



Contemporary Romance  
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Chapter 1  
Aguas Mansas, Puerto Rico  
August 1997

I should've listened to Grandmother that evening.

*Abuela*, Grandmother in English warned me: "No shortcuts on the way home from Mass—not in the dark." She referred to The Mount, a trail that ran high above Santa Ana Avenue. "Something may happen to you, child."

"Hi. I'm Elena Pereira—I'm almost 19."

"You're beautiful and stubborn like your mother, God rest her soul." *Abuela* patted my cheeks.

"And I'm not a little girl any more." I tucked Sofia, my rag doll, into my knapsack. "Mom would've agreed I'm a grown woman. Five feet four, see?"

"Just listen to me, grown woman. Better you take a cab home tonight."

"God give me the wisdom to accept the things I can't change." The words a song on my lips, I made the sign of the cross. Eyes lowered, I clasped my hands in prayer.

*Abuela* often used the phrase in resignation. One day, having failed a math test, I repeated it in jest. I made the sign of the cross. And

then, hands folded in prayer, I cast down my eyes. *Abuela* had answered, "Amen."

We both laughed at my improvisation. The spoof became a habit, though. One day *Abuela* would die. What a fitting way to keep her alive in my heart, her favorite phrase.

The afternoon of which I write, though, *Abuela* didn't find my antics funny. Instead, she raised my face to hers.

"Elena, how could I live if something happens to you?"

"You survived Mom's death. Just let me grow up, okay?" Out of kitchen I dashed, down the stairs that led to the patio.

Lest *Abuela*, now by the kitchen window, harped on my safety again, I rushed my step. Worries were for the old.

Besides, *Abuela*'s concern made no sense. What evil had ever happened in Aguas Mansas? None. In fact, sometimes I wished the devil paid a visit. That's what my barrio needed, to make the front page. After all, no one knew we existed. Our barrio God had tucked in Puerto Rico's Western Coast Valley.

Something in my grandmother's tone of voice did bother me. I hate to admit I took a cab on my way home after Mass. Then I changed my mind. I wouldn't feed *Abuela*'s paranoia. I got off at the entrance to the avenue.

The moon lay hidden behind clouds that night, I recall.

A candle burnt on the window of Doña Leticia's house on stilts. People needed to know the Lord walked among them even in darkness. The light ... well that was her reminder. That she care did not surprise me. Eighty years young she had taught Bible class, twice a week, sixty years now. On her wedding day, she'd vowed to teach God's Word. Few were the times she broke that promise.

How did I know? Doña Leticia was Federico de Santos' mother. He had married my Cousin Rosalina.

A good woman, I appreciated her thoughtfulness. Abuela had made me leery, after all.

I glanced to the right at the service road that gave access to those who lived at The Mount. I enjoyed walking the lane above the main road below. About a mile into my jaunt, I'd come upon my fork. That was my short cut to Casa Sosa, my home.

Abuela ... I wouldn't give in to her fear.

Both palms on my knees now, I inhaled the night air. I breathed it out in one spurt. The Mount was steep. I was ready to climb the cement stairs to the lane above.

All was well. Aguas Mansas, Docile Waters in English, slept in peace.

Coquí... coquí sang the Puerto Rican miniature frog. Coquí... coquí...

Honk! A blare, like that of a duck with a head cold, broke the amphibians' song.

I swerved around. There, at the entry to the avenue stood a van, a charcoal bull waiting to attack. Who was inside, I wondered?

Relax: Nothing bad ever happens in Aguas Mansas.

I stared upward at the sky. The stars danced slower than ever across the heavens. They stopped, gathered above my head, millions ready to crash down on me. God, I was seeing things. Lord, don't let me panic. Mary, let me ground myself in reality, I remember praying.

Quick, I wound my fingers tight around the rosary in my jeans.

I must flee. One-step, that's all I took across the street.

Click. Was that the engine I heard turn on?

