

‘Deliciously dark and full of tasty twists guiding the reader to a brilliantly shocking finale. This gets a banging five stars from me’

Lisa Hall, author of *Between You and Me*

‘Sizzling with a glamorously Gothic setting, tantalizing twists and a premise that’ll have you begging for seconds, *The Dead Husband Cookbook* is the depravedly delicious foodie thriller you never knew you needed... Valentine sets the table for a truly unique and mesmerising read – sit down to dinner, if you dare’

Leah Konen, author of *You Should Have Told Me*

‘So intriguing, I wanted to inhale the whole thing in a sitting. *The Dead Husband Cookbook* is as compulsive and moreish as a favourite meal. Thoroughly delicious’

Alison Littlewood, author of *A Cold Season*

‘Devilish, tense and exquisitely cooked up, *The Dead Husband Cookbook* is both nail-biting and deeply satisfying... A perfect blend of horror and suspense, peppered with apparently innocent recipes’

Heather Critchlow, author of *Unsolved*

‘A knife-sharp thriller with a dash of horror set in the over-the-top world of professional cooking? Yes, please! Danielle Valentine’s atmospheric chiller made my jaw drop and my mouth water with its fresh, original twists... I absolutely devoured it’

Andrea Bartz, author of *We Were Never Here*

‘A satisfying page-turner. Twisty, fun and surprising’
Heather Darwent, author of *The Things We Do to Our Friends*

‘A simmering stew of secrets and suspense. *The Dead Husband Cookbook* serves up a gourmet thriller where every recipe has a hint of danger. Domestic bliss meets bloodshed. You’ll want seconds!’

Joanna Wallace, author of *You’d Look Better as a Ghost*

‘Delightfully twisted and utterly delicious. It had me gripped from the very first page and wouldn’t let up until that shocking and satisfying ending. Danielle Valentine is a master of the horror thriller’

Sara Ochs, author of *The Resort*

‘Forget five stars, *The Dead Husband Cookbook* deserves a Michelin star! I read it in one, single serving; an absolute page turner from start to finish’

J.M. Hewitt, author of *The Life She Wants*

‘A deliciously dark treat of a novel, seasoned with the perfect amount of intrigue and a deadly dash of revenge’

Sarah Lawton, author of *All the Little Things*

‘It’s impossible to describe *The Dead Husband Cookbook* without using the word “delicious”: publishing scandals, Italian food, an intricate family mystery, and some mysterious meatballs... Safe to say, I devoured it. Danielle Valentine has created another gripping, immersive world’

Ally Wilkes, author of *All the White Spaces*

‘*Knives Out* meets *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* with a pinch of Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn*, *The Dead Husband Cookbook* takes a murder mystery, rolled in family drama, and roasts it in the heat of feminine fury. I devoured every page’

Stacie Grey, author of *She Left*

‘A dark delight of simmering murder-mystery. Danielle Valentine skilfully teases the reader with humour, horror, and long-buried family secrets. A brilliant read, it has a last line to rival *The Silence of the Lambs*’

Guy Morpuss, author of *A Trial in Three Acts*

**THE
DEAD
HUSBAND
COOKBOOK**

ALSO BY DANIELLE VALENTINE
AND AVAILABLE FROM VIPER

Delicate Condition

THE DEAD HUSBAND COOKBOOK

DANIELLE VALENTINE

RECIPES BY RON WILLIAMS



First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Viper,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.viperbooks.co.uk

First published in the United States by Sourcebooks Landmark,
an imprint of Sourcebooks

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Internal design © Sourcebooks, 2025

Internal design by Tara Jagers/Sourcebooks

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Our product safety representative in the EU is Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd.,
Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, D02 P593, Ireland.
www.arccompliance.com

Hardback ISBN 978 1 80081 918 4
Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 80081 921 4
eISBN 978 1 80081 920 7



For Ron, the love of my life. Consider this a warning. (Jk. Sort of)

THE SECRET INGREDIENT

INTRODUCTION

I've always said recipes are like family. Even the best ones are hiding something.

Take meatballs, for instance. Meatballs are a food built on secrets. People think they're Italian, but ground meat rolled into balls have been featured throughout Greece and Rome and the Middle East. In the Middle Ages, impoverished populations all over the world mixed their meat with breadcrumbs, onions, butter, and minced garlic to make it last.

Throughout the Ottoman Empire they were called köfte; in Sweden, köttbullar; in Belgium they were boulettes de viande and gehaktballen; in Finland, meatballs were called lihapullia, literally "meat buns"; in Ukraine, they were frykadel'ky.

And, in Italy, they were polpette. So that's what we called our restaurant. Polpette della Nonna. My grandmother's meatballs.

The grandmother in question was my late husband, Damien's. My beloved's nonna had died the year before we opened our restaurant, and we found a yellowed Tupperware of meatballs in the back of her freezer while cleaning out her house. The very last batch she would ever make.

"She made the most incredible meatballs," Damien told me, cradling that container as though it was precious. "But she never wrote down her recipe. I've been trying to re-create it my whole life."

It took Damien years to deconstruct his nonna's meatballs. Every week he would make them alongside his traditional Sunday gravy: tomato sauce and sausage and braciole. I still remember the rich

aroma of ripe tomatoes, the freshly chopped basil, the sizzle of garlic and onions, sautéed to perfection in glistening olive oil.

While the sauce cooked, my love would toil over his own batch of meatballs, carefully measuring the breadcrumbs and soaking them in milk, rolling them together with veal and pork and beef. At the very last moment, he'd throw one of his nonna's frozen meatballs into the tomato sauce and we would test them side by side, his against hers.

Hers always won. They were better than anything else my talented husband put in that pot.

Until the day they weren't.

