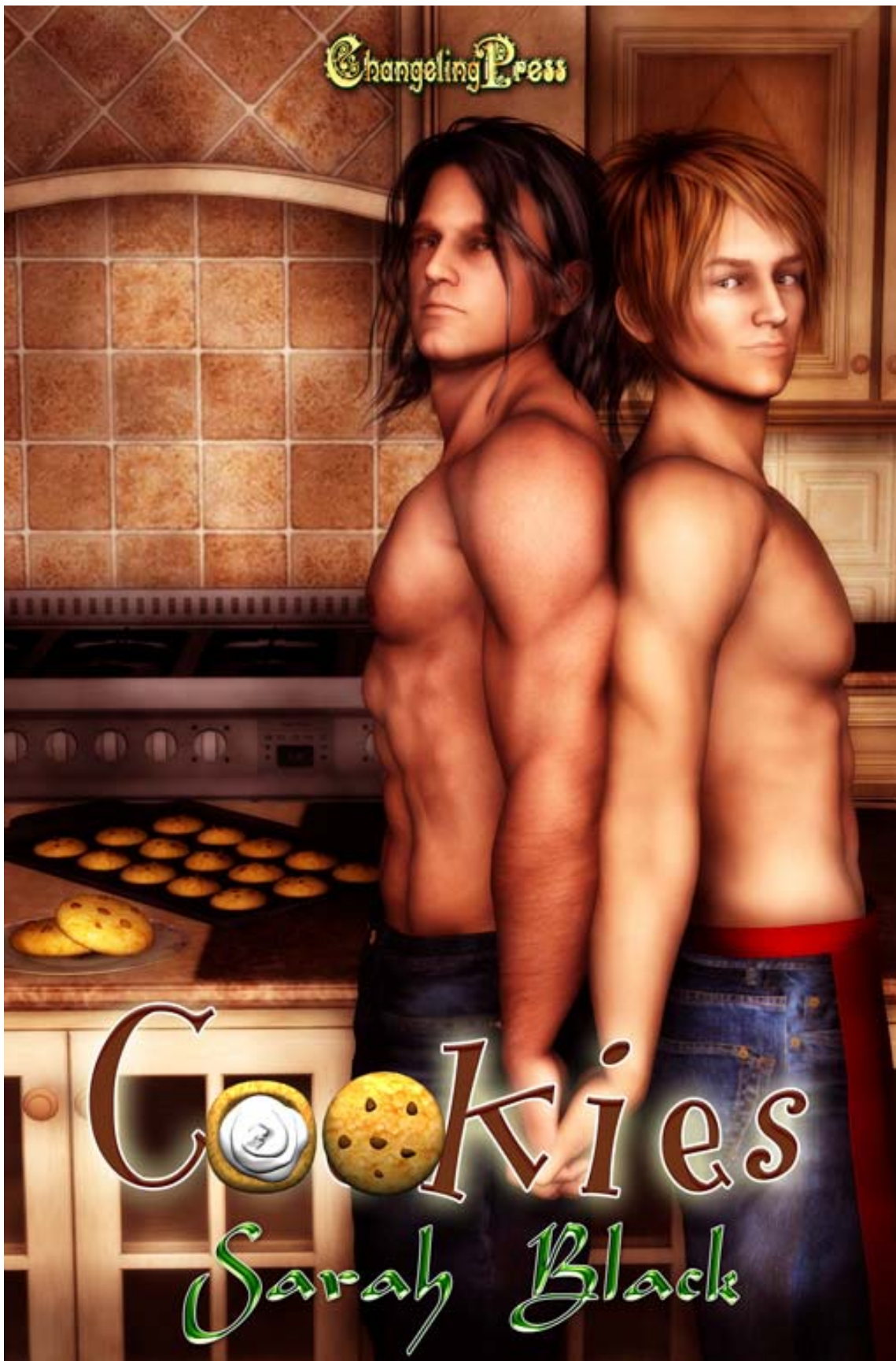


Changeling Press

Cookies

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Cookies

Sarah Black

Kenny Lee had avoided the cutthroat competition between cooks until his old friend Julio lures him into a friendly little cookie booth at the farmer's market. Then the competition heats up, the cookies heat up, and Julio and Kenny Lee find they have their hands full -- with each other!

The Market Meeting

“We have several new vendors for this year’s Capital City Farmer’s Market, including Udderly Delicious, an organic goat dairy concentrating on yogurt --” There was polite applause when Brie gestured to the young farmers. “-- Tongues On Fire, a specialty pepper farmer, and Shangri-La, Cookies from Heaven.” Kenny Lee waved a hand in the air, and the other vendors gave him a hand. “Big Bill’s Cookies has been the only cookie vendor for two years. It’s always good to have a bit of friendly competition. Kenny Lee, can you tell us about your cookies?”

“I’m using all organic ingredients,” he said, “and I’m concentrating on the gourmet market. The best ingredients and special care. I would suspect the more sophisticated market patron will like my cookies.”

Big Bill gave a tiny cough behind his hand. “So if people want a plain old chocolate chip or an oatmeal raisin, they’ll still have to come to me?” Big Bill was only his name during market season. The rest of the year he went by his real name, Julio.

Kenny Lee ignored him. “If people want, for instance, Scottish shortbread made with unrefined cane sugar, from a two-hundred-year-old recipe, or a sugar cookie with rose ganache and candied rose petals, or perhaps a Medjool date stuffed with almond paste and lavender, they can come to Shangri-La. If you want a Chocolate McChip, you can go to Big Bill’s.”

Brie patted Julio on the shoulder. His face had turned as pink as rose ganache. “I can see this is going to be an exciting year for cookies! Maybe we can hear now from Tongues on Fire.”

When the pepper farmer stood up to speak, Kenny Lee leaned forward, stared at Julio until the other man turned around. They locked eyes, and Kenny Lee made a sudden slicing gesture across his neck. Julio just grinned at him, jerked his fist up and

down between his legs. Kenny Lee sat back. It was indeed going to be an interesting season for cookies.

Kenny Lee had run into Julio a few weeks earlier. It had been a couple of years since they finished cooking school together. Julio had snagged the primo job, as sous chef at Naropa Café, the best organic vegan café in Boise. Kenny Lee had been happy for a job as sous chef at the Plaza Grill. He liked it okay, though they strayed very far from the principles of the Slow Food movement, and slow food was his passion. Julio had hugged him, dragged him off for an espresso with a dab of whipped cream and a shaving of dark chocolate on top.

"Kenny Lee, I saw your mom the other day. She was wearing this t-shirt that said 'One Tough Mother.' Scared me a little. She was with this whole group of women doing a march or something. They looked pissed and ready to rumble. What was she protesting?"

"Could be anything. She's a storm trooper for the National Organization of Women. She puts on those boots, I make myself scarce, you know what I mean? How's Naropa?"

"I quit six months ago." He shook his head. "Kenny Lee, you would not believe it. Nobody cares about good food anymore. It's all about money, making money, saving money, cutting corners. I couldn't take it. So I went to the Gamekeeper's Lodge."

