

SEEDS OF PASSION: CHAPTER TWO

Isabella Martinique was overwhelmed.

It was real. The Mount Horeb Mustard Museum. She had heard the legends, seen the photos, shopped the website at www.mustardmuseum.com, but nothing could have prepared her for seeing the real thing for the first time.

The Latin poet Virgil once wrote, “The mind boggles at how many mustards there are.” *Quandum mustardia est, cranium doa da loopdiloop.*

Isabella Martinique had that feeling. Jars and jars of the world’s greatest condiment. Stretching as far as the eye could see. Rothschild’s Apricot Ginger Mustard. Cherchie’s Champagne Mustard. Slimm & Nunne Habañero Horseradish Mustard. It would take a catalog to list them all. And here they all were, in one Museum of Mustard. One Temple of Taste. One Cathedral of Condiments.

She thought of the curator’s words, “This museum is of the heart.” A salty tear of joy trickled down her cheek.

Across the floor, she saw a display of Plochman’s. Plain, ordinary, everyday Plochman’s. It reminded her of everything she loved about mustard. This humble yellow supermarket staple could stand proudly next to its’ snooty gourmet brethren and proclaim in all of its’ plastic squeezability – “I, too, am mustard!”

I’m a lot like that mustard, thought Isabella. I, too, come from humble beginnings. I, too, don’t come in a fancy package. (She cast a jealous glance at Daphne, her Hollywood-gorgeous co-worker.) I, too, can stand proudly among the finest mustards in the world with my head held high.

In fact, Isabella was holding her head so high, that she missed seeing the kneeling man at the entrance to the museum. For Isabella was not the only person that day feeling the lure of the world’s greatest condiment. At that moment, on his knees, the dusty stranger was also feeling a sense of fulfillment, of a quest that was finally at an end.

Phyllis Comstock, chief condiment counselor, didn’t miss seeing him. And Phyllis Comstock had no use for this sort of nonsense.

“Get up”, she yelled. “This is a respectable museum.”

“It’s more than respectable.” Said the stranger. “It’s... It’s...”

Then he passed out face first on the floor.

“Code Dijon!” shrieked Serena. It was the softest shriek Serena could manage, but it still turned every head in the museum.

Years ago, the Curator cooked up a complex series of codes so his staff could communicate without alarming the customers. Code Dijon was a fainting, passing-out, or other loss of consciousness. Code Poupon was for spillage, breakage, or other activity involving the mop.

Code Habañero was for a re-awakening of the bitter, ancient feud that threatened the very future of the Mustard Museum itself.

No one had ever used Code Habañero.

Isabella looked around and saw nothing but the bustle of activity.

Phyllis grabbed the Hit & Run Excruciatingly Painful Brown Horseradish Mustard kept behind the counter in case of emergency.

Claudia grabbed the glass of water that the victim would need after tasting the Hit & Run Excruciatingly Painful Brown Horseradish Mustard kept behind the counter in case of emergency.

Serena told the throngs of customers to step back and give the victim some air. People as far away as Verona and Barneveld complied.

Daphne dialed 411 to request the number for 911.

Isabella felt helpless. Her first momemnts of her first day on the job and there was a crisis. She could do nothing but watch.

“Code Dijon” was not an uncommon drill. Many first-time visitors to the museum were overwhelmed, and the Fab Four went at their tasks with compassion and professionalism. The fainting drill had only gone wrong once. Years ago, a Hollywood action movie hunk had stopped in to see the Curator. The star casually asked “Is it hot in here?” – and Daphne began mouth-to-mouth several minutes before the star fainted. The Curator had needed everyone in his high-powered, shadowy legal network to worm the museum out of a lawsuit.

Serena called joyfully, “He’s coming around.”

The crowd parted.

Isabella got her first glimpse of the man on the floor.

The dusty stranger from Highway 78. The man with the Red Sox cap, and the dented suitcase. The man with the piercing green eyes, and the long chestnut hair. The man with the perfect white teeth. The man with the taut, lean body – chiseled to perfection by months of walking.

Isabella caught her breath.

The dusty stranger blinked a few times, willed his vision to focus, and then turned his gaze on the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

The woman he gazed at wasn't Isabella. It was Daphne Ames.

"Don't try to talk", shrieked Serena.

The stranger could not stop gazing at Daphne.

Daphne gazed back at the stranger.

Isabella knew that look in Daphne's eye. Isabella had seen that look many times when her son Tony was bored.

Tony had a "Great Chefs Of The World" action figure set, and when he was bored, he would cook up terrible fates for his miniature culinary heroes. Graham Kerr, trampled by galloping horses. Wolfgang Puck, run over by limousines. Rachel Ray, screaming "yumOOOOOOO" as her car went off the top-bunk cliff.

Isabella knew that Daphne was about to toy with the dusty stranger's heart. She fought the maternal instinct to protect the stranger. How could she protect a man she herself had almost killed less than an hour ago?

