

TWO ON THE AISLE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

*If this were played upon a stage now,
I could condemn it as an
improbable fiction.*

—*Twelfth Night*, Act III, Scene 4

Other than the fact that Maia had pushed several succulent ingredients aside—capers, Sicilian olives, roasted red peppers—and had picked out as much of the fresh basil as she could manage before she'd been willing to take a bite of her panzanella, their date, their *second* date, was going well. Better than many second dates, in Wren's experience. A year or so ago, picking inoffensive ingredients out of one's food would have been an immediate and permanent deal breaker for Wren. Tonight she would let it slide. She realized with some misgivings that she was lowering her standards.

Wren sighed. She wasn't ready to give up on Maia. She was lovely to look at. She was incredibly smart. She seemed to genuinely like Wren and that was a huge plus. The food thing—maybe she could be taught. Wren's life, both personal and professional, revolved around food and this was Josephine, a truly exceptional restaurant, one of San Francisco's best. Wren shuddered, imagining the chef watching Maia's fork weed out the offensive components of the dish, her mouth curled into a look of revulsion as if she were picking out mouse turds.

“I’ve got a feeling about us,” Maia said, smiling warmly with her puckery, kissable mouth. “I really like you.”

She reached a hand across the table and Wren took it, twining their fingers together. Maia was a few years younger, twenty-seven, with long dark brown hair and widely-spaced brown eyes. Their first date had been last weekend, a hike down the west flank of Mt. Tam to Stinson Beach. It had been a good day. They’d sat on a grassy slope above the Pacific Ocean eating sourdough bread and a nutty Jarlsberg cheese and Wren had never suspected she was with a woman who could so thoroughly emasculate a perfectly beautiful panzanella as Maia had just done. *Let it go!* she warned herself.

Maia had an exotic look about her, as if she were some part Asian. Wren knew very little about her. They had met only a week ago, the morning of that hike. Wren hadn’t yet confessed her own secrets and she was sure Maia was holding back as well. She just hoped the as-yet unrevealed facts were bearable.

The waiter came to take their plates away, leaving a dessert menu. Wren took her hand back while she looked it over.

“Do you want to share something?” she asked.

“Okay. How about something chocolate? I’m a total chocoholic. The first time I tasted it, I thought, oh, my God, this is better than an orgasm. Actually, I couldn’t have thought that because I hadn’t had an orgasm yet, the first time I tasted chocolate.”

Wren chuckled. “No, I wouldn’t think so.”

Maia looked thoughtful, staring into space. “No. It was about two months later that I had my first orgasm. You know, it’s hard to compare those two things, isn’t it? I mean, they’re like apples and oranges. Or maybe chocolate and orgasms. Just different.”

Wren blinked, trying to catch up. “How old were you when you first tasted chocolate?”

“How old? Relative to?” Maia looked momentarily confused. “Oh, you mean in earth years?”

Maia laughed louder than usual with an edge of hysteria. She was apparently joking. Wren tried to laugh, but it came out as a small twitter because experience had taught her to be wary. Dating had become so disappointing, not to mention terrifying, that she was nearly ready to give it up. Why was it so hard to meet a pleasant, ordinary, sane woman in this huge city full of gay women?

“Twenty, twenty-one,” Maia said.

“Twenty? You never tasted chocolate until you were twenty?”

Maia nodded. “It gave me the creeps. They don’t have it where I come from and I had this instinctive fear of it, I guess.”

“I thought you were from Denver.”

Maia was distracted by something on the menu. “Look! Twelve layer Hungarian Dobos Torte.” She read the description. “Rich layers of sponge cake sandwiched by alternating layers of chocolate buttercream and chocolate ganache, finished with a hard shell of caramel and sprinkled with walnuts and chocolate nibs.” She looked up at Wren with an eager, lustful expression, nearly salivating.

If a woman ever looks like that while thinking of me, Wren decided, I’ll ask her to marry me on the spot.

“I had it a couple weeks ago,” Wren said. “It sounds wonderful, but it was a little disappointing. The cake was too dry. I think you’ll be happier with the chocolate mousse pie. Dense mousse on an almond paste crust. It’s extraordinary.”

“Okay.” Maia snapped her menu shut. “You must come here a lot.”

“Not that often.”

Josephine was too expensive to come to often. Especially when it was pleasure and couldn't be written off as a business expense.

“Back to where you come from,” Wren said after they ordered coffee and mousse pie.

“Where they don't have chocolate.”

Maia again laughed the slightly crazy laugh. Then she peered soberly into Wren's eyes and spoke softly. “I feel I can trust you. I can trust you, can't I?”

This isn't a good sign, Wren decided, but nodded anyway and said, “Sure.”

“Yes,” Maia said decisively. “I know I can. I have unusual powers of perception and I can see what a sincere, honorable person you are. I want us to start off solid. No surprises. I believe in laying all the cards on the table up front and I hope you'll do the same with me.”

The seriousness of Maia's expression suggested this evening, originally so full of promise, was about to go badly south. Wren prepared herself for *The Thing*, the inevitable confession, the horrible reality that would dash her hopes to the ground and stomp them into dust.

“The people who raised me,” Maia said solemnly, “weren't my biological parents.”

“Oh!” Wren breathed, hugely relieved. “You're adopted.”

