JUST DESSERTS
A MYSTERY PUZZLE STORY BY DOROTHY R. COLGAN
CAST OF CHARACTERS

GUEST LIST:

BAILEY ST. JAMES

LAZSLO TUTTLE
—Ruggedly handsome, square-jawed network anchorman, formerly of New York, now residing in Washington, D.C.

MICHELLE CHERBELLE
—Famous French-born Hollywood actress, she plays the fiery and scheming Genvieve on a popular nighttime soap opera. She is married to:

FRANK DUBAY
—Miss Cherbelle’s husband and manager. Born Francois Dubois.

DORA SUE LANDERS
—Perky food show hostess and etiquette maven. Originally from New York City, Landers now resides in Hollywood. Her show, The Happy Cooker, has been in syndication for years.

HOST:

PHILIP MIKELS
—Owner of the White Sands Resort in the beautiful Caribbean, Mikels has invited the above guests for a special evening—an evening, as it turns out, they’ll never forget. Formerly part owner of a four-star hotel in his native Greece.

CHEF:

JACQUES FLAMBEAU
—French chef with a fiery Mediterranean temperament. Controversy has followed him from his earliest years in Paris through his years in New York—and now to this new job at the White Sands Restaurant.

PRIVATE EYE:

MEL GIBBONS
—Caribbean investigative reporter and private eye. Gibbons “retired” to the Islands a few years ago after an unpleasant divorce from Bailey St. James—and for career reasons he refuses to go into. Gibbons has made arrangements to do the publicity shots of the dinner for a photographer friend so he can see Ms. St. James, whom he has never quite gotten out of his system.
Dear Ms. Saint James,

I'm so pleased to hear that you will be attending our small, private preview dinner at White Sands Resort. As I mentioned, I think you will find our resort on tiny White Sands Island both beautiful and private.

Sadly, the hotel portion is not yet complete, so I have taken the liberty of reserving a suite at the Caribbean Jewel Hotel on the larger island of St. Raphael, a 20-minute ferry ride across the sparkling Caribbean waters.

Our chef has gone to great lengths to master an international menu, and will prepare a Mediterranean meal that evening. It will be a candlelit dinner on the terrace, so a light wrap may be advisable. I am including a menu for your perusal.

While publicity will be discreet, you will surely gain favorable exposure in one of the world's most exciting new playgrounds for the famous and fascinating.

All arrangements are being made now, and you will receive your itinerary in a few days. The ferry will leave for our resort from St. Raphael at 7:30 p.m. You and our other guests will need to be sure to take this ferry, as it will remain at our dock until the return trip at midnight.

Please let me know what else I can do to help make this evening one you will never forget!

Your host,

Philip Mikels

* MENU *
Antipasto
Olive and Tomato Salad
Daube de Boeuf à la Provençale
Chevre
Ice Cream and Fresh Island Fruit
Chateauneuf-du-Pape + Kirsch
+ Black Coffee
"Fzzzxt...KaBOOM!!!"

That's just the way I heard it as I rounded the corner to the terrace. I was more than fashionably late to this swanky dinner. I'd expected my ex-wife, one of the guests, to explode when she saw me. I hadn't counted on the dessert beating her to it.

I shoulda had the camera ready—when's the next time I'll get a chance to see my ex-wife's face covered in Bananas Foster, and her date hunched over kissing a plate full of ice cream with his tonsils? I wouldn't know till later about the Bananas Foster (after all, the invitation had said "Ice Cream and Fruit"). But I'd know Lazslo Tuttle's toupee flopping forward over the edge of the china anywhere.

"You look stunning as usual, my dear, but who's the deadbeat you're with?" I quipped as I got to the table. She brings out the quips in me. "She" being Bailey St. James. Food critic. Socialite. Ex-wife.

I almost felt sorry for her, though, as she looked up, terrified. I couldn't be sure if it was because of Tuttle (Network anchorman. Ex-wife's steady date. Jerk.) breaking a plate with his pate, or because her makeup would be mussed once the banana gunk came off.

There were four others around the table in varying stages of banana. As Bailey hissed, "What are YOU doing here?" a gooey mess of bananas with dark eyes in the middle of it and a tux underneath it came over to me.

"I'd shake your hand, but under the circumstances, I think it best to forego the pleasantries. I'm Philip Mikels, the owner of this resort. You must be the photographer from the Caribbean Island News," he said smoothly.

I offered my hand. "Mel Gibbons," I said.

"Well, Mr. Gibbons, if you take any pictures in the next 20 minutes, I'll break your camera. Is that understood?" And as he turned to see to his guests, he said over his shoulder, "Where have you been, anyway? You're really very late!"

"Sorry. I'm not the usual guy. He had a touch too much rum last night and I offered to fill in."

