

# Missed Connections

*a novel*



*Aimie K.  
Runyan*

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HARPER MUSE

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Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC, 501 Nelson Place, Nashville, TN 37214, USA.

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ISBN 978-1-4003-5326-2 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-4003-5325-5 (TP)

ISBN 978-1-4003-5327-9 (downloadable audio)

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HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (<https://www.harpercollins.com>)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

CIP data is available upon request.

Art Direction: Halie Cotton

Cover Design:

Interior Design:

*Printed in the United States of America*

§PrintCode

*For Kerry Schafer aka Kerry Anne King,  
without whom this book may have driven me insane.  
You are an amazing crit partner, nurse, author genie . . .  
and, above all, friend.  
You have my humble thanks.*



*Cooking is like love. It should be entered into with abandon or not at all.*

—HARRIET VAN HORNE

*Of all the high-end culinary guides produced by major tire manufacturers, the Michelin Guide is easily in the top three.*

—SAM DENBY, HALF AS INTERESTING



## The *Brigade de Cuisine*

Developed by Auguste Escoffier in the nineteenth century, the hierarchical kitchen-brigade system was born of Escoffier's experience as an army chef in the Franco-Prussian War (for more on that conflict, see my novel *A Bakery in Paris*) and is still used in fine-dining establishments the world over, often using the original French terminology. The modern restaurant kitchen has adapted these roles to fit their needs, but the hierarchy has remained much the same for a century and a half. The following terms do not comprise an exhaustive list, but they may help some readers better appreciate certain details in *Missed Connections*.

### BACK OF HOUSE:

- *Chef exécutif*: Executive chef who manages the menu and the vision for the kitchen but is not directly involved in the running of the kitchen unless also serving as head chef.
- *Chef de cuisine*: Head chef in charge of the day-to-day operations of the kitchen who makes final decisions regarding the menu in conjunction with the executive chef, if there is one, or the general manager and the sous-chef if there is not.

- *Sous-chef*: Deputy chef, second-in-command of day-to-day operations and the head chef's right hand. The sous-chef leads service in the absence of the head chef and plays a key role in the smooth running of any kitchen.
- *Chefs de partie*: Station chefs are responsible for a specialized area of the kitchen. Examples include:
  - \* *saucier* or sauce chef
  - \* *pâtissier* or pastry chef
  - \* *rôtisseur* or roast chef
  - \* *entremétier* or vegetable chef
  - \* *chef de tournant* or swing chef (substitutes for any station lead)
- *Commis chef*: These entry-levels chefs assist the station leads. They may specialize in one area or move from station to station as the head chef wishes.
- *Escuelerie*: The staff of dishwashers and kitchen porters who keep the kitchen clean and running efficiently.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

- *Restaurateur/CEO*: Responsible for the business side of the restaurant and its branding. Nowadays, usually represents investors for a larger "restaurant group."
- *General manager (GM)*: Oversees the day-to-day running of the business end of the restaurant and is charged with making the restaurateur's vision come to life.
- *Maître d'hôtel*: Assists the GM and organizes staff schedules. Oversees seating and makes sure all is running smoothly during service.
- *Sommelier*: Wine steward who curates the wine list and works with the head chef for pairings. Manages bartender and cocktail servers.

- Expediter: The crucial link between front and back of house. The expediter ensures all orders for a table are served at the same time and helps pace the timing of individual courses.
- Servers: Led by the head waiter, the servers are the public face and beating heart of every restaurant.



## *Prologue*

MAY 2000

SANTA BARBARA COAST, CALIFORNIA

### *Serendipity.*

The word sags under the weight of the expectation it evokes. One can hardly read it without the mind racing into a dozen flights of fancy. If a person is fortunate enough to encounter the serendipitous, will it be something as momentous as discovering the cure for cancer in a lab mix-up? Or will it perhaps be something more mundane . . . like finding a ten-dollar bill in last year's winter coat? Is it presumptuous to say that serendipity is *ever* mundane?

After all, that ten-dollar bill might give a young woman an excuse to treat herself to a coffee before going into the office.

While waiting in line for her coffee, she might fall into conversation with a tall and handsome stranger.

The conversation with the tall, handsome stranger might bolster her confidence, and she'd finally be bold enough to ask for a promotion at work.

She might, in time, become a leader of that company. A com-

pany that will ensure that very same cure for cancer is readily available across the globe, free of charge, and save countless lives. Including that of the tall, handsome stranger.

A ten-dollar bill just might be all the serendipity it takes . . .

But in this case, Serendipity is a charming seafood restaurant on the coast of California, forty-five minutes from Solvang, where the lovely Sabrina Sorensen has spent her entire young life. The darling girl has no idea how apt the restaurant's name is, nor will she for quite some time.

It's Sabrina's thirteenth birthday, and she's dressed in her finest: a new A-line periwinkle-blue dress that plays up her Nordic-blue eyes. The dress is nice enough, but it pinches at Sabrina's chest. But it was the dress her mother, Robin, insisted on because it was "the most appropriate." Rather than choosing a dress that fit properly or altering the garment to accommodate her daughter's developing body, Robin preferred to purchase a too-small brassiere to flatten Sabrina's bosom. The result isn't entirely effective, but it is wholly uncomfortable.

In a similar vein, Sabrina's hair is styled in two long, blonde braids. Not stylish, but pretty and neat. Robin believes that allowing preteen girls to dress and style themselves like adults leads to smart mouths and small acts of rebellion in the beginning. But if the unruly behavior is left unchecked, it results in a late-night summons to the county jail with bail money in hand.

Sabrina hates the childish clothes and hairstyle, but if she'd put up a fuss, it might have risked her birthday dinner. So she wisely decided that dressing like a child to please her mother is a small sacrifice to pay for being treated like a young lady by her father.

Tonight, there is no older brother competing for their father's attention. No younger sister to spill milk all over the table or cry at the slightest provocation. No mother to constantly scold and

correct. Just an evening for Sabrina to be with the one person she feels truly understands her. Her father is dressed in a suit as well, which makes Sabrina feel as if he's taking the evening just as seriously as she is.

"What looks good, Sabrina?" Her father, Jannick, an immigrant from Copenhagen, prods his daughter. His eyes dance with merriment rather than reproach. She's studying the menu with all the seriousness of Scripture and looks terrified as she peruses the list of unfamiliar dishes.

She casts her eyes downward. "I don't know."

Her mother, while well-meaning, is always so quick to make decisions for her daughter that Sabrina often finds herself cowed when faced with them. Sabrina also knows her mother doesn't exactly approve of this outing, which makes Sabrina even more hesitant.

In the past few weeks since Jannick formed his plan, Robin had mentioned several times—loudly—that when she herself had turned thirteen she'd been more than happy with pizza and ice cream with three of her friends at the local pizzeria. It was, in Robin's view, fancy enough for a child. After all, the red-and-white checkered tablecloths had been made from actual cloth rather than plastic. Anything more is an extravagance.

Serendipity, with its blanched linens and polished crystal, is akin to a fairy castle in Sabrina's eyes. More than an extravagance, it is the stuff of dreams.

But Jannick, thankfully, had been able to win Robin over to his point of view. Sabrina is sure her father is the only person who could persuade Robin to agree to anything she wasn't already in favor of. But Jannick has always been a special case for Robin. He'd gone from being a poor carpenter's apprentice when he first arrived in Solvang to becoming one of the most respected archi-

tects in the region.

He supports his family admirably and revels in the opportunity to take his children on excursions such as these. Jannick hopes to impart his love of fine cuisine to at least one of his children. Their oldest, Brian, seems all too firmly entrenched in the meat-and-potatoes camp, much to his father's dismay. Their father-son outings generally consist of professional ball games in Los Angeles, where nothing on the menu is more complex than a hot dog. The baby, Chloe, at five years old, still thinks chicken tenders are the pinnacle of haute cuisine, though Jannick holds hope her palate will mature in time. But with Sabrina, the timing is just right.

Jannick had already prepped Sabrina in proper restaurant etiquette—beyond the basic table manners that had been instilled since she was old enough to hold a spoon. The hurdle will be getting over her fear of trying new foods, a fear that developed as a result of her mother's strict policies against food waste.

Jannick couldn't fault his wife for her fastidiousness in this area; he'd known hunger himself a few times in his life. But it did discourage the children from any spirit of adventure when ordering off a new menu.

