

# CAP'N

Advance Review Copy

# HOOK

A NOVELLA



BOOK 4 : BONJOUR NEVER LAND SERIES

**Stella & Phillip Lemarque**

# **CAP'N HOOK**

## **A Novella**

**Phillip and Stella Lemarque**

**Book 4: Bonjour Never Land**



Baba Rum International Publishing

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Advance Review Copy

# One

“Madame is born to money,” Sophie says, as I unpack our gear. “It shows.”

Our new employer impresses Sophie, which is something new.

Another good sign—Sophie is not critical of the living accommodations.

Our quarters are on the main floor and include a comfortable bedroom, a bathroom, and a great view over the well-trimmed rose garden. The bedroom is conveniently attached to the main kitchen. I have already figured out how I can get up at the very last second to serve Mr. and Mrs. Kloss’s breakfast. Sophie, who has an aversion to rising early, will cozy herself in the king size bed for an additional hour before joining me in the kitchen. Our usual arrangement.

Sophie opens the window, and a warm windy flow of air carries the smell of roses into the room.

“She is very confident about what she wants. She will be easy to work for,” she says.

I feel confident of a stay for at least a few months.

Which is good. We are the best in the business, but the offers lately have been disappointing. No job in the last six months has lasted more than a week. We don’t even bother to pack the big suitcases any more—just overnight bags, and I never unpack until Sophie gives the signal. This time, she gives the signal with no hesitation. Two shakes, and the clothes we brought are in the closet, our toothbrushes by the sink—and I think it is lucky our Santa Monica studio is in easy driving distance. I will go home and fill up all the luggage tomorrow.

We have been here an hour and already the place feels like ours.

The two-story house is hidden from the street, a six-acre Garden of Eden behind the Beverly Hills Hotel. We had been hired on the recommendation of our agent, sight unseen, and had arrived in the driveway at dusk. The window panes reflected the orange and gold of the incandescent sunset. We sat mesmerized in Sophie’s Mercedes for a long time.

“It must be at least twelve thousand square feet.”

“But it is not disproportionate, like so many homes in Bel Air and Beverly Hills.”

“The layout is magical,” Sophie declared, “with a European charm of its own.”

It was the most beautiful house we had ever seen in the US.

We met Mr. and Mrs. Kloss in the grand salon, an all-white room furnished with taste—sofa, armchairs, and ottomans of white leather. The thick llama’s-wool carpet, also white, made one feel as if floating on a cloud. The east side of the room was divided by a series of French doors opening into an English garden. Within a short distance a cabana was visible in which a family of three could live in comfort, and just beyond glimmered a pool the size of Kansas.

Madame, a tall blonde with a large frame and a short haircut, rather hip, showed us to comfortable armchairs, also white. As she assessed Sophie, who was at her most Parisian in lavender and yellow Dior, I assessed her. Early sixties, casually dressed in a pink cotton blouse, pink sweatpants, and slippers to match. She must have been beautiful in her younger days. Mr. K, at least twenty years older. A thin man with thinning hair and a loose set of false teeth. He agreed to all her graceful comments and suggestions with a soft snarl.

Mrs. Kloss described every detail of our duties with the enthusiasm of an aficionado—living quarters, salary and benefits, use of the house car and credit cards. Emphasis, of course, was laid on the food.

“Obviously, we’re health conscious.”

“Yes, I see.” Sophie answered these questions with her usual savvy. “Don’t worry. I cook only with farm-raised produce from local farms.”

“Farms? In Beverly Hills?”

“You will eat only the best and most healthy dishes. I learned nouvelle cuisine under Roger Verge at the Moulin de Mougins.”

“You’re from Provence?” Madame clapped with joy.

“No,” Sophie corrected her. “I am from Paris. I was with Roger in Provence for two years. It is where Pierre and I are going to retire one day.”

One day. Our nest egg must be almost ripe by now. How many jobs has it been since Sophie and I were thrown together by a cruel turn of events? I lost my restaurant, my fortune. Sophie, similarly fallen from the heights, proposed this career—the feed and care of millionaires, the one thing we knew all about. We have done well, with just a few setbacks here and there. If we play our cards right, and Madame lives up to expectations, maybe this job might be our last.

“Well!” The lady shot us a dazzling smile. “I can’t wait for breakfast. Marty, what do you think?”

“Yes, all right,” Mr. K muttered impatiently, eager to get back to the book in his lap.

After breakfast—a simple affair of toast and coffee—we are summoned to a small office at the back of the house. Behind a cluttered desk stands a woman with a thick folder in her hand—our resume and references. She is dressed in a vivid orange, her black hair shines in the bright sun pouring through the uncovered window. Her tawny skin makes her light blue eyes stand out. She holds her body tight and straight and doesn’t leave any doubt who is in charge of her office. I worry—most likely her attitude will not gel with Sophie’s.

“I’m Debbie.” She holds her hand out. “Madame’s secretary.”

The introduction is short. She is very busy, but the usual stack of paperwork must be signed by us before she can get back to doing whatever she does. The stack of mail in the basket indicates Madame is a world class philanthropist—museums, colleges, diseases. The only photograph in the room is a large one in a silver frame. It is a family picture of the Klosses—the couple dead center, two collegiate looking girls flanking Dad, a pimply boy standing rigid beside his mother, and the secretary to the left of an old guy with a wandering paw.

“That’s that,” Debbie declares, stuffing our papers into the fat folder and laying it on top of the file cabinet. “Nice to meet you. I know we all have a lot to do.”

In a flash she is at the door, holding it open for us. I rise from my seat with all the etiquette I have ever acquired. But she is not done after all. She corners Sophie for another quarter hour for a diatribe about Monsieur and Madame—what to watch for, what they like, don’t like—the whole shebang. Nothing new, but it gives her time to size us up, especially Sophie, who listens politely but is unable to melt the secretary’s reserve.

“Debbie is very suspicious,” Sophie tells me her impression once we are free.

“Of us? Do you think one of our references spilled some beans?”

“No. It is her nature. But none of your insanity here, you hear. Watch yourself. We want to keep this job.”

With time to kill before preparing lunch, we decide to take a walk around our new gig. Exiting the house to the west we follow an ornate brick path lined with marble Greek females carrying amphoras and entwined with bougainvillea. Here and there the colors of autumn touch the treetops, though the morning is warm and sunny like midsummer.

“It’s country living right in the middle of Beverly Hills,” Sophie says as we stroll through the rose garden. The path ends among a grove of Lebanese cypresses, but a series of steps cut from redwood logs and meshed flagstones of natural slate leads us down to a lower level of the grounds.

At the bottom, we discover to our right a tennis court, with bleachers. This is great news. We are enthusiastic players, and my daughter Brigid—home from England—will love this court. It is well kept up, although it doesn’t look much used.

But that is not all. On our left is a large, all-glass building.

“Oh, let’s go in!” Sophie is all excited. “It’s a greenhouse.”

## Two

The door is blocked by wooden crates, boards, and crisscrossed metal rods.

“You’re sure there isn’t another entrance?”

