

KITCHEN NIGHTMARES

“The secret’s in the seasoning.”

Compliments about her food were part of the language of Cara’s life. Her response always as ready as her legendary chocolate cookies, mixing bowl to mouth in thirty minutes.

“Cara should write a book.”

“She should be on tv.”

The chatter of the middle-classes at table. Wives moving goose-fat laden potatoes to husbands’ plates, masking envy with cool smiles. Husbands licking sinful sauces from over-filled spoons and wondering if Cara’s generosity extended to the bedroom.

“Cara’s happy enough as she is.” That proprietary pat on her arm he always adopted in public. “She’s a wonder.”

I’m your biggest asset.

The words, as always, unspoken; Cara’s smile, as always, in place. Alan’s world remained as Alan’s world should: orderly, well-run and beautifully-catered.

Cara could hardly complain: the bargain worked as well for her as it did for him.

“We’d be a great team.”

His first words, bestowed like a gift ten years ago when she started catering for the company functions Alan starred in. He’d said it again when she’d poured out the truth of her previous life one exhausted, vulnerable night, her rule about no third glass of wine long broken.

“Seriously Cara, think about it. You want security and a fresh-start, I need a wife.”

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That was true. Men like Alan didn't climb the company ladder at old firms where employees were required to be as traditional as the boardrooms. As for Cara, she was more than willing to trade passion for respectability. Mutual protection, a good team.

“When will you let me put you on television?”

As Cara smiled her usual smile, Jenna shook her head.

“I'm serious. You have the talent, I have the contacts. At least think about it.” She raised her glass, “unless you're far too busy looking after Alan.”

It was bitchy and beneath her but nothing Cara hadn't heard before.

Little Suzy Homemaker, Alan's colleagues had christened her. It was only amusing when Alan used it.

Refusing to be riled, Cara sipped her sparkling water and considered her plate. The dressing was dull, the leaves chosen for fashion not taste. She pushed it away.

“I have thought about it.”

Jenna raised an eyebrow: she'd expected to be ignored again, this nibble at the bait was unexpected.

“But Alan wouldn't like it?” Jenna sipped her drink, her too-red lips sticky on the rim. “Dull, darling, very dull. Why you ever married him...” she spread her hands in mock humility as Cara's frown tightened. “I know: your precious marriage is off limits. But at least take a meeting, give it a try.”

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Could she risk it? Could she step out of the shadows, have a little fun? So many years had passed, surely she could afford to take a chance?

She couldn't, of course, but who listens to Jiminy Cricket when the wolf is smiling?

Cara was a television dream.

The camera loved her, the format was perfection. A 1950s kitchen decked out in ice-cream pastels, with Cara at its heart, prime-time's classiest cook. A still-shiny Martha Stewart in vintage frock and heels, wielding a wooden spoon as though it was a platinum cigarette holder. The public adored her.

"The secret's in the seasoning."

A perfect catch-phrase, as at home in the country's playgrounds as it was in its kitchens and beloved of every talk-show host who fawned over her.

"Your favourite recipe?"

"Boeuf Bourguignon, an elegant classic."

The audience swallowed the subtext and breathed rapturous sighs.

"Your favourite meal?"

"My boeuf bourguignon, naturally, and champagne. Always champagne."

That voice just the right side of breathy, that mouth pouting just enough. Could they possibly love her more?

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A pilot went to a series, to a book, to merchandise. It was unstoppable. Cara was the perfectly packaged embodiment of the vintage lifestyle every owner of a 'Keep Calm...' poster craved. A twenty-first century it-girl crafted from nostalgia and apple-pie.

"It won't last."

Cara regarded her husband levelly, taking in the thinning hair, the widening paunch.

With her own money flooding into the bank, his security blanket suddenly seemed smothering. As red carpets beckoned and new escorts arrived, the bargain was starting to tarnish.

"It can't last. It's not safe."

His face was thickening as much as his waist. A sponge cake over-risen, falling back on itself.

"You're in the public eye now, a walking cash register. Don't you think someone will start digging to find the real payload?"

He crunched her latest cookie batch with no regard for the perfection of its snap and continued through the crumbs.

"You're everyone's darling for the moment and that's a dangerous place. Tall poppies my dear, every journalist's favourite flower and if they go for you, they'll uncover me. We're a team remember, teams are loyal."

If only his voice hadn't been an echo.

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“Don’t let me down baby. Where would you go without me to look after you, what would you have? We’re a team, you and me, a team.”

First the pleading, then the venom, always the same.

“You can’t escape who you are you stupid bitch. It’s in you, like it or not. You’re damaged goods, just like me, nothing you can do about it.”

Cara pulled herself back into the room. That little girl was gone, buried deep.

“You still hear her, your mother?”

Alan’s voice was softer now, the arm she let him slip around her shoulders still a good fit.

She settled into him, trying to push the tainted air out of her mouth.

“She gets in, not so much but she gets in.”

Cara worried at the side of her thumb, an old habit he thought she’d overcome.

“Even if you’re right and they dig, what could they find? No one in the States would make the connection, it’s too long ago. The only one who knows anything is you. Surely I can trust you not to tell?”

The kiss dropped on the top of her head was answer enough. There might be nothing of romance in their marriage but the rules of kindness stayed sugar-sweet.

When the story broke, it was a perfect storm.

“The Secrets Behind the Seasoning! Classy Cara Cooked Up Her Past!”

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It was inescapable.

Tabloid headlines from journalists wielding knives far sharper than any Sabatier. Interviews with people unremembered from Cara's early catering days carefully worded to cast her as secretive. The headmistress of a school Cara had vaguely murmured about attending (some interviews simply press too hard) expressing astonishment that no one could recall such a famous pupil. And finally the wedding certificate, its secrets all too black and white, unearthed from a registrar looking to enjoy a more comfortable retirement.

