

Dr. Mary Chance feared she'd poison half of Liberty on reopening day.

Not that she'd personally put the town at risk. Ethel Lynn Percible's cuisine was to blame. Her slippery hold on culinary skills had Mary wishing she'd dumped antacids instead of mints in the crystal bowl beside the cash register. True, the elderly cook hadn't exactly poisoned anyone. But the historic recipes Mary hoped to serve were soggy, lumpy, undercooked or scorched to a fine black sheen.

A trim woman in a severe grey suit rose from a table. "I hope you were a better doctor than you are a business woman," she snapped. Storming past, she gave Mary a dismissive glance. "You should've opened an emergency room instead of a restaurant. Or better yet, both. *Then* you'd have a thriving business."

For a shattering moment, Mary connected with her frigid gaze. The woman had ordered the lunch special, Martha Washington's beef stew. She'd received a concoction that resembled glue and smelled worse.

In the center of the dining room, the young waitress Mary had rehired fended off a barrage of insults. Delia Molek's voice rose like a violin's plucked string. Cornered beneath antique pewter sconces, she ditched patience and favored the disenchanted patron with steely regard. The gum wadded between her molars snapped angrily with her retorts.

In contrast, the less confident Ethel Lynn remained hidden in the kitchen. She'd suffered a host of culinary calamities since the first customer appeared this morning. Perhaps she was infected with opening day jitters. Perhaps she *would* serve up savory meals once she got into the swing of things. In the fervor of new and disbelieving ownership, Mary had overhauled the menu, bringing back a delectable array of historic recipes. Many of the offerings graced the finest Colonial tables long ago, like succulent beef dotted with cloves and cakes sweetened with Rum. The new menu also featured a Civil War recipe of chicken seared with cherries. The dessert menu included rich puddings and a Spice Cake from the Roaring Twenties so beloved by Calvin Coolidge, he'd made the confection a White House staple.

No wonder Ethel Lynn's skills needed polish. The historic recipes were to blame for her bad start. With enough practice, she'd learn to make each dish with finesse. Customers would no longer risk upset stomachs, and the restaurant would thrive. Glancing heavenward, Mary prayed she'd hit on the problem.

The portly man fled toward the street. Delia marched up.

She said, “He didn’t leave a tip.”

Mary arched a brow. “Would you?”

“With Ethel Lynn running the kitchen? No.”

Given Ethel Lynn’s many years with the restaurant, the remark was unkind.

Letting it go, Mary said, “Count your blessings. At least your customer didn’t demand a refund.”

“Point taken.” The waitress popped a fresh stick of gum into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “So. Your first day as the owner of Liberty’s one and only restaurant is a train wreck. Here’s a fun thought. We still have the dinner rush tonight.”

Mary surveyed the patriotic decorations she’d festooned throughout the dining room, a treasure trove of Americana harking back to the restaurant’s founding in the 1800s. So many beautiful things, but they’d gone unappreciated. Diners noticed little but the glop on their plates.

Her heart sank. “There won’t be a dinner rush. After the meals Ethel Lynn made for the breakfast and lunch crowds, we won’t see a soul.”

Delia wandered to the picture window. “I hope the town council doesn’t burn up the phone lines scaring off our customers.” She squinted at the courthouse anchoring the north end of Liberty Square. “Then again, they have a soft spot for Miss Meg. It might stop them from passing legislation condemning this place.”

“Think I should ask my aunt to fire off an email?” Desperation made a grab for Mary’s nerves, but she convinced herself long-distance lobbying could work.

“Don’t intrude on Meg’s retirement. She’s half a world away, and no longer running the place. This is your problem, sister.” The mirth on Delia’s face died as she added, “We were sorry to see her go.”

*And sorry to see me take her place?* Mary resisted the unwarranted thought. Since her arrival, the town had welcomed her with subdued kindness if not open arms. Sure, the townspeople gossiped whenever they thought she was out of earshot. She’d come around a corner in Liberty Square only to find chattering women huddled on the cobblestone walk. One glimpse of her and they’d burst apart like so much confetti showering down on Times Square. The men were no better. When she strolled the center green before the

courthouse, they regarded her with ill-concealed curiosity. The way they acted, it was plausible she was the town's first new resident in decades.