Sophie’s disappointment moves me to heroic measures. “Wait, Cherie.”

I put my shoulder to the door and bump and push, shoving inch by inch, until I can reach and grab planks, boxes... out, out of the way. I toss aside one last rusting metal bar, and in we go.

The atmosphere inside the greenhouse is hot, humid, and stuffy. It stinks of rotten mould.

“Somebody has been busy in here.”

“What’s the smell?”

“Flowers, look—orchids.”

We enter only a few steps before we are overpowered by the swampy heat.

“I need some air,” says Sophie as she steps back to the door for a breather. A slender breeze comes through the half blocked opening.

“It’s hot all right.” I am already sweating. An oppressive atmosphere hangs in the moist, pungent air.

I step forward, penetrating the heavy mist. I am sure there is more than orchids.

I push aside more crates, wheelbarrows, ladders, and half rotten wooden beams.

“What are we going to do with Dominique?” Sophie asks.

Dominique? In our absence, Brigid is squatting on our studio with this girl, her step-cousin in-law, Sophie’s niece Dominique. Broke, as always, Dominique wants a place to sleep for a few days, until she finds her feet.

“Dominique? What do we have to do anything for? She’s a big girl. She’ll get a job.”

“You know her?”

Not well, I don’t. She’s a knockout redhead who takes up a lot of room. She ought to be able to take care of herself. “Brigid already has *two* jobs,” I brag, just to point out the reasonable possibilities. But these pseudo-cousins are as different as can be.

“Dominique has no skills. She only knows how to use credit cards.”

The greenhouse seems to go on forever.

“Vegetables!” cries Sophie. “Oh, look, Pierre. Tomatoes—”

Sophie props the door and joins me among the lush rows of tomatoes swimming in water tanks. The pockets of Sophie's sweater are soon filled.

"Madame will be surprised there are fresh vegetables in Beverly Hills. Right here, growing bumper crops in her own greenhouse. More flowers—I can use these. I won't have to go downtown to the flower district."

"Sophie."

"Herbs—do you smell? I wonder what sort ... There is something..."

"Yes, something." I point to the shaded half of the greenhouse.

Sophie takes a full breath of the perfumed air. "Whoa!" she says. "I would recognize this smell anywhere."

Somewhere in the distance, I hear a leaf blower. "Maybe we should have closed the door?"

Sophie is determined to know all. She pushes potted palm trees to clear a path.

"Come here, Pierre, and see for yourself—marijuana. Look how much!"

"Son of a gun. Who do you think?"

"Who knows? Let's get out of here, right this minute. It's our first day. We don't want to be caught sneaking around."

In unison, we hurry to put back the boxes, boards, and metal rods as well as we can. At a brisk pace, we scramble up the steps and make for the main house. Holding tight her right hand, I whisper into Sophie's ear: "D' you think whoever grows that stuff will notice our break-in?"

A little shrug is enough for my reassurance—Or is it?

"Let's watch who is doing what to who?" Sophie murmurs back. "We'll find out who is the naughty one. The son, I bet."

"This is a major operation. You think the parents are not aware?"

"With the money they have, would they take such a risk?"

"One thing for sure," I say between huffing and puffing as we reach the little brick path, "whoever grows the pot is pretty clever. In the middle of Beverly Hills, just behind the Beverly Hills Hotel!"

Our pace slows, to blend in with the normal. No need to show our frenzy to any observer. The gardener, far away across the lawn pauses his leaf blowing to give us a meager wave before returning to his work.

"Who would ever think it possible? Hidden in a greenhouse, away from any surveillance." I raise my thumb up. "Chapeau!"

"Mmmm..." Sophie ponders my words. I can barely hear the "Yes, *very* clever" that escapes her lips in a soft breath.

Madame is waiting for us in the kitchen.

"How are you both doing? Your accommodations? Is everything okay?"

"Great!" I answer.

"I know you haven't had a chance to settle in yet, but I would appreciate, if you would fix lunch for Monsieur and myself a bit early today."

"I haven't checked the refrigerator. I'm not sure of what you have," Sophie says.

"You'll find enough variety for lunch." She waves a hand to indicate the vast resources of the kitchen. "Debbie always keeps cold cuts in case of emergency. A bowl of soup for myself and for Monsieur a small ham sandwich. We will have lunch in our bedroom."

Madame, with her irresistible smile and a wink of the eye, blows a kiss for my account as she turns to leave us.

“Soup and sandwich,” I repeat. “Any kind of soup?”

“Any kind. And a small ham sandwich, on a tray please, for Monsieur.”

I instantly learn—size matters.

Monsieur moves his prominent but unsmiling false teeth in his mouth, back and forth, with a clicking noise. He wears a green bathrobe, while his bare feet host worn out brown slippers. Red in the face, infuriated, he is looking at the sandwich in front of him.

“I wanted a *small* sandwich. I don’t want a big sandwich. Make a big sandwich for yourself, if you want. I only want a small sandwich.”

Overtaken by a fresh wave of exasperation, he pushes away the tray I am holding for him and then, with a jerk of his hand, gives it an extra push. The glass of orange juice spills on the bed and on his pajama pants.

“See, now. A mess. All I wanted was a small sandwich.”

For a moment, I wonder about my next move? Call 911? Run? Or hide under the bed? I am frozen, I can’t do either. I watch in amazement Mr. K trying to wipe up the spilled liquid from his jammies.

“Get me a small one—D’you hear?”

“Okay, okay,” I manage to stutter at last. “One small ham sandwich, coming right up.”

Mr. K. looks up. “And another thing. You left the bedroom window open.”

“No...yes...I’m sorry—” I object. “I only just started...”

“I don’t want the bedroom window open. The rats—RAaaAts, the RATS! That’s how they come into the house. They climb the ivy along the walls and get in. I never—you hear?—never want to see any windows open. You HEAR?” Mr. K is red in the face. I hope he has a strong heart, to sustain the pressure of all the rats.

“Small sandwiches, no rats, no windows open. Got it.” I turn on a dime to face Madame.

“How is your soup, Mrs. Kloss?”

Madame is reading a travel magazine and slipping tiny spoonloads of Sophie’s tomato bisque between her lips.

“Very good for canned soup.”

“That’s because it isn’t from a can. It’s Sophie’s special recipe, made with farm fresh tomatoes.”

“Really? That was quick work. Where’d she find the tomatoes?”

“In her pocket.”

Madame’s eyes twitch open wide as she tries to absorb the word *pocket*.

“I want dry pants,” wails Monsieur.

“Would you send the maid up, Pierre, to change the bedding?”

“Yes, Madame. And one small sandwich.”



The day passes, then another. Then another. The Klosses are quiet. Debbie checks up on us with regularity, inspecting the cold cuts and analyzing the grocery receipts. The son, Joshua, appears one afternoon and requests a glass of water. Never met such a boring kid. I have yet to



locate the wine cellar, though Mrs. Kloss says it is crammed with nothing but the best. But my wanderings are not without interest.

“Guess what?”

“What?” Sophie greets me, both hands on her hips, with her distinctive pout. “Don’t tell me. If he wants his sandwich any smaller...”

