



SHORT STORIES BY:



CHOONG JAY VEE

CHIN AI-MAY

FOO SEK HAN

SHARMILLA GANESAN

CATALINA REMBUYAN

LEROY LUAR

ABD QAYYUM JUMADI

WONG PEK MEI

PAUL GNANASELVAM

TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA

MARTIN VENGADESAN

SUKHBIR CHEEMA

CLAUDIA SKYLER FOONG

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KL NOIR X YELLOW



KL NOIR

TO THE BITTER END

AMBROSIA



TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA

It looked like the carcass of some tentacled sea monster, floating on a sea of red. Aaron Gomez sighed.

The fool cannot poach an egg.

It was supposed to be a stunningly simple starter: poached egg in tomato soup. Yet, the idiot had managed to bungle the most basic of dishes. The idiot in question was the man standing in front of Aaron—a bespectacled, grey-haired, middle-aged man wearing a baggy green polo shirt that stretched taut over his beer belly.

His name was Simon Loh. Aaron knew that because he always made it a point to have all participants introduce themselves before commencing the three-hour-long class. His prodigious ability to save and file away hundreds of names of people he had already met or been introduced to in his memory was a point of pride for Aaron.

Aaron used a slotted spoon to scoop the deformed monster out onto a stainless steel tray. He then sliced into the beast's heart, a tough yellow thing of no beauty.

"Simon," he began, trying his best to keep his voice calm and even, "you've got to poach the egg in water that's barely simmering. See, if you do it with hot water, the yolk's not going to be runny. And see all this white stuff around it? That's because the loose egg white is all over the place when it congeals in hot boiling water."

"Yes, Mr. Gomez. I understand. Let me try again."

Aaron nodded and quickly moved on to the other participants.

Eugene Lee appeared to have a handle on things; the tall well-built underwear model was plating and garnishing his main dish, a classic country-style ratatouille, to be served with a side of toasted baguette slices. He might be an amateur cook, but with his good looks, Aaron could see the boy going on to become a decent food-show host.

The matronly Kak Long was just completing her appetizer: sautéed scallops on top of corn salsa. Not a hard dish by any measure, but getting scallops just right can be a challenge for any home cook.

“Kak Long,” he said, “these scallops are just slightly undercooked. It’s not that bad, really. I much prefer scallops that are slightly undercooked to those that are overcooked because then they have the consistency of rubber. Just make sure you keep them in the pan a tad longer next time.”

Kak Long nodded apologetically.

Moving on, Aaron saw to his surprise that one of the participants had already moved on to dessert. Pia, a slender lady who looked to be in her mid-thirties, was making the filling for the peach and blackberry pie, a workhorse dessert that was always a big hit with the participants and crew members.

She was one of those catering chefs, looking to pick up a tip or two; generally, Aaron held such chefs in low regard, considering them cowards for turning their backs on the restaurant industry for something that was a tad safer but a lot more boring and repetitive. But despite his personal view of catering chefs, he always gave credit where credit was due.

“Well done.”

Pia turned toward him and smiled. “Thank you, Chef.”

Not really a stunner. Nose too sharp and crooked. Besides receiving his cut of the fees the following Monday, looking at the more beautiful female participants was one of the very few highlights of Aaron’s cooking class. If he had to spend time with these nobodies, he might as well treat his eyes to some candy in the process. Unfortunately, eye-candy was in short supply this time around.

Aaron continued hopping from one participant to another, making sure they did not botch things up too badly. Thankfully, besides an air-headed ex-stewardess cooking her filet mignon to a piece of charcoal, there were no other serious mishaps.

As the clock was winding down and the participants adding the final touches, Aaron found himself staring into space, wondering what twists and turns his life had taken such that the highlight of his Saturdays was now a twenty-some-person cooking class that begun way too early in the morning.



He graduated from a no-name backwater culinary school in the early ‘90s, whereupon he then did what was expected of him: eke out a living under the harsh neon lights and smog-clogged air of Kuala Lumpur. Life in the congested metropolis became a subsistent affair, a carousel of far more downs than ups.

After what seemed like a lifetime of flipping burgers, dunking fries in smoking hot oil, and scrambling millions of eggs, Aaron caught his first big break as the sous chef of a modest fifty-seater Italian restaurant in Ampang. Two years down the road, he took over as head chef. A year later, he was poached by the discerning restaurant manager of Le Parapluie, the famous French brasserie-style restaurant in Changkat Bukit Bintang—the only French restaurant in Malaysia at the time.

