

Spaghetti
& Giraffe
and the
Chaos Cake

For Joan, a superb cook – SJ For Josephine – DH

With thanks to Barbara Else.

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www.sarahjohnson.co.nz

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Illustrations and design by Deborah Hinde: www.deborahhinde.co.nz
Edited by Sue Copsey: www.suecopsey.com
Typeset in Horley Old Style by Deborah Hinde: www.deborahhinde.co.nz
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Sarah Johnson
Illustrations by Deborah Hinde





Chapter 1

MINA CUCINA WAS IN the kitchen of the cottage at the tip top of Meringue Hill. She was cooking, and her young daughter, Philo, was helping her.

Mina Cucina hadn't cooked anything for quite some time. There had been no need. After she and Gorgon were married, Gorgon had taken over most of the cooking. This arrangement suited everyone. Gorgon produced delicious meals, with little fuss and even less mess. Meanwhile, Mina Cucina had turned her

attention to farming. She'd planted a flower farm in the fields around their cottage, and added a butterfly sanctuary when Philomena, or Philo for short, was born.

Today, though, Mina Cucina was back in the kitchen. It was a special occasion. Gorgon's mother, Mrs Zola, was coming to dinner, and Mina Cucina was determined to cook.

"Are you sure?" Gorgon had asked when Mina Cucina announced her plan at lunch. "Perhaps it would be better if I—"

"No," said Mina Cucina firmly. "I want to do it. I want your mother to feel welcome. Besides, my cooking might have improved."

"Mmm," said Gorgon with a wonky smile. "It might." And he escaped to the garden.

Philo stayed behind to help.

"So," said Mina Cucina, leafing through an ancient cookery book. "We're going to keep it nice and simple."

Philo stood on a chair so she could see the

book too. “What does that one say?” she asked, pointing to a small recipe in one corner.

“Pasta with olive oil and basil. That doesn’t sound too hard, does it?”

“I like pasta,” said Philo.

“Me too,” said Mina Cucina. “So, we’ll have that first, then a simple salad. Even I can make that.”

Philo looked at her mother sideways. “I’ll get a saucepan,” she said.

Philo rummaged through the cupboard, looking for a pan. She found one, but her pet hamster was asleep in it. Philo transferred him to a bucket under the sink. “You’ll be safer there,” she said. The hamster’s whiskers twitched, but he didn’t wake up.

The hamster was not the only animal in the kitchen. The under-cooker animals were there too, cowering in the various nooks and crannies where they lived.

Under the cooker, three prune hedgehogs, two

fettucine snakes and a toffee beetle tussled to get further to the back, while in the pantry a gaggle of broad-bean tadpoles were being kept safe in a bowl, supervised by a frog with worried pea eyes.

Beneath the dresser, a fluff monkey, a marshmallow pig and a macaroni snail nervously watched Mina Cucina's every move.

"This could get dangerous," whispered the pig.



"I bought a helmet," said the fluff monkey, pulling a dried-out piece of macaroni down over his ears.

"Hey, that's my spare shell," protested the snail.

"Shh," said the pig. "We need to stay alert. In case we have to run."

The only two under-cooker animals who stayed out in the open were the giraffes. The larger giraffe – Spaghetti Giraffe – had a glossy

golden coat. The smaller – Blue Speckled Giraffe – was finely dusted with blue. Both were made entirely of spaghetti.

Like the other under-cooker animals, the giraffes had been made when one of Mina Cucina’s previous attempts at cooking had gone disastrously wrong. Unlike the others, however, they liked to roam, their adventures taking them all over the Bonbon Valley and beyond.

For now, though, they were back at home in the kitchen, watching from the far side of the room as Mina Cucina and Philo set to work.

First, Mina Cucina washed the pan and filled it with water, then Philo measured in the pasta and the salt. They left the pasta to cook and started to chop the basil.

“It’s funny to think,” said Spaghetti Giraffe, “that this is how we were made.”

“It is,” said Blue Speckled Giraffe. “We’re lucky Mina’s such a terrible cook. If she wasn’t, none of us would be here.”

“And I suppose,” said Spaghetti Giraffe, continuing his train of thought, “if she made us, then one day she might make some more.”

Blue Speckled Giraffe studied him from under her long blue eyelashes. “More giraffes? Do you mean children?”

Spaghetti Giraffe shrugged. “It might be nice.”

“Very nice,” said Blue Speckled Giraffe.

“But not just yet,” said Spaghetti Giraffe. “There are too many adventures to have first. The sea, for instance. I would love to see the sea.”

“Me too,” said Blue Speckled Giraffe. “Besides, now that Mina Cucina’s not cooking so much, there aren’t so many baby animals around.”

