

CHAPTER ONE



LUCAS MARCHAL FULLY EXPECTED his grandmother to show no interest in her hospital dinner tray; her appetite had dwindled to almost nothing. But in his wildest dreams he wouldn't have imagined that her dour, no-nonsense nurse's aide would lift the dish cover, scream, then stumble backward and fall to the floor.

He bolted toward her to help, vaguely aware of other San Diego Hope rehab staff filing through the door.

His grandmother's roommate, chubby and childlike despite middle age, pitched forward in her bed to utter a lisping litany of concern. "Oh . . . my . . . goodnethh. Oh, my!"

"Here." Lucas offered a hand to the downed nurse's aide. "Let me help you up, Mrs.—"

“No need,” she sputtered, waving him and one of the other aides away. “I’m all right. Weak ankle. Lost my balance, that’s all. After I saw that . . . *horrid* thing.” Revulsion flickered across her age-lined face. “On your grandmother’s plate.”

What?

Lucas’s gaze darted to the remaining staff now gathering around his grandmother’s tray table. They stared like curious looky-loos at a crime scene. Lucas was all too familiar with that phenomenon, though as an evidence technician, he operated on the other side of the yellow police tape. He turned back to the nurse’s aide—Wanda Clay, according to her name badge—who’d managed to stand and retrieve the dish cover she’d dropped in her panic. “What’s wrong with my grandmother’s dinner plate?”

“It was on the rice,” Wanda explained, gingerly testing her ankle. It was hard to tell if her grimace was from an injury or from what she was struggling to explain. “Sitting there on the food, bold as brass.” She crossed her arms, tried to still a shudder. “Black, huge, with those awful legs. I haven’t seen one of those vile bugs since I left Florida.”

A *cockroach*? On his grandmother’s food? It could snuff what little was left of her appetite—and his hope that she’d finally regain her strength.

“It’s probably scurried away by now.” The nurse’s aide rubbed an elbow. “That’s what they do in the light. But I saw it, plain as can be. And you can bet I’ll be reporting it to—”

“You mean *this*?” A young, bearded tech in blue scrubs

pointed at the plate. Then made no attempt to hide his smirk. “Is this what freaked you out, Wanda?”

“I wasn’t scared,” the woman denied, paling as she stared at the tray. “Startled maybe. Because no one expects to see—”

“A black olive?” the tech crowed, pointing again. “Ooooh. Horrifying.”

Someone else tittered. “Yep, that’s an olive—was an olive. Sort of cut up in pieces and stuck on the rice. A decoration, maybe?”

“Oh, goody.” The roommate clapped her hands, her expression morphing from concern to delight. “Can I see? Is it pretty? Can I have a party decoration too?”

“Hey, Wanda,” the tech teased, “what form do we use to report an olive to—?”

“I think that’s enough,” Lucas advised, raising his hands. “No harm, no foul. Okay?” He reminded himself that law enforcement saw its own share of clowning. But . . . “We have two ladies who need to eat.”

“Yes, sir.” The technician nodded, his expression sheepish. “Just kidding around. I’ll get your grandma some fresh water.”

“Thank you.” Lucas glanced toward Wanda. “You’re not hurt?”

“Only a bump.” She rubbed her elbow again, lips pinching tight. “Some decoration.”

“Yeah.”

Lucas watched for a moment as Wanda helped the chattering roommate with her tray; then he glanced toward the

window beyond—the hospital’s peaceful ocean view—before returning to his grandmother’s bedside. He slid his chair close, his heart heavy at the sight of her now. Asleep on her pillow and far too thin, with her stroke-damaged right arm lying useless across her chest. For the first time ever, Rosalynn Marchal actually appeared her age of seventy-six. So different from the strong, vibrant woman who’d essentially been his mother. A woman whose unbridled laughter turned heads in more than a few fancy restaurants, who shouldered a skeet rifle like she intended to stop a charging rhino. A still-lovely senior equally at home in a gown and diamonds for a charity event or wearing faded jeans and a sun hat to dig in her wildly beautiful garden high above the Pacific Ocean. She was an acclaimed painter, a deeply devoted believer. And a new widow. That inconsolable heartbreak had brought her to this point . . . *of no return?*

No.

Lucas watched her doze, torn between the mercy of letting her dream of far better times and the absolute fact that if she didn’t eat, drink, move, breathe, she’d succeed in what she’d recently told her pastor and her grandson: *“I’m okay with leaving this earthly world.”* Lucas couldn’t let that happen even if his grandmother’s advance medical directive, her legal living will, required he honor her wishes regarding life support. She’d beaten the pneumonia that brought her to the hospital this time, and the therapists said she still had enough physical strength to regain some mobility, as long as she mustered the will to take nourishment.

“Here’s that water,” the technician said, setting a pitcher beside the food tray. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry about that kidding around earlier. It wasn’t professional.”

“No harm done . . . Edward,” Lucas told him after glancing at his ID badge. “I appreciate the help all of you give my grandmother.”

“Pretty special lady, huh?”

“The most.”

“If you need to get going, I can help feed her tonight,” Edward offered. “I know she’s on Wanda’s list, but I don’t mind. I have the time.” He shrugged. “And after all that joking around, I’m probably on her list too. Wanda Clay’s ever-growing—” The young man’s gaze came to rest on the Bible on the bedside table, and he appeared to swallow his intended word. “Her hit list.”

Lucas smiled. His grandmother’s powerful influence for good. Even in sleep. “Thanks, but I can stay tonight. Things look pretty decent out on the streets.”

“You’re a cop, right?”

“Evidence tech—CSI,” Lucas added, using the TV term everyone recognized.

“Cool.”

“Sometimes. Mostly it’s like being a Molly Maid. With gloves, tweezers, and a camera. Not as exciting as on TV.”

