

Allison Ashton



SWEET, SPICY, DELICATE



Chapter 1

Early October 2020

“PIPER! IT’S TIME FOR SHARLA to take her break, and you’ve got two new tables out front.”

When they announced the lockdown, Piper Halliday was dancing in a Broadway show. She began October 2020 working in a diner. Piper had thought being a fictional maid in *Annie* was bad enough, but being an actual waitress was worse. The hours were a little better, but the uniform was not an improvement.

“You got it, Ed.” Piper leaned against the wall behind the diner, trying not to be downwind of Jim, the dishwasher. Nothing on him—it was the half-smoked Marlboro hanging from his mouth. Many of the dancers, actors, and even singers she knew smoked at least occasionally. It would be hell on Piper’s vocal cords. Smoker’s voices were for, well, waitresses. She couldn’t work in a diner forever.

Sharla came out to take her break, her light hair slipping out of her bun. Her ex looked more frazzled than usual. They’d never taken their relationship to any serious level, just hooked up at Juilliard when they were both in school. Sharla cocked her head in a silent apology even though Piper didn’t think she needed to apologize for anything. After Sharla got out of Juilliard, she’d accepted some executive job in a fancy hotel. When the theaters closed, Piper e-mailed everyone she knew in New York. Sharla landed them both jobs at Ed’s diner. Ed was an ass, but it beat having no job at all.

Piper slipped her N-95 mask back on and plucked one of her dark hairs off her apron. She stood up. Eleven minutes. Eleven minutes of leaning against the outside wall of a diner, avoiding cigarette smoke and trying not to inhale too much grease. She deserved a fifteen-minute break. Legally. She'd complained when she worked on Broadway too, but she'd always gotten her legally mandated breaks. Since she caught on to Ed's cheapskate ways, she'd started timing how long it took for Ed to call her back inside. He always cut it short. Even worse, sometimes her tips disappeared. She wasn't sure what she planned to do with the information. It sucked not to have a union.

At the moment.

She didn't have a union at the moment.

As she strolled into the diner, she smiled at her boss. *Troll*. The Department of Labor guaranteed her every second of that fifteen minutes. At the same time, the diner could be close to broke for all she knew. Outdoor dining meant less space and as it got cooler, Ed's didn't always fill its tables. Takeout orders didn't help the waitresses. The boss got to any takeout tips before they did.

Jorge started banging pans around the kitchen. Ed must have bitched about his pace again.

Broadway couldn't stay dark forever. She wasn't sure if *Annie* would reopen or that she would be cast again if it did. It hurt to think about her solo and the years of work it had taken her to get to New York and on that stage. Still, all she needed was Broadway to exist. She'd landed one solo; she could land another. At least the Juilliard classes of 2020 and 2021 would be at a greater disadvantage.

Actors Equity kept sending e-mails about how she shouldn't give up on her dreams. Yet the pandemic hit Broadway like a cue ball, sending everyone scattering around the country. So many people were out of work that Piper was lucky to have her diner job in Manhattan. But then, she'd hustled and knew how to be a little extra friendly to the right people.

She came through the diner and surveyed the customers sitting at the outdoor tables.

Did any of the right people ever come in here? Ed's Diner seemed like a hellhole to her. Still, in her years in town, she'd learned that

New Yorkers made weird sacrifices for convenience. She re-tied her apron, lifted her chin, and smiled.

She always served the regulars first.

“Good morning Mr. McAfee, how you doing today?”

“Oh, hi, Piper. I’m hanging in there.” His bland, nondescript face and khakis helped him fade into the woodwork, but she learned everyone’s name once she’d served them twice. He ate there most days—two eggs over easy, bacon crispy, and wheat toast. He liked consistency. She noticed a sticky spot on the table and slipped him a menu as a distraction. She swiped at the table with her clean table rag. Pigeons... Ugh. She understood why the city mandated outdoor seating, but it sure was a pain in the ass. “Don’t need a menu. You know my order, right?”

“Are you kidding? It’s on the staff training exam!” she chirped. When she wore her Ed’s Diner uniform, she took on the role of a waitress who gets the big tip. She wrote down his order, checked the other tables and put the order in.

“Miss!” A woman with a bulldog face flagged Piper down. The woman’s voice was not easy to hear over the traffic.

“Hi, I’m Piper. How can I help?”

“These potatoes are much too spicy!”

She pointed at a regular order of breakfast potatoes, crispy with slices of bell pepper. The rich smell made Piper wish she could have a meal break, although fried potatoes were out of the question. She wasn’t dancing every day to keep her metabolism up.

“So, you’re not happy with them?”

