

*Sugar and Spice and
All Those Lies*

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Prologue

I'm alive. I'm dead. I'm in-between. In that limbo where my vital signs hover just above death. I rise above my body and look down on it, lying on a gurney. Hospital staff are rushing me along the brightly-lit hallway to the operating room. One of them holds an oxygen mask on my face. Another, a bag of intravenous fluid connected to my veins by a tube.

I'm not ready to die yet. These good people anxious to rescue me don't know that my resolve is the only thing that is keeping me alive. No, I'm not ready to die—I've only just begun to live. I have yet to prove to myself, to the world, that I have what it takes to prevail.

My family—now on their way to the hospital—doesn't know yet exactly what happened to me. And except for one detective, neither do the police. I see him now by the foot of the gurney, keeping pace with the nurses. He's scowling, his lips pressed into a grim line.

A tall, taut, and solitary man, he has deep-set gray eyes clouded by too many images of violent death and a lower lip that hangs perpetually open in disgust or despair. So much darkness he has already seen in his thirty odd years in this world. He needs to piece together the facts that constitute the attempt on my life, events that may have led to it, and various fragments of my past to understand what brought me to this point.

The first time I met him, I fell in love with him. There was something primal about him, some paternal, animalistic instinct to save hurt or fallen victims. Like me, maybe. It gave him power and it made him irresistible to me.

But fate is fickle. It teases. It entices. One day, something quite ordinary happens to you. Yet, you sense that that ordinary something can change your life. Not necessarily for something better, but for something new. Fate is dangling before you the promise of a world that, before then, was totally out of your reach. How can you not seize it?

Now, of course, I see the end of that promise. And it's not where I want to be.

It's tragic, don't you think, that the end of that promise should be right here on a gurney, with me fighting for my life? It certainly is not what I hoped for.

How could it end this way? I embraced life,
took chances, but half-dead on this gurney, I
wonder: Am I paying with my life? But, like I said.
I'm not ready to die yet.

I

Sous chef Guy watches to my left, his hands clasped behind his back. He's tense, struggling not to reach for the bowl of crumbled nori on the counter to my right. The part-adult, part-adolescent strawberry blond with a pointed chin—bright eyes darting between me and Guy—watches from behind us, waiting to be handed two plates of the course I'm preparing to garnish.

I take a pinch of the nori, sprinkle it over raw tuna on one plate. Another pinch over the tuna on the second plate. I look up at Guy.

Hands finally unclasped off his broad back, he picks up one plate, thrusts it to me. "Okay Gina, your turn. Take this to table 29."

My mouth opens to protest. Just as quickly, I close it again. I've learned the ritual, but this is the first time I'll be participating in it. I'm frazzled enough and going out to the dining room will make me jumpier.

Guy hands the second plate to the strawberry blond. He's only been serving a few weeks. His bright eyes, even brighter smile, the spring in his steps still reek of his gratitude for being lucky enough to work at Du Cœur.

On each of the large plates, the two ounces of red tuna seem to float on a wide expanse of white porcelain. I still don't get why our plates have to be ten times the size of the portions we serve. Well, maybe, not ten times. Extravagantly large, anyway.

Strawberry blond follows me out of the bustling brightly-lit kitchen. Laure, the owner and chef de cuisine, thinks all her cooks should occasionally go out to the dining room and serve customers. I'm not quite sure why. Something to do with the buzz between cook and customer when creator and consumer meet. Plus comments you may get can tell you a lot about what customers like (or don't like) about your dish.

The original idea for the dish I'm serving is mine. Guy played with it and we all taste-tested the many variations he and I came up with until we found the combination that made our taste buds sing.

But a new dish isn't ready until Laure says so. She tastes it, squints at it for presentation and color and when you see her smile and wink at you, you know it's a go. If not, you try again. She's

easy, though. Many times, she herself tweaks the dish a little, before she rewards you with that wink and recites her culinary mantra: Dining isn't just about flavors; it's also textures, color, and context. Context to her is anything from the layering of flavors to the ambiance in the dining room.

