



# The Love Goddess' Cooking School

By Melissa Senate

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**Camilla's Cucinotta: Italian Cooking Classes. Fresh take-home pastas & sauces daily. *Benvenuti!* (Welcome!)**

Holly Maguire's grandmother Camilla was the Love Goddess of Blue Crab Island, Maine--a Milanese fortune-teller who could predict the right man for you, and whose Italian cooking was rumored to save marriages. Holly has been waiting years for her unlikely fortune: her true love will like *sa cordula*, an unappetizing old-world delicacy. But Holly can't make a decent marinara sauce, let alone *sa cordula*. Maybe that's why the man she hopes to marry breaks her heart. So when Holly inherits Camilla's Cucinotta, she's determined to forget about fortunes and love and become an Italian cooking teacher worthy of her grandmother's legacy. But Holly's four students are seeking much more than how to make Camilla's chicken alla Milanese. Simon, a single father, hopes to cook his way back into his daughter's heart. Juliet, Holly's childhood friend, hides a painful secret. Tamara, a serial dater, can't find the love she longs for. And twelve-year-old Mia thinks learning to cook will stop her dad, Liam, from marrying his phony lasagna-queen girlfriend. As the class gathers each week, adding Camilla's essential ingredients of wishes and memories in every pot and pan, unexpected friendships and romances are formed--and tested. Especially when Holly falls hard for Liam . . . and learns a thing or two about finding her own recipe for happiness.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Senate handles the hefty topics of loss and remembrances with lightness and respect and in so doing, redefines comfort food."

--Publishers Weekly

"Tender, charming, and seasoned with a pinch of old-world magic, The Love Goddess's Cooking School is a warmly rendered story of loss and starting over." --Beth Hoffman, New York Times bestselling author of *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt*

"The real magic here is Melissa Senate's writing, which laps rhythmically against your heart like gentle waves along the coast." --Claire Cook, bestselling author of *Must Love Dogs* and *Seven Year Switch*

### About the Author

Melissa Senate is the author of ten novels, including the bestselling *See Jane Date*, which was made into an ABC Family TV movie. She's published short pieces in *Everything I've Always Wanted to Know About Being a Girl I Learned from Judy Blume*, *It's a Wonderful Lie*, *Flirting with Pride and Prejudice*, and *American Girls About Town*. A former editor of romance and young adult fiction, she now writes full time on the coast of Maine.

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### One

According to Holly Maguire's late grandmother, revered on Blue Crab Island, Maine, for her fortune-telling as much as her cooking, the great love of Holly's life would be one of the few people on earth to like *sa cordula*, an Italian delicacy. It was made of lamb intestines and stewed with onions, tomatoes, and peas in a savory butter sauce that did little to hide the fact that it looked exactly like what it was.

"So I'll know if someone is 'the one' if he likes stewed lamb guts?" Holly had asked repeatedly over the years. "That's it? That's my entire fortune?" She'd kept hoping her grandmother would say, *Just kidding! Of course that's not it, bella. Your true fortune is this: you will be very happy.*

Holly would be satisfied with that.

Not that Camilla Constantina would ever say *just kidding*. Or kid, for that matter.

"That is it," was her grandmother's response, every time, her gleaming black eyes giving nothing away. "The stones have spoken."

A month ago, her hand trembling, her heart hoping, Holly had set a plate of *sa cordula* in front of John Reardon, the man she loved. As she'd been living in California, thousands of miles away from her grandmother in an attic apartment with no oven, she'd paid the Italian butcher's eighty-six-year-old great-aunt to prepare the dish. Holly and John had been a couple for almost two years. She was practically a stepmother to his four-year-old daughter Lizzie. And more than anything, Holly wanted to become part of their family.

Why had her grandmother saddled her with this fortune? Who could possibly like *sa cordula*? Holly had tasted it three times before, and it was so . . . slimily awful that even Holly's grandfather, who, per legend, ate even more reviled "delicacies," had hated it. But the love of Camilla's life wasn't supposed to like it. Her Great Love was to have blond hair and blue eyes, and when in 1957 twenty-two-year-old single Camilla had turned down another eligible, dark-eyed, dark-haired man in her small village near Milan, everyone worried she was crazy like her spinster aunt Marcella, who muttered in a back room. But some months later, the dashing Armando Constantina, with his butter-colored hair and Adriatic blue eyes, had come to town and swept her off her feet all the way to America, and Camilla's reputation as a fortune-teller had been restored.

Holly's father, Bud Maguire, had taken one bite of *sa cordula* during Thanksgiving dinner in 1982 and forever refused to taste anything his mother-in-law cooked unless he recognized it and knew what it was. Bud liked plain old spaghetti doused with jarred Ragu and a piece of garlic bread, which was just fine with Holly's mother, Luciana Maguire, who went by Lucy and had no interest in her heritage or cooking. Or fortune-telling. Especially because Camilla Constantina's supposed source of knowledge was a trio of small, smooth stones she'd chosen from the banks of the Po River as a three-year-old. "I'd sooner believe in a crystal ball from the clearance aisle in Walmart," Holly's mother had often said with her usual disdain.