“Still sounds cool to me.” The tech moved the dinner tray closer. He pointed to the tepid mound of boiled rice. “I guess I can see how someone might think that thing was a bug.”

Lucas inspected the offensive olive. “You think it’s supposed to be a garnish?”

“Yeah.” Edward snickered. “Some bored dietary assistant getting her cutesy on.”



“It’s not like I’m sous-chef at Avant or Puesto,” Aimee Curran told her cousin, citing top-ten local restaurants. She tucked a tendril of auburn hair behind an ear and sighed. “Or that I even get much of a chance to be food-creative here. But . . .” She raised her voice over the mix of staff and visitor chatter in the San Diego Hope hospital cafeteria so that Taylor Cabot could hear. “At least working in a dietary department will look good on my application to the culinary institute.”

“You’re serious about it. I can see it in your eyes,” Taylor observed, mercifully offering no reference to Aimee’s failed and costly past career paths. Nursing, right up to the moment she panicked, then passed out and hit the floor during a surgery rotation, followed by early childhood education that . . . just didn’t fit. “Aunt Miranda would love it, of course.” Taylor slid an extra package of saltines into the pocket of her ER scrub top. “She was such an awesome cook.”

“She was.” Aimee’s mother had been a school nurse, but her kitchen was her beating heart. “Apron time” with her only daughter had meant the world to her. And to Aimee.

“If I win the Vegan Valentine Bake-Off, it means admission to the culinary institute with fully paid tuition,” Aimee

explained. “I can’t qualify for more student loans. So this is it.”

“I didn’t know you’d gone vegan.”

“I haven’t. Not even close, though Mom taught me to respect organic and local foods. It’s just that there won’t be so many entries in a vegan contest. It’s a calculated risk. And I need to win, Taylor.” Aimee’s pulse quickened. “It’s my last chance to honor my mother with a choice I’m making for my life—my *whole* life. I’ve got to do that. I can’t bear it if I don’t.”

“I think . . .” Taylor’s voice was gentle. “I think that your mother would be proud of you, regardless.”

“But it just seems that everyone else has found their calling, you know? You’ve got your career in the ER. My brother’s starting medical school up in Portland, and Dad’s found Nancy.” Aimee smiled, so very happy for him. “Now they’ve adopted those two little rascals from Haiti . . .” Her eyes met Taylor’s. “The contest is being held on Valentine’s Day.”

“Your birthday. And also . . .”

“Ten years from the day Mom passed away.” Aimee sighed. “I’m going to be twenty-six, Taylor. It’s high time I got myself together and moved on.”

“I understand that.”

“I know you do.” Taylor’s husband, a Sacramento fire-fighter, had been killed in an accident almost three years ago. Taking a job in San Diego was part of Taylor’s plan to move on.

“So what are you going to wow those bake-off judges with?” Taylor asked after carefully tapping the meal’s calorie count into her cell phone. The old familiar spark of fun warmed her eyes. “Some sort of soybean cheesecake?”

“Not a tofu fan,” Aimee admitted, her nose wrinkling. “I thought I’d go through Mom’s old recipe tin and adapt something—you know, ban the chickens and cows, but keep the sugar.”

“And all the love. Aunt Miranda was all about ‘stirring in the love.’ I think I asked my mom once if you could buy that at Walmart in a five-pound sack like flour.”

Aimee smiled. “The first phase is tomorrow. I’ve got to pass that. The bake-off finals will be televised. Professional kitchen, top-grade tools . . . ticking time clock.” She grimaced. “Nothing like pressure. But at least the hospital dietary kitchen gives me a chance to handle more equipment than I have at my apartment and practice my chopping and slicing techniques.” She shook her head. “Mostly when nobody’s looking, since the biggest part of my job is tray delivery. But I’ve been known to add a few artistic, signature Aimee touches and—”

“Hey, Curran!”

Aimee turned and saw a familiar young man in scrubs cruising toward them. Beard, husky build. That rehab tech, Edward.

“Hey there,” he said, plunking a hand on the edge of their table. He grinned at Aimee, raised a brow. “Was it you?”

“Was *what* me?”

“That cutesy olive on Mrs. Marchal’s rice.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Aimee told him, afraid she did. Why was he making a big deal out of—?

“A black olive, cut up like some kind of decoration? I think someone got pictures of it.”

“Really?” She hesitated. Was he flattering her? Or . . .

“Wanda thought it was a cockroach. She screamed like a banshee and fell down on her—”

“What?” Aimee’s heart stalled. *No*. This had to be a bad joke.

“Anyway,” he said, waving at a passing student nurse, “Wanda’s probably gunning for your department. Grumbling about ‘malicious mischief’ and things like that. Thought you should know.” Edward winked, smacked his hand on the table. “But thank ’em for me, would ya? Highlight of my day.”

Aimee closed her eyes as he sauntered away. *Please . . .*

“Aimee?” Taylor leaned over the table, touched her hand. “You okay?”

“I . . .” She met her cousin’s gaze and groaned.

“Oh, dear.” Taylor winced. “A ‘signature Aimee touch’?”

“It was a *daisy*. I snipped all those little black petals really carefully. I didn’t even know whose tray it was. But I thought it was sort of cheery. And now, when I’m still on probation, I might be accused of doing something malicious . . .” Another thought made her breath catch. “Wanda’s pretty old. Do you think she got hurt? Broke a hip or—?”

“I doubt it,” Taylor interrupted, her expression reassuring.

“Wanda is sturdier than she looks. But I do think you should go over there and explain. Apologize to her. And to the patient, too, if she was upset by it.”

“Oh, great. I just thought of something else.” Aimee squeezed her eyes shut again. “I think Mrs. Marchal’s grandson works for the police department. Can this get any worse?”