

# the wrong menu (extract)

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**This is the beginning of the book, where Ralph takes his first step towards gaining control of the restaurant.**

Alberto Lorenzo took one faltering step and winced; his face red and distorted. Close by, a middle-aged man, up to now enjoying what he had hoped would be a discreet meal with his long time lover, looked on horrified. Alberto's chubby hands let go of the two plates of food he'd been carrying to their table and clutched his chest. His cry was masked by the clatter of the broken crockery as the dishes fell to the floor. Lurching out of control, he fell forward, knocking over the glasses, cutlery and dinner plates from the table of the man and his mistress. A ghastly thump, and then he was slumped, face down on the carpet, motionless.

The woman from the table close to where Alberto had fallen yelled out to her dumbstruck partner to help her. She was on her feet and reaching down to the poor man's inert body, lying face down amongst the remains of Braciolette Di Maiale Al Rosso and Scaloppine Di Pollo Con Erbe. Amidst the nauseating amalgam of the two classic Italian dishes, smeared into the thick pile of the carpet and splattered all over Alberto, were various size shards of broken glass and white china. The woman looked down upon an eerie and grisly sight.

At once people were on their feet; some rushing to offer assistance, others ghoulishly pushing and shoving their way towards the circle that had quickly surrounded the fallen restaurateur, not wanting to miss out on the action. At first the waiters tried to carry on as normal, collecting plates laden with steaming food or carrying trays of glasses and bottles of wine from the servery. Very quickly they realised it was all a waste of time. If they managed to breach the throng blocking their path, they'd find the diners had left their tables. Once the first waiter had turned back they all remained passively in a line by the kitchen, staring aghast at the proceedings. It was pandemonium.

'Excuse me,' Ralph Launcier said authoritatively as he broke through the assembled crowd. He stopped abruptly. He raised both his hands and placed one on each cheek, letting out an audible gasp. 'I'll take over, Mr Thompson,' he said quickly as he stepped forward to where the middle aged guy from the nearest table was trying to raise Alberto's lifeless body from the gungy mess beneath and around him. Within seconds Ralph had raised Alberto to a sitting position. 'Could I ask you to move away,' he said with a touch of annoyance to the small circle of people who had gathered to watch.

Most looked embarrassed. 'Of course,' 'yes,' and 'I'm sorry,' could be heard mumbled softly as they shuffled away. Some took the hint and started to walk slowly back to their tables, others stood in cliques about a metre away and pretending not to look as they gossiped and speculated about Alberto. The consensus was that he was dead.

A youngish man, mid thirties, wearing an aviator style leather jacket, a casual denim shirt and a pair of jeans and accompanied by a woman, dressed in a black long sleeve blouse and black

trousers, both of them with bright and expectant expressions, came in the front door. They stopped at the spot where normally Alberto or Ralph would greet them. They glanced around the restaurant and then back at each other. Both looked equally bewildered and confused. One of the guests sidled up to them and, in hushed tones, passed on his view of what had taken place. Shock and horror appeared on the couple's faces. Quietly they said a few words to each other and left. A few of the customers who had seen them leave took it as their own cue to depart. While others followed, most stood around in small groups expecting some sort of announcement. Faintly in the distance an ambulance siren could be heard.