It had taken Camilla Constantina until Holly was sixteen to tell her granddaughter her fortune. As an adolescent, Holly had asked her grandmother over and over to sit her down with the stones and tell Holly what she was desperate to know—would Mike Overstill ever ask her out? Would she do okay on the American history test worth 85 percent of her final grade? Would her mother ever stop being such a killjoy? Camilla would just take both her hands and tell her all would be well. But finally, on Holly's sixteenth birthday, when Mike Overstill had not shown up at six thirty to escort her to the junior prom (he had called twenty minutes later to say, "Sorry, um, I forgot I asked someone else"), her grandmother, who was visiting, reached for her white satin pouch (out of eyesight of Holly's mother, of course) and said *si*, it was time. Camilla took the three smooth stones from the pouch and closed her hands around them. As Holly held her breath in anticipation, her grandmother held Holly's hand with her free one and closed her eyes for a good half minute.

And the long-awaited revelation was that the great love of Holly's life would like lamb intestines tossed with peas. In butter sauce.

This, from a woman who'd rightly foretold the fates of hundreds of year-rounders and summer tourists on Blue Crab Island and the nearby mainland towns, who'd drive over the bridge to pay twenty-five dollars to sit in the breakfast nook of Camilla Constantina's famed kitchen and have their fortunes told.

Holly had said she was sure there was something else. Perhaps her grandmother could close her eyes a bit longer? Or just do it all over again? Camilla would only say that sometimes the fortune could not be understood readily, that it held hidden meaning. To the day Camilla Constantina had died, just two weeks ago, the fortune had not changed. Nor had the meaning become clear. Holly had been taking it literally from the first time she'd fallen in love. At nineteen. Then again at twenty-four. And yet again two years ago, at twenty-eight, when she fell in love with John Reardon.

Because she couldn't, wouldn't serve lamb intestines to a guy she was crazy about, she'd wait until she knew she was losing him, knew from the way he stopped holding her gaze, started being impatient, started being unavailable. And unkind.

And so to console herself that this man was *not* her Great Love, she would serve him the *sa cordula* as an appetizer—a small portion so as not to tip the scales in her favor (who *would* like a big portion of sheep

guts?). And each time, bittersweet success. The love she was losing was not her Great Love. He was just a guy who didn't like *sa cordula*—and didn't love her. It made it easier when he broke up with her.

This time, though, *this* love, was different. Despite John's pulling away. Despite his impatience. Despite the way he stopped calling her at midnight to tell her he loved her and wish her sweet dreams. She loved John Reardon. She wanted to marry John Reardon, this man she'd fallen for on a solo vacation to San Francisco, where she'd gone to get over a lesser love. This man she'd stayed for, uprooting herself from Boston, hoping to finally find her . . . destiny, what she was meant to do with her life. And she thought she'd found it in this mini family of two. She wanted to spend the rest of her life baking cookies with Lizzie every other weekend during the child's visitation with her father; she wanted to shampoo those golden curls, push her on swings, and watch her grow. Everyone, namely her mother, had told her she was crazy for dating a newly divorced man with a kid. But Holly adored Lizzie, loved almost-stepmotherhood. And she loved John enough to wait. Though the past few months, he'd stopped referring to "some day" altogether.

And the past few weeks, he was more distant than ever. They always got together on Wednesday nights, so there Holly was, changing Lizzie into her favorite Curious George pajamas after her bath while John avoided Holly. He was on his cell phone (first with his brother, then with his boss), texting a client, emailing a file, looking for Lizzie's favorite Hello Kitty cup. He was everywhere but next to Holly.

She sat on the brown leather sofa in the living room, Lizzie cross-legged next to her as Holly combed her long, damp, honey-colored curls and sang the ABC song. Lizzie knew all her letters except for *LMNOP*, which she combined into "ellopy." Usually when Holly gave Lizzie her bath before dinner and brushed out her beautiful hair and sang silly nursery rhymes that made Lizzie giggle or they got to the "ellopy," John would stand there with *that* expression, the one that always assured Holly he loved her, that he was deeply touched at how close she and his daughter were. That one day, some day, maybe soon, he would ask her to marry him. And that this wish she walked around with, slept with every night and woke up with every morning would come true.

This wasn't a fairy tale, though, and Holly knew in her heart that John wasn't going to propose. Not in the near future and probably not ever. She knew this with 95 percent certainty, even though she wasn't psychic like her grandmother.

