

CHAPTER 1

Four-and-a-half minutes before the premature finish of her last show ever, Maggie brushed her hair back and tucked it behind her left ear to give the television audience a clear view of her profile.

She leaned in to check the frying chicken and pretended the camera wasn't there.

She'd insisted that it be placed a little higher than other cooking shows. Not the best for showing the food, but definitely right to showcase her cleavage to advantage. And the frilly edge of her Navajo-blue satin blouse made it appear that even more showed than truly did.

Mama always said that sex sold. And she proved it with her elite clientele and her upper East Side condo. Hence Maggie's chosen screen name, Hadderly. Almost couldn't resist the next step, Had Her Lately.

Of course, Maggie preferred not to sell sex by the half hour like her mama. Well, there was a laugh, dearie, we both work in the thirty-minute format. Mama often cooked their midnight

meals after her last trick left, Maggie's first Naked Chef. Definitely not her last.

The skinless chicken breast in a simple egg-white and spiced-flour batter was sizzling up to low-fat perfection. Her mouth rattled away with practiced nonchalance about fats, calories, anti-oxidants, and high-flavors-not-being-sacrificed-thank-you-very-much. Make it sound easy and it sold that way, first cookbook headed into third printing. Hardcover. Eat them noodles!

Her brain always ran a different script than the show's.

"See ladies. You can cook these dishes, and still have the figure that knocks them dead in their tracks, every man's bedroom fantasy. Well, maybe not you middle-age, middle-weight housewives. Not without my inherited metabolism. I could live on pizza and pie and look like this. Mama and me, we could be twins. Men walk into sign posts when we stroll Fifth Ave arm-in-arm. Forty-one and she still snags the rich fifty-year old jerks looking for teenage fantasies in their beds. She makes them pay, big time, and she doesn't disappoint. At twenty-four I've got it twice over."

Maggie inspected the audience while she chatted about kale, arugula, and walnut salad, "good calcium and Omega 3s there," and gave the side camera a long view of her flat stomach and perky, sheerly-harnessed breasts.

Ten years and she'd be made with enough cash to live out her days in luxury. Then she'd worry about finding a nice beach house and a man who could make her toes curl just by walking into the room. But no man would ever declare she was successful because of him. For now, she'd take men as she found them, delectable and disposable.

Any likely ones in the audience today? She inspected the four rows of studio theater seating while explaining her mother's mustard vinaigrette.

There was always Joey. Her production assistant sat in the second row for each filming as a last resort, always introduced as her "good friend." Achingly handsome. He wasn't the sharpest

whip, but they looked damn good together for the final taste shots. Boring in bed. Really, really sad. A waste of manflesh and it would be a long time until she sank that low again.

All this month she'd found handsome enough husbands of other women for the last shot, but that's as far as it went. Mama's siren song beckoned to other wives' men, VIP and very cash-heavy ones to keep her in her high-rent lifestyle. Her daughter only took 'em free and single. But it had been far too long since she'd found one in the audience handsome enough to assuage her own appetites. And the dregs you found trolling in bars weren't worth the effort of carving your way through their egos.

Then she spotted him.

Back row, off to the side. Not a big man. No broad shoulders or square chin, but the look of self-assurance and absolute focus that always made her knees weak. He sat a little too obviously by himself, all out of age with the scrawny little grandma beside him. He focused on her with an intensity that was both arousing and a bit scary, her favorite mix.

Awfully far back to invite down for a taste. . . But, if she climbed the steps to fetch him herself, the camera following her stair-mastered behind from behind . . . Sex sells, Mama. Should've worn a lower-backed blouse. Should've worn one open down to her ass. But it was mid-show, too late to help that. She'd shake her hair loose as she walked, that provided the same effect. Guys couldn't resist her straight fall of Scandinavian blond hair any more than they could Mama's.

She turned up the heat a little under the chicken, had to accelerate the cooking to create the extra camera time to make the walk. Her timing was always impeccable, on and off camera. They were already talking hour format and even hinting at a live-broadcast cooking show, the top of the pyramid. On my way up, Mama.

This was the last episode to film today and damn if she didn't deserve a treat.

She'd start with him in the dressing room.

Hopefully, he'd have the stamina for another round in the taxi, then back to her place . . .

Or maybe they'd start right here on the polished wooden floor after the crew was gone, a little Mazola Roller. Been a while since she'd done that, two naked bodies and a couple pints of oil.

