

One

Campers

Nose pressed to the window of Ristorante Vito Allegro, I wait for the campers at table twelve to finish their meals and leave. Cretinous raindrops outside race each other down floor-to-ceiling glass. They meld and split again, staggering drunkenly toward the sidewalk. It doesn't matter which of them wins; they're all headed for the gutter, to wash down the street and into the storm drain. Off to the river, the ocean, and back again someday as another dreary rainstorm. Old drops now new drops, beginning the race again.

My breath forms a vanishing cloud on the inside of the window. Squishing my face against the glass is the only way I can see outside at night. Two steps back, and the immense windows turn into shiny mirrors, doubling the size of the dining room. I hate the windows, especially on moonless nights like this one. I'm a department store mannequin, a puppet in a show, on full display for anyone walking or driving by. So, I lean my nose against the polished glass, watching tourists and drunks, madmen and walking tour guides. The late-summer wind blows empty chip bags and red Solo cups in a cyclonic dance down the middle of the street. I wait for something interesting. Something dangerous. There's no telling what apparitions might pass by on a rainy, dark night in Savannah, Georgia.

The campers don't stir. None of them consult their expensive watches. Ristorante Vito Allegro closes at 10:30 p.m. sharp on weeknights and Sunday, and 11:00 on Friday and Saturday. It's in all the advertising and promotional material for the restaurant, and if you miss that, the hours are painted on the glass front door under the restaurant's logo.

It's late Sunday night, and the restaurant is dead. I sent a bunch of the staff home early,

and those of us still working are ready to call it a night and lock up. Then, at 10:25 exactly, a party of four walks in, shaking rainwater out of their hair. Two couples, late thirties, fashionably dressed. I consider turning them away. I could tell them the kitchen is already closed. The computer system's shut down. There are rats. The Plague. But the watches and the women's shoes and handbags cry "money," and there may be a chance of salvaging the evening after all.

I seat them with my most welcoming smile, sculpted and honed to such perfection that my dead mother wouldn't have known what lay behind it. The Smile does half my work during service. I pour it on as I fuss and flutter, pulling chairs, offering menus. Letting them know their server will be with them directly.

Shae Corbin is not smiling. She's the last server remaining tonight, the one I kept when I sent everyone else home. She's also my niece. It's my last dinner shift with her, although neither of us knows that yet.

She's in the kitchen with the sous chef, Chet Hollis, fuming. "Why?" she snaps. "Why'd you seat them? It was, like, one minute to close!" Hollis nods his head in sullen agreement.

I scowl at her. I'm used to fuming from staff. And sullen nodding. Whining. Yelling. Crying even. It's an emotional business. "You know why," I say. "Now, do you want the table or not? Last chance to redeem the night. I bet that's a three-hundred-dollar table, at least. They look thirsty." I know what her response will be. She may stomp her feet and shake her fist, but money is money, and that's why we're here.

"Goddamn it." Shae does stomp her feet and heads out into the dining room, immediately transforming into efficiency and charm. She's good—a stage actor in her element. The guests love her. She knows how to make them feel comfortable and appreciated while simultaneously sucking every nickel she can out of them. She's a stone-cold conman, rummaging through their

pockets while she makes them feel like royalty. Now, she flatters the diners as she steers them to order appetizers they don't really want and talks them into the priciest entrées on the menu. She knows that the more the guests enjoy their meal, the more they'll spend, and the more they spend, the bigger her gratuity will be when they finally pay their check. Their pleasure, their satisfaction, is good for the restaurant's bottom line, and it's also good for Shae's bottom line.

I'm salaried, however, and so is Hollis, so the size of this table's bill doesn't help our bottom line at all. Hollis kept one cook and the dishwasher and sent the rest of the kitchen staff home early. I cut the entire front-of-house staff except for Shae, so now I have to lean in and make cocktails, fill water glasses and clear dishes for the late table. Shae sells the diners a couple of bottles of pricey Argentinian Malbec, and I fetch them from the wine cellar and serve them with the appropriate flourish and flair. In a series of well-honed, fluid gestures, I wrap the neck of the first bottle with a black linen napkin. Cradling the bottle in my left hand, I reach into my right front pocket and withdraw my favorite wine key, my baby. The size of a Swiss Army knife, the wine key is essential gear for every server, manager, bartender and sommelier for freeing wine from a bottle. When the apocalypse hits, all restaurant folks will have one in our bug-out bags. With a practiced flick of my thumb, I flip out the wine key's small, sharp, serrated knife and remove the foil from the bottle's cap. Next, with three turns of the attached corkscrew and a gentle pop, I pull the cork. A sniff and a taste, a pour and a smile, and everyone's happy. My wine key retreats into its home in my trouser pocket.

Cocktails and wine, soup and salad, perfectly prepared entrées and Hollis's not-so-unique chocolate lava cake for dessert. Coffee and cognac. Conversation. And camping. The dishes are cleared, the kitchen's clean, and all the employees sit out of the guests' line of sight, waiting for them to leave. Waiting. Shae drops the check, and I visit the table to make sure they enjoyed

everything. I thank them for coming. They don't get the hint. The minute hand on the clock in the kitchen moves in slow motion. Hollis says nothing. There's nothing to say. We've all been here before.

As the clock creeps toward midnight, I start pulling out old, practiced tricks to shake the campers out of their fat languor. I shuffle a handful of dining room chairs from one table to another. Then I restock the bar, clinking and clanking plenty of bottles together. Next, I go to the front door and make a show of unlocking and locking it again, the ten thousand keys on my restaurant ring jangling like Jacob Marley's chains. I tug on the enormous glass doors for emphasis.