Well, that's not quite how it went. Actually. I'm an investigative reporter for the same paper. Since there ain't much to investigate on these islands, it's strictly a free-lance arrangement. Anyway, the usual guy owed me a favor and when I saw the invitation to this thing with Bailey St. James's name at the top of the guest list, I told him how he could
pay up.
Yeah, I know. We’ve been split up for 3, 4 years now. I live on
the islands, she lives in New York. I’m a slob, she’s an eternal
debutante. What can I tell you? It wasn’t always like that. And for
some crazy reason, I still have this thing for her.
I could go on, but it’s tough handling the exposition chores with
Bailey shouting, “He’s dead! He’s dead! Someone’s murdered
Lazslo!” right behind me. You try it sometime.

TWO

So I went over to check out Lazslo Tuttle. I would probably be
the chief suspect if he kicked off, so I wanted to ensure his health for
my own convenience.
“Hell, Bailey, he’s not dead. Your he-man boyfriend here just
fainted.” I slapped his face gladly. “Is there some place we can get
him to?” I asked Mikels as Tuttle started coming to. I gave him
another good slap for good measure.
“My office—this way.” The two of us managed to drag Tuttle
into the office just off the dining room terrace, and dump him onto
the deep leather couch. Bailey took off his shoes like she’d done it
before and threw a blanket over him. With the wet napkin she
carried in, she gingerly wiped his face clean and did her best to put
his toupee back in place. Touching, really.
“Come on, Bailey. Let Sleeping Beauty lie, and let’s see what’s
going on out there.”
Bailey, Mikels and I returned to the terrace, where the rest of the
guests had done wonders regaining their various composesures. Trips
to the wet bar, napkins in the ice water, sojourns to the powder
room, whatever, had helped them look a lot better than when I’d first
encountered them.
Now I could recognize Michelle Cherbelle, Hollywood femme
fatale and prime time prima donna. Even we islanders stop what
we’re doing every Friday night to see what the fiery Genvieve, siren
of the soaps, is up to.
The red-faced bald guy at her right was undoubtedly Frank
Dubay, her husband and financial manager and whatever else those
husbands who don’t really work but have famous wives do. Across
from them sat the Happy Cooker herself, Dora Sue Landers. I’d
recognize those dimples anywhere. Somehow she looked perfectly
put together. Every hair in place, no sign of bananas anywhere on
her.
I decided at this point that someone had to take over. I decided
that it should be me.
“OK, now. Let’s hear it. What’s going on here?”
“What business is it of yours, fella?” growled Dubay. “You’re
just some PR photogra—”
“No,” interrupted Bailey. “Actually, Mel is a private investiga-
tor. Used to be pretty good, too. You still good, Mel?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Who sent you?!” “What the—” “But how did you know something was going to happen?”

“Look,” I said, “I didn’t know anything. I just came here to take pictures for a friend, like I said. But I DO know what I’m doing. Now, listen. I may not be the Caribbean Gourmet or anything, but I do know that no flambé is going to explode like that unless someone plans it to. And that someone’s gone to a lot of trouble to harm—or at least seriously scare—somebody on this terrace. I’d like to know who—and why. First, I’d like to hear everything that’s gone on here tonight. This is one weird party. Mikels...”

“Yes, well. The ferry arrived at 7:50 as scheduled. The guests all came together. There were five. Madame Cherbelle and her husband, Mr. Dubay. Miss Landers. Ms. St. James and her...” he looked at me, “her escort, Mr. Tuttle. They walked from the ferry to the terrace where I greeted them and offered drinks. One of the servants—I only slated two for this evening to give it—how do you say—a more intimate atmosphere—got them all what they requested. There was some small talk. ‘Superb gown.’ ‘My dear, I haven’t seen you in ages.’ Polite chatter, mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Well, I did notice a rather heated exchange between Tuttle and Miss Landers, but nothing in exceedingly bad taste. And there was something between Miss Landers and Madame Cherbelle. Seems they wore the same magenta and seafoam wrap. Then at promptly 8:30, we were seated at this table. Festus, one of the servers, brought in the antipasto...”

“Wait a second,” I broke in, “where’s the chef now? We need him here!”

“Well,” said Mikels. “He’s a little—uh—eccentric. Superstitious, you know. He locks himself in the kitchen, then passes the food through a kind of transom, doesn’t allow people to see his food before it’s ready. Doesn’t like them to see him in his kitchen. He’s probably locked in there now getting the kitchen back in order.”