“Damn right, I’m not. They’re inedible.” Piper had taken a negotiation class once. Her agent handled the important deals, but she liked getting her way. Active listening was just one of the skills in her toolbox.

“I’m sorry to hear you don’t like them. You must have a delicate palate to taste Jorge’s secret dash of hot sauce! He only puts one in every huge batch of potatoes. How can I make this right for you?”

The woman’s shoulders drooped and she exhaled. “I can’t eat anything anymore.”

In theory, Piper could ask Jorge to make the lady her own special batch of home fries without the seasoning, but she'd hear about that all week if she messed up his rhythm with a bunch of special orders from those he viewed as entitled Manhattanites. This woman did not come off as an entitled Manhattanite. Piper doubted Jorge would be open to that conversation. A restaurant kitchen was always backstage before the show.

"What would you like? I can give you a three-dollar discount on your meal or bring you an order of French Fries. That's close to home fries, right?"

Diner customers were like toddlers. You had to give them the illusion of control.

"French fries sound good, but no spices."

"I got that," Piper said. She made a note.

"Thank you, dearie." The woman sat up. She almost smiled.

Well, Piper had completed her good deed for the day. Maybe Sharla would get a big tip and Piper would owe her less. It was awful to have red in her ledger where an ex was concerned, even if the relationship had been casual.

Jorge called Mr. McAfee's order. As she served Mr. McAfee, Piper subtly brushed against him, a tactic she used on lone male diners. Sometimes she liked to bring the wrong jam. Men loved to correct her. She never made big mistakes. If you gave them a chance to make little corrections, they felt smart. When they felt good about themselves, they often left a better tip. Win-win. Since she'd made the little comment about the staff training exam, though, she made his order perfect today.

She set down his plate, and he turned his head toward her. At first, she thought he meant to compliment the eggs and bacon, which would have been strange enough. Weren't bacon and eggs always delicious? She needed to dance on the regular again. She wanted to eat more bacon.

"Hey, pull up your mask for a second."

He wasn't a bad-looking man, as men went. She bet that folks found him attractive. His blue eyes stood out against pale skin. He dressed in an understated business casual way. None of that appealed

to Piper, though, and he was definitely barking up the wrong tree with her. Her long dark hair, short stature and the lean muscle she still had from her rigorous dance training brought her male attention all the time. She could always shoot him down after she snagged a good tip. She needed to let him down easy. He was a regular and a good investment. Piper checked for her boss. Ed bent over the register, counting quarters. She held her breath, pinched her mask, and stretched it away from her face for an eight count. Then she put it back in place.

“Has anyone ever told you that you could be on TV?”

Well, as a kid, she'd starred in a commercial as the youngest daughter who could only fall asleep with a blanket tumbled with Dottie's Dryer Sheets, but acting surprised and pleased was the way to turn a compliment into a tip.

“What a sweet thing to say! Thank you!” she gushed.

“I'm serious.”

It's not like there was anything to be ashamed of. This was New York. Half the young women here wanted to be famous. Still, she didn't want to get too far into that subject with Ed nearby. Everybody was happier if she pretended she didn't plan to take the first decent job she could.

Ed headed back into the kitchen. He wouldn't take long. Jorge was sensitive about micromanagement.

She leaned down and handed Mr. McAfee his check. Close to his ear, she said, “Sure, I came here to act.” She felt a little unsteady about telling him the truth, but what was there to lose? “The pandemic closed my show, so I will serve burgers and fries to pay the rent until Broadway reopens.” A swish of the kitchen door let her know that Jorge had kicked Ed out of the kitchen. “I got to get back to work; my boss hates when we linger with a customer and I need this job.”

She stood back up and wrote “Thank you!” in a girly script on his check. He straightened up, took a mental inventory of her, and began writing on a napkin. She shrugged. Everyone had problems these days. Hers weren't so bad, all things considered. He kept scribbling on the napkin.

Find me on LinkedIn—or Google me—Reed McAfee with The Yum Channel. Then give me a call, but be quick about it—I think we can help each other.

He left a phone number and tipped her twenty bucks.

* * *

Helena Chatfield never liked the conference rooms at The Yum Channel. This morning, the too-bright light that streamed through the windows made her head throb. Her fingertips clicked on the glass conference table. She couldn't stop herself. Usually, when an executive wanted to meet about her TV show, her cookbooks, or her endorsement deals, she invited them to her apartment and served them a huge dinner. Beef bourguignon went over well, as did chicken à l'orange. Sometimes she'd even whip up a chocolate soufflé for dessert. Experience taught Helena the types of meals that signaled a huge fuss had been made. They needed to remember her talent, why they hired her in the first place. Over coffee, they laid down any potential changes or expectations before she stated her case. By that time, she'd won them over and, with their full stomachs and satisfied palates, they gave her more than they planned. She loved that they always thought they were the ones in control. That's the power of a well-cooked meal.

