

The
Spaghetti
& Giraffe



For Jason and Carlie, with love, mess and cake – SJ
For Mark, my little Gorgonzola – DH

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Chapter one

WHEN MINA CUCINA SLOPPED the gleaming pile of spaghetti onto the waiting plate, her hand slipped. As usual.

Mina Cucina's hands flailed like startled cats, as the pot somersaulted through the air. The spaghetti fell from it in a glittering arc and landed on the floor.

"Bla ... da ... bother!" said Mina Cucina, being too well brought up to say anything more, and she stomped outside for a breath of fresh air.

The spaghetti stayed on the floor. At first, it steamed, limp and glossy in its coating of olive oil. Then it settled, strand relaxing on strand, as its heat ebbed away. The afternoon passed and the spaghetti stiffened and stuck, until the slippery mess had transformed into a tacky tangle glued to the kitchen floor.

Outside on her balcony, Mina Cucina leaned on the railing and sighed. Below her, the Bonbon Valley stretched eastwards in a riot of colour: the mint green lozenges of pasture, the brilliant blue braid of the river, and the pink, purple and yellow snippets of flowers, all bathed in the buttery summer light.

“Butter,” sighed Mina Cucina. “Bother butter.”

Indeed, the light that bathed everything, from the far hills to the village at the bottom of the valley, was exactly the colour of the creamiest butteriest pat. Which could mean only one thing; it was late summer, nearly autumn – time

for the Great Bonbon Confectionation.

“Bah butter,” said Mina Cucina. “And bah to their bothersome Confectionation.”

But while she was bah-ing and bothering, the smell of the summer flowers sneaked its way into Mina Cucina’s nose and she began to notice the glorious patchwork of colour spread before her.

Mina Cucina’s house stood at the tip top of Meringue Hill. And Meringue Hill rose in a symmetrical swirl at the head of the Bonbon Valley. The house itself was shaped like a cupcake, narrower at the bottom than the top, with a roof of thick thatch that flopped like frosting over the eaves. Mina Cucina reached up and plucked one of the small flowers that grew in the thatch, tucking it into her own thatch of tangled golden hair.

“Ahh,” sighed Mina Cucina, more happily this time. “Who cares about their silly Confectionation anyway?”

Below her, a person was threading their way

along the pale path that wound all the way from the village in the valley, up the side of Meringue Hill, to her house at the tip top. Mina Cucina squinted into the buttery sun and the person waved.

Mina Cucina waved back. Her wave, which was rather energetic, knocked the snoozing cat off the balcony railing, into the rose bush below. Pale pink petals billowed and caught in the breeze, wafting this way and that before settling in Mina Cucina's hair. Two tiny turquoise butterflies, that had been chasing each other through the late summer light, alighted



amid the petals.

Mina Cucina didn't notice. Below the balcony her good friend Gorgon reached the top of Meringue Hill and strode up the path towards her. All thoughts of the Confectionation were banished, as Mina Cucina started down the steps to meet him.



Chapter two

“WHAT’S UP, Mina Cucina?” asked Gorgon.

“Your face was as long and blue as the river.”

“Until I saw you,” said Mina Cucina. “Now it’s pink as a pansy with pleasure.”

Gorgon laughed. “Not a bit, but why so glum?”

Mina Cucina’s smile sank. “It’s the light,” she said.

Gorgon considered the bright day. “What’s wrong with it?”

“When the light’s like this, it means it’s nearly autumn, and if it’s nearly autumn, it means that it’s nearly time for ...” Mina Cucina’s voice dropped to a strained whisper, “for the Confectionation.”

Gorgon laughed so hard that the cat, which had just clambered back onto the balcony railing, fell off again into the rose bush. “Mina Cucina, you and that Confectionation. It is the thorn in your otherwise sun-filled life. If you hate it so much, don’t enter it.”

“But I have to enter,” wailed Mina Cucina. “Everybody enters.”

It was true. All over the Valley of Bonbon, small children would be practising breaking yellow-yolked eggs into bowls, old men would be dusting off family recipes passed down by their fathers and their fathers’ fathers before them, while matronly housewives whipped ever more elaborate concoctions into dizzying heights of butter, sugar, flour, spice and cream – all in

preparation for the Confectionation.

“I don’t enter,” said Gorgon.

“You’re not allowed,” said Mina Cucina.

“You’re the judge’s son. And besides, what would my mother say?”

“Oh, Mina Cucina,” said Gorgon. “Your mother wouldn’t mind. She’d just want you to be happy.”

Mina Cucina blinked, and Gorgon thought how pretty she was with her flushed cheeks, her eyes sparkly with tears, and the pink petals tangled in the golden mess of her hair.

“Do you hate losing that much?” he asked.

“I don’t mind losing at all,” said Mina Cucina. “Mama always said the most important ingredient in baking was the love you put into it, and that’s something no one can judge. No, it’s the ...”

Mina Cucina tailed off. She wasn’t about to tell Gorgon it was the judges she minded; how they sniffed at her kitchen, muttered over her

cake tins, raised eyebrows at her spice jars and looked squeamish when they sat around her table. No, she couldn't tell him that; not when his mother was the head judge and could raise her eyebrows higher than all the others put together.

“Let's not talk about the Confectionation,” she said, resting her hand on Gorgon's arm. “Let's have a cup of strawberry tea instead.”

“Yes, let's,” said Gorgon, turning a gentle shade of strawberry himself.

“Good,” said Mina Cucina, full of smiles again. “Oh, but I'd better warn you. There's a bit of a mess in the kitchen.”