

## Chapter 1

*M*arianne Rimaldi scooped a scant teaspoon of the Gran Marnier chocolate ganache and drizzled it atop the single bite of truffle cheesecake. The perfect final bite for the meal she was creating.

A glance at the competition clock.

Two minutes.

She plated three more desserts for the judges. The television cameras filming *Kate's Kitchen from Hell* hovered close by—two on her, two on her competitor as the final seconds ticked away. One glass-eyed lens had an angle that showed the cameraman wasn't focused only on the food.

Precisely according to plan.

Marianne needed the win on America's most popular cooking show, which meant winning over at least two of the three judges. More than that, she lusted after that *Kate's Kitchen* "Golden Knife" stamp of approval on her career, which required all three judges. For that she wasn't above applying other... ingredients.

The heat of the competition kitchen—the flaring burners and blinding stage lights—had “forced” her to pull at the cross-shoulder buttons of her confining chef’s jacket which now hung half open. She wore a loose-necked satin blouse beneath, no bra. She’d chosen a emerald green to contrast with the fire-red of the winner’s jacket that she hoped to be awarded at the end of the show. It also stood out well against her unadorned ash-black jacket of a contestant, but she wanted the red.

However, mere party tricks wouldn’t work on the show’s main judge.

Marianne had to capture Kate Stark’s attention. With her, nothing would count except the food itself.

Kate Stark, the blue-eyed goddess of television food on the nation’s most popular cooking network, was also founder and perennial judge of the show. Always front and center on the final panel.

Deep down Marianne didn’t want to just win Stark’s vote, she wanted to impress the hell out of her. She’d sell her soul to Devil if needs be; it was *Kate’s Kitchen from Hell* after all.

*Don’t think! Focus on the food...but don’t forget the theater.*

Marianne was slightly built, so even the least view down her blouse from above was a very revealing one. She bent over her dessert plates and the satin draped away from her body allowing a deliciously cool ripple to course down her front. Her build might be far less substantial than the one that had made her mother such a success on the “wrong” side of Hollywood. But she’d certainly watched her mom and learned what sold. It had been an educational upbringing, if not a typical one.

Three judges.

Two of them were easy.

The guest taster was Zania in the role of the “every person’s” palate so necessary for engaging an audience. Someone for the viewers to identify with, among all those professional chefs. Of course her palate was about the only thing on Zania that wasn’t extraordinary.

Zania was the hottest new Hollywood starlet—who Marianne would bet was a closet butch. It wasn't too dangerous a bet because Zania's mother worked the same side of Hollywood as Marianne's and word got around of what really happened after the bedding was rumped in erotic film.

During her intro, Tinsel Town's hot new box-office draw had announced she was centerfolding for *Playboy* next month in the same sultry breath as promoting her new tight-leather, sci-fi thriller movie. Marianne knew that anyone who pegged Zania as an airhead had a nasty surprise coming; she absolutely knew how to market herself. In all ways.

However, hinting to the actress that there was a chance of some woman-on-woman bonding that would allow Zania to prove just who was the "ultimate female among women" offered real possibilities for leveraging the star's vote. It definitely looked as if she'd bought into Marianne's careful seasoning of her performance with hints and suggestions.

Marianne's own tastes however, were for the second guest judge; the professional chef.

Harold Merritt, with his Michelin-starred *Chicago's Merritt* restaurant, was both very handsome and notoriously single. Win or lose, she'd make a point of chatting him up after the show. All that broad chest and short dark crew cut gave him a deliciously tough look; she could find many uses for him outside the kitchen, or in it—a little oil, two bodies, maybe some chocolate sauce...

A careful peek from behind the screen of the jet-black dyed bangs of her blond hair revealed Zania and Harold were staring hard at their monitors of the show's live feed rather than gazing benignly over the competition kitchen floor. Their attention was right where Marianne wanted it. On her.

The head judge was a different problem.

Kate Stark—the number one slotted television chef on any network, not just the one she owned—also watched the monitor, but with a slightly amused smile that Marianne would pay a lot to understand. Kate with her direct blue eyes and straight brunette

hair that brushed her shoulders and framed the well-defined cheekbones and aquiline nose that made her one of the most attractive faces in television, cooking or not.

She was a notoriously deadpan judge, at least on this show, so that wry smile must mean something.

For good or ill, Marianne would not find the answer to that this side of the judge's table.

