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The Garden of Earthly Delights

Thir teen

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Thanks to MsJess0125 for inspiring this story. Here it is, MsJess, as requested. Grateful thanks also to Dan for his very kind editorial services and advice on all things culinary

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Introduction

Some five years back as I was just starting out writing romances, I chanced upon a certain chat area on a certain erotica forum where readers discussed stories they'd like to see. One post in particular caught my eye. It was posted by MsJesso125, a foodie with a certificate in pastry arts, who was hoping some aspiring writer might create a story for her of a girl seducing a gent with gourmet cooking.

Intrigued, I e-mailed Ms. Jess, letting her know that I wanted to take a stab at this. She invited me to do my best and sat down at my literary table in anticipation. Little did Ms. Jess know how fanatical I was on the topic of a culinary romance. With editorial help from a restaurant Chef named Dan, I cooked up a six-course story (with snacks) in homage to the love potion that is fine dining.

MissJesso125, I am pleased to say, was delighted with the feast. I hope, readers, that you too, will find it in every way as satisfying. *Bon Appetit*!

FOOD AND COOKING TERMS

Aioli: A garlicky mayonnaise sauce made with olive oil, egg, garlic and sometimes Dijon mustard and/or herbs.

Amuse-bouche: A single-bite, "surprise" hors d'oeuvres, compliments of the chef and usually not on the menu.

Boysenberry Cocktail: A cocktail that often includes a shot of citrus juice (lemon, orange or tangerine), mashed boysenberries, sugar (optional) and either vodka, rum or sparkling wine. There is no one recipe for boysenberry cocktails and no one style. Vodka is usually used for martini style while sparkling wine is often used for mimosa style.

Brie: A rich and soft white cheese.

Brulée: A silky custard topped with a thin layer of caramelized sugar. The sugar is sprinkled on top then torched—literally burned with a hand torch—to form a brittle, crunchy cover.

Chiffonade: Leafy vegetables or herbs sliced into thin strips. Sometimes these strips are used as a "nest" for other ingredients and sometimes they're strewn like confetti over a dish so that the diner gets hints of their flavor.

Chilies Rellenos: A Mexican dish where green chili peppers (usually mild ones) are roasted, skinned, seeded and stuffed with cheese. They are then dipped into an egg batter and pan fried in oil.

Coffee Press: A carafe for coffee. Instead of brewing the coffee by pouring hot water through grounds and a paper filter into a pot, hot water is mixed with coffee grounds in the press. A fine, metal sieve on the end of a plunger is pressed down, capturing the grounds at the bottom and leaving the filtered coffee to be poured out.

Compote: Fruit stewed or simmered in syrup. While similar to jam, the fruit isn't broken down into a jelly, but, rather, left whole or in large pieces.

Fennel: A celery-like vegetable that has a very mild licorice flavor. It grows in Mediterranean climates and is often featured in Mediterranean cuisine.

Gazpacho: A cold soup usually made of uncooked ingredients.

Green Zebra Tomatoes: A dark green tomato with yellow streaks and a flavor that is more tart than red tomatoes.

Heirloom vegetables: Vegetables commonly grown in earlier times, but not in modern agriculture. Such vegetables have odd shapes, vibrant colors, and deeper, richer flavors.

Kosher Salt: Salt with granules that are larger than common table salt. Kosher salt is less likely to completely dissolve when added to food, thus giving the food salty accents.

Mandoline: A device that consists of an angled "slide" fitted with a blade at one end. Vegetables are pushed over this blade creating uniformly thin slices

Merlot: A red wine.

Palate Cleanser: A dish (usually a sorbet) served between two courses. Its purpose is to "cleanse" the tongue of the favors of a prior dish so that the next dish can be better tasted and enjoyed.

Ramekins: A porcelain baking dish about three to five inches wide used in various ways throughout the kitchen. They can be used to make individual custards, casseroles or cakes. In addition, they are used to hold small ingredients like raisins or spices, or portions like a side order of fruit salad.

Tarragon: An herb with a sweet flavor.

Tarte tatin: A fruit pie made by caramelizing the fruit in a pan with sugar, before covering the caramelized fruit with a crust. After it is baked, it is inverted. It is similar to an upside down cake only with a pie crust instead of cake.

Vinaigrette: A dressing, usually for salad, that consists of a 3-to-1 oil-to-vinegar ratio. It can include other ingredients such as garlic, herbs or spices, but remains primarily an oil and vinegar mix.

RESTAURANT TERMS

Executive Chef: The chef who is the boss in the kitchen and responsible for creating the menu and dictating the method for preparing and presenting the food.

Sous-Chef: Second in command in the kitchen. He/she issues orders when the Executive Chef can't and ensures that everything is as the chef wants it.

Line Cooks: Those cooks who do the cooking in the kitchen according to the Executive or S-Chef's orders. They are sometimes ranked as First Cook, Second Cook, etc.

Californian **Cuisine:** cuisine that melds (fuses) together different cuisines from around the world and emphasizes the use of local and seasonal ingredients. Classic California Cuisine would not, for example, use frozen or imported vegetables, but rather would have local farms deliver them Restaurants that specialize in this cuisine have changing menus depending on what produce is in season. Reasonably sized portions. light sauces and shorter cooking times are also used to highlight the natural flavors of the food.

Order of courses: The order in which the dishes of a prefixe menu are served, such as whether the salad course is served near the beginning of the meal or near the end. These vary according to the number of dishes and the traditions of the cuisine. A French five-course dinner, for example, will have a different order than a Middle-Eastern menu. The order offered as chapter headings in this story are those commonly found on the pre-fixe menus of Californian cuisine restaurants.

Pre-fixe Menu: A series of courses—such as appetizer, main course and dessert—offered by the restaurant for a single fixed price as compared to "a la carte" menus where the diner can pick what courses they like, but must pay for each course.

Signature Dishes: Dishes that are the specialty of a restaurant or a chef.

Toque (Toque Blanche): The tall, white, mushroom-shaped hat historically worn by chefs. It isn't often worn by modern chefs.

CHAPTER ONE

AMUSE-BOUCHE

She discovered the garden by accident. It was nearly midnight on a mid-summer's evening, but Rosemary, unable to rest or sleep, had decided to take her own private tour of the quiet, coastal town of San Elisa. There wasn't much by way of streetlights, and her mocha skin made her nearly invisible as she wandered past the old homes and silent businesses, all dark and put to bed for the night. At last, she came to the two-story, craftsman-style restaurant on the outskirts.

Rosemary had been too preoccupied to get a good look at it earlier that day, so she examined it carefully now. She couldn't tell for sure but it looked like a new coat of paint had been added since she'd last been here, making the walls more cream and the accents more red. Otherwise it looked very much as she remembered it.

There were lights on, likely the staff still cleaning up from all the cooking they'd done for the reception. It'd been held in the downstairs dining area. Rosemary remembered seeing a great deal of food on a buffet table, and some relative had brought over a plate for her, but she hadn't had the stomach to try any. What

she had really wanted to do was explore the restaurant, but she'd found it impossible to get away. Now she'd gotten away, and could peer and examine to her heart's content.

Avoiding the front entrance, she slipped around to the back gate. It was unlocked and she stepped through easily. Her intent was to give it a quick look, but then she got a glimpse of the generous yard and her mouth dropped open. When she'd last visited some five years ago there'd only been a few outdoor tables and some trees. Now there was a garden, and not just any run of the mill garden. This was a *real* garden with vegetable plots, fruit trees and herbs.

Mesmerized, Rosemary walked down one of the sandy paths illuminated by a string of hanging solar lanterns. She walked past tomatoes, squash, carrots and stalks of corn, inhaled the smell of fresh strawberries, and touched the branches of plum and cherry trees. What amazed her most was the rich diversity crowded into the yard. There were three varieties of raspberries, several kinds of beets, lettuces and asparagus. From fence to fence was a culinary box of crayons, packed tight with every color of earth's rainbow.

Stone benches offered spots for a gardener to rest and admire their work, and, in one secluded corner, a Moroccan-style tent complete with mosquito netting and outdoor furniture provided a cozy retreat. It wasn't the cheap aluminum and plastic kind of furnishings either; these were made of fine wood and covered with thick, white cushions.

