

• CHAPTER FOUR •

AI never, ever got sick. He had eaten dodgy foods from Shanghai to Mexico City, from food trucks and back-alley counters. One reckless evening he even drank tap water in a small Indian village an hour outside Mumbai. During a college trip to North Africa, every one of his friends spent some time locked in their hotel room bathroom while he explored the vibrant souks and sampled more of the fragrant foods, uninterrupted. He was quite proud that he could eat anything, anywhere without negative effects—so the unsettled stomach ruining his morning made him particularly cantankerous toward Luella's.

His review was due to Hannah by three o'clock for the Friday edition. He'd mostly finished it last night while awake with stomach cramps. The discomfort sharpened his wit to a samurai sword; this was his most scathing review yet. A little smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. After this review, he hoped no one else would have to endure indigestion at the hands of Luella's inept chef. Serving undercooked fish should

be criminal, outside of a sushi bar. And Luella's was most definitely not sushi.

"Why're you here so early?" asked John as he set his camouflage messenger bag on his chair, a perfect accompaniment to his shabby appearance. Then Al noticed the tiny print on the shiny silver buckles.

"Is that camouflage Prada? Where did you find that in Milwaukee?"

John looked pleased and guilty at Al's observation.

"Chicago. Though I find a lot of stuff online."

Al sniffed. "That's where I go when I want good food. And a promotion." He added the last part under his breath.

"We should take the Hiawatha down sometime. I can show you the great shops. You can show me the great eats."

Al stared. "You want to go to Chicago with me?"

"You can't be an ass all of the time. It might be fun." John shrugged. "So, why are you here so early?"

"Submitting my review from last night."

"Wasn't that your first visit? Don't you normally go a few times?"

"After last night, there's no need." He took a meaningful sip of tea and turned back to his monitor. His eyes settled on an e-mail he'd been avoiding. With a sigh, he opened it. It had arrived last week from his mother, but he hadn't had the stomach to open it then. Now on a high from writing his review, he was ready. Attached was a scanned article from the *Windsor Observer*, his hometown newspaper. Ian, his perfect older brother, had donated several million pounds to build a new library at Eton.

During their schoolboy days, Ian had always fit in effort-

lessly with the much wealthier families, comfortable with the sleek private jets, castle-like country homes, and watches worth more than most cars. He had embraced the privileged world of high collars with coat and tails while Al squirmed, drowning in the school uniforms, more dork than dashing. Everyone had expected him to come from the same Golden Boy mold as his brother, but he could never quite fit, never quite found himself. Instead, he was the awkward teacher's son who squirmed in the back of class, avoiding notice. Ian acted as if he belonged, so he belonged. Al had just counted the days until he could be free of his brother's long shadow.

So Ian would now be immortalized at Eton—fantastic for him. He was even putting Dad's name on the building, earning him another hash mark on the "best son" scorecard. He must have had a great year in investment banking. Al looked at the time—8:44. He moved his fingers, counting—2:44 in London. He dialed Ian's office number and heard the familiar ringback tones.

"Mr. Waters's office, Margie speaking."

"Hello, Margie. This is Al Waters. Is he available for a moment or two?"

"One moment, please."

The Muzak version of "Yellow Submarine" played as Al waited on hold. He sipped tea, watching John's back as he worked. From behind, he resembled a caveman fumbling with a computer, an image at odds with his elegant cube.

"Al! You saw the article, didn't you?" Ian's voice broke into Al's thoughts. He sat up and turned back to his desk.

"Mum sent it. Congrats, mate. Now Eton can never forget you."

“Thanks. Dad’s a bit overwhelmed at the mo. They would have named a building after him sooner or later—I just made it happen while he could still savor it.”

“You’re such a good son,” Al muttered.

“Don’t be a twit. So, when should I come visit you in Milwaukee? I haven’t seen you in ages. You can show me the sights.” Al could hear papers shuffling in the background, Ian managing to work and be kind to his little brother at the same time.

Al thought about his first impression of Milwaukee—the gray lake, the boarded-up shopwindows down Wisconsin Avenue, the Milwaukee River, frothy like a bitter, dark beer. He imagined walking Ian past the graffiti-covered alley walls and up the dark, narrow stairs to his apartment. His view was of the busy street in front of his building, not the grand views Ian had in his many homes.

“There’s nothing to see—trust me. And I won’t be here much longer. Wait until I’m someplace better.” Al took another gulp of now-cold tea. He never had anything that he felt was worth sharing with his brother, so their conversations dwindled into awkwardness. “I better be off. Just wanted to say congrats.”

“Thanks, mate. See you soon, I hope.”

Al set down the phone and rubbed under his too-tight collar.

