do."

"Just because you never got over her..."

He held up a hand. "Stop."

"But—"

"I mean it. Stop."

They all shut their mouths, thankfully, though he knew that wouldn't last.

"I don't appreciate your doing this without consulting me. You know, just like everyone else in town, what happened between us twelve years ago. Why would you think we could work together?"

"But would you have hired her if you'd known?" Veronica asked.

"I'm telling you, she's the only person who can do this for us," Alex said. "She knows the fresh-food culture, and she knows our traditions."

"You've been alone too long," Daniel said. "You don't trust women."

"You should talk," Veronica said, elbowing Daniel.

"I don't trust *her*," Javier said flatly.

"See, this is all part of your personality issues." Veronica pushed herself into the curve of his arm. As the little sister, she could get away with saying things their brothers couldn't, and she knew it. "You have to do everything yourself, you're over-responsible, you're controlling. This time, that's not working."

"Look," Alex said, "we all want the best for El Corazon. We hate to see it go under. But when you were in Mexico and I was running the place, I saw the truth. That's where we're heading."

"I'm just not ready for that." Veronica's voice sounded shaky. "I'm not ready to lose this world I grew up in. The world Mama and Papa made." She glanced over at the framed photograph of their parents.

Javier looked at it, too, and then stared down at the tile floor. As the oldest brother, it was his job to care for them. Right now, he was more of an impediment to getting things done, at least from the way they were describing it.

Not only that, he was outnumbered. They all four had a quarter interest in the restaurant, and if three of them had made a

decision, he should—had to, really—go along with it.

But work with Molly Abbot? The woman who'd played him for a fool and broken his heart?

"I'll think about it," he growled just to get them out of his hair. "Now, everybody needs to leave. I've got work to do."



Focus on right now, Molly told herself after a dinner she'd cooked but hadn't been able to eat. A walk, fresh air, and a little back-to-school shopping with Trina would settle her nerves. And although Uncle Dale had been nothing but kind about letting them stay with him for a bit, he wasn't well and he wasn't used to a twelve-year-old's moods and loud music. He needed a little time to himself.

"It's so cute!" Trina sped up as Arcadia Valley's tree-lined Main Street came into view. "Come on, Mom!"

"I'm coming." Molly walked more slowly, taking in the sights and sounds of her small hometown after twelve years away. Arcadia Valley held wonderful memories for Molly, but they were

overshadowed by the horrific last thing that happened to her here.

But now that she was raising an almost-teenager, the good outweighed the bad. Trina needed a place like Arcadia Valley. And for her daughter's sake, she was willing to face her demons.

If, that is, Javier Quintana let her keep the job she'd been promised.

"I wonder if girls dress up for the first day of school here like they did in Cleveland." Trina hopped along beside Molly now, holding onto her arm like a little kid. That was a twelve-year old: clinging one moment, pushing Mom away the next.

"What to wear might not be as important here as it was in the city," Molly said, hoping it was true.

"Mom, it's always important. Look at that girl. She's wearing leggings. Can we go shopping for more school clothes after this?"

"Not tonight," Molly said automatically. "We have to budget for new things." They did okay, her work brought in good money, but she was the sole support of herself and Trina. After the school shopping they'd already done, she had fifty dollars left in their clothing budget for August.

Trina's lower lip stuck out. "I bet *she* doesn't have to budget. Her whole outfit is cute and it's not even school yet."

Molly looked ahead at the girl her daughter was watching and her heart almost stopped. The girl and another teen were walking with someone who looked an awful lot like Javier Quintana.

It couldn't be, could it? There were lots of tall, dark-haired men in this part of the country.

The man turned a little to the side to talk to one of the girls, and all doubt left Molly's mind. It was Javier.

"Let's get ice cream!" She tugged Trina toward a small café with a sign advertising fifteen flavors. "Come in here!"

"I'm not that hungry. If we have ice cream, we won't be able to go into the shoe place. Let's get it after."

Molly sighed. Her daughter was definitely becoming a teen, if she were more interested in shoes than ice cream. Now more than ever, Molly had to set a good example for her daughter and not be intimidated by a man.

When she glanced up the street, Molly saw that Javier and the girls had disappeared from sight. She breathed a little easier. She just wasn't ready to face Javier again, not until she'd figured out a plan to get him on her side.

There was the back-out clause in the contract, but she desperately wanted to raise

Trina in Arcadia Valley. Desperately wanted to settle down now that Trina was twelve. Desperately wanted to help Uncle Dale, the man who'd provided warmth and comfort to her when she was prickly and miserable, grieving the loss of her parents.

She'd find a way to convince Javier to keep her on, but not tonight when her nerves were ragged and her stomach tense and jittery.

They continued down the street. Molly gave herself an inner pep talk while Trina chattered and tugged her arm to look in various shop windows.

Minutes later they reached their destination. "Look," Molly said, forcing cheer into her voice, "Wallman's Shoes. They've been here since I was a kid, and they're the best." Molly didn't add that when she was a teenager, her own shoes had come from the discount store. She was just glad she could provide better for her own daughter.

Inside, Trina headed automatically to the sale racks—Molly had trained her well—and after greeting the saleswoman, Molly followed her daughter. The store was hot and smelled of leather.

"I just wish I knew what kids wear here. I don't want to be the only dork in high tops if everyone else wears ankle boots."

"You don't have to be like everyone else." Molly picked up a pair of marked-down Sergio Rossi pumps in her own size, running a finger over the rich leather. *If only.* "You're an individual, and anyway, confidence is the most important thing."

"If I look different, they'll tease me." Trina said it matter-of-factly, the voice of experience.