Watching as the flutter of moths circled the lights, Rosemary could imagine herself enjoying this spot. This place was perfect for indulging in a glass of wine and a siesta on a lazy summer afternoon. Surrounded by such glorious bounty, Rosemary didn't realize she was no longer alone until she heard a voice.

"Hello?" The call came from the direction of the restaurant.

She heard footsteps hurrying towards her and spun, her heart thumping with fear even though she knew the man was probably a busboy who'd been cleaning and locking up.

"Excuse me," he said, coming up. He sounded annoyed. "But we're closed and no one's allowed back here."

"Oh, it's all right," Rosemary assured him, "I'm..."

He stepped into the hazy lantern light, and Rosemary felt her words vanish and the air whoosh out from between her lips. The man before her was...luscious. His boyish face was white as sweet cream with a hint of stubble black as the tousled hair on his head. Under a white tee was a body long and

firm with strong shoulders. Her eyes drifted down his baggy pants to a pair of bony feet in flip-flops, before making their way back up again.

"We should be open again in a week or two," he said, gazing at her with large, doleful eyes. Their color was hard to make out. Green maybe? They looked lost, devastated even, belying his angry tone. Rosemary felt herself sinking into those eyes.

"Sorry," the man suddenly added, his gaze finally dropping and releasing Rosemary, "I didn't mean...I suppose you...came here for the funeral?"

She raised her brows at that and barely kept herself from saying "Ya think?"

The town, located some ninety minutes north of San Francisco, was overwhelmingly white. The few people of color who lived here were pretty much known on sight. That had included one Daphne Davis, owner of Earthly Delights Restaurant up until her death just last week. The funeral, which had taken place that afternoon, had brought dozens of Daphne's dark skinned relatives to town. They were all crowded into the two local bed-and-breakfasts—herself included.

"Yeah," Rosemary affirmed the obvious. The young man flushed. He looked familiar now that she thought about it. Not from the reception. She was quite sure she hadn't seen him there. The funeral.

That's where she'd seen him, but out of all the people who'd been there, the whole town included, why would she recall him in particular?

"I guess I can understand," he remarked, "Coming here to remember Chef Davis. It was like the restaurant was her temple, and these its sacred grounds. Chef always said that to create really fine cuisine, you had to have ingredients that were absolutely fresh and in season."

He had his hands deep in his pockets, and his gaze was distant, as if she hardly mattered. "Gardening out here was a little like praying." He reflected and drew in an unsteady breath. "You can come back in the morning if you want to—you and anyone else. I'll be happy to let you walk around then."

"Thanks so much," Rosemary couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She considered arguing, but decided there was really no point to it. It was late, and she really ought to be getting back. The man walked behind her as she made for the gate, more like a security guard ejecting a thief than a gentlemanly escort. She heard him lock the gate at her back as she made her way to the empty street. The air smelled of sage and sea spray, and she could hear the crickets chirruping in the grass.

Rosemary was halfway to the bed-and-breakfast when she paused, finally remembering the young man.

He'd sat near the front of the church at the funeral, clutching a small bouquet of wild flowers in his hands. Tears had run down his face through the entire service. She'd noticed even then how large and sad those eyes were; their color the blue-green of fresh herbs. At the gravesite, after the family members had tossed their handfuls of earth, he'd come forward and dropped in his bouquet. Rosemary remembered seeing him again as she was leaving with her cousins. He'd been seated on a bench, head in hands, weeping.

CHAPTER TWO

APPETIZERS

Morning sunlight pierced the kitchen like a knife. Jake blinked against it as he rinsed the lemons, peaches, oranges, avocados and plums he'd just picked. There might not be any point to it, but it was something he and Chef had done every morning for the last three-and-a-half years: harvest the produce, clean it, and tuck it away in the walk-in refrigerator.

Doing it alone...hurt. He knew however, what Chef would've said. "If it's ready, then bring it on in. Don't leave it out there to rot. We can always find some way to use it." And she did. If a couple of apricots was all that was left on the tree, Chef Davis would peel and puree them with honey until she had a mouth-watering glaze for the pork roast she planned on cooking over an open fire.

That had been Chef's genius. She could transform anything she found into something worthwhile—even him. Gazing out the kitchen's bay window, Jake fondly recalled one bewildering dawn he'd spent following after Chef Davis with a large, empty picnic basket. A small brown woman with a smattering of gray in her 'fro, Chef had led them at a breathless pace to the grassy hillside above the

seashore. Wielding a box cutter that had Jake fearing for her safety, she'd harvested so much wild fennel there was no closing up the basket.

"Hurry it up, Jake!" she'd urged him as they hiked on home, "Time to get cookin!" For the next three days the evening menu had included a fennel salad, a savory fennel fish stew, and roasted fennel with mushrooms and onions. All of it was freshly made and delicious.

That had been before the garden, and long before Chef Davis had slowed down due to a weakening heart she'd never told anyone about. Jake felt tears welling in his eyes and blinked them back as he set the last lemon in its bowl. There!—It was ready to go. That is, if they ever re-opened.

"Hello!" Penny, one of the cooks, called out, in conjunction with the front door opening. She came up the stairs a moment later, accompanied by Alfonzo. They crossed through the wood paneled dining area and into the open kitchen.

"Mr. Jake," Alfonzo, who was one of the waiters, took a moment to grip his hand.

"Judgment day," Penny observed and gave him a hug before vanishing with Alfonzo to change.

"Yeah," Jake sighed. He heard the front door open and shut again as elderly Frank, the busboy, came up the stairs, nodding as he passed. Right behind him was the tall, cinnamon-haired waitress, Tina, who paused to give him a quick kiss. And finally, freckled Mark, their second cook, who stopped to offer a Roman salute.

"We who are about to die—" Mark began, but Jake waved him off. He loved the bastard, but he wasn't in the mood for any clowning.

Jake checked the clock, it was almost eight. His stomach twisted and turned and he set to polishing the already immaculate granite counters and stainless steel sinks. The kitchen was completely open to the dining area, like a stage on which the cooks could entertain. That had been very important to Chef.

"Keeps us honest," she'd once remarked with a dimpled smile. "And we can see right away how much folk are enjoying our food."

The distinct sound of the front door opening along with Liz's voice brought Jake back. "The main dining area and kitchen are on the second floor. We reserve the downstairs for special events," the hostess was anxiously explaining, "Which you, um, probably know from yesterday."

"And from when I visited years back," a female voice remarked dryly.

"I'm sorry, that was stupid of me."

Jake heard their steps on the stair. "They're here," he called nervously to the others, and wiped damp palms down the back of his chef's trousers.

Mark and Penny appeared, dressed like Jake in white cooking jackets, checkered trousers and comfortable clog shoes. Tina, Frank and Alfonzo had on black shirts, pants and waiter aprons. Jake found himself glancing over them, proud of how presentable they all were—his co-workers and second family.

"Our only problem right now," Liz was saying while coming up the stairs, "is that the bakery where we get our breads and desserts is going out of business."

"That'll be someone else's problem," the other voice was pert.

Crap. Jake straightened. She wasn't even going to give them a fucking chance! Wait. That voice...is that...no, it couldn't be—

Finally, they appeared at the top of the stairs, blond Liz first, her face stressed, and behind her a young woman in a gauzy, plum-colored sundress. The first thing that struck Jake was that she didn't look like her mother. Instead of being heavy in the hips, she was ample on top. In fact, thanks to the tight bodice, her cleavage was quite distractingly evident. Her face was different as well. Chef Davis's had been all angles, which she'd attributed to her Apache great-

grandmother, and her eyes had been hazel. This young woman had a beautifully smooth oval face and thick-lashed eyes black as coffee.

The flicker of those lashes sent a shiver down his spine. All she seemed to share with her mother was a tight afro, blacker than her mother's and stylishly curled—and the beautiful, burnt sugar brown of her skin.

She scanned each of them with those impenetrable eyes, before finally stopping on Jake. He swallowed hard. Recalling what he'd said to her last night in the garden and how, haughtily, he'd informed her that she could come back in the morning if she liked, he felt his face flush.

Fuck me, he thought. I said that to Daphne's daughter!

"This is our crew," Liz was already guiding the young lady down the line, from busboy Frank on up. Jake tried not to fidget as Chef's daughter politely shook hands with each one, accepting their words of condolences. She seemed remarkably collected, her responses kind but cool.

