



Welcome to Anna's Life

Anna falls to her knees and raises her hands to the heavens above. 'Must . . . have . . . pizza,' she gasps. 'Must . . . have . . . it . . . immediately.'

Byron rolls his eyes. 'Baby, I've said it before and I'm sure I'll say it again – your diet is appalling.' Byron's right. As is the case with an astounding percentage of well-educated chi-chi chefs, Anna eats like a seven-year-old. Cap'n Crunch Peanut Butter Crunch for breakfast, microwave mac 'n' cheese (or more Cap'n Crunch) for lunch, greasy order-out (or more Cap'n Crunch) for those inevitable late-night dinners.

Adding up her pseudo-meals and the blips and blops of beef tenderloin, and flourless chocolate cake, and veal scaloppini she has to taste each night at her restaurant, Anna ends up taking in over 2,500 calories a day, seventy-eight per cent of which are empty, and thirty-one per cent of which have the potential to rot her pretty white teeth.

Regardless of her caloric intake, Anna believes that the

only reason she stays thin (or thinnish) right now is because she's on her feet approximately 5.2 million hours a week. She's certain that when she retires from the restaurant business, she'll have to trash her cute, underutilized size-six wardrobe and replace the whole kit and caboodle with many, many selections from the Lane Bryant catalog. Not that she'll miss her current clothes that much, anyhow. She rarely wears any of her going-out outfits: the BCBG tops, the Dolce & Gabbana bottoms, the De la Renta dresses, and the Chanel suits hardly ever see the light of day. And really, why should they? To Anna, wearing going-out outfits without actually going out is kind of silly. But it's the principle of the thing.

Anna gets up off her knees, kicks her beloved red Crocs across the room, missing her gluttonous brown and white cat Stinks by mere inches, and says, 'Fine, you're right, Byron, you're always right, I'm a lousy eater.' She pseudo-sexily peels off her black pinstripe chef's pants, spansks herself on the tush, then jokingly adds, 'But I'm still cute. Right?' Of course she's joking: Anna *never* feels cute after work. For that matter, Anna hasn't felt cute since culinary school.

The irony is that Anna *is* cute. Very cute. Her deep-set brown eyes: cute. Her full, naturally upturned mouth that makes her look like she's smiling even when she's in a lousy mood: cute. The tiny square-ish birthmark on her chin: cute. The fact she doesn't realize how cute she is makes her even cuter.

Byron also strips down to his underwear – off with the black, silky Armani pullover; off with the sleek, black

Kenneth Cole slacks – only without the sexiness or the spank. Tall, whippet-lean, and casually suave, Byron doesn't really have to try and be sexy – it comes naturally. 'But you're not even trying a little bit to stay healthy,' he complains. 'You don't take vitamins, and the only time you eat vegetables is when you're testing something for "doneness," and outside of all the cheese you nibble on at work, you get approximately zero protein.'

Anna unbuttons her solid black chef's jacket – not the least bit sexily this time – and throws it at her live-in boyfriend. 'Why do we always have this discussion on a Saturday night at two in the morning? I mean, it's not like I'm completely fried from overseeing two hundred and seventy-five meals tonight or anything.'

'Two hundred and ninety-seven,' Byron corrects. 'It was *hopping*.' He rubs his thumb and index finger together in the international hand motion for 'money, money, money' and smiles. 'August is my favorite month.'

'Whatever. Why can't we talk about my eating habits when I'm not, you know, dying of hunger and exhaustion and sweaty armpits?'

'Because Saturday night is *always* pizza night. What better time to talk about it? Let's straighten you up.' He walks across the room, puts a hand on Anna's hip, and kisses her neck. 'And I'm only doing it because I care.'

'Fine. Starting next week, *Tuesday* night is pizza night, so we'll talk about it Tuesday. But that's starting next week.' She rummages through her purse for a minute or three – her purse is huge, a disaster area filled with cooking magazines, and index cards with handwritten

recipes, and Advil, and tampons, and a pair of gloves that have been there since three winters ago, and several kitchen sinks, and a dinosaur skull carbon dated approximately 108 million years ago – and pulls out her cell phone. ‘What do you want on your half?’

‘The more appropriate question is, what do *you* want on *my* half? Because we all know you’ll probably eat your half and part of my half.’

Anna nods. ‘True.’ And the wheels start turning: she sees little sausages floating across the Chicago skyline. She sees fields and fields of pepperoni. She sees tomato plants, spinach plants, and zucchini plants, dancing in lockstep. The wheels turn some more. And some more. And some more.

Byron falls to his knees and raises his hands to the heavens above. ‘Must . . . have . . . decision,’ he gasps. ‘Must . . . have . . . it . . . immediately.’

Anna says, ‘Don’t rush me. These things take time.’

Byron stands up and sighs tiredly. ‘I’d better pee. This could take a while.’ He pads down the foyer and into the half-bathroom across the hall from the guest bedroom.

Anna continues to consider her options. And continues. And continues. And continues. Finally, a mere six years, three months, four days and one hour later, she calls, ‘Double cheese and extra sausage.’