"Take a chance. It's not the end of the world if you don't like it, *min skat*." He reaches across the starched white linen of the tablecloth. "Let's pretend we're Michelin food critics. We'll order—and eat—like the professionals."

Her keen eyes narrow. "Michelin? Like the tire company?"

Jannick smiles broadly. "The very one. They began reviewing restaurants and hotels in France to encourage road trips when automobiles were new."

She considers this a moment. "So their tires would wear out faster?"

He chuckles, the corners of his eyes crinkling in the way Sab-

rina loves so. “Already thinking like a businesswoman. Precisely right. But their little red guides evolved into something far bigger than they ever envisioned. They became the standard by which all fine-dining establishments are measured the world over.”

Sabrina sits mesmerized by her father’s words. “How is eating like a critic different from the way normal people eat?”

He meets his daughter’s serious expression with equal solemnity. “First and foremost, we don’t have to pretend if we don’t like it.”

“Like with Mom’s meatloaf.” As soon as she says the words, Sabrina looks as though she wants to leap out of her chair, snare the words with a butterfly net, and swallow them back inside.

Jannick doesn’t bother to suppress a laugh. “Just so. Your mom’s feelings would be hurt. But a professional chef doesn’t have that luxury. He or she must take criticism as it comes, analyze it for whatever truth it contains, and learn from it. As nice as they are to receive, a chef can’t grow from compliments alone. They need honest criticism too. A plant may love the sun, but it needs rain just as much to take root and flourish.”

Sabrina nods, absorbing her father’s words like gospel. Her eyes widen. “So how do we order?”

“We each get an entrée, a main dish, and a dessert, but we don’t get the same ones so we can sample each other’s, and we get to experience twice as many offerings. As we eat, we’ll give each dish our honest appraisal.” Jannick grins as his daughter’s face lights up at the prospect. It was a grand meal indeed when the family shared an appetizer at a restaurant. Dessert was almost always drugstore-brand ice cream or nothing at all. A full three-course meal per person seems an unthinkable luxury.

She is about to be introduced to a world where an entrée is not a basket of mozzarella sticks served with lukewarm marinara

sauce or a greasy platter of potato skins filled with cheese and bacon crumbles—a few chives thrown in to remind the clientele that the dish is, academically speaking, a vegetable. The entrées here are bite-sized morsels meant to awaken the palate and tantalize the patrons for all the delights about to reveal themselves. A true amuse-bouche in the purest sense of the term.

Jannick continues his lecture. “We order with an eye for the chef’s signature dishes. Pay attention when the server mentions the specials. You can often tell from their expression if a dish is truly a chef’s special creation made to take advantage of the best produce of the season, or if it’s just a hodgepodge of ingredients the kitchen wants to use up before they turn. For that reason I generally avoid soups and salads when dining out.”

Young Sabrina listens enraptured, brow furrowed like a young scholar hungry for the knowledge imparted by a sage elder.

He removes a small package from his jacket pocket and produces a leather-bound notebook and fine writing pen she can use to jot down her musings. He promises to make these outings a regular occurrence, and she’ll have the notebook at the ready to record her assessment of their dining experiences. It’s the most grown-up gift she’s ever received, and she’s positively tingling with the prospect of more dinners like these with her father.

The kindly waitress, an older woman with a maternal aura, bustles from table to table but can hear every word as father and daughter discuss the virtues and demerits of the various entries on the menu. When she knows they’ve settled on their choices, she stops by their table.

“This must be a very special occasion.” She addresses Sabrina with the same respect she would an adult, because she senses in her very bones this is what the girl craves. “I trust the young lady has found something to her liking on the menu?”

“I would like the crab cakes, the macadamia nut–encrusted Alaskan halibut, and the pit-hiver for dessert.”

“A good *pithivier* is a delight,” Jannick corrects mildly, not condescending to wink or even look in the waitress’s direction. “I love anything with puff pastry and almond crème. Good choices, *min skat*.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask about the specials.” Sabrina looks as though she realizes she’d forgotten the back page of an important exam.

“Chef has a seafood cioppino on for tonight, as well as a *Canard Montmorency*, which is duck roasted with bourbon-soaked cherries.” The waitress knows Jannick will be looking for her tell, so she doesn’t bother trying to hide which dish is being used to clear the fridge and which one the chef spent three weeks perfecting.

“I’ll have the duck.” Jannick changes his choice of main dish without hesitation. “With the escargots in Chablis to start, and the Grand Marnier soufflé for dessert.” Now he does glance at the waitress with a knowing look.

As they weren’t ordering from the prix fixe, custom would dictate that the server would take their order for each course separately, but he could teach her this next time. And there would be many more next times.

For the next two hours the waitress delights in hearing their running commentary on the food: everything from the ingredients, the choices in plating, and her own service. Thankfully they’ve found the latter exemplary. Jannick has infinite patience for the girl’s questions and revels in teaching his daughter all the moving parts in an establishment such as this. The kitchen hierarchy, from the *escuelerie* to the chef de cuisine himself, is explained not like a pyramid, with the head chef at the pinnacle, but more like the precise inner workings of a watch. No cog, large or

small, is less essential than another. If one cannot perform, the whole apparatus fails to function. As an architect he understands that better than many seasoned chefs.

When there is just enough of a lull in the kitchen, the waitress brings Chef Nathan out to speak to them, and Sabrina reacts as though she's being introduced to the lead singer in her favorite rock band. Nathan will ride that high for weeks, bless her. Her questions are erudite beyond her years, and chef and father are both impressed with the insightfulness of her queries that range from the technical "How are you able to get the crust on the halibut so crunchy without burning?" to the more philosophical "Do you think it's better to use local produce, even if it means limiting your menu?"

She'd noticed several of the items on the menu had been imported quite some distance and, having learned about the concept of a "carbon footprint" in school, is wisely convinced that the food industry—perhaps the most essential industry in existence—must be at the forefront of sustainability measures.

The waitress isn't meant to intervene, but she can't help but become attached from time to time. Along with the check, she brings Sabrina an enamel lapel pin in the shape of a red flower with six petals and a small pearl in the middle. The shape is not unlike the Michelin Star logo, though a bit more refined. The girl beams at the waitress and envelops her in a parting hug.

Father and daughter leave with their stomachs replete and their hearts brimming even fuller. Her dreams are born that day, and her father's mission of opening his daughter's palate—and her mind—to the world is already more complete than he realizes. Heartache is waiting for that special, sweet child. The time will come when the waitress needs to intervene and guide her back to

her path . . . But for now, she can be in no hands more loving and capable than her father's.

So the waitress will bide her time, silently keeping tabs on Sabrina as she grows from gangly child to grown woman until such time as she needs her.



HARPER  
MUSE

## Chapter 1

DECEMBER 23, 2024  
DENVER, COLORADO

*Get it together, Sorensen.*

I've been in enough job interviews that this should be old hat, but even fifteen years into the chase, I've never been to one where my hands didn't shake. From my first gig in New Orleans, fresh out of The Culinary Institute of America at twenty-two, to my last job as general manager of Maison Ortense in Paris, each one sent me into something just short of a panic. Despite this, I land the jobs I want more often than not. Sometimes competence matters more than confidence. And at this stage of my career, I'm able to fake the latter better than most.

I have been working toward becoming a Michelin Guide inspector this whole time, each job another rung climbed on that oh-so-competitive ladder. I've chosen each position with an eye toward making my application to Michelin irresistible . . . when I do finally work up the courage to send in my application.

I also keep an anonymous food blog—The Anonymous Epicure—on Substack to serve as a running portfolio of my food-writing skills that I'll use as part of my application. It has gained

quite the following and has been a nice little side hustle that gives me practice reviewing on the sly. It's also a financial lifeline in this hopefully brief period of unemployment.

I am actively trying to convince myself that this job as GM of 540 Blake in Denver is the next step up on the ladder, and not the setback it feels like. There is no way I am going to blow my chances and apply to Michelin after a failure. I have to wait until my career is on an upswing.

Fun fact: No one but those in the most secret of Michelin's bat caves (okay, they're probably normal offices, but I enjoy picturing them as bat caves . . . don't take that from me) knows the exact number, but it's widely understood they receive *thousands* of applicants for every opening they post. Sure, a huge number of those aren't even close to qualified, but if even 5 percent of applicants *are* qualified, it's one of the most competitive jobs in the world.

