

## Chapter 1

*Maria Amelia Avico Parrano* sat at the take-out window of her son's restaurant in the heart of Seattle's Pike Place Market. Outside her window, the morning bustle of Post Alley would just be starting. Inside, the kitchen sounds of the busy prep crews of Angelo's Tuscan Hearth were already echoing behind her. Manuel, Angelo's *sous chef*, was pushing his new assistant Nora to see if he could make her panic. Maria smiled to herself, no luck yet.

Luisa and Graziella were rehearsing the new menu items for the daily fresh sheet. "Black sea bass poached in a Piedmonte Roero Arneis, that's a slightly sweet white wine of northern Italy, with a rub of basil..."

Maria let the words drift into the background. Served with a surprise pairing of a young Barbaresco red, it would be an innovative pleasure on the palate. The other noises were starting to sound so familiar, it was as if she'd never been anywhere else. Six months she'd been in Seattle since her retirement. Retired at forty-seven, it still made no sense.

But the couple she'd cooked for the last three decades in New York had retired and didn't need a resident chef any more. They had rewarded her most comfortably and now she had a place here at her son's restaurant. And it was time.

She flicked on the heater switch, in moments a warm wash of air blew onto her legs. When she slid up the kitchen window to face the chill first day of December, the cold wasn't bad. Russell, her son's best man at the beautiful fall wedding, had installed another heater over the outside of the window to radiate a wall of warmth down onto the customers and an awning to keep Seattle's December rains at bay.

Russell was such a sweet man, she really didn't need that much protection. She had helped raise both Angelo and Russell, her son and her former employer's boy, so of course they saw her as old and frail. That was their role in life. Youth was supposed to think that way. But she didn't feel that way. Not even a little.

Besides, she had far too much fun selling coffee and pastries at her take-out window to stop merely because of the weather. Already some of her regulars were loitering on the wet brickwork of Post Alley and quickly clustered around the window as soon as she opened it.

"Good morning, Maria." The near chorus was music to her ears.

"Hello Clara, Joseph, and William. I don't see you as much as I do when the weather is nice. Don't you love your Maria any more?" She handed William his cappuccino first to soften the tease. He dropped a five dollar bill in the jar she'd set out. She'd made a decorative tile with "Breakfast \$5" worked in lavender against a yellow glaze at one of those paint-it-yourself pottery places. "The price," she would tell people, "she is fixed in stone." Then she gave William a fresh *cornetto*.

"What's in it this morning?" he took a big bite without waiting for an answer. "Oh my god!" He managed to mumble with his mouth full, a smile on his face, and crumbs clustering on the lapels of his sharp lawyer's suit.

“It’s a sweet *Prosciutto di San Daniele* with a fresh, tangy *Robiola Bosina* cheese.”

By that time Clara had bitten into hers and had her eyes closed, as usual, to relish the tastes. Joseph went for the cappuccino first, still looking more asleep than awake. Other regulars had queued up as they paid and chatted, only moving to the edge of the awning and the radiant heat as others pressed inward.

The milling, happy crowd attracted other Pike Place Market tourists. Inside of five minutes there were more people that she didn’t recognize than ones that she did.

Henry came over from the fish market and she refused his money, as she had a hundred times before, but he always offered. Henry always held back the best of the day’s catch for Angelo or Manuel each morning, today it was the black sea bass.

“Maria, when are you going to marry me?”

“I could never marry you, Henry. You always smell of fish. I could no marry such a man.” He of course knew that was a little joke. His fish were always so fresh and he kept everything so clean. He was a vendor, and a very smart one, not a fisherman.

“I’ll give it all up for you.” He flashed her one of his smiles.

She was half tempted to at least date him. He was such a nice man, and good looking, even if a bit round in the belly. His graying hair would go silver and make him a very handsome older man. But, though she liked him, there was no spark.

Maria wanted spark. She wanted electricity, lightning bolts. She only hoped that she hadn’t waited too long and missed her chance.

She served and chatted with a dozen more tourists after Henry left. Her son had found lightning. And Russell too. The two boys were so cute in married life it was hard to credit that they were men grown, always doting on their wives while trying desperately to appear the strong men they couldn’t help being if they tried. Their wives, Jo and Cassidy, were both such exceedingly competent women, they made her feel

out of her depth. All she had ever done was cook and raise the two boys.

But she'd felt that spark once in her life. She'd felt it right to the very core of her being. A love for a no-good, useless man who had walked away after taking her virginity and leaving her pregnant with a son. Maria had been forced to come to America to hide the shameful pregnancy of an unmarried Italian Roman Catholic girl. She'd never gone back to Manarola for more than to visit.

She wanted fire. She wanted someone who made her blood burn and her heart race. For an hour, perhaps two, she smiled and teased and enjoyed herself immensely. It had become her contribution to her son's success. He was the great chef, but she knew how to charm the people.

The morning always went too quickly; another dozen *cornetti* and she'd be sold out for the day. She made her usual bet with herself. Today she guessed that nine, perhaps ten of the people she'd served would be back for an Italian lunch when the restaurant opened. Even one additional customer would pay for the minor loss she took on each breakfast she sold.

She served a young Chinese couple who didn't speak a word of English, or Italian either. It didn't matter. She helped them figure out which bill to put in the jar and they left ready to explore the waterfront with their breakfast in hand.

