

FOR ME AND MY GAL

by

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CHAPTER ONE

"What are the specials tonight?" Shelby asked as she pulled a cropped black jacket over her stiff white blouse in the employee lounge. As long as she didn't remove her jacket, nobody would notice the spaghetti sauce stain on the left shoulder. Dabbing at it last night with a cold wash cloth had merely spread it and she hadn't had time to do laundry because at the moment her life was in total chaos.

Oh, wait, she thought, we don't say "spaghetti" at *Cibo*. There's no such thing as spaghetti or spaghetti sauce. There's *bucatini alla Puttanesca*. There's *capellini pomodoro*. And there was her favorite—to eat, not to say—*Pappardelle Bolognese*.

Todd shoved a clipboard at her, then finished tying his bow tie and began fussing with his black, heavily-gelled hair, making pucker lips at himself in the mirror. She read the printed list out loud to help herself memorize it.

"Fish of the day—seared Mediterranean Branzino with mint gremolata, served with fresh Maricopa Farms English peas and herbed farro."

She looked at Todd with a deliberate grimace. He was used to this routine, but he sighed in his typical exaggerated exasperation, thrusting out his left hip, and said, in a deadpan voice, "Branzino is sea bass. Gremolata is a condiment made of mint, lemon zest and garlic. Farro is wheat, so it's a side dish like rice."

As a student at the Culinary Institute of America, Todd knew this stuff. Without him,

Shelby would have to ask one of the other waiters who would dismiss her with disdain. Todd was good-natured about it. She didn't mind looking like a no-nothing around him. But she couldn't afford to look like a no-nothing in front of customers...or Francois, the manager. The corn cob up his ass was so tight it would take a jackhammer to budge it.

She turned back to the list to check the soup du jour. "Free-range Napa Valley capon with hand-made tagliatelle, roasted cippolini onions and organic Thumbelina carrots."

Before she could make her face, Todd leaned down and whispered, "Chicken noodle soup."

Shelby laughed, then squelched it quickly. The mood here was serious. Serious food, serious mood. Todd raised one eyebrow and looked sideways at her. He was, as usual, putting the gay on for Cibo. He knew tips were better for gay men, so he went all out for his customers in a way he didn't do in private life. His hips never had this much swing in them away from the restaurant. It was expected by the patrons, or so restaurant traditions held, that the best upscale restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area had the best waiters, and the best waiters were gay men. That did not hold true for the females, however. They could be straight or gay, it didn't matter, as long as they were professional and efficient. Shelby knew she was only one flying oyster away from being replaced by a gay man, for no matter how hard she tried, she would never match their savoir faire and elegance. In fact, she saw herself as a natural-born klutz, so her objective from one night to the next was simply to avoid disaster.

Where better to demonstrate klutziness, she mused, than as a waitress in an upscale restaurant? She knew she wasn't cut out to wait tables, but the schedule fit in nicely with school and tips at Cibo were great. If people were willing to pay nine dollars for a cup of chicken noodle soup, you'd expect that. She was lucky to have landed this job, since her only prior experience as a waitress was at the local Denny's. Now if only she could keep a straight face as Todd sashayed

his way between the tables.

She took her order book and started her shift.

In addition to generous tips, one of the best things about this job was the west-facing wall of picture windows that gave her and the diners an unobstructed view of the Bay and the city of San Francisco beyond. At night you could look out at the length of the Bay Bridge sparkling with a white ribbon of headlights and red stream of taillights along its entire length as it hopped to Yerba Buena Island and then into the lap of the City. Beneath the bridge, lumbering cargo ships inched into port, loaded with chemicals from Russia, electronics from Japan and textiles from China. At the far end of the bridge, the outlines of San Francisco's downtown buildings glowed in a series of staggered rectangles, shapes relieved only by the cylindrical Coit Tower and the Transamerica Pyramid.

Shelby especially enjoyed her job on nights when the temperature was warm enough to open up the outside deck to diners. The deck was built on pilings, so it hung out over the rip-rap which lined the edge of the entrance to the Oakland Harbor. Seated there, you heard the gentle lapping of waves below and sometimes the sound of fog horns in the distance. In the early evening, the sunset and the cries of gulls made this one of the most romantic dinner spots in the East Bay. Tonight was such a night, mild and clear, giving patrons a view south to the regular comings and goings of the airplanes dipping low over the San Mateo Bridge on their approach to the San Francisco Airport. In the daytime, if there was no fog, you could even see the delicate orange strands of the Golden Gate Bridge at the entrance to the Bay.

