

Prologue

It's funny what runs through your mind when facing death. You know the old saying about your life passing before your eyes? Well, that's just a crock. At least it was for me.

If my life was a movie reel to play out on the Megaplex screen of my mind then Death had best opt for the jumbo bucket of popcorn and Big Gulp-sized soda because we'll be here a while.

You see, I was born in Genoa, Italy in the year of our lord 1642 and unless I miss my guess, Death, in the form of the stern looking young man straddling my hips and holding a jagged piece of pine to my throat, wasn't prepared to wait for the opening credits to roll. The cheapskate. He could have at least sprung for hardwood. It's not that the visual wasn't bad enough but what dominated my thoughts was the simple fact that it had been words—mere syllables, consonants, and vowels—that brought me to this point.

Not an excess of words. Not a War and Peace amount of words. Three words to be precise. Just three little words. How had they gone from *I want you to Die, vampire bitch?*

It was easy, really. Too damn easy. And it all started with a marinara sauce.

Chapter One

“*Buono!* Now all that’s lacking is my secret ingredient...?” I paused for dramatic effect with brows raised and a wide, sparkling Crest smile wreathing my face.

“Hand pressed extra virgin olive oil!” the audience shouted obligingly.

“That’s right, extra virgin olive oil from my family’s own orchards,” I said pouring a dollop of green liquid from a cut glass decanter into the hot skillet with one manicured hand while quickly whisking the ingredients with the other. “Let’s add a touch of sea salt and some fresh ground black pepper,” I said grabbing a pinch from the salt cellar and tossing it into the pot. Taking the pepper grinder, I spun it a few times before returning it to the granite counter top and whisking the bubbling veggies.

“After we sauté the onions and bell peppers we add the crushed Roma tomatoes and chicken stock.”

I gave it a good stir. Running a finger across the metal wires, I popped it in my mouth, shut my eyes and let loose a throaty groan while the audience applauded as if on cue—well, because it *was* on cue thanks to the lit *Applause* sign.

“Now this, *Signore e Signori*, is a marinara fit for royalty, which I would know, since I *am* a *Contessa*,” I added with a bawdy wink. “Let’s turn down the heat and allow the spices to get better acquainted with the sauce...while I put the fettuccini I made this morning on to boil,” I said, scooping up the fresh pasta and laying it into a pan of steaming water.

After giving the contents a perfunctory jiggle with a pasta fork, I wiped my hands on a blue and white dishtowel. Turning to face camera one, I chirped, “We’ll be back after the break to check on our *Biscotti a Riccio*, that’s curled cookies for you Italian challenged. After that, I’ll choose one lucky audience member to be tonight’s dinner date.”

“And we’re out, but *I’ll be back*,” J.T. the cameraman said in a cheesy Arnold Schwarzenegger voice. J.T. is a movie buff. When he speaks it’s in movie dialog. Always. Irritating, much?

You betcha.

I sighed, slipping out of the torture devices Jessica Simpson calls “shoes”. My feet were killing me. One of my gimmicks was to clothe my body in anything short and skimpy and my feet in any shoe as long as the heel height was over four inches. I limped over to the sink to pull a tissue from the box I kept there.

With my back turned to the audience, I spat the marinara sauce into its folds then balled the tissue up and tossed it into the trash.

The problem wasn't the sauce. No, the sauce was perfection, a family recipe handed down my family tree from antiquity. Unfortunately, the problem, if you want to call it that, was me. I adore the sauce, had been hankering for it all week, paired with my fresh basil and sun dried tomato pasta. Add a spinach salad spritzed with cranberry vinaigrette, and a half loaf of crusty artisan bread drenched in garlic and churned butter and you've got the food of the gods. The only setback is...I can't eat any of it.

If I ingest food, put foodstuffs (solid or liquid) into my mouth, masticate and swallow I get violently ill, barf all over the place then go into a coma which can last up to a month.

Been there, done that, and it's so not a week at a Sandals resort.

One thing I do know is there's more than one way to cook a turkey. Another thing I know? Time was a'wastin' and the commercial break wouldn't last much longer, so I put on my best smile, stepped back into my Marquis de Sade pumps, spun about and strutted my sexy Tyra Banks' stroll back over to the counter where my seven potential dinner dates perched on bar stools.

"Who do we have tonight?" I murmured to Ashley, the assistant producer.

Ashley, a chunky brunette with the complexion of curdled goat milk and a personality to match consulted her clipboard through a pair of thick lenses fit into black cat-eye frames. She tapped on it with a pudgy finger whose nail had been gnawed to the quick. Nervous girl, our Ashley.

“Looks like we’ve got a mixed bag—four men, three women.”

“I can see *that*,” I interrupted. Not the brightest bulb in the box, our Ashley. “Who are they, sweetie? Do you have their bios?”

A blotch of red stained both pasty cheeks at my sarcastic tone. Crimson splashed across her throat and beneath her button down blouse as she peered up at me through those ridiculous glasses, her eyes comically enlarged by their Coke bottle lenses.

