

ASSAULT AND PEPPER (A SPICE SHOP MYSTERY) BY LESLIE BUDEWITZ



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Assault and Pepper



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Review

Praise for Leslie Budewitz and her mysteries

"Seldom does a new author hit all the right notes in a first book, but Leslie Budewitz does. Convincing characters, a believable plot, the right dash of romance, and a deft use of words all come together to create a seamless and satisfying read."--Sheila Connolly, "New York Times "bestselling author of "Scandal in Skibbereen"

"A dizzying culinary delight with a twisty-turny plot! I'm totally enamored of Leslie Budewitz's huckleberry chocolates, Shasta daisies, and Cowboy Roast coffee."--Laura Childs, " New York Times" bestselling author of "Gilt Trip "

"An intriguing sleuth who loves gourmet food, family, and her hometown, plus recipes to die for distinguish a delectable mystery."--Carolyn Hart, " New York Times" bestselling author of "Death at the Door"

"Clever, charming, and completely yummy. Leslie Budewitz cooks up a delectable mystery!"--Hank Phillippi Ryan, Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity award-winning author of "The Wrong Girl"

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"Engrossing and satisfying."--"Fresh Fiction"

"A potpourri of spices, a melange of murder--Pepper and her crew serve up a tantalizing mystery and a fragrant treat for the senses."--Connie Archer, national bestselling author of the Soup Lover's Mysteries

"There's a savvy new amateur sleuth in town, and her name is Pepper Reece. "Assault and Pepper" is a smart blend of zesty characters, piquant spices, and scrumptious food. Set against the intriguing Seattle backdrop, this well-plotted whodunit is the perfect recipe for a great read."--Daryl Wood Gerber, national bestselling author of the Cookbook Nook Mysteries

"Leslie Budewitz writes her new Seattle Spice Shop Mystery, "Assault and Pepper," with a dash of humor and a half-turn of charm that will leave readers smiling."--J.J. Cook, national bestselling author of " Death on Eat Street"

"An iconic Seattle setting, a smart and capable heroine, and a spicy investigation... what mystery reader could want more? Budewitz combines it all with effortless finesse."--Victoria Hamilton, national bestselling author of the Vintage Kitchen Mysteries

"Parsley, sage, rosemary and...murder. "Assault and Pepper," the scintillating first book in Leslie Budewitz's new Spice Shop Mystery series will add zing to your reading."--Barbara Ross, author of the Maine Clambake Mysteries

About the Author

National bestselling author Leslie Budewitz writes the Spice Shop Mysteries ("Assault and Pepper") and the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries ("Crime Rib"; "Death Al Dente"). She fell in love with Seattle's Pike Place Market as a college student, and still misses prowling its streets and alleys, sniffing out tasty treats and sensory delights. Leslie won the 2013 Agatha Award for Best First Novel for "Death al Dente," first in the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries, and won the 2011 Agatha Award for Best Nonfiction for "Books, Crooks & Counselors: How to Write Accurately About Criminal Law and Courtroom Procedure." She loves to cook, eat, hike, travel, garden, and paint--not necessarily in that order. She lives in northwest Montana with her husband, Don Beans, a doctor of natural medicine, and their Burmese cat, Ruff, an avid bird-watcher.

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Acknowledgments and Historical Note

Inventory—Aka the Cast

Pepper Reece—owner

Sandra Piniella—assistant manager and mix master

Tory Finch—salesclerk and artist

Zak Davis—salesclerk and musician

Reed Locke—part-time salesclerk and college student

Kristen Gardiner—part-time salesclerk, Pepper's oldest friend

Pepper

Kristen

Laurel Halloran—restaurant owner, caterer, houseboat dweller

Seetha Sharma—the newest member

Gabe Halloran—Laurel's teenage son and honorary member

Angie and Sylvie Martinez—aka the orchard girls

Yvonne Winchell—grows the best flowers in the Market

Jane Rasmussen—founder and former owner of Seattle Spice

Doc aka Damien Finch—the mysterious newcomer

Sam and Arf—a man and his dog

Jim and Hot Dog—Sam's friends

Marianne Finch—Damien's wife

Ken Griffey—Damien's partner

Alex Howard—restaurateur Pepper may or may not be dating

Fabiola the Fabulous—graphic designer

Keyra Jackson—Tory's sculptor friend and neighbor

Jen the Bookseller and Callie the Librarian—Pepper's former law firm employees

Vinny—the wine merchant

Officer Tag Buhner—on the bike beat, Pepper's former husband

Detective Cheryl Spencer—homicide

Detective Michael Tracy—homicide

One

An herb is a fresh or dried leaf. A spice is a dried plant part—a bud (cloves), bark (cinnamon), root (ginger), berry (peppercorns), seeds (fennel), or even stigma (saffron). The same plant may provide both—fresh or

dried cilantro leaves are the herb cilantro, while the dried seeds are the spice coriander.

“What does autumn taste like? How does it smell?”

Even as I asked, the questions seemed utterly ridiculous. This was already shaping up to be one of those glorious September days in Seattle that make you think the weather will never change, that the sky will always be a pure cloudless blue, the leaves on the trees a painter’s box of green, the waters of Elliot Bay calm and sparkling.

I’ve lived here all my forty-two years, and I still get fooled.

But as the owner, for the last ten months and seventeen days, of the Seattle Spice Shop, it was my job to think ahead. Fall would be here in less than a week, by the calendar. And by my nose. I really could sense the difference right about this time of year. The annual run on pickling spices for the last cukes would soon give way to cider mulling mixes. And before long, our customers would be asking for poultry seasoning and scouting for Christmas gifts.

“The taste,” I repeated to my staff, gathered around the butcher block worktable in our mixing nook, “and smell of fall.”

Sandra fanned herself with a catalog from the kitchen shop up the hill and peered over the top of her reading glasses—today’s were leopard print. “Fall, shmall. It’s seventy-six degrees out.” Spot-on to most Seattleites, but my assistant manager is one of those native Northwesterners who thrive in a narrow temperature range. Anything above seventy-two and she sweats; below forty-five, she shivers. And complains, cheerfully. A short, well-rounded woman of sixty with smooth olive skin, pixie-cut dark hair, and lively chocolate brown eyes, she came with the place, and I say daily prayers of gratitude that she stayed.

“Apples,” Zak said. “Applesauce, apple butter, spiced apple cake. Plums in brandy. Plum pudding. Fruitcake.” Zak had been my first hire after I bought the shop. Six-two and almost thirty, with muscular shoulders, he’d seemed an unlikely candidate for employment in a retail spice shop in Seattle’s venerable Pike Place Market. But I’d been desperate and he’d been earnest. And he pleaded for a weekday job so he could rock the nights and weekends away with his band.

Plus he’s my ex-husband Tag’s best friend’s nephew, and I have to admit, Tag Buhner isn’t always wrong about people.

“You have fruit on the brain,” Sandra said. “Been flirting with the orchard girls again?”

Zak blushed, a sweet look at odds with his shaved head, fierce dark brows, and black goatee.

The orchard girls, two sisters with shiny black hair, full red lips, and curves in all the right places, had caught the eye of every straight man under thirty-five in the Market since they took over the family fruit stand this past summer. Their looks and the location of their stall—they usually draw a prime spot across from us on Pike Place, the Market’s long, cobbled main street—guarantee plenty of attention.

That their fruit is the freshest and their jams the tastiest doesn’t hurt.

“Our tea is the essential fragrance of the Market year-round,” I said, pointing my pen at the ornate brass electric teapot that resembles a Russian samovar. We’d just resumed serving the hot black Assam tea spiced with cardamom, allspice, and orange, although the iced tea dispenser would stay out a few more days.

“That, and fresh fish.” Zak had recovered from his embarrassment. The fish merchants near the Market’s

main entrance put on a comedy routine to rival the Marx Brothers', tossing whole coho salmon like softballs, teasing customers, and welcoming both locals and wide-eyed tourists to the heart and stomach of Seattle.

Zak filled his mug, emblazoned with a Z, and snatched a hazelnut cookie from the box. It wouldn't be a staff meeting without treats from the French bakery.

"We need three or four new blends," I said. "For our home cooks. Zak's zeroed in on the harvest aspect of fall. But I'd like something to rub on those fish, or a slow-cooked chuck roast. To warm up the salty mist and stave off the chills, until we get into the familiar tastes of Christmas."

My staff turned thoughtful, summoning their own ideas of fall. They say the sense of smell is the most intimately linked of all our senses to memory, and I believe it. One whiff of a familiar scent, even one we haven't encountered in years, can transport us to a time and place long forgotten, even before we consciously recall the memory.

Our task was to find common elements and translate them into balanced blends of herbs and spices to evoke a positive sensory experience for our customers.

The Wednesday morning staff meeting is one of the few times we're all in the shop together. Such a satisfying sight.

Actually, we were one person short. I checked the clock—a large, copper-rimmed metal ticker—next to the front door. As if on cue, the door opened and a blond cloud swept in.

"Right on time for the eight-seventeen meeting," I said with a grin. Kristen Gardiner and I have been best friends since childhood, when our families shared a creaky, turn-of-the-century house on Capitol Hill. She still lives in the house, a classic Seattle Box built by an ancestor, although now it glows with an attic-to-cellar makeover that would color any decorator in the Emerald City green. She helps out in the shop a few mornings a week, and she is never, ever on time.

"I'm so sorry, Pepper. One of the girls forgot her lunch and I had to—"

I held up a hand. "You're fine. We're brainstorming fall blends."

"Something pungent and flavorful." Reed spoke without glancing up from his task of running a rubber stamp of the shop name over small white paper cups. Shoppers who drop in for a sample of tea often end up buying herbs, spices, or other goodies they'd forgotten they needed. Or that they didn't need, but the fragrance and possibilities set their taste buds and imaginations awl.

"It's so neat how you can trace geography and history through spices," he continued. "When I open a jar of chili pepper cocoa, I'm in the world of the Aztecs. Ask me for a curry, and I'm halfway to India." Maybe five-six, an inch shorter than me, slight, with shaggy black hair and hooded eyes, Reed Locke is a history major at Seattle University. Wednesdays, he comes in early before dashing off to classes. His father runs an acupuncture clinic nearby, so he practically grew up in the Market.

We all turned to the world map on the wall, where colored pins mark the origin of every spice we carry. Many spices have migrated and become integral to cuisines and economies far from their genesis. The map also hides an ugly water stain on the plaster that paint didn't cover. Spice has added flavor to the Market since shortly after its founding in 1907, when our main competitor opened a shop, still prospering. In the fervor surrounding the campaign to save the Market from redevelopment in the early 1970s, hippie chick Jane Rasmussen threw her lot in with capitalist competition and started this shop. Why she thought the

Market could support two separate spice merchants, I don't know—but she'd been right, running this one for forty years until she sold it to me and retired to an island in Puget Sound. Our building once housed a nursery, and in spring, we honor that heritage by carrying seed packets and potted herbs.

I like to think of myself as the caretaker of one piece in the Market puzzle.

“A curry is a good idea,” I said. “Can we add a pinch of a chili or some other pepper, for our pungent mix? Put a chutney on the menu, and you've got Zak's harvest touch, with an international accent.” Heads bobbed. “Okay, now we need a savory combo, and a comfort blend. Everyone's sense of comfort varies, but we're after something that evokes that feeling of coming home after a walk in the rain, or spending a Sunday afternoon reading by the fire.”

“If we're spicing to feel warm, we'll be using the same stuff until April,” Kristen said. She wrapped a black-and-white Indian madras scarf around her neck, tucking the ends into her apron, black with the shop name in white. “It's freezing out there.”

Sandra rolled her eyes.

“We'll trot out our pie spice mix, of course. It's perfect for coffee, or oatmeal—”

“Or pie,” Zak said.

“For the comfort blend,” Tory said, “you want something earthy. Familiar, but not boring. A mix that makes you want to cook just so you can taste it.”

Tory Finch had also come with the shop. Twenty-eight, with a shapely figure, even in her black shop apron, and light brown hair in a chin-length blunt cut. She met my gaze, her golden brown eyes a touch less guarded than usual. Painter by night, spice girl by day, there was little question which she regarded as her real work. But when she spoke at our meetings—which wasn't often—everyone listened.

Every business needs at least one employee like that.

I nodded, with a glance at Sandra, my master mixologist. “Something for dips and sauces or to give a little oomph to chicken. Add depth to sautéed spinach or roasted squash.” Labels inside the metal tins would include a recipe or two, with more on our website.

A tiny smile tugged at Tory's mouth, shiny with her usual pale pink lip gloss, and she reached for the second stamp to help Reed with the cups.

“And for the savory,” I began, breaking off at the sound of angry voices outside. Zak strode to the door, and I dashed after him, confirming with a quick pat that my phone was in my apron pocket.

“I told you, again and again. This is my corner. When you gonna listen, old man?” Sam, a Market regular, jabbed his forefinger and pointed at the sidewalk where Pine Street meets Pike Place, the Market's cobbled main thoroughfare. Though he stood on the street, Sam towered above the man pacing on the sidewalk. Sam's wiry black hair, flecked with gray, peeked out from under a black wool beret that matched his long, flowing coat, and his beard stubble looked like coffee grounds against his dark skin. Beside him, Arf the dog, a tall gray-and-brown terrier mix, stood at heel, his emerald green nylon leash slack. Dogs aren't officially allowed in the Market, but you'd never know it.

“Hey, guys.” Zak extended his hands like stop signs.

“Everybody cool it,” I said, stepping in front of him and sizing up the situation. No fists were being thrown; no one appeared injured. “What’s the problem?”

“He’s got my corner.” Sam stood as tall as Zak. The other man barely topped my five-seven.

“These are public streets,” I said. “Anyone can be anywhere.” Technically true, but that doesn’t keep the regulars from staking their claims. Aggressive begging is illegal, as is blocking foot or vehicle traffic. But I’d rarely seen a problem—and never from Sam. Trouble usually comes from outside.

Sam’s chin jutted out. He lowered his head apologetically, gnarled fingers tightening the dog’s leash. I glanced at the other man, who’d shown up a few weeks ago and often stood on this corner or across the street. Sam, who had to be sixty, called him “old man,” but it was hard to judge his age, with the khaki rain hat he wore every day tugged low over his forehead and his thin shoulders hunched inside his olive green raincoat. It hadn’t rained in weeks.

“You’re Doc, right?”

He punched his hands deeper into the coat’s big pockets and nodded. Though I don’t have children—by the time Tag felt “ready,” the batteries on my biological clock had run down—Doc’s response made me feel like I was separating squabbling toddlers.

“Sam, since Doc’s the newcomer, why don’t we show him a little Market hospitality and let him pick which corner he’d like today. You take that one.” I pointed across Pine. “Tomorrow, you switch.”

A long silence before Sam said, “Yes, Miz Pepper,” a touch of the South in his deep, shy voice.

“That okay with you, Doc?” He raised his head briefly, then lowered his golden brown eyes, terror-stricken. He didn’t speak.

“If either of you misses a day, just keep alternating. And if there’s a problem, talk to me.”

“I’ve called the police,” a woman’s breathless voice said.

Pooh. Yvonne Winchell sold the freshest flowers in the daystalls—customers had come in all week carrying bouquets of her colorful dahlias, sunflowers, and others I couldn’t identify—but I’d never met such a worrywart. The Market is safe and clean; still, put thousands of diverse people in a small space seven days a week and things do happen. This was minor.

Behind her, one of the orchard girls watched us.

“No need,” I said. “Everything’s under control.” Yvonne stared intently, then ducked back under the shed roof that covered the long rows of daystalls, the long wooden tables with built-in benches rented by farmers and craftspeople.

“C’mon, Arf,” Sam said.

Both man and dog were clean, if a bit scruffy, so I suspected they had regular shelter somewhere. I fumbled in my pocket for a liver chew, keeping it hidden in my hand. Arf perked up, his long gray and caramel ears flopping back as his nose rose. “May I?”