It's the job I've wanted since I was thirteen, and I've never considered doing anything else long term. I've made it a point to move on as soon as I feel too comfortable. And I've had jobs I've loved. Absolutely loved. But when that happens, I pack up for a new city and a new job before I decide to settle there forever. Though in the case of Maison Ortense in Paris, the decision was made for me. I'd been hired as GM to help debut head chef Joëlle Durand earn back the third star that was stripped from the restaurant when legendary chef Eugénie Rosier retired.

It's Michelin's custom to remove a star when the baton of a master is passed on to a protégé. The idea is that the chef needs, and deserves, the chance to prove themselves. Our investors gave us two years to reclaim the honor, and when we failed to do so, both of us were unburdened of our employment and replaced with new blood. Seeing Girard Bodin, Joëlle's cocky sous-chef, take over

her place had been a blow. They wanted to throw him in right at the holidays, perhaps to prove he was up to the challenge. Or perhaps to deny Joëlle the chance to demonstrate—again—that she is a world-class chef worthy of following in Eugénie’s footsteps.

It’s not that I wish Girard and the new GM ill . . . I just don’t put a lot of energy into wishing them well.

It didn’t matter to the investors that we’d worked our asses off and had done some damn fine work. It didn’t matter that a third star is never ever guaranteed. It didn’t matter that the Parisian restaurant scene is one of the most insidious old boys’ clubs in existence and all manner of decks were stacked against Joëlle. The dirty little secret is that once a woman like Eugénie shatters the glass ceiling, it re-forms again right beneath her feet, this time reinforced and bulletproof, like the windshield of an armored car, so other upstart women can’t reach the same heights.

But as unjust as it is, there is nothing to be done. We’d been given a timeline to make it happen, and we failed to meet the benchmark. Fairness never entered the equation.

Since leaving Paris a few days ago, I have succeeded in being philosophical about this career setback. Most of the time. Perhaps we *could* have done things better. Perhaps not. It’s not out of the question that Michelin was set on making Joëlle pay her dues for more than a couple of years before restoring the third star. It’s possible there would have been no way to change their minds and we were never going to succeed in the time frame we’d been given.

But we’ll never know, and no good will come of speculating how it could have turned out differently. Though, I confess, in darker moments the temptation to Monday-morning quarterback the situation is too great to resist.

I force my head back in the game. This is a job interview, and I

desperately need a win. I *need* this job, even if it's not in a key city like Paris, New York, or Hong Kong.

I should be grateful to have any sort of interview, especially during the busy holiday season. I'd been surprised at the invitation—and on just two days' notice—but decided it would be worth the detour on my trip back to my hometown of Solvang, California. 540 Blake wants someone to start early in the new year, so the new GM would have the January lull to formulate a plan for a profitable Valentine's Day and Denver Restaurant Week, and they were willing to carve time for interviews during one of the most hectic weeks of their year. The investors must be worried and want someone in place to right the ship's course.

I've never spent much time in Denver, apart from layovers in their infernal airport, but the city is fast becoming a player in the industry and is worth paying attention to. Each city has its own quirks, and I'll need to learn them in order to succeed. I've arrived early enough to eat a meal here before the designated interview time. Incognito—Michelin-inspector style. It will give me more to talk about in the interview, and I might decide to write the place up in my blog for the sake of content if I don't land the job. Conflict of interest is never a good look.

To work at Michelin, one has to be a chameleon. Not easy for me, who at six foot two stands out no matter how hard I try to camouflage myself. In other cities I would dress for a business meeting. I generally stick to well-tailored clothes in good fabrics, usually in dark colors. Boring but convenient. It's easy to hide in a sea of pin-striped suits.

Unfortunately, Denver, as I gathered from quick research, is too casual for the smart suits and dresses I wear in other cities. I've opted for my usual preferred travel garb—dark knit wide-leg pants and top with a duster jacket. Comfortable for hours

crammed in a plane seat but still put together enough for a job interview in one of the most casual cities in the US.

I step out of the car and stride into the building, moving as though I belong there. The feeling that I am somehow an impostor is ridiculous; I am just a diner like any other. The interview is an hour and a half away, and this is my chance to see what I'd be working with if this job comes to fruition.

It's time to chase the nerves away and assess the place with my Michelin hat on.

I scan the dining room from the other side of the currently vacant host stand. Patrons are wearing enough denim and performance fleece to prove the cursory research right—pinstripes here would have stood out like a red dress at a funeral. I was raised in the California Casual aesthetic, sure, but could all these people possibly be coming in from or headed out for hiking or skiing? Do Denverites really go to work dressed like this? I shake my head and wait several more minutes for the host.

I take advantage of the host's absence to begin my appraisal. At first glance 540 Blake is your typical trendy hot spot for up-scale food. Understated all-lowercase signage on the outside. Minimalist décor on the inside. Starched white tablecloths, substantial flatware without embellishment, sleek glassware, stark white floral arrangements with spindly branches. Lord spare me, strands of bare Edison bulbs hang from the ceiling. It's like the proprietor has taken a checklist of all the must-haves for a high-end modern eatery and followed them meticulously. Ruthlessly, even. The result is that there isn't a bit of personality in the place. I feel like I am in a desert of black and white, thirsting for any splash of color. Unfortunate, but fixable.

It's eight full minutes before a scowling woman comes to the host stand.

“We’re full up for lunch service.” She grumbles rather than speaks. She is tired and harried. And a disheveled front of house never bodes well for calm and order in the back of house. That will take some work to fix.

I summon a smile for the beleaguered woman. “I have a reservation. Meredith Turner?” A fake name I used when making the reservation—I always use one when I’m blogging, just like Michelin inspectors do, to make it harder to trace the blog back to me. I like to imagine that, in those secret bat caves, Michelin has random name generators to produce forgettable pseudonyms. The trick is that inspectors have to remember them—and can’t reuse them—so I try to keep to the same standard with my blog.

The hostess glowers down at an iPad affixed to the host stand, and she heaves a sigh when she spots my fake name. I notice not all the tables are full, but the poor hostess is acting like they have a huge backup. This tells me they don’t have enough waitstaff to cover their real estate. She shows me to a two-top in the corner and thrusts a menu in my hands.

I take out my phone, open a blank sheet in the Notes app, and peck out my first impressions:

*540 Blake*

*\*Service could use improvement. Cold welcome. Kept waiting.*

From a professional standpoint I am grateful that in the digital era, taking photographs of food and scrolling on one’s cell phone is accepted practice in a fine-dining establishment. It sure beats the old days described by retired inspectors of sneaking off between courses to discreetly scribble notes on a covert notepad in a restroom stall. All the while hoping an overly officious staff member wouldn’t check in on them during their third such trip out of concern that something was dreadfully wrong with the food.

But for the rest of the patrons, who should be fully present for their dining experience, it's a shame so many are distracted by their phones. My father would have hated it. He introduced me to fine dining in the era just a few short years before everyone had cell phones glued to their hands. Had I been my baby sister Chloe's age, introduced to the restaurant scene five or ten years later, I liked to think he'd have held my phone hostage until the bill was paid.

He *might* have indulged me long enough to take a photo of an exceptional meal. Maybe.

I'll never forget the year he took me—just me—to a place on the coast called Serendipity. It was a standard white-tablecloth, tie-preferred sort of place, but to me it seemed like a fairy palace. It's gotten a Michelin Star in recent years, but back then it was grateful to have been mentioned in the guide, even without the distinction. I'd fallen in love, not only with the food, but also with the theater of it all. From the gracious host to the especially kind waitress and the introduction to the chef, it was a spectacle.

I read the menu. It isn't laminated but is a loose sheet of paper tucked into a leather backboard designed for this purpose, suggesting the offerings are changed frequently. A good sign. It's printed with elegant but unadorned script on thick linen paper, much like a résumé. Appropriate. A menu is very much a snapshot of a head chef's CV. Not the whole of their repertoire, unless they're foolish or they're running a chain restaurant with a ten-page menu, but it should represent a wide variety of their skills and talents.