“Tell the servants to stand by—and somebody go get that chef!” Dora Sue Landers jumped up. “I’ll go. I feel certain he’ll let ME see his kitchen!” she squealed confidently, and walked from the terrace into the darkness beyond, toward the kitchen.
“Eeeek!!”
I’m not kidding. That’s exactly how she screamed. Michelle Cherbelle, that is. When she found the sticky note in the mess that was still on the table. I hadn’t allowed anyone to clean it up for just such a reason. She’d read it to herself, and now was handing it over to me. It was lousy with bananas—must have come blasting out of the dessert. I read it aloud:

_The ferry is gone. Phone lines are dead._
_By tomorrow, you’ll all get_
_what’s coming to you!_
_How’s that for Just Desserts!?_

—Jacques Flambeau

There were gasps all around.
"Let’s not kid ourselves," said Frank Dubay. "We all knew it was Flambeau as soon as we saw that flaming dessert. After all, that IS his trademark—no matter how inappropriate it may be to the finish of a meal such as this!" Dubay exclaimed, then added suddenly, "Good heavens! Miss Landers!"

He ran from the terrace as I ushered the others into the enclosed dining room area. If this nut was serious about his threats, I didn’t want us to be sitting ducks. We closed and locked the terrace doors. It seemed a long time before Dubay and Landers returned, knocking at the doors till Mikels let them in. I noted that Dubay’s wife looked none too pleased.

"The kitchen door is answer. The coward!" locked! Flambeau won’t
Dubay growled.
"Mikels, don’t you have a key?" I asked.
"Only the master key—"
but it’s at my place on the other side of the island. A good 20, 30 minutes away. I can send one of the—"

The dining room lights flickered. Then came back up. Flickered. And we were in darkness. Someone screamed. Because it sounded like “Eeeeek!” I had a good idea who it was.

"LET’S NOT KID OURSELVES... WE ALL KNEW IT WAS FLAMBEAU AS SOON AS WE SAW THAT FLAMING DESSERT."

"Nobody move!” I ordered. "Flambeau may be up to something!"

"Or it may be nothing,” assured Mikels. “This happens on the islands all the time, as you know, Mr. Gibbons.” He got up to get candles and flashlights stored in a sideboard nearby.

"You’re right. So why isn’t your backup generator kicking in?"

"We’ve had some trouble with it. I’ll get the servants right on it. They’ll be able to get it working in no time!"

"Oh, my. He’ll kill us all!” moaned Dora Sue. "He’s cut the electricity, hasn’t he? You’re just making up this ‘happens all the time’ stuff, aren’t you? Oh, my!"

"Well, I should have figured something was going on when I was heading over here and saw the empty ferry heading back to St. Raphael,” I said half aloud.

"So we’re not stranded! You have a boat!” Dora Sue cried.

"Fraid not. The paper’s chopper brought me over...dropped me off down the beach a ways so we wouldn’t disturb this little shindig here.

"Now about that key, Mikels..."

"Oh, no. That won’t do any good now. With the electricity off, the kitchen door CAN’T be opened. It has some kind of electric eye device that Flambeau insisted on installing. Something to ensure his privacy, he said. When it was on, he could get out, but no one—not even with a master key—could get in. Now that the electricity is off, he can’t get out. I warned him this might happen, but he wouldn’t listen. Of course, that’s assuming he’s still in there. So you see, going for the key wouldn’t do any good just now. Better to keep the servants working on the generator. I’ll send one of them to my place once it is operating."

"Well, then, I guess there’s nothing to do now but sit tight,” I said, the candles flickering eerily as I looked from one frightened face to the next. “Mikels, go ahead with the events of the evening.”
“Where did I leave off? Oh yes. I guess you could say the conversation became more lively when the main dish was served. At that point Lazslo Tuttle shouted, ‘I came all this way for GOUASH?’”

Dora Sue interrupted. “The boor wouldn’t know nuance if it bit him in the shin. That daube de boeuf was sensual—I dare say mystical. It spoke to every one of my senses. Such layers! Such lusty seasoning! A masterpiece!”

“Pah!” Dubay interrupted her. “I should have realized that only Jacques Flambeau could insult a daube with that much bay leaf. And always those horrid pungent Mediterranean ones of his. He knows I detest that heavy-handed approach. In fact, I became so ill after consuming only a portion of that...that dish that I was forced to leave the table after the main course—for which I apologize once again most sincerely—to get some air. It was somewhat still on the terrace, and I needed a good breeze to help me digest that monstrosity.”

“Just a minute,” I said. “Bailey, go get lover boy. He’s had enough time to recuperate, and I want everyone in here.” She huffed, but she took one of the flashlights and went. She knew it was getting serious.

FIVE

Lazslo came out smoothing his hopelessly crooked hair.

“Hi, everybody! What a night! Somebody turn on some lights around here!” What a jerk.

Finally, after comings and goings of all kinds all evening, everyone was in one place. And I intended to keep it that way for a while. Because I just hate when a crazy murderer is loose, people are sitting in the dark, and excuses keep coming up for them to leave the room one by one. I wasn’t about to let that happen in this story.

“Mikels—PLEASE, go on. After the main dish—”

“Of course. Well, Dubay left the terrace and wandered off for quite some time. He says he was sick—I thought it looked more like anger.