"And this," Liz predictably ended at him, "Is our sous-chef, Jake Cosgrove."

"Mr. Cosgrove." Was that a hint of amusement in those black eyes?

"Ms. Davis," he murmured back. "Your mother spoke of you."

"Not very often, I imagine," she said.

He couldn't tell if that was a wry remark based on their interaction last night or a bitter observation. Perhaps both? The truth was that Chef hadn't talked much about her daughter.

"Thank you for coming in this morning," she went on to them all. "First, I'd like to express my gratitude for yesterday's buffet, for all that work you did on such short notice. My relatives thought it a fitting tribute to my mother."

What did you think? Jake wondered with a frown.

"I'd also like to thank you for making this restaurant such a success. It was my mother's dream and she could have never made it a reality without you. I know you'd like to keep it going for her, but—"

Mark threw Jake a look.

"I'm not a restaurateur. Once I finish going over the books, I'll be selling."

Jake winced at the finality of her tone. He felt the others shifting.

"Your salaries will be paid, of course, and I promise to get things in order as fast as I can so you can get back to work. This all came about so suddenly, you understand."

They murmured ascent. What else could they do?

"I assume there's an office?" she spoke to Liz as if the hostess were her secretary. That bothered Jake. The two women vanished down the narrow hallway that led to the restrooms and Chef's office.

Mark was first to break the silence. "Guess that's that." He started unbuttoning his jacket.

"Shit," Tina murmured.

Jake said nothing. He thought his heart had broken with Chef Davis's passing, but, evidently, there'd been a few un-shattered pieces left. They cracked now.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOUP

Rosemary tracked her way through her mother's computer records, taking note of the restaurant's inventory and mortgage. Her relatives had all gone back to their respective homes. A few had been concerned for her.

"Are you sure you don't want to let someone else take care of all this?" one aunt had asked while standing in the B&B parking lot, suitcase in hand. "There are lawyers and accountants who could—"

"It's a form of closure for me," Rosemary said, even as she winced at how cliché that sounded. "And I know what I'm doing. I'll be fine."

She was fine actually. Working helped keep her mind off her mother and all their unresolved—now never to be resolved—issues. And it was good to be away from her job. Good, she had to admit, to be away from Brad and their on-again, off-again relationship. They were currently off-again, but he'd generously offered to accompany her when he'd heard of her loss. One of the more tasteful flower arrangements at the funeral had been from him. She ought to give him a call.

She did feel a morbid guilt that it had taken her mother's passing to get her back to Northern California. She'd always loved this part of the country with its winding coastline and rolling hillsides. Maybe she would take a drive when she was finished here to clear her head before flying back to Manhattan. It wasn't going to take her long to get through this. The only headache was going to be putting the place up for sale.

Oddly, she felt a nudge of resistance to that idea, probably because she was sitting there in her mother's office. The place was tiny, just a desk, a computer, a few filing drawers, and two photographs.

The first photo was of her mother graduating from culinary school. It depicted her with arms about proud and pleased grandpa and grandma. The second photo was of Rosemary when she was five years old seated on her mother's lap. They were both wearing chef's jackets and mushroom-shaped toques and grinning.

Rosemary noticed that there weren't any more recent photographs of her around. No photos of her graduation from college or pictures of her and her mother in Manhattan. That bothered her.

Getting up, she stretched and wandered over to the office's very small window. She saw Jake out in the garden pulling up handfuls of carrots and beets. Jake.

Her lips pressed together. Not long after everyone was supposed to have left the restaurant, he'd appeared at the office door with a mug in one hand and a coffee press in the other.

"I thought you might need some caffeine," he'd apologized when she'd frowned at the interruption.

"I thought I told you to go home," she'd said, more sharply than she'd intended. The *sous-chef* had looked less romantic in the morning light, more real, but still very, very edible.

His face had reddened, and those gorgeous eyes had flickered away. "I live here."

"Pardon?"

"Chef...that is, your mother, let me live here. There's a small, attic bedroom. You'll find it on the books," he'd added quickly. "I pay rent."

"Oh."

"Do you want me to move out?"

"No, of course not." She'd returned to the computer, and he'd set the coffee within reach before vanishing.

Well, so what? She thought, turning from the window and getting back to work, she wasn't going to be here long. She could deal with him.

Lunchtime rolled around and her stomach began to growl. Just as she was about to go in search of something to eat, she heard a knock at the open door. Jake stood there, a plate in hand. There was a rakish quality to the fall of his blue-black mane, and his cook's jacket was unbuttoned at the top revealing a flirtatious hint of chest hair.

Her mouth went dry. Damn.

"It's just some cold fried chicken and potato salad," he said bringing it over. "Leftovers from yesterday."

"Thank you," Rosemary said uncomfortably, as he set out a fork and napkin. He smelled warmly masculine under the fragrance of garlic and herbs.

"Can I ask you something," she ventured when he turned to go.

He stopped at the door. "Sure."

Her gaze flickered to the photo of herself at age five. It occurred to her that Jake hadn't known who she was last night, just as she hadn't known who he was.

"Did my mother *ever* speak of me? I mean, really speak of me?"

He looked a little taken aback. "Well, you were something of the mystery daughter," he admitted. "Most of the time she didn't say anything, but whenever she got back from visiting you, she'd talk some."

"What about?"

"She'd mention how the two of you went to a Broadway play or a museum or the botanical gardens. She was really proud that you had such a wide variety of interests." He shrugged. "I think she was glad that you hadn't obsessed on one, narrow thing like she did."

Rosemary couldn't help it: she snorted. The only reason she'd taken her mother to all those places was so they'd have something to do together. God knew, her mother never wanted to discuss cooking or the restaurant, and Rosemary's banking job wasn't very interesting. They had to have something to talk about.

"I asked her once if you were anything like her," Jake added, almost shyly. "She said you were the sort who always looked for solutions, and liked to take charge. Like her."

"She said that?" Rosemary shifted.

"Yeah." Jake smiled a little. "Enjoy the chicken," he added as he left.

Rosemary couldn't help but notice that the chef's jacket, which wasn't all that long, allowed her a nice view of Jake's behind. He had a tight, rounded ass that had her licking her lips. Damn again.

She took a bite of her lunch and felt her muscles start to melt. It had been years since she'd tasted anything so good. The chicken's deep-fried buttermilk batter had been spiced with cayenne pepper, paprika and a dash of kosher salt. The meat beneath was succulent and almost buttery in its moistness. The potato salad had been made with roasted potatoes and a tarragon aioli; pure heaven. Used to eating microwave or fast food, Rosemary nearly inhaled the meal. It was so good, she would've chewed down the chicken bones if she'd been able.

The next day was a culinary repeat of the one before. Rosemary was treated to fresh coffee in the morning. At lunchtime, Jake brought her a grilled ham and cheese sandwich along with a fruit salad.

"That looks delicious," she thanked him.

"S'no trouble," he assured her, hesitating. "You know, I never got around to apologizing for not recognizing you the other night."

"Understandable. I was wearing a big hat and sunglasses at the funeral."

"And I wasn't paying much attention," Jake put in, by which he meant, Rosemary guessed, that he'd been too lost in grief to care. She could understand that, she could well understand that.

"It's been really hard for everyone," he added.

"Her going must have been more unexpected for you than it was for us."

"Not really. I'm sure Mom told you how I took her to a doctor in New York?"

Jake blinked. "In New York? No. She never said a thing. When was this?"

"Six or seven months ago. She got all out of breath when we were walking through the park and said she felt strange, so I took her to my doctor. That's when we found out about her heart. She promised to go to a specialist when she got back home." Rosemary glanced over at the photos again. "I don't know if she ever did. The next time she came to visit me we went to the lawyer to make sure everything was in order. Her passing was a shock, but it wasn't totally unexpected."

Jake's face was deathly white now. He looked devastated. "She...she didn't tell us anything, Not a word."

"Oh. Geez. I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault. Enjoy your lunch," Jake managed, before stumbling out.

Rosemary stared after him. Jake had been her mother's *sous-chef*, her second in command. Rosemary would've expected her to confide in him even before her own daughter. Yet that wasn't what had happened.

