

Chapter One

THREE HOURS into Saturday night dinner service and she was already running on fumes.

Rachel Bishop rubbed her forehead with the back of her sleeve and grabbed the newest round of tickets clattering through on the printer. Normally orders came in waves, enough time in between to take a deep breath, work the kinks out of her neck, and move on to the next pick. Tonight they had come fast and furious, one after another, tables filling as quickly as they were cleared. They were expecting two and a half turns of the dining room tonight, 205 covers.

It would be Paisley's biggest night in the six months since opening in January, and one they desperately needed. As part-owner of the restaurant, Rachel knew all too well how far away they still were from profitability. There were as many casual fine dining places in Denver as there were foodies, with new ones opening and closing every day, and

she was determined that Paisley would be one of the ones that made it.

But that meant turning out every plate as perfectly as the last, no matter how slammed they were. She placed the new tickets on the board on the dining room side of the pass-through. “Ordering. Four-top. Two lobster, one spring roll, one dumpling. Followed by one roulade, two sea bass, one steak m.r.”

“Yes, Chef,” the staff answered in unison, setting timers, firing dishes. Over at *entremet*, Johnny had not stopped moving all night, preparing sides as fast as they came through on the duplicate printer. It was a station best suited to a young and ambitious cook, and tonight he was proving his worth.

“Johnny, how are we coming on the chard for table four?”

“Two minutes, Chef.” Normally that could mean anything from one minute to five—it was an automatic response that meant *I’m working on it, so leave me alone*—but at exactly two minutes on the dot, he slid the pan of wilted and seasoned greens onto the pass in front of Rachel and got back to work in the same motion. She plated the last of table four’s entrées as quickly as she could, called for service, surveyed the board.

A muffled oath from her left drew her attention. She looked up as her sauté cook, Gabrielle, dumped burnt bass straight into the trash can.

“Doing okay, Gabs?”

“Yes, Chef. Four minutes out on the bass for nineteen.”

Rachel rubbed her forehead with the back of her sleeve again, rearranged some tickets, called for the grill to hold the steak. On slow nights, she liked to work the line while her sous-chef, Andrew, practiced his plating, but tonight it

was all she could do to expedite the orders and keep things running smoothly.

“Rachel.”

She jerked her head up at the familiar male voice and found herself looking at Daniel Kearn, one of her two business partners. She wasn’t a short woman, but he towered above even her. Her gut twisted, a niggling warning of trouble that had never steered her wrong.

“Hey, Dan,” she said cautiously, her attention going straight back to her work. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Now’s not a great time.” Dan might be the rarest of breeds these days—a restaurateur who wasn’t a chef—but considering he owned four other restaurants, he should be able to recognize when they were in the weeds. The energy level in the kitchen right now hovered somewhere between high tension and barely restrained panic.

“Carlton Espy is here.”

Rachel dropped her spoon and bit her lip to prevent any unflattering words from slipping out. “Here? Now? Where is he?” She turned and squinted into the dim expanse of the dining room, looking for the familiar comb-over and self-satisfied smirk of the city’s most hated food critic.

“No, he left. Stopped by my table before he went and told me to tell you, ‘You’re welcome.’ Does that make any sense to you?”

“Not unless he considers questioning both my cooking and my professional ethics a favor.” She looked back at the tickets and then called, “Picking up nine, fourteen!”

“You really need to issue a statement to the press.”

She’d already forgotten Dan was there. One by one, pans made their way to the pass beneath the heat lamps and she

began swiftly plating the orders for the pair of four-tops. “I’m not going to dignify that troll with a response.”

“Rachel—”

“Can we talk about this later? I’m busy.”

She barely noticed when he slipped out of the kitchen, concentrating on getting table nine to one of the back waiters, then table fourteen. For a few blissful moments, the printer was quiet and all the current tickets were several minutes out. She took a deep breath, the only sounds around her the clatter of pans, the hiss of cooking food, the ever-present hum of the vent hoods. After five hours in the heart of the house, they vibrated in her bones, through her blood, the bass notes to the kitchen’s symphony.