Kenny Lee goggled at him. "Are you kidding me? That steak and potato palace? What are you doing there?"

"Suffering, bud. But I've got my own little moneymaker, a cookie booth at the farmer's market. I'm saving up. I've got a plan. For the future."

"Hey, I was thinking about doing a pie booth at the farmer's market!"

"No way, man. The Amish ladies have the pie market sewn up. Why don't you do a cookie booth? A little friendly competition can only be good for business. Just don't expect me to do slow food anymore. I've resigned. America wants cheap and supersized, and that's what I'm going to give them."

Julio was waiting for him outside the market meeting, leaning against the brick wall of the Idaho Building. "Chocolate McChip? You're such a dick. And candied rose petals on a cookie in Boise? Good luck with that." He nibbled on a tiny pastry, no bigger than his thumb. Kenny Lee came to attention like a hound dog pointing. Julio had been the top of their class in pastry. To hear that Julio had turned away from the purity of the Slow Foods movement was on par with Anakin Skywalker turning toward the Dark Side.

"What's that you're eating?"

Julio held another tiny pastry out to him. "Nothing. Just a little snack."

Kenny Lee studied the tiny tart. It looked like a shortbread crust, and the filling? He sniffed. Something rich and Mediterranean... He took a nibble. Oh, man. Pure butter shortbread, Sicilian salt, and the filling was fig and a tiny bit of chopped, fresh cherry. He closed his eyes, let the buttery crust melt across his tongue. Butter and figs, something about that combination always went straight to his balls. He cleared his throat, and hoped Julio wouldn't notice the unfortunate bulge in his Levi's. Or if he noticed, he would be a gentleman and not...

"Looks like you're about ready to let your big dog off the leash. Why don't you come on upstairs with me?"

Kenny Lee rubbed both hands down across his face. "We shouldn't be sleeping together, now we're competitors."

"I don't think a couple of dueling cookie stands at the farmer's market comes under the same type of competition as, say, Olympians going for the same gold, or small countries..."

Kenny Lee held up his hand in surrender. "Okay, you made your point."

"Come on, then." Julio tugged him inside, pulled him into the elevator by his sleeve, and when the doors closed he brought another tiny tart from a paper bag in his pocket. "Try this one."

Key Lime burst on Kenny Lee's tongue, and he moaned with pleasure. He'd just managed to swallow when Julio backed him into the corner of the elevator and pushed

the emergency stop button. "Let me taste," he said, hands soft against Kenny Lee's cheeks, and he kissed him like his mouth was the most delicious mouth he had ever tasted.

Busy hands moved down his chest, flipped open the button on a pair of old Levi's, and Julio slipped a hand down Kenny Lee's jeans and into his boxers. "There he is. I've got some strawberry cream upstairs..."

"Where did you get the strawberries?" Kenny Lee felt Julio's big hand wrap gently around his cock, give a long, slow stroke.

"Oregon," he said, breath warm in Kenny Lee's ear. "Organic, picked two days ago by virgins who bathed in goat's milk before they went into the fields. Come on, Kenny Lee," he said, smiling down and kissing Kenny Lee lightly on the mouth. He still had his cock in one big fist. He reached over and released the emergency stop button. "Let's see a smile."

Kenny Lee looked up at him as the elevator lurched and started its ascent. Julio was a big guy, with lovely ivory skin and glossy black hair, big, dark brown eyes with the longest, lushest lashes, and a chin like a rock. He grew whiskers 24/7, and his chin twelve hours after a shave could abrade the top layer of skin right off anyone he happened to be kissing. Like Kenny Lee. Kenny Lee wasn't sure if he adored him. Occasionally he couldn't stand him. He thought it was extremely unfair a man could look like Antonio Banderas and cook like an Iron Chef and still be a primo smart ass. Kenny Lee couldn't keep up in looks, cooking, or smart-assery. Though he hadn't given up in the kitchen.

"Which one did you like the best?"

"The Key Lime," Kenny Lee said. "But maybe it was because it was so unexpected."

"I think I like the fig best plain, no cherries." Julio pulled his hand out of Kenny Lee's jeans, zipped and buttoned, pulled his t-shirt down. "Still missing something, though. Something Greek, Lebanese..."

"Lemon? Honey? Walnuts?"

“That’s baklava. If we added the figs, it would be a Turkish fig tart. What about a drop of lemon curd?”

They both stared at the ceiling, thinking about this. When the elevator stopped, Julio pulled Kenny Lee by the hand down the hall to his apartment.

Inside, Julio pushed him gently up against the wall in the living room, held him in place with a full-body press. One big hand on either side of his head, Julio’s thigh pressing against his cock, chest breathing against chest.

“Julio, the thing is...”

Julio opened his eyes, lifted his mouth from Kenny Lee’s neck. “What?”

“The Turkish fig tart might be the very best way those ingredients go together. They’ve been making it that way for over two thousand years.”

He rubbed a fist across his chin. “You could be right. I tried candied ginger and it wasn’t bad, just not that good. The crust is the thing. Phyllo or shortbread?”

Kenny Lee reached for Julio’s shirt, pulled it out of his jeans, started unbuttoning. “I tried some stuffed dates with a piece of candied ginger. Candied ginger, sugared walnuts, and parmigiano. Not all together. One at a time. I liked the parmigiano the best.”

Julio grabbed him by the shoulders. “Dates!”

“What?”

“Figs and dates and a drop of lemon curd! In the shortbread crust.”

“Holy shit.” Kenny Lee felt a flush of pleasure rise in his cheeks. “That will be fucking awesome.”

Julio nodded. “Let’s go to bed. Strawberries later.”

Kenny Lee sat down on the end of Julio’s bed, kicked his shoes off. But he didn’t have time to do more than that, because Julio picked him up in a flying tackle, tumbled him into the big pile of bedding. Julio never made his bed. And wherever you landed, you landed on top of tangled flannel sheets and fluffy down comforters and pillows, and it all smelled like warm male skin and spice and maybe a faint whiff of vanilla. Julio leaned over him, smiling. “Let’s make out.”

"Let's make out naked," Kenny Lee said.

"Let's make out naked with whipped cream." Julio was busy pulling his clothes off and tossing them off the side of the bed. Kenny Lee tugged his shirt over his head, threw it off the other side of the bed. He knew if he got his clothes mixed in with Julio's laundry pile, his socks would never be seen again.

"I vote we save the whipped cream for the strawberries. I'll make a pot of Earl Grey and a pan of scones."

"Done," Julio said. "Nobody makes scones like you."

And Kenny Lee smiled up at the ceiling, let Julio tug his jeans down off his legs.

Julio really knew how to kiss. His mouth was soft, smiling, and he took his time. While he refused to join Kenny Lee on the Slow Foods bandwagon, Kenny Lee had to admit he was a master of Slow Sex.

Kenny Lee was lying on a big fluffy pile of feather comforters, and Julio was moving his mouth down his neck and over his chest, with agonizing delicate attention to each nipple in turn. Kenny Lee had only one job, to lie there and take it, and he tried to slow himself down to Julio's pace by counting the tiny feathers that were floating in the air above them. When he got excited and started to thrash, the comforter he was lying on released a small puff of down. It was no use. He filled his hands with Julio's glossy black hair, slid them over his shoulders. "Julio."

