

J O A N B A U E R

A N E W B E R Y H O N O R B O O K

HOPE
WAS
HERE





Somehow I knew my time had come when Bambi Barnes tore her order book into little pieces, hurled it in the air like confetti, and got fired from the Rainbow Diner in Pensacola right in the middle of lunchtime rush. She'd been sobbing by the decaf urn, having accidentally spilled a bowl of navy bean soup in the lap of a man who was, as we say in the restaurant game, one taco short of a combo platter. Gib, the day manager, was screaming at her to stop crying, which made her cry all the more, which led to the firing and her stomping out the door wailing how life wasn't fair, right in front of the hungry customers. That's when Gib turned to me.

"You want her job?"

I was a bus girl at the time, which meant I cleaned off dirty tables and brought people water and silverware. I'd been salivating for years to be a waitress.

I stood up tall. "Yes, I sure do."

"You going to cry on me, fall apart if something goes wrong?"

And I saw right then if you're going to cut the mustard in

food service, you'd better know how to handle turmoil. I straightened my shoulders, did my best to look like flint.

"I'm the toughest female you've ever seen," I assured him.

"You're hired then. Take the counter."

It was my fourteenth birthday, and I took to waitressing like a hungry trucker tackles a T-bone. That job was the biggest birthday present I'd ever gotten, next to getting my name changed legally when I was twelve.

I've had three waitressing jobs over the last two and a half years—slung hash from Pensacola to Brooklyn—made money that most teenagers only dream about. Brooklyn was the best place yet.

And now I've got to leave.

"You ready?" My aunt Addie asked me the question.

We were standing by the boarded-up windows of what had once been the greatest diner in Brooklyn. The Blue Box was shut up like a tomb. You couldn't see the green vinyl booths by the window or the big oval counter that sat in the middle of the place like the center ring in a circus. There weren't any whiffs of stuffed pork tenderloin with apricots or country meatloaf with garlic mashed potatoes or Addie's famous cinnamon ice cream dripping down that deep-dish apple pie of hers with crust so buttery it would bring cabdrivers to their knees in pure reverence. Anyone from Brooklyn knows cabdrivers don't bow the knee for much.

The sign wasn't lit up like it had been for those sweet eighteen months that Addie had been chief cook and part owner with Gleason Beal, Slime Scourge of the Earth.

I stood there remembering how Gleason had stolen the money from the cash register one night; how he'd cleared out the business bank account and headed off for parts unknown with Charlene the night waitress and our money. We'd limped by for a few months on what we made daily, but when the furnace died (\$10,000) and the roof started leaking (\$4,000) and the monthly bills came due, we were toast. Addie had to close the place down before the bill collectors did.

Bill collectors are like cheap tippers—they always leave bad feelings behind.

I touched the boarded-up window. I'd invented a sandwich here when I was fifteen—the Keep Hoping. It had layers of smoked turkey, sun-dried tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, and chopped salad greens with red wine vinaigrette on a sour-dough roll. People ordered it like mad, too, because hope is something that everyone needs. It was a sandwich for our time.

I took out my blue pen and wrote HOPE WAS HERE in tiny letters on one of the boards. Hope is my name. Whenever I leave a place I write this real small someplace significant just to make the statement that I'd been there and made an impact. I've never defaced anything—never carved it into a tree or painted it on a sidewalk or a street sign. I wrote HOPE WAS HERE in half-inch-tall letters above the rotating dessert case at the Ballyhoo Grill back in South Carolina before we moved to New York. It's one of the ways I say good-bye to a place. I've had tons of practice doing that.

“I'm ready,” I said.

Addie squared her shoulders. “Let's do it.”

One new life . . . coming right up!

When Hope and her aunt move from New York City to small-town Wisconsin to run the local diner, Hope's not sure what to expect. Luckily, she's used to thinking on her feet—she hasn't become a terrific waitress by accident. And when G.T., the diner's owner, decides to run for office against the corrupt mayor, Hope's drawn into G.T.'s vision of the future. Because, after all, everyone could use a little hope to get through the tough times . . . even Hope herself.

★ "When it comes to creating strong, independent, and funny teenaged female characters, Bauer is in a class by herself."

—*SLJ*, starred review

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