Aaron gave ten years of his life to Le Parapluie, five of that as the head chef; under his stewardship the restaurant prospered. Unknown to the rest of his staff, friends or family, Aaron had also spent those years working on a book about the underbelly of Malaysia's professional culinary industry. In his penultimate year at Le Parapluie, he decided that he had worked on it long enough and moved on to the next stage: publication.

His manuscript was summarily rejected by eight publishers. The ninth one pitied him and decided to take a gamble. *Belly, Belly Good* was released in April 2006, and became an overnight sensation, making it to the top of Kinokuniya's Southeast Asian Bestsellers List in its first week. The book and its large public following transformed Aaron Gomez into a celebrity chef, the "rock-'n'-roll bad boy of Malaysia's culinary scene."

With his new-found fame, Aaron headed south across the Causeway to take up the invitation to be the head chef at Il Tramanto, one of Singapore's best Italian restaurants.

One and a half years later, Aaron received an offer from the Four Seasons Resort Jimbaran Bay, Bali. Upon seeing the staggering amount of money they were willing to offer him, Aaron said yes and hopped on a plane in a fortnight.

A year later, the Asian Food Channel came to him with an even more irresistible offer: his own twenty-four-episode travel and food show. Hungry to try new and different things, Aaron took the plunge and left the restaurant industry behind.

The show, titled *The Food Diaries*, proved to be a moderate hit and was extended for another two seasons. Aaron also wrote *Wok Hey!*, a sequel to *Belly, Belly Good*. The follow-up book, like his TV show, enjoyed moderate success, but the sales figures were a lot lower than for his first book.

Aaron still received the occasional offer from new restaurants looking to build new empires across the region's culinary map, but he declined all of them, not because they were bad offers, but he had come to realize one thing: his body was no longer able to withstand the long, grueling hours in a commercial kitchen. And he had more than enough money by then anyway.

He continued living it up as Malaysia's bad-boy celebrity chef, attending glitzy parties hosted by the A-listers of the local entertainment industry and indulging in debauched soirées of self-confessed dilettantes and narcissistic politicians alike; smoking weed in his new-found-friends' million-dollar mansions and doing tequila shots off some model's stomach also became common events in his weekly schedules.

Aaron thought the whole thing was a grand adventure.
His wife did not.

The divorce ended up on the third page of the papers but after a week or two, the buzz started dying down. With the bad-boy image that Aaron had made his trademark, the media had expected the couple to split up sooner or later. She went away and took their daughter with her.

Life did not seem all that great to Aaron after the divorce. Professionally, he had two bestselling books, one hit TV show and was regarded as one of Malaysia's five Heavenly Chefs. But inside, he was a mess.

The parties and soirées started turning into hollow affairs and great sinkholes of time; the weed-smoking and tequila-drinking slowly became empty little gestures that frittered away energy and passion. Eventually, he declined all invitations. The only events he went to were those that were approved by his manager, and most were food related.

Aaron knew his glory days were numbered—that is the fate of all celebrity chefs, especially those who were no longer cooking professionally for a living. He figured he had perhaps another two books left in him and maybe another two to three seasons of television before fading into obscurity.

There were times where he would find himself missing the old life, of working in the kitchen, not having to worry about what he would be doing an hour or two from now because he would be in the zone, moving to the left, to the right, sautéing, poaching, plating, garnishing, bringing it to

the hot pass and then calling out the next ticket. The constant pressure to deliver his best, the camaraderie with his brigade, and the high after great service were the things that had made him feel truly alive.

It was during these quieter moments of self-reflection that Aaron Gomez dared to admit to himself that perhaps not all the life choices he had made so far had been the right ones.



Aaron awarded the best participant in the class the Gomez Gold Award (a certificate that cost about RM5 to produce) and stood there for all of seven seconds so that the photographer could take the shot. Another minute or so was spent offering the winner and the rest of the class some pithy observations and remarks before Aaron finally made his way off stage and headed toward the studio exit door.

“Thanks,” the cameraman said as Aaron passed him by.

Aaron merely nodded and walked on. He looked at his watch again. Fifteen minutes to noon. He was still pretty full from the breakfast that the studio assistants prepared for him before class, so he was in no hurry to head off to lunch just yet. Not that he had any lunch appointments today.

As he made his way toward the door, he caught sight of Zak Ahmad Shariff approaching from the corner of the studio.

Shit.

Zak was his TV show's executive producer and was involved in anything that required Aaron to get behind a camera—like today's cooking class. He was also an incredibly annoying, iron-fisted perfectionist with a zero-tolerance policy when it came to mistakes. He also had the sense of humor of a dried-up slug.