It made her feel oddly smug, yet also very guilty and angry. How dare her mother hurt Jake like that! Belatedly, she ate her sandwich. It was still hot and crispy. Accented with grainy mustard, the generous slices of ham tasted enough like the ones her mother had always baked for Easter that Rosemary's throat closed up a little. Holidays had been among the rare occasions that her mother had cooked for her and only for her.

By late afternoon the next day she'd completed her work, but instead of leaving, she found herself wandering through the kitchen. She touched the pots and pans hanging overhead, examined the stainless steel sinks and the vast ranges and ovens and the empty food bins and baskets. Finely honed knives on magnetic holders were at the ready. Food processors and bottles of spices waited to be used. What would it be like, she wondered, to play in such a kitchen, to create in it? She felt a strange stir of excitement at the idea, especially when she also imagined Jake in there, cooking with her.

Gazing through the bay window she could see him digging and pruning in the garden. He was wearing a thin tank and she openly admired the wiry muscles in his bare shoulders and arms. It was probably for the best that she was leaving soon. Jake

was a distracting temptation. Way too distracting. All the same, she couldn't seem to step away from the window.

The boysenberry harvest this year was prodigious and Jake carried two full pails of the dark purple fruit up the back stairs. Entering the kitchen, he was startled to find Rosemary standing by the sink, gazing out the bay window. Had she been watching him?

His heart sped up and he felt his cock twitch at the thought. God, he stunk of sweat and he looked a mess. His shirt and shorts were streaked with dirt, his hands and arms scratched and stained from picking berries. He started for the refrigerator, hoping she wouldn't turn his way, but of course she did.

"Those are an awful lot of berries."

He froze. "Um, yeah. How...how goes the accounts?"

It wasn't what he really wanted to talk to her about. In fact, he'd been trying to discuss the sale of the restaurant for two days. The problem was, every time he came near her he felt a stirring in his pants and ended up swallowing his words. She had the poise of a queen and the most wonderful face with plump

lips and thick-lashed eyes. She also smelled good, like honeysuckle.

Jake felt particularly unsettled this morning, seeing her in that plum-colored sundress again. Just following the flow of her curves made his flesh tingle. Her beautiful skin reminded him of caramelized sugar. It made him want to run his tongue over every glowing inch.

Self-consciously, he moved the pails of berries to hide his excitement. Rosemary's black eyes were like stone, which ought to have doused his ardor, but didn't, especially when he took in those full lips. His dick helplessly rose and pulsed as he imagined those lips kissing his throat, his belly, kissing slowly and sweetly on down.

"What are you going to do with them?" Her eyes were locked on his groin.

"What?" Jake could feel his face getting redder.

"The berries."

"Oh. I'm not sure—salads, a sauce perhaps or maybe boysenberry cocktails."

"Oh. The accounts are all finished. I was just...trying to decide what to do with the rest of my day. How's the traffic into San Francisco?"

There was something in her voice, as if she were asking him to change her mind. Hoping he wasn't wrong, Jake jumped at it. "Lousy. Why don't you stay

here instead? You can help me make lunch, or an early dinner?" he amended, glancing at the clock and seeing that it was well past lunchtime. "You could get a feel for what your mother did in this place; enjoy some of our signature dishes."

Rosemary folded her arms before her, and her eyes resentfully slid away, like he'd reminded her of some forgotten insult. "I don't cook."

Don't cook? Chef's daughter?

His thoughts must have shown in his expression, because she qualified herself, "I mean I don't cook like my mother does—did. Professionally or for others." Her full lips tightened. "Mother...kept family and work very separate. She almost never cooked at home and she never gave me any lessons. She didn't even like for me to come to the restaurant."

Jake could almost taste the bitterness. He winced. That explained why, in the four years he'd been here, Rosemary had never visited. He'd imagined her as some kind of ivory tower brat, an intellectual snob with no interest in her mother's hands-on profession. It had never occurred to him that Chef Davis might have been to blame.

"If it hadn't been for my grandfather," Rosemary added, "I wouldn't even know what a kitchen was."

"Oh." Jake managed. "Um. So, what did your grandfather teach you?"

She shrugged. "How to bake."

Jake straightened, suddenly aroused in a whole different way. "You mean pastries? Desserts? You've got to be fucking kidding me. Chef never made any of that stuff. She always ordered in the breads and sweets."

"Ah." For the first time Rosemary's gaze softened. And for the first time, Jake saw a resemblance between her and her mother. It was there in that same, amused expression.

"That's 'cause momma spent her childhood and adolescence slaving away in grandpa's bakery. It was one of the most famous bakeries in Oakland," she added in that bluesy accent common to certain parts of the East Bay. "They made cobblers and monkey bread, rice pudding and such—all without air-conditioning. They just had big fans blowing the hot air around. Grandpa and grandma did all the baking, which left momma stuck behind the counter filling orders."

"Ouch."

"Um-hmmm." Rosemary agreed. "She hated it, so much that when she left for culinary school she made a vow to never make sweets or baked goods, not ever."

"That...explains a lot."

"My dad died around the same time that Momma finally became a head chef," Rosemary went on. "Grandpa, who was a widower by then and having trouble with arthritis, sold the bakery and came to live with us." She shrugged. "I got a different view of baking from him than Momma did. It was an activity we could share, like making things out of clay. It was fun, not work."

Jake felt that his eyes must be nearly falling out of his head upon hearing that. He was staring at her so intently now. "So you do cook."

"I bake," she insisted, "and usually only for myself. That's different."

"All right, then. I'll make the savory, you make the sweet."

"Huh?" Her arms dropped to her sides. "No. Oh no"

"Yes!" He grinned. "Come on. I've got all this fresh produce that will just go to waste. You can help me figure out what to do with it, or better yet, you can show me."

"Jake, I don't want to spend the day making pies."

"Two quick breads and a dessert," he cut in. "That's all I ask. And I'll make three savory dishes in return. The only rule is that we have to use at least one

ingredient from the garden. Whoever makes the most delicious item wins."

"Wins what?"

He waggled his brows. "We'll think of something, unless you don't believe your homey baking skills can match my culinary expertise?"

That got to her. A spark came to her eyes. So, she did have some of Chef Davis's competitive edge.

Rosemary stepped forward and snatched the pails of boysenberries from him. "These are mine," she announced. "And I'm going to want some peaches. Where do you keep the flour?"

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE FIRST COURSE

Rosemary wanted to resent Jake for getting her into this, but she had to admit, it felt good to be measuring and mixing. She'd forgotten how good. She'd already made the crust for her dessert and had skinned and sliced the peaches that were now sautéing in the skillet. Merging with sugar, butter and vanilla beans, their aroma filled the kitchen.

There was a creativity to baking that was completely missing from her job as an investment banker—also a certain sensuality. Kneading the dough for the biscuits, and feeling the silkiness of flour over her fingers was erotic. Investment banking didn't offer anything like this she thought as she checked on the boysenberries. The mix of fruit and sugar was bubbling away in its copper pot.

"What's in the bags?" Jake asked over her shoulder, startling her. He'd showered and changed out of his tank into a chef's jacket, which was a shame, as she'd liked the scent of his masculinity and the way perspiration had delineated his muscles. She still had to fight an almost irresistible urge to lick the blue veins on his neck up to his delectable earlobes. Just thinking on it made her heart race with desire.

"Bags?" she echoed stupidly before remembering the cheesecloth bags floating among the boysenberries. "Mulling spices. I found a tin that must have been left over from the holidays."

"Mulling spices?" His brows shot up. She felt her back tense defensively, expecting criticism.

"What a delicious idea," he said with sincere approval. "That's going to be wonderful!"

"I thought so," she said coolly. She'd show this asshole. Her grandfather may not have been a trained pastry chef, but she'd pit his down-home desserts against those of any four-star restaurant. Now if she could just stop feeling like an intruder in her mother's kitchen.

"So," she ventured, moving from her berries to crack eggs into her cornmeal mix. "How long have you worked here?"

"Over four years now," Jake went back to his side of the kitchen.

Rosemary couldn't see what he was up to, but she smelled wine and onions, and she'd seen him slicing potatoes on a mandoline slicer. He had at least four pans on the fire and something had been slipped into the oven.

