

Chapter 1

Ava Santoro should quit making friends with single women. Then she couldn't get roped into all these weddings, right? But maybe married women didn't make much better friends, since they were distracted by their husbands and, eventually, babies.

Not her, though, even if she wished it would happen. True love seemed to have passed her by as unworthy. Her most recent boyfriend was now gaga over her cousin, and she'd been paired with today's groom's older brother. It couldn't get much worse. Basil was Ava's least favorite cousin, and she had plenty to pick from.

She'd smiled graciously for hours — or so it seemed — and the reception was just beginning. But now she was stuck between Basil and the bride, who was understandably busy making eyes at her brand-new husband.

“Almost over, huh?” Basil leaned a little closer. “You gonna be next? Got a significant other?”

She tried to edge away, but there was nowhere to go. “No boyfriend.”

“You must be the only unhitched Santoro besides me. And the juveniles.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“It’s not so bad. Give it long enough, and they quit having expectations. Then you can do whatever you want.”

“Like you *ever* cared,” she muttered under her breath.

Of course, he heard her and responded with a low chuckle. “Oh, I cared once upon a time. But you make one little mistake, become the family black sheep, and — poof — it’s suddenly sort of freeing.”

That’s how it looked to him? He was full of himself. “You were drunk. You ran a police checkpoint and went to jail. That’s what you call freedom?”

Basil uttered a sardonic laugh. “You have no idea.”

“You’re right.” Ava grabbed her clutch and pushed out her chair. “Now, please excuse me. I need to use the restroom.”

“See what I mean about being a pariah?”

She almost pivoted and told him exactly why she was shunning him. It had little to do with his teensy-tiny *mistake* and everything to do with his derisive attitude. How could he live with himself?

Ava strode to the restroom in the Bridgeview Community Center, dodging past the servers preparing to bring plates out to the tables. For a

fleeting moment, she wished she were one of them. She worked part-time at the bistro in charge of tonight's catering and had served at plenty of special events like this one. Wouldn't it have been nice to get a paycheck for smiling and nodding to hundreds of people instead of being stuck with Basil? If only she could have said no to Marley, but a girl just didn't do that to a friend. The temptation had been mighty strong once she found out Alex had asked his older brother to be best man.

She couldn't stay in the restroom long enough to get her temper completely under control. That would take a week of sub-zero weather, but maybe she could survive another hour before disappearing again.

Eating ought to take up some of Basil's attention. He'd probably complain how it wasn't up the standards of the award-winning Seattle restaurant where he worked. Imagine a college grad of thirty-two, waiting tables. Yeah, Basil was just as much a loser as she remembered, not that they really knew other. With their six-year age difference, they hadn't exactly chummed around as kids.

Ava tested out her glamor smile in the mirror. She'd been in the performing arts since she was three. She could do this. She sashayed out of the restroom.

And nearly bowled over a blond server with a platter of plates. Instinctively, she managed to avoid a collision by rising to her tiptoes with her hands high

and sucking in her gut. Dance moves to the rescue.
“Sorry!”

“You okay?” He asked politely enough, but Ava could sense he knew it was all her fault, because it was.

“Sure. And good job keeping that thing balanced. I’m impressed.”

He rolled his eyes as Hailey, one of the bistro owners, turned to relieve him of two more loaded plates.

Ava frowned a little before remembering the stage smile she’d donned. Where had Hailey found this surly guy? Ava had worked at Bridgeview Bakery and Bistro on and off since high school, fitting shifts around classes and dance recitals and substitute teaching, but she’d never seen him before. She’d definitely have remembered.

Looked like the head table had already been served. Ava slid back into her chair and lifted her fork.

“Who’s that guy with Hailey?”

And... there was Basil nattering on again as though Ava were his sole source of local information and entertainment. Maybe she was.

Ava glanced over, taking a closer look at Hailey. When had her boss worn this much makeup or fixed her hair so formally? Hailey had catered plenty of weddings — Ava had helped with her fair share of

them — and this was a first. And that little black dress clung to her curves.

Who was she trying to impress? Server Boy? That didn't seem right, although Hailey tended to chase anyone with a Y chromosome, and the guy was reasonably good-looking. Yellowy blond hair, strong jaw... plus it seemed there might be a muscle or two rippling beneath his white shirt.

“Ava?”

“I don't know him. Is the entree good?”

Basil shrugged. “Okay, I guess. It's food.” He scowled as he glanced back at Hailey and the guy working with her.

Wait. What? Basil and Hailey were two of a kind, flirting with anyone who'd look twice, both flitting around like butterflies — wouldn't Basil love that comparison? — never sticking with one flower for long. Could they...?

Nah. There were too many starry-eyed lovers in Ava's life these days, if she was starting to imagine unrequited love between that unlikely pair.

Still watching, she reached for her wine glass. Crash! Over it went, sending a widening burgundy puddle toward the edge of the table. Toward her peach-colored dress.

Way to be a klutz, Ava.

She skidded her chair back to get away as Basil snapped his fingers. “Hey, can we get some help over

here?” he hollered, throwing all the linen napkins he could reach onto the spill to little avail.

Heat suffused Ava’s cheeks. Oh, man, way to draw all eyes to herself and now Basil.

Server Boy set the platter down, grabbed several towels, and jogged over. He caught the edge of the burgundy lake before it turned into a waterfall. In another minute, he and Hailey had rolled away the offending tablecloth while the wedding party lifted their plates and glasses. A few seconds later, a fresh cloth covered the table, the plates were set down, and the meal resumed as though nothing had happened.

