



*Husband
Material*

ANNETTE M. IRBY

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He'd just come in for a few groceries. Lara Farr could tell by the basket he carried. The empty basket. But the huge, red-white-and-pink Valentine's Day display stalled him. Not that she blamed him. She'd traipsed that aisle twice now herself. What was this guy's reason for lingering?

He didn't actually read any of the cards, simply stood there in the center of the row, looking slightly shell shocked, busy shoppers swirling around him. The pain-filled expression in his eyes got to her. A strange sensation swept over her, a drive to want to hold him, to comfort this handsome stranger. What was she thinking?

She started to turn away, but couldn't make herself leave. Not when he so obviously needed help. She stepped closer. "Sir, are you OK?"

He shook off the expression he'd been wearing and met her gaze. He was probably near her in age. Tall and lean, this guy had a good four inches on her height, and the deepest green eyes she'd ever seen. Pair that with his light brown hair, and she could stand here staring up into his face all day.

"Oh, I'm fine." He tried a smile, but his face seemed unaccustomed. "Thanks." Still, he didn't move.

"Can I help you find something?"

He studied her now, probably assuming she worked here, especially since she hadn't grabbed a cart. "I just needed milk and coffee, maybe some lunchmeat."

Ah, grocery list of champions, especially the coffee. What self-respecting Seattleite would go without it? But, none of those items were located in the seasonal section. This guy was lost. That look in his eyes—brokenness. *Jesus, help him. He's been hurt. Please heal him.*

"Thanks, though." He disengaged and finally shuffled down the aisle.

Lara scanned her restaurant's dining room, glad everything seemed in place. The aromas of garlic, freshly baked bread, and grilled steaks enveloped her. Perfect. Her employees kept a good pace with the influx of holiday diners. Valentine's Day was traditionally a great evening for business. *Thank You, God.*

What's this? A choice corner table stood vacant and prepped while patrons lined up near the door. How had her staff overlooked that? She straightened her vest and made a beeline for the front desk. "Christie, how come no one's at number seventeen?"

The redhead turned but didn't make eye contact. "It's reserved."

"Reserved? We don't take reservations." She kept her voice low, not wanting to embarrass her employee. The Blue Hyacinth was always first come, first served.

"This guy lost his wife. He made a special request. Byron okayed it."

Byron, the manager, second in command. Lara would have to talk to him.

"OK. No worries. Carry on." She pivoted toward the kitchen.

They'd promised the poor guy, so she'd let it slide this time. But never again. Table seventeen rested in the far corner. A lovely spot, even after the sun set. Private. Welcoming. Her finest nook.

Wait. She had ten couples lined up and this guy was coming to eat alone, at her best table? She spun on her heel. Maybe it wasn't too late to change the plan, offer the guy some sort of excuse for why others were seated there when he came in. Point him to a perch at the long counter.

The grocery store guy entered just as Lara's eyes locked on the doorway. His gaze landed on her and he tipped his head, acknowledging he recognized her with hiked brows and a gentle smile.

The staff set right to work leading him to the corner table—number seventeen.

This was the guy. Only two hours ago, compassion had arrested her for him. Now, he planned to eat alone. A widower... No wonder she'd felt a nudge from the Lord to offer him kindness.

And she'd almost denied him his table. Thankfully, she hadn't. He settled in the chair facing the room at large.

She approached. "Welcome."

He offered that same tenuous smile. "Hi." He studied her, his eyes dropping to her name badge. "Nice to meet you, Lara."

"You, too, uh..."

"Wyatt." He stood, offering his hand. "Wyatt Hansen."

Ooh, a gentleman.

"Lara Farr." His palm felt warm and strong. Electricity shot up her arm. Did he know he had this kind of effect? Was he feeling the same thing?

“Owner?” His eyebrows hiked. She’d guessed right; he thought she worked at the grocery store.

“Yes.” She chuckled and extended an open hand to her left, proud as she glanced around. “This is my place.” She saw respect in his gaze. “You all right?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” He shrugged as if his next words would explain everything. “It’s Valentine’s Day.”

Something about him drew her in, but she didn’t want to pry. “Can I bring you anything?”

“Oh, no. I’ll wait for my server. Thanks, though. I won’t keep you.”