"How did you do it?" His family were the first to ask, and then the people who came to our restaurant. And then, after he was gone, the world.

What was his recipe? It made me smile when people would inevitably ask that question at every signing I ever did for one of my own cookbooks, at every event. It was a small, beautiful way of keeping him alive, of keeping him with me.

What was the secret ingredient? Do you know? What did he put in those meatballs that made them so good?

If my husband knew anything, it was how to keep a secret. But I was there the whole time. I shared his kitchen. I helped him stir and measure. I stood beside him as he perfected the recipe. I saw exactly how he did it.

And I've never been that good with secrets. I plan on telling you everything.

—MARIA CAPELLO, FEBRUARY 3, 2025

PART ONE

ANTIPASTO

THEA

SOMEONE WAS COOKING. I SMELLED IT THE SECOND I WALKED into our building, a rich and heady scent of meat and onions and garlic simmering together in a pot. My mouth filled with saliva, and for a moment, I forgot all about my wet shoes, the throbbing pain in my shoulder, my weighted-down tote bag and screaming toddler.

Maybe it's Jacob, I thought, hopeful. Maybe my husband had stepped away from work early for once, picked up one of my old cookbooks, and decided to make dinner. Stranger things have happened.

Ruthie's voice cut through my thoughts. "MOMMY, MOMMY, MOMMY, MOMMY!" She was always either screaming at the top of her lungs or speaking in a such a low mumble that I had to ask her several times to "please talk just a little louder, honey."

"Ruthie, Ruthie, Ruthie!" I said in my normal tone, hoping she'd take the hint. The entryway door slammed shut behind us, and I paused, taking a moment to adjust all the things I was carrying: the Hanes Press tote swollen with books; the still-open, drenched umbrella; the reusable grocery bag filled with overpriced bodega staples (toilet paper, milk, the carton of blueberries that currently composed 90 percent of Ruthie's diet); and, of course, Ruthie herself.

“Mommy, did you see the jamrock?” She was trying to say *shamrock*. It was a week or so before St. Patrick’s Day, and our neighbor had one taped to her front door.

“I did see the shamrock. It’s very pretty.” I was starting to lose the feeling in my right arm. “Do you think you could try walking for a little while, sweetie?”

Ruthie responded by wrapping her arms tighter around my neck and wailing directly into my ear. She’d insisted on being carried half-way through our walk home. She hadn’t liked the wet ground, and she’d wanted to be closer to the umbrella. I couldn’t blame her. I also hated walking around Brooklyn in the rain. But we were inside now, facing four floors of stairs, and I was not an athletic person. My sole experience with working out consisted of a weight-lifting class I’d taken in my late twenties, the optimistically named “Couch to Barbell.” It had promised to turn me into a weight lifter in just three sessions a week for twelve weeks. We hadn’t even started with real weights. We’d started with a broom handle, which the instructor explained was for learning proper weight-lifting form and not building muscle.

I made it to the fourth session before pulling something in my shoulder. From lifting a *broom handle*. I’d been so embarrassed I never went back, which had meant forfeiting the \$195 fee I’d paid in advance, a fortune back when I was on an assistant editor salary. I still felt a twinge of regret whenever I thought of it.

From somewhere within my tote, a sharp chime sounded. It was the specific tone I’d programmed for when my boss emailed—a short, clear, efficient-sounding chirp, like the sound of an old-fashioned metal call bell sitting on a hotel’s reception desk. Whenever I heard it, I imagined Cassandra Hanes placing a single, elegantly manicured finger on a bell, eyebrows raised as she waited for me to give her my full attention. I used to hear that sound multiple times an hour as Cassandra emailed an inside joke or shot me a question about some high-profile project or checked to see if I wanted to grab lunch or a drink. Now, the sound shot a quick jolt of nerves up my spine. Lately, any email Cassandra had for me wasn’t good.

The smell of food grew stronger as I hauled Ruthie up the stairs. It coated the insides of my nostrils so that each time I inhaled it was even more intoxicating. It was earthy mushrooms and rosemary, the sharp tang of mustard, all of it tempered with the honeyed sweetness of caramelized onions. Heavenly.

“Mommy, what’s that smell?” Ruthie asked.

“Someone’s cooking dinner. It smells like a roast.”

Ruthie screwed up her face. “Eww. It’s yucky.”

“Yucky?” I laughed, amused that Ruthie’s palate hadn’t yet caught up to complex tastes and textures and scents.

But as I climbed further, I started to notice it, too. There was something beneath the heavy smell of the meat, something cloying. It reminded me of dying flowers, of fruit going soft in the basket we kept in the corner of our kitchen, and I found myself making the same face Ruthie had, even trying to breathe through my mouth.

Whoever was cooking had done a lot with the mushrooms and onions, but beneath that wonderful smell was something else, something too sweet. The meat they were cooking had gone bad.

It didn’t smell like food anymore. It smelled like rot. Like the decay of dying things.

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“*This* is why you couldn’t come down and help us?” I asked Jacob when Ruthie and I had finally stumbled into our apartment. He was in workout clothes, his forehead red and shiny with sweat.

“I was in the middle of a set,” he explained, breathless. He was panting, face flushed. “I just did ten reps. That’s a personal best.”

I could tell he wanted me to congratulate him, but I didn’t have it in me. Our apartment was a fourth-floor walk-up. Standard, for a place in Brooklyn in our budget. Not a big deal when you’re in your twenties; hell when you have a kid, groceries, and a tote bag filled with books to carry.

Oh, and an umbrella. I also had an umbrella.

I glowered at Jacob as he refocused his attention on the pull-up bar hanging from the kitchen doorway. My husband was tall and slender with lean, ropy muscles, dark, wiry hair, and a long nose. The first time we met, he'd reminded me of a dog, a majestic Irish setter loping around some verdant green field, a hunting dog with a job to do, places to see, things to sniff out. It was an association that has only grown stronger the longer I've known him.