"Use canola ladies," she indicated the frying pan and thought about kneading his tight, slippery buttocks, "avoid those saturated fats." Her smile for the camera was perhaps a little greedy, but they'd think it was for the food. She knew better. A quick glance revealed that he was up on the edge of his seat. He understood her smile. Excellent!

Maggie moved to the oven to check on the garlic-olive oil bread while keeping up her inane cholesterol-chatter about "Virgin versus extra virgin," continued for the camera. "Not even close, ladies, not since thirteen." Boy from the apartment next door, did it in the elevator. Scared the daylights out of him and snagged ten bucks from the security guy for giving him a peep show on his monitor. Her first paid appearance on TV.

The initial blast of heat from the oven brushed her hair back, a little sweaty could be very sexy. She pulled the door all the way down so that the hot air spilled over her skin above the plunging neckline. Bedroom sweaty. She and Mr. Back Row Hunk were just gonna sizzle together.

A small flash blinked deep in the oven. No bigger than the spark off her bedroom doorknob zapping her finger after shuffling barefoot across the plush carpet in Mama's high-rise condo.

The tiny flash blossomed forth, a slow-motion, unfolding flower of deep orange. The convection fan in the back spun rapidly.

But she hadn't set it to convect. She checked. The switch was off. The bread better not be burnt, that could be awkward, though she had a spare loaf stashed ready for a discreet swap out in the second oven.

The blossom of orange flickered red and yellow as the fan roared up to a high whine. The smell of gasoline wafted across her nostrils, gasoline?

A firestorm blew out of the oven like a dragon's breath. In an instant, a tornado of heat and fire wrapped around her.

After the shock came the pain.

She spun away exposing her waist-long ponytail to the blast. It burst into flame. Like a rotisserie beef, she twisted one way and another as the jet-fuel, benzene, and styrene mix roasted her alive in front of the studio audience. The napalm gel burned away her sheer clothes then clung to every part of her skin and turned her into a twelve-hundred degree human torch.

The high-angle cam caught her in naked glory the moment before her skin began to crisp, a perfect Godiva clothed only in flame. Without question, the film, no matter how well suppressed, would hit the Internet within the hour. It would go viral within a day. She'd finally found international fame.

The last thing Maggie Had Her Lately ever noticed was the empty seat in the back row of the audience.

CHAPTER 2

At the same moment, twenty blocks south of Maggie's studio, First Lieutenant Bobby Stenman wasn't minding his current assignment as much as he'd expected. From the second to last row he watched television chef "Julio Julio, the Spanish Wonder." He had to be the most irritating man alive.

Which wouldn't be much longer.

"Welcome back to Chef Julio Julio, that'sa me, the Best of Spanish Food coming to you live from Rockefeller Center. Let'sa see what we've done." He opened the second oven, pretending he hadn't just shoved the raw one into the first oven two minutes ago, right before the commercial break. He tipped his finished seafood paella for the cameras to see. Camera Two slid in for the close-up while Camera One set up for the audience-reaction shot. The audience lighting only reached the first few rows making the crowd appear larger than it was. Stenman was careful to remain safely lost in the shadows.

He'd researched this operation like any other. And there was nothing authentic about the chef, Mr. Dave Roberts of the Bronx.

Not his upbringing, not his tan, not his pretended heritage. Bobby had failed to uncover the fatal flaw, the one that made Julio a target of his superiors, but that information wasn't his job.

The chef was babbling about the Iberico Chorizo sausage and the sweet clams. "Can't you just imagine the bee-you-tiful smells there at home? Our studio audience certainly doesn't have to!" He fluttered his eyebrows in a fashion that was meant to be wise or meaningful, but reminded Stenman of a bad Austin Powers imitation.

It was almost worth killing him just to silence that trademark fake accent, cultivated to cover his itinerant, dead-beat father's Brooklyn grind.

Julio made wafting motions over the dish with his free hand. The Audience Cam panned the front couple rows while they did their best to look excited. Pretty good imitation, maybe they really were.

At the far left end of the second-to-last row, Stenman prepared to hide his face with a cough, but the camera's eye didn't come near his section. Didn't test his disguise of a pale blue button-down shirt and loosened tie that made him appear but a bored, young business exec with nothing better to do on a Tuesday afternoon than sit in a television studio audience and applaud on cue.

No savory paella aromas reached him. Back here all he could smell was the sour sweat of the woman to his right and the hot metal stench that reminded him more of an overheated weapon than the studio lights hanging only a few feet overhead.

