

Chapter 1

Lucas Ruiz Morales hadn't expected a big brass band to greet him, but having someone at least answer the door would have been nice.

He tapped again on the door of his ancestral home in Arcadia Valley, Idaho. Yes, his grandfather had been sick, but where was Connie, the housekeeper? Where were the visiting nurses?

After repeated knocking, Lucas retrieved the key from the spot under a decorative planter where it had always been kept and let himself into the house. Maybe his abuelo was asleep. Lots of older people lost some hearing. Maybe he just hadn't heard the knocking.

He was ashamed he didn't know more about his grandfather's condition. But that was all about to change.

"Belo?" He walked through the sprawling home that his parents, both now gone, had fondly called La Hacienda. He stepped in the master bedroom to find tangled bedclothes, pill bottles on the nightstand, and a large-print library book open, face down beside the pillows.

The man himself was nowhere in sight.

"Belo?" He called louder now and checked the adjoining bathroom. Empty.

His footsteps echoed as he hurried to the big farmhouse kitchen. It was a lonely sound, and guilt stabbed him again. For his grandfather to be rattling around by himself in this giant place wasn't right. Yes, Lucas had arranged for nursing staff to be there around the clock, but that didn't make up for the lack of family.

And speaking of nurses, where were they? And where was Amiga, Belo's beloved, three-legged corgi mix?

"Hello? Belo? Anyone?" He called louder now, searching the dining room and living area.

He heard a thump.

Lucas cocked his head, seeking the source of the sound. He heard it again. From the basement.

"Belo?" Surely his grandfather couldn't make it down the old house's steep cellar stairs. The man was almost ninety.

But when he checked, a dim light shone from the basement, and there was another thumping sound.

Bracing himself for intruders — because maybe he'd missed a memo and Belo was staying somewhere else, leaving an opportunity for thieves to break in — Lucas made his way down the stairs, hand on the sheathed knife in his pocket. He wasn't a violent man, but you didn't spend a decade as a war correspondent in the most remote, dangerous parts of the world without learning to take care of yourself.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and a shape rose out of the darkness. He lifted his knife and feinted left, then moved right, and some kind of stick came crashing down where he'd been.

He caught his assailant around the waist.

A small, bony waist. With a familiar, musty-spicy smell. "Belo?"

"So, you have finally arrived," Belo said in his precise, accented English. "Why are you creeping up on me?"

"I thought you had an intruder! Didn't you hear me calling?" He loosened his grip and eased his grandfather over toward the steps. "What are you doing down here, anyway?"

"I am searching out something for you." The old man gestured toward a pile of boxes. He'd obviously been down here awhile, going through them.

His wrinkled hand was ice-cold. Not good. "I can get you whatever you need later," Lucas said. "Come on upstairs."

"Not until I find it." Belo stumped over toward the pile of boxes. "It is in here somewhere. I remember."

"What are you looking for?"

"Mama's necklace." His legs wobbled as he lowered to his knees and rifled through a box in the dim light. "Make yourself of some use. That blue box — right there — pull it down. You are as tall as a giraffe."

The grumpy words made Lucas grin, but he obediently reached up and pulled down the box his five-foot-six grandfather couldn't possibly have reached. "If you'll tell me what it looks like, I'll help you find it. Is it in a jewelry box?"

"Pouch. Velvet." Belo shoved aside the box he'd been working on and opened the one Lucas had gotten down for him. "Green, I think."

Lucas turned on the flashlight from his phone and shone it into the box. Immediately, he saw a scrap of green velvet. "Is this it?" he asked, extracting it from the heap of papers, ribbons, and china knickknacks.

"At last you have done something useful. Help me up."

That was Belo. If you wanted a bunch of easy compliments, you didn't turn to him. Lucas extended his hand and helped his grandfather to his feet, steadied him, and then shoved the boxes out of the middle of the floor with his foot. "Satisfied now? Can we go upstairs?"

Belo didn't answer, he just led the way. Which was good, because Lucas wanted to walk behind to catch him if he fell.

The old man made it up the stairs, slow step by slow step, and shuffled to the kitchen table, sinking into a chair with a little groan. "Ah, Miho. I'm not as young as I used to be."

Tell me something I don't know. "Where are your nurses?"

"I did not like them," Belo said, "and they did not like me."