"Your mother took me in." Jake said cutting open the small, green peppers that he'd roasted and skinned. "I mean that literally. I won't get into the

pathetic details, but it started when I was living in San Jose and got fired from my job as a short-order cook. I was smoking the wrong thing and was also involved with this girl—" He flinched visibly at the memory.

"One of those people you shouldn't be involved with?" Rosemary helpfully provided.

"Very much shouldn't be involved with," he fervently agreed. "Anyway, after I was fired, we got it into our heads to travel north. I still can't remember exactly what happened. There was a joint and some beer, maybe pills; anyway, I woke up a few miles outside of town. I was lying on the side of the road, my clothes scattered everywhere, wallet gone and my sorry ass stranded."

"Shit," Rosemary sympathized. Jake was looking very chagrined now, his eyes lowered in shame.

"I hiked here and started asking around. There weren't any jobs at the diners, not even for a dishwasher. I almost didn't bother asking at Earthly Delights; I didn't think a place this upscale would let me in the door, let alone hire me, but I was desperate. I talked to your mom. She didn't say a word. She just went to the refrigerator, brought out a piece of salmon and some veggies, and told me to make something. No one had ever done that—challenged me to create a dish rather than follow a recipe. It scared the shit out of me, but it also, I dunno, excited me. I poached the

fish, steamed the veggies and served it with a warm vinaigrette. Chef hired me on the spot and told me I could have the upstairs room." He shrugged as he chopped up a slice of honeydew and tossed it into the blender. "Best thing that ever happened to me."

Rosemary gritted her teeth. "That was mom," she agreed neutrally as she put a dollop of boysenberry jam on a chilled plate to check its thickness. It looked ready, and a quick taste assured her that it was exactly the right mix of sweet, tart and spice she'd wanted. Shutting off the heat, she returned to her batter, adding in puréed corn and small slices of fresh plum. She spooned it all into greased muffin tins.

"You don't understand," Jake sounded agitated now. "She gave me a place to live and helped me to recognize my dreams and my talent. She taught me everything."

"It's nice to know she taught someone," Rosemary sprinkled generous spoonfuls of maple sugar over the muffins, then slid them into the hot oven and slammed the door.

"Liz, the hostess, has a baby daughter," Jake went on, "she needs this job and Frank, the busboy, his wife has Alzheimer's..."

So that's what this was all about; Jake didn't want her to sell the restaurant. Well Rosemary, she

asked herself, whatever did you think he wanted from you?

"Stop!" she commanded, and in the quiet that followed she plucked vanilla pods out of the skillet and arranged her pastry dough over the peaches. Into the oven that went. The biscuits waiting in the refrigerator would be put in last.

"When will you be ready to eat?" she demanded.

He stared at her with those blue-green eyes. They looked perplexed. "Fifteen minutes."

"I'll set out some plates," she said. She would have this meal, prove whatever point it was she was trying to prove, and then be gone.

**

The chiles rellenos were made from mild green chiles no longer than Jake's thumb. He'd stuffed them with Bleu cheese and Brie then dipped them in whipped and seasoned egg whites and floated them in sizzling oil until they were crisp. He hoped Rosemary liked cheese.

"My starter dish," he said, dividing them between their plates before setting small ramekins of pale green soup beside them. "That's a meloncucumber gazpacho to refresh the palate." He poured out two glasses of merlot. "What have you got?" he asked, sinking into his chair.

Seated and shaking out her napkin, Rosemary presented a basket filled with golden muffins crusted with maple sugar.

Helping himself to one, Jake broke it open. A trail of aromatic steam wafted up making his mouth water. He took a bite. The muffin was moist and buttery with a crunchy maple-y crust and an interior that tasted so like corn on the cob it took his breath away. Balancing out all this sweetness was something tart and fruity, a surprise that punctuated the flavors.

"Plums" Rosemary answered his look, "Those and the corn are the garden ingredients I used."

Fuck him. These muffins were wonderful. Marvelous! He'd expected something edible, tasty even, but nothing like this. This was as good as any muffin he'd ever had, including some made by master pastry chefs. He gazed at Rosemary in wonder. She had cut a chili in half and was lifting a forkful to her lips. The melted cheese oozed out and she licked up tendrils as she got it into her mouth.

"Oh," she breathed, and shut her eyes as she chewed. Her thick lashes fluttered with pleasure on those smooth, brown cheeks.

Before this moment he had desired her. Now, between the marvelous flavors of her maple-corn

muffin and her enraptured response to his chiles, he found himself wanting her—Wanting her with a burning need as potent as a hit of adrenaline. Jesus. He'd never felt anything like that before. Not for anyone.

"Damn," she murmured. "That's good."

She cut up another bite of the relleno. Her lips parted, glistening from the oil as she welcomed it. Jake wanted to break off bits of muffin and slip them between those lips. He wanted to feel his fingers being caressed and sucked by them. *Keep your on the prize*, he admonished himself, even as he ate more of the heavenly muffin. "This is fantastic."

She shrugged modestly. "My yeast breads are better."

"Better?" he echoed. God, if the woman could make rolls and loaves more flavorful than this he'd fall on his knees and worship her as a goddess.

"Is it equal to your culinary expertise?" she asked wryly.

He cleared his throat. "It could be."

They ate in silence for a moment.

"Rosemary, about the restaurant, don't sell it, please."

"I don't know anything about running a place like this, Jake."

"Liz and I can run it. We know everything, and we'll keep it just as your mom wanted it unlike a stranger who might want to make changes. Who might fire some of us..."

"I'll be careful about who I let buy it."

"Damn it, you lived here—"

"No, I didn't," she interrupted. "When my mother finally got the loans to create her dream restaurant, she pretty much left me with my granddad in San Francisco." Rosemary took a sip of wine.

"She said she didn't want to uproot me from my school and friends, but I think she wanted me out of sight and out of mind. If I'd been around, she'd have had to deal with her guilt over spending all her time on this place rather than raising me. Wanna hear something funny? I actually got to see more of her when I finally left for college. It forced her to fly out to see me, which meant I got to spend whole, uninterrupted days with her."

Rosemary took another sip of wine before continuing. "I heard it all at the funeral about how this restaurant has put the town on the map and drawn tourists. And now you tell me these heart-warming stories of her generosity toward you and the staff."

"Is that all we are to you?" he cut in, "Heart-warming stories?"

"No," she said flatly. "You're the lucky bastards who got it all—my mother's time, her generosity, her creativity, her success and now you want whatever scraps she left behind for me." She glanced away, eyes glimmering. "I'm glad my mother gave you a home and a family, Jake. I wish to God she'd given me the same."

Jake felt his heart thump hard, and turn over. Chef Davis was and always would be his hero, but she'd been no saint. Executive chefs and owners of successful restaurants were often as tough and mean as Marine drill sergeants, and Jake knew first hand that Chef had been no exception. She'd been ambitious, competitive, obsessive and absorbed in her work. He understood this intimately because he had similar drives. It was why the petty and selfish part of him wanted the restaurant. Damn it! He was more child and heir to it than Rosemary. There was, however, another part of him that was ashamed of what Chef Davis had done to her daughter. None of this however did anything to solve the problem.

"Ready for the next course?" he asked.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PALATE CLEANSER.

Jake had made up three small salads of heirlooms to grace her plate; one of *heirloom* carrots, thickly cut, steamed, and tossed with a honey-ginger dressing. Another of roasted, *heirloom* beets with an earthy, walnut vinaigrette, and the tomatoes. Each salad was amazing, but the tomatoes were mindblowing.

Rosemary had never known tomatoes could taste like this. Heirlooms had bolder flavors, that she knew, but heirloom tomatoes fresh from the garden—Holy Jesus. She'd thought the chiles and refreshing melon soup good, but these tomatoes, dotted with sweet-sharp drops of balsamic vinegar, were nirvana! They were a feast for the eyes as well: deep red, rich gold, orange, that green zebra and an almost purple. The slices looked like a stained glass window.

"I love these salads!" Actually, that was an understatement. Rosemary had to restrain herself from gobbling them down and licking the plate clean. She also had to restrain from ravishing Jake.

"I wanted to give you a sampling of the garden at its purest. The taste of truly fresh produce is so intense

and wonderful, it barely needs anything else." His blue-green eyes sparkled with a food-lover's passion.