Chef Julio Julio flashed his signature smile at the camera. Perfect teeth and deep Latino tan not inherited from his fair-skinned Puerto Rican mother. He maintained the look with heavy bouts of UV tanning.

Stenman had suggested a UV overdose, but Command had rejected it. It wasn't high enough profile for this scenario, whatever that meant. Stenman was paid to plan and conduct the operation, not to question it. Asking why it was a matter of

national security to kill a television chef had gone unanswered. Not that he'd expected one.

His orders were very clear. Do the op and then sit quietly in the audience to make sure it all went as planned. Witness only. No action. No questions.

A few prep smells finally reached his row. The bright tang of sautéed onions. The browning of the sausage made him near enough insane after living on moldy rice for the last ninety days in the Thai jungle while chasing opium lords. He'd have to delay his return from this op at least long enough to get a couple of Quarter Pounders at McD's.

He sure as hell wasn't going to taste the paella.

Chef Julio Julio waved invitingly to a woman in the front row. It took a second wave for the leggy, bottle-blonde to break her inertia at being picked out of the crowd. She offered a coy giggle as she moved to the counter with a nice sashay of hips. Good choice, aisle on one side, a woman of similar age and equally skimpy yet expensive attire on the other. She wasn't there with a husband or doting parent. Girlfriends out on the town, maybe a little bored if the chef was lucky. Maybe they both were looking for a little post-show party if his luck was running high.

It wouldn't be.

Stenman shook off the assessment and leaned forward in his chair. Chef Julio Julio had never done this before, never shared his food with a guest. Background had showed that his wife and his mistress had both dumped him in the last two weeks, but the celebrity chef had kept on cooking as if nothing had changed. The op had been given the last-minute go-ahead.

There wasn't a contingency plan for this change because Chef Julio Julio had simply never shared his cooking with anyone. He even threw out the leftovers rather than giving them to the crew as most other chefs did, another quirk Stenman had been unable to trace. Made for a lot of hard feelings on the set, but profile perfect for this op.

Chef Julio Julio leaned in very close. Flirting heavily, sending a titter of laughter through the older ladies in the studio audience including the underwashed behemoth whose hip was forcing him half into the aisle. After a lengthy whispered inquiry, the chef introduced, “Bee-you-tiful Jennifer from Ohio” to the camera. It was easy enough to guess what else had passed in that precious airtime by the blonde’s coy smile. She was indeed bee-you-tiful, even if Stenman wanted to throttle Chef Julio Julio for his overuse of the word.

Stenman’s seat embodied a padded luxury compared to squatting in the Thai jungle. Dry, too. But the jungle sounded very attractive. Now. Right now.

He should stop the show, break the charade. But all his training rooted him to the spot. Silence had been ingrained for years. It kept him from acting rashly in far more hazardous conditions than a New York television studio. He considered the options rapidly, but there weren’t any. The top-ranked mandate of this op was invisibility. Not low profile, but zero profile. Making a major fuss on a live, national TV feed about poisoned paella definitely wasn’t zero.

Both cameras swung forward. One on their faces, the other operator finding a nice profile shot of the unexpected guest from bust to top-of-head. Stenman was no producer, but shouldn’t one of the cameras be showing the food on a cooking show?

Leggy Jennifer and Chef Julio Julio dipped their forks together into the paella. All he could do was curse the chef’s overactive testosterone and watch. In a gesture that would have been charming in any other situation, they fed each other their forkfuls.

Their “yummy” sounds were the last they were ever going to make. They both grabbed their throats, again in unison. The audience laughed. Someone even chanted, “Too hot! Too hot!” More laughter.

The close-up camera picked out the heckler, second row, three in from the center aisle. Young woman, maybe early

twenties, half-dozen years younger than Stenman, worn leather jacket over a tight t-shirt with a torn out collar. Blond and blue hair. Worked on her, kind of cute. They gave her a few extra seconds of airtime, good to have a wide spread on your audience demographic. He checked the overhead TV monitor repeating the camera's views for those seated in the back rows. Seriously cute, several steps better than perfectly coiffed, blonde Jennifer's studied presentation. Under different circumstances he might have chatted her up.

Focus, Stenman. The Op. Zero profile.

He shifted behind a corduroy cowboy hat some brunette wore too far back on her head as the camera swung. This is New York, lady. City Cowboy went out years ago.