“The greenhouse—guess who is the culprit?”

“You found out? How?”

“The Klosses loved their lunches so much, I rewarded myself with a walk in the garden.”

“What! You didn’t even wait for me?”

“I could not wait. I had an errand.”

Sophie humphed and crossed her arms.

“Listen, Cherie. I was walking down the steps, towards the tennis courts.”

“And you were there to look for—?”

“More tomatoes. Madame is going to want a steady diet.”

“I see.”

“Suddenly, I heard a noise like broken glass. I stopped. I recognized a voice.”

“Someone inside the greenhouse?”

“Not quite. Just at the far corner, close to the trees—”

“Who? Who?”

“None other than—”

“Who?”

“The gardener.”

“No one else? There must have been. Pierre, who was he talking to?”

“The best part. Debbie, Madame’s well-thinking and very proper secretary.”

Sophie shrugs. It is too good to be true. “She manages the staff. She must have been giving him some instructions.”

“They were talking about crop prices.”

“Crop? You mean the pot.”

“Yes, the marijuana.”

“Hard to believe—”

“Holly macro, this is a good one.”

A line of concern crosses Sophie’s forehead. “Are you sure they didn’t see you?”

“Don’t worry, Love. Their secret is our secret.”

## Three

Thanksgiving approaches.

It is our first big dinner party for the Klosses. Madame plans a family dinner with a head count of sixteen.

“There’ll be a traditional turkey, of course.” Madame, glowing vigorously in a pink top, gives a handwritten note to Sophie.

“A big one!” shouts Mr. K. “I want a big one. Look, I want to show you.” Mr. K wriggles out of his chair and leaves the great room with a finger raised in the air. “Lemme show you.” Will he bring a specimen of a giant bird, to make his point?

“And we always have Honey Baked ham,” says Madame. “It’s my favorite part of the meal. Turkey really doesn’t taste like anything, does it?”

Sophie’s fingers take on the slightly claw-like look they get when someone approaches the forbidden line pertaining to her cooking, the line that no employer may cross. The room darkens. Is that thunder in the distance?

Then, Madame smiles at Sophie. With a deep sigh and a little shrug, she sends the clouds fleeing. “I leave everything to you. You have complete leeway over the menu.”

Sophie loosens her arms and lifts the note to study it. The menu is basic, with lots of room for Sophie’s specialties.

Mr. Kloss bustles in a moment later, his arms extended. In his hands is a green velvet box with gold ornaments. “Here, d’ya see?” He carefully lifts the lid and waves the contents, first in front of Sophie and then in front of me. “For thirty-five years, I have carved the turkey with this silver electric knife, saved only for this yearly occasion. So don’t get a dinky bird, Pierre.”

“Oh, Pierre!” Mrs. Kloss recalls an important detail. “You’ll know the best wines to serve. Just fetch up whatever is needed from the cellar. We have a great selection of French wines.”

I don’t know when Madame last visited her cellar, but the contents do not exactly match her description. The cellar is nothing more than a basement with all kinds of paraphernalia thrown around in disarray. I spent the best part of an afternoon digging among piles of boxes, antique books, rotten furniture—One can only wonder why rich people keep saving so much crap. It’s obvious someone got there before me and found the goodies. What’s left of Madame’s myriads of great wines is not worth a detour—at best, five or six drinkable ones from California and Chile.



“Move the cart, Pierre. It’s our turn.” Sophie reaches into her bag for the house credit card. “Put the wine on the counter and start unloading.”

“Lucky they had this case of Châteauneuf-du-Pape 1987.” I gently put the heavy box on the conveyor belt and start in on the condiments. “Who do you suppose wiped out Madame’s stock? The secretary? The gardener...?”

“Who knows. They have three children.”

“No need to rat on the kids. It will be up to you and me to restore order to the cellar. With a little ingenuity, all will be right, and she will never know her offspring are thieving inebriates. This is a good start. We got a deal on the wine.”

Sophie double checks the grocery list. “I still need to get the flowers from the greenhouse.”

“Do you want me...?”

“No, you stay away from the greenhouse. Armando wants to talk to you.”

Armando the leaf blowing gardener. I cannot leave the house without his eyes following me. To get a bell pepper is a mission to be accomplished.

“Why me?”

“He thinks he can handle you. He came to the house earlier, looking for you. I told him to talk to me. It’s the same thing.” Sophie’s nose emitted an elegant snort, her eyes dilated with hidden fury. “He insists he wants you... you only. *The man of the house*, he says. I’ll show him who wears pants in this house.”

Sophie’s grimace is an indication of what is in store for Armando.

In the background, the Gelson's check stand fades. Sophie, with her fisted hands on her hips, occupies a bull ring, the dust red with rose petals, the blood yet to be drawn. She is a matador, her finger a sword. She looks straight in the eyes of her bull.

"*I want to talk to the boss,*" says the doomed animal.

In this dramatization, Sophie imitates the low, rough growl of the gardener, then switches back to her own sweet voice.

"The boss? I am the boss!"

"I want to talk to Pierre. It's a man-to-man talk."

Sophie raises her chin. "Man to man? About what? What do you want? I am in charge—hear it?"

What can the defeated gardener do?

Sophie swipes the credit card with a dramatic flourish.

"Forget this type of guy who doesn't like to talk business with a woman, Sweet Pea," I whisper soothingly in her ear. "You're cutting into his profits."

"Too bad. I told him I want every week a delivery of fresh vegetables, lettuce, fruits, and flowers."

"Very reasonable. He has a good deal—nice greenhouse, free water and power..."

"He said he couldn't—couldn't do it! So I asked if he thought Madame Kloss would be interested in the main crop he was growing on her property."

"Have a nice day," says the checker. The box boy swings the cart around and pushes it ahead of us towards the exit.

"Cherie, you are a tough bargainer. What did Armando say?"

"Nothing. I told him we also want our cut on the marijuana. Take it or leave it."

Sophie makes a flourish with her arms, a matador ready for the coupe de grâce. "NOW OUT YOU GO!" she tells the imaginary gardener.

The box boy looks around at us.

Sophie enjoys her stint as a negotiator with such enthusiasm I can't help a belly laugh. "My Don Quixote, you are magnifique."



The table is set. The traditional roasted turkey sits on a large, very old silver platter. It is to preside over the most important yearly gathering of the Kloss family. Sophie has outdone herself. The bird will dominate the table, and Mr. Kloss will carve the beast as he has done since Kennedy was president. The masterpiece is accompanied by wild mushroom, chestnut, and duck liver stuffing—with the au jus crafted with port wine by Sophie, to the delight of the taste buds. A side of cranberry compote with candied orange zests will crown the festivities. To add a healthy touch, Sophie includes French string beans and carrots sautéed with Provençal herbs. The choice of dessert, for anyone who has room for another bite, is between carrot cake, cheesecake, pumpkin and pecan pies with tons of ice cream, and Madame's favorite—Sophie's specialty, her sublime Tiramisu.