“Yes’m. Whachew say, dog?” he said as Arf licked my hand. Man and dog headed for the opposite corner, and I turned back to Doc.

He wasn't there. After all that, where had he gone? I scanned the sidewalk, in case he'd thought I'd sent him across Pine to the corner by the Triangle Building. But there was no sign of him.

Had he ducked into the Spice Shop for a spot of tea? We weren't open yet, but we did sometimes hand out samples of hot tea to help keep the street folk warm.

I glanced inside. Not there, either.

Tory stood in the doorway of our salmon pink stucco building, one hand braced on the forest green frame, the other covering her mouth. Anxiety shaded her usually placid face.

A metallic whizzing followed by the scrape of rubber on a hard surface commandeered my attention, and I spun toward the sounds.

"Damsel in distress?" said a familiar baritone.

Double pooh. Why couldn't this have been Tag's day off?

"We took care of it, Officers," Zak said from behind me. He knew how I felt about Tag's tendency to jump right on any dispatch to the Market and wheel his trusty Seattle Police Department bicycle into my neighborhood. I recognized the irony—Zak's protectiveness mirrored Tag's. Not that there was anything romantic between me and my employee. He's just that kind of guy.

So, alas, is Tag, and he hadn't quite given up on romance between us. Despite his affair with a meter reader. (I couldn't bring myself to say "parking enforcement officer.") Despite our divorce.

"A couple of street guys got into a shouting match," I said. "They both wanted to camp on the same corner, but I got 'em to agree on taking turns. No trouble. Sorry to take you out of your way."

"Your shop's never out of my way, Pepper." Tag balanced his bike, one long, lean leg stretched to the pavement, the other foot on the pedal, ready to take off at a moment's notice. Behind him, his partner, Jay Olerud, wove figure eights, eyes scanning the crowd. How they manage to stay upright on the cobbles and curbs, swerve in and out of traffic, and speed up hills and down wearing guns, radios, and other gear, all the while sniffing out trouble, I can never understand.

There's a lot I don't understand about Tag. Including why he still seems so keen on me. I ran a hand through my spikey dark hair. When my job as a law firm HR manager fell victim to the senior partners' shenanigans, leaving me unemployed only a year after my divorce, I cut my ties to the corporate world and cut my hair. My morning routine now means sticking my head in the bathroom sink, toweling it dry with a washcloth, and rubbing a handful of goo over the remains. Bed Head R Us.

And for some reason, Bike Boy thinks it's hot.

He grinned. I reddened. Why does the man always look like he knows what I'm thinking?

"No trouble," I repeated.

"You're sure about that," he said, fingering his radio. At my nod, he keyed a button and reported in to dispatch. His china blue eyes bored into me. "That changes, you call me."

I gave him a mock salute and turned away before he took off. Those tight shorts reveal things I really didn't want to see.

• • •

SANDRA and Tory—both true spice artists—and I worked most of the day creating the new blends. I had one advantage: Not knowing what didn't work made me open to almost any combination.

And after years in law firm admin, I am an organizer par excellence.

We tossed out ideas, using the framework we'd laid earlier, and Tory fetched the jars of herbs and spices. Before I bought the shop—when I was a curious customer who slowly graduated from sipping tea to buying premixed combos, then on to preparing my own—I'd walk around the place, astonished by its beauty. By the bounty of jewel-like colors, intriguing shapes and textures, alluring smells. The vibrance of it all still stuns me.

The variety intimidates some shoppers. They buy cinnamon in the grocery store, where only one jar says "cinnamon." That way, they don't have to choose between ground, chunks, and sticks, from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Vietnam, or a blend—particularly nice if I do say so myself.

"That's two parts to one and one, plus one-quarter part Aleppo pepper. Are you getting this, boss?" Sandra nudged me with an elbow, and I broke off my reverie and wrote down the proportions. She slid the mixing bowl across to Tory and me, and we each dipped out a sample.

I closed my eyes, the better to taste with, and sniffed. "It needs to be—darker, if that makes sense. To balance the hint of sweetness." Turns out herb and spice tasting is a lot like wine tasting, with some of the same vocabulary. Although I've never heard anyone refer to cumin's "legs."

"She's right," Tory said. "Try the other Aleppo, the smokier one."

We agreed on the pungent and savory blends before turning to names. We planned to continue the pattern that Jane, the prior owner, had begun, using historic names and geographic features of western Washington and a subtitle describing the flavors. Not exactly inspired, but I hadn't hit on anything better. Last spring, we'd highlighted the bays of Puget Sound: Elliot, Skagit, Shilshole, and Anacortes. A lot of local features bear handles derived from the languages of coastal tribes. The words trip up newcomers, but before long, they rattle off Duwamish, Nooksack, Snoqualmie, and Skookumchuk like natives.

Plus the tongue twisters amuse tourists, and I'm all for that.

Job done, we took a quick break. I left the nook—a raised corner of the shop, set off by pony walls to let us keep an eye on things—just as a regular customer came in. Once a paralegal at my old law firm, Jennifer now works at a mystery bookshop.

She thrust her list at me and waited, a sly look on her face.

"Sumac. Pomegranate molasses. Cumin, allspice, cinnamon, coriander, rose petals." I raised one eyebrow, pretending to be stumped. "Marjoram and oregano, and three kinds of pepper. Hmm. It's got to be Middle Eastern." The sumac gave it away. A bright, lemony flavor and a rich, dark red, it's essential to Fattoush, or Levantine Bread Salad. And the other ingredients make a classic Kamunah, or cumin blend. With a few variations, it could be found in Baghdad, Beirut, Tel Aviv, or Istanbul. Or so I understood—I had not yet taken my own Grand Spice Tour.

"Yes. And the cinnamon, caraway, and anise are for a Lebanese pudding made with rice flour."

God bless gourmet clubs. I weighed and measured, working my way down Jen's list, while she chatted about

last month's French feast. Meanwhile, Sandra got back to work, but where had Tory gone?

I frowned as I labeled the white pepper. The front door flew open and Tory barged in, Zak two steps behind. She looked furious; he looked flustered.

Uh-oh. Workplace spat—or romance gone wrong? Had I missed the signs? Wordlessly, Tory returned to the mixing nook. I packed Jen's purchases in her canvas bag, and she headed out. A pair of women came in, and Zak tended to them.

The door opened again. "Hey, Yvonne. What's up? The girls watching your stall?"

She nodded. "I just, uh, need a pick-me-up." She gestured to the tea cart, then crossed the shop and poured a cup.

"Yvonne," Reed said. "Go see my dad for that bad leg. Acupuncture's great for pain."

"Voodoo," she said.

Zak twisted the lid off a jar of my favorite Hungarian paprika and the sharp scent filled the air. Yvonne sneezed.

"Gesundheit." "Bless you." The automatic responses echoed around the room, and she left as quickly as she'd come, still limping and sneezing.

Back at the worktable, I puzzled over how to approach Tory about Zak. Ordinarily, I'd just pull an employee aside, report my observation, and ask if she needed help working out a problem. But you've got to tread carefully when the relationship you're probing might be more than professional. Tory and I got along well, but without the friendly jibing Sandra and I shared or the almost motherly feeling I had for Reed. She focused her attention on mixing, blending, smelling, and tasting, giving me no opportunity to speak.

I transcribed our tasting notes. Had Tory's visible distress this morning stemmed from concern for Zak's safety? But while the spat between Sam and Doc had gotten loud, it never presented any real danger—not to me, and certainly not to Zak.

"Any idea what's up with her?" I said to Sandra when Tory stepped away to fetch another jar of sage.

She shook her head. "That girl is as private as a Swiss bank account. She's worked here two years, and I read her about as well as ancient Cyrillic."

"Me, too. She pours her passion into her art. But I've never seen a painting. You?" Her expression said no. "I wonder if Zak is breaking through her reserve."

Sandra sealed the last of the plastic bags that held today's samples. We'd try them all again tomorrow before making final decisions—it takes a blend anywhere from six to twenty-four hours for the flavors to round off. "Maybe. Though he loves to flirt with the orchard girls and sweet-talks every female customer."

"That's our Zak."

But something had shaken my least flappable employee.

I just hoped it was none of my business.

Two

Average number of rainy days in Seattle: 155 days a year. Average number of sunny days: 58. Everything else: shades of gray.

I snicked the Spice Shop's worn brass lock shut, turned, and raised my face to the last glorious rays. People in other parts of the country think it rains every day in Seattle.

Let 'em.

The Market is tucked smack into one of Seattle's hills, with Western Ave on—go figure—the west side. First Ave lies uphill to the east, with Pike Place, a curious L-shaped street, and Post Alley sandwiched between. From Western to First is a steep vertical rise. Happily, my loft is on Western and my shop is in the middle, on Pike Place. So I rarely have to trek the whole thing at once.

Right now, I made my way up Stewart to First, a good climb, carrying a special order for a restaurant customer and test bags of today's blends.

Thinking of Alex Howard, proprietor and chef of the First Avenue Café, brought a smile. Proverbially tall, dark, and handsome. Not to mention successful, intense, and almost flamboyant. A media darling. We'd been out a few promising times.

No, I didn't mind delivery duty one bit.

At the corner, a woman stepped into view and started across the street. Tory. Two or three feet behind her came a man in an olive green raincoat. He appeared to be talking to her, reaching out his hands.

It was Doc. She shook him off, glancing over her shoulder, and kept walking.

You don't beg with both hands. You plead with both hands.

What did he want from her?

I hurried up the hill. She reached the corner just as a Metro bus screeched to a halt, and was gone before I could catch her.

Doc stood, hat pulled low, staring as the bus zoomed away.

"What do you want with T—with her?" I stopped myself from blurting out her name. Over the years, I'd had to intervene several times when downtown denizens hassled my young female employees. Bad enough that he knew where she worked and what bus she rode.

Doc did not reply.

"Leave her alone," I said. "If you've got a problem with Sam, or with the arrangement about the corners, you talk to me, not my staff."

He ducked his head till it almost disappeared between his shoulder blades. Without a word, he trudged down the hill.

I was breathless, not from exercise but from anger and protectiveness. From not knowing whether Doc posed a threat to Tory—or to any of us. He didn't look like much, but that was no guarantee.

When Doc reached Pike Place, he headed back toward the heart of the Market, to my surprise. Most of the street men—homeless or not—hang out at Victor Steinbrueck Park, a grassy lawn on the Market’s north edge punctuated by a pair of fifty-foot cedar totem poles. The park is named for the visionary architect who saved the Market from destruction by progress. But now that I thought about it, Doc didn’t seem the type to join that crowd—he was more of a loner. Plus, Sam and Arf usually spend the sunset hours there.

I shook off my apprehension. No point worrying without facts.

Several nights a week, Alex Howard presides over the kitchen at his flagship restaurant, the First Avenue Café. He owns the whole building, keeping his corporate offices on the second floor and his apartment on the penthouse level. We met when he grew frustrated with an inconsistent supply of Grenadian nutmeg for his jerk chicken and asked me for help. His charms were undeniable, but I resisted. After thirteen years of marriage to Tag, I’d seen the light: Charm is overrated.

But Alex had kept calling, and now I stood at the Cafe’s side door, delivery bag in hand and hope in my heart.

A prep cook answered my knock. “Hey, Pepper.” He took the bag and yelled, “Alex!”

I’d arrived in that brief twilight between prep and service. I peered into the dining room, fully set but unoccupied—except for the hostess, passing slowly between the tables, adjusting a chair, realigning an errant napkin. Each wooden surface—tables, chairs, floor—gleamed.

Even a glimpse of its casual elegance made me feel underdressed. I’d taken off my apron but still wore my retail uniform: black yoga pants, black T-shirt with the shop logo, black T-strap climbing shoes perfect for Seattle’s hills and the Market’s wobbly streets.

The kitchen’s stainless steel pots and surfaces shone. The mise-en-place was all in place—mounds of chopped shallots, parsley, and other ingredients exactly where each cook needed them. The scene hummed with invisible energy, something like how I imagined a high-wire act would be. Or a high-voltage electrical wire. I’ve never worked in a restaurant kitchen, and frankly, the idea terrifies me. The precision, the juggling, the unpredictability—amid all those knives and all that heat. And all that testosterone. No, thanks. Supply and delivery are close enough for me.

“Pepper Reese!” Alex bounded into view and bussed my cheek. “Family meal’s just wrapping up. Curried clams with chickpeas and spinach over rice. A variation of one of tonight’s specials.”

I followed Alex downstairs to the prep kitchen, humid and fragrant. “A bowl for my friend,” Alex called to a line cook. He pulled out two wooden folding chairs and reached for a basket of grilled naan.

I dug spice samples out of my jute carryall. “We’d love your impressions of the flavor balance, recipes, anything you want to suggest.”

“We’ll try them out and I’ll give you a call.”

A woman in white slid a bowl in front of me and I inhaled the sweet-sharp fragrance of a perfectly balanced curry. Remembering what Reed had said this morning about the geography of spice, I closed my eyes and conjured up the map. Hot, saucy. Southern India, with a Pacific Northwest accent.

Scuttle says some chefs begrudge every bite their crew takes and offer barely edible fare below stairs. Not Alex. “How can I expect a waiter to rave about my Dungeness crab cakes if she’s hungry?” he’d told me. “If

she's never eaten them, or she's ticked off that I fed her watered-down gruel? My cooks need good hearty fuel if I expect them to work their tails off."

His chair angled toward me, Alex rested his elbows on his knees and watched me eat. In the restaurant, he was all energy. Dark curls glistened on top of his head, the sides well trimmed but not too short. His brown eyes sparkled. He was like a long, sleek cat, pulsing with energy, ready to pounce into action.

Fascinating, and a little bit unnerving.

He rattled off the night's specials—they made me envy the paying customers—then stood. "Gotta run. Eat all you want. See you Sunday?"

I nodded, mouth full of curry. Chefs sweat over hot stoves all weekend. No Friday nights at the movies or Saturday dinner dates. I swallowed, and he swooped in for a kiss. A long, warm, luscious kiss.

Oh, I thought as he dashed up the stairs to take the reins of his domain. Is this what fall tastes like?

• • •

OUTSIDE, the last sunlight set the peaks of the Olympic Mountains aglow in orange and pink, trimmed in deep purple. I felt the same glow inside. From the curry or the kiss?

Who cares?

I'll be the first to admit, downtown living isn't for everyone. But I adore it. Tag and I had shared a sweet bungalow in Greenwood, a few miles north of downtown. When we split, it had been time for a serious change. I hadn't known, of course, that a year later, the law firm where I worked would implode in scandal.

And I hadn't known I'd find solace—and employment—in bay leaves.

Best. Thing. Ever.

No chill in the air, despite the twilight. Sandra might be sweating and Kristen freezing, but as far as I'm concerned, fall takes all the prizes.

A few last office workers shuffled past me to their bus stops or the light rail station. I strolled down Virginia to Pike Place. The totem poles in the park stood as silhouettes in the fading light.

A couple stood at the railing, arms around each other, watching the sun set over the water and the mountains beyond. Nearby, half a dozen teenagers laughed and joked.

"Miz Pepper."

The sound of my name took me by surprise. Sam, Arf beside him, broke away from a group of men huddled by the fountain and the Tree of Life sculpture.

"How you doin', Sam? Sorry, boy." I held out a hand for Arf to sniff. "No treats this time."

"Oh, he gets plenty. Market folks is good to him. You need a escort? Gettin' on to dark."

"Thanks, Sam. I'm fine." His offer reminded me of the encounter I'd seen earlier. "But I do have a question for you. The man you tussled with this morning, the one they call Doc."

His brows furrowed but he nodded to me to go on.

“He’s fairly new around here, isn’t he?” Another nod. “Causing any trouble? Other than wanting your spot.”

“Why you be askin’ that, Miz Pepper?”

“I know some of the men”—I gestured toward the group by the totem pole—“take an interest in protecting the women who work in the Market, like you do, and I wondered if you’ve seen Doc helping anyone that way.”

