



Sizzling In Singapore

A Carnal Cuisine Novel by
K.C. Falls & Torri D. Cooke

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Chef de cuisine Mae Whitten is forced to step into the executive chef's job when her boss goes AWOL. She's a focused professional in the world of fire and knives and the lone woman in a major hotel chain's kitchen full of testosterone-driven colleagues. She keeps her private life on a low simmer until she makes a snap decision to taste a delicious stranger. Things really start to sizzle when she finds out that the man

she thought was a short-term guest has come to Singapore to temporarily fill the head honcho's job.

Contains "recipes for romance"
-a short collection of scrumptious dishes featured in the book. Cook up something spectacular for those moments (before or after) that you just have to come up for air! **You'll find them highlighted and linked within the text.** Some of the recipes are provided at the end of the book and other links will take you to Torri's blog where she adds additional recipes from time to time.

Content warning: Adult scenes with graphic, explicit descriptions of sexual acts.

Recipe warning: Tempting concoctions are not for those on a celery and water diet. Read at your waistline's risk!

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, names, places and events are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

The material in this book is intended for adults only.

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####

"May I have my bathing suit?"

"A bathing suit?" asked Mae as she swung the tiny, black garment from her index finger. Her bright blue eyes twinkled as she impishly grinned at the handsome guest standing in the midst of his scattered clothing. I thought it looked more like an eye-patch."

"Excellent observation, Mademoiselle Chef. It is the smallest swimming costume I can legally wear in

most places. Of course, it would be considered over-dressed in *Cap d'Adge*," he answered with an accent that was too vague for Mae to place. Her travels had made her a veritable expert in placing people by their manner of speech. She found the small mystery appealing.

"That's the nudist town in the south of France, isn't it?" As she asked she couldn't help but ponder how the man sharing the elevator would look in the tiny suit--or out of it. Under his chic clothes she had no doubt that the body

was just as yummy as the face. His tight jeans showed a perfectly tight male ass as he bent to retrieve more of his belongings from the floor.

"Not many would recognize the name of that place. Though those who frequent such places prefer the word 'naturist' to nudist." He reached out and transferred the black thong from her small finger to his. She observed his long, perfectly formed fingers and approved. Tiny hands on a man were a bad sign, and a turn-off. Mae, rightly or wrongly, associated little hands and feet

with pencil dicks. She glanced down at his shoes which were impeccable loafers that her buddy Tank would describe as 'Euro-poofter shoes'. *Uh-oh*, she thought. *Has my gay-dar failed me? Nude beaches, poofy shoes. Damn and double damn.*

"Have you ever experienced the pleasure of having no tan lines?" He looked up and down her small frame in a way that assured Mae that her gay-dar was still working perfectly. "It's quite liberating, really, to soak up the sun's warmth completely naked." He

continued stuffing his suitcase with its scattered contents. "This old valise has seen better days. It isn't the first time that I have had the clasps spring open."

"Maybe it's time to get a new one. For the price of a night at the Elysium you could probably get a whole new set of luggage." Mae wondered why a man this well dressed would carry around an old battered suitcase.

He answered her unspoken question. "It was my grandfather's and I'd hate to part with it. Lots of sentimental value." He snapped the

tarnished brass locks in place and moved away from the elevator doors he had been holding open with his body. The doors slid shut. "What floor, *Mademoiselle* Chef? I've detained you long enough."

"Oh, I'm going to the basement, so just go up to your floor first. You're the guest, after all. I just work here."

"No, you're in a far greater hurry. You practically knocked me down when you sprinted into the elevator and spilled my valise on the floor." He flashed her a toothpaste-commercial

smile and she wasn't surprised that a little jolt electrified her.

"I'm not supposed to use the guest elevator when I'm in uniform. So I was making a dash for it. Sorry about the suitcase." Mae took a moment to realize what a mess she was. She probably smelled of a bad combination of food and sweat. Her jacket bore the results of a 'teachable moment' with a young apprentice: [grilled peach vinaigrette](#) and the immersion blender. Her clogs looked like she had been cooking with them, not wearing them. Tendrils of her cocoa-

brown hair had escaped her braid and were swirling around her pale face like greasy little snakes. When he held out his manicured hand to introduce himself Mae involuntarily wiped her hand on her checks. Another lesson on [cracked-pepper crusted roasted beets](#) made her fingers look like she had been butchering a dirty pig with her bare hands and it would take several more scrubblings to remove the stains.

"I'm Nicholas Seville." He smiled that model smile again and shook her hand warmly. "Nick."

"Mae Whitten. Pleased to meet you, Nick." As the handshake lingered just a fraction longer than expected, Mae was surprised to notice that the apparently aristocratic hand had a few calluses on it. A working hand like hers.

"M-A-E or M-A-Y?"

"M-A-E" she blushed." Mae Belle. My great-grandmother was a grand old Southern lady from New Orleans and I'm named after her."

"Here's the basement, Miss Mae Belle. I'm glad I ran into you."

"Well, actually I ran into you,

but I can't say I'm sorry. Have a great stay in Singapore, Nick. Everyone at the Elysium is at your service. We're here to please."

As the elevator door slid closed behind her Mae found herself thinking about what a pleasure it would be to please Nick Seville in ways the Elysium's employee handbook didn't cover. Then, remembering how late she was running, she pushed the lovely image from her mind and sprinted down the hallway to her quarters.

Because Mae was the only

female among the kitchen's upper management, she had special rooms tucked into the basement floor of the hotel. A nice suite with a spacious living room and bedroom and a bathroom that was far too luxurious for employee quarters. Mae absolutely loved the fact that her bathroom was open to a tiny walled garden with a miniature rock fountain. It was a godsend of a respite after hours in the clanging bustle of her busy kitchen. Right now she wanted nothing more than to fill the tub, slip into the water and point the shower massage

between her legs. She'd cast Mr. Nicholas Seville in her fantasy and be on her way to a rollicking orgasm.

But Cecily would be furious if she was any later than she was already going to be. They had so few evenings together what with Mae's schedule in the kitchen and Cecily's schedule in the skies. Being a flight attendant had great perks, but it was a hectic life. So Mae sluiced the sweat from her body with a quick shower and shampoo. It always took a while to get her long hair combed through and she knew she'd regret going

out with wet hair when she hit the freezing interior of the Finewood Park's coffee shop but she just couldn't spare the time to dry it. She twisted her dark locks into a bun and secured it with a couple of lacquer chopsticks. She hastily pulled a sundress from her closet. She slipped into the dress, wiggled her feet into some sandals, grabbed a shawl and was out the door.

Mae cut through the hotel's carefully-maintained gardens to Orchard Road and hot-footed it the few blocks to the Finewood Park. By the time she

reached the underpass at the big intersection she was glistening with sweat once again. She shivered as she pushed open the doors to the coffee shop and wrapped her shawl around her slight shoulders. Cecily was already at 'their' table looking like some guy's idea of a ravishing Nordic goddess. The two women couldn't have looked much less alike. Mae, at just barely five feet tall had almost black hair and brilliant blue eyes. Her skin was as pale as milk because, even though she lived in the tropics, she rarely saw the sun. Cecily

was nearly six feet tall with white-blond hair and a deep golden complexion she cultivated on every beach and at every pool side on her stops around Southeast Asia.

"Who craves the Kway?" Mae asked as she leaned down to give her friend a kiss.

"Bring on the noodles and don't spare the peppers!", answered Cecily. "It seems ages since I've had my fave Singapore dish."

"Sorry I'm late sweetie. Bad afternoon. Kurt went AWOL."

"That nasty old sod you work for? Good riddance to him."

"Oh, come on Cess, Kurt is a pussycat underneath it all. And he's not all that old, either. Just because he goosed you at that party..."

"Goosed me? He practically raped me with his hand. His fingers were nearly in my twat."

"Darling, that should teach you to wear panties."

"Spoils the line. And anyway it doesn't give one license..."

Mae laughed at her mind's eye

picture of her crusty exec trying to grab a piece of her friend in a drunken moment. Really, with all Cess's sexual escapades Mae couldn't quite understand the exaggerated indignation that brought on." He wasn't himself. He was swept away by your considerable charms. Seriously though, I'm really worried. It isn't like him to just not show up. And it's been more than a week. No one knows anything. Or if they do, they're not saying. But the upshot is that I've had a bitch of a week doing his job and mine. It's a miracle I got tonight off. Tank is

holding the fort. I couldn't take it. I've worked doubles for ten straight days."

"You poor thing. I'm glad that my stopover inspired you to take a break. You can't be all things, Mae. Even before Kurt left you didn't have much of a social life with that job."

"Ah, but your social life gives me so much vicarious pleasure. Tell me the latest. How goes it with Captain Bret or Brad or Brent or whatever his name is?"

"His name is now Mud. We went to a sex club in Bangkok last week

and a clearly underage prostitute was hitting on him. When he told her that he had a date for the night she said '*That okee dokee, I do you bofe!*' He thought that was a dandy idea and I didn't. Then he got pissed and told me I was 'inhibited'. Another one bites the dust."

"Was it that she was underage or that he called you 'inhibited'? Clearly, given your history, it was not the suggestion of a threesome that bothered you."

Cecily pulled herself up straight in the chair and peered down her

aquiline nose in classic British style.

"You are referring," she sniffed, "to an incident from the far distant past. I was utterly besotted by that man and would have done anything to see him happy. And she was undeniably quite the little hottie. She was also a mature woman not a teenage whore."

The waiter appeared tableside and Mae ordered them a couple of Tiger beers. "Two Tigers for my uptight friend and I. Followed by two more and two orders of [Beef Kway Teow](#). Don't be stingy with the peppers." She smiled

across the table at Cess. "You might want to cruise the Elys if you're on the prowl. I literally ran into a tasty hunk of manhood in the elevator today. Don't know much about him except that he's fond of being naked. And he's gorgeous. I mean a real delicious; eat 'em up, cream-your-panties kind of guy."

"If he's so hot, why don't you jump on him. The way you live, you might as well be wearing a nun's habit instead of a chef's coat. It has been way, way too long since you've had any. It isn't healthy."

"Believe me, sister, even though I much prefer a decent, warm actual 'relationship' with someone, I'd make an exception with this one and just jump his bones. Unfortunately, I don't even have time for sport fucking these days."

"Oh that's rich. Mae, I've known you quite a while. Not once in all the years we've been sharing our deepest and darkest have I known you to just have sex just for the sake of sex. I know you're not a prude, but you're also..."

"Not a slut like you?" Mae grinned and poked her best friend in the

ribs.

"There's a lot to be said for 'recreational' sex. I may be peeved at Captain Bret, but I am not heartbroken. As I recall, you mourned your last break-up quite dramatically. You haven't tried just doing it because you are horny and he is hot. Here's a guy in transit. There's no 'relationship' potential. Therefore it's the perfect opportunity for you to try something new. It's called 'adult playtime' and there's not a thing wrong with it. You can have a good time without romance"

"Given my schedule right now there's not much chance of playtime or romance. And really, my celibacy seems to bother you more than it does me. I chose a career that is A, notoriously rough on relationships and B, extra tough on females. I love what I do. It consumes me. It is deeply satisfying. I don't lie awake at night pining for Mr. Right or even Mr. Playmate. I'm okay, really I am."

"And I," sighed Cecily, "have a non-career as a flying waitress. The satisfaction in my life all revolves

around what I can do when I am off of that tin can. I still love the travel, though. When the thrill of that wears off I guess I'll be looking for a new job."

The waiter put two steaming bowls of Beef *Kway Teow* in front of Mae and Cecily and their attention instantly turned to the food.

"Here's something that satisfies us both, Cess. Look at that perfect bowl. No 'presentation', no 'artisanal' ingredients, no 'fusion'. Just simple slippery rice noodles, melt-in-your mouth beef, brilliant greens probably

picked today and all punctuated with spicy, fruity pickled peppers. This is one of the meals served in my heaven, for sure."

Cess clinked her beer against Mae's. "Cheers to that, my friend!"

The air had cooled just enough for Mae's walk back to the Elysium to be comfortable. She strolled slowly along Orchard Road as the sparse traffic cruised by. Singapore is not a city that

never sleeps. At eleven o'clock most restaurants are closing their doors and the city loses the frenetic air it takes on during the business of the day. Late in the night, even in the heart of downtown, there is a sense of the abundant tropical life evident in lush swaying palms and flowers spilling out of planters and over walls everywhere. Insect song, drowned by the sounds of commerce by day, reminded her that life in this latitude found its way into every crack and crevice man had not covered in concrete.

Mae was tired, but she wasn't ready to sleep. A chef's life means nighttime hours are energetic hours. When a chef closes the restaurant for the night there are still miles to go before she sleeps. Kitchen energy is like theater and it takes some time for the adrenaline of the 'show' to subside. So Mae used the late night hours to think and relax and plan for the next day. She particularly enjoyed the deserted gardens of the Elysium at those hours when you could hear the tinkling of the waterfall at the pool and smell the night flowers

sprinkled through the landscape.

Occasionally she would slip into the pool whose lights were dimmed after nine-thirty, leaving only the blue glow from the grotto that was the pool's signature feature. Tonight felt like a good night for a dip in the pale light of the quarter moon and she moved silently through the darkened pathways to enjoy a respite in the cool water. It was undoubtedly against the rules.

Employees were strictly forbidden to use the Shang's recreational facilities. It was probably even more against the

rules to use said facilities naked. But Mae had skinny-dipped late at night many times and if security had ever made the rounds and spotted her there, they never let on.

She quietly removed her clothes and shook her hair loose. She noticed that someone had conveniently left a towel on one of the lounges. *Great*, she thought, *I won't have to sneak back to my room soaking wet.*

Mae loved the sensation of the cool water on her body. Often, after a day on her feet, the weightlessness of

being in the pool was such a relief--the gift of floating out of a leaden world. The only lights were the very faint ones that lit the footpaths of the garden and the azure glow of the cave.

She slipped into the water with barely an audible ripple. But it was enough to be heard inside the grotto.

Nick had been unable to get to sleep even after a couple of generous single-malts. Jet lag was working on him

hard. He had unwisely taken a nap when he got to his room that afternoon instead of fighting to adjust his schedule. Wide awake, he had gone to take a swim to see if that would relax him enough to let sleep come. He had heard Mae's approaching footsteps and swam into the grotto thinking that a security guard was making his rounds. Not ready to go back to his room, he tucked into the cave and hoisted himself up on the dark ledge. When he heard Mae enter the water, he wasn't quite sure what to do.

He backed completely into the

shadows and hoped that the interloper would swim past. And she did. He saw dark hair like a chocolate slick on the water and a quite naked ass move slowly by. Mae's limbs were pale and shimmered in the ghostly light as the water swirled gently around her. He could not see her face. But the sight of her bare body was enough to swell his cock and strain the limits of his tiny bathing suit.

Mae circled the pool again and turned over on her back to float through the blue light of the grotto. Nick heard

her approach and moved to the edge of the ledge where he sat and watched her slowly skulk toward him. He still couldn't get a good look at her face, but he appraised the floating orbs of her breasts and her nipples, erect from the cool water. *Time to make my presence known and see if the water nymph will play.* He cleared his throat and the sound brought Mae's head up as she turned to face him. *It's the little kitchen wench! My lucky night.* Nick smiled at her small gasp of surprise and then the look of recognition. He wondered if she was

going to bolt.

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

Mae said as she made her way to his perch on the grotto's ledge. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to see you in that garment you claim is a bathing suit." Mae approached with with slow lazy strokes and rested her arms on the ledge next to his dangling legs. Nick could see that she was having a long hard look at him as if making some sort of decision. His erection was plainly visible even in the dim light and there was nothing he could do to hide it. If it made her

uncomfortable, she wasn't telegraphing that at all. Instead she seemed cool and not the least bit self-conscious. She rewarded him with a wicked little smile. "Now that I've seen you *in* the eyepatch, how 'bout slipping it off and joining me for a swim? You did imply that you enjoy being naked."

Nick didn't need any stronger encouragement as he slid into the water next to her and slipped his bathing suit off. His cock was so stiff that it nearly pressed into his taut belly. "Being naked with your lovely body next to me is a

double pleasure." He reached out and took her shoulders in each hand and pulled her toward him. Although the water was too deep for her to stand, his long legs rested comfortably on the bottom of the pool. He slipped one hand down her back and cradled her tight, tiny ass as he traced the outline of her face with one finger. He moved his finger over her parted lips. She tongued and then lightly bit the tip.

Mae playfully pulled away and swam out into the pool. Nick followed behind, the better to watch her lithe

frame, her legs as she gently scissored them and the sweet curve of her bottom rising and falling with each kick. She rolled over and looked back at him. The light reflecting on her dark brown mane and the mischievous little grin on her face reminded him of a sleek sea otter. He did a surface dive and a few strong strokes under the water brought him around behind her head. He pulled her backwards onto the raft of his torso and floated her into the cave.

Mae turned and twined her arms around Nick's neck and drew her face

close to his. They exchanged soft kisses at first, discovering the taste, smell and feel of each other. He nibbled beneath her ears and she shivered with delight. She laced her fingers in his jet hair and he answered by taking her tresses in his. Her breasts floated against his chest and her nipples brushed back and forth against his. His cock bobbed beneath her electrified pussy and he felt as if she was ready to suck him inside her body. Heat radiated from his groin as their kisses grew more insistent. His tongue found hers and she gasped into his

mouth. Their tongues explored, running over teeth, tickling corners, sucking and being sucked.

Nick slid his hand further under her ass and teased at the folds of her pussy. Even under water, it was easy to distinguish the cool wetness of the pool from the slippery hot juice that was pouring out of her. He lightly ran his fingers on both sides of her slit and then back up her ass to press the pouty little hole he found there. He felt her back arch as if she would impale herself on his throbbing dick then and there. He

was nearly mad with desire.

He was determined to stay in control. Nick didn't want to hurry his pleasure at the expense of hers. He turned her around and lifted her easily onto the ledge he had occupied minutes before. He hoisted her like a feather and spread her knees with his hands to expose her clit that he was sure was throbbing to be touched. He nibbled the inside of first one thigh, then the other as he teased her pussy lips with soft touches. He slipped a finger inside her and began a slow massage of the sweet

spot there. He knew her clit was screaming for attention, but Nick continued to tease and nibble everywhere but that red-hot button. He took each of her pussy lips into his mouth and suckled them in turn. He ran his tongue from back to front and back again. She arched and moaned, reaching her hand down to spread her lips and as if to beg him to narrow his focus to her now quite erect little shaft. Finally, he locked onto her pleasure target and began to massage it with his tongue.

"Oh, that's it, suck me, eat me."

She answered his mouth with groans of pure lust. She began to move against his tongue, grinding her pussy into his face. He knew that her sensations had become singularly focused on her clit--that her world was now a small place between her legs. She grabbed his head and begged him not to stop and as she bucked against his mouth he sensed the inevitability of her orgasm. The contractions began to roll from deep inside her. He could feel the spasms of her climax start and sucked hard on her clit as she squirted a gush of juice

against his chin. Her clit was rock hard and pulsed against his lips like a beating heart as she gave herself over to him, to her pleasure. She grabbed his hair and pulled him away from her now exquisitely over-sensitive little knob. He rested his head against her thigh as she caught her breath.

"Oh. My." Mae smiled down Nick's fine, aristocratic face, "Such a very talented mouth. You're breathtaking, Nick." She slid back into the water and kissed his lips that tasted of her sex, her juice, her come. She wrapped her arms

around his neck and her legs around his waist. His erect cock was screaming to fuck her as it trembled below her still throbbing crotch. She began to tease the head with her pussy. Every inch of him was trembling with the knowledge that he would soon penetrate her tight, willing cunt.

He was more than ready. He had nearly come just eating her. She was so responsive. Her pleasure was beautiful. There wasn't a hint of inhibition, not a whiff of hesitation in her delight. Her body was electric and alive in every

way a woman's body should be. She held nothing back. Now as she bounced above the head of his dick her pussy lips kissed him in all the right ways. She whispered in his ear, " Are you ready to fuck me, Nick?" and the words exploded in his head making his cock throb and ache to be inside her.. He took her hips in his hands and pressed his cockhead into her. She spread her legs even wider, urging him inside her body. His turgid shaft slid into her amazingly wet hole that gripped him in a tight embrace. She sucked her breath in with his entry but

took every inch of him with sheer abandonment. He began to move her slowly up and down his dick and she tightened the muscles of her pussy with each stroke. His hands gripped the cheeks of her ass harder as the pace of their fucking increased.

She added a little grinding motion to her rhythm each time he was fully inside her and he knew that she was pushing her clit against his pubic bone. It drove him crazy with lust to know that she was going to come again as already he recognized how she strained when

her climax was near. Suddenly, he could feel her bear down on the base of his cock and he heard the deep guttural growl of her mounting orgasm. His cockhead throbbed and he felt the explosion of his own imminent rush. She became still with the contractions of her pussy and he thrust hard against her a few times before he too simply pressed bone to bone and let the rush of hot semen finally fill her waiting hole.

He was spent. The delicious release of orgasm allowed him to finally find the relaxation that had been eluding

his jet-lagged head. They swam in silence to the pool stairs and sat for a moment on the tiled steps.

"That was wonderful. You are wonderful. Thank you." He whispered into her shiny, dripping hair.

"The pleasure was mine. Twice." She kissed him sweetly on the lips and then on the forehead as she climbed out of the pool. He watched her glistening body in the feeble light and wondered when he'd get the opportunity to fuck her again. *As soon as possible, that's for damn sure. What a fine piece.*

They shared his towel and a little awkward moment as they prepared to part. She didn't ask how long he would be staying at the Elysium. He didn't volunteer. He watched her walk away toward her room and felt a little guilty. *Maybe I should have told her. Too late for that now, Nicky-boy. The pussy's out of the bag.*

Mae hadn't really known what to feel or what to say to Nick after their

romp in the pool, so she said very little. There was the afterglow of outrageous pleasure, but also a tiny bit of regret that the pleasure came in such a fleeting package. She felt out of character and out of her element not quite sure what the 'procedure' was in such an impromptu encounter. He was a guest and he would be gone, if not tomorrow, then undoubtedly very soon. Too soon.

As they walked in opposite directions toward their respective rooms she sensed a bittersweet emptiness between her legs that his thick cock had

recently filled. She tightened her thighs as her pussy remembered the magical moment of penetration. That sublime feeling of being whole...of having an empty space filled.

She sat on the edge of her bed for a long time after she reached her room. By the time sleep seemed possible, she had considered every conceivable way she could think of to finagle another meeting with Nick Seville.

She could easily find out which room he was in. She could surprise him

with a 'complements of the chef' room service treat.

She could simply call and ask him for a date.

He could come looking for *her*.

Something, maybe that little voice of self-preservation, told Mae to leave it alone. There was too much power in our passion. Another session, or several, is going to do more damage. I already ache and it isn't just between my thighs.

When sleep finally darkened the whirlpool of her thoughts it was very

late. Her alarm seemed to sound just minutes after she nodded off.

As *chef de cuisine* in a hotel as large as the Elysium, Mae wore many hats. The one she enjoyed the most and felt she was best at was the role of teacher. Training cooks as beginners and as they advanced through the kitchen hierarchy was something that required knowledge and patience. Mae considered herself as accomplished as

the best of chefs and she had a knack for communicating with the various nationalities and personalities that flowed through the Elys kitchen.

Her underlings were almost exclusively male and there was often some resistance about taking instruction from a woman. Many female chefs overcompensate for their gender and become worse tyrants than men in the kitchen. But Mae chose another path-- she used her charm and her undeniable expertise to garner the respect she needed to be a success. Her confidence

in her ability fell just short of cockiness because she recognized that she would probably never develop the creative brilliance one needed to be a groundbreaking, headline-grabbing 'celebrity' chef. Weird combinations of ingredients and slavish devotion to anything 'new' simply left her cold. She felt that sometimes--often really--the classics were still the best choice. That's why hotel work suited her. Rarely do hotel patrons expect to eat dishes that have been 'deconstructed'. And while fusion has its role, a grand old hotel is

not one of the places it is likely to be found.

Kurt was gone so Mae was at it earlier than usual. There wasn't a second to spare to savor last night's delights. She checked the produce order and had a short conference with the burly butcher about the reliability of the meat purveyor. Thankfully, the head butcher was a competent guy from Germany who could take on the supervision of the meat stock. That was one less thing for Mae to worry about. The menu changes that she had hoped to have in place two days ago

would have to wait. She moved into the kitchen to check on one of the guys who had recently moved up a notch from cold to hot sauces. He was a thoughtful, quiet guy from the Philippines and he was having a bit of trouble adjusting to the demands of his new position. Filipinos made up the bulk of the lower rungs on the kitchen ladder, but the upper rungs were a hodgepodge of Europeans and North Americans using their culinary skills as a ticket to travel and adventure.