When Chef and Blonde didn't respond, the same heckler called out, "Breathe! Breathe!" Throaty voice, kinda sexy. The camera jerked back, catching a nice bit of cleavage and a wicked smile. Cute and funny. Killer combo.

Stenman grimaced at his word choice. Breathing was one thing they couldn't do.

The floor director edged forward at first, finally, against all of her training, rushing in front of the camera as their throats closed permanently. The shellfish-based neurotoxin would be easily discounted as severe allergic reactions. Any medical tests would discover the nature of the toxin. Another member of his team would take care of the food scraps before they tested for the exceptional quantity of it. Not his part of the op. But he'd planted the toxin. This was his part. He forced himself to watch.

Their skin paled. Chef Julio Julio turned a white that belied his pretended Spanish heritage and Jennifer from Ohio, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, was turning a rather ugly blue as true asphyxia took hold. Suddenly he wasn't so interested in his Quarter Pounders.

When they collapsed to the studio floor, Stenman rose quietly from his seat, eased down the emergency stairs at the

back of the seating, and moved out the studio door before the screams began.

No one would remember his face. Probably not even that there'd been a man in business casual seated in the back.

He was invisible.

He was US Special Operations Forces, a professional ghost for his country.

He hadn't even been there.

CHAPTER 3

Jeff “the Chef” Davis watched Julio’s show that he’d taped last night. His new flat-screen television looked huge and out of place in his apartment, but the picture was worth it. Made it feel as if he was really there.

He half watched as his friend did his Spanish paella, a second place winner at three different contests back before he was a television star. A good dish, Jeff knew it well. Jeff “the Chef” had placed first all three times: a Prime Rib marinated in pineapple barbeque sauce, breast of turkey à la Davis, and Mahi-mahi roasted with red peppers and caramelized with Jamaican rum.

Jeff switched the Chagall reprint of *I and the Village* beside the screen with the smaller, framed menu of his prize-winning seven-course meal at a Craig Claiborne contest. The large screen stood out less. Well, a little less.

Julio was selling his finished paella to the audience. Then he called a girl up from the audience, at least a decade younger than he was, more like two. Jeff knew he’d picked his next target. Julio had always been a fan of the long and leggy blondes. His

wife, his mistress, and bee-you-tee-ful Jennifer from Ohio were practically interchangeable. He'd known Julio for years and the man never ceased to amaze him. Jeff had trouble speaking with a pretty woman outside his professional, on-screen persona. Julio swept them up like a Central Park street cleaner.

The menu was really too small for the space it was supposed to fill. Somewhere he had a photo of Craig shaking his hand. An old Craig and a younger Jeff, much younger. Which was why he'd taken it down in the first place. But he was over that now and it would look nice beside the menu.

On screen, the feeding each other thing made a cute touch. Julio and the leggy blonde looked good together on camera, you could even hear the audience sighing at the romance of the moment. He certainly knew how to play the crowd.

Jeff should call him and see if he'd persuaded the blonde into his bed. Or even the blonde and her friend. It was hard to put anything past Julio, he was a blonde-glutton. Maybe he wouldn't call, they might still be abed. It was only mid-afternoon.

It wasn't until the floor director rushed on screen that Jeff realized something was wrong. He grabbed the remote and turned the sound off. After some fumbling he turned it up to a room-filling roar. He more fell than sat back on his couch.

Chaos exploded on his television screen. Julio and the girl collapsed. Audience members screamed. Someone actually trampled Julio as they sprinted across the set. Jeff jerked to his feet and then dropped back onto his couch as his knees let go. He looked around for some explanation. But he was alone in his upper West Side apartment. All the plush trappings of the nation's number one television cooking show host paled before the tragedy unfolding on the screen.

No one thought to stop the camera feed and the camera guys were doing their job well. Too well. They captured it all for posterity. The stampede as half the audience surged forward to gawk. The other half a stampede as they bolted for the door in terror of their own lives.

Julio's gaping mouth and confused, dying eyes were abruptly replaced with black. After a few seconds a Tide commercial filled the screen. The sound of the screams and confusion continued over the wholesome housewife and her son's grass-stained soccer uniform.

Jeff hit the mute button. The abrupt silence lasted a long moment before he heard a siren sound far below. It was wrong, they'd be too late already. And the time was wrong. He'd taped Julio last night.

Julio couldn't be dead, not last night and not now.

He'd had dinner with the man two or three nights ago. Three. They'd been friendly rivals for a decade, once they'd found they were both from the same neighborhood in a back corner of Bronx.