The first thing I notice on the menu is the prices. They wouldn't be out of line in New York, Singapore, or Paris, but seem, according to my cursory market research, a solid 25 percent too high for Denver. That is something crucial to bring up in the interview,

as one of the five criteria Michelin takes into account is “value for the money.” If they want stars, they have to play it smart.

While few Michelin contenders sell their food on the cheap and their prices invariably go up as soon as they affix the red plaque with the white star on their door, value is still a consideration. It’s one thing to drop a few hundred on a good meal that will leave you talking about it for weeks. It’s quite another to shell out that figure for a meal that leaves you wanting a cheeseburger afterward.

The next thing I notice is a huge number of offerings that include vanilla, sweet and savory dishes alike. It’s unconventional as a signature flourish, and I hope the effect won’t be too cloying. I’m fond enough of the flavor, but too much of any one note can be tedious. But if it’s the chef’s trademark, it would be my responsibility to select dishes that highlight it. Ingredient quality is another tenet, and I hope the chef has brought their A game with some exceptional home-brewed vanilla.

My options selected, I scan to the bottom of the menu and see the words *Executive Chef Edward Fairbanks* printed in small type.

Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.

I consider leaving then and there. I could message Nora, the director of operations for the restaurant group that recruited me. I could claim my flight was late and if I stayed for the interview, I would miss my connection back to California. That I’d risk missing my kid sister’s engagement party unless I went straight to California. But if I flake on an interview, word will get around. I might not get another GM interview, and it would set my career back even further.

Edward will block me from being hired here. I’m as certain of this as I am of my next breath, but that won’t reflect as badly on me as my not showing up to the interview.

I had done as deep a dive into research as I could, given that the interview was offered on short notice. Edward must be very new to the place, or else they aren't crowing too loudly about his association with the restaurant. Which, given the industry rumors about him, might be true. He had a spectacular failure in New York not long ago: a nouveau-industrial nightmare called Nava.

Out of morbid curiosity I'd taken the opportunity to eat there while on a weekend stay in the city last year, and it was as awful as the reviews said. Most newspapers and magazines either left tepid praise or omitted the place from their reviews altogether. I assume his investors had sway in publishing to bring that about. But even if they'd secured a glowing review in the *Times*—and they didn't—it wouldn't have been enough to drown out a sea of bad word of mouth among the foodie crowd.

I had referenced the place in my blog, briefly, as a place to skip if on a short trip to New York. I'd offered up one short sentence about the bad ambience and discordant flavor pairings and suggested three other "edgy" places that better managed to hit the mark. It was perhaps untoward to review an ex's restaurant, but if the chef had been a total unknown to me, I don't think I would have done anything differently.

Actually, that isn't true. I'd have done a full review and panned the place the way it deserved. But as a kind and magnanimous ex-girlfriend, I'd refrained.

It would seem he came to a less competitive environment to start over. But the investors won't plaster his name all over the place until he's earned some accolades. Accolades in the form of a red-and-white plaque one affixes to the front entryway.

Knowing Edward, this has to be eating at him. He lives for the recognition that comes with being an executive chef. To have his

name kept on the down-low would be the worst sort of blow to the ego. I almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

I *am* glad to see he isn't making the same mistakes with garish ambience and discordant flavor pairings. If anything, he's erring too far in the other direction. He couldn't even come up with a name that was more exciting than the address, for crying out loud.

I decide to stay the course. Chances are, an executive chef isn't in-house on a Monday. I'd escaped seeing him at Nava, and my luck may extend far enough to avoid an encounter here. I'll do the interview and save as much face as I can.

I bury my face in the menu and pray I can stave off embarrassment.

But fate has *really* decided to mess with me these days.

"Sabrina fair, listen where thou art sitting," a familiar voice croons from above me. "Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave."

I look up from the menu and there he is. Edward. Not Teddy. Never Eddie. Always . . . Edward. His bronze hair is a little grayer around the temples, a few more lines at the corners of his eyes. Still devastatingly handsome. And quoting the Milton poem for which I was named, which is a low blow. My mother envisioned a delicate water nymph of a daughter, not a sturdy Viking maiden; a fact she reminds me of often. In her reading she somehow missed that Sabrina Fair is a valiant warrior queen.

I study Edward's face. Has his ego mellowed with age? Unfortunately, my experience has shown the opposite is more likely. Chefs' egos age like whiskey: They don't mellow. They become more complex and nuanced. More potent, oftentimes. But mellow? No.

I pause for the briefest of moments and consider the possibility

of lying to his face and telling him that he must have mistaken me for someone else. But, unfortunately for me, I am a terrible liar. It's also unlikely that my doppelgänger is walking around Denver. Copenhagen? Maybe.

"I didn't know you were much for Milton." I like to think my words are laced with confidence and bravado, but I probably just sound like I have a cold. "It's nice to see you, Edward. Or Executive Chef Fairbanks, if you prefer. Well done, you."

His black chef's coat with *Fairbanks* emblazoned on the right side above the words *Executive Chef* is sleek and fitted. He must have gone to the expense of having it tailored rather than deigning to wear something from a garden-variety uniform supply shop. Very on-brand for him.

"What brings you to Denver?" His eyes are on me, assessing. Classic Edward. Always analyzing. Always scrutinizing.

"Oh, just a long layover on the way home for the holidays. Lots of travel lately, and I couldn't bear the thought of airport food for another meal. You know how it is. And when I heard you had a new kitchen, my curiosity got the better of me." There. Not entirely true, but believable.

"I'm flattered you'd take an interest after all these years." I think I detect a flicker of sentimentality cross his face but dismiss it just as quickly as the machinations of my own mind.

"I've always rooted for you, Edward." *Even if you didn't believe me.* The unspoken words hang heavy in the air over our heads, like a noxious plume of kitchen smoke we both want to escape.

He averts his eyes for a moment and clears his throat. "What looks good to you?" He gestures to the menu I've set aside. I'm unsure if he's taking my order or asking for an assessment of his repertoire, but the answer is the same.

I glance back at the menu. "I was drawn to the scallops for the

starter, the lamb for the entrée, and the vanilla bean panna cotta with the gingerbread *espuma* looks especially intriguing for the dessert?” I voice it like a question. There is nothing in the rules against asking the staff, even the executive chef, what’s good that day.

He nods. “Good choices. Add a beverage pairing: white, red, and a dessert cocktail to go with it, and you’ve got yourself a meal. Want to see the wine list, or do you trust me?”

I consider. “Both, actually. I’d be delighted to follow your advice, but I’d love to see what your list is like.” Key information I’ll need for the interview. I might as well ace it since I’m here.

“Are you doing the sommelier thing these days?” His eyes sparkle as they search mine, hunting for information.

“Not now, but I did several years back. Boston. Eight years ago? Nine?” It seems like a lifetime.

His brows rise. “Impressive. Coming right up.”

He strides off to the kitchen, and the surly hostess provides the wine list a few minutes later. Her expression has softened somewhat, but she looks bone weary. She almost trips over her own feet as she hands it to me.

“So sorry.” She reddens as she rights herself. “Our expo quit last week, and I’ve been doing two jobs. Dead on my feet.”

She snaps her jaw shut as she realizes she probably shouldn’t confide this in a patron. It explains a lot. The expediter is the link between the front and back of house. There isn’t a role more important in the running of a restaurant. Efficient waiters and talented chefs mean little if there is no communication between the two. To ask the host to do both roles is like asking someone to juggle flaming batons while doing figure eights on roller skates. Technically feasible, but incredibly difficult. And disastrous when it goes wrong—which is a near certainty. I give her a

sympathetic smile, and she rushes back to the kitchen.

*Get your house in order, Edward. You know better than this.*

He'd do better to run expo himself and leave the cooking to his sous than to have an inexperienced host try to do two jobs at once. And he certainly shouldn't have taken the time to visit with me when they're down a key staff member. I suspect there is a fair amount of chaos in back of house, and the previous expo snapped. Probably mid-service. Edward didn't run a Zen kitchen fifteen years ago, and I doubt very much that has changed.

In the unlikely event I get the job here, it will be quite the hurdle to get Edward to change his ways. I consider searching online to see if the previous GM ran screaming into the night, but high-end places like these do their best to keep their dirty laundry off the internet. They're classy and spread gossip by word of mouth, the way nature intended.