Julio looked up from the tiny patch of skin, one inch above Kenny Lee's belly button, that he was tasting with the tip of his tongue. He studied Kenny Lee's face, then moved back up until they were sharing a pillow. His dark eyes moved slowly over Kenny Lee's face, settled on his mouth. "You taste like honey and sunshine." And he kissed Kenny Lee on the mouth, slipped his tongue between his teeth, rolled on top of him.

This was the way Julio liked it the best. They moved against each other, cock to cock, belly to belly, and they found their rhythm, a slow thrust and grind that worked its way up up up until one of them would catch their breath, heart pounding, balls

pulled up tight, cock spurting, and the smell of semen, the hot sticky come on the belly, would push the other over the edge.

Tonight, tasting a tiny Key Lime tart on his tongue, Julio's voice warm in his ear, telling him he tasted like honey and sunshine, Kenny Lee was flooded with delight, flooded and flung over a waterfall of sensations, and he crashed against Julio's chest, wrapped his arms and legs around his body, thrust against him so helplessly, so ferociously, that Julio laughed against his neck, took a bite of his warm skin, and leapt over the waterfall with him.

Saturday Morning

"Hey, wake up." Kenny Lee felt a tiny nibble on his bottom lip, then a piece of whole grain bread slathered with butter and honey hovered under his nose. He opened up, and Julio shoved the piece of toast between his teeth. "It's four in the AM. You need to make cookies? We can start setting up at eight, but no selling before the nine o'clock bell."

Kenny Lee sat up, took a bite of the toast. Julio was standing at the end of the bed, already showered and dressed, sipping from a cup of coffee. "How long have you been up?"

"About an hour. I like to get to market early -- that's when the other vendors do a little under the table trading. I always like to get some beef from that lady who runs the cows down in Owyhee Canyon. If we get some meat, you want to make some meatballs tonight? I'll make salad and pasta."

"I can make meatballs." He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Can I use your shower?"

"Sure, go ahead. I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"Great." Kenny Lee looked at him, but Julio just grinned, didn't move.

"What a shy boy. You want me to turn around so you can run into the bathroom? I won't look at your naked butt, I swear."

Kenny Lee sighed, stood up and gave Julio the finger.

Ten minutes later, Kenny Lee walked into the kitchen and refilled his coffee cup. Julio had prepared most of his cookies already and was loading them into huge plastic bins for safe transport to the market. Kenny Lee opened a cupboard, winced when he saw a can of butter-flavored Crisco. "What are you thinking, Julio? You were the last person in the world I would have believed could give it up."

"Give what up?"

"Your principles. What we believe in. Slow food, made the right way, with care and attention. You were the very best in our class, and now you've got Crisco in your cabinet? What happened to you?"

Julio just looked at him. He was busy stacking cookies. "We're not in school anymore, man. It's a big, nasty world out there. I'm just trying to..."

Kenny Lee leaned against the kitchen counter. "Make money?"

"I don't mind being a hungry artist, but I don't want to be a starving artist, Kenny Lee. You want to be chopping veggies in somebody else's kitchen when you're fifty? I don't have anything but what I make for myself. And I want something."

"What?"

"I don't know. But I know I need a stake."

Kenny Lee studied his handsome face, looking uncharacteristically serious. "So you're selling out to finance your dreams?"

Julio turned back to his cookies. "Something like that."

"It's not right, Julio. It's not you."

Julio lifted four big plastic bins of cookies and set them gently on a cart with rolling wheels. "You can tell me what you think after market today, big guy." He turned back to Kenny Lee, his face suddenly furious. "What's the matter with you? Don't you have dreams? Aren't you working toward something bigger than a sugar cookie with rose ganache filling?"

And he banged out of the apartment, left Kenny Lee standing with a cup of coffee in his hand and his mouth hanging open.

Kenny Lee spent the next couple of hours making his lovely gourmet cookies from the ingredients he had already prepared. He was proud of them, proud to have people know he made these wonderful treats. It was windy down on Market Street, and he spent some time trying to set his table up in such a way that his candied rose petals wouldn't fly off down the streets of downtown Boise. When he had everything set up,

with small price markers in careful rose-colored calligraphy, he went down to the end of the street to see Julio.

Big Bill's Cookies was flying a banner decorated with dancing clowns eating cookies. Kenny Lee sighed, looked around for Julio. He was talking to a lady wearing a cowboy hat and jeans, and when he saw Kenny Lee, he smiled and waved him over. "Hey, come meet Sally Wright. She's got the best beef at market." He turned to Sally. "I went to cooking school with Kenny Lee. He makes awesome meatballs."

"Italian grandmother," Kenny Lee explained, reaching out to shake her hand. "Julio, got a minute?"

"Sure." Julio stuck his hands in his jeans, wouldn't meet Kenny Lee's eyes.

"I know you're pissed off at me. And you should be. I didn't have any right to give you a dressing down. It's not any of my business."

Julio looked at him. "I didn't mean to take it out on you. It's just, seeing you again reminded me, you know? Of what we used to be like. How we used to take things so seriously. Like what we were doing in the kitchen was the most important thing in the world."

"You don't feel that way anymore?"

Julio shrugged, stared down the street. "Maybe I'm getting too wrapped up with trying to make a living. I forget I used to cook for love. For fun."

"Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start anything. Can we just..."

"Yeah, we can. Hey, have you tasted any of those little pies the Amish ladies make? I got a couple of peach pies. Peach and blueberry are my favorites."

"I'll take a bite later. I better get back and make sure my table hasn't blown away. Listen, I hope you do well today."

Julio nodded toward Big Bill's Cookies. "I always do well, buddy. I'll come find you after market closes if you want. We can take a little nap, then make spaghetti?"

After Market

Kenny Lee sat slumped in his chair, watching apathetically as the happy vendors around him packed up their tables and made plans for the evening. One thought, like a mantra, kept repeating in his mind. Holy hell. Holy hell. Holy hell. After the street had been empty for nearly a half hour, Julio walked up, pushing his wheeled cart. Julio looked carefully over the rows and rows of unsold cookies on the table, studied the street, where the tiny cards with their calligraphy and the candied rose petals tumbled over each other, heading for the gutter.

Kenny Lee raised his head. "Julio, I don't understand. Shangri-La, Cookies from Heaven was a bust! I had to sit here all day, watching pudgy-faced kids eating jumbo cookies from Big Bill's, staring at me like I was an alien."

Julio picked up a cookie, let the rose ganache melt on his tongue. "Wow, Kenny Lee. That is amazing." He sighed. "I should have told you about samples. I didn't think. I haven't done that since the first year. Listen, I didn't want you to ever have to understand this. America likes fast, supersized, and deep fat fried. I don't think slow and beautiful food is ever going to catch on here."

Julio and Kenny Lee packed up the beautiful cookies in silence, then they walked, pulling the wheeled cart, into the Idaho Building.