A podcast droned from the speaker in the kitchen. Something about World War II. Jacob was the only person I knew who worked out while listening to history podcasts.

"If you really needed help, you should have said." Jacob spoke loudly so I could hear him over the podcast hosts, who were now discussing something called Operation Pedestal. "I didn't realize you were carrying so much."

The text I'd sent had literally read, *Please come help me I don't think I can carry all this up*, but I was too distracted to point that out, trying to get Ruthie to take off her shoes and coat while she twirled in a lackadaisical circle in the middle of our entryway, singing three words of that song from *Frozen*, the only lyrics she knew: "I can't anymore!" They weren't the right words, but she didn't know that.

"Ruthie, c'mon," I said. "Let's get you out of your wet outside clothes."

"Mommy, I'm Elsa. I'm dancing." I finished pulling off her jacket and she darted into the apartment like a puppy finally released from her leash.

I collapsed against the wall. The effort of the climb and the jacket and all of the things clamoring for my attention was too much. My bones were tired.

I looked up at Jacob without moving my head from the wall. "Something was going on at the office when I left. Final bids, I think."

"Bids for the top-secret...Beyoncé memoir?" Jacob grunted, hauling his chin up to the pull-up bar.

I considered it, then shook my head. "I don't think they would've been able to keep a celebrity that big under wraps. Someone would've

let something slip.” Not to me, of course. Talking to me was still verboten. I hadn’t heard a word about the submission that’d come in Monday, but I’ve been at Hanes long enough to note the signs: the closed-door meetings with the heads of every department, Cassandra hanging around more than usual, shades drawn over the glass walls of her office, assistants hovering at the printers, waiting for pages to spit out so they could secret them away before anyone’s greedy eyes fell on the words. Most editors read on their computers, but Cassandra insisted on ink and paper. She said reading was as much a tactile experience as a mental one. I used to wonder if she huffed printer ink when she was alone in her office. I really did.

And then there’d been the assistants in the bathroom who hadn’t realized I was squatting in one of the stalls, their hushed whispers bouncing off the tiled walls, “Have you read *The Dead Husband Cookbook* yet?” and “No, have you?”

The Dead Husband Cookbook. It was a fake name, obviously, and didn’t necessarily refer to an actual cookbook. Once upon a time, Cassandra and I would have come up with it together, making a joke of some throwaway line or image in the proposal, laughing until we were breathless. I felt an ache now, remembering. Had she called another editor in to her office to help her come up with this one? A new mentee to replace the one who’d failed her so miserably? The thought turned my stomach. I blinked, hard, to keep tears from forming.

Jacob looked like he was going to say something else, then decided against it and went back to the pull-up bar. “Ruthie’s school called. Did you send in tuition this month?”

I went back to unpacking the bodega groceries. “Not yet.”

“You want me to do it?”

“No,” I said a bit too sharply. Then, adjusting my tone, “It’s fine. I’ll do it.”

Watching him at the bar, I felt my teeth grit together. He’d gotten off before six for once, and instead of starting dinner or putting the dishes away, he’d used the time to work out. But it wasn’t worth the

fight, so I did my best to push the annoyance aside. I scanned my shelves of cookbooks, trying to come up with an idea for dinner. The smell of the hallway meat, though rotten, had inspired me to cook.

I pulled *The Italian Family Table* down from a shelf. My go-to cookbook since forever. It was hopelessly dated, a faded photograph of the famous chef Maria Capello standing in a Tuscan-style kitchen, all rustic wood and terra-cotta floors, Maria wielding a rolling pin like a weapon. It was by far the most tattered and worn of all my cookbooks. It had been my mother's originally, but I'd taken it with me when I moved away for college, reasoning that it was only fair. Maria had spent more time raising me than my mother had, after all. And I'd never even met her.

The book automatically fell open to a recipe near the middle, manicotti stuffed with braised meat and besciamella, my favorite since I was little. I could still remember making it on Sunday nights during a brief, disastrous year where I'd tried to get my mother to play-act like the two of us were a real family. Dragging a dining room chair across the kitchen so I could stir the meat on the back burner, watching cheese bubble and brown through the dirty glass of the oven. I owed my mother a call, actually. She'd tried to get me over lunch, but I'd let it go to voicemail. The longer I put her off, the worse the call was going to be.

I scanned the ingredients list, though I knew it by heart. I had pasta and pork, and I even had a jar of Capello besciamella sauce, Maria's brand, which was inevitably better than anything I made regardless of how closely I followed the recipe.

"How do you feel about manicotti?" I asked Jacob.

"You know that dish is the reason I married you," he said.

He meant it as a joke and I smiled dutifully. But it hit different today. Maybe it was just that I used to know I contributed more to the world than a meal I'd made following someone else's recipe. Now, I wasn't so sure.

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It wasn't until much later in the evening, when the manicotti had been made and eaten, when Ruthie was in her favorite pajamas—the Hanna Anderson footie ones covered in lemons, so old we'd had to cut the feet off when she outgrew them—and I was brushing my teeth for bed, thinking about how I'd avoided calling my mother yet again and I really needed to just get it over with, that I remembered I'd gotten an email from Cassandra.

Something foul took root in my stomach as I fumbled for my phone, opened the email, and read. I'd known this email was coming, but the words were still like a punch to the gut. Tears pricked infuriatingly at my eyes. I felt like I needed to sit down.

The email read simply: *My office, first thing tomorrow morning.*

Which was, of course, the exact email you got before you were informed that you were being let go.