She hears the toilet flush. Byron, wiping his freshly washed hands on his boxers, re-enters the living room and says, ‘Double cheese and extra sausage would be lovely.’ He gives her a not unappreciative once-over. ‘Baby, I enjoy looking at your legs as much as the next guy, but I

really don't want that next guy looking at your legs, so maybe you could put on some pants before the delivery man gets here.' Having shed her chef's gear, Anna is wearing only a blue striped Victoria's Secret Pout thong – her one worktime nod toward womanliness – and a tight black ribbed tank top that comes to a stop just above her outie belly button. Anna exaggeratedly purses her lips. 'Jealous?' she teases. She has the number for Art of Pizza, her favorite pizza joint, programmed into her cell's speed dial; she pushes '5,' and then 'send.' Knowing that fourteen inches of greasy, drippy, cheesy, sausagey goodness is on its way comforts Anna greatly.

Order complete, she closes her cell and drops it on to a pile of blankets on the floor – her and Byron's apartment is as carelessly messy as Tart's kitchen is anally neat – plops on to the couch, grabs the television remote, and surfs over to Channel 70.

Byron groans. '*FoodTube*?! Again with the FoodTube. I thought you were over it.'

'I've been seeing it behind your back,' she says, immediately engrossed in a five-year-old rerun of *The Golden Chefs*, a campily overdubbed cooking contest show from France.

'Wonderful,' Byron says. 'And just when I thought it was safe to turn on the TV again.' He plunks down next to her and puts his hand on her bare thigh. She rests her head on his shoulder, and looks around the apartment, inwardly grimacing at the pile of food magazines on the beaten-up, wooden coffee table, wishing that either she or Byron could spruce up what could be a lovely living

space. An Afghan rug covering the scuffed hardwood floor in the living room would be nice. A couple of framed prints in the dining room wouldn't hurt. And if somebody put away the random CDs, books, and DVDs that are strewn everywhere, well, that wouldn't be a bad thing either. But let's be honest here: neither Anna nor Byron has the time. Or the energy. Or the inclination. Or, most damningly, the shelf space.

Twenty-some-odd minutes later, the doorbell snaps Anna out of her TV-induced trance. (Anna and Byron's flat is located in Lakeview, a mellow, centrally located section of Chicago where you can almost always get food delivered in twenty or so minutes, even in the dead of night.) She springs off the couch and buzzes in the delivery man, who, moments later, bangs on their door. Before she can receive the Art of Pizza delivery guy, Byron snaps out of his own stupor and yells, 'Anna! Jesus Christ! *Pants!*'

She looks at Byron, then at the door, then at her bare legs, then at her chef's pants all the way on the other side of the room – chef's pants that Stinks is utilizing as a temporary crash pad. Right then, her stomach rumbles big-time, so she shrugs and mumbles, 'Screw it.' In a half-hearted show of modesty, she tugs her tank top down as far as it can be tugged – which is more or less (less, really) even with her thong's waistband – then flings the door open and inhales the cheesy, sausagey aroma.

The delivery man inhales the vision of Anna's smooth, pale legs, then stammers, 'Fif-fif-fif-fifteen fif-if-if-if-ty.'

Anna gives the dumbstruck delivery man a twenty,

slams the door shut, flings the pizza box on to the ancient coffee table, runs into the kitchen and grabs a bottle of beer from the fridge, runs back into the living room and crashes down next to Byron, rips open the box, and gobbles up half a slice before Byron even touches the food. Like many chefs, when she's not in a restaurant environment, Anna's table manners – or, in this case, sofa manners – are all but non-existent.

Three-quarters of the way into her second slice, Anna, mouth overflowing with cheese, sausage, etc., points at the television screen and asks, 'Why don't you get us on FoodTube?'

Byron theatrically covers his eyes. 'Close your mouth when you're chewing. And what's the point? We don't need FoodTube. We don't need the publicity. We're packed every night. Movie stars up the bazoo.' (Johnny Depp, in town filming a movie, came by Tart the week before, and Kate Winslet, in town because Chicago is awesome, the week before that.) 'FoodTube is unnecessary.'

'I thought you love publicity.'

'Not publicity. *Visibility*. There's a difference.'

'Yeah, well, there's also a difference between being a nice boyfriend and a condescending wiener.'

Byron says, 'I'm not being condescending.' (Yes he is. Very much so. Not purposely, though. It's just Byron being Byron.)

'Whatever,' Anna grunts. 'How could getting us on FoodTube be bad? I mean, we're not *always* going to be packed every night, forever and ever. It'd be a good notch

on our belt.’ Then, because she knows Byron is loathe to spend a dime, well, *anything*, she adds, ‘And it won’t cost you a cent.’

Byron uncovers his eyes and rests his hand on the back of Anna’s neck. ‘Baby, as long as you keep doing what you’re doing in that kitchen, I don’t see any reason why we *wouldn’t* be packed every night, forever and ever.’