When Ron and Gordy wanted to schedule this, though, neither side felt enthusiastic. Maybe Helena would have been enthusiastic if not for the pandemic. Her beloved adopted city was so depressing right now. Even if she had wanted to call some of her old crew together for a one-off catering job, only the worst people threw parties.

She was so tired of it all.

Leila, her agent, offered to come with her, but Helena declined. They needed to see the Helena Chatfield they had hired so long ago, a woman who didn't need the help of a pushy agent. After all, her ratings were fine, and she knew they found her new figure attractive. Some people say you should never trust a thin chef, but The Yum Channel loved to put them on TV. She was supposed to be aspirational.

Today, Helena wore one of her comfort-meets-power designer suits, navy blue, crisp, perfect for business negotiations. One Armani

hung deep in her closet, but this occasion called for the matter-of-fact linen. Dominic, her tailor around the corner, squeezed her in and took in the waistline. The cut was tasteful, though the thinness was evident. It couldn't hurt in a negotiation with television types. She gave in to the flats instead of heels; she just couldn't imagine maintaining effortless balance right now.

She came to the October meeting expecting a standard contract renegotiation. Her proposal for a cross-promotional tie-in between her last cookbook and the next season of *Helena's Country Kitchen* would surely pique their interest. Her books always sold well. Helena arrived early for the meeting. The producer, Ron, and his assistant producer were earlier. Ron stood up and extended his hand. A tall, chubby man, he'd enjoyed many a three-course meal at Helena's apartment. An assistant producer always trailed behind him like a puppy at his heels, but he fired them often. He needed everything just so around him and only accepted perfection. The newest assistant stood taller than Ron but stuck to him like a shadow. Who knows, maybe this one would last.

Helena shook both hands, nodded, then pulled a disinfectant wipe out of her purse. She wiped off her boss' sweaty touch; Helena wanted him off her hands.

"Pandemic," she said. She gave a warm smile, the kind she used for fans.

Ron and Gordy smiled. They indulged their star. They looked at her as if she were out of her mind. But who didn't like a fastidious chef? The three of them sat down.

Too suddenly to be polite, Ron assumed a serious expression. "We need to talk about *Helena's Country Kitchen*. I'm afraid the news isn't good."

A wave of exhaustion hit, making her feel dizzy and nauseated.

"It's the ratings. You know how it is. The channel wants something new every few years. Also...the last part of the Summer 2020 season was a little chaotic. The viewership response was not good. You know we love you, and we love your work. Hell, I love your food, but I'm running a network here."

"Of course," she said. "I expect nothing else."

Did he think she hadn't known how her last season ended, with weak episodes cobbled with suboptimal footage because of her on-set behavior? She'd either thrown dishes and insults, or moved like a zombie through the scenes.

If she were stronger, she could have defended herself. When Helena and her agent first proposed a show where a female chef visited various countries to learn cooking techniques from housewives, no one thought it would find an audience. Yet *Home Cooking Everywhere* fascinated viewers and brought The Yum Channel a major award. It brought Helena a humble degree of television stardom.

Then, the Midwestern conglomerate that bought The Yum Channel decided that no one wanted to see what housewives made in Nepal. So, she hosted *Helena's Country Kitchen* instead. She didn't land any awards, but her many viewers loved her. Her cookbooks, aprons, and kitchenware sold well, even with that terrible photo of her splashed across them. She barely remembered the shoot, and the photo hadn't changed in ten years. A different person stared out from the labels on her spice mix now.

Helena's Country Kitchen fit the network. The show offered a fabricated, down-home version of Helena, complete with a fake Southern drawl. She focused on simple, delicious food loved by the masses with butter, lots of carbs and an unhealthy dose of self-censorship. Only the occasional exotic ingredient dared to sneak onto her plate.

Even if reality shows and competitions drew more attention, a steady demand for instructional programming remained, and she had starred in successful shows for fifteen years. Helena evolved *Helena's Country Kitchen* from a simple demonstration show with almost no budget to the kind of show with high production values advertisers wanted. There were so many reasons to give her another chance.

Helena forced herself not to squint, even though she wanted to study Ron's face and the light in the room was making her head ache. She doubted that he would feel bad delivering this news. Was he anxious? Were they both? Gordy tapped out a slow rhythm with his pen. He watched her as if he expected her to explode. Throw some crockery at a television camera, threaten to fire someone, perhaps? Maybe raise her voice about unprofessionalism? Helena couldn't respond at all. She

couldn't raise the will. When a producer tells on-air talent that a show is canceled, some eggs already can't be unscrambled. Still, she felt disgusted about giving up so easily. She barely recognized this person with crossed legs, a tight bun, and zero ideas on how, and if, to fight back?