"Oh goodness," one of the ladies exclaims, "it's late! Are we keeping you?"

"Of course not, ma'am." Effusive, comforting. "Take your time. No rush at all." And I stand with my back to the dining room, looking out the window at the racing raindrops.

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My name is Scotland Keyes, but that's not my fault. When my mother issued forth her only child into this world 38 years ago, she fantasized she had given birth to a future aristocrat, a president, some American royalty. That, although the Keyes name had belonged to working-class folks since our ancestors emigrated from Glasgow in the mid-eighteenth century. Our people were farmers, sailors and stevedores. Regardless, my mother had wasted what little imagination she had in bestowing the fanciest name she could think of on her newborn lord. So, my last name is our ancestral family name, and my first name is a place. I haven't found myself elevated into the aristocracy yet, but I do wear the title of General Manager of Ristorante Vito Allegro, so there's that.

I've been in the food and beverage industry all my working life. My first employer, when

I was thirteen years old, was named Shady Oak Catering—emphasis on the “Shady.” I was hired underage and under the table to work events: weddings, receptions, bar mitzvahs, birthday parties, whatever. A couple of other kids and I would set up tables and break them down again, clear and wash dishes, and haul everything in unmarked vans back to the company’s warehouse when functions were over. Our pay usually comprised a hot meal, a few sips of leftover wine, and three dollars an hour cash under the table. To a thirteen-year-old, this pocketful of dollars at the end of a shift felt like bank robbery, and I was sold on restaurant work forever. Over the years, I made my way up the food and beverage ladder—from catering to washing dishes, washing dishes to bussing tables, bussing to serving. Then bartending. Shift leader to headwaiter. Headwaiter to assistant manager. And finally, right before my thirty-fifth birthday, General Manager.

I don’t hate being General Manager. I busted my ass to get here. Along the way, I got good at what I did. People respect me, and I don’t hate that either. I found out just today that I’ve been nominated for the Georgia Restaurant Association’s 1998 Award for Best Manager. Mom would have been proud.

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Eventually the campers rise contentedly, unsteadily, to their feet. Their flushed faces and wide smiles tell me they’re happy, and a little wasted. I unlock the door and hold it open for them.

“Oh my gosh, that was amazing! Thank you so much,” one woman exclaims. “I’m sorry we kept you so late.” She sways to her left and stumbles slightly on her expensive heels.

“Yes, thank you for staying open for us,” her date agrees.

“It’s our pleasure. I’m so pleased you enjoyed everything.” Deferential. Appreciative.

“Can I call you a cab?”

“No, no.” The other man holds up his keys. “We’re fine. We’re going dancing! Let’s go get our groove on!” I cringe as the man does a dance move that looks like a horde of fire ants was swarming his scrotum.

“Ha, ha. Very good, sir.” Amused. “Have a wonderful night.”

“Thank you!”

“Thanks!” And the campers walk out and get into a black BMW parked at the curb. They drive off laughing, and only fate knows if they’ll run anyone over on the way to the dance club, or if they end up in jail for DUI before the night’s over. Probably not the last, though, as they’re all white and wealthy.

I close out the computerized point-of-sale system and count the night’s receipts. The P.O.S. was cutting edge when we’d installed it in ’95, but it’s been getting buggy lately. I have to plead with it to print out a sales report at the end of shifts now.

Shae sneaks up behind me. “Boo!” she says and laughs when I jump. “Every time!”

“Yeah, that never gets old,” I growl. “They take care of you?”

“Hell yeah! Seventy bucks! Glad I stayed.”

“Hmm. Who would have guessed?”

“So,” she says, ignoring me. “whatcha doing tonight? Hot date?” Shae skitters. She hops while she talks. Young twenties after-work energy hums around her.

“Nope. Just headed to the pub for a few.”

“Yeah, I knew that. Same ol’ same ol’ every night.” She puts on a pretty good geriatric voice. “*Watch out, missy!*” She hobbles around the dining room. “*I got to get to my barstool, my party spot, before some other ass beats me to it!*”

“Yeah, you got me.”

“Damn, Scott. Why don’t you take that woman of yours out dancing? Do something fun!”

I smile. “Hanging out with our friends *is* fun, smartass.”

She waves a hand at me in disgust. “Please God, don’t let me get old.”

“How about you?” I ask her. “What trouble are you getting into?”

“Not me, old man.” Feigning innocence. “I’m an angel.” She walks to the front doors and yanks on them, knowing they’re still locked. “Let. Me. Out!” She throws her head back dramatically.

“Hold on there, ‘Angel.’” I unlock the doors and hold them open for her. “Be careful.” I don’t know why I add that last bit.

“You too,” she says. “Don’t fall off that barstool!” She boops my nose with her forefinger and runs out into the rainy night.

“We’re out too, Boss.” Hollis and the dishwasher, José, walk out of the kitchen to the front door. “Everything’s squared away.” He throws me a mock salute.

“Awesome. All right, then.”

“Oh yeah, congratulations on your award! Well deserved.”

“Thanks, Chet. I appreciate that. Have a good one. *Buenos noches*, José.”

“*Buenos noches, Señor.*” I let them both out into the darkness and lock the door.

After locking the day’s take in the safe in my office, I shut off all the lights and check that all the doors are secure. I’m in a hurry to leave. An empty restaurant can be the loneliest place in the world.