He shook his big head slowly. “No, can’t say as I have. He ain’t here every day. And he don’t stay down evenings. Don’t know where he goes. I ain’t seen him around, at the shelters or getting a meal. You want me to keep an eye on him?”

“Thanks, Sam, but no. It’s nothing.” I rubbed Arf’s head with my cupped hand. “You two have a good night, now.”

Despite refusing Sam’s offer, I had a hunch he’d be watching Doc anyway. Poking around. Some of us are like that.

Three

Fueled by Alaskan gold, Seattle’s population quintupled between 1889, the year of statehood and the Great Fire, and 1907, when the Public Market opened. Takes a lot of food to feed 200,000 people.

The builder who helped me flesh out the loft’s bones called the mezzanine above the bedroom “retreat space, for yoga or meditation.” Apparently some people exercise in their yoga pants. The cold steel steps zing my bare feet in the morning, but it’s the only place in the loft that lets me peek over the Viaduct to the Sound. If I think tall. This stretch of the Viaduct is scheduled to come down soon, with all that traffic moving to a tunnel. They say it’s for earthquake safety, but the changes would revamp the waterfront and give us downtown dwellers killer views.

Plus higher taxes and, no doubt, pressure from developers. My next-door neighbor, a city council member, has his finger on that pulse and keeps us all informed. I settled into a canvas director’s chair, hand-painted by a Market artisan, to meditate on caffeine and morning mist.

The weather was clearly changing. Well, “clearly” wasn’t the right word. Not today. Vapor from the Seattle Steam plant collided with cool air rolling in off the Sound to create a bewitching white cloud.

A fog horn blared and an outbound ferry glided into view. I grabbed the binoculars, but the air was too dense for me to make out the name.

As a child, I’d lie in bed and strain my ears to hear the fog horns, usually falling asleep first. One of my earliest memories is standing at a ferry rail clutching my grandfather’s hand on one of his visits from St. Louis. I might have been destined for my business, but I was not, as most people assume, named for it. Grandpa nicknamed me after the legendary Cardinals third baseman Pepper Martin, known as a ball of fire.

I like to think I’ve mellowed since then.

I sipped my coffee, an Ethiopian Longberry Harrar, and ran through what we needed to accomplish that day

at the shop. First, repeat the taste tests and settle on our descriptive subtitles so we could get the info to our brilliant graphic designer. Then choose the recipes. Plus the usual daily business of working with our walk-in traffic and commercial accounts.

Would yesterday's clash between Sam and Doc be a one-time thing? I hoped so.

But why had Doc been pestering Tory? Slim chance that I could get her to spill any details, even with careful questioning. She'd shift her shoulders slightly, set her chin, and tell me—without a word—that she could take her of herself.

I watched another huge green-and-white ferry chug into view—coming from Bainbridge Island, judging from the angle. They truly are iconic.

Enough in-home sightseeing. Time to get spicy.

• • •

I crossed Western, bypassed the elevator entrance, and trudged up the Market Hillclimb—my version of a cardio workout—to the Main Arcade. Emerged near City Fish—home of the famous flying fish—and exchanged greetings with the fishmongers. (And yes, that's what they call themselves.) Passed Rachel the brass pig, Market mascot and piggy bank for the Foundation, which funds housing and social services. Waved hello to the couple who run the Oriental Mart in the Corner Market. Bought a strawberry-banana smoothie at the Creamery and a blueberry bran muffin at Three Girls Bakery, one of the oldest Market tenants. Most retail shops were still closed, although I spotted a few merchants bustling around inside.

A half-dozen delivery trucks idled on Pike Place, men with hand trucks unloading cartons and crates. The aromas of fish, fruit, and fresh bread mingled with the sharp but mouthwatering smell of cheese making.

Have I mentioned I love this place?

I crossed Pine, my attention on the mess inside my tote as I dug for my keys. My feet slowed as I neared our door, on autopilot. "Eureka!" My fingers closed around the keys and I reached for the lock.

And froze. A truck clattered by on the cobbles. Up on First, commuter buses offloaded passengers, and out on the Sound, ferries blew their whistles.

While I stared at the man known as Doc, crumpled in my doorway, a paper cup stamped with our logo beside his open hand.

Four

Seattle's Public Market houses a year-round farmers' market, bakeries, meat and fish markets, produce stands, and specialty food stores. Two hundred plus craftspeople rent daystalls, operating alongside more than 200 owner-operated shops and services and nearly one hundred restaurants. The Market is also home to more than 350 residents—all in nine acres.

—Market website

My shout brought people running, people whose phones weren't buried at the bottom of their tote bags or knapsacks, like mine. "Help is on the way," someone assured me as I knelt beside Doc, holding my breath

and his wrist, praying for a pulse. A nurse on her way to the Market clinic nudged me aside but, when she got no better result, turned her kind face to me.

“He’s gone,” she said, her voice almost too soft to hear amid the chit and chat and scrape and squawk around us. In the distance, a siren screamed, but whether bound for here or some other unlucky locale, no telling.

I nodded. Years ago, at the law firm, a client stumbled into my office in search of the restroom, keeled over, and died. The image of his red face matching his red tie, contrasting sharply with his white shirt and hair and his classic navy blue suit, had stuck with me.

In contrast, Doc wore his usual olive green raincoat and scarred brown shoes. His eyes had lost their sheen, the dull, sandy skin around them pooched and pocketed like a Shar Pei’s after an all-nighter. And yet, despite the world of difference from that long-ago client, he was just as dead.

The nurse pushed herself up, fingers pressing lightly into my upper arm. I shook her off. It seemed indecent to leave him, to stand back and join the small crowd staring at this odd, dead man. The merchants, farmers, and craftspeople of the Market call themselves a family, and family doesn’t make one of their own into a curiosity, even a newcomer.

I’m a newcomer, too.

His hand lay half open, fingers gently curved, as if still holding the cup. The fingers were pale, nails well trimmed and scrubbed clean.

Amazing what goes through the mind at moments like this. My family was never traditionally religious, though both my parents were active in peace and justice causes during my childhood. My mother helped found a soup kitchen in the basement of St. James Cathedral but rarely attended Mass, entering the nave only to hear chamber music. Once I went with her to hear the Tallis Scholars sing and wondered, as I stared up at the gold-and-white-trimmed vaults, how their voices could climb so high and who was up there listening.

My father had chosen to study Zen Buddhism. Whether because of or in spite of his experiences in Vietnam, he never said. If asked, no doubt he’d smile and ask me quietly what I thought. Friends had wafted through the big house on Capitol Hill, day and night, to sit in meditation in the third-floor ballroom. Where Kristen’s great-grandparents had held formal dances and her grandmother learned swing and defied convention by inviting a black jazz band to entertain soldiers during the war, we heard rhythmic breathing, mantras being chanted, and the rolling tones of a Tibetan bell. Kristen and I had helped our mothers melt the used candle ends and remold them, adding sandalwood or lavender oil. A mere whiff of Nag Champa Incense takes me back.

Later, when Kristen’s mother discovered yoga, we heard the soft gummy sounds of sticky mats being rolled onto the maple floors, punctuated by groans as stiff joints responded to gentle coaxing from the teachers who came and went.

All my life, the medieval harmonies my mother loves have slipped into my consciousness when I least expect them. When my heart’s been ripped open, when the stakes are highest. They swirled around me now as I tried to summon the sacred peace of the Cathedral and the ballroom studio, and wrap it around the man we knew as Doc.

I stayed there until another hand touched me. “Pepper,” Tag said. “Let the EMTs take over.”

He led me down the sidewalk, out of the way. Just yesterday, Doc and Sam had argued on this spot and

Tag's partner carved ruts in the road dust with the fat tires of his mountain bike. Now navy-blue-clad EMTs tumbled out of the red Medic One ambulance that had clambered down Pine and idled noisily beside my shop. I hoped the parking brake held. The crew, two men and a woman, fell into a routine, tasks so well defined that they barely needed to speak to communicate.

"What are you doing here?" I finally thought to ask. "And where's your partner?"

Tag jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and I turned to see Olerud, off the bike, notebook in hand, surrounded by half a dozen Market folks. "You know we work First Watch."

I faced my ex squarely. "But why the police, for an old man's heart attack?"

Eyes hidden by mirrored sunglasses, he shrugged one shoulder. "Control the crowd. Preserve the scene. Do whatever these guys need." He cocked his helmeted head toward the EMTs. One knelt by the body, repacking a box of equipment, while the others unloaded a gurney.

ASSAULT AND PEPPER (A SPICE SHOP MYSTERY) BY LESLIE BUDEWITZ PDF

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The Agatha Award-winning author of "Crime Rib" is proud to introduce Pepper Reece, the owner of the Seattle Spice Shop who thinks she can handle any kind of salty customer--until a murderer ends up in the mix...

After leaving a dicey marriage and losing a beloved job in a corporate crash, Pepper Reece has found a new zest for life running a busy spice and tea shop in Seattle's Pike Place Market. Her aromatic creations are the talk of the town, and everyone stops by for a cup of her refreshing spice tea, even other shopkeepers and Market regulars. But when a panhandler named Doc shows up dead on the store's doorstep, a Seattle Spice Shop cup in his hand, the local gossip gets too hot for Pepper to handle--especially after the police arrest one of Pepper's staffers, Tory Finch, for murder.

Tory seems to know why she's a suspect, but she refuses to do anything to curry favor with the cops. Convinced her reticent employee is innocent, Pepper takes it on herself to sniff out some clues. Only, if she's not careful, Pepper's nosy ways might make her next on the killer's list...

- Sales Rank: #4528422 in Books
- Published on: 2015-06-17
- Format: Large Print
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.40" h x .90" w x 5.40" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 349 pages

Review

Praise for Leslie Budewitz and her mysteries

"Seldom does a new author hit all the right notes in a first book, but Leslie Budewitz does. Convincing characters, a believable plot, the right dash of romance, and a deft use of words all come together to create a seamless and satisfying read."--Sheila Connolly, "New York Times" bestselling author of "Scandal in Skibbereen"

"A dizzying culinary delight with a twisty-turny plot! I'm totally enamored of Leslie Budewitz's huckleberry chocolates, Shasta daisies, and Cowboy Roast coffee."--Laura Childs, "New York Times" bestselling author of "Gilt Trip"

"An intriguing sleuth who loves gourmet food, family, and her hometown, plus recipes to die for distinguish a delectable mystery."--Carolyn Hart, "New York Times" bestselling author of "Death at the Door"

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"Engrossing and satisfying."--"Fresh Fiction"

"A potpourri of spices, a melange of murder--Pepper and her crew serve up a tantalizing mystery and a fragrant treat for the senses."--Connie Archer, national bestselling author of the Soup Lover's Mysteries

"There's a savvy new amateur sleuth in town, and her name is Pepper Reece. "Assault and Pepper" is a smart blend of zesty characters, piquant spices, and scrumptious food. Set against the intriguing Seattle backdrop, this well-plotted whodunit is the perfect recipe for a great read."--Daryl Wood Gerber, national bestselling author of the Cookbook Nook Mysteries

"Leslie Budewitz writes her new Seattle Spice Shop Mystery, "Assault and Pepper," with a dash of humor and a half-turn of charm that will leave readers smiling."--J.J. Cook, national bestselling author of "Death on Eat Street"

"An iconic Seattle setting, a smart and capable heroine, and a spicy investigation... what mystery reader could want more? Budewitz combines it all with effortless finesse."--Victoria Hamilton, national bestselling author of the Vintage Kitchen Mysteries

"Parsley, sage, rosemary and...murder. "Assault and Pepper," the scintillating first book in Leslie Budewitz's new Spice Shop Mystery series will add zing to your reading."--Barbara Ross, author of the Maine Clambake Mysteries

About the Author

National bestselling author Leslie Budewitz writes the Spice Shop Mysteries ("Assault and Pepper") and the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries ("Crime Rib"; "Death Al Dente"). She fell in love with Seattle's Pike Place Market as a college student, and still misses prowling its streets and alleys, sniffing out tasty treats and sensory delights. Leslie won the 2013 Agatha Award for Best First Novel for "Death al Dente," first in the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries, and won the 2011 Agatha Award for Best Nonfiction for "Books, Crooks & Counselors: How to Write Accurately About Criminal Law and Courtroom Procedure." She loves to cook, eat, hike, travel, garden, and paint--not necessarily in that order. She lives in northwest Montana with her husband, Don Beans, a doctor of natural medicine, and their Burmese cat, Ruff, an avid bird-watcher.

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Acknowledgments and Historical Note

Inventory—Aka the Cast

Pepper Reece—owner

Sandra Piniella—assistant manager and mix master

Tory Finch—salesclerk and artist

Zak Davis—salesclerk and musician

Reed Locke—part-time salesclerk and college student

Kristen Gardiner—part-time salesclerk, Pepper's oldest friend

Pepper

Kristen

Laurel Halloran—restaurant owner, caterer, houseboat dweller

Seetha Sharma—the newest member

Gabe Halloran—Laurel's teenage son and honorary member

Angie and Sylvie Martinez—aka the orchard girls

Yvonne Winchell—grows the best flowers in the Market

Jane Rasmussen—founder and former owner of Seattle Spice

Doc aka Damien Finch—the mysterious newcomer

Sam and Arf—a man and his dog

Jim and Hot Dog—Sam's friends

Marianne Finch—Damien's wife

Ken Griffey—Damien's partner

Alex Howard—restaurateur Pepper may or may not be dating

Fabiola the Fabulous—graphic designer

Keyra Jackson—Tory's sculptor friend and neighbor

Jen the Bookseller and Callie the Librarian—Pepper's former law firm employees

Vinny—the wine merchant

Officer Tag Buhner—on the bike beat, Pepper’s former husband

Detective Cheryl Spencer—homicide

Detective Michael Tracy—homicide

One

An herb is a fresh or dried leaf. A spice is a dried plant part—a bud (cloves), bark (cinnamon), root (ginger), berry (peppercorns), seeds (fennel), or even stigma (saffron). The same plant may provide both—fresh or dried cilantro leaves are the herb cilantro, while the dried seeds are the spice coriander.

“What does autumn taste like? How does it smell?”

Even as I asked, the questions seemed utterly ridiculous. This was already shaping up to be one of those glorious September days in Seattle that make you think the weather will never change, that the sky will always be a pure cloudless blue, the leaves on the trees a painter’s box of green, the waters of Elliot Bay calm and sparkling.

I’ve lived here all my forty-two years, and I still get fooled.

But as the owner, for the last ten months and seventeen days, of the Seattle Spice Shop, it was my job to think ahead. Fall would be here in less than a week, by the calendar. And by my nose. I really could sense the difference right about this time of year. The annual run on pickling spices for the last cukes would soon give way to cider mulling mixes. And before long, our customers would be asking for poultry seasoning and scouting for Christmas gifts.

“The taste,” I repeated to my staff, gathered around the butcher block worktable in our mixing nook, “and smell of fall.”

Sandra fanned herself with a catalog from the kitchen shop up the hill and peered over the top of her reading glasses—today’s were leopard print. “Fall, shmall. It’s seventy-six degrees out.” Spot-on to most Seattleites, but my assistant manager is one of those native Northwesterners who thrive in a narrow temperature range. Anything above seventy-two and she sweats; below forty-five, she shivers. And complains, cheerfully. A short, well-rounded woman of sixty with smooth olive skin, pixie-cut dark hair, and lively chocolate brown eyes, she came with the place, and I say daily prayers of gratitude that she stayed.

“Apples,” Zak said. “Applesauce, apple butter, spiced apple cake. Plums in brandy. Plum pudding. Fruitcake.” Zak had been my first hire after I bought the shop. Six-two and almost thirty, with muscular shoulders, he’d seemed an unlikely candidate for employment in a retail spice shop in Seattle’s venerable Pike Place Market. But I’d been desperate and he’d been earnest. And he pleaded for a weekday job so he could rock the nights and weekends away with his band.