“Anyway, the rest of us enjoyed the main course. When we were through, Miss Cherbelle excused herself to go looking for Dubay as the plates were being cleared away. She didn’t want him to be gone when dessert was served, she said.

“I didn’t see them return, though, because I myself received a phone call in my office. Ordinarily, I’d never leave a table to pick up a call, but after 10 rings I thought I’d better see to it—what with the others off somewhere and all.”

Dora Sue Landers sniffed. “It was like a circus. I swear, I’ve never seen such rude goings-on!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Landers. You are right. I shouldn’t have answered the call. But I did. I was gone for about 15 or 20 minutes

“OH, MY.
HE’LL KILL US ALL!
HE’S CUT THE ELECTRICITY,
HASN’T HE?”
and returned. Everyone was here then."

"That was some phone call!" Tuttle blurted out. "Who the heck was that? You were in there yelling so loud, I could hear from out here!"

Mikels reddened around the ears. "It was nothing. A man I was hoping to do some business with. He was trying to pull a fast one. I'm sorry. I didn't realize I could be heard."

"Well, Phil," pontificated Tuttle, "take my advice. Don't let every little setback shake you up like that. You'll never make it in this biz." What a jerk.

Mikels cleared his throat. "At any rate, when I returned I told Festus to bring in the dessert. Festus served the ice cream individually, then presented the chafing dish of bananas and syrup. You see, the chef changed desserts without informing me."

"Of course, so we wouldn't suspect from the invitation that he was the chef, don't you see?" cried Miss Cherbelle.

"What time was that—when the dessert was served?" I asked.

"Oh, it must have been approaching 10 p.m. by then. Festus brought it in and said the chef had written specific orders that I should flame the bananas personally. I read the note. Then I prepared and lit the liqueur here at the side of the table. I poured it over the dessert. Blam. You know the rest."

I thought for a moment. "Am I right in assuming everyone here but me knows this Flambeau?"

Bailey looked at me. The candlelight made her dark eyes dance. "You knew him, too, Mel." I was all set with a smart remark when the memory hit me like a metro bus. "Jacques Flambeau—"

Mikels broke in. "I don't understand. When I hired him he told me his name was Jacques de Fleur. Who IS this man?"

"Jacques Flambeau," continued Bailey, "was sent to prison some years ago for allegedly putting a contract out on the owner of a New York restaurant after they had some sort of falling out."

"But he shouldn't have been released yet, should he?" Dora Sue asked, an edge to her voice. "Suddenly I'm not feeling at all well." She grabbed dramatically at her stomach.

"Well, they never proved much—and gave him a minimum sentence. Looks like time's up."

"So, Bailey, this is the guy from Paris 10 or 12 years ago, right?" I asked, though I knew it was. "The guy you wrote that review about when we lived in Paris that year?"

"Yeah, he's the one, all right," she said, giving me THE look. I wasn't liking this at all. Bailey had just been starting out as a food critic then, and Flambeau was fired from that restaurant after her review. Soon after that, he came to our flat one night when I was out. Bailey'd been pretty shaken. Said he'd threatened to kill
her if she ever reviewed his food again—or continued to check into his career in any way. Said he’d find a way to ruin her if it was the last thing he did.

I’d figured he had something to hide. I’d done a little digging and found out he’d actually been fired for being suspected of stealing recipes from other restaurants. A definite no-no in chef circles, I guess.

It was strange, though. Because that’s all I ever found out for sure. The rest was all rumor or hearsay, nothing I could substantiate. Rumor had it that he’d grown up poor in some tiny village in the south of France somewhere—that he’d learned everything he knew from some old local guy there—Richelieu or Michielieu or something—stole all his recipes, got into some kind of thing with him and...well, that’s where the reports varied even more. Either stabbed him with a boning knife, poisoned him, left him to die of a broken heart. Something not nice, anyway. One of his kids found him, they said. But it was never more than a rumor.

There was another rumor that he’d come from America and was merely posing as a Frenchman. That he was some rich senator’s son who had disgraced his family and run away. He just seemed to gather up rumors around him like lint on a cheap suit.

I remember, too, that after he was fired he landed on his feet. Became assistant chef at Chez Louis—what was then THE restaurant in Paris. In fact, I think he got that job by sabotaging some assistant. One Francois Dubois, if memory serves. I looked at Frank Dubay...

Suddenly there was a “click.” Mikels said, “Ah, excuse me. I forgot about my tape recorder.” He pulled a slim recorder from his pocket.

“What are you doing with that?”

“I was—I had wanted to tape the meal. To get unsolicited favorable comments I might be able to use in the upcoming advertising I’ll be doing for the resort. But I forgot to start it until the end of the meal. I turned it on before dessert and, well, forgot about it. Till now.”