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Everything hurt, inside and out. Muscles on her back twitched from sleeping on the office cot, her hands were rubbed raw from the hot water and harsh soap used to wash the dishes, and

her face hurt from fighting back tears. She remembered staggering into the Lair and tumbling onto the cot the night before, her aching body a testament to her hard work. Lou knew Sue had capably finished the night as the sole chef. Sue could run any kitchen, but she shouldn't have to run Luella's.

With a deep breath, Lou sat up, smoothed her hair, and opened her eyes. Her cluttered office surrounded her, giving her comfort. The shards melted a little; her heart reinforced itself. She told herself Devlin was no longer important. It didn't matter if she was alone. Her restaurant and, more importantly, her employees needed her. A pan clanged from the kitchen. Lou glanced at the round clock hanging on the wall—the little hand hovered near the ten. Sue must have come in assuming Lou would be useless again. Not today. Not ever again. A coffee-scented breeze wafted into the Lair, and Lou followed its trail out of her office and into the already-bustling kitchen.

It wasn't just Sue. Harley's bandanna-covered head bopped to a Katy Perry song as he vigorously chopped onions. All the busboys and dishwashers washed floors and walls. Lou grabbed Tyler's arm as he walked by with a stack of freshly laundered napkins. He jumped a little when he felt her hand.

"Sorry about last night," Lou said, and looked him straight in the eye. Tyler moved his shoulders.

"We all have bad days."

"But I'm the boss. I should have known better."

Tyler smiled. "We're cool."

Lou smiled back. "Is there a health inspection I don't know about?" She pointed at the bustling kitchen.

"No." Tyler shook his head. "We just wanted to do something to make you feel better. Harley wouldn't let us go after

your fiancé. This seemed the next-best option.” He continued out to the dining room, where the entire waitstaff were cleaning everything, from the light fixtures to the coffeepots. New tears misted her eyes.

“You gonna help or just stand there leaking all over the clean floor?” Sue noticed her late arrival and knew just how to get her moving. Sentimentality had no place in the kitchen. Her staff’s actions showed her they’d forgiven her meltdown; they didn’t need to say anything. Back to work as usual—exactly what she needed after the turmoil of yesterday. She lost herself in the kitchen; the smell of fresh bread and simmering veal stock, the hum of the kitchen vents over the stove and grill, the chatter of her staff as they worked—they were a healing salve on her still-throbbing wounds. She wasn’t better yet, but she would be.

“Did Chris drop off the Bordeaux he promised?” Lou asked Sue, knowing her sous had stood in her place with all the early-morning vendors to pick out the best produce, meats, cheeses, or whatever hard-to-find morsels they might have unearthed. Sue’s jaw clenched and her eyes tightened in response to Lou’s question.

“No,” she said. “He claimed he didn’t have any in our price range.”

“But I already paid him for it,” Lou groaned.

“I know—that’s why I told him he’ll give us something better to make up for the inconvenience. Billy’s putting the cases of wine in the cellar right now.” Sue’s smile implied her convincing involved unveiled threats, her favorite kind to make.

“You shouldn’t have done that. He’ll think we’re cheap. I’ll have to pay him the difference.”

“I don’t give a damn what he thinks, and we shouldn’t pay him any extra. He’s trying to screw you like he always does. It’s time to find a new wine vendor who won’t try to take advantage of your Midwestern good manners.”

“You’re probably right.” Lou chewed her lip. “Anything good on the trucks?”

“Some beautiful lake salmon, fresh asparagus, and new potatoes.”

“New enough their skin is peeling?”

“Yes.”

“I know what we’re going to do today!” Lou felt the excitement surge. This was why she loved cooking: getting amazing fresh ingredients and making something extraordinary. Luella’s traditional French menu didn’t leave much room for creativity, so the daily special had become Lou’s canvas, where she was limited only by her imagination and whims.

“We’ll keep it a simple spring dinner. Roast the potatoes in butter, salt, and pepper. Maybe some thyme or tarragon, too. We’ll top the salmon fillets with hollandaise and roast the asparagus.”

“Works for me,” Sue said. “You know, you don’t need to make it French. It might be fun to do it with a Latin flair. Or get all crazy and do Japanese.”

“I wish, but we aren’t there yet. We don’t have that many regulars, especially ones who’d like a change. And the new guests come because they want classic French cuisine. I just don’t want to mess with things now that we’re getting busier.”

“You can’t play it safe forever.”

“Someday, Sue, someday.” Lou squeezed Sue’s arm, then grabbed her favorite knife. She lost herself breaking down the

salmon into generous fillets. In the background, Lou could hear her crew start their latest debate.

“You have to get out of the city,” said Sue. “You need to avoid people.”

