

Chapter 1

Couldn't she rub her aching feet *yet*? Crawl up the stairs at the back of Bridgeview Bakery and Bistro to the apartment she shared with her cousin and co-owner?

Kassidy North turned back to the brightly lit, teeming space. Her smile faltered when her gaze swept the clock. Two more hours until closing.

"Girl, this is a happening place!" Former employee Linnea Ranta — no, Linnea Dermott now — bumped Kass's elbow. "This birthday party is such a success you've got a line down the block."

Kass groaned. "Tell me that's not true."

"Oh, it's true, all right." Linnea glanced around. "Where's all the staff?"

"Shay put in her eight hours and couldn't stay. Ava broke her leg day before yesterday. The new girl... well, let's just say she's a warm body, but the tables are getting cleared at least. Hailey's in the kitchen trying to keep up with the baking, so that leaves me on everything else."

"Where's an apron?" Linnea didn't wait for a reply but stepped past Kass to the hooks beside the office door.

"But you don't work here anymore." Still, Kass

couldn't help the lilt of hope that infused her words. After all, Linnea and Logan had returned from their honeymoon just a day or two ago and were packing for their move to Seattle.

"I work here today." Linnea tied the apron around her back. "Where can I do the most good?"

Kass heaved a sigh of relief. "Running the till. I'll plate."

Linnea nodded and turned to the next person in line. "Hi there. What can I do for you?"

"I've heard I can order bread and other stuff for weekly pickup, but the rack with signup forms is empty."

Kass snagged the notebook off the counter. "I'll help you over here." At least Linnea could keep the line moving while she took time out. And hadn't they printed enough of those order forms? The rack had been jammed full at seven this morning.

"Logan can do that. He's familiar with all the inventory." Linnea waved both arms to catch her husband's attention from where he sat at a table chatting with some of their friends. When he looked up, she beckoned him over.

"You've got him well trained already," Kass whispered to her friend.

Linnea grinned then tugged the notebook out of Kass's hands and pressed it into Logan's. "Would you mind helping out with standing orders, love? You know the drill."

He should. Logan had worked his way through the entire menu in the first few months he'd lived in

the neighborhood before settling into a weekly subscription of his favorites. The man did not love to cook.

“No problem.” Logan looked at the notebook, snagged a pen from the holder beside the till, and smiled at the forty-something woman who stood there looking from one to the other. “As you can see, ma’am, baked goods from Bridgeview Bakery and Bistro are in high demand, but I know we can fill your order. Let’s take a seat over here.” He led the woman over to the table where he’d been having coffee with the guys and shooed Peter and Alex out of their seats.

Kass dared to breathe. Maybe they’d survive today after all. Thank the Lord tomorrow was Sunday and they’d be able to relax. She hadn’t promised to bring snacks for coffee time at church, had she? Pretty sure that was next week. She’d check her reminder app later... if she remembered.

Linnea clipped an order to the line, and Kass glanced at it before scooping a bowl of sausage and kale chowder then placing a warm sourdough biscuit beside it. A pat of butter, and the plate went up.

She settled into the routine, breathing a prayer of thanks for Linnea’s and Logan’s help. Hailey slid a pan of warm cinnamon rolls into the display case, and a few patrons who’d already been seated returned to sample the sweetly aromatic treats.

“Three years in business? Congratulations. That’s an achievement these days.” An older man Kass didn’t remember seeing before smiled as he accepted a plate with four chewy chocolate peppermint

cookies. “These smell really good.”

“Thank you.” Kass glanced at the order. “Your London Fog will be right up.” She turned to the machine.

“The guys from my office told me about this hidden gem. I’m impressed. Really impressed.”

“We’ve been blessed.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

“Our grandparents operated a bakery here years ago and willed it to my cousin and me. It was a lot of work to bring it up to code and re-open, but it’s been worth it.” A lot of work and a lot of cash. “We’ve dedicated this business to God, asking Him to bless our community through us.”

The man waved a hand. “Looks like a lot of people are being *blessed*, as you put it. At least they seem happy to be here.”

Hailey had turned off the music hours ago. It had been drowned by the sounds of voices and laughter anyway. A quick peek around the vibrant café brought a grin to Kass’s face that belied her aching feet. “It’s been a good day. Here’s your drink, sir. Thank you for coming in, and I hope to see you again sometime.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Tiny interludes like this had taken place all day, making everything worthwhile. She and Hailey had prayed God would bless their business and grow it, and He’d sent Nathan Hamelin, a marketing guru who’d grown up here in Spokane and learned his trade in L. A., to ignite plans for this third-birthday

extravaganza.

Nathan had even helped cover the noon rush, citing his college years waiting on tables. Now the newlyweds were pitching in. What had she and Hailey done to deserve such good friends? And what were they going to do if even a fraction of today's visitors came back?

The crash of shattering china yanked Kass from the monotony of fixing lattes and plating sweets while smiling, nodding, and greeting an endless sea of faces.

Across the counter stood a man with dusky blond hair and a neatly trimmed short beard clutching the hand of his mini-me. The boy, about five, stared up at Kass with his eyes wide and his mouth in an 'o.' "I'm s-sorry."

Kass pushed a smile to the front. "It's okay." She grabbed the broom and dustpan from inside the closet and rounded the counter. A platter lay in a dozen shards. Oh, no.

She bent to clean up the mess, only then recognizing the platter, one of the few that had remained from her grandparents' days in the bakery. Grandma had served tea and cookies to two little girls on matching floral china. The citrusy aroma of the lemon squares on the tile floor morphed into the bergamot tea and snowdrop cookies dusted in confectioners' sugar from her childhood.