A man drifted to the take-out counter window during a momentary lull.

Maria Amelia recognized him. Lately, he'd often wandered by in the mornings, slowing down but never stopping. He always appeared to want to, but never quite managed.

Her greeting elicited little more than a friendly nod. A shy one. He wore old sneakers with white socks, dark-brown khakis that had started to fray where the hems scuffed along the ground, a red flannel shirt under a faded jeans jacket, and a baseball cap with some computer-looking logo. The whole outfit had clearly been worn several years too long, probably from a Goodwill

store. He didn't have a beard, but needed a shave badly. It was long enough she could see it would have a little salt in the pepper if he let it grow.

For all that he was quite the handsomest man she had served that morning. Not the prettiest, so many of the young men were pretty. Those fresh clean faces that thought they knew the world while having seen none of it.

This man had seen much of it. Perhaps too much, perhaps not, but it showed on his solid features and in the soft brown eyes that didn't skitter aside despite his unease, or downward despite her low-cut dress. She wouldn't mind much if they did, after all, why was a woman built the way she was if not to share it a little bit. But she liked that he didn't go there.

He stopped uncertainly several steps from her window, just at the point where she could see the rain dripping off the awning, splashing onto the brim of his hat, and trickling off the brim and into his open jacket.

The man pulled out a wallet, made a back-and-forth motion with his fingers as if searching for money, then shoved it back in his pocket.

As he turned away, Maria called to him.

"Don't go."

He stopped, this time with the drip falling down the back of his neck. When he looked back at her, his nice eyes looked just a little wild. Fear that he couldn't afford to pay even so little for a breakfast.

"Here, it's my last. You should have it." She held out a *cornetto* and cappuccino.

He hesitated, so shy it was almost painful to watch.

"I always save the best for last. So these must be for you."

The man came and took them, careful not to touch her as he did so. His nails needed trimming, but the hands were good ones. He didn't use them for manual labor, but they showed a man who had used them for more than office work his whole life. A few small burns and nicks she recognized as someone

who cooked, and wasn't very good at it, which only made her like him all the more.

He almost managed a smile before turning away and hurrying into the rain.

# # #

His cheeks burning with shame, Hogan Stanford hurried down Pike Place Market's Post Alley until he was out of sight of Maria's window. Then he circled around to the antiques place at the corner of Post and Stewart and peeked back toward Angelo's Tuscan Hearth.

It was a gray, drizzling December morning, freezing water was trickling down his back, and he was a complete and total idiot.

He hadn't been able to say a word.

He'd first noticed her from his condo's window which faced Puget Sound. Watching the tourists mob up and down the four short, bricked blocks of Pike Place Market had become one of his favorite pastimes. Even if he didn't like to join the fray, it always seemed so full of life.

And in the midst of it all there had been a flash of color, of sky blue and gold that had glittered in the crowd. That was what had finally drawn him outdoors to wander the streets of the Pike Place Market. On his third outing, he'd spotted her again. It had been a warm day for December and she'd worn her tan camel hair coat open. That day she'd been wearing a red skirt, a vivid orange blouse, and a sunny yellow kerchief over her dark, curling hair, like a flower in bloom. But he had no doubt that it was the same woman. It simply had to be, there couldn't be two women in the world who glowed so brightly.

He'd been so stunned by her beauty that he'd lost track of her when she must've ducked into a store. It took him another week to spot her again, though at least now he had a face to go by. This time she sat in the window at Angelo's Tuscan Hearth

Ristorante, framed by the wood-and-brick window frame, like a Botticelli.

Today she'd been dressed in brilliant blues as she served up breakfast and charm in equal portions. She shone like a ray of sunshine in an otherwise dark world on this dreary December day. At least he was pretty sure it was December now.

He peeked again around the brickwork corner and back up Post Alley. She was bantering happily with another customer. Leaning her elbow on the counter and resting her chin on her hand, she looked as if she could happily visit away the whole morning. It was an ability he had never understood. He didn't know whether to be impressed by how natural she was, or be nervous that she would talk everyone to death and be a bore. Yet she never appeared to bore anyone, though he had watched her many times. He decided that she had an uncanny awareness of the mood of each individual she met.

Hogan noted with some chagrin that she served the woman a *cornetto* and a paper cup. The one still warm in his hands hadn't been her last after all. Thinking him homeless, she said it to make him feel less embarrassed. People were never that nice. It had to be an act...but again, it didn't feel like one.

*Being stupid, Hogan.* It was one of his trademarks, but he just couldn't approach her. Half a dozen times over the few weeks since he'd spotted her, he'd walked by while she was serving, trying to work up the nerve. Finally this morning he'd managed it.

Now she slid her window down. In moments, the soft red glow of the overhead heater faded to black. Finally sold out. He shifted back around the corner and out of sight of the restaurant, then rested his back against the wet brick. The moisture slowly seeped through at his shoulders and butt.

She was so different from the dark and brooding Vera who had totally screwed up his life.

He knew he had to get out and speak to someone. All he'd wanted was one moment in the glow of a woman as bright and cheerful as the one in the restaurant window.

And then he'd looked in his wallet and realized that the smallest bill he was carrying was a hundred.

Then she'd decided he was homeless.

How sad was that?

And he'd let her think it.

*Really sad*, he answered his own question, knowing it was absolutely true.