Upstairs, Julio went into the bathroom, came out with a medicine bottle. "I keep Xanax in the apartment for emergencies. You want one or two?"

"Just one," Kenny Lee said, and Julio gave him a tiny pill. He swallowed it dry.

Julio pulled Kenny Lee's shirt over his head, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. "Come on, baby. Let's take a nap." He pulled the sheets and comforter semi-straight, and Kenny Lee slid under the covers, hid his face in the pillow. Julio locked the apartment door, lowered the blinds, and climbed in with him. He pulled Kenny Lee

into his arms, curled his body around, pulled Kenny Lee's head onto his shoulder. "Go to sleep," he whispered.

Kenny Lee thought later that it must have been the Xanax that gave him such a weird dream. He was back at the market. The crowds were hungry, and person after person passed his little table, eating mini-donuts, fried and drizzled with sugar, or bags of kettle corn, or gigantic cookies that Kenny Lee recognized as Big Bill's jumbos, which sold two for five dollars. Kenny Lee was set up three booths from where a giant vat of kettle corn was cooking, and the melting sugar smell hour after hour was making him feel dizzy. This seemed real, just like it had really happened that morning.

Then a dancing clown came down the street, tossing giant cookies like Frisbees into the crowd. Kenny Lee stood up, yelled for the clown to stop throwing cookies, but when he turned, Kenny Lee could see the clown was Julio. Then Julio was throwing cookies at his head, faster and faster, one after the other, and Kenny Lee was running, the cookies chasing after him, lethal flying discs of dough, and Julio was laughing in the background, laughing and slapping his clown leg.

He jerked bolt upright in bed, took a deep gulping breath. Julio was curled up next to him, drowsy and warm and sweet smelling. Kenny Lee looked down at Julio's beautiful face. His chin was already dark with whiskers. Why had he ever thought he could compete with Julio at anything? He had never bested him, never. Julio was always sweet to him. He was a considerate, affectionate lover, a good friend, and the best cook Kenny Lee had ever met. So why was he still trying to compete with him?

It wasn't Julio. Kenny Lee knew that. It was him. It was a character flaw. He scooted back down and let Julio wrap a sleepy arm around him. It was the fault of his mother, Kenny Lee decided. She had raised three sons, had encouraged all of them toward excellence, and since Kenny Lee was the baby of the family, naturally he had always tried and failed to best his older brothers.

She had been, he knew, pleased that he was gay. He suspected she secretly hoped he was interested in being transgendered, since most of her academic work in the Gender Studies Department at Boise State centered around the transgendered

experience. Everyone in the family had very important work that they were passionate about. He was the least accomplished of them all. Even so, the passion for Slow Food burned bright in his heart.

Julio had sold out in order to finance some as yet undisclosed dream. Would it be selling out for Kenny Lee to keep sleeping with Julio, when Julio had sold out? Sort of a guilt by association deal? But nobody else wants you, a small voice in his head reminded him. And if he was being honest with himself, he had felt extremely attached to Julio for a very long time. He suspected he himself fell into the category of fuck-buddy and decent cook, in Julio's world. No one with Julio's many extraordinary accomplishments could possibly be satisfied with a cookie-loser like him. It was important, he thought, not to let Julio know that his feelings went beyond fuck-buddy. Kenny Lee thought of the clown -- Julio in his dream, zinging cookies at his head and laughing. Good God.

So he had tried to compete with Julio and he had failed. And what had Julio done? Given him a Xanax and snuggled up with him. Kenny Lee felt his eyes fill up with tears. Julio was a fucking prince. He was going to make him the best damned meatballs he had ever tasted.

Kenny Lee found an apron in the kitchen, red canvas with a pattern of chickens along the bottom hem, tied the strings around his naked waist. Julio would like that, spaghetti and meatballs in the buff. He rooted around in the kitchen, gathered his ingredients. At least as far as his personal food went, Julio still went for lovely and slow. Spanish garlic, Greek cold pressed olive oil, organic flat leaf Italian parsley. He saw a healthy chunk of bread on the counter, the end of a loaf of Italian bread, and he put that aside for toasting. What about cheese? Parmigiano was the usual, but Julio's fig pastries were still in the back of his mind. He could add a few crumbles of feta, give the meatballs a tiny bit of Greek flavor, make a nice chunky sauce to go with them. Rosemary and feta! Yeah, baby. Maybe he couldn't make cookies worth dick, but nobody could touch his meatballs.

He had been working happily for an hour when Julio woke up and came yawning into the kitchen. "Man, I was really out. My Saturday afternoon naps are the best sleep I get all week." Kenny Lee was cooking meatballs in a frying pan, waited for Julio to notice the red apron strings dangling down his naked ass.

Julio came up behind him, hands slipping under the apron, cradled his waist. Kenny Lee could feel the rough silk against his skin, feel Julio's cock nestle tenderly against his ass. "How are the meatballs?"

"Good," Kenny Lee said. "I'll be done in five minutes, then we can let them drain."

"Do I smell rosemary? Yum."

"I made a pot of coffee. You want a cup?"

Julio moved to the cabinet, took down a cup and filled it up. He leaned against the kitchen table, and Kenny Lee only glanced once at the long length of him, skin so silky, ivory against the black hair on his head, a tangled thatch on his chest, then a lovely intense patch of black in his groin. Was there anything more beautiful in the world than a man's naked body, leaning against a kitchen table? Julio's cock was full and heavy, and Kenny Lee surmised that the red apron was doing its job.

Julio went to the CD player, rifled around in the pile of music. Like all great cooks, Julio kept the decent sound system in the kitchen. "What do you want to listen to?"

"You pick."

"Okay, how about Los Lonely Boys? Or you can shake your ass to Annie Lennox. I know she's your favorite."

"Los Lonely Boys," Kenny Lee said, and Texican rock filled the little kitchen. Julio wrapped an apron around his waist, butt swinging to the music. Kenny Lee thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

They ate spaghetti and meatballs in bed, Julio leaning against the headboard with Kenny Lee's head in his lap. Julio held the bowl, twirled pasta in puttanesca sauce

tenderly around a fork, and Kenny Lee opened his mouth like a baby bird when the fork hovered over his lips.

When the bowl was empty, Julio sighed and set it on the nightstand, slid down until he could take Kenny Lee into his arms. "It's been great to see you again, Kenny Lee." And Kenny Lee wondered if this was his cue to get up and put his jeans on, and make a graceful exit. "I know it was rough for you today, but I sure did enjoy spending some time with you."

"You got work tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I work Sundays so I can get Saturdays off for market. How about you?"

"Yeah, I've got an early shift -- we put on that big breakfast buffet."

"How is it?"

Kenny Lee sighed. "Depressing. I don't see any reason for cold shrimp on the same buffet table as biscuits and sausage gravy, chicken fried steak, and a rasher of bacon. Not to mention a pork roast. What's the matter with people? You can't imagine the fresh mango that is left on that buffet."

"Where my family is from, we have a mango farm. Well, not a farm like the farms here. Just sixteen acres. But when the mangos come in, we're eating mangos from morning till night."