MANHATTAN TRIBUNE

Celebrity Chef Damien Capello Disappears Near Woodstock

By Benjamin Fields

JULY 20, 1996

WOODSTOCK, N.Y.—Celebrity chef Damien Capello has been reported missing. Capello was last seen on July 17 at his family farmhouse just outside Woodstock. His sudden disappearance has left both the local community and national followers in shock.

In the early hours of July 18, family members reported that Capello disappeared from his home. A subsequent search of the property revealed Capello's personal belongings—including his clothes, shoes, and watch—left by a riverbank. Given the proximity to the water, police are considering the possibility of an accidental drowning. However, with no body recovered from the creek yet, the investigation remains open.

Sgt. Mitchell Greene, who leads the investigation, commented, "While we are exploring the drowning theory due to the location

of Capello's belongings, we are also pursuing other leads and treating this as an open investigation."

On the evening of his disappearance, the Capellos were hosting a party attended by immediate family, several close family friends, and the staff of their popular restaurant, Polpette della Nonna. Capello owns the restaurant with his wife and business partner, Maria Capello, who was also at the party. According to reports, the party ended early, around 10 p.m., with Maria Capello taking her and Damien's ten-year-old son, Enzo Capello, to the emergency room following an accident that resulted in the boy breaking his nose. Damien reportedly stayed behind to see off their guests.

Hank Casey, a longtime friend of the family, was reportedly the last to leave the house, at around 10:30 p.m. "Everything seemed fine when Damien said his goodbyes. I can't imagine what happened," Casey said.

Maria Capello stated, "I called home from the emergency room at eleven o'clock to update Damien on how Enzo was doing, but he didn't pick up. I assumed he was still talking to our guests. I had no reason to suspect that anything might have happened." According to Maria, the couple's children, Isabella and Enzo, were with her at the emergency room until approximately 1 a.m. Security footage from the hospital confirms this.

While Woodstock is a relatively quiet town, the sudden disappearance of such a high-profile figure has drawn significant media attention. The Capellos' restaurant, Polpette della Nonna, a fixture in the Woodstock dining scene, remains temporarily closed.

Police are urging anyone with information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, to step forward.

The investigation is ongoing. Further updates will be provided as more information becomes available.

2

THEA

HANES HOUSE PRESS WAS PRACTICALLY EMPTY WHEN I ARRIVED the next morning. An intern I didn't recognize was shelving books and Sean, our publicity director, was in his office. His low, steady voice boomed through the glass as the elevator doors closed, dinging softly behind me.

This had been a coveted office space, once. It took up the top two floors of the Bank Note building in the Bronx, a loftlike space with concrete floors and fifteen-foot-high windows, skylights, and exposed wooden beams soaring overhead. It also leaked year-round, had mold crawling up the walls of the bathroom, and moths had laid eggs in the expensive vintage rugs.

I swallowed, mouth dry. I felt like I had as a twenty-two-year-old college grad walking into this building for my interview with Hanes House's CEO and publisher. A six-foot-tall woman with arms like Michelle Obama's, Cassandra Hanes wore her silver hair in an elegant bob that hit just above her shoulders and dressed like she'd once had a fashionable person tell her exactly what colors and styles she needed to wear to complement every part of her figure.

"So," she'd said as soon as I was seated on the other side of an

expansive glass desk that didn't seem to have a single smudge on it. "Who *are* you?"

I remembered wondering if she'd forgotten who she was supposed to be interviewing. I was the kind of person people tended to forget. Nothing about me was particularly exciting or dramatic. If you put every Caucasian twentysomething female face into an AI image generator and asked it to come up with a composite, you would probably end up with something like me. Average-sized nose and an average-shaped chin and two average brown eyes sitting an average distance apart. The only thing about me that tended to stick with people was my hair, which was a deep, vibrant auburn red.

I shuffled around inside my fake leather satchel for my résumé to help her out. "I'm...Thea Woods? I just graduated from NYU with a major in English lit, specializing in..."

"No," Cassandra had said, and I could tell she was disappointed, that this wasn't what she'd been after at all. "Who *are* you? How did you come to be sitting across from me?"

It had been a deeply annoying question, to be honest. Years later, after we'd become closer, I told her as much. *Who are you?* Had she wanted my life story? My opinion on organized religion? Should I have rattled off a bit of *The Faerie Queene*?

But at the interview, in the moment, I'd felt the chill of the air-conditioning raising the hair on my arms, and I'd been overcome with an almost physical need to impress her. I'd been applying for jobs for months by then, and editorial assistant positions were notoriously hard to get. But it was more than just that. I'd wanted *Cassandra* to think I was someone worthwhile. I'd always had an affinity for strong older women. Throughout high school, I would often spend lunch hours in the narrow office the algebra, geometry, and pre-calc teachers all shared, claiming I needed help with the homework when what I really needed was for three women in their sixties to look at my work and tell me I was smart, that they were proud of me. It was a little embarrassing to admit, to be honest.

Once I'd managed to gather my courage, I'd told her the truth,

which wasn't exactly revolutionary but which I'd been afraid to share with anyone else I'd interviewed with. "I don't know who I am yet. The only time I've ever been brave was when I moved down to the city for school. I'm from upstate originally, near Utica. Girls like me usually end up as English teachers where I'm from, and that's if they even make it through college. But I've wanted to be an editor ever since I knew what they were, so I'd decided the risk was...worth it, I guess. That's why I'm here."

Cassandra had given me nothing, not even the slightest hint of a smile, but I'd always assumed that answer was what had gotten me the job. Many years later, after having one too many scotch and sodas at a holiday party, Cassandra had blurted, "It was because you said you knew Excel on your résumé. Ninety percent of an assistant's job is using Excel, and yet all these Ivy League grads come to my office talking about how much they love Salman Rushdie and Alice Munro."

