

Chapter 1

“Oh, oh, oh, who wouldn’t go?” Hope Lyons crooned to “Up on the House Top,” humming the rest as she rolled out a pie crust.

She adored Portland, Oregon. She loved owning Pie in the Sky. Most of all, she relished the way her children’s eyes lit up whenever they entered the shop and inhaled the aromas of freshly baked pastries.

Starting on the first of December, all of the excitement of the holiday made Hope’s life brim with joy. Yes, Pie in the Sky specialized in pie, but in December, she made yule logs and gingerbread houses and sugar cookies—with sugar-free variations for her daughter, of course. She decorated the shop top to bottom with Christmas cheer. And she played joyful music non-stop while singing out loud.

The door to the shop swung open, and cool air from the fresh snowfall wafted in.

“Hi, Hope, ho-ho-ho,” a woman chimed in time to the music. She brushed off her snow-dusted coat and headed to the display of pre-boxed pies. A public relations wizard, she purchased over a dozen pies every week for her workplace. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you, Mrs. Smith.” Hope swiped a strand of loose hair off her face, hair that should’ve been constrained by her hairnet. She sighed. Her hair had a will of its own, like her mother’s. She remembered how her father would swoop her mother’s hair off her face and then plant a steamy kiss on her lips. When Hope was in high school, she’d been grossed out. Now, she cherished the memory. They had been so in love.

“Busy afternoon?” Mrs. Smith asked as she set a stack of boxes by the register.

“Busy enough.”

“Do you need more customers? I can spread the word.”

“It’s okay. I’m doing fine,” Hope said. “Although I think people are being a bit more frugal this year. You know, watching their pennies.”

“Or their waistlines,” Mrs. Smith joked, patting her thick frame. “Not all of us have your svelte figure. How do you manage it? Don’t you eat your own wares?”

“Oh, I down plenty of pie, but I’m on my feet all day, and at night, the kids want to run and tumble.”

“How old are they now?”

“Melanie is nine, Todd is six. She loves to throw hoops. He likes to climb anything and everything.” Hope snorted. “I wish I had their energy.”

An elderly woman with a brood of six children under the age of seven trooped into the shop. “Don’t touch,” she cautioned them. “Hi, Hope. Six sugar cookies, please, for my very well behaved grandchildren.”

“Coming right up, Mrs. Lundstrom.” Hope used tongs to grip the cookies and insert them into individual parchment paper sleeves. She slotted the sleeves into a Pie in the Sky to-go bag and tossed in a handful of napkins. “Anything else?”

“Not today, but I’ll be ordering all my holiday pies from you next week.” Mrs. Lundstrom paid in cash. “You do make the most delicious crust.”

Hope warmed to the compliment. It was her grandmother’s recipe, handed down to her mother, and then to Hope. The secret ingredients were rice wine vinegar and sour cream.

As Mrs. Lundstrom and the children exited, a pair of handsome, dark-haired men entered the shop. Hope recognized them. Steve Waldren was a well-known sports announcer on KPRL. They’d met briefly in high school when she was a freshman and he a senior, though he didn’t

seem to remember. From what Hope could tell, he'd turned out to be a decent guy. If asked for autographs by customers when he was in the shop, he happily complied. His buddy Harker, on the other hand, a sports reporter who was edgy and decidedly shallow, couldn't be bothered. Most often, he was too busy talking about his latest date.

Today, they waved to her. She waved back. Steve smiled, but his gaze didn't meet hers. He was focused on the contents of the glass display case. Hope didn't take the snub personally. In high school, she'd faded into the background, too. Not because she wasn't attractive but because she'd been a nose-to-the-grindstone, super studious sort. Her parents had instilled in her at a young age that nothing came easy, and in order to succeed, she'd have to work harder than everyone else. *No one is guaranteed a livelihood*, her father told her. *One forges one's own destiny.*

Per usual, Steve ordered a caffè Americano and a slice of the pie of the day. Hope heard him once say to Harker that he loved to take chances. Harker, on the other hand, always went for pecan pie and black coffee.

"She's the devil," Harker said to Steve as he handed Hope twenty-five dollars, continuing the conversation that he and his pal must have been having upon entering.

"She's not," Steve countered.

Hope wondered if they were talking Portland's mayor or Oregon's governor or Harker's latest conquest.

"Does she tell you how good you are?" Harker asked. "How brilliant you are? What a kickass dude you are?"