It's a full twenty minutes before I see the scallops and another five after that before the waiter, just as harried as the host/expo, remembers to bring the white wine Edward selected to go with it. The scallops appear fresh—always a concern of mine when eating seafood so far from the coast—and the vanilla cream sauce is a bold choice to accent them, especially with the strong undercurrent of rum. The sauce is mellow enough that it doesn't overpower the delicate flavor of the scallops and draws out their flavor without giving too “fishy” a finish on the palate. Full marks for the tenets of “mastery of flavor and cooking techniques” and “the personality of the chef represented in the dining experience” in the entrée.

I consider those criteria the most important, so it's a promising start. The Alsatian Riesling, a bit on the sweet side for an aperitif wine, has a hint of citrus that cuts the sweet notes short. A strong start overall, but the Reisling is served a few degrees too

cold, which masks many of the nuances in its flavor. Not an insurmountable problem, but one that Edward should address with his sommelier.

The lamb is brought out before I can finish the scallops, which is never ideal. Colorado is known for its lamb, and I'm excited to see what Edward has done with it. Vanilla again. This time it's a vanilla balsamic glaze that is, admittedly, amazing. His saucier is very good at their job, and I hope Edward knows this and does all he can to keep them happy and on his staff. The vanilla in the glaze is distinct from the one used in the cream sauce. It's earthier and contains notes of whiskey, rather than rum, interlaced with it.

The problem is that the lamb is overcooked and far too dry to serve to a customer. The last of Michelin's tenets is "consistency between visits," which I can't yet comment on, but there isn't even consistency between *entrées*, which means the kitchen needs an overhaul. There had clearly been an issue with the scallops that resulted in them holding the lamb back too long and reheating it before bringing it out. It's usually fine to "fire" a dish gone cold once right before serving, but there's been a mix-up in communication, and the poor lamb has seen the frying pan at least two times more than it should have. The two stalks of asparagus on the side are limp and pale too. It'll be weeks until asparagus is in season, and he should have chosen a different side that's in its prime. The whole point of a frequently changing menu is to serve food in season. The red wine shows up, only two minutes late this time, but is a rather forgettable local blend.

I snap a few photos that show the lamb's dryer-than-sawdust texture and push the plate to the side. Despite the excellent glaze, it's just too overdone to finish. The dessert arrives, beautifully presented on a comically oversized plate. The waiter doesn't think to clear my entrée plate, which is left moldering at the side

of the table.

The vanilla bean panna cotta is more complex than I expect, with bottom notes of cinnamon and coffee that take me by surprise. The gingerbread *espuma*—a fancy word for “foam”—is clearly a nod to the festive season and leaves me salivating. It’s earned an entry in my top three desserts.

Ever.

It’s good enough that, for a few moments, I don’t just need, I actually *want* this job. I have visions of talking Edward into an entire themed dessert menu around the *espuma*, a Dessert High Tea before the matinee of *The Nutcracker* at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Sumptuous dishes to make the Sugar Plum Fairy and Mother Ginger proud. It would be a sensation. Moments after I’ve taken my first bite, the bartender presents me with a vanilla-infused hot buttered rum, the likes of which I’ve never tasted.

I consider the meal through the eyes of an inspector. Were the last course the only course, I’d insist Edward ought to get two stars immediately, and to the devil with protocol. Taking the first and last courses into consideration, I’d give him a confident recommendation for a star. But with a clunker of a main dish—the remains of which still sit festering on my table—I could not offer him my recommendation. And while service isn’t an official consideration, it is a dereliction of duty not to clear a plate. Given that a decent amount of the meal has been left untouched, the waitstaff really should have asked if it was to my liking.

*Edward, you are better than this.* I wish chefs’ coats had lapels so I could grab his and shake him by them. So much potential. So much talent. So many needless screwups.

I start to take some notes on my phone. There are a lot of things I want to discuss with Nora. I don’t relish the idea of work-

ing with Edward, but I know I can help this place run better. To get his buy-in, I would have to frame it as helping to take a lot of the day-to-day mechanics of the place off his shoulders so he can focus on his vision—which is objectively incredible.

Edward emerges and his face falls when he sees the uneaten lamb on my plate, but he says nothing about it. He arches a questioning brow.

“The dessert was absolutely incredible. The cocktail too.” It’s the truth and he deserves to hear it.

“And the lamb?” He glances down at the barely touched plate. It speaks for itself, but he is insistent I speak the words out loud.

“Subpar, I’m afraid.” It’s the closest thing to a diplomatic response I can offer without disrespecting both of us with a lie.

His eyes flash cold. No hint of sentiment or nostalgia there now. His eyes land on my phone for a moment and then fix on me. “I’m sorry to hear it. By the way, good luck with your interview . . . *Ms. Turner*. Don’t forget to mention your little experiment with *The Anonymous Epicure*. I’m sure Nora will find it fascinating.”

The glow I’d felt from the warm rum cocktail and the decadent dessert dissipate instantly into frozen mist. *Play dumb, Sabrina*. “Edward, I’m sure I have no idea what you mean . . .”

He cocks his head, his expression just a degree short of lethal. “You’re not the only one keeping tabs on old chums. Your little blog got too big to go unnoticed, and you made the mistake of writing up too many restaurants in the cities where you worked. Not to mention your voice and style are obvious to anyone who knows you. It wasn’t too hard to make the connection.”

Shit.

“Let me make this simple. You panned Nava, but I won’t let that happen again. You mention my restaurant in your little blog

*at all* and I'll make sure every chef worth their coat from Bruges to Beijing will know who you are."

"Listen, Edward, if I *did* run a blog, there is no way I'd platform this"—I gesture to the uneaten food on my plate—"Even to pan it. I'd hate to alert readers to the existence of this place. Unless you turn the ship around, you deserve to fail like you did in New York."

His face goes ashen, but he regains his composure. "Appearances matter more than truth in this business, Sorensen. Plenty of people are looking for the Anonymous Epicure and would be all too happy to believe that it's you. And once your name is out there, it will be hard to regain that *anonymity*."

His cards are all on the table now. He has the power to block me from getting this job. I'd resigned myself to this as soon as I saw his name on the menu. But that isn't enough for him. He is poised to take out my blog and any shot I might ever have of Michelin too. Aside from my father, Edward is the only one I ever told about my Michelin aspirations.

And it's clear he has no compunction about ruining all of it for me.

## Chapter 2

DECEMBER 29, 2024  
SOLVANG, CALIFORNIA

Mom, please. You have to listen.”

Robin storms into the room in a cloud of Chanel perfume, Chloe trailing in her wake. Chloe’s voice, usually soft and restrained, carries effortlessly over the empty restaurant without the din of patrons and waitstaff to dampen it. The pang of panic in her words is unmistakable.

I peer down from the stepladder from which I’d been hanging fairy lights in the Oak Room of the Laerke Inn, our family’s preferred event space for decades, as the dutiful spinster does when her baby sister is having a pre–New Year’s Eve engagement party.

Chloe had decided to hold the party on December 29, giving people something to do in the weird void between Christmas and New Year’s. A lot of her childhood friends would be in town for the holidays, and having it now would save them a trip. Plus it was a Sunday night, so the venue rental was cheap. This is totally in line with Chloe’s people-pleasing mindset. She probably racked her brain trying to find the least obtrusive date that would maximize the guest list. Off-peak pricing? Even better.

“You have no experience planning these things, Chloe.” Our mother’s dulcet tones lace the air like an arsenic cocktail. The more she speaks, the more I’m glad there isn’t actual poison handy, lest I be tempted to take a swig. She has a maddening way of speaking as though she rules by fiat.

Chloe’s jaw actually drops. “Mother, what are you talking about? I plan events for a living.” It’s the closest I’ve heard Chloe come to challenging Robin in ages. Good for her.

Robin looks at her youngest with an indulgent gaze that one might give an errant six-year-old. “It’s not the same thing, darling. Weddings are different. We’ll do the seafood buffet like the Hansens did for Astrid’s wedding.” She takes Chloe’s hand and pats it. “You need to trust me to organize things. It’s the appropriate thing to do.”