Of course, that was seventeen years ago. In the years since, I'd been approached by other, bigger houses, but I'd never felt compelled to leave. I loved everything about Hanes House. I loved the moth-infested carpets and the concrete floors. I loved the old factory windows, even though they made the space drafty in the winter, sweltering in the summer. I loved the sound of rain tapping the skylights, even if it meant we'd had to pull buckets from the closet when the windows started to leak. And I'd loved Cassandra, the strong, confident woman who'd taken me under her wing, who'd mentored me. Up until a few years ago, I'd thought I would die an editor at Hanes House.

But so much had happened since then. I hadn't realized how much work came after you got the dream, how much you had to sacrifice to hold it together year after year. I felt like a completely different person from that meek, twenty-two-year-old who'd talked about how brave she'd had to be to leave her hometown. If that girl saw me now, I'm not sure she'd recognize me.

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A lump formed in my throat as I settled into the leather ergonomic chair across from Cassandra's legendary glass desk. I could already feel the tears stinging my eyes, the muscles knotting in my shoulders and the back of my neck. I wanted to be anywhere else in the world. I wasn't ready for this. I wanted to beg Cassandra to reconsider. I wanted to turn the clock back, fix my big mistake, do everything differently.

"Thank you for coming in, Thea." Cassandra's voice was cool, professional. I would never get used to hearing her address me like this after years of inside jokes and gossip, her introducing me at parties as the daughter she never had, her second-in-command, her younger self. My throat closed and I had to push the memories aside.

She closed her office door and her heels clacked against the floor as she headed for the seat behind her desk.

"Of course." I knotted my hands in my lap, trying not to squirm. I took a deep, painful breath.

This was it. I just had to get through the next ten minutes without crying.

Cassandra leaned back in her chair, arching an eyebrow. Her silver hair lay in soft waves around her face. If she'd bothered to dye it, she wouldn't look a day over forty-five. As it was, she seemed alien and timeless.

She let the silence between us stretch for a moment, and then she said, "I think it's time we had a little chat."

I'd told myself I wouldn't beg for my job, that I'd accept my fate with some measure of dignity. But now, faced with the inevitable, I couldn't stop myself. "Cassandra," I choked out. "I—"

But Cassandra held up a hand, palm out, stopping me. "I want to talk to you about *The Dead Husband Cookbook*."

I closed my mouth, confused. She hadn't mentioned the submission to me, not once. As far as she was concerned, I didn't even know there *was* a submission. It seemed an odd way to open a conversation with someone you were about to fire. It took me a moment to recover enough to come up with an appropriate response, and still, all I had was a faltering "I... What?"

Cassandra considered me with a shrewd gaze, as if trying to decide whether I was faking my confusion. “I’m sure you’ve noticed there’s been some excitement in the office over the past week,” she said after a long moment. “On Monday, we received a submission for Maria Capello’s new memoir. We found out late last night that she accepted our bid.”

A small sound, like a sigh, escaped my lips. Just for a moment, like a fool, I let myself feel a lift of hope. *Maria Capello* was the secret author everyone had been talking about? Maria Capello, who I’d loved practically my whole life. I thought of all the hours I’d spent slowly turning the pages of her cookbook, running fingers over faded photographs of her in her kitchen, her hands wrinkled and soft-looking as they rolled out dough. I remembered watching her show, *Dinner at the Farm*, marveling over her infinite patience as she showed her children how to cut pasta or stir sauce, wondering what it would feel like to be in that kitchen with them, to be that well mothered.

The hope lingered for an instant and then it was gone, replaced with a sucking sick feeling as I remembered why I was here. What I’d done. A small pain slid into my chest like a sliver, deep and sharp.

“Rumor has it she’s leaving her publisher because of some tiff with the publicity director, but I don’t buy it. My niece is in the publicity department over there, and she told me they all adore her. Maria has luxury gift baskets sent over every holiday and release day. The last one had a bottle of Dom Pérignon in it. My niece wouldn’t shut up about it, actually. Anyway, regardless of why, she *is* leaving, but she hasn’t officially accepted our offer yet. She and her team are on their way here now, but she had a very specific request. That’s why I wanted to meet with you this morning.”

Maria and her team are on their way here? Now? I couldn’t begin to fathom what this had to do with me.

Unless—and the thought was like a hard twist of that splinter—did Cassandra want me out of the office before they got here?

I somehow managed to choke out an “Oh?”

Cassandra stared at me. There wasn’t a hint of a smile on her face.

Her voice grew several degrees colder as she said, "Maria said she'd only accept our bid if you were the one who edited her."

I blinked. I couldn't have heard that right. I opened my mouth, then closed it again. My brain felt slow. "I don't understand."

"Maria Capello told me that the only way she'd let Hanes publish her book was if Thea Woods was her editor."

Something began to hum inside my chest as I looked at Cassandra, the woman I used to trust more than my own mother. I could see instantly that she was telling me the truth.

But it didn't make sense. Maria Capello could've been edited by the same people who'd edited Obama and Prince Harry. I hadn't been that caliber of editor even before my big mistake. Now, I was a publishing cautionary tale.

Cassandra leaned forward, sliding her elbows onto her glass desk. She looked...irritated. Confused.

Curious.

"In fact," she said, "I was hoping you might enlighten me as to why Maria Capello is so keen to work with you."

I was at a loss. "I—I have no idea."

"You two have never met?"

"No."

"And you didn't talk to her at all? Get in touch when you found out about the book?" An annoyed twist to her lips when she said "found out about the book." She probably assumed one of my friends in the office had told me. I felt a brief, sharp pain that none of them had.

Still, she clearly thought I'd orchestrated this somehow. That I was trying to save my career with a last-ditch effort at landing a big celebrity memoir. Honestly, the idea was laughable.

