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romance you'll want to devour in one sitting."*

IRENE HANNON, award-winning author

THE SATURDAY NIGHT SUPPER CLUB

A SUPPER CLUB NOVEL



CARLA LAUREANO

Praise for Carla Laureano

The Saturday Night Supper Club

“You don’t have to be a foodie to enjoy *The Saturday Night Supper Club*, but if you are, you’re in for an extra treat. Carla Laureano has written a delicious romance you’ll want to devour in one sitting. Filled with sugar and spice, *The Saturday Night Supper Club* will leave you hungry for more from this talented author.”

IRENE HANNON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER

“With descriptions that will make even the least-foodie among readers salivate, *The Saturday Night Supper Club* is a romantic feast for the imagination as well as the heart. In this, her fourth contemporary romance release, author Carla Laureano serves up a delectable contemporary romance within a cautionary tale for the age of social media. At turns devastating and delightful, this novel contrasts the heartbreak of instant infamy against the charm of a budding attraction. A savory story garnished with the sweetness of friendship, it chronicles the reshaping of Rachel’s career as romance simmers on the back burner, waiting for its turn at the table. And when that romantic dessert course is served? Delicious. Highly recommended!”

SERENA CHASE, AUTHOR OF *INTERMISSION* AND *THE EYES OF E’VERIA* SERIES

“*The Saturday Night Supper Club* is an absolute delight with compelling characters, a rich sense of place, and food that lingers on your palate long after the final page.”

KATHERINE REAY, AUTHOR OF *A PORTRAIT OF EMILY PRICE* AND *THE AUSTEN ESCAPE*

“Heartwarming with plenty of romantic sizzle—this is the menu Laureano serves in her latest, *The Saturday Night Supper Club*, and it’s sure to leave readers hungry for more!”

KATIE GANSHERT, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LIFE AFTER*

“Smart, funny, romantic, hopeful—the perfect starter for Laureano’s scrumptious new series.”

CANDACE CALVERT, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STEP BY STEP*

“*The Saturday Night Supper Club* is a riveting read, crafted with sophisticated characters, delicious settings, and a satisfying romance that will leave readers breathless and anxious for the next book in the series.”

JEN TURANO, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A CHANGE OF FORTUNE*

“With an exceptional eye for detail, author Carla Laureano invites readers into the highly competitive restaurant world, revealing both the professional and personal challenges of an acclaimed chef. Laureano also examines what motivates our life choices—and how we learn to live with the consequences of our actions.”

BETH K. VOGT, AUTHOR OF *CATCH A FALLING STAR* AND *WISH YOU WERE HERE*

“*The Saturday Night Supper Club* is a delicious treat! Carla Laureano’s story of dashed dreams and second chances will leave your heart happy . . . and your mouth watering. I love her genuine characters and subtle but poignant thread of faith. I can’t wait to see what Laureano writes next!”

MELISSA TAGG, AUTHOR OF *ALL THIS TIME* AND *KEEP HOLDING ON*

Five Days in Skye

“Sweet and scathing, lush and intimate. . . . This story has guts and heart as well as the depth and heat necessary to satisfy any romance reader’s palate.”

USA TODAY

“From page one, *Five Days in Skye* captured my imagination and every minute of my pleasure-reading time. With enviable finesse, author Carla Laureano weaves romance, hope, healing, and faith into a spunky and sparkling tale that made me sorry to say good-bye to the characters and the alluring Isle of Skye. I look forward to reading more from this author.”

TAMARA LEIGH, AUTHOR OF *SPLITTING HARRIET* AND *THE UNVEILING*, BOOK ONE IN THE AGE OF FAITH SERIES

“After reading *Five Days in Skye*, I wanted to pack my bags and catch the first flight to Scotland to discover Skye for myself. In her debut novel, Carla Laureano brought Skye alive with vivid detail, drew me into the main characters’ budding romance, and kept me turning the pages late into the night. I’m looking forward to more books from Carla!”

BETH K. VOGT, AUTHOR OF *CATCH A FALLING STAR* AND *WISH YOU WERE HERE*

“*Five Days in Skye* swept me away to Scotland! Against the craggy beauty of the Isle of Skye, author Carla Laureano weaves a story . . . of love between an American businesswoman and a Scottish celebrity chef. Fans of the movie *The Holiday* are sure to enjoy this contemporary romance. Laureano’s voice is deft, seamless, and

wonderfully accomplished. An exciting newcomer to the world of Christian fiction!”

BECKY WADE, AUTHOR OF *MY STUBBORN HEART* AND
UNDENIABLY YOURS

London Tides

“In *London Tides*, Carla Laureano shows how fear and grief can hold us captive—unable to love ourselves and others. Yes, Laureano has written a beautiful reconciliation romance, but she also delves into deeper themes of identity and acceptance. The character of Grace Brennan, in spite of her unconventional life, speaks to all of us.”