"I'm tasting basil on the tomatoes, but I'm not seeing any. Where is it?"

"I used a basil flavored olive oil," Jake said. He looked pleased that she'd noticed. "I think that works better than the usual chiffonade of basil leaves."

Rosemary had to agree. Instead of being overpowered with basil, the tomatoes were enhanced by it, as if lightly perfumed with the green herb. The mix of fresh flavors was making her feel decidedly sultry, sexy even. Maybe that also had to do with the two glasses of wine she'd imbibed.

Jake finished off his own samplings of salads and offered her a shy smile. It was innocent, but also boyishly mischievous. She felt herself captured again by him, as she had been when he'd appeared that first night, illuminated and out of nowhere, like some Jack-of-the-Green protecting his garden. She saw that nature spirit in him now, vibrating with life and ambition.

"You know," she ventured, "I'd sell you this place for a dollar if it was feasible, but I've gone over the finances and it's not. I'm sorry."

"I know that, Rosemary." He was looking at her with those eyes again, damn him. "I just don't understand why you can't keep it. You wouldn't have to do anything, just reap the profits."

"I work in investment banking. Restaurants are not good investments; even ones that have stayed afloat for as long as this one. Besides, it wouldn't feel right to me. I don't do anything half-assed, if I make this place my responsibility, then it's my responsibility. That means moving out here and learning how to run it, and that..." she sighed at the thought, "that's just crazy. I've got a good job that I've worked hard to get, and a nice apartment I've lived in for a couple of years."

"A guy?" Jake asked bluntly. Was that resentment in his voice?

"On-again, off-again," she admitted. "The point is; if I'm going to completely uproot myself, it has to be for something more than my mother's legacy."

"Yeah, I can see why that might not appeal to you. So," he added, "What's *your* second offering?"

"Ah." Rosemary got up and slipped around Jake, She couldn't quite resist brushing her hand over his shoulder as she did so—. It felt wonderfully strong. What had he put into those salads she wondered as she brought over the biscuits, hot from the oven.

"This is actually less about my second bread course than its compliment." She set down a rustic white bowl filled with what looked like glazed berries.

"My God, that's beautiful!" Jake's tone was hushed, almost reverent.

"I made up a spiced boysenberry jam and strained out the seeds," she told him. "While it was still hot, I added in every kind of fresh berry you had on hand; strawberries, raspberries, blueberries. It's a compote of sorts."

She took up one of the biscuits. They were a specialty of hers, the kind that had thin crisp layers. Still standing, she broke it apart as if opening a fan and spread butter over the white interior; it melted into golden puddles.

Jake's Adam's apple bobbed. "That...looks very good."

Rosemary nodded as she spooned glistening berries onto the bread. They hung in a dark violet glaze like rare gems. Holding the biscuit to Jake's lips she waited for him to take it. To her surprise he let her feed him instead; taking a bite and then sitting back to enjoy it.

"Jesus," he moaned. "Jesus, Rosemary that's the best, fucking compote I've ever tasted. The B&Bs in town would buy that off us in a heartbeat to serve at their own breakfast tables. Hell, I think every B&B from here to Napa would want it!"

There was a stain of jam at the corner of his mouth. Without thinking, Rosemary leaned in. Jake's

eyes were closed, but he must have felt her breath there. He made no move, however, as she licked at his lips. She tasted ripe boysenberry spiced with clove. And then she was kissing him, wanting to taste more.

Rosemary had no idea how it happened, but the next thing she knew Jake had pushed his chair from the table and drawn her down to straddle his knee. His berry flavored tongue was meeting hers, not frantic, but slow, as if he, too, were under the spell of their creations. He caressed the sides of her tongue, her lips. She gave back, exploring his mouth while grinding herself against his knee. Her panties were wet and she wondered if the dampness was seeping through his pants.

Reaching toward the bowl she dipped fingers into the compote and pulled out a strawberry. Breaking the kiss, she brought the strawberry to his lips. She meant to pop the berry into his mouth but he captured her hand. He chewed and swallowed, then started to lick and suck her fingers clean. His tongue caressed the tips, pulled at them. Bucking against his knee, Rosemary almost whimpered as a tingle shot down to her clit.

Getting her wet fingers free of his lips, she lowered them to his crotch. She felt and stroked the firm outline of his rod. His moan vibrated through her, and then she was sliding off his knee and pulling at the

elastic waistband of his baggy chef's pants. Jake lifted up to help her slide his pants over his erection, which is when she discovered he wasn't wearing underwear. The pants came down and she saw his white thighs, covered in fine black hair. She wanted to finger-paint those thighs with berry juice and lick it off slowly.

And there was his cock; a nice, long, white cock. The blue veins were very visible trailing over it like rivers of pleasure. It had the most beautiful flared head, sculpted and shaped like a pink cherry. She took hold of that hot, silky length, and parted her lips over its slick crown.

Jake caught his breath. He couldn't believe this, and, for the life of him, he couldn't say how it had happened. One minute he was lost in the bliss of spiced berries. The next minute Rosemary was kneeling at his feet, her hands caressing the sensitive veins along his shaft, those wonderful lips devouring his cock. God, she was curling his toes! Every inch of skin buzzed as she swirled her tongue over each ridge and dip and, finally, across his tender slit. He jerked and groaned and reached shaking hands to run over her head.

His fingers sunk down into the springiness of her 'fro, which he loved. He'd never liked the slippery feel of straight hair. This was so wonderfully textured; he wanted to press his face into it. But she had him with his pants about his knees, his cock captured and he could only surrender to her attentions. His heart was beating like crazy and his crotch felt like it was on fire.

Rosemary heard Jake's low moans. His hips were beginning to buck. Slowly she drew away from that delicious cockhead. His stem was hard and straining to meet with his belly; the crown had darkened to apple red. It pulsed and spilled forth its musky, sticky flavor. She didn't want him to cum, not yet, but she couldn't resist nuzzling in lower. There was a light, but delicious, nest of pubic hair that was short near the shaft and a little longer about the balls. She explored it with her tongue, loving Jake's smoky flavor. His balls tumbled in their hairy skin. Jake jerked and gasped.

Later, she admonished herself, and pulled back.

She watched as Jake's breathing began to quiet and his hands relaxed on the chair arms. His dick sank to half-mast. He licked his lips, swallowed, and

blinked open his wonderful, blue-green eyes. "There's one last course," she murmured.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MAIN COURSE

"Oh, yes," he croaked, and struggled to draw up his trousers. "I'll...um...get it for us."

"You do that. I'll be right back," Rosemary said, heading down the hall. She took a quick moment in the bathroom to splash some water over her face.

Cool down, she told herself, but the heat inside her remained.

Jake, she noted as she came back to the table, also had a damp face and likely had done exactly the same thing. He was still tenting his pants, however, when he brought over the plate. Well, thought Rosemary, he wasn't the only one antsy to finish what they'd started.

There were two small squares on the plate resembling crust-less tea sandwiches, only with paper-thin slices of new potatoes instead of bread. The sliced potato had been layered and baked golden. Each square had a judicious drizzle of sauce over it, white for one, wine red for the other. They smelled amazing. The *sous-chef* cleared his throat once, then again, as if trying to get his brain back on-line.

"These are a signature dish of mine—I call them potato pies. One is filled with creamed spinach and

caramelized onion. The other has fresh asparagus and wild mushrooms. Here, allow me," he added, snatching up her fork and knife and cutting into the parchment thin potatoes. He scooped up a corner of the creamed spinach.

Rosemary opened her mouth. She felt the tines of the fork on her tongue, the warm bite on the end.

"Mmmmmm!" It wasn't just the taste that made it heavenly, but the textures: the delicate, buttery crunch of the potatoes, the greenness of the spinach, the toothsome, caramelized onions. It all came together in a dream of flavor, one highlighted by nutmeg- cream.

"Oh, my..." she breathed, even as he offered her a bite of the other one, which had asparagus, earthy mushrooms, and rich wine sauce. She never knew that vegetables could taste like this! It was unbelievable, irresistible.