Lucas could only imagine.

"So I sent the last one away yesterday. Because you were coming."

Oh, man.

Lucas wasn't sure how long he could stay. His new work as a freelance food-and-health writer wasn't exactly location dependent, but since his assistant was in New York, he based his travels from there.

As if on auto-pilot, he moved to the old stove and put the kettle on, just as he'd watched his grandmother do so often in the past. He opened and closed cupboard doors, looking for tea, noting with dismay the sticky film on some of the dishes and the lack of supplies. Why were the cupboards so bare? He could barely find a teabag.

"So what happened with Connie?" They could start there. Belo's housekeeper had worked here for most of her life and she'd never have left the

kitchen in this state.

Belo shrugged. "She had to go take care of her sister. I'm fine. Get these worthless nurses to do a little work."

"But... they can't keep up if you've fired them." Lucas opened the refrigerator, which held a carton of milk — expired — a few wilted celery stalks and peppers, and a package of lunch meat. No wonder Belo was getting so thin.

"It doesn't matter. Sit down." Belo's voice was still authoritative, and Lucas was still enough of an obedient grandson that he obeyed.

"I want to talk to you. Give you something." He held up the green velvet pouch with shaking hands and fumbled to open it.

Lucas wanted to grab it away and do it himself, but respect compelled him to let Belo take his time.

Finally, he got the pouch open and extracted a tarnished silver necklace, embedded with turquoise and rose quartz. "Ah, still beautiful." He held it out. "This is for you."

Lucas took it and studied it. "It's a women's necklace. I remember Mama wearing it."

"That's right." Belo nodded. "And now, it is time you found a woman to give it to."

Lucas lifted an eyebrow. "What do you know about women in my life?"

"Only that you don't have them," Belo said with a disgusted snort. "Not enough, anyway. Not

one special one."

That was undeniably true, and there was a good reason for it. Lucas stood and went to the stove, checking the gas burner and listening to the water start to boil. "Where's the mutt?" he asked, seeking to change the subject.

"I lost her two months ago." Belo's voice thickened, just a little, and Lucas glanced over and saw the sadness on his grandfather's face.

How lonely the old man must be without his loyal companion.

But Belo wasn't one to share the softer emotions. He cleared his throat. "There is something I want you to do."

"Oh? What's that?" Lucas was getting a bad feeling. He poured the water over teabags in two cups, even though it wasn't quite boiling. He carried the cups to the table.

Belo put his hands around the outside of the cup but didn't drink it "The time has come for you to marry."

"Oh, really?" Lucas frowned, dunking his teabag. "Why's that?"

"The Ruiz name dies with you and me," Belo said, "unless we continue it." He flashed a ghost of a smile. "And I haven't met anyone lately."

The weak attempt at a joke, more than anything else, made Lucas sit up and take notice. Belo wasn't usually much for joking. "What brought this on?" he asked, buying himself time

to figure out how to tell Belo what he needed to tell him.

Belo reached out a veined, wrinkled hand and gripped Lucas's forearm with surprising strength. "I have a diagnosis."

A hollow feeling started in Lucas's stomach. "What is it?"

"It's my heart, complications from the diabetes," Belo said. "The odds aren't good."

The hollowness spread to Lucas's chest and throat, making it hard to breathe. He put his hand over Belo's and looked down at it. Two brown hands, one old, one young. Both with the thick fingers and prominent veins of a Ruiz.

They were the last of their line. Could it be true that Belo wasn't long for this world?

No. He didn't accept that. "What doctor told you that?" he asked. "There's nobody here in Arcadia Valley qualified to make that kind of diagnosis."

"The doctors sent me to Twin Falls," he said. "There, I was seen by good doctors."

"Good local doctors, sure." Lucas blew out a sharp breath, his head filling with plans. "We'll set up an appointment at the Carnegie Clinic in Denver. I have a friend I can call—"

"You are not listening." Belo clutched Lucas's arm tighter. "I don't need a big-city doctor. What the Twin Falls Heart Center said was good enough for me, nothing less than what I've sensed

myself.”

“But Belo—”

“I’m eighty-nine years old, and I have had a good life. But this conversation isn’t about me.” He took up the pendant Lucas had put down and handed it to him again. “I want you to marry and have children. It’s time. Before I go, I want to see you settled down here on La Hacienda with a good woman. Preferably pregnant.”

