

Chapter 1

“*You’re* Evelyn Felton?”

Whatever *that* was all about. The man blocking the entrance to Corinna’s Cupboard couldn’t be a minute over twenty-five, but that didn’t stop him from acting like he owned the place. Eyebrows raised, he appraised her from steely blue eyes.

What had she ever done to him? Nothing. She’d never seen him before... had she? Evelyn stiffened her back and kept the smile in place. “Yes, I’m Evelyn, and I’m here to meet with Ben Kujak about donating garden-grown produce. Is he in?”

Silence reigned for several heartbeats.

Had she asked such a difficult question? The building this charity operated just north of Arcadia Valley’s Main Street wasn’t that big. If Mr. Kujak wasn’t stocking shelves or applying for grants, he likely wasn’t on the premises.

The upstart chewed his lip then nodded, stepping aside. “With a name like Evelyn, I was expecting someone older.”

He had to be kidding. Her name wasn't Matilda or Ethel. Evelyn tightened her grip on her messenger bag and raised her eyebrows. "I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean. You haven't answered my question. Is Mr. Kujak available? If not, when's a good time to meet him?"

Muscles rippled the length of his arm as he stretched out his hand. "I'm Ben. Come on in."

"I, um..." She blinked and shook his hand briskly. "Hi." Nobody had told her the man who'd worked miracles starting a charity from nothing was little more than a kid. Scratch that. Definitely not a child, not with how attractive he looked in those cargo shorts and gray T-shirt. Not with his light brown hair matching the stubble that graced his cheeks and chin.

Evelyn shook her head and took a deep breath. "Like you, I thought I was meeting with someone older."

She'd counted on it, actually. Not that she was easily distracted by good-looking men close to her age, but there was something protective about working with someone older. Somebody who was a husband, a father, maybe even a grandfather. Someone who could guide her as she took on the management of her daughter's ingenious project of using the Akers Garden Center's former greenhouses to grow food for the needy.

Evelyn had no idea what she was doing. She'd truly hoped the recipient of their hard work could smooth the transition. Instead she was stuck with Mr. Do-Good, Junior.

Ben's face morphed into a half-smile. "Well, now that we've gotten all that out of the way, come on into my office." He led the way through a space with tall, sturdy shelving containing a smattering of canned and packaged goods.

How many times had she clutched little Maisie by the hand and searched for something besides boxed macaroni and cheese and over-sweetened cereals on shelves like these? Clouds of uncertainty and desperation had permeated their entire life back in Memphis. They hadn't completely dissipated even with Idaho's fresh air and blue summer sky.

Evelyn followed him past another storage room and into a small office. She stopped in the doorway as though she'd rammed into a glass wall. Bricks shored up one corner of a chipped pressboard desk. It was impossible to discern what type of wood it was pretending to be between all of the folders and papers at awkward angles, threatening to slide. Her gaze followed the likely avalanche path to the concrete floor where a few papers and a Styrofoam cup lay beside a full trash can.

Her fingers itched to toss the cup, haul out the garbage, and file this man's papers. How could he get a stitch of work done in a disaster like this?

Ben pointed at an orange plastic chair. "Have a seat." He rounded the desk, scooped together the loose papers in the work area, and deposited them on top of the tallest stack of folders before pulling out his own chair. "Now, what exactly do you want from me?"

Ask not what your food pantry can do for you...

Evelyn perched on the edge of the orange chair and clutched her messenger bag to her chest. "I'm not sure where to start." Why couldn't she remember the speech she'd rehearsed?

He glanced at the clock above the window.

Man, he didn't need to be rude. She took a deep breath. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but elderly Mr. Akers set up a living trust in conjunction with Grace Fellowship. The property in question used to belong to Akers Garden Center and contains an old house, two greenhouses, and numerous garden beds. Volunteers have been growing vegetables there since June, and the first pickings of peas and greens will be ready to harvest in about a week."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not certain what this has to do with me." Ben leaned back in his chair.

Evelyn flinched as it creaked.