She could have ridden it out. With a little time she could have whipped up a story about a girl-made-good, a tried and trusted recipe. But there were still too many missing ingredients, too many gaps for the papers to push at, sending in their pigs to sniff out the truffle.

Classy Cara was falling away like meat from long-cooked bones.

"My mother must be dead, surely she must be dead? All those pills. All that drink. Can't you be the one to do some digging, can't you help me?"

But Alan was shifting away, she could feel it and the hope was a hopeless one.

"American? Well that's a nice twist."

Jenna had had to shove her way through the phalanx of reporters circling the house; it had not improved her mood.

"Given the effort you've put into your re-invention, I presume the States won't be dancing at the syndication rights?"

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Cara stuffed another biscuit in her mouth. Since the news had broken all she had craved was sugar, the safest cheap high of her youth. Her obvious weight gain had not gone unnoticed by the merciless photographers or the headline writers: *Carby Cara* was just the spice to keep the story alive.

“What’s coming at us, Cara, can you at least tell me that?”

But Cara shook her head and numbed the nightmare with corn syrup. When the eye of the storm finally hit her, at least she was a little insulated.

“They’ve found your mother.”

Alan was matter-of-fact. Cara was now a bad-investment he needed to offload.

“They’ve found her and she’s still very much alive.”

He waited for a response but what could Cara say?

“She’s on a plane, booked onto talk shows, all ready to tell her heart-breaking story.” He paused, “you might want to move out for a while, no sense in us both losing everything.”

He pushed the keys to her new flat across the table and the discussion was done.

The winning tabloid moved quickly. This story was far too good to let Cara have her say first, this was Mommy Dearest’s moment in the spotlight.

“I was the worst mother, may the Good Lord forgive me. I know that and I pray to God every day to forgive me for the things I did to my little girl, the things I made her do. I was so young, I had no one to show me the path. I was in darkness, lost to the good Lord’s light.”

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First the pleading, then the venom, always the same.

“But she’s damaged goods, just like me, nothing she can do about it, no matter how she dresses it up. Although I guess you have to admire how hard she’s tried.”

That nasal voice on every talk show: sugared with religion and remorse, bitterness in every bite.

The media machine had done its best with its latest mouthful, Cara could see that.

They’d put Lisa through make-up, styled her brittle hair, found a designer dress in wardrobe. All the primping had done was accentuate her mother’s bony frame, spotlight the hard-edge to her empty eyes. There were louder gasps at Lisa’s age, decades lower than she looked, than at the stories she spilled of drugs, the pregnancy at fourteen repeated from mother to daughter, the tricks she’d taught a little girl to perform to pay the rent. It was repulsive and compulsive both and the viewing public gulped it down.

Cara watched it all alone in her quiet little flat. Door firmly locked, food delivered, the outside world held at bay.

The talk-show slots were just the taster: everyone was waiting for the great reunion. Jenna phoned constantly, insisted Cara cooperate. There had to be some goodness left in the brand.

“The public need to play their part, a new Greek chorus for this too modern tragedy.”

Jenna was unstoppable, Cara wasn’t listening.

“We’ll stage a live-meeting in front of a selected audience, package it to look like the first reunion. Don’t worry, that’ll just be spin, I’m not going to throw you that far to the dogs.”

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If Jenna had hoped for an answering laugh, there was none forth-coming.

“You can meet properly the night before. I thought a dinner - you and me, Lisa and Alan. You can cook, let Lisa see what you’re really worth. A peace-offering to save the golden-goose.”

“A last supper”.

Jenna put the phone down very quickly after that.

Golden goose, sacrificial lamb: Cara would be neither. But she would cook, pull out her party tricks one last time.

Boeuf bourguignon, with a twist. She shopped for the ingredients herself in the traditional celebrity disguise of hat, sunglasses and sweatpants. The extra stone in weight helped.

“Don’t forget to add extra herbs at the end. Remember, the secret’s in the seasoning.”

The butcher’s grin caught her by surprise but it was simply her catch-phrase, probably parroted to everyone.

Cara nodded her agreement and ordered the extra basil to deepen the sauce. Masking her special ingredient wouldn’t be easy – she’d considered simply making frangipane tart with its marzipan aroma but Cara’s public knew her favourite meal and this wasn’t a time to leave loose ends. Besides, Lisa’s taste-buds were long since rotted away and her knowledge of French cooking limited to fries. By the time anyone noticed an almondy-tang it would be far too late to complain.

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Attention to detail was the key: sparkling silverware, candles, carefully pressed linen, things her mother would barely recognise. No bucket meals and limp hamburger patties dripping grease on oilcloth for this feast.

Cara's favourite dress lay ready on the bed: it was far too tight now but a cardigan would hide the gaping zipper. The illusion was all.

Pearls at throat and neck, black court shoes with a stiletto heel; *Classy Cara* was reborn, cheap little Cissy reburied.

The stage set, she lit the candles, unscented so the rich aroma of the stew would fill the room and set everyone's mouths to watering.

Seven o'clock, just moments to go. Jenna would be loud, talking for everyone; Alan would be subdued. As for Lisa, well, whatever Lisa was it would be short-lived.

The fizz of the bubbles was music enough. The rich red of the casserole dish, the deep bronze of the stew nestling its pearly onions were as vibrant as any Picasso. Cara was her own creation, her own masterpiece, every carefully selected ingredient the finest she could find.

Lifting her glass in a silent toast, the cook waited patiently for her guests to arrive.