



Single Sashimi

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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ONE



Venus Chau opened the door to her aunt's house and almost fainted.

"What died?" She exhaled sharply, trying to get the foul air out of her body before it caused cancer or something.

Her cousin Jennifer Lim entered the foyer with the look of an *oni* goblin about to eat someone. "She's stinking up my kitchen."

"Who?" Venus hesitated on the threshold, breathing clean night air before she had to close the door.

"My mother, who else?"

The ire in Jenn's voice made Venus busy herself with kicking off her heels amongst the other shoes in the tile foyer. Hoo-boy, she'd never seen quiet Jenn this irate before. Then again, since Aunt Yuki had given her daughter the rule of the kitchen when she'd started cooking in high school, Jenn rarely had to make way for another cook.

"What is she cooking? Beef intestines?"

Jenn flung her arms out. "Who knows? Something Trish is supposed to eat."

"But we don't have to eat it, right? Right?"

"I'll never become pregnant if I have to eat stuff like that." Jenn whirled and stomped toward the kitchen.

Venus turned right into the living room where her very pregnant cousin Trish lounged on the sofa next to her boyfriend, Spenser. "Hey, guys." Her gaze paused on their twined hands. It continued to amaze her that Spenser would date a woman pregnant with another man's

child. Maybe Venus shouldn't be so cynical about the men she met. Here was at least one good guy.

Trish's arms shot into the air like a Raiders' cheerleader, nearly clocking Spenser in the eye. "I'm officially on maternity leave!"

Venus paused to clap. "So how did you celebrate?"

"I babysat Matthew all day today." She smiled dreamily at Spenser at the mention of his son.

Venus frowned and landed her hands on her hips. "In your condition?"

Trish waved a hand. "He's not that bad. He stopped swallowing things weeks ago."

"I'm finally not wasting money on all those emergency room visits," Spenser said.

"Besides, I got a book about how to help toddlers expect a new baby." Trish bounced lightly on the sofa cushion in her excitement.

"And?" It seemed kind of weird to Venus, since Trish and Spenser weren't engaged or anything. Yet.

Trish chewed her lip. "I don't know if he totally understands, but at least it's a start."

A sense of strangeness washed over Venus as she watched the two of them, the looks they exchanged that weren't mushy or intimate, just . . . knowing. Like mind reading. It made her feel alienated from her cousin for the first time in her life, and she didn't really like it.

She immediately damped down the feeling. How could she begrudge Trish such a wonderful relationship? Venus was so selfish. She disgusted herself.

She looked around the living room. "Where is—"

"Venus!" The childish voice rang down the short hallway. She stepped back into the foyer to see Spenser's son, Matthew, trotting down the carpet with hands reached out to her. He grabbed her at the knees, wrinkling her silk pants, but she didn't mind. His shining face looking up at her—*way* up, since she was the tallest of the cousins—made her feel like she was the only reason he lived and breathed. "*Psycho Bunny?*" he pleaded.

She pretended to think about it. His hands shook her pants legs to make her decide faster.

“Okay.”

He darted into the living room and plopped in front of the television, grabbing at the game controllers. The kid had it down pat—in less than a minute, the music for the *Psycho Bunny* video game rolled into the room.

Venus sank to the floor next to him.

“Jenn is totally freaking out.” Trish’s eyes had popped to the size of *siu mai* dumplings.

“What brought all this on?” Venus picked up the other controller.

“Well, Auntie Yuki had a doctor’s appointment today—”

“Is she doing okay?” She chose the Bunny Foo-Foo character for the game just starting.

“Clean bill of health. Cancer’s gone, as far as they can tell.”

“So that’s why she’s taken over Jenn’s domain?”

Trish rubbed her back and winced. “She took one look at me and decided I needed something to help the baby along.”

Jenn huffed into the living room. “She’s going to make me ruin the roast chicken!”

Venus ignored her screeching tone. “Sit down. You’re not going to make her hurry by hovering.” She and Matthew both jumped over the snake pit and landed in the hollow tree.

Jenn flung herself into an overstuffed chair and dumped her feet on the battered oak coffee table.