BETH K. VOGT, AUTHOR OF *CATCH A FALLING STAR* AND *WISH YOU WERE HERE*

“Achieving an aching depth and a resounding trueness within a heated yet baggage-ridden romance, author Carla Laureano has proven herself a storyteller who is not afraid to take her characters into the darkest regions of their own hearts. An excellent follow-up to *Five Days in Skye*, *London Tides* tugs and churns every emotion . . . right up until the lovely, hope-buoying end.”

SERENA CHASE, AUTHOR OF *INTERMISSION* AND THE EYES OF
E'VERIA SERIES

“At times lighthearted; at times heart wrenching. Laureano has penned a delightfully romantic tale about the importance of finding home. If readers weren’t already smitten with the MacDonald brothers, they will be after *London Tides*!”

KATIE GANSHERT, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LIFE AFTER*

“Another captivating story! *London Tides* is as compelling and engaging as Laureano’s award-winning *Five Days in Skye*. It’s deliciously romantic and filled with tension, wonderful characters, and vivid scenery. A must-read this summer!”

KATHERINE REAY, AUTHOR OF *A PORTRAIT OF EMILY PRICE* AND
THE AUSTEN ESCAPE

“War photographer Grace Brennan is the kind of character I love to read about—she’s savvy, fearless, and damaged, yet is determined to carry on. Returning to London means making amends with Ian MacDonald, the fiancé she left behind, and author Carla Laureano knows how to make the most of their chemistry. But a chance at love for Grace also means facing the realities of PTSD, a subject Laureano handles with great sensitivity and care. Vividly written and deeply felt, *London Tides* will sweep readers away.”

HILLARY MANTON LODGE, AUTHOR OF *A TABLE BY THE
WINDOW*

Under Scottish Stars

“In *Under Scottish Stars*, independent single mother Serena Stewart returns to the beautiful land of Skye, looking for stability for her two small children—not romance with Malcolm Blake, who manages the hotel that Serena owns with her two brothers. Their ‘this can’t be happening’ relationship is engaging, and Carla Laureano reveals both Serena’s and Malcolm’s vulnerabilities as they fall in love when they least expected it. *Under Scottish Stars* is a satisfying romance that reminds readers that love doesn’t always go according to our agendas—and that can be a very good thing.”

BETH K. VOGT, AUTHOR OF *CATCH A FALLING STAR* AND *WISH
YOU WERE HERE*

“Under Scottish Stars is a fabulous read, filled with compelling characters, a delicious setting, and a romance that can only be described as . . . swoon-worthy. Carla Laureano’s third and final book in the MacDonald Family Trilogy exceeded all my expectations and truly shouldn’t be missed.”

JEN TURANO, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A CHANGE OF FORTUNE*

“Solid characters, brilliant dialogue, believable conflict, a setting you can taste—and, always, breath-stealing love scenes. No one writes a romantic hero like Laureano! *Under Scottish Stars* takes us back to Skye to explore poignant truths of single parenthood, family loyalty, the pursuit of dreams—and faith. A satisfying and stellar finish to the MacDonald Family Trilogy.”

CANDACE CALVERT, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STEP BY STEP*

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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 sweatshirt 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 long-time 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.

Chapter Two

MORNING CAME FAR TOO SOON. Rachel sat in the driver's seat of her Toyota SUV, staring at the back door of her restaurant and summoning up the energy to climb out of the car.

She was getting old.

That was the only explanation for how she felt now, as sore and aching as if she'd been run over by a bus. Back in the day, she'd not only been able to work a fourteen-hour double shift, but she'd proceeded to party with the rest of the kitchen staff until the wee hours, catch a couple hours of sleep on someone's sofa or in her car, and do the whole thing again the next day.

Clearly, her body had gotten the memo that she'd just turned thirty and thrown the switch.

"Come on, Rachel. Woman up." At seven o'clock, she was already the last person in, the rest of the crew arriving early to prep for Sunday brunch, which started at ten thirty. Since they didn't take reservations on Sunday, the line would start

forming outside the front door by nine and not stop until midafternoon.

If she were honest with herself, Sundays were the only part of her old life that she missed. Each Sunday until she turned eleven, she and her mom would dress up to attend service at their little white church in Hartford, munching donut holes from the bakery on the way and trying not to get powdered sugar on their clothes. She'd sit beside her mother in the pew and listen in rapt attention to the bearded pastor, wondering if that's what Jesus had looked like. Afterwards, they'd splurge on lunch and browse the expensive boutiques downtown, even if they couldn't afford to buy anything. It had truly been a day of rest, and those days together were virtually the only memories she still cherished of her childhood.

But those Sundays had ended long before she started cooking, and now a full day to herself felt like a distant dream. Rachel wrenched herself from her recollections and dragged her aching body from the car, then stumbled to the back door, where she could already hear sizzles and clatters coming from the hot line.

She shoved her sunglasses onto the top of her head and stopped first at the pastry section, where her baker and best friend, Melody Johansson, was hard at work.

"Morning," Rachel said quietly. "Everything good?"

Melody glanced up quickly from the sticky buns she was glazing, then did a double take. "You look awful."

"Thanks. I needed that."

Melody laughed. "Another hard night here?"