"Aaron."

Aaron resigned himself to his fate and turned wearily toward Zak. "Yes, Zak?"

"Did you go over the agenda?"

"What agenda?"

Zak took a deep breath. "The Bangkok agenda. I emailed it to you yesterday morning."

"Dude, it's a Saturday morning. Surely you can give me the weekend to reply."

Zak took another deep breath. "That's the same thing you said about the Sarawak agenda, which you never read. And look what happened."

"Oh geez. Are you still going on about that? It looks like you've still got your panties in a knot over that. Dude, make like the song and just let it go, okay?"

"Don't you 'dude' me. And I'm not going to let it go. You insulted the entire longhouse. If only you'd just done..."

"What I told you to do," Aaron finished the sentence, mimicking Zak's voice unconvincingly.

Lines of fury were beginning to creep onto Zak's face. The other crew members were starting to stare and whisper among themselves.

"Listen, don't bust a gut about it," Aaron said. "I'll read it over the weekend and get back to you on Monday. Take a chill pill."

"You're an asshole, Gomez."

"Hey, it takes one to know one, asshole."

With that, Aaron reached for the door. He could feel Zak staring daggers into his back as he departed, but he just could not be bothered anymore.



Aaron got into the car and looked at his watch again. He knew of one person he could—no *should*—meet today.

"Luan, take me to Paulo's office."

Luan nodded and proceeded to join the flow of traffic heading toward Petaling Jaya. Aaron's last driver had made the decision to return to Jakarta three weeks ago. Luan Santos was the man's replacement, and he could not be more different from the Indonesian man. Firstly, Luan was taller than Aaron by an inch or two, and a whole lot bigger. And all that extra bulk was pure muscle. Secondly, Luan was always on time and hardly spoke, two traits that Aaron considered absolutely essential for a good driver.

Aaron grabbed the newspaper from the front seat and began to peruse the soap opera that was Malaysian politics. Almost half an hour later, they finally arrived at Damansara Uptown. Aaron hated coming here. The shops in the commercial center looked out of date and ugly.

And the way the entire place was designed, with tiny little lanes allowing access to rows of shops that formed a square around the center office blocks, meant that it only took just one uncle stopping his car by the side of a shop to offload his grandmother, mother, wife, kids and the entire clan to bring a grinding halt to traffic. The place had the architectural charm of a centipede feasting on its tail end.

He handed Luan a twenty ringgit note. "Go treat yourself to some Starbucks, Luan. I'll probably be an hour or so with Paulo. Hopefully."



Paulo Maeda worked in what could best be described as a shoebox, at least by Aaron's standards. The office had enough room for Paulo's work table, one shelf behind him, another smaller one to the side, and that was about all. Aaron sat down, noticing that Paulo had barely acknowledged his presence and was staring at the computer screen, which was placed at such an angle that only Paulo could see it.

"What you doing there, Paulo? Looking at porn again?"

Paulo's mouth broke out ever so languidly into a thin-lipped smile. "Booking flight tickets actually."

Aaron was caught by surprise because Paulo hardly went anywhere. But then he remembered.

"Oh, right. Your holiday. Where to again?"

"Hong Kong, first. After that, we'll see."

"Who are you going with again?"

“Just the two of us—my girlfriend and me.”

“Ah, yes. The girlfriend,” Aaron said. “I remember you mentioning something to that effect. When am I going to meet this incredibly unlucky lady?”

Another miserly smile from Paulo. “When the time is right, I suppose.” Paulo clicked his mouse and seconds later, his printer started chugging as it was brought back to life. “Where’s Luan?”

“Oh, probably at Starbucks. I gave him a twenty and told him to wait for me.”

“You like Luan so far? He’s okay?”

“A lot better than Fahmi,” said Aaron. “Where did you find him? You guys knew each other back during your time in the homeland?”

Paulo actually chuckled. “What? You think just because we both came from Brazil that we somehow know each other? Brazil has more than six times as many people as Malaysia and is more than two hundred times larger.”

“Okay, okay,” Aaron said. “So sue me. I haven’t been to Brazil before.”

“He’s an acquaintance of an acquaintance’s acquaintance.”

“What a mouthful.”

Paulo reached for the paper that came out of the printer, made sure everything on it was in order, then placed it into yellow plastic folder. “Now, I assume you’re not here to bust my balls, so shall we get down to business?”



