

# Raw Footage

by *Jacqueline May*

Today's challenge: Create a dessert that includes a meat, a vegetable, and a complex carbohydrate.

As he stands in the improbably shiny show kitchen this morning, Steve's eyeballs feel like they're coated in kosher salt. Last night his roommate, Gordon, had another manic rhetorical flare-up. While Steve tried to block the noise with headphones, Gordon stalked around the bedroom shouting that trans-fats were killing America; they were a tasty chemical weapon stopping Steve's heart. Right now! Steve, you're dying!

Dying didn't sound so bad to Steve or, probably, to the cameraman who couldn't leave during such potentially interesting footage. Gordon knew he needed to shut up. He would stop talking, plant himself on the edge of his bed, and twitch until the pressure built too high: "Steve, the chemicals! You don't even know!" Eventually Steve slid into his usual useless sleep, full of Miri-dreams. When his alarm went off, he thought dark thoughts about the producers who wouldn't let him switch bedrooms after Hoa and Brittain were eliminated. A whole empty room across the hall, and he's stuck with Gordon because Gordon is good television.

This morning when the guest judge, executive chef from L'Etoile, announces the challenge, Steve almost forgets to make a joke. He's thinking ahead to the textures of grains, to maybe pork chops and molasses, when he realizes the rest of the chefs are waiting for him to speak. Before any episodes have aired they know what Steve's edit will be, that their reactions will be made to seem spontaneous.

"Well, hell," Steve says, broad and aw-shucks, "it beats chitlins!" He is a terrible comic-relief oaf today. Nobody laughs. Anyone would say this who endured the last challenge, which left Selene sobbing, Nidhi drunk, Allyson muttering in the hallway and all the judges gagging on Steve's attempt, which looked like something out of the dumpster behind the Inquisition. Brittain's chitlins were edible, but he was too quiet, not the bitchy Liberace he'd seemed at first, so off he went.

The guest judge smiles at Steve. "Intestines, zey are very difficult. Zis dessert will be better."

"Thank you, chef," Selene chirps. Her black Bettie Page bangs ac-

centuate the roundness of her cheeks, the wide divots of her dimples, the sweet firmness of her determined little chin. Everyone who meets her wants to cuddle her. Off-camera she once called Nidhi a "fucking brown bitch with herpes and an IQ of 10." Steve wonders whether viewers will see that Selene. He bets not. She's going to win.

Next to Steve, Gordon's twitching up and down, bouncing his heels against the tile. He's always like this at the start of a challenge. He's happiest holding a chef's knife – a Kerzbrunner, of course. ("Kairtz-broo-ner," the producers nag, "say the name every time!") He gives himself to the food. His talents deserve to win, but he's not stable enough to be trusted with the prizes – the money, the restaurant consultant to the stars, the cookbook deal.

Miri would win if she were here. She would have conquered the chitlins and now be plotting an outlandish quinoa-raisin torte striped with carrot-ginger icing and spicy nouveau mincemeat. Or something. If Steve were capable of thinking up a Miri dish, he'd actually deserve to be here: to have beaten out dozens of applicants for his slot, to have hung on for seven challenges while ambitious sous-chefs and culinary-school dazzlers rolled up their aprons.

But if Steve deserved to be on "Mean Cuisine," Miri would probably be on it instead.

The night before he left for what was then called "Untitled Cooking Competition Dramality," Steve stopped by Miri's apartment one last time. The basement-like smell of the cinder-block hallway socked him in the gut, a sensation of similar heft to the thrill it had replaced.

Miri's sister answered the door. "Hey." Margot was a leaner, drier version of Miri – her dark hair chopped shaggily at mid-neck, her hips less generous, her skin grainy. Had she looked like this – flattened, dehydrated – before? Steve couldn't remember. "I thought we'd be seeing you today. You leave tomorrow, right?"

"Right."

"You must be pretty excited." She grinned at him like a fond babysitter, but her eyes were sad.

Steve looked away. "I guess. How's she doing?"

"The same. The nurse said she's getting more responsive, but I don't see it."

Steve had to ask. "Have they found out anything else?"

"No. They say they're still looking, but it's not like she's a priority, you know? At this point either she comes back or she doesn't."

Inside the apartment, Miri looked like she had been ladled into the armchair from above. The light from the TV tinted her face a wavering gray-white and glinted off her eyeballs. As Steve leaned down toward her, her fingers twitched together in her lap. Steve jumped; behind him Margot sucked in air, then let it out slowly.

Steve kissed Miri's cheek. She smelled almost like herself. For an instant he wondered if he would survive.

