

Chapter 1

The usual?"

Winnie Santoro nodded, blinking back sudden moisture in her eyes. "Thank you." When was the last time someone besides her kids had remembered her preferences for ten minutes, let alone an entire week? Since Al, that's when. And her husband been gone for over two years now.

The man in the coffee truck moved with quiet efficiency, prepping her latte and adding an artful flourish of whipped cream on top. He smiled at her as he slipped a sleeve on the paper cup and set it on the ledge.

"Do you remember everyone's orders?" She handed him her payment.

His blue eyes twinkled. "Just the pretty ladies who come alone."

She'd asked for that, but she couldn't fault him for the flirt. He looked to be a bit older than her fifty years, with lightly salted thinning hair. His cranberry red Henley sported the emblem of Redband Roasters,

a stylized version of Spokane's signature redband trout.

For once, there was no one behind her waiting for their cup of java at the Kendall Yards Night Market. With frost in the air this October evening, she'd have thought lots of people would need a warmup.

"What do you do with the truck when the markets close in fall?" Not that it was any of her business, but today had been a hard day, and she needed to stay distracted for more than thirty seconds.

"This will be my first winter since I bought the company, but I've got a three-pronged plan." He smiled again, the skin around his eyes crinkling as he did.

His face was made for smiling. "Oh?" Suddenly, Winnie actually wanted to know.

"I'm booked for area festivals through the Christmas season, I've got a place to park the truck near offices downtown weekdays, and I plan to approach more local restaurants about carrying my brand."

"It's terrific coffee. You shouldn't have any trouble finding outlets." She sipped the brew. Probably had a whipped cream mustache, too. She reached for the dispenser only to find the man was already handing her a napkin.

"I should hire you as a spokeswoman."

Winnie chuckled as she dabbed her lip. "Have you approached the owners of Bridgeview Bakery

and Bistro? They might be willing to talk.” She pointed across the river in the general direction.

“I haven’t. Frankly, I’ve been too busy learning the ropes of my new business and running the truck over the summer. They’re on my list, though.”

“Tell them Winnie sent you. Not that I have any influence there.”

“Winnie. That’s a lovely name.” He reached through the opening. “I’m Charlie.”

“Pleased to meet you. Officially.” She shifted the cup to her left hand and shook his hand. He might not wear the calluses like Al had obtained from years of trimming trees, but Charlie’s grip was firm nonetheless. The warmth of it filtered through her. Welcome, but strange.

He looked out over the evening market for a moment, and she turned to do the same, sipping the latte. Canvas gazebos lined both sides of Summit Parkway, but the crowds that had thronged the area even half an hour ago had thinned out as darkness fell.

Winnie was going to miss these Wednesday evening excursions. She told the boys she needed to pick up farm-fresh vegetables, so she made sure to come home with something. A few squash — neither of the boys’ favorite — a jar of fiery salsa, maybe some pastured chicken or gourmet cheese or a boule of artisan sourdough. Honestly, she came more for the outing than the shopping.

And for her weekly specialty latte... but if anyone thought to approach the truck, she was blocking their trajectory. No one seemed to be angling this direction, though, and she didn't feel like moving.

“Mr. Winnie doesn't prefer to come to the night market?”

Mr. Winnie? Right, she hadn't offered her surname. Probably because there were so many Santoros in Spokane this man probably knew one of them, or maybe ten. Tonight, she wanted incognito. To be just herself. But his curious gaze was fixed on her wedding rings. She should take them off, but that seemed so final. So traitorous. “He is enjoying dancing in heaven at the feet of Jesus.”

“I'm sorry. None of my business.”

“It's been over two years.” Winnie hesitated. “Today would have been our twenty-seventh wedding anniversary.” Which summed up why this had been an uncharacteristically melancholy day. Not that she needed to dump it all on a stranger.

“So... not quite twenty-five.”

The man could do math. “We had plans for our silver anniversary. A big party and then a Caribbean cruise. We were going to learn to snorkel.” Winnie shook her head. “Sorry for dumping all that. It's been a strange day, but it's not on you.”

“Not a problem. Twenty-five years is quite a feat in this day and age.” This time it was he who stared

off. Then he turned a lopsided smile on Winnie. “My ex and I made it all the way to seventeen.”

Ex. So Charlie was divorced, not widowed. *But he’s single now.* Winnie shushed her brain, because what did that matter? She might be lonely, but she wasn’t looking for a relationship.

Nor did she wish to know the details of Charlie’s failed marriage, which meant he was equally as interested in hearing about Al. In other words, she’d overstayed her welcome in front of the Redband Roasters truck.

Winnie lifted the paper cup in salute. “I still have my shopping to do, so I should get on with it and quit holding up your time. Thanks for the coffee, and have a good evening.”

And a nice life, since this was the final market of the season. No point in giving Charlie another thought. She’d never seen him anywhere but at Kendall Yards, so it was unlikely she’d run into him at random around the city.

Unless, of course, she attended the Christmas festivals and sought out his coffee truck.

But a respectable widow of fifty with three teens left in the house, living surrounded by her late husband’s extended family, wouldn’t do such a thing. She’d keep Al’s memory alive every day for their kids and be thankful for the precious years they’d had.

She’d had it good. She knew that. It wasn’t fair to expect a second chance.

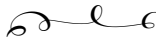
“Thanks for stopping by, Winnie.”

She’d already turned away and taken a few steps, but now she looked back.

