

Prologue

Lillian loved best the moment before she turned on the lights. She would stand in the restaurant kitchen doorway, rain-soaked air behind her, and let the smells come to her—ripe sourdough yeast, sweet-dirt coffee, and garlic, mellowing as it lingered. Under them, more elusive, stirred the lingering essence of fresh meat, raw tomatoes, cantaloupe, water on lettuce. Lillian breathed in, feeling the smells move about and through her, even as she searched out those that might suggest a rotting orange at the bottom of a pile, or whether the new assistant chef was still double-dosing the curry dishes. She was. The girl was a daughter of a friend and good enough with knives, but some days, Lillian thought with a sigh, it was like trying to teach subtlety to a thunderstorm.

But tonight was Monday. No assistant chefs, no

customers looking for solace or celebration. Tonight was Monday, cooking class night.

After seven years of teaching, Lillian knew how her students would arrive on the first night of class—walking through the kitchen door alone or in ad hoc groups of two or three that had met up on the walkway to the mostly darkened restaurant, holding the low, nervous conversations of strangers who will soon touch one another's food. Once inside some would clump together, making those first motions toward connection, while others would roam the kitchen, fingers stroking brass pots or picking up a glowing red pepper, like small children drawn to the low-hanging ornaments on a Christmas tree.

Lillian loved to watch her students at this moment—they were elements that would become more complex and intriguing as they mixed with one another, but at the beginning, placed in relief by their unfamiliar surroundings, their essence was clear. A young man reaching out to touch the shoulder of the still younger woman next to him—"what's your name?"—as her hand dropped to the stainless steel counter and traced its smooth surface. Another woman standing alone, her mind still lingering with—a child? a lover? Every once in a while there was a couple, in love or ruins.

Lillian's students arrived with a variety of motivations, some drawn by a yearning as yet unmet to hear murmured culinary compliments, others who had

come to find a cook rather than become one. A few participants had no desire for lessons at all, arriving with gift certificates in hand as if on a forced march to certain failure; they knew their cakes would always be flat, their cream sauces filled with small, disconcerting pockets of flour, like bills in your mailbox when you had hoped for a love letter.

And then there were those students who seemingly had no choice, who could no more stay out of a kitchen than a kleptomaniac could keep her hands in her pockets. They came early, stayed late, fantasized about leaving their corporate jobs and becoming chefs with a mixture of guilt and pleasure, like a grown-up bypassing the entrées on a menu and heading straight for the sugar. If Lillian's soul sought out this last group, it was only to be expected, but in truth, she found them all fascinating. Lillian knew that whatever their reasons for coming, at some moment in the course of the class each one's eyes would widen with joy or tears or resolution—it always happened. The timing and the reason would be different for each, and that's where the fascination lay. No two spices work the same.

The kitchen was ready. The long, stainless steel counters lay before her, expansive and cool in the dark. Lillian knew without looking that Robert had received the vegetable order from the produce man who delivered only on Mondays. Caroline would have stood over skinny, smart-mouthed Daniel until

the floors were scrubbed, the thick rubber mats rinsed with the hose outside until they were black and shining. Beyond the swinging door on the other side of the kitchen, the dining room stood ready, a quiet field of tables under starched white linen, napkins folded into sharp triangles at each place. But no one would use the dining room tonight. All that mattered was the kitchen.

Lillian stretched her fingers once, twice, and turned on the light.