Though none of this was new to Shelby, she still never took it for granted. On any day of her life, she had been able to travel a short distance from her Alameda home and look across the water to one of the most beautiful cities in the world. That view never failed to draw her eye and it still had the power to take her breath away.

The restaurant was busy tonight. It was a Friday at the start of the summer, so Shelby was sure it would be like this all night. More than once during the evening she felt the vibration of her phone where it was clipped to her waistband. She checked the number the first time to verify what she already suspected. It was her mother. When her break came, she made a dash to the restroom and listened to her voicemail in the bathroom stall. Multi-tasking both the phone and the toilet tissue was tricky, but she managed to avoid dropping her phone in the toilet. As she heard her mother's voice, full of exasperation and weariness, she let her head roll limply back on her shoulders.

"Shelby, will you please call me?" her mother said. "I want to give you an update. The doctor released your grandmother this afternoon. An ambulance took her to the rehab place. She'll be there several weeks like we thought. It's called Piedmont Gardens, on the east side of town."

Shelby stood and yanked up her black slacks by the waistband with one hand while her mother talked on.

"I hope you can move into her house like we talked about. It would give her so much peace of mind. And it's such a good plan for you too. You're just wasting money on that apartment anyway."

Shelby pressed the speakerphone button and set her phone on a shelf while she washed her hands. There was a second message, also from her mother.

"Did you remember to go over to your grandmother's house today to feed Oscar and water the plants? She's worried about them. Especially the weeping fig because it dries out fast."

Shelby wiped her hands on a paper towel while inspecting herself in the mirror. She looked better than she felt, she decided. A few strands of honey-colored hair, too long for bangs and too short to stay in her ponytail clip, hung limply on either side of her face. She tucked them

behind her ears, knowing they wouldn't stay there. She gave herself a small, encouraging smile.

"Call me and let me know," her mother continued, "or I'm going to worry all night."

Shelby shut her phone and clipped it back on her waistband, then left the bathroom and collided with Todd in the narrow hallway. He grabbed her shoulders to keep her from falling sideways.

"Whoa!" he said, releasing her. "Watch it."

"Sorry. Just feeling a little stressed. And hungry. I never did get a chance to taste that ooh-la-la chicken noodle soup. I was hoping to get a snack this break."

Todd reached into his pocket and pulled out a Snickers bar. "I heard somewhere that if you give a girl a Snickers, she'll follow you anywhere."

Shelby snatched the candy bar from his hand. "I think that's an elephant, not a girl."

Todd followed her to the makeshift employee lounge, really a cluttered storeroom, where she fell into a faded chair with threadbare armrests, someone's cast off that properly belonged at the dump. She ripped open the candy bar, throwing one leg over the arm of the chair and revealing the small dolphin tattoo above her ankle. "Thanks," she said.

"What are you so stressed about?" he asked. "Finals getting to you?"

"No. Finals I can handle. Mostly it's family stuff."

Todd sat in the chair next to her. This was the first time she'd seen him this week, so he didn't yet know about Nana.

"Tell me." He sounded concerned. Todd was a wise ass most of the time, but he was capable of breaking out of that persona to be a nice guy when required. His dark eyes regarded her steadily and patiently.

"My grandmother's in the hospital. Well, I guess she's not anymore. I've had two messages from my mother since I got here. Nana fell and broke her hip on Tuesday. They put an

artificial one in on Wednesday."

Todd winced. "That's lousy."

"I've been over at the hospital a lot and running back and forth to Nana's house. With studying for finals, I haven't had much sleep." Shelby took a bite of the candy bar as Todd looked at her with wordless sympathy. "Now they've taken her to a rehab place. My mom wants me to move into Nana's house to take care of stuff there. She's got a dog. And plants. She's worried about her plants."

"Are you gonna do it?"

"It's fine with me. It's just the way she asks. I mean, the slams that come with it. Like, your cousin Rachel can't do it, of course. She has a family and a home of her own to take care of. You, no husband, no kids. No responsibilities at all."

"She didn't say that," he accused.

"Not exactly. But she did say I was wasting money on the apartment. Obviously, she meant the chunk that's her money."

"But you're a student. And you're about to graduate and start your illustrious career at Pratt and Rutherford. Two more weeks and you'll be an architect. She must be proud of you for that."