"Is there any other kind?" Rachel squeezed Melody's shoulder before moving on to the prep cooks, who were already hard at work at the rear stations. She paused at the

walk-ins, where Andrew was going over the stock with the clipboard. "Where's Gabby?"

Andrew looked up, his expression answering before his words. "She hasn't shown up."

"Call her and find out what's going on. And then meet me in my office."

He gave a respectful nod. "Yes, Chef."

She retraced her steps to the office, her haven and a monument to her type-A nature. In every kitchen she'd worked, the chef's space was a wreck, a jumble of papers and coats and books. Hers was almost sterile in its cleanliness, a collection of cookbooks and kitchen manuals lined up behind her on the wood shelves, the paperwork sorted neatly into a multitiered in-box, the labels on the containers in the drink cooler all facing the same way. The closet containing the staff's coats was neatly organized, each cook's garments lined up on rods between retail rack tags with their names, beside it a bin for dirty ones to be picked up by the uniform service. A little spot of orderliness in the chaos, yes, but it also set an example for her staff. She'd never be able to lecture a cook on working clean if her own space weren't pristine.

Rachel pulled a Gatorade from the mini-fridge by the door and twisted off the cap as she collapsed into the desk chair. Half a bottle later, she was feeling a bit more like herself. Definitely too old for these hours. She'd taken the lack of sleep and long days in stride when she hired on to her first fine-dining restaurant in New York, wore them as a badge of courage, even. Now, she wondered if she was just taking years off her life. And to think as a lowly line cook, she'd thought the executive chef had the cushiest job in the kitchen.

At least she had a couple of minutes to herself before the

madness set in. Rachel fished a thick green journal from her bag and opened it to the frayed ribbon bookmark.

And sat, pen poised above the page, mind completely blank. It usually wasn't this difficult to think of something.

Finally, she scrawled beneath today's date: *Sunny mornings, even when I don't have long to enjoy them.*

Melody slipped through the door and set a cup in front of her. "Double Americano."

"Bless you." Rachel lifted the cup, ignoring the singe of hot liquid on her tongue, and enjoyed the warm trail it created down her throat and chest. Impulsively, she jotted *Strong coffee* on the next line, then snapped the book shut. "What's that?"

Melody set a plate in front of her. "Chocolate-almond brioche."

"New addition?"

"Experiment." Melody settled into a chair across from her as Rachel tackled the bun.

Like everything else the baker did, it was nothing short of amazing. Rather than being a cloying, overly sweet morning bun, the chocolate was subtle and bitter, laced with almond and a hint of espresso. Sophisticated. "It's excellent. How many do you have?"

"Six dozen."

"Okay, let's do it. The early birds get lucky today." Rachel dove back into the bun, tearing pieces off with her fingers and feeling a little better with every bite. While Melody technically reported to her, Rachel had given her carte blanche with the dessert menu and breakfast pastries, and she never disappointed. That was part of what made the brunch so popular at Paisley—the anticipation of what might be in the baked goods assortments placed at the center of each table.

Rachel had done a *prix fixe* menu for that very reason—it limited the number of cooked-to-order items on the menu while allowing for some creativity, not to mention the fact it practically guaranteed a certain level of revenue for the week.

“Was Carlos in when you got here?” she asked when she finally felt coherent enough to talk.

“Yes. Already hard at work.”

“Good. My Spanish must be getting better.” Carlos was one of the prep cooks—a machine really, preternaturally fast with a knife—but he’d gotten a little lax on his start times. “I’m never sure if he’s understanding me or not.”

“I think Carlos chooses to understand what he wants to understand,” Melody said. “Language barrier notwithstanding, he’s probably the smartest guy in the kitchen.”

No doubt. He worked the most hours, made the most money, and still had his evenings free to spend with his family, while the rest of them were toiling away in a stainless-steel box. “So, go ahead and ask. I know Ana texted you.”

“Am I that transparent?” Melody laughed, then sobered. “What are you going to do? Are you going to give a statement?”

“I already told Dan I have nothing to say. Espy or this Kanin guy, it’s the same response. Let someone else be the spokeswoman against sexism in the food service industry. I’ve got too much else to worry about.”

Melody rose. “Okay. If that’s how you want to play it, I’m behind you.”

“You don’t agree?”

“It doesn’t matter if I agree or not. This is your restaurant. I just don’t like the idea of someone else writing your narrative for you.”

Rachel smiled. Melody did a good job of playing the laid-back bohemian baker, but every once in a while, she let her thorough and unconventional education slip out. “That’s exactly why I’m not responding. Because it’s *my* narrative, and this is a story I refuse to be a part of. Let them criticize my food. The rest is none of their business.”

Fortified by Melody’s coffee and brioche, Rachel refocused on the specials menu, which was really two additional items derived from the leftover product in the walk-ins. A salmon-cake Benedict went on in addition to the standard crab cakes, and Tex-Mex steak breakfast tacos would use up the last of the New York strip. Done. She passed off the instructions to Andrew, who would be responsible for the specials prep; devised the limited cocktail menu, which would be handled by *garde manger* in the absence of a bartender; and changed into her whites for the day. Only then did she notice the flashing blue light on her cell phone that indicated a text message.

