

## Praise for Patricia V. Davis and *Cooking for Ghosts*

“Davis's patient hand at storytelling threads itself into a perfect and suspenseful character of its own in this wonderfully dark and moody tale brimming with beautiful juxtapositions: modern technology with old world tastes and scents, surface interactions with deep, ghostly otherworldliness, and the common narratives around women and friendships with the ethereal, the intuitive and the feminine.”

—**Amy Guth, President, Association for Women Journalists Chicago**

“Complex, rich, satisfying ...” ~ *Midwest Book Review*

In *Cooking for Ghosts* Patricia V. Davis manages to combine an exuberant lust for the good things in life with an eerie sense of foreboding. This is an exceptional, uniquely gratifying novel.”

—**David Corbett, award-winning author of *The Mercy of the Night***

"Ghosts, romance, friendship, and food...what a great combination. From the very first page, I was drawn to the characters and their lives aboard the *Queen*. A bit of history, woven through a newly formed partnership, wrapped in mystery and intrigue. A wonderfully delightful story."

—**Kim Henry, Books or Books**

“OMG! Patricia V. Davis is amazing. With the gift of giving woman a genuine voice through the alchemy of storytelling, she brings painful, real-world issues to light through the words and actions of the women in her novel. Magically, they become as real to us as the tragedies and triumphs of our own lives, cracking our hearts open to create our own internal transformation alongside them.”

—**Siobhan Neilland, Founder, OneMama.org and FightingForYourJoy.com**

“Leave it to Patricia V. Davis to bring together four amazing women, on an equally amazing ship, to cook up something magical and mystical, as well as something intrinsically human. *Cooking for Ghosts* is a reminder that all of us harbor secrets — friends, lovers, mothers — even iconic objects. Davis’s characters entice us into their world, and the more we get to know them, the more we get to know ourselves. A delicious and perfectly spiced read.”

— **Vicki Larson, award-winning journalist and co-author of *The New I Do: Reshaping Marriage for Skeptics, Realists and Rebels*.**

“In this poignant yet joyful tale, Patricia V. Davis vibrantly illustrates the value of female friendships. Despite remarkably diverse backgrounds and experiences, the women of *Cooking for Ghosts* cultivate a deep and inspiring bond that serves to strengthen their lives.” — **Shasta Nelson, author of *Frientimacy*, and founder of GirlFriendCircles.com**

***Cooking for Ghosts* is an official Pulpwood Queens Book Club Selection**

# COOKING FOR GHOSTS

—  BOOK ONE  —

THE SECRET SPICE CAFE

**Cooking for Ghosts:**  
*Book I in “The Secret Spice Café Trilogy”*

by Patricia V. Davis

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, dates, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To every mother who's ever lost a child;  
to all the children who never had the mother they deserved.

In memory of my beloved father-in-law, Jack, who taught his sons to "Always do the right thing."  
(Thank you for my husband, the only one of the four who inherited your beautiful gray eyes.)

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In order to get this book written, I had to ask a lot of questions. The questions were all over the board: “How does one obtain a concealed weapons permit?” “What lingo would a chef use to tell a line cook he’s run out of shrimp?” “What type of wood are the decks on the *RMS Queen Mary*?” “How do you strangle someone?” To find the answers, I pestered a lot of people — food critics, historians, a judge, a six-foot-five martial arts master who works out at my gym. I also got to sit aboard the *Queen Mary*, drink wine in her fabulous Observation Bar, and chat with some charming ship aficionados. To those who shared their knowledge, sparked ideas, critiqued, or took the time to assist me in any way, I appreciate you so much, and want to thank you by name. With a list this long, I know someone will be left off inadvertently, either by me or by someone else in the editing process. If that happens, please tell me. There are two more books in this series, giving me two more chances to make it right.