Dismissing the thought, she said, "I know everyone misses Aunt Meg. She ran this place for so many years." Mary ignored the curiosity glittering in Delia's blue eyes. "She called an hour ago."

"From Tibet?"

"She wanted to know how we were faring on reopening day." Naturally Mary had glossed over the problems they'd encountered. "We didn't talk long. Said she had to get back to the monks."

Delia grinned. "She sure is eccentric."

Incorrigible was more like it. "She's practicing yoga with the monks then having a drink once they retire for the night. How she smuggled booze into a monastery is anyone's guess."

"Makes her own rules, that's how." Delia tipped her head to the side. "She's also an open book. You aren't. You never talk about yourself."

Mary crossed her arms. "I will when I have something useful to share."

The young waitress wasn't buying. "Everyone has stuff to talk about," she pointed out. "Like, why did you take over? Everyone thought Meg would shut the restaurant when she retired. And did you like being a doctor? Do you miss it?"

"Not at the moment." Worry over bankruptcy occupied most of her thoughts. "Well, I miss my patients. If you don't mind, I'd rather not go into details."

Mostly because her emotions were sorely in need of CPR. And her bank account languished on death's door after generous Aunt Meg handed over the restaurant and waltzed into retirement.

In fairness, her aunt's largesse was perfectly timed. Though Mary was loath to explain, she'd eagerly left Cincinnati for a sabbatical from medicine. Slogging through her residency and working long hours in the ER had left her exhausted. Then the unthinkable happened. In a fog of grief, she handed in her resignation at the hospital and packed her belongings. Sorrow over the sudden death of her closest friend wouldn't end any time soon. The passionately driven and fiercely intelligent Dr. Sadie Goldstein was gone. Mary needed time to heal.

None of which was suitable conversation with the gum-popping Delia. Excusing herself, she returned to the kitchen.

The acrid scent of burnt vegetables spiked the air. Before the stove Ethel Lynn fluttered like a bird abandoned in the carnage of heaped pots and pans, and food-spattered counters. Her oversized apron swung in loose folds. She padded her fingers across the collar of her bluebell-patterned dress, a retro number that seemed better suited for the Eisenhower era, much like Ethel Lynn herself.

“Is the lunch rush over, dear?” she asked. “I’m ready if you need anything.”

Mary hesitated. “Why don’t I take over for a few hours? Walk home, and rest. You look frazzled.”

Ethel Lynn threw back her shoulders. “I’m fit as a fiddle!”

*Right.* The woman possessed the metabolism of a sparrow on amphetamines. She’d worried her way through the renovations after the restaurant changed hands. Ethel Lynn had perspired in her delicate way, lace handkerchief at the ready, as the dining room took on a new coat of creamy paint and patriotic bunting was hung on the picture window. Now they’d reopened to disastrous results. Predictably, she seemed ready to fret into a full-blown state of distress.

Which was never good for a woman on the far side of sixty.

Gently, Mary patted her on the back. “About your cooking . . . there’ve been a few complaints. Do you need another pair of hands in the kitchen?”

Ethel Lynn turned her palms skyward. “What’s wrong with this set?”

“I mean, well—it is a lot of work. Too much work for one woman.”

“Nonsense. This establishment has always managed fine with one cook. You’re willing to pitch in, and Meg did the same before she got it in her head to leave.” Ethel Lynn puffed out her sparrow’s chest. “You rehired the staff, didn’t you?”

“I rehired Delia,” Mary corrected.

“*Only* Delia?”

“I called the other waitress. She refused my offer.”

“She’s not coming back?”

The mysterious Finney Smith had blistered Mary with a few choice words before slamming down the phone. Shocking, sure, but who cared if they were short one

waitress? “We’ll find a replacement for Finney. Honestly, I can’t imagine a woman like that waiting tables.” Not unless the tables were in Sing Sing.

A squeak popped from Ethel Lynn’s throat. “About Finney,” she whispered, and something in her voice sent goose bumps down Mary’s spine. “She wasn’t a waitress, dear. Her job was—heavens to Betsy—a tad more important.”

Mary’s pulse scuttled. “What do you mean?”

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