"Where's your family from?"

"Belize."

"No way! Were you born down there?"

Julio shook his head. "I'm a Boise boy. My grandmothers are still down there, though. I used to go down for the summers, run barefoot. You would like it there, Kenny Lee. They live Slow Food. They grow it and pick it, or get what they need from the market. People eat what's in season, and they spend all day cooking, just for one spectacular meal. Then everybody sleeps."

Kenny Lee turned his face into Julio's big chest, let himself taste the warm skin. Salty and sweet. "Sounds like heaven."

Julio spread his fingers through Kenny Lee's hair. "Yeah, you would love it there," he said, almost as if he was talking to himself. "Let's make out."

"Let's make out naked," Kenny Lee said. "Oh, wait, we're already naked. You ready for me to push on? I've been hanging with you for a whole day now."

"Stay," Julio said. He opened his legs, let Kenny Lee slide against his body, then he wrapped him up tight, arms and legs. "We still haven't eaten those strawberries."

Friday Morning

Kenny Lee had an email from bigbillbites asking him if he was ready for market. *You bet, he replied. You making cookies tonight?*

Already done. You want to come over? We can make out.

Let's make out naked. Kenny Lee was in a very good mood. He had done some serious thinking about cookies, taken the previous weekend's blow to his ego and put it away, and Shangri-La, Cookies from Heaven was ready to be reborn. And, he had to admit privately to himself, making out with Julio would keep anybody smiling. The possibility of repeating the previous weekend's lovemaking-and-cooking fest had kept him on happy simmer all week.

Come spend the night. We can go to market together from my place.

Done. I get off about six.

Friday Night

Six thirty found him loading his supplies onto Julio's wheeled cart and bringing them upstairs for safe-keeping. He had invested in a number of big plastic bins, as well as a new secret marketing weapon -- hot chocolate. Julio watched him, looking delighted.

"What are you up to? Do you have a new plan?"

"Yep. Okay, check this out. I'm going to target one small demographic of the cookie eating world -- elderly women. I saw lots of them last week, and most of them eyed my table, but didn't come over. I'm going to offer a free cup of hot chocolate to anyone who buys cookies."

"Hey, sweet idea!"

"And that's not all! I'm giving out recipes with the cookies, all of which have the words "old fashioned" in the title. And each week, I'm going to feature two old fashioned cookies. I'm going with a smaller sized cookie, and each little package is going to have three small cookies inside. What do you think?"

Julio draped an arm around his shoulder. "Man! You may have hit on a winner. What cookies did you make for this week?"

"Peanut butter and snickerdoodles. Plus some sugar cookies shaped like Easter animals -- baby ducks and bunnies. I'm going to write names on those for Easter gifts. I ground the peanuts myself for the peanut butter cookies over at the co-op."

"Wow, Kenny Lee, that sounds way too delicious and way too expensive for the farmer's market." Julio was studying him with a quizzical eye, and Kenny Lee felt his cheeks heat up.

"Okay, well, I'm already so far in the hole, what's a little more?"

Julio's eyebrows flew up at this. "Just don't forget the purpose here is to make money and make cookies. Right? Isn't your purpose to make money?"

"I suppose."

"Bud..." Julio sighed, gave him a little squeeze. "You didn't eat, did you?"

"No. I'm a little bit hungry. For something with whipped cream on top." Kenny Lee felt his cheeks flame at this, and Julio laughed out loud and put his arms around him.

"Just you wait till you see what I've got for supper."

"What? Tell me."

"Banana splits, baby. Hot banana splits."

Kenny Lee sat down at the table in the kitchen, watched Julio cook. The man had the most sensitive hands when he was handling fruit. Kenny Lee thought he saw a strawberry give a wiggle and a giggle when Julio picked it up, and when he sliced into the ripe mango, held the first sliver up to Kenny Lee's mouth, Kenny Lee nearly bit the tips of his juicy sweet fingers off.

He had a couple of boats on the table filled with ice cream -- vanilla bean, it looked like, and piles of fresh fruit on top -- strawberries, mangos, and blueberries. No bananas. Kenny Lee watched with interest. Julio sliced the bananas into a frying pan of melted butter, gave them a quick stir, squeezed a lime over the top, then quickly ladled the hot bananas on top of the other fruit. Then he scooped a spoonful of fresh whipped cream on the top of each, and stuck spoons in the side.

Kenny Lee took the first bite of hot buttery bananas and cold vanilla ice cream, and felt tears leak from his eyes. He blinked at Julio. "Man, I'm on my knees to you. You are a cooking god."

Julio lifted a spoonful and offered it to Kenny Lee. "You gonna stay with me tonight?" His voice sounded wistful.

"You couldn't get me out of here with a crowbar." His voice was thick and sticky around his mouthful of hot banana.

"I bet all your other honeys are going to get jealous, I monopolize your time this way."

Kenny Lee stared a bit longer than was probably attractive. "Julio, I'm not seeing anybody."

"Why not?"

Because every time a thought of you crosses my mind, my cock leaps to attention and a little puffy pink heart goes floating around my head on bluebird wings. He shrugged. "I don't know. I thought I was sort of seeing you."

Julio grinned at him. "Yeah, okay. And I'm sort of seeing you."

"How's work?" The Gamekeeper's Lodge was a fancy men's steak joint.

Julio's face darkened. "Toxic, man. I swear, that place is gonna kill me."

"What's wrong?"

"I hate the bullshit competition. Everyone trying to get in Chef's good graces, and he just sits back and sucks it up like a king on his throne. But," he said, his voice a little cheerful, "since everyone else is so busy kissing ass, I get to take the two busiest nights off so I can go to market with my cookies."

Kenny Lee was starting to feel worried, worried and guilty. "Julio, you don't think I'm being too competitive, starting up another cookie table? I mean, I don't want..."

Julio reached over, kissed him on the mouth, and the kiss was sticky and sweet with bananas and whipped cream. "Cookies will never come between us," he promised.

Kenny Lee nearly licked his bowl clean. He rinsed the dishes and the spoons in the sink, then followed Julio into the bedroom. "I need a shower," Julio said, tugging his t-shirt over his head. "Why don't you come with?"

Julio reached for the waistband of his jeans, flicked open the button and shrugged them down his hips. He tossed them toward the pile of laundry on the floor next to his bed. "I traded eight jumbo cookies for a bar of lemon-geranium soap at market last week."

Kenny Lee was drawn irresistibly to Julio's chest, to the glossy black hair that clustered so thickly between his nipples. He reached forward, took a strawberry nipple into his mouth, and the smell of Julio's skin, the taste of male sweat, nearly made Kenny Lee's knees buckle. His arms went around Julio's waist, then he decided to just let them buckle, what the hell, and on his way down, he slid Julio's boxers to his ankles.

Kenny Lee loved Julio's hair. It was a patch of live wire, it quivered and stood at attention when he buried his face in it and smelled that sinful rich male smell that seemed to bloom between Julio's legs.