"How's it going, Reggie?" She paused by his station where he was

obviously preparing a batch of Hollandaise for breakfast service. Eggs Benedict, and many variations of them, were one of the classic favorites that went out of this kitchen by the dozens. Reggie's first day making the buttery sauce for breakfast service had unfortunately resulted in a broken disaster that had to be thrown out even though Mae had valiantly tried to salvage it with a little ice. That trick works well on a family-sized batch, but not so well on a grand scale. The broken sauce backed up the breakfast service by

just enough time for the other line cooks to dish out a fine measure of ridicule to the hapless Filipino. He wasn't used to the abuse so common in Western-style kitchens and seemed a little shaken by what would have rolled right off Mae's back.

"Ah, Chef Mae. Thank you-thank you. I think we have better sauce today." He bobbed up and down like some mechanical toy. "Taste-taste!"

Mae dipped her little finger in the pot of sauce. Very nice, Reggie. Just the right texture and there's a good lemon

kick to it. Just hold it carefully. Too hot and it will break. Too cold and it won't be appetizing on the eggs." She moved along down the sauce line checking that everything was as it should be.

At the far end of the kitchen near the walk-in cooler, Mae stopped to go over the list of cold dishes to be served at a luncheon in the Orchid Room with the *garde manger*. "They specifically asked for our steak salad with the [gorgonzola horseradish cream](#). You're going to have to throw the salad together at the last minute or it will get soggy."

"Yes, Chef."

"I want two mirrors at both ends of the buffet with identical *charcuterie*."

"Yes, Chef."

"The shrimp are in the walk-in?"

"Yes, Chef."

"I want my [wasabi cocktail sauce](#) with those shrimp, not the usual."

"Yes, Chef."

Mae looked up from her list to see the hotel's general manager making his way through the kitchen toward her.

"I hope to hell that you have

something good to say to me, Claude." said Mae as he approached. " I don't mind telling you that I am worried sick about Kurt and I'm also done in. A basket case."

"Well, my dear Chef Mae, you wouldn't know it to look at you. You're absolutely aglow." Claude's French-Swiss charm was always at the ready. "I'm afraid I can't shed any light on our missing Executive Chef, but I can provide you with some temporary relief. We have a stand-in exec out of our sister hotel in San Francisco. He was actually

retiring from his position, but agreed to pinch hit here until we sort the situation out or until you decide to take the job."

"Claude, I appreciate your confidence in me, but: A, I want Kurt back and B, I'm not executive chef material. I like it out here, I don't care for menu planning and I really suck at food costing. There's way too much office time involved in the exec's job."

"No harm in trying, Mae."

Claude glanced at the checklist Mae had only begun. "I won't keep you. I just wanted to let you know that the pinch-

hitter will be in some time this morning. I wanted him to take at least a day to recover from jet-lag, but he insisted on beginning immediately. He has a wonderful reputation at our San Francisco sister. It's really generous of him to give us his time in our hour of need."

"Maybe the old guy just wants a last hurrah before he hangs up his *toque* for good." Mae said as she turned back to the *garde manger* and his list.

"Oh, he's not..." Claude started to say, but realized Mae wasn't listening

anymore.

When Nick entered the kitchen at the peak of the lunch rush, he was happy to see that the layout of the shop was identical to what he knew in San Francisco. He was relieved to find himself in familiar surroundings if only at his workplace. He could almost swap out the sea of Filipino faces for his beloved Mexican staff and feel right at home.

The gleaming stainless work tables, the spotless white tile walls and the walk-in coolers spoke of efficiency and order. The line-up of the workhorses--grill, flat top, oven, stove and fryers--were all in their places and humming the symphony of service. Plates clacked, food sizzled and "ordering...one fish and chips, one chef's salad--SOS, one Mulligatawny soup" became the chorus. This was the music of Nick's life and he loved it.

Sometimes, Nick felt that he had been born in a kitchen. Certainly, his

earliest memories took place in the back pantries and occasionally the prep stations of the many kitchens his father called home. His mother had a bad case of wanderlust and travelled frequently. She was warm and beautiful when she was around, but she was the inconstant parent in his life. His father, on the other hand, was ever-present. He was an old-school chef, gruff and raw of speech, but passionate about his work and his son. He kept his only child close, even if that meant that Nick spent countless after-school hours in the care of prep cooks,

dish washers and the odd bartender or waitress.

So it was at an early age that Nick learned more about food and its preparation than most people will know in a lifetime. Before he hit puberty, he could tourné a potato with seven perfect sides, clean a fish and all manner of meats, make mayonnaise by hand, and make and reduce a stock to glossy perfection. He had begun the journey as a child and that journey now brought him to the Elysium. He surveyed the movement of the dance and listened to

the song of the kitchen and felt confident that he would be able to step into Kurt's place efficiently and get the job done.

He didn't want to interrupt the flow of service so he quickly tucked into the exec's office that occupied a small elevated platform at the back of the kitchen. A couple of the guys glanced his way, but the kitchen staff was so busy, they hardly had time to take notice. Once he shut the door to the office, no one knew he was even there. The smoked glass window that overlooked the kitchen obscured him from the staff's

view and he sat down at the desk to watch his new team in action. He wondered when he'd run into that hot little pantry girl he so pleasantly fucked last night and hoped she wouldn't be pissed off when she discovered he was her new temporary boss. He would very much like to have a piece of that cute little ass again.

He turned his attention to the menu files he had pulled up on the computer and tried to concentrate on what he was reading. Jet lag was hitting him hard and he couldn't seem to will

himself to stay focused. His thoughts kept circling back to those round globes of her tight ass pointing up at him and that sweet pussy dripping an invitation to mount her. How he'd buried his face between her thighs and made her shudder as he drew his tongue from cunt to asshole. Next time, he intended to pay a lot more attention to that ass.

Mae had left the kitchen in the capable hands of her line and gone to

see about the luncheon. She had less confidence in the *garde manger* than the line cooks. The *garde* had a tendency to get sloppy if she didn't ride him pretty hard. When well supervised, though, his presentation was positively art. He was brilliant at all the intricate fruit and vegetable carvings that made the elegant luncheon buffets so highly sought after (and profitable) for the Elys's food and beverage department.

Today, she was pleasantly surprised at the way the luncheon was going. Everything was neat and orderly,

all items were in place and the whole spread looked divine. Mae understood why her hotel was so well-regarded. Looking at the table groaning with the freshest and finest ingredients, made into dishes with exacting care and laid out with such grace and beauty made Mae proud of herself and her staff.

By two-thirty, the lunch service was done and the staff began to prep for the dinner.

Mae made some quick rounds of the kitchen, checking the prep for dinner service. The line was still very much up

and running, but by now it was mostly poolside burgers and club sandwiches going out the door. The afternoon hours were critical for a smooth dinner service. Everyone had their jobs to do and today, it seemed there were no surprises from the purveyors. Mae was grateful for that. No last minute menu changes because the ingredients didn't arrive in time.

Being a small island nation, Singapore imported nearly everything from near and far. Most of the produce came in screamingly fresh from across

the straits and the Malay fields. Beef and lamb flew in from Down Under. Rice and chickens from Thailand. And, as much as she claimed she was no good at food costing, Mae was actually pretty good at squeezing all the value possible out of all that expensive food.

After she had satisfied herself that all was humming along as it should in the main kitchen, she went to file the various invoices from the deliveries in Kurt's office. She climbed the few steps up to the exec's office and opened the door. She did a double-take when she

saw a man dozing on the desk. His long arms wrapped around his head as he slept and a bright red bandana covered his hair.

The sound of the door being opened roused the man from his nap and he jerked upright. Mae stood in the office door and gaped open mouthed at the stud she had so thoroughly enjoyed the night before.

"What are you doing here?" The question came out of Mae's mouth even as she realized with a sinking feeling that she knew exactly what he was doing

there.

"I probably should have told you before I...before we got together last night that I was here to pinch-hit in Kurt's absence, but things...well...you know"

Nick's rather sheepish explanation didn't sit well with Mae. How dare he deliberately withhold that very important fact? If she had known he was going to be working at the Elys in any capacity she would never have given in to last night's impulsiveness. "Yes, you damn well should have told me. I

would never have...I don't mix work with...I mean I avoid..."

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just that you were pretty much irresistible last night. There's no harm done. I'm only here until either Kurt comes back or a replacement is found. Besides, we're not likely to run into one another very often. I'm not exactly going to be supervising every pantry girl at the Elysium."

"Pantry girl? *Pantry* girl? You assume I'm a pantry girl, huh? Oh the arrogance!" Mae was doubly ticked off now. First the deception, now the

assumption that she was some lowly salad spinner. "I will have you know, Chef Nick that I am your chef de cuisine. Furthermore, Claude offered to let me step up to the plate as exec and I declined"

"I see. Well that is a bit on the awkward side, isn't it? Look Mae, no one has to know what we're up to. You're obviously a girl after a bit of fun, so let's have our fun when we can."

"We're no longer up to anything. You knew last night that you'd be my boss and you should have allowed me to

make the choice of whether we should...whether I wanted to..."

"Fuck me senseless?" His smile infuriated her. "We were very good together. I can't say I've ever had better."

"You were deliberately deceptive. I don't appreciate it at all."

"You certainly seemed to appreciate it last night."

Mae felt a little tingle between her legs in spite of herself. "Last night was a mistake and is now history. I'd be very grateful if you could manage to keep it to yourself. I've worked hard for

the respect this crew grudgingly gives me. They would love to have something like this to tease me mercilessly about. I don't want my authority eroded by some meaningless incident"

"You have my word that I won't reveal our dirty little secret," Nick said. Mae sensed a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"You have absolutely no right to be peeved with me," she said indignantly. "You used me with the full knowledge that we'd be working together."

"I think you'll have to agree that the 'using' part was entirely mutual."

Mae was tempted to explain that her behavior the night before was very much out of character for her and that she didn't jump every man's bones. But as angry as she was, she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of thinking that there was anything special about him. It was better for him to continue assuming that it was completely normal for her to have passionate sex with a random stranger.

"Okay then, we used each other."

But you're the one who was deceitful."

"I said I was sorry. As you won't let me make it up to you in the manner I would very much like to, what *mea culpa* would satisfy you?"

"None. I mean, nothing. I mean I accept your apology. Let's just move along from it, okay?"

When you're ready, I'll introduce you around." Mae covered her confusion with an all-business-now attitude. She made a quick exit with a forced tight-lipped smile that looked more like a grimace. She was

determined to put up a mature front even if she was suffering a combination of anger at his deception and embarrassment that she was now going to have to work beside Nick for the foreseeable future. *If I can't look at him without remembering last night, he certainly won't be forgetting either. This is what happens when I step out of my comfort zone! Now I've got a boss who thinks I'm a complete slut. And there's nobody to blame but myself. Damn, damn, damn!*

Nick spent the rest of the day sequestered in the office. Not only was he physically slammed from the jet lag, he was also licking the wounds to his male pride. No matter how much a man fancies himself a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy, it stings when the shoe is on the other foot. Nick was surprised that it hurt just a tad when Mae dismissed their passion so casually. Obviously, she was simply the kind of woman who used men for sex when she felt like it and could

walk away. *Figures, she's got to have brass balls to do her job so it follows that she'd have a guy's attitude toward getting some. Point made, Chef Mae.*

It irritated him, but he had to admit to himself that somehow he felt a real sting by her rejection of any further intimacy. It seemed more than obvious that Chef Mae could put their tryst in the pool in the 'meaningless event file' in her world. Nick wondered why she had such an effect on him. He'd had casual encounters with beautiful women before. And she wasn't even that beautiful. Her

nose was a tad too long, her lips a tad too full. Her body was perfect, if you liked the tiny type. *Yes*, he told himself, *I've had more beautiful women. Was it her passion? Her abandon? Why does she keep intruding on my mind?* Try as he might, Nick could not dismiss the chemistry between them easily. And, now that he knew her position in the kitchen, he also had to admit to himself that he was intrigued.

Nick himself had held the *chef de cuisine* title at the San Francisco Elysium before he stepped into the exec

position. Truth be told, he thought being the exec was a softer job. The main reason he was retiring from hotel cheffing was the fact that he had worked himself up to the top and didn't like it much. He missed being a part of the action. Missed having the hands-on day-to-day contact with the food, the people, the purveyors--everything.

He watched from the office and found himself envying Mae her job. The entire floor was hers. She had the authority (and the skill it seemed) to step into any station, correct any person or

dish, orchestrate the entire ebb and flow of the kitchen. She was the conductor without whom the rhythm of the place would fall into chaos and discord. He fondly remembered the demands of that position and respected anyone who could pull it off, including himself. Frankly, he had more pride in being second in command than he had in being the exalted head honcho.

He willed himself to concentrate on Uncle Kurt's menus. There were some really brilliant twists and turns on standard, classic favorites.

Uncle Kurt knew his way around food, that's for sure. Runs in the family, I suppose, Nick mused. His father's youngest sibling by many, many years, Kurt was more like a brother to Nick than an uncle. Both had learned the culinary trade at Nick's father's knee. Both had also inherited the Gander tendency to go off on wild adventures-- the restless spirit that had impelled Nick to make the decision to leave a very cushy job at the San Francisco Elysium and strike out on his own. His father's death the year before had left him bereft

and everything in the big hotel kitchen reminded him of that it was his father's legacy that put him there. It seemed the right time to finally go out on his own and open his own little shop.

Generations of Ganders had wandered the globe going from one classic old-school hotel kitchen to the next. Nick wanted to be the first to break the mold and go it alone as a chef-owner. He intended to bring his classical training and his world travels together in a rustically elegant bistro. Kurt threw a monkey wrench into his plans when he

took off.

Not that he blamed Kurt for splitting. When Bernadette surfaced in Panama, he had to go find her and at least try to make sense of the relationship that had consumed him for so many years. That memory had tormented Kurt for too many years. No one knew the whole story in the Elysium kitchen and no one would hear it from Nick. Carrying his mother's surname in the Spanish tradition would ensure that there'd be no reason for any of the staff to put two and two together and connect

Nick with Kurt. Nick could see the family resemblance, but with his mother's dark hair, he really didn't look like he was related to his tow-headed uncle.

Wish you'd given me the head's up on the little hottie you had as second in command, Uncle Kurt. I could have avoided what promises to be a very uncomfortable situation. Nick brushed off the thought of Mae. *If she can do it, so can you, Nicky-boy.*

Mae was happy that Nick gave her ample opportunity to avoid him during the dinner service. He stayed mostly in the office while the rush was on. From there he could observe the busy rhythm of the kitchen and assess the team. It made sense that he wanted to spend a little time getting a feel for how they all worked together. But as Mae moved in and out of stations tasting here, correcting a plate there, occasionally pitching in to expedite a large table, she thought she felt Nick's observant hazel

eyes follow her every move. She could not kick the feeling of being electrically charged by his proximity and it disturbed her usual composure. All throughout service she was having a raging argument with herself, chiding herself for not being able to treat last night's incident more casually. She was determined to hold her head high and let him know that she would conduct herself in the most professional way, in spite of being anything but the night before.

When the dinner rush slowed, Nick made his way out of the office and

scanned the kitchen. She knew he probably wanted the promised introductions to the staff before everyone started cleaning their stations and shutting down. Mae saw him emerge and stand on the little staircase for a moment. His tall frame wore the impeccable white coat beautifully and the bandana around his head made the classic attire somehow sexier than it might have been. He looked like a pirate chef. She felt her knees weaken at the sight of him in spite of her resolve. She drew herself up as straight as she could manage as he

approached her. As he got closer to her, she could feel the current oscillating between their bodies and wondered if he felt it too.

"Chef Mae, would you be so kind as to introduce me to the staff now?" Nick asked stiffly.

"I'd be happy to, Chef Nick." She clapped her hands a couple of times. Everyone who wasn't still actively cooking fell silent and turned their total attention on her. "I'd like to introduce you to Nick Seville who will be temporarily taking on the executive role

here at the Elysium. I know you will all give him your full cooperation and support as we work through this confusing and difficult time."

All eyes now on him, Nick flashed his signature grin and Mae tried not to look. "I've been running the Elysium kitchen in San Francisco for many years, so I hope that experience will serve me well here. I think that with the team I've been observing tonight, we can weather this period without too much ill effect." He continued, "I hope I'll be able to add at least a little

something of my own in the brief time I'll be in charge here."

Mae began her introductions with the line cooks and the expeditor working her way down the chain of command all the way to the dishwashers.

Nick shook hands with each and every worker in the kitchen and had something unique to say to each of them. It was annoyingly obvious that the staff took an instant shine to him. He had none of the typical 'attitude' of superiority that so many highly regarded chefs bring with them to the kitchen. Mae was

looking for something to dislike in his demeanor, but found nothing. Normally she scorned the military precision that turned a chef into a commander and usually an asshole. But after the 'pantry girl' crack, his humility struck her as less than genuine.

"Can we meet first thing in the morning to discuss a few specials I've come up with? I understand from Claude that you haven't had the time to run any this past week."

"Yes, Chef Nick," Mae bristled, "I haven't had time because I was doing

two jobs."

"I didn't mean to imply..."

She cut him off. "I normally get into the kitchen around nine. Breakfast service runs well without me. Would nine suit you?" She intended to sound brusque and give him no real option--it wasn't a question, it was more of an order.

"Nine is fine, Chef Mae."

Mae was never so grateful to get

back to her quarters as she was that night. *That was the longest damn day of my life*, she thought. Exhausted, she shed her clothes and made straight for the shower. Experience had taught her that even though it seemed as if she could fall into bed and sleep, she needed a 'wind-down' time before sleep would come. Today especially, when her mind was reeling with thoughts of Nick in the kitchen and Nick in the pool, she had to let the water do its magic and calm her shattered nerves.

She stood under the hot stream

and closed her eyes. She dialed the shower head to pulsating massage and gratefully directed it at the back of her neck and between her shoulder blades. She was tight as a drum. Try as she would to ignore it, there was also a delicious ache between her legs where sex had bruised her ever so slightly. The way they had ground themselves into each other, Mae wasn't surprised to be sore. Even the insides of her thighs felt like she had been exercising them--and she had--spreading her legs as far as she could make them go.

Revisiting the passion made her clit start to twitch and she aimed the pulsing water there for a guaranteed quick release. She got off with lightening speed most of the time when she used the shower wand. She found it better than a vibrator as she could really control the pressure and the warmth of the water added a nice glow. Tonight, though, she was fighting herself. Unwilling to fantasize with Nick as her fuck partner had Mae engaged in the ultimately futile attempt to block out all faces and just imagine a disembodied cock. It wasn't

working. Nick's face, Nick's chest, Nick's mouth, Nick's voice--all kept intruding--until she had no choice but to accept that he, and he alone, was going to be the author of her sweet orgasm tonight.

She surrendered and her mind's eye watched him bury his mouth in her pussy and suck her clit until it spasmed. Bingo. Orgasm number one.

She played her mind-movie as she rode him hard, impaling her hole with his rod and felt the fire of male desire singe her. Bingo. Orgasm number

two.

She let the action heat up as she pictured the head of his cock sliding up and down the crack of her ass teasing her puckered hole as he pumped his hot spunk out onto her cheeks. Bingo. Orgasm number three.

Spent, she could take this very effective fantasy no further. She felt unsettled and embarrassed at the flight of her imagination. That her mind wandered so willingly where she desperately wished it wouldn't spoke to some primal flaw in her psyche. She

wrapped her robe around her and fell across her bed face down. She wanted to cry, but tears only teased her tired eyes and refused to fall.

Fitful sleep finally came to her around midnight. She tossed and turned and woke a dozen times anxious and uneasy from unremembered dreams she was sure starred Nick Seville. At six she could fight it no longer and resigned to face her day with as much stoicism as she could muster. She plaited her coffee-colored hair into a thick braid that she twisted into a chignon at the base of her

neck and observed her reflection in the mirror. Her brilliant blue eyes didn't seem as tired as she felt. Her pale skin was as creamy and smooth as it had ever been. Satisfied that she did not, in fact, have "I'm lusting after the boss" tattooed on her forehead, Mae donned her chef's jacket. Her hands did shake ever so slightly as she pushed the black studs through the double-breasted coat, but she steadied herself by the time she'd put them all in.

The kitchen was humming when she reached it. She grabbed a cup of

coffee and one of the Elys's excellent Danish and slipped into her little corner that served as a quasi-office space. Here she could check the minimal paperwork she was normally responsible for and spend precious minutes planning out the day's tasks. Breakfast service was hectic but rarely held any crisis or surprise. Guests in the dining room ate from the buffet which had an omelet station and a waffle station. Room service was the biggest demand at the breakfast service, but the cooks easily handled the rush.

An hour until the meeting. I can

do this. I'll focus on how grateful I am that Nick's here to take back the god-awful duties that were dropped in my lap. Mae tried to rationalize her way into a positive attitude. The deception still stung, but it was really not the worst thing the man could have done.

Restaurant kitchens are notorious for sexual liaisons of all stripes. The atmosphere of food and fire just lends itself to thoughts of a sensual nature. Usually it was a chef doing a waitress, but other combinations were certainly not unheard of. Amongst her staff the

affairs tended to be the high drama variety what with the abundance of gay Filipinos employed by the Elysium. Years back, Mae herself had had a wonderfully torrid little fling with a wine purveyor who was a relentless flirt. *Great sex and the bennies were even better. I didn't drink a bottle of cheap wine for months! Too bad he turned out to be an utter turd. Too bad I allowed him to get too close.*

She reconsidered her attitude toward Nick. It isn't as if I had much conversation with him in the pool. I

certainly offered myself up on a silver platter. She resolved to try simply act as if nothing had happened. *Nothing did happen*, Mae reminded herself. *I went after a satisfying fuck with an extremely desirable passing stranger. He thought he was shagging a kitchen wench. Enough said. Over and done with.*

Nick had not quite adjusted his circadian rhythm to Singapore. He had

heard it said that you need a day of adjustment for each hour of time difference. He had days to go before his body accepted that he was no longer in San Francisco. He had dug deep into the menus, the invoices and the countless other details of his uncle's huge scope of responsibilities during the long sleepless night. Just before dawn he made his way back to his room, showered and took a couple hour's cat-nap. He wasn't exactly raring to go, but he felt clear-headed enough to face the day and Mae. He pulled on some checks from his closet

and a freshly laundered chef's coat. *Note to self: dress warmly Nicky-boy. Your hot little water sprite has turned into a cold fish.*

Nagging at the back of his mind, no matter how much he tried to expunge it, was the memory of his romp in the pool with Mae. How could a woman evince such passion and abandon and turn right around and cut it off just like that. Nick had had plenty of little affairs 'just for fun' and managed to part on friendly terms with most of the lovely ladies who gave themselves up so freely

to the handsome, virile chef. Hell, the last few years had been a bonanza for the guys in his trade. Being a chef had garnered glamour and sex appeal what with the all the TV food channels and the celebrity chefs who made women go all dreamy over a guy who could cook. The rough language, the competitive food shows, the proficiency with knives and machines and the working knowledge of foods most folks out in TV land had never heard of lent a certain charm to a formerly pretty mundane profession (at least to the public's eye).

Added to his profession was the undeniable appeal of Nick's strange Euro-American accent that always aroused a woman's curiosity, and sometimes the woman herself. Nick's mother was Spanish, (Basque to be exact) and his father was Dutch. But a great deal of the early years of his father's career had been spent in New York where Nick was born and spent his formative years. Then his family circled the globe with his father's increasing status as a great executive chef capable of turning loss leaders into profit

centers. Consequently, Nick's deep bass voice was laced with an indefinable and unique accent that women found very appealing.

He had learned, in San Francisco that the accent could also lead to some assumptions about his gender preferences. His staff at the hotel never missed an opportunity to razz him ruthlessly about the number of times he got hit on by men. "It's the Euro thing, man," his expeditor buddy had told him one night after a particularly persistent guy had been hitting on Nick. " Plus

you're a good looking dude. It's kind of hard to tell who's who and what's what these days. The lines get pretty blurry. You know we just give you shit in the kitchen. You get a piece more often than the rest of us and we gotta see that you pay a price."

Nick wondered if he might be able to maneuver just a wee bit more warmth out of Mae by sharing his unusual background. *Why do you give a shit, man? You have got to get yourself together. This is a temporary assignment and she was a temporary*

plaything. Good God, you're mooning around like a seventeen year old over a piece of ass that's likely poked by any stud that strikes her fancy. Get the fuck over it and do your job!

Right now, the job was to meet the wench and prep her on his specials. Much as he admired his uncle's creativity in the kitchen, there was always room for twists and turns. Hotel menus tend to be predictable for a reason. Guests arriving from far afield want to have some choices that don't challenge their tastes too terribly much.

At the same time, they want to 'experience' the whole foreign thing. It takes a rather delicate balance to provide both.

Nick approached his little kitchen colonel yellow pad in hand, prepared for a real ice-goddess treatment. "Good morning, Chef Mae." He smiled a tad too brightly.