"Talk to her," Margot said. "Might as well."

Steve cleared his throat self-consciously. "Hi, sweetie." Margot brushed past him and went into the kitchen. Steve said, "So, I'm going to L.A. tomorrow." He sat down on the floor half-facing the armchair and picked up one of her hands. It felt like it had never held an object. He stretched the fingers flat and sandwiched the hand between his. "I wish you were coming," he said.

Margot came back into the room with beers, glanced at Steve, set the beers on the coffee table, plopped down next to him on the floor, and wrapped her lanky arm around his shoulders. "I know," she said, patting him. "It's OK." She smelled like Miri's shampoo; Steve softened against her, then immediately sat up again. With Miri's hand inert in his, Steve allowed himself the thought he had been trying to banish: that he wished, after all, that he had killed her.

The swanky official-sponsor grocery store is white like the set kitchen, like the chef's jackets with the contestant's name embroidered on the left breast and "MC!" on the right, like the soundstage where they filmed the show's promos. (Steve had to say, "When I cook, things get crrrazy!") All the whiteness makes Steve's ears ring. He feels like he's trapped in a locker room; at any moment the other chefs might descend on him and snap him with towels and tell him to put on a bra.

Gordon skitters through the store like a water bug; his cameraman can barely keep up. He caroms off Steve and knocks over a basket of quince.

"Quince!" Gordon sings, twirling. "Quince on the flo-ho-hor!" Steve squats to help corral the fruit. He puts a couple in his basket. Surely there's a place for quince in a quinoa-raisin torte. The meat could be quail. "Brought to

you by the letter Q," he could tell the judges.

Steve is all out of funny.

Nidhi stomps over to the quince basket, trailed by her camera. She's wearing the pink spiked collar today. "Fuck," she says to Steve and Gordon as a general greeting. "I cannot believe this bullshit challenge." Humming, Gordon wanders away to thump gourds.

"Fuck," Steve agrees. The theory among the chefs is that the more they swear during a conversation, the less likely that conversation will make it into an episode. They may be wrong. "It's fucking ridiculous. Who would ever make this bullshit?"

"Who would fucking eat it if they did?" Up close, Nidhi has under-eye circles you could park a boat in.

"Besides the motherfucking judges?"

"Motherfuckers. I could have Alain Ducasse growing out of my ass and they'd still call me an amateur." She kicks a stray quince, sending it bounce-rolling under a display of regional apples.

"Motherfuckers." Steve likes Nidhi. They smoke together on the roof in the evenings. For all her grouchiness she's a better person than sugary Selene, and more interesting than Allyson the Earnest Mom Doing It For Her Kids. "You made it this far," he offers. "They must think you're a good chef." If this were true, Steve wouldn't be here to say it.

Nidhi gives him a look. "Say something funny. Save your chunky ass."

"Fucking brown bitch."

Nidhi holds up a finger. "Let us not forget the herpes."

Steve's cameraman suppresses a laugh. "Do you find something amusing, young man?" Steve demands, gazing sternly into the camera.

"Damn it, Steve," says the cameraman. "Quit doing that, or you'll never get any airtime."

Nidhi swats Steve. "Come on, quit fucking around. Let's buy some motherfucking groceries."

Every challenge, Steve imagines he is Miri, walking the aisles. Imagines that doughs spring together beneath his masterful fingers. Imagines that herbs whisper to him, that knives – Kerzbrunners, of course – nestle content-



edly into his hand. Imagines that he wouldn't rather find a nice normal recipe, written by someone else, for something obviously delicious.

It never helps. Today he has the quinoa and the quince and the raisins and the carrots and the mascarpone and some flank steak and candied ginger and brandy for the mincemeat, but he's still stuck. He feels like a crucial lobe of his brain has been removed, but it's a lobe he never had. Until he met a woman who did have it, he never minded.

Miri was Boston brown bread baked in a coffee can. She was roast chicken gleaming amber under an oven light. She was bacon and scallions and potatoes and eggs and red peppers all fried together, popovers oozing butter, and brownies studded with half-melted chocolate chunks. She was a feast Steve couldn't believe he was invited to.

It must be a measure of his current mental state that he thinks of everything in gastronomic terms. He used to be nothing but a decent weekend cook. He liked to invent muffins to leave in the break room at his office and to invite friends and neighbors over for international experiments (like Spanakopita-palooza, when he and phyllo dough finally forged a truce).