"She says I need to expand my horizons."

Aha. Steve's wife, Hope guessed, although she didn't see a wedding ring on his hand. Maybe he, like his friend, had a flavor-of-the-month girlfriend. She didn't pay much attention to celebrity gossip columns. She made change and then prepared the coffees and set slices of pie in biodegradable clamshell containers. She slotted the containers into a to-go bag and added utensils and napkins.

"Why do you need to expand your horizons? You're a star here"—Harker spread his arms and turned in a circle—"and Portland is a fabulous city. Who needs more than this? I mean, honestly, what does she want?"

"Los Angeles," Steve said.

Harker coughed out, "Smog City."

"Or Chicago or New York."

"Craven."

Steve laughed.

Hope set their coffees on the counter and slid the to-go bag toward them. Harker thanked her. By then, Steve was too engrossed with something on his cell phone to acknowledge her.

A few new customers entered as the men moved to one of the four bistro tables by the window. Hope intended to add more tables next year. Building a business took time.

"Good afternoon," Hope said to the customer dressed like Santa Claus and the elf that trailed him. "Welcome," she said to a starry-eyed young woman who was hanging on an equally head-in-the-clouds man. "Happy Holidays," she said as two regulars traipsed in.

And then the door swung open, and Hope's husband, Zach, stomped inside. Once upon a time, he'd been a loving, caring soul. Now, his eyes were smoldering with something close to disgust, erasing all the momentary joy Hope had been experiencing.

“Hope!” he called.

Hope released the breath she was holding. When was the last time he’d looked at her with love? When was the last time she’d wanted him to? Even so, she quickly checked herself in the mirror behind the cash register. Flour dusted her cheeks. Her eyes were glassy with fatigue. She brushed the flour away and spun back.

Zach pushed past two customers, grunting, “Let me through.” A lock of dark hair dangled on his forehead. His denim jacket hung open, a T-shirt with the words *Card Shark* visible beneath. “Hope, I’m talking to you.”

“I heard you,” she said weakly, forcing a smile.

“Hey, pal.” To Hope’s surprise, Steve Waldren cut off Zach before he could skirt around the elf. “Take it easy and wait your turn.”

“Back off, man,” Zach hissed, pushing Steve with his palm.

Hope saw Steve’s hands ball into fists. “It’s okay, Steve,” she said, not realizing until the words came out that calling him by his first name might sound too familiar. “He’s my husband.”

Steve held his ground for a long moment before throwing up his hands in surrender and shuffling back to his table.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Hope said, knowing her tone lacked sincerity. “What brings you in?”

“Where are they?” Zach demanded.

“At school. They don’t get out—”

“Not the kids. The keys.”

“To what?” Hope squinted, not understanding. They each had sets of keys to their apartment.

“To the Explorer.”

“Why?” It was her car. Bequeathed to her by her parents.

“Because I want them. Now.” He snapped his fingers.

A shiver ran through her, but she said, “By the register.”

Without invitation, Zach rounded the counter, swiped the keys, raised them in his fist like a trophy, and blew her a dry kiss. “Bye, babe. We’re through.”

“Wait. What? What do you mean we’re through?”

“Through. Finito. I tried.”

“You tried? You did not. You—”

But Zach didn’t break stride. He stomped to the exit and threw Steve Waldren a nasty look before pressing through the door.

Hope slumped against the counter. What the heck? She couldn’t believe it. They’d had *the talk*. He was going to change. He was going to seek help. She’d thought that he . . .

No, if she was honest, she hadn’t thought. She kept burying her head in the sand while wishing and praying. But none of that was enough. Zach had emptied their savings and gone through the inheritance from her parents. He’d expected Hope to pay every bill for the last year, and now he was taking the car.

She growled and cursed inwardly. Then a soft moan of inevitability escaped her lips. If only she’d been smarter. If only she’d foreseen the future. She glanced at the Christmas photo of her parents and children that she kept pinned to the wall near the mirror, taken four years ago before her parents died in the crash. Before Zach started tumbling down a rabbit hole of debt. They were posing in front of the Christmas tree in her home town, Hope Valley. All grins. Sweeter times.

Hope fought tears, but she lost the battle. This was it. Her dream, her future, was over. Zach—Mr. Right once upon a time—was gone, and she was a failure. She would have to give up the shop.