Jake stroked her bare arm in between alternating bites for her and for him. Rosemary shivered as goose-bumps rose on her arms. His fingers lowered the thin strap of her sundress and teased her neck, as he proffered her another savory forkful. As she delighted in that, his hand dipped into the crevasse between her breasts. This play aroused her so badly she could barely sit still. The mix of Jake's

delectable cuisine and his sensuous caresses had her shaking with desire.

At last, they finished off the modest entrée, and downed gulps of wine. "Why don't we," she licked her lips, "Have dessert out in the garden?"

His eyes were dilated, the black center dark against the vibrant color of his irises. "Yes," he whispered back.

Rosemary got to her feet and fetched her prize. Jake, bringing plates, napkins and utensils, opened the back door and followed her down the stairs. She blinked against the warm sunlight and led them past the rich bounty of the garden towards the tent. It was shaded under an avocado tree and was relatively cool. She stepped in, set her dessert on a small side table and toed off her sandals. The rugs covering the ground felt good under her bare feet. She turned back to Jake and took the place settings from him. Leaving them next to the dessert, she reached for his chef's jacket.

One by one, she undid the buttons. His hands stroked her arms the whole time, a feathery, trembling touch that had her vibrating. Rosemary pulled open the jacket and got it off. Jake was very pale underneath, his nipples small and pink. She caressed his arms and his corded muscles. There was a scattering of hair at his collarbone and down the center of his chest ending in a teasing black swirl

about his navel. Leaning in, Rosemary slowly licked that hair flat, paying special attention to the patch about the navel. His stomach rippled and he swayed toward her, groaning. His cock was up again and fighting against his trousers.

"Rosemary" he moaned.

"Take these off," she told him, tugging at the pants, "and get comfortable."

Jake kicked off his clogs and, modestly turning away from her, drew down his trousers. She admired his firm, white ass and experienced a lustful heat as she caught a glimpse of his, pink, low-hanging balls. He settled on the reclining chaise, the one wide enough for two, his cock alert and bobbing.

She brought the little table closer giving him a good look at her dessert.

"Holy—that's stunning!" Jake exclaimed.

Rosemary had to agree. The peaches she'd sautéed had been covered with a crust and baked before the entire dessert had been inverted onto a plate. The finished tarte tatin of caramelized fruit, in shades of light and dark gold, now glowed in the dappled sunlight. It offered a fragrance as warm as summer.

Jake might have felt awkward, being in his all-together before Rosemary, but he was completely distracted by her and her dessert. As she plated a piece, leaning to give him glimpses of her wonderful cleavage, he flashed back to how she'd carefully placed slices of that slippery fruit in the pan. Remembering how her fingers had glistened with juice, he felt his throat tighten up with desire.

Shifting, he let her settle next to him and offer him a forkful of the delectable tarte tatin. His heart nearly stopped dead in ecstasy. This was too wonderful. Ripe peach, warm vanilla, a thin perfect glaze of burnt sugar, flakey crust and some kind of spice flowed over his tongue. What was that spice?

"Cinnamon," he breathed. Blinking open his eyes in confusion. "Is that cinnamon?"

"In the crust," Rosemary admitted.

The crust—the crust was genius. Both flakey and tender, the perfect complement to the fruit. The two combined seemed to be working as an aphrodisiac; with every bite, he grew more aroused.

"My grandfather never made tarte tatin," she observed, feeding him another heavenly bite. She was clearly enjoying the effect her dessert was having on him. "But there were peach pies and peach cobblers. I know how to make this fruit sing,"

She was half snuggled into him now, her bare leg across his thighs and rubbing against his stiff cock, creating a delicious friction. It merged with the lemon and lavender scented breeze rippling through the tent, wafting over his skin. The pleasure of taste and touch entwined.

All too soon, the slice was finished and there were only crumbs left. Rosemary set aside the plate. Lips met, then tongues. The taste of peaches and cinnamon flowed from Jake to Rosemary and back again as he lifted her skirt and tugged at her underwear. Half-way down, he stopped and let his hands roam over her bare ass. He delved between her thighs. Her wetness sent a jolt thorough him. God, she even smelled like peaches! He explored deeper, adoring the way she whimpered and writhed and sucked at his lip.

Rosemary turned around to help him get her panties entirely off and ended up seated on his lap. The weight of her soft, round ass pressing into him, down on his cock, drove him crazy. Trembling with desire he tugged at the zipper of her dress, parting it, and brushing aside the light fabric. She wore no bra. Full breasts escaped their captivity and overflowed his hands. Long nipples became hard under his fingers. He lay back on the cushions, pulling her so that she rested on top of him. Indulgently, he rubbed and

tweaked those nipples. She cried out and arched against him.

Rosemary couldn't stay still. She felt Jake's stiff cock at her ass crack, and wiggled against it even as he slipped his head under her arm so he could flick his tongue over her nipple. Writhing and moaning, she tried to work her way onto his dick, but his strong arms wouldn't let her go there. His flickering tongue sent sparks through her nipples, and the roaming hands pulled up her skirts to get at her wet folds.

She felt those long fingers brushing over the tight curls of her pubic hair, felt them pushing at her damp thighs until she parted them. Finally, those digits glided between her slippery, swollen folds.

"Oh, God!" she groaned, as his teeth sunk into her neck. He had one hand on her breast and the other one between her legs.

His fingers teased her pussy and fondled her clit, making her shutter and cry out with pleasure. Her juices flowed, soaking the white cushions. Against her ass his cock twitched and dripped precum, teasing her. Unable to take any more, she pushed up till the head of Jake's hard dick popped between her soaked thighs. Then she settled back down, letting it glide in.

Jake was so lost in Rosemary that when she enfolded his sensitive member he shouted and bucked in shocked ecstasy. Her tight wet pussy felt hot and delicious and her ass squirming on his thighs made him hungry for more of her, for all of her. As if she felt his need, her head leaned back, her 'fro brushed his shoulder as, chin raised, her lips offered a kiss. He accepted, sucking at her tongue, even as he rocked into her.

Sweat sprung out across his brow and crept down from his temples. All the while he kept one hand on her breast, teasing with feathery strokes. He fingered her clit with his other hand, gently rolling that slick little nub. He could feel his own cock passing by as it pumped in and out. With each glide, his cockhead was caressed and tormented.

Her heart, pounding against the hand he had at her breast, beat faster and he knew she could feel his own quickening breath on the back of her neck. Her pussy began to contract.

"AHHHH!" she cried out, her pulsing orgasm milking him to soaring heights.

Sweat poured down over his ribs. His ass clenched; his legs shook under her weight, and suddenly he was spurting, firing his hot cum deep into her. Their shouts mingled, echoing through the garden, and he held tight to her plush curves, held tight as he gave himself to her. For a moment they hung together, as alive and warm as the garden.

Rosemary trembled. Her pussy was still tingling and clenching, as she sunk back against Jake's lean, sweaty body. They were both panting, gasping after breath. Though she was perspiring, all she wanted to do was stay in his arms.

Slowly, as if he, too, were reluctant to let go, Jake rolled them both onto their sides, onto the damp cushions and slid out of her.

"That was amazing," he wheezed. Then, after a moment, "The sex was pretty good, too."

Rosemary laughed weakly. "There's plenty of dessert left if you want seconds."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dessert

Jake did want seconds...of the actual dessert and Rosemary happily served up pieces. Around them, the garden buzzed with sleepy insects and soaked up buckets of setting sunlight. They lazed on the chaise, feeding each other bites of peach tarte tatin, sated and content.

Rosemary found herself thinking of all her mother had cultivated: this garden, the restaurant, the people who'd worked for her, and the town itself. All cultivated at the expense of her daughter, and yet, for once, Rosemary felt no resentment. Maybe it was because the garden gave back. And like Jake, it was—a gift of sorts, from her mother.

"I guess we both won, then," she said aloud as she set aside her empty plate, and though she was referring to their unofficial cooking contest, she meant more. Much more.

"I certainly feel rewarded." Jake smiled back, but his tone was troubled. "Rosemary, this is probably out of line, but I don't think Chef—your mother—meant to cut you out of her work."

"You're right." She took his crumb-scattered plate from him and set it aside. "You are out of line."

"Listen, please," he asked, placing an earnest hand on her shoulder. There was no refusing those eyes. "I think she didn't want what happened to her to happen to you. Working in her father's bakery made it so she couldn't enjoy sweets, not even making them. Chef didn't want to force her passion on you and have you resent good food. She wanted you to delight in it as much as she did."