Miri tagged along to the tapas party with the girls who lived downstairs. He got the impression she worked with one of them, but he barely had time to shake her hand with his hastily dried one before he had to dash back into the kitchen to save the calamari.

That night, Steve had been using the oven, the electric griddle, and all four burners of the gas range. With that, the landlord's apparent desire to slow-roast his tenants over the radiators, and the addition of nine extra bodies to Steve's one-bedroom apartment, everyone sweated. Steve's regular guests knew to dress in layers, and the ones who lived in his building showed up in the tank tops they'd been wearing already, but Miri hadn't been warned.

During dinner Steve watched her sweat: watched the roots of her soft dark hair dampen and separate and her nose begin to glisten, watched her wipe her upper lip dry with her napkin while pretending to blot away wine. She tried to push up the sleeves of her heavy sweater, but they wouldn't stay. She caught Steve watching her and yanked her hands apart as if she'd been doing something inappropriate, and then she smiled at him. "I'm overdressed."

Steve glanced down at her breasts, which were of a size that even the thick sweater was powerless against, and she caught him at that too.

"And I have boobs, yes."

Steve felt himself blush, but figured he was safe because he was already bright pink from the heat. "Sorry." He expected Miri to turn back to the friends she'd come with, but all along the table, conversations had sealed off. The girls from downstairs were debating whether to buy a rabbit, Steve's office mates were trying to enlist the couple from down the hall in their basketball pool, and Steve's old drug dealer was detailing some new chemical miracle to a nice kindergarten teacher Steve had just stopped trying to date. Steve and Miri were an island in the center. To keep it this way, he said the first thing that came into his head: "Do you want a shirt?"

"Do I what?" Miri leaned forward and her breasts pressed against the edge of the table.

"Do you want to borrow a t-shirt? I feel bad; it's a furnace in here."

"Oh, no, that's OK—" She considered. "Yes, please."

Steve wrestled his chair free of its neighbors and escaped. Miri followed him into the bedroom, plunked down on the pile of coats on the bed, then sprang up. "Ow! Keys."

Steve bent to look through his t-shirt drawer. He was giving her a detailed, close-up show of his butt, which was not exactly that of an Olympic swimmer, but he couldn't think of a graceful position to switch to.

"Listen," Miri said.

"What?"

"No, just listen."

Steve straightened up and listened. The sounds of the party came into focus: a jumble of laughs, the clunk of fork against earthenware. A woman called, "Mas sangria, por favor!" and giggled. Then came the gentle sucking sound of liquid pouring, and the clattering of ice cubes, and a man saying, "Is this really a squid? It's not bad!"

"Is there a better sound than that?" Miri smoothed a chunk of hair away from her face with a dreamy tenderness. "Happy people, enjoying your food?"

Steve, looking at Miri, the warmth of her brown eyes in her flushed face, the sweetness of her wine-reddened lips, the curve of her thighs against his mattress, could imagine a sound that might be better. After a pause he said, "It's beautiful." He wanted to touch her. More so when she came out of his bedroom in his old college t-shirt, twisting her hair off her neck. But he didn't make contact until he kissed her the next night, when she stopped by with the shirt, which smelled of some intoxicating alien detergent, and a paper plate of tiny pecan tarts with crusts like a shiver down the spine.

Miri worked for a caterer who didn't appreciate her, who wanted his advertised menus to be accurate, and who wasn't interested in learning to make or trying to sell her experiments. She took to calling Steve during down times at parties and weddings and describing her own version of the menu. Always she'd cut herself off with: "But you're a cook; you know how I feel."

So for her he was a cook. He complained to her about his software job, which he liked. Between dates he holed up at the library, taking notes on techniques and ingredients, which he both hoped and feared would come up in conversation.

The first time Miri cooked for Steve, she made simple dishes – roast chicken, potatoes, broccoli, biscuits – but their flavors were new, complicated, both what he expected and nothing like it. The broccoli had figs and Thai chilies in it, and Steve would have eaten the entire pot, except that the chilies accumulated and suddenly he realized his head was on fire.

"That was the best dinner I have ever eaten," Steve told Miri over dessert (carrot cupcakes with cardamom), raising his snifter of cool, soothing milk.

He expected denials – he'd learned already that Miri could not take a compliment – but she said, "Thank you." She leaned over the table, kissed Steve on the tip of the nose, and settled back. "Next time it's your turn."

All the next week, Steve imagined the scene. As he pored over his growing accumulation of cookbooks, he saw himself serving Miri the best food he had ever made – galaxies beyond even his spanakopita. The fulfillment of every ounce of his potential.