She hated that the licensing deal with Home Details Superstore dictated that she remain on a TV show. If she breached the contract, she'd lose the dream apartment she just recently completed.

She should have brought Leila. Her agent would have loved to jump down Ron's throat about how Helena's innovations made up the root of half of his programming.

Ron seemed to predict her line of thinking. "I know your heart was in *Home Cooking Everywhere* but you adapted when we needed you to. Honestly, some of your tweaks even influenced other shows. The network's focus, however, has shifted away from educational programming. Except, perhaps, for one..."

He trailed off, leaving a pregnant pause.

She stifled a sigh, the urge to groan almost overwhelming. The contract held a specific clause: cancellation due to ratings came with a guaranteed offer for another show before termination. It dawned on her that Ron had maneuvered her toward this reveal all along.

"Are you looking for talent for other shows?"

She hoped he received no satisfaction from her ask. Since she'd surrendered, why go halfway? Maybe a Thai cooking show would let her scrape curry pots. She'd been happy enough to do that alongside housewives in Phuket once. She didn't care as long as the ratings remained high enough for her to work out her contract.

"That was my good news. Have you ever taught anyone to cook? As-in, one-on-one?"

She squinted at him. "A recipe here and there."

"Given the motherly nature of your on-screen persona, we think you'd be an excellent fit for a new educational reality show we're producing."

Motherly nature? "A reality show?"

“An educational reality show. It won’t differ much from *Helena’s Country Kitchen*. We will just have an extra person there, one who learns hands-on from you.”

Gordy lifted his arms as if he were about to do jazz hands. “We’re going to call it—get this— *I’m a Millennial and I Don’t Know How to Cook!* We’ll find some charismatic young person who can have on screen banter with an older Yum Channel chef. The young person gains free cooking lessons in the basics, and their rapport keeps things exciting.”

The food should keep things exciting. Making amusing chit chat while teaching a recent college graduate to make grilled cheese wasn’t why she wanted a Yum Channel show in the first place. That said, her contract said they had to offer her another show; it didn’t say which other show.

The meeting ended. Far too much had hit her too fast.

“I need to talk to my agent.” At least Ron, and probably Gordy, knew she had no choice. She needed time to think. Her words rushed out of her even as time crept. The dull throbbing behind her eyes indicated the headache was really setting in. Sometimes, they could knock her out for days.

She searched Ron and Gordy’s faces. Even with the brief meeting time, they’d said all they needed to say.

A reality star. It was the only way. Ten minutes ago, she would have fought this move, this silly show. Now she understood how her survival depended on its success. She hadn’t agreed out loud, but she thought of the view from the window of her library and surrendered in her own mind.

Ron offered a stiff smile. “Sure, talk to your agent. I suggest you decide fast. You’re not the only talent we have.”

Something in the way he said “talent” turned Helena’s stomach.

Chapter 2

Later the same day

ED'S DINER WAS FARTHER FROM Piper's apartment than the theater. Even with all the time she spent on her feet in the diner, she still couldn't justify risking her lungs on the subway or in an Uber.

Her singing voice was her instrument, her livelihood, and this stupid virus was running rampant. So, she walked home every day. At least in October the baked-in heat lifted. New York already smelled a little better. No familiar scent of rotting garbage filled the air. A whiff of chicken rose from the Halal cart. She even loved the hint of char from well-done onions.

It was an improvement.

She'd thought about the weird conversation with Mr. McAfee as she'd finished her shift. No harm if she checked out the offer, right? Piper walked down the street every day, and the relative emptiness still surprised her. She noticed plenty of cars, but few people going places.

Her agent, Daphne, hadn't heard of Reed. She loved the general idea, though. She wanted Piper out of the service industry as soon as possible and didn't mind Piper doing TV. Piper checked Reed's LinkedIn. He was a director and associate producer for The Yum Channel. His LinkedIn page connected to other people at The Yum Channel, so he seemed legit enough. Piper didn't own a TV. The Yum Channel filmed in restaurants all over the city. The featured restaurants hung banners and flyers letting customers know where to tune in and when.

At least reality TV wasn't illegal. Usually. Maybe he created a web of fake LinkedIn connections at "The Yum Channel" to target young women like her. He'd lure them into feet-fetish porn or pitch some pyramid scheme. Now that, at least, had theatrical potential. Much better than complaints about spilled drinks and bad tips. Despite the cold air, the sunny and bright weather meant she was warm enough to amble.