Lucas stared at his grandfather. Had the old man lost his mind? “I have a few plans other than finding and impregnating a wife,” he said. “Something called a career?”

Belo waved a dismissive hand. “You can write books anywhere. And it does not take so long to find a woman. Why, I met your grandma—”

“I know, at a VA dance, and you married her a month later,” Lucas said. He’d heard the story a dozen times.

“And we had a happy life,” Belo said. “My one regret is that we only had one child.” He looked away, but not before Lucas saw reflected in his eyes the same pain that was in Lucas’s heart. His parents. Happy and in love and doing good work one day, dead in a car crash the next, victims of a drunk driver.

“So carrying on the family name is up to you, and you’re not getting any younger. What are you, thirty?”

“Thirty six.” Thanks for the reminder.

“*No hay mucho tiempo.* You must find a woman. Polish the necklace before you give it to her.” Belo pushed back his chair and stood. “Now, I must go to bed. You make yourself at home, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Was this some kind of a joke? “I’m not getting married, Belo.”

His grandfather opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. His eyes were more watery than Lucas remembered.

Then his grandfather shook his head a little and turned away. “I am tired,” he said as he headed toward the door. Frailer, maybe even shorter than he’d used to be.

Lucas stared after him, shaking his head. The old man was *loco*. People didn’t get married to continue a family name, not anymore.

But that didn’t make Lucas feel any better about disappointing him.



From the hostess stand of El Corazon, Veronica Quintana smiled at the McKennas, parents of a classmate she’d known her whole life. “Thanks for coming in tonight,” she said, her friendly customer service persona coming back to her, as comfortable as an old pair of jeans.

She'd loved her writing job in Twin Falls — well, most things about it — but, reluctant as she was to admit it, El Corazon was home.

Mrs. McKenna shrugged into the coat her husband held for her. “We adore Mexican food! But it's too bad about your job, honey.”

“Thought you were running the website for that big newspaper over in Twin Falls,” Mr. McKenna boomed, loud enough for the half-full restaurant to hear. “That gig sure didn't last long!”

The smile froze on Veronica's face. “No, it didn't.” Three months, to be exact.

Three months of being her own independent woman, until things had gone terribly downhill terribly fast and she'd come home to Arcadia Valley with her tail between her legs.

And while she loved El Corazon, she didn't love the feeling of failure that reared up whenever people asked — or didn't ask, but obviously wanted to — about what had happened to the new job.

“Well, we're glad you're back.” Mrs. McKenna patted Veronica's shoulder. “It's always nice when our young people stay in Arcadia Valley. And with your family here to take care of you, you can take your time figuring out your next move.”

“Or maybe there won't be a next move,” Mr. McKenna said. “Nothing wrong with helping out in the family business. Your parents would be

glad.”

Veronica glanced automatically at the large portrait of her parents on the restaurant’s wall. They’d started this place, had loved it, had made it grow. They’d both been excellent cooks with a good sense of what customers wanted.

Whereas Veronica couldn’t fry an egg without burning it.

As the couple left the restaurant, Veronica’s oldest brother, Javier, strode out of the kitchen and toward the hostess stand. “Heard you got home late last night,” he said as he picked up the clipboard to see which tables were still available. “Where were you?” His eyes scanned the restaurant, checking everything out, making sure there wasn’t a napkin or fork out of place.

“Yeah, where were you?” her brother Alex called from the other side of the dining room. He wore a white apron and was bussing a table, subbing for an employee who’d called in sick.

She glared at Alex. He was just a couple of years older than she was and should know better than to stick his nose into her business. He was supposed to be on her side against their oldest brother’s overprotectiveness.

“It’s okay.” Her middle brother, Daniel, spoke up from the table where he sat with his twins and his new wife, Tabitha. “She was at Karaoke night at the American Legion. One of my patients mentioned it.” He tilted his head to one side as he

looked at Veronica. "Did you really sing 'All My Exes Live In Texas?' Twice?"

"I love that song," one of the few remaining customers said, and started to whistle it.

Veronica let her head sink into her hands.

She was twenty-six years old, with a college degree in media and journalism. She'd lived on her own, hosted exchange students, helped to start a women's prayer group. When she'd moved to Twin Falls, she'd made new friends right away. She'd started volunteering at an animal rescue farm and singing in the church choir.