*Appropriate.* Her favorite word. I feel my shoulders droop in exhaustion, and the party hasn’t even started. At least I haven’t had time to stew about my interview. How I aced it. How it will all come to nothing anyway. How Edward needs my help to get his house in order, but there is no way he’ll accept it. I’ve started looking at other opportunities, but it’s still the holiday season and hardly anyone is hiring. The overt threat to my blog and Michelin aspirations weighs even heavier over my head. There is no way I’d cover 540 Blake or any other of Edward’s restaurants on my blog now . . . even to praise them. But he is just the sort of person to blow my cover just because he’s mad at the world. He thinks he should have made it bigger by now, and he hasn’t.

So, yes, the upshot of being in Solvang is that there’s always too much drama surrounding . . . everything . . . to dwell on my own misfortunes. The downside of coming home is pretty much everything else.

Rather than meet Robin toe-to-toe, Chloe shrinks. “Chris is

allergic to seafood, Mom.”

I’ve only met Chris, a very bland investment banker sort, three times before this trip, but I already knew this about him. He isn’t just itchy-hives allergic, but ambulance-ER-anaphylaxis-level allergic.

Robin chuckles as if indulging the prattling on of a willful child. “So we have the caterers make him a steak. Astrid’s wedding dinner was so lovely. People talked about it for months.”

The red in Chloe’s cheeks deepens several shades, but she doesn’t speak up. Chris shouldn’t even sit near a fish tank, let alone be in a room where fish is being served. If he ever were to come to a restaurant I was managing, I’d have the kitchen on high alert to keep any kind of seafood from coming within ten feet of him. Liability is a thing.

Chloe bows her head in defeat, and I want to shake her. *Stand up for yourself, woman!* But I’m just as apt to cave to our mother as she is. I just won’t be as sweet about it as Chloe generally is. The problem is that Robin has already got the whole affair planned in her mind. Once this happens, she won’t accept any deviations from her vision.

Robin bristles at Chloe’s displeasure. In her mind, Chloe should be radiating with gratitude at Robin’s magnanimity in sharing her expertise in planning an event that’s *appropriate*. Appropriate for whom, I can’t say. “So what do you have in mind then? Pizza and beer? This isn’t a frat party.” She has her trademark steel-blue glare of disdain, which makes stronger mortals than Chloe quake in fear.

So very much in character for Robin. No one knows better than her about such things, and anyone who doesn’t heed her advice is a fool. No matter that Chloe’s job involves planning *movies*, which is far more complicated than any wedding our family

could afford. The truth is of little consequence to Robin.

I feel the heat in my own cheeks now. Chloe is closing in on *thirty* and has fabulous taste—and she’s far more in step with modern preferences than Robin. But as much as I want to go in swinging in Chloe’s defense, I soften my approach, hoping it’ll lead to less bloodshed in the minutes before we welcome guests. I descend the ladder and wrap an arm around Chloe’s delicate shoulders. She is a strawberry-blond pixie of a thing, and I feel like a giantess in comparison. “I sense a catering emergency. My superpower has few uses, but this is one. How may I be of assistance?”

Mom glares at me as though I’ve just tracked mud in on her clean white tile floors. “Now’s not the time, Sabrina. Aren’t there more lights to hang? You’re the tallest, after all.” She speaks as though my height is a personal affront. Inheriting my stature from my dad’s side was the first of my many offenses against her vision for me and my future. She scans me from head to foot with her assessing eyes. “Did you really *need* to wear heels, dear?”

Chloe stiffens under my arm. “Leave Sabrina alone. I don’t want my maid of honor pecked to death before the wedding.”

I startle slightly. Chloe has a bevy of friends, and I was certain I’d be relegated to guest book detail. “Really?”

She embraces me, careful not to rumple her pale pink dress that looks like it might be crafted out of meringue. “Of course. Who else but my big sister?”

“Chloe, dear, we still have a lot to decide before we finalize the attendants. You have so many friends who would look so nice in the bridal party photos.”

For the first time in my memory, Chloe shoots Robin a *try me, woman* look. She has always been the favored daughter precisely because she never challenges Robin when she insists on

something—which is often. I likely don't fit our mother's *vision* for the wedding party: petite, delicate girls all under the age of thirty who would look pretty in whatever dress Mom picks out and who wouldn't complain about her numerous demands for the day. But Mom is trying to hold her tongue since it's Chloe's engagement party.

"Tonight's about Chloe." I accept a glass of bubbly from a waiter who's loaded a tray of glasses for the imminently arriving guests. I raise the glass in Chloe's direction, hoping to deflect Robin's attention off me. "I want to hear all your plans. I'm happy to help with whatever I can."

Chloe's face lights up, and she looks ready to launch into a rapturous speech about dress fittings and centerpieces when Mom interjects.

"I don't see how you can help from Paris." Robin shakes her head as though I've suggested lending a hand from the International Space Station. I'm momentarily dazed at how resolutely every strand in her shellacked strawberry-blonde bob stays fixed in place.

"I'm not in Paris anymore." I wish I could reel the words back in as soon as I say them. This is not a can of worms I need to open tonight.

"So I suppose you'll be wanting your old room back?" Robin looks half exhausted, half delighted at the prospect. She'd love nothing better than to have me back under her roof to boss around until she's had her fill—a limit we've yet to find. More than anything, she's thrilled at the idea that as the one of us three who's been the most likely to ignore her advice, I'm apparently the biggest screwup. This smarts because, at least at the moment, it feels extremely true.

"No, I have some prospects in Denver." It's a lie, but the best

cover I have.

“Denver? For heaven’s sake, why?” Robin looks horrified, as though I’ve suggested I’ll be renting a stall in a barn rather than an apartment.

“Yes, I’ve already begun settling in.” Another lie. Everything I own is currently in my hotel room upstairs. Any furniture I acquire in a city is generally secondhand and left to benefit whoever takes over my lease after I move on or be donated to the nearest thrift. The life of a Michelin inspector is nomadic: three weeks of travel per month and 275 reviewed meals per year. I have done my best to adapt myself to life on the go so I’ll have the stamina and fortitude I need when I finally get the job. Though I freely admit that the idea of a home base with decent furniture and things like decent kitchen equipment and throw pillows—unnecessary, extravagant throw pillows—sounds wonderful at times. But then, I wonder if I get used to a decent mattress and a nice sofa, will it be harder to go back on the road?

I shove the thought away and turn to Chloe, refusing to put more gas on Robin’s perpetual fire of martyrdom. “I have tons of contacts in catering. I’ll hook you up.”

Chloe beams at me. “I knew you would. I had kind of an off-the-wall idea for the food, actually. I was thinking street food. With cute stalls and everything. I can call in some favors and have them made custom to look like stalls from places we’ve visited and loved. Something different, you know?”

“Oh how fun!” I can envision the whole thing now: tacos al pastor and tamales to pay tribute to their trips to Mexico with a churro station for the kids. Arancini from Italy and banh mi from Vietnam. The stalls are a super-clever touch, and the right caterer might even be willing to buy them after the wedding for use at future events. A list of contacts starts swirling in my brain.

A picture of a stereotype fit for *Merriam-Webster*: Robin actually clutches at the rope of pearls around her neck. “Heavens, no. Why not hold the wedding at a theme park if you’re going to make a joke of it?”

Chloe bristles and I open my mouth to defend her. “I think—”

Robin holds up a hand to silence me. “Nice try with the diversion, but we weren’t done with you yet. Tell us why you left that promising job in Paris for some pokey old cow town?”

I stand straighter, eschewing my usual tendency to slouch in my mother’s presence. “It’s not about the location; it’s the job. It was time to move on, so I did.”

I suspect Robin has loved telling all her friends about the far-flung European cities where I’ve worked. Occasionally I found myself on the East Coast but have avoided the US west of the Mississippi from a professional standpoint since I went away to school. Not because there is any shortage of incredible restaurants here, but, well . . . to paraphrase Elizabeth Bennet, it is possible for a woman to be settled too near her family. And me moving someplace as prosaic as Denver would give Robin a lot less to boast about.

She puts one hand on her hip and heaves a dramatic sigh. “How typical. You got bored and left. How many jobs is this now?”

I do the mental math and opt against full disclosure. “Just the right number.”

“That’s quite enough sass for one night, thank you.” She takes a swig from a flute of champagne. “And quite enough aimless job hopping for one lifetime. Once Brian and Annabelle and the kids head back home, you can have your room back and we’ll discuss your plans.”