"And say *what*?" I wanted to know. I supposed some other editor might have tried something like this, "accidentally" bumping into Maria at a restaurant or hotel lobby, pitching her a vision of the book in the hopes of wooing her away from a more successful editor at a bigger house. Cassandra, in fact, would be exactly the kind of person to do something like that. But I was not that person. I would've felt

much too awkward. What would I have said to someone like Maria? The mechanics of it seemed impossible.

Cassandra stared, not blinking. I couldn't tell whether she believed me. After a moment, she said, "If you really didn't say anything to her, it's possible she wants you on this project for another reason. No one really knows why she decided to leave her publisher."

Her voice had defrosted the tiniest bit. It made my shoulders unclench. Sunlight reflected off her desk. Cassandra smelled like expensive soap, something with lavender. She pulled her lip between her teeth, eyes far away. She was holding something back, I could tell.

"What was in the proposal?" I wanted to know.

A shrug. "Bare-bones outline. One sample chapter."

"That's all?"

"They're being pretty cagey about the whole thing. Maria's agent said the book is going to be a memoir, possibly with recipes, maybe recounting her years with her late husband, Damien Capello." Cassandra's eyes slid back to mine. "Maybe something about the disappearance. Maybe."

The words *holy shit* slipped from my mouth, completely unplanned. The corner of Cassandra's lips twitched. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was the closest I'd gotten in months.

Maria had never spoken about the night her husband, world-famous chef Damien Capello, disappeared. Not once in three decades. In fact, she'd famously walked out on an interview with Barbara Walters because Walters had mentioned Damien's disappearance in passing. It was well known that the topic was off-limits.

"You really think she'll write about it?" I asked.

"It would explain the secrecy, the NDA." Cassandra ticked the points off on her fingers as she went. "That, frankly, insulting outline—"

"But why now? It's been thirty years."

Cassandra's eyebrow twitched upward. "Maybe she's finally going to admit that she killed him."

If we'd been on better terms I'd have laughed, certain she was

joking. The rumor that Maria had killed her husband had been a part of her mythology since she first rose to fame, but believing it was like believing that Elvis was still alive or JFK killed Marilyn. Damien's suicide had seemed fishy at the time, yes, and people always assumed the wife was involved whenever there was a mysterious death. But the facts of the case were clear: multiple people had seen Maria Capello leave the party to take her son to the hospital, there was the camera footage showing her waiting in the emergency room lounge, and there was her signature on the visitor's log, her phone message on the answering machine.

The reasons people had for believing there'd been a cover-up—that the camera footage only showed the back of a woman's head, not Maria's face, that the signature hadn't looked exactly like hers, that Maria's cell phone call hadn't pinged the tower closest to the hospital—were interesting enough to keep the story alive for thirty years, but not enough for the police to get involved. Eventually, that night had become a dark anecdote in Maria's otherwise meteoric rise to fame, something that gave her an edge, like Martha Stewart's stint in jail.

I waited for Cassandra to laugh this idea off, tell me she was kidding. She didn't. She looked like she'd just caught the scent of blood in the water.

"Her publisher would never have passed on a memoir about the night Damien died," I pointed out.

Cassandra shrugged. "Maria might not have offered it to them. She might've thought a smaller publisher would be easier to deal with."

I tried to ignore my heartbeat, my breath running wild. Over the last three decades, remarkably few people had spoken publicly about what happened that night. A few members of Polpette's staff, some distant friends and relatives, a guy who was technically their neighbor even though he lived over a mile away. No one in the inner circle had ever said a word.

If Maria was really going to write about it, this would be the book of the season. The book of the year.

And if Cassandra let me edit it... It would be the shining highlight

of my career. It would give me *back* my career. I felt breathless, light-headed. It was like winning the lottery.

Where was the catch?

"Why would she want *me* to edit it?" I asked.

Cassandra leaned over her desk, folding her hands in front of her. She looked like she was considering her words very carefully before she said, "You know how small this industry is, Thea. People talk. I can't imagine Maria doesn't know about what happened with the Kincaid Hughes book. She might've come away with the idea that you were someone who could be..." She hesitated before adding, "Handled."

I felt a sinking in my gut because this, unfortunately, made sense. "You mean manipulated?"

"I mean it's possible that she thinks she can write a version of the truth and you won't question it too closely because you need a win." Cassandra let her hands fall open. "She might want to get a specific story out there for reasons of her own."

I felt nauseous, actually sick to my stomach. I'd been an editor for nearly twenty years. How had *this* become my reputation? Was I going to spend the rest of my life being judged by the worst mistake I'd ever made?

"No, that doesn't make any sense," I said, after a moment. "If she's so worried about people questioning her story, why write the book at all? Especially now, after thirty years? Why not just let it be?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" Cassandra appeared to think about this for a moment. "Maybe she wants to set the record straight, put the rumors to rest once and for all. Or maybe she knows what really happened that night and she's tired of keeping silent. She could be protecting someone."

I was already shaking my head. "Damien died by suicide. He left a *note*." A note that was famously stolen from the Capello house and reprinted in tabloids nationwide. *By the time you find this I'll already be gone. I need it to be over.* "Multiple people said he was acting strange that night, that it felt like he was saying goodbye."

"I didn't realize you were such a fan."

To be honest, I didn't think the word *fan* really did justice to what I was. I was more than that. I was a devotee. But admitting that wouldn't win me any points here, so I kept quiet.

"I don't think it will surprise you to know that, before getting this very...*odd* ultimatum, I was planning on letting you go." Cassandra leveled her eyes on me, wiping the memory of the lip twitch that had almost been a smile from my mind. "The only reason I didn't fire you immediately is that I didn't want to add to the media scrutiny. But what happened with Hughes was completely unacceptable."

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry. I was well aware of how bad it was.