She searched her heart. Why should a simmering gaze between a new co-worker and a dust-covered pedestrian fill her heart with fear? Why should she even care? She knew she was going to have to sort herself out. Get her feelings under control. Here she was, just handed the professional opportunity of a lifetime.

"I'm a chef," she thought. "I'm the head chef. The only simmering I'm here to do involves delicious soups."

Meanwhile, Daphne lowered her eyelids and fluttered them slightly. Venus Fly Traps make that move in the wild, thought Isabella.

"Can you sit up?", asked Claudia.

The stranger complied, never taking his eyes off of the coy Daphne.

Phyllis shooed the crowd of customers away from the scene on the floor. "Show's over. He's fine. Return to your shopping." Then she pulled herself up to her full height – somewhere around 4' 6" – and turned on her sales team. "Somebody make sure he signs a release form. You know how the Curator likes everything nice and legal. Everyone else, get back to work. We've got mustard to sell."

"I'll look after him," purred Daphne.

Isabella's blood boiled.

Daphne knelt on the ground beside the stranger, clipboard in hand. "My name's Daphne. What's yours?"

"I... I..." stammered the stranger.

"Ivan?" asked Daphne. "Ipod? Imax?"

"I can't remember. The only thing I remember from my old life is the night the Red Sox won the 2004 World Series. I remember dancing through supermarket aisles with delirious joy. The next thing I remember, I woke up at the institute. The Massachusetts Home For The Condimentally Confused."

"Amnesia?" blurted Isabella. She hadn't meant to reveal her presence to the stranger, but her heart often lurched one step ahead of her brain.

The stranger looked up at her and smiled. "My angel of the highway. You didn't tell me you worked here."

"It's my first day," blushed Isabella.

"No wonder you're in such a hurry," said the stranger, flashing perfect white teeth.

"That's enough about Izzie," interrupted Daphne. "I want to hear all about you."

"No," he said sadly, "It's worse than amnesia. They tell me that on the night they found me, I tried to buy mayonnaise. Now I have long term memory loss, brought on by improper condiment usage."

"Condementia," said Isabella.

"You've heard of it?" asked the stranger.

Just the word condementia brought back memories of Fernando. That tortured genius who spent night after sleepless night in the lab. Fernando had done the first serious work on condementia. They laughed at him when he published his findings in the New England Journal Of Mustard. Then he had walked out of her life, and her son's life. Forever.

"You must be awfully stressed out," purred Daphne. "Don't you want to go somewhere and lie down?"

"I've walked all this way," said the stranger. "They told me there was only one man who could help me. I'm here to see the Curator."

All activity stopped. The normally bustling museum became as still as a tomb.

Phyllis stopped the cash register in mid-ring.

Claudia stopped in mid-sales-pitch.

Serena, who was posting the Mustard Of The Week on the bulletin board, dropped her pin. Everyone heard it hit the floor.

“Don’t say such things,” whispered Daphne hurriedly.

“What’s going on?” asked Isabella.

Phyllis looked sternly at the stranger from under the top of the register. “Daphne, get his signature and send him on his way.”

“What’s going on?” asked Isabella.

“No one sees the Curator,” said Phyllis. “No one’s seen the Curator in years. He curates by night, when there’s no one around. He leaves notes. He decides what mustards stay and what mustards go. But no one sees the Curator. I think you’d best be leaving.”

The stranger stood. All six feet of him. If Isabella had had a chisel and block of marble, she would have carved him right then and there.

“I’m not leaving,” said the stranger. “I’m a customer.”

“Customers buy things,” hissed Phyllis. “Loiterers do time in the Mount Horeb City Jail.”

Isabella knew the stranger was broke. She had seen all his possessions scattered on the shoulder of the highway. And she could tell by the tight, tight fit of his jeans that he wasn’t carrying a wallet.

Isabella herself was broke. She had only \$19.42 to make it through until her first payday. Still, she couldn’t bear the thought of this man being hounded out into the streets of Mount Horeb by that troll, Phyllis.

“We have a fine selection here,” blurted Isabella. “The first mustard’s on me.”

“That’s very generous of you, dear” interrupted Daphne, “But kept behind the counter in case of emergency, you’re not a sales counselor, you can’t show him around properly.”

Phyllis fumed. “I want him to buy something, and then I want him out of my museum.”

Daphne took the stranger by the arm. “Over here, we have a fine selection of European mustards...”

Isabella took a step to follow, but found herself face to chin with an enraged Phyllis. “Get back in the kitchen where you belong, Izzie.”

Isabella had no choice. This job meant everything to her. She retreated into the cool, stainless steel sanctuary of the kitchen. Why had she let her foolish heart cloud her thinking? Why had she made an enemy of the chief condiment counselor on her first day?

“I am a chef,” murmured Isabella. She determined never to let her heart dictate to her again. To use her mind, and the cool calculations of logic to create her dishes.

Little did she know that she was fighting a losing battle. The seeds of passion, once planted in the fertile soil of the heart, never take long to bloom.