Scarfs, hats and overcoats pile up on the couches, armchairs, even the grand piano of the grand salon. Hugs, greetings, laughs and unsophisticated jokes invade the warm family-and-friendly atmosphere. The guests quickly soak up the wine served as aperitif.

Madame finds us in the kitchen, putting the final touches to the feast.

"Sophie, your flower arrangements are beautiful."

Madame Kloss has a guest at her side, with a maid in tow, who for some reason is carrying a large roasting pan with a small cooked item wrapped up in foil.

“Very well done,” the friend chimes in. Her heavily painted eyes appraise Sophie from head to shoes. “I adore the flower market downtown. I suppose that’s where you get those marvelous arrangements?”

“Closer than downtown, right here in Beverly Hills. Mrs. Kloss has her own supplier. I do my own arrangements.”

“Oh,” Madame’s friend turns away.

“Sophie is wonderful, Meryl,” says Mrs. Kloss. “She knows all the farmers.”

“Of course.” Suddenly Meryl is all busy, pushing the small woman with the large pan and its mysterious aluminum package towards nowhere in particular. The counters are loaded with carefully arranged platters. The guest pats her wig and stretches her upper lip, a show of impatience.

I know her. She does not recognize me, but I know her from when I owned my own place in Santa Monica. She is the scourge of restaurant interior design. Her atrocities are found from one end of Hollywood to the other.

“Would you like a glass of something? Maria, just set your tray down over there.” Madame winks at Sophie’s questioning look. “Just a bit of pot luck,” she says with an embarrassed laugh. “Pierre, drinks, please. We have thirsty guests.”

“Your girlfriend... What’s her name?”

“Muriel, Mom. Muriel. You asked me, like, ten minutes ago.”

“Sorry, son. I guess at my age the mind just starts to go.”

Madame leans towards Meryl. “I still have to worry about my twenty-two year-old baby.”

“I asked her to come.” Josh, the youngest Kloss, raises his shoulders awkwardly as I pause in refilling his mother’s glass. “She chooses to attend her own family dinner.”

There is no Muriel. He has confessed to me, she is an invention to keep his mother off his back.

Mrs. Kloss and her friend Meryl look consolingly at him.

“It’s very important for her,” he adds.

“I guess it is. Since you’re by yourself,” says Madame. “Well, go socialize with the relatives then.”

Josh surveys the room and looks miserable. Aunts, uncles, red-faced friends of his father. No one to talk to.

“Okay, okay,” coos Mrs. Kloss, patting the young man’s arm.

Meryl bumps my elbow and waggles her empty glass in my face.

“More, garcon, as long as you’re just standing there.”

I am standing, frozen to the spot. A redhaired vision has just appeared on the edge of the crowd. Dominique?

“Here we go!” Madame thumps Josh on the back. “Who’s that girl?”

“I don’t know.” Josh looks shell shocked.

“Must be Sophie’s niece?” She turns to me for confirmation. I manage a nod. Dominique looks amazing, her figure overflowing one of Sophie’s more daring evening gowns. All the aunts have clutched their old men and are practically standing on their feet to keep them nailed to their places. “Oh, dear.” Mrs. Kloss touches her cheek, a little worry line crinkling her forehead. “She was supposed to meet Grandpa, wasn’t she.”

“Grandpa?”

“Well, baby boy,” Madame chuckles, “you’re here and Grandpa’s in New York, the old goat, with his new girlfriend. Why don’t you go talk to her?” Madame pushes her tall awkward son in the direction of the unexpected female, who has lowered herself onto the edge of the white leather couch. I see she is without a glass. I rush to supply.

I deliver second and third rounds before I can return to the kitchen to help Sophie. It turns out I am not needed. The decorator’s maid has pitched in arranging the appetizers. I only have to deliver the platters to the two-fisted hungry crowd.

“How is Dominique doing?” Sophie asks. She is too busy to look at me, her fingers expertly making little arrangements of baby bok choy.

“Just a minute, Love. I hear the phone.”

I take a message from a tardy guest. When I return: “Looks like we have a couple of empty chairs tonight.”

“Rude. Never mind. Dominique? Does the old Kloss like her?”

“He isn’t here.”

“What?”

There is a minor explosion in the bok choy.

“It’s okay. She’s working the grandson.”

“What for? He’s too young.”

“He’ll be rich someday.”

“Someday. What good is that? Here, take this tray out.”

I walk towards Madame with my tray and the latest news. “Ginger called. She’ll be late.”

“No surprise. I have never seen that girl show up on time for anything.”

“She said don’t wait for her, she’ll catch up.”

“Yep, she’ll catch up. The way that girl drinks. She’ll outpace any one of us by twenty-five lengths in less time than it takes to run the Kentucky Derby.”

“Can I refill that for you?”

“Yes, please, Pierre.”

I deliver Sophie’s dim sums to the gang, who are eager to get to the action.

“Chinese food for thanksgiving? I didn’t know the pilgrims were Chinese,” snarls Robert, a second cousin of the old Kloss and the uncouth sheep of the family. “Where’s the sake? Ha ha!”

The dim sums disappear between grasping fingers as I move around the salon. I keep one eye on the young couple. Josh has not left the couch. He doesn’t say much to his companion, but he has developed a quick wrist, lifting glass to mouth. A personal Hatha Yoga type of move. The platter is nearly empty when Dominique rises and comes to me.

“You look lost,” I say in her ear. “A dim sum for your thoughts?”

She raises her eyes to mine.

“I know everyone here is about twenty-five years too...”

“What happened to Grandpa?” she whispers.

“Unavoidably detained by a new girlfriend. But at least you have a handsome young boy—man, I mean... Look, he’s waiting for you to go back.”

Her blue eyes overflow with a despair that fills me with pity. A quick rescue is in order.

“Your aunt wants you,” I tell her, loud enough for her admirer to overhear.

Dominique shoots across the room like a flame in a stiff wind. Josh stares after her. I step over.

“Top up?” I offer.

Before he can pull himself together and answer me, the empty cushion is filled with the lonely boy's mother.

"Hello," she says.

"I am the best son... you ever had?" Joshua gives a hug to Mommy.

Madame leans against her progeny. "You get funny with a little glass of red wine." She kisses Joshua's hair.

Outside it's raining hard. I peek at the grandfather clock. It shows 4:34 pm. The rain is on time for Thanksgiving dinner. Inside, the voices of the guests gathered in the salon are flowing in high spirits. Joshua's voice barely gets over the brouhaha. Showing an empty glass: "Is there any more to drink?"

"Can't he get his own wine?" squawks Sophie in my ear. Mrs. Kloss has put the kibosh on his intake. "He needs his mummy's approval?"

"Mummy is out by the pool with her horrible decorator friend. Where is Dominique?"

"In our rooms, freshening up. She'll be out before dinner."

"She could eat with us?"

"She was invited to dinner," Sophie says firmly. "She is going to sit with the family and be served like a queen." Sophie does not bother to keep her angry voice from drifting beyond the kitchen. "Can you believe—That woman brought her own—her own—she has the nerves to call it turkey."

An ugly little bird is poking out of its aluminum foil wrapping. There is something wrong with it. It is pale and gleams strangely.