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*Perhaps if Death is kind, and there can be returning,  
We will come back to earth some fragrant night...  
We will come down at night to these resounding beaches  
And the long gentle thunder of the sea...  
~ from "If Death is Kind" by Sara Teasdale*

—

*"She breathed. She had character... She was, above all else, the  
nearest ship ever to a living being."  
~ Captain John Treasure Jones, the last Captain of the  
RMS Queen Mary*



## Prologue

*Somewhere in the Atlantic, 1949*

In an ocean as dark and still as death, the Queen floated. The scythe-shaped moon engulfed in mist gave off only a dank tinge of light. Waves skimmed lazily along the Queen's sides, like the careless caress of an indifferent lover. She was only fifteen years old, but she'd already witnessed so much misery: war, love lost to tragedy, and once, a vile murder that had left a stain on her no sea she traveled had ever washed away.

Now she was about to witness another. The killer's rage was silent and patient. And yet, she could feel it. In desperation, the Queen willed her fog horn to blow...



Under the cover of the dimly lit stairwell on the deserted sports deck, the sailor waited. He'd timed it well. The watch wouldn't make his rounds up here until after it was over.

Long before he could see his prey, he heard the click of her heels on the planked wood, echoing off the water as she approached. He pressed himself back further into the darkness as she came into view, her eyes focused on what he'd stolen to lure her, carefully placed so that it would be visible to her while he remained hidden. As she bent to pick it up, he stepped swiftly behind her and clamped his forearm around her throat, cutting off her scream and her breath as he pulled her into the shadows.

She felt her windpipe close up and the blood rush to her head. She couldn't twist around to face him, but — *oh, God* — she knew who he was. How ironic. In a life as mousy as the color of her hair, the one impetuous thing she'd dared do, would end her. As dreary as her life had been, she didn't want it to be over.

So she struggled. She dug her nails into Death's rigid forearm and clawed at the skin on his elbow. But he only swore at the blood she'd managed to draw and kept that arm hooked resolutely under her chin, dangling her legs up off the deck, pressing even tighter against her throat as she kicked. He

shook her and she felt the cool night air hit the sole of her foot as one of her shoes fell off. The thump it made against the deck startled him. He lost his vice hold on her for an instant and she tried again to scream. He slammed his other hand across her nose and mouth. With a rush of stinging pain, the salty iron taste of blood filled her mouth, mingled with the smell of his familiar aftershave. Who'd have thought Death would come wearing Old Spice? He'd groomed himself as carefully for her murder as he once had for her seduction. She went queasy with the realization that his arms were not the only part of his body that felt rigid against her.

But mere seconds later, she was too lightheaded to feel disgust or even fear. She now lay in his arms, compliant, his hand still pressed against her bloodied mouth and nose. Her head was tipped back as he continued to suffocate her and she could see the night sky, a depthless backdrop for the stars that flickered through the gauzy veil of ocean fog. And the moon looked like a grin. Lovers walking the decks below must think it all so romantic. Dimly, she could hear the band playing in the ballroom. She was amazed she could even recognize the tune — a new one, just come out that year:

*“Some enchanted evening, you may meet a stranger...”*

Her final act was to pray that he wouldn't dump her before she was truly dead. As cruel as his arms were, at least they were warm. She didn't want the ice cold water to be the last thing she felt.



The crewman making his rounds looked at his watch. He was ten minutes early, and strangely enough, so was the ship's horn. He looked out over the water. Misty, but not too thick. Not because of fog, then. He made a mental note that the timer might have to be adjusted. No sooner did he have the thought than the whistle sounded again, low and long and...inconsolable, he thought fancifully. "Mary's larynx," was built to emit a note so powerful she could be heard at least ten miles away. For a reason he couldn't fathom, a sound he heard repeatedly every day and every night was giving him the shivers. He sensed a movement to his left at the far end of the deck and turned. *Who-ee*. A couple was clenched together in what looked to be one steamy embrace. She was so wrapped up in him she'd lost one of her

shoes. They were too shadowed for him to see their faces, but he could make out that the man was wearing the uniform of a fellow crewman. Uh-oh. Trouble there. It was against the rules to consort with guests.

But it was none of his business. He'd walk down on the other side and give them another ten minutes. If the crewman had any smarts, he'd be out of there with his dolly bird before then. The watchman turned again, back the way he'd come.

The whistle sounded again.

Yep, that would definitely have to be checked.