Paulo Maeda had always been a survivor, no matter what life threw at him. As a young man without any education or family, he had attempted to stowaway on a ship that was departing Rio de Janeiro for Australia, hoping that he could start a new life in a country that had far fewer people.

The ship's captain had other thoughts, however, when he found the young Paulo within the ship's cargo hold. The grizzled sea veteran promptly dumped Paulo in Pork Klang before continuing to Australia. It was all Paulo could do to survive the first week; he had no money and knew no one in this foreign land.

However, he had a healthy young body, and that was sufficient for him to scrape by. When he had enough money, he headed for the bright and shiny lights of the nation's capital, hoping to make a name for himself.

Twenty years later, one of Aaron's acquaintances had mentioned Paulo after Aaron had just fired his previous manager and was out and about looking for a new one. Aaron had called Paulo in for an interview and had been impressed.

Paulo had been managing a local starlet at the time and appeared to be a very level-headed man. More importantly, the Japanese-Brazilian was the only candidate who had not fawned all over him or tried to ingratiate himself into Aaron's good graces. It was a quality that Aaron respected; he had seen too many bootlickers and brownnosers in his tumultuous rise to the top of Malaysia's culinary scene.

The reserved man had reacted to the news with a nod, a soft "thank you" and a firm handshake.



“Do you have the forms with you?”

Aaron opened the file with the transparent sleeves and took out a small stack of forms. “Here you go. It’s all in there.”

Paulo took the forms and scanned each one briefly. “Looks like everything is in order. I’ll give these to the right people.”

“I still don’t know why she couldn’t come and see me herself,” Aaron remarked. “It’s not like I’m going bite. Much.”

“Divorces are always messy affairs,” Paulo said matter-of-factly. “She’s probably hurting just as much too.”

“Hmph,” Aaron snorted. “And what’s with the will, kemo sabe? You think I’m going to be keeling over any time soon?”

Paulo sighed. “A will is a must for anyone our age. It’s a smart thing to do, like insurance. Think of it as a lifeline for your soon-to-be ex-wife and daughter, in case anything happens to them.”

Aaron remained quiet for a few seconds before deciding to change the topic and focus on work instead. “What have I got on my schedule? I’m really looking forward to sitting in as a judge for that offal-cooking contest. I want to see what that new guy can do with tripe and coxcomb.”

“That’s next month. I think you should be looking forward to next week’s event, instead. Pour some of your interest that way.”

“And what’s next week’s event again?”

Paulo rubbed his temples. "I told you to go through the brief. It's that mega-event in Damansara Heights. That socialite party thing. Next Wednesday."

"Shit. Next Wednesday? I thought that was a month away."

"You always forget the dates. Aren't you glad you have me?"

"Overjoyed. What's this whole party thing about again?"

Paulo sighed and rubbed his temples more vigorously. "It's a charity fundraiser dinner, organized by one of Jane Lim's charity foundations. It will be held at one of her houses in Damansara Heights, a very nice house I hear."

"What are they fundraising for?"

"Saving the poor children in Africa. Or something like that."

Aaron rolled his eyes but gestured for Paulo to continue.

"So as I was saying," Paulo began, "It's a fundraising party sort of event. But the organizers have turned it into a themed party, based on *Cluedo*."

"The board game?"

"Yes. Guests will go about the house, looking for clues, trying to deduce who carried out the crime or some such nonsense, and the team who makes the right guess gets a nice cash prize."

"I thought this was a fundraiser?"

Paulo scratched his nose. "Well, Jane Lim isn't noted for being very bright. Perhaps they'll convince the winners to donate their reward to the foundation?"

Aaron snorted. "And my role in this? Preparing the food for all the movers and shakers of Kuala Lumpur?"

"Yes," Paulo confirmed. "Like I said, it's going to be the biggest and hottest event in KL next week. And, as I mentioned in that brief which you did not read, the rest of the Heavenly Chefs will be there as well."

"Jimmy? And the rest as well?"

"Yes. All five of the Heavenly Chefs will be in charge of the food and drinks for the guests. Like I said, mega-event, and Jane Lim wanted only the best. Which is only natural, since she's asking her guests for their money."

"Fine. I'll go," Aaron replied. Although he hated the idea of attending yet another party for the elites of the city, he was rather looking forward to meeting up with Jimmy and the other chefs. It had been a long time since they had been together.

"Go back, read the brief. You'll find notes on what you need to do to prepare. Jimmy's already suggested some good people to have in the kitchen."

"Yeah, yeah. Fine," Aaron said. "Now look who's busting whose balls."

