## Chapter 1

Cynthia’s black velvet, floor-length dress hung perfectly. The modest neckline flattered her broad shoulders. Rachel had to restrain herself from walking up to her and kissing her right in the middle of the gala fundraiser. But technically, they were both at work. Cynthia was talking animatedly to three men and a woman. They looked very official.~~, so~~ Rachel knew interrupting wouldn’t be right. ~~Plus,~~ She was supposed to be passing these hors d’oeuvres.

Rachel skated the crowd's edge, offering the little pots of lobster mac and cheese to groups of people until she ended up at Cynthia’s side.

“Lobster mac and cheese, anyone?” Rachel smiled broadly, inserting the tray into the circle. A few took the food and a napkin from her, but no one said anything. Cynthia didn’t even make eye contact.

Rachel’s throat tightened. Rachel hadn’t even wanted to take this job. She hated catering gigs for wealthy people or organizations because it all felt inhuman. Food was life-sustaining, but events like this made it feel transactional and dry ~~in Rachel’s mind~~. Rachel’s dream was to cook for a family, to feel close to the people she served, to be part of sustaining them as a group as a private chef. But Cynthia was correct that a job was a job at this point. As she moved on to another group of people, the food dwindled to nothing.

Rachel returned to the kitchen, her white bow tie cutting into her neck. She should have told Cynthia no when she recommended ~~Rachel for~~ this job. ~~She wasn’t a cater waiter, she was an aspiring chef.~~ But the look on Cynthia’s face at the prospect of Rachel having a job made that impossible. Rachel knew she needed to make money; she couldn’t keep accepting Cynthia’s financial support without making something at least.

“If you have time to lean…” the lead caterer said, coming around the corner with another tray—grilled octopus this time. Rachel straightened ~~up~~ her tie and ~~took it~~ headed back into the fray.

“Ready to go?” Rachel was back in her street clothes, and Cynthia was looking at her phone on the steps of the New York Park Terrace Hotel.

“Yeah, I’ll call a car.” Cynthia didn’t look up.

“Everything okay?” Rachel asked, knowing Cynthia wasn’t going to tell her the truth. They’d been together long enough for Rachel to read her body language. Right now, she was projecting annoyance.

“Yes, everything’s great. The event was very successful.” Cynthia looked down the street for the car.

A beat passed as the night air grew colder.

“You didn’t even look at me ~~all night…~~” Rachel said in a low tone. She didn’t want to start another fight, but needed to know why she’d been invisible.

Cynthia finally looked at Rachel, her eyes ready to roll at the insinuation. “I was working, Rachel. This fundraiser for the NICU means we can save more lives. What was I supposed to do? Dance with a cater waiter?”

The disdain dripping from the last two words felt like a polar plunge into the Arctic Ocean.

“You got me this job. You insisted I take it, actually. Why would you do all that if you didn’t want me here?” The walls of protection Rachel carried in her heart snapped shut.

Cynthia sighed and rubbed her forehead. “You have to work, Rachel. This is cooking adjacent, so I thought it would be good. I was very wrong, apparently.”

“Are you embarrassed by me?” ~~Rachel said, without thinking about the potential answers and how much they’d hurt.~~

Cynthia waved at the approaching car. They got in silently. Rachel didn’t take her eyes off her girlfriend. They’d been fighting more lately, and Rachel felt the same panicked fear each time. If she screwed this up, she’d literally be on the street. And she loved Cynthia. They were great together. They rode for 12 blocks in silence as the cabTV blared about new Broadway shows and local mechanics.