“No, no, no,” Harley disagreed. “Commandeer a huge boat and stay off the coast. You can get the resources of a big city—the water, empty stores, and fuel—but the zombies can’t get at you. You have mobility, supplies, and shelter. And you can move around to different ports.”

“You won’t be able to get any supplies in a big city. The zombies will be where the most people are. You’ll need to go somewhere more isolated, with water, food, and weapons. Like north to Canada. Not a lot of zombies in Canada.”

“That’s ’cause it’s cold. I’ll take my boat to the Caribbean—you go hang out with moose. Let’s see who lasts longer.”

Sue scowled.

Normalcy settled over the kitchen like a fleecy blanket. Lou smiled to herself, then stood up straighter as an idea flared.

“Sue, what about a second restaurant?”

Sue’s face brightened. “Now you’re talking. What are you thinking?”

“Something small, intimate, where the menu changes with the seasons. Maybe even more.”

“Lovely.” Sue’s eyes grew dreamy.

“I’ll need to save a lot.” Lou paused, then added, “That’s what I originally planned for Luella’s.”

“Why didn’t you do that?”

“Devlin suggested a French restaurant would work better. People would be more open to it.” Lou shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, he just screws everything up.”

Lou smiled. “It was the only advice he gave me about Luel-
la’s, so I thought taking it would encourage him to get more in-
volved.”

“Thank God that didn’t work.”

Lou laughed, mending part of her broken heart.

• CHAPTER FIVE •

Al missed seeing his newly printed articles straight off the printer. Pushing Send wasn't quite as satisfying as a crisp, white page emblazoned with perfectly written prose, but it was faster.

He looked at the time on his monitor—2:55 p.m. Time to send it to Hannah. Al read through the review one more time, made two clicks, and done. He looked around the office. Most heads stared at computer screens or out the window. John shopped online.

“Anything good?” Al asked.

John started at the sudden break in silence. He turned his head and said, “Not unless you like strappy neon sandals and wear a size five in ladies' shoes.”

“I can't catch a break.” Al laughed.

John studied Al, who stood with his jacket in one hand.

“You done?”

“Yeah, I just submitted it.” Al smiled.

“You like that, don't you? The power trip?”

Al tilted his head to the side and squinted, trying to see the

truth in John's question, then shook his head no. "That's not it at all. Someone needs to tell these chefs their food is no good. They need to know so they can cut their losses and move on."

"So, you're doing them a favor?"

"Isn't that how you view telling someone when their outfit isn't flattering? It may not be easy to hear, but they'll dress better as a result of your advice. With so much good food available, subpar dining should be called out. Plus, I owe it to the readers to give honest feedback. If I didn't tell them about my bad experiences, then they might waste money on an awful meal. I'd lose credibility." Al paused, then continued, "I do feel bad, but I believe honesty is more important."

John watched Al as he spoke, judging his words against the resolute Brit standing before him.

"You need to get laid."

"Pardon me?"

John used his palm to make a circular gesture at Al's head.

"Clear up all your negative juju. Then maybe you'll start to enjoy your life a little more."

"I like my life quite a bit. I just don't like where I'm living it."

Al pushed in his chair and left the office, walking out the main doors and heading south toward the Public Market. He didn't notice other people on the street or whether the sun had emerged to warm those around him. Instead, he let John's observations sink in—all of them. As he walked past the newsstand, he couldn't help sniffing the air, searching for hints of bacon, coconut, and vanilla. Combined with John's declaration that he needed to get laid, he couldn't get that smell off his mind, or her adorable freckles, or the broken expression on her face as she blew past him on the sidewalk. Such a marvelous

creature deserved someone who understood her talents—someone like him, perhaps.

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Four thirty arrived and the restaurant never looked better. With all the help, Lou had time to prepare a special meal for the daily meeting—her way of thanking her staff. The daily meeting always covered the specials, any new wines on the menu, reservations, and any other issues. While Sue ran the meeting, Lou always tried to add a few words of advice or encouragement. After her meltdown yesterday, she wanted everyone to focus on what was important—the customer and her dining experience.

As she looked at the faces of her staff, she warmed with affection. Tyler, who she was so hard on last night, smiled at her as their eyes met, not a hint of lingering anger at her mistreatment of him. Billy sat on the edge of his chair, trying to pick the lint off the back of another waiter, a little agitated by the lack of tidiness. The bussers and dishwashers sat toward the back, whispering in Spanish about a soccer game. The remaining waitstaff enjoyed the last few minutes of rest before the long night ahead.

In such a small restaurant, nothing was private, so Lou knew everyone had heard the abbreviated version of what happened. She teared up a little at her employees' loyalty. Lou stood to get their attention and started to speak.