Venus turned to glance at the foyer. No Nikes. “Where’s Lex?”

“Late. Where else?” Jenn snapped.

“I thought Aiden was helping her be better about that.”

“He’s not a miracle worker.” Spenser massaged Trish’s back.

“I have to leave early.” Venus stretched her silk-clad feet out, wiggling her toes. Her new stilettos looked great but man, they hurt her arches.

“Then you might not eat at all.” Jenn crossed her arms over her chest.

Venus speared her with a glance like a stainless steel skewer. “Chill, okay Cujo?”

Jenn pouted and scrunched further down in the chair.

Venus ignored her and turned back to the game. Her inattention had let Matthew pick up the treasure chest. “I have to work on a project.”

“For work?”

“No, for me.” Only the Spiderweb, the achievement of her lifetime, a new tool that would propel her to the heights of video game development stardom. Which was why she’d kept it separate from her job-related things—she didn’t even use her company computer when she worked on it, only her personal laptop.

A new smell wafted into the room, this one rivaling the other in its stomach-roiling ability. Venus waved her hand in front of her face. “Pfffaugh! What is she cooking?”

Trish’s face had turned the color of green tea. “You’re lucky *you* don’t have to eat it. Whatever it is, it ain’t gonna stay down for long.”

“Just say you still have morning sickness.”

“In my ninth month?”

Venus shrugged.

The door slammed open. “Hey, guys—*blech*.”

Venus twisted around to see her cousin Lex doubled over, clenching her washboard stomach (Venus wished *she* could have one of those) and looking like she’d hurled up all the shoes littering the foyer floor.

Lex’s boyfriend Aiden grabbed her waist to prevent her from nose-diving into the tile. “Lex, it’s not that bad.”

“The gym locker room smells better.” Lex used her toes to pull off her cross-trainers without bothering to untie them. “The *men’s* locker room.”

“It’s not me,” Jenn declared. “It’s Mom, ruining all my best pots.”

“What is she doing? Killing small animals on the stovetop?”

“Something for the baby.” Trish tried to smile, but it looked more like a wince.

“As long as we don’t have to eat it.” Lex dropped her slouchy purse on the floor and walked into the living room.

Aunty Yuki appeared behind her in the doorway, bearing a steaming bowl. “Here, Trish. Drink this.” The brilliant smile on her wide face eclipsed her tiny stature.

Venus smelled something pungent, like when she walked into a Chinese medicine shop with her dad. A bolus of air erupted from her mouth, and she coughed. “What is that?” She dropped the game controller.

“Pig’s brain soup.”

Trish’s smile hardened to plastic. Lex grabbed her mouth. Spenser—who was Chinese and therefore had been raised with the weird concoctions—sighed. Aiden looked at them all like they were funny-farm rejects.

Venus closed her eyes, tightened her mouth, and concentrated on not gagging. Good thing her stomach was empty.

Aunty Yuki’s mouth pursed. “What’s wrong? My mother-in-law made me eat pig’s brain soup when I was a couple weeks from delivering Jennifer.”

“*That’s* what you ruined my pots with?” Jennifer steamed hotter than the bowl of soup.

Her mom caught the *yakuza*-about-to-hack-your-finger-off expression on Jenn’s face. Aunty Yuki paused, then backtracked to the kitchen. With the soup bowl, thankfully.

“Papa?” Matthew’s voice sounded faint.

Venus turned.

“Don’t feel good.” He clutched his poochy tummy.

“Oh, no.” Spenser grabbed his son and headed out of the living room.

Then the world exploded.

Just as they passed into the foyer, Matthew threw up onto the tiles.

Lex, with her weak stomach when it came to bodily fluids, took one look and turned pasty.

A burning smell and a few cries sounded from the kitchen.

Trish sat up straighter than a Buddha and clenched her rounded abdomen. “Oh!”

Spenser held his crying son as he urped up the rest of his afternoon snack. Lex clapped a hand to her mouth to prevent herself from following Matthew’s example. Jenn started for the kitchen, but then Matthew’s mess blocking the foyer stopped her. Trish groaned and curled in on herself, clutching her tummy.