“Sorry, Contessa,” she gulped and looked back at the clipboard. “Guest One is here with his wife and two daughters from Tampa, Florida. He says his wife is your biggest fan, but I think it’s really him, who is the fan, if you know what I mean...”

I rolled my eyes. Yeah, I knew what she meant. Why is it always men who claim their wives, daughters, fiancés, etcetera, etcetera, you fill in the blank, are my biggest fans when all along they’re the ones who like me on Facebook and follow me on Twitter? But who am I kidding? Everyone knows men are visual

creatures. If a female looks good, they're going to ogle. It's in their genetic code.

I suppose I'm not exactly hard on the eyes. I've been called the Elvira of the Foodie Culinary Channel by catty critics, and Chef Jessica (as in Jessica Rabbit) by a couple of the late night talk show hosts. So, is it any real surprise that the demographics of my studio audience usually runs sixty to seventy percent male? Me thinks not.

"Numbers six and seven are twin sisters from Washington State down to celebrate their birthday," Ashley concluded and glanced up at me.

I gave her a solemn nod. I must have really zoned out to miss the bios on guests two through five. Oh well, where a guest lived, what he did for a living, how many kids, cats and dogs she had really didn't interest me.

Like any culinary artiste worthy of the name, I not only create my masterpieces using skills honed by time and practice but also by using my extraordinary olfactory sense.

Scent is particularly important to any chef in determining the freshness of ingredients, the combination of spices, and the burning of said ingredients.

Taste is important, too, I suppose. Vital, in fact, to any chef, but the sense of taste isn't an option for me. That's not to say I don't possess a very refined palate, I do. It's just that my palate is not precisely found in my mouth. It's in my nose.

“Sixty seconds, folks,” J.T. announced causing Ashley to jump. Her clipboard hit the floor with the sound of gunshot and she stumbled back, her feet tangling up in power lines almost taking camera one with her. If not for J.T.’s quick reflexes the camera would have gone down and we would have been screwed. I could see it—the Twitter-verse erupting in hashtag complaints and hashtag rants all directed at hashtag Cooking Contessa. That was one headache I could easily do without.

Dio, the woman was intolerable. Any other AP would have been fired for gross incompetence and sheer stupidity, but not our Ashley. She was the sole child and heir to Foodie Culinary Channel General Manager and Senior Vice President, my boss, Stephen W. Montmar.

Lucky me, I had the...how did old Monty put it? Ah, yes, I had the *privilege* of having her work with me on my show. After three months of near disaster and maddening amateurish blunders, which caused extra work for every person on the set, I wanted nothing more than to hand off my *privilege* to another host.

I turned my back on Ashley sprawled spread eagle on the floor like road kill, her feet snarled in electric cords, and prowled over to my seven potential dates muttering curses behind clenched teeth.

Guest one was a balding, middle-aged orthodontist here in San Francisco using a national dental conference as a smoke screen to write off a family vacation. When I brushed his cheek

with my lips he sprouted an extra pair of hands turning the simple greeting into a wrestling match. Expertly and discreetly fending him off (not my first time in the squared circle), I knew with a whiff that this was not tonight's dinner partner and breathed a sigh of relief. I do not enjoy fighting with my food. It's bad for the digestion.

I passed up guest two, a retired librarian, and guest three, an overweight car salesman, shiny with sweat from the lights' heat, finding nothing appetizing in their scents. I chose my meals—er—partners by the bouquet of fragrances that permeate the skin, the breath, their very pores. I confess I loathe fast food, trans fat, and broccoli. I suppose I'm a bit like Goldie Locks. I want my meal prepared just right. A sophisticated palate can be such a burden.

"Fifteen seconds, Contessa," J.T. called and I sped up, whipping past guest four who smelled of jalapenos and cumin and was brought up cold by guest five. The young man stood at attention, a solid six feet in height, legs spread and hands clasped behind his back. A sailor, I surmised by both his uniform and haircut, and he smelled...perfect. Here is tonight's main course, I thought, my lips curving slightly. I spoke to guest six (Thai food), shook hands with guest seven (Peeuuw! A cigar smoker) then sashayed back to my place behind the stove, the heels of my stilettos clicking on the tile.

J.T. gave me the high sign. The *On Air* symbol lit up and I motored through the last few minutes of my show on autopilot

praying the microphones wouldn't pick up my stomach's angry growling. I was starved.

With the preparations complete, the food beautifully plated and artfully set upon the linen bedecked table, the beeswax candles in the candelabra glowing softly, the wine opened and breathing, I strode over to the seven finalists accompanied by the measured clapping of hands and stamping of the audience's feet. The lights lowered and a few finalists reached out and grasped their neighbors' hands like beauty pageant contestants during the crowning ceremony.

I heard J.T. snort, ignored him and strolled back and forth in front of the seven as though I hadn't already made up my mind. Beauty, stellar cooking chops, and acting skills worthy of Broadway, that's me.

"What do you say, people? Who's tonight's lucky diner?" I asked with a laugh. "Remember tonight's diner not only wins a candlelight dinner with me, but a prize package that includes two days and one night at the Oriental Empress Hotel and a one thousand dollar shopping spree at the Pampered Chef. Come on, help me out."