The sailor remained motionless as the crew member on watch walked away. That had been too close. The lucky bastard. Good thing he'd decided to keep his nose out, or else he'd have found himself with a slit throat, and there'd be two bodies to get rid of. He needed to be quick, before the asshole came back. Looking down into the dead eyes of the women he held, he spoke gently to her, as though they were still lovers. "Now you know. Nobody walks away from me."

Moving closer to the rail, he took a swift look around, then flopped her over the side. She slipped under the water with scarcely a splash, and the churning of the ship's motors did the rest, pushing her almost immediately out of sight.

That should make the fish happy, he thought.

But her shoe was still on deck. He picked it up and was about to throw it after her when he thought he heard the watch return. *Fuck*. Unnerved again, he slipped back behind the steps where he'd hidden while waiting for his victim, and tossed the shoe into a vent unit. No one would find it there. But even if they did, he'd be long gone. The ship docked in the morning, and he planned to slip away before anyone could get nosy about the gouges on his arm. He stayed where he was, listening, forcing his breathing to slow.

False alarm. He came out from behind the steps and, with studied casualness, headed back to his quarters.

Not a moment too soon. The watchman had circled around a second time, and was relieved to see that his fellow crewman and the girl he'd been with were gone. Now he could call it a night. He frowned as an overhead lantern flickered on and off.

Then a second one.

Then a third.

What in hell was going on with the *Mary*? Probably a short. Walking up to investigate, he noticed that lying on the deck directly beneath those lanterns, one second in shadow, one second illuminated in a sphere of light, was a doll.

A Raggedy Ann doll.

He bent to retrieve it, then thought better of it. Whatever family it belonged to would probably remember where they'd been and come looking for it. He left it there.

The lights continued to flicker as he walked on.

**PART I: The Women Arrive**

**A Chemist, a Cocktail Waitress, a Widow, and a Witch**

## Chapter One

*Long Beach, California, Sunday, August 1, 2004*

Of the four women traveling in the snappy red Porsche on Interstate 710 toward the *Queen Mary*, only one of them was openly skeptical, and that was Jane. The other two passengers, the ones reserving judgment, were Angela and Rohini. The fourth chatted vigorously as she drove too far above the speed limit for the comfort of the other three, and that was Cynthia.

“You will *love* it. I promise you,” she was saying.

“Cynthia, are we driving a getaway car?” snapped Jane. The top on the car was down and there was so much wind blowing about that she had to raise her voice to be heard. Added to that irritation, she felt cramped in the tiny back seat, her knees forced nearly to her chest. Good lord. She’d been mad to agree to this — to open a restaurant, sight unseen — with one woman who she knew very well had some serious issues, and with two others who, up until an hour ago, she’d only ever communicated with over the internet.

She blamed Oprah. And that bloody *More* magazine that touted “actualization” to women over forty. And blogging on websites that “empowered women” and fuck all else she’d been hammering at like a neurotic woodpecker to keep herself from falling completely to pieces these past two years.

Seriously, what had she been thinking? She was *forty-six*. She should go back to England, back to Newcastle where she belonged, back to her lab at the university and her pupils. If she had any sense, her middle-aged spread would be the only thing she’d be working hard at now, preferably with M&Ms. Absolute stacks of M&Ms.

When Angela had told her what she was going to do and then suggested she join in, Jane thought she was taking the mickey. But as she listened to Angela talk with more excitement than she had since university, Jane found herself factoring in the excruciating wretchedness of her own life these past two years, and Angela’s idea began to transform from something preposterous into a genuine possibility for a fresh start. The next the thing she knew, she was taking an extended leave and heading to New York to

pick up Angela, who'd already sold her house and the bakery — everything, in fact, that she'd shared with Marco — and was waiting fretfully for Jane so they could hotfoot it to California.

Now here she was, sitting squashed against Rohini, one of the two she barely knew, in the minuscule back seat of a humiliating sports car belonging to the other woman she barely knew — Speed Racer in peri-menopause, apparently — who'd just finished telling them that they were way over budget. And who would pay for that, then?

They were out of their minds, the lot of them.

Rohini was the first to point out the conspicuous, albeit in the tranquil manner they were all coming to recognize was her usual way. “But Cynthia dear, that's fifty thousand dollars more than we'd agreed,” she said as she struggled to keep her long black hair from blowing in both her own face and Jane's. “That's rather a lot of money.”