The camera that was spying down her jacket still hadn't wavered, so Marianne "accidentally" dribbled a large dollop of the orange-chocolate ganache onto the back of her hand. She licked it clean as if too hurried to wipe it away, making sure the camera could see the pleasure on her face at the success of her own work without losing the angle on her blouse.

Damn! It really was good. Marianne would win on taste alone. But she'd have to play the meal presentation very carefully, spiking the odds even further in her favor with both of the two guest judges.

The competition buzzer sounded as she shaved the last of the zest of a blood orange using a nutmeg rasp. Even as Marianne held up her hands to show she was done, the camera focused in on the cloud of orange dust still sprinkling down like the first snowflakes.

Her shiny dark green satin blouse made a perfect backdrop, which had "somehow" slipped out of another button. Somehow... because she'd enlarged the buttonhole last night to ensure that the button popped when she raised her arms.

Nailed it.

She had to close her eyes for a moment to steady herself.

Light-headed.

She needed to eat.

Her normal technique of shrugging it off didn't work. Even lowering her arms and subtly bracing herself against the table didn't help clear her head.

Her hands were shaking.

Her hands never shook.

## Chapter 2

*Franco Lamar cursed.*

The damned bitch wasn't supposed to taste her own food, not that big teasing lick off the back of her hand anyway. A small taste and she'd have been fine. For a while. Long enough anyway.

Now he could see Marianne Rimaldi wavering from where he and his men lurked in the shadows of the television studio, far behind the judges' table and well clear of any camera's eye.

Bitch was really pissing him off.

He held his breath, keeping his men in place. He had a Plan B, but he hated when that happened. Especially because he didn't have a Plan C.

Rimaldi made it through the other competitor's meal service by clutching the edge of her work table, rousing herself to high-five her sous chef, but little else.

The studio emptied. Last shoot of the day. Competitor headed for the bathroom after the judges were done critiquing him. All the main kitchen staff and cameramen drifted out just as he'd planned.

Now he was down to three judges, two cameramen, one floor director, and dumb bitch Rimaldi.

She served the first of her three main dishes. Oohs and ahs and cheerful commentary among the sappy judges.

Franco could feel his fingers digging into his opposite arms where they were crossed. He always hated this part the most.

In Marine Force Recon, they'd parachute down behind enemy lines, observe, assess, and report. They could be weeks on the ground playing cat-and-mouse games with enemy security and military forces. That was fine. Even laying low between the final "Go" and the actual zero-hour start of the operation was easy; you found a willing local female, or an unwilling one, and you laid her low until it began.

It was the time between the actual start of the operation and the launch of his role in it that had always eaten at him.

Full alert and on hold sucked. It sucked when he was still in Recon and it sucked now.

Rimaldi was wavering, but fighting it well through the first three plates of her meal. Her body was shutting down on her and she'd have no idea why. Her brain was going with it so she was probably past caring.

*C'mon bitch. Just hold it together long enough to deliver the dessert clean.*

She almost dumped the final dessert plates to the studio's cement floor, earning gasps of surprise from the judges and cameramen.

But she recovered and made it to the table.

Franco held his breath as she stumbled through her final presentation. The drug was allowing so little oxygen to her brain that it was amazing she was still standing.

Done.

Now the tasting.

*C'mon judges.*

The movie star wench did even better than he could have hoped.

She ate the poisoned dessert in two neat bites. Then the stupid whore picked up her plate to lick up the puddled chocolate sauce with a long, sensuous move that sent a shiver up his balls.

Licking that plate clean on top of the dessert was a massive overdose, not just a knockout.

She collapsed forward, face down into the plate.

Shit!

The actress hit the table so hard that one of her awesomely impressive breasts—barely trapped in her sheer top anyway—popped free.

Franco looked at the other two judges as the studio exploded in panic.

Kate Stark's hand rested on the male judge's arm to keep him from eating.

The two primary targets both sat there—undrugged.

Rimaldi's body finally figured out that it was already dead and she collapsed to the floor.

That put paid on the two secondary targets: Rimaldi and Zania were past recovery.

Still Stark and that guy sat there unmoving.

Franco nodded to Jason. Jason Mann pulled out a dart gun and shot them both in the back of the neck.

They each flinched in turn, then slowly collapsed forward.

Franco signaled his men and they started forward. When the studio lights blacked out, the four of them pulled down the night-vision goggles that had been perched on their foreheads. The studio was now visible in a hundred shadings of green.

They pulled the darts out of Kate Stark and Harold Merritt and dragged them back.