Her peace was short-lived. Carlton Espy had been here, the troll. Of all the legitimate restaurant reviewers in Denver, a scale on which he could barely register, he was both the most controversial and the least likable. Most people called him the Howard Stern of food writing with his crass, but apparently entertaining, take on the food, the staff, and the diners. Rachel supposed she should be happy that he’d only questioned her James Beard Award rather than criticizing the looks and the sexual orientation of every member of her staff, as he’d done with another local restaurant last week.

The thing Dan didn’t seem to understand was that slights and backhanded compliments from critics came with the territory. Some seemed surprised that a pretty woman could actually cook; others criticized her for being unfriendly because she didn’t want to capitalize on her looks and her gender to promote her restaurant. She had never met a woman in this business who wanted to be identified as “the best female chef in the city.” Either your food was worthy of note or it wasn’t. The chromosomal makeup of

the person putting it on the plate was irrelevant. End of story. Tell that to channel seven.

As the clock ticked past nine, the orders started to slow down and they finally dug themselves out of the hole they'd been in since seven o'clock. The post-theater crowds were coming in now, packing the bar on the far side of the room, a few groups on the main floor who ordered wine, appetizers, desserts. The last pick left the kitchen at a quarter past eleven, and Rachel let her head fall forward for a second before she looked out at her staff with a grin. "Good job, everyone. Shut it down."

Ovens, grills, and burners were switched off. Leftover *mise en place* was transferred to the walk-ins for tomorrow morning. Each station got scrubbed and disinfected with the careless precision of people who had done this every night of their adult lives, the last chore standing between them and freedom. She had no illusions about where they were headed next, exactly where she would have been headed as a young cook—out to the bars to drain the adrenaline from their systems, then home to catch precious little sleep before they showed up early for brunch service tomorrow. By contrast, Rachel's only plans were her soft bed, a cup of hot tea, and a rerun on Netflix until she fell into an exhausted stupor. At work, she might feel as energetic as she had as a nineteen-year-old line cook, but the minute she stumbled out of the restaurant, her years on the planet seemed to double.

Rachel changed out of her whites into jeans and a sweat-shirt in her office, only to run into Gabrielle in the back corridor.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Chef?"

Rachel's radar immediately picked up the nervousness beneath the woman's usual brusque demeanor. Changed out

of her work clothes and into a soft blue T-shirt that made her red hair look even fierier, Gabby suddenly seemed very young and insecure, even though she was several years older than Rachel.

“Of course. Do you want to come in?” Rachel gestured to the open door of her office.

“No, um, that’s okay. I wanted to let you know . . . before someone figures it out and tells you.” Gabby took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “I’m pregnant.”

Rachel stared at the woman, sure her heart froze for a split second. “Pregnant?”

“Four months.” Gabby hurried on, “I won’t let it interfere with my work, I swear. But at some point . . .”

“You’re going to need to take maternity leave.” In an office setting, that was hard enough, but in a restaurant kitchen, where there were a limited number of cooks to fill in and new additions disrupted the flow they’d established, it was far more complicated.

Gabby nodded.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rachel said finally. “And congratulations. You’re going to make a wonderful mother. I bet Luke is thrilled.”

Gabby’s words rushed out in relief. “He is.”

“Now go get some sleep.” Rachel’s instincts said to give her a hug, congratulate her again, but that damaged the level of authority she needed to maintain, made it harder to demand the best from Gabby when she should probably be focusing more on her baby than her job. Instead, Rachel settled for a squeeze of her shoulder.

Andrew was the last to head for the back hallway, leaving Rachel alone in the kitchen to survey her domain. Once again, it gleamed with stainless-steel sterility, silent without

the drone of vents and whoosh of burners. It should probably bother her more that she had no one to go home to, no one waiting on the other side of the door. But Rachel had known what she was giving up when she set off down this career path, knew the choice was even starker for female chefs who had to decide between running their own kitchens and having a family. Most days, it was more than a fair trade. She'd promised herself long ago she wouldn't let any man stand between her and her dreams.