Except for Ava. She took a couple of small bites, but it seemed her stomach would reject even that, so she crossed her utensils on her plate.

“Not going to eat your dinner?” Basil eyed her portion.

Seriously? “Be my guest.”

“If you insist.” He swapped their plates.

Ava couldn’t watch. The noise in the community center had resumed its previous level once the drama at the head table was over. She found her parents chatting with some of Dad’s brothers and their wives then located her younger sister surrounded by several of their cousins. Her gaze lingered on dozens of neighbors and friends and church members. She loved Bridgeview.

Except that everyone had witnessed her humiliation. Graceful, poised Ava Santoro, dance and

music teacher, tipping over a wine glass like a butterfingered kid after nearly running over that cute server.

Not that she'd ever have a chance with a guy like that, not that she wanted one. Especially not if he was interested in a woman like Hailey North.

It was an uncharitable thought. Ava loved the camaraderie at the bistro, both among the staff and with the regulars. The place exuded a joyous atmosphere, and that had as much to do with Hailey as with her co-owner, Kass Ferguson.

Ava simply preferred Boss Hailey to Manhunter Hailey, and tonight the woman was fluttering her eyelashes at Server Boy like he was Adonis. Ava should warn him, but then, he looked like a grownup, and if he was lapping up all this attention, Hailey was his problem.

Good luck with her, Server Boy.



Seth Donahue lined up with the other waitstaff, watching for the opportunity to remove the remaining plates. He couldn't help glancing over at the head table where the dark-haired beauty sat between the bride and the best man, who'd taken over eating from her plate.

She seemed to have regained her poise, but she hadn't eaten more than two or three bites. One of

those women who watched her waistline so avidly that she was starving herself to death? He knew enough women with eating disorders, and she didn't really carry the signs.

"Thanks, Seth. You're doing great." His boss for the evening leaned closer and rested her fingertips on his arm.

Did she have no sense of propriety? He barely knew her and had done his best not to give off easy vibes. He knew far too well what those looked like. Too many years living the other life, but he was done, now.

He scratched his shoulder, effectively dislodging her hand. "Thanks. What's next?"

"A few speeches. Cutting of the cake." She pointed to the towering multi-colored confection on a side table. "Serving dessert. Clearing dishes and cleaning the kitchen while they start dancing."

The maid of honor was going to dance with the best man. Great. But Seth didn't have to watch. A quick glance at his boss revealed she was contemplating the same couple he was. That was weird. "Who is that?"

Hailey straightened and looked away. "Just the groom's brother."

Like he was eyeing the dude. "I meant the girl."

"Oh." Twin pink dots rose high on Hailey's cheeks. "The groom's cousin and best friend of the bride."

Which made her the best man's cousin, too. Seth had no right to feel the relief sliding down his spine.

"Marley works at the bistro, and so does Ava and one of the other bridesmaids. It's why I needed to hire extras for tonight."

Marley was the bride, which meant... "The maid of honor's name is Ava?"

"Ava Santoro." Her fingertips fluttered against his sleeve again. "Schmooze on your own time."

Seth's eyebrows shot up. "Like you're doing?" Uh... he should have bit back those words. She was his boss for the evening.

Hailey snatched her hand away. "Looks like the far table is ready for clearing."

"I'll get their plates right now." He didn't even look to see who else was bussing that table. Probably not Hailey, since it was surrounded by folks middle-aged and up with nary a single guy in sight. Okay, maybe he wasn't being fair to her. Maybe she was just a touchy-feely person, but all that attention made him uncomfortable. It made him feel he'd been hired mostly as a prop. Wasn't that a laugh? Seth Donahue wasn't the kind of guy who attracted women like Hailey North, thank the Lord.

And where that thought had once been a glib reminder of his churchy upbringing, these days, he meant it. He'd had his Prodigal Son moment, thankfully before his dad and stepmom's accident, since he now had custody of his two half-sisters. What

did a guy of twenty-eight who'd wasted most of a decade know about pre-teen girls? But at least he'd been able to step in before Beatrice and Peyton were sent into foster care. There was no one else. Just him.

Which made him super attractive to women. Not. Who wanted to date a guy with two kids who just might be young enough to be his offspring? The girls were with a sitter tonight, someone arranged by Hailey. She'd been fairly desperate to have him serve this event. He blocked his mind from that direction and got back to work.

An hour later, he was done with his cleanup assignments and stood in the kitchen doorway, watching as the wedding party danced. The best man and maid of honor swung closer, more gracefully than he'd have expected from someone as bumbling as she seemed to be.

Both of their gazes fastened on him in the same instant. The best man's cool and calculating. The maid of honor's desperate.

Seth took a step forward. Damsels in distress were his specialty. Then he stopped, because he was only waitstaff tonight, and she likely didn't mean to signal for his attention the way it appeared.

And then Ava twirled elegantly out of the guy's arms and straight into Seth's like she did know what she was doing. "Dance with me? Please?"

"But..."

The best man glowered at him. But no, his gaze roved past Seth to Hailey, who pivoted away, her color heightened. Interesting. But that still left Seth with a raven-haired stunner who smelled of gardenias in his arms, looking up at him with pretty blue eyes.

Hailey'd never said he couldn't dance — why would she have thought he'd be tempted? — and he was off the clock. Why not just go for it? One dance, a little extra bonus for his evening's work?

He rested a palm on the woman's waist, clasped her hand with his, and spun her back into the melee. "I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Seth Donahue, and you are...?"

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