Plus he’s my ex-husband Tag’s best friend’s nephew, and I have to admit, Tag Buhner isn’t always wrong about people.

“You have fruit on the brain,” Sandra said. “Been flirting with the orchard girls again?”

Zak blushed, a sweet look at odds with his shaved head, fierce dark brows, and black goatee.

The orchard girls, two sisters with shiny black hair, full red lips, and curves in all the right places, had caught the eye of every straight man under thirty-five in the Market since they took over the family fruit stand this past summer. Their looks and the location of their stall—they usually draw a prime spot across from us on Pike Place, the Market’s long, cobbled main street—guarantee plenty of attention.

That their fruit is the freshest and their jams the tastiest doesn’t hurt.

“Our tea is the essential fragrance of the Market year-round,” I said, pointing my pen at the ornate brass electric teapot that resembles a Russian samovar. We’d just resumed serving the hot black Assam tea spiced with cardamom, allspice, and orange, although the iced tea dispenser would stay out a few more days.

“That, and fresh fish.” Zak had recovered from his embarrassment. The fish merchants near the Market’s main entrance put on a comedy routine to rival the Marx Brothers’, tossing whole coho salmon like softballs, teasing customers, and welcoming both locals and wide-eyed tourists to the heart and stomach of Seattle.

Zak filled his mug, emblazoned with a Z, and snatched a hazelnut cookie from the box. It wouldn’t be a staff meeting without treats from the French bakery.

“We need three or four new blends,” I said. “For our home cooks. Zak’s zeroed in on the harvest aspect of fall. But I’d like something to rub on those fish, or a slow-cooked chuck roast. To warm up the salty mist and stave off the chills, until we get into the familiar tastes of Christmas.”

My staff turned thoughtful, summoning their own ideas of fall. They say the sense of smell is the most intimately linked of all our senses to memory, and I believe it. One whiff of a familiar scent, even one we haven’t encountered in years, can transport us to a time and place long forgotten, even before we consciously recall the memory.

Our task was to find common elements and translate them into balanced blends of herbs and spices to evoke a positive sensory experience for our customers.

The Wednesday morning staff meeting is one of the few times we’re all in the shop together. Such a satisfying sight.

Actually, we were one person short. I checked the clock—a large, copper-rimmed metal ticker—next to the front door. As if on cue, the door opened and a blond cloud swept in.

“Right on time for the eight-seventeen meeting,” I said with a grin. Kristen Gardiner and I have been best friends since childhood, when our families shared a creaky, turn-of-the-century house on Capitol Hill. She still lives in the house, a classic Seattle Box built by an ancestor, although now it glows with an attic-to-cellar makeover that would color any decorator in the Emerald City green. She helps out in the shop a few mornings a week, and she is never, ever on time.

“I’m so sorry, Pepper. One of the girls forgot her lunch and I had to—”

I held up a hand. “You’re fine. We’re brainstorming fall blends.”

“Something pungent and flavorful.” Reed spoke without glancing up from his task of running a rubber stamp of the shop name over small white paper cups. Shoppers who drop in for a sample of tea often end up buying herbs, spices, or other goodies they’d forgotten they needed. Or that they didn’t need, but the fragrance and possibilities set their taste buds and imaginations awl.

“It’s so neat how you can trace geography and history through spices,” he continued. “When I open a jar of

chili pepper cocoa, I'm in the world of the Aztecs. Ask me for a curry, and I'm halfway to India." Maybe five-six, an inch shorter than me, slight, with shaggy black hair and hooded eyes, Reed Locke is a history major at Seattle University. Wednesdays, he comes in early before dashing off to classes. His father runs an acupuncture clinic nearby, so he practically grew up in the Market.

We all turned to the world map on the wall, where colored pins mark the origin of every spice we carry. Many spices have migrated and become integral to cuisines and economies far from their genesis. The map also hides an ugly water stain on the plaster that paint didn't cover. Spice has added flavor to the Market since shortly after its founding in 1907, when our main competitor opened a shop, still prospering. In the fervor surrounding the campaign to save the Market from redevelopment in the early 1970s, hippie chick Jane Rasmussen threw her lot in with capitalist competition and started this shop. Why she thought the Market could support two separate spice merchants, I don't know—but she'd been right, running this one for forty years until she sold it to me and retired to an island in Puget Sound. Our building once housed a nursery, and in spring, we honor that heritage by carrying seed packets and potted herbs.

I like to think of myself as the caretaker of one piece in the Market puzzle.

"A curry is a good idea," I said. "Can we add a pinch of a chili or some other pepper, for our pungent mix? Put a chutney on the menu, and you've got Zak's harvest touch, with an international accent." Heads bobbed. "Okay, now we need a savory combo, and a comfort blend. Everyone's sense of comfort varies, but we're after something that evokes that feeling of coming home after a walk in the rain, or spending a Sunday afternoon reading by the fire."

"If we're spicing to feel warm, we'll be using the same stuff until April," Kristen said. She wrapped a black-and-white Indian madras scarf around her neck, tucking the ends into her apron, black with the shop name in white. "It's freezing out there."

Sandra rolled her eyes.

"We'll trot out our pie spice mix, of course. It's perfect for coffee, or oatmeal—"

"Or pie," Zak said.

"For the comfort blend," Tory said, "you want something earthy. Familiar, but not boring. A mix that makes you want to cook just so you can taste it."

Tory Finch had also come with the shop. Twenty-eight, with a shapely figure, even in her black shop apron, and light brown hair in a chin-length blunt cut. She met my gaze, her golden brown eyes a touch less guarded than usual. Painter by night, spice girl by day, there was little question which she regarded as her real work. But when she spoke at our meetings—which wasn't often—everyone listened.

Every business needs at least one employee like that.

I nodded, with a glance at Sandra, my master mixologist. "Something for dips and sauces or to give a little oomph to chicken. Add depth to sautéed spinach or roasted squash." Labels inside the metal tins would include a recipe or two, with more on our website.

A tiny smile tugged at Tory's mouth, shiny with her usual pale pink lip gloss, and she reached for the second stamp to help Reed with the cups.

"And for the savory," I began, breaking off at the sound of angry voices outside. Zak strode to the door, and I

dashed after him, confirming with a quick pat that my phone was in my apron pocket.

“I told you, again and again. This is my corner. When you gonna listen, old man?” Sam, a Market regular, jabbed his forefinger and pointed at the sidewalk where Pine Street meets Pike Place, the Market’s cobbled main thoroughfare. Though he stood on the street, Sam towered above the man pacing on the sidewalk. Sam’s wiry black hair, flecked with gray, peeked out from under a black wool beret that matched his long, flowing coat, and his beard stubble looked like coffee grounds against his dark skin. Beside him, Arf the dog, a tall gray-and-brown terrier mix, stood at heel, his emerald green nylon leash slack. Dogs aren’t officially allowed in the Market, but you’d never know it.

“Hey, guys.” Zak extended his hands like stop signs.

“Everybody cool it,” I said, stepping in front of him and sizing up the situation. No fists were being thrown; no one appeared injured. “What’s the problem?”

“He’s got my corner.” Sam stood as tall as Zak. The other man barely topped my five-seven.

“These are public streets,” I said. “Anyone can be anywhere.” Technically true, but that doesn’t keep the regulars from staking their claims. Aggressive begging is illegal, as is blocking foot or vehicle traffic. But I’d rarely seen a problem—and never from Sam. Trouble usually comes from outside.

Sam’s chin jutted out. He lowered his head apologetically, gnarled fingers tightening the dog’s leash. I glanced at the other man, who’d shown up a few weeks ago and often stood on this corner or across the street. Sam, who had to be sixty, called him “old man,” but it was hard to judge his age, with the khaki rain hat he wore every day tugged low over his forehead and his thin shoulders hunched inside his olive green raincoat. It hadn’t rained in weeks.

“You’re Doc, right?”

He punched his hands deeper into the coat’s big pockets and nodded. Though I don’t have children—by the time Tag felt “ready,” the batteries on my biological clock had run down—Doc’s response made me feel like I was separating squabbling toddlers.

“Sam, since Doc’s the newcomer, why don’t we show him a little Market hospitality and let him pick which corner he’d like today. You take that one.” I pointed across Pine. “Tomorrow, you switch.”

A long silence before Sam said, “Yes, Miz Pepper,” a touch of the South in his deep, shy voice.

“That okay with you, Doc?” He raised his head briefly, then lowered his golden brown eyes, terror-stricken. He didn’t speak.

“If either of you misses a day, just keep alternating. And if there’s a problem, talk to me.”

“I’ve called the police,” a woman’s breathless voice said.

Pooh. Yvonne Winchell sold the freshest flowers in the daystalls—customers had come in all week carrying bouquets of her colorful dahlias, sunflowers, and others I couldn’t identify—but I’d never met such a worrywart. The Market is safe and clean; still, put thousands of diverse people in a small space seven days a week and things do happen. This was minor.

Behind her, one of the orchard girls watched us.

“No need,” I said. “Everything’s under control.” Yvonne stared intently, then ducked back under the shed roof that covered the long rows of daystalls, the long wooden tables with built-in benches rented by farmers and craftspeople.

“C’mon, Arf,” Sam said.

Both man and dog were clean, if a bit scruffy, so I suspected they had regular shelter somewhere. I fumbled in my pocket for a liver chew, keeping it hidden in my hand. Arf perked up, his long gray and caramel ears flopping back as his nose rose. “May I?”

“Yes’m. Whachew say, dog?” he said as Arf licked my hand. Man and dog headed for the opposite corner, and I turned back to Doc.

He wasn’t there. After all that, where had he gone? I scanned the sidewalk, in case he’d thought I’d sent him across Pine to the corner by the Triangle Building. But there was no sign of him.

Had he ducked into the Spice Shop for a spot of tea? We weren’t open yet, but we did sometimes hand out samples of hot tea to help keep the street folk warm.

I glanced inside. Not there, either.

Tory stood in the doorway of our salmon pink stucco building, one hand braced on the forest green frame, the other covering her mouth. Anxiety shaded her usually placid face.

A metallic whizzing followed by the scrape of rubber on a hard surface commandeered my attention, and I spun toward the sounds.

“Damsel in distress?” said a familiar baritone.

Double pooh. Why couldn’t this have been Tag’s day off?

“We took care of it, Officers,” Zak said from behind me. He knew how I felt about Tag’s tendency to jump right on any dispatch to the Market and wheel his trusty Seattle Police Department bicycle into my neighborhood. I recognized the irony—Zak’s protectiveness mirrored Tag’s. Not that there was anything romantic between me and my employee. He’s just that kind of guy.

So, alas, is Tag, and he hadn’t quite given up on romance between us. Despite his affair with a meter reader. (I couldn’t bring myself to say “parking enforcement officer.”) Despite our divorce.

“A couple of street guys got into a shouting match,” I said. “They both wanted to camp on the same corner, but I got ’em to agree on taking turns. No trouble. Sorry to take you out of your way.”

“Your shop’s never out of my way, Pepper.” Tag balanced his bike, one long, lean leg stretched to the pavement, the other foot on the pedal, ready to take off at a moment’s notice. Behind him, his partner, Jay Olerud, wove figure eights, eyes scanning the crowd. How they manage to stay upright on the cobbles and curbs, swerve in and out of traffic, and speed up hills and down wearing guns, radios, and other gear, all the while sniffing out trouble, I can never understand.

There’s a lot I don’t understand about Tag. Including why he still seems so keen on me. I ran a hand through my spikey dark hair. When my job as a law firm HR manager fell victim to the senior partners’ shenanigans, leaving me unemployed only a year after my divorce, I cut my ties to the corporate world and cut my hair. My morning routine now means sticking my head in the bathroom sink, toweling it dry with a washcloth,

and rubbing a handful of goo over the remains. Bed Head R Us.

And for some reason, Bike Boy thinks it's hot.

He grinned. I reddened. Why does the man always look like he knows what I'm thinking?

"No trouble," I repeated.

"You're sure about that," he said, fingering his radio. At my nod, he keyed a button and reported in to dispatch. His china blue eyes bored into me. "That changes, you call me."

I gave him a mock salute and turned away before he took off. Those tight shorts reveal things I really didn't want to see.

• • •

SANDRA and Tory—both true spice artists—and I worked most of the day creating the new blends. I had one advantage: Not knowing what didn't work made me open to almost any combination.

And after years in law firm admin, I am an organizer par excellence.

We tossed out ideas, using the framework we'd laid earlier, and Tory fetched the jars of herbs and spices. Before I bought the shop—when I was a curious customer who slowly graduated from sipping tea to buying premixed combos, then on to preparing my own—I'd walk around the place, astonished by its beauty. By the bounty of jewel-like colors, intriguing shapes and textures, alluring smells. The vibrance of it all still stuns me.

The variety intimidates some shoppers. They buy cinnamon in the grocery store, where only one jar says "cinnamon." That way, they don't have to choose between ground, chunks, and sticks, from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Vietnam, or a blend—particularly nice if I do say so myself.

"That's two parts to one and one, plus one-quarter part Aleppo pepper. Are you getting this, boss?" Sandra nudged me with an elbow, and I broke off my reverie and wrote down the proportions. She slid the mixing bowl across to Tory and me, and we each dipped out a sample.

I closed my eyes, the better to taste with, and sniffed. "It needs to be—darker, if that makes sense. To balance the hint of sweetness." Turns out herb and spice tasting is a lot like wine tasting, with some of the same vocabulary. Although I've never heard anyone refer to cumin's "legs."

"She's right," Tory said. "Try the other Aleppo, the smokier one."

We agreed on the pungent and savory blends before turning to names. We planned to continue the pattern that Jane, the prior owner, had begun, using historic names and geographic features of western Washington and a subtitle describing the flavors. Not exactly inspired, but I hadn't hit on anything better. Last spring, we'd highlighted the bays of Puget Sound: Elliot, Skagit, Shilshole, and Anacortes. A lot of local features bear handles derived from the languages of coastal tribes. The words trip up newcomers, but before long, they rattle off Duwamish, Nooksack, Snoqualmie, and Skookumchuk like natives.

Plus the tongue twisters amuse tourists, and I'm all for that.

Job done, we took a quick break. I left the nook—a raised corner of the shop, set off by pony walls to let us keep an eye on things—just as a regular customer came in. Once a paralegal at my old law firm, Jennifer

now works at a mystery bookshop.

She thrust her list at me and waited, a sly look on her face.

“Sumac. Pomegranate molasses. Cumin, allspice, cinnamon, coriander, rose petals.” I raised one eyebrow, pretending to be stumped. “Marjoram and oregano, and three kinds of pepper. Hmm. It’s got to be Middle Eastern.” The sumac gave it away. A bright, lemony flavor and a rich, dark red, it’s essential to Fattoush, or Levantine Bread Salad. And the other ingredients make a classic Kamunah, or cumin blend. With a few variations, it could be found in Baghdad, Beirut, Tel Aviv, or Istanbul. Or so I understood—I had not yet taken my own Grand Spice Tour.

“Yes. And the cinnamon, caraway, and anise are for a Lebanese pudding made with rice flour.”

God bless gourmet clubs. I weighed and measured, working my way down Jen’s list, while she chatted about last month’s French feast. Meanwhile, Sandra got back to work, but where had Tory gone?

I frowned as I labeled the white pepper. The front door flew open and Tory barged in, Zak two steps behind. She looked furious; he looked flustered.

Uh-oh. Workplace spat—or romance gone wrong? Had I missed the signs? Wordlessly, Tory returned to the mixing nook. I packed Jen’s purchases in her canvas bag, and she headed out. A pair of women came in, and Zak tended to them.

The door opened again. “Hey, Yvonne. What’s up? The girls watching your stall?”

She nodded. “I just, uh, need a pick-me-up.” She gestured to the tea cart, then crossed the shop and poured a cup.

“Yvonne,” Reed said. “Go see my dad for that bad leg. Acupuncture’s great for pain.”