Rosemary opened her mouth to snap back, to tell him he didn't know what he was talking about, but the words died on her tongue. Shit. He could be right.

"Some plants" he went on, "don't do well in the shade of others. They need to grow unhampered, like you. Others," he added ruefully, "like yours truly, are fuck-ups who need to be pruned and forced up the trellis." He offered her a self-deprecating grin. When she said nothing, his eyes dropped and his hand began to slip from her shoulder. She grabbed hold of it.

"It's a different way of looking at it," she admitted.

All the times her mother had discussed finances, which was Rosemary's expertise, coupled with her mother's refusals to talk about cooking or anything to do with the restaurant, all made a strange sort of sense now. The sad thing was that if this afternoon had proved anything, it was that Rosemary was her mother's daughter. She'd felt more creative this

afternoon than in all her time in investment banking, also energized, competitive, and even ambitious. She'd also felt talented. Would she have felt this way if she'd always been in her mother's shadow?

All these years she'd thought her mother had just neglected her, but perhaps Momma had been trying to cultivate her. Recalling the photograph of them on her desk, Rosemary wondered if perhaps her mother had seen that they were too much alike, and had feared what the results would be if she was too present in Rosemary's life.

Shit.

Tears welled in Rosemary's eyes and she felt them trickling down her face. She hadn't cried for her mother, not once, but now she couldn't hold it back. Her shoulders began to shake. She felt Jake's hard arms wrap about her, and then, quite unexpectedly, she was sobbing into his chest, wetting down his chest hair with her tears.

"I miss her, too," Jake whispered in Rosemary's ear.

He kissed her forehead and her damp cheeks. He rubbed her back and when she started to sniffle, he reached over and handed her a napkin.

"This has been a long, strange afternoon," she reflected, wiping her eyes and nose.

Jake gazed into her reddened eyes and found his throat growing very tight. He could still taste the flavor of the peaches on his tongue, and the one thing going through his mind was that he still hadn't tasted Rosemary. The thought of never getting that chance was unbearable.

"Transplant yourself, Rosemary," he heard himself say. "You've grown as much as you can on your own. It's time to come back to familiar soil. You've tasted what it can be like—a kitchen to play in, seasonal fruit at your fingertips, and people to adore your creations."

He waved out a hand at the garden and the restaurant. "Your mother never gave you what you really wanted, let her do it now. Make it yours."

"What if I say no, Jake?" she asked, and he flinched from the pain of it. "What if I still want to sell the restaurant and go back East? What then?" She wasn't looking at him, and he could feel the tautness in her back and shoulders.

He thought about that, feeling the pull of Chef's restaurant on one side, Rosemary on the other. For a wonder, he realized there was no contest.

"I guess I'll have to move to Manhattan." He leaned in to kiss her soft lips.

She blinked. "No shit?"

"No shit. I could've resisted you after the muffin, but not after the berry compote. The peach tatin just sealed the deal."

It was true; also amazing to him. Four-and-ahalf years of his life against one afternoon, and he'd gone for that one afternoon. Not because Rosemary outweighed those years, he realized, but because he recognized her as the next step, the dessert course that completed the meal.

"Where you go, I'll go." He stroked her wonderful skin, his hand very white against its rich brown. "I just hope you don't mind the déjà vu of being with someone whose dearest wish is to be the head chef of a fine restaurant."

The silence was longer this time. Jake grew chilled with the thought that she was going to tell him not to bother...that she didn't feel the same or that she just couldn't deal with another obsessed cook.

"My granddad use to say," she finally murmured, "that when a pie is ready, you have to take it out of the oven, and I suppose, when the fruit is ripe, it's time to use it. I think people are the same. When you're ready, you're ready."

"Just what your mother would have said," Jake agreed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER DINNER COFFEE & SWEETS

The elderly gent smiled beatifically as he captured Rosemary's hand. "This cobbler tastes just like my mother use to make!" he gushed.

"My granddad's recipe," Rosemary said.

She'd been making her way among the tables, trying to do a quick check of customer satisfaction, but she kept getting snagged and pulled aside.

"Are you going to start selling your breads?" the henna-haired woman at the next table asked. Rosemary recognized the lady from the town, not a tourist. "Now that the bakery is closed, will you think about it? Those rolls with the sunflower seeds were the best I've ever tasted."

"Thank you. We're considering it." Rosemary stepped back so that Alfonzo, who was carrying the dessert tray, could pass. She watched him present it to a table, explaining each one of the sweets as if they were crown jewels.

"Your mother would be proud," yet another townie insisted on telling her.

"I'm sure," she said and tried to retreat to the kitchen.

"Do you cater?" A wide-eyed young lady asked and jabbed with her spoon at her dark-and-white chocolate crème brulée. "I'm hosting a baby shower, and I would love to serve this."

"I'm sure we can arrange something," Rosemary promised. "Talk to our hostess before you leave."

At last, Rosemary reached the kitchen. They were winding down and Penny was calling out for desserts. "Slice of walnut-apple pie!" the *sous-chef* shouted, "Poached fig parfait, lemon-pear ice cream."

"Yes, Chef!" Mark responded, quickly plating those desserts and embellishing them with a dollop of whipped cream, a caramel lace cookie, or, in the case of the ice cream, candied citrus peel.

"Where's Jake," Rosemary asked, as Penny passed the plates to Tina.

"Taking a break. It's okay," the sous-chef added quickly, "I've got things covered."

Penny still worried that Rosemary would find fault with them. In truth, she felt daily astonishment at their commitment and inventiveness. But then, she reflected, her mother had always been a good judge of people. Maybe she'd even judged her daughter right in the end. She pushed out the back door into the cool autumnal evening and down the stairs. Jake sat at the bottom.

"You said this was going to be fun," she groaned, settling in next to him. "I've never worked so hard in my life as I have these last three months."

"Wait until the holidays start," Jake grinned at her sadistically.

"Ah, no." She snuggled under his arm and gazed up at the full moon. "I refuse to do anything for the holidays unless we hire an extra waiter, another line cook and an assistant pastry chef. I'll go on strike first."

He shrugged. "You're the boss." A beat then, "Care to take a stroll through the garden with me Chef Davis?"

"Why not, Chef Cosgrove? Liz and Penny can close up."

"They sure can," Jake agreed, helping her up.
"Sugar pumpkins are almost ripe," he pointed out as
they strolled down the sandy paths. "I'm thinking of
roasted pumpkin ravioli."

"Yum. With your sage butter sauce?"

"Of course."

"I'm thinking pumpkin custard," she countered, "Pumpkin cookies with cranberry icing. Pumpkin

muffins with pecans, and pumpkin bread with golden raisins and a ginger glaze."

Jake groaned aloud and tightened his arm about her waist. "I like the way you think. Also, apple season will be in full force. While you're making sumptuous apple crisps and pies..."

"And warm," she drew out the word, "spiced apple cake."

He shut his eyes for a moment. "Yes, well, I was considering making an apple curry soup."

"Hmmm."

"And I've created this new recipe for roast pork with apple stuffing and a cider glaze."

"Oh, my God," she leaned into him, "that sounds so good."

"Maple sweet potatoes on the side, as they're ready to harvest. Speaking of which, I don't suppose you know how to make sweet potato pie?"

"Huh? What kinda question is that?" Rosemary snapped her fingers at him. "Teach your grandmother to suck eggs, white boy. Do I know how to make sweet potato pie? Let me tell you, you haven't *tasted* sweet potato pie until you've had *mine*!"

"Is that right?" he growled into her ear.

"That's right,"

"I can hardly wait to taste it."

"We're gonna have to bake it up first," she purred as they reached the tent.

"Let's get cookin' then."

THIRTEEN

In the Fall of 2005, Thirteen felt a desire to read some romantic erotica and went to an online website to indulge. Halfway through this indulgence, it occurred to her that she had a few erotic and romantic stories she wanted to tell. Five years, four awards—including one from a French website—and twenty-two stories later, she's still writing erotic romances. Who knew such large rewards would come from such a small indulgence? Thirteen lives in a seaside town with a cat, a strange but sexy man who says he's her husband, and a very romantic imagination.