

HADLEY
BECKETT'S
NEXT
DISH



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To Kelly.
Thank you for a lifetime of *better*.

Prologue

HADLEY

“Okay, everyone! We’re back in twenty. Places, please.”

“You okay, Had?” Stuart, my longtime friend, collaborator, and, on this set, the assistant director, asked me with concern as he crossed from Max’s kitchen space to mine.

I smiled. At least, I *attempted* a smile. My competitor was rapidly taking away my reasons to smile, one by one. But that wasn’t Stuart’s fault. “I’m fine, thanks. I’m less sure about our friend Chef Cavanagh over there.”

Stuart rolled his eyes and nodded. “I’m so glad this is our last segment.” He backed away from me with a grimace and then shouted, “Ten seconds!”

I cleared my throat and straightened my apron, looking down at my coconut-curry chicken and naan waffles one last time to make sure I wasn’t missing something important, like the chicken. Or the waffles. I figured I could make just about anything else work for the judges—and with how stressful the day had been, thanks to my fellow chef’s antics, I figured if the main ingredients made the plate, I could call the day a success.

Stuart’s verbal countdown ended after four, and I kept my

eyes on his fingers—three, two, one. I was ready to hear the outcome of a long day in the kitchen, and I was more than ready to put an end to a miserable two days of filming alongside Max Cavanagh.

First there were eight. Now there are two. Which of these landmark, on-the-brink-of-legend chefs will be crowned America's Fiercest Chef? We're about to find out.

I tried to listen to the host, Xavier Stone, as he gave a quick recap of all we had been through over the course of our two days of filming, which would play out as six separate episodes, spread out across six weeks of Culinary Channel can't-miss viewing. But, as I had been for the entirety of two days, I was too distracted by my competitor to focus on a single thing happening in the moment.

"I'm sorry," Max muttered, actually turning and facing my direction, not seeming to care one little bit that the cameras were on us. "Did he just say 'on the brink'? Did he say we're on-the-brink-of-legend?"

"Oh my gosh, please stop!" I seethed through my teeth.

"Cut!" The director called out the command, and everyone in the studio groaned. It was a familiar call-and-answer of which we'd all had enough. We'd all be professionals and prepare to do our jobs, Max Cavanagh would decide *not* to be a professional and *not* do his job, then we'd all have to stop and repeat the cycle from the top—over and over for two days, like a chicken on a rotisserie grill.

"Chef, what's the problem this time?" Glenn, the director, asked from his chair.

Max shoved his knives aside and hopped up on the counter. As he did, the knives tumbled to the ground, taking a beautiful cut of unused Wagyu ribeye with them.

“The problem *is*, Glenn, that it’s insulting for you to refer to us as on-the-brink. I mean, considering the ratings we get for this network, and considering my nine Michelin stars, I’d say we deserve better. You’re with me on that, right, Hayley?”

Oh, where to begin.

I shook my head and opened my mouth to speak. I was prepared to tell him that I most assuredly was not *with him*. I couldn’t have been less *with him*.

Until two days ago, I had looked up to him as a brilliant chef and a masterful businessman, not to mention an engaging television personality. At thirty-six he was only three years older than me, but he’d reached pinnacles in his career that I didn’t anticipate reaching until I was no longer young enough to enjoy them, if I ever reached them at all. It was amazing how quickly the awareness that he was a complete and total jerk had gotten in the way of my esteem. He wasn’t legendary. Jacques Pépin was legendary. Wolfgang Puck was legendary. Julia Child was a legend among legends.

Maxwell Cavanagh was a spoiled little boy with a haircut he stole from Hugh Grant, circa 1994, and a propensity toward underseasoning his stocks and bases.

“It’s Hadley,” I mumbled as I crossed to his kitchen space to pick the gorgeous, expensive meat off the ground. *And I have two Michelin stars of my own, thank you very much.* I didn’t say that, of course. How pretentious that would have sounded.

“Hadley, Stuart’s got that,” Glenn called out.

Stuart was, indeed, fully capable. In addition to working on *America’s Fiercest Chef*, he was the director on my weekly show. He also happened to be my oldest friend and probably the only reason I was on television, so I knew him to be *extremely* capable.