Before I can say “like hell we will,” she spins on her heel and shoots one last look back at Chloe. *We aren’t finished here.*

“I’m so sorry, Sabrina. I’d hoped she’d be mellower tonight since it’s a special occasion.” Chloe puts a hand on my arm, and I can feel the sympathy radiating off her like heat off asphalt. Great. She thinks I’m a screwup too.

I turn to Chloe, refusing to succumb to the tears that threaten. “Listen, we’re going to make a pact, right here and now. Neither of us is giving in to her. You’re going to have the wedding you want, and there is no way in hell I’m moving in with her.”

I hold up a pinkie to seal the pact, but Chloe doesn’t reciprocate, her eyes downcast. “Good luck. You know how hard it is to change her mind once she’s set on something. And she’s in rare form today too. We told her we’re covering the cost of the wedding and she’s acting like we told her she isn’t invited.”

Suddenly I’m glad there was “simply no room” at Robin’s house for me to stay this holiday season. With Chloe and Chris in from LA, along with my older brother, Brian, his wife, Annabelle, and their kids in from Portland, it *is* a pretty full house. The little ones have taken over my childhood bedroom, and Mom thought I’d be “more comfortable” in a hotel. Which I had to reserve and pay for myself. And, wow, I’d be conveniently on-site to start preparations for the party long before anyone else thought to show up.

I wrap an arm around her shoulder once more. “Oh, hon, that’s simple. If she were writing the checks, she could call the shots without compunction. You took that from her and she’s hacked off.”

Chloe’s eyes spark with her own threatening tears. “I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings, but it’s important to Chris that we ‘stand on our own two feet’ as he says.”

“You have *four* feet between the two of you.” I point down in the direction of her fabulous shoes, wagging a finger back and

forth. “Don’t let him discount yours.”

As an associate producer for a midsize studio in LA (read: she plans everything for everyone and acts as the executive function lobe of the brain for everyone on set), Chloe isn’t making a tremendous amount of money, especially when compared to Chris, but she is immensely talented and is lucky enough to be making a living doing what she loves. But I worry the small paycheck means Chris and the rest of our family see her work as less valuable. I certainly won’t be one to talk about paycheck size once Michelin happens, but the work still matters.

Fun fact: Michelin guide inspectors are paid roughly on par with public school teachers and are required, by the nature of the job, to live in some of the highest cost-of-living areas in the world. My latest positions have paid well, however, and I’ve lived well below my means. I’ve socked away as much of my wages as possible for years, along with some money from Dad’s estate, so I’ll be able to buy a small place outright wherever Michelin sets as my home base. The hope is that I’ll be able to live comfortably on my salary without the burden of rent or a mortgage.

Chloe brushes a kiss on my cheek. “Thanks for that, Rina.” I smile at the use of the nickname that has fallen out of favor with everyone but her. “I’m going to need you, I think. Mom is set on having the reception *here*. It will be like every other family event for the past century, and it’s not what Chris and I want. I’d hoped having the engagement party here would help appease her.”

I hold up two fingers in a scout’s pledge. “As maid of honor, I vow your venue and catering will be exactly what you and Chris want. Not a bit of seafood on-site.” I make a mental note to discuss security measures, like passwords, with the caterers and other vendors. I wouldn’t put it past Robin to go over Chloe’s head and try to make changes to suit her own tastes despite the

whole thing being on their dime.

She kisses my cheek and dashes off toward Robin to tend to some detail or another before the guests arrive, which should be any moment. Seeing no restaurant staff with free hands, I fold up the stepladder and haul it out of the dining room, looking for someone out in the inn's lobby to whisk it away. Of course Brian and Annabelle aren't here yet to help. She's probably doing a livestream from Robin's kitchen, making organic purées from scratch for baby Bailey or some such thing. Annabelle is happy to be the life of the party, so long as she doesn't have to break a sweat to make the party happen.

That's where I come in. The consummate spinster who's expected to make herself useful while the pretty young things like Annabelle and Chloe get their time to shine.

I stop off in the ladies' room to make sure my moonlighting as an electrician hasn't left me too ruffled. I'm wearing a cobalt-colored sheath dress. Silk, designer, and well made, but second-hand like most of my better clothes. Understated but festive. The black patent heels were perhaps a mistake since Robin is in attendance, but I developed the habit of wearing them in Paris. I already stood out so much there, a few more inches didn't make much difference.

I return to the dining room and admire the effect of my handiwork. I not only strung the lights but also oversaw the delivery of the centerpieces, directed the staff on the best layout for the tables, consulted the chef on the menu and head count, and generally made sure the space was shown to its best advantage. The restaurant is a bit outdated, but we've hosted so many special occasions here over the years, it feels like an extension of Robin's living room. The restaurant doesn't have any stars yet, but it does merit a mention in the guide, which is great for a small place

so far outside LA. On the exterior the inn conforms to the Solvang aesthetic: a quaint white building with dark-timber framing designed to pay homage to the town's Danish roots. The inside is—as my father's people would call it—*hygge*. Comfortable, cozy, familiar . . . exactly what we wanted for such an important night in Chloe's life.

As hard as it is to come home, the Danish flair of Solvang always makes me think of Dad, and I take complicated comfort in it. I don't know if I can claim much aside from looks from my Danish side, but an appreciation for making people feel at home—*hygge*—is one Danish principle I do aspire to. I like to think it's part of the reason I've been called to the hospitality business and why I care that patrons in my restaurants feel welcome. And why serious reviewing by places like Michelin matters. They set and uphold standards that ensure everyone is treated like an honored guest.

I see Robin fussing with one of the centerpieces I've already aligned perfectly with the table.

“Please stop messing with those.” I gesture to the centerpiece that is now off-kilter.

“That's rude.” Mom hisses her words as her eyes flicker to the door to make sure no one is here.

I step closer and use my height to its full advantage to tower over her. “Right backatcha, lady. I've worked all day on this while you all were off getting your hair done, so leave it alone.”

I move the centerpiece back to its original place, never breaking eye contact with her. I swear I can hear a low growl escape her throat, but I refuse to retreat.

“What's wrong, Robin, really?” I use even tones, hoping to engage her in a real dialogue. “This isn't about catering or my moving to Denver.”

“I have no idea what you mean. This is a lovely party for a lovely couple.” I’ve skated too close to something resembling meaningful connection, so the ice shields rise to save her from the indignity of having to be emotionally vulnerable. “And since this is probably the last one of these I will get to throw, I ought to do my best to enjoy it.”

I ignore the jab at my single status. “You should enjoy it because you’re celebrating Chloe and Chris. That’s reason enough.” I accept another flute of champagne and turn back to Robin, who is, to her credit, trying to collect herself.

“And who says I’m not?” She avoids looking at me altogether with an expression of such pained annoyance, I hope Chloe doesn’t see and have her night spoiled.

“Listen, I don’t want to fight. But I do want you to take it easy on Chloe with the wedding. She and Chris will do a fine job. Let them come to you for help where it’s needed. Your relationship will be the better for it.”

Robin purses her lips. “I’ll manage my relationship with your sister without your interference, thank you.”

“Wow, a serious family meeting, and you didn’t think to invite me?” Brian’s booming baritone sounds behind us. “I’m hurt.”

Robin’s demeanor changes in an instant. Golden Boy Brian is now on the scene with his Stepford wife, Annabelle. No doubt my impeccable niece and nephew, Bailey and Asher, whom I’m convinced have never been permitted near a speck of dirt in their short lives, are probably in the care of three specially trained nannies with résumés good enough to get them posts in the Secret Service. They’d want a spare in case one is taken out by sniper fire in Robin’s living room or some such equally likely disaster.

Robin. Loves. Annabelle.

“Not at all, dear. Sabrina and I were just finishing up a little

chat, weren't we?" She shoots me a glare that dares me to contradict her.

I lock eyes with my brother and pray silently he can somehow defuse her. If anyone can, it's her precious baby boy. Perhaps, with Annabelle's help, he can persuade Robin that Chloe's ideas are brilliant and creative. But Annabelle is off taking footage for her feed, and Brian seems more interested in working his way over toward the bar than playing referee. Not that I blame him.

The guests begin to arrive and Robin's face brightens. "Oh, there he is. You two stay here and I'll be right back."

Brian turns to scan the room. "Did Bradley Cooper just show up? Or whoever it is Boomer moms drool over these days?"

