

A SERVING OF SCANDAL

By Prue Leith

Chapter One

'Are you waiting at table then? You can hardly do it in chef's whites.'

The voice was not friendly. Kate turned from the sink to see Dennis, the Foreign Office butler, lips pursed and eyes narrowed behind his designer frames.

Hell, she thought. Why him? Why couldn't I have had Tom, or Rodrigo? Dennis was the Head Butler and a pain. She reached round her back for the dishcloth tucked into her apron. Drying her hands, she said,

'Hello, Dennis. I didn't know you were here. It's only a working lunch isn't it?'

'This is One Carlton Gardens, however, and the official residence of the Foreign Secretary. We have standards to maintain.'

Kate, knowing she must work with the man, said evenly, 'And I will not let you down. Don't worry. But I did clear my waitressing with Julian. I'll wear a black apron over the top. It will be fine. I cleared it with Julian.'

Dennis gave his head a little shake of disapproval. He did not like the Facilities Manager to whom they all reported.

Kate said, 'Of course if you want to do it, that would be wonderful, but as it's such a tiny job, I said I could manage on my own.' Better lay it on thick, she thought and added, 'I'm sure you've got much more important stuff to see to.'

'I have, as it happens, though I do not like to leave the Secretary of State unattended, even for a small working lunch.'

She shrugged, pulling mouth down in an ironic moue. 'Everyone, even the Government, is trying to save money. I'll be lucky if I cover my costs, the budget is so tight. Julian seemed to think I could do it for the price of the food.'

'What do you mean? You make a fortune.'

'I wish. I do OK, but not on a job for four. If it was anyone other than the FCO I'd have turned it down, but I've got to impress the new Foreign Secretary.' She picked up two sauté pans and shoved them upside down onto the pot rack.

Dennis, leaning against the fridge, was inspecting his nails, which irritated Kate. She'd have liked him out of her kitchen. Only it wasn't her kitchen.

'You won't get the catering here, you know.' He said, 'We have our own chef and he's really good.' He shrugged and turned to inspect his reflection in the shiny chrome fish-kettle. 'Only he's sick today, so needs must.'

Kate had to make an effort not to rise. 'Dennis, come on, you know all I am after is keeping my place on the approved list of party caterers for the department. Oliver Stapler has a reputation as something of a foodie and he may just have a pet caterer of his own. I don't want some Chelsea girl with connections shoe-horning me out.'

Dennis gave a dismissive little snort. 'That's all gone now. Government jobs have to be awarded after a proper selection process. You were lucky. You got in before the rules changed.'

Thanks very much, thought Kate. But she kept her voice pleasant as she laid out her starter plates on the worktop and switched the subject back to practicalities.

'Are you doing the drinks? Or do you want me to? I can easily manage it. The starter and pud are cold, so it'll be a doddle.'

'No, of course not. A sommelier's job can't be done by any Tom, Dick or Harry.'

What a tosser. And anyway they'd only drink water. But, determined not to give him any ammunition, she smiled and said, 'Well, I am none of those, at least.'

'I'm more concerned about you doing the waiter's job' said Dennis.

'Since you have decided to do it yourself, I am prepared to run you through the do's and don'ts.'

Kate would have liked to punch his self-important paunch. But she said,

'It's fine Dennis. I was a waitress long before I was a cook, and I can still carry a row of plates up my arm or serve from the left and clear from the right. Don't worry, I won't let you down.'

She watched him glide out of the kitchen with an almost imperceptible sway of his hips, his nose very slightly in the air and his hands held a few inches away from his body. He wore the regulation butler's uniform but always managed to look infinitely smarter than the others: his striped worsted trousers were perfectly cut, starched white cuffs just visible under his tailored jacket, his black tie thick silk, his shoes (even the heels) polished like new. And he always smelt expensive.

I bet he shaves that bald head, thought Kate. And wears silver hoops in his ears – she'd noticed they were pierced – when off duty. She had a sudden vision of Dennis dancing in a gay club, kissing the neck of a young lad. She shuddered. Well, at least there was no danger of his pushing her up against a storeroom door.

Kate walked confidently and purposefully about the kitchen but she was anxious. As she ground coriander into the spiced potatoes, and turned them carefully in the pan, her mind stayed on Dennis. She really did not like him and she was unused to disliking people. And she was made uneasy by Dennis's obvious dislike of her. Why did he try so hard to get up her nose? Surely it was easier and pleasanter to get on with your colleagues? He was charm itself to the clients, nothing too much trouble: Yes, Sir; Certainly, Minister; At once, M'lady. And he was very good at his job – which accounted for his rise to Head Butler. But below stairs he was poison: a master of drama, his staff never quite knowing if they were in favour or out. And he had it in for all outside contractors, especially female ones.

All she could do was take no notice, tread carefully and give him no cause for complaint. She was as conscious as he was that one word from him to the Facilities Manager and she would not be hired again.

But very soon, in the stress-free enjoyment of such a simple job, she had forgotten all about him. She laid the table with care. All the silver, china and linen were provided by the Foreign Office and, to Dennis' credit, everything sparkled. She was pleased with herself for bringing a bunch of snowdrops for the middle of it: the department did not run to extra flowers for internal or inter-department events, and though the main rooms would have flowers or plants, the dining table would not. So she and Toby had been out in the garden last night, picking. The thought cheered her: it had been almost dark, but the snowdrops had glowed bright white and the five-year old had dashed from clump to clump, filling his plump hands.