“Business has been good lately. It was brought to my attention that during my unfortunate meltdown yesterday, everyone was distracted and concerned. While I appreciate the sentiment, our customers may not have gotten the experience they

pay so generously for. We have started to build a base of regular diners, so let's not alienate them. If you recognize someone from a previous visit, pay special attention to them. Try to learn their names, their preferences. We need to do everything in our power to make that guest want to come back. Alison, what are reservations for tonight?"

"We have a two-top and two four-tops at six, an eight-top at six thirty, and two more four-tops at seven. The Meyers will also be in at seven. Thursdays usually see a lot of walk-ins, so I expect a steady night," said Alison, the hostess.

"Let me know when Gertrude and Otto arrive; I'd like to visit with them."

If Luella's had a small but loyal following, the Meyers were the fl oyant drum majors. Otto and Gertrude ate there several times a week. Th y preferred a table in the center of the dining room, where the restaurant bustled around them. Lou tried to make a point of visiting their table often. One, it was a good example to other diners of how regular guests were treated; and two, the Meyers were the most interesting people she had ever met. Lou loved talking to them. Both emigrated from Germany as children, right before World War II. Th parents fl d to the United States before things got ugly and came to Milwaukee because of the large German population. Th couple traveled often, especially to Germany to visit friends and distant relatives. Lou admired their easy approach to life, how they went where the wind took them. And she was grateful it took them to Luella's at least twice a week.

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That night, Luella's hummed with business. Sue's head bobbed to the eighties hair band playing on the radio, dipping and turning while she worked the grill station. Her cooking could double as interpretive dance.

"So, you think we'll get a review soon?" Lou asked.

Sue stopped grooving to give the question her full attention.

"If so, I hope it isn't that Polish ass hat from the paper," she said.

"You mean A. W. Wodyski? I don't know. I'd kind of like to hear what he'd come up with. I think we do great food," Lou countered. "And even a mediocre review from him could be good for business."

"Lou, we don't want him anywhere near us. Trust me. We're better off trying to get positive online reviews."

"Did you know the Meyers left one at BrewCityReviews? It's the cutest thing. I can picture them sharing a chair in front of the computer screen, typing together. As of now, it's the only review we have. At least it's a good one."

Sue opened her mouth to respond when Alison sauntered into the kitchen to say a brisk "They're here" before returning to her base, scanning the dining room for any sign that a guest required assistance. *That girl is good*, Lou thought. *She must be due for a raise.*

As Lou pushed open the stainless steel doors separating the kitchen from the restaurant, she caught sight of Otto's shining head reflecting the dining room's dim light next to Gertrude's white hair and beaming face. Gertrude glowed all the time, as if she had a hidden secret waiting to spill into the world. In her eighties, Gertrude probably did have some secrets to life.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Meyer. It's always so nice to

see you.” Lou sat down with them so they didn’t have to look up at her when she stopped by their table.

“*Guten Abend*, Lou,” said Otto and Gertrude—they even spoke as one.

“Alison mentioned yesterday was difficult,” Gertrude said, patting Lou’s arm softly with her tiny, pale hands, wrinkled but lively.

“Yes. It’s over with Devlin. I feel like I should’ve known something was up.”

“*Liebchen*, how would you have known? You were here almost every day and night. He doesn’t deserve you.”

“True. But who does?”

Lou’s lips curved ever so slightly as she tried to believe her joke was true.

“You will meet someone who appreciates you for you, scars and all.” Gertrude rubbed one of the many burn marks on Lou’s hands. Lou put her hands in her lap and smiled at Gertrude’s kindness, but she felt as if the odds were against her. Under the table, she rubbed one of the larger scars on her left wrist, feeling the smooth, tight bump. Gertrude pulled Lou’s arm back above the table and held both her hands.

With her watery blue eyes, she stilled Lou’s protests. “Do not hide who you are. These are a nurturer’s hands. Cooking is hard and sometimes painful work, but you do it to share your gift with us. Your cooking improves our lives. Don’t ever be ashamed of who you are.”

Lou’s lips rolled inward, as if she were biting them between her teeth; her brows pushed in and her eyes welled with tears. One dripped down her cheek and plopped onto the white tablecloth.

“*Schätzchen*, you will be all right,” said Otto, even though he didn’t normally speak up other than a “How do you do?” “You have someone special coming for you, someone who deserves you, someone you can laugh with, cook with, and sleep with.” Otto’s eyebrows waggled and his blue eyes sparkled with his naughty comment.

“You’re right. It’s got to get better.” Lou straightened in her chair and smiled at the Meyers. She still had a great life, full of dear friends and work she was passionate about. One man couldn’t take that away from her.