Couples swarmed the place, normal for this night every year. All the people around him sitting close, sharing intimate conversations, didn’t have the usual effect on Wyatt. Of course, he missed his wife. But this Valentine’s Day, an old longing reemerged. A longing to share his ideas with someone, to share this meal with someone, to share his...life with someone. The thoughts seemed traitorous, as though he was betraying Susie’s memory. Not that he could or would ever forget her, but, time had helped him heal...a bit.

He ordered his usual and rotated his glass of ginger ale in circles on the cardboard coaster. Sitting here alone felt strange this year. The past two years, he was doing a service, offering a living memorial to his wife by keeping this reservation. But today, something seemed off, not unlike wearing a coat, expecting cold blasts of winter when spring had slipped in and tamed the thermometer.

And how long had a woman like Lara owned The Blue Hyacinth? He couldn’t remember seeing her

when he and Susie used to come in. Maybe she'd recently bought it. Impressive, given how young she was. Good for her.

No wonder she was successful. She raced around the dining room, seeing to customers' needs, finessing a few situations, smiling at couples dressed in red or carrying roses.

Roses.

He'd forgotten to bring one. He always brought one red rose, left it on the table for Susie.

This year was different.

So, why had he reacted that way to seeing the V-day display? Hard to say. And funny that Lara caught him. He longed to go to the "wife" cards and pick out the perfect one, just once more.

Lara appeared exhausted when she dropped back by his table. Attractive. But tired. "You OK?" His turn to ask. That's not all he noticed. From the way she carried herself—her confidence and bearing, her poise. Here was an obviously successful business woman. Just look at this place. OK, the restaurant could do with some updates, still the joint was hopping with diners. But personally, Wyatt liked the spark in Lara's eyes. Made him feel like life might be worthwhile again.

"It's been busy. How is everything?" She studied his plate. He'd only finished half his usual meal—prime rib with baby red potatoes, and steamed asparagus, with rye rolls. Hunger wasn't working with him tonight. He'd have them box the rest. "Not up to standard?" Real concern shone in her blue eyes.

"Oh, no. It's fine. I'm just not all that hungry."

She nodded, that caring look back in her energetic eyes. "Is there anything I can do?" Her staff had probably told her why he sat alone at one of her best

tables on a couples' holiday. She started to shift away when he waited so long to answer.

"Wait." He reached out, but didn't actually touch her. His own desperation surprised him. She stilled. Moments ago, her smile lit up this corner of the room. He didn't want her to walk away and take her light and joy with her. "I mean. Sorry." He'd startled her. *Idiot.* "Are you... allowed to sit down?"

She gave a soft chuckle as if his question was absurd. After all, she owned the place. "Absolutely."

He nodded toward the chair across from him and raised his eyebrows.

"You sure?" Something sincere and gentle passed between them. She cared about not intruding on the place Susie used to occupy. Sweet.

He nodded. "I'm sure." And he was. The days ahead didn't seem so bleak as his days behind had been.

She settled in with a sigh, adjusting her vest. The various colors only amplified her features—sparkling blue eyes, shiny pink lips curved in a smile.

"Have you eaten?"

"Who has time?"

"Why don't you have them bring you something?" He offered the last half roll from the crumb-laden basket. "Here."

She tipped her head to the side, studying him. "You seem better." She accepted the bread.

He did feel better. Stronger, maybe. Less vulnerable. Lighter. Wait. He'd invited her to join him as a friendly gesture, but what if he was stepping on someone's toes? "Will your boyfriend mind you sitting with me?" He'd already noticed she didn't wear a ring. But someone this caring and pretty had to be in a

relationship, especially by her age, which he guessed as near his own thirty-four years.

She grinned at him. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Oh, well, then"—he reached for his ginger ale, held up the glass as if to toast—"happy Valentine's Day." He didn't try to disguise his sarcasm.

She raised an imaginary glass, her eyes sparkling. "Cheers," she said, grinning. Her stomach rumbled loudly enough he heard it across the table, even with the background music and hushed chatter from people around them. She chuckled.

"Why don't you eat something?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

He shook his head, hoping she'd stay. "Eat," he encouraged. It'd be nice to have her company. Maybe this tradition had run its course. At least the alone part. Especially since he and his wife had made an agreement granting each other permission to move on should either one die. Moving on had never felt remotely possible. Until now. Sitting here across from Miss Sunshine made him rethink life, happiness, and the future.