Venus shot to her feet. She wasn’t acting Game Lead at her company for nothing.

“You.” She pointed to Jenn. “Get to the kitchen and send your mom in here for Trish.” Jenn leaped over Matthew’s puddle and darted away. “And bring paper towels for the mess!”

“You,” she flung at Spenser. “Take Matthew to the bathroom.”

He gestured to the brand new hallway carpet.

Oh no, Auntie Yuki would have a fit. But it couldn’t be helped. “If he makes a mess on the carpet, we’ll just clean it up later.”

He didn’t hesitate. He hustled down the hallway with Matthew in his arms.

Venus kicked the miniscule living room garbage basket closer to Lex. “Hang your head over that.” Not that it would hold more than spittle, but it was better than letting Lex upchuck all over the plush cream carpet. Why did Lex, tomboy and jock, have to go weak every time something gross happened?

“You.” Venus stabbed a manicured finger at Aiden. “Get your car, we’re taking Trish to the hospital.”

He didn’t jump at her command. “After one contraction?”

Trish moaned, and Venus had a vision of the baby flying out of her in the next minute. She pointed to the door again. “Just go!”

Aiden shrugged and slipped out the front door, muttering to himself.

“You.” She stood in front of Trish, who’d started Lamaze breathing through her pursed lips. “Uh . . .”

Trish peered up at her.

“Um . . . stop having contractions.”

Trish rolled her eyes, but didn't speak through her pursed lips.

Venus ignored her and went to kneel over Matthew's rather watery puddle, which had spread with amoeba fingers reaching down the lines of grout. Lex's purse lay nearby, so she rooted in it for a tissue or something to start blotting up the mess.

Footsteps approaching. Before she could raise her head or shout a warning, Aunt Yuki hurried into the foyer. “What's wron—!”

It was like a Three Stooges episode. Aunt Yuki barreled into Venus's bent figure. She had leaned over Matthew's mess to protect anyone from stepping in it, but it also made her an obstacle in the middle of the foyer.

“Oomph!” The older woman's feet—shod in cotton house slippers, luckily, and not shoes—jammed into Venus's ribs. She couldn't see much except a pair of slippers leaving the floor at the same time, and then a body landing on the living room carpet on the other side of her. *Ouch*.

“Are you okay?” Venus twisted to kneel in front of her, but she seemed slow to rise.

“Venus, here're the paper towels—”

Jenn's voice in the foyer made Venus whirl on the balls of her feet and fling her hands up. “Watch out!”

Jenn stopped just in time. Her toes were only inches away from Matthew's mess, her body leaning forward. Her arms whirled, still clutching the towels, like a cheerleader and her pom-poms.

“Jenn.” Spenser's voice coming down the hallway toward the foyer. “Where are the—”

“Stop!” Venus and Jenn shouted at the same time.

Spenser froze, his foot hovering above a finger of the puddle that had stretched toward the hallway. “Ah. Okay. Thanks.” He lowered his foot on the clean tile to the side.

Aiden opened the front door. “The car's out front—” The sight of them all left him speechless.

Trish had started to hyperventilate, her breath seething through her teeth. “Will somebody do something?!”

Aunty Yuki moaned from her crumpled position on the floor.

Smoke started pouring from the kitchen, along with the awful smell of burned . . . *something* that wasn't normal food.

Venus snatched the paper towels from Jenn. "Kitchen!" Jenn fled before she'd finished speaking. "What do you need?" Venus barked at Spenser.

"Extra towels."

"Guest bedroom closet, top shelf."

He headed back down the hall. Venus turned to Aiden and swept a hand toward Aunty Yuki on the living room floor. "Take care of her, will you?"

"What about me?" Trish moaned through a clenched jaw.

"Stop having contractions!" Venus swiped up the mess on the tile before something worse happened, like someone stepped in it and slid. That would just be the crowning cherry to her evening. Even when she wasn't at work, she was still working.

"Are you okay, Aunty?" She stood with the sodden paper towels. Aiden had helped her to a seat next to Lex, who was ashen-faced and still leaning over the tiny trash can. Aside from a reddish spot on Aunty Yuki's elbow, she seemed fine.