The raw peeled beetroot for the goats' cheese starter went through the Robot Coupe in a single long push, the fine red julienne strips snaking into the bowl below like magic. She sprinkled them with lemon juice and sea salt. She'd have

liked to add fresh mint, but it was January and, over the years, she'd become ever keener on sticking to seasonal food. She made four neat piles of beetroot in the centre of each plate, and surrounded them with chunks of goat's cheese and fresh walnuts. She garnished each plate with a few young beet leaves, (poly-tunnel grown, but at least English). All they needed now was a drizzle of good olive oil before serving.

Rather than risk disturbing the look of her salads with plastic wrap – besides she hated wasting the stuff, and felt guilty about its non biodegradable nature – she covered each plate with an upended soup bowl. She left them on the side. She wanted the cheese to soften slightly to develop its flavour.

Kate liked cooking on her own. She was fast and methodical, constantly wiping her boards as she used them, washing up as she went along, putting things away. She swung round the kitchen, tossing debris into the bin, stirring a pot here, flicking salt into a pan there, slamming the bread rolls into a hot oven. She cut deep slashes through the skin of the sea bass fillets, noticing with approval how fresh and thick they were. The fish was wild and had cost a bit but was worth it: farmed sea bass were so often skinny and tasteless. She lay the fillets on the greased grill pan. Once she'd got the first course in front of the diners, she'd brush them with melted butter, salt them and bang them under the blazing grill. Seven minutes should do it, then she could whip them off and let them settle while she cleared the first course.

The creamed leeks were cooked and delicious, the spiced potatoes ditto, the plates warm. There was no pudding, only a dessert of finely sliced pineapple with a thin dusting of five-spice powder and castor sugar, and the thinnest of ginger thins, made to her mother's recipe. No cheese, just coffee and exactly four perfect chocolates, filled with brandied cherries. Her friend Talika made those and they cost a fortune.

The Secretary of State, of course, was late, but they sat down straight away and Dennis unfolded their napkins and laid them reverently on their laps (a carry-on that always amused Kate – surely grown men could open out their own napkins?) she went round with the hot bread rolls, then put the beetroot salads in front of them.

She had time for a good look at the new Foreign Secretary. He had presence, no doubt of that, and he was good looking in an elegant old-fashioned way. 'Patrician' the press called it. He sat straight in his chair, very still, his hands in his lap and yet he looked as relaxed as his colleagues leaning on the table or lounging back in their chairs. He did not acknowledge her.

His hair was prematurely grey – at forty-five he was one of the youngest members of Cabinet – but it suited him. She could see why the tabloids had him down for a snob and a toff in spite of his Labour credentials. His stillness and silence were unnerving. He listened, nodded, seldom commented, and when he picked up his knife and fork to eat his first course, or his glass to take a sip of water, he did so with no unnecessary movement. His stillness made Kate notice how the other guests pushed their food about the plate, ran their fingers up and down the goblet stem, sat back, sat forward.

When Kate served his sea bass, it struck her, at it so often did, that well-brought up people with apparently impeccable manners could not spare the time for a quick glance or a thank you when their food was put before them. Besides, she thought crossly, that fish dish was faultless: the skin was crisp and brown, the flesh plump, moist, glowing white through the cuts in the crusty skin, sitting on a perfect round of chopped young leeks in a cream sauce. And to the side, a delicate castle (she had used a mould to get a perfect shape) of crumbly, golden, spicy, potatoes. And it smelt like heaven. Even he, living off the fat of the land, could not get lunch that good every day. You'd think he'd not seen the plate

before him, but since he promptly picked up knife and fork and set about eating it, he obviously had.

Dennis deigned to serve the coffee but disappeared as soon as the guests had gone, leaving Kate to do the clear and wash up by herself. She did not mind. If it had been one of the other butlers she would have liked the help and the chat – butlers always knew all the political gossip, true and false – but she'd rather have no help at all than that of the petulant Dennis.

By three o'clock she was done, grill and cooker top cleaned, floor mopped, rubbish bagged. As she picked up her handbag a smartly suited young man with dark hair and glasses, appeared.

'Kate McKinnon? I'm Sean, PPS to the Foreign Secretary. He sent me to have a word.'

Kate's heat sank. 'Was something wrong?'

'No, no. Not at all. He was delighted. He said to tell you he has seldom had a better lunch, and do you do private dinner parties?'

'Whew, that's a relief.' She fished in her bag for a business card. 'Yes of course I cook dinners. Love to. '

'He's got a dinner arranged for next Thursday at his own house in Lambeth. The chef here was to have done it but as you know he's ill. I was about to appeal to Government Hospitality to find us another. But since he likes your food ...?'

Kate nodded, 'I'd love to do dinner for him. Have to check my diary but I'm pretty sure it will be OK.' It will have to be, she thought.

He looked at her card. '*Nothing Fancy*. He'll like that. I'll be in touch.'

Kate picked up her handbag, ran her eyes over the kitchen one last time to make sure there would be no smudge of grease or crumb on the floor that Dennis could complain of. Then she hurried down the corridor to the cloakroom.

She stopped at the sight of herself in the mirror, unused to the black apron. She usually wrapped a white chef's apron round her middle, its multiple folds round her waist giving her a dumpy look. At five foot three and 9 stone plus she would never be tall and thin, but the long black apron down to her calves and wrapped tightly round her waist made her look slimmer and taller than she was. And the white of her jacket set off her Celtic colouring, right now heightened by the kitchen heat. She did not wear a chef's skullcap or toque – her mop of dark curls were a struggle to stuff into them. She knew she was meant to, but no one had ever challenged her. And as yet no customer had found a hair in the soup. Her other non-regulation touches were her gold earrings, chunky little hoops which she wore all the time, even in bed or the bath.

She gave her reflection a brief nod. Bravo, she told herself, a very good day. Everything worked, cooked lovely food, managed not to fight with the poisonous Dennis, impressed the boss.

Best of all I'll be home in time for Toby's tea.