She dialed the number.

"This is Reed." She'd never noticed when he sat outside the diner, but his voice had an NPR smoothness on the phone. She wondered if he'd been an actor or maybe had a podcast.

"Hello, Reed. This is Piper, the waitress at Ed's Diner. You gave me your napkin."

"Piper!"

She didn't even think he faked being pleased to hear from her.

"Should I have waited until I got home to call you? I'm headed there now."

"No, you're fine. Do you watch The Yum Channel?"

"No."

"That's great!"

Did he not hear her? Or did he think it was great that she didn't watch his channel? Piper didn't give a shit whether people ate at the diner or not if they didn't show up sick and the diner stayed afloat until the theaters reopened. Still, what a weird response.

"Another question. Do you cook? Are you good at it?"

"No. My parents worked all day and popped pizzas into the oven when they got home. I eat a lot the same. I'm busy."

"Perfect. I would love you to come in for a screen test for a new show I'm directing. My producer will love you. You'll be an easy choice."

"Easy?"

"I should start at the beginning. Have you heard of Helena Chatfield?"

"She has a cooking show. I know that."

"She doesn't have one anymore. The Yum Channel will feature her in a new show called *I'm a Millennial and I Don't Know How to Cook!*"

“That sounds stupid.” Piper knew that came off too blunt but they needed to know that going in. Plus, it did sound ridiculous. Why trash her generation like that?

“In some ways, it will be stupid, but some viewers like stupid. In another way, we help bridge that gap between Gen X and millennials and turn a new generation onto culinary arts. Once the millennials tune into the network, our crew earns a solid paycheck for a few years.”

“I don’t think that it’s going to deter you that I’m not a millennial? I’m 27. I’m on the Gen Z cusp.”

Reed snorted into the phone. “I’m on the Gen Z Cusp and I Don’t Know How to Cook! is a terrible name for a TV show. Besides, since when are actresses picky about their ages? Your ability to calm down customers and even convince them to tip more will come in handy. You need some tricks up your sleeve. I need someone to bring that energy to Helena, a few oohs and aahs, some careful responses to contain the drama.”

Piper liked flattery, but she’d been onstage enough that applause had become a noise that signaled you could head home. “Why does Helena need a handler?”

Piper paused for a red light. An almost-empty bus went by. She stood in front of a closed theater. It wasn’t one she’d ever been in. It still made her stomach knot. No indication when they would reopen.

“You know how stars can be. She’s used to having everything her way. She will be difficult at first.”

Piper wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. But she did like the sound of not waitressing.

“Well, I have to pass the screen test first,” Piper said. “And run this by my agent. I don’t want to be on TV. I want to be on Broadway. My Broadway show was just about to open.”

“This is to pay the bills. I’ve never done a reality show before, but I watched them. The stars all have other jobs that they’re planning to go back to. Since you’ve already been a Broadway actress, you’re not an aspiring Broadway actress. You’re a Broadway actress between jobs. *Annie* is still on hiatus, right?”

“What, did you google me? How do you find an actress in New York City when you only have a first name?”

“Well, I also knew late 20s and a southern accent you forgot to disguise when you’re busy. I decided that you were talented and would have your equity card. You’ve got a great union. Very helpful.”

“They’re trying.”

“In the show, everybody on camera can talk about how you sing and dance for your real job and you took this role for the experience until *Annie* reopens.”

Piper wasn’t naive. Waitressing to pay the bills wouldn’t hurt her acting career. But reality TV? That felt like a different beast altogether. Many actors and directors loathed its kitsch. “Look,” she said, hedging, “screen tests are one thing, but chemistry with this actress? We haven’t even met.” Piper could usually build rapport with anyone.

“She has to agree to do the show first,” Reed said. “She will. I think she knows this is her last chance to keep her contract with The Yum Channel.”

“What if she hates me?”

“She hates a lot of people. Look great on camera, get some cooking lessons and pay your bills. You’ll never leave work hungry. They have to make a vaccine soon, and you can get right back to tap dancing.”

Piper was an actress. She could tap but preferred shows where it wasn’t asked of her. She stopped on another street corner. Some guy asked for change. She ignored him.

“Why are you pushing for me so hard, Mr. McAfee?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you want me and not some other woman off the street? I’ve brought you eggs and bacon a bunch of times. You’ve never seen me act. It seems oddly important to you that I say yes.”

“I watched you talk down crazy-potato-woman in the diner. I don’t want my job to depend on a millennial—”

“I’m on the cusp.”