I handed the meat to Stuart after he had carefully scooped

up Max's MAC knife set and gingerly passed it to a production assistant to take and clean. "Here you go," I whispered with an apologetic smile.

"Thanks," Stuart replied, once again rolling his eyes.

As I stood back to my feet and realized Chef Cavanagh was towering over me from his perch just a couple feet away, I questioned what I was doing there. I don't just mean picking up the steak. Why had I stuck around for two days of demeaning treatment from a chef I had once admired but whose cooking skills were actually very much on the same level as mine, apart from the underseasoning? Yes, *To the Max* was the number-one show on the network, but *At Home with Hadley* was number two—and gaining ground all the time.

Why hadn't I corrected him more vehemently when he called me Hayley for the eighth time? Why hadn't I told him that his béchamel needed more nutmeg? And why had I picked up the blasted meat that had landed on the floor as a result of *his* temper tantrum?

"Thanks, doll." He hopped down from the counter and leered at me as he returned to his mark, as if nothing had happened.

Doll?

"Did you seriously just call me doll?" I asked.

Glenn, who was typically heard and not seen, was suddenly standing beside us. He leaned in closer to Max and softly asked, "What would you prefer, Chef? Would you rather we just go with 'legendary'?"

I scoffed, and they both turned to face me.

"Is there a problem, Hadley?" Glenn asked.

I lifted my hands in the air and, as my jaw dropped, looked around the room. *Seriously? Is anyone else hearing this?* My level of confusion and frustration grew as I realized both Glenn and Max were looking at me with accusation in their

eyes—as if *I* was slowing down production—and yet no one else seemed to be clued in.

Why am I just now hearing it?

“Chef,” I corrected him hesitantly.

“Yes?” Max answered.

I shook my head and cleared my throat, focusing entirely on Glenn and doing all I could to pretend Max wasn’t there. “No, I mean . . . you should call me Chef. You refer to Chef Cavanagh that way, and I’d appreciate it if—”

They turned away from me. Turned away!

I took a deep breath and attempted to tune out their discussion regarding the proper usage of the term *legendary*.

Anise. Broiler. Colander. Dough. Egg timer.

My tried-and-true trick of calming down by alphabetically listing items found in the kitchen had failed me spectacularly before I got to *fondue set*, and I felt heat rising in my cheeks. Just about the time the rushing blood reached my temples, resulting in a *whoosh* pulsing through my ears—similar to the sound of the ocean but ever-so-slightly tinged with the ambience of chainsaws and screeching owls—Stuart entered my periphery with a kind smile.

“Had?” He put his hand gently on my elbow and escorted me back to my cooking space. “I’m sorry that this has been such a nightmare,” he whispered, his eyes flashing over toward Glenn and Max pretty much continually.

I wondered if he was worried Max would hear him call it all a nightmare, or if he was worried Glenn would hear him apologize. Maybe, if he was a true friend, he was just trying to size up the best moment to go over and thump Max on the head.

“Why is Glenn coddling him? He should have been kicked off the set a long time ago.” I matched the quiet tone out of respect for Stuart—no one else.

He shrugged. “You know how it goes. We’re so far into production now that all anyone wants is just to finish it up and move on.”

“I get that, but—”

“Okay, people!” Glenn shouted. “We’re ready. Back to your marks, please. We’ll pick it up there again.”

Stuart repeated his eye roll from earlier and then returned to his spot. He repositioned his headset and called out, “Ten seconds!”

First there were eight. Now there are two. Who will be crowned America’s Fiercest Chef? Will it be Maxwell Cavanagh, the legendary restaurateur who, at thirty-six, is the youngest-ever recipient of nine Michelin stars, or will it be Hadley Beckett, the sweet and sassy Southern belle of the kitchen? We’re about to find out.

My eyes flew open, and for a moment, I thought I heard a familiar bubbling. I briefly wondered if Max or I had left a burner on, but I quickly realized it was only my blood that was boiling.

Cool your jets, Hadley, I warned myself. Sure, I had been downgraded from landmark and on-the-brink-of-legendary to “sweet and sassy,” but all I really wanted was to wrap up the shoot, move on with my life, and leave Max and his nine stars to marinate in their pomposity.