I asked Mikels if I could have the tape. Maybe listening to the first few confusing moments might help me in some way.

The wind had begun to pick up outside. It made the terrace doors rattle and one of the palm trees slap against the dining room window. Tension was building. There was no sign that Flambeau was on the loose, but we couldn’t be certain, and everybody knew it.
"I need to know how each of you knows Flambeau. And I need to know the truth! Something you say may save your life!" I thought a touch of drama might bring out some reluctant pieces of information. I was right.

"Miss Cherbelle, what do you know about this guy?"

"I know that marriage to him was the biggest mistake of my life," she said quietly.

"Shut up. You don't have to tell him anything," her husband demanded.

"It's all right, Frank. I have to say something. He may mean us harm. You know he hates us both. And the vows for revenge of a man from southern France are not to be taken lightly!"

"Yes," she went on, "I was married to him for a short while, long ago. I was a—a dancer in Paris. He came often to see my show after his restaurant closed for the night. At that time, he was a rising star in Paris. Jacques came with his little canisters of bay leaves and garlic and sweet onions and olives and such, and set the restaurant community on—how do you say—on its ear. His food was hearty, robust. Not light. Not delicate. Many were appalled by it. Such as yourself, perhaps, Madame?" she said to Bailey. "But he would say nothing of his past. For one so young to be so accomplished—to have such a repertoire of recipes with such a symphony of flavors—"

"Oh, just get on with it, already!" Dubay said, peeved.

"—Well, he was thought a genius in some circles. I was in love with him immediately."

Dubay shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"He was not good to me," she continued, "but he was so overwhelming and forceful. He got me a respectable dancing job in a better part of the city. That led to modeling and acting—and soon I was on my way. But Jacques, he would never let me forget it was he who had done it all. He had made me just as surely as he made one of his fancy soufflés. And he continually reminded me he could destroy me as easily."


"All right, if we are playing 'True Confessions,'" Dubay began, his French accent becoming decidedly more pronounced as he reminisced, "I, too, have reasons to hate this man.

And he, me. Many years ago I had a promising career. I was gaining some prominence as a chef—at Chez Louis, no less! This Flambeau, he came to the kitchens one night asking the head chef for a job. But the
chef told Flambeau I was all he needed.

"While he was there, I swear it, Flambeau ruined one of the dishes I was preparing. Suffice it to say I was disgraced and fired. I was not able to convince anyone that I had not been responsible. Patrons became ill. Very ill. Monsieur Flambeau ruined my career. I hated him, never realizing I would soon be able to get my revenge in a most innocent way.

"For soon after I was fired, I met Michelle. We fell in love. She left Flambeau for me. He vowed he would one day get his revenge on us both. Within the year, we left for America. Michelle was in a successful French play at the time. But one night she came home, her mind made up to try Hollywood. So we did, and that is where we've stayed.

"I left my dreams of being a renowned chef behind. Now I do not even like to be in the kitchen. The memories are too painful! He has ruined my life once—and now, maybe, maybe again..."

Michelle put a hand on his arm. He pulled away from her, but grew silent. Michelle looked up at me as if there were more to be said, but she, too, sat silently.

EIGHT

"Miss Landers?"
Dora Sue jumped. "Hmm?"
"Tell me about Flambeau—and you."
"Well, there isn't much to tell, really. I knew him briefly in New York. That's all. That's not so strange, really. I know a lot of people in New York."
"Oh, for crying out loud, Dora Sue," Lazslo Tuttle exploded in his smooth baritone. "The man said tell the truth."

Dora Sue allowed her shoulders to slump ever so slightly. "Oh, all right then. He'd just come to America from Paris. I'd heard about him before we met. I had a cooking show then. Maybe you remember it—Someone's in the Kitchen With Dora—well, I'm no chef, of course, but I could make food look so pretty, and my place settings were out of this world! I also had a segment on etiquette—and one on food astrology. You know, what you should be eating at any given time depending on your sign, what moon is rising and so on.

"Well, I was quite flattered when I heard that the controversial Jacques Flambeau wanted to meet me! Imagine! One thing led to another and he ended up moving in with me."
"That 'one thing' being ME!" Tuttle broke in, his face turning red. "We were great together and you know it, Dora Sue. But I guess a WEEKEND anchorman—the youngest on any New York station. I might add, just couldn't compete with some superstitious weirdo in a white hat who could crack eggs with one hand. Oh, he did GREAT things for your career!"
Dora Sue interrupted, “I’m getting to that, Lazslo. Don’t worry. I know if I don’t tell them, you will. He’s right. After living quite happily together for 3 or 4 months, I read Jacques’s astrological food chart one evening. It said strawberries would definitely be his power food for the next 4 to 6 days. He grew absolutely furious. Called me a fake—and a few other things, as I recall. I was startled. It was so clear in his chart, yet he went berserk!”