For the millionth time, Molly bemoaned the affluent public school Trina had attended back in Cleveland, where clothes had been crucial and mean girls ruled the hallways. She'd thought she was doing the right thing, renting an inexpensive apartment in a fantastic school district, but once Trina's elementary school years were over, everything had gone downhill for her.

A low, rumbling voice on the other side of the sale rack played along Molly's nerves and made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. A moment later, the two girls who'd been with Javier came around the edge of the sale rack. "We can show you what kids wear here," the older one said. "Come up front."

"Really?" In Trina's face, mistrust battled the desire to make new friends. She looked up at Molly.

With her mom-radar, Molly scanned the other girls' features and detected only a

wary friendliness. "Are you Mr. Quintana's nieces?" she asked.

"Kind of," the younger girl said. "Our mom is his cousin, so I guess we're really... anyway. We call him Uncle Javier."

"Can I, Mom?"

"Go ahead. I'll be here."

Trina headed off with the other two girls, smiling shyly.

Molly stood frozen, her heart pounding.

"I was rude to you today." Javier came around the edge of the shoe rack. "I apologize." His voice was toneless.

When Molly looked up at him, memories and emotions flooded her. She looked at the rack of shoes, focusing on the practical canvas ones she ought to buy herself next month. "It's not that so much. I've been in business awhile, I know clients can be emotional about changes. It's just that... I moved us here hoping this job would make for a smooth transition. Financially, I mean. So your resistance is a little worrisome." She hazarded a glance at Javier's arm and noticed he had a tattoo. It reminded her that he'd been in the service since they'd known each other. He had a whole life, probably including a wife or a girlfriend. Those kids could be his own, though somehow, she didn't think so.

"I promised my brothers and sister I'd think about hiring you." He picked up a pair of spike-heeled pumps, shook his head, and put it back.

How long would his thinking process take? Was she supposed to humbly thank him?

The truth was, Javier had pushed her away twelve years ago, at the most painful time of her life, and she still carried anger and hurt from that.

Of course, he hadn't known the whole story, and she hadn't told him.

She glanced up and then quickly looked away. Javier was still so handsome it squeezed her chest tight.

Sweat trickled down her sides. Man, was it hot in here.

The girls were giggling over by the shoe displays. One of them had a phone, and as Molly watched, she snapped selfies of the three of them, holding up various shoes. Trina struck a silly pose and the others laughed.

Relief washed over Molly, even in her exhaustion and tension. It was good to see Trina making friends, good to see kids just being kids.

She looked up to see Javier smiling over at the girls, too. So he wasn't stone faced all of the time.

He still had a killer smile.

“Your nieces?” she guessed.

“My cousin’s daughters, but we’re close.”

Trina saw them watching and came rushing over, banging into Molly with a hard hug, all elbows and knees. “Mom! Laura and Raquel say a lot of the girls wear boots like this the first day.” She thrust a pair of fleece-lined suede boots at Molly. “Can I get these instead of shoes, please?”

Molly checked the price tag on the bottom of the boots. \$110.00.

“Please, Mom? I know it’s more than the budget but I’ll... I’ll help Uncle Dale in the yard, and do the dishes every night, and—”

“Wait.” Molly used her phone to check her bank balance, conscious of Javier’s eyes on her. An argument pounded her already aching head.

Aunt Lisa to a much younger Molly, when she’d begged for a sky-blue sweater in the style worn by the cool girls: “When you’re earning your own money you can buy whatever clothes you want. Until then, Gambino’s Discount is perfectly good.”

The church money management class’s teacher: “It’s the little decisions you make that add up to never reaching your goals.”

She didn't want to raise her daughter the cold way Aunt Lisa had raised her. She'd promised herself she'd be warm, loving, open.

But would a particular type of boots really help Trina to fit in at school? And what lesson did she want to teach her daughter about money?

The numbers swam a little before her eyes. She really should have eaten something at dinner. "No, honey. Choose a pair in our price range for now."

"Aw, Mom!" Trina looked at Molly as if to see if she meant it, and then stalked off.

Trina wasn't the only one upset; Javier was looking at her suspiciously. Was it because she wouldn't buy her daughter boots, or because he thought Trina was the product of an affair she'd had while dating him? She swayed a little and grabbed onto the shoe rack for support. The lack of food and sleep was catching up with her. "I'm going to sit down," she told Javier, and aimed at the row of chairs for shoe customers.

Halfway there, she felt Javier's firm hand under her elbow. He guided her to a seat and then knelt beside her, looking up at her face.

His touch, his closeness, brought back all sorts of feelings she shouldn't be having.

She could smell his faint cologne, the same he'd used in high school.

She took deep breaths, trying to control her dizziness. Maybe he still cared about her. Or at least, maybe he didn't hate her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Don't tell me you're pregnant again?"

His words hit her like a blow.

"Sorry," he said with a nervous laugh. "Bad joke, huh?"

She didn't answer his question, just called to Trina. "Come on, honey. It's time to go. Make your choice." She stood, and Javier did to, so she stepped away, taking deep breaths and straightening her spine. Good. She didn't feel dizzy anymore. Just angry.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?" Javier asked.

Molly ignored him and walked over to where the girls were.

A few minutes later, Trina had chosen some shoes approved by the other two girls and within their budget, and Molly had paid for them. As they headed out the door, Trina stopped and turned back. "Bye, Raquel. Bye, Laura."

"It was nice to meet you," Laura said, and all three of them—the two girls and Javier—came across the store toward the door, too.

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“We’ll see you at school,” Raquel said.
“You’ll like it here.”

“I already like it,” Trina said, and looked up at Molly. “Can we stay in Arcadia Valley, Mom?”

Molly looked down at her beloved daughter and brushed back her hair. “I hope so, honey.” Or *did* she hope so? Could she subject herself to more insults from the only man she’d ever loved? “We’ll have to see.”

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