Paulo sighed and browsed the open planner on his desk. "Looks like you're just about set for next week then. No need to find me again until next weekend. I know you hate coming here."

"I wish you'd move to a better office."

"I don't like big offices," Paulo replied. "Small, compact and efficient. That's how I always run my ship."

Aaron shook his head in feigned disbelief. "I pay you well enough to move out of this dump." He began getting up to leave but then remembered something. "Hey, I almost forgot. I read the second part of your manuscript last night."

"What did you think?"

"Well, you know, I don't write fiction, so take my comments well-salted. I liked how Eric Payne did the whole Sherlock Holmes thing in the beginning and pretty much solved the case without any police assistance. That's pretty cool. But that last scene? What was the point of him crying and asking that big philosophical question? *What can change the nature of a man?*"

"It's a question I ask myself often," Paulo said, reclining in his leather high-back chair. "What does it take, what has to happen to them, for a person to be able to change the very way they perceive themselves."

"Sounds very *The Tempest*." Aaron got up again to leave. "If you ask me, it was a good read. But I'd put in a little more action. Some fisticuffs, you know? Most readers are looking for a bit of escapist fun. Make them think too deeply about huge existential questions, and they might lose interest."

Paulo shrugged. "Perhaps I'm going after a different sort of audience?"

"Well, champ," Aaron said as he opened the door, "then you've got the guts I never had."



4 days later, Wednesday

Aaron got into the car. It was the day of Jane Lim's *mega-event*.

"Morning, Mr. Gomez."

"Morning, Luan."

"To Damansara Heights now, Mr. Gomez?"

"Yes, head to Damansara Heights, please."

"OK, Mr. Gomez. Just sit back and relax."

Luan then proceeded to punch in the address into the GPS unit and it took all of 5 seconds for the suggested route to show up. Aaron reached for the papers in the front seat like he always did and spotted something underneath the newspaper. He reached for it and brought it up to his face for a closer look.

It was some sort of seed, or perhaps a kind of nut, with a waxy, shiny exterior, and black markings on a light brown shell. Aaron was not sure what sort of seed or nut it was, but he was a little surprised; the inside of Luan's car had always been immaculately clean, to the degree that Aaron was beginning to suspect that the man might be suffering from OCD.

"Didn't know you were into snacking on the healthy stuff, Luan."

The change in Luan's expression was subtle, but Aaron did not miss it: the stoic, impassive mask slipped, just for an instant, to be replaced with one that was an odd combination of shock, guilt and horror.

"I-I'm sorry, Mr. Gomez. I always keep the car clean. I..."

“Relax, Luan. You’ve taken great care of the car. In fact, I think you’re the cleanest driver I have ever met.”

Luan extended his left palm to Aaron. “Come, Mr. Gomez. Let me throw it out.”

Not wanting to inflict further stress upon the big man, Aaron dropped the seed into Luan’s hand. Luan then rolled down the window and threw it outside before wiping his hand with a piece of tissue.

Okay. Definite OCD-level neat freak here. Aaron then opened the papers and began reading.



The house on the hill looked like it had jumped right out of an interior design magazine spread. Main entrance accessed through a wood walkway paired with a powder-coated rail system. Living room with an open floor plan that allowed guests to look out and down upon other houses that were probably equally as exorbitantly expensive and tastefully decorated. Centrally located stairwell girded with solid wooden planks with subdued metallic balustrades. Bathrooms that were more than the equal of any five-star resort’s.

Aaron knew all about food porn. Looking around him, he surmised that there must surely be interior design porn out there as well. It was less a house, more a mansion decked out with the most stylish, tasteful and modern of furnishings. *That Jane Lim certainly picked the right house to play giant Cluedo in. Miss Scarlet and Professor Plum indeed.*

He proceeded to make his way to one room where his services would be needed, a spacious L-shaped kitchen with a big island in the center void that came with its own bar.

And there they were, the other Four Heavenly Chefs.

Jimmy Chong, the only chef in Malaysia with a restaurant that had been awarded a Michelin star. Ever since Gorengz earned the coveted culinary award, the Malaysian press had continuously lauded the tough-as-nails chef as Malaysia's Godfather of Fine Dining. He was also one of the star judges on *Masterchef Malaysia* and well-known for his perfectionism, fiery temper and no-nonsense approach to cooking. He was also one of Aaron's closest friends.

Hazrie Osman was nicknamed "The Wizard" by the media on account of his all-encompassing love for melding science and culinary technique. The mild-mannered man was a pioneer of molecular gastronomy and famous even outside the region for his unorthodox dishes.