Vroom ... vroom, the van roared. On went its headlights, capturing me in its embrace. It was then I noticed the car's windows were tainted black.

A frightened horse, I ran across the road at a gallop's pace. I lost my balance. My arms flailed sideways. I crashed unto the ground.

The vehicle rumbled closer to me now.

Clonk! I heard door clang shut.

Footsteps.

I struggled to rise; I wobbled on my feet; and I never saw my attacker.

The blow to my neck I did feel, that and nothing more.

When I came to a few minutes later, I had a headache. I couldn't move. Having bound my wrists and ankles, my kidnapper then had propped me against a pillow.

I could neither see nor scream. He'd taken care of that, too: blindfolded me; my mouth he'd bound in surgical tape. But one thing I felt: the mattress flutter beneath me. Then, legs straddled on each side of me, my captor locked me tight. No need to have done that, I thought. He'd secured me already.

Clack. An object flicked by my ear. I cringed. The man had wedged a knife between my shoulder and chin. He'd jabbed my flesh to let me know. One move on my part: the weapon would slip and plunge into my throat.

His hands brushed against my silk blouse, next.

Stop, I'd wanted to say. He kept on course. His fingers I felt trip against each other in a hurry to their destination.

Snap, my blouse opened.

He reached beneath my camisole. I hadn't worn a bra that day.

I felt him hesitate; he pulled his hands away.

He removed the knife, then, from its place on my shoulder and chin.

A twist of his wrist next. Rip ... rap ... rip ... The gag that had held me silent came off.

Forward, I jerked in pain upon the pillow. Backward I collapsed against it again.

“Please ... no ... Don't rape me. I'm a virgin.”

The man closed in on me. He smelled of cologne ... no, perfume, its scent spiced vanilla and spice. A familiar scent; where had I smelled it?

I thought he might kiss me.

Forward, behind my head he curved his arms.

He was going to untie me.

The blindfold unfurled beneath his fingers.

I'd imagined my captor held me in the dark. I was wrong. A blue light crept through sheer curtains. I realized then, we hid behind white drapes that wrapped around a four-poster bed.

Who was the man who had kidnapped me? At last, I looked up at my assailant. He wore a Zorro eye mask, his eyes downcast.

I noticed, too, the black hood that flowed down his shoulders. It was part of a one-piece tunic, actually. The garment, loose, was topped off by sleeves taut at his wrists.

Between his fingers, he gripped a switchblade.

“You were waiting for me at that road. We know each other. I'm sure we do,” I lied.

Upward shot the blade. Down glided the hood unto his shoulders.

Two skeleton faces, fluorescent, centered inside his eye sockets glared back at me.

I withheld a scream.

Down again swung the knife.

I held my breath; I wouldn't show fear.

Up once more, the man let the weapon hang in mid-air.

I had called his bluff. What a stupid thing to have done at that moment!

“Who are you?” I asked a chance he might slip and tell me his name.

He didn't indulge me. Instead, he let a ponytail slither from behind the hood. His hairstyle didn't faze me. That was in with the high school crowd. What, if anything, was he trying to say?

He smiled. His grin was a pretzel twisted against his pale skin. I saw him swab his tongue on his lips then. I trembled; he took, it seemed pleasure at what he might yet do to harm me.

Head a tilt; he arched his back to a perfect bow. I saw, then, her breasts sketched against the attire she wore.

A woman—my kidnapper was a woman.

She was a female—I had to outsmart her to get out alive.

“Untie my hands.”

Her eyes narrowed behind the mask.

I must not panic if I hoped to survive.

”You took a risk bringing me here. Why?”

Like a child who couldn't talk, she traced a heart on her palm.

“You love me?”

She nodded.

“Prove it.”

Had she heard me? Then, why was she indifferent?

Mom came to my mind. On the day she died, she fought the tide that carried her and Father out to sea.

This my Abuela learned from eyewitnesses. My mother wasn't a coward. I was her daughter.

I would live—or die—but no one would ever say I didn't put up a fight.

