

Italian Kitchen Banshees

by Juliet Robinson

It was past one in the morning, and we stood at the top of the stairs engaged in a heated debate, our voices low. It was dark, though the moon was doing its best to light the stairwell through the dirty roof lantern.

From downstairs, the wailing continued. It had shifted from frantic fear to resigned misery while we'd been arguing.

Finally, Mum caved with a dramatic huff, 'Fine!'

Off she went, sweeping downstairs with as much dignity as she could muster in her worn nightdress. My sister and I leaned over the wooden rail for a better view. The miserable cries from the kitchen had softened to an occasional hiccup, letting me hear Mum's tread as she crossed the hall - the soft thud of her bare feet and the sticky peel of skin against cool tiles.

She paused at the kitchen door and glanced up at us as if for moral support, then tapped tentatively on the wood.

'Stefano?'

Sudden silence.

'Are you okay?'

That did it. The piteous wails cranked back up, reaching new ear-splitting levels of torture.

'Go in!' I whisper-shouted down at her.

I didn't know why I was bothering to keep my voice down. The only person still sleeping was Dad, who could sleep through Armageddon. The Dubois were awake - I could hear them stirring behind their door, and Gábor was the one who had tapped our bedroom door to alert us to Stefano's plight in the first place.

Mum set her shoulders and swung the door wide, unleashing howls so loud they rattled through the hall. The whole street must have thought we were being murdered in our beds.

Kitchen light flooded the hallway. Mum froze, her mouth agape, her face a mask of abject horror. Then she whipped around, covering her eyes.

‘What!’ she shrieked. ‘What the hell!’

I ducked lower, pressing my face against the cold metal of the railings to see what on earth was happening.

The moment I saw it, I started shrieking, hysterical giggles ripping almost painfully from my chest.

Behind us, a door flew open, and the Dubois spilled out into the hall.

‘This is enough!’ Madame Dubois thundered, her hands on her hips. ‘We pay good money for this room, and we get no sleep!’

I’d fallen backward onto the floor, clutching my stomach and laughing hysterically.

‘What! What is it!’ my sister was demanding, pulling at my pajama leg.

‘He’s naked!’ I panted out between giggles. ‘He’s naked!’

Her mouth dropped open, and she spun back to the railings.

‘Oh, that silly boy!’ Madame Dubois roared. ‘Etienne, deal with him.’

Etienne shook his head and slipped back into their bedroom. Gábor, who was peeking his head round his doorframe, executed a swift retreat before he could be sent out into the trenches.

‘It is always the women who have to do the dealings,’ Madame Dubois barked.

Downstairs, I could hear Mum asking Stefano where his pyjamas were. She hadn’t asked why he was naked in the kitchen. Or why he was screaming like a banshee or whatever the Italian equivalent was.

Breakfast was a strange affair. I sat hidden behind a box of Coco Pops. Next to me, Gábor picked at his eggs while Etienne quietly sipped his coffee. Madame Dubois hadn’t appeared - apparently, she had a headache after her broken night’s sleep.

At the head of the table, Mum took notes on who would be around for dinner. She was being rather overzealous in her duties and occasionally snapped at people, asking whether they liked pork chops or preferred new or mashed potatoes. My sister, blissfully unaware of the strange tension humming through the room, shoveled cereal into her mouth; she was happy as it had been her turn to have the prize from the cereal box.

The chair Stefano usually occupied was empty. Occasionally, one or another of us glanced at it, but still nothing had been said about last night’s goings-on.

Dad wandered in. He was dressed in his sarong, had pulled an ancient, patched woollen jumper on over his nightshirt, and his hair stood on end. He looked like an eccentric who had gotten dressed in the dark. Beaming a cheery 'Good morning!' to the assembled, he sat down in Stefano's chair.

Everyone looked at him. Mum's eyes narrowed with the predatory glare of a hawk. Dad reached for the butter, oblivious to the five pairs of eyes fixed on him. Butter acquired, he looked around for the toast rack, and upon finding it empty, he glanced expectantly at me, as my breakfast duty was toast.

'Mashed potatoes or boiled, Rowland?' Mum demanded.

A comical expression of confusion spread across Dad's face. And then he shot himself squarely in the foot.

'I rather fancy roasties.'

He wasn't the smartest at navigating marital discord, but this really was suicidal. I slumped lower behind the Coco Pops. My sister stared wide-eyed at our parents. Gábor shoved the remaining eggs into his mouth, and Etienne picked up his coffee and scarpered.

Mum's nostrils flared. Dad opened his mouth; for a second it flapped soundlessly, and then he closed the coffin lid upon himself.

'Did you sleep well, Inga?'