James Guntam was a native of Sarawak who had enjoyed a brilliant career overseas, working for the best restaurants in the UK but who had decided to return to Malaysia to open his first restaurant. An extremely likable man who had the energy of a man half his age, James was a prolific cookbook writer, having more cookbooks than the other Heavenly Chefs combined.

Shenara D'souza was considered a domestic goddess by the media and public alike. Although never having trained as a chef, Shenara's TV show, *Life and Cooking with Shenara*, enjoyed very high ratings. Renowned for the flirtatious

manner in which she cooked and spoke both on and off her show, Shenara was widely considered a media darling and the most approachable of the Five Heavenly Chefs.

"There's the skinny fucker," Jimmy Chong bellowed, taking a break from chopping tomatoes to down a gulp of red wine.

"Late as always," Hazrie muttered, shaking his bald head in mock disappointment.

Aaron shrugged. "I'm not a morning person. Looks like you all started without me anyway."

"Mate, if we had to wait for you, we'd never get things done," said James, busy showing one of the assistants the best way to devein a prawn.

"Have a glass of wine, Gomez," said Shenara, as she handed him one. "Shiraz, Australia."

Aaron took a sip then studied the orderly chaos around him. "What do we do again?"

Jimmy proceeded to make short work of another batch of tomatoes. "Three dishes each. Our best. The catering company will handle the hors d'oeuvres and the rest. Bring out the big guns, Gomez. We'll have an early dinner after we've done the prep and the major stuff."

"See. I told you. He didn't read the brief. Again," Hazrie said.

"Fuck you, Hazrie," Aaron replied.

"When?" Hazrie retorted.

"Now, boys," Shenara drawled. "Let's play nice. We got work to do. Let's leave the claws for later, shall we?"



By the time they were done, it was already a quarter to five. They dismissed all the kitchen assistants, who had to return to the catering company's headquarters in Hartamas to help prepare and deliver the rest of the food. The only ones left in Janet Lim's mansion were the five Heavenly Chefs and a small team of serving staff who were also employees from the catering company and were on standby to replenish wine glasses for the chefs, and later on, the guests. They moved swiftly whenever called for, and went about their job without as much as a sound.

Aaron and his peers were enjoying their early dinner in the smaller dining area attached to the kitchen; it was a meal that would hopefully keep them going for the rest of the night. He was actually looking forward to the night's main event, and not because of the ridiculous sum of money that Jane Lim was paying him, but because the time spent with the other chefs had put him in high spirits.

"All I'm saying," said James to the rest, "is that you don't need to go about putting so many unnecessary ingredients on a plate that's filled with glorious fresh produce."

"Yes," Shenara agreed, "let the produce speak for itself."

"Where's your sense of experimentation?" Hazrie countered. "People expect more when they go to a fine dining establishment lah. Tak kan you serve them fish and chips, right?"

“With the high prices at your place, of course they expect more lah, friend,” said Jimmy Chong, laughing.

“You have to pay for cutting-edge stuff,” Hazrie replied matter-of-factly.

“Like liquid nitrogen and edible wood?” Aaron offered.

“Aiyoh, please lah. You don’t even cook anymore,” Hazrie countered.

“That’s true,” Aaron replied, before raising his glass of Sauvignon. “So here’s to me cooking again! And seeing all you losers again!”

The four other chefs raised their glasses. “To more good fortune ahead!” roared Jimmy Chong. “Yam seng!”



Aaron turned his heavy head, peering out the glass window. The sky was getting dark, and he could see even darker clouds and brilliant flashes of lightning on the horizon.

That’s no good. A storm will mean everyone gets stuck in traffic and people will show up two hours late. Aaron placed his hand on the leather seat and tried to force himself up. He failed to stand but was moderately successful in lifting himself off the leather bench.

Damn, shouldn’t have drunk that much wine. He cursed; this was not how he had imagined the evening would go. Next to him sat a red-faced Jimmy Chong, kneading his temples.

“Shit, we’ve drunk too much wine,” said Aaron. The small attached dining room was getting very stuffy so he unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. “I know we only start after 8, but it’s not going to reflect well on us if we’re in this state.”

“Hey, Gomez?”

“Yes, Jimmy?”

“Shut the fuck up. Your voice is beating a couple of nails into my head.”

Aaron ignored Jimmy’s jibe and looked across the table. The other three chefs were all slumped together on their leather bench, their eyes closed, and chests slowly rising and falling.

“Jimmy! Something’s happened to the others.” Something about the entire scene bothered him, but he could not quite put his finger on it.