Jane snorted. An underestimation if there ever was one.

Cynthia looked in the rear-view mirror at Rohini and waved a hand, airily. “I'm good for it. You know I am.” Then she swore in Portuguese, as the little car swerved.

That was it. This ride, this conversation, was making Jane ill. “Will you bloody well *please* keep both hands on the wheel and slow down?”

Angela glanced behind her from the passenger seat and exchanged an uneasy look with Rohini. This was not at all the propitious start to their partnership they'd been hoping for. “Um...let's go over this again,” she said to Cynthia. “Exactly why did we need to spend the extra money, and how will this affect the payback schedule we'd agreed upon? Because I'm not sure we're willing to make any changes to our contracts at this point.”

There. She'd gone for her best take-charge tone and thought it came across reasonably well, considering that she couldn't seem to prevent her right hand from making a grab for the dashboard every time Cynthia careened into a turn. And that in between she'd been biting her nails again, a habit she'd thought she had beat.

“Oh, no, no. No — this is my gift. Not to worry,” Cynthia assured them with a smile. Of course, she kept it to herself that the money was not actually hers to give. But a successful businesswoman had a certain image to maintain. She’d pay it all back. Somehow.

They were almost to the docks when the argument was cut off by Rohini’s exclamation as three massive, orange-red smokestacks with their distinctive black trim became visible in the distance.

“Look — there she is! Oh, she’s beautiful!” She gazed at the *Mary* as though it were calling her name.

“Oh. My. God. Jane, can you believe it? We made it! We’re here.” Angela all but stood through the open roof to get a better view.

From the rearview mirror, Cynthia caught the expression on Jane’s face at her first glimpse of the majestic ship, and allowed herself a tiny smile of satisfaction. Saved by the *Queen*.

Not quite. As eager as Jane was for her first in-the-flesh look at her new home, she was not to be deterred. “I am worried, Cynthia, actually,” she continued where they left off, even as her eyes stayed fixed on the historical ship. It had been built in the late 1930s as “the world’s most luxurious ocean liner,” then converted into a warship during WWII, then back into a cruise ship again. But by the mid-sixties, she was considered past her prime, and was subsequently sold to Long Beach to be docked there permanently as a floating hotel and museum. Jane felt her chest constrict as she thought of how much Antoni and Gabriella would have loved to see it. She sucked in a breath as the car drew closer. Oh, how bittersweet it was to feel the moist, cool air of the ocean again.

Shaking that off, she went on resolutely, “We’d agreed to an equal ownership of twenty-five percent each. The fact that we’ve all borrowed that startup money from you does not mean that *you* can dictate these decisions unilaterally —”

“Would you have this restaurant without me?” Cynthia ripped through Jane’s lecture as she used her card key pass to release the electronic gate and then pulled into the parking lot for the *Queen Mary*.

“Could you have gotten that much money from a bank, with no credit rating and no collateral?”



Right after she'd spit that out, she regretted it. Now Rohini and Angela were wearing twin expressions of distress, and Jane looked so outraged that they'd be wiping pieces of her spleen off the leather upholstery any minute.

"As it happens, Cynthia," she huffed, "I *can* get the money from a bank, and it's not too late for me to do so!"

"Well, I can't," Rohini blurted, hoping to avert disaster. "I came to America with just my spices and some clothing. I even sold my wedding ring."

"Me neither," added Angela, biting her nails again. "They don't make widows' pensions like they used to."

There was silence in the car after Cynthia settled into a parking space and cut the engine. She wanted to cut her tongue out too. Shit, shit, shit. *When* would she learn to keep her mouth shut and just let Jane vent? Now, because she couldn't resist a cheap shot, she'd probably ruined everything.

Hoping to make amends, she took a deep breath and turned around to face Jane. "I'm sorry. You're right — we're equal partners. I overstepped, okay? As I was trying to tell you, the opportunity came up to get Tony Chi. I promise you, once it's out that he was involved, we'll make up whatever it cost and then some. Wait until you see how beautiful and functional our restaurant is. And I meant what I said — it's my gift. To us. To our dream." Her tone became even more cajoling as she looked at each of them. "Please. I know what I'm doing. I've been in this business for years. Trust me. Okay?"