“Voodoo,” she said.

Zak twisted the lid off a jar of my favorite Hungarian paprika and the sharp scent filled the air. Yvonne sneezed.

“Gesundheit.” “Bless you.” The automatic responses echoed around the room, and she left as quickly as she’d come, still limping and sneezing.

Back at the worktable, I puzzled over how to approach Tory about Zak. Ordinarily, I’d just pull an employee aside, report my observation, and ask if she needed help working out a problem. But you’ve got to tread carefully when the relationship you’re probing might be more than professional. Tory and I got along well, but without the friendly jibing Sandra and I shared or the almost motherly feeling I had for Reed. She focused her attention on mixing, blending, smelling, and tasting, giving me no opportunity to speak.

I transcribed our tasting notes. Had Tory’s visible distress this morning stemmed from concern for Zak’s safety? But while the spat between Sam and Doc had gotten loud, it never presented any real danger—not to me, and certainly not to Zak.

“Any idea what’s up with her?” I said to Sandra when Tory stepped away to fetch another jar of sage.

She shook her head. “That girl is as private as a Swiss bank account. She’s worked here two years, and I read her about as well as ancient Cyrillic.”

“Me, too. She pours her passion into her art. But I’ve never seen a painting. You?” Her expression said no. “I wonder if Zak is breaking through her reserve.”

Sandra sealed the last of the plastic bags that held today’s samples. We’d try them all again tomorrow before making final decisions—it takes a blend anywhere from six to twenty-four hours for the flavors to round off. “Maybe. Though he loves to flirt with the orchard girls and sweet-talks every female customer.”

“That’s our Zak.”

But something had shaken my least flappable employee.

I just hoped it was none of my business.

Two

Average number of rainy days in Seattle: 155 days a year. Average number of sunny days: 58. Everything else: shades of gray.

I snicked the Spice Shop’s worn brass lock shut, turned, and raised my face to the last glorious rays. People in other parts of the country think it rains every day in Seattle.

Let ’em.

The Market is tucked smack into one of Seattle’s hills, with Western Ave on—go figure—the west side. First Ave lies uphill to the east, with Pike Place, a curious L-shaped street, and Post Alley sandwiched between. From Western to First is a steep vertical rise. Happily, my loft is on Western and my shop is in the middle, on Pike Place. So I rarely have to trek the whole thing at once.

Right now, I made my way up Stewart to First, a good climb, carrying a special order for a restaurant customer and test bags of today’s blends.

Thinking of Alex Howard, proprietor and chef of the First Avenue Café, brought a smile. Proverbially tall, dark, and handsome. Not to mention successful, intense, and almost flamboyant. A media darling. We’d been out a few promising times.

No, I didn’t mind delivery duty one bit.

At the corner, a woman stepped into view and started across the street. Tory. Two or three feet behind her came a man in an olive green raincoat. He appeared to be talking to her, reaching out his hands.

It was Doc. She shook him off, glancing over her shoulder, and kept walking.

You don’t beg with both hands. You plead with both hands.

What did he want from her?

I hurried up the hill. She reached the corner just as a Metro bus screeched to a halt, and was gone before I could catch her.

Doc stood, hat pulled low, staring as the bus zoomed away.

“What do you want with T—with her?” I stopped myself from blurting out her name. Over the years, I’d had to intervene several times when downtown denizens hassled my young female employees. Bad enough that he knew where she worked and what bus she rode.

Doc did not reply.

“Leave her alone,” I said. “If you’ve got a problem with Sam, or with the arrangement about the corners, you talk to me, not my staff.”

He ducked his head till it almost disappeared between his shoulder blades. Without a word, he trudged down the hill.

I was breathless, not from exercise but from anger and protectiveness. From not knowing whether Doc posed a threat to Tory—or to any of us. He didn’t look like much, but that was no guarantee.

When Doc reached Pike Place, he headed back toward the heart of the Market, to my surprise. Most of the street men—homeless or not—hang out at Victor Steinbrueck Park, a grassy lawn on the Market’s north edge punctuated by a pair of fifty-foot cedar totem poles. The park is named for the visionary architect who saved the Market from destruction by progress. But now that I thought about it, Doc didn’t seem the type to join that crowd—he was more of a loner. Plus, Sam and Arf usually spend the sunset hours there.

I shook off my apprehension. No point worrying without facts.

Several nights a week, Alex Howard presides over the kitchen at his flagship restaurant, the First Avenue Café. He owns the whole building, keeping his corporate offices on the second floor and his apartment on the penthouse level. We met when he grew frustrated with an inconsistent supply of Grenadian nutmeg for his jerk chicken and asked me for help. His charms were undeniable, but I resisted. After thirteen years of marriage to Tag, I’d seen the light: Charm is overrated.

But Alex had kept calling, and now I stood at the Cafe’s side door, delivery bag in hand and hope in my heart.

A prep cook answered my knock. “Hey, Pepper.” He took the bag and yelled, “Alex!”

I’d arrived in that brief twilight between prep and service. I peered into the dining room, fully set but unoccupied—except for the hostess, passing slowly between the tables, adjusting a chair, realigning an errant napkin. Each wooden surface—tables, chairs, floor—gleamed.

Even a glimpse of its casual elegance made me feel underdressed. I’d taken off my apron but still wore my retail uniform: black yoga pants, black T-shirt with the shop logo, black T-strap climbing shoes perfect for Seattle’s hills and the Market’s wobbly streets.

The kitchen’s stainless steel pots and surfaces shone. The mise-en-place was all in place—mounds of chopped shallots, parsley, and other ingredients exactly where each cook needed them. The scene hummed with invisible energy, something like how I imagined a high-wire act would be. Or a high-voltage electrical wire. I’ve never worked in a restaurant kitchen, and frankly, the idea terrifies me. The precision, the juggling, the unpredictability—amid all those knives and all that heat. And all that testosterone. No, thanks. Supply and delivery are close enough for me.

“Pepper Reese!” Alex bounded into view and bussed my cheek. “Family meal’s just wrapping up. Curried clams with chickpeas and spinach over rice. A variation of one of tonight’s specials.”

I followed Alex downstairs to the prep kitchen, humid and fragrant. “A bowl for my friend,” Alex called to a line cook. He pulled out two wooden folding chairs and reached for a basket of grilled naan.

I dug spice samples out of my jute carryall. “We’d love your impressions of the flavor balance, recipes, anything you want to suggest.”

“We’ll try them out and I’ll give you a call.”

A woman in white slid a bowl in front of me and I inhaled the sweet-sharp fragrance of a perfectly balanced curry. Remembering what Reed had said this morning about the geography of spice, I closed my eyes and conjured up the map. Hot, saucy. Southern India, with a Pacific Northwest accent.

Scuttle says some chefs begrudge every bite their crew takes and offer barely edible fare below stairs. Not Alex. “How can I expect a waiter to rave about my Dungeness crab cakes if she’s hungry?” he’d told me. “If she’s never eaten them, or she’s ticked off that I fed her watered-down gruel? My cooks need good hearty fuel if I expect them to work their tails off.”

His chair angled toward me, Alex rested his elbows on his knees and watched me eat. In the restaurant, he was all energy. Dark curls glistened on top of his head, the sides well trimmed but not too short. His brown eyes sparkled. He was like a long, sleek cat, pulsing with energy, ready to pounce into action.

Fascinating, and a little bit unnerving.

He rattled off the night’s specials—they made me envy the paying customers—then stood. “Gotta run. Eat all you want. See you Sunday?”

I nodded, mouth full of curry. Chefs sweat over hot stoves all weekend. No Friday nights at the movies or Saturday dinner dates. I swallowed, and he swooped in for a kiss. A long, warm, luscious kiss.

Oh, I thought as he dashed up the stairs to take the reins of his domain. Is this what fall tastes like?

• • •

OUTSIDE, the last sunlight set the peaks of the Olympic Mountains aglow in orange and pink, trimmed in deep purple. I felt the same glow inside. From the curry or the kiss?

Who cares?

I’ll be the first to admit, downtown living isn’t for everyone. But I adore it. Tag and I had shared a sweet bungalow in Greenwood, a few miles north of downtown. When we split, it had been time for a serious change. I hadn’t known, of course, that a year later, the law firm where I worked would implode in scandal.

And I hadn’t known I’d find solace—and employment—in bay leaves.

Best. Thing. Ever.

No chill in the air, despite the twilight. Sandra might be sweating and Kristen freezing, but as far as I’m concerned, fall takes all the prizes.

A few last office workers shuffled past me to their bus stops or the light rail station. I strolled down Virginia to Pike Place. The totem poles in the park stood as silhouettes in the fading light.

A couple stood at the railing, arms around each other, watching the sun set over the water and the mountains beyond. Nearby, half a dozen teenagers laughed and joked.

“Miz Pepper.”

The sound of my name took me by surprise. Sam, Arf beside him, broke away from a group of men huddled by the fountain and the Tree of Life sculpture.

“How you doin’, Sam? Sorry, boy.” I held out a hand for Arf to sniff. “No treats this time.”

“Oh, he gets plenty. Market folks is good to him. You need a escort? Gettin’ on to dark.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’m fine.” His offer reminded me of the encounter I’d seen earlier. “But I do have a question for you. The man you tussled with this morning, the one they call Doc.”

His brows furrowed but he nodded to me to go on.

“He’s fairly new around here, isn’t he?” Another nod. “Causing any trouble? Other than wanting your spot.”

“Why you be askin’ that, Miz Pepper?”

“I know some of the men”—I gestured toward the group by the totem pole—“take an interest in protecting the women who work in the Market, like you do, and I wondered if you’ve seen Doc helping anyone that way.”

He shook his big head slowly. “No, can’t say as I have. He ain’t here every day. And he don’t stay down evenings. Don’t know where he goes. I ain’t seen him around, at the shelters or getting a meal. You want me to keep an eye on him?”

“Thanks, Sam, but no. It’s nothing.” I rubbed Arf’s head with my cupped hand. “You two have a good night, now.”

Despite refusing Sam’s offer, I had a hunch he’d be watching Doc anyway. Poking around. Some of us are like that.

Three

Fueled by Alaskan gold, Seattle’s population quintupled between 1889, the year of statehood and the Great Fire, and 1907, when the Public Market opened. Takes a lot of food to feed 200,000 people.

The builder who helped me flesh out the loft’s bones called the mezzanine above the bedroom “retreat space, for yoga or meditation.” Apparently some people exercise in their yoga pants. The cold steel steps zing my bare feet in the morning, but it’s the only place in the loft that lets me peek over the Viaduct to the Sound. If I think tall. This stretch of the Viaduct is scheduled to come down soon, with all that traffic moving to a tunnel. They say it’s for earthquake safety, but the changes would revamp the waterfront and give us downtown dwellers killer views.

Plus higher taxes and, no doubt, pressure from developers. My next-door neighbor, a city council member, has his finger on that pulse and keeps us all informed. I settled into a canvas director’s chair, hand-painted by a Market artisan, to meditate on caffeine and morning mist.

The weather was clearly changing. Well, “clearly” wasn’t the right word. Not today. Vapor from the Seattle Steam plant collided with cool air rolling in off the Sound to create a bewitching white cloud.

A fog horn blared and an outbound ferry glided into view. I grabbed the binoculars, but the air was too dense for me to make out the name.

As a child, I’d lie in bed and strain my ears to hear the fog horns, usually falling asleep first. One of my earliest memories is standing at a ferry rail clutching my grandfather’s hand on one of his visits from St. Louis. I might have been destined for my business, but I was not, as most people assume, named for it. Grandpa nicknamed me after the legendary Cardinals third baseman Pepper Martin, known as a ball of fire.

I like to think I’ve mellowed since then.

I sipped my coffee, an Ethiopian Longberry Harrar, and ran through what we needed to accomplish that day at the shop. First, repeat the taste tests and settle on our descriptive subtitles so we could get the info to our brilliant graphic designer. Then choose the recipes. Plus the usual daily business of working with our walk-in traffic and commercial accounts.

Would yesterday’s clash between Sam and Doc be a one-time thing? I hoped so.

But why had Doc been pestering Tory? Slim chance that I could get her to spill any details, even with careful questioning. She’d shift her shoulders slightly, set her chin, and tell me—without a word—that she could take her of herself.

I watched another huge green-and-white ferry chug into view—coming from Bainbridge Island, judging from the angle. They truly are iconic.

Enough in-home sightseeing. Time to get spicy.

• • •

I crossed Western, bypassed the elevator entrance, and trudged up the Market Hillclimb—my version of a cardio workout—to the Main Arcade. Emerged near City Fish—home of the famous flying fish—and exchanged greetings with the fishmongers. (And yes, that’s what they call themselves.) Passed Rachel the brass pig, Market mascot and piggy bank for the Foundation, which funds housing and social services. Waved hello to the couple who run the Oriental Mart in the Corner Market. Bought a strawberry-banana smoothie at the Creamery and a blueberry bran muffin at Three Girls Bakery, one of the oldest Market tenants. Most retail shops were still closed, although I spotted a few merchants bustling around inside.

A half-dozen delivery trucks idled on Pike Place, men with hand trucks unloading cartons and crates. The aromas of fish, fruit, and fresh bread mingled with the sharp but mouthwatering smell of cheese making.

Have I mentioned I love this place?

I crossed Pine, my attention on the mess inside my tote as I dug for my keys. My feet slowed as I neared our door, on autopilot. “Eureka!” My fingers closed around the keys and I reached for the lock.

And froze. A truck clattered by on the cobbles. Up on First, commuter buses offloaded passengers, and out on the Sound, ferries blew their whistles.

While I stared at the man known as Doc, crumpled in my doorway, a paper cup stamped with our logo beside his open hand.

Four

Seattle's Public Market houses a year-round farmers' market, bakeries, meat and fish markets, produce stands, and specialty food stores. Two hundred plus craftspeople rent daystalls, operating alongside more than 200 owner-operated shops and services and nearly one hundred restaurants. The Market is also home to more than 350 residents—all in nine acres.

—Market website

My shout brought people running, people whose phones weren't buried at the bottom of their tote bags or knapsacks, like mine. "Help is on the way," someone assured me as I knelt beside Doc, holding my breath and his wrist, praying for a pulse. A nurse on her way to the Market clinic nudged me aside but, when she got no better result, turned her kind face to me.

"He's gone," she said, her voice almost too soft to hear amid the chit and chat and scrape and squawk around us. In the distance, a siren screamed, but whether bound for here or some other unlucky locale, no telling.

I nodded. Years ago, at the law firm, a client stumbled into my office in search of the restroom, keeled over, and died. The image of his red face matching his red tie, contrasting sharply with his white shirt and hair and his classic navy blue suit, had stuck with me.

In contrast, Doc wore his usual olive green raincoat and scarred brown shoes. His eyes had lost their sheen, the dull, sandy skin around them pooched and pocketed like a Shar Pei's after an all-nighter. And yet, despite the world of difference from that long-ago client, he was just as dead.

The nurse pushed herself up, fingers pressing lightly into my upper arm. I shook her off. It seemed indecent to leave him, to stand back and join the small crowd staring at this odd, dead man. The merchants, farmers, and craftspeople of the Market call themselves a family, and family doesn't make one of their own into a curiosity, even a newcomer.

I'm a newcomer, too.

His hand lay half open, fingers gently curved, as if still holding the cup. The fingers were pale, nails well trimmed and scrubbed clean.

Amazing what goes through the mind at moments like this. My family was never traditionally religious, though both my parents were active in peace and justice causes during my childhood. My mother helped found a soup kitchen in the basement of St. James Cathedral but rarely attended Mass, entering the nave only to hear chamber music. Once I went with her to hear the Tallis Scholars sing and wondered, as I stared up at the gold-and-white-trimmed vaults, how their voices could climb so high and who was up there listening.