From Gabby. On the way to the hospital. Afraid I might be miscarrying again. Please pray.

The words hit her like a brick to the chest. *Again?* Gabby and her husband had been married for twelve years, and Rachel had assumed that they’d decided not to have children. But maybe it was more that they hadn’t been able to have children. Rachel sent a prayer heavenward for Gabby’s safety and that of her unborn child. That was all she had time for. It was now five minutes after ten, too late to call for a fill-in. She’d have to work the line after all. At least it would keep her from acknowledging the awful, shameful part of herself that hoped maybe she wasn’t going to lose one of her best cooks as she’d thought.

Today was going to be a test of her experience, though,

the combination of her work hangover and the caffeine stretching her nerves as thin as phyllo dough. Morning was different than dinner, where orders were expedited in courses. Brunch required everything to be cooked *à la minute* as it came in. Next to Andrew, who handled the eggs, Gabby had the hardest station for brunch, the rest of the protein.

Rachel put on her game face as she strode onto the hot line, rubbing her hands together. "All right, boys. Ready to get rolled?"

"Yes, Chef," came the chorus of answers, not without a ring of excitement. She shook her head in amusement, but even she felt the rush of adrenaline, the thrill of anticipation like a drug in her veins. She could complain all she wanted, but some part of her still lived for the brutal challenge of working the line.

One ticket followed another, the heat from the griddle blasting her like an Arabian desert and turning her skin hot and tight. The Benedicts went fast, followed by the steak tacos, so those were off her back, leaving the regular breakfast meats and the crab cakes to deal with. She took advantage of a brief lull while her bacon and ham were frying to grab another bottle of Gatorade from the lowboy and step away long enough to guzzle it in one gulp before she was back at her station.

And then it was over. When the last plate went out at three minutes after two, Rachel figured they had done almost as many covers as the night before. That would make it a record Sunday for receipts.

"I need you to supervise the close," she murmured to Andrew before she left the kitchen in favor of the cool quiet of her office.

Away from the line, the last dregs of adrenaline drained

from her body, leaving only a bone-deep ache, that flu-coming-on feeling that had nothing to do with a virus. It was the natural result of pushing her body too long with too little sleep and nourishment. But she had no choice. She had the restaurant to think about, dozens of employees who depended on her, a steady clientele of hungry guests. Not to mention the fact that this was her dream. She'd sacrificed everything to get here, and this was part of how her debts were being called in.

She fished her cell phone from her pocket and checked the messages—none—before tapping out a reply to Gabby: Any news?

By the time she'd changed into her street clothes, there was a reply: Baby is ok for now. I think I'm going to be on bed rest. I'm so sorry. Call you when I have details.

Rachel swallowed down the twin swells of relief and terror. Bed rest meant that Gabby had a chance of having a healthy baby. It also meant she would not be coming back.

She squeezed her eyes shut against a prick of tears born of pure exhaustion, grabbed her tote bag, and headed straight from the restaurant without saying good-bye.

Directly into a microphone.

"Rachel Bishop? Would you care to make a statement?"

Rachel squinted into the sunshine and shoved on her sunglasses so she could make out the overly made-up features of a woman shoving a microphone the size of a bazooka in her face. She recognized her, vaguely. She was some field reporter for channel nine. Or was it twenty-four? Was there a channel twenty-four in Denver? Rachel was so wiped out she couldn't remember.

"Make a statement about what?"

"About the vicious attack on your integrity from Carlton

Espy and the attention it received from the *New Yorker*. Did you know that Espy's review has now gotten over three hundred thousand hits?"

Three hundred thousand? How was that even possible? That was half the population of Denver. She blinked, momentarily stunned. She should simply tell the reporter that her publicist would issue a statement, but exhaustion had brought down her filter. "I don't even understand how this is news."

"You don't think the topic of sexism in the workplace is an important one to women?"

"I think people need to stop taking Internet trolls like Carlton Espy seriously. If I were a more litigious person, I would sue him for libel."

It was the wrong thing to say. The reporter perked up. "Are you going to sue him for libel?"

Rachel put her head down and headed for her car, hoping the reporter would take the hint. This time her only answer should be "no comment."

"Why do you think there are so few female chefs? Is it because women are ill-suited for the profession?"

Rachel whirled, her jaw dropping. "I don't know. I haven't interviewed every woman who has decided not to be a professional cook. Male or female, if they don't have the dedication and skills to succeed, they shouldn't be there. The guest doesn't care if it's a man or a woman cooking their food; they only care that it tastes good."

There. Let them air that little sound bite. Rachel unlocked her car door, plopped into the driver's seat, and backed into the alley as quickly as she could manage, only marginally concerned with not hitting the cameraman who was following her car's progress with his camera. Seriously, how was

this even news? Was the media so low on shootings and natural disasters that they had to resort to talking to chefs about topics no one really cared about?