He saw Miri eating it. Saw her smile politely, nodding encouragement as if praising a child's drawing of a dog with all four legs on one side. Good try, Steve. Have a sticker.

Intellectually, Steve knew several things. He knew Miri had already eaten his tapas and enjoyed them. He knew that if Miri really liked him, she'd like him as a software analyst with above-average culinary skills. He knew he was being an insecure idiot, and the only smart course of action would be to cook a nice meal for Miri and let her reaction take care of itself.

He knew. And yet. If she left, if she stopped calling – the thought made Steve want to cry and hyperventilate and punch someone. He couldn't stand it. He couldn't risk it.

The night before his meal, his mind was such a frenzied and inhospitable landscape that finally he called his old drug dealer. Steve rarely bought from Joel now; he'd left his two-bowls-a-day habit in college, and he'd never had the guts to try one of the concoctions Joel smuggled home from work.

Joel's day job as a research chemist for a drug company dovetailed beautifully with his night job as a dealer, though the drug company and their stack of legal forms bearing Joel's signature wouldn't have seen it that way. His recklessness always seemed less brave than oblivious. Before Joel, Steve had thought of drug dealers as cool people with expensive jackets.

When Steve went to Joel's apartment to pick up the pot, Joel met him at the door. "I gotta show you this, this is the greatest, you will love it." He did a little grapevine into the living room.

"Man, can I just have my pot?"

"Check this out. Check this out!" Joel fumbled among jars and beakers on a table and pulled out a clear glass vial half full of a grayish-yellow powder. "That chick at your party wouldn't believe we were developing this. I bet she'd give me her number now!"

Poor kindergarten teacher. "Uh, sure," Steve said. "Can I –"

"It's perfect. They're testing it as a painkiller but it's so much better."

Steve rubbed his eyes. The apartment smelled like feet and hair dye and Hot Pockets. In eighteen hours Miri would be eating his food.

Joel uncapped the vial. "Smell it!" He shoved it into Steve's face. Here was the hair-dye odor, though faint. "See, isn't that great? Almost no smell!"

"Great, yeah."

Joel burst into a lengthy recitation of chemical detail. Steve recognized "carbon." Joel finished, breathlessly: "But you can't tell anyone the formula!"

"No," said Steve, "I can't."

"Help me think up a street name? It's a happy drug, so it needs a happy name."

"Like 'ecstasy'?"

"Don't be an asshole. It's nothing like that, it's much more subtle."

"Joel, can I please just have my pot and go?"

"You're so narrow-minded. This is better than pot. Nothing else is so gentle. You just eat a tiny bit and you're happy for like three hours."

"You eat it?"

"Sure! Just a tiny, tiny sprinkle. I've been putting it on my cereal."

Stillness trickled down Steve's limbs. He was afraid to move, afraid of what he might be about to do. He swallowed hard. "Is it addictive?"

Joel gave him an unbearably cocky grin. "Shouldn't be." He laid his lanky arm along Steve's shoulders. "Stephen, my friend, now is your chance. Become part of chemical history."

The next night, Steve seasoned both steaks with a spice rub that included turmeric, and one steak with a hint of an additional yellow powder. Just a sprinkle. No worse than serving her a drink, he kept telling himself.

Miri swallowed her first bite of steak and smiled politely. “It’s good.” Steve tried his own steak and found it deserved exactly that reaction: pleasant, not enthusiastic. He wondered about Joel’s chemical skills. He wondered how long this evening would last. He realized he was staring at Miri as she chewed, at the shifting contours of her jaw. A speck of yellow stuck to her upper lip.

Halfway through the steak, Miri’s pupils began to dilate. She sucked chipotle sweet potatoes off the fork in a new slow way that gave Steve an instant erection. Still holding the fork in front of her chin, Miri swallowed, tipped her head back, and moaned, “Oh, God.”

Sex that evening was otherworldly. Miri rubbed against Steve like a cat, murmuring low in her throat. Steve wished he had tried Joel’s powder himself, but the bliss rippling across Miri’s face was a high of its own. He felt like Paul Bunyan. Paul Newman. Paul Prudhomme.

The intensity of the high kept Steve awake worrying, but the next morning Miri seemed fine. “That was wonderful,” she said. “You can cook for me any time.”

Back in the show kitchen with his quince and his quinoa, Steve doesn’t feel like cooking for anyone. Certainly not the judges, who like to call his dishes “unsubtle” and “amateurish” and “baffling” and “Applebee’s.” They ask him what he was thinking. He says something wacky and self-deprecating. They tell him they’re not sure he has what it takes. They send someone else home.