Jane still looked mutinous.

*Nossa!* thought Cynthia. It's like she knows I'm lying. But how?

Rohini and Angela exchanged another anxious glance.

Then Jane said, "*Fine*. I won't say another word until we see what you've done. Now will you let us out? My legs have gone numb. When you said you'd pick us up at the airport you didn't say it would be in a clown car. 'Four-seater' — what absolute rubbish. That's all any of us needs is to get stroke from a blood clot."

No, not a propitious beginning at all.



But Cynthia's three business partners were soon appeased. Up close, the *Queen* was an even more stately and elegant masterpiece than she'd looked in the photos Cynthia had sent to each of them. And the redesign of the dated and dusty restaurant on her Promenade Deck was...

"Wow," said Rohini. She stopped so suddenly that Jane nearly ran into her back.

Angela put out a hand to steady herself. "Oh. My. God," she said again, her New York roots evident in that favored exclamation.

But Jane said nothing. She was too stunned. Cynthia, whom she'd begun to suspect was a bit of snake oil salesman, had created a small miracle.

The L-shaped space was completely transformed. While maintaining the art deco flair and the planked gleaming wood flooring that was characteristic of the ship's original motif, there was a contemporary airiness about the dining room and the layout now. The traditional and the innovative were harmonized by the woven-fabric seating and unique oiled-bronze lighting fixtures. The dark paneling had been removed and the fresh paint covering the walls looked like thick, rich cream. The soft color seemed dappled with hints of saffron where touched by the sunlight coming in from the wide, expansive row of windows. They offered a sweeping view of the Pacific Ocean from the dock where the *RMS Queen Mary* had remained moored since 1969.

Madness indeed, thought Jane once again, as she looked over the gloriousness of that insanity, right there in front of her, spelled out in persimmon-colored letters on the nostalgic, nouveau-style signs near the two entryways, one that led out to the deck and one leading out to the main lounge. She recalled how the four of them had deliberated over the name in endless, exuberant emails that had zigzagged from Newcastle to New York to Las Vegas to Mumbai. And now, all that planning, all those life changes for all of them, were over. And The Secret Spice Café was a reality. Hers to share with three other women who would from now on be a very big part of her world.

Jane intended to make the best of that, starting right then. They were watching her apprehensively. And why wouldn't they be? Her behavior had been piggish. Well, she'd made a mess of everything else in her life, but she'd be damned if she was going to muck this up as well.

"Marvelous," she pronounced. "Absolutely marvelous." She looked at Cynthia and said sincerely, "Well done."

Angela and Rohini breathed a joint sigh of relief, and Cynthia beamed at Jane the same way her first-year chemistry pupils did when she complimented them on their work. "Wait until you see our office. And our staterooms and the rest of the ship! Everything's been upgraded and it's all fantastic."

"And the kitchen? What about the kitchen?" asked Rohini, all but bouncing in her shoes. It was the first time the others had seen her so animated.

"Ah. Well, the galley has all been remodeled, but there's something going on with the back scullery. It's puzzling. We've been trying to remove an old freezer, but it's like the damn thing's been fused to the wall. The other day, one of the crew —"

As she was about to elaborate, a striking teenage girl walked into the dining room from the door to what might have been the office Cynthia had mentioned. "Ah, *filhinha*, there you are." Cynthia opened her arms and smiled.

"*Mamãe*, the concierge just phoned to say the bags have been delivered from the airport. I told them to send them on to the ladies' staterooms, like you said." She walked into Cynthia's arms and looked at Rohini, Angela and Jane with interest.

"Everyone, this is my daughter, Sarita. She's been looking forward to meeting you all. She's heard a lot about you, as you can imagine. And of course, you've all heard a lot about her."

Sarita laughed. "I'll just bet they have, *Mãe*. Let's hope at least some of it was good. Hello. Nice to meet you," she said, coolly composed despite her mother's blustering protest at her remark. When she smiled, her resemblance to Cynthia was unmistakable.