Anna picks up her third – and possibly her final, but possibly not – pizza slice. ‘But it’s not only about the restaurant,’ she points out. ‘It’s about me. Like what if I decide I want to write a cookbook? It’d look a lot better to a publisher if my biography says something like, “Chef Anna Rowan has made approximately two thousand appearances on FoodTube.”’

‘Saying “Anna Rowan is the finest under-thirty-years-old chef in Chicago” should be more than enough for any publisher,’ Byron says. He takes a napkin from the coffee table and wipes the pizza grease from hands, and mouth, and arms, and legs, and back, and left earlobe. ‘Can we please not get double cheese next time? I can feel the pimples forming on my forehead as we speak.’

‘Don’t change the subject. Forget about a cookbook for a second. Let’s say I want to, I dunno, audition for FoodTube myself. There’s no reason I can’t have my own show.’ She points at the screen. ‘I mean, look at this lame-o loser chump. He’s on a bunch of different shows, and he can’t really cook. And he’s not even that good-looking.’

This ‘lame-o loser chump’ is California-based chef Jordan DeWitt. Aside from running four unbelievably

successful Asian fusion¹ restaurants in Los Angeles, Jordan hosts three of the more popular FoodTube programs: *DeWitt Goes DeWild*, a purposely low-rent-looking travelogue on how to throw a low-rent party; *Eastern Rebellion*, an in-studio show that features Jordan's quite excellent tips on Asian cuisine; and the show Anna and Byron are presently watching (sort of), *Sunday Sneak Attack*.

Byron asks. 'If you think he's such a lame-o loser chump, why do you even want to be associated with a network that gives a guy like him so much face-time?'

She says, 'Well, I'm not going to lie, *Sunday Sneak Attack* is pretty fun.' Anna's right – it *is* fun, which is why it's FoodTube's highest-rated program. The show's premise is brilliant in its low-budget, *cinéma-vérité* simplicity: on any given Sunday, Jordan and one of his sous chefs² – accompanied by a two-man camera crew and an unbiased *LA Times* food critic who serves as the judge – arrive unannounced at a random restaurant and challenge the head chef and sous chef to a two-on-two cook-off. DeWitt always arrives near the beginning of dinner service, but so as not to piss off the chef or the restaurant's brain trust, after the challenge is issued, he struts around the dining room and tells the patrons that if

¹ Asian fusion: A melding of Asian cuisine with any other cuisine the chef likes, which has been known to lead to such unfortunate dishes as sashimi fajitas and pad Thai Parmesan.

² Sous chef: Depending on your interpretation, it's either the head chef's right-hand man or woman, or the head chef's indentured slave.

they're willing to wait around for the end of the contest to finish their meal, dinner is on him. DeWitt's an honest-to-goodness celebrity – he's on Leno, and Conan and *The Today Show* so often that his FoodTube cohorts joke that he should buy stock in NBC – so most diners take him up on it.

Since Jordan has the element of surprise on his side, he lets his opponent pick the so-called 'Attack Cuisine', which sometimes leads to some hilarious missteps, as Jordan isn't at all that strong when it comes to either Mexican or Italian foods. In a nutshell, he's afraid of cheese. Most professional chefs are FoodTube junkies, and are thus well aware that Jordan can't make a decent carne chimichanga or a solid eggplant Parmesan if you held a Wusthoff³ serrated knife to his boy parts, so if they feel like opening a can of whup-ass on Mr DeWitt, they'll choose a dish whose primary or secondary ingredient is of the dairy variety. Some chefs, on the other hand, want to beat down the flamboyant chef-you-love-to-hate at his own game, so they'll pick something from in or around the East, which might mean a lobster and crab pad Thai, or hamachi don, or Szechuan pheasant, or even a simple filet mignon stir fry. But much to the surprise of those viewers who think of him primarily as 'that showboat spaz from that FoodTube par-tay show' (or at least that's what LA

³ Wusthoff: Chi-chi knife manufacturer. If a professional chef sees you putting one of theirs in the dishwasher, they will immediately remove it, hold it up by your carotid artery, and whisper, 'Knives. Don't. Go. There. Always. Wash. Them. By. Hand.'

City Paper once called him), Jordan is truly a fine Asian chef, one of the fifteen or twenty best in the country, so more often than not, the chef who chooses to do battle with DeWitt on a Chinese, or Japanese, or Thai, or Vietnamese playing field gets their lychee nuts handed to them on a silver platter.

Byron says, 'You want to be on FoodTube?' Anna nods. 'Really?' She nods again. 'Really really really?' Another nod. 'Okay. Fine. I'll make some calls.'

Anna claps her hands and bops up and down on the sofa, her brown pigtails bouncing in rhythm. 'If I didn't have two pounds of cheese sloshing around my stomach, I'd screw you blind.'

Byron pats his flat, lightly haired belly. 'If I didn't have one pound of cheese sloshing around *my* stomach, I'd let you.'

Half an hour later, they're asleep on the couch, Anna's head on Byron's lap, Jordan DeWitt's valley boy accent floating from the flickering television.