My father had chosen to study Zen Buddhism. Whether because of or in spite of his experiences in Vietnam, he never said. If asked, no doubt he'd smile and ask me quietly what I thought. Friends had wafted through the big house on Capitol Hill, day and night, to sit in meditation in the third-floor ballroom. Where Kristen's great-grandparents had held formal dances and her grandmother learned swing and defied convention by inviting a black jazz band to entertain soldiers during the war, we heard rhythmic breathing, mantras being chanted, and the rolling tones of a Tibetan bell. Kristen and I had helped our mothers melt the used candle ends and remold them, adding sandalwood or lavender oil. A mere whiff of Nag Champa Incense takes me back.

Later, when Kristen's mother discovered yoga, we heard the soft gummy sounds of sticky mats being rolled

onto the maple floors, punctuated by groans as stiff joints responded to gentle coaxing from the teachers who came and went.

All my life, the medieval harmonies my mother loves have slipped into my consciousness when I least expect them. When my heart's been ripped open, when the stakes are highest. They swirled around me now as I tried to summon the sacred peace of the Cathedral and the ballroom studio, and wrap it around the man we knew as Doc.

I stayed there until another hand touched me. "Pepper," Tag said. "Let the EMTs take over."

He led me down the sidewalk, out of the way. Just yesterday, Doc and Sam had argued on this spot and Tag's partner carved ruts in the road dust with the fat tires of his mountain bike. Now navy-blue-clad EMTs tumbled out of the red Medic One ambulance that had clambered down Pine and idled noisily beside my shop. I hoped the parking brake held. The crew, two men and a woman, fell into a routine, tasks so well defined that they barely needed to speak to communicate.

"What are you doing here?" I finally thought to ask. "And where's your partner?"

Tag jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and I turned to see Olerud, off the bike, notebook in hand, surrounded by half a dozen Market folks. "You know we work First Watch."

I faced my ex squarely. "But why the police, for an old man's heart attack?"

Eyes hidden by mirrored sunglasses, he shrugged one shoulder. "Control the crowd. Preserve the scene. Do whatever these guys need." He cocked his helmeted head toward the EMTs. One knelt by the body, repacking a box of equipment, while the others unloaded a gurney.

Most helpful customer reviews

37 of 39 people found the following review helpful.

Good Strong Heroine, But Some Flaws

By Mystery Reader

I actually want to give this 3.5 stars. There's a lot to like in this first novel in a new cozy mystery series. However, there are some flaws that while not a deal breaker, would need to be tweaked somewhat if I'm going to continue reading it. The protagonist is Pepper who is just about to celebrate her one year anniversary of own a spice shop located in Seattle's Pike Place Market. A homeless man dies on her store's doorstep and one of her employees is arrested and charged. It's up to Pepper to solve the case, made more difficult by an unhelpful employee and a cheating ex-husband who happens to be the cop who's beat is right where her store is located.

What's to like. Strong, well-defined heroine. Pepper is someone you can root for and like. She's had a major life change with divorcing her cheating husband and she's also lost her job as an HR manager in a law firm which is why she owns the spice store. She's also goes about the investigation in a pretty reasonable way, though she really doesn't figure things out until it practically hits her in the face. However, it's believable in how she does things, because she hasn't just dropped everything. Pepper still works and is concerned about her business, her livelihood.

The strongest thing the author does is she describes Seattle and Pike Place beautifully. It truly makes you want to go there. And the author does a very good job in going over the spice store details. Great job on that.

What's weak, but not ultimately fatal to the book, weak characterizations for about everyone else and way too many characters introduced. I get concerned when the book starts off with a list of characters describing each one and their relation to the heroine. That means you have too many characters in your story if the reader isn't able to keep them straight and it also means likely several, if not a lot of them, will get shortchanged in the characterization department which is what happened. The author introduces a bunch of characters that you wonder what was the purpose and even those that appear frequently, have nothing about them that makes them stand out. For example, there are two employees of Pepper, Sandra and Kristen, one a childhood friend, the other a long-time employee of the spice shop. They're basically interchangeable with each other.

When the author does give some detail and shading to a character, it comes off wrongly, aside from Pepper and one other character named Fabiola who is unrelated to the mystery aspect of the story. I'm thinking of Pepper's ex-husband, Tag. He's a cheating, bossy character and to me, came off creepy in how he watches and is always around Pepper, yet by the end of the book, the author wants us to think he's not such a bad guy. It just felt off, the switch in tone about a man who's been set up to be not trusted. Then there are several homeless characters in the book, that frankly, come off like stereotypes. The big, hulking, but gentle, black homeless man with the Southern accent, who has mental problems and addresses the heroine as "Miz Pepper". That struck a discordant note for me.

The last major issue I have with the book, is the accused that Pepper is trying to clear. Her name is Tory and it's established that she's a private, aloof person, but nice. She refuses for quite a while to tell Pepper what links her with the murder victim and why the police believe that's a motive for her. She's so aloof, you don't feel any sympathy for her at all, but you don't hate her. You just don't know her and you wonder why Pepper is going through all this effort, especially when Tory won't even help herself. Then you find out the "motive" and you think, really? That's it? THAT is all the criminal case hinges on? Any decent lawyer would've had her out pronto because the police case is that weak and the motive is pretty flimsy.

I don't think these are killers for this series. They're just adjustments that need to be made and Pepper is definitely a strong character to carry a series. I will give the second book a try, but I hope at least the writing for the supporting characters improve.

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

ASSAULT AND PEPPER was a tasty read and has whet my appetite for more.

By Lisa Ks Book Reviews

First in the Spice Shop Mystery series, ASSAULT AND PEPPER was a tasty read and has whet my appetite for more.

With a large percentage of cozies being set in fictional towns, I wasn't sure how I would feel about this book being set in Seattle at a famous location like The Pike Place Public Market. Honestly, at first it was a little strange for me, but I was soon lost in the story, and Ms. Budewitz's wonderful writing and no longer gave it a thought.

Her protagonist in ASSAULT AND PEPPER, Pepper Reece was really enjoyable and I liked getting to know her. The same goes for the other characters in the book. Pepper's staff at the Seattle Spice Shop are as wide ranging in styles and personalities, as the spices they carry are in tastes and smells. The same is to be said of the rest of the cast of characters.

The mystery element of this story, who killed the panhandler, Doc, and why they killed him, along with the fact that one of the staff of Pepper's store, Tory, is a suspect, and Tory seems to know why she is, but isn't

doing much to help herself, kept me guessing as I turned page after page, only to be very surprised when the truth came out.

A fun bonus: Every chapter starts off with a fact or a quote.

A delicious bonus: Lots of yummy recipes!

Give ASSAULT AND PEPPER a try and see if it doesn't spice up your life like it did mine!

13 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

So So.

By Amazon Customer

It started slow and never got better. There are too many characters and none are well fleshed out or fully formed. I didn't care about the protagonist or the wrongfully accused young woman. There are whole chapters that pretty much just describe food and pages upon pages of self doubt. It is rare that I write a review where there is nothing good I can say about the book but there is nothing good about this book. Boring pretty much sums it up.

[See all 108 customer reviews...](#)

ASSAULT AND PEPPER (A SPICE SHOP MYSTERY) BY LESLIE BUDEWITZ PDF

After recognizing this really easy way to check out as well as get this **Assault And Pepper (A Spice Shop Mystery) By Leslie Budewitz**, why don't you tell to others about in this manner? You could tell others to visit this website and go with searching them preferred publications Assault And Pepper (A Spice Shop Mystery) By Leslie Budewitz As understood, below are great deals of lists that supply lots of kinds of books to accumulate. Simply prepare couple of time and also internet connections to get guides. You could truly delight in the life by reviewing Assault And Pepper (A Spice Shop Mystery) By Leslie Budewitz in an extremely basic fashion.

Review

Praise for Leslie Budewitz and her mysteries

"Seldom does a new author hit all the right notes in a first book, but Leslie Budewitz does. Convincing characters, a believable plot, the right dash of romance, and a deft use of words all come together to create a seamless and satisfying read."--Sheila Connolly, "New York Times "bestselling author of "Scandal in Skibbereen"

"A dizzying culinary delight with a twisty-turny plot! I'm totally enamored of Leslie Budewitz's huckleberry chocolates, Shasta daisies, and Cowboy Roast coffee."--Laura Childs, " New York Times" bestselling author of "Gilt Trip "

"An intriguing sleuth who loves gourmet food, family, and her hometown, plus recipes to die for distinguish a delectable mystery."--Carolyn Hart, " New York Times" bestselling author of "Death at the Door"

"Clever, charming, and completely yummy. Leslie Budewitz cooks up a delectable mystery!"--Hank Phillippi Ryan, Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity award-winning author of "The Wrong Girl"

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"Engrossing and satisfying."--"Fresh Fiction"

"A potpourri of spices, a melange of murder--Pepper and her crew serve up a tantalizing mystery and a fragrant treat for the senses."--Connie Archer, national bestselling author of the Soup Lover's Mysteries

"There's a savvy new amateur sleuth in town, and her name is Pepper Reece. "Assault and Pepper" is a smart blend of zesty characters, piquant spices, and scrumptious food. Set against the intriguing Seattle backdrop, this well-plotted whodunit is the perfect recipe for a great read."--Daryl Wood Gerber, national bestselling author of the Cookbook Nook Mysteries

"Leslie Budewitz writes her new Seattle Spice Shop Mystery, "Assault and Pepper," with a dash of humor and a half-turn of charm that will leave readers smiling."--J.J. Cook, national bestselling author of "Death on Eat Street"

"An iconic Seattle setting, a smart and capable heroine, and a spicy investigation... what mystery reader could want more? Budewitz combines it all with effortless finesse."--Victoria Hamilton, national bestselling author of the Vintage Kitchen Mysteries

"Parsley, sage, rosemary and...murder. "Assault and Pepper," the scintillating first book in Leslie Budewitz's new Spice Shop Mystery series will add zing to your reading."--Barbara Ross, author of the Maine Clambake Mysteries

About the Author

National bestselling author Leslie Budewitz writes the Spice Shop Mysteries ("Assault and Pepper") and the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries ("Crime Rib"; "Death Al Dente"). She fell in love with Seattle's Pike Place Market as a college student, and still misses prowling its streets and alleys, sniffing out tasty treats and sensory delights. Leslie won the 2013 Agatha Award for Best First Novel for "Death al Dente," first in the Food Lovers' Village Mysteries, and won the 2011 Agatha Award for Best Nonfiction for "Books, Crooks & Counselors: How to Write Accurately About Criminal Law and Courtroom Procedure." She loves to cook, eat, hike, travel, garden, and paint--not necessarily in that order. She lives in northwest Montana with her husband, Don Beans, a doctor of natural medicine, and their Burmese cat, Ruff, an avid bird-watcher.

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Acknowledgments and Historical Note

Inventory—Aka the Cast

Pepper Reece—owner

Sandra Piniella—assistant manager and mix master

Tory Finch—salesclerk and artist

Zak Davis—salesclerk and musician

Reed Locke—part-time salesclerk and college student

Kristen Gardiner—part-time salesclerk, Pepper's oldest friend

Pepper

Kristen

Laurel Halloran—restaurant owner, caterer, houseboat dweller

Seetha Sharma—the newest member

Gabe Halloran—Laurel’s teenage son and honorary member

Angie and Sylvie Martinez—aka the orchard girls

Yvonne Winchell—grows the best flowers in the Market

Jane Rasmussen—founder and former owner of Seattle Spice

Doc aka Damien Finch—the mysterious newcomer

Sam and Arf—a man and his dog

Jim and Hot Dog—Sam’s friends

Marianne Finch—Damien’s wife

Ken Griffey—Damien’s partner

Alex Howard—restaurateur Pepper may or may not be dating

Fabiola the Fabulous—graphic designer

Keyra Jackson—Tory’s sculptor friend and neighbor

Jen the Bookseller and Callie the Librarian—Pepper’s former law firm employees

Vinny—the wine merchant

Officer Tag Buhner—on the bike beat, Pepper’s former husband

Detective Cheryl Spencer—homicide

Detective Michael Tracy—homicide

One

An herb is a fresh or dried leaf. A spice is a dried plant part—a bud (cloves), bark (cinnamon), root (ginger), berry (peppercorns), seeds (fennel), or even stigma (saffron). The same plant may provide both—fresh or dried cilantro leaves are the herb cilantro, while the dried seeds are the spice coriander.

“What does autumn taste like? How does it smell?”

Even as I asked, the questions seemed utterly ridiculous. This was already shaping up to be one of those glorious September days in Seattle that make you think the weather will never change, that the sky will always be a pure cloudless blue, the leaves on the trees a painter’s box of green, the waters of Elliot Bay

calm and sparkling.

I've lived here all my forty-two years, and I still get fooled.

But as the owner, for the last ten months and seventeen days, of the Seattle Spice Shop, it was my job to think ahead. Fall would be here in less than a week, by the calendar. And by my nose. I really could sense the difference right about this time of year. The annual run on pickling spices for the last cukes would soon give way to cider mulling mixes. And before long, our customers would be asking for poultry seasoning and scouting for Christmas gifts.

"The taste," I repeated to my staff, gathered around the butcher block worktable in our mixing nook, "and smell of fall."

Sandra fanned herself with a catalog from the kitchen shop up the hill and peered over the top of her reading glasses—today's were leopard print. "Fall, shmall. It's seventy-six degrees out." Spot-on to most Seattleites, but my assistant manager is one of those native Northwesterners who thrive in a narrow temperature range. Anything above seventy-two and she sweats; below forty-five, she shivers. And complains, cheerfully. A short, well-rounded woman of sixty with smooth olive skin, pixie-cut dark hair, and lively chocolate brown eyes, she came with the place, and I say daily prayers of gratitude that she stayed.

"Apples," Zak said. "Applesauce, apple butter, spiced apple cake. Plums in brandy. Plum pudding. Fruitcake." Zak had been my first hire after I bought the shop. Six-two and almost thirty, with muscular shoulders, he'd seemed an unlikely candidate for employment in a retail spice shop in Seattle's venerable Pike Place Market. But I'd been desperate and he'd been earnest. And he pleaded for a weekday job so he could rock the nights and weekends away with his band.

Plus he's my ex-husband Tag's best friend's nephew, and I have to admit, Tag Buhner isn't always wrong about people.

"You have fruit on the brain," Sandra said. "Been flirting with the orchard girls again?"

Zak blushed, a sweet look at odds with his shaved head, fierce dark brows, and black goatee.

The orchard girls, two sisters with shiny black hair, full red lips, and curves in all the right places, had caught the eye of every straight man under thirty-five in the Market since they took over the family fruit stand this past summer. Their looks and the location of their stall—they usually draw a prime spot across from us on Pike Place, the Market's long, cobbled main street—guarantee plenty of attention.

That their fruit is the freshest and their jams the tastiest doesn't hurt.

"Our tea is the essential fragrance of the Market year-round," I said, pointing my pen at the ornate brass electric teapot that resembles a Russian samovar. We'd just resumed serving the hot black Assam tea spiced with cardamom, allspice, and orange, although the iced tea dispenser would stay out a few more days.

"That, and fresh fish." Zak had recovered from his embarrassment. The fish merchants near the Market's main entrance put on a comedy routine to rival the Marx Brothers', tossing whole coho salmon like softballs, teasing customers, and welcoming both locals and wide-eyed tourists to the heart and stomach of Seattle.

Zak filled his mug, emblazoned with a Z, and snatched a hazelnut cookie from the box. It wouldn't be a staff meeting without treats from the French bakery.

"We need three or four new blends," I said. "For our home cooks. Zak's zeroed in on the harvest aspect of

fall. But I'd like something to rub on those fish, or a slow-cooked chuck roast. To warm up the salty mist and stave off the chills, until we get into the familiar tastes of Christmas.”

My staff turned thoughtful, summoning their own ideas of fall. They say the sense of smell is the most intimately linked of all our senses to memory, and I believe it. One whiff of a familiar scent, even one we haven't encountered in years, can transport us to a time and place long forgotten, even before we consciously recall the memory.