She drove home in an exhaustion-laced stupor, almost surprised that she managed it safely, then parked on the street in front of her house, a charming but run-down Victorian condo conversion in the Wyman Historic District. Routine took her up the paved walkway to the lower unit, where she let herself into the sparsely decorated space, walked straight to the bedroom, and fell asleep with her shoes on before her face even hit her pillow.

Chapter Three

THERE WAS NOTHING like hanging off the side of a sheer rock face in high winds to put life into perspective.

To be truthful, Alex Kanin's only perspective right now was on how much it would hurt if he fell. He surveyed the expanse of red rock above him, looking for the handhold he knew to be there, assuming he'd followed the proper route up the side. He forced himself to relax his grip and save the strength in his fingers and forearms for the next move, however contrary to instinct it was when facing one's own mortality.

"Enough with the histrionics," he muttered. He was clipped in to a bolt five feet below him. The worst the fall would do is give him a jolt through the climbing harness and some bruises as he banged into the rock. Assuming he didn't die of a heart attack first.

"You thinking about building a summer home up there?"

The shout drifted up to him from his friend and climbing

instructor, Bryan Shaw, then dissipated on the wind. Easy for him to say. Bryan was one of the top-ranked technical climbers in the country, whereas Alex had only been climbing for three years. This little 5.10-rated route in Colorado's Castlewood Canyon State Park might be easy for Bryan, but to Alex it might as well be Everest.

The taunting must have worked, though, because there was his next hold, a full foot out of his reach. A dyno. Alex gritted his teeth and coiled his muscles in preparation for the leap. For one sickening moment, he hung in midair, his hands and feet free of the rock face. And then his chalked fingers found the hold at the deadpoint, the zero-gravity pivot between jumping and falling. His hands, forearms, and biceps strained against the downward pull of his body weight while he felt for his foothold and secured himself on the rock.

Bryan whooped triumphantly from below, and Alex laughed aloud. Now it was clear climbing to the top. Energy flooded his body as he scrambled up the last ten feet and levered himself over the edge. He clipped in to the top anchor and then flipped himself into a sitting position, swinging his legs over the forty-foot drop below.

"Yeah!" Bryan pumped his fist in the air, and Alex laughed at his friend's enthusiasm. "Now you have to get back down!"

"Shut up!" he yelled back. "Let me enjoy this for a minute!"

Alex flexed his hands and rolled the kinks free from his neck, the knots a sure sign he'd been climbing tense. Only then did he notice the raw patches on his fingertips. That would make typing difficult tomorrow, but it was worth it. This route was his hardest climb to date, something he'd been too chicken to try until Bryan forced his hand. And now he couldn't wait to do it again.

"All right. On belay?"

"Belay on."

"Climbing." He moved himself off the edge of the rock, ignoring the quiver of nerves as he got his hands and feet into position. He could have rappelled or walked back around, but Bryan insisted he be as comfortable with downclimbing as he was with the ascent. It was a slow process of finding his footholds and pausing to remove his quickdraws—the webbing-linked carabiners—from the permanent bolts.

When his feet finally hit the solid ground and he called off belay, Bryan greeted him with a hard, affectionate slap on the back. "Nicely done. I was sure you were going to bail for a second."

"I almost did. I thought I was looking for a crimp and started doubting my route."

"Now that you've led a 5.11d successfully, are you ready to try some easy multi-pitch climbs with me in California this fall?"

Alex laughed. That easy multi-pitch climb was a three-day ascent up Yosemite's Half Dome. "Not remotely. Wait, what do you mean 5.11d?"

"I might have understated the difficulty of this one," Bryan said. "But you were ready."

Alex shook his head at his friend. He'd known Bryan since their high school days, and back then he'd already been a world-class junior climber. It was only when Alex started feeling the toll the writing career took on his body that he took Bryan up on his offer of lessons. He should have known he'd be pushing him every step of the way.

"I blame the fact you made it look easy," Alex said. "I don't think I have one more in me today, though."

"I need to go anyway. I promised my parents I'd make an appearance at their thing tonight."

The "thing" was more than likely a fund-raiser or a party that rivaled the White House Correspondents' Dinner, but Bryan tended to regard the black-tie affairs like Alex would a potluck. The side effect of being the black sheep of a wealthy family, he guessed, or maybe his friend's way of showing his gratitude that his father hadn't disowned him when he became a professional climber rather than following in the family's real estate business.

"Who are you bringing?" Alex began to remove the chalk bag and quickdraws that hung from his climbing harness.

"Kirsten."

"Which one is she? The blonde?"

"They're all blonde. She's the yoga instructor. I fully expect her to ask my mom if she's ever tried a juice cleanse before the night is up."

Alex chuckled. So maybe Bryan didn't toe the line completely. "Ah, the vegan health nut. Think your mom will go for it?"

"I think there's more chance of my mom getting Kirsten to eat meat than doing anything remotely like a cleanse." He shrugged. "It makes for good entertainment on a boring night. Don't suppose you'd like to drop by?"

"Not with that kind of resounding endorsement. Besides, they didn't invite me."

"You know you're like family. You don't need an invitation."