Camille, Paisley's front-of-house manager, slipped into the kitchen quietly, somehow looking as fresh and put together as she had at the beginning of the night. "Ana's waiting for you at the bar. I'm going to go now unless you need me."

"No, go ahead. Good work as always."

"Thanks, Chef. See you tomorrow."

Rachel pretended not to notice Camille slip out with Andrew, their arms going around each other the minute they hit the back door. The food service industry was inescapable, as it must be—civilians didn't tend to put up with the long hours, late nights, and always-on mentality. There had been plenty of hookups in her kitchen among waitstaff and cooks in various and constantly changing combinations, but they never involved Rachel. On some points at least, she was still a traditionalist—one-night stands and casual affairs held no appeal. Besides, she was an owner and the chef, the big boss. Getting involved with anyone on her staff would be the quickest way to compromise her authority.

Rachel pushed around the post to the dining room and crossed the empty space to the bar. A pretty Filipina sat there, nursing a drink and chatting with the bartender, Luis.

"Ana! What are you doing here? Did Dan call you?"

Ana greeted Rachel with a one-armed hug. “I worked late and thought I’d drop by to say hi. Luis said it was a good night.”

“Very good night: 215.”

Ana’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s great, Rachel. Way to go. I’m not going to say I told you so, but . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, you told me so.” Rachel grinned at her longtime friend. Analyn Sanchez had been one of her staunchest supporters when she’d decided to open a restaurant with two Denver industry veterans, even though it meant leaving the lucrative, high-profile executive chef job that had won her a coveted James Beard Award. And she had to give part of the credit to the woman next to her, who had agreed to take on Paisley as a client of the publicity firm for which she worked, even though the restaurant was small potatoes compared to her usual clients.

Luis wiped down an already-clean bar top for the third time. “You want anything, Chef?”

“No, thank you. You can go. I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

“Thank you, Chef.” Luis put away his rag, grabbed his cell phone from beneath the bar, and quickly slipped out from behind his station. Not before one last surreptitious look at Ana, Rachel noticed.

“Do I need to tell him to stop hitting on you?”

“Nah, he’s harmless. So, Rachel . . .”

Once more that gut instinct fired away, flooding her with dread. “You’re not here for a social visit.”

Ana shook her head. “Have you seen the article yet?”

“The Carlton Espy review? Who hasn’t? Can you believe the guy had the nerve to come in here tonight and say, ‘You’re welcome’? As if he’d done me some huge favor?”

Ana's expression flickered a degree before settling back into an unreadable mask.

Uh-oh.

"What is it? You're not talking about the review, are you?"

Ana reached into her leather tote and pulled out a tablet, then switched it on before passing it to Rachel.

Rachel blinked, confused by the header on the web page. "The *New Yorker*? What does this have to do with me?" The title of the piece, an essay by a man named Alexander Kanin, was "The Uncivil War."

"Just read it."

She began to skim the article, the growing knot in her stomach preventing her from enjoying what was actually a very well-written piece. The writer talked about how social media had destroyed civility and social graces, not only online but in person; how marketing and publicity had given an always-available impression of public figures, as if their mere existence gave consumers the right to full access to their lives. Essentially, nothing was sacred or private or off-limits. He started by citing the cruel remarks made on CNN about the mentally disabled child of an actress-activist, and then the story of a novelist who had committed suicide after being bullied relentlessly on Twitter. And then she got to the part that nearly made her heart stop.

Nowhere is this inherent cruelty more apparent than with women succeeding in male-dominated worlds like auto racing and cooking. The recent review of an award-winning Denver chef suggesting that she had traded sexual favors in return for industry acclaim reveals that there no longer needs to be any truth in the speculations, only a cutting

sense of humor and an eager tribe of consumers waiting for their next target. When the mere act of cooking good food or giving birth to an “imperfect” child or daring to create controversial art becomes an invitation to character assassination, we have to accept that we have become a deeply flawed and morally bankrupt society. The new fascism does not come from the government, but from the self-policing nature of the mob—a mob that demands all conform or suffer the consequences.

