

VILLAINY PREVIEW STORY # 1

THE REVIEW

By John E. Petty

Winthorpe Polander smiled as he put the period to the last sentence of his latest review. “...and to even deign to regurgitate this odious malevolence would be to do too much honor to the culinary criminal who created it, as that would necessitate tasting his vile effluvia one more time. One can only hope that its passage out of the body is more pleasurable than its journey in.”

It was a masterpiece, certain to run the head chef at the Wainwright Hotel out of the country within two weeks. How dare that

craven cur serve him, Winthorpe Polander, head food critic of the city's greatest newspaper, a shrimp salad that was not precisely chilled to 41 degrees Fahrenheit? Unthinkable.

Polander was well known for his insistence on excellence (although where, exactly, his standards came from, no one quite knew), which meant that he wrote far more bad notices than good ones.

Throughout the years that he had been writing restaurant reviews, Polander had gained a certain reputation for his acid-laced commentaries. Readers looked forward to his venomous diatribes, while chefs trembled whenever the arrogant critic walked through their doors. Polander had ruined more than

one chef, and closed more than one restaurant, in his twenty years behind the typewriter.

Tonight, however, would be the highpoint of Polander's career. Tonight was the night to which his whole life had been leading. Tonight he would destroy the man he hated most in the entire world.

Paul Montrain, formerly the head chef at the Ritz-Carlton, had recently opened a new restaurant in town, The Crestview, that had been receiving glowing reviews and had become the darling of the city's social elite. Famed for his daring and visionary culinary creations, Montrain had become an instant celebrity, appearing on local talk shows and as guest of honor at charity events. There was

even talk of his hosting his own syndicated TV show. He was on top of the world, and that galled Winthorpe Polander.

Polander had hated Montrain since they were students at the Culinary Institute. Both naturally competitive, they had been the heads of their class and natural rivals during their tenure at the school. They had even competed for the same woman, their Sauces and Dressings instructor, Vivian Towers.

Near the end of their senior year, there had been a competition sponsored by a leading hotel chain. The prize was a five-year contract as chef at a major hotel. It was a prize that could easily make a young chef's career. Everyone in the school competed, but it soon boiled down to a duel between

Polander and Montrain. To sweeten the pot, as it were, Vivian announced that she would marry the winner.

The battle was intense, with both combatants giving their dishes their all. They were under a strict time limit, with a minimum of three dishes to be prepared in a mere sixty minutes. The rules had to be rigidly adhered to, and both contestants were watched for even the most minor infraction. It was the most nerve-wracking hour either of the two men had ever undergone.

Montrain prepared an appetizer of pan seared foie gras, with gingered pineapple, cranberries, mango jam, and pecans, followed by a Black Angus strip loin of beef and Kobe

beef short ribs, accompanied by scallion whipped potatoes in a Madeira wine sauce and finished with a poached pineapple covered in rum cream, served with a coconut sorbet.

Polander offered a chilled Maine lobster salad, with fresh hearts of palm, tomatoes, carrots, avocado, and lemon basil vinaigrette to start, followed by black truffle mushroom soup highlighted with smoked squab. His main course was a delicately prepared pan roasted breast of duck, with duck confit, foie gras, and caramelized pearl onion, drizzled with a dried cherry port wine sauce, and finished by a luscious chocolate tart, accompanied by Chipotle sorbet and passion fruit red pepper sauce.

Finally, the moment of tasting and judgment had arrived. As both chefs walked down the aisle toward the judges bearing their main courses, Polander tripped and ended up wearing his duck. Not only was he disqualified, but a picture of him covered with his creation became the front page of the city's largest newspaper. It was a humiliating moment, one that took him months to live down. Of course, Montrain won the competition - and Vivian - and went on to a successful career as a respected and decorated chef. Polander, on the other hand, never entered a kitchen again, turning his culinary acumen instead into the basis of an award-winning restaurant review column. Deep in his heart, however, Polander swore that he

would someday have his revenge on Montrain, sure that his rival had tripped him to insure an easy victory.