“Pick me, Contessa,” a burly man shouted grabbing his crotch, “I’ve got a package for you.” The audience roared with laughter as his buddies thumped him on the back and hooted.

I laughed along with them although my skin crawled at the thought of the brute and his package. Something white flashed on the periphery and I cast a glance to the side and found a frowning Ashley tapping her wristwatch. I’d lost track of time which was a major no-no, but I didn’t allow it to rattle me, rather I embraced the flub seeing as how time management was our Ashley’s responsibility. Oops. My smile widened. Explain that to daddy, I thought gleefully.

Ashley’s face reddened, her pudgy features became gargoyle-like as her frown intensified. Through lowered lashes, I watched her throat bob as she swallowed, saw her shift from foot to foot, and finally open her mouth to object. Only then did I spin about and prowl over to the sailor. Threading my arm through his, I felt his biceps tighten, heard his startled intake of breath, and smelled the musk of his excitement.

“We’re proud to announce tonight’s winner is a member of our esteemed armed services. Petty Officer...”

“Seaman, ma’am,” he corrected with a gulp. “Mahoney. John J.,” he finished.

“Sailor, Seaman – whatever. Tell me, John J.,” I purred snuggling his arm firmly against my overflowing bodice. “Are you married?”

He gulped again and color bloomed on his cheeks as the audience once more erupted into frenzied catcalls and whoops. “No... no ma’am, Miss Contessa, ma’am,” he stammered looking down at me his eyes glazed, lips slack, the glamour already taking its toll.

“Perfect,” I said with a mock growl and the crowd exploded again. “There you have it folks, another satisfied customer. You won’t want to miss tomorrow night’s show. I’ll be whipping up Genoa style minestrone, *Orechiette della Nona Gigi* with sausage, cannellini beans, and mascarpone; and *Carciofo della Genovese*. That’s artichokes for those of you who don’t speak Italian. You’ll have to tune in for my special surprise dessert,” I concluded with a wink. “Thanks for coming. I’m the Cooking Contessa and this is...” I ended in an almost questioning lilt. “*Midnight Delight*,” the crowd shouted while I beamed my approval.

“Th...th...that’s all, folks,” J.T.’s Porky pig impression carried throughout the set. The *Applause* light went off and the set was overrun with workers, assistants, and interns like ants at a Fourth of July picnic. Giving John J.’s arm a small squeeze, I stepped away to shake hands and rub elbows with my audience and fans.

Fans. The word still makes me want to look over my shoulder for someone more worthy. That I, a three hundred and seventy-something year-old vampire is revered, worshipped,

even followed on Twitter and Facebook by humans, by prey for God's sake, freaking boggles the mind.

Top-forty pop music poured through the speakers and like the Pied Piper's mice, the audience got to their feet and began to file out. I autographed my last program, publicity photo, and cookbook then my attention swiveled back to my mouthwatering sailor. Having been sped on their way with burgeoning swag bags and promises of free dvds, the other six finalists had departed.

I paused. My attention snagged by a glittery something shining on the outer edge of my eyesight. I turned to face it. It almost looked like a clear shower curtain that somehow divided the back of the studio. It was transparent enough to see through, but the objects behind it were blurred. My heart sank. *Dio, not now...* was my last coherent thought.

I awoke disoriented and dizzy. I staggered forward then stopped, blinking furiously as though that would clear my mental fog. Finally, I looked up, chill bumps running back and forth on my arms, making my teeth chatter. The lighting was dim, smoky. I heard the dulcet tones of a lute and the voice of a bard swelled in song. Inhaling deeply, I smelled roast pig and the tang of human sweat. I didn't know where I was, *when* I was. No, that's not true, I realized with a start. I know this place. I'm in the great hall of my father's villa and it is a feast day honoring some Saint or other, and I'm but a child.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! I pressed chilled fingers tightly against my temples. The music was off, distorted. My ears rang then boomed as blood pounded in my temples drowning out the odd metallic sound. I clenched my teeth, swallowed hard as my stomach rebelled and my gorge rose. These time warp episodes were growing in frequency—to the point where I was finding it more and more difficult to keep spatial clarity.

Time seemed to spin out and out like a thread until the years became infinitely long, unbearably heavy. Then, like the stretching of an elastic band, time snapped back into place. The past faded and with it the soft sound of the lute.

I swayed, dizzy, my gut still protesting, and felt hands grab my shoulders and steady me.

“You okay, ma’am?” It was the sailor. What was his name? I struggled to remember, like that would save me, like his name was a buoy in this ocean of confusion. Something to anchor me, bring my essence back into my body. Hands grabbed my elbows as my knees gave out.

“It’s nothing,” I tried to say, but it came out gobbledegook. I was shocked by the sound of my voice. It was weak, tinny. I sound like an old woman, I thought, loosing a burble of hysterical laughter.

“Sit down before you fall down. I can’t believe you! You do realize I’m going to have to tell my father you’re drinking on the job,” a female voice, one I recognized as Ashley’s, said with a sniff and another little burble spurted from my lips as the

world finally stopped spinning. Oh, yeah, I drink on the job.
Darn right I do. Every night.