

Chapter One

Today is the six-month anniversary of my girlfriend's death. It will be tough to get through. But I made a promise to honor Fern's memory and turn my life around, and I'm going to keep it.

Sure, I screwed up big-time after she died. But look how far I've come. Three months ago I started off as a dishwasher at Pepper & Pie restaurant. I worked my way up and now I'm a shift manager, and I help train staff.

There's a new girl working this morning. Amena is from Syria and hasn't been here long. Her English isn't great, but I think she understands me okay. I explain that customers order and pay at the counter, and then we give them a number to put on their table. When their food is ready, she should take it to the table with that number.

When the next order comes up, she looks unsure. "Go ahead and serve it to table ten," I tell her. "Over there."

She picks up the burger-combo plate and heads to the right table. But she walks like she's scared of dropping it. Like she's scared of everything.

The other servers rush past and around her. Pepper & Pie is always busy, and we have to be fast. Super fast. But this is Amena's first day, so I'll wait and tell her later that she'll need to move more quickly.

The guy at table ten isn't happy with the slow service. "Hey, fatso!" he shouts. "Move it!"

Amena lowers her head and hurries a bit. But when she finally reaches his table, she sets the plate down too hard. Some of the soup slops over the edge of the bowl. Some of the fries go flying onto the floor.

"Freakin' terrorist!" the guy yells. "Go back where you came from!"

Amena freezes.

The guy turns to all the customers watching. "Immigrants are ruining this country!"

I look around for my boss, but Jasmine's out back somewhere.

I can't just stand there. I take a deep breath and say in a calm voice, "Sir? If you don't stop insulting my co-worker, I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Oh yeah?" He stands and gets all in my face. I can smell that he's been drinking. "Be my guest, big man."

He doesn't leave, and I don't know what to do. Jasmine has warned me twice already not to get into it with customers.

The first time was because I told this couple that left without eating the food they'd ordered that they were being wasteful. I asked if they were aware that street kids would be grateful for even half that much food.

The second time was because I told a mom to stop calling her little kid a *useless piece of crap* after he spilled his drink. Then she really went off on him, and he started crying. I couldn't take it and said she shouldn't be allowed to be a parent.

When Jasmine called me into her office that time, she said, "Look, I like you, Kipp. You're a good worker, reliable and responsible. But I can't have you mouthing off to customers. This is your last warning."

I know I should let Jasmine handle this situation. But I don't want to go look for her and leave Amena alone with the rude guy. So I say, "With respect, sir. We don't tolerate racist comments here. Please leave."

Amena doesn't make a sound, but tears flood her face. "Take a break," I tell her. "And please ask Jasmine to come out here."

Amena nods, but as she turns to go, the guy grabs at her hijab. It's like he wants to rip it right off her head.

I reach out to stop him. Amena runs. The guy laughs. "She your girlfriend? You got a thing for terrorists?"

I give him a push toward the door. "Out before I call the cops." Wrong move. He's way bigger than me. And he's pissed off.

He pushes back. "You little shit!"

I punch him in the gut.

The guy doubles over for a second and then quickly leaves. On his way out he threatens to charge me with assault. Great. Just what I need.

Jasmine appears just in time to see our fight. She orders me into her office. "For god's sake, Kipp," she says. "What were you thinking?"