

Death is a Dish Best Served Cold

By Perri Nash

He was a bold man that
first ate an oyster.

Jonathan Swift

CHAPTER ONE

The sous chef was struggling with a large bushel of fresh mushrooms and a second only slightly smaller basket of herbs. She was losing her grip when suddenly the basket of mushrooms was snatched from her arm, causing her to stagger from the abrupt load shift.

“Let me help you with that.” The man had a deep baritone voice sprinkled with a rich curl in his pronunciation.

“Oh...oh thank you, but I’m all right.” She didn’t want to appear incapable to the man who she assumed was one of the Embassy staff. It was important to her to be able to keep up with the rest of the kitchen staff who were, for the most part, half her age. Her youthful enthusiasm and upbeat attitude, along with a fierce determination to succeed, belied her age, as well as her inexperience.

The two exchanged smiles, and he acknowledged her comment with a slight bow and a nod of respect as he set the mushroom basket on the table and moved on. For her part, she laughed at her own folly in dismissing an offer of help. What was she thinking?

“Cassie, Cassie, where are you?” A man’s voice boomed above the din of noise humming under the caterer’s tent in the garden of the St. Denis Embassy. There were numerous fans, convection ovens and refrigeration units that created a cacophony of motors at different decibels requiring the catering staff to almost shout at one another to be heard.

“I’m here, Stephan. On my way.” Her voice had a sliver of fear in it. Whenever this tyrant of the kitchen summoned her by name, she was in fear for her future in the catering business.

Cassie Doolin hugged the baskets of herbs and mushrooms close in front of her and wormed her way through the makeshift kitchen aisles at a quick pace before coming to an abrupt halt at the sleeve of the Executive Chef, Stephan Matthews.

“Where did you go for those mushrooms, a coal mine in Siberia?” He addressed his sous chef with a dismissive sneer in his tone.

“Chef,” she responded to him in the manner of a formally run kitchen hierarchy, “I am sorry, but these ‘rooms were left on the truck by accident. It took me some time to track them down.”

“No excuses. We are running behind schedule. The guests will be arriving in another hour, and the hors d’oeuvres are not finished. Hurry, hurry.” He snatched the basket out of the woman’s arms and, in doing so, accidentally pulled a strand of her red hair from the wide, single braid used to hold her hair off her face.

“Ouch...that hurts; take it easy; we’ve got plenty of time. Most of the work has been done, and we are on schedule.” As she was speaking to the chef, Cassie’s glance briefly caught, out of the corner of her eye, the stranger who had just helped her.

For a quick moment, she wondered, if he were part of the Embassy staff, why would he be engrossed in a private conversation with one of the kitchen staff? She couldn’t clearly identify with whom he was speaking. She wondered what they could be talking about but then just quickly forgot her curiosity as her attention was drawn back to the canapés being assembled in front of her.

The Ambassador’s farewell reception at the Embassy of St. Denis was to be a premier showing for the small island nation, formerly a French colony. Plans had been made weeks in advance with invitations issued to the entire Washington diplomatic corps. The carefully chosen menu reflected the country’s more exotic Caribbean food culture, as well as the more classic dishes from its French colonial period.

Cassie Doolin was thrilled to be a part of the event. She had spent the first half of her professional life as a successful securities trader with several investment management firms. However, that position did not afford her the creative satisfaction she craved and when her most recent job abruptly ended with the violent deaths of two business colleagues, she was no longer able to face the investment business. Cassie took the murders as a sign that she needed to move away from the structured life of stocks and bonds and start to pursue her artistic talents.

The cell phone hooked to her belt loop vibrated. Doolin’s hands were thick with the cilantro oil and garlic she was liberally brushing on jumbo fresh shrimp, which

would then be grilled.

“Damn.” She grabbed at a towel and punched at the phone to receive the call as she bent her head to cradle it against her shoulder. It was a precarious process as she continued to paint the shrimp at a frantic pace.

Her husband of several years said, “Cassie, it’s John.”

“John, I’m busy. The drill sergeant is picking on recruits, and I seem to have been singled out for today’s target practice. Stephan is unusually nervous and edgy today. I guess his visibility to the whole diplomatic community has got him riled. I’ve never seen him like this before. He’s positively wild. I’ve got to go.”

“Cassie, just listen for a minute. Then I’ll let you go.” John Doolin loved his wife and, despite her worried tone, he knew she was happy in her new career. He instinctively knew that Stephan Matthews, the tyrant owner/executive chef of Creative Cuisine, had singled out Cassie for ridicule because he recognized her talent. Perhaps he even felt slightly threatened by her abilities.

“I am going to be working tonight. Filling in for McNally, his wife is delivering the twins and, for some damn fool reason, he wants to be there for it.” It was said with a smile in his voice as they shared a private opinion about the hard-bitten professional homicide cop who had expressed fear of being in the delivery room.

“Do you want me to come by and pick you up around midnight, when I get off? Will you be done by then?”

“Yeah, I think this should be wrapped up, everything but the yelling anyway.”

As if on cue: “Cassie, Cassie, get over here. The raspberries are moldy.” The executive chef’s roar made everyone under the tent freeze-frame for an instant, until the calm voice of his sous chef could be heard.

“Gotta go. I’m being summoned. Love ya; see you later.” Cassie hastily whispered into the phone and then yelled back to her boss, “I’m coming, Chef; we’ll take care of it; it’ll be fine.”