Jason hesitated just long enough to grope Zania's errant breast. He looked ready to do more until Franco hissed at him to get moving.

Their timing was perfect.

Down the elevator that their inside man had locked in place for them.

Along the corridor.

As the hired truck backed the empty shipping container against the loading dock, Vince used bolt cutters to off the diplomatic-pouch door seal. Manuel held the door open as they dropped the two bodies on the mattress inside and Jason injected them with the antidote.

Doors closed, an identical seal slapped back into place, and Nicky—who'd been sent to greet the driver—shooed the truck on its way.

They dumped all of their gear into a couple of lawyer's briefcases and each took a different route to the parking garage.

They were done. The container and its cargo were on their way.

## Chapter 3

*F*BI agent *Marcus Reynolds* and his partner Leona Edwards were walking along the 50th Street side of Rockefeller Center in mid-town Manhattan when a semi-truck burst out of the underground loading dock and almost plowed into them.

“Shit!” New York was like that. Your attention goes sideways for a moment and you’re done.

He automatically noted that it was from Express Truck of the Five Boroughs and had a twenty-foot burnt orange shipping container on its bed. The driver waved them by without too much impatience, then he roared out over the sidewalk.

Marcus’s problem was the same as it had been for the last six weeks, Leona. That’s how long she’d been his partner and he still couldn’t stop looking at her instead of trucks that were trying to kill him.

Leona Edwards’ lustrous skin was the color that only emphasized his pale-guy whiteness and would have sent his white-trash parents stumbling for their shotguns. The way she filled out a white shirt and black suit coat were enough to kill a

man; definitely custom-tailored—had to be on her frame. No problem hiding a sidearm in a shoulder holster; she had plenty else filling out the jacket for even her FN Five-sevenN semi-auto service issue to be a distraction.

She caught him and quirked one of her eyebrows up; damn woman thought she was Spock. He'd been caught staring so many times that now it was just part of their routine.

She had too damn much worth staring at and the woman knew it.

She pulled him out of the way of a midnight blue BMW 760Li sedan with dark-tinted glass all around that shot out of the parking garage and across the sidewalk without even touching its brakes.

He really needed to get his head back in the game.

“What is this ‘hacker signature’ crap again?” Leona was way better at computers than he was. Which didn't bother him any, as long as he kept outshooting her on the range. It was close, but she hadn't beat him yet.

“Every computer hacker has a style, a unique way of doing things, as unique as a bomber does for wiring a timer. It's their fingerprint or signature.”

Damn but he could listen to her rich, mellow voice all day. No wedding ring, no jewelry at all, which didn't signify squat on a field agent. Six weeks together and he didn't even know if she was married or had a boyfriend.

He held a door for her then they headed across the busy lobby of Rockefeller Center to the bank of elevators.

“So someone with this hacker signature broke into our FBI databases and no one could stop them?” Cyber warfare crept him out. He didn't like things that made him afraid of his own smartphone.

“They didn't just break in, they strolled in with such a sophisticated set of tools that the guys down in Quantico still aren't sure how they were hit or what was taken.”

“Then how—”

“You know we’ve been trying to tag Rafe for the last six months?”

The fact that the two of them had been working the case from opposite ends was what finally brought them together. That and his old partner retiring. Marcus would have to remember to thank him someday.

Marcus and Leona somehow got their own elevator and started the climb. He thought of some things that two people could do in an elevator if they were willing. Then he thought about the cameras that were probably watching them and stayed focused on the conversation.

“Sure. I just don’t get why we’re here when we should be closing in on this creep. Damn, we were so close. Then he guns down poor Jake and vanishes.” Jake’s death was the reason Leona needed a new partner.

“Because,” Leona stared unblinking at the floor numbers. Damn but she was a strong woman.

Out of some thin shred of decency, Marcus resisted the urge to look down and see what nice things that shoulders-back position did to her figure.

“That hacker with their *very unique* signature just strolled into our system. Not just some random part of it, they went into DITU.”

“Shit! Really? I thought that thing was bolted down hard, I remember a lecture on it.” The Data Intercept Technology Unit was about the scariest damn thing he’d ever heard of. E-mails, phone calls, Internet browsing history, all of it compiled and cross-indexed covering pretty much everyone in the country, or whose signals crossed American borders.

“Said hacker,” Leona continued, “apparently read every e-mail and grabbed every phone call we had scooped up on Rafe and a number of others. It’s a signature they haven’t seen in almost five years.”

“So we’re going to see Kate Stark the owner of Cooks Network because...” it was finally making sense.