That was true. Maybe he'd dust off the tuxedo and drop in. The evening might be slow, but the food would no doubt be amazing. He'd been to more than one of those events in high school, during the long periods he'd lived in one of

the Shaws' spare rooms while his professor parents were off at a conference or doing a research sabbatical in Europe. Bryan's dad and mom had never balked at Alex's presence. They'd simply put another plate at the table, signed his permission slips, and bought him new school clothes when he'd outgrown his own but run out of the money his parents left in his account.

"If I don't show up, tell your dad I'm in for the fall gala."

"I will." They hoisted their gear and started up the far gentler ascent toward the parking lot where they'd left their cars. With every step, Alex's rubbery legs complained even more. He'd be feeling this climb for days. He'd thought he was in pretty good condition, but he was going to have to add another weight day into his workout schedule. Bryan seemed determined to make a respectable traditional climber out of him, even though Alex had barely graduated from artificial terrain at the gym.

The clouds were beginning to mound overhead when they reached the parking lot, and the first big drops of rain spattered down around them, raising the musty smell of damp concrete. In the distance, thunder rumbled.

"Tuesday at Red Rocks?" Bryan asked.

"I'll be there. We're running the steps first?"

"You know it." They heaved their gear into the back of their cars, then slammed the trunks. Alex slipped into the driver's seat as the clouds let loose.

Rain drummed on the roof of the car and poured down the window. They were out of the flash flood range now, but had they been a few minutes later, Alex would have been stranded on the slab while Bryan bolted for safety. The gullies and ravines that made up the park's climbing areas could turn into deadly rivers in mere minutes.

With visibility so bad, he had no choice but to wait it out. He reached for the cell phone he'd left in his cup holder and saw the blinking green light that indicated messages.

The first one was from his literary agent, Christine. "Alex, have you been on Twitter? Call me as soon as you get this."

The next three were from Christine as well, various permutations of the first. What exactly had happened to cause the usually sanguine agent to turn so twitchy?

He tried to open his Twitter app, but the state park was located in a sketchy cell zone south of Denver, so all he got were connection-error messages. Might as well hear it directly from Christine then. He dialed her number, and after a couple of seconds of deciding whether to connect or not, the call rang through.

"Christine?"

"Where have you been? I've been calling you all morning!"

Alex blinked. She was nothing if not brusque and businesslike; this note of excitement in her voice was completely foreign. "I was climbing. I left my phone in the car."

She didn't even acknowledge the comment. "Have you seen Twitter?"

"I don't have data out here."

"It went viral."

"What went viral?" By the sound of her voice, he was thinking a contagious disease.

"Your new essay for the *New Yorker*. It went up online last night and it's already been shared thousands of times."

"What?" Alex leaned back against the seat of the car. This particular piece had been written as exclusive online content, not even to be printed in the magazine. He'd figured no one would bother reading it.

"It hit a nerve. People are sharing it everywhere, talking

about what's wrong with our social media society. I've got to tell you, Alex, I thought you were procrastinating, but you really played this one right."

"I didn't—" He broke off. There was no point in arguing the issue. He hadn't set out to write a viral post—as if one could even predict what would make a piece take off. In fact, it had been little more than a veiled rant, coming off some unkind, if rather ironic, reviews of his book, *Mis-Connected*, a volume of essays about his traditional upbringing in the digital age. "What does this mean?"

"Well, for one, it means that the e-book is trending at number thirty right now. You're outselling David Sedaris in memoir at the moment." Christine paused. "We have to capitalize on this, Alex. Your publisher is being flooded with interview requests. You need to do as many as you can. This is your chance."

To salvage his career as an essayist, she meant. Interviews meant more exposure, which meant more book sales. He knew how this went. Milk the publicity for all it was worth, use that to get another book deal while the publisher was still excited about him.

Show up all the critics who had used him and his absurdly large advance as an example of what was wrong with legacy publishing today.

"Okay. I'll call Stephen this afternoon and see what they have for me."

"Good. Good. And I'll want a new proposal as soon as you can have it done. Don't let this one slip away, Alex."

"I'll keep you posted." Alex clicked off the line and sat there for a moment, stunned. He'd pretty much written off *Mis-Connected* as a failed experiment, and as recently as this morning, he'd been sure the book he was supposed to be

writing a proposal for would never see the light of day. He made a pretty good living as a freelancer, so that had seemed like a smarter way to spend his time. Until now.

The rain passed almost as quickly as it had come, decreasing to a halfhearted spatter, so he put his car into gear and made the slow, winding drive out of the park onto the rural highway. As soon as he neared the town of Parker, the little icon indicating a data connection blinked to life on his phone's status bar, and he pulled into the first gas station he saw. He had to resist the urge to check his book's online sales rankings, instead opening Twitter to see his mentions.

Tweet after tweet with comments like:

This!

Couldn't have said it better myself.

Finally, a guy who gets it.

Why isn't this guy married? He's totally hot.

Okay, so that last one made him smile a little wider.

And then some unexpected ones:

Anyone know who this chef is?

Has to be Rachel Bishop.