I was mid-sip, and a chuckle reverberates in my champagne flute. "I wouldn't put it past Robin to try to get some A-list celebs here for the event. Though whom she's trying to impress, I don't know. I've been wondering that for close to twenty years now."

"Don't be so hard on her. She's just trying her best." Brian gives me a scowl as though Robin is a small child passing off a lopsided cake for dessert at some important dinner and I am the persnickety hostess who insists on perfection.

I successfully keep my tone low. "Trying her best to do what? To be supportive of Chloe and Chris? Not so much."

"It *is* possible for you not to get involved for once. Let Mom and Chloe work it out between themselves." Brian speaks as though reminding his son, Asher, to use a fork instead of his bare hands for the third time in the course of a meal.

I hate when he takes on the "man of the family" persona, as though he can dictate our behavior. I take a step closer, taking advantage of the two inches I have on him. "I wish I could, but you know full well Mom will just steamroll Chloe into whatever she wants, and Chloe will spend the whole day hovering over Chris

with an EpiPen, miserable in a venue she doesn't want. Chloe deserves better than that."

Brian rolls his eyes and wanders off toward Annabelle, who is holding her phone at arm's length, yammering away to her adoring fans. As usual he will be of no help.

The sound of the arriving guests drowns out my frustrated inner monologue, and I decide to play my part and make sure the food and drink are circulated without a hitch. If people are well fed and the champagne flows freely, the better the chances people will stay civil. I'm greeted by a flurry of relations, many of whom I haven't seen in ages. I'm about to greet my ancient aunt Carlotta when Robin uncharacteristically loops her arm in mine. "Come, I've someone I want you to talk to."

The dread washes over me as she hauls me across the dining room. It's either some long-forgotten relative, one of her boring-as-beige-paint friends, or . . .

"Darling, you remember Tim, don't you?" She purrs like a cat who caught the mouse.

Tim Espersen. The literal boy next door from my childhood. Mom had pushed us together at every opportunity, but I'd resisted. He had been a foot shorter than me, pimpled, and a massive computer nerd. I wasn't popular or charming either, but I preferred hanging out with my dad and futzing around in the kitchen to forced social situations where neither party would have enjoyed themselves.

But the Tim before me looks nothing like the Tim from high school. He's tall and confident, and his skin has mercifully cleared up.

"We had four years of English and science classes together, and a few other classes too. I think I can dredge up a memory or two." I extend a hand toward Tim and wink. I actually wink.

What on earth is wrong with me?

“True story. I could never keep up with Sabrina in English, but I like to think I gave her a run for her money in science. Except chemistry. You slayed in chemistry.” Tim flashes a grin as he accepts my hand in his.

“True enough. Cooking is just edible chemistry. It’s the science I could wrap my head around.” I’d never considered that Tim considered me an academic rival, but it made sense. We both graduated in the top five of our class. I barely edged him out for salutatorian, but I’d not been all that interested in competing against him so much as against myself.

Robin chimes in with her fake titter she pulls out for social situations. “Yes, our Sabrina is quite handy in the kitchen. I’m shocked no one has swept her off her feet yet.”

It takes more than a little self-control to refrain from turning for the door. I instead decide to turn the conversation in the way Robin will hate the most. “I’m six foot two. I’d hate to meet the brute capable of sweeping me anywhere.”

I’m rewarded with a glower. Robin *hates* being mocked. Which is likely why I enjoy it so much.

Tim, to his credit, ignores Robin’s death stare and accepts a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and tips it in my direction. “It’s great to see you, Sabrina. You look the same as you did in high school.”

I snort. “So you come to my family’s party just to insult me? Real nice, Espersen.”

Robin elbows me discreetly but not playfully. She apparently missed that Tim is laughing at my rebuke. She is also incapable of letting the conversation flow without moderating it. “Tim is working in computers in Silicon Valley. Making quite the name for himself too.”

Tech means dollar signs and prestige to her. I don't look over to see her saccharine expression as she daydreams of his opulent house and posh lifestyle. As she envisions living vicariously through me if Tim and I were to become an item. I don't think my stomach can handle it, but I keep my game face on for Chloe's sake. "No surprise there. Tim was always destined for the tech life. I had no doubt we'd all be using some product on the daily with the name Espersen on it."

A slight blush rises in his cheeks. "Yeah, I developed an algorithm that a lot of apps are using . . ." He goes on to list several, three of which are currently occupying prime real estate on the front page of my phone. He hasn't just made it in the tech world; he owns it. Best of all, he's the smart sort that manages to keep from becoming a household name, because who wants that?

"Wow," is all I can muster.

Robin nudges me a step closer to Tim. "Sabrina has been working in Paris until recently. We're all very proud."

I look back at her to check for signs she's been abducted by aliens. Remarkably, there are none.

"I knew you'd be a sensation, whatever you did." Tim looks genuinely happy. "So if you're not in Paris anymore, where are you?"

I decide to keep my lies consistent. "Denver. It's great there. Good skiing, fabulous hiking." I have never skied and only rarely hiked, but at least I've read both are true.

Robin clears her throat. "Yes, well, Sabrina's career has led her all over the world. Who's to say it won't lead her back to California?"

I don't give her the satisfaction of looking at her with disdain but lock eyes with Tim instead. "My plan is to stay in Denver awhile."

“Plans change, dear. Especially yours, it would seem.” Robin fairly purrs the insult.

God how I wish Dad were alive to rein her in. He was the only one who could make her see how unreasonable she was.

I force myself to breathe once again. Just being in Robin’s presence makes me forget how. Just as she is trying to railroad Chloe into her vision for the perfect wedding, she’s pushing me to settle here so I can be open to the mere *possibility* of dating Tim. She’s publicly implying that I am so desperate and my career so unimportant, I can drop everything for the mere prospect of a relationship. And embarrassing me spectacularly in the process.

I beam a Hollywood-worthy smile. “Tim, it was so great seeing you. If you’re ever in Denver, give me a shout, okay?” I shake his hand and turn back to the crowd to mingle. Of course I *won’t* be in Denver, most likely. And I didn’t give him my card. But it was at least a pretense of politeness.

Robin follows hard on my heels. “What are you doing? He is *such* a nice boy.”

I, through sheer force of will, love for my sister, and fear of the American prison system, narrowly avoid throttling Robin right there in the Oak Room. “I’m sure he is, but you don’t have to ram him in my face. He’s just making small talk, and you act like he’s on the verge of a marriage proposal. You were embarrassing me.”

“Embarrassing *you*?” Her expression goes cold. “Maybe it’s just as well. He’s a family friend and it would be awkward. Even if it worked out for a while, you’d find an excuse to end things. It’s the same with men as it is with jobs for you: You never stick with anything long enough to really give it a chance. It’s sad, really.”

I scan the room and see that Chloe is enmeshed in her crowd of admirers, enjoying her moment in the sun. She won’t notice if I leave. I set my champagne flute down on the nearest table. I

don't spare a glance backward at Robin as I exit the dining room. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tim working the room with a confidence I never would have expected of him.

I have worked so hard to get where I am. Sacrificed relationships—even friendships—to get closer to Michelin. It has meant upheaval and change, yes, but Robin should be proud of me and my accomplishments, even if she's not fully aware of my end goal. That's a mother's job, isn't it?

But between Robin's spiteful words, the awful encounter with Edward, and the unrelenting feeling I let down Joëlle and Maison Ortense, I am beginning to feel the weight of it all. Is going after the Michelin job at the expense of almost everything else in my life really worth it?

I've had some amazing experiences these past fifteen years, but it doesn't change the fact that I feel alone in the world, even in a ballroom filled with my "nearest and dearest." And I have felt that way for some time . . . and I'm not sure *any* job can fill that void.

### *About the Author*



Internationally bestselling author AIMIE K. RUNYAN writes to celebrate unsung heroines. She has written eight historical novels (and counting!) and is delving into the exciting world of contemporary women's fiction. She has been a finalist for the Colorado Book Award, a nominee for the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers' "Writer of the Year," and a Historical Novel Society's Editors' Choice selection. Aimie is active as a speaker and educator in the writing community in Colorado and beyond. She lives in the beautiful Rocky Mountains with her wonderful husband, two (usually) adorable children, two very sweet cats, and a pet dragon.



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