Julio had shrugged off the loss of both Becky and Bobbi Jean, his wife and mistress, lightly.

"We learned growing up that it was dangerous to get too attached to anything, especially a relationship. You remember, *mi amigo*."

Jeff had grown up two blocks away and his parents had moved to the country before Jeff was ten or Julio was born, which Julio blithely brushed aside as if they'd been bosom buddies. But he remembered the Bronx and that letting anyone close was dangerous. Was that why he was fifty-six and alone? No, that wasn't it. Jeff picked up the remote and set it back down.

"I'd be some kinda peesed," Julio's television accent slipped out on occasion in his real life as well, "if they weren't just women."

Jeff had almost spit his Katz's corn beef sandwich on Julio.

"See," Julio had taken a bite of his pastrami on rye and spoken around it. "My male ego is intact. Women are everywhere. They are all beee-you-tiful," he kissed his fingertips and tossed the kiss toward the ceiling, "and thankfully many of them are willing to tickle the fancy of big TV stars like us."

And last night, in the midst of a detergent commercial, Julio had died on a studio floor in midtown. Dead because of his promiscuity? Perhaps killed by his mistress or wife?

He had to call Julio. It had all been some sick joke. They'd have a good laugh over it next week while Jeff cooked Beef with Oyster Sauce and Mr. Chu's Pork Egg Fu Yung as promised.

Jeff managed to find the stop on the remote, before reaching for the telephone. On screen was Maggie Hadderly doing her "Health and Happiness with Hadderly" routine. She was an up and comer, have to keep an eye on her. A comfortable enough thing to do for its own sake, cute kid. He'd even bought her cookbook, retail. It was good enough for a first one. The potential was there.

The closed captioning caught up with the show, it came up whenever he had the sound muted.

Yesterday Maggie Hadderly was cooking for a studio audience of sixty five . . .

Good crowd for a weekday, pre-recorded show. She was doing better than he thought.

. . . when she went to her oven. Experts are saying this required no exceptional mechanical skills to achieve.

Maggie sashayed to her oven. She really was fun to watch, the woman definitely knew how to sell it. She pulled open the oven door and a tongue of flame twenty feet long shot out of the oven and enveloped her in fire.

Jeff sprang back to his feet and dropped the remote. It bounced off the coffee table and the mute switched off.

Screams filled his apartment. Maggie's screams. Her audience's screams.

He almost screamed in response.

People rushed in from off camera with fire extinguishers. They shot them off—and the entire studio kitchen was enveloped in flame.

“In addition to the napalm in the oven, three fire extinguishers had been refilled with gasoline,” the voiceover resumed, some pert woman was reporting in exactly the same tone she’d probably used last week to report the results of the Westminster Dog Show.

Jeff recovered the remote and turned the volume down as he watched. Maggie was roasted alive.

God, napalm. Who had she “peesed off?” Some jilted lover? She was nearly as infamous for the length of her list of conquests as she was famous for her cooking. Had she and Julio both been murdered by someone they’d slept with?

He buried his head in his hands. The phone in one hand and the remote in the other clunked against his forehead. He hung up the phone and muted the television.

The news was now busy reporting a stray kitten who’d scampered across the runway at a Bryant Park fashion show. Leggy models in tight skirts and stilettos were sprawled like spilled rice along the runway. The captioning appeared . . .

Fortunately the models in the shorter [cough] attire were wearing thongs.

A close up made sure that America had a clear view of how little use a thong really was in hiding anything.

He pressed the play button. Detergent had to be better than this.

Show day tomorrow.

For the first time he didn’t want to go and wasn’t sure if he dared. Not that there’d been any ex-lovers lately to hunt him down. But still, maybe the winning entry was to not enter at all. Huddling beneath the bedcovers in his high-security, high-rise apartment sounded very appealing.

A sharp knock on the apartment door jerked him back to his feet. The television remote flew from his hands once more and landed on the carpet in front of the set.

Some stupid corner of his brain suggested getting a new career selling yo-yos for the number of times he'd leapt to his feet in the last two minutes.

The knock expanded. Bidda, bidda, bum, bum, bum.

No! This couldn't be happening. Bloody hell!

Twenty-seven years since he'd heard the "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" drum solo pounded out on his door. Plus four months and six days, the same useless part of his brain informed him. He resisted looking at the clock so that it could fill in the hours. The morning of his last day with EMS. His last day working to change the world for—

Oh hell and damnation!