Julio made a noise deep in his throat, some rumble of pleasure that had Kenny Lee smiling and lifting his heavy cock. He slid the foreskin back, kissed the tender head peeking out. Julio closed his eyes, reached tentative hands down and moved his fingers through Kenny Lee's hair. "Baby, that feels so good."

The cock between his lips swelled, hardened, and he took its long length between his teeth, his tongue busy on the sensitive underside. He clutched two handfuls of warm, tight ass, felt the muscles under his hands clench and bunch when Julio thrust into his mouth. His hands were gentle on Kenny Lee's head, his thighs trembling, and when he started to come, he lifted to his toes, muscles tight, rhythmic spasms in his ass. Then he sighed, his voice tender, "Oh, Kenny Lee."

Julio tugged him close on the tangled sheets. Their toes touched, and Julio pulled one of Kenny Lee's legs between his thighs. Kenny Lee felt the peculiar tenderness of another cock beside his own, nestled in his groin. Julio wrapped an arm around Kenny Lee's waist, and they shared the pillow, nose to nose, mouths close enough to kiss. Kenny Lee decided to bring up a delicate subject. "Julio, are you okay? You aren't sick, are you?"

Julio grinned. "No, not unless you count sick in the head."

Kenny Lee didn't laugh back at him. "It's not my business, but it seems... you've got shadows in your eyes. Like you aren't really happy but you're pretending. Is everything okay?"

Julio sighed, rolled onto his back and tugged a handful of his glossy black hair in his fist. "Shadows in my eyes." He rolled back over, looked at Kenny Lee.

"Don't be mad, Julio. I was just concerned. I mean, you hate your job. It's the second cooking job you've had since school. You don't seem all that keen on Big Bill's Cookies, either, except as a way to make money. I was wondering if you don't really want to be a cook anymore?"

Julio sighed again, closed his eyes. "I'm taking an antidepressant. I went on it about four months ago. It's helping some. That's what I meant about being sick in the head, but I suppose it isn't really a joke. But I don't really think I'm depressed. I think I'm looking for the life I'm meant to live. I don't know how to explain it."

"What are you looking for that you haven't found?"

"I don't know, Kenny Lee." Julio ran his hand down Kenny Lee's chest, rested it warmly over his belly button. "Do you know what you're looking for?"

"I dream about this, sometimes," Kenny Lee said. "A kitchen garden. Where I can grow lots and lots of fresh greens, fresh herbs, and I'll be out in the garden, picking, and I'll bring them into the kitchen, and start cooking." He rolled over, buried his face in Julio's shoulder. "There's someone else in the kitchen already, and we cook together. Mostly I think it's you. For some reason, it's always early summer."

"What does the kitchen look like?"

"Old brick floor, very light -- big windows with white trim, and the walls are painted sunshine yellow."

"That sounds like a wonderful kitchen. I'm glad I'm there cooking with you. Let's make salads, okay? Maybe if there're some white beans ready in the garden, you could cook those. I'll roast a little piece of pork with mango jam. We'll serve lunch, only ten or twelve people, and we'll eat the leftovers and take a siesta. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

Kenny Lee stared at the ceiling. He admitted to himself that he felt a sense of relief that Julio was depressed. Like, if he wasn't perfect, it made more sense he would

be interested in hanging out with a cookie-loser like him. If Julio was perfect, happy, gorgeous, a cooking god, why would he be wrapped up in a down comforter with Kenny Lee? He wouldn't be. And maybe when he wasn't depressed anymore, he wouldn't be. Kenny Lee decided he was a selfish creep to want Julio to remain depressed.

He rolled over, pressed his face into Julio's sweaty warm neck, and confessed.

"Say what?" Julio was shocked. "You're happy I'm depressed because..."

"Yeah, I know. You ought to kick my sorry ass right out of here. Listen, Julio..."

"Kenny Lee, you've got the self-esteem of a piece of peanut brittle."

Market Day

Kenny Lee was excited to try out his new cookie marketing plan. He showed Julio his small cookies in their waxed paper envelopes at breakfast. "Very elegant! If I was an elderly woman looking for cookies, I'd be all over you. Hey, save a couple of cookies for us later, okay?"

"If last week was any example, leftovers won't be a problem. I ate cookies all week. I thought I would have a seizure if I tasted rose ganache one more time."

"It's an acquired taste," Julio agreed. "Maybe best eaten in the bedroom."

Kenny Lee thought about this. Maybe if his plan to market old-fashioned cookies to elderly women failed, he could develop a line of erotic cookies, sell penis-shaped cookies to the sex-mad crowd. Would the Boise cops roust him for obscene cookies? Could he, perhaps, figure out a way a bit of whipped cream could squirt out of the head of the penis-cookie? He decided to think about that idea for the time being.

The weather was better today, sunshiny and cool, with just a little breeze. Julio kissed him, dropped the plastic bins of cookies off at his table, and rolled his cart on down Market Street. Kenny Lee set his table up quickly, with stacks of recipes and a big sample plate. His first elderly woman approached before the echoes of the starting bell had faded away.

She had a seriously battered shopping bag already holding some rainbow Swiss chard. She tasted the peanut butter and snickerdoodles, complimented him on the fresh peanut flavor, and bought a small bag. "Do you have any cookies for diabetics?"

Kenny Lee shook his head. He hadn't realized that there were cookies for diabetics.

"I'll bring you a recipe next week," she promised. "You make them with Splenda and freshly ground peanut butter."

After she had gone, Kenny Lee waved a kid over, wrote a note to Julio and sent the kid down to Big Bill's with a cookie for payment. *I sold a cookie!!!*

The note came back, and this time the kid held a giant chocolate chip in his hand. *Yippee! Let's celebrate!*

"I can take another note back down," the kid said.

"Haven't you had enough?"

"Your cookies are pretty small," the kid observed, and Kenny Lee shooed him away.

By the end of the day, Kenny Lee had sold thirty-eight packages of cookies, had put about that same number on the sample plate, and had twelve offers of recipes and requests for diabetic cookies. After the closing bell, he wandered down to Big Bill's. "I think there's an epidemic in this country," he said. "Maybe diabetes is a bigger deal than I realized."

"Good to know, if you're going to concentrate on that demographic," Julio said. "I think depression is an epidemic, too. Did you save me some snickerdoodles?"

"Plenty."

"Good. I'm going to show you how good cookies and cream are together."

"What kind of cream?"

Julio just stared at him, his eyes smiling, and Kenny Lee felt a blush start about his belly button, work its way up. Julio winked. "I'm gonna be packed and cleaned up in fifteen minutes."

"Oh! Right. Yeah, me, too."

Saturday Night

Kenny Lee was contemplating every possible meaning of the phrase “prisoner of desire.” Julio had restrained his hands, tied them to the headboard. His feet were free, but he had them planted firmly on the mattress. The object of the game, Julio had explained, was to see who could balance the cookie the longest, and this required both concentration and stillness.