Why hasn't anyone called out @CarltonEspy?

Some of them linked back to the restaurant review that had helped spur this article in the first place, a few of them linking to Rachel Bishop's restaurant or her page on the James Beard Award website.

The first hint of disquiet rippled over Alex's skin. He'd tried to be judicious about the details he'd used, not wanting to send more people to read the disgusting reviews that Espy churned out. But he'd underestimated the cross section of readers who would have seen that review and read the *New Yorker*, or who at least spent too much time

on Twitter. Still, it had to be a good thing, right? It called attention to the unfairly harsh criticism leveled at people in creative careers, specifically women. This was the kind of article you wanted to go viral, compared to, say, a photo essay on Kim Kardashian's butt.

He let out a long breath while he processed the news, then tossed the phone onto the seat next to him and stepped out of his car, headed for the gas station's mini-mart. He'd call Stephen, the publicist who had handled *Mis-Connected* and who incidentally had stopped taking his calls nearly three months ago. But first, coffee. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Thirty minutes later, reviewing the notes spread across his desk, Alex knew he would need more than coffee to get through the coming weeks. The promotion schedule Stephen had set up for him would require a continuous caffeine IV. Print, radio, maybe even some television. The in-house publicist had apparently been instructed to go big while the buzz was still strong enough to catch the attention of segment producers.

He should be excited. He was getting a second chance that few writers did—but those were the books that went on to hit bestseller lists, and his publisher knew it. Christine had to be very specific that he was to do everything and anything they asked of him while she began talking to his editors about a second book.

So why did he feel like he'd done something terrible?

It was because he'd inadvertently given those trolls a national stage, which was exactly what they wanted. And he was profiting from it. The whole thing made him feel like an ambulance chaser.

He made his decision before he realized he was even

considering it, his fingers closing on the plastic-shrouded hanger that held his tuxedo. Mitchell Shaw might be his best friend's father, but he'd also been something like a mentor. In the time Alex had known the family, Mitchell's company had gone from a modest commercial developer to a major player in Denver's urbanization movement, all without losing the guiding principles and morals that had made him a success. If anyone could help him put his uneasiness to rest, it would be Mitchell Shaw.

Alex showered and shaved and then pulled on his formal wear, praying it still fit. He spent most of his time in sweatpants and T-shirts these days; ever since he and Victoria had broken up, there was little need for a tux. To his relief, it fit well enough to wear, even if the trousers' waist was a little loose and the jacket a bit snug across the shoulders, a result of his expanded climbing routine.

Bryan hadn't mentioned what time the event started, but seven was a safe bet, so Alex timed it to pull into the driveway of the Shaws' Capitol Hill mansion a few minutes past. He'd once been intimidated by this hulking 1920s brick edifice, so far removed from his family's modest bungalow in its equally modest east side neighborhood. The Shaws might as well have been the Waynes of Gotham to his thirteen-year-old self. Only later did he learn Mitchell and Kathy had rescued the historic home from demolition during the new wave of conservationism in Denver.

Alex turned over his Subaru to one of the uniformed valets on the large circular driveway, straightened his tuxedo jacket, and strode up the brick steps of the home into the paneled front foyer, which glittered with light from the crystal chandeliers and buzzed with conversation. Dozens of guests milled around with glasses of champagne or cocktails

in hand, the men garbed in tuxedos and the women in operaworthy evening gowns.

He moved into the main parlor and then the dining room, looking for Mitchell or Kathy among the crush of guests. He finally found them in the library toward the back of the house, speaking with a distinguished-looking older couple. Alex took a flute of champagne so he had something to do besides stand awkwardly at the edge of the room and wait to be acknowledged. Finally, Mitchell looked his direction, his eyebrows rising for a moment before he lifted a hand and waved him over.

"What a surprise!" Mitchell held out his hand, which Alex shook enthusiastically. Kathy greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm so glad you came," she said. "Do you know Roberto and Carol Veracruz?"

Alex shifted so he could shake the hands of the couple to whom they'd been talking, as Kathy went on. "Alex is a close friend of our son, Bryan. He's a critically acclaimed essayist and writes for the *New Yorker*, among other publications."

Carol's eyebrows lifted. "How interesting," she said, and did legitimately seem interested. "I'll have to look you up."

Alex smiled politely and exchanged a couple words of small talk before the Veracruzes wandered off to chat with someone else. Now that they were alone in the conversation, Kathy put her hand on his arm. "I saw your post. Beautifully written, Alex. It was something that needed to be said."

"Thank you." Somehow the praise made him feel guiltier. "I was hoping I could grab a few minutes of your time to talk about that, Mr. Shaw."

Mitchell glanced at his watch and considered. "I have a few minutes until dinner. Kathy, do you mind?"

"Of course not." Kathy smiled at the both of them. "I'll go check on the caterers and see when we'll be ready to begin seating."

Mitchell gestured with his head for Alex to follow, and they wound their way through the crowd toward the front staircase, Mitchell pausing long enough to greet friends and acquaintances as he went. Alex climbed the stairs to the second floor behind him, feeling vaguely uncomfortable about taking him away from his own party.