“Untie me—” Again, no reaction. I risked my life should I not come through with what I now promised. “Do that, and I'm yours.”

Magic words: The blade clawed into the twine that bound me. The woman dropped the switchblade next to her on the mattress. I wasted no time. Now or never—I bounced forward. I screamed a yell I thought Aguas Mansas had heard.

My attacker did not see it coming. Two fingers each I sunk into her cosmetic contacts. Curled in a ball, the woman fell on the mattress.

Quick, I scrambled to get a hold of the knife.

Success. I had set my ankles free.

I clambered out of bed; tripped over a pair of heels. Tottering, I held on to a bedpost.

Hurry, Elena, get away, I thought I heard Abuela say.

I regained momentum, to no avail. Behind me, my pursuer cut my flight at the bedroom door. She slammed it shut.

I swerved about. The woman twisted my wrist; the weapon fell in her clutches.

“Mom!” I didn't even remember her; all I had was a faded picture ... Sophia, the rag doll she had made for me. But I needed her strength. “Mom!”

I leaned forward; my teeth I clamped on my assailants right shoulder. I had hoped she'd drop the blade to the floor. Then I could run out the house to freedom.

Towards me, the woman jerked her left shoulder, away.

Her flesh I released. She twined my hair around her fingers. She threw me against the door. Both my arms she now pinned beneath her chest.

The blade still at bay over my head, she searched for my mouth.

“Mom ...” My mother's name died on the woman's lips.

Her tongue probed deep; I choked on her kiss. I smelled again that perfume, its scent vanilla, and spice. Oh, Lord, that fragrance seemed familiar.

I jerked away.

“You want to kill me?” My eyes traveled to the knife above me. Downward again, I glanced deep into the skeleton heads in the woman's gaze. “Do it.”

Her mouth tightened; they became blanched, actually, but she didn't answer.

“Then rape me once you've murdered me.”

I spat at her face, then, my spit hanging on one corner of her mask. Earlier I had wanted to yank off her disguise, but I dare not.

“You won't touch me while I'm alive.”

She jostled her leg between my thighs.

Then, a snicker on her lips, her head swept downward. A buzzard, her teeth lifted my camisole. I felt her saliva drip-drop down upon one my breasts.

“Mom, I need you! Help me, someone ... Mom!”

I've no idea where I got the strength. One minute, unable to move, I was certain I'd died. The next second I swiveled to grab the woman's forearm above me. I knew then I'd live. My attacker, caught up in caressing me, I caught by surprise.

The blade, a pitchfork, I plunged into the woman's left shoulder.

She slacked against me, and then collapsed on her knees on the floor.

But why hadn't she screamed when I injured her?

On her feet again, she rocked sideways. I thought she'd slam head first to the floor this time. She didn't, regaining her balance.

"One more step and I'll cut your face."

The woman didn't pay me heed. Pain etched on her brow, she tottered to the foot of the bed.

And I held my place.

"No shortcuts on the way home from Mass—not in the dark.

Something may happen to you, child," I heard Abuela say.

Coquí... coquí sang the Puerto Rican miniature frog.

Vroom... vroom, the van roared.

Honk.

Clonk.

The blow to my neck I did feel, that and nothing more.

Quick. Snap. All that led to this time swirled about in my head.

I felt dizzy, overwhelmed, in shock, all at the same time.

The woman, her right hand coiled around one of the bedposts now, turned to me. She held my blouse—I didn't know when I had lost it.

Eyes lowered, she pressed it against her wound. Then she brought the garment to her lips, letting it linger, before throwing it to me.

"I meant what I said." I caught the blouse in mid-air. "Go ahead. Come near me. I'll shred your face."

Such bravado! What would I have done had she called my bluff? I didn't have to find out. My attacker waved me away ... with a curl of her hand she bade I leave.

Sofia ... my knapsack ... where were they? Downstairs: Both I rescued there on a chair by the door to the living room. I flung the knife on the porch and fled.