And now that day had come, a day that Polander had been planning for months. Not only would Polander ruin Montrain's career, but he had another surprise in store for the popular chef as well.

When Montrain had come to town, still married to Vivian who was just as beautiful and vivacious as in their college days, Polander had seen his chance. Normally, he would have reviewed the new restaurant within days of its opening, but this case was different. This time there was more at stake here than a mere restaurant review.

Using his vast web of contacts, Polander had gathered a mountain of information on both Paul and Vivian. He learned that Paul had become a workaholic, spending much more time in his kitchen than with his wife. He learned that Vivian was growing restless at being slighted, and that she had begun to express her displeasure with Paul. And he learned that Vivian had started hanging out in the bar at the Renfield, a trendy hotel in the expensive part of town.

Armed with this information, Polander managed to “accidentally” run into Vivian one night at the Renfield. They spent several hours chatting about old times, and Winthorpe did his best to be sympathetic and attentive. Polander had aged well since last

seeing Vivian. His salt-and-pepper hair was the most obvious sign of the two decades that had passed, as his trim and athletic build belied his copious appetites, and he could tell instantly that Vivian was attracted to him all over again.

Over the next few months, Winthorpe and Vivian spent more and more time together, although they were careful to be discreet and keep out of the public eye. For all intents and purposes, Vivian was his.

The fact was, though, by this time, Winthorpe could not have cared less about Vivian. He had gotten over her years ago. There was only room for one “most important person” in Winthorpe’s life, and that was Winthorpe. None of this was about winning

the fair maiden (although he would never tell Vivian that – at least not yet), it was about ruining a hated rival.

And so time passed and Montrain's restaurant become more and more successful, and Winthorpe and Vivian become more and more involved. It was a scheme worthy of Machiavelli, as Winthorpe skillfully played Vivian like a simple trout on the end of his line – alternately reeling her in and giving her some lead - and Polander reveled in his coming revenge.

And finally the big night was upon him. Winthorpe arrived at the Crestview promptly at seven o'clock, the time of his reservation, and was shown to his table for two. Moments later, Vivian joined him. She looked luscious

in a sleek black evening gown slit almost too far above her hips, her fiery red hair perfectly coiffed, and her nails expertly rendered in blood-red lacquer highlighted with what appeared to be small yellow flames. For a moment, looking at her, Winthorpe actually experienced a tinge of the old desire that he once felt for the stunning creature who sat opposite him, but the unwelcomed feeling soon passed. She was an object, a thing to be used and discarded, a bit of unwelcome gristle on the plate of Polander's life. Nevertheless, Winthorpe was pleased that she had gone to all the trouble to make herself irresistible (to others, of course). All the better to stick the knife in Montrain's heart just a little deeper, Polander thought.

“Have you seen him yet?” Vivian asked.

“Not yet,” said Winthorpe. “I just got here myself.”

Although he hated to admit it, dinner was better than Polander had expected. The steak was tender and juicy and cooked to perfection, highlighted with a delicate yet piquant seasoning, and the wine was served at precisely the right temperature. Even the asparagus spears had just the right amount of snap to them. In any other circumstances, he would actually have written one of his rare positive reviews about The Crestview. But tonight wasn't about journalistic integrity. It was about payback for twenty years of humiliation. It was about revenge.

“I can’t wait to see his face when we tell him,” Vivian said, her eyes sparkling in the reflected candlelight.

“Soon, dearest, soon,” Polander promised.

After the meal, Polander had the waiter take his card back to the chef. Just as he expected, Montrain soon appeared from the kitchen, a warm smile on his face, a smile that fell as soon as he saw Vivian at the table.

With a glance, Winthorpe could see that Paul had been pushing himself. He was haggard, and a tic played at his lips.

Winthorpe knew Paul didn’t deal with stress well. It had almost been his downfall in school. God knows how he was dealing with the pressure of running his own restaurant.

“Hello, Winthorpe,” Paul said. “It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, not long enough,” Polander replied, not even looking at the nervous chef.

“Vivian...?” Paul said.