And then everything had blown up around her. Her confidence had been shaken, her sense of herself as a professional — and as a woman — chopped down.

And now here she was, back in Arcadia Valley, living with her brother and his wife. And having her every movement scrutinized by not just Javier, but her two other brothers and half the rest of the town as well.

She had to get out of here. To lick her wounds, to regain her self-assurance, to start over.

"You boys leave Veronica alone." Tabitha put an arm around her. "She's a grown woman, and it's nobody's business what she sings at the Legion!" She lifted an eyebrow at Veronica. "Although I wish you had better taste. Country music... ugh."

Alex slipped over and changed the music

station from Latin contemporary to wailing country. When Tabitha glared at him, he laughed. "Just want to bother my newest sister-in-law."

"Veronica will always be my baby sister," Javier said. "And I don't like the idea of you staying late at the Legion, *hermanita*. Most of the folks there are good people, but you never know—"

"Thanks for your concern." She was going for sarcasm, but it fell flat.

Because the truth was, as much as she railed against it, a part of her *did* like her brothers' concern. Wasn't that why she'd come running back to Arcadia Valley?

"Come on, let's have some girl talk." Tabitha pulled Veronica out of her seat. "The rush is over, and your brothers can handle whoever's left."

Veronica followed her friend to a corner table, grabbing a basket of chips and a cup of salsa from the stand beside the kitchen. "Is it just me, or are they ridiculously overprotective?"

"It's not just you." Tabitha laughed. "Daniel's the least overbearing, but even he can get bossy when it's a question of family. But they mean well."

"They do. I know they do. It's just... I got a taste of freedom living in Twin Falls. When I came back, everything felt different." She sighed. "Seems like they didn't grate on me as much before."

"Well, you weren't living with Javier and Molly before," Tabitha said. "Living at the cottages gave you at least a little bit of freedom. Do you want to come stay with Daniel and me and the girls?"

Veronica crunched a chip. "You're sweet. But I'm not going to be a third wheel with you newlyweds."

Tabitha snorted, looking over at the table where Daniel was wiping up a drink one of the twins had spilled. "It's not like we have a lot of privacy anyway, with the twins around."

Daniel glanced over their way, and when he noticed Tabitha looking at him, his lips turned up at the corners.

Their gazes locked, and it seemed to Veronica that the temperature in the dining room went up by ten degrees.

"Daddy! Can we have flan for dessert?" one of the twins asked. Daniel got involved in that discussion, and Tabitha looked back at Veronica, a faraway look in her eyes and a smile lingering on her lips. "What were we... oh. Yeah. You'd totally be welcome to stay with us. We'd love to have you."

That was all she needed, to watch Tabitha and Daniel fall ever more deeply in love when she'd ruled that out for herself. "Thanks, but no. What I need is my own place."

At least, until she could scrape together the

money to leave Arcadia Valley.

"You can't get your cottage back?"

Veronica shook her head. "No. Those places are in high demand, since there aren't many rental properties around." She sighed. "I feel like I'm going backward in my life, you know? All I want is to stand on my own two feet and be independent."

"I hear you," Tabitha said sympathetically. And she wasn't faking sympathy, but Veronica couldn't miss the way her eyes flickered toward Daniel again.

All three of her brothers had found love in the past two years. They'd all settled down and were living their adult lives.

Only Veronica still wandered, acting like a kid, staying out and singing Karaoke. Which, for the record, hadn't even been that much fun, since she'd been one of the few sober customers in the place.

The bells on the front doors jingled. "That's my cue," she said to Tabitha. She walked up to the hostess stand, glancing at the clock on the wall. Eight forty-five, so the kitchen was open for another fifteen minutes. And it had been drilled into her by her parents: treat the last customer just as well as you'd treat the first. "One for dinner?" she asked, picking up the menu.

Only then did she look closely at the customer. Hair cropped as close as a military

man, brown eyes, muscles to die for. He was familiar, and yet not.

"Take out," the man said. Then he did a double take. "Veronica? Veronica Quintana?"

From three separate points in the room, her brothers' dark heads swiveled toward the newcomer.

"I'm Veronica." She studied him, trying to keep an impassive expression as her insides jumped and danced. "Do we know each other?"

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