Charlie stood illuminated in the truck window, that lopsided smile back on his face. He raised a hand in farewell.

A man who was trying to start something would say something now, but he didn’t. He turned to his sink and turned on the faucet.

Just as well.



“Hey, Dad?”

Charlie Jalonon shifted his cellphone to his other hand and settled into his big comfy chair. “Hey, baby! How are you?”

“Great! I know I told you I couldn’t get time off over Thanksgiving, but one of the other nurses in my unit needs the following weekend off for a wedding, so we’re swapping shifts.”

He barely dared to hope but couldn’t help himself. “And...?”

“And Dominic wants me to meet his family.” Katri gave a little squeal, and Charlie pictured her

bouncing around her small apartment. “Dad, do you think that means what I hope it means?”

Back in the day, a young man would ask his girlfriend’s dad for his blessing before proposing. Guess that was kind of old-fashioned now. Charlie could only be thankful one of his daughters had let him back in her life at all after all the venom their mother had spewed. He didn’t deserve the lies Julia told, but he *had* been at work too much and therefore a lousy father. Julia was right about that part.

“I don’t know, baby. Maybe it depends on what you think it means.” He kept his tone light, teasing. She didn’t need to know the wound her words scratched open.

“He’s amazing, Dad. You’re going to love him.”

Doubtful any young buck could win over a cynical father like Charlie, but whatever.

“And I think it’s pretty cool that you moved to Spokane so the whole meet-the-parents thing can go both ways in one weekend trip.”

Charlie dared breathe. His baby girl was really coming home in a couple of weeks. Not that it was home to her, but he could hardly wait to show her around the city. At least if he could pry her away from that boyfriend for an hour or two.

“Has your mother met him?” Why, oh why, had he allowed the question to slip out? At least he’d kept the tone neutral.

“Yes, she has.”

Of course. Julia still lived in Seattle. She probably had the young couple over for dinner once a week. He'd missed out on so much over the years. Still was.

"She's thrilled he's a doctor. Well, when he finishes med school next year. Mom figures he'll be able to support a family well."

There were so many things Charlie wanted to say to that. If Julia thought Charlie had worked long, irregular hours at Boeing, she shouldn't be encouraging Katri to marry a doctor, of all things. Money couldn't replace time with his wife and kids. Charlie knew that now. He'd even kind of known it then, but what was a man to do? His career had provided the big house, the two luxury cars in the garage, the upscale vacations, and everything his family could want.

Except a great marriage. Except time with his daughters.

The woman from the night market popped into his mind, not for the first time in the past few weeks. A woman whose husband had passed away and was obviously still grieving two-years-and-a-bit later. She'd once had what Charlie wanted, but hers hadn't lasted, either.

"Dad?"

He blinked. "Pardon me?"

"I asked if you have a spare bedroom for me, but you were so quiet I wasn't sure if the call had dropped."

“I’m here.” Just sidetracked. “Yes, I made sure to build in a second bedroom so you or your sister could visit anytime.” Not that Evie would be showing up any day soon. She’d swallowed Julia’s poison.

“Okay, good. Dominic said I could stay with his sister, but that just seems awkward since we haven’t met. Plus, he’s going to his cousin’s wedding on Saturday. He invited me as his plus one, of course, but I’m not sure about it. Doesn’t it seem presumptuous for me to attend a family event? He says he has a million cousins.”

“Baby, if you want to go to the wedding, go for it. You’ll wow them all. You clean up pretty nice, you know.”

Katri chuckled.

“But if you’d rather, you can hang out with me. I’ll treasure any time we can spend together.”

“Aw, thanks, Dad. I’ll let you know what I decide.” Her fridge door creaked, and she sighed. “I need to pick up some groceries.”

“Do you need money?”

“I’ve got a job. I got off late and skipped the supermarket on my way home from work. Looks like I shouldn’t have.”

Charlie already wished he could snatch the words back. He’d always thrown money at every problem. Julia had loved his solution. Until she hadn’t.

“Don’t forget to eat your veggies.”

“Dad!” Katri half-laughed and half-sighed the word.

“Gotcha.” If it weren’t for Katri’s nagging, he’d probably exist on take-out. Turned out he kind of enjoyed cooking, now that he wasn’t a burned-out department head in a Fortune 500 company. He should probably have stepped out years ago. Could he have saved his marriage?

Probably not. Nothing satisfied Julia.

“Okay, gotta go. Talk to you soon.” Katri popped a kiss into the mic and disconnected.

Charlie set his cell down and wandered over to the large window. Down the hill, through the barren trees, he could make out the Spokane River. A short river, full of obstacles, just like a man’s life. Nine of the obstructions were power generators. Was he allowing the obstacles in his life to become something mighty that benefitted those around him? He hoped so. He couldn’t undo the past, but his move to Spokane had been a good one. He could start over here. Find a new rhythm.

Once again his mind drifted to the woman. Winnie. The whipped cream clinging to her upper lip. The warmth in her pretty brown eyes. Her delight in the latte she ordered every week. Where was she getting her fix now that the market was closed for the season?

He didn’t even know her last name.

Cadence of Cranberries by Valerie Comer

Just as well, since she still mourned her husband,
and Charlie wasn't looking, either. He was no great
catch.

Just ask Julia.

Cadence of Cranberries

An Urban Farm Fresh Romance Book Ten

<http://valeriecomer.com/cadence>