I can't help laughing. I know there will be more to this. But first, I must see to the alcoholic needs of the young scion. Then, in a few minutes, I will round up the herd and drive them to the trough. When they are all set, I will return to the kitchen for the dinner Sophie has prepared for us. Then I will have a little time to spare for tales.

I pull a bottle of Chardonnay from the ice bucket on the counter and put my head out the door. A quick look over the salon. The coast is clear. I wave a fresh glass at Josh, who lunges at me.

"Oh, gosh, you saved me!" he says, grabbing the bottle from my hands. The pride of the Kloss family haphazardly manages to pour a quantity of wine from the bottle—half in his glass, half on the carpet.

"Ask Pierre when you need more wine." A frowning Madame has materialized beside her son. "My Persian carpet doesn't deserve any more smears, please."

I feel a gentle pat on my shoulder. It is Sophie.

"Dinner is ready," she announces. Mrs. Kloss breaks into one of her most radiant smiles.

The guests are seated. I have removed the places for the missing grandpa and the tardy friend. There is plenty of elbow room now for the guests to help themselves to the bounty on the table. Josh had lain in wait for Dominique to reappear and followed her like a clingy Labrador to the table, taking the chair next to hers. At last, all are settled into their places. The wine is poured and laughter goes round the table. I go get the turkey.

Oohs and ahs are suitably emitted from the guests as the giant golden turkey appears on its gilded platter. It's so heavy I break a sweat getting it onto the table. It has a special place in front of Mr. Kloss, who cracks his knuckles and sniffs the bird.

Meryl bangs on her glass with a soup spoon and bursts out: "Let's raise our glasses to the Klosses. Happy Thanksgiving to all!"

Glasses are raised among joyful hullabaloo. The decorator's scraggy voice resonates one more time: "I brought another bird for all of you guys."

On cue, the kitchen door is slowly opening. Maria's head emerges then disappears. She is having trouble getting through the heavy door while balancing her tray. I make a beeline for the poor woman carrying the exhibit. No need at this time to show the shameful meager bird. Luckily, no one seems to notice the maid's retreat or the decorator's confusion. All eyes are on Monsieur, who is on his feet, hovering over the golden carcass.

Monsieur with great pride demands the tool of tools. Madame hands the green velvet box holding the electric knife to the master of ceremony. Monsieur's persona is enhanced by the flickering lights of the chandelier. The knife in his expert hands stabs the breast of the traditional bird and carves row after row. Then the thighs and drumsticks are dismantled, and all the pieces are laid on a silver platter, to much acclaim. Joshua raises his empty glass.

"Bravo, Papa. A job well done."

Dominique has warmed herself in the kitchen with half a bottle of champagne. She gives me a grim sort of wink and removes her shawl, which has hidden her bare shoulders and an aggressive expanse of décolletage. Joshua instantly acquires a neck twitch.

In the kitchen, a second spread is laid out—no chandelier, but still lavish. I don't know how, but Sophie has fixed the decorator's poultry. It lies before us, browned and sliced, moistened with miracle gravy.

"Sit down with us and eat some turkey." Sophie shows a chair to her unexpected helper. Maria, a tired woman in her late fifties, has been working for the same employer for the last twenty-five years, a commitment Sophie and I find rather incomprehensible.

"Maria, sit and eat your turkey."

"Oh, no puede—no puede, la patrona—"

"What d'you mean you can't, who says that?"

"La duenna, no le permite."

"You mean your boss doesn't allow you to sit down and have dinner?"

"No, no... le permite."

"You're in my kitchen, Maria. I'm the boss here. Sit with us and eat dinner. If your 'patrona' shows up and says anything, I'll take care of her—don't worry."

Maria sits nervously and accepts the wine with a shy smile.

"I can't believe this bitch treats her employees like cattle." Sophie is furious. "I'll talk to Madame Kloss tomorrow about your boss."

"No, señora, no lo hace. Por favor para mí, será muy mal."

"All right," Sophie's tone is reassuring, but I can tell she is still smoldering. She heaps Maria's plate with a kind of tasty revenge. "How is Dominique doing?"

"I can't say she hasn't given it her best."

"Eh?"

"Under the half-dressed female spell—Josh is unsure which hand his fork belongs in. He is sitting in there cutting his ham into tiny fragments."

"Oh, dear," Sophie says.

"Tut tut." Maria shakes her head.

"Dominique shows him her empty glass. The ice bucket is there, at his elbow. All he has to do is put his hand on it."

“Not too difficult,” Sophie gives me a big dose of dressing, strengthening me for a long evening of gossip.

“He is frozen with lust. All he can do is push his green beans and twitch.”

“What a shame.”

“So she tries a little harder. She says, ‘Can you pour *me* a glass?’ “

“Pays to be direct. What did he do?”

He just mumbles. ‘Hum...mmm... I...I—’.”

“So then, completely out of patience, Dominique stands up, leans over the stunned Joshua, and grabs the bottle from the bucket. ‘Pas de meilleure aide que soi,’ she says, and she sits down again.”

“Good for her. Then what?”

“I don’t know. I came in here to eat. I’m famished.”

Compliments on the food are not dished out at first, the gathered crowd being more concerned with feeding empty stomachs. It is a long meal, with second and third helpings. A brief pause to clear away dirty dinner plates while the guests rearrange their enlarged laps and belch into their fists. Then I am busy again, serving dessert after dessert. The feasting extends deep into the evening, until the guests at last weaken. Weary with the effort, they slump in their chairs. Cousin Robert heads for the television, and the tardy Ginger stumbles in and helps herself to the Cognac. Meryl bangs her glass with a sticky fork.

“Attention, attention. A toast to my very dear friends for putting on this wonderful Thanksgiving dinner.”

Glasses are drained one last time. The guests begin to scoot their chairs, as if to leave the table. Dominique’s high voice resonates over the room’s bustle.

“We want the chef!” she shouts, with a backslap of Josh’s drooping shoulder. “We want the chef... we want the chef!”

With this reminder, the well-contented guests return to consciousness and join the chant.

“We want the chef!”

To thunderous applause, Sophie, in a clean outfit, not a hair out of place, makes a triumphal entrance.

The Klosses’ faces glow with pride and pleasure.

The chorus of farewells fills the house as the guests make for the exit. We are just sitting down to our own tiramisu. But there is one more ceremony to come. Sophie sips her champagne, a mysterious smile lighting her face. A hinge squeaks. The decorator puts her head through the kitchen door.

“Can you put the leftovers of my turkey in a bag?”

“I am going to fix it for you,” Sophie says, with a big smile. “Especially for you—don’t worry about anything.”

Meryl pulls her head out of the door without another word and hangs out long after the other guests have left. Mr. Kloss is already tucked in bed and we are putting away the last of the dishes before Meryl returns to fetch her exhausted maid and her bag of turkey remains. Sophie has packed all the leftovers—flaps of skin, coagulating gravy. She even dumped in the bones.

“Lovely,” the decorator says, gesturing to Maria to take the carefully sealed package nestled on top of the roasting pan in which it arrived.