“No, not adopted. I was a changeling.”

“A changeling?”

“A changeling is a baby who gets switched with another.”

“Yeah, I know. But I haven't heard the term outside of fairy tales. Because in literature, the changeling is a non-human child who's left in the place of the human baby stolen by fairies,

trolls or even the Devil. So, technically, you can't be a changeling unless you're a non-human."

Wren added a laugh just as their dessert arrived, a disconcerting imitation of the new crazy Maia laugh she had just been introduced to. The waiter set down the coffee cups and a plate of chocolate perfection with whipped cream and chocolate curls on top and poured them both coffee.

Maia tasted the chocolate mousse. "Umm. You were right about this. So good!"

"So you were switched with another baby?" Wren was still intent on clearing up the facts of Maia's origins. "A hospital snafu or something?"

Maia's mouth was full of chocolate mousse, some whipped cream on her upper lip. She swallowed and said, "No. Seriously, Wren. I was a changeling. I was left with these people as an infant. They were wonderful to me. They raised me as if I were their own daughter. In fact, to this day they won't admit what I know to be true, even though they must be heartbroken over losing their own child. Even I have no idea what happened to her." Maia swallowed another big spoonful of mousse. "My people communicate with me telepathically, but they never mention the other baby. I guess they don't want me to be distracted with worrying about her."

Wren shook her head. "You showed me a picture of your parents last week. You look just like your mother."

Maia nodded emphatically. "That was supposed to fool them, to make them think I was really theirs. It's the way it's done."

"The way what's done?"

"Aren't you going to taste this? It's delicious."

"Go ahead." Wren had lost interest in dessert.

Maia took another spoonful. "My parents, my real parents, are from Gravlax."

“Gravlax?” Wren sputtered in disbelief. “Cured salmon?”

“No. This is a different Gravlax. This is a planet in the Rambutan system.”

Wren slammed into the back of her chair and laughed, thoroughly relieved to realize she was the butt of a joke. “Very funny! Rambutan, like the fruit. Good one!”

Maia stopped eating, looking thoroughly, deadly serious. “I’m not joking.”

“Yeah, right.” Wren picked up the second spoon and took a big scoop of mousse. “I suppose you’re going to tell me the town you were born in was Kielbasa and your father’s name is Radicchio.” She shook her head, impressed, realizing someone must have tipped Maia off about Wren’s secret identity as a food critic.

Maia still wasn’t smiling.

“Is this one of those hidden camera shows?” Wren looked around to see if she could find a TV crew disguised as waiters. “Picking the capers and olives out of the panzanella, that was supposed to drive me nuts, right?” She poked through the freesias in the vase between them, looking for a microphone.

Maia looked genuinely perplexed. Either she was a good actress or she was out of her mind. Wren stopped eating and put down her spoon, worried that she had just encountered the reason she and Maia would not be waking up tomorrow morning in one another’s arms, joyfully celebrating the beginning of their life together.

A loud disturbance from the kitchen attracted the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Sounds of banging metal, breaking glass and raised voices reached them, overwhelming the low-playing classical music and halting dinner conversation. Everyone stopped eating to listen. The only intelligible word amid a string of French-sounding curses was “dry,” uttered with a slightly rolled “r.” It came like a staccato refrain: *Dry! Dry! Dry!* Or the call of a scarlet macaw,

emphatic and high-pitched, a chorus of exclamations followed by a round of questions: *Dry? Dry? Dry?*

A chef in kitchen whites came running through the swinging door, looking terrified and shrieking in Italian. Following him was a man Wren recognized as the owner of Josephine, John Bâtarde, the famous French chef. He wore a three-piece suit and carried a huge and beautiful torte on a plate above his head. He clutched a rolled up newspaper in his other hand, squeezing it so tight his knuckles were white, like he was trying to strangle it. His ginger mustache was crooked from the snarl on his mouth. His round face was red with wrath and his little eyes blazed with fury. He looked truly scary.

“He dares to call my Dobos torte dry!” Bâtarde yelled at no one in particular. “Dry! Dry! Dry!”

Suddenly realizing he was referring to her review of Josephine in today’s paper, Wren shrunk into her chair, willing herself to disappear from Bâtarde’s intense gaze. *Oh, crap!* she thought, trying to recall exactly what she’d said about the torte in an otherwise radiant report.

“Threlkeld’s days are numbered!” he declared. “Nobody insults my cake and gets away with it!”

With that, the great chef flung the cake blindly into the air where it smacked into a ceiling fan. He then turned and stomped back into the kitchen as twelve layers of cake and chocolate frosting were swiftly chopped and sprayed around the room by the turning blades. Wren instinctively put her arms over her head as cake rained down on them and the plate bounced from one to the other of the fan blades before falling to the floor and breaking into shards. As the screaming in the restaurant subsided, she realized the danger had passed and peeked out to see traumatized diners with cake in their hair and frosting on their faces.

She was unscathed, but a fist-sized chunk of cake had landed next to her coffee cup.

Maia pinched off a sample and tasted it. “You’re right,” she said. “It’s a little dry. Apparently some food critic thought so too. But the chocolate frosting’s really good.” She looked thoughtful. “When my people return to take us back to Gravlax, I’m insisting we bring cacao trees back with us.”