He had a snickerdoodle on the tip of his straining cock, and Julio was licking his way up the inside of Kenny Lee’s thigh. Every time Julio’s warm and wet tongue tickled him a bit higher, his cock gave a lurch of excitement, and the cookie teetered on the brink. As did he, Kenny Lee thought. Julio shoved his knees apart, nuzzled under his balls. One long swipe with his tongue, up across his balls, up the length of his cock. Then Julio stalled there, nibbling just centimeters from the cookie, from the head of his cock.

Kenny Lee lost it, and the snickerdoodle went flying, and Julio gobbled up the head of his cock just as he let loose. The cookie landed on the pillow next to his head, but Julio reached up and grabbed it. “Mine,” he said.

Wednesday after Work

Kenny Lee found himself getting more and more depressed the longer he looked into the issue of diabetic cookies and diabetes in general. Because it wasn't just diabetes, but high blood pressure, heart disease, colon cancer, obesity, and food was responsible for it all. Somehow food had become the enemy, and was killing Americans! The entire diet cookie industry, with its Splenda for sweetening and strange fat substitutes, made him feel like a killer in an apron and a toque. Were people really eating these bizarre chemical cookies so they could eat a dozen of them, rather than just eating one decent homemade cookie made with butter and sugar and salt? What in God's name was wrong with people?

He went to the grocery store, studied the diet aisle, looked at the number of diet cookies, one hundred calories per small bag, then with trembling heart turned a box over and studied the ingredient list. He put it back on the shelf, trying hard not to throw up. He decided to go find Julio.

He called from outside the Idaho Building, and Julio opened his window and stuck his head out. His hair was wet and tangled from the shower, and he waved Kenny Lee in. He was wearing a towel around his waist and holding a glass of orange juice, and he handed Kenny Lee the glass and went back into the kitchen for another. Kenny Lee sniffed the juice. Orange and mango, with a healthy slug of tequila. He took a sip, nearly moaned. Orange and mango, fresh squeezed, a bit of lime juice, a spoonful of unrefined cane sugar, and tequila. Enough sea salt to rock his blood pressure into the outer atmosphere. Julio waved a bottle of Patron Silver at him. "Drink up, Kenny Lee. I made enough juice we can have two each."

Kenny Lee realized, his chest filling with delight, that Julio was tanked, and determined to join him in this happy state as soon as possible.

They ended up in Julio's bed, lying among the tangled sheets and pillows. Julio brought the bottle of Patron when they ran out of juice, and Kenny Lee scooted over until his head was in Julio's lap. "What is happening to food in America?" He nearly whimpered when Julio leaned over and kissed him with a salty tongue.

"I've got several theories," Julio said, leaning back against the headboard and gazing bleary-eyed at the ceiling. "Greed. Sloth. Gluttony."

"So what's the theory?"

"That's the theory! We've gone soft and lazy, and we're all greedy pigs. Believe me, if you saw the number of men putting away the Cattle Baron's Special every night, you would agree."

"I already agree! Is this why people are eating bullshit cookies made out of chemicals and ignoring decent homemade old fashioned peanut-butters?"

"Hey, my cookies aren't made out of bullshit or chemicals! Well, except the butter-flavored Crisco. It keeps them soft longer."

"No, no, no. Not you, Julio!" Kenny Lee rolled over, tried to wrap his arms around Julio's waist. "I went to the store, so I could see the diabetic cookies, and you just would not believe..." He trailed off, let his head droop back into Julio's lap. "Fuck me. America is dying! Of diabetes and depression. Damn! That's a lot of D's."

"You come with me to Belize, Kenny Lee. We'll go see my family. Cook and eat all day, and sleep in the afternoon, and stay up late drinking tequila. If they have diabetes down there, people are too poor to know about it."

"Can I really come? I bet you want somebody you love to come with you. I know I'm just a fuck-buddy."

"You're not just a fuck-buddy. Who told you that? I want you to come! Let's go and never come back! Come on, Kenny Lee. Let's do it! Sleep together in a rope hammock strung between two mango trees. Make out naked all night long."

"What about the cookies?"

"Screw the cookies! Boise doesn't appreciate Shangri-La, Cookies from Heaven, Kenny Lee. And Boise doesn't appreciate me. We're artists! I'm so depressed. These

pills aren't doing dick. Hey, you want to know a secret?" Julio leaned down until his lips were warm and wet against Kenny Lee's ear. "I made peach pies, made the pie crust with butter and cold lard. It was so fucking good, grown men were weeping into their plates! I know how to use butter and lard, Kenny Lee!"

They stared into each other's eyes, and the train of their conversation seemed to chug off into the night and disappear.

"So can I come to Belize with you?"

"Yes! I want you to come. I've got my ticket already. Cookie money. I'm leaving the Prozac behind. Trying the Margaritaville cure. Can you get seven hundred dollars together?"

Kenny Lee chewed on his bottom lip. "Seven hundred. I'll try, Julio. No, I'll do it! I don't know how -- I'm so in the hole already with these fucking cookies that nobody will eat, I can't hardly give them away..." And he was weeping, Julio's strong arms around him, his cheek nestled into thick warm chest hair.

Julio's face was very solemn. "Kenny Lee, you make the best old fashioned peanut butter and snickerdoodles I've ever eaten, bar none. I swear, buddy. Figure out how to come with me, Kenny Lee. I'll show you a place where Slow Food lives."

Thursday Morning

Kenny Lee woke with a strange mix of diabetic cookies, Belize, mango juice, and something about cold lard floating around in his head. He lay very still, hoping his tangled thoughts would become a bit less incoherent. But he could still hear Julio, clear through the tangle, *I'm so depressed*. Julio walked into the bedroom carrying a cup of coffee. He placed each foot carefully on the ground, as if the floor was the deck of a ship fighting massive swells.

"You remember last night you said you would go to Belize with me?"

"Yes." Kenny Lee stared at the ceiling, sure he had caught it moving just a bit.

"I need to tell you something. Like the reason I was home from work last night. I quit, Kenny Lee. Told Chef to shove his day-old mashed potatoes up his ying yang. I was making soup, leek and potato soup, and he tried to get me to use the day-old leftover mashed potatoes!"

Kenny Lee tried to sit up. "Are you kidding me? This is Idaho! For crying out loud, Idaho has got plenty of fresh potatoes! What kind of a cheap ass would use leftover potatoes in Boise, Idaho?"

"The weird part was, I was getting happier and happier, the madder he got, because I knew he was giving me a reason to leave. Like I was just waiting for something, anything, any reason I could pack up and hit the road. I know I should have told you about Belize before now. I mean, it's not just wishful thinking with me. I'm going to do it. I've got a ticket. I'm gonna try something radically different, you know? And it may not work. I don't want... If it doesn't work, and I fail miserably, I don't want to take anybody else down with me."

Kenny Lee thought about this. "Seven hundred dollars?"

"That's for a round trip ticket. Mine only cost five hundred."

Kenny Lee thought some more. "You aren't coming back."

"Nope."

"I'll get the money."

"Kenny Lee, you don't have to come."