Michelle broke in. “Perhaps you did not know of his aversion to strawberries. I learned of it very early—in a moment of playfulness, I tried to feed him one. He had a similar reaction with me. He made me remove every one and promise never to bring them home again. I was not even allowed to say the word! He told me he had almost died from this allergy when he was a young man. He made me swear to tell no one. I kept my promise till this moment.

“He was convinced that someone would try to use it against him. He said I was the last one who would ever hear the reason he would not allow any strawberry desserts in his restaurants. Perhaps I was, from what you say.”

Dora Sue went on then. “Before I knew it, he had begun poisoning my reputation in all the crucial circles in town. At the time I had—well, sort of invented a background for myself more in keeping with the network’s expectations. Chef schools—the Maison Rouge—all of that. He found out that I was really a little nobody from Sandwich, Illinois, and wasted no time ruining my career. I left New York in shame.

“Fortunately, Hollywood loved the whole story, and when I moved out there, I had more offers than I knew what to do with! He made my life miserable for some time, but things are all right now—as you all know!” She smiled primly and patted her hair. She and Tuttle WERE perfect together!

“If he’s the kind of vindictive sort he seems to be, he won’t be satisfied till he ruins your Hollywood career, too, isn’t that right?” As I said it, her candle flickered. She and Tuttle exchanged glances.

Nine

“All right, Tuttle, let’s hear your story. Flambeau took your woman. Is there more to it than that?”

He seemed ready to pass out again. Bailey put her hand on his back. What does she SEE in this jerk?

“All right. ALL RIGHT! There’s something you need to know. Dora Sue. Flambeau found out I was—well, being paid a kind of a bonus from time to time when I was the Friday film critic.”

“Like payola, you mean?”

“Well, like if I gave a good review, I’d get a little gift.”

“What kind of gift?”

Tuttle squirmed. “Oh, 5, 10 thou. Sometimes more.”

Dubay whistled softly.
"Flambeau found out about it. That's why I had to move out without a fight, Dora Sue." He looked up sheepishly. "I loved you, but that guy was out to destroy me. If this ever leaves the room, I'll deny I said any of it. No one will take the word of any of you over an honored TV anchorman anyway. And all the records have been destroyed."

Dora Sue looked at him adoringly. "So, that's why you—"
Something occurred to me suddenly, and I cut her off.
"You know, Mikels, I think you lied to us."
"I beg your pardon?"
"I think you lied about not knowing the chef you hired. It occurs to me that if someone like Dora Sue Landers knew of the infamous Jacques Flambeau, then someone in your business would certainly know every chef—at least by reputation—from here to the Riviera."

Mikels hesitated. Then sighed. "Yes, you're right. I knew of Flambeau's prison sentence. In fact, I was rather instrumental in his release. This resort was a steeper financial commitment than I had anticipated. In my homeland—in Greece—my resorts were never as costly to start up. I needed the best, and I needed it cheap.

"So I found Flambeau. I thought we understood each other. He gave me his solemn word that he wanted to turn over a new leaf. I believed him. He said he'd put his violent behavior behind him. I believed that, too. I should have known better!

"He convinced me to invite all of you here this evening. He said there were some people from his past he wanted to see—to ask their forgiveness and to tell them he wanted to begin again. He didn't want them to know it was he—said they'd never come then. So I was to imply he was a young culinary wizard. He wanted to surprise them, he said. He's done that, all right. It was even his idea to get your comments on tape—before and after you knew who he was. Great publicity hook, you know?

"I'm sorry I believed him. He's ruined everything for me. I can't possibly afford another chef. And word of this will get out, mark my words. He won't get away with this, at least I can guarantee that much!"

At that moment, the lights flickered, then went on.
"Finally!" someone shouted.

"Let's get to the kitchen," cried Mikels, taking a large ring of keys from a sideboard drawer. Dubay and I rose.
"I'll just stay here and protect the women," Tuttle said lamely.

"Nothing doing!" cried Bailey. "No offense, Lazslo, but I'm going to go give that guy a piece of my mind!"

"All right, but stay behind us," I told her, and, it turned out, all the rest of them, as they came with us. Mikels showed us the way, put the key in the lock and turned it. "The electric eye has to be reset before it can keep us out!" he said. The lights were bright, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. And when they finally did, I couldn't believe them.

"...WELL, I'M NO CHEF, OF COURSE, BUT I COULD MAKE FOOD LOOK SO PRETTY, AND MY PLACE SETTINGS WERE OUT OF THIS WORLD!"
(STOP! PUT THE PUZZLE TOGETHER NOW!)
That’s just how we found him, too. Face first into the food. Clutching that bay leaf in his icy hand.

Then a whole bunch of stuff started happening at once, but since this isn’t TV or the movies, I can only relay one thing at a time. You’ll have to just imagine how it really was.