"I'm sorry to crash the benefit," he said. "What exactly are you raising money for?"

"The university arts program," Mitchell said. "You knew Kathy studied music there, didn't you?"

"Yes, I remember her mentioning that." Mitchell had been an engineering major and his wife had studied . . . flute, maybe? However comfortable Mitchell might seem with the high-society set, he'd always enjoyed the construction side of things more. An opposites-attract situation if ever there was one. And it seemed to work, considering they had been married for forty-two years.

Mitchell led him past the first two doors in the hallway, but Alex couldn't help but pause and peer into the second one as they went. That had been his space for nearly his entire senior year of high school. It looked exactly as it had when he'd lived there—four-poster bed, heavy antique furniture, Oriental rug. No matter how many times they had told him he could decorate it to his taste, he hadn't been able to bring himself to change a thing. It wasn't his home, not really, and to settle in like it was would have felt like a

betrayal. And yet when he needed advice, it was Mitchell Shaw he went to, not his own parents.

He hurried to catch up and followed Mitchell into a modest but period-appropriate study at the end of the hall. Alex took the chair that was offered him opposite the desk while Mitchell settled on the other side.

"I take it your parents aren't back yet," Mitchell said by way of opening.

Alex frowned. "Back?"

"Maybe I'm mistaken. I thought they were out of town for a conference this week. We'd invited them to the benefit, since it's their university, but they sent their regrets."

"Right, of course." He hadn't spoken with his mom and dad for almost two weeks; naturally they wouldn't have thought to mention their upcoming trip. Ever since he had abandoned academia in favor of commercial writing, they seemed to think that made him a traitor to the cause.

"What's on your mind, son?"

Alex poured out his concerns without hesitation, telling him how he felt like he was somehow morally culpable for bringing such filth to the attention of the wider masses and profiting off it. Mitchell sat and listened, his expression quietly considering.

"Let me ask you this: what obligation do you have to your publisher to help promote your book?"

"Contractually? It's not really written in."

"Maybe not legally, but there's the expectation that you help promote it, right?"

Alex nodded.

Mitchell leaned back thoughtfully. "And refusing to do it will hurt the sales of the book?"

"Most likely."

“Then you have a quandary. They paid you a great deal of money with the expectation you would do everything you could to make the book a success. If that now conflicts with your personal convictions, you need to decide which is more important to you—those, or keeping your word to someone who has invested in you.”

Somehow Alex had thought that Mitchell would help him come to an answer, not give him more to think about. “You think I’m being oversensitive, don’t you?”

Mitchell smiled. “If there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that you think deeply on everything. It’s what makes you a good writer. But let me ask you one more thing—have you prayed about it?”

Alex shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He’d known it would eventually come around to this, just as he knew he was going to have to answer no. It still wasn’t second nature to him to seek God’s guidance on daily matters. He’d been raised in the Russian Orthodox Church, which focused far more on traditionalist doctrine than personal spiritual experience. By that definition, Mitchell and Kathy, with their nondenominational Protestant beliefs, didn’t even qualify as true Christians. Besides the night he announced he was quitting his PhD program, the moment he told his parents he was leaving the Orthodox Church was the most disappointed he’d ever seen them.

And yet times like now, he realized how much he still reached for some sort of rule book for answers.

Mitchell smiled as if he understood his conflict. “Think about it. Pray about it. The fact that you’re concerned about doing the right thing means you’re halfway there. Just remember, you’re not responsible for everyone else’s actions. Only your own. So whatever decision you make, be

sure you're doing it because it's what God would have you do, not simply because it's most comfortable."

Alex stood and held out his hand to shake Mitchell's. "Thank you."

"You know I'm always here if you want to talk. Are you going to join us for dinner?"

"I shouldn't. I didn't realize you were having a plated meal. Thank you, though."

Mitchell ushered him out of the office. When Alex set foot on the bottom floor, instead of turning toward the dining room with the rest of the guests, he headed for the front door. He would do what Mitchell suggested. He'd weigh his responsibilities and ask God for guidance. He hoped that today God felt like answering back.

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.

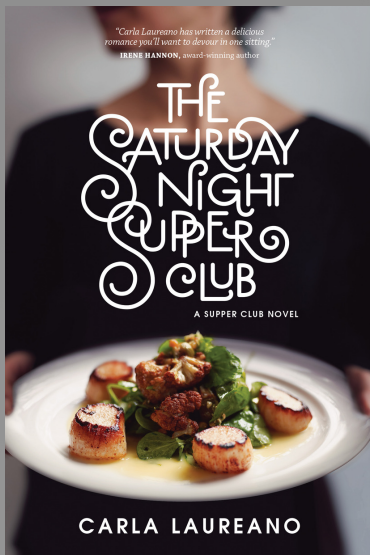
Rhino Crash, the funky bar and food truck pod in the River North neighborhood, is a near-double for the quirky Finn's Manor, home to some of the city's best food trucks.

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.

Enjoyed your sample of The Saturday Night Supper Club?



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