“Oh, cut the crap, Paul,” Vivian shot back curtly. “It’s over. I’m sick of coming in second to your stupid restaurant. I’m leaving you, Paul. I’m leaving you for Winthorpe.”

Polander didn’t say a word. He looked up at Montrain and smiled.

Stunned, Montrain turned without a word and shuffled back into the kitchen. As Polander watched him go, he imagined he heard a single sob coming from the chef as he left the room. It was the sound of triumph,

the most glorious sound Winthorpe had ever heard.

Winthorpe's review of The Crestview was his most vicious yet. With comments like, "...the disgusting mélange that congealed upon my plate was surpassed in wretchedness only by the noisome glass of viscous fluid that purported to be wine," and "...tasting the so-called creations of Chef (although one is loathe to use that word in this context) Paul Montrain is like having one's teeth drilled sans Novocain: it's unbelievably painful and unpleasant, and, while one is in the midst of the agony, feels as if it will never end."

Polander accomplished his goal: within a week, it was announced that the Crestview was closing its doors.

Several weeks later, Polander received an invitation in the mail that bore the return address of the Crestview. Curious, he opened it to see that he had been invited to the closing night of Montrain's restaurant on the following evening. There was a handwritten note on the bottom: "No hard feelings," scrawled in a shaky hand, and signed only with a single "P."

Polander couldn't resist the opportunity to revel in the fruits of his revenge one more time, so he called the restaurant and made a reservation for two. No doubt Vivian would also enjoy the evening.

Later that day, Polander rang Vivian to tell her about the event.

“Wonderful, Darling,” she said. “I have to stop by there to drop off some papers but I won’t let on that I’m coming, too. It’ll be a delicious surprise. I have an appointment with the lawyer at six, so I might be a smidge late, but I’ll see you there as close to seven as possible.”

The next evening couldn’t come fast enough for Polander. This was even better than he had hoped. Not only had he crushed his hated rival, now he had a chance to see him grovel. No doubt Montrain wanted to suck up in the hopes that Winthorpe wouldn’t ruin his next restaurant. Fat chance.

Winthorpe entered The Crestview at precisely 6:59 and was promptly shown to his table. By 7:05, he was looking at his watch,

impatiently wondering where Vivian was. By 7:15, he was calling her cell phone, and by 7:30, he was ready to start dinner without her.

Stupid woman, he thought. As soon as this evening was over, it was time to end things with her. She wasn't worth his time and his effort now that she had served her purpose. He had more important fish to fry.

The restaurant was sparsely populated. Winthorpe was pleased to see the results of his handiwork. It was rare that he got the opportunity to observe the aftermath of his column's influence. It gave him a perverse thrill and sharpened his appetite.

There was no menu in front of him, and when Winthorpe asked the waiter about his apparent oversight, he was told that the chef

was preparing a special menu tonight in Polander's honor. Winthorpe thought this was odd, but other chefs had gone to even more outrageous lengths to curry favor with the great critic. He decided to sit back and enjoy the evening, even without Vivian.

The first course was a liver and kidney compote, served atop a bed of steak tartar, followed by a bowl of rich tomato soup, which had a dark, thick texture that Polander assumed must be the result of organically grown vine-ripened Mediterranean tomatoes grown only in one small district in Italy. Winthorpe smiled to himself, pleased that he had been able to place the peculiar taste. Although the compote was lovely, Polander

found the soup a bit too salty for his taste, although he finished the entire bowl.

The main course was a tender filet of beef au jus, accompanied by potatoes au gratin and glazed carrots a la Montrain. Even Polander had to admit that the steak was the best he had ever tasted. Firm and flavorful and seasoned to perfection, it had a lovely taste that Polander couldn't quite place. He had tasted beef all over the world, from Japan to Guatemala to the Australian Outback, but he had never tasted a cut of meat quite like this before. He desperately wanted to ask Paul where it was from, but he knew he wouldn't. His pride wouldn't allow it.