He was surprised that she seemed more relaxed than he had expected. " Pull up a chair, Chef Nick, and let's see what you've got for me. And you don't have to stand on ceremony out

of earshot of the troops, by the way. Mae will do fine. When the show's on, we try to stick to protocol, but other than that, we're all friends here."

"Then I can hope that we can also be 'friends' while I'm here?"

"Look, I'm sorry about the snippiness yesterday. Let's just forget about it and make the best of an awkward situation. Jumping into this kitchen on such short notice can't be easy for you and I don't want to make it harder. I love this place and wouldn't do anything to jeopardize our standards."

Mae's brow furrowed. "I am very worried about Kurt. I consider him a very dear friend as well as the best executive anyone could hope to work under."

As uncomfortable as Nick was with the subterfuge, he could do nothing to allay Mae's fears. He had sworn not to tell anyone what he knew about Kurt's whereabouts, which was precious little anyway. "I understand that chef Kurt is one of the best," he said blandly.

"I promise to do everything I can not to sully his reputation. So consider me an ally in your effort to

keep this place running as if he were still here." Mae indicated that he should take the other chair opposite her so they could get started.

Nick pulled up the rickety kitchen chair next to Mae and straddled it backwards as he flipped a couple pages into his notes. In the back of his mind he hoped that somehow that very masculine posture would jiggle the hell out of the composure Mae seemed to have so easily summoned up. It would be a great deal harder than he thought to concentrate on the specials he was

proposing sitting within inches of her. Perhaps his body language would even the score.

Nick tapped his pad with his pencil "Look, I know Kurt's lamb shank special was a popular one. Hell, how can you go wrong with apples, rosemary and lamb? But, I was thinking that since this is Singapore, maybe we try a different take...how about braised with mango, lemon grass and a hint of curry?" He looked up at her and chewed on the eraser.

"Green mangoes would hold up

better in a braise, but you might need something to cut the tartness if you go with green." She was thinking hard and it showed on her face. Nick saw the lines of concentration snake across her smooth forehead.

"A little brown sugar?" he suggested.

"Palm sugar would be a more local flavor"

Nick was pleasantly impressed. As he went through his list of dishes that Mae was able to give him thoughtful and really quite creative feedback. Not only

did she know her ingredients, but she seemed a lot less combative than others might be under the circumstances. Most chefs he knew would be stubborn on principle alone if a new guy walked in and started messing with a kitchen's traditions. He had to admire her loyalty to Uncle Kurt as well as her professional approach to her job. It made it all the more difficult to dismiss their shared passion in the pool as just a meaningless romp with a stranger. It just didn't jive with the person she revealed herself to be on the job.

Then, just as he had begun to feel that perhaps things could move forward for them in more than just a professionally courteous way, she jolted him with an abrupt dismissal.

"If you're finished with the briefing, Nick, I think it's time for me to source a few ingredients and get the staff working on the changes. You can see Maribel in the front office and she'll run you through the usual way we present the specials menu and have it printed for you. Later, we can bring the wait staff in for a tasting and description once the

cooks have the recipes down. Unless you feel you need to walk me through, I think I can handle it from here. I'm sure there's plenty of paperwork up there in the office that I've neglected these past days. It's not my forte and I apologize in advance for whatever mess I've made of the invoices and cost analysis." She rose after her little speech with an unmistakable signal that, in her mind at least, the meeting was over.

Nick was used to being in charge and it took him slightly aback to have 'his' meeting terminated so

peremptorily. But, as she was right, and there was little else to say he simply nodded and went on his way. He wasn't thrilled about spending most of the day mired in paperwork when he would have much preferred to test and taste the new recipe concepts. But clearly that was Mae's bailiwick and he had the feeling it was best to let the waters stay calm after their rocky start.

Mae's thoughts were running

nearly along the same lines as Nick's. Here was a guy who clearly knew his way around a menu and his ideas were quite inspired. It wasn't as if she felt Kurt any less a chef, but here was a man who could take a classic and twist it just enough to make it intriguing without scaring the timid palate away from a new experience. It was going to be very difficult not to like the man. And Mae desperately did want to dislike him for the sake of her sanity. She had deliberately iced-down her demeanor at the end of their meeting.

She noticed his slight change in body language when she rose to signal that the meeting was over. *Good. I'd rather he knows now that it's best to keep his distance. It's hardly fair for him to sit like that in front of me knowing--I am pretty damn sure--that I can't stare into his crotch without thinking about...*

Mae gripped her notes as if they were going to escape. She squeezed her eyes closed then opened them to try to bring the words she had written into some sort of order. A quick phone calls

to the produce purveyor made for an excellent distraction and brought her back to the tasks at hand.

Most of the ingredients needed were on hand in the kitchen and those that weren't were easily dispatched to the Elys kitchen even before the lunch service began. She assembled the line cooks who would be handling the specials and efficiently described what tastes they were looking for and how to achieve them. Mae had a well-trained staff and there was not a great deal of explanation needed to get them cracking

on tasting-dishes for her.

If he was watching from the glassed office above the kitchen, Mae was determined to demonstrate her professionalism. She went into her 'go' mode and began briefing the various chefs who would take responsibility for executing the special. There were few words and a lot of nodding from the cooks. Everyone went their separate ways at light speed to attend to their various tasks.

Nick *was* watching. She just knew he was. Mae patiently

demonstrated how to make a signature sauce for the Elys's daily fish special. It was a sauce that Mae had stolen shamelessly from a former colleague and used to great effect time and again. The young Filipino saucier watched as she melted butter and added an equal measure of brown sugar and soy sauce to the mix. She whisked in about a half a cup of wasabi powder and the sauce magically came together topped with a hint of sesame oil and a kiss of grated ginger. It was a perfect foil for the black-sesame-crusting tuna grilled and

served from the kitchen each day. She wordlessly followed the young cook's own rendering of her sauce. She tasted his. He tasted hers. She asked the fellow what the difference was in the two sauces. She nodded as the novice added just a touch more wasabi and a small dash of sesame oil. They tasted again. Mae patted the kid on the back and let him combine the two pots to go in the walk-in for service.

She walked around the various stations with a sharp eye for quality control. There was never any malice in

her corrections but there was nothing soft about her manner either. It was a strange combination of power and diplomacy rarely found in a kitchen of the stature of the Elysium. She stopped to point out the silver skin left on a tenderloin that a cook who had probably been cleaning filets for years had missed. He actually smiled at her for pointing out his lapse and she patted his back and walked on to check the next station, the next process, the next dish waiting for her approval.

The day rumbled forward, the

hectic lunch schedule giving way to the intense concentration of the quiet afternoon hours so critical to dinner service success. Mae disappeared, as was her custom, to power-nap at the shank of the afternoon. Even slammed in Kurt's absence she retained the habit. Fourteen-hour days require some sort of refueling. She returned refreshed at four o'clock to help put together the tasting for the new specials for the wait staff and, of course, for Nick. Mae grudgingly admitted to herself that he had kept his distance during the course of the day and

allowed her to execute his ideas without interference. The last thing she needed or wanted at this point was someone breathing down her neck and critiquing her every move.

Maribel had left the printed specials' menus at her station and Mae quickly proofread the copy to make sure the description was as written and without error. Maribel seldom made any careless errors and this time was no exception:

Braised Lamb Shank with Curried

Green Mango and Jaggery Sauce

On Steamed Basmati Rice

Macadamia-Crusted Pomfret with

Tropical Fruit Coulis

And Coconut Beurre Blanc

Chili Prawns with Fresh Asparagus

and Water Chestnuts

Served with Bean Thread Noodles

Pork Tenderloin Adobo Style with

Ragout of Roasted

Local Pumpkin and Baby Vegetables

*House-made Ceylon Tea Smoked Duck
with Lychee Sauce
Rice Pancakes and Garlic Greens*

Mae was pleased with the five specials as well as the several appetizers and soups that she and Nick had collaborated on. Once again, she mused at his lack of ego-involvement when they discussed his ideas. He seemed to welcome the addition of her local knowledge into his extensive

repertoire.

I admire his style. Very much like a smoother-talking version of Kurt. He seems to know enough to know what he doesn't know. Kurt used to say that was an essential skill so many so-called 'chefs' are too proud to cultivate. Damn, I wish I knew what happened to the bastard. He owes me some explanation...I thought I was more than an employee. I was his friend. Mae tossed off the worry and gathered her wits. Time to brief the staff and run the presentation by the chef.

Mae tapped at the office door. "We're ready with the specials now if you want to have a look at them, Chef Nick." Cool and all business was Mae's watchword now.

"I'll be right there." Nick threw on his coat and buttoned it as he descended the few stairs into the kitchen. This was not the time to appear too casual. Although he wasn't a tyrant, Nick still had a great deal of respect for the

old-school formalities of the kitchen. It wouldn't due to review the first set of 'his' specials in a ratty old t-shirt from a decades past rock n'roll band.

He was certainly not surprised to find all the specials lined up and perfectly plated. His uncle's hand was everywhere. Each plate had the elements of presentation represented in creative and effective form. Even the more difficult to present items, like the chili prawns, were successful. Instead of chopping all the asparagus, several whole spears leaned tall against a tight

nest of the bean thread noodles. The shocking red of the chili sauce played beautifully against the green vegetable and the snow-white noodles and was artfully swept across one side of the big dinner plate.

The lamb looked mouth watering. Nick knew that was going to be his favorite and a big hit. He had worried that it would be a monotone of brown, but the yellow of the turmeric in the curry sauce brightened the braise considerably. Ringing the shank and sauce propped against the molded

Basmati were shiny drops of a brilliant green that added just the right note to the entire look of the plate. "Cilantro oil?" he asked.

Mae nodded. "I hope you don't mind that I made the addition. The color palette was a little dull."

"Perfect touch. I was concerned about the color issue on that plate. Cilantro is the natural choice." Nick found nothing to criticize in the plating and began to methodically taste a tiny portion of each dish.

"Personally, I'd like much more

chili in the prawns. I suggest you offer the customer a choice of heats or provide some extra sauce with the serving, on the side."

"Yes, Chef Nick," Tank answered. He was on sauté and that included the wok so the prawns were his responsibility.

"I know that you don't want to serve the ragout as mush, but I do think that a few of those baby vegetables could use a minute or two more."

The expeditor, Jonesie, would put this plate together. "It'll go under the

salamander for a couple of minutes, Chef Nick. I'm hoping that will bring them up to al dente."

"Very well," Nick allowed, "But check the first orders and make sure. It isn't pork adobo with *salad*"

"Yes, Chef."

"Okay, then. Good job everyone. Let's get the wait-staff briefed and I think we're good to go." And with that Nick gave them all a postcard perfect smile and headed straight back up to his office.

That's it? That's all? Wow. Don't give up too much effort there, Nick. I mean it's grand that you find our work so perfectly executed, but surely there's something more you could say. Without knowing why, Mae found herself actually miffed that the man didn't have more criticism to levy. His casual attitude struck a nerve just as she was beginning to grant him some grudging respect.

Mae had no idea what

arrangements the Elysium management had made with Nick Seville, but it obviously wasn't anything important enough to warrant his serious attention. Grateful as she was to have the paperwork monkey off her back, she still felt that a chef, even an executive chef, should spend at least a portion of his time and energy actually cooking. Kurt always found reason to come and interfere, as they used to joke, but it was part of staying in touch with the actual food, real people and paying customers that made Kurt such a good leader. *This*

guy is nothing more than a paper-pusher with a good food imagination. Come back Kurt, come back!

Around eight o'clock the kitchen was rockin'and rollin' It had turned into a very busy Thursday night. Typically, the hotel attracted pretty equal numbers of tourists and business travelers so weekdays and weekends were both just as likely to be busy. Mae was helping ready a ten-top for pick-up when she saw Nick make his way down the steps, coat slung over his shoulder. Without so much as a glance at what was happening

in the kitchen, he loped out the back door.

If anyone else on the line noticed, they didn't comment. But now the slow burn that started with his nonchalant performance earlier in the afternoon started to ignite into a full-fledged fury. Mae couldn't believe he didn't have the courtesy to ask how it was going or even say goodnight. *This is obviously someone who knows his way around food but where's the passion? Maybe I can chalk the other night up to another passionless talent of his. What*

a waste. All the talent in the world doesn't light a fire. He's like a paint by number artist—or lover.

She didn't have any more time to ruminate over Nick's talent, or his apparent lack of passion to match it. The kitchen started to get slammed with an unusual number of big tables. She danced between stations intuiting what she could do or bring that would help keep the line out of the weeds and at the same time stay the hell out of their way. It was a ballet and one she loved.

Three hundred and some-odd

dinners later, the crew was giving each other high-fives as they began to break down the line. This kind of night, with more than ten tables of ten or twelve customers, was a nightmare scenario. Only half of those big-tops had made reservations. Coupled with five new specials to run, it could have been a disaster. So, everyone was rightly proud that they had come through the night without a meltdown.

"The Chef's specials sold great tonight, Mae," Tank commented. " I appreciate that they weren't all sauté.

That could have gotten ugly."

"Hmmmph."

"You know what I mean. Those specials were brilliantly designed... easy to put together on the fly and spread out among us."

"Yes, Tank. Chef Nick is a certified genius. I think we've proved that here tonight. Certainly his track record here in the Elysium kitchen has been brilliant."

"What'd he do to you? He seems a good enough guy."

"It's what he failed to do, Tank.

Did you notice him leave at eight tonight?"

"I wasn't really noticing shit at eight o'clock tonight except all them tickets."

"I just thought it was kind of inconsiderate. I mean he's only been here a couple days. You'd think that he'd want to see how we operate."

"Mae, this is a temporary gig for the guy. He's here to fill a gap. I don't think it's fair to expect him to treat this job as anything more than what it is."

"No, we wouldn't want him to

make more of this than it is." This was said with more sarcastic venom than Mae had intended.

"Is it just his work attitude that's got your panties in a bunch or did he say something to piss you off?" Tank was very protective of Mae. Although he and the others never let on just how much affection and admiration they had for their 'little boss' Mae knew that any one of her guys in the Elysium kitchen would lay flat any man who did her wrong. Tank looked at her sharply and scowled.

"No, my dear, dear giant.

Nothing of the sort. You just know how I feel about this place and it's harder than I thought adjusting to someone in Kurt's place. I'll get over it." With that she pretended to get very busy in her quasi office.

In truth, Mae was shuffling papers around mindlessly. She had seen so many faces of Nicholas Seville in three days that she was having trouble reconciling them all to the same person.

There was, of course, the first Nick. The Nick of the pool. The lusty, talented, sensual and quite beautiful

playmate. Then there was the creative Nick who had all the right instincts when it came to food. The Nick who could conduct himself without the crippling ego she hated so much in other chefs. But last, and sadly, she had seen the passionless Nick. A Nick who could walk away from a full-on dinner service under his command without so much as a look over his shoulder. Mae thought it was very much like a general leaving the battlefield at its peak. Granted, he was a temporary general, but she felt very strongly that he should have taken his

role more seriously.

One by one the staff had cleaned their stations, availed themselves of a shift drink compliments of the management and exited into the heavy night. Those who were attached would likely go home to the partners who put up with their odd hours. Those who were not would head for one of the few places in Singapore that didn't shut down until the wee small hours.

Mae grabbed her list to do a quick inventory of the meat on hand to leave on Nick's desk. He would have to

order early on Friday to get the weekend's stock by the afternoon. He would need to know what he *had* to know what he *needed*.

The walk-in for proteins was divided into the forward refrigerated part and the rear frozen section. Mae quickly assessed the inventory in the front part and went into the back section to do the same for the frozen items. She hated this task. It was beastly cold and the light in the freezer was not the best. As she closed the freezer door behind her she realized that the stool that was

usually kept in the freezer wasn't there. Mae wasn't the only member of the staff too short to reach the topmost shelf comfortably. It was late and she was in a hurry so she decided to just use the bottom shelf as a step stool to reach the topmost stock.

She checked the floor first, then the next two shelves and then hoisted herself onto the lowest shelf to peer into the half-darkness and count the whole ducks and the chickens. As she reached to shimmy along toward the back, her hand caught the drip pan that was always

present under the aging condenser that labored to keep the tropical humidity from invading the cooler.

In a flash, the pan gave into her grip and tumbled along with Mae to the floor of the freezer. The ice water hit her chest just as her head made contact with the shelving on the opposite wall. She was out cold when the last of the cooks locked the outer door to the walk-in and turned the kitchen service lights out before he himself left for the night.

It could have been an hour or two or minutes. Mae awoke with a throbbing head, confused and freezing cold. It took her a few moments to gather her thoughts enough to sort out what had happened to her. The top half of her body was soaking wet. The drip tray was upside down beside her.

She struggled into a sitting position and gasped at how cold she was. *Got. To. Get. Out.* Her mind was having a great deal of difficulty communicating with her body. *Stand.*

Up. She made it to her knees after and paused on all fours to gather strength to stand. Her hands did not want to grasp the cold steel of the shelving and slipped once, then twice when she attempted to rise. On the third try she pulled herself to her feet. In slow motion, she took the three small steps to the freezer door.

She pushed on the round release to open the freezer door but she was so weak it didn't budge. Again and again she tried and failed to dislodge the latch that would get her into the refrigerator section. Finally she summoned all of her

strength and used her full body weight to slam into the release with her hip. It should have hurt, but she was too cold to feel it. The door gave way and she was out in the fridge.

She went straight for the outer door latch and pushed at the latch release there. It didn't move a millimeter. She tried her hip again and still nothing gave. She called out to anyone to get her out of there, but no one came. She pushed and rammed and even kicked at the stubborn latch to no avail. *Goddammit, let me out! Open the*

goddamn door!

She pounded on the door for what seemed like forever. Her hands were brilliant red and alternated between numbness and pain. Finally, desperately she wrapped a kitchen towel around a lamb shank and began to pound on the door with the bone.

So cold. So fucking cold. Have to rest. Have to sit. She slipped down against the cold steel of the door. *This is how I'm going to die? Where is everyone?* Tha-wump. She whacked at the door with the shank and began to

imagine that her hand was actually a bloody stump.

The front of her jacket was a partially frozen plank of icy cotton. Mae tried in vain to fumble with the studs that imprisoned her in the sodden material. She slipped into a dream-like state and the lamb shank dropped to her side.

She imagined that she heard the door open. And then it closed again. *Noooo. Help me! I'm in here!* Mae thought she was screaming, but it was the sound that comes from a nightmare—a scream that she could feel, a scream

that she meant to be heard, but a silent scream all the same.

She fumbled for the lamb shank. It weighed a hundred pounds and slipped from her numbed hand. A single beat—tha-wump—was all she could manage.

I have to get out of here or I am going to die in here. Have. To. Move. Sucking up what she knew might be a final effort, Mae willed herself to whack the door with the now shredded shank. One—tha-wump. Two—tha-wump. *No one's coming.* Three—tha-wump. *I don't want to die!* Four—tha-

wump. *Oh please, oh please.* Tha--...
and the bloody bone flew out of her
hand.

"I want you to fuck my ass." She
leaned over the cold, clean steel of the
prep station naked only from her hips
down. Her coat rode up slightly and
Nick could see the curve of her hips to
her little-girl waist. He had shaken her
hair loose from confinement and it
shimmered like well-made demi-glace

in the dim light of the empty kitchen.

She glanced over her shoulders and smiled a devilish little grin at him as she reached for the small pan of clarified butter that was kept on the prep table for adding the right sheen to so many dishes. "Here's an appropriate lube for the two of us! Tasty and effective." She dipped her finger in the butter and made a little dramatic show of licking it off as if her digit were a miniature cock. "Mmmm. Sweet and salty at the same time. Just like you."

Nick was drumming with

anticipation. He couldn't believe that this tiny, perfect ass was going to receive his dick. He knew he couldn't have actually gotten bigger, but the enormity of his desire and excitement made it seem so. He traced the crack of her butt with his finger and took a long look at the hole he was about to penetrate. So small. So tight. And she wanted him there.

He leaned down to nibble at the round globes of her ass, pale as two full moons. He measured his hands against her cheeks and the two orbs fit perfectly in them. The skin under his fingers was

softer than anything he could imagine and surprisingly slightly cool against his hot palms. He gently pushed them apart and she arched to reveal more of her most intimate parts. *God this woman excites me. I want her in every way a man can want a woman. Please, let this be okay for her. Please let me have the control I need to give her the pleasure I know she wants.*

He leaned further down between her parted legs and gave her pussy some gentle licks. From this angle he couldn't reach her clit with his tongue so he

reached around and heard her gasp of delight as he found it with his fingers. Rubbing her as he already knew she liked to be rubbed; he ventured his tongue upward until he found her asshole. Ever so softly at first, he tested her reaction as he lightly rimmed her little wrinkled hole. He heard her suck in her breath. Was that good or bad? Then he heard her moan and push ever so slightly back against his tongue.

Emboldened, Nick pushed the tip of his tongue firmly against her opening and wiggled it as hard as the

tight sphincter permitted. Mae cried out with mewes of delight. He played his finger against her, lubricating it with his mouth. He stood up as he pushed the tip of his finger gently past the muscled barrier to her passage. She gave a guttural moan and put one hand forward to grip the far edge of the table while she slid her other hand down between her legs and began to rub her clit with strong fingers. She arched against his penetrating finger and told him "yes" over and over.

Nick was nearly crazy with

want. His cock was almost bouncing with the pulses of blood that seemed to thicken it with each course. Drops leaked from the end of his dick as he worried like an adolescent that he would simply explode without ever taking the prize. He put the head of his cock against her asshole and lubed it with the pre-cum that dribbled from it. Mae worked her clit and begged him to take her.

He reached for the butter and slathered his cock and her asshole with copious amounts. The butter dribbled down the insides of her thighs mixing

with the juices from her swollen pussy.
"Oh please, Nick, I want you inside my
ass...now...now."

Her plea was all he needed. He held his cock tightly and began to press gently on her puckered asshole. "I don't want to hurt you, baby. You guide me in."

She took her hand from her pussy and reached behind her to find his cock. Grasping it just below the head she bore down on it and opened herself to him. Nick felt the unbelievable tightness yield as she yelped, just once,

with the violation of her body. "It's okay, Nick, my love, just wait a moment. Give it time to relax."

It took all of his genuine concern for her to stay the primal urge to thrust his cock deeper into her. She held the head of his cock just past her sphincter and breathed deeply a few times before she began to push against him in earnest. Nick grabbed her hips to steady himself and stay in control. He felt himself being drawn in in a way that was entirely unlike fucking her vagina. The hole was so tight it felt like fingers squeezing him

and moving up and down the end of his shaft. His cockhead, completely inside her ass, rested in a warm void. *Dear God. What a sensation.*

She began to buck harder against him, heating the butter that allowed him to slide so easily in and out. She took more of his length with each thrust and grunted with pleasure and exertion with each thrust. She had moved her hand back to her clit and was rubbing furiously. "Don't take long, love. I can't last long with you in my ass."

He was grateful for her warning.

He struggled not to spew his spunk into her instantly. He could feel her pace quicken and knew she was near. He began to move more boldly against her as her tight ass muscle drew his semen to the point of no return. Her orgasm was sharp against his cock and he could feel every wave as the spasms took her. Taking her this way, her contractions were much clearer to him. Her pleasure drew him out and gave him permission to release.

"I'm coming now, baby. Take it." And with that she pushed back

against him and took nearly the full length of his cock inside. As her spasms reached their peak he thrust once, twice and then stood still as he emptied himself into her.

Nick sat bolt upright in bed with a gasp. Chest heaving, he tried to connect himself with the room, the bed and his solitude. He could still feel the palpable aftershocks of orgasm and, to his chagrin, felt the sticky wetness of his

semen on his thighs. *A wet dream? At my age?* Even alone, he felt the familiar sense of embarrassment that rightly belonged to a much earlier time. *Holy shit. I know that this melatonin I took to counter the jet-lag is supposed to bring on vivid dreams, but this is ridiculous!* But it felt so good. Delicious sensations of satisfaction made him want to return to the dream--to snuggle against Mae's willing body in afterglow.

There was no sleeping now. He looked at the clock and saw that he was in the impossible hours when nothing

moves and sleep eludes the weary. He felt an urgent need to be outside looking at stars, listening to the night insects and breathing the coolest air he was likely to find in this tropic torpor that was Singapore. He quickly pulled on some clothes and wandered into the hall, brightly lit as if expecting some late visitor. The elevator took him to the lobby where the same bright expectant light juxtaposed against the quiet night. The lone attendant at the desk leapt to her feet in hopeful anticipation that she would have something to break the

monotony of the graveyard shift. Nick strode past her with a perfunctory nod and burst into the still, humid air.

He walked swiftly around to the gardens and away from the neon lit signs of the Elysium and the luminous chatter of Orchard Road. He needed darkness and space. He wanted to feel the inky fingers of the night massage away the disturbing, but oh-so pleasant dream.