She ordered soup and a salad, and they brought it right out. Smart woman to request something pretty much instant. When they were alone again, she leaned in. "Thanks for this."

"For what?" He loved how often she smiled, like joy bubbled inside her all the time. He should thank *her*.

"Letting me take my break at your table." She winked. Here she was, the owner, and she interacted with him so playfully, so freely. Adorable.

He almost laughed at her comment and her wink. What was it about her that made him comfortable right

away? Like it'd be natural to cover her hand, reassure her. "You're welcome."

She grinned at him, tipping her spoon in his direction as she chewed and swallowed a spoonful of clam chowder. She'd caught it—his double meaning. Welcome to sit there, and he was glad she'd accepted his offer.

"So, what do you do, Wyatt?"

"I bring businesses back from the brink of destruction." He knew he sounded overly dramatic now, but why not? She brought out this playful side of him, and he liked it. Anyway, you could term his business that way.

"How's that?" She set down her spoon and threaded her fingers together under her chin, elbows on the table.

He sat straighter, sobering. He'd give her the real story. "I come in and help struggling businesses with marketing and research to determine better ways to reach their target customers. Usually that means things turn around and where once they were struggling to stay afloat, now they thrive. Plus the customers are happy—a win-win."

She leaned forward. "You love what you do." She could tell.

"Definitely."

"You get to be the hero."

He chuckled, embarrassment humbling him. "I guess."

"Do your efforts ever... uh, fail?" Something about the way she asked the question showed genuine wariness.

Cute that she'd even ask. "Not yet."

She spooned up more soup, but didn't eat it.

Seriousness settled in her eyes. "My staff mentioned why you like this table."

Just as he'd figured. Still, her gentle concern pushed a lump into his throat. He choked down a chug of ginger ale.

She put the spoonful of soup back in her bowl, now appearing uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. I just thought—"

"No, it's OK. I'm fine. It just hits me every now and then."

"Like today at the store."

"Yup." He drew a deep breath. "My wife died a few years ago." He hadn't meant to divulge something this personal. Talking about work was one thing—his late wife another. Yet he didn't feel threatened, especially considering her compassion. Another anomaly of sitting across from this woman. "Honestly, I'm finally starting to breathe again."

She studied him. "How so, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Well, despite how it's hitting me today, I think I'm beginning to heal." How true and enlightened that comment was. "V-day will pass. And I won't long to hunt for the 'perfect card.'" He used air quotes for emphasis.

She nodded, and he felt their camaraderie grow. "I remember those days."

"How long for you?" He didn't want to pry, but she'd dug around in his stuff for a minute. Turnabout, right?

"Five years in, and one and a half out, now." She didn't even hesitate to answer, so she must not feel uncomfortable.

"Married?" If so, that was a short marriage.

She grabbed a napkin, shook her head, swallowed. “No... he couldn’t commit.” Hints of rejection’s sting creased the corners of her eyes.

Wyatt tore into a new roll from their freshly filled basket, more to busy his fingers than anything else. If he wasn’t careful, he’d reach for her hand yet. “Sorry.”

“You know, for years I wondered if males in general are born fighting commitment. I mean, I saw all these married couples around me but then they’d break up. What about their vows? What’s the deal?”

He nodded, rather not-so-proud of his gender’s track record in her life. “Well, speaking for myself, I’m not a commitment-phobe.” Yes, folks, here’s Wyatt—an open book. Inexplicably open, expect for this gentle angel gracing his table with her presence. Hadn’t he longed for an intimate conversation tonight? It seemed God was listening even when he didn’t voice his prayers. *Thank You, Lord.*

She gave them a moment’s breather, swallowed a nibble of roll. “Even now?”

She knew how to get to the heart of it, didn’t she? No use stopping here. “Yeah. Even now. I loved being married.”

“You’d do it again?” A charge chased her words. Must be the V-day vibe in the air.

He met her eyes, needing to say this as much for himself, as for the sake of conversation. “Yes.” He paused. “You?”

“I’ve always longed to get married.”

“I mean, risk being in a relationship again.” Because he knew that’s exactly what it’d be next time—a risk. For him, but also for her, wherever she ended up. Too bad there were no guarantees in love and in life.

“If the guy seemed like good husband material, yes.” She’d really been hurt, but she hid well behind her humor and smiles.

At some point, her staff had brought her an iced tea.