But how was she supposed to give up on John? Give up on what she wanted so badly? To marry this man, be this child's stepmother, and start a new life here in this little pale blue house on a San Francisco hill? Yes, things were strained between her and John, though she wasn't sure why. But that didn't mean things could not be unstrained. A long-term relationship went through lulls. This was a lull, perhaps.

There was only one way to know.

And so, when Lizzie was occupied with her coloring book and a new pack of Crayolas, Holly went heavy-hearted into the kitchen to make the dinner she'd promised Lizzie, cheeseburgers in the shape of Mickey Mouse's head (the only food she cooked really well) and to heat up the Great Love test. With the cheeseburgers in front of them all, a side of linguini for Lizzie in butter sauce with peas (which looked a bit like the *sa cordula*) and two small plates of *sa cordula* before her and John, Holly sat down beside this pair she loved so much—and waited.

If John liked the *sa cordula*, she could relax, accept what he said, that he was just "tired, distracted by work." Etcetera, etcetera. He *was* her Great Love. If he didn't like it, then what? No, she wouldn't let herself go there. Her breath caught somewhere in her body as John placed his napkin on his lap and picked up his fork,

eyeing the *sa cordula*. In one moment, everything between them would change because of hope or lack thereof, and yet John looked exactly the same as he always did, sitting there at the dinner table in front of the bay window, so handsome, his thick sandy-blond hair hand-swept back from his face, the slight crinkles at the edges of his hazel eyes, the chiseled jawline with its slight darkening of five o'clock shadow.

Holly sucked in a quiet breath and took the quickest bite, keeping her expression neutral—despite the gritty, slimy texture of the *sa cordula*. The intestines of a lamb did not taste “just like chicken.” Did not taste like anything but what it looked like. Savory butter sauce or not. And as if the peas could help.

John forked a bite and stared at it for a moment. “What is this again?” he asked.

“An old-world Italian dish my *nonna* sometimes makes,” Holly said, trying not to stare at his fork.

Lizzie twirled her fork in her linguini the way Holly had taught her. “I wish I had a *nonna*.”

“You do, pumpkin,” Holly said, treasuring the idea of Camilla Constantina showing Lizzie how to roll out pasta with a tiny rolling pin. “You have two. Your mom’s mother and your dad’s mother.”

“But if you and Daddy get married, then I’ll have a *nonna* Holly too.”

Out of the mouths of babes. Holly smiled. John stiffened. Lizzie twirled her linguini.

And then, as if in slow motion, John slid the fork of lamb intestines, topped with one pea, into his mouth. He paled a bit, his entire face contorting. He spit it out into his napkin. “I’m sorry, Holly, but this is the most disgusting thing I ever ate. No offense to your grandmother.”

*Or me*, she thought, her heart breaking.

Maybe her grandmother was wrong.

But forty minutes later, after Holly had helped Lizzie brush her teeth, pulled the comforter up over her chest, read half of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” and then kissed the sleeping girl’s green-apple-scented head, John had come right out and said it. That he was sorry, it-wasn’t-her-it-was-him, that despite not meaning to, he’d fallen in love with his administrative assistant, and she had a young son, so they really understood each other. And no, he didn’t think it was a good idea if Holly continued to see Lizzie, even once a month for a trip to the playground or for ice cream. “She’s four, Holl. She’ll forget about you in a couple of weeks. Let’s not complicate anything, okay?”

Holly wanted to complicate things. She wanted to complicate this whole breakup. And so she pleaded her case, reminded him of their two years together, of Lizzie’s attachment to her, of the plans they’d made for the future. Which, Holly had had to concede, had dwindled to maybe going to the San Francisco Zoo the weekend after next. And when he just stood there, not saying anything and taking a sideways glance at the clock, she realized he was waiting for her to leave so he could call his new girlfriend and tell her he’d finally done it, he’d dumped Holly.

As if in slow motion, Holly went into the bathroom, afraid to look at him, afraid to look at anything, lest she start screaming like a lunatic. She closed the door and slid down against the back of it, covering her face with her hands as she cried. She sucked in a deep breath, then forced herself up to splash water on her face. She looked in the mirror over the sink, at the dark brown eyes, the dark brown hair, and the fair skin, so like her

grandmother's, and told herself, *He's not your great love. He's not meant to be.* It was little consolation.

And what if he had liked the *sa cordula*? Then what? How could she fight for a great love with someone who'd said he didn't love her as easily as he'd said the *sa cordula* was disgusting?

After a gentle yet impatient, "Holly, you can't stay in there all night," she came out of the bathroom. He handed her a shopping bag of her possessions he'd clearly packed earlier that day in anticipation of dumping her—a few articles of clothing and her toothbrush, and again said he was sorry, that he never wanted to hurt her. And then she stood in the doorway of Lizzie's room, watching the girl's slight body rise and fall with each sleeping breath.

"Good-bye, sweet girl," she whispered. "I'll bet if I'd given you a taste of the *sa cordula*, you would have asked for another."

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