The pale guide-lights of the garden paths led him to the back door of the kitchen and with a homing instinct, he instinctively sought respite there. The

kitchen was lit as in his dream. At three in the morning, no one was required to be in attendance. The on-call cook could be summoned up if some traveler arrived with an appetite.

Nick opted for some therapeutic chopping. An executive chef gets precious few chances for hands-on culinary work. There are minions of all stripes to get the basics out of the way for the big guns. Nick sometimes wondered if knife skills were like bike-riding—once learned, never forgotten. Occasionally, in the Elysium, San

Francisco he stepped up to the sauté station for some line work, but it had probably been ten years since he chopped an onion or sliced mushrooms. Even if he cooked for himself, more often than not it was in the hotel kitchen and he availed himself of the *mise en place* waiting for him in the walk-in cooler.

He flipped on the light over the prep counter and plopped a cutting board onto a kitchen towel to prevent it from slipping. Rather than rooting around in the office for his personal

knives, he grabbed one from the knife rack and tested the blade against his thumb. It was a cheap knife, but it was sharp enough.

The walk-ins were lined up on one side of the kitchen and locked when the last regular left the kitchen at the end of the dinner shift. It was corporate policy to remove the temptation to pilfer expensive ingredients. Of course, everyone knew it still happened that cooks and chefs left with a pocket full of pine nuts or a nice steak tucked into a folded jacket, but food costs being what

they were, at least no one could return to the larder late at night and empty it.

The kitchen was unnatural in its quiet. There was a faint chorus of hums from the various refrigeration units but without the raucous crew, the banging cookware and the ever-audible and never idle dishwashers, the place seemed eerie and very much like the dream he was trying to forget.

Nick fumbled with his still unfamiliar keys and found the one to the produce locker. He opened the heavy door and flipped on the light. Finding

two nice baskets of crimini mushrooms that he knew would be used in several ways that day, he decided that slicing them would be just the therapy he needed. Mushrooms are small, slippery and should be sliced paper-thin. It was one of the more challenging items a cook finds in the produce basket and it takes skill to do the task quickly and efficiently.

Arms full of mushrooms, Nick heeled the heavy door shut and took them back to the prep table. He thought he heard a tha-wump behind him and

decided it was just the latch on the cooler snapping back into place. The street shoes he wore made an odd sound tapping across the floor as he rounded into the prep room at the kitchen's back. He grabbed an apron from the linen-bag and set to work on the little caps. He worked a bit more slowly than top speed at first.

I am totally out of practice. I used to do this twice as fast and not even have to look at my hands. Now I need to watch every move these big paws make. I can't wait 'til this gig

ends. I have to get out of this 'exec'crap. It's gonna ruin me. Chop, chop, chop. Nick's hands began to pick up their pace. That's the way, Nicky-boy. Just like riding a bicycle. You'll be running your own little show soon. Just you and a couple of dudes on the line. Sweet.

The knife rocked steadily against the cutting board and the echo against the metal prep table sang through the empty kitchen.

Bangbangbangbangbang. Each stroke nearly perfectly matching the last. This

was the kind of music Nick adored.

Bangbangbangbang. Tha-wump.

Bangbangbangbang. Tha-WUMP.

This time Nick was sure he heard something. It wasn't his knife and it wasn't anyone slamming a door, because he was still very much alone. He put the knife down, wiped his hands on his apron and strained to hear the noise again. Tha-wump. It was faint and sounded like someone was banging from inside one of the walk-ins. Nick hurried over to the other side of the kitchen where the coolers lined up against the

wall. Tha-wump. It was coming from the meat locker!

Nick fumbled with his keys again and it seemed to take forever to find the one that fit the walk-in's lock. He jerked the door open and a small figure slumped out at his feet and onto the kitchen floor.

Nick looked at the lump at his feet. It didn't immediately register that this was a person, much less that it was

Mae. The unexpected confuses. He couldn't reconcile the bone and meat that flew past him when he finally got the stubborn key to open the lock.

Finally, he found his sense and saw with horror that it was she. Her lips were blue, her hair swirled around her head in an angry, confused way. He picked her up—light as a feather—and realized she was soaking wet and nearly frozen to death. He recalled some bizarre Nazi experiment that proved that a naked body warms one other naked body better than even two or three could

do and set about tearing the sodden jacket and undershirt from her. She wasn't shivering. A bad sign. She didn't seem to recognize him or know where she was. Another bad sign.

He tore his own shirt from his chest as if he was wearing paper. Gathering her close to him he began to murmur her name as he tried to press as much of his warm skin against her cold flesh. He rubbed her bare back with one hand as he manhandled her soaked chef's pants down her slim legs. He put her frigid hands into his armpits and

breathed his night-breath into her hair.

"My God, my God. Mae can you hear me?" No response. The transition to the heat was not instantly effective.

"HELP! HELP! Somebody help me, please!"

It was late. The kitchen was silent and well-insulated against the heat and to keep the dining areas quiet. No one heard him as he struggled with whether to leave her and get help or stay and warm her. He gathered her into a tight ball onto his lap. He willed his body heat to enter her cold, nearly

lifeless frame.

How long did it take before she began to shake and shiver? He was overwhelmed with gratitude as finally he could begin to feel her body come to life. She shook violently and began to whimper.

"It's okay now, baby. I've got you." He felt her wriggle into the warm cocoon of his arms, his torso and legs as he tried to cover every inch of her skin with his. She moaned as sensation began to return to her hands and he tightened his biceps to keep her hands in his warm

folds.

Every so often he would call again for help. Still no one came and he was loathe to leave her on the hard floor. He stroked her head and felt the hard lump on the back of her skull. He tucked her bare feet into his groin and felt her toes like icicles against his balls.

She began to weep and he wondered that a body so cold could produce tears so hot. "It's okay, Mae. You're safe. Safe now."

Finally she looked up at him. He didn't think she immediately recognized

him, but he didn't care. *Just be okay. Be okay. Please, please be okay.* He began to rock her in his arms and to his utter chagrin felt his own tears coursing down his cheeks. *You're beautiful. You're strong. I know you don't give a rat's ass about me, but I do about you. More than a rat's ass. More than I should. More than I can.*

He heard footsteps behind him and didn't bother to turn around to see who it was. "Call an ambulance, now. Tell 'em hypothermia, possible concussion." The disembodied footsteps

hurried away.

Nick continued to warm Mae with his body wrapping her in his flesh and covering her soaking, cold hair with his discarded t-shirt. Her lips were still a frightening shade of purple and she had yet to say a word. Most worrisome to Nick was the lack of focus in her eyes. They seemed to be staring at a point somewhere beyond him in the darkness of the kitchen.

"Mae, look at me. Focus on me. Do you know who I am? Do you know where you are?" Nick was desperate to

evoke some sort of conscious response from her.

Mae's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she struggled to form words. She was shivering so much that when she opened her mouth to answer her teeth just clacked together. Her eyes closed and her jaw clenched as she tried to calm her muscles. "I don't...don't know where I am."

Nick was surprised that the words coming out of her mouth sounded exactly as if she was terrifically drunk. Slurred and even with a little

belligerent. "And you're...you're...the... She looked up at him and he could see her wrestle with consciousness. "You're the...the...new asshole."

Nick would have dropped her if they had been standing up. *Bloody fucking hell. She's half unconscious, frozen nearly to death and she can manage to remember that she thinks I'm an asshole.*

Mae slumped against Nick's chest as if the effort of identifying 'the new asshole' took the last bit of whatever she had left. Her heavy-lidded

eyes fought to stay open. The violent shaking was subsiding somewhat and he saw that she was giving in to the exhaustion. Feeling the swollen knot at the back of her head again, Nick was sure that she must have done some damage with a fall. He remembered reading somewhere that people with concussions were supposed to be kept awake.

"C'mon, girl. No sleeping. Tell me your name. Tell the asshole your name."

She opened her eyes and

dreamily focused on his face. "Mae. Mae Belle Whitten."

"That's a good girl. We're making progress. Do you recognize where you are now?"

"My kit...my kitchen."

"That's right, Mae. You're in your kitchen. Where's your kitchen, Mae?"

"The Palace. Maurya Palace. Delhi."

Shit. She's too confused. Where the hell are the paramedics? Isn't Singapore supposed to be one of the

most efficient places on earth? It's taking for-fucking-ever.

Finally, the EMT crew burst through the kitchen doors, stretcher at the ready. They pried Mae from Nick's arms and hoisted her up onto the stretcher wrapping her in thermal covers at the same time. Nick wondered how a tropical rescue crew had warming blankets at the ready. Then he wondered at his bizarre thought pattern.

"What happened?" The other EMT's were wheeling Mae out to the waiting ambulance while one stayed

behind to question Nick.

"She got locked in the walk-in cooler. I heard her banging on the door and when I opened it, she kind of fell out at my feet. There's a huge lump on the back of her head and she seems really disoriented."

"How long was she in there?"

The EMT scribbled fast on his pad.

"I don't know"

"How long has she been out of there?"

"It seems like forever..."

honestly, I don't know. Maybe fifteen

minutes.. Maybe less." Nick admitted that he had lost all sense of time.

"That's okay, sir. You did what you should have done. Body heat is nearly the best thing there is for hypothermia."

"Is she going to be okay?" Nick was surprised at how much that meant to him. Rocking her frozen and nearly naked body next to him had made him realize that, quite without wanting to, and very quickly, he had become attached.

"I'm not a doctor, sir. We'll give

her the best possible care. We should have her at Singapore General in less than ten minutes. There's no traffic at this hour so she'll be in a doctor's care very soon." With that, the EMT turned and trotted after his colleagues. Moments later Nick heard the siren wail and fade into the blackness of the sticky night.

Mae woke up in strange surroundings. She gave a confused look around her and lapsed back into sleep.

For thirty-six hours she came into and out of reality, sometimes on her own, sometimes with the gentle prompting of the nurses who were caring for her.

Finally, she opened her eyes to the afternoon sun streaming orange onto her bed and saw Maribel sitting in the chair next to the bed.

"Maribel?" Mae was confused by the whole situation. She was clearly in a hospital room and her friend, the office manager from the Elysium was sitting next to her. That's about all Mae could say with any certainty. That and

that her head hurt like hell and her hands felt like they were on fire. She groggily looked down at them and saw they were bandaged.

"Mae! You're awake!"

"Did I get burned? What happened to my hands?"

Maribel laughed. "Just the opposite, you got frostbite. But it isn't severe."

Mae looked at her without showing any signs of understanding.

"Sweetheart, you were trapped in the cooler. If Nick hadn't come along

and found you, you might have been killed."

"Nick?"

"Yes, Nick. Chef Nick. The guy whose name you've been mumbling all day long. He found you and apparently warmed you up with his body heat. Maybe that's why you've been calling for him in your sleep. You were both mostly naked when help arrived."

Mae tried very hard to remember. But she kept looking at her hands and the pain was horrible. *My hands. My tools. Oh God.* "My hands."

"Mae, Tank was here most of the morning. He had a long talk with the doctor and the doctor said that your hands are going to be fine. You know Tank would know exactly what those hands mean to you."

"Tank." Mae seemed capable of very few words. She had to reach far into a fog to retrieve them.

"He's been here as much as he could. I volunteered for the afternoon shift because all the boys had to be back at the shop. Big shindig tonight and the show must go on. There's been someone

from the Elysium with you ever since you were admitted. The doctors said it was important that you have a familiar face nearby when you came around."

"Head hurts."

"Yes, you also suffered a real whopper of a concussion. Nick's body heat treatment prevented the hypothermia from doing too much damage, but you hit your head pretty hard."

"Nick"

"Yes, you've said that. Just try to rest, Mae. It will come back to you soon enough. Right now sleep is what your

body needs."

Mae winced as she tried to sit up.

"Don't try moving right now. I'm going to go alert the nurses that you're awake."

Mae lay in bed trying hard to remember more. But the pain in her hands and her head were stronger than her memory. By the time Maribel returned with the nurse, Mae had drifted off again.

"You're a very lucky young woman, Miss Whitten. Your slender build is most vulnerable to hypothermia. You were fortunate that Mr. Seville found was around when he was and knew what to do." Dr. Liu smiled at Mae with satisfaction. "The concussion also exacerbated the danger, but you seem to have come through that surprisingly well."

"Chefs are a tough bunch, Doctor."

"There certainly has been a

parade of them in and out of here. You must be held in very high regard."

Mae winced inwardly. Yes, it was true that nearly every member of the Elysium kitchen staff—from cooks to dishwashers—had paid her a call in the five days she had been at Singapore General. Claude, the hotel general manager, had been in to see her briefly several times as had a number of other staff members. Cess had taken a couple of 'emergency days' to be at her friend's beside. Conspicuous in his absence was the author of her miraculous salvation.

Nick Seville had sent an extravagant display of orchids to her with a generic "Get Well Soon" card attached that he had signed "Best, Chef Nick"

Hospital beds are an excellent place for introspection and Mae had taken the time to examine her conflicted emotions about Nick and the relationship (or lack thereof) that was born so carelessly in the Elysium swimming pool. She wondered how such a casual encounter could produce such lasting effects. She berated herself inwardly for not having the maturity to just let their

coupling simply settle in as a pleasant memory.

Mae spent as many hours reliving those passionate moments as she did reconstructing her near death experience in the cooler. As the days passed and her memory of the events became clearer she could recall being cradled in his arms as he tried to press every square inch of his warm flesh against her cold body. She came to remember, slowly, the urgency of his concern for her, his tenderness and the endearments he whispered in her ear.

She could not dismiss his actions as merely the concern of one human being for another's welfare. It was more than that. She could feel it viscerally. Even as she recalled the terror of her ordeal, a thread of emotion ran through the moments following her release from the walk-in that she couldn't ignore.

So it was a confused and puzzled Mae who was released from the hospital with strict orders of rest and recuperation for two more weeks. "This is not negotiable, Miss Whitten," Dr. Liu had admonished when she protested that

she was needed in the kitchen. "Although your hands and your head will recover completely, you can do further damage if you don't allow your body the time to heal. Give it that time."

The bandages were off of her hands, but she had to admit that they still felt tender and sore. Her fingers were peeling in a couple of spots, but Dr. Liu said that this was completely benign and would soon pass.

As it was, Mae wasn't really ready to go back to the Elysium. She felt it would be very difficult to just hang

around the hotel without taking some part in the life of the kitchen. But more than that, Mae was delaying a face-to-face meeting with Nick. She wanted to thank him for all that he did but at the same time she was irrationally hurt and miffed that he hadn't come to see her in the hospital.

Cess had a seldom-used apartment shared with another flight attendant who was also rarely in residence. The two women gladly offered Mae their place while she recuperated.

"We've got a nice pool, a bookshelf full of trashy novels and a rack filled with cheap but drinkable wine. We're within walking distance of a great hawker's center. You can literally step out the door and find some fantastic local grub." Cess had given her a convenient out.

It was a perfect solution for Mae. She would have a physical distance that would prevent her from popping into the kitchen (or running into Nick).

However, after a few days and

as many trashy novels, Mae was about to lose her mind. For a person used to fourteen-hour days, nearly ten empty, purposeless ones were torture. Mae missed her work, her room and her crew. She decided to give Tank a call.

"Tank, love, I need some conversation. I'm going bat-shit crazy doing nothing all day. Can you steal an hour or two this afternoon and come over to Cess's?"

He was happy to oblige. "Of course I will. Anything for my Maybe Chef. You shouldn't whine about being

bored, though. Soon enough you'll be slaving for the 'massuh' again."

When the afternoon lull was upon the kitchen, Tank took the opportunity to grab a cab and visit. "You're looking fine, Chef." He grinned at her from the doorway he nearly filled and gathered her into a crushing bear hug. "We've missed your bony-ass."

"I've missed you too, Tank. All of you. How's everything going at the shop?"

Tank grinned wide enough to see the several missing teeth that

bespoke a childhood spent in deprivation. It always tugged at her heart when Mae recalled the stories her gentle giant of a friend had told her about his youth. The lulls in a kitchen's frenzy tend to promote intimacy and Mae and Tank had come to know each other very well.

"Mae, this new guy is something else. He's jumped in with both feet and dances like he was born in our kitchen. He's been doing your job and Kurt's without missing a beat. I couldn't do as well, I know that."

Tank caught the fleeting look of

dismay on Mae's face before she answered with a desultory "that's nice"

"I didn't mean we don't need you, love. We do. Besides, Nick's made it crystal clear that as soon as management finds a replacement he's outta here with his ass on fire. Man's got big plans and they don't include the Elysium."

"Plans?"

"Shit yea. He's already bought a property outside of Charlotte, North Carolina of all places. He's getting ready to open his own place. Small place.

Maybe a dozen tables. Doing his own thing. He was just about ready to get started when he got the call to bail our asses out."

"I see." Mae tried to digest what she already knew. That Nick was not only temporary, but anxiously so.

"Man's spent his life in hotels. He grew up in hotels. He's just counting the days 'til he can have his own little show and a real house. That's the way he put it. 'A real house'. He's got himself a property with an old farmhouse and he's turning the barn into a restaurant. How

cool is that?"

"Extremely cool," Mae said coldly.

Tank looked at her with eyebrow cocked. "What have you got against this guy? I mean, he practically saves your life, he steps into a difficult position simply out of loyalty to the Elys, he's a kick-ass chef and, to tell you the truth, he's a pretty nice guy."

"I have nothing against the man, Tank. I guess I'm just cranky and sick to death with boredom. And maybe a little jealous that I can be replaced so easily."

"Aw, c'mon Mae. You know that no one's irreplaceable. Not even the ole' Tankman. You *are* missed and you'll be back in no time. Claude will find a new, permanent exec and we'll all get back to normal."

Mae wondered about that. Somehow she felt that since Nick Seville had entered her life nothing was really ever going to feel 'normal' again. With only a couple more days to go before she could return to work, Mae was becoming more nervous and agitated every time she thought about

seeing Nick again. Part of her hoped that he'd be gone by the time she got back to the Elysium and part of her fervently hoped he would not.

Mae was just about finished making a salad to go with dinner when the doorbell rang. Wiping her hands on a dish towel, she walked across the small living room and opened the door not really giving much thought to who it might be. *The girls aren't here, whoever*

you are...

"Nick!" Surprise was a vast understatement for what went through Mae's mind. This was literally the last person she expected when she opened the door. And just as quickly as her surprise subsided, it was replaced by undeniable little surge of joy at seeing him.

"Sorry to just drop in like this but I was afraid if I called you wouldn't want to see me." He proffered a peace offering in the form of the Elysium Danish that he knew she liked. "Cheese

and peach Danish. I've been told they're your favorite. They'll be day-old by tomorrow morning, but I didn't know what else to bring."

Mae had to grin at the boyish way he presented the Danish. And the dazzling smile that caught her eye in the first place was hard to ignore. He took up nearly as much of the doorway as Tank, only in a much more proportional way. She was overwhelmed with the realization of how glad she was to see him. There was no point in trying to kid herself.

"C'mon in. I guess they told you I was crashing at my friend Cess's place. Just couldn't bear being at the Elys without working." *And I wanted desperately to avoid your oh-so-delicious self...*

"Thanks."

"No. Thank you. I've meant to call or something but I'm not sure what the protocol is on thanking someone for saving her life. And the orchids were beautiful."

"No thanks needed. I'm... I'm really... What I mean is that I'm just so

grateful that you're okay" He stared at her in a way that made her a bit self-conscious.

"Is something wrong?"

"No...it's just that I've never seen your hair down. Not dry, anyway." He grinned that little kid grin again.

"And you look so different from the last time I saw you."

"I've been soaking up some sunshine."

"You were mostly gray when they took you to the hospital. Gray with purple lips." He grimaced. "You look

fantastic with some color. The sun agrees with you. You look all shiny and healthy."

Mae smiled at the 'shiny and healthy' He said it like you'd expect someone to describe a puppy. "The doctors say I have come through with flying colors. Apparently, you knew just what to do."

"I read somewhere that flesh on flesh is a good way to warm someone who's frozen stiff. And you were just about gone."

"It took me a while to remember

what happened to me. Even now, I'm not sure everything is clear." Mae was lying. She vividly remembered, now that she was recovered, the sensation of being in his arms, flesh upon flesh--of coming back into the world--and feeling safe.

"I wanted to come and see you in the hospital, but I was afraid you wouldn't want me to."

"Why ever not?" Mae turned her back to him toward the kitchen. Had she been so transparent in her confusion about him that he knew she wanted to avoid him and why?

"Well, when I was trying to rouse you from a near-coma you couldn't remember where you were. But you did remember who I was."

Mae shot a puzzled look at Nick.

"I asked you who I was and you answered without hesitation. You said 'You're the new asshole'"

The walls Mae had hoped to erect between them came tumbling down with her laughter. "I didn't!"

"You absolutely did!"

"Oh my God, Nick. I am so

sorry. I was delirious. I...I...

"It's okay, Mae. I guess I am kind of an asshole."

"No. Really. I've been unfair to you and I know it. We both...made that decision... and I can't blame you for wanting the same thing I wanted."

"But I should've come clean from the start about why I was here."

"Water under the bridge." I have to stop this conversation. NOW. I don't want to revisit our passion in the pool.

"Hungry?"

"Pretty much twenty-four seven.

What's cooking?"

Mae looked a bit sheepish as she admitted that what was cooking was macaroni and cheese. "It's one of my secret pleasures. I love all the Asian stuff but let's face it; cheese is not a staple in this culture. I miss my mom's cooking sometimes."

"I would utterly adore some mac and cheese."

While Nick busied himself opening one of Cess's bottles of "cheap but drinkable wine" Mae dressed the side salad with her favorite simple

vinaigrette and pulled some plates out of the cupboard.

"Here, if you could set the table, I'll get the casserole out."

She set the steaming dish on a trivet between them at Cess's tiny table. The macaroni bubbled with golden deliciousness--all crusty with buttered crumbs and fluffy with the eggs that were its secret ingredient.

A chef appreciates comfort food more than nearly anyone. Spending your life trying to reinvent the wheel and dazzle an audience jaded by countless

culinary adventures gets tiring.

Sometimes all a chef wants is meatloaf and mashed potatoes. A grilled cheese with canned tomato soup. Fried chicken.

Macaroni and glorious cheese.

The casserole was an admirable thing. It puffed and glistened with the promise of a rich explosion on the tongue. The homey smell of fatty cheddar, the whisper of yeast from the crusty topping- it was literally mouth-watering.

"Dig in," Mae smiled as she saw the genuine hunger on his face. Chefs feed people but seldom get to

share the pleasure of watching them eat.

Nick served himself a big portion and inhaled the aromatic clouds that rose from his plate. "Oh God it smells good." He forked a mouthful and blew on it furiously. Mae thought he didn't blow nearly long enough.

"Mmmm. Oh, yum. Damn this is good, Mae." Another forkful. "Ahhhh. HOT!!" He breathed hard trying to combat the hot cheese and pasta he shoveled into his face.

"Easy there, cowboy. You're going to burn your mouth like that."

"It will be worth it. Damn, this is good."

"Yes, you've said that. I'm glad you like it."

Mae allowed her own food to cool to a reasonable temperature before tucking in. Meanwhile she watched Nick fight the temperature and smiled at the obvious pleasure her simple dinner was bringing him. By the time she began eating he had already served himself a second helping.

"This is like a great soufflé wrapped around macaroni. You're going

to have to give me the recipe."

"It is, essentially just that. My mom ran across a recipe once for something called 'convent pie' in one of her mom-magazines. It was a way to use up leftover spaghetti. Like a frittata, only with spaghetti in it. Mom decided that was a good way to make mac and cheese and this dish came out of that."

"I suppose your mom is a great cook."

"She was. She died when I was twelve."

"Oh. I'm sorry. That's a tough

time to lose your mother."

"Thanks. It was pretty tough. She was a great cook. She's the one who made me want to be a chef. How about yours?"

"My mom couldn't boil water. She was graceful and beautiful and strictly ornamental. I didn't know women could cook for most of my childhood." He ate another bite with visible delight. "My dad was a chef. I grew up in hotels."

"Is that why you want the farmhouse and the barn restaurant?" She

saw the question in his eyes. "Tank told me about your plans."

"Oh. Well, yes, that's part of it. That and my desire to cook what I want to cook. I mean, mango-curry lamb shanks are great, but there's a whole world of honest food that's been bastardized. I want to bring some 'real' back in my restaurant."

He finished his third helping a bit more slowly as they talked easily. All of the earlier discomfort was set aside as they shared a common love of the most basic of human needs. Both

knew that what they did was a sort of brotherhood in the world. Anyone can roast a chicken, but for a chef it is never 'just' a roast chicken. Even in the busiest, the trendiest, the most elevated of kitchens, the basic premise remains for those to whom the profession is more a calling than a job: to give the people more than they expect. To know, without hearing, the sighs of satisfaction and the murmurs of contentment that really good food elicits.