"My dad's proud of me for that, even though it took me seven years to get through college. My mom, I don't know. She has very traditional ideas about, you know, marriage, family, all that stuff. That's what's important to her. I'm twenty-five, still single, with nothing on the horizon. I'm causing her grief, stress, whatever."

"Maybe you should tell her you're gay," Todd suggested. "Then she'd quit complaining that you don't have a husband."

Shelby snorted and bit off another hunk of the candy bar. "Somehow, I don't think that

would be better news to her."

Todd was one of the few people who knew Shelby was gay. Being closeted hadn't been her choice, though. Lori had insisted on it. Lori had never acknowledged her lesbianism even to herself. Considering how it had turned out, maybe that made sense after all. The entire five years they were together, Lori had always been terrified that someone would guess they were lovers. So they had pretended to be roommates and best friends. That was just as well for Shelby's mother's sake, though. Her mother had been the main reason Shelby had never put up much of a fuss about living in the closet. She was sure it would destroy Vivian to know her daughter was anything less than the perfect Barbie stereotype, especially coming so soon after the enormous disappointments of her own divorce and her son's less than model behavior. That was Vivian's opinion, not Shelby's. She thought her older brother Charlie was doing just fine. Dropping out of college and having a child out of wedlock didn't strike her as the earth-shaking disaster their mother maintained it was. But if Charlie's indiscretions could cause her that much anguish, Shelby assumed her own revelation would bring about nothing less than Vivian's personal Apocalypse. No, she thought with a private smile, she would not be going there any time soon.

"Besides," Shelby said, picking two peanuts out of the empty candy wrapper, "there's nothing to tell. I'm not dating anybody now, male or female."

"You mean you might be open to some straight action?" Todd's eyes widened in mock horror.

She shook her head. "Nope. I mean I'm non-sexual at the moment. After all these years of hiding it from my family, this would be a strange time to come out."

"I love irony," Todd gushed.

"I'd better get out there. You too. Thanks for the snack."

As they entered the dining room, Todd whispered, "Lesbians at table seven."

Shelby followed his gaze to see two women reading menus. They both looked around thirty years old, one with reddish-brown hair and the other a brunette. The redhead was dressed casually in jeans and a button-down cotton shirt. Her companion was wearing a lightweight business suit. Shelby nodded her agreement at Todd, then picked up a bread basket and bottle of olive oil. She made her way through the crowded restaurant to table seven and placed the basket on the table between the two women.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "I'm Shelby. I'll be your waiter tonight."

Before she turned up the bottle to fill their oil dish, she tested the spout to make sure it was firmly in place. Last weekend, she'd tipped over one of these bottles and the stopper had popped out, flooding the table and a man's lap with oil. Not her best night. Francois nearly blew a gasket.

"Do you have any questions about the menu?" she asked after the oil was safely dispensed.

The redhead looked up and smiled. She had a friendly round face, wide mouth, large luminous brown eyes and thick, rust-colored eyebrows. "What's the soup tonight?"

Shelby started to answer, then realized she couldn't remember the menu version of the dish at all. All she could remember was Todd's sarcastic joke. She glanced furtively around to assure herself that Francois wasn't nearby, then lowered her voice and said, "Chicken noodle."

The redhead's eyes held hers for a moment, looking amused. Then she peered over the menu at her companion and asked, "Melissa, are you ready to order?"

The brunette, Melissa, nodded shortly and spoke in a husky, confident voice. "Yuzu-marinated halibut."

"How do you want that cooked?" Shelby asked. "Fried, grilled or broiled?"

"Broiled." Melissa handed over her menu, looking satisfied with her choice.

Shelby turned to the redhead, who folded her menu and looked up with a naturally warm smile.

"I'll have the salmon salad," she said. "And why don't you bring me a cup of that chicken noodle soup. It sounds refreshingly unpretentious."

The woman laughed lightly. She looked refreshingly unpretentious herself, Shelby thought, noticing her large, unadorned hands and long fingers as she handed over the menu. These two might be out on a date, even a first date, she speculated.

"Would you like something from the bar?" she asked. "Or a bottle of wine?"

"No, thanks," the redhead replied.

"Actually," countered Melissa, "I'd like a vodka mojito."

Shelby nodded, then left, dropping the food order off with the kitchen staff and heading toward the bar to get the drink. After delivering a bottle of pinot noir to table twelve, she swung by table seven where the two women were engaged in a serious-looking conversation, which abruptly broke off as she approached. She set Melissa's mojito on a paper napkin and departed. The next time she visited their table, to deliver the soup, she caught a bit of dialogue before they stopped to wait out her presence.