Kass blinked away both the tears and the desire to bolt up the back stairs and hide out for even a little while.

Wesley Ferguson stared at the fragments of turquoise and white china on the tiles at his feet. Had that been a vintage piece? If he didn't miss his guess, a Tuscan Works design from Staffordshire in the mid-forties. Yes, that shard was a gilded ear handle. Oh, man, the thing was rare. Priceless.

Shattered.

"I d-didn't mean to, Daddy."

Wesley pulled his son closer. "I know, buddy." But sorry wasn't enough, and there was no way he could afford to replace the plate... and that's if a replacement existed on the planet.

But, did the gorgeous redhead who crouched in front of him know what she'd lost? He touched her shoulder. "I'm so sorry. Here, let me get that."

Another woman approached with a small cardboard box. Wesley took it from her then crouched to the aromatic mess.

The redhead sniffed. "I've got it." She swept the larger pieces together, the turquoise border laced with white flowers.

"It's the least I can do. That was a rare piece. I'm so sorry my son bumped into it." He picked up the gilded handle, set it in the box, and reached for another.

She dumped a dustpanful into the box and cast him a sidelong glance.

Wesley winced at the clatter of broken glass. "Easy does it."

“They’re already broken.” Moisture glistened in her brown eyes.

“Maybe it can be repaired.”

Her eyebrows rose. “There are dozens of pieces.”

As though he couldn’t see that. “Let me try.”

The clamor of voices and laughter continued unabated around them, but the only thing pulling his thoughts away from the pretty woman was Sebastian’s pointy elbow digging into his shoulder and the mess in front of them.

“I’m Cassidy North,” she said at last, searching his face. “My cousin and I own this café.”

“Wesley Ferguson. I’d like to say it’s nice to meet you, but not like this. My son, Sebastian.” He reached for her hand.

She looked at her lemon-custard-covered fingers and shook her head.

“I’m s-so sorry.”

Kassidy eyed his boy then angled slightly away. “I’ll clean this up. Don’t worry about it. Had you already placed your order? Linnea would be happy to help you at the counter.” She dumped two quick pans into the box.

Dismissed, then. She didn’t even ask how he knew the piece, how he thought he might repair it. Not that it would be exactly the same.

The gum-chewing waitress he’d noticed earlier leaned over his shoulder. “Now there’s a mess.”

Kassidy looked up. “Celeste? Can you get a bucket and rag and finish here, please?”

The young woman nodded. “You got it.”

Wesley rose and pulled Sebastian further from the diminishing disaster. His son tugged him to the display case. “Can we get a c-cinnamon roll?”

“Sure, buddy, but they’re huge. Split one with you?”

“Okay.”

He placed his order, along with milk for Sebastian and a coffee for himself, before retreating to a table just being vacated by several teens, where he sat facing into the cheerfully decorated bistro. The waitress wiped up the remains of the lemon squares while, behind the counter, Cassidy washed her hands then turned to help the next customer.

“This is g-good,” whispered Sebastian.

Wesley grinned at his son. “It is. I’m glad our neighbors told us to come here, aren’t you?” Not that he hadn’t seen the posters announcing the birthday party around their new community, but the personal recommendation from the Sheridans next door had been the final nudge.

This was his kind of building. Exterior walls of reclaimed brick met the inner walls’ whitewashed planks. Chairs painted in yellow, white, and turquoise surrounded wooden tables, similar colors popping up in signage and a few antiques. The platter had been right at home for all collectors called it duck egg blue rather than turquoise... and should have been kept well out of the hubbub. Although, Sebastian shouldn’t have reached for one of the lemon squares sitting on it, either.

His gaze lingered on Cassidy North. Her red hair

had been braided from the crown of her head and ended past her shoulder blades. Sydney had always hated fiddling with her hair, keeping it short and spiked.

Sydney. Sebastian hadn't talked about his mom in a while, and Wesley hadn't thought of her often lately. She'd promised him forever, but her definition had been different than his.

Sydney would have reacted a lot differently than Cassidy had to a broken heirloom. Good grief — she'd freaked out when Sebastian dropped a dime-store bowl.

“Dad, what's th-this?”

“What's what?” Wesley pulled his gaze from the redhead back to his son, who pointed at a paper tucked between the salt and pepper shakers. He picked up the pamphlet. Once a month cooking? He chuckled. That's about how often he got struck by inspiration but, wait, that's not what this was about. Instead, it was about a group cooking experience where each participant took home twenty meals for their family every month. Twenty meals. Five days a week, he'd know what was for supper.

His interest mounted as he explained the concept to Sebastian. “I don't know if you'd like it, buddy. There's chili and lasagna and...” He flipped the pamphlet over and his voice stopped working.

“I like ch-chili.”

Kassidy's smiling face met his from the photo on the paper. She was the facilitator? Seemed so. Her email address. Her phone number.

He and Sebastian needed to eat, didn't they? Certainly there was more to life than hot dogs, canned ravioli, and takeout. He folded the paper and stuck it in his shirt pocket. "Ready to go home? Time to unpack a few more boxes. Maybe we can get your room finished up before bedtime."

Sebastian's face lit up as he slid off his chair.

They walked out the door as a middle-aged couple set their cups on the vacated table. On a whim, Wesley guided Sebastian around the back of the building. Aha, just as he suspected. Beside the trash can sat the small cardboard box holding the fragments of Cassidy's vintage platter.

Wesley tucked it under his arm. He could create something beautiful out of it and give it back to her. It was only because he felt so badly about Sebastian's clumsiness. Right?

Sure, he could try convincing himself of that. Maybe it would even work.

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