Jane hated herself for feeling a pang of envy. "Nice to meet you, Sarita. Your mum's had nothing but good things to say, I assure you. How are you finding California so far?"

“I like it a lot. It’s been fun watching the progress on the restaurant. And it beats the weather in Vegas at this time of year.”

“Lovely,” smiled Jane and hated herself a second time for the stiffness she could feel in her face. Hoping to hell no one had noticed, she added, “Well, then, I shall head up to my room. I should like to get my things unpacked, maybe have a lie-down.”

“Good idea,” said Angela. “I can feel jet lag starting to hit, myself.” She beamed at them all. “Besides, I can’t wait to see if our cabins are as gorgeous as the rest of this place. This is just so exciting.”

Rohini said, “I’m not at all sleepy, but I’ll come along, just to check that my spices made it safely.” She rubbed her palms together. “And then I want to get a look at that kitchen.”

Sarita looked at her, her tone polite, but skeptical. “There are spices in the bags they just brought over?”

Studying her keenly, Rohini nodded. “Not in all of them, but in my bag, yes. I only brought the one.”

“But, aren’t you the one who flew in from India?” She glanced at her mother, then back to Rohini. “Um...I’m pretty sure those bags went through customs. I don’t think they allow you to bring in food.”

Rohini grinned impishly. She was already getting the sense that this was one unusual teenager. “Don’t worry, darling. Spices aren’t food. They’re just...spices.”

Before Sarita could reply to that, Cynthia asked her, “Where’s the new bus boy?” She started shouting in Spanish. “Esteban? Esteban! Where are you? I need you to take the *señoras* upstairs!”

Sarita rolled her eyes. “His name’s Emilio, *Mãe*.”

At Cynthia’s shout, a handsome, dark-haired boy in his teens came out. New as he might have been, he was already used to being called by someone else’s name.

“Should I go with them?” Sarita looked at Cynthia hopefully.

Cynthia shook her head. “Esteban can manage on his own. You and I have some important things to finish up this afternoon. Come with me.” She crooked her finger at her daughter, then teetered hastily toward the office on her four-inch heels. Looking disappointed, Sarita followed behind.

As the three other women tailed Emilio as he directed them up to a richly-carpeted corridor that smelled of beeswax and brass polish, Angela whispered to Jane, “I didn’t know Cynthia could speak Spanish as well as Portuguese, did you?”

Jane sniffed her disapproval. “I’m more impressed that she can walk in those shoes.”



Cynthia closed the door to the office and then put her ear to it to be sure that everyone had left the adjacent dining room. She turned to Sarita. “Okay, tell me.”

“Tell you what?” Was it Cynthia’s imagination, or did Sarita look just a little guilty?

“What do you think I’m talking about, *filhinha*? Did he call?”

“Oh! I’m sorry, *Mãe*. I was thinking about something else. Yes, he called. Well, someone from his office did.” Sarita looked at her mother with sympathy. “He’s coming. Just as you expected.”

“Did they say anything about the money?”

“Come on, *Mãe*. Don’t be silly. It was probably just his office manager or secretary. How would they know anything about it?”

Cynthia stared at her. “Did they at least tell you when he would get here?”

Sarita nodded. “Not until late October. He’s still away on business and can’t make it before then.”

Cynthia sank into one of the new leather desk chairs. She said nothing as she absorbed this information.

At length, she spoke. “Well. We knew this was coming. But at least we still have a few months to make this whole thing work.”

Silently, Sarita walked to her mother, leaned down and hugged her.



They'd had the option of renting living space in Long Beach, but the four were unanimous in their desire to experience staying aboard "the greatest ocean liner to have ever graced the seas." One look at their staterooms was all it took to know they'd made the right choice. A step into them was a step back in time, as luxurious as the rest of what they'd seen of the *Mary* so far.

Smooth, lustrous panels of inlaid wood in shades of oak and mahogany adorned the walls. In homage to the era of the ship's heyday, much of the framed hanging artwork was original Art Deco, as were the wardrobes and cabinetry which offered plenty of storage space along with their beauty. There were no right angles on the ship, it being bowed in the middle, so all the furniture for the cabins was custom-made from woods forested from different parts of the world and equally as sumptuous as what was on the walls. The counters, desk and table top made of black speckled marble were shined to a luster, as were the brass-rimmed and glass portholes which looked out to the periwinkle blue of the water.