Jimmy turned to look, his hands never leaving his temple. “They’re just drunk. They’re sleeping it off.”

No, that’s not it. Suddenly, his addled mind put the pieces together. “No, Jimmy! They’re not drunk!”

“What are you yapping on about? Of course they are d...”

“Hazrie doesn’t drink!”

Jimmy’s brow crinkled. “I-I-I...”

Aaron turned back toward his friend. “Jimmy, what is...”

The only Michelin-starred chef in all of Malaysia clutched his throat then toppled over, landing on the marble floor with a dull thud.

“Jimmy!” he had wanted to shout, but the word came out in a hoarse whisper. In trying to grab Jimmy, a sudden nausea and dizziness came over him, causing him to lose his balance and fall right next to the stocky chef. Aaron could feel his throat constricting. His heart was beating rapidly, too rapidly, as if it was drawing upon all his vitality just to keep him alive. It was getting harder and harder just to breathe.

“Jimmy,” he croaked, grabbing the man’s face, just inches away from his own.

Jimmy’s eyes were unmoving, his mouth wide open as if desperately gulping for air. The man’s fingers clung feebly to Aaron’s.

“He’s going to die very soon,” said a voice.

It came from just beyond Aaron’s field of vision. Then there were footsteps. And then the owner of the voice loomed above him. *One of the serving staff?*

“Help,” he whispered, trying to reach out to his savior.

“Like you helped me?”

It was a woman’s voice, almost mellifluous. Aaron brought his vision into focus, trying to make out the woman’s face. It was not hard to do as she was standing over him, looking right down at him. The spark of recognition lit up an unquenchable conflagration of surprise and shock.

“I know you,” he bleated out weakly. “Pia. Cooking class.”

The woman smiled, almond eyes holding him in their gaze with cruel amusement. “That’s my name now. But I had another name long ago.”

Aaron's lungs were grasping for breath; it was as if all the oxygen was being sucked out of the room, and he was desperately trying to get the very last few bits before the entire place became a vacuum.

The woman looked past her too-sharp, too-crooked nose, right down to his soul. Aaron looked up, and all he saw in those almond orbs was an old man who was about to die.

"Maya Chatterjee," the woman said.

Aaron knew who she was. He never forgot a person's name. Especially those whose lives he had ruined.



Walking out onto the main entrance, she then strode calmly onto the wood walkway with its powder-coated rail system. In the distance, peals of thunder roared throughout the heavens, a harbinger of the night that was to come for all those who would enter the halls of the mansion she was now walking away from.

She continued walking down the slanting wood walkway, which curled around itself several times before ending at the carpark. With every step that she took, the façade that had been Pia grew weaker and weaker, until it completely disappeared, nothing more than a fake name now blown to the winds, utterly subsumed by the woman that was Maya Chatterjee.

Once, in another lifetime, she had been the sous chef at Le Parapluie. The head chef had been a vain and arrogant

man by the name of Aaron Gomez. Her amazing palate, her technical prowess, and her dedication to her craft saw her rise to become one of the most talented chefs in Malaysia. Insiders of the restaurant industry had predicted that she would go on to become the country's next big star. The media was abuzz with speculation: when was Maya Chatterjee going to strike out on her own and open her own restaurant?

But, inexplicably, that dream never materialized. She had tried. But all manner of things went wrong; the application for her liquor license was quashed, and she found it difficult to find investors. She was told that financially, she was not a bankable name. Aaron Gomez had suggested that perhaps people were not yet ready for a female chef headlining her own restaurant, that perhaps she could try again in another five years, after she had added even more career-winners to her resume.

He invited her to come along with him to Singapore, to work as his sous chef at Il Tramanto. "It'll be great for your career!" he promised. Seeing as how she was getting nowhere in Malaysia, Maya agreed. It was in her first six months at Il Tramanto that she discovered the truth of the matter.

The private detective that she had hired returned with shattering discoveries. It was Michelin-starred Jimmy Chong who had put in a word with the powers-to-be that led to the quashing of her license, and it was Jimmy Chong again who had spread the word to potential investors that she was not ready yet for her own restaurant.

And the person who had suggested those things to Jimmy Chong? None other than the author of *Belly, Belly Good*—Aaron Gomez. He had wanted her to stay with him, to work under him, to be his right wing woman, to be part of his brigade; her prodigious talents only made him look better.

Furious at the treachery, Maya confronted Aaron, who broke down in tears when faced with evidence of the injustice he had meted out to her. If only it had stayed like that, Maya might have escaped with all her stardom intact. But that was not to be.