"We're not a big publisher," Cassandra continued. "We can't afford to make mistakes like that." She hesitated before adding, "And I'm sure you know Maria's reputation."

Everyone knew Maria's reputation. She was notoriously difficult to work with, demanding, easily offended, manipulative. *Diva* was the word I'd heard used most often. It was difficult to know how much of that reputation was sexism and how much had been earned, but I had friends who'd worked with her, so I'd heard stories of an aloof, prickly woman who insisted on controlling the editorial schedule, rewriting press releases, even micromanaging the way her books were displayed in stores. She'd once had an editor reassigned because she didn't like his notes. His career never recovered afterward. I'd heard he'd left the industry, the *city*. And that wasn't the only story of someone who'd worked with Maria seeming to disappear.

But I'd heard other stories, too. Maria took care of people she liked. She helped a former assistant launch her own brand. Now, that woman had a line of cookbooks and Tupperware of her own. Maria could make your career, if she wanted to.

"This book is going to be a challenge," Cassandra continued. "But it could also be huge for us. And it would go a long way toward undoing some of the damage you did. So, what do you think? Are you up for it?"

Was I up for it? I felt awe, actual *awe*, like I was standing at the edge

of the Grand Canyon, lost in that feeling of being at once very small and connected to everything. I was forty years old. I'd been an editor for nearly two decades. And I was good. I wanted *that* to be my legacy. Not Hughes.

And Maria... I'd seen every episode of her show; I'd cooked every recipe in her books. I didn't care if she was difficult. I could handle difficult. She was my idol. This was my dream job. I might not have concocted this plan on my own, but I wasn't stupid enough to walk away from it now that it had landed on my lap. It felt like an answered prayer.

But I also knew Cassandra. Once, while grabbing a drink at the divey Irish pub around the corner, she'd given me a quick tutorial on how to be a better negotiator. *Make the first offer. Ask for more than what you think you can get. Be clear about what you want.*

That Cassandra was different from the one staring back at me now. She'd wanted me to succeed. This Cassandra regarded me like a shark. It took every last ounce of bravery I had to say, "I would want to reopen our discussion about my promotion." Sarah Stewart, one of Hanes's two editorial directors, had just announced she was stepping down. I hadn't been in any position to ask Cassandra to consider me to replace her. Until about two minutes ago.

"Of course," Cassandra said. There was no hesitation in her voice. She'd expected this.

"I want Sarah's job," I added, so there wouldn't be any confusion later.

Cassandra didn't blink. "Done."

"And," I added, thinking fast, "I'll need a raise. Childcare costs are insane right now."

I had no right to ask for that, but I thought I saw something glint in Cassandra's eye. Was I fooling myself to think it could have been pride?

Cassandra leaned across the desk and said, her voice low, "Get Maria Capello to write us a memoir about what happened the night her husband disappeared and you'll get your promotion and your

raise. But, Thea... I hope you understand how rare this opportunity is. I don't offer second chances. You would not be sitting here if Maria hadn't insisted."

I nodded. "Yes. I realize that."

"Good," Cassandra said, voice clipped. "Then you should also realize that one misstep, one complaint from Maria, one *hint* of a problem and that's it. You're done here."

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I hurried out of Cassandra's office and into the bathroom, barely breathing. The air felt stagnant, hot.

I stopped at the row of sinks and the faucets groaned, then creaked as I turned them on, icy water thundering into the basin.

My reflection winced as I met my eyes, blinking rapidly. There was a tingling in my chest that could have been excitement or anxiety or dread, a tightening of my heart, my breath gone short and shallow. What was happening? What the *hell* had just happened?

I'm not fired, I told myself, testing the thought. *I'm not getting fired*. Not today, at least.

Maria Capello asked me to edit her book. *Me*.

A smile tugged at the corners of my lips. Slow at first, then unraveling like a flag in the wind. Holy shit. *Holy shit*.

Everything had gotten so messed up but this, *finally*, was a way to get things back on track.

I used to have plans. Not long ago, I knew exactly where my life would be in one year, five, ten. The last time one of the bigger houses had tried to poach me, I'd gone to Casandra with my shiny new offer and a list of demands: I wouldn't leave, and, in exchange, I expected to make executive editor in two years. Editorial director in four.

Who knows, maybe that's exactly what would have happened if things had gone differently. But then I got pregnant with Ruthie, and I'd had to go on bed rest when I was only six months along, which had meant taking maternity leave early. I'd gotten a pelvis fracture while

giving birth that had left me unable to stand without leaning heavily on a walker, requiring months of intensive physical therapy as I basically relearned how to move my legs. I was only supposed to be gone for four months. I'd ended up staying out for the better part of a year.

And when I finally did get back to work, I was...different. There was no other way to put it. Motherhood had shifted something fundamental inside of me. I was like that paradox, the Ship of Theseus: If all parts of a ship were replaced gradually over time, was it still the same ship? I felt different on a cellular basis, even though I looked the same. It was as though someone had switched out my blood, my bones, my brain.

The project that ruined everything was a memoir by a politician out of Iowa named Kincaid Hughes. At the time I'd acquired the book Hughes had an unimpeachable reputation. There'd even been rumors that he was planning a presidential bid in the next decade or so. It was the first book I worked on after coming back from maternity leave, but Hughes had made it all so easy. He'd hired a ghostwriter, an outside editor, and by the time the book got to me it was nearly perfect. I barely managed to fill a page with notes.

Hughes though. I'd known from our very first meeting that there was something about Hughes I didn't like. His eyes lingered a beat too long and in inappropriate places. Some of the jokes he told could've been considered tasteless, if he'd meant them a certain way, or could've been completely innocent if he hadn't. Once, I thought he'd touched my lower back, but when I turned around, I couldn't be entirely sure that it wasn't the edge of his bag.