“Right. Someone in whatever generation who will quit when work gets difficult. You convinced me that you won’t. Helena Chatfield can be difficult herself. And you won’t be intimidated when she gets in your face over something minor.”

“When?”

“When.”

A fire truck cut off the discussion. Piper shifted on the balls of her feet and worked up the guts to ask one vital question. This part of the conversation had to happen.

“So we’re clear,” Piper said. “I don’t have to do anything—I don’t know—personal, for you to get the part?”

“You’re not my type. My wife and daughters would say a few things if I decided you were.” Ah. “That’s why the flirty little tricks you do for tips were so obvious to me.” Reed sounded smug.

“I doubt they were all obvious. I have a PhD in how to get people to tip more.”

“I believe you.”

“I’ll run The Yum Channel idea by my agent,” Piper conceded.

“Fantastic,” Reed said. “I’ll be in touch as soon as Helena says yes.”

Piper said good-bye, then inhaled and exhaled a full breath.

She passed a bodega and the air tasted like coffee. Piper looked forward to stretching out next to her cat and thinking everything over. Her friend Gail had a psychic shop on the first floor. Piper was tempted to stop by, but she wanted to think about her day before she got any input from the spirits. She checked her mail and noticed another thick envelope from her mother. Piper opened it with her nails. Another mask slipped out. This one had purple sequins. She slipped it under Gail’s door.

* * *

Helena wanted to curl up in bed, but experience told her that protein would help, at least for tomorrow. She pulled two eggs out of the refrigerator, cracking and separating them with a smooth set of motions she’d done a thousand times. She loved the sound of a cracking egg.

She tossed the shells into her compost jar. It was an environmental thing, but it was also something that an old-fashioned cook did for her garden. Few individual New Yorkers maintained gardens. Sometimes Helena felt energized enough to walk to the churchyard garden two blocks away. She would sit among the vegetables and brainstorm ideas. They used a large barrel for compost. It looked like a wine cask.

The kitchen's hanging lights could be pulled up out of the shot, but they weren't suited for filming an episode. But the faux industrial pendant lights elevated her design and she had spent over a year deciding on those light fixtures, the scarlet accent wall colors, and matching cabinet pulls.

She beat the yolks, trying to let the motion soothe her anxieties. She set out sea salt and cayenne pepper. One path. She had one path forward. She would teach some girl all about cooking, and she would do it on the network, and maybe if viewers liked it, she could get at least *Helena's Country Kitchen* back, if not *Home Cooking Everywhere*. She had given the network so much. Was that too much to ask?

In a separate bowl, she beat the whites until they were stiff and dry, clinking her whisk. She didn't need fame or to live in Manhattan. Her equity could buy a house anywhere in the country. Or maybe in Paris where no one knew her name, or face.

Yet she'd worked hard for this apartment, her show, and her friends. She cut and folded the contents of the two bowls together. Was it so crazy to want to keep them? It's not like it would be so hard if only she could return to being herself. She used to be a natural at this. All she needed to do was play The Yum Channel's game long enough to satisfy her contractual obligations to everybody. Of course, to win, she had to smile, play nice, crack a joke here and there. People needed to watch this ridiculous show, preferably without tearing her actions, manner, and body to pieces in internet comments.

An omelet took just enough butter to coat the pan. She savored the crackling. Once she had taught herself to cook, so she could teach anyone as long as she stayed alert and awake. Helena turned the pan so the omelet would cook evenly. Other chefs who worked for The Yum Channel, the young, popular ones, managed to tape four episodes a day, knock out a season in a few months, then leave for the Hamptons. The producers bent over backwards for their stars. She slid the pan into the oven.

Her beautiful expensive oven in her beautiful expensive apartment. She had to keep it. Even if it meant risking further humiliation.

She leaned against the white kitchen counter and closed her eyes. She could get back. All she needed to do was keep experimenting,

finding new things to cook, and showing the world how wonderful and engaging she was. Keep everyone happy, get the ratings, and satisfy her contract. She opened her eyes out of instinct to check the omelet. It was ready. She pulled it out, letting it rest for a moment as she got herself a plate. She took a bite and knew she would eat the whole thing. She had to. It was medicinal at this point. The texture was perfect. Maybe she wasn't entirely incompetent.