Our task was to find common elements and translate them into balanced blends of herbs and spices to evoke a positive sensory experience for our customers.

The Wednesday morning staff meeting is one of the few times we're all in the shop together. Such a satisfying sight.

Actually, we were one person short. I checked the clock—a large, copper-rimmed metal ticker—next to the front door. As if on cue, the door opened and a blond cloud swept in.

“Right on time for the eight-seventeen meeting,” I said with a grin. Kristen Gardiner and I have been best friends since childhood, when our families shared a creaky, turn-of-the-century house on Capitol Hill. She still lives in the house, a classic Seattle Box built by an ancestor, although now it glows with an attic-to-cellar makeover that would color any decorator in the Emerald City green. She helps out in the shop a few mornings a week, and she is never, ever on time.

“I'm so sorry, Pepper. One of the girls forgot her lunch and I had to—”

I held up a hand. “You're fine. We're brainstorming fall blends.”

“Something pungent and flavorful.” Reed spoke without glancing up from his task of running a rubber stamp of the shop name over small white paper cups. Shoppers who drop in for a sample of tea often end up buying herbs, spices, or other goodies they'd forgotten they needed. Or that they didn't need, but the fragrance and possibilities set their taste buds and imaginations awl.

“It's so neat how you can trace geography and history through spices,” he continued. “When I open a jar of chili pepper cocoa, I'm in the world of the Aztecs. Ask me for a curry, and I'm halfway to India.” Maybe five-six, an inch shorter than me, slight, with shaggy black hair and hooded eyes, Reed Locke is a history major at Seattle University. Wednesdays, he comes in early before dashing off to classes. His father runs an acupuncture clinic nearby, so he practically grew up in the Market.

We all turned to the world map on the wall, where colored pins mark the origin of every spice we carry. Many spices have migrated and become integral to cuisines and economies far from their genesis. The map also hides an ugly water stain on the plaster that paint didn't cover. Spice has added flavor to the Market since shortly after its founding in 1907, when our main competitor opened a shop, still prospering. In the fervor surrounding the campaign to save the Market from redevelopment in the early 1970s, hippie chick Jane Rasmussen threw her lot in with capitalist competition and started this shop. Why she thought the Market could support two separate spice merchants, I don't know—but she'd been right, running this one for forty years until she sold it to me and retired to an island in Puget Sound. Our building once housed a nursery, and in spring, we honor that heritage by carrying seed packets and potted herbs.

I like to think of myself as the caretaker of one piece in the Market puzzle.

“A curry is a good idea,” I said. “Can we add a pinch of a chili or some other pepper, for our pungent mix?”

Put a chutney on the menu, and you've got Zak's harvest touch, with an international accent." Heads bobbed. "Okay, now we need a savory combo, and a comfort blend. Everyone's sense of comfort varies, but we're after something that evokes that feeling of coming home after a walk in the rain, or spending a Sunday afternoon reading by the fire."

"If we're spicing to feel warm, we'll be using the same stuff until April," Kristen said. She wrapped a black-and-white Indian madras scarf around her neck, tucking the ends into her apron, black with the shop name in white. "It's freezing out there."

Sandra rolled her eyes.

"We'll trot out our pie spice mix, of course. It's perfect for coffee, or oatmeal—"

"Or pie," Zak said.

"For the comfort blend," Tory said, "you want something earthy. Familiar, but not boring. A mix that makes you want to cook just so you can taste it."

Tory Finch had also come with the shop. Twenty-eight, with a shapely figure, even in her black shop apron, and light brown hair in a chin-length blunt cut. She met my gaze, her golden brown eyes a touch less guarded than usual. Painter by night, spice girl by day, there was little question which she regarded as her real work. But when she spoke at our meetings—which wasn't often—everyone listened.

Every business needs at least one employee like that.

I nodded, with a glance at Sandra, my master mixologist. "Something for dips and sauces or to give a little oomph to chicken. Add depth to sautéed spinach or roasted squash." Labels inside the metal tins would include a recipe or two, with more on our website.

A tiny smile tugged at Tory's mouth, shiny with her usual pale pink lip gloss, and she reached for the second stamp to help Reed with the cups.

"And for the savory," I began, breaking off at the sound of angry voices outside. Zak strode to the door, and I dashed after him, confirming with a quick pat that my phone was in my apron pocket.

"I told you, again and again. This is my corner. When you gonna listen, old man?" Sam, a Market regular, jabbed his forefinger and pointed at the sidewalk where Pine Street meets Pike Place, the Market's cobbled main thoroughfare. Though he stood on the street, Sam towered above the man pacing on the sidewalk. Sam's wiry black hair, flecked with gray, peeked out from under a black wool beret that matched his long, flowing coat, and his beard stubble looked like coffee grounds against his dark skin. Beside him, Arf the dog, a tall gray-and-brown terrier mix, stood at heel, his emerald green nylon leash slack. Dogs aren't officially allowed in the Market, but you'd never know it.

"Hey, guys." Zak extended his hands like stop signs.

"Everybody cool it," I said, stepping in front of him and sizing up the situation. No fists were being thrown; no one appeared injured. "What's the problem?"

"He's got my corner." Sam stood as tall as Zak. The other man barely topped my five-seven.

"These are public streets," I said. "Anyone can be anywhere." Technically true, but that doesn't keep the regulars from staking their claims. Aggressive begging is illegal, as is blocking foot or vehicle traffic. But I'd

rarely seen a problem—and never from Sam. Trouble usually comes from outside.

Sam's chin jutted out. He lowered his head apologetically, gnarled fingers tightening the dog's leash. I glanced at the other man, who'd shown up a few weeks ago and often stood on this corner or across the street. Sam, who had to be sixty, called him "old man," but it was hard to judge his age, with the khaki rain hat he wore every day tugged low over his forehead and his thin shoulders hunched inside his olive green raincoat. It hadn't rained in weeks.

"You're Doc, right?"

He punched his hands deeper into the coat's big pockets and nodded. Though I don't have children—by the time Tag felt "ready," the batteries on my biological clock had run down—Doc's response made me feel like I was separating squabbling toddlers.

"Sam, since Doc's the newcomer, why don't we show him a little Market hospitality and let him pick which corner he'd like today. You take that one." I pointed across Pine. "Tomorrow, you switch."

A long silence before Sam said, "Yes, Miz Pepper," a touch of the South in his deep, shy voice.

"That okay with you, Doc?" He raised his head briefly, then lowered his golden brown eyes, terror-stricken. He didn't speak.

"If either of you misses a day, just keep alternating. And if there's a problem, talk to me."

"I've called the police," a woman's breathless voice said.

Pooh. Yvonne Winchell sold the freshest flowers in the daystalls—customers had come in all week carrying bouquets of her colorful dahlias, sunflowers, and others I couldn't identify—but I'd never met such a worrywart. The Market is safe and clean; still, put thousands of diverse people in a small space seven days a week and things do happen. This was minor.

Behind her, one of the orchard girls watched us.

"No need," I said. "Everything's under control." Yvonne stared intently, then ducked back under the shed roof that covered the long rows of daystalls, the long wooden tables with built-in benches rented by farmers and craftspeople.

"C'mon, Arf," Sam said.

Both man and dog were clean, if a bit scruffy, so I suspected they had regular shelter somewhere. I fumbled in my pocket for a liver chew, keeping it hidden in my hand. Arf perked up, his long gray and caramel ears flopping back as his nose rose. "May I?"

"Yes'm. Whachew say, dog?" he said as Arf licked my hand. Man and dog headed for the opposite corner, and I turned back to Doc.

He wasn't there. After all that, where had he gone? I scanned the sidewalk, in case he'd thought I'd sent him across Pine to the corner by the Triangle Building. But there was no sign of him.

Had he ducked into the Spice Shop for a spot of tea? We weren't open yet, but we did sometimes hand out samples of hot tea to help keep the street folk warm.

I glanced inside. Not there, either.

Tory stood in the doorway of our salmon pink stucco building, one hand braced on the forest green frame, the other covering her mouth. Anxiety shaded her usually placid face.

A metallic whizzing followed by the scrape of rubber on a hard surface commandeered my attention, and I spun toward the sounds.

“Damsel in distress?” said a familiar baritone.

Double pooh. Why couldn’t this have been Tag’s day off?

“We took care of it, Officers,” Zak said from behind me. He knew how I felt about Tag’s tendency to jump right on any dispatch to the Market and wheel his trusty Seattle Police Department bicycle into my neighborhood. I recognized the irony—Zak’s protectiveness mirrored Tag’s. Not that there was anything romantic between me and my employee. He’s just that kind of guy.

So, alas, is Tag, and he hadn’t quite given up on romance between us. Despite his affair with a meter reader. (I couldn’t bring myself to say “parking enforcement officer.”) Despite our divorce.

“A couple of street guys got into a shouting match,” I said. “They both wanted to camp on the same corner, but I got ’em to agree on taking turns. No trouble. Sorry to take you out of your way.”

“Your shop’s never out of my way, Pepper.” Tag balanced his bike, one long, lean leg stretched to the pavement, the other foot on the pedal, ready to take off at a moment’s notice. Behind him, his partner, Jay Olerud, wove figure eights, eyes scanning the crowd. How they manage to stay upright on the cobbles and curbs, swerve in and out of traffic, and speed up hills and down wearing guns, radios, and other gear, all the while sniffing out trouble, I can never understand.

There’s a lot I don’t understand about Tag. Including why he still seems so keen on me. I ran a hand through my spikey dark hair. When my job as a law firm HR manager fell victim to the senior partners’ shenanigans, leaving me unemployed only a year after my divorce, I cut my ties to the corporate world and cut my hair. My morning routine now means sticking my head in the bathroom sink, toweling it dry with a washcloth, and rubbing a handful of goo over the remains. Bed Head R Us.

And for some reason, Bike Boy thinks it’s hot.

He grinned. I reddened. Why does the man always look like he knows what I’m thinking?

“No trouble,” I repeated.

“You’re sure about that,” he said, fingering his radio. At my nod, he keyed a button and reported in to dispatch. His china blue eyes bored into me. “That changes, you call me.”

I gave him a mock salute and turned away before he took off. Those tight shorts reveal things I really didn’t want to see.

• • •

SANDRA and Tory—both true spice artists—and I worked most of the day creating the new blends. I had one advantage: Not knowing what didn’t work made me open to almost any combination.

And after years in law firm admin, I am an organizer par excellence.

We tossed out ideas, using the framework we'd laid earlier, and Tory fetched the jars of herbs and spices. Before I bought the shop—when I was a curious customer who slowly graduated from sipping tea to buying premixed combos, then on to preparing my own—I'd walk around the place, astonished by its beauty. By the bounty of jewel-like colors, intriguing shapes and textures, alluring smells. The vibrance of it all still stuns me.

The variety intimidates some shoppers. They buy cinnamon in the grocery store, where only one jar says "cinnamon." That way, they don't have to choose between ground, chunks, and sticks, from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Vietnam, or a blend—particularly nice if I do say so myself.

"That's two parts to one and one, plus one-quarter part Aleppo pepper. Are you getting this, boss?" Sandra nudged me with an elbow, and I broke off my reverie and wrote down the proportions. She slid the mixing bowl across to Tory and me, and we each dipped out a sample.

I closed my eyes, the better to taste with, and sniffed. "It needs to be—darker, if that makes sense. To balance the hint of sweetness." Turns out herb and spice tasting is a lot like wine tasting, with some of the same vocabulary. Although I've never heard anyone refer to cumin's "legs."

"She's right," Tory said. "Try the other Aleppo, the smokier one."

We agreed on the pungent and savory blends before turning to names. We planned to continue the pattern that Jane, the prior owner, had begun, using historic names and geographic features of western Washington and a subtitle describing the flavors. Not exactly inspired, but I hadn't hit on anything better. Last spring, we'd highlighted the bays of Puget Sound: Elliot, Skagit, Shilshole, and Anacortes. A lot of local features bear handles derived from the languages of coastal tribes. The words trip up newcomers, but before long, they rattle off Duwamish, Nooksack, Snoqualmie, and Skookumchuk like natives.

Plus the tongue twisters amuse tourists, and I'm all for that.

Job done, we took a quick break. I left the nook—a raised corner of the shop, set off by pony walls to let us keep an eye on things—just as a regular customer came in. Once a paralegal at my old law firm, Jennifer now works at a mystery bookshop.

She thrust her list at me and waited, a sly look on her face.

"Sumac. Pomegranate molasses. Cumin, allspice, cinnamon, coriander, rose petals." I raised one eyebrow, pretending to be stumped. "Marjoram and oregano, and three kinds of pepper. Hmm. It's got to be Middle Eastern." The sumac gave it away. A bright, lemony flavor and a rich, dark red, it's essential to Fattoush, or Levantine Bread Salad. And the other ingredients make a classic Kamunah, or cumin blend. With a few variations, it could be found in Baghdad, Beirut, Tel Aviv, or Istanbul. Or so I understood—I had not yet taken my own Grand Spice Tour.

"Yes. And the cinnamon, caraway, and anise are for a Lebanese pudding made with rice flour."

God bless gourmet clubs. I weighed and measured, working my way down Jen's list, while she chatted about last month's French feast. Meanwhile, Sandra got back to work, but where had Tory gone?

I frowned as I labeled the white pepper. The front door flew open and Tory barged in, Zak two steps behind. She looked furious; he looked flustered.

Uh-oh. Workplace spat—or romance gone wrong? Had I missed the signs? Wordlessly, Tory returned to the mixing nook. I packed Jen’s purchases in her canvas bag, and she headed out. A pair of women came in, and Zak tended to them.

The door opened again. “Hey, Yvonne. What’s up? The girls watching your stall?”

She nodded. “I just, uh, need a pick-me-up.” She gestured to the tea cart, then crossed the shop and poured a cup.

“Yvonne,” Reed said. “Go see my dad for that bad leg. Acupuncture’s great for pain.”

“Voodoo,” she said.

Zak twisted the lid off a jar of my favorite Hungarian paprika and the sharp scent filled the air. Yvonne sneezed.

“Gesundheit.” “Bless you.” The automatic responses echoed around the room, and she left as quickly as she’d come, still limping and sneezing.

Back at the worktable, I puzzled over how to approach Tory about Zak. Ordinarily, I’d just pull an employee aside, report my observation, and ask if she needed help working out a problem. But you’ve got to tread carefully when the relationship you’re probing might be more than professional. Tory and I got along well, but without the friendly jibing Sandra and I shared or the almost motherly feeling I had for Reed. She focused her attention on mixing, blending, smelling, and tasting, giving me no opportunity to speak.

I transcribed our tasting notes. Had Tory’s visible distress this morning stemmed from concern for Zak’s safety? But while the spat between Sam and Doc had gotten loud, it never presented any real danger—not to me, and certainly not to Zak.

“Any idea what’s up with her?” I said to Sandra when Tory stepped away to fetch another jar of sage.

She shook her head. “That girl is as private as a Swiss bank account. She’s worked here two years, and I read her about as well as ancient Cyrillic.”

“Me, too. She pours her passion into her art. But I’ve never seen a painting. You?” Her expression said no. “I wonder if Zak is breaking through her reserve.”

Sandra sealed the last of the plastic bags that held today’s samples. We’d try them all again tomorrow before making final decisions—it takes a blend anywhere from six to twenty-four hours for the flavors to round off. “Maybe. Though he loves to flirt with the orchard girls and sweet-talks every female customer.”

“That’s our Zak.”

But something had shaken my least flappable employee.

I just hoped it was none of my business.

Two

Average number of rainy days in Seattle: 155 days a year. Average number of sunny days: 58. Everything

else: shades of gray.

I snicked the Spice Shop's worn brass lock shut, turned, and raised my face to the last glorious rays. People in other parts of the country think it rains every day in Seattle.

Let 'em.