“Then, here’s to future marriages.” He raised his refilled glass. She clinked with him.

Winding down now, she stabbed her last crouton. “So, are you taking any new clients?”

He eyed her, let her change the subject. “Sure.” He pulled out his card.

“Wyatt Hansen Consulting. ‘The future begins today,’” she read, and then met his eyes. “Very impressive.”

A quick glance around the room confirmed the place was still packed. “You wouldn’t need my services, though. This place is hopping.”

Her eyes dimmed a little. “Maybe we could schedule a meeting.”

Confused, he didn’t want to deny her. He’d already made the invitation with his comment about accepting new clients. But, honestly, why did she need his help? She couldn’t pack anymore people in here without violating the fire code. “Sure. Where would you like to meet?”

“Here’s good. Say, later this week? Lunchtime on...Thursday?”

“OK.” A chance to see her again, to talk business—his expertise. Perfect, even if her request for help with her restaurant didn’t make sense.

Nostalgia floated over him as the intro of a new song played on the speakers. Grief crept in and robbed away the levity. Flashbacks of the car accident. *Susie*.

Lara reached across the table and covered his hand

with hers, jarring him back to the present, sending something warm and powerful straight to his heart. "I'll let you be now. You sit here as long as you want. And dessert's on the house."

She waved over the server with his tray. The smell of coffee and chocolate invaded their nook. Admittedly, he would like some space for a few minutes. He offered her a smile. "Thanks, Lara."

"You're welcome. Thursday at lunch, then?"

"You got it."

Had she really sat down to dinner with a grieving widower? Poor guy just wanted to eat in peace. But she couldn't deny the draw. And he hadn't appeared frustrated with her presence, but rather as though he'd meant his welcome. She should've offered the entire meal on the house, given that he was grieving. But then, if he did help her with her business, she'd have created a conflict of interest. No, dessert was enough.

But he was very attractive, not just because of his looks, but also his professed willingness to commit, and his gentle demeanor. He seemed...settled. Peaceful, even if still grieving. She pictured him, muscled and seated across from her in a suit on Valentine's Day—he'd dressed up between the afternoon grocery store visit and dinner. Maybe there was potential there. Except, if she was able to sign him on as a consultant, they couldn't enter into a relationship. She had a company policy about not mixing business with pleasure, and it'd served her well since she'd inherited The Blue Hyacinth. Too bad. He was the first guy who'd come along espousing

commitment. She chuckled at her own pun, but then sobered. Why did an ache settle in her stomach with her decision?

The moment Wyatt walked through the doorway of The Blue Hyacinth, Lara stepped forward and shook his hand. "Hi again."

His warm smile greeted her. "Hi, Lara. How are you?" He glanced around the quiet dining room. Yeah, sure, see her shame. The place had been dragging since Valentine's Day.

"Would you mind if we went somewhere else for lunch?" She led him toward the corner, near the entrance, but away from her daytime hostess. "I forgot this wouldn't be the best place for our meeting."

"Of course." He'd tucked his hand into his pants pocket, so his long coat hung open—attractive. Classy. "Wherever you'd like to go."

She slipped her jacket off a nearby hook. "Let's walk."

Brisk wind met them as they stepped outside, Wyatt holding the door for her. "Where to?"

"Do you mind pizza?" They marched two shops down the strip mall. "This place is pretty good. And it's private."

Again, he held the door. She could get used to his. They settled into a far table after ordering a thin-crust veggie pizza and drinks. The pie would take a while, but they sat down with sodas.

Wyatt shucked his coat, and his suit jacket fit perfectly over his shoulders. Tailored. This man was successful. He didn't, however, wear a tie. When you

run the show, you can dress how you want.

"What are you thinking about, Lara?" he asked as the silence continued.

"Oh, the privileges of owning your own business." And the worries. "And the responsibilities."

"It can't be all that bad." He kept his voice down, which was considerate. The competition—this pizza parlor—didn't need to know of her business's struggles. Thankfully soft rock music would cover their conversation.

She loosed a long, quiet sigh. "I need your help."

His brow wrinkled, and she read genuine concern. "What's happening?"

For the next ten minutes, she filled him in on the slow decline of sales since she took ownership and how the news got around that her grandparents, who'd bequeathed the place to her, had died. "Can you help me? I can't let their business fail. I want to honor their memory."