Before I can walk into the dining room, Marcia, the easy-going pastry chef who's become my best friend, steps away from her station, whispers as I pass by. "Be the best you can be. Guy at 29 dines here about twice a month, a Du Cœur favorite."

Eyes round and incredulous, but also amused, I say, "No way twice a month."

"Yes, way. Filthy rich, you know. Old money from the California Gold Rush that his family invested profitably."

At this restaurant, the second one I've worked for, the clientele comes from the moneyed class. Privileged with money to spare. Money to put aside for a full-course dinner costing hundreds for two people. And that's without the wine. I could never dine here unless I gave up my apartment, banked all my earnings, and slept in my car or a homeless shelter for a whole week.

Our regular customers are often fifty years or older and established, and come twice, sometimes thrice a year for special occasions. Dining here

twice a month? The guy at Table 29 must be worth diamonds to the restaurant.

I get shivers in my spine entering the dining room. I've only been in it when it's empty, quiet, and bright from lights and white tablecloths. This evening, the lighting is subdued and—yes—romantic, warmed by candles and small vases of bright yellow chrysanthemums on tables. Nonintrusive, soft music plays against the hum of voices from every table.

Table 29 usually sits four, but tonight it holds only two people. I'm surprised to see that they're quite young. Maybe about my age or a little older. And attractive. Now I'm even more curious. And intrigued. Mature and rich or nearly rich, I've seen a lot of. But filthy rich and young? Well, I must at least sneak a peek at what this priceless diamond looks like.

For now, though, I'm a willing peon, as grateful as strawberry blond is when I started learning the ropes in this exclusive eatery. So, I focus on the course I'm serving Table 29. How I perform at this restaurant decides whether my career goes haute cuisine or a la Burger King. But that last choice is really no choice at all. I'll work my butt off to make sure it stays that way. It's my future, after all, that I'm slaving for.

I recite to myself the script we've been trained to deliver. The script is quite simple, but this is

my first foray into a dining room full of privileged clients. And hives are sprouting on my arms just thinking that I'm serving my creation to the restaurant's most valued client. If this guy doesn't like my dish and blabbers to Laure about it, I can kiss my future in haute cuisine goodbye. Laure is well-loved and well-known, and a word from her can make or break culinary dreams.

I quickly glance, first at his date then at him, vaguely taking in how they look. I take a deep breath, smile at neither one in particular and say, "Medallions of raw ahi, wasabi hollandaise, on a bed of diced cucumbers, vernissage cherry tomatoes, and capers, finished with a sprinkle of toasted nori. Bon appetit!"

Distractedly, my fixed smile still on, I wonder if "filthy rich" Table 29 guy holds my cooking future in his manicured hands—or, more likely, on his pampered taste buds. I take a couple of steps back, so they can start eating. Maybe I can catch a glimpse of whether he likes my dish or not before I go back to the kitchen. I'm also waiting for that "buzz" I've been made to expect. Nothing yet. *Anything to say about my creation? Maybe that's what it takes.*

But I'm new in this game and still a coward, so I chicken out as he picks up his fork. I control the urge in my legs to run backward to the kitchen. *Be*

at your best, Gina. Be cool. But my ego will be in tatters if Mr. Filthy Rich doesn't like the dish.

A familiar voice, an excited voice, a voice I've not heard from in three years halts my step.
"Gina!"

I turn to the woman in surprise. A face I never expected to see in this hallowed hall. I smile, sincerely, but I try to suppress a wide grin at seeing someone I've known since childhood. She's matured nicely—more womanly curves and dark eyes, expertly accentuated. Extra shine in the red-brown hair. Gorgeous in a green dress with a décolletage just low enough to provoke male hands.

My training at this restaurant includes pleasing but sincere decorum with clients—not bright, put-on good cheer. "Cristi, how nice to see you."