A number of the old appointments were left intact for historical illustration, such as the cabin call boxes and the "saltwater" versus "freshwater" taps in the bath, there since the days when saltwater baths were considered therapeutic. But the old world was nicely balanced with modern amenities. There was a flat screen TV, a small fridge and icemaker, a wine cooler, a state-of-the-art microwave and coffee maker. The bed, with its goose down comforter and pillows, along with Egyptian cotton sheets, was the size of a lake.

For the moment, Jane barely glanced at any of it. In fact, she'd only just managed to get inside her door before she started to cry.

And that was going to be a problem. She knew from experience that once she got started doing that, it would take her a long time to quit. Her eyes, being so light, would go bloodshot, and with her fair English skin, that meant a red nose and splotches on her face for hours afterward. She did not want to go down to dinner — her first face-to-face meal with her new business partners — reddened and splotched. They'd know she'd been crying. Well, at least Angela would know. The others might assume she'd been drinking. Her people had that reputation abroad, unfortunately, and she most certainly did not want to do

anything to perpetuate that myth. But whether they believed she was drunk or guessed she'd been crying, she'd be mortified either way.

She sat down on the bed and took a few deep breaths. She had to make herself stop. She couldn't think what might have set her off this time. Maybe it was that "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride," and the way she'd barked at Cynthia during it, when it was clear now that the poor woman was just as anxious as any of them about all this. Or maybe it was being blindsided by how much Sarita reminded her of Gabriella. Not in looks, but in manner.

Gabriella had been precocious for her age too. And quick to jump in with a cheeky comment in front of strangers, one that would embarrass her mother, just as Sarita had embarrassed Cynthia with her remark this afternoon. Gabriella had been that independent, even at seven years old. And when Jane had seen Sarita walk into that room today and speak to them all with such aplomb, instead of shuffling her toes or looking bored, as Jane would have done at that age, she couldn't prevent herself from thinking that this was how Gabriella would have been, had she lived.

She gulped back sobs. *Damn it to hell.* She'd promised herself she wouldn't do this again. She bit the inside of her cheek, pulled repeatedly at the blonde bangs of her pixie-cropped hair, hoping the irritations would distract her from her wretchedness. But all she managed to do was make her mouth sore and her forehead pinch. And the tears kept coming.

"Hello."

Jane yelped and jumped so high she nearly fell off the bed. She swung around. Standing behind her was a little girl, no more than five years old. She was barefoot and wearing a nightgown.

"Good heavens! Where did you come from?" Jane glanced toward the cabin door and saw that it was open. "I thought I'd closed that. You scared me to death." Jane was wiping at her eyes with one hand, while she held the other over her drumming heart. *God.*

Well, at least fright worked just as well to stop tears as it did hiccups, evidently.

"I'm looking for Missy Doll."

Well, listen to that. This one spoke the Queen's English as well as the Queen herself. Her hair was the color of strawberries in sunlight, and Jane caught a whiff of what might have been lavender shampoo.

Jane gave the room a cursory glance. "Sweetie, you won't find any dolls in here." She pulled a tissue from the box on the end table near the bed and blew her nose, swearing at herself under her breath when she noticed there was mascara on her fingertips. She'd have to repair her makeup, as well. And now, on top of all else, there was this child to sort out. "You'd best get back to your family before you're missed."

The little girl didn't answer. She just stared at Jane. Then she asked, "Why were you crying?"

Well. This was getting uncomfortable. And as was usual when Jane felt uncomfortable, she resorted to snippiness. "That's my business, now, isn't it?" she said. "Shame on you for running around the halls in your nightie and barging into strangers' rooms. It's dangerous."

"I know. But I can't remember where I'm supposed to go."

Poor little mite sounded so dejected that Jane relented. "Well, all right, then — not to worry. I'll just make a call to the concierge and we'll find out. I'm sure your family is looking for you. What's your name?"

The little girl just kept looking intently at her. A rather peculiar child, evidently. "You sound like my Missy Doll," she finally said.

