

## Chapter 1



Something's burning. Aunt Jade says if the smoke's white, it's all good. But if the smoke is yellow, I'm in trouble. Which means I have to decide whether I should save the fried radish and egg pancake I forgot to flip or the five sticks of pork satay blackening on the grill.

As the charred scent wafts through the kitchen, I dive for the sticks of skewered pork cubes. The fat on the meat burns with a ton of smoke, and if the fire alarm goes off and the sprinklers kick in, we're all screwed.

Megan snatches the pan with the sizzling pancake off the fire. She shoots me a look. "Dylan, weren't you supposed to be watching the chye tow kuay?"

"T-minus three on order number thirty-eight, sixteen xiao long bao!" Tim calls through the serving window. He's eleven, so he's not allowed into the war zone, but he's handling the counter like a boss, taking orders online and from walk-ins. Tim wrote an algorithm to crunch data and determine  $T$ , the time hangry customers detonate and cancel their orders. "And Auntie Heng's still waiting for her Hokkien prawn mee!"

“I’m on the xiao long bao!” I snatch the cover off the steamer basket and carefully scoop the soup dumplings into a box lined with waxed paper. Like an unstable element, a xiao long bao has a core of minced pork surrounded by a volatile mixture of soup and wrapped inside a thin layer of dough. If the dough breaks, the soup will leak out. One of us will still eat the ruined dumpling, but we should be selling food, not putting it into our stomachs.

Chinese people believe names have a powerful effect on how something or someone will turn out, which is why most restaurants are called some variation of *Happy*, *Lucky*, or *Golden*. Something serene, positive . . . nonviolent. When Aunt Jade set up her Singaporean Chinese takeout here in Brooklyn, New York, she should’ve known better than to call it Wok Warriors.

But maybe there’s more truth to our takeout’s name than meets the eye. Aunt Jade’s a warrior at the stove, tuned out to the chaos and completely focused on conquering her signature stir-fried egg fried rice. The cast-iron wok can burn as hot as the sun, but she doesn’t flinch as flames roar up around it. She grips the handle and uses the curved side of the wok to flip the fried rice into the air. Tossing the food nonstop is the secret to capturing the elusive wok hei—the “breath of the wok,” a deliciously smoky, flame-singed aroma that lingers on your tongue.

Tim sticks his head through the window again. “Chung called—he’s got a flat tire! What should we do about these orders that’re ready to go?”

Shit. Our delivery radius in Brooklyn covers Sunset Park and Bay Ridge, and we usually have two guys on motorbikes handling deliveries. But Uncle Bo’s sick—we call anyone around our parents’ age Uncle or Auntie, though we aren’t related—so Chung’s

flying solo tonight. It's Labor Day weekend, and we're slammed with orders.

I look at Aunt Jade and my cousins. Aunt Jade has a splash of soy sauce on her sleeve. Megan's using a pizza wheel instead of a knife to chop spring onions more quickly. Tim's frowning as he checks the timestamp on five orders waiting to be delivered.

There's a Cantonese phrase Aunt Jade likes to use: "Sup gor cha wu, gau gor goi." Ten teapots, but only nine lids to cover them.

"I'll do it." I yank off my apron and hang it up. "I've got my bike."

We try not to stack more than three orders in each run so the food won't arrive cold, but we don't have a choice. Tim and I load the boxes of food into a gigantic warmer bag, which is so bulky and full it threatens to throw off the balance of my bike. Hopefully I won't wobble into a dumpster or clip one of the cars double-parked along the avenues. Which will give our takeout's name a whole new meaning, since I'll have to wok back. Megan hates my bad puns.

I strap my helmet on and ride along the side of the road, avoiding puddles in gutters clogged with litter and dead leaves. This is the first weekend of September, and even after the sun has gone down, the city's still a giant oven. A thunderstorm drenched the streets earlier, and now the air is not only hot but also unbearably humid. Before I arrive at the first destination, my T-shirt's soaked with sweat.

I make four deliveries, apologizing for the delay each time. My last stop is a Bay Ridge condo on 74th Street. I enter the lobby and show the doorman the slip Tim always staples neatly onto

the corner of the paper bag. The order's for "Adrian R." I hope he'll tell me to leave the food at the front desk so I can get out of here.

The doorman picks up the phone and dials. "Good evening, Mr. Rogers? There's a rider with a meal delivery for you. Certainly, I'll send him right up."

Tonight's really not my night.

I'm headed to the penthouse. When the elevator opens, a guy in his late teens stands in the doorway. He's wearing an oversized Fendi T-shirt over his shorts. With his platinum-blond hair and hollow cheekbones, he could be on the runway at New York Fashion Week. But he's not my type, especially when he's glaring at me like I'm a piece of gum stuck to the sole of his calfskin loafers.