“He’s poisoned himself!” cried Mikels. “He’s eaten part of the bay leaf, look!”

“No—he’s broken part of it off to tell us something!” cried Dora Sue. “See, take away a little bit of bay leaf and you have...BAILEY!”

“Get away from the body, everyone!” I barked. I didn’t want Dora Sue to go on with that line of thought.

“Look, I recognize this scarf—”

“Quiet, everyone! I think it’s fairly obvious that Flambeau has been asphyxiated in some way. It may be the bay leaf, if he did consume it, but I really don’t think that would be fatal. It could have been a number of things from the look of it!

“I think some of you have been lying. And you might as well tell me. Because if you don’t, you’re gonna be telling the cops.”

“All right, I’ll admit it!” cried Dubay. I talked with Flambeau tonight when I realized it was his daube I was choking on. All the hatred came back in a rush and I went to have it out with him. But all I did was talk through the door. He wouldn’t let me in. He was preparing the dessert, he claimed. I knew of his little idiosyncrasies about keeping people out of his kitchen, but I still think he was afraid to face me. So I left.”

“But obviously someone was allowed in, isn’t that right, Miss Landers? How else could your wrap have ended up in here?”

“Why I—that isn’t MY wrap! I took mine off and put it on the sideboard in the dining room when I realized it was identical to hers.” She pointed to Miss Cherbelle, who paled.

“All right, yes. The wrap is mine. I did see him. I can’t say why.”

“Suit yourself,” I shrugged. “The cops will be able to get here sooner or later and you can tell them. It’ll do wonders for your acting career for some rag to get hold of this story.”

ELEVEN

She looked miserable. “All right. After Francois talked with Flambeau through the door, I found him in the garden, and he confronted me with something Flambeau had said. It was about something from my past. An event for which I am very ashamed.” She took a deep breath. She no longer resembled her tough TV character in the slightest.
“You see, after I married Francois, Jacques was furious. Not only was I in a successful play without him, but I was also happily married. May I just say he found a way of blackmailing me to—to stay with him one night. That is when I went home and told Francois that we must move immediately to Hollywood. You see, I knew Jacques well. I knew he would never leave me alone.” she looked at Francois, tears in her eyes. There were tears in his, too.

“I’m sorry, Francois. I went to him tonight to beg him not to say anything more to you. Now here I am telling you myself. Yes, he let me in. He told me he had merely asked Francois to forgive him for the indiscretion with me. He assumed I had told Francois years ago. I guess I should have.

“Anyway, I grew confused. Here was the man I had hated so long being kind...excited about his new life here at the resort. I thought it must be some kind of trick, so I ran out. I must have dropped my wrap.”

“Miss Cherbelle, are you certain it didn’t happen another way? It would be understandable if you realized who was in the kitchen and went to quiet him before he could tell your husband your long-kept secret. Your husband is a jealous man and even after all these years, he might not understand. Maybe Flambeau let you in intending to pick up where he left off years ago. Maybe when his back was turned you realized you couldn’t take it any longer, and strangled him with your scarf. It would be understandable, Miss Cherbelle.”

Her eyes grew wide. “No, no, no. I swear it! I did not strangle him with my scarf!”

I spoke quietly. “No, but perhaps you were able to force him to kill himself. By eating the one thing you—and perhaps you alone—knew he was allergic to. Strawberries.

“Hasn’t anyone wondered why there are strawberry tops here when there were no strawberries in the food tonight? When Miss Cherbelle herself told us about his allergy—long after the door was already locked? No one would have been able to get in here after hearing about it. And look. Not only was there enough time for him to grab a bay leaf—for whatever reason—but also to spell out something in the strawberry tops. Look carefully. M-I-C...”

“No, no. Why would I do this and then tell you all about his allergy? That would make no sense at all! Don’t you see?”

And finally I DID see. And I turned to Mr. Mikels.

**T**W**E**LVE

“Yes, I do see,” I said. “And that’s why I’m certain that Mr. Mikels—or should I say Phillipe Michelieu—killed him.”

Mikels looked around quickly as if to bolt, then realized it was no use.

“You are the son of the first man Flambeau used and discarded, isn’t that right? I should have noticed the similarity in the names
right away."

Mikels--I'll call him that still for simplicity's sake--lowered his head, tears rimming his eyes.

"Yes, yes, yes! He is the one who killed my father. Of course, he was not the great Jacques Flambeau then. He was merely Jacques Cochon, which is quite another thing.

"He learned all my father had to teach. He also learned of my father's fatal allergy to a certain shellfish. My father shared that information with him while Flambeau was recovering from his near-fatal dose of strawberries.

"And one night soon after, he—he forced my father to eat a plateful of those shellfish! He wanted nothing to get in his way of fame and fortune. As if my father would have stood in his way!" he spat angrily. "No one ever believed that's what happened. But I knew. I knew!"