"Look, Gwen," said Melissa, her tone decidedly irritated, "I don't know why we can't just enjoy a meal together once in a blue moon without—"

Shelby picked up the empty mojito glass, then said, "Did you want another drink?"

"Yes," snapped Melissa.

Shelby hurriedly left. Apparently this was not a first date. Must have been together a while, she thought, remembering that the redhead's name was Gwen. *Gwen, Gwendolyn, that's a nice name.* It suited her. She had a fresh, casual look, like a girl from the Welsh countryside.

When Shelby returned with the second drink, Melissa said, "Her soup's cold."

"No, no," Gwen said with a wave of her hand. "It's fine."

"You said it was cold," Melissa accused.

"Well, it's not exactly hot."

"Sorry," Shelby said. "Let me get you another cup and I'll make sure it's hot."

Between setting the "not exactly hot" soup down on the bus boy's cart and picking up Gwen and Melissa's entrees, Shelby was pulled in several directions, taking orders and delivering drinks and food. Table seven was no longer on her mind, not until she carried the tray over with the halibut and salmon salad. She noticed, on her approach, that the two women were now sitting sullenly across from one another, not looking at each other. No, it was not a good night for them.

"Here you go," Shelby said as brightly as she could to counter the strain. She set the plates on the table.

"What happened to the soup?" asked Melissa.

"Oh!" Shelby said, inwardly cursing. "Sorry. I forgot. I'll go get it right now."

"That's okay," Gwen said. "Don't worry about it. Now that the entrée's here, I'll skip the soup."

"I'm really sorry," Shelby said.

Gwen gave her a reassuring smile, her quiet eyes conveying a genial lack of concern.

"This isn't right," Melissa said, staring at her plate.

"That's the halibut," Shelby replied, certain she'd gotten the order right.

Melissa poked the fish with her fork. "Yes, but I said I wanted it broiled. This is fried. It looks fried to me."

Shelby examined the fish, seeing that she was right and feeling a sense of helplessness.

"I can't eat this," announced Melissa flatly.

"Okay. I'll take it back." Shelby reached for the plate.

"No. I don't want to wait another half hour for it either. Can you find out what this was fried in? Is it butter or corn oil or what? I'm trying to avoid certain types of fat. That's why I ordered it broiled in the first place."

"I'm pretty sure it's canola oil," Shelby said.

Melissa stared at her for a second, then said, with a condescending smile, "I'd like you to check on that to be sure. At this point, I really don't think I can trust you."

Oh, boy, Shelby thought, no tip for me from this pair!

Francois, who had an uncanny ability to smell trouble, was suddenly standing directly across the table from Shelby, one of his murky eyes open wide with curiosity and the other narrowed at her with suspicion. He stood at attention, his suit perfectly pressed, his left arm bent at the elbow, his right arm straight at his side, posed as if he were a manikin. Of course, he had been waiting, watching her, expecting her to screw up. She thought she could even see a hint of glee in that wide-open eye.

"Is there a problem, ladies?" he asked, smiling his counterfeit smile under his ridiculous little mustache.

"She's gotten everything wrong," Melissa complained.

"Not everything," Gwen corrected. "Nothing, really. Everything's fine."

"No, everything is *not* fine."

"Melissa," Gwen pleaded, "please."

But Melissa persisted. "The chicken noodle soup was cold. We sent it back and she forgot to bring a replacement."

Oh, no! Shelby thought as she heard that damning phrase. She clenched her eyes shut for just a second before opening them to see Francois staring at her, his face pallid with horror, as

if...as if—Shelby remembered another of her mistakes—she had just shaved Parmesan cheese on crab! She was sure she had by now committed every last one of the seven deadly sins on the restaurant commandment list.

Melissa continued her litany of Shelby's failings. "And my halibut was supposed to be broiled, but it's fried."

"Everything else is fine," Gwen maintained, smiling reassuringly at Shelby. "And the halibut may not be her fault. Obviously, it's very busy here tonight and—"

"Chick...en noo...dle soup?" Francois repeated laboriously, glaring accusingly at Shelby. I'm in really deep shit now, she thought.

After an exaggerated sigh, Francois hissed, "Go tend to your other customers and I'll take care of this."

Shelby obediently turned and left, hearing him say, "Ladies, I'm so sorry for all the trouble. Let me get you a complimentary beverage."