Chapter 3

Mid-October 2020

PIPER READ HELENA'S WIKIPEDIA PAGE and felt a thrill up her spine when she noted all of Helena's past girlfriends. There had been quite a few. She and Helena had one common link at least. She found the YouTube compilations of *Helena's Country Kitchen* with no problem. The comments centered around the most recent episodes. Helena Chatfield still looked like the woman on the cover of her series of cookbooks. She had striking bone structure and long, delicate fingers that made Piper envy those past partners. Her bearing was off, though. She couldn't have always lumbered through the kitchen, could she? Piper expected more grace from someone who was, in a sense, a performer like herself. Helena repeated instructions and stumbled over her words. Her chicken and dumplings turned out an unappetizing color and consistency. The Foxtrot Diner back home could serve up better. Piper could see why the producers wanted someone livelier.

The live clips of Helena in rehearsal made Piper's stomach hurt. In one leaked video, Helena tried to bake a meat pie, but the crust collapsed in the middle again and again. As the chef failed, her movements became stiff and jerky and Piper thought she could see tears. Then Helena cussed at the director who tried to defuse the situation. She understood the stress factor, but that unprofessional behavior shocked her. What if that happened on their set? Even worse, at the end of the clip, when Helena's pie collapsed for the final time, she slammed the glass dish against the counter. It shattered.

Piper's gut twisted in empathy as this woman's career fell apart. What pushed her to that point?

There was a loud knock on the door.

She closed her laptop and got up. What on earth? Where she'd grown up, people getting in each other's business was more common; she had come to treasure how New Yorkers left each other alone. Of course the exception had to occur the night before Piper's audition.

"Piper?"

A familiar voice wailed outside her door. She still opened the door on a chain.

Sharla leaned against the doorway. Her puffy eyes looked as if she had been crying for a long time. Why tonight? Concerned that Sharla might scream her name in the hallway again, Piper released the chain. Angry neighbors would be the last thing Piper needed.

"Sharla, come on in. Can I get you something?"

Piper glanced at her refrigerator. She guessed she was offering a drink, though a towel might have been more appropriate. Sharla must have walked here in the rain.

"What do you have to drink?"

"Um, how about a seltzer?"

"Okay. Thank you."

They stared at each other.

"It's weird that I'm here."

"Yes?"

This did not seem like a booty call. Plus, Piper no longer hooked up with co-workers and she still waitressed, even if against her will. She plucked a seltzer out of the fridge and handed it over, opening one for herself. She hoped the carbonation would wake her up long enough to make it through this conversation.

"Listen, babe, I need a place to crash for a few nights. Carlos and I got in a big fight. He'll take me back; he always does. I just need to give him a little space."

Of course, Sharla couldn't stick to music, couldn't stick to women. She sure was one for the easy route. Her cheeks were less puffy now that she was drinking something cold and calming. Her dark blonde hair hung over her eyes until she reached a hand up and pushed her

bangs aside. Her eyebrows pinched. “Carlos flipped out more than usual,” she said. “He told me not to come back. I freaked out. You must have blocked my number when we broke up, or I would have called first.” Sharla gave a sniff.

Piper hadn’t blocked Sharla’s number. It was more like Sharla had known if she called first, Piper would say no. This whole situation seemed weird, but she knew Sharla fairly well and she needed to hit the hay. College friends and art friends were weird, anyway. At least Sharla would leave soon.

“Ok, sure. You get the couch, though. Do you need to borrow some work clothes for tomorrow?”

“That would be awesome. I’ll sneak back into my place tomorrow afternoon while he’s at work and pack a backpack.”

Piper sighed.

“Okay. But you’re going back soon, right?”

Sharla’s tears had started. She didn’t try to wipe them away. Clearly, she hadn’t taken any of the acting classes in school.

“Right. I think he needs a few days. Men, right?”

“Yeah. Men.” Piper let out a snort. “Anyway, I have a screen test in the morning and need my sleep. Let me get those clothes. The cat’s name is Sutton. She’s shy, though.”

Piper picked some of her oldest and least expensive clothes. She’d been a New Yorker for a while and wasn’t as trusting as she used to be. She grabbed her extra key. Was she crazy to hand it over? At the same time, they had worked with each other for months and Piper didn’t own much worth stealing. Besides, she’d slept with Sharla several times, maybe many times. Wasn’t that more intimacy than loaning the keys to her apartment?

“What kind of screen test?” Sharla said when Piper came back with the clothes and the key.

“I’d rather not get into it,” Piper said. “Believe me, if it turns into a job, my co-workers will be the first to know.” Because she would give notice. Now *there* was something to look forward to.

Sharla patted the couch next to her, but Piper ignored it. No reliving the good times tonight. She needed to look fresh in the morning.

Sharla seemed to get the message. “Cool. Thanks.”

“The apartment’s small. I’m sure you can find anything you need.”

“Do you not have a TV?” Sharla asked.

“I’m not here much.”

“It’s cool. I can use my laptop.”

“Sure.”