"I want a homey place. The barn is amazing. All gray and aged but sturdy

as the day it was built. The house is big, much bigger than I need but so classic. And I want to have a garden where guests can stroll and see where the produce for the menu comes from."

"I can really picture it, Nick. I love vegetable gardens. My mom had an awesome one when I was little. I think she had more than forty different kinds of herbs growing there." Mae grew wistful thinking about helping her mother pick vine-ripe tomatoes or gathering herbs. "She always called it her 'garden of earthly delights'"

"Did she take that phrase from the Bosch painting or the Joyce Carol Oates novel?"

It was not the first time Mae had been surprised by Nick's broad ranging knowledge. Whether it was knowing the cultural context of this common phrase or fixing the gas intake to the flat-top, he seemed to know more than a little bit about a lot of things.

"You know, I'm not sure where she borrowed the phrase. Maybe she just heard it somewhere. Because neither of those sources call up a particularly

happy image. And her garden was most definitely a happy place."

After dinner, they sat on the couch nursing a final glass of wine. The air was clear and both realized that they did, in fact, like one another. In spite of his deception, in spite of the devil-may-care romp in the pool, in spite of perceived slights; the common bond was there.

"Let me see your hands." She offered them up to him and he held each in one of his. "I kept them warm in my armpits."

"I think that qualifies as too much information."

He lifted first one and then the other to his lips and softly kissed each palm. "I went to the kitchen because a dream woke me up. I was dreaming of you."

"Oh?"

"I'll save those details for another time. But, Mae..."

"Yes?"

"It was a good dream. A scrumptious dream." He leaned toward her and brushed his lips against her

temple. "You are scrumptious."

As he traced the outline of her face, brushing the wild tendrils back she knew that she would yield, happily, to his body once again. This time, though, there was a gentler rhythm to their pace.

He leaned toward her and traced her nose with his. She breathed his breath into her sigh. She felt every amplified touch with the exquisite sensitivity of one who has recently faced certain mortality. She felt a fierce hunger in his touch as he told her, "I thought you might actually die that night. It was

terrifying to hold you and wonder if you'd survive."

He kissed her slowly and her small damaged hand crept softly around the back of his neck. The pads of her fingers, still with an inkling of the peeling wrought by the cold, traced rough circles on his skin.

Mae felt her sex begin to pulse with each new exploration of tongue and lips. He tasted of wine and want. She moved to press his leg between hers pushing her swelling pussy against the strength of his thigh. He nibbled down

her neck and she groaned with anticipation and need. Every time his mouth found her neck she could feel the heat course down her body and burn between her legs. He nibbled at her earlobe and his warm breath found her ear. He mumbled something she couldn't quite understand but heard the language of sex and desire just the same. She felt his cock awaken under her own slender thigh and throb to attention.

She rose from the couch and wordlessly led him to the unmade bed she had been sleeping in. He pulled her

t-shirt over her head and drew a sigh as her hair tumbled in its return to her slender back. Then he noticed.

"Why you little minx! You don't have any tan lines!" It was hard to miss that the noticeable bronzing she had been cultivating didn't stop at the traditional places.

"Well, that's been highly recommended so I thought I'd try it. Cess's balcony is a perfect spot for it. If there's someone out there in the concrete jungle with a pair of binoculars who's looking down on me from afar, he's

welcome to the view."

Nick chuckled. "I like your attitude. I envy the person who scans the Singapore skyline and happens on the sight of you. Quite a feast for the eyes."

She hadn't bothered to put a bra on and her small breasts begged to be kissed. He leaned down and took a nipple into his mouth. He suckled gently at first and then pulled harder on her and finally pinching the erect little nub between his teeth. Mae felt the pain every so slightly and gasped at the sensation. He tightened his fingers

around the other nipple and twisted it. A tiny but exquisite jolt shot down her belly and landed directly on her clit which answered by swelling with her desire for him.

Nick moved in slow liquid motion. He lowered her onto the bed and watched her shimmy out of her shorts. She started to remove her miniscule black lace thong, but he stopped her. "Leave it on for now," he murmured as he pulled his own clothes off. "You're the most tempting woman I've ever known." His cock was at full staff. "I

love the way you're looking at me."

"I didn't really get a chance to see you the other night." Mae purred out the words as she slid herself to the edge of the bed. "Come here and let me appreciate you." She pulled his cock toward her face and nuzzled her nose into his dense black pubic hair inhaling the man-scent of his sex. One hand cradled his heavy balls while the other stroked up and down his shaft. He groaned with pleasure as she handled him. She traced the ridge where his cockhead met the shaft with her tongue

and he tilted his head back and closed his eyes for an instant, savoring the first feeling of her mouth caressing his dick. Then he brought his head forward to watch as she licked his cock up and down, her hands working his balls and the shaft, now wet with her saliva. He reached down to gather her hair out of the way so he could watch her. Finally she took him into her mouth and began to suck him off in earnest. He didn't move. She could sense that he was fighting the desire to pump himself into her face. She brought her hands around his ass and

began to move his hips for him taking as much of his fat rod into her mouth as she could.

Mae reveled in the obvious bliss her mouth brought to him. She tightened her lips around him and caressed him trying to communicate just how much she wanted to give him the same amazing satisfaction that he gave to her. Suddenly he gently stopped her.

"I don't want to come this way. Not this time. I'd love to surrender to your sweet mouth but not tonight. Another time I'll give you a

mouthful...tonight I want to be inside."

Mae obligingly slid into the middle of the bed and made room for his body beside her. He reached down to tug on her thong, bringing the string up between the lips of her pussy. Then he pulled it back and forth across her clit, which seemed to pluck on the taut fabric like a pick on a guitar string; each pass singing out the notes of the passion he brought forth in her.

She felt restraint slip away and pushed him to his back as she stripped off the tiny garment. She climbed onto

his hips and impaled herself on his swollen rod. Her knees beside his hips, she started to slowly move her pelvis up and down, punctuating each downward stroke with a satisfying thrust of her pubic bone against his. Her hands braced on his broad chest, now slick with exertion and excitement. With each upward motion, she tightened her pelvic floor to squeeze him inside her and heard his sharp intake of breath in response to every stroke.

Mae was so aroused she lost a sense of their bodies as belonging to

'Nick and Mae'. She entered that zone where nothing exists except cock and cunt and nothing matters but pounding the two together until finally, they explode. She drew her knees further up his torso until she was nearly perpendicular to him and hammered her body into his.

Her orgasm swept over her in violent waves and her face contorted with uncensored extasy. Her breasts bounced violently as she hard-fucked him in the throes of her orgasm and took him to his own release. She pressed herself hard against him, relieving the

pressure of her swollen sex and he thrust upward to meet her. She savored the long spurts that rained out of his cock and groaned with the pleasure of it, of him.

He kissed the nape of her neck as they lay spooned in the rozy breaking dawn. She murmured her awareness and wiggled her ass into his groin behind her.

"One of us has to get to work

this morning, my lovely. I'm afraid that would be me." Nick marveled at the cascade of dark waves above Mae's head on the pillow. He'd always had a 'thing' for long hair and hers was just about as perfect as it got. "You've got a few more days R&R coming. Keep working on that tan."

Mae was slow to wake and could only manage a small growl of displeasure as Nick slipped out of bed, quickly donned his trousers and slung his shirt over his shoulders. He did have to go to work early and was hurrying so the

temptation to stay and frolic wouldn't get the better of him. He imagined that he could still smell their sex in the room and his cock gave an involuntary bounce in his boxers. "I'll talk to you later," he said as he kissed her forehead. "Sweet dreams."

The taxi ride back to the Elysium was one long, delicious replay of the night before. Nick was besotted with the passion that this woman could call forth in herself and in him. The mental image of her wildly riding him, hair flying, hands pressed against his

chest was on a continual loop in his mind. But then another image played its way across the theater of his mind. Mae, barefoot in the kitchen, leaning into the oven to retrieve a casserole. It was an ordinary image that had an extraordinary result. All at once, he could see that same scene with a different background--a farmhouse kitchen in North Carolina.

Nick surprised even himself. He literally shook his head to try to rattle away the ridiculous thought. *Man, the mind is a terrible thing to lose.*

Remember Nicky-boy--girl chef, down

and dirty sex. She's grateful that you saved her ass from freezing to death. She's 'playing nice'. She's used to rolling whatever playboy guest strikes her fancy. It's a nice fancy, that's for sure. But it's a fancy all the same.

She's a career chef in a profession that is doubly hard on women. Sure, she's well-respected, hell, she's likable enough. But she's not looking for your idea of paradise. Stick to the program. Play nice, but don't get involved. You've got a whole lifetime to find someone to share the dream.

By the time the taxi pulled up to the hotel, Nick had gone through the mental masturbation necessary to move Mae back into the box she belonged in. The first thing he did when he got to the office was put in a call to Kurt to find out how much longer he could expect to be pinch-hitting for him.

Mae allowed herself to drift for a while in the soft light of morning, sleeping and waking flowed seamlessly

into one another for an hour or so until she awoke in earnest. She remembered Nick's kiss good-bye and wasn't really sorry that she didn't have to face the whole 'morning thing' with him just yet. She didn't feel ready to listen to him brush his teeth or take a morning whiz. She, herself, was most assuredly not a morning person and did everything she could to avoid people for at least an hour after she awoke even if it meant getting up early to have that luxury. One of the many attractions of being a chef had been that it is largely not a morning-

oriented career. Hotels are an exception, but once you move into the management ranks of the kitchen, no one expects you to be slinging eggs at the ass-crack of dawn.

This morning in particular, Mae was very grateful that there was nothing to compel her to rise and shine. She wanted to take full advantage of lying around for a while just luxuriating in being satisfied. *So, so good. So fine. So sexy. So yummy.* She just kept going over and over how good Nick smelled, how he tasted, even the sounds he made

when she touched him.

She smiled at the pleasure he took in the simple meal she had prepared. He was so much like a kid tucking in to that mac and cheese. In spite of the rather European sophistication he projected, it turned out that he was really a fairly down-to-earth guy. She finally did have to admit that he had passion about food--and the right kind of passion at that. They had discussed their views over dinner and discovered that they both found the same pretensions silly, both admired the same

schools of thought about food, both disdained the old-school 'Chef's gotta be a drill sergeant' mentality.

He had chided her on that point. "But you called me an asshole even when you couldn't remember where you were!"

"True, but I spent a lot of time trying to convince myself that you were an asshole," Mae had laughed. "Really, I did think it was inconsiderate of you to just walk out of the kitchen that Thursday at eight o'clock."

"Oh so that's what bothered

you!"

"You didn't even say goodnight to anyone."

"Mae, you guys were slammed. I was slap happy with jet lag and would have been all thumbs if I had even tried to pitch in. Besides you guys were kicking ass. I didn't want to do anything to break the rhythm."

Mae had grudgingly had to admit to herself that he was right. There was really nothing he could have done but get in their way.

She sighed. *No I really can't*

dislike him. I just can't have him. It could be a week, or two, but he's got a whole plan mapped out that he's committed to and before I know it, he'll be gone and on his way to a 'real house' and a restaurant he's going to build the way he wants it to be. I have to respect that. And I know that I brought this on myself. I thought he was a guest. I intended to have a some 'adult playtime' with a handsome stranger. I should enjoy him for what he is. I hope I can. I hope I can let go gracefully. I hope this sadness goes

away.

"Right, man. That sounds like a good plan to me." Nick nodded into the phone and listened to his uncle's tale.

"Everything's running smoothly here. Not to worry. That little colonel you have is something else."

From the opposite side of the world Kurt laughed out loud into the phone. "She is absolute proof that good things come in small packages. Cool

under fire, energetic, and knows her stuff. I'll be really glad to see her again."

"She could have easily taken over for you. I didn't need to drop everything and come here, you know."

"I know that and I appreciate your sacrifice. If it hadn't been for you, the Elysium would have canned me for this stunt. But you know, Nick, I had to find Bernie if for no other reason than to find out why she left."

"Kurt, you don't owe me an explanation. I'm just glad you're coming back. I'm ready to move along."

As Kurt regaled him with the tale of his adventure in Panama, Nick's mind wandered. I am ready to move along. I want my farm, I want to watch my ideas take shape, to nurture this dream. I am sick and tired of a thousand different demands and the whole impersonal mega-show these hotels require.

Kurt's return to Singapore would free Nick from what had occupied him for so many weeks. But at the same time, it spelled the end of his time with Mae and that he knew he

would regret. After the night at Cess's apartment, they had continued to steal what time they could with each other. Most of it had been late at night after Nick left the Elysium kitchen..

They revisited the pool and the grotto and played again in the dark water. They sneaked up to his suite and frolicked on the king sized bed. And, one night Mae stole into the kitchen at closing and they made Nick's wet-dream come true.

Mae had returned to work a day earlier than the doctor had ordered and

during the many daylight hours spent in close proximity, both enjoyed the shared secret of their relationship. Their daily meetings in the morning became an exercise in play-acting and harmless deception that both of them laughed about later when they dropped their work persona and dived into each other's arms. Passing in the kitchen or the pantry, each savored the electric current that arced between them.

By an unspoken agreement, neither one of them discussed the terminal nature of their affair. But Nick's

imminent departure hung over them like a mist and produced moments for each of them when things that begged to be expressed were instead suppressed. The consequence was to grant them, in their lovemaking, an abandon and passion neither one of them expected. It was as if in tying their own tongues, they gave their bodies license to mutely sing to each other. And sing they did.

When they talked about their lives going forward, they spoke in carefully crafted narratives. He talked about his father's death and how it had

influenced his decision to strike out on his own. He talked of his farm, the way he would create his barn restaurant, the dishes he hoped would garner him a loyal following. He did not expect great wealth, nor did he need it. His parents had managed to leave him a surprising fortune. His father's work had been more than sufficient to support the family and the legacy that passed into his Spanish mother's aristocratic hands had simply been left to grow. There was more than enough in his trust for him to live well for the rest of his life without ever

working again.

But Nick craved the satisfaction of building something that was an expression of his vision. He spoke to Mae of the ideas he would put into place at his farm. He described what he wanted to do with the barn's interior and how he'd remodel the house without taking away its original charm. He didn't tell her that his dreams included having a wife and family in that house someday. That would have been out of their silent, self-imposed boundaries.

She talked mostly of travel and

the places she might move along to after her time at the Elysium was over. She wondered aloud at what opportunities might present themselves to her in Hong Kong or New York. She seemed, to Nick, to have a career focus much like he had had before his decision to leave hotels and the corporate life.

She talked about how much she truly enjoyed her work and the affection she had for the great crew at the Elysium. She frequently made reference to Kurt and his absence and how genuinely worried she was about the

boss who was her friend. And at those times, Nick felt guilty. He knew where Kurt was and why but he had been sworn to secrecy to share it only with the highest levels of management when Kurt arranged for Nick to be his replacement.

"Nick, are you still there?" Kurt had been rambling on about Bernadette and Panama for several minutes with no response from Nick.

"Sure, Kurt. That's quite a tale. Have you decided on a date when you're coming back?."

"You're going to have to hold down the fort a little longer. I'll try to make it snappy, but I still have some tap-dancing to do. Give my little Mae a kiss for me. She's gonna be mighty pissed when I return, but she's the forgiving sort."

"Does that mean I can tell her the story? And that you're coming back?" It had been hard to keep the information from her and Nick wasn't at all sure how she'd react but he was anxious to be done with the subterfuge.

"I suppose it's okay if you think

she can keep a secret."

"I think she can." *I know she can.*

Mae was sketching out a recipe for [Tuscan chicken soup](#). Her favorite night at the Elysium was Saturday when the special's menu highlighted a unique world cuisine. She especially loved the Italian-themed nights. The recipes were familiar and the execution was easy, but the results were always satisfying. She

had developed an entire notebook devoted to her Italian recipes for the Elys. Italy has so many distinct cuisines that it was easy to make the cycle of Italian nights interesting and fresh every couple of months when that country's menu came up in rotation.

She could see Nick watching her from the platform outside his office door. She had a small notebook computer that she used exclusively for the kitchen and she drummed her fingers on the keys as her mind worked through proportions and ingredients. She knew

what Saturday's menu was going to look like as they had fleshed out the particulars in bed a couple of nights earlier. Food talk was always safe and they always had a great time bouncing culinary ideas off of one another.

"Tuscan chicken soup" she had exclaimed as if she had just made some grand discovery. "No one expects chicken--it's always about pork, pork and more pork. I think roasted chicken would be divine in a light tomato broth."

"Add some white beans," he said as he drew a nipple noisily into his

mouth and let it out with a pop. "And, a handful of pasta." He drew the other one in the same way and giving it a little nip as he pulled his head away and let it escape the suction.

"Ouch! My nipples aren't beans you sadistic glutton!"

"I am a glutton. And now I'm going to devour you." He had then proceeded to make her giggle with delight as he pretended to 'eat' his way down her body with groans and cries of "yum-yum!", "delicious!", "succulent!", "flavorful!", "tasty!" Then he reached her

pussy. "Ah, what have we here? Hmmm. What's this? A fresh bearded clam to tempt my palate?"

In mock surprise he had tilted his head this way and that as he spread her legs as if to better examine her parts. "Why, this clam is beardless! Truly, a hairless mollusk! I must have it...must have a taste of this rare specimen." And with that, he dove into her shaved mons still making exaggerated slurping noises and occasional exclamations as if he were praising a fine meal. "Sweet! Fresh! A natural delight. A hint of the

salty sea...a perfect explosion on my palate."

Mae had laughed so hard that it made it difficult to concentrate on the pleasure he was bringing to her responsive body. Finally, she begged him to "please stop making me laugh so I can concentrate!" And he did. And she did.

Mae had come to adore the many different ways she and Nick made love. One night it was silent passion--ravenous and fast-paced--another would be slow and languid with long stretches

of soft touches and well chosen words to excite and tantalize. He could tease and be playful, too, and that brought out the best in Mae who was a woman who craved a little lightness in her purposeful life.

Mae tossed off her reverie as he approached her. "Mae, can you take a minute and come to my office?"

"Sure. Let me just save this."

Mae noticed a very serious look on Nick's face. "Is something wrong?"

"Just come on up when you're ready," he said as he turned to go back

up to the 'cage'.

Moments later Mae was seated in front of him. She hadn't spent a lot of time across from his desk and the formality of it struck her with foreboding. *This is going to be it. He's going to tell me he's leaving here in the office so there won't be any scenes. Not to worry Nick, I've been preparing for this for weeks.* But no amount of mental preparation could keep the lump from rising in her throat as she waited for him to speak.

"I have something to tell you.

But before I do, I want you to know that I wanted to tell you this for quite a while."

Mae's eyes widened. Is this going to be some sort of proposition? *Is he going to tell me he loves me and wants me to go with him?* Her head began to spin with anticipation. *Yes, Nick, yes I will!*

"Kurt Gander is my uncle. We more or less grew up together as brothers."

Mae's emotions did a one-eighty. She couldn't quite wrap her mind around what he was saying as she had

just admitted to herself that she desperately wanted to have a life with this man. Until this point she hadn't given voice to her feelings--not even to herself. She tried to focus on what he was telling her.

"My last name is different because, as I've told you, my mother was Spanish. It's their custom for the children to have the maternal name. Hence, the Seville."

No, it isn't a proposition. It isn't about me at all. What the hell is he talking about?

"We've both worked for the Elysium chain for years. When Kurt needed to leave, he asked me to come and fill in for him. He knew I was retiring from San Francisco and figured I could take a little time to help him out."

"I don't really understand," Mae mumbled. *I don't understand anything at all.* "Why didn't you tell me this at the beginning and why are you telling me now?"

"I'm telling you now because Kurt gave me permission to. Only a couple of people knew about this and we

were sworn to secrecy." Her puzzled look prompted him to continue. "You see, Kurt needed a leave of absence and the only way he could convince management to allow him to come back was throwing me into the deal."

"But Claude offered me his job!"

"Management was not happy. Part of the deal was that you'd get the nod, if you wanted it. If you had taken the job, Kurt would have lost the position for good. And I would never have come to Singapore." An explosion

of confusion played across Mae's face as she tried to process his words. "Frankly, I think Kurt knew you wouldn't take it."

"But why all the secrecy? Is he sick?" Suddenly another emotion jumped into Mae's psyche--that her friend and mentor might be terribly ill.

"No. No. This was just something he needed to do for himself. He didn't want any of the staff to know." He paused and began his story. "When Kurt came to Singapore about ten years ago, he was quite a different man than the one you know. He was full of joy.

Always laughing."

"You know I adore the man, but you're right. He's not exactly happy-go-lucky."

"Shortly after he took the job here, he had an affair with an assistant pastry chef. She was just out of culinary school and about ten years younger than Kurt. At that point in his life and career, he was very much committed to devoting himself to his profession. He never expected to fall in love with Bernie."

"Bernie?"

"Bernadette. She stole his heart.

By the time he realized how much he loved her and that he wanted to spend his life with her, she was gone. She just left without explanation. Kurt was devastated."

"I'm aware that he had his heart broken. It's kind of a legend in the kitchen. He never spoke a word about it to anyone. But people talk." Mae looked at Nick with new eyes and realized that her heart was breaking, too. "Tell me what this has to do with Kurt's absence."

"Well, he never really recovered. Never had another serious

girlfriend, just some drunken rolls in the hay once in a blue moon."

"I witnessed an attempt at one of those."

Nick frowned "Did Kurt make a pass at *you*?"

"No, he groped Cess at a party a couple of years back." She laughed a brittle little laugh. *Cess and I talked about it the night you and I first 'played' in the pool.* "Cess didn't appreciate it."

"I was seriously concerned that he was going to go over the edge.

Possibly drink himself to death. But eventually he just went on. Only he changed. He never let anyone close again. And he lost one of the best parts of himself--the ability to love."

"Are you going to tell me what this story has to do with him leaving?"
Because I have some real thinking to do and I need you to wrap this up.

"Every so often, Kurt would do a web search on Bernie's name. It never got him anywhere. Then, a couple of months ago, he came up with an article for an online paper in Panama. It was the

story of Bernadette and her business in a town called Boquete. He took off to find her as quickly as he could make arrangements with me and the Elysium."

Mae looked blankly at Nick as it dawned on her that not only had Kurt wronged her by allowing her to worry (and work herself half to death) but Nick had perpetuated the deceit. "You knew how much I worried about Kurt. We talked about it. Often. I actually cried about him one night after we made...had sex." She couldn't bring herself to call it love making. That would presume too

much.

"I couldn't betray a confidence. Kurt didn't know what he'd find or how it would turn out. His pride was on the line."

The almighty male pride rears its nasty head. "Well, I sure do appreciate that it wouldn't do to have little ole' me knowing anything about Mr. Big Chef's vulnerabilities." Anger was starting to push back on the confusion she'd been feeling. Anger at Kurt for not telling her. Anger that Nick's loyalty to his uncle was stronger than his trust and

concern for her. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"He found her. But he says there have been 'complications' He asked me to give him a little more time. He told me that he was going to wrap it up 'one way or the other' very soon. He's anxious to get back here."

"I see." *He can't come back soon enough for me. I don't know how to stay aloof anymore. It hurts too much to know that any day Nick's going to take off for a new life. A life that doesn't include me.*

"Look, Mae, I don't think Kurt imagined how much his disappearance would affect you. He's very fond of you and I know he wouldn't have worried you for all the world. He's just...Kurt. The man has lived in kind of a cloud of gloom for so long that I think he's lost his sense of empathy. He's not completely aware of other people's feelings."

Oh, and you are? I'm dying over here and you haven't got a clue.

"That much is abundantly clear. When you talk to him again kindly tell him how relieved I am that he isn't dead," she said

flatly. "Now, if there's nothing else, I need to get back to my Tuscan soup recipe."

Mae pretended to work with her recipe as she dissected the conversation. Berating herself for being a complete and total idiot, she tried to think of a plan. There was an indeterminate amount of time left, although she sensed the clock was ticking faster. Kurt was going to return soon.

Allowing herself to imagine that Nick was going to ask her to return to the States with him—that he had fallen for her—was an incredible leap into fantasy land. *I sat there like some breathless, vapid sixteen-year old. I was actually prepared to say 'yes' to him! Where the fuck did that come from? We've only known each other for what—six weeks? What was I thinking?*

Okay. I already know it's gonna hurt like hell when he leaves. I already know that I'm in way deeper than I wanted to be. And, if I didn't

admit it before, I am admitting it now. I am useless at this so-called adult play, or sport fucking or 'casual affair' crap. I don't want 'no strings attached' I want strings. Lots of strings. A whole, big whopping ball of string.

And since she was being brutally honest with herself, she had to acknowledge that she'd like that ball of string wrapped tightly around Nick Seville.

So. Two choices. Either I continue with the relationship until he leaves or I don't. It's not going to be

pretty no matter what I do. But if I continue to touch him, oh-dear-god make love with him, there's the chance I won't be able to keep quiet. Now that I know how much I want him in my life, I might not be able to keep from telling him so.