“True,” said Spaghetti Giraffe. “But she’s cooking now, and as long as she still cooks sometimes, then one day—”

“It will be our turn,” said Blue Speckled Giraffe.

“Yes,” said Spaghetti Giraffe thoughtfully.
“Our turn.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud banging. While they’d been talking, Mina Cucina had drained the cooked pasta and arranged it in a mound on a serving platter. Now she was hitting an olive with a mallet to get the oil out of it.

“Mummy,” said Philo, tugging at her arm.
“Mummy, I don’t think you need to ...”

But Mina Cucina didn’t hear her. She just banged harder. The olive shot off the board and hit the salt cellar, which toppled sideways onto the serving platter. Pasta pinged everywhere.

Spaghetti Giraffe gave Blue Speckled Giraffe a meaningful look.

The kitchen door opened, and Gorgon stuck his head into the room. “What was that banging?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Mina Cucina, sliding sideways to stand in front of the pasta.

“I came to tell you my mother is on her way,” said Gorgon. “She’s at the bottom of Meringue Hill.”

“She’s early,” said Mina Cucina. “See if you can delay her. I need to ... ahhh ... tidy up a bit.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Gorgon. “But you know how much she’ll want to see Philo. I won’t be able to stall her for long.”



Chapter 2

AFTER GORGON HAD GONE, Philo scooped the spilt pasta back onto the platter. She fetched the bottle of olive oil from the pantry and drizzled it over the pasta. Then she scattered the chopped basil on top. She tweaked the pasta with some tongs, and it settled into a series of shimmering, green-specked coils.

“It looks just like a fern,” said Mina Cucina, gazing at the platter with admiration. “A beautiful green fern frond. How on earth did you do it?”

Philo shrugged. “I just poked it a bit.”

The kitchen door opened, and Mrs Zola swept into the room, followed closely by Gorgon.

The two giraffes hurriedly slipped behind the onion basket. They did not want to be spotted by Mrs Zola, who would almost certainly mistake them for old food and want to throw them In-the-Bin.

They needn't have worried though; Mrs Zola had eyes only for Philo. As soon as she spied her granddaughter, she threw off her cloak and enveloped her in a huge grandmotherly hug.

“You're just in time,” said Mina Cucina.
“Philo has just finished the first course.”



Philo disentangled herself from her grandmother to fetch the platter of pasta.

“You made this?” asked Mrs Zola, beaming proudly at her. “Look how well presented it is; look how finely arranged. I’m so pleased my little Philo has inherited my cooking talents.” She raised her eyebrows at Gorgon. “I was rather worried that wouldn’t be the case.”

“Because of me,” said Mina Cucina with a wry smile.

Mrs Zola frowned at her. “You do remember, Mina, the first time I came to dinner here?”

“Oh yes!” exclaimed Mina Cucina. “I made pasta then too. But we had no pasta, so I used porridge oats instead. Who would have guessed that when you added the sauce it would stick like glue?”

“It took a week to scrape it off my teeth,” said Mrs Zola.

“Then there was the chicken pie,” said Mina Cucina.

“Like a brick,” said Mrs Zola.

“Omelette,” said Mina Cucina.

“Bounced,” said Mrs Zola.

“Bean stew.”

“Chipped two teeth,” said Mrs Zola. “After that, I vowed I’d never come to dinner again.”

“Yet here you are,” said Mina Cucina brightly. “And nothing can go wrong this time, because I’ve had Philo to help me.”

While Mina Cucina served the pasta, Mrs Zola turned her attention to Gorgon. “You have started practising your cake for the Confectionation, Gorgon?” she asked. “You are entering?”

Gorgon shrugged. “I guess so.”

“What do you mean, you guess so? Everyone enters, so you must too, now you’re allowed.”

Mrs Zola was right. The Great Bonbon Confectionation was the biggest, most competitive baking competition in the Bonbon Valley and all the valleys around, and everyone

who was old enough entered.

In the past, Mrs Zola had been the head judge, so Gorgon, as her son, had been unable to enter. This year, though, she was stepping down and Gorgon could enter for the first time.

“You don’t have long, you know,” said Mrs Zola. “It’s the start of summer next week.”

“The Confectionation is at the end of summer,” said Gorgon. “It doesn’t take three months to make a cake.”

Mrs Zola ignored him. “When I used to enter, before I became a judge, I’d have chosen my cake by now and would be practising every day. It’s the only way to win you know. Practise, practise, practise.”

“But I don’t want to win,” said Gorgon. “I just want to have a go.”

“You don’t want to win!” exclaimed Mrs Zola. “Of course, you want to win. That’s what the Confectionation is all about. Winning! And to win, only the best, most perfect cake will do!”