Sutton’s tail shot up as she padded after Piper into the bedroom.

Piper calmed down by thinking through the preparation she had done so far. She had gotten her first taste of near-nepotism with this casting process. After her agent okayed it, Piper told Reed she was interested. He helped. She sent him her tapes and her application. He provided notes so she could evolve into the producer’s perfect hire. She’d applied to *I’m a Millennial and I Don’t Know How to Cook!* with an application that reflected a perfect complement to Helena. A one-minute video in which she created a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in her apartment’s run-down kitchen cemented her persona. She smiled, flirted, and chatted to the camera. She knew how to ooze charm. She added her usual Broadway audition tape in case they cared.

Reed said the usual procedure took several levels of auditions, but due to Covid the producer wanted to see the best of the best. Or the best of the worst as far as actual cooking skill went.

Either way, she earned a screen test with Helena Chatfield herself.

Piper could have taken a cab, though who knows what kind of coughing, sneezing person would have been in it last. It was an hour’s walk, but she spent a lot of time on her feet these days. She planned to get up and sneak out past Sharla. Piper packed her lipstick, wallet, and a lucky charm she’d gotten at Gail’s shop into a miniature backpack. She figured it made her look less mature, which was part of the role. As she fell asleep, she imagined things she would say to express her appreciation and fascination with all she was learning.

* * *

Helena couldn’t tell you how many hours she slept each night these days. It had gotten worse when she’d lost her cooking show. She bought the nicest sheets, pure cotton thread. A bedroom should always appeal to potential visitors. But now—with her body disintegrating from within, she simply needed a comfortable space. Sheets

needed to wick away night sweats and allow her to sleep as much as possible before the morning's reanimation routine.

She propped a chin on her pillow and willed this morning's headache to dissipate. Mornings were so bright and the world so exhausting.

Somehow, on the morning of the screen tests, she woke at five. She wasn't due at the studio for hours. She liked to think it was a caterer's old habit to rise before the sun but that was a lie. She slept until noon most of the time. The correct move now was to get up and feed herself. She got a lot of eggs from the farm share for mornings like this one. Instead, she stretched in bed. An enormous, way too empty, bed.

When her last girlfriend left, Helena assumed she wouldn't be so hard to replace. After all, many beautiful women prowled New York City. Helena wasn't beautiful, but she wasn't bad-looking and she was at least somewhat famous. Well, that was relative in this town. Still, women had always come to her.

She'd told herself that there were always women around, but somehow, one had never arrived, and she'd never looked, and now she couldn't imagine it. She grabbed her laptop from the other side of the bed and pulled up one of the final episodes of *Helena's Country Kitchen*. She didn't know why she did this. The impulse for self-flagellation was so deep. Would she have given the miserable woman on the screen, dragging herself around the set, another season of a television show? How could anyone make a Virginia ham appear unappetizing? She'd managed to. Worse, she'd failed to communicate that making it was fun.

She wouldn't date herself either, much less follow her recipes or purchase her cookware.

She scrolled down to the comments:

Remember when this show was good?

I'm glad she's not in my kitchen.

I'd still butter her up. She looks like she needs it.

Butter her up? Appalling.

For fifteen years Helena had lived and breathed culinary shows. Catering felt like a distant memory and her contact list felt thin and stale. She couldn't imagine any career other than starring on her own show.

She'd shaped her life around *Helena's Country Kitchen*, and now it was gone.

It was time to imagine an alternative, though. Helena needed a backup plan. She didn't have a cooking program at the moment, and she'd have to be better than the draggy mess on her laptop screen to earn herself another one. It might not happen. She should be planning a different way to live. It would help if she could think clearly at all.

Helena heard a soft clatter as Bettina bustled around the kitchen, about to vacuum the rug. She would miss having a housekeeper.

Maybe, with the right co-star, she could breathe a little life into basic cooking education. In turn, maybe she'd slow her own career's rapid decline.

Helena knew this was a tall order. Basic cooking? The height of tedium in television. As for herself, the compelling spark she once possessed seemed as lost as her network's good judgment. They'd taken her away from projects that fueled her, and her illness had hammered the final nail in the coffin. But perhaps, with the bright-eyed woman from the audition tape by her side, they could find a way to make even boiled potatoes interesting.

She needed to get out of bed by sheer force of will. She needed to make some protein and head for the studio. She had a hopeless child who couldn't cook to meet. The hopeless child sported impressive acting credits and a beautiful voice, though.

Helena stretched out again and set her clock. A wave of tiredness had hit her. She needed a few more minutes. Or maybe a Bloody Mary.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

Sweet, Spicy, Delicate

BY ALLISON ASHTON

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com