A camera-ready smile still plastered on my face, I tilted my head to look at him and his dish. *Well, that should be enough to feed a three-year-old. Are Michelin stars awarded by toddlers, Chef?* I caught a groan as it threatened to escape. I’d never understood the gourmet food industry’s propensity for starving its customers while charging them the price of a month’s worth of groceries.

As my gaze wandered upward, however, and I observed

the smug expression on his face, I resigned myself to his soon-to-be-announced victory. There was a part of me—a pretty big part, if I were being honest—that really wanted to win. I mean, *of course* I wanted to win. From the beginning. I wouldn't have left Nashville and flown to New York in the first place if I didn't intend to win. I got paid handsomely and publicized excessively win or lose, of course. But to be named Fiercest Chef? I'd already outlasted some of the greatest chefs in the country, and if I could defeat Max Cavanagh—the “Playboy Gourmet” as he was “affectionately” called by the media—well . . . that was the kind of validation and reputation-builder money couldn't buy.

Plus, I really wanted to see that smug, infuriating smile melt off his face.

Chef Beckett. Chef Cavanagh. Please bring your dishes forward.

I was pretty sure I would never get used to being a chef on television, no matter how long I did it. My competitor, on the other hand, seemed to feed off of the attention like one of those hungry toddlers eating their tablespoon of duck ballotine. Or, you know . . . something a toddler would actually like. As soon as it was his turn to *present*—his creation or himself—he shifted into a higher gear.

Eh . . . maybe not higher. Higher implies better. And as awful as I had discovered him to be when the cameras *weren't* rolling, he was so much worse when they were.

“Okay, hold it there, please,” Glenn instructed as soon as we had approached the judges' table, like two attorneys on *Law & Order* approaching the bench.

My mind wandered as Stuart and a production assistant adjusted the angles of our hands and dishes, and the cameras zoomed in to capture various shots of the way we had

each chosen to plate. I held perfectly still, as instructed, and wondered if *Law & Order* was still on the air. When was the last time I had watched TV? Had they launched any additional *Law & Order* spin-offs? Was *Law & Order: DMV* a thing yet?

“Hadley, we need you to look at camera two, please,” Glenn stated.

I nodded and did as I was told, until I heard Max sigh. Not a restless sigh. An exasperated sigh.

I turned away from camera two and glanced at him, and wasn't surprised to see him looking right at me.

Don't engage, Hadley. You're so close to the finish line. Go back to looking at camera two, stop your hands from shaking so you don't have to reset your garnish, and just let it all finally be over!

“What! What is it, Max?” I asked, blatantly disregarding my inner sage's wise advice.

He looked me straight in the eye and had the audacity to say, “It's been a long day. Could you please stay focused on your cues so we can get out of here?”

Apron. Blender. Carafe. Dutch ov—

“Hey, Glenn, can you get me another bourbon? And grab one for Hayley too. She seems uptight.” He winked at me, and I squirmed in disgust.

“You've been drinking?” I asked.

I was shocked, but I don't really know why. If anything, it made everything about the day make more sense. Yeah . . . nothing about the lack of decorum shown by Max could surprise me at that point. I guess I was just disappointed to be part of a project that had allowed such unprofessionalism to rule the day.

“We're almost done, Chef,” Glenn replied. “Think you can hang in there just a few more minutes?”

Max nodded. “You bet I can. Just as soon as you grab me another bourbon.”

Glenn chuckled. “Stuart, go ahead and get Chef Cavanagh a—”

“Are you kidding me?” I shook my head vigorously. I just couldn’t take any more. “I—I—I mean, I’ve *never*—”

“Hadley, can I see you for a minute?” Glenn called out, as if summoning me to the principal’s office.

Sure. I’m right here. Jump down from your special little stool and join me in my kitchen like you did Max!

I was so irritated with myself for, instead of saying any of that, setting my dish down on the counter and crossing the set to where Glenn sat. Stuart smiled apologetically at me as he passed by, a lowball of whiskey in his hand.