We all stood, looking at him, as he continued.

"I was just 12 then. But I vowed the morning I found my dead father that I would have my revenge. Yet, every time I have come close to getting it, he would ruin things for himself in some way! It has taken many, many years, many false names and false occupations and much money, but I have done it! And because I have followed his life so closely, I know that all of you, too, have cause to be glad!"

"Now wait just a minute here, pal. I hated the guy, but I wouldn't kill him. No way!" Tuttle said, fearing any charge of collusion, no doubt.

Mikels continued. "I thought it would be simple to frame one of you. And when I saw you drop your wrap in the garden, Miss Cherbelle—for that's where you dropped it, not in the kitchen—I decided you could be implicated beautifully. Realizing you'd just come from talking with Flambeau, I waited till you left, took the wrap and went in to see Flambeau. I dropped the wrap when his back was turned.

"Imagine my surprise, then, when we came bursting in here and saw that M-I-C spelled out in the berries! What could have been more perfect to implicate you, no?"

"But I didn't realize until just this moment how little I would care about what happens to me. I have had my revenge, my life's mission is over, and now I simply do not care—"

"Wait a minute," Dora Sue broke in. "You were on the phone while Miss Cherbelle was out getting her husband and talking with Flambeau!"

"Ah, that. Simple. I told the ferryman to call me at precisely 9:20, and to keep ringing until I answered. I wasn't sure if we'd need him after all, I said, so if he called, he might be able to leave early. He rang. I answered and quietly told him he could go. Thus giving the guests the illusion of being stuck here. To make them afraid. To make them confess the things I already knew about them.

"Then I played my tape recorder. I'd taped a lengthy argument I'd invented earlier today. As I played that back at full volume, I went out the side door, disconnected the phones, then went to have it
out with Flambeau. He let me in to help with his surprise dessert. I had some mild explosives I secretly placed in the bananas. That is why I arranged to flame it myself. I knew just how to do it for maximum effect.

"That was his idea, too—the Bananas Foster. He thought it would be fun to announce himself with a bang, as it were. He really was quite convincing about wanting to start a new life. But I didn't believe it for a second. Besides, even if he were serious, what about my father's life? What about that?

"Anyway, he didn't know of the note I'd prepared for inside the dessert, or about the strawberries I brought in from my office. I told him who I was and made him eat the strawberries—I held a knife to him, just as I had imagined him doing to my father—but you don't need to hear the details just now. After he'd eaten them, I quickly put the dessert up for the servant to pick up. Then I left.

"I came back in my side office door, turned off the tape and finished the phony call (Tuttle snickered at the pun) and rewound the tape. When I came back, I recorded your voices over the evidence that the argument was prerecorded.

"I didn't count on the electricity going out. That was just a nice little island bonus that helped confuse and frighten everyone still more. I was going to send one of the servants all the way to my place to get a key."

"So you said," I interrupted, "but I noticed how readily a key appeared once the lights went on!"

"Yes, I admit that was sloppy. But I guess even then, I didn't care that much about protecting myself. As I say, I didn't take into consideration the emptiness I would feel—and the realization that my life would have no meaning once I had had my revenge. As you see, I could have framed you, Miss Cherbelle. But I simply don't care enough anymore."

"Don't overestimate yourself, Mikels," I said. "Michelle might have been implicated by the strawberry message he left, and even by the scarf. But he left another message as well. In his last breaths, he went past the jar of domestic bay leaves right in front of him and grabbed for the one out of his reach—the one that says, 'Mediterranean Bay Leaf,' the one he knocked over as he frantically grabbed a leaf. You see, I believe he wanted us to get the connection. The Mediterranean connection. Even if we HAD believed you were from Greece as you claimed, instead of southern France, we could have gotten that connection. He wanted us to know it was someone from that long-ago time. And you are that someone."

Mikels sighed a bone-weary sigh.
"Come, Gibbons, I'll connect the phones. Let's get the police here and let these people go home."

As I walked Bailey to the door of her hotel room in the wee hours of the a.m., I couldn’t help rubbing it in: “I thought that sure was cute the way Tuttle and Dora Sue went off hand in hand into the sunset. Well, the sunrise.”

“Shut up, Gibbons. I know what you’re trying to do. But it won’t work. Lazzlo was just a date, nothing more. I don’t care what the press has been implying.”

She slid the card key out of the lock and the green light flashed on.

She paused. “You wanna come in for a while?” She yawned, and stretched dreamily. “My flight won’t be leaving for six hours.”

I was tempted. Boy, was I.

“Naw, I’d better get to the station to see how this ends up.” Besides, I’d rather leave her wishing I had than leave her wishing she hadn’t.

I said good night then, and gave her a kiss. And as I left, I realized there was still the faint scent of bananas all around her.