She pondered the painful choice facing her. On the one hand, she knew that their time together was short and she might only have a few more chances to touch that warm skin, to smell his spicy male smell, to kiss his tender mouth, to have his body inside her body and know

the completeness of being full of him.

But on the other, there was the danger of blurting out something stupid that would make a fool of her. Her pride won.

I can use this Kurt situation to fabricate a reason for shaking him off. I'll tell him that I have trust issues and don't want to be with someone who could take my feelings so lightly and keep important secrets from me. That's plausible. Sort of. I can feign enough hurt and anger to make him buy it. He'll never know how hard I've fallen. Somehow, I can extract myself from

this gracefully and send him on his way.

Mae let out a melancholy sigh and took to the task of figuring out when and how she would tell Nick that playtime was over.

The note read: "Can we have a word when service ends?"

It had been a busy night. Mae had had to step in beside Tank at sauté when he fell into the weeds. Every

single order coming in was at his station and all the burners were occupied with a holding pattern behind them. Mae did what she could to have pans and ingredients at the ready and grab what she could from the stove as the dishes cooked off. It is never a comfortable thing to have two people working in a space designed for one, but she and Tank accomplished it with as much grace as could be hoped for.

Nick had been spending his night opposite the expeditor and as the dinners were plated, he took over the

garnishing and final inspection. He made sure that all the elements were in place and the plates were impeccably clear of any stray drops, crumbs or fingerprints.

When the pace finally slowed a bit, Mae slipped the note into Nick's pocket as she passed him on her way to the walk-in. He pulled it out and knew immediately that something was up. He wondered why she would feel the need to ask for 'a word' when at this point their meeting up after work was a foregone conclusion.

They sometimes planned to

leave separately and meet at an agreed location after work. Other times they both pretended to be busy with paperwork until the last cook had left and the dishwashers had finished the final cleaning. Once or twice they had sequestered themselves in the office, where they were hidden by the smoked glass and just waited until they were alone.

Nick's curiosity led him to push their usual time-frame up a bit, so it was fairly early when he passed by Mae at her desk and said "a word?" There were

still a few late orders, but the people left in the kitchen saw nothing unusual about the two top dogs having a pow-wow in the office.

Mae sat down and folded her hands in her lap. Nick didn't speak. He left the ball in Mae's court. "Nick, I've had a lot of fun with you these past weeks."

"And I with you, Babe."

"But this deceptive streak in you is something I just can't accept in a person--not a friend *or* a lover. I can't trust you to tell me the truth. You lied to

me when we met and now I find you've been lying to me about Kurt all along."

"I never lied to you."

"Oh, grow up! Don't piss on me and tell me it's raining. You know that lies of omission are just as bad as overt ones."

"C'mon, Mae. That's not fair. I told you I was sworn to secrecy. I've known Kurt all my life, I owed him that."

"Part of me admires your loyalty. But another part of me is angry and hurt that you didn't think enough of my feelings or trust me enough to keep a

confidence. And frankly, we don't have the luxury of *working through* this issue."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that this 'relationship' of ours is finite. And, the fact that in the short span of time we've known each other you've chosen to keep something very important from me shows me where your priorities lie."

"I think you're being terribly unreasonable. What would you have done under the circumstances?"

"It doesn't matter what I would

have done. What matters is what you did. I'm sorry, but my life was busy and fulfilling before we met and I think it's time for me to get back to a comfort zone that I can live with. I'm sorry Nick."

"I really don't understand how you can be angry enough about this to just end it this way." Nick felt a tug of panic as he realized that he and Mae might really be over.

"We both know that it was over before it really started."

"I thought we were good together," Nick said sadly.

Mae softly laid a hand on his arm. "We were good together. Very good. But it was always going to end and now is as good a time as any. I don't need the drama and you need to move on." She rose from her chair and leaned over him to give him peck on his forehead.

The brush of her lips on his face was bitter sweet. He made no attempt to hide the misery he was feeling. But if she noticed, she didn't say. She quietly shut the door and left him with his thoughts.

This time, tears came fast and hard. She allowed herself the luxury of having a good cry, sobbing into the pillow until her chest shook with the effort of it. Every so often she would stop, thinking she was all cried out, and then another image would intrude on her mind--a remembered touch, a recollected word, the vivid mind's-eye pictures of his smile--and the tears would begin anew.

She tried to find the place in their time together when she went over the line. When, she asked herself, did it cease to be casual and cross into consuming? *When, exactly, did I fall in love with this man?* She knew it had been before she actually thought the thought. But, somehow, it was important to Mae to figure out when the moment occurred that she felt that Nick was more than a passing, casual affair.

It was muddled so much by the fact that I jumped into the whole thing thinking he was something he wasn't. If

he had been a guest and left in a day or two I would never have had the chance to see him in another light. I would have cherished the fond memory of an awesomely handsome stranger and the incredible pleasure we shared.

Was it that night when he came to Cess's apartment? That night was beautiful, but I think I was still not quite 'there' Was it the naughtiness in the kitchen? That could have been the beginning of the end. I felt so vulnerable and so trusting. He was so gentle, so careful. And the next day

there was this lingering intimacy that spilled over when we walked in the Gardens.

The Gardens. They had stolen a few rare hours to explore the daylight together and Mae had suggested a walk in the Singapore Botanical Gardens as dawn approached. The early morning was a favorite time for locals to explore the renowned tropical gardens that were a source of national pride. The many winding paths provided lots of places for lovers to sit and chat tucked into the manicured tropical jungle with its

exotic, rare plants. They had chosen a wide bench in a copse of feathery pines.

They sat in the early morning light watching the people hurrying through the maze of paths, taking hurried short cuts to their jobs. They sipped on tea purchased from a push-cart vendor on a stop to watch a group of old folks doing *tai chi*. Though the morning was no different from any other Singapore morning, somehow it felt a little fresher, just a hair cooler. And although the tea was piping hot it was ironically soothing and refreshing. Mae had explained to

Nick how the locals believed that drinking ice-cold beverages in a warm climate actually made the heat feel stronger and that a warm drink was far better to cool the body.

Nick had purred in her ear that nothing--hot or icy cold--could cool his body at that moment. She was sitting across his lap and he was tracing the outline of her face with a finger, brushing away a tendril here or there. He drew his finger down her bare arm and the light touch stirred her nerve endings into high alert. He explored her knees,

bare under her voluminous white cotton skirt.

"You should keep this tan.

You're legs are the most delicious shade of gold." He touched the inside of one thigh as he worked up to where her legs met and then down the other thigh. Mae would always remember the tug she felt deep inside her abdomen when he got anywhere near her sex. He kissed and snuffled in the crook of her neck while his hand crept up her legs again and he began to tease her with his finger. He took her earlobe in his teeth and tugged

at it while his warm breath tickled inside her ear. "You're a beautiful woman, Mae. I can't stop desiring you. Only hours ago I was spent and yet..."

His erection was hard under her recently taken ass. The recollection fueled her as he fondled and explored her sodden hole. She had purposely left off her panties knowing that there might be a moment like this. A family happened by and she nonchalantly smoothed her skirt over his wandering hand and smiled innocently at them as they passed.

"Nick, there are people all over this park!" But even as she protested she swung herself around to straddle him. Her skirt covered their laps in its gauzy folds and she wove her arms around his neck. She pressed her lips to his and pulled in a breath as she kissed him. Between his cock and her now swollen mound, the fabric of his jeans seemed to sizzle with their body heat.

A man on a bicycle passed and paid no attention. Lovers stole kisses in the gardens all the time.

Nick reached down to unzip

himself and free the erection that threatened to burst through the fabric. Mae had looked nervously over her shoulder before she raised herself just enough to come back down with him inside her pussy. She rearranged the skirt chastely around their hips.

For some moments they didn't move at all. They simply looked into each other's eyes, savoring the intensity of an utterly private moment in a very public place. Occasionally she would squeeze his cock with her internal muscles and he would respond by using

his to ever so slightly bounce himself inside her. They giggled a little. They gasped a little. They kissed some more. He put his hands at her hips and pressed her tighter to his groin as she drew tiny, almost imperceptible circles with her clit at the base of his erection.

Every so often passersby would come into his sight and he would draw his face away from hers and pretend to say something. She would mime a response. If anyone had paid them any mind, it would appear as if two lovers were engaged in an intimate

conversation. And of course they were, only their bodies were doing most of the communicating.

The intensity of that moment had rocked Mae to her core. The brazenness of their unbridled desire playing out in the national garden was an experience unlike any other she had ever had. The fact that they couldn't really move nor vocalize their sensations forced them to communicate mostly with their eyes.

They had locked upon each other's gaze and Mae felt that she was looking into the hazel depths and seeing into a secret

place inside him.

And, because they were mostly clothed, all of the contact they did have was concentrated. Conjoined by lips, cock and pussy felt, at that moment, more naked than if they had been in bed without anything on.

When they came to their climax, it was deliciously unique. She felt her eyes widen and watched his do the same. They couldn't shout or groan or invoke God. They could only gaze at each other and share the silent knowledge of their consummation.

I think that was the defining moment when I realized I love this man. It just happened. I love what he does with my body. I love that he knows why I do what I do. I love that we share this spirit that shapes us. His goals and his dreams appeal to me in ways that surprise me.

God, I feel like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz. I know I have a heart because I can feel it breaking.

Mae was not looking forward to work. Her eyes were puffy, her nose was red and she had a raging headache from all the crying the night before. She wanted to get back under the covers and sleep for days. But that, of course, was not her way. So she put some drops in her bleary eyes, splashed cold water on her swollen face and stoically dressed for battle.

All morning long she looked for Nick, watched for his arrival and wondered what, if anything they would have to say to one another. Every nerve

on her body was on high alert and she went through the motions of her job zombie like. She must have done a pretty good job of it because no one, not even Tank remarked on her mood. Of course, it's easy to hide in the routine of a busy kitchen. Sauces are made, orders are placed, plates are garnished, meats are butchered and none of those tasks require much in the way of comment. By the time lunch service had ebbed into the silent pace of the afternoon prep Nick had still not arrived. Mae decided to buy herself a little more time out of his

presence and told Tank she wasn't feeling well and would take the evening off. Ever responsible, she made sure that there were no events that night that absolutely required her to be on duty.

Fortunately, Cess was in town and was more than happy to lend a willing ear and ready shoulder when Mae needed it. They met for high tea in the luxurious lobby of the Finewood Park. The grand piano was tinkling away, as it usually did, sans musician. Mae always found the idea of a grand player piano a bit strange, but the music

was soothing all the same.

High tea was a ritual that hung on long after the British had left the island nation to fend for itself. There were all of the traditional elements--cucumber sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, confections of every sort and an assortment of teas that Mae could never really comprehend. To her, tea was tea. But to Cess, it was the beverage of Valhalla.

"Civilization!" Cess studied the menu and chose Golden Monkey black tea for her 'cuppa' "Such a lovely tea.

Smooth, rich and with a hint of cocoa. After that swill we offer on the plane, this will be heavenly."

Mae ordered the same because she really didn't care one way or the other. "I know my palate should be sophisticated enough to appreciate a good tea, Cess, but it all pretty much tastes the same to me. Besides, right now my senses are all dull as dirt. I'm so depressed that I feel like there's a gray mist fogging me and everything around me."

"Why must you take everything

so hard, Love? You were having such a good time. Now you're wallowing in a funk."

"I guess I'm just not capable of a 'detached' affair. Something in me just dives in and goes for broke. I didn't mean for it to happen. I *willed* it not to happen."

"But happen it did and here we are. Again. Honestly, I really thought that you'd be able to be a bit more grown up about this thing. You knew..."

"Yes, dammit, I knew. I don't think it's very kind of you to chastise me

at this point. There's the tea," she pointed to the pot, " Now how 'bout a little sympathy?"

"My dear Mae, I am sympathetic. But I'm also your friend. A friend who's willing to be full-on honest with you. The man can't help his situation, now can he? Did you expect him to sweep you into his arms and carry you to America to live happily ever after?"

"I don't know what I expected. It just seemed that we enjoyed one another so much. We have so much in common. I

think it's almost worse to *like* him than it is to love him. And Cess?..."

"What?"

"I've never made love with a man like I did with Nick. It can't be my imagination that there was something different for him too."

"Poor dear you. I wish there was something I could say to make it better. But I can't. Time is the only thing. Sad to say because it's so trite, but you know that eventually you *will* get over him. You're lucky he's going to leave soon. At least you won't have to see him

all the time."

"Somehow that doesn't sound all that great to me."

"Any word on when Kurt's coming back?"

"No, but it can't be soon enough for me. I dread having to face Nick. We managed to avoid one another today, but we won't be able to do that every day." Mae pressed her palms into her still throbbing temples. "You know, I read somewhere that it *is* possible to die of a broken heart."

"Oh my giddy aunt! Now you're

just being melodramatic. You'll immerse yourself in that hell's kitchen you call a job and pretty soon, Bob's your uncle, you'll be just fine."

Mae had to laugh at that. Trust Cess to eke a chuckle out of her with her bizarre Britishisms. "Just who is this uncle Bob and is he the reason your aunt is so giddy?" It was an old joke between them, but it lightened Mae's mood. They sipped their tea in the comforting warmth of a friendship that had endured more than a few dark moments.

By the time they had devoured

their scones with generous lashings of cream and jam, Mae felt a lot better. Cess's philosophical attitude about the mystery of men and women nudged Mae's despair into something a little easier to bear. Cess was far more worldly than Mae and her 'this too shall pass' council lifted Mae's spirits.

As they parted, Cess offered a last nugget of advice. "Now you've made the break, don't weaken. You know it will only make things worse. Keep your distance and don't let him get into your knickers again."

Mae gave her friend a big hug.
"Thanks for the words of wisdom. I'll guard my 'knickers' I promise."

Nick *was* miserable. Miserable and very angry. Hurt, rejected, wounded and just plain pissed off. He slammed his fist into the desk, picked up a ledger and threw it across the room. He reached up to the shelf where Kurt kept his aged single malt and swigged several ounces of liquor straight from the bottle.

Dinner service was just gearing up and it wasn't a good time to be drinking but what the hell. He'd come in late only after he had steeled himself to face her. But Mae had already left.

How can she just dismiss me like that? So I didn't tell her what I knew about Kurt. What was I supposed to do? She's unreasonable. She's being stubborn. She's overreacting. This was just some inconsequential fling to her. How can she make so much out of this?

How did she put it? A lie of omission. Good God. I didn't realize

that fucking someone obligated you to betray an oath to family. Damn bitch. Uses me and then ditches me over something as ridiculous as this. It's not like I meant anything to her. I don't OWE her a thing. There were no promises. Not a word was spoken.

And then it hit him. *Not a word was spoken.* How many opportunities had there been to tell her what he felt that he let slip away from him? How many times had he bitten his tongue when he wanted to let her know that she had become more than just a casual

affair? *He* was the one with the agenda, with the schedule. *He* was the one who came with a built in good-bye. *He* was the one who pictured her bent over a farmhouse stove, barefoot in the herb garden, laughing at bickering hens when she gathered their eggs and never said a word. Had he expected her to read his mind?

I could have tried. I could have trusted. Could have taken a chance. God. I've never had a face in my fantasy world. Just the vague notion that someday I wanted a mate. I wanted

someone to share the dream and never gave her a face. Until now.

His head reeled with the possibility that the one woman who stepped out of the fog to occupy his dream was lost to him. Maybe he never could have had her. Maybe the notion that he meant something more to her than she admitted was all in his imagination.

No. No. That can't be. There are things that can't be faked. I know the difference between a friendly fuck and something else. We had something else. We became more than lovers. We

became friends. The once in a lifetime kind of friendship between a man and a woman who slide like puzzle pieces into one another.

He went over the 'scene' they had about Kurt. How could she feel so betrayed if she regarded me as nothing more than a passing thing? It wouldn't have been that important to her. I couldn't have let her down if there was nothing to descend from. She's using this as an excuse to put some distance between us. That's it! She's putting up a barrier so that she can handle the

situation better.

What was it she said? "We don't have the luxury of working through this." She was telling me she couldn't invest herself. Couldn't talk it out.

Naw. I'm trying to invent something that doesn't exist. I'm just a nice playmate. We managed to become friends and that's been great. But she'll barely notice it when I'm gone. She'll just go looking for another guy to bang. She'll probably make sure he really is a guest next time though.

Nick's thoughts were waves

crashing on the shore of his psyche. In and out they went rolling over him, unstoppable and unpredictable. *This is why they call her Chef 'Maybe' Well, she is one question mark of a woman for sure. But, come what may, Mae, I will have an answer.*

Nick was so lost in his reverie that he didn't hear the first knock on the door. Claude tapped a little harder and Nick called for him to come in.

"Chef, I have some welcome news for you. I just got an email from Kurt. We can expect him back within the week. I know how anxious you are to get on with your plans so I came to tell you straight away."

"Oh. A week? I didn't really expect him so soon. When I talked to him the other day he said he still had some things to wrap up." Now Nick was thrown once again. *I didn't expect him back so fast. I thought I'd have time...*

"I'm afraid I can't shed much light on what the situation is. He just

said 'Be back in the saddle in a week or sooner if I can swing it. Until then...off grid."

"Off grid? What's that supposed to mean?" Nick was a bit annoyed that Kurt hadn't let him in on what was happening and chose instead to send a cryptic note to Claude.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Do you want me to inform the staff?"

"No. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to handle it."

"It isn't strictly necessary to tell them if you think that's a better tactic.

After all, we don't know exactly what he wants anyone to know about where he's been. As much of a mystery as his departure was, I can't see that his return will be any worse a surprise."

"That's okay, Claude. I'll handle it. If I don't do it exactly the way he would want me to, too bad. It'll be on my shoulders and those shoulders will be halfway around the world."

"Thanks. That's a relief for me. Your uncle can be a bit of a tyrant when it suits him. I'd rather not take the risk of bringing out the bear, if you know what I

mean."

"I guess it runs in the family."

"Not at all, Nick. It's been a real pleasure to have you here. Everyone finds you easy to work with. In the short time you've been with us, you've earned the respect of the entire staff."

"Thanks, Claude. I do appreciate it. It's hard to believe that my time with the Elysium Hotels is coming to an end."

"I wish Kurt had given us a definite arrival date. As it is, you can't really make any travel arrangements."

"No one ever accused Kurt of being overly considerate."

"You know, it really doesn't matter. A day or two, give or take, won't make any difference. Mae held the fort for more than a week before you arrived and I'm sure she can do it again. Why don't you go ahead and book your flight. You've already gone the extra mile for us. I think we owe it to you to let you be on your merry way, so to speak."

"Thanks, Claude. I'll keep you posted on whatever I decide to do."

After Claude left, Nick

absentmindedly pulled up his favorite travel site and looked at his options. Singapore to Tokyo, Tokyo to Washington, Washington to Charlotte. He considered going the other way, stopping in Europe to see his mother. He could meet her in Paris. Lots of flight choices there. Singapore to Shanghai, Shanghai to Paris. Or Singapore to Doha, Doha to Paris.

He thought about his mother, the beautiful and charming Maria Seville. In spite of all her flaws and her frequent absences he adored her just as his father

had. His father had likened her to a beautiful wild cat that needed to roam but came home to purr. Both he and Nick were content to know that she loved them both with all her heart. There was no doubt that she had been utterly faithful to his father and that he, her only child, was as precious to her as life itself.

Was his mother one of the reasons he was so drawn to Mae? For all the obvious differences between the two women, there were undeniable similarities--the love of exotic places, the fierce independence, perhaps even

the slightly promiscuous bent. It was no secret that Maria had broken several hearts before settling down with his father.

Nick had an irrational desire to take Mae to his mother. To have his mother's stamp of approval on the only woman he ever even considered bringing 'home'. For where ever she was in the world, to Nick 'mother' would always mean home.

Suddenly, Mae was back at the forefront of his thoughts. He went to the window to see if she had returned to the

kitchen and saw her sitting at her makeshift desk in street clothes. It was a slow night and he presumed that she was just checking her plans for the next day.

Act now. Act now. Do it, Nicky-boy. The clock is ticking. Take the leap, man!

He nearly bolted down the steps into the kitchen. She looked up at him from the shabby little chair and stopped him dead in his tracks. To Nick, the look on her face was colder than the night he found her half-frozen in the kitchen. His resolve withered under her frigid blue

gaze.

What am I thinking? What did I think I was going to say to her in the middle of the dinner service?

He managed a weak half-smile and turned partially toward the line where the cooks were pushing the few remaining orders out the window.

"I've got an announcement, everybody." He watched her face carefully as he spoke. "Claude has just informed me that Kurt will be back with you in a week or less. I'm afraid I don't know much more than that, but soon

enough you'll be able to ask him all the questions you want about where he's been and what he's been up to."

Mae remained expressionless. A blank slate. "After all the worry he's put you through," he said almost directly to Mae, "I think you all deserve to take him to task."

Mae flipped her little notebook closed and walked out of the kitchen without a word.

Her heels clicked a desperate rhythm in the darkness. She felt almost faint. The pain was unbearable. Cess was wrong. Mae was sure it *was* possible to die of heartbreak. *Time won't erase this, Cess.*

He's leaving. Oh god, he's leaving for good. Please let this be over. I don't know how I can stand another week. I don't know how to deal with this. I've never felt anything that hurt like this. Where can I hide? What can I do?

She made it back to her room in

just enough time to run to the bathroom and heave high tea right into the commode. Cold sweat was pouring down her back as she retched and cried into the toilet. Finally, she stood up, brushed her teeth and looked at her once again puffy, wept-out face. The cold water she splashed on her angry skin helped a little. Listlessly, she stepped out of her clothes and left them in a pile where they fell.

She wrapped a well worn compliments-of-the-Elysium terry robe around her and sat down on the edge of

the bed. She absently flicked the TV on to some absurd cooking show where the cooks were expected to make dessert out of matzo crackers, lychees, butterscotch candies and cheddar cheese. One of the competitors was a very good looking dark-haired man who wore a bandana around his head. *Just like Nick.*

She flipped the channel and there was a couple in a lip-lock against a tropical landscape. *Not good.*

Finally she settled on a bland travel log about Argentina. But then she started hearing "Don't cry for me,

Argentina" playing in her mind and tears started slipping down her cheeks again. *This is absurd. It isn't even a love song.*

She turned the set off and picked up a notepad thinking she might start roughing out a recipe for wild mushroom and white asparagus risotto. Even though she never needed a recipe for this kind of thing, she tried to write everything down so that anyone could duplicate the dish when she wasn't around. She tried to think about the proportions of each ingredient but it was no use. She couldn't concentrate. Finally, she phoned Cess.

"What's up little sister?" Cess's ever cheerful greeting was small comfort.

"Kurt's on his way back, Cess. Nick announced that he'll be here within a week."

"Well, that's fine for you, then. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"Be fair. He isn't 'rubbish' This whole mess is my fault. I allowed myself to fall in love with him. He never tried to mislead me as to his plans."

"He lied to you! Twice."

"I hardly gave him a chance to

tell me the truth the first time. I practically served myself up to him. And the second...well, I can't really blame him for that either. He asked me what I would have done and to tell you the truth, I wouldn't have told me about Kurt's situation either."

"Good lord. Now you're making every excuse you can. Go ahead if it makes you feel better."

"All I'm trying to say is that if you, for instance, swore me to secrecy I wouldn't spill the beans to some casual lover no matter what."

"Mae, darling, I feel responsible for goading you into having at the man in the first place. I'm very sorry that I encouraged you to do something so out of character."

"Please don't blame yourself. Last time I checked I was a full-fledged adult woman. The fact that I seem singularly unable to have a little fun without getting all ridiculous is...well, it's just..."

"It's you. It's your nature and I'm willing to admit that there's probably nothing you can do to change it. You're

pretty much a serious person. Serious about your career, serious about your life and serious about love."

"But that's part of the hell of this! Believe it or not, I did have a lot of fun with Nick. I laughed and played. There were plenty of times that I wasn't at all serious. It just sort of sneaked up on me and hit me that I didn't want to see it end. That I didn't want to let go."

"I wish I could be more help. I really do. I know we're just about the same age, but I swear sometimes I feel a million years older. He will go. You

will stay. And, you will live. Someday there will be someone who doesn't go and that will be the right one."

"I hope you're right. Because I have to confess that knowing Nick, loving Nick, has made me realize that I *do* want someone permanent in my life. I want a home. I want a mate--for life."

"If that's the case, then all the heartbreak has been worth it. You've made a discovery about yourself. A wind to direct your sail. Better that than to be flapping about in the breeze like I am."

"I guess there is some solace in that thought. But right now I can't imagine ever feeling about anyone else the way I feel about Nick."

By the time the kitchen had pretty much cleared out, Nick was staring at an empty bottle that once held Kurt's very old, very expensive Scotch. After Mae left the kitchen so abruptly he had retreated to the 'cave' and set about drinking away the thought of her. Of

course, it didn't work. In fact it made it worse as alcohol tends to do.