Aaron had hired a ‘mediator’ who was going to persuade Maya to stay on at Il Tramanto. But when Maya refused, the hired man started getting aggressive and finally resorted to violence. An ‘accident’ in her apartment led to an explosion, one that was attributed to a leaky gas pipe. That ended the amazing career of the up-and-coming chef, Maya Chatterjee.

Three years later, after dozens of surgeries, she had a face again, although it was not one that she was used to. She found a man who loved her in return, not for who she had been, but for who she could be. She could even work with her hands again.

But there was one thing that she wanted above all else. Vengeance. For a life that could have been. For a life that almost was. For a life that would never be.

It had all been simple enough. The ricin had been easy to produce once she had access to castor beans. It had been a lot harder to find a small team of illiterate and mute men.

But the 2,000 ringgit she had paid each of them, for both the final act itself and their subsequent disappearance, should keep their already silent lips sealed.

The three other Heavenly Chefs had been served drinks spiked with Rohypnol, a powerful sedative. Although she hated them for living the life that was meant for her, they had done her no wrong. But they needed to be taught the harsh lesson of humility.

The Heavenly Chefs, the media had dubbed them. They were the culinary gods of Malaysia, untouchable by all those below them. Their names were whispered from ear to ear, their legends fed by books and TV shows, their grandeur lovingly stoked by media and public alike. A well-respected food critic had once compared their signature dishes to ambrosia, the food of the Greek gods that bestowed immortality upon those who consumed it.

When the three of them came to, they would know of what had transpired. They would know that there was no ambrosia, no immortality, and that even gods could die.

Maya Chatterjee pressed the key remote to her car and got in. She smiled. If only she could be there when they discovered the two bodies.

It was Maya Chatterjee, in the attached dining room, with the ricin.

She laughed at her own joke and drove off.



Twenty minutes later, she arrived at the meeting area. At this spot on the hill, a person could see the entire Kuala Lumpur skyline. The sun had now abdicated its throne in the sky to the moon, and the thunder was getting louder and louder with each passing minute.

Her lover's car was already there, an unassuming, almost battered-looking Wira. He was standing with his back to the road, taking in all of Kuala Lumpur's wild, chaotic and unkempt beauty. She parked by the side of the lonely road and walked toward the man who loved her.



Paulo Maeda could hear her parking her car, but he continued looking out at the city's skyline, now scantily illuminated by a sprinkling of lights here and there. It was not particularly beautiful, the sight, but he forced himself to take it all in, the place where he had spent nearly 20 years of his life.

He had told her: go and meet him face to face. If you can look him in the eyes and still wish him dead, then your conscience is clear. He had drafted the will and got Aaron to sign it; the man's wife and daughter were innocent and had no part to play in Maya's desecration. There was the sound of another car, and Paulo knew, even without turning around, that it would be a white Vios.



Maya saw Luan coming out from the car. "Thank you for the castor beans."

"De nada," the big man said.

Maya dropped off her car keys into Luan's out-stretched hands. They both walked toward Paulo.

Paulo shook Luan's hand. They spoke in the language of their homeland.

"Thank you for everything, my friend."

"It is nothing," Luan replied, nodding.

Paulo handed a brown envelope over to Luan. "Here is the money, your flight ticket, and passport."

Luan took the envelope and peeked inside. He then nodded again. "Thank you."

Paulo offered his countryman a smile. "Perhaps I will look for you if I am in Salvador."

Now it was Luan's turn to smile. "I doubt that will ever happen. But you are welcome to." He paused, before adding, "Do not worry. I will take care of both cars. I will come back for the other."

Paulo nodded. "Travel safe, my friend."

As he watched Luan drive off in the white Vios, Paulo wondered whether Aaron Gomez had truly known what loyalty meant. The man had tried to buy loyalty, but he should have known that it could never be bought. It was true enough, Paulo and Luan were not related in any way—one came from the smaller and quiet Salvador, the other from the massive sprawling monstrosity that was São Paulo. But both men understood the true meaning of loyalty. They

had both agreed on that the day Paulo brought Luan on as Aaron's driver, the day after the previous driver, Fahmi, fled to Indonesia.

Paulo and Maya embraced and kissed. When they finally broke apart, he asked "Did you hesitate?"

"No."

"Then it is as it should be."

He put his arms around her waist and looked out at the city's skyline for one last time. *What can change the nature of a man?* Paulo realized that he might have finally found the answer.

"Let's go."