Early motherhood compounded all these anxieties: I was exhausted, barely sleeping through the night. I obsessed about Hughes. Sometimes I gaslit myself into thinking I'd imagined everything; other times I'd convince myself that I had a duty to out him—that I owed it to the next generation. Eventually, the whole situation unnerved me enough that I'd started asking around. Just a few conversations over drinks or in the quieter corners of parties. *Did Hughes ever say... Did you ever feel...* The responses weren't too scandalous, but it was enough to put

together a sketchy picture of a guy who made women uncomfortable. A guy who maybe enjoyed making women uncomfortable.

Then this woman, a publicity director at another house who I'd always been friendly with, mentioned in passing that I should talk to her assistant, Riley. Riley didn't just have a story, my friend told me. She had receipts. She'd interned with Hughes's PR firm back when she was in college. And, according to her, he wasn't just kind of creepy. He was a full-on predator.

Riley seemed happy to talk to me. She showed me dozens of DMs from Hughes. They started friendly, flirty, then quickly became crude. Hughes—who, by the way, had been *married* and was about thirty years older than Riley at the time—had sent sexually explicit photos, written disgusting things, and even insinuated that if Riley were to give him sex, he'd make sure the PR firm hired her on full time. "*You take care of me and I'll take care of you,*" he'd written.

The whole thing had infuriated me. I took screenshots of the DMs and showed them to Cassandra the very next day. I told her we had to drop Hughes's book, which, by the way, was impossible. Every bookstore in the country already had their copies. The book was coming out in weeks, and it was supposed to be our biggest book of the season. If we pulled it, Hanes House would be out hundreds of thousands of dollars. Cassandra was apologetic. She told me she felt the same way about Hughes, that we'd never publish him again. But this book was going to come out.

The next part was where I fucked up. There's no other way to look at it. And I truly hate to put any of the blame for this mistake on hormones, but in this case, it was accurate. I was only a few months out from giving birth to a daughter and more sensitive than usual about the idea of anyone out there preying on girls. When I looked at Riley, I didn't see a twentysomething woman. I saw a child, someone's daughter, a little girl who it was my job to protect. It deeply bothered me that Hughes was going to get away with what he'd done, that there was nothing I could do about it.

And so drunk on half a glass of wine (which was all it took to get

me tipsy back when I was still breastfeeding) and bored at some media party Jacob had dragged me to, I'd told a stranger everything I'd heard about Hughes. In fairness, she'd asked me about him. She'd just gotten hired to do some social media work with his campaign for reelection and wanted to know about my experience working with him. Still, I shouldn't have said anything. I didn't even know this person. It was just that she'd looked so impossibly young. I couldn't stop thinking about how Riley's hand had trembled when she'd shown me those disgusting DMs, or about my daughter's perfect, innocent face. I'd only wanted to warn her.

Later that night, an anonymous TikTok account called HushHush released a video: a series of still shots of Hughes, over which they'd added audio of me warning the young social media manager about what a predator he was, that he preyed on young women, how I desperately wished we could pull his book. Someone had recorded our entire conversation without my knowledge.

It would have been bad enough on its own. But whoever was behind the HushHush account also ended up with the screenshots I took of Riley's DMs, screenshots Riley had warned me to keep secret because she'd signed an NDA. The screenshots were included in the video with the pics, which made it look like I'd provided them, and HushHush had credited me with a hat tip in the caption.

The post immediately went viral. The story got picked up by every major news publication. And while the media circus tended to focus on Hughes, publishing TikTok had plenty to say about me. There were people who thought I was a hero and slammed Hanes Press as cowardly, and others who said I was an example of "woke liberalism" run amok. I didn't agree with either take. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't a symbol of anything. I was just a mother and a woman and I'd wanted Hughes to go down.

Unfortunately, that's not exactly what happened. No one could agree over whether Hughes's DMs proved he was a predatory monster. Riley wouldn't come forward—too afraid of violating her NDA—but she texted me to let me know she would never forgive me for releasing

her name and private DMs, and that she never wanted to hear from me again. That's what upset me most of all, that my actions had hurt more than they'd helped her. I felt like a monster.

We never officially pulled Hughes's book, but most of the bookstores returned their orders, so we may as well have. Hughes wasn't canceled, not even close, but his people still sued Hanes. I wasn't privy to much on the financial side of things, since Cassandra tended to keep that information strictly need to know. But I knew we were still in the red. Because of me.

I took a deep breath and splashed the cold water onto my face, my neck, firmly pushing those memories away. Cassandra had publicly backed me when all this went down, but that was just to save face. She'd built Hanes House herself, and she couldn't afford to have its name dragged through the mud. Behind closed doors, she'd been incandescent with anger. She hadn't fired me then, but it was clear that it was only a matter of time. A promotion was laughable. And it's not like I could go anywhere else. Publishing was a small industry and everyone knew what I'd done. Even the people who thought I was a hero for revealing Hughes wouldn't ignore the fact that I'd violated Riley's NDA by sharing her screenshots and trashed Hanes for not pulling his book. I wasn't getting another offer, and I couldn't move up at Hanes. I was stuck, just waiting for Cassandra to put me out of my misery.

But now. Now there was hope.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw a text from my mother: *Can we talk?* A familiar mix of emotions bubbled up inside of me: guilt and annoyance and anger and more guilt.

Then, a soft rap on the door, the sound so sudden it made me jump. "Thea?" came Cassandra's voice. "Maria and her team are here. We'll be in the big conference room."

I stuffed the phone back into my pocket. I absolutely could not deal with my mother's drama right now. I switched the faucet off. The fluorescent lights flickered more erratically, casting long shadows over the ceiling and floor.

For a moment it looked as if it were reaching for me.