"Adrian R.?" I ask, walking briskly toward him.

"About time," Adrian snaps. "I don't care how good your fried rice is, it shouldn't take over an hour to get here. People need to eat, you know."

My lips are parched from thirst. My fingers are raw from shredding ginger. My feet are sore from rushing around the kitchen and pedaling my bike faster than ever. But sure. People need to eat.

"Sorry for the long wait." I hand him the paper bag. Over his shoulder is a stunning view of the Brooklyn skyline through the floor-to-ceiling windows. "Enjoy the food."

I'm about five feet to the elevator when an outburst makes me spin around.

"What the hell is this?" Adrian holds up the box of fried rice, his face contorted with disgust. "This isn't what I ordered!"

I warily retrace my steps. Tim rarely messes up the instructions. "Ten sticks of pork satay and two boxes of egg fried rice with shrimp?"

“AND NO SPRING ONIONS!” Adrian rips the slip from the bag and thrusts the piece of paper in my face. “The note is right here! So why is my dinner covered with clumps of gross green stuff?”

Tim even highlighted the special instructions in yellow. But in the chaos, we all missed it. The spring onions are sprinkled on top and can be scraped off. But I get the feeling that suggestion may make our angry customer go nuclear.

“I’m sorry, this is our fault,” I say. “Your food was paid for online, and the refund will go back to the credit card you—”

“I don’t want a refund. I want what I ORDERED!” Adrian explodes. Road rage is bad, but food delivery rage is on a whole other level. “Am I supposed to be happy to have MY OWN money returned for dinner I PAID FOR but didn’t GET after waiting for over AN HOUR? What kind of moron do you think I am?”

“Come on, baby.” Another male voice drifts from inside. “Let’s order pizza, okay?”

The guy who comes into view makes my train of thought jump the tracks. He’s around my age and looks half Asian, half white. He’s wearing nothing but boxer briefs—which means Adrian’s parents probably aren’t home and the two of them have the entire condo to themselves. And all I can think is, why is Adrian having a meltdown at the poor delivery guy when he could be, I don’t know, licking whipped cream off those abs for dinner and dessert?

“Stay out of this, Theo. I’m handling it.” Adrian glowers at me. “What if I’m fatally allergic to spring onions? And all you can say is sorry? Is your chef blind or illiterate?”

Blood rushes to my brain. Aunt Jade works six days a week from dawn to midnight. She never gets to let her hair down—literally, since she’s always wearing a chef’s hairnet, doing the

kind of backbreaking work I'm pretty sure this guy has never done in his life.

"You have every reason to be upset that your food wasn't prepared the way you wanted," I retort. "But you have no right to insult the chef, who happens to be my aunt."

"I honestly don't care." Adrian points a finger in my face. "You know what? Since you're not even remorseful, I want compensation."

I blink. "You didn't eat the food. And we're giving you a full refund—"

"I want compensation for the emotional distress you've caused. Punitive damages are a thing. My dad's a senior partner at his law firm."

I bite on my lip, reining in my anger. Threatening legal action is nuts, but if he's allergic, we could've made him sick. Food preparation is a responsibility, and we screwed up this time.

Because we ran late on this batch of deliveries, I ended up getting more frowns than tips this evening. I dig into my pocket and pull out a few crumpled fives. Guess Clover won't be getting her favorite bacon dog treats this week.

"I'm sorry, this is all I've got on me," I say. "If you want more, you'll have to call the shop and talk to my aunt—"

"Adrian, stop it. I mean that."

The guy he called Theo comes to the door. His brown hair is short on the sides and sticking up in wet spikes on top. His boxer briefs have ARMANI on the waistband. I always wonder why people bother splurging on branded underwear practically no one else gets to see. Maybe it's for times like this, when the delivery guy has had a tough night and could use a pick-me-up. Okay,

Dylan. Stop staring. You don't need to give his boyfriend another reason to murder you.

"Fine, whatever," Adrian says to Theo before narrowing his eyes at me. "I'm never ordering from you again. And I'll be leaving one-star ratings on all the review sites, telling everyone how your food could've KILLED me."

He shoves the box of fried rice into my hands and slams the door in my face.

I stand there, stunned, before I walk away. As I exit the building, Chung texts that he's fixed his flat tire and he can take care of the rest of tonight's deliveries.

Stifling convections of heat and exhaust fill the air as I sit on the curb next to my chained bike. My stomach lets out a growl, and I open the takeout box. They say culinary masters dish out fried rice with a bit of egg stuck to every grain. I'm probably biased, but I bet Aunt Jade could give them a run for their money. I take the plastic spoon and shovel the fried rice into my mouth. Even though the food has gone cold, it still tastes like the best thing ever after this shift from hell.