The Market is tucked smack into one of Seattle's hills, with Western Ave on—go figure—the west side. First Ave lies uphill to the east, with Pike Place, a curious L-shaped street, and Post Alley sandwiched between. From Western to First is a steep vertical rise. Happily, my loft is on Western and my shop is in the middle, on Pike Place. So I rarely have to trek the whole thing at once.

Right now, I made my way up Stewart to First, a good climb, carrying a special order for a restaurant customer and test bags of today's blends.

Thinking of Alex Howard, proprietor and chef of the First Avenue Café, brought a smile. Proverbially tall, dark, and handsome. Not to mention successful, intense, and almost flamboyant. A media darling. We'd been out a few promising times.

No, I didn't mind delivery duty one bit.

At the corner, a woman stepped into view and started across the street. Tory. Two or three feet behind her came a man in an olive green raincoat. He appeared to be talking to her, reaching out his hands.

It was Doc. She shook him off, glancing over her shoulder, and kept walking.

You don't beg with both hands. You plead with both hands.

What did he want from her?

I hurried up the hill. She reached the corner just as a Metro bus screeched to a halt, and was gone before I could catch her.

Doc stood, hat pulled low, staring as the bus zoomed away.

"What do you want with T—with her?" I stopped myself from blurting out her name. Over the years, I'd had to intervene several times when downtown denizens hassled my young female employees. Bad enough that he knew where she worked and what bus she rode.

Doc did not reply.

"Leave her alone," I said. "If you've got a problem with Sam, or with the arrangement about the corners, you talk to me, not my staff."

He ducked his head till it almost disappeared between his shoulder blades. Without a word, he trudged down the hill.

I was breathless, not from exercise but from anger and protectiveness. From not knowing whether Doc posed a threat to Tory—or to any of us. He didn't look like much, but that was no guarantee.

When Doc reached Pike Place, he headed back toward the heart of the Market, to my surprise. Most of the street men—homeless or not—hang out at Victor Steinbrueck Park, a grassy lawn on the Market's north

edge punctuated by a pair of fifty-foot cedar totem poles. The park is named for the visionary architect who saved the Market from destruction by progress. But now that I thought about it, Doc didn't seem the type to join that crowd—he was more of a loner. Plus, Sam and Arf usually spend the sunset hours there.

I shook off my apprehension. No point worrying without facts.

Several nights a week, Alex Howard presides over the kitchen at his flagship restaurant, the First Avenue Café. He owns the whole building, keeping his corporate offices on the second floor and his apartment on the penthouse level. We met when he grew frustrated with an inconsistent supply of Grenadian nutmeg for his jerk chicken and asked me for help. His charms were undeniable, but I resisted. After thirteen years of marriage to Tag, I'd seen the light: Charm is overrated.

But Alex had kept calling, and now I stood at the Cafe's side door, delivery bag in hand and hope in my heart.

A prep cook answered my knock. "Hey, Pepper." He took the bag and yelled, "Alex!"

I'd arrived in that brief twilight between prep and service. I peered into the dining room, fully set but unoccupied—except for the hostess, passing slowly between the tables, adjusting a chair, realigning an errant napkin. Each wooden surface—tables, chairs, floor—gleamed.

Even a glimpse of its casual elegance made me feel underdressed. I'd taken off my apron but still wore my retail uniform: black yoga pants, black T-shirt with the shop logo, black T-strap climbing shoes perfect for Seattle's hills and the Market's wobbly streets.

The kitchen's stainless steel pots and surfaces shone. The mise-en-place was all in place—mounds of chopped shallots, parsley, and other ingredients exactly where each cook needed them. The scene hummed with invisible energy, something like how I imagined a high-wire act would be. Or a high-voltage electrical wire. I've never worked in a restaurant kitchen, and frankly, the idea terrifies me. The precision, the juggling, the unpredictability—amid all those knives and all that heat. And all that testosterone. No, thanks. Supply and delivery are close enough for me.

"Pepper Reese!" Alex bounded into view and bussed my cheek. "Family meal's just wrapping up. Curried clams with chickpeas and spinach over rice. A variation of one of tonight's specials."

I followed Alex downstairs to the prep kitchen, humid and fragrant. "A bowl for my friend," Alex called to a line cook. He pulled out two wooden folding chairs and reached for a basket of grilled naan.

I dug spice samples out of my jute carryall. "We'd love your impressions of the flavor balance, recipes, anything you want to suggest."

"We'll try them out and I'll give you a call."

A woman in white slid a bowl in front of me and I inhaled the sweet-sharp fragrance of a perfectly balanced curry. Remembering what Reed had said this morning about the geography of spice, I closed my eyes and conjured up the map. Hot, saucy. Southern India, with a Pacific Northwest accent.

Scuttle says some chefs begrudge every bite their crew takes and offer barely edible fare below stairs. Not Alex. "How can I expect a waiter to rave about my Dungeness crab cakes if she's hungry?" he'd told me. "If she's never eaten them, or she's ticked off that I fed her watered-down gruel? My cooks need good hearty fuel if I expect them to work their tails off."

His chair angled toward me, Alex rested his elbows on his knees and watched me eat. In the restaurant, he was all energy. Dark curls glistened on top of his head, the sides well trimmed but not too short. His brown eyes sparkled. He was like a long, sleek cat, pulsing with energy, ready to pounce into action.

Fascinating, and a little bit unnerving.

He rattled off the night's specials—they made me envy the paying customers—then stood. “Gotta run. Eat all you want. See you Sunday?”

I nodded, mouth full of curry. Chefs sweat over hot stoves all weekend. No Friday nights at the movies or Saturday dinner dates. I swallowed, and he swooped in for a kiss. A long, warm, luscious kiss.

Oh, I thought as he dashed up the stairs to take the reins of his domain. Is this what fall tastes like?

• • •

OUTSIDE, the last sunlight set the peaks of the Olympic Mountains aglow in orange and pink, trimmed in deep purple. I felt the same glow inside. From the curry or the kiss?

Who cares?

I'll be the first to admit, downtown living isn't for everyone. But I adore it. Tag and I had shared a sweet bungalow in Greenwood, a few miles north of downtown. When we split, it had been time for a serious change. I hadn't known, of course, that a year later, the law firm where I worked would implode in scandal.

And I hadn't known I'd find solace—and employment—in bay leaves.

Best. Thing. Ever.

No chill in the air, despite the twilight. Sandra might be sweating and Kristen freezing, but as far as I'm concerned, fall takes all the prizes.

A few last office workers shuffled past me to their bus stops or the light rail station. I strolled down Virginia to Pike Place. The totem poles in the park stood as silhouettes in the fading light.

A couple stood at the railing, arms around each other, watching the sun set over the water and the mountains beyond. Nearby, half a dozen teenagers laughed and joked.

“Miz Pepper.”

The sound of my name took me by surprise. Sam, Arf beside him, broke away from a group of men huddled by the fountain and the Tree of Life sculpture.

“How you doin', Sam? Sorry, boy.” I held out a hand for Arf to sniff. “No treats this time.”

“Oh, he gets plenty. Market folks is good to him. You need a escort? Gettin' on to dark.”

“Thanks, Sam. I'm fine.” His offer reminded me of the encounter I'd seen earlier. “But I do have a question for you. The man you tussled with this morning, the one they call Doc.”

His brows furrowed but he nodded to me to go on.

“He’s fairly new around here, isn’t he?” Another nod. “Causing any trouble? Other than wanting your spot.”

“Why you be askin’ that, Miz Pepper?”

“I know some of the men”—I gestured toward the group by the totem pole—“take an interest in protecting the women who work in the Market, like you do, and I wondered if you’ve seen Doc helping anyone that way.”

He shook his big head slowly. “No, can’t say as I have. He ain’t here every day. And he don’t stay down evenings. Don’t know where he goes. I ain’t seen him around, at the shelters or getting a meal. You want me to keep an eye on him?”

“Thanks, Sam, but no. It’s nothing.” I rubbed Arf’s head with my cupped hand. “You two have a good night, now.”

Despite refusing Sam’s offer, I had a hunch he’d be watching Doc anyway. Poking around. Some of us are like that.

Three

Fueled by Alaskan gold, Seattle’s population quintupled between 1889, the year of statehood and the Great Fire, and 1907, when the Public Market opened. Takes a lot of food to feed 200,000 people.

The builder who helped me flesh out the loft’s bones called the mezzanine above the bedroom “retreat space, for yoga or meditation.” Apparently some people exercise in their yoga pants. The cold steel steps zing my bare feet in the morning, but it’s the only place in the loft that lets me peek over the Viaduct to the Sound. If I think tall. This stretch of the Viaduct is scheduled to come down soon, with all that traffic moving to a tunnel. They say it’s for earthquake safety, but the changes would revamp the waterfront and give us downtown dwellers killer views.

Plus higher taxes and, no doubt, pressure from developers. My next-door neighbor, a city council member, has his finger on that pulse and keeps us all informed. I settled into a canvas director’s chair, hand-painted by a Market artisan, to meditate on caffeine and morning mist.

The weather was clearly changing. Well, “clearly” wasn’t the right word. Not today. Vapor from the Seattle Steam plant collided with cool air rolling in off the Sound to create a bewitching white cloud.

A fog horn blared and an outbound ferry glided into view. I grabbed the binoculars, but the air was too dense for me to make out the name.

As a child, I’d lie in bed and strain my ears to hear the fog horns, usually falling asleep first. One of my earliest memories is standing at a ferry rail clutching my grandfather’s hand on one of his visits from St. Louis. I might have been destined for my business, but I was not, as most people assume, named for it. Grandpa nicknamed me after the legendary Cardinals third baseman Pepper Martin, known as a ball of fire.

I like to think I’ve mellowed since then.

I sipped my coffee, an Ethiopian Longberry Harrar, and ran through what we needed to accomplish that day at the shop. First, repeat the taste tests and settle on our descriptive subtitles so we could get the info to our brilliant graphic designer. Then choose the recipes. Plus the usual daily business of working with our walk-in

traffic and commercial accounts.

Would yesterday's clash between Sam and Doc be a one-time thing? I hoped so.

But why had Doc been pestering Tory? Slim chance that I could get her to spill any details, even with careful questioning. She'd shift her shoulders slightly, set her chin, and tell me—without a word—that she could take her of herself.

I watched another huge green-and-white ferry chug into view—coming from Bainbridge Island, judging from the angle. They truly are iconic.

Enough in-home sightseeing. Time to get spicy.

• • •

I crossed Western, bypassed the elevator entrance, and trudged up the Market Hillclimb—my version of a cardio workout—to the Main Arcade. Emerged near City Fish—home of the famous flying fish—and exchanged greetings with the fishmongers. (And yes, that's what they call themselves.) Passed Rachel the brass pig, Market mascot and piggy bank for the Foundation, which funds housing and social services. Waved hello to the couple who run the Oriental Mart in the Corner Market. Bought a strawberry-banana smoothie at the Creamery and a blueberry bran muffin at Three Girls Bakery, one of the oldest Market tenants. Most retail shops were still closed, although I spotted a few merchants bustling around inside.

A half-dozen delivery trucks idled on Pike Place, men with hand trucks unloading cartons and crates. The aromas of fish, fruit, and fresh bread mingled with the sharp but mouthwatering smell of cheese making.

Have I mentioned I love this place?

I crossed Pine, my attention on the mess inside my tote as I dug for my keys. My feet slowed as I neared our door, on autopilot. "Eureka!" My fingers closed around the keys and I reached for the lock.

And froze. A truck clattered by on the cobbles. Up on First, commuter buses offloaded passengers, and out on the Sound, ferries blew their whistles.

While I stared at the man known as Doc, crumpled in my doorway, a paper cup stamped with our logo beside his open hand.

Four

Seattle's Public Market houses a year-round farmers' market, bakeries, meat and fish markets, produce stands, and specialty food stores. Two hundred plus craftspeople rent daystalls, operating alongside more than 200 owner-operated shops and services and nearly one hundred restaurants. The Market is also home to more than 350 residents—all in nine acres.

—Market website

My shout brought people running, people whose phones weren't buried at the bottom of their tote bags or knapsacks, like mine. "Help is on the way," someone assured me as I knelt beside Doc, holding my breath and his wrist, praying for a pulse. A nurse on her way to the Market clinic nudged me aside but, when she got no better result, turned her kind face to me.

“He’s gone,” she said, her voice almost too soft to hear amid the chit and chat and scrape and squawk around us. In the distance, a siren screamed, but whether bound for here or some other unlucky locale, no telling.

I nodded. Years ago, at the law firm, a client stumbled into my office in search of the restroom, keeled over, and died. The image of his red face matching his red tie, contrasting sharply with his white shirt and hair and his classic navy blue suit, had stuck with me.

In contrast, Doc wore his usual olive green raincoat and scarred brown shoes. His eyes had lost their sheen, the dull, sandy skin around them pooched and pocketed like a Shar Pei’s after an all-nighter. And yet, despite the world of difference from that long-ago client, he was just as dead.

The nurse pushed herself up, fingers pressing lightly into my upper arm. I shook her off. It seemed indecent to leave him, to stand back and join the small crowd staring at this odd, dead man. The merchants, farmers, and craftspeople of the Market call themselves a family, and family doesn’t make one of their own into a curiosity, even a newcomer.

I’m a newcomer, too.

His hand lay half open, fingers gently curved, as if still holding the cup. The fingers were pale, nails well trimmed and scrubbed clean.

Amazing what goes through the mind at moments like this. My family was never traditionally religious, though both my parents were active in peace and justice causes during my childhood. My mother helped found a soup kitchen in the basement of St. James Cathedral but rarely attended Mass, entering the nave only to hear chamber music. Once I went with her to hear the Tallis Scholars sing and wondered, as I stared up at the gold-and-white-trimmed vaults, how their voices could climb so high and who was up there listening.

My father had chosen to study Zen Buddhism. Whether because of or in spite of his experiences in Vietnam, he never said. If asked, no doubt he’d smile and ask me quietly what I thought. Friends had wafted through the big house on Capitol Hill, day and night, to sit in meditation in the third-floor ballroom. Where Kristen’s great-grandparents had held formal dances and her grandmother learned swing and defied convention by inviting a black jazz band to entertain soldiers during the war, we heard rhythmic breathing, mantras being chanted, and the rolling tones of a Tibetan bell. Kristen and I had helped our mothers melt the used candle ends and remold them, adding sandalwood or lavender oil. A mere whiff of Nag Champa Incense takes me back.

Later, when Kristen’s mother discovered yoga, we heard the soft gummy sounds of sticky mats being rolled onto the maple floors, punctuated by groans as stiff joints responded to gentle coaxing from the teachers who came and went.

All my life, the medieval harmonies my mother loves have slipped into my consciousness when I least expect them. When my heart’s been ripped open, when the stakes are highest. They swirled around me now as I tried to summon the sacred peace of the Cathedral and the ballroom studio, and wrap it around the man we knew as Doc.

I stayed there until another hand touched me. “Pepper,” Tag said. “Let the EMTs take over.”

He led me down the sidewalk, out of the way. Just yesterday, Doc and Sam had argued on this spot and Tag’s partner carved ruts in the road dust with the fat tires of his mountain bike. Now navy-blue-clad EMTs tumbled out of the red Medic One ambulance that had clambered down Pine and idled noisily beside my shop. I hoped the parking brake held. The crew, two men and a woman, fell into a routine, tasks so well

defined that they barely needed to speak to communicate.

“What are you doing here?” I finally thought to ask. “And where’s your partner?”

Tag jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and I turned to see Olerud, off the bike, notebook in hand, surrounded by half a dozen Market folks. “You know we work First Watch.”

I faced my ex squarely. “But why the police, for an old man’s heart attack?”

Eyes hidden by mirrored sunglasses, he shrugged one shoulder. “Control the crowd. Preserve the scene. Do whatever these guys need.” He cocked his helmeted head toward the EMTs. One knelt by the body, repacking a box of equipment, while the others unloaded a gurney.

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