At the station next to Steve’s, Allyson is boning a chicken. Steve can remember a time when he found this verb hilarious. The quick certain strokes of her knife mesmerize him, the brutal geometry, the surrender of the pale flesh. He’s too tired for this. Everything is so white.

Allyson rubs her nose with her forearm and notices Steve. “You doing OK over there?” She’s sympathetic but chiding, the total mom.

For the benefit of the camera behind him, Steve leers at her. “Just watching you bone.”

“Ha, ha.” She bends over the chicken and with the knife tip delicately wiggles a leg bone free. Steve turns back to his ingredients. First to marinate the steak: brandy, lemon juice, raisins, ginger, maybe something with more of a bite – would Miri use black pepper? Peppercorns? OK, peppercorns, sure. Selene crusts everything in peppercorns and the judges love it.

One of these days Steve is just going to snap and serve them a bowl of Rice Krispies.

Steve glugs brandy into a pan, then swigs from the bottle. Two challenges ago he would have done a terrible Julia Child impression to make Allyson laugh for the cameras. Or to launch Gordon into an endless ramble about grape farmers or something. Steve’s burned out on playing the funnyman.

Across the kitchen Gordon’s skinny shoulders sway delicately as he chops. Further down the same counter, Nidhi drops her Kerzbrunner with a clatter. “Motherfucker!” With one hand wrapped around the other wrist, holding it at chest height, she stalks to the nearest sink. A dark line of blood rolls down onto her cuff. She jerks the cold-water faucet on full blast, sticks the injured hand under it, yelps, and turns down the water pressure. Steve knows better than to offer sympathy. All the contestants get cut, and they’re all embarrassed when they do. Burns just happen when you work with hot food, but a cut signifies a lapse in knife skills or concentration. Steve isn’t sure how he’s kept all his fingers this long. He turns back to his station and very carefully cuts up the candied ginger and the flank steak.

Nidhi isn’t the only one having problems today. As Steve spreads his unsettlingly compliant quinoa-carrot batter into layer pans, there’s a shriek and a crash. Steve glances over and sees Selene amid a swamp of ground-meat mixture chunked with ceramic shards, her seamed stockings splattered with raw meringue.

His eyes round, Gordon sucks in a breath, like a child spotting an angry teacher. The camera operators scatter to capture everyone’s reaction. Nidhi, now wearing one rubber glove, could be fighting a smile. Allyson says, “Oh, no,” but makes no move to help Selene.

The producers make everyone wait in the lounge while production assistants clear the mess away. Selene plays woeful Kewpie doll for the cameras, but under the table her feet in their kitschy embroidered clogs lash against



the floor.

Selene has to start from scratch. Steve can't help feeling a little sorry for her. She's out of most of her ingredients, so she goes from chef to chef flirting for extras. Allyson gives her an artichoke. Gordon offers cornbread. Steve measures out his mascarpone and gives her the rest. Nidhi says, "Sorry, I'm using everything." Selene picks up a half-full jar of apple butter from Nidhi's work space. Nidhi snatches it out of her hand.

As Steve's torte layers bake, he beats puréed quince, cardamom and brown sugar into the mascarpone. And, what the hell, a few grinds of pepper. A fingertip taste astonishes him: it's good. He moves on to cooking the meat mixture on the stove. As the brandy sauce reduces, he leans over the pot and inhales. With the rich scent of the beef comes a prickle at the back of his nose and a wave of intricate sweetness. It smells like something people would want to eat. This shouldn't surprise Steve, but after the chitlins, after deconstructing Thanksgiving with culinary-school snot Ari as his partner, after trying to impress based-in schoolchildren with new twists on perfectly good snack foods — it does.

He's twisting around to give the nearest camera a big smile when Nidhi bellows, "God-fucking-damn it!" Another injury? No, she's scraping frantically at a pot on the stove. A cameraman moves in to film the food and Nidhi elbows him. She whirls to face the rest of the kitchen: "Who turned up this fucking burner?"

No one says anything. Gordon holds a bunch of sage in one hand and a knife in the other; both tremble. After a long silence, Selene shrugs cutely. "The flame had gone out," she says, innocent. "I just turned it back on."

With Joel's powder, Steve and Miri were equals. While Steve's guilt took a lot of the fun out of cooking for Miri, the rest of life made up for it. Miri told him how glad she was to have a boyfriend who shared her passions. They had sex that made Steve feel skinless. He used Joel's powder himself sometimes, but it didn't hit him like it did Miri. It knocked the world slightly askew, made it shimmery. Mostly it made him gaze at Miri. Even sober he couldn't get enough. He wanted to grip her hard enough to leave finger marks.