He was well on his way to being quite drunk. Drunk and confused. He convinced himself that she had turned her feelings for him off completely. Then he convinced himself that she secretly loved him.

And, being in his cups, he was also horny. Not that he could have done much about that either, being unsure if he could even stand up at the moment. But images of their bodies together were running through his head like some very

nicely done porn movie. No bad editing or poorly conceived plots, though. Just pure sweet and perfect images of her underneath him, glowing with exertion as he pummeled his hard dick into her. Of Mae's full lips wrapped around the head of his cock and her fingers pulling hard on the shaft. Of her pussy dripping into his mouth as she moaned her pleasure. Of her small perfect ass lifted up to him--a presentation of delightful promise.

"Boss?" Tank occupied the doorway completely. "I'm gonna run

now. You want I should lock the coolers?"

"Sure, Tank. That'll be fine."

Nick focused one bleary eye on the giant.

"You okay, Chef?"

"Just been drinkin' a little," Nick slurred. "But I'm not driving. Don't figgir I could crash the elevator." Nick chuckled at his own not very funny joke.

"I guess you've got a right to slam a few back, Chef. Kurt's comin' back is kind of the end of an era for you, isn't it?"

"Yep. That's sure what it is. The end of an era."

"How long've you been working for the Elys?"

"I dunno...a very long time."

Nick's head wasn't in any shape to count the years.

"I kinda envy you. I'd love to have my own show somewhere. Someday. I mean I enjoy the work here, but to be the 'real' boss, to own my own place. I think I'd like that."

"It's been a long time coming."

"You know, I think some people

are just better at the corporate shit than I am. I gotta fight with myself all the time to keep my trap shut. But some people are just natural diplomats and can tow the line, like Mae."

"Ah, yes. Mae. The little chef that could."

"She sure can. That girl's golden."

"I bet she has a fine time for herself in this hotel."

"She don't complain."

"Who would? I mean she's got a great job and the benefits can't be beat."

"We got good benefits, that's true. Not many hotels have it better."

"That's not eggzackly what I meant." Nick eyed the empty bottle hoping it had somehow magically refilled itself. "I mean...cute little piece like that has plenty of meat passing through those fancy front doors."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You know, plenty of rich businessmen, trust fund babies seeing the world, the occasional celebrity. I know all about it. Jeez, in San Fran I could get

laid by a woman, man or both every night of the week. A lady chef, god that's gotta be even better."

"Chef, you're drunk or I'd be tempted to deck you. Mae's like a little sister to me, even if she is my boss. She ain't like that at all."

"Bullshit. We're all like that. Chefs are all whores."

"Look I don't know what's got into you other than that bottle of whiskey on your desk, but I've known Mae for going on five years. She ain't no whore. Hell, she's practically a little nun. In all

the time I've known her I ain't never known her to just fuck around."

Nick looked up with a dubious smirk. "Is that so?"

"She got her heart broke once or twice. I coulda killed the wine asshole that left her mournin' him for months. No sir, I think you've read her all wrong. Don't see how you coulda, but I don't know you all that well."

"No you don't know me. I'm not too sure I know me."

"Well you don't know Mae, either. So let's just leave it at that."

"Sorry man. I didn't mean to offend. Just making stupid conversation."

"Look, Chef, it's late. Why don't I help you get up to your room?"

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. Really."

"Okay, boss, I'll see ya tomorrow. Take it easy now"

"Thanks Tank. Oh...and thanks for not decking me."

Tank closed the door on his way out and left Nick to think alone in the dim kitchen office. Even though his thoughts were not completely crystal

clear, he slowly processed what the big man had told him. Tank had no reason to lie to Nick. Especially in the camaraderie of cooks, the sexual escapades of fellow chefs is fair game. If Mae had a penchant for rolling the guests, Tank would have shared a tale or two and they would have had a good laugh. Women can be every bit as raunchy behind the swinging doors as men. Early in his career, the young Nick had been shocked more than once at the frankness with which his female co-workers discussed all things sexual.

He laughed to himself as he recalled a waitress who had passed by some mayonnaise he had spilled on the prep counter and said "nice splooge!" He didn't know what that meant at the time, but he knew from the laughter in the kitchen that it was something sexual.

Even as a gangly adolescent, Nick had been a handsome boy. He looked older than his years at fifteen. Because he'd spent so much time immersed in the bawdy atmosphere of the kitchen he could at least pretend a level of sophistication even if he didn't

feel as mature as his swagger would suggest. As a result, his 'first time' took place on a flour sack with a pastry chef twice his age. She was a mighty hellion in the kitchen, but a sensuous and generous lover who gave him a fine introduction to the pleasures he could find between a woman's legs.

But, assuming what Tank had told him was true, Mae did not fit the usual mold of the women he had known in his cheffing career. And that meant that his suspicions might be true. She might really be fabricating this whole

righteous indignation thing over Kurt to spare herself the inevitable pain his departure would cause. His instincts about her feelings could be right!

On the other hand, one thing was certainly true. She was dedicated to her job and her career. Did he have the right to ask her to go with him? Was that fair? When he had shared his dream with her she'd asked all the right questions. She had told him she thought the farmhouse and the barn sounded fabulous. They had even discussed the kinds of food he'd have on the menu and the way he should

renovate the barn. Nick dared to hope that she would consider a drastic change in the direction of her life and career. They would make a fantastic team. In every way, in all ways. Always.

Nick folded his arms on the desk to make a pillow for his drooping head. In minutes he was asleep. But not before he had made a plan.

"Ordering: 33 Bennies. Two florentine. Four crab. Six asparagus.

One cajun. That leaves twenty regular--one SOS. Always an asshole in every bunch" Jonesie called the order from room service that had everyone jumping.

Mae reached through the window and took a look at the ticket. Talk about a nightmare of an order! They kept a dozen or so pre-poached eggs for room service every morning and twice that on weekends but they needed 66 poached eggs for this monster. "Who in the hell is up there in those suites?"

"Some entourage for a band descended in the night and decided to

play hell with our nice little breakfast service. Rock those pots--NOW!" The expeditor shouted to the dishwasher who was running pots of steaming water from his station to the stove.

Mae saw that Reggie was about to melt down trying to quadruple the Hollandaise recipe. "I'll take the sauce, Reg. You go lay out the English muffins on sheet trays for the salamander. Tank, forget sautéing the ham there's no room on the stove--grill it." She barked at one of the assistants. "Start laying the plates and get the fruit garnish in place. How

are we with the fries?"

"Plenty there, chef."

"Thank God." Most of the egg dishes on the breakfast menu came with a side of sweet potato home fries and those took a while to pre-cook. "Get the fries on the flat top. We want quality here, people!"

The cooks ran through their sweaty paces like the pros they were. Orders ticked out for other in-room diners and every time eggs Benedict came up Jonsie would call out " Ordering: another fucking plate of

Bennies!" and the cooks would groan.

The 33 plates went upstairs on several trolleys accompanied by gallons of Mimosas that had given the bartender his own special hell as their version of the drink was made to order with fresh squeezed juice.

The kitchen reverted to its normal pace and only then did Mae realize that Nick wasn't there. With the frenzy taking place the past forty minutes, she wasn't surprised that she hadn't noticed. *Good, she thought, maybe he wants to avoid me, too. There's a big*

banquet tonight and I can remove myself at dinner to supervise that. I could use at least today to get myself together without having to look at him.

Oh, but I so want to look at him. I want to look at him forever. Those hazel eyes--deep as a tawny forest. That black as night hair. The body that moves so gracefully around mine. He'll be gone so soon and all I want to do right now is drink him in.

"Tank?"

"Yes, Chef?"

"Did Nick say he wasn't coming

in this morning?"

"He didn't say. But after last night I'm pretty sure he's nursing a kick-ass hangover."

"Is that so?" Mae had seen Nick slightly tipsy when they'd had a bit too much wine, but she's never seen him drunk.

"I was closing last night and he was in the office getting shit-faced on Kurt's special reserve. Man, that dude was wasted. Wasted and strange."

"What do you mean, 'strange'?"

"I don't know what set him off,

but he went into this whole weird shtick about you and your...sex life, I guess you'd say. I'm tellin' you it was bizarre."

Mae did a double take. Did Nick discuss their affair with Tank? Was the "your" part referring to her individually or the two of them? "*My* sex life? How did *my* sex life come up in your conversation?"

"I didn't bring it up, he did. I thought we were talking about working here and the benefits. But he was talking about other kinds of benefits."

"Dish." Mae wasn't sure what to

expect.

Tank repeated as much as he could remember of the conversation verbatim. "Honestly, I was ready to punch him. But he was real drunk, Mae. Real drunk. I set him to rights, though."

Mae was apoplectic. What a horse's ass. Drunk or not drunk he had no right to go nosing around with a member of the staff--someone who worked *under* her for goodness sakes--implying that she was a slut. Okay, so maybe she had acted like a slut at first, but surely the past few weeks...

"Thanks for defending my honor, you big clumsy knight."

"Any time, Chef Maybe. You're a slave driver, but I love ya anyway."

Mae went into her corner and flipped open her notebook. She needed to gather her wits about her. Why, in his inebriated state, did Nick start such a ludicrous conversation with Tank? Was he trying to undermine her with the staff? Was he trying to confirm his suspicions about her--or deny them? The whole incident seemed terribly out of character. At least out of the character

she had come to know.

They had become friends. What kind of friend gets drunk and starts talking trash about you? Had she made him so angry when she broke it off that he wanted to get back at her? Whatever the motivation, it was completely out of line. She had warned him early on that she worked very hard to maintain a professional relationship and a strong position as *chef de cuisine* for an all male staff. And, quite possibly had it been anyone other than Tank, he might have created quite a hot topic of

conversation within the crew. The kind that resulted in lots of leering and speculation. As it was, she was grateful that he chose the one person on the kitchen staff who knew her very well. The entire incident would go no further, she was sure

Nick paid the price for killing that bottle of Scotch. He eventually made it back to his suite in the wee small hours and fell into his bed, reeking and

reeling. Work in the morning was out of the question. His head was exploding with a force he vaguely remembered having experienced once or twice when he was much younger and far more stupid.

Surprisingly, he had total recall of the evening up to and including his conversation with Tank. His relief at Tank's vigorous defense of Mae's honor and reputation gave him hope that he might possibly be more important to her than she let on. It would explain a great deal about her recent confusing

behavior--the over reaction to the fact that he kept his knowledge of Kurt to himself really could be a ruse to get some distance.

It was conceivable. Nick had gotten a scent of something else in their conversation the afternoon when he had 'fessed up about his uncle. Something about her reaction to the entire conversation was just, well, off kilter. He sensed there was an internal dialogue going on with Mae that had nothing to do with the mystery of the missing chef.

Then, the whole 'it's over

because you lied to me' thing stank of contrivance. Nick knew Mae would have done exactly the same thing he had done. He knew her well enough by now to know that she'd face down an inquisition rather than betray a confidence. There had been too many examples of her loyalty and fidelity to friends and coworkers for him to buy into the flimsy excuse she'd put up for ending their affair so abruptly.

Time to call her bluff. Time to grow a pair, Nicky-boy. She's already done her worst to you and you've faced

it. You can be miserable and possibly lose the best thing that's ever crossed your path or you can take action. What was it dad used to say? Oh yeah. You always lose a hundred percent on the chances you don't take.

Nick showered and shaved, pulled on a pair of shorts and a shirt and slid into his flip-flops. He always felt like he wasn't quite fully dressed when he wore 'regular' clothes. There was a group of young women in the lobby when he opened the elevator door and approached the concierge. The girls

made no secret of watching him and a couple of them even whistled as he passed them. They looked like groupies for some rock band to Nick. All weird hair and funky clothes. He could hear them swearing loudly at one another and picked out a couple of comments that apparently concerned his ass and his hair.

He leaned over the concierge's desk and heard one girl murmur, "Mmmm, mmmm. Now that's what I'm talkin' about!" Nick ignored her.

"Say Sally, do you know where

I can find a nice woodworking shop?"

"In Singapore, Chef? There are plenty. What do you want made? Furniture, frames, cabinets?" The efficient concierge already had her reference files pulled up on the laptop on her desk.

"Actually, I need to find someone who can make me a sign. So, it would have to be a place that has some kind of carver. I want it to be artistic."

Sally wrote down a name and address. "This shop has done some great work for not only some guests, but there

are a few items around the hotel from them also. If I'm not mistaken, the 'Reception' sign and the ones for the banquet rooms all came from them."

Nick looked at the sign over the reception desk. The lettering was outstanding and the floral decorations were realistic and detailed. He wanted colors a bit more bold than the pastels used on the flowers, but he felt sure he could communicate his ideas to the artist well enough. "That looks perfect, Sally, thanks."

"Any cab driver will know the

address. It's out Thompson Road."

In the back seat of the cab, he pulled out the paper he had roughly sketched his idea on. He was no artist, that's for sure. But at least he had put his ideas to paper and, given a talented enough carver who could listen and understand what he wanted, it shouldn't be too difficult to execute.

The shop was nestled among several in a rear portion of an all purpose shopping center that had everything from a food market to apparel and furniture. There were several frame

shops and one or two other less identifiable establishments. Nick was tempted to nose around and look at what other choices he had, but he figured it was best to go with Sally's recommendation. He approached the wizened Chinese man who was sitting at the entrance to the open front of the narrow workspace. The man was absently whittling at a stick and his feet and the floor were covered with sawdust.

Nick described what he was looking for and the man called to another

who came out from behind a jumble of boards, half-finished projects and various tools. "This my son," said the old man. "He help you."

The son motioned for Nick to take a seat at a rough board table and sat next to him. For the next half hour or so, they discussed the sign in great detail. Nick wanted to make sure that the fellow knew exactly how the sign would be designed. He wanted vibrant, rich colors and the text to have soft, almost cursive lettering. To his surprise, the son disappeared in the mess of the back and

returned with a laptop on which he pulled up all the fonts he could imitate. They decided on teak for the wood because it was abundant and took intricate carving well. "It also resists termites," said the carver. Nick chose a very light piece of teak with some subtle shading.

"Look, I'm in kind of a rush for this." Nick realized that the carver probably heard that from every tourist who came into the shop for a 'Welcome to the Smiths' sign for their front yard back in Iowa. "I'm the Executive Chef

over at the Elysium," he offered, thinking that maybe the promise of future business would sweeten the deal. Plus he hadn't dickered at all on the price, something that was a foregone part of any purchase on the island.

"Today I work. Tomorrow afternoon you pick it up. That fast enough for you?"

"How 'bout tomorrow morning? I'll pay extra for the rush."

"Can't. Paint take time to dry.."

"I'll be very careful. I'll take full responsibility if I smudge your paint

job"

"Your sign. Pick up tomorrow morning if you want."

"I'll be here first thing."

Mae banged a small angry fist against the suite's door. She had exited the kitchen after the lunch service was over and high-tailed it up to the eighth-floor room where Nick had been housed the past weeks. No one answered. She knocked again, this time with enough

vigor to smart on her knuckles.

The door opened and he stood there obviously fresh from a shower and dripping wet. The water drizzled down over the peaks and valleys of his finely toned chest and just about did her in. His hair had been tousled around but not combed and she was ever so tempted to brush it away from his face, the better to see those gorgeous eyes. It was hard for her to find the breath to speak. The towel was secured at his hip leaving one strong thigh exposed and barely covering his groin. Summoning all the self control

she could manage, Mae lit into him.

"How dare you?

How-*fucking*-dare-you? What gives you the right to discuss my personal life--my private affairs--with a member of my staff?" Mae's eyes were locked on his, wide and lit with indignation. "Tank told me about your little drunken conversation last night. I can't believe it. I can't believe you would do something like that."

"Mae, I wasn't myself. Have you ever seen me drunk?" Nick shook his head. " Well I wasn't pretty last night. I

guess I was a little overwhelmed with the shock that I'd be leaving within a week. I didn't expect it so soon."

"And that's the excuse you're sticking with? That's the reason for intimating to my friend--my friend who works for me--that I am a...that I'm some sort of..a predator?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, you simply implied that I was in the business of screwing around with every playboy, rock star or businessman who stays at the Elysium. Thank goodness you chose Tank to

express yourself to. He's too loyal to spread your nastiness around"

"So now loyalty is a good thing, is it? You certainly didn't respect it when I was loyal to someone close to me."

"That's different."

"And that's always your fall back rationalization isn't it? That somehow what *you* feel makes *you* right, but what *I* feel doesn't count. It's okay for you to expect loyalty from your friends but you cut me off cold when I did the same for Kurt."

Mae knew he'd hit on a painful truth. She was at least pretending to hold him to a different standard. She changed tactics. "I can't believe that you would think I'm so shallow that I spend my nights just sport fucking total strangers."

"What would you have me think? Have you given me any reason to believe otherwise? You may recall that I was a total stranger. And Babe, if that night in the pool wasn't sport fucking I don't know what is."

Mae raised her hand high intending to slap the sarcastic smirk off

Nick's face. He caught her wrist and roughly yanked her toward his body. The towel fell to his feet. "Just what," he asked as he pressed himself up against her, "do you think *this* is?" He pulled her hand down to his crotch and forced her to feel his hard cock. "And," he leaned down to kiss her "what do you think *this* is?" His mouth took hers in a violent, crushing kiss. She felt the taste of him and the lightning bolts of desire that he called forth pierced her. She struggled to free herself but he held her tightly in his embrace.

"I want you to tell me, Mae. *Tell me what this is.*" He reached for her jacket and ripped the double-breasted panels apart scattering the little black plastic studs to the floor. Pulling her undershirt below her breasts, he savagely suckled them. "And this...*what is this?*"

"Oh god, Nick stop. Please." She felt herself cleaving into his flesh.

"I won't stop. I won't stop until you tell me." He pushed her pants and underwear to her ankles. "Tell me what you think it is, Mae!"

No, I can't tell you. I won't tell you. But I don't want you to stop. Ever.

He shoved her onto the bed and roughly removed what was left of her clothes. She stopped struggling. He began to kiss her again, and she felt the possessive crush of his bulk on top of her. His elbows framing her shoulders as he held her head, palms to her cheeks, fingers twined through her hair.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Mae reluctantly centered her gaze on his deep forest eyes. She was sure he could read the desire, the need

and, yes, the love written on her face. She wanted him more than she wanted her pride, more than she wanted safety from the heart wrenching that would follow the bliss already seeping into her like a slow, fierce fire.

"Make love to me, Mae. Don't call it anything else because that would be a lie. Make love to me now and know in your heart that you are." He kissed her again, this time tenderly. His mouth slid down around the curve of her neck and she felt the shimmering heat of his breath on her skin. She quivered with the

pleasure of his touch and wrapped her legs around his hips urging him forward, urging him to penetrate her body and her soul.

"Nick...I want to make love to you. I want you inside me." She struggled for breath. "You...you... complete me."

His cock found the warm wetness of her pussy and she guided him inside her with her hips. She felt the stretch of her intimate flesh around his and cried out his name again and again as he began to thrust into her.

"Feel it, love. Feel how much I want you, Mae."

His strokes fed her passion and she strained against him with uncensored hunger to be fucked, to be taken, to be owned. Thrusting deeply, he fed himself to the mouth of her womb. She could feel the head of his rod as it bumped into her sacred entrance. There was ecstasy in each upward motion, desire in each withdrawal. She forsake herself to the abandon of union with his body. She felt transported to a place where her most intimate and hidden self was laid bare

and she celebrated the nakedness of it. She felt possessed in body and spirit and it fulfilled her deeply.

She could feel the dance of their flesh quicken in her quivering cunt. His pace became urgent, demanding her body to respond in kind. Her swollen flesh begged for the tight drum beat of orgasm. He murmured her name and words of rapture into her ear and each exclamation pulled her closer and closer to the explosion she so vitally desired.

She wrapped her legs tighter around him, hooking her feet at the small

of his back. His long strokes restricted, he banged her with the full force of his weight against her mons. When the pulsing answer of her climax forced her legs apart once more, he drew his cock nearly out of her and slammed himself into her to his hilt. She clutched at his shoulders pulling him into her with the power of each spasm that racked her body.

He raised himself up on his hands and arched his back as he spewed into her waiting chasm. The animal noise of his release came from deep within his

strong chest and to Mae, it was a melody of ultimate joy.

He held her tightly as he recovered and she nuzzled at his shoulder trying not to think, only to feel the blessed connection to him and be thankful. She turned her head away to hide the single teardrop that escaped from her eye, in passion or in sadness--she didn't quite know which.

The clock on the bedside table said 4:45.

"Ohmygod, Nick. Look at the time!"

He didn't immediately connect. She had to shake him from his cloud of contentment.

"Nick, we have a banquet for 250 in less than two hours. We've got to roll, handsome!" As much as she would have liked to stay and savor what had just happened between them, her sense of duty prevailed.

They threw their clothes on and hurried to the kitchen. Mae was sure they

both smelled of sex, but she didn't have time to worry about it. The Chamber of Commerce banquet was one of the most important events on the Elysium calendar and had better be executed perfectly.

No one remarked on the fact that they were both late for something as important as this. The Elysium kitchen staff were top-notch professionals who weren't about to drop the ball at a critical moment. They were also far too well-trained to question the executive chef or his second-in-command about

their tardiness.

Except for Tank, of course.

"Well, Chef Maybe, glad to see you decided to join us. I got a few dinners to prepare. Care to pitch in?"

"Don't ride me, Tank. Just tell me what you need from me right now." Mae could feel the stickiness of Nick's semen in spite of the quick splash she had given herself before she dressed. As deeply as he had come within her, his jism was taking its time sliding out of her. She looked around to catch a glimpse of him, and saw his red

bandana'd head bent over a huge pot.

In spite of the ordered chaos around her, Mae felt his presence and the tenderness it called forth in her. She finally understood the old cliché that *is* truly is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Because, at that moment, she could not imagine having never known Nick Seville or the passion and peace she found in his arms.

Thankfully, Mae could take her thoughts no further. The room was banging. All hands were on deck and there was no time for self-indulgent day

dreams. If Mae was going to wallow in any kind of remorse or regret over Nick's eventual departure, it would have to wait until the banquet was over.

Both kitchens were involved in the preparations for the event--the main kitchen and the special purpose banquet kitchen. Until the hotel's regular dinner service began, as many burners, ovens and other resources had to be put to work getting food ready for the big crowd. At about 5:30, the main kitchen started to feed the dishes prepared there into the banquet kitchen and Mae

stationed herself in the banquet kitchen to supervise.

It was a long and excruciating night. Although the guests would never know it, a dozen different disasters were averted behind the swinging doors. Mae didn't stop moving until nearly eleven when she finally sank into her old kitchen chair. The dish washers were just hauling the floor mats outside of the main kitchen to be hosed. It had been a late night for the dining room staff as well.

"You look completely spent."

Nick came over to her as soon as he spotted her. "We had a helluva night in here, too. Unannounced big tops, a stove broke down, and Jonesie really burned his hand badly--but he's okay."

"I feel like I've been hit by a truck. I don't know what happened tonight, but there were more screw-ups than I've seen in ages." Mae rolled her shoulders in an effort to release some of the tension there. "How 'bout a shift drink for us?"

"Smack?" Nick always referred to Grand Marnier as 'cook's heroin'

because of the orange brandy's notorious popularity among chefs.

"That would be fantastic." Mae watched Nick as he went to the kitchen liquor stock and pulled the bottle down from the shelf. *He makes the ordinary seem so extraordinary. I could watch him move--just simply move--for hours.* He brought the bottle and two coffee cups over to her desk and poured a couple of generous shots in each mug. Mae watched his hands remembering they were one of the first features she noticed about him. *How perfect they*

are--long, graceful and so masculine.

"Here you go, Babe. Cheers"

The endearment caught her a little off guard. She glanced around to see if anyone was within earshot. They only had a few more days and Mae was more than ever committed to keeping their relationship private. The last thing she wanted was to have to endure not only merciless teasing but probably also a great deal of pity after he left.

"Thanks for fetching it. I think this might knock me out."

"Listen, Mae. It's been a very

hard night for both of us. I know you're exhausted. I know I sure am. Why don't you take your drink back to your room and soak in a hot tub. Get a good night's sleep."

Oh but we have so little time left! I want to spend it all with you.

Mae reluctantly agreed. She topped off her Grand Marnier with another splash. She looked at him and smiled, a little ruefully. "Good night, Nick." *I love you, Nick.*

Nick was up at dawn the next morning. He was excited, but he was also terrified. He grabbed a cab too early and wound up cooling his heels on the street waiting for the wood shop to open.

He wandered the street which was also home to a number of shops dedicated to the manufacture of paper effigies. He was fascinated by these offerings made to be burned at Chinese funerals. Cars, animals, houses and even chests of money all intricately

constructed to go with the deceased into the afterlife.

