

CHAPTER 1

When Tina and Ernie Ramirez rang the doorbell of my apartment in Torrance, California I was preparing dinner for Rigo—my husband and their son. I wasn't expecting them but I was always glad to see them. They had given me unqualified support when I first had amnesia and didn't know who I was. When I opened the door I wondered whether I had enough food to invite them for dinner.

They came in and I gave them each a big hug. Then I noticed they weren't their usual cheerful selves. Their glum expressions gave me a feeling of foreboding. Tina spoke first.

"Carol, have you heard from Rigo?"

"No. Not since he left early this morning. He said he was going to a meeting, but if he couldn't make it home by six-thirty he'd call me."

I glanced at my watch; it said 6:45. He was late. If he said he'd do something, he usually did it.

Ernie and Tina looked at each other. Ernie spoke next with his Spanish accent. Both Ernie and Tina had been born in Mexico, but Tina had no detectable accent.

"It's probably nothing. He probably got hung up somewhere."

The way he said it didn't give me a warm, fuzzy feeling. Something had happened to Rigo. Why had they come here instead of just calling me from the company they owned, and where Rigo also worked? They were worried. I invited them to sit in the living room. They both plopped on the sofa. They shook their heads when I offered them a drink.

I excused myself and ran into the kitchen to take the chicken out of the oven. It smelled delicious, but suddenly I wasn't hungry. When I returned I sat in an armchair. They were usually very loquacious, especially Ernie, but they remained silent. All kinds of alarms were going off in my head.

"Would you mind telling me what's happening?"

They looked at each other again. Tina took a deep breath before she started talking.

"The meeting Rigo had was in San Diego. He was supposed to be back at the office by mid-afternoon. He's not answering his cellphone. When he didn't return by five I called the people he was meeting with. They said he left before two. I checked the traffic reports. No serious problems have been reported on the five or the four—oh—five. He should easily have made it to the office or here by now."

Their office was only a few miles from the apartment. I was wondering whether they were overreacting. Rigo was law-abiding, and didn't use his cellphone while he was driving.

"Maybe his cellphone battery is dead. Maybe his car broke down. I've been on his case to buy a new car ever since we got married."

We'd been married almost a year. Mentioning his old wreck of a car almost brought smiles to their faces. Rigo was legendary for his loyalty to it. But they quickly became serious again.

Ernie said, "If he had a problem he would have found a way to contact us—or you." He hesitated."

My gut tightened. I was certain they were hiding something.

Ernie and Tina looked at each other again. They didn't look so much scared as embarrassed.

Tina cleared her throat. "I overheard Rigo talking on the phone yesterday. It sounded like he was setting up an appointment with someone for this afternoon. But I'm sure it wasn't business related."

Ernie cut in. "He used to have a girlfriend who moved to the San Diego area. Her name is Barbara, I believe. Cute redhead."

Tina said, "I remember now that he did call her Barbara on the phone."

I glanced from one of them to the other. Tina, looking elegant in her pantsuit with her dark hair done just so. Ernie, with his intense look and wide-mouthed smile. Only he wasn't smiling now. I was tempted to laugh. They were trying to warn me that Rigo might be up to something. Rigo, who was an open book.

I appreciated them doing this, because they could have just as easily covered for their son. I knew this openness on their part was due to the close relationship I had with them, and I was very glad of it. However, *I* was the secretive member of the family. I was the one who was always running off to the far corners of the globe with barely a word to Rigo. *He* was the steadying influence.

I wanted to set their minds at ease. The pot, as my grandmother used to say, shouldn't call the kettle black.

"Rigo has spoken to me about a couple of old girlfriends. If he wants to meet one of them for a drink, that's all right with me."

They looked visibly relieved. I was suddenly hungry. I invited them to dinner.

"I've got plenty of food. If Rigo shows up he can eat leftovers. Ernie, I have lots of Corona and lime."

Ernie loved Corona beer with a wedge of lime in the bottle.

Rigo didn't show up and he didn't call. I was beginning to get concerned about him, but I tried not to show it. This wasn't like him. I kept the conversation going so Tina and Ernie wouldn't worry. I showed interest in how their company was doing. When Ernie got started he could talk business for hours. They complimented my cooking; I was definitely improving as a cook. I fed them fresh strawberries for dessert, one of the benefits of summer.

When they left I tried to assure them that Rigo would be fine. I promised to call or text them as soon as he arrived home. I gave them each a hug and a false smile. After they were gone I collapsed in a chair, almost in tears, and feared the worst.

The last contact I'd had with Rigo had been a phone call around lunch time. Actually, it wasn't exactly a phone call. When I answered the phone all I heard was a series of taps. Rigo had suggested we create our own code language for communicating with each other without talking (or texting), largely because he knew I'd broken several codes, and had even been offered a job as a code breaker in England. It was just for fun, of course, but it was nice to be able to communicate in a language nobody else could understand, in a world where some group or other seemed to know everything we did. He had tapped out "I love you" and hoped my day was going well. I had responded in kind.

I couldn't sit still, so I compulsively checked my cellphone for messages, oral, text, or in tap language. Then I checked my email. I knew Rigo's password, so I checked his personal email. Nothing. I checked several social and business sites he belonged to, not expecting to find anything. I didn't. I called Rigo's cellphone for about the tenth time, and got sent to voicemail.

I went to bed after midnight, but I couldn't sleep. I reviewed the history Rigo and I had together, starting from when he'd found me unconscious and naked in a Dumpster almost two years ago. He'd been a part of my life ever since, even though we'd often been separated for weeks or months at a time. But permanently? How could I live if I knew I'd never see him again? The empty feeling I had in my gut became a spasm.