Jenn entered the living room, her hair wild and a distinctive burned smell sizzling from her clothes. "My imported French saucepan is completely blackened!" But she had enough sense not to glare at her parent as she probably wanted to. Aunty Yuki suddenly found the wall hangings fascinating.

Venus started to turn toward the kitchen to throw away the paper towels she still held. "Well, we have to take Trish to the hospital—"

"Actually . . ." Trish's breathing had slowed. "I think it's just a false alarm."

Venus turned to look at her. "False alarm? Pregnant women have those?"

"It happened a couple days ago too."

"What?" Venus almost slammed her fist into her hip, but remembered the dirty paper towels just in time. Good thing too, because she had on a Chanel suit.

Trish gave a long, slow sigh. “Yup, they’re gone. That was fast.” She smiled cheerfully.

Venus wanted to scream. This was out of her realm. At work, she was used to grabbing a crisis at the throat and wrestling it to submission. This was somewhere Trish was heading without her, and the thought both frightened and unnerved her. She shrugged it off. “Well . . . Aunty—”

“I’m fine, Venus.” Aunty Yuki inspected her elbow. “Jennifer, get those Japanese Salonpas patches—”

“Mom, they stink.” Jenn’s stress over her beautiful kitchen made her more belligerent than Venus had ever seen her before. Not that the camphor patches could smell any worse than the burned Chinese-old-wives’-pregnancy-food permeating the house.

At the sound of the word Salonpas, Lex pinched her lips together but didn’t say anything.

Aunty Yuki gave Jenn a limpid look. “The Salonpas gets rid of the pain.”

“I’ll get it.” Aiden headed down the hallway to get the adhesive patches.

“In the hall closet.” Jenn’s words slurred a bit through her tight jaw.

Distraction time. Venus tried to smile. “Aunty, if you’re okay, then let’s eat.”

Jenn’s eyes flared neon red. “Can’t.”

“Huh?”

“*Somebody* turned off the oven.” Jenn frowned at her mother, who tactfully looked away. “Dinner won’t be for another hour.” She stalked back to the kitchen.

Even with the nasty smell, Venus’s stomach protested its empty state. “It’s already eight o’clock.”

“Suck it up!” Jenn yelled from the kitchen.

It was going to be a long night.



Venus needed a Reese’s peanut butter cup.

No, a Reese's was bad. Sugar, fat, preservatives, all kinds of chemicals she couldn't even pronounce.

Oooh, but it would taste so good . . .

No, she equated Reese's cups with her fat days. She was no longer fat. She didn't need a Reese's.

But she sure wanted one after such a hectic evening with her cousins.

She trudged up the steps to her condo. Home. Too small to invite people over, and that was the way she liked it. Her haven, where she could relax and let go, no one to see her when she was vulnerable—

Her front door was ajar.

Her limbs froze mid-step, but her heart *rat-tat-tatted* in her chest like a machine gun. Someone. Had. Broken. Into. Her. Home.

Her hand started to shake. She clenched it to her hip, crushing the silk of her pants. What to do? He might still be there. Pepper spray. In her purse. She searched in her bag and finally found the tiny bottle. Her hand trembled so much, she'd be more likely to spritz herself than the intruder.

Were those sounds coming from inside? She reached out a hand, but couldn't quite bring herself to push the door open further.

Stupid, call the police! She fumbled with the pepper spray so she could extract her cell phone. *Dummy, don't pop yourself in the eye with that stuff!* She switched the spray to her other hand while her thumb dialed 9-1-1. Her handbag's leather straps dug into her elbow.

Thump! That came from her living room! Footsteps. *Get away from the door!* She stumbled backwards, but remembering the stairs right behind her, she tried to stop herself from tumbling down. Her ankle tilted on her stilettos, and she fell sideways to lean against the wall. The footsteps approached her open door.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

She raised her hand with the bottle of pepper spray. "Someone's—"

The door swung open.

"Edgar!" The cell phone dropped with a clatter, but she kept a firm grip on the pepper spray, suddenly tempted to use it.

One of her junior programmers stood in her open doorway.