Finally, he saw the doors to the wood shop creak open and accordion back to open the entire street side wall. His sign was, as promised, ready and resting on a pair of sawhorses just inside the door.

It was perfect. The wood carver had captured the cornucopia of produce that Nick had asked for. He had supplied the carver with printouts from an online seed catalog and the man had rendered them perfectly. The colors were bright

and shaded in a beautifully natural way. Black-seeded Simpson, red oak leaf and romaine lettuces formed a verdant bouquet behind radishes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and several types of summer squash. Shiny purple eggplant, creamy turnips and blood red beets contrasted with sweet corn, cabbage, broccoli and asparagus. The lettering was excellent. He and the wood carver had chosen a font that was meant to be clear at a distance. When Nick stood back from the sign, he was very happy with their choice.

He carefully stowed the sign in the back of his waiting cab, paid the carver and returned to the Elysium. He nervously scanned the lobby hoping no staff member happened to be passing through as he sprinted to the elevator and up to his suite.

Spreading his complimentary "Straits Times" on the floor he laid the still-tacky work of art down on the newspaper. He propped it up at an angle with the phonebook and stepped back to have a final look before he called her up. It was perfect. Better than a diamond

ring for his purposes.

He called down to the kitchen and asked for Mae. When she got on the line he tried his best to sound casual.

"Mae, can you take a minute and come up to my room?"

"Sure, I guess so." She sounded hesitant. "We're pretty slow this morning. I'll be right up."

Nick thought it took an hour until he heard her tap on the door. He opened it just enough so that his body took up the space. "I have something for you," he said and pushed the door wide open.

Mae looked at Nick's dear smile and then followed his eyes to the object on the floor. It took a moment to figure out what she was looking at. It read: "Mae's Garden of Earthly Delights"

Her heart danced. "It's beautiful Nick." *What does it mean?*

"It's a question, Mae. I've been thinking of little else since I found out Kurt is going to be back here soon. I realized--oh, I don't know when, really--

but I realized that I don't want to let you go. I can't seem to envision the future without you. Hell, I can't even fantasize about my farm without you somewhere in the picture."

"But..."

"Before you answer just think about it. About us. There's never going to be another 'us' in my life, Mae. For better or worse, I know you're a once in a lifetime love for me. I want you to come with me. I want you to live with me and help me make the farm *our* dream." He took a deep breath. "I love

you, Mae. With all my heart I do. I want you beside me always."

They were the words she had tried so hard not to wish for. The words she didn't think she'd ever hear. Her mind spun in glorious, confused happy circles and rendered her speechless.

"Look, I know you love your job, but it's just a job. And the travel...maybe we'll close a month a year and go to faraway places. I don't need to be a huge financial success, I've got enough socked away to never have to work again. We don't have to be tied to

the place. But I do want to be tied to each other." He watched as Mae crossed the room to look at the sign up close.

Strings, her heart sang.

Wonderful, wonderful strings. Mae turned to him and all the love in her welled up in gratitude and exaltation.

"My darling. My impulsive, passionate darling Nick. There is nothing in the world that I would love more than to come with you and share your dream."

"*Our* dream. *Our life.*" In two steps he crossed the room and pulled her into his arms. He put his hand to her chin

and tilted her face up to his. "I want you to be sure, my love. I don't want to push you."

"Yes you do. Yes, you can. I love you Nick."

"It's going to be a fantastic journey, Babe."

"It's been fantastic already. It'll only get better." She tiptoed up to kiss him. He lifted her off her feet and they sealed themselves in each other's hearts.

Epilogue

Kurt returned a few short days later. After giving him a tongue-lashing about his disappearance, Mae listened to his story of Bernie and his adventure in Panama.

Nick made swift arrangements for them to fly to France so he could introduce Mae to Maria Seville. She fell quite in love with Mae and rejoiced for her only child. Mae saw how much Maria adored her son and had a wonderful time watching them together.

Nick's male beauty was simply a masculine form of Maria's intensely feminine type. She felt accepted and welcome in Maria's presence. It was a beautiful beginning and Mae found herself hopeful that Maria could fill at least a small part of the motherless void in her life.

They took a week at *Cap d'Adge* to lay naked in the Mediterranean sun and visit nightclubs there where anything goes. They found out that the streak of exhibitionism they had discovered in the botanical gardens ran deeper than they

imagined. They were able to frolic and play quite publicly in the south of France and both agreed they'd return to do it again.

The flight over the Atlantic was all about champagne and mischief. They became members of the mile-high club, even though Nick could barely fit in the tiny bathroom.

They finally arrived at the farm on a crisp morning in the early spring. Mae propped the sign for her garden against a fence post beside the rambling old house. "That's the spot, Nick. And

it's a perfect time of year. If we hurry, we can have the first crops in before the daffodils are up."

He laughed at her impatience.

"We'll get a few loads of compost and a tiller this week, my love. But right now, there's another 'garden of Mae's earthly delights' I'd like to explore."

"Nick, my darling, no matter what, you'll always be my only plowman."

Companion Recipes for Romance from

Sizzling in Singapore

Find more recipes for Carnal Cuisine
on Torri's blog:

<http://torridcooke.com>

"Elysium Hotel" Roasted Peach and Basil Vinaigrette

This dressing is simple to make and makes a wonderful accent for a green salad topped with grilled salmon or chicken. It has a bright and unusual flavor that is sweet, smoky and tangy all at once. The basil complements the

peaches perfectly. If you are lucky enough to be in a place where you can get really good fresh peaches, by all means use them. Use three whole peeled peaches. Fresh peaches will give you a really wonderful color that canned ones can't match. But the restaurant where I learned this recipe was in a place where fresh peaches were grainy and tasteless so don't hesitate to use canned.

I use Canola oil in this recipe or an all-purpose blend. Olive oil just doesn't complement the peaches. I don't use corn oil for the same reason—the

taste is too overwhelming.

For a variation on this recipe, try substituting pineapple slices for the peach halves. I have had the most success with fruit packed in juice as syrup-packed fruit tends to burn when grilled.

INGREDIENTS:

$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup of Cooking Oil

$\frac{1}{4}$ Cup of Rice Wine Vinegar

$\frac{1}{4}$ Cup Sugar

One Can –Fifteen ounces—

Peach halves in juice

½ Cup of loosely packed basil
leaves

1 Teaspoon of salt

½ teaspoon of cracked black
pepper

Mesclun salad mix (or your
favorite--clean and perfectly dry)

Grilled salmon or chicken, if
desired

Drain the peaches well. Spray a
grill pan with non-stick cooking spray
and heat until very hot. Grill the peaches

until they have dark grill marks. You may turn them if desired during cooking for more grill flavor. Don't worry if some of them break a little. You're going to blend them anyway.

Put the peaches in a container with the rest of the ingredients. You don't need to cool them. Blend until smooth with an immersion blender. If you don't have an immersion blender, you can make the dressing in either a blender or a food processor. Taste for level of salt and pepper and adjust if necessary.

Handsome men appeal to the senses more if slightly underdressed and so does a salad. Don't drown your greens. Mix the salad just before serving to avoid wilting. Hate it when that happens.

"Elysium Hotel" Honey Roasted Beets with Cracked Black Pepper

If you aren't a beet fan, you really should try this funky vegetable on more time, roasted. Beets are really sensual food. They're earthy, sweet and

slightly bitter at the same time, kick-ass for color on the plate and full of vitality-giving iron that all lovers need. Roasting brings out the sugars in beets and mellows the 'rooty-ness' That is one of the main objections I hear about beets.

You can use red beets or any of the other more exotic colors like the orange ones or the candy striped ones if you can find them. This recipe also works well with small turnips, but the cooking time is less and, of course, you don't get the color.

INGREDIENTS:

3 Small beets (about golf ball size) or the equivalent in halved larger ones per person

Olive Oil

Honey

Coarse black pepper
(preferably freshly cracked)

Salt

Preheat the oven to 350°

First, remove the root end and trim off the green tops. Slice the entire

top off leaving a clean exposed surface. Don't throw the greens away, they are excellent in their own right. Scrub the beets, let them drain off most of the water and rub a little olive oil on them. (Just put them all in a big bowl and rub away).

Put some aluminum foil in the bottom of a roasting pan sized for your number of servings. Put the beets on the foil, cover with another piece of foil and crimp around the edges. The cooking time depends on how large the beets are and how old they are. They can take

anywhere from an hour to two. When you can easily pierce into the beet with a paring knife, they're done. Really, because they take so long to cook, five minutes over-cooking isn't going to make any difference so don't sweat it too much.

When they're done, remove them from the hot pan and let them cool enough for you to handle them. You will be able to slip the skins right off of the beets by wiping them with paper towels. Gloves will prevent your hands from turning beet red, but in time you can use

just the paper towels. Just takes a little practice.

Quarter the beets.

Now, back in the big bowl, toss the beets with a couple of tablespoons of honey. Return the beets to the oven for just long enough to get them piping hot. The honey will render them sticky. You're going to use tongs for the next step unless, like Mae, you have asbestos fingers. Have enough black pepper in a saucer to use for coating the curved side of the beet quarter. Arrange them artfully on the plate. Visually this is a stunning

side dish so don't just throw them at your plate like they were French fries! Serve with roasts, chops, steaks, etc.

An excellent appetizer can be made by putting a golf-ball sized piece of goat cheese on a plate and arranging the beets like petals around the cheese.

"Finewood Park" Beef Kway Teow

This dish was my absolute favorite thing to eat in Singapore. Apparently, from my research it is a dish found only at this island nation. The

place I had it for the first time was called the Goodwood Park Hotel. It is a venerable old institution on which I modeled the fictional 'Finewood Park' where Mae and Cess meet for dinner. Like many places in Singapore, the place is kept icy-cold. Mae would very much have needed her shawl in that place!

Most Asian dishes, whether from Chinese origins or from the subcontinent use meat sparingly. In this recipe, I use about a half a pound of beef and would expect four portions—that's

only two ounces of meat for each serving. If you think this is too little, feel free to make it more 'meaty' But, I urge you to try it with the small amount first. You might be pleasantly surprised at how a lot of flavor makes a little bit of expensive protein go a long way. Since we are using such a small amount, go with the best meat you can find. I use filet or sometimes a strip or sirloin. Whatever you do, do not succumb to your grocer's 'beef for stir-fry' come-on. It's usually cut way too thick and will disappoint you with both texture and the

way it cooks.

You will have to search out the noodles—kway teow—for this dish, but if your town has an Asian market it won't be too hard to find them. You can order them online if you can't find them locally. There is no substitute. The wide rice noodle has a particular texture that just can't be fudged. In Singapore the noodles are fresh. I've learned to live with the dry variety and it is a really good facsimile of the "real thing" As with all stir-fry type dishes the key to success is not to overcook anything.

The classic recipe calls for Chinese chives, but I have used many greens as the veggie part of the dish. Spinach, Swiss chard—leaves only, mustard greens, even the mature outside leaves of Romaine lettuce will make a fine dish. Do not fear to improvise, Grasshopper, it is the essence of all the best sensual delights.

The dish calls for fresh bean sprouts. The real experts pick off the heads and tails, but that is wayyy too much work for me. Feel free to do so if you have time on your hands or cheap

child labor around. If you can't find fresh bean sprouts, leave them out altogether. The canned ones bear as much resemblance to the fresh as a flaccid penis to an erect one. If you'd like, you can add some really finely shredded cabbage to get that element of crispness. No one will sue you.

A note on ginger and garlic: I know you are busy. I know you 'don't have time'to peel and grate these essential Asian elements. Please try it once. Then make your dish with the jar kind. If you can't tell the difference, then

okay, I can't help you. If you do see the difference, take the five minutes for the real thing. Foreplay, baby, can make or break sex or cooking.

INGREDIENTS:

½ Pound of lean beef filet

One package—usually around a pound (more or less) wide rice noodles. Sometimes called Pad Thai or rice sticks. They should be about a half inch wide.

½ Pound –a bag, bunch, etc. of

the greens of your choice (see above)
sliced in ribbons

3 Small green onions sliced
thinly on the diagonal—green and white
parts

½ Pound of fresh bean sprouts
or finely shredded cabbage—Chinese
variety is best

5 Cloves of minced or grated
garlic

A two-inch knob of minced or
grated peeled fresh ginger

4 Tablespoons of cooking oil—
peanut is best, but any neutral oil is fine

A few tablespoons water

Marinade for meat:

2 Tablespoons soy sauce

2 Tablespoons oyster sauce

1 Teaspoon rice wine vinegar

Scant teaspoon sugar

1 ½ Teaspoons cornstarch

Several dashes sesame oil

First, slice the beef as thin as you can, against the grain. Marinate the beef in the mixed ingredients of the

marinade for twenty minutes or so.

The noodles are the trickiest part of this dish. I can't really tell you how long to blanch the dry ones as there is so much variation in moisture content of packaged rice noodles. I take a pot of boiling salted water and throw the noodles in. Then I turn the heat off. The noodles are ready when they are slightly less done than 'al dente' You should be able to bite through one, but it shouldn't be done enough to eat. Softening the noodles in this way shouldn't take more than a few minutes so don't walk away

and get busy with other things. If you overcook them at this stage, you will have an unappetizing lump of goo when you cook them the second time.

When the noodles are done enough, drain them and rinse them with cold water. They will be slippery.

Now, you can assemble the dish. Most recipes will tell you to use a wok for Chinese cooking and that's fine, but you don't *have* to have a wok. In fact, I have an excellent wok that for some reason doesn't get along with the gas stove I presently have, so I have been

using a big cast iron skillet lately. It works great.

Heat a tablespoon of oil to hot, but not smoking, and quick-fry the greens and the sprouts or cabbage to 'almost done' This takes a minute or so. Don't overcook as they will be going back into the pan for the final combining. Set the vegetables aside.

Heat another tablespoon of oil in the pan and add the garlic. Don't burn it. When the garlic begins to color, add the drained noodles and cook until the noodles start to show some browning on

the edges. Be gentle, the noodles will break easily. Set the noodles aside with the vegetables.

Heat the remainder of the oil in the pan with the ginger. Let the ginger start to sizzle and then add the meat, marinade and all. The meat is not going to get brown, just cook it until the color changes and it's done.

Add a few tablespoons of water and stir. The cornstarch in the marinade will thicken and form the sauce. Add the vegetables and the noodles to the meat and sauce mixture and gently combine

until everything is nicely coated. Garnish with the green onions and serve hot.

This dish is usually served with these tiny green pickled chilies on the side that I have never found outside of Singapore. However, I have found several excellent substitutes. Most Asian groceries sell a small green pickled pepper. There are many varieties. You can use the jalapenos you probably already have in your pantry, but these just aren't quite as good as the little green ones. These peppers are also easily made at home. Buy some Serrano

chilies, slice them in thin pieces and put them in a clean glass jar. Boil enough cider vinegar to cover the peppers and season the vinegar with salt and just a pinch of sugar. Pour the boiling vinegar over the chilies and refrigerate for a couple of days. They just keep getting better with age.

Mae's Wasabi Cocktail Sauce

This is just a little variation on the traditional cocktail sauce you are already familiar with. But I've had rave

reviews on it. Sometimes simple changes to old standards pack a big flavor punch. This is excellent with any cold shellfish—shrimp, crab claws, even cold pieces of poached white fish like Mahi-Mahi. Just make sure your fish is screaming fresh.

INGREDIENTS:

½ Cup ketchup

Zest and juice from half a lemon
or one small lime

A couple of dashes of

Worcestershire sauce

A few drops of Tabasco sauce
2 teaspoons of wasabi paste

Mix it all together and serve chilled. Adjust the wasabi to your taste level. I use the kind in the tube as I find most powders that are available in retail stores tend to be bitter. But if you have a favorite, by all means experiment.

A wonderful seafood salad can be made by mixing three parts good quality mayonnaise with one part wasabi cocktail sauce. Toss in shrimp, lobster

or crab, some chopped celery and onion and, if you have them and like them—some capers. Yummy.

Braised Lamb Shank (Kurt's original version and Nick's new version)

If you think you don't like lamb or haven't a clue how to cook it, braised lamb shanks are an excellent introduction to this 'other red meat' and the method of cooking is very forgiving. Lamb shanks are braised until they practically fall off the bone so you don't

have to pay much attention to the dish once it's prepped and ready to cook.

Lamb shanks are one of the cheaper cuts of lamb, but still not as cheap as chicken or pork chops. So, although this is a rustic meal, it would still qualify as a 'special'dinner. Plus, there's a certain raw sexiness about having a shank on your plate. It looks like caveman food, although I would advise against trying to eat it with your hands unless you're into messiness. I am going to give you the traditional method and then I am going to give you the

different take on the traditional method that Nick and Mae came up with at the Elysium.

Mastering the technique of braising will serve you well in the kitchen. Your goal is to achieve a caramelization of the sugars present in the meat. This brown coating accomplishes two things: it seals the juices inside the meat and it provides a depth of flavor to your dish that you can't get by just boiling a hunk of flesh. Braising is an excellent way to coax a cheap cut of meat into becoming an

elegant, complex dish. For example, if you wanted to substitute beef short ribs for the lamb in the first version of this recipe, it would be delicious. You could even braise chicken for the second version of the recipe—the Asian-influenced one—but you would need to shorten the cooking time.

Both of these dishes start the same way. The first step is to brown the shanks well. You can cook this dish in an electric frying pan (this is what I use), a crock-pot, or in the oven. If you choose to do it in the oven, you'll need a heavy

skillet or Dutch oven that can go on the stove top and in the oven. A cast iron Dutch oven is a perfect choice. If you choose a crock-pot, you will still need a heavy skillet to prepare the ingredients for the slow cooker.

Allow one shank per person. If your market carries the foreleg portion of lamb, this will usually feed two people. Be warned, though, that the foreleg may be too long to fit in your vessel. (Yes, it is possible to be *too long* when we're talking about fitting in a cooking vessel). If you need to cut part

of the bone, you will need to saw it.

Generously salt and pepper the shanks and brown them on medium high heat in just a small amount of oil—enough to keep them from sticking. The lamb will render off quite a bit of fat so you want to keep added fat to a minimum. Turn the shanks often and try to get them as evenly brown all around as you can. The browning is what gives the sauce a lot of its color and flavor. Browning will take a while—fifteen minutes or so—so while that is happening you can prepare the

ingredients for your braising sauce.

Traditional Apple and Rosemary Braise

Allow one Granny Smith apple, one small onion, one carrot and a rib of celery for two shanks.

Peel and chop (medium dice) the apple, onion and carrot. Chop the celery.

When the shanks are browned, remove them and put all of the chopped fruit and vegetables into the pan. Sweat

the vegetables until they soften.

Mince or grate three cloves of garlic. Remove the leaves from a six-inch stalk of fresh rosemary and chop finely. Add these ingredients to the pan along with a bay leaf or two.. Add the shanks.

You will need enough liquid to come halfway up the shanks. If you are only making two shanks, you will have way more sauce than you will consume, but there's no way around the liquid requirement. Use one part red wine to one part water. In my electric frying pan,

I use about a quart of liquid.

Bring the mixture to a boil and reduce to a bare simmer if using an electric skillet. If you are baking the shanks, put foil over the pot very tightly and then put the top on. Cook in the oven at three hundred degrees. If you are using a crock-pot, this is the point where you put the shanks, veggies and liquid into the pot. They will be fine cooking all day on low. Both the oven and the electric skillet method will require about four hours cooking time. A word of warning: my electric fry pan

periodically heats up and boils and therefore I usually have to add some liquid during the cooking process to keep it from drying out. Use just water for this as you don't want the wine to be overwhelming in the end product. This won't be a problem with the oven or the crock-pot method.

The shanks are done when you can easily separate the meat from the bone with a fork. They should be very tender. If the sauce seems too watery, you can reduce it on the stove or in the electric frying pan, if using.

Elysium Dinner Special with Mango Braise

Substitute one (or two if very small) green mangoes for the apple. Omit the carrot but keep the onion and celery. Probably the only place you might find green mangoes (other than on the tree) is at an Asian market. If you don't have green mangoes, don't despair. Use the hardest mango you can find at your supermarket.

Use ½ to one teaspoon of your

favorite curry powder—I like hot Madras--instead of the bay leaf and rosemary. Add a teaspoon of grated ginger with the chopped garlic.

Add two stalks of lemongrass to the pot. Crush the ends of the lemon grass, tie it in a knot and remove before serving. No lemongrass? Toss half of a seeded lemon, skin and all in the pot.

Use a dry white wine instead of red. This is just so that the color of the fruit and the curry has a chance to shine in the dish. Once your ingredients are all combined taste the liquid. Add one or

two teaspoons of brown sugar (palm sugar or jaggery in the Elysium recipe, but that's nearly impossible to find—check the Indian shelf at the Asian market) if the sauce seems too tart.

Again, these are proportions for two shanks. More fruit, veggies and spice for more shanks. But because the shanks then occupy more of the pot space, you probably won't have to double the liquid even if you double the shanks.

Questions, comments, demands,

needs, desires? Email Torri:

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**And, if you enjoyed the book and love
the recipes, please take a moment to
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Cooke***

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Short Story)

Hunger for Halloween (Carnal Cuisine

Short Story)

About K.C. Falls

The 'C' in my name stands for Cheyenne. Although you wouldn't know it by looking at me, I have a great grandparent who was a member of that

Native American Tribe. Her people once lived in the very southeastern corner of Montana where I now make my home. I didn't always live in such a wide open space, though. I grew up in New York City. Much as I love the city and admire what it takes to live there, I met a kindred spirit at Columbia University and together, we found a way to take our lives from the Big Apple to the Big Sky. We haven't regretted a moment.

We've got a smallish ranch where we raise cattle and keep a menagerie of other animals, too. Once or

twice a year, we hire a 'ranch sitter' and take an urban vacation somewhere hitting all the restaurants, plays, museums and musical performances we can squeeze in. Then it's back to the wide open.

My inspiration comes from the hundreds (maybe thousands) of wonderful romances I have read since I was old enough to hide my "bodice rippers" under the covers and read with a flashlight away from my mother's prying eyes. I'm happy to have found a partner in Torri who can bring her

passion for food to my world of passion for, well, passion. Together I think we make a very creative team. She gets all the credit for the culinary creativity that goes into our collaboration.

A writer finds creativity flourishes in solitude. My fantasy world is full of characters and stories lined up and waiting for me to bring them to life. I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I enjoy writing them.

About Torri D. Cooke

I've been around the world seven times. I've eaten in some of the finest restaurants on the planet and some of the humblest as well. I've cooked for diplomats and princes as a private chef. I've slaved in a bitch-run deli in a strip mall and toiled as a cheesemonger in a gourmet grocery store. I've taught ethnic cuisine to bored, rich American housewives in Saudi Arabia and American comfort food cooking to Filipina housemaids in Singapore. I've served as the herb garden specialist for

a renowned botanical garden. I've peeked inside the lives of the very rich as a personal chef. I've sweated on the line of fine white-tablecloth establishments in South Florida's toniest districts. I know my way around the culinary world.

I've always felt that people who regularly work with fire and knives are sexy and a little dangerous. By its nature, cooking takes the ordinary and elevates it into something that is at best sublime and at worst, at least sustenance. Like sex, food is one of our basic instincts.

We need food to survive as individuals and sex to survive as a species.

And, like food, sex can become the physical equivalent of shoving a McBoring burger into your face day after day. There is a place for McBoring burgers and I'm not saying they should be outlawed. By the same token, in the right time and space, sex can be of the less than earth-moving variety and still serve its purpose.

But not here. Not with me. I'm here to bring you the polar opposite of McBoring (burgers or sex).

Our books are romances about culinarians--the grand and the humble--in exotic locations with a no-holds-barred erotic punch. I've decided to bring my considerable food experience into erotic romance by including recipes published both with the books and extras ones here, on my blog. All the recipes are as original as it is possible to be and are mentioned or prepared in the books. I say as original as can be because, unless you are el Bulli or one of his disciples, there's nothing really new under the sun when it comes to food.

Hell, when you think about it, people have been pretty much fucking the same way since time began as well.

But what I'm saying is that the recipes are mine, I made 'em and I wrote 'em.

The characters in our books cook the way they make love--sensually, passionately, adventurously, and with devotion to the task. If you are looking for "five easy dinners from one pot" don't look here. If you want your lovers to play with bits "down there" and the curtain to draw before they even get

naked--not here either.

The Condom Conundrum

We are aware that the issue of condoms in erotica is contentious. We claim our license as fiction writers to conjure up raw and unfettered sex. If you, dear reader, cannot bear the thought of our handsome hero and our lovely heroine going at it Trojan-less, feel free to add the following at the appropriate

point in any of our sex scenes:

“He opened the Magnum wrapper with his teeth and sheathed himself with one hand, never missing a beat in pleasuring her. She shivered in anticipation at the crackle of the cellophane as she realized the moment of completion was upon her.”