TITLE: Chef

BRIEF SYNOPSIS: A out-of-work musician auditions for the job of a chef at a Silicon Valley venture capital firm and finds romance instead.

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Chef

I saw the ad on Monday. "Menlo Park VC firm seeks chef for weekday lunches with locally sourced ingredients. Contact Maritza: maritza@shvc.com." A dream job, which could help me "scale up" as they say here in Silicon Valley.

I'm a bass player, and performed in a trio for years at Café Paoletti in Palo Alto. As prices rose (produce, supplies, rent, bridge tolls), the restaurant closed. My income stopped and I needed a Plan B to pay the bills.

I've always loved to cook, even as a toddler mixing pancake batter with a wooden spoon under my mom's supervision. I started preparing large meals, and invited people on my neighborhood Nextdoor group to buy a meal or two a week. The orders mounted, from single parents, live-at-home seniors, and families wanting a break. In a few months, I was making a small profit.

On Tuesday, Maritza, the VC firm admin, called.

"Would you care to "audition"? Prepare Friday lunch for ten people, delivery at 11.30?"

"Yes!" I was excited and nervous. "Any food restriction?"

"One vegetarian (ovo-lacto) and one on a gluten-free diet. No allergies."

Her friendly voice and speech pattern made me think of Natalie in *Monk*. Googling her immediately, I found she was neither blonde nor blue-eyed, and had a warm smile.

"What do they like to eat?" I asked conspiratorially.

"Avoid eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, and tongue of dog," her voice smiled. "Less Macbeth, more Getafix."

"Ah! Mistletoe, clovers, strawberries…"

"Bingo."

I planned the meal. Greens, rosemary bread: two loaves, one with gluten-free flour. Chicken for protein, and for the vegetarian: seitan, tempeh or tofu? I called her for guidance. "Oh, I'd love tofu," she replied. So, it was her! For dessert, macarons, naturally gluten-free.

On Friday, rising at 5 AM to bake the bread, I laid out compostable lunchboxes, cutlery and napkins. In tinfoil mini cake pans, I placed three macarons each. I made her lunchbox with extra care, placing an orchid flower on top.

As I walked into the lobby at 11.20, a back door opened, and in walked Maritza.

"Magic potion delivery," I quipped.

Her laugh was even more appealing in person.

I placed a mason jar with a few sprigs of lavender and lemon verbena on her desk. "Thank you for the opportunity to audition."

She called on Wednesday. They had tried three other chefs and picked someone else.

"I understand. If they ever need a change, I'd welcome another chance." I tried to hide my disappointment.

"Noted." Her voice was soothing. "I loved what you made. So delicious."

I was seized with a growing impulse, to which I gave in.

"Are you free for dinner one day this week?"

"Will you cook?" Again, the teasing smile in her voice.

"Of course!"

"I would love to. Friday would work."

"Friday it is."

I hung up and danced around my apartment. Then embarked on a frenzy of cleaning, alternating with digging up every tofu recipe on the Internet.