The ladies make a good-bye racket in the foyer for a while. Sophie and I partake of a last glass of wine and a whispered toast to leftovers.





The house sleeps late into the next morning. It is nearly lunch time when Mrs. Kloss breezes into the kitchen. She is pink in the cheeks. “What nice dinner! Sophie, thank you.”

“How about a nice lunch?” I ask.

“Oh, these flowers!” Madame gently pats a stem of lilac Sophie is putting in fresh water. “Sophie,” Madame tilts her head to one side and chuckles. “I was a little pickled last night, but...tell me. What’s this about me having my own supplier?”

“You do. A very exclusive supplier.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“They are from your own garden.”

“We don’t have flowers like that in the garden.”

“Oh, yes, you do. And you also have fresh vegetables, year-round.”

“What are you talking about? I was raised in this house, and I have never seen anything of the sort on the property.”

“D’you ever visit the greenhouse?”

“The greenhouse? You mean the greenhouse? On the lower level? It’s in ruins. I haven’t been there in years—”

“Armando, your gardener. He has his own business right here in your own garden.”

“Business? Here?”

“I told him he has to supply you if he wants to stay in business.”

“You don’t say. Well, I always knew he was a smart fellow.” Mrs. Kloss with her pink cheeks and irresistible smile thinks it over. “Oh, well—It’s okay. He has a family to support. Who cares?”

“I do. I told him we want a piece of the action. His operation is costing you—water, electricity... At least he can spare fresh flowers and vegetables for the house.”

Madame laughs.

“Sophie, you are so practical. You deal with him. Pierre, lunch would be wonderful.”

## Four

The weeks slip away. Things could not be better. The Klosses are easy, the money is good. The extra remittances from Armando’s year-round crop add to our bulging nest egg. Acquiring our refuge in Provence is beginning at last to feel like a dream that will soon come true.

Ready to fold for the night, Madame, dressed in her jammies, finds me on the porch, a step away from the open front door. The night air is bracing and the sky is moonless, full of stars and airplanes. A plane to France, maybe. Soon it could be me and Sophie departing from LAX, soaring above Beverly Hills. Mrs. Kloss hands me a few envelopes.

“I know it’s your night out,” she laughs. I am waiting for Sophie. We have big plans for the evening. “Can you drop this letter at the post office.”

“No trouble. The P.O. is on our way.”

“There’s a \$25,000 check in there for my dad. Don’t lose it! I left the payee’s space empty.” I wish she had not told me.

“That is a big risk.” Sophie appears like a genie behind Mrs. Kloss. She tugs the envelope out of my hand and drops it in her handbag.

“He likes to use his girlfriend’s name to cash checks,” Madame Kloss explains. “He doesn’t like to pay taxes.” Mrs. Kloss drops her arms to her side and lets out a heavy sigh. “The trouble is, I don’t even know the name of his new girlfriend.” She shakes her head and laughs. “What am I going to do with him? He’ll never learn. Well, on your way. Have a lovely time, but don’t be too late. When you get back, we might need help packing our suitcases.”

“Pack? Why? Where?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning for Lake Tahoe.”

“Tahoe?” Sophie and I are both surprised. This seems a sudden decision.

“We always spend Christmas at Tahoe,” Madame says, her husband joining us on the porch.

“We didn’t know!” Sophie scolds, but I know she is delighted.

“Eh!” Monsieur grunts. He points at Sophie with a snicker. “You’re thinking about those slot machines, aren’t you?”

Sophie ignores him, as she always does. “What time are you leaving? Will you need breakfast?”

“Don’t bother,” Madame waves one hand and wraps the other around the thick, knitted sleeve of Mr. Kloss’s sweater. “We’ll be off early. You might as well sleep in. Enjoy your night out. We’ll see you after New Years.”

“Will do,” I say. “And we’ll make sure the letter is mailed—don’t worry.”

“I feel like Chinese,” I yawn. “What about you?”

It’s been a long day. For our hot date, I am half asleep behind the wheel.

“You’d better wake up—you almost hit the car coming down the canyon.”

“Relax, Love. Everything is under control.”

“No napping, please.”

“Okay, okay—Here, your majesty, we are sane and safe at the Beverly Hills Post Office of the stars.”

“Stop in front of the drops.”

I snug the car along the red paint on the curb. Sophie snaps open her safety belt, pushes the door open, and walks briskly towards the mail boxes. Only a few steps, mission accomplished, and she is again beside me. In another moment, we are driving down Rodeo Drive, our mouths watering for a good dinner, while looking for a parking spot.

“You sealed the envelope with the check, didn’t you?” I ask.

“You... you mean *you* didn’t seal it? You must be kidding! You didn’t seal the envelope with the \$25,000 check?”

“No...why? You’re supposed to do it, before dropping the envelope in the box.”

“No way—The envelope is not sealed, with a \$25,000 signed check with the payee left blank!”

I am now wide awake. I turn at the next corner and head back to the post office.

Sophie jumps out of the Mercedes. After a long wait—it is an eternity—Sophie’s long face pops in the car’s passenger window. “You won’t believe this. The head postmaster tried to help. The mail is already picked up and is on its way to the sorting station.”

“The sorting station? What the heck is a sorting station?—Where is it?” Hunger has left me. My anguish is now the dominant state of affairs.

“It is in Culver City,” a prostrated Sophie drops on the passenger seat. “A signed check with a blank name—anybody can take it and cash it. What are we going to say to the Klosses?”

“We can tell ’em the three stooges were only two, and their names were Sophie and Pierre.”

“Come on, be serious. I don’t think it’s a laughing matter. Our job is on the line.”

“Our impersonation of Bonnie and Clyde is a bit short from reality. Is that what you mean?”

“Stop it, I can’t stand it. What are we going to do?”

“Is this the address in Culver City?” I grab the piece of paper from Sophie’s trembling hands. A barely audible voice from the passenger’s seat confirms my suspicion. “Let’s go to Culver City.”

Well, for 25 Ks—not a small piece of change. I head the car south.

“Don’t kill us on the way. The Post Office Master mentioned several hours are needed to sort the mail especially around this time of the year.”

There is no question of hurrying. We arrive at the post office sorting center in Culver City after a long ride in heavy Saturday night traffic, to find the parking lot locked up with iron gates. We must park on a side street.

“How do we get in?” Sophie asks.

A survey of the huge fenced building is required.

“I’ll go case the place. Stay in the car.”

“Come right back—” Sophie’s anguish is now close to panic. “I’m scared.”

The street is dark, the air noisy with badly maintained car engines and the faraway shouts of discontented young men. A broken bottle crunches under my shoe.

I make my way up to the corner and edge along the front of the facility, looking for an opening. The street lights flicker, a bad bulb. The fence goes a long way, looks like all the way around the building. Then at last, a gate. Ah, locked! Is this a bad dream? I see checks flying around in every direction like confetti at a Macy’s Easter parade. Time stands still. The old Kloss will receive an eagerly awaited envelope—empty, no check! He will tell his daughter. Suspicion will fall. We will be arrested, dismissed from this easy job. Doomed to live in Santa Monica forever.