One night Miri showed up with a video camera and a link to the online application for a new cooking competition show on cable. She pushed Steve down in his computer chair and leaned her breasts against his shoulders as he read the webpage.

Steve knew he wasn't good enough, but Miri could convince him of anything simply by existing nearby. They made the tapes. Miri cooked her

signature broccoli and a chicken napoleon thing with ground walnuts, and though she didn't look at the camera enough, she came off as skilled and articulate and lovably giggly. Watching her through the lens, Steve thought his chest would explode. When they switched roles — and apartments, so producers wouldn't connect the two tapes — Steve was so uncomfortable that he cracked a compulsive string of dumb jokes, then tripped over his shoe and flung a loaded spatula across the kitchen. Gobs of soufflé batter slid down the fridge door. He convinced Miri not to reshoot and sent the tape in unedited. It wasn't like he had a chance on the show, but Miri wanted him to apply, and pleasing her was all that mattered.

And then this task got harder. As they waited to hear back from the show, the powder stopped working. Maybe Miri built up a tolerance; maybe something went wrong with Joel's latest batch. Miri's enthusiasm for Steve's food began to wane. The euphoria went out of the sex and left them on bare dry land.

Steve was already gripped by a desperate, finger-scrabbling panic before they had the fight. The fight arose from nowhere, from Miri's day of assembling timbales for the wedding of her high school boyfriend, from the wilting heat of Steve's apartment and a difference of opinion regarding which movie to see. When the flames died down, Miri's cheeks were shiny pink with tears, and the whole lower half of her face was clenched tight. Steve had seen this expression on her only once, not directed at him. He knew what would happen next: She would get up from the table. She would tell him he'd never fooled her, that she'd never seen anything but a fat impostor who couldn't cater a Lutheran picnic, a meat-handed fumbler whose sexual moves seventh-graders would mock. She would leave for good.

In a haze Steve went into the kitchen, dished out two bowls of the beef curry that was beginning to scorch on the stove and dug out his new bag of powder. Joel had sworn the last batch was fine, but in the face of Steve's desperate rage, he'd knocked twenty bucks off the price. Mechanically Steve sprinkled powder on top of one bowl. Watched the yellow grains float, insignificant. Added another sprinkling. Dumped more, maybe a tablespoon, straight out of the bag. Stirred it all in.

He set the bowl in front of Miri. "Here. Be happy."

After a few bites she smiled at him. "Thank you for cooking. I'm sorry I yelled." She tucked her hair behind her ear in the caressing way that always killed him.

After a few more bites her movements slowed, her face slackened. She groaned. She swirled her finger through her curry and held it across the

table for Steve to suck.

When Miri finished the bowl, she was swaying in her chair. Steve tried to get her to stand up, but she sagged like a beanbag. She slid down his legs to lean against his shins, looking up at him with vacant amusement. Then her expression flattened. She convulsed. Steve lunged to catch her before her head hit the floor. The dull sound of it hitting reverberated all through his skeleton.

His torte assembled and firming up in the fridge, Steve finds Nidhi on a couch in the lounge, not raging like he expected, but crying. Her elbows dig into her thighs and her spine curves downward like the graph of a disaster. Her camera guy films steadily. Steve wonders if the camera operators have trouble re-engaging when they leave work, if neutral observation becomes their default state.

He sits next to Nidhi and rubs her shoulder. “Don’t cry, motherfucking bitch.” Steve’s camera guy sighs.

Nidhi glances at Steve. Droplets balance on her lashes, powerless against the sheer volume of mascara. “I’m so gone.”

“Come on, what about fucking Selene? Did you fucking see her fucking dish?”

“She’s Selene.”

It’s a good point. Steve abandons the fuck-masking. “At least you’re going last. You have time for damage control.”

“They remember the last dish.”

“OK. So. Worst-case scenario: you get kicked off because of Selene. So you go to the hotel and watch HBO with Brittain and Jessica, and in like two days I show up and we all have a good time. And fucking Selene wins, like she was going to all along, and we all go find nice restaurant jobs and do a couple of talk shows. Yeah?”

“Fuck.” Nidhi starts crying again, harder, and Steve tries not to seem alarmed as he keeps rubbing her shoulder.

“Shit,” he says gently, “I didn’t think you cared so much.”

Nidhi punches him in the arm, hard. “You asshole, how else am I going to get my restaurant?”

“Loan?”