The waiter cleared the table and Polander waited expectantly for dessert. While he sat, impatiently, he called Vivian again. No answer. Where could she be? She had been looking forward to this evening as much as he. Now Winthorpe was angry. No one stood up Winthorpe Polander.

Just then the waiter walked by, and Winthorpe grabbed him by the arm.

“You there,” he said, in his most authoritarian manner. “What’s going on? Why is dessert taking so long?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the waiter replied. “Monsieur Montrain is preparing something special. He won’t even let the kitchen staff see what it is.”

Leaning in, the waiter said in a conspiratorial whisper, "It's very odd."

Now Polander's interest was piqued. What could it be, this secretive dessert? Just as he was musing on the possibilities, the door to the kitchen opened and Paul himself came out bearing a large covered platter. If he had looked bad the last time Winthorpe saw him, he looked downright scary now. Montrain was gaunt and emaciated, his eyes deep-set and hollow. He hadn't shaved for days, and his hair was a mess. He didn't look at Polander, but seemed to stare at a fixed spot somewhere in front of him. The tic around his mouth was worse as well, and Montrain moved with a jerky, hesitant motion. As he got closer, Polander could see

red splotches all over Paul's white chef's coat, which was odd, as Paul had always been one of the most fastidious men Polander had ever known.

As Montrain reached Polander's table, he placed the enormous platter in front of his guest and stood there, fixedly staring at the wall. He was beginning to make Polander uncomfortable, so Winthorpe finally said with a smirk, "Sorry to hear that you'll be closing, Paul."

"Yes, I'm sure you are," Montrain responded tonelessly.

"I'm sorry Vivian didn't make it tonight," Polander said, attempting to goad the chef one more time. "She would have enjoyed your final meal."

That remark got a reaction. Turning his head slowly, almost robotically, Montrain focused on Polander for the very first time, with dead, empty eyes that still managed to hold a savage look that chilled Winthorpe to the bone. It was the look of a twisted, desperate man, a man with nothing to lose. Montrain's crooked, deranged smile – the smile of a madman, Winthorpe thought – made the hairs on the back of Polander's neck stand up.

“Oh, Vivian didn't miss anything,” Montrain said through tightly clenched teeth. “She wouldn't miss dinner with you for the world. And it wasn't my final meal, it was hers... and yours.”

Montrain pulled the domed cover off the platter with a flourish, revealing Vivian's head, an apple wedged firmly between her teeth, staring at Winthorpe, a pleading, helpless expression on her dead face.

Arranged around her head were her fingers, all ten of them, like little white carrots equally spaced around the platter.

“She was here for the appetizer,” Montrain said, with an insane, sing-song quality to his voice. “That was her liver and kidney, and wasn't that a lovely steak tartar? She was here during the soup, too, that fine blood-based soup. Tangy, no? And wasn't that a yummy filet? All Vivian, you know. And here she is, joining you for dessert. She

knows how much you love your food. Say goodbye to Winthorpe, darling...”

Polander was stunned, unable to move. He felt his throat constrict, at the same time that the contents of his stomach struggled to be free. His face turned purple, and he grabbed at the table, tipping it over with a crash of glass and metal. As he rose from his chair, desperate for breath, Paul saw everyone else in the restaurant staring at him, shocked into immobility by the horrific scene playing out before them. Vivian’s head, now on the floor, stared up at Winthorpe, although whether her final look was mournful or accusatory, Polander couldn’t tell.

Polander took a single step towards Montrain, who removed a long-bladed knife

from beneath his chef's coat. Without a word, Montrain lunged at the man who had ruined his life, and plunged the knife deep into Polander's chest. With a gurgle of surprise, Winthorpe sank to his knees, then toppled over sideways to lie motionless on the restaurant's floor.

As the life ebbed out of Winthorpe Polander and he listened to Montrain cackle insanely, seemingly far, far away, he was surprised that he had the presence of mind to be appalled by his final thought: that he had gotten more pleasure out of Vivian as a meal than as a girlfriend.

Look for this and 22 other exciting stories in the upcoming Hall Brothers Entertainment anthology **VILLAINY**, available June 9th.