Friday Night

Kenny Lee wasn't sure if running away to Belize was the best way to cure Julio's depression. But what did he know? Maybe tropical sun, warm water, Slow Food, and quiet nights, and Julio would be dumping his antidepressants into the salty water of the Caribbean. Maybe it didn't matter. If Julio was depressed in Boise maybe he would be depressed in Belize. Kenny Lee didn't know anything about depression. What he did know was that he wanted to be making snickerdoodles for Julio when they were eighty. So he needed a plan to come up with a quick plane ticket.

He had a strange floaty feeling, like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff, and the chalk was crumbling under his feet. He didn't know if he was about to fly, or if he was shortly going to be tumbling to his death on the rocks below. He was going to try really hard to fly. He refused to allow thoughts of Icarus into his head.

"I explained to my mother that my cooking foundation, the Slow Food movement, was crumbling under the weight of diabetes in America." Kenny Lee sighed.

"What did she say?"

"She said I sounded like an idiot."

"Huh. Did you tell her about Belize?"

"I think I'm going to wait and send her a postcard once we get there."

"Maybe that's a good idea. Last market for me," Julio said. "I haven't even made cookies yet. If you stay, you'll be the only cookie vendor. You can take over Big Bill's Chocolate McChip franchise if you want to rake in the bucks."

Kenny Lee hauled his plastic bins of cookies into the elevator. "I gave notice at work. This is the last market for me, too."

Julio stared down at the floor. "I can't promise you anything, Kenny Lee."

"I'm coming. And I figured out how to get the plane ticket. But you're going to have to help."

* * *

They were curled up together. Kenny Lee had been thinking about depression. "Julio, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, baby."

"Do you feel depressed right now?"

Julio stretched, his toes curling, then he tightened his arms around Kenny Lee. "This is what I feel right now. I'm warm and sticky, and my cock has this sweet little ache. You smell like strawberries. I feel like the world outside this bed, outside this room, doesn't exist. The only thing that's real is this minute, this bed, you and me." He leaned over, nuzzled Kenny Lee's neck. "No, I'm not depressed. This feels like the most perfect moment, you know? And I think it's going to last forever."

Last Saturday Market

Julio lay amid the tangled sheets, shaking his head. "Forget about it."

"Come on, Julio. It's a sulu. You'll look great."

"Mr. Sulu would never wear a skirt."

"It's not a skirt. It's a sulu! And Mr. Sulu would look hot in this." Kenny Lee shook the length of fabric, black rayon plastered with fuchsia hibiscus. "All the men in Fiji wear these with t-shirts. See, I got you a black t-shirt to match."

"What does wearing a skirt like the men in Fiji have to do with us running off to Belize?"

Julio was gorgeous, long legs splayed out in the sheets, black hair sticking up in every direction, lethal chin stubble, a cranky look on his face.

Kenny Lee sat down on the side of the bed. "Julio, I had a revelation."

"Under the influence of Patron Silver?"

"No! Okay, check this out. Shangri-La, Cookies from Heaven has been reborn!"

"You mean reincarnated?" Julio had a smart-ass smirk on his face.

Kenny Lee stood up, wrapped his own sulu around his waist and tied it. His was black with gold flowers. "Shangri-La, Cookies from Paradise! Everybody wants to run away to Belize, Julio. That's what I figured out. We don't need to sell cookies. We need to sell the dream!"

Julio raised both hands, ran his fingers through his black hair and scratched absently at his scalp. Kenny Lee took the opportunity to stare at the gorgeous silky black thatch of hair on Julio's head, on his chest, on his belly, and nestled around his long, thick cock. He unfurled the sulu, let the silky fabric float down and cover Julio, then he dove underneath. Julio giggled, wrapped his legs around Kenny Lee's head. Kenny Lee sucked down that spicy cock. "Oh, my gosh! You're ticklish!"

Julio clutched Kenny Lee's head, thrust up into his mouth. He was mumbling something, fingers stroking tenderly. Then the muscles in his thighs went rigid, and his hands tightened on Kenny Lee's head. When Kenny Lee snuggled up to him, kissed his ears, his neck, his cheeks, he tasted salt.

* * *

Kenny Lee raised the banner over Big Bill's Cookies. BELIZE OR BUST! Julio was attracting a good bit of attention in his sulu and matching tight t-shirt, his feet in pink flip-flops. His usual jumbo sugar cookies, chocolate chips and oatmeal raisin had been replaced with Kenny Lee's tropical delights. Coconut crème puffs, bite-sized pineapple pastries, tiny Key Lime tarts. Kenny Lee moved among the crowds, holding trays of cookies, and his little apron pockets were soon heavy with merrily clinking coins. He loved wearing the sulu, loved the feel of silky rayon over his hips, and he found his gait was developing a bit of an elegant sway. By mid-morning, the sound system was playing a merry ukulele tune, and when the waitresses from the Plaza Grill began an impromptu hula, the crowd swayed along, a happy conga-line, people eating cookies and dreaming of paradise.

Belize

A small boy with black hair rode his bike up to the back door. "Uncle Julio!"

"Hey, pipsqueak, what have you brought me today?"

"I'm no pipsqueak!" The boy gave a running lunge, wrapped his skinny arms around Julio's waist and tried to take him down in an NFL tackle. Since Julio and Kenny Lee had settled in the little village of Black Kettle, the kids were beginning to pick up the rudiments of American slang and Green Bay Packers football.

"Mama sent you a big pork roast," the boy said, racing back to his bike and wrestling a heavy, paper-wrapped bundle from the basket.

"Perfect! You want to take some mangos home? Kenny Lee is in the garden right now."

"I got plenty of mangos at home. How about some cookies?"

Kenny Lee pushed open the screen door and set a basket of mangos down on the kitchen table. "And what kind of cookie would you like?"

"Do you have any of those Turkish fig pastries?"

"I can probably find one. Do you remember where Turkey is?"

"Asia Minor, Kenny Lee. But the food has a Mediterranean influence."

"Good boy." Kenny Lee took the lid off the cookie jar, handed over the treat. "Take some lemon cookies to your sisters, okay?"

"They like the ones with flowers on top!" The boy was hopping from one foot to the other with excitement.

"Perfect! I have lemon crisps with candied lavender."

"That's just for girls," the boy said. "Boys don't eat cookies with flowers."

Kenny Lee watched him race out of the kitchen. He looked at Julio, leaning against the kitchen counter, drinking a cup of coffee. "I bet those cookies don't make it home."

"How do the mangos look?"

"Ripe. I'm going to start the jam today."

Julio smiled at him, sweetness and pleasure lighting up his beautiful face. "Hey. Come on over here before you start peeling mangos." He set the coffee cup down, opened his arms. Kenny Lee fit perfectly, snuggled up to Julio's big chest. "Did I tell you today thanks for coming with me?"

"You tell me every day."

The bright morning sunshine was coming in through the open kitchen windows. The walls were painted yellow, and the floor was soft red brick. The kitchen table was a battered pine plank, covered with mangos, bunches of mint and rosemary, lemons from the lemon tree by the back door.

"One more minute," Kenny Lee said, his arms around Julio's waist, nose pressed against his neck. "One more minute and I'll get to work."

Julio wrapped his arms around Kenny Lee, pulled him in tight. "We've got time."

Sarah Black

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