“My credit fucking sucks. No one will lend to me. My family doesn’t talk to me, and, God, look at me. Who’s going to invest in some fuckup dyke’s curry place?” Nidhi never makes Indian food. “I don’t even know anyone with money. Do you have money?”

“No.”

“Fuck you, then.” Nidhi drags the toe of her boot across the industrial carpet, producing a shuddering noise.

“Maybe it’s just a little burned.”

“Fucking charred.”

“Still. Remember my postmodern blackened turkey fritters? And they kicked off Hoa because his potatoes were too simple.”

“Those were some fucking great potatoes.”

“Uh-huh.”

Steve puts his arm around Nidhi and they sit in silence, listening to the muffled sounds of plating, clanks and scrapes and the distant farting of squirt bottles. Gordon’s voice yells, “Balsamic now!”

“I miss cooking for people who don’t know about food,” Steve hears himself say.

Nidhi peels the rubber glove away from her wrist and stretches it until it threatens to tear. “I just want my restaurant.” She lets the glove snap back and winces in a satisfied way. “All I ever wanted is a goddamn restaurant.”

Steve’s heart lurches. He has heard this exact sentence before: Miri’s couch, with the mingled scents of fried chicken and sweaty scalp rising from her hair. Her boss has chewed her out again for deviating from the recipes. She wants to strike out on her own so badly. Angry tears shine on her flushed cheeks and tense jaw. She’s upset enough to swear.

Steve looks at Nidhi. Her spikes and angles and what’s-it-to-you posture couldn’t remind him less of Miri’s softness, but the despair in her dark eyes is piercingly familiar. In that look Steve sees adorable villain Selene defeat everyone who plays fair. Everything is wrong. Miri should have had a restaurant.

“Motherfucker,” he tells Nidhi, “take a walk with me.”

Joel offered one last batch for free to thank Steve for not killing him. “I told you, just a sprinkle,” he pleaded, his eyes darting around his living room. This was after Joel showed too much scientific interest in Miri’s overdose – “Did her lips look blue at all? Was she having trouble breathing? We’ve had some depressed lung function in the rats, but only with huge doses, just ridiculous” – and Steve punched him in the eye.

Steve considered punching Joel again, but he took the bag. At home, he left it on the table so it snagged him every time he passed. Late one bleak night, he washed down a spoonful with a glass of water. It tasted like dust. He lay on his bedroom floor all night, finding patterns in the sheetrock, alter-

nately laughing, sobbing, and yanking hairs out of his arm. The next morning he felt weak, cleansed, loosened. The world stretched flat around him like a calm sea. What good were guilt and grief and anger? That the doctors had already classified Miri's case as a medical fluke, not a criminal matter, was a sign. Miri would be OK, or not, and so would Steve. All he needed was a change of scene. When he flew to L.A. for his final interview, he brought along a jar labeled "Turmeric."

They manage to evade cameras for just long enough to cram into a bathroom stall and confer.

"I swear I haven't used it here. I haven't even taken it out of my cabinet." Steve had meant to use it carefully, to stay on the show, right up until his last visit to Miri's apartment. After that, he smoked all his pot and spent half the night taking the jar out of his suitcase, imagining implausible ways to destroy it, shaking it to watch the powder clump and separate, and putting it back in the suitcase. In the rush to catch his plane the next morning, he forgot to take it out again.

"I swear," Steve repeats.

Nidhi looks skeptical, but she follows Steve out of the bathroom, back into the white chaos of the kitchen. Their cameras catch up with them ("Damn it, Steve!"), and they're in trouble, and Gordon's dessert is going out to the judges right now, now! plates! and Selene is twittering over her ginger artichoke bread pudding, trying to unmold the soupy mess onto a plate, and Allyson is shaving strips from a block of chocolate, but they keep crumbling and she says "Shit!" in her wholesome mom-voice, and who could notice or care that Steve digs a spice from the back of his workspace cabinet and shows it to Nidhi?

Steve shakes the powder into a ramekin: one, two, three, four scant shakes, one per judge. Against the glass it looks like nothing.

"That's it?"

"Just a tiny sprinkle. That's all you need." He pushes the jar against the back wall of the cabinet. Nidhi opens her mouth as if to protest, then shakes her head and takes the ramekin to her station.