A comforting silhouette takes shape at the end of the deserted street.

“Sophie, I told you to stay in the car.”

“I could not wait all by myself. It’s too scary. Did they let you in?”

“It’s locked, shut tight—completely locked.”

Against hope, we explore the perimeter. The building is like a windowless black box, nearly surrounded by a chainlink fence. But I am not ready to give up. An idea flickers like the streetlight. I stop in my tracks.

“The only way in is on this side of the building,” I tell Sophie. “See, where the light shows at the bottom of the back door? Someone is in there.”

“You can’t get to it. Everything is fenced and locked.” She does not take her eyes off my desperate face.

Without a single sign of explanation, I start to scale the fence.

“Be careful. You’ll hurt yourself.” A concerned Sophie stands helpless before the twelve foot high metal barrier. I easily reach the top and let myself, on the other side, slide to the ground. After several poundings on the door, it opens. A post office employee’s head sneaks out to identify the commotion. Pleading and gesticulating, I forcefully explain my dilemma. My jeremiad works—The woman lets me in.

Twenty-five minutes, half an hour, maybe more, time passes. I am helped out of the sorting station, through the front, out the gate. The heavy door slams, and the chill of the night air hits me. Where is Sophie?

Alone in the car, Sophie has suffered a slew of the darkest of thoughts. What if someone has already stolen the check? Cashed it? Can they cash a check on a Saturday night? The Klosses can't cancel the check over the weekend. What if...What if they cancel their Tahoe trip instead, to stay at home and deal with the situation? What if, what if?

She jumps when I tap the window. She lowers it and looks up at me with worried eyes. "What did they say? Did you get it?"

I reach through the window with both arms and scoop up the sourpuss in a big hug.

"The supervisor showed me to the sorting area. There are thousands and thousands of pieces of mail in hundreds of hand-carts waiting to be directed to their final destination. It's their busiest time of the year."

"We can't get it? That's what you are saying?"

"Nope, can't do it."

I have never felt like a ne'er-do-well before, a misfit. To let so much money disappear into thin air, to fall into the hands of some nefarious stranger—it is inconceivable. We will have to face our employers with the news.

Sophie senses my regret.

"Remember," she says in a soothing voice. "It's only money."

"A mere \$25,000 affair."

We mount the stairs to the master bedroom, both with pounding hearts.

The Klosses are cheerful, busy packing. Madame says, "Oh, you're back!" and disappears into her closet. They don't seem to notice us standing in the middle of their bedroom, our heads hanging, our hands sweating.

Sophie tries to ease the news. "We dropped the envelope at the post office with the \$25,000 check without sealing the envelope." Without taking a breather she continues: "Do you need help with your luggage?"

Mr. Kloss, half standing with his two hands full of well-folded shirts ready to be stored in his travel bag, hums, "We'll do it ourselves, we don't need your help. Go to bed. Merry Christmas."

## Five

"Dominique—she is having a difficult time, poor girl. We must cheer her up."

"Dominique? What can be wrong with Dominique—she's a knockout. And nice to boot."

"Money problems, what else? She can't control her credit card. What she needs is a rich husband."

"Don't we all?"

"It is unforgivable for the grandpa not to show up for Thanksgiving."

"I don't know, Love. Josh's allowance is steady and doesn't come in the unreliable mail."

"Yes, but don't forget, Dominique could be the one signing those checks."

The house is all ours. It is warm, quiet, the sofa soft. Sophie is stretched out, her feet in my lap. The reflection of the firelight swims in the depths of my Cognac. I close my eyes and listen to the scratching of Sophie's pencil as she makes notes of things to do and remember tomorrow.

“Have you heard from Brigid?” she asks, her voice drowsy.  
“She wouldn’t miss our party for the world. But she insists on bringing Boris.”  
“Boris is okay. You should be happy for her.”  
“Boris is okay, but she is wonderful. Which one should I be happy for?”  
“Your daughter has a good head. You should trust her. How many does that make for dinner?”  
“That’s twelve. What d’you have in mind for the food?”  
“Starters: Gravlax, made with home-cured organic salmon Hendrix and dill marinade, then toasted goat’s cheese on a bed of Boston lettuce glazed with honey, with ripe tomatoes and virgin olive oil.”  
“Sounds good.”  
“Spicy crab soup, with saffron and garlic mayonnaise and cheesy croutons.”  
“Your cheesy croutons are the best, Love. And for the main course?”  
“Fresh sea bass fillets, filled with hand-picked crab meat, and Tagliatelle pasta served with a lobster reduction and a walnut-pear Stilton sauce.”  
“The Klosses don’t know what they are missing. I wish they would go away more often.”  
“Lime sorbet,” Sophie continues. “A selection of matured French cheeses and bib salad adorned with celery, grapes, and crackers.”  
“And for the finale?”  
“Traditional French apple tart flambéed with Cognac, hazelnut meringue filled with fresh raspberries and whipped cream, and homemade chocolate rochers.”  
“Bravo, Love, that’s a great menu. Let’s see. After dinner drinks—we will have Courvoisier XO, Grand Marnier, Cointreau, and single malt Scotch Whisky.”  
“That should do.”  
“It will be an all-Champagne dinner?”  
“Of course. La Veuve Clicquot will be perfect.”  
“There is only one problem. The cellar is not stellar and the bar is bare.”  
“Well, it is time you took care of these things. Mrs. Kloss thinks she has a world-class cellar, she should have one. I will do the shopping in the morning.”  
“What about me?”  
“You go to what they call their cellar and clear away the mess.”

Brigid and her boyfriend are the first to arrive.  
“Hi, Dad. Remember Boris?”  
“Yes, hello, Boris.”  
“We met a couple of weeks ago at the beach club,” says Boris.  
“I know. I remember. Make yourself comfortable, kids.”  
“Nice of you to have us over,” Boris says.  
“You are in for a treat. Sophie has such a great menu for tonight.”  
“Dad, is there time for Boris and me to play some tennis?”  
“Sure. They have a great tennis court here. Just follow the path through...”  
“Dad, I know.” Brigid points towards the majestic, blue-green Lebanese cedars. “Across the lawn, behind the garden, and down the steps.”  
“You know—How?”  
Brigid makes little tsk-tsking noises and rolls her eyes. “Spent a lot of time here, Dad. With Josh?”  
“You did?” This is news to me.

“Remember, before London?”

Before...that was years ago. She was a kid. I had the most popular restaurant in Santa Monica and a house in Mandeville Canyon.

“We dated?”

“You don’t say.”

“Didn’t you recognize him?”

I try to picture the faces of the boys in her life, but I come up blank.

“It’s okay, Dad. He’s pretty forgettable.”

“What happened? You didn’t like the fellow?”

“He was so boring.”

“Boring? And what about this one you have now?”

Boris, the only English man I’ve ever met who doesn’t have any sense of humor.

“Oh, Dad.”

“Sorry, darling, just kidding.” I don’t know which boyfriend is the most boring, but one at least is going to inherit a twelve-thousand square foot mansion behind the Beverly Hills Hotel. “I love you. Go play tennis with the beach boy.”