Hadn't she just told him? "The volunteers are growing produce for Corinna's Cupboard. We understand that you feed hot meals three evenings a week, and we think that's fantastic. We want to help supply ingredients."

"Uh... That's great. What format exactly are these vegetables coming in?"

She smiled at him brightly. "Garden fresh." He could smile and say thanks anytime.

The man closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Evelyn frowned. "They're organic. Fresh. Full of flavor and nutrients." Why did she feel the need to sell the guy on garden-grown veggies? Didn't he care about the needs of the people for whom he supplied food? Didn't he realize how much money this would save the charity?

Ben took a deep breath and looked across the disastrous desk at her. "Look, Ms. Felton, that sounds wonderful."

She beamed.

"But I'm one man. I don't have time to prepare meals for forty people from scratch. I have a basic menu I rotate through every two weeks, and that's all I can do."

One man? One guy who was most definitely under thirty did this all by himself? "I-I don't understand."

“There’s nothing to understand. I’m not a superhero. I’m one normal guy who happens to run this place single-handedly, and I don’t have time to cook from raw ingredients. Thanks for thinking of Corinna’s Cupboard, but you’ll need to find another outlet for your vegetables.” Ben rose. “Was there anything else? Because I have something I need to be doing.”

Like cleaning his office? Evelyn stood. “But...”

“I’m sorry, Evelyn. I really am.” He gestured toward the door. “I’d need to be at least three people to handle what you’re offering, and I’m not.”

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Ben couldn’t get the memory of the morning’s meeting with Evelyn Felton out of his mind. What a contrast she’d been to the needy people who frequented Corinna’s Cupboard. She was so vibrant. So full of confidence. So pretty.

So much like Corinna had been.

About that. Extra work aside, he didn’t need to notice a woman. He liked donors who sent checks in the mail, hit the PayPal button on the charity’s website, or donated to one of the many fundraisers his former in-laws held across the country. Also acceptable: having cases of canned or packaged goods delivered by the local freight company.

Meeting donors face to face only took time he couldn't afford out of his schedule.

Ben drove his hands through his hair. Enough with Evelyn. What had he been doing when she arrived? Counting size 10 cans of peas on the shelf. Hadn't been that hard to count all the way to two.

He and Corinna had bought that acreage with the creek running through it shortly after their wedding with help from her parents. She'd put in a garden amidst the volcanic outcroppings on the property. They'd sat on the back porch, shelling peas into a large bowl and eating them just as quickly, popping the rounded end and sliding their thumbs down the interior of the pod, dislodging the little green orbs. Happy memories of a happier time.

He glared at the huge cans of peas on the shelf. They hailed from a different planet, but he'd told Evelyn the truth. He didn't have time for that much food prep.

All of the shelves were rather bare, but that wasn't unusual. God always provided what Ben needed when he needed it.

Was God trying to provide him with fresh peas? Sweet, succulent peas?

He snorted a laugh as he made his way back to the dismal office. God had better supply an army of volunteers while He was at it.

Ben stopped in the doorway. What had Evelyn seen? His stomach curdled. A full-on disaster. How had it gotten this way? The fourth-hand file cabinet had given up and all but collapsed. He'd removed the files and dumped them on any flat surface. The cabinet was unsalvageable, but he hadn't yet bothered to haul it to the curb on trash day.

He'd gotten in such a rut. Why not just go buy a new file cabinet? He might not want to ask his in-laws for money for that, but he could buy it himself. He could forego riding Halim this afternoon and drive into Twin Falls. It wasn't a hot meal day, and the regulars had already come in to pick up day-old bread. He could lock up early.

If Corinna could see him now — see the food cupboard that bore her name — what would she think? Would she be glad he was making a difference, or would she chastise him for the mess it was all in?

He could see the glimmer in Evelyn's narrowed eyes when she looked at his towering paperwork, and he'd spent under fifteen minutes in her presence.

A file cabinet. It was a good place to start. He strode toward the door, fingering the keys in his shorts' pocket.

What if... what if there was something to Evelyn's offer?

Her brown hair, artfully messy, had flowed halfway down her back. Corinna's had been shorter.