A frazzled Gordon returns from judging and goes into the lounge. Allyson carries her chicken artichoke custard tarts with chocolate shavings into the judging room – Allyson's food always sounds awful and tastes great – and Selene angrily ladles her pudding into bowls. Steve sets his torte on the counter and admires. The layers are clean and distinct, and while the colors – orangey brown, muddy brown, and pale green – won't awe any-

one, the contrasts of chewy cake, silky filling, and syrupy/tender mincemeat might. It smells wonderful. He hates to cut it. He's scattering raspberries next to the first dense slice when Nidhi appears behind him: "Looking good, motherfucker."

"Thanks. How's it going over there?"

With a quick fingertip, Nidhi swipes a blob of quince filling from between the layers. As she tastes, pleasure flashes across her face. What replaces it looks like fear.

"Hey!"

"Cut from the other side, dumbass." The words are normal, but her voice is suddenly cold. She scoops more filling from the other side and is gone.

Unsettled, Steve trims one of the disemboweled edges. He tries a forkful. It's tasty, almost the Miri dish he'd imagined. Allyson returns, smiling, and joins Gordon in the lounge. Selene pastes on her cutest expression and carries pudding into the judging room. Steve arranges raspberries. Across the kitchen, Nidhi mutters.

Before they try his dessert, the judges tell Steve he seems subdued. They ask if he's having trouble with his fellow chefs. He should crack a joke, but all that comes out is, "I'm tired." Like Brittain, he is ruining his edit.

The guest judge from L'Etoile calls the torte "exquisite." The food writer, a finch-like old woman, twinkles at him: "Steve, who really made this?" The fitness model takes an uncharacteristic second bite. The head judge tilts his head, regards Steve through his professor-ish glasses, and decrees, "You've been holding out on us. This is very nice work."

Steve watches them eat his food without grimacing or invoking the names of chain restaurants. The clink of forks and the moist sounds of chewing begin to dissipate the fog he's been living in. He had forgotten how good this feels. A longing to share this with Miri lances through him.

Back in the kitchen, he stops by Nidhi's station to wish her good luck. Breathing loudly through her nose, she continues grating lemon zest over her ugly heaps. Steve walks away, snubbed. Something about Nidhi's sauce is odd.

The color is different. Yellower.

He dives for his cabinet. The jar is gone.

The door to the judging room slams shut behind her. Steve follows. All four judges, Nidhi, and four cameras turn their gazes on him.

"Out," the head judge says.

"Was there something you wanted?" the little food writer asks nicely. Steve blurts, "Don't eat that!"



The judges exchange looks. “Why not?” the head judge asks. Nidhi’s eyes, desperate, defiant, are skewering Steve right through. “Please don’t eat it.” He hears himself, how pathetic he sounds, how jealous.

The head judge clearly agrees. “Nidhi’s food isn’t your problem.”

Steve fumbles to speak, knowing he has to explain, has to, but unable to make himself say the words that will destroy everything, and Nidhi stares him down with those eyes until his neck prickles, and then a production assistant escorts him out.

He sits on the floor of the kitchen, running his finger along the blade of a Kerzbrunner. It doesn’t cut him. They’re crappy knives. From the judging room he hears Nidhi trying to talk over the judges. No one sounds happy. Nidhi’s tone becomes pleading, and the other voices go silent. Then begin again, more cheerful. Someone laughs. Someone else. They are all laughing. Someone pounds the table and a dish breaks and the laughter doubles in size. Someone moans. The sounds become cacophonous, bristling and bulging in all directions, and Steve starts to wonder about the cameras, the producers. Will they step in, or is a table of tripped-out judges too good to cut short?

Someone cries out. A PA runs in, clutching a towel. Steve sees behind her a crush of people and cameras on the far side of the judges’ table, a pair of tiny yellow pumps protruding. People shout “Check her pulse!” and “Who’s got 911?” The head judge leans on the table, wheezing. Nidhi stands like stone.

As the commotion splinters and spreads, as Gordon and Allyson and Selene and their cameras come in from the lounge to investigate, as the ambulance is called and the wet towel is draped across the food writer’s forehead and the other judges are helped to lie down on the floor, as Nidhi is ushered into the lounge by a producer, Steve stands in his white slice of kitchen and admires his torte. It is beautiful. If he had more powder, he’d pour it all on top. He stabs a fork into it and chunks crumble off the side, but in his mouth the cake is perfect. The raisins yield in a voluptuous burst of brandy, and the pepper strokes the back of his nose, and his teeth journey downward through the textures, through chewy and springy and creamy and back to springy, home again in quinoa, and it is so good, this thing he made, good enough for Miri, so good he stands there eating and eating, filling himself with its intricate spiced sweetness, crowding out the death of the old woman, this maelstrom of good television, all the bitter things about to happen.