He nodded. "I can help."

She sat back, feeling her aching muscles begin to uncoil. Hope infiltrated her thoughts for the first time in months, brought by this hero of business rescue. The urge struck her to hug him, but the table between them stopped her. That and a little sense. *C'mon, girl, hang on to your resolve.* Hard as that would be. *Help me here, Lord.*

"No guarantees, but I have a few suggestions."

The server carried over their pizza on a metal stand, and another employee brought plates, napkins, and forks. "Enjoy."

Business talk set aside for a moment, she breathed deeply. The aroma and sight of peppers and tomatoes tempted her. "I love pizza."

"You should serve it at The BI—your place." He caught himself.

"Thanks." She referred to his catch. "Well, I haven't really wanted to change the menu since Gramps died."

"But you have to make it your own."

She stopped mid-serve, holding her slice aloft. "Oh, that hadn't occurred to me." She deposited the food on her plate and focused on him again. "I thought by keeping the menu and everything else the same, I was doing them a service."

He smiled. "Sounds like my reason for keeping my reservation the other night. Though I'm glad I did." So sweet, that tender look in his eyes. Wasn't it too early for such a connection? What was it about him? She'd felt at home with him from the moment she'd interrupted his trance at the store.

"But sometimes you have to move on, right?" A loaded question, she knew.

He nodded. He did understand.

Before they went any further, she'd need to know about his fees. "So, how does this work? Do you charge by the hour?"

He shook his head, swallowed his bite. "I'm not going to charge you."

"What?" *Unacceptable.* "I'll pay you. I'm not going to take advantage. What's your usual routine? A contract?"

"Yes, but like I said, my help is free. For you." Gorgeous green eyes challenged her.

She pushed her plate away, though her heart stuttered. *Steady.* "No. Sorry. I don't want to be rude, but I can't accept that."

He reached across the table, but didn't touch her

hand. "I feel like we're friends. I don't want to charge you." Ooh, his sincere and pleading tone almost undid her. If only her principles would allow the compromise.

"I can't take up your time and not pay you. I must insist."

He sat back, his own meal apparently forgotten. He studied her, one arm across his chest, one finger crooked against his chin. "I'll think of something."

She crossed her own arms in front of her. "Then, I'll only take a few pointers. Honestly, you've already given me something to think about. Wyatt, I really can't."

"And I can't accept payment." He paused, thoughtful. "What if you provide a few meals? I love the food at...your place." He darted a quick glance toward the front counter.

She squinted at him. "I pay you with food? It's not like my business is that far gone. I'm not destitute. I have a budget for incidentals."

"So apply it to a few lunches. A weeks' worth should do it. Maybe a few dinners."

Hmm, interesting problem-solving. "Except, we can't eat at 'my place' and talk business."

"So, we'll have to talk elsewhere and then come in for dinner." His mischievous grin got to her. Convinced her. Never mind his consulting fees were probably well over one-hundred dollars per hour, and her meals weren't pricey. Never mind that she'd rather keep this all business and no pleasure. Never mind that something in her gut said, "No, no, no," something in her heart said, "Yes."

And looking across at this attractive and considerate man, she knew it was about time she

started listening to her heart.

“Done.”

He didn't think she'd ever agree. This woman and her principles. Generally he wouldn't mind. But not when they stood in his way of helping her. He'd finished two slices of pizza listening to her chat about her cat. Small talk. And as much as he loved witnessing her cheerful approach to life, he was eager to help, too. Time to bring the topic back to more serious matters. “So, let's get to business.”

“OK.” She pushed away her crumb-laden plate and grabbed a blue legal pad from her oversized purse. “Ready,” she said, pen poised over the lines.

He used his fingers to tick off the ideas he'd had since she'd mentioned the problems. “First, you make the place your own. People who used to frequent TBH”—he winked at her—“went there to see your grandparents, to eat the food they made famous, right?” When she nodded, he continued. “You've got to make them come back to see *you* and to eat your creations.”

“I'm not a cook.”

“Well, OK, the foods your chef makes famous.”

“I did just hire a new chef. The last one retired.”

“Great.” That'd make things easier. “Work well with him?”

She nodded.

“Then, cooperate to create dishes that perfectly represent you and the new image you want TBH to have.” Could she be any cuter sitting there, drinking in his every word? He loved this part of his business.