Rachel set the tablet down carefully, her pounding pulse leaving a watery ocean sound in her ears and blurring her vision. “This is bad.”

“He didn’t mention you by name,” Ana said. “And he *was* defending you. You have to appreciate a guy who would call Espy out on his disgusting sexism.”

Rachel pressed a hand to her forehead, which now felt feverish. “Anyone with a couple of free minutes and a basic understanding of Google could figure out who he’s talking about.” A sick sense of certainty washed over her. “Espy knows it, too. Without this article, his review would have died a natural death. He should have been thanking *me*.”

Cautiously, Ana took back her tablet. “I’m hoping people will overlook the details based on the message, but just in case, you should inform your staff to direct media requests to me.”

“Media.” Rachel covered her face with her hands, as if that could do something to stave off the flood that was to come.

“Take a deep breath,” Ana said, her no-nonsense tone firmly in place. “This could be a good thing. You’ve told me

about the difficulty women have in this business, the kind of harassment you've put up with to get here. Maybe this is your chance to speak out against it. You'd certainly get wider attention for the restaurant, not that it looks like you're having any trouble filling seats."

Rachel dropped her head into her folded arms. What Ana said was right. It would be publicity. But despite the old saying, it wasn't the right kind of publicity. She wanted attention for her food, not for her personal beliefs. To give this any kind of attention would be a distraction. And worst of all, it would make her a hypocrite. Playing the gender card for any reason—even a well-meaning one—went against everything she stood for.

"No," she said finally, lifting her head. "I won't. I'll turn down all the interviews with 'no comment' and get back to doing what I do best. Cooking."

"I thought you'd say that. I'll issue a statement to that effect. Just be prepared. Reporters can be relentless when they smell an interesting story." Ana hopped off the stool. "I'm beat. Call me if you need me."

"I will." She hugged Ana and watched her friend stride out the door, five-inch heels clicking smartly on the dining room's polished concrete floors. Rachel didn't move from her perch at the bar, though she was glad that Luis was already gone for the night. He would take one look at her and pronounce her in desperate need of a drink. The last thing she needed to do was send herself down that unwitting spiral again.

Instead, she would head to her office in the back as she always did, look over the pars that Andrew had calculated for her that morning, and pay the stack of invoices waiting in her in-box. Work was always the medicine for what ailed

her, even if she was hoping that for once, her gut feeling was wrong.

Because right now, her gut told her everything was about to go sideways.

A Note from the Author

IT WAS THIS food nerd/writer's dream come true to set a book in the middle of Denver's thriving food scene—Rachel's restaurant and the supper club would feel right at home in the Mile High City. While Denver's real neighborhoods and landmarks set the backdrop for this story, all the restaurants mentioned are works of fiction. However, with so many inspiring chefs and restaurants in the city, I couldn't help but take my cue from real places.

Rachel's restaurant, Paisley, has no exact correlation in the real world, but I did borrow its Larimer Square location from Jennifer Jasinski's excellent Mediterranean restaurant, Rioja. If you're curious about the interior design, I loosely based the description off another of my favorites, Lon Symensma's ChoLon Bistro on Sixteenth and Blake.

Rhino Crash, the funky bar and food truck pod in the River North neighborhood, is a near-double for the quirky Finn's Manor, home to some of the city's best food trucks.

The girls' breakfast joint in the Ballpark neighborhood is an unabashed reference to the original location of Snooze, a retro-styled breakfast-brunch-cocktail spot that has

now expanded to multiple locations in Colorado, Arizona, California, and Texas.

Lastly, The English Department was an excuse to pay homage to my very favorite spot in the city: Alex Seidel's Mercantile Dining & Provision at Union Station. If Rachel waxed a bit too eloquent when she visited, it's only because of my own barely restrained foodie glee.