"Little one, what's your name?" asked Jane again, even more kindly this time. "I can't get you back to your family unless I know."

Just then, her cell phone began ringing from inside her handbag. She turned to reach for it and had to rummage around to find the phone while it shrilled. "Damn." Then, "Hello?"

*"Jane, are you coming down?"*

The line was filled with static. They'd been warned about that. The metal of the ship sometimes caused the service to be a bit dodgy, but she could make out that the voice on the other end was Angela's. They'd said two hours. Had that much time passed already? She hadn't even unpacked.



“I’ll be down shortly. I’ve run into a spot of bother — oh!” She’d turned as she was speaking to look back at the little girl.

But she was gone. And the door to Jane’s cabin was now closed. Jane hurried to it and pulled it open. The corridor was empty save for some soiled room service dishes and trays left on the carpet outside several of the stateroom doors. But she could still smell lavender.

“*Jane — are you there? What’s going on?*” Angela’s voice came through the phone again.

Jane sighed. “Nothing at all. I’ll be down soon.”



Unconcerned with what her business partners were up to, Rohini was giggling with excitement. Hugging herself, she whirled in circles, then flung her arms up over her head and collapsed back in dizzy elation onto the enormous bed in the glorious stateroom. *Everything* was glorious. She was here. This was her room. The Secret Spice was, in part, her restaurant.

*Hers.*

And when she’d first seen the *Queen* from the back seat of Cynthia’s preposterous little car, she knew she was headed to exactly where she should be. She couldn’t stop smiling, until, abruptly, a lump formed in her throat and her eyes misted with tears.

“I made it, Zahir,” she whispered. “I made it.”

She sobered as she thought of him, of all he’d done for her, and all that she might still need to do on her own.

But that wasn’t for today. Today was for celebration and thankfulness. Getting up from the bed, she opened her case, pulled out all the little plastic sacks of spices and herbs she’d packed, and sighed with relief. Not a one had opened or torn. Even so, she could smell their pungent bouquet right through the protective wrappings. *Rauwolfia Serpentina, Jaiphal, Javitri, Khus Khus, Ashwagandha* and more — why did cinnamon always smell the strongest? There were dozens of varieties that she’d stuffed inside shirt sleeves and trouser legs and white cotton gym socks, just like a drug dealer might hide a stash. The

TSA had missed them completely. They'd even affixed a sticker to the top of her bag: "Checked by Homeland Security."

Giggling again at that, Rohini placed all the smaller sacks into a large white bag she'd found in the wardrobe. The bag had a price list for various laundry services printed on it. With that mission accomplished, she took her treasures downstairs to the kitchen.

But she wasn't two steps in before she stopped stock still and remained right where she was, listening.

"Oh, my," she murmured to herself. "Oh, my, my, my."

Now she understood why she'd felt that the ship had summoned her.

To anyone else who might peek in, the kitchen appeared silent and empty. But not to Rohini. She could hear the walls sighing.

Gradually, she walked further inside, and the sighs turned to whispers. She stood still, breathing cautiously, waiting, watching.

In unison, the stainless steel cooking utensils dangling from the long, narrow cylinders that were screwed to the walls began to sway, soundlessly. The copper pots that hung from the ceiling over the two spanking-new ovens and eight burner stoves began to twirl, gracefully. Every inanimate object in the room that wasn't bolted down was waltzing eerily, on its own. To Rohini, the dance seemed sad rather than ghoulish.

Walking quietly, listening carefully, she followed the hushed sounds as they moved along the walls, leading her back to the scullery. As she approached, an ancient, enormous, floor-to-ceiling freezer blew out a puff of ice cold air as its door swung wide open as though it were greeting her, then gently clicked closed again.

Unafraid, Rohini observed it all. Still clinging to the laundry bag filled with her precious sacks of spice, she turned in a full circle, leisurely, so as not to miss any of it. After a while, she set the bag down on one of the gleaming stainless steel work tables. Bending into a full and formal curtsy, she spoke aloud.

"It is my great honor to meet you, Your Majesty."

# COOKING FOR GHOSTS

 BOOK ONE 

THE SECRET SPICE CAFE

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