“Kate Stark,” Leona straightened her jacket as the elevator slowed, “was a Secret Service agent at the time, in the counterfeiting division. She is credited with taking down this same hacker who just popped back up inside our network, but there’s no record of who the hacker was.”

The elevator doors slid open on the main floor of Cooks Network to shouts.

A lot of them.

They weren’t shouts of surprise.

They were panic.

## Chapter 4

*Captain Rang Jin-ho stood* on the bridge of the North Korean ship *Chong Chon Gang* and shifted his weight to keep it off his artificial leg; it itched horribly. The problem was that it itched in a place that was now made of steel.

But he wasn't going to go below and rest it. They had permission to be in port for three hours and he'd never looked out on American soil before, not once in his twenty years at sea.

*I wish you were here to see it with me, Su-jin.* His wife would have enjoyed the moment, but even trusted families of Office 39 were not allowed to leave North Korea together, for fear of defection. One or the other always remained behind.

He'd taken command of the hundred-and-fifty meter ship a decade ago. Perhaps he'd done it a little brutally, but it had succeeded with no one the wiser which was all that counted. He and the *Chong Chon Gang* had been Office 39's number one cargo and smuggling vessel ever since.

But they were known—you couldn't hide the purpose of such a large ship forever. So why did the Americans agree to

let the premier vessel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's most secret and powerful government agency arrive in Red Hook terminal in the Port of New York and New Jersey?

Were Westerners really so soft-hearted that they'd allow a spy vessel in their harbor under the pretense of being a U.N. food aid delivery?

Perhaps.

Jin-ho would not be so foolish. No CIA ship would ever be allowed into Wonsan harbor.

He had been granted three hours to take aboard and stow one hundred shipping containers. The big cranes were making quick work of the task. But only ninety-one of the containers were in the stack they were loading.

It had been two hours. He had less than an hour left before the hovering Coast Guard cutters would escort him once more to sea, when he spotted the delivery trucks.

Nine trucks bearing nine containers.

No customs inspections on those.

They were under the seal of the People's Republic of China diplomatic pouch. Each door lock seal was checked as the trucks arrived, but nothing more.

He knew the contents of five of the containers, all of it forbidden goods specifically against the U.N. sanctions: two containers of RPGs and other ground-fire weapons, two containing the various parts from which a Bell Cobra attack helicopter might be assembled, and a Tesla roadster to assuage the Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un.

As long as the vicious bastard had his occasional new toys, he would leave Office 39 alone. And if he didn't, he would find out exactly who truly ran the Democratic People's Republic of Korea just as his father Kim Jong-Il had before him.

In his first two years of power, Kim Jong-un had executed the four men his father had appointed to train him; every general in the military who had been one of his father's cronies, and even his uncle. He had his uncle, the man's family, and most of

his relatives machine gunned down, or fed to starved dogs—the reports varied; over a hundred people were rumored to have gone down in a that single purge.

The Supreme Leader had not touched a single family member of Office 39 which proved he was not stupid, just vicious.

Jin-ho kept an eye on the “loading mix-up” that caused one of the containers to be rejected by his First Officer only after it was lowered down into the cargo hold.

P’yo was very smooth.

The lifting tackle was switched in mere moments to a different container which bore the same identifying numbers and seal.

Jin-ho watched from his eagle’s eye perch on the command bridge.

No inspectors were any wiser for the exchange.

A quarter of a billion dollars in supernotes, counterfeit U.S. hundred dollar bills, would be returned via the PRC’s diplomatic pouch to the embassy and be spread out through the gangs of the Chinese Ghee Mun Tong. A very simple payment for the contents of the nine containers.

Office 39’s supernotes were the best on the planet and they distributed billions of dollars per year. Yet one more way that the Office kept the DPRK’s economy afloat. He’d been told that the American gambling casinos’ machines accepted them every time, which was apparently the ultimate test.

Jin-ho watched the replacement container as it was reloaded onto the truck which then departed back out through the gate.

He eased his leg again.

The last four containers’ contents were unknown to him. They were labeled for the Council of Five, the leaders of Office 39. A Council on which he still intended to sit one day.

His wife Su-jin had instructed him at length on how to spot opportunity when it came.

*These four unknown containers?* he asked his wife’s image in his mind.

He didn’t know. So for now?

*Wait and see, Jin-ho. We remain always patient.*

But those last containers gave him an ache in his missing knee that he didn't like at all.

What could possibly be inside them?