A voice clamors throughout the house.

“Come on, you guys, sit at the table—the food is ready!” Sophie with a wooden spoon waves the guests to their seats. “Pierre, help me to sit everyone. I need help. Come and pick up the first dish.”

The food is devoured with great passion and a steady flow of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, now the house wine of the Klosses’ reconstituted cellar. Dessert and Champagne crown an exciting evening full of laughter, joy, and storytelling—a wonderful evening with family and great friends. At the height of the festivities, we miss the sound of the front door opening.

Joshua walks in with a friend, just in time for dessert.

“Hello, everybody. Don’t mind us—we’re not staying.”

“Come and join us!” I open my arms and raise the bottle. “A glass of Champagne?”

“No,” the young man replies, shaking his head. “You guys enjoy your dinner. I thought my parents were here.”

“Out of town,” Sophie informs him. “Did they not tell you?”

“Oh. Christmas. I forgot.”

Behind him, my daughter returns from some errand in another part of the house. A little hand pats his shoulder. “Joshua, is that you?”

He turns around and stops, stunned. “Brigid, what are you doing here?”

“You know each other?” Sophie turns to me with a dumbfounded look.

“Sophie, Dad, Boris, everybody. This is Josh.”

“Josh,” Boris repeats in a bitter mumble.

“This is his house,” Brigid explains to the assembled dinner party.

“What a small and strange world.” Sophie raises her glass of Champagne to the newcomer.

His friend says nothing but makes impatient mumbling noises in Josh’s ear.

“We’re just going to go...play tennis. Down by the court. We won’t bother you.”

“Here! Wait!” Sophie stops them with a gentle command. “For later.”

With half a dozen chocolate rochers in a napkin, Joshua and his friend leave us to our revelry. Leaning towards me, Sophie whispers for the benefit of all: “Your daughter, what a stupid girl. She discarded the rich guy for the beach bum.”

I lean towards Brigid with a grin. “Can you imagine? If I had a smarter daughter, instead of working for them, we could have been part of this family.”

Brigid gives me a poke with her finger and leans the other way, towards Boris, to give him a smack on the cheek. A small and strange world indeed.

## Six

“My father is here to stay with us for a while, upstairs in the blue bedroom.”

Madame Kloss is apologetic for giving us extra work.

“He can come and eat with you guys, if it’s okay—You don’t have to if it’s an inconvenience.”

“We don’t mind if he is okay with the arrangement and doesn’t mind eating late—7 or 8 pm.”

What a strange request. What is wrong with the guy, they don’t want him to eat with the family? Mrs. Kloss smiles with grace. Sophie establishes the rules right off the bat. “You tell him no slurping. And I won’t babysit for his medicine.”

“It’s only temporary,” Madame assures us, “until he finds a wife.”

“A wife?” Sophie perks up. “What about the girlfriend, with all the checks?”

Debbie has told us the check must have arrived at its destination. The girlfriend’s signature was on the back when it was cashed.

“Spring fever, I suppose. One got tired of the other. Anyway, he’s back on the market.”

Madame shakes her shoulders in a sign of desperation.

I can’t help myself. “How many times has he been married?”

“So far, eight times. He’s never had to look far or for very long. It’s gotten harder, of course—he’s not able to get around like he used to. He’s actually very actively searching for the perfect one.”

“Where is he looking?”

Madame winces. “He has ads in a multitude of newspapers all throughout the world.” She perhaps wants us to be sure he won’t be long on our hands.

“You don’t say, throughout the whole world?” Sophie is stunned to learn about this old man looking all over the planet for a wife.

“He gets hundreds of letters every day. He sorts through all of them. Debbie helps, when he’s here. When he finds one to his liking he sends a response—he’ll even go to their country to meet if he feels a possible connection.”

“Whoa, that is dedication,” I say. “How successful is he?”

“Oh, very.” A frown wrinkles Madame’s forehead. “It *is* a concern for the family. The last one—a Japanese lady, he went to Nagasaki to get her... Well.... In the end, she got him for four million dollars in settlement.”

“Hola! Your dad has for sure an expensive hobby.”

“It’s ridiculous at his age. Still playing the field at eighty-three. He should be playing dominoes with other retired people instead.” Madame Kloss looks straight at Sophie, expecting the usual dose of consolation. Sophie doesn’t gibe with Madame Kloss’ Domino Theory—No encouragement on her part.

“I guess he feels lonely.”

“Yes, he is lonely. A lonely man all his life. When he was younger, he was impossible to reach—an autodidact, selfish and hard-headed.” Mrs. Kloss pulls out a surgical mask from her

coat pocket. “My husband wants him to wear a mouth protector. He’s scared of catching any sort of bug he might be carrying.”

“Is he sick?”

“Not at the moment. But Marty’s susceptible to pneumonia and doesn’t like to take chances. Anyway, don’t let him walk around under any circumstances without a protective cover on his mouth.”



“No slurping at my table. I can’t stand it. Otherwise, no more soup for you.” Sophie is relentless after the old man’s table manners. “You don’t clean your plate with a piece of bread. You don’t talk with your mouth full. Any of those or you’ll be excluded from my table.” Sophie wraps a serviette around the old man’s neck. “Don’t drop food on your shirt.”

I try to help, holding the old man straight. He has a tendency to a sideways slide. But the geezer is not short of spunk.

“I’m the one who created the business and made it what it is today. I had stores in all the fifty states. My son-in-law is crazy, treating me like a child.” The tall and frail old guy pulls down his mouth cover to eat his ice cream. “I started to make money when I was eleven. Yes, siree. I was eleven.”

“Doing what?” I ask.

“My father was a tailor in St. Louis. I asked him for a pair of roller skates.”

“He refused?” I am now all ears, grabbed by the tale.

“A pair of roller skates at the time would have been a week’s salary for my dad.”

“What happened?”

“I went to the junkyard, looking for an old pair, or parts, anything.” The thin old man, almost a shadow of himself, pauses, does some breathing before continuing with the tale. “By and by, I got lots of parts. I was able to make four pairs for a cost of only twenty-five cents.”

“That was great. What did you do with the extra pairs?”

“I sold them to the kids in school. Then I went back, got more parts—built more skates. Pretty soon I was scouting all the junkyards over St. Louis building roller skates from old parts and selling them. I was making three times more money than my father by age twelve.”

“Did you quit school and became a junkyard whiz?”

“Nope, but I went on with bicycle parts, later to add old furniture and cooking utensils and kitchen tools.”

“You refurbished old stuff and sold them?”

“Nope, I refurbished and rented them. It was much more profitable. By age twenty-two, I was already a millionaire. The rest is history.”

“Congratulations,” I am completely overtaken by the tale of the old man.

“Pierre, he must wear his mask.” Sophie offers a reminder.

“How can he eat with something covering his mouth?”

“I don’t know, but the orders are clear. If he is going to talk instead of eating he must cover his mouth.”

“The heck with Marty,” the old Kloss growls. “I can’t stand to wear a mask.”