As I approached, Glenn jumped down and then gently pulled me aside. “What an experience this has been, huh?” he whispered. “You’ve been a total trooper, and I just can’t tell you how much I—how much we all—appreciate it.”

“Why are you indulging him?” I asked, not bothering to keep my voice down to match Glenn’s. “This is ridiculous. I know he’s the top dog and all that, but I don’t think anyone is doing anybody any favors by letting him walk all over y’all. By letting him walk all over *me*,” I added. “I get it. His ratings are higher. But *At Home with Hadley* is solid, and I really think . . .”

I kept talking. I know I kept talking. But I really don’t know what exactly I said next. I got a little too caught up in the realization that my righteous confrontation was quickly morphing into a situation where I was on the verge of apology. I wasn’t even sure how that had happened.

“That’s not it,” Glenn said as my attention snapped back into focus. “We love you around here. You know that. The network is *thrilled* with your ratings, and with the magazine

launching next week, your audience is only going to grow. It's just that . . ."

"It's just what?"

He pulled me a little further away and lowered his voice even more. "As you know, Max has had a bad week."

How in the world would I know? Why in the world would I care?

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that Max has had a bad week. How can I help?"

"That's very sweet of you." Glenn squeezed my arm and smiled. "I think he'll be okay. I knew you'd understand."

Seriously? Was I even capable of sarcasm? I could have sworn that my offer of help had been dripping in it. That had certainly been my intent . . .

He continued, my masterful sarcasm having been artfully deflected. "I know you're the praying type. I'm pretty sure Max could use some of it."

What was I even supposed to do with that? I couldn't be offended that I was known for being the praying type. I *was* the praying type. But I did not want to pray for Maxwell Cavanagh. All I wanted was for my brilliant Indian/Southern infusion to walk all over his toddler-ready finger food/truffle/mashed pea/foie gras infusion, and then to get the heck out of there.

But when you *are* the praying type, it's not easy (or, probably, advisable) to refuse to pray for someone just because they're a nincompoop.

I groaned softly. "Can we please just finish this?"

"Stuart!" Glenn abruptly shouted, shattering the veil of discretion. "Count it down! And get Hadley a drink if she wants one."

Max whooped, as if *now* the party could get started. But Stuart, thankfully, knew me, and just threw his eyes open

comically wide as he passed and said, “On your marks, please. We’ve got the transition shots. Let’s pick it up from there. Ten seconds!”

Chef Beckett. Chef Cavanagh. Please bring your dishes forward.

We completed the walk to the judges’ table and set our creations before them. Finally. I looked over at Max’s dish and felt simultaneous admiration and irritation. How? In the midst of all of the drama—all of *his* drama—how had he managed to create a beautiful jambalaya bourguignonne, an infusion dish he made up on the spot, just as I had made up mine, that looked as if it were ready to be served at any Michelin-starred restaurant in the world?

“Chef Beckett, please tell us about your final dish.”

Why couldn’t it be enough to just be really good at cooking? Or, in my case, really good at cooking and exceptionally good at baking? When had that stopped being enough? When had it been determined that in order to be truly successful in the food industry, you had to be on television?

I took a deep breath and prepared to explain the dish to the judges, and to all the world, I guess. I was so grateful that when I heard the sound of my voice, it seemed to be full of confidence. Confidence I really wished I was feeling.

“Today, Chefs, I have prepared for you a coconut-curry chicken, served on a naan waffle. And while the flavor profile is a little more on the exotic side, I think even exotic food should be comfort food. To that end, you’ll see that you also have a side of warmed sweet and slightly spicy plum chutney. I’ll ask you to pour that over the dish, as you would maple syrup over the traditional Southern version of chicken and waffles.”

I held my breath as I looked down at my dish one more

time, and then gently pushed the plate in closer to them. They poured the chutney and then cut into the chicken, and I released a bit of the air I was holding when I saw how easily it cut. My shoulders relaxed as the waffle sprung down and back again beneath the pressure of forks. And finally, my teeth freed my bottom lip from their clenches as three poker faces morphed into expressions of satisfaction and contentment.

“Thank you, Chef Beckett,” the lead judge stated with a smile. “And Chef Cavanagh, what have you prepared?”