Black. Evelyn's eyes flashed amber in her eagerness then faded to brown when he'd squashed her hopes. He'd teased Corinna that gazing into her eyes was like drowning in pure coffee.

Why was he even comparing the two women? Corinna was gone, and Evelyn wasn't offering herself as a replacement. No. She offered vegetables. He needed vegetables. Ben's mouth watered. He really liked them fresh from the garden, personally.

He locked up the building. It was just as ugly as the others on this block. Red brick like most of the older storefronts, scuffed and watermarked with age, it crowded the chipped sidewalk. Main Street had been revitalized in the past few years, pulling residents back to shopping locally. A block off Main? Still stuck a hundred years in the past, Corinna's Cupboard shared a block with a tattoo parlor, a couple of bars, a thrift store, and several boarded-up buildings.

Without making a conscious choice, he drove the few blocks out of his way to pass the old Akers' greenhouses. His eyes widened as he rounded the end of the block and saw a row of garden beds overflowing with lush greenery. Several people worked among them.

The truck coasted to a stop at the curb. Ben slid out and walked around to stand on the sidewalk.

Looked like folks were staking and pruning tomatoes. A kid of about ten knelt by the bed nearest him, plucking tufts of green. She glanced over at him.

“Hi.” Ben lifted a hand in greeting, his gaze shifting back to the amazing lush scene in front of him. This was what Evelyn had been talking about? Wow.

“Want to help?” the girl asked. “There’s lots to do.”

Ben turned back to her. What would happen if he played dumb? “I haven’t been down this street for a while. What’s going on?”

The girl stood and stripped off the dirt-smeared gloves she’d been wearing. Her dark blond hair stuck out of the ponytail trying to corral it. “This here is a project from that church over there.” She thumbed toward the brick building housing Grace Fellowship a couple of blocks closer to downtown. “The old man wrote a living... a living something. He wanted us to use this place for something that would help people.”

Ben searched his earlier conversation for the right words. “Living trust?”

She snapped her fingers. “That’s it. I’m Maisie. Who’re you? Want to sign up? Cameron’s over there. He can help you.”

“I’m, uh, Ben.” His name wouldn’t mean anything to her. “I’m kind of busy these days, so I

probably won't volunteer for anything. Thanks, though."

Maisie shoved her hands into the pockets of her shorts. "Everyone's busy." She tilted her head to look up at him. "Did you know that there's lots of people in Arcadia Valley who don't have enough food? Maybe even hundreds."

Why did a kid her age know that or even care?
Play along, Ben. "Really? Right here?"

"Some of them don't have jobs. And some of them are drunks." She pursed her lips. "There's all kinds of reasons."

"I've noticed a man sitting on the sidewalk holding out a hat."

"That's probably Hiram. The doctors had to cut off his leg because of diabetes and he couldn't work anymore."

Ben narrowed his gaze at this child who was barely taller than his waist. "Yes, that's him. Do you know him?"

"I talk to him sometimes. But I usually don't have anything to give him because the old woman by the park is always hungry. I feel bad if I don't give her half my sandwich."

"Rona?" the name slipped out before Ben could censure it.

Maisie tipped her head at him and gave him a closer look. “Yeah. Rona. You know her? Nobody knows her.”

Was he going to tell this child who he was? That he worked to better the lives of people like Hiram and Rona? People most others ignored or jeered? He opened his mouth to confess all but, for some reason, reluctance halted his words.

No, he had too much to think about to get embroiled in whatever this kid knew. Whatever this project was for. If they wanted to give him fresh food, couldn't they have thought of the fact they should give him volunteers as well?

Maisie asked him to join the work here. He bit back a sardonic laugh. He should ask her to volunteer for him... but he wouldn't, because she might agree. Might show him up. Anyway, a soup kitchen was no place for a kid.

Ben nodded sagely and offered a smile for the girl. “Thanks for telling me about them. It's nice to find people who care.” He turned toward his truck. “Have a great evening.”

“If you care about them, you should help us grow food for them.”

Ben clamped down on his jaw and didn't turn back. Little did she know.

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