Cristi and I grew up in the same neighborhood, but now live in different parts of the city. We see each other only when we happen to visit our respective parents at the same time. My last visit home was two years ago.

She says, "I didn't know this is where you worked. Wow, I'm impressed. Real classy, this place. You must be good."

"I'm just a line cook, but it's great experience. Been here more than a year. How about you? You're looking great. How have you been?"

She beams. “Wonderful, just wonderful. You ...” Her bright smile dims a little.

“Look a little harassed.” I chuckle as I finish her sentence. I used to do that a lot for her.

“No, no. You look good. It’s just ...”

“How about I call you later, catch up. If you like?”

“Yeah, sure. About time. Same number. You still have it, right?”

“Won’t you introduce me to your friend, Cristi?” The male voice turns our heads towards its source. It’s deep, relaxed and one you can’t ignore.

He’s staring at me with a pair of very blue eyes on a well-tanned face crowned by bronze, wavy hair. I bet he’s also tall, judging from his long arms. I can easily believe he’s filthy rich, as Marcia says. He has that polished, fussed over look you’d never see among the guys in my old neighborhood. *Lucky you, Cristi!*

I don’t feel envy for Cristi—at least envy I will admit to myself. I like guys who are a little more tousled, who clean their fingernails without bothering a manicurist to sculpt them every week. Besides, I’m a realist. This one is way out of my league.

He has a sticky gaze that seems to take in all of me, although his eyes focus on my face. It’s been a while since I’ve had time to go out with men, and

I squirm a little at the interest glowing out of Mr. Filthy Rich's eyeballs. In a louder, more insistent voice, he says again, "Introduce us. Cristi?"

Cristi says, "Yeah, sure. Gina, this is Leon."

From the look on Cristi's face, she isn't too happy to introduce me. It had become familiar—her unhappy look. A resentful look I first saw when boys began noticing us.

When she was seventeen, Cristi had her first boyfriend, Paul, whom she met at community college. Confident that a twenty-year old won't take a girl of fifteen seriously, she introduced him to me. She was wrong. More garrulous and less shy, boys preferred talking to me, and Paul was no exception. Several weeks after I met him, he turned his attention to me. But Cristi said she forgave me.

When her second boyfriend, Bart, dumped her to pursue me, she shed inconsolable tears, wouldn't talk to me for months. I felt bad when she cried and worse when she avoided me. I never hooked up with either Paul or Bart, but that seemed to be beside the point for her. Shifting their attention to me was fault enough. We reconciled on account of our parents being friends, but we couldn't get over that unspoken gulf that sprang up between us.

For the sake of whatever is left of our friendship, I should retreat to the kitchen

straightaway, but my niceness training holds me back. Especially because of what this guy means to the restaurant.

Leon rises from his chair and extends a hand to me. I take a couple of steps forward, hesitating a few seconds before I take the proffered hand.

He doesn't shake mine, but covers it with his other hand, squeezes it gently, and gives me a wide smile. "How do you do, Gina? I can't wait to taste your tuna. I'll be sure to tell Laure how I like it."

"Hello, Leon. Nice to meet a friend of Cristi's. I hope you two like the ahi." I withdraw my hand and cast Cristi a surreptitious glance. She's looking down on her plate of sashimi.

More for Cristi's benefit than Leon's, I point to the kitchen, "Gotta go back. Busy, you know. Nice to have met you, Leon. Good to see you again, Cristi. Enjoy the rest of your dinner."

Cristi nods and glances at me with accusing eyes and a forced smile. She picks up her fork and turns her full attention on her plate of sashimi, dismissing me.

Sorry, Cristi. Maybe your guy is a jerk.

Leon sits down, amusement crinkling his eyes. With a small shrug, he also picks up his fork, his sticky, unwavering gaze still on my face. I can feel it following me as I walk back to the kitchen.