For the next two minutes I marveled. It was as if a switch had been flipped, and suddenly Max Cavanagh, grade A jerk, was replaced by a culinary and presentational genius, seemingly worthy of at least some of the honors and commendations which had been bestowed upon him.

He was so smooth and nuanced, and he flirted effortlessly. With the judges. With the cameras. With all of America and the world, it seemed. The pompous, verbose egotist disappeared and a quiet, perfectly subtle Casanova appeared. It was almost indecipherable—and I imagined that to be on the receiving end of his charm would be completely disarming. You know . . . if you hadn't spent two days growing increasingly convinced that he was somehow the spawn of a serpent and a rabid raccoon.

“Thank you, Chef Cavanagh.”

The judges looked just as satisfied and content after eating his dish as they did after eating mine, and I felt whatever confidence had developed slipping away. Ah well. The anticipation of a second-place finish wasn't so bad.

But man, oh man, I hated that *he* would be the one to beat me.

Ten minutes later Max and I were sitting at the Chefs' Table—a long, rustic wooden slat with equally rustic benches, none of which matched the decor of the “stage” area, but at

least felt less cold and staged than the rest of the set. It was at the Chefs' Table where my opponents and I had sat during the filming of each episode, while our fates were determined. One camera crew was out filming the judges breaking down our dishes while another sat with us as we bantered. At least banter was the goal and expectation.

Max and I did not banter. Certainly not with each other.

"Hadley?" Stuart whispered my name from behind the camera. I looked up and saw him gesture for me to join him.

I hopped down from my bench and walked over to him. "What's up? I thought we were rolling."

"We were. But, I mean . . . you guys have to give us *something*."

I crossed my arms. "I think we've given you plenty. Right now I'm just grateful for the silence."

"Come on, Hayley," Max called out. "I think we can handle thirty seconds of small talk."

I glowered at him and sighed. "Fine." I returned to the bench as I added, "But please, for all that is good and holy, can you remember my name for those thirty seconds? Please?"

He downed the last of his drink—not even the same one he'd been finishing off a few minutes ago, I was pretty sure—and handed the glass to Stuart. "Of course I can, Harley." He laughed uproariously at his joke, which I was actually strangely comforted by. At least he knew Harley wasn't my name either.

"We're rolling," Stuart said. Nervously, I think.

And still we sat in silence.

Okay, suck it up, Hadley, I lectured myself. Be the bigger person. Again. If he doesn't want to put in any effort, it will all come across plain as day on TV.

“Your dish looked really great,” I told him, for the benefit of our future audience.

“Thank you,” he said with a nod. “Yours looked better than I expected.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Stuart shake his head and then bury it in his hands.

“And what did you expect, Chef?”

Max shrugged. “You don’t have to be offended—”

“I’m not,” I lied. “I would just be really interested in knowing what you expected.”

“It’s nothing personal, it’s just that very few chefs can pull off all Southern, all the time. I mean, it worked for Harlan Sanders, but—”

I nearly choked on my indignation. “You’re comparing my cooking to fast-food fried chicken?”

He shrugged yet again. “Well, I mean, it’s not quite as flavorful as the Colonel’s, of course, but you’re just getting started. You’ll get there.”

“That’s it!” I exclaimed, jumping up from the bench and stomping to the door. “I’m done.”

Stuart placed his finger to his headset to put it closer to his ear. “They’re ready for you. Come on, Hadley. It’s almost done. This is it.” He put an arm out to usher me back into the main studio.

Aioli. Breadbasket. Chopsticks. Dish rack. Espresso machine. Flour sifter. Gravy boat.

I was going to need at least the entire alphabet in order to actually cool off, but that was going to have to do for now.



“This was the closest competition in the history of *America’s Fiercest Chef*,” Xavier began as soon as film began rolling once again. “Ultimately, our judges chose one chef to carry the

mantle and the title. One chef will be named victorious. One chef will . . .”

Oh my goodness, get on with it!

The rest of it was a blur, and not just because it was all so repetitive and melodramatic. Although, that certainly didn't help. I zoned out because I just couldn't take one more hyperbolic guarantee that the winner's life would completely change, and that they would never be bored or financially strapped or unknown or alone or, I don't know . . . stuck in traffic ever again.

So when I heard Xavier say my name, it took me a moment to remember the rules. Did they say the name of the winner or the loser first? The loser, right? I plastered on a disappointed-but-resigned-and-grateful-for-the-opportunity smile and took a step toward the judges, to shake their hands and say thanks.

“You're kidding me,” Max said. At least that's pretty much what he said. His version was somewhat less family friendly.

I rolled my eyes. Really? He was even going to make a big deal about the fact that I hadn't shaken his hand and congratulated him first? Granted, that was the way it was usually done on these competitions. Granted, that would have been the polite thing for me to do.

But come on! He was lucky I didn't haul off and slug him.

I sighed and turned back to face Max, my arm extended. His arm extended as well, and for one fleeting moment I considered the possibility that we might actually end this thing with civility. But then I realized it was his left arm reaching out, and it wasn't meeting up with the right arm I had extended. He wasn't going to try to *hug* me, was he? He wasn't that much of an imbecile, surely.

I was wrong. He was so much more of an imbecile than I had ever imagined. He wasn't coming in for a hug at all. As

bad as that would have been, the reality was even worse. He reached past me to the judges' table and with one fluid motion, struck the edge of my plated masterpiece and caused it to flip into Chef Aguste Bisset's lap.

I gasped and, regrettably, muttered, "Well, I never!" I was always so disappointed in myself when Southern colloquialisms dripped from me freely in the most stressful of moments.

I don't know a lick of French, apart from necessary cooking terms and the essentials to assure any French visitors to my restaurant that I'm merely ignorant, not rude. But I was fairly confident that Chef Bisset's exclamation was even less flattering than my Minnie Pearl-inspired outburst.

I heard Glenn call out "Keep rolling!" and I whipped around to glare at him, but he couldn't be bothered by my disapproval, I suppose. He was, after all, in the process of filming the Culinary Channel's first foray into *Jersey Shore*-level entertainment.

"Chef Maxwell," Xavier said, his voice sounding more confident than his cautious steps back from the table appeared. "We'll kindly thank you to control—"

"Her?" Max asked with a sneer and, if I'm not mistaken, disgust as he gestured toward me. "With her 'y'all come back and her 'kiss my grits' . . . *her*?" He took another step toward the judges' table, causing them all to scoot back in fear of what he might do.

"I have never said 'kiss my grits' in my entire life!" I protested, quite possibly zeroing in on the wrong thing first. Although, seriously. Kiss my grits? I may have been a little too folksy at times, but I would not stand there and be accused of being a folksy grandmother.

Besides, I was prepared to add, you won. You are the better chef, even if you are the lesser human. So kiss my ever-lovin' grits, Maxwell Cavanagh.

But before I could say any of that, a funny thing happened. My brain kicked into gear. Finally. They'd said my name first. I'd watched four seasons of this show, in preparation for my appearance. Back when I'd thought that my episodes would bear even a slight resemblance to any episodes that had gone before, I'd studied the patterns. What the judges liked, what they hated, what they were tired of, what they would view as fresh and innovative. Once my brain was working, I saw it all clearly. I knew this show inside and out.

And they always announced the winner's name first.

"I won?" I muttered.

Thankfully no one heard my muttering. They were all too busy being verbally assaulted by Max's deluge of insults. Not that I'm thankful about that part, of course.

In context, his temper tantrum made a lot more sense. I mean, it still made absolutely no sense whatsoever, but a temper tantrum over *winning* would somehow make less than no sense whatsoever.

A few moments later, about the time security was called in and Max was forcibly removed from the set, hurling accusations and threats all the way to the door and beyond, it began to really sink in.

I won. I defeated Max Cavanagh, who was generally regarded as the greatest chef of our generation. I had done it my way—with manners and a whole lot of butter and salt—when faced with unbelievable circumstances that would have caused even the cook at a firehouse to crumble. I'd proven that I was more than just a great pastry chef from Nashville. I'd made it clear that I could hold my own alongside the big guns.

It was just too bad the world would never know, since there was absolutely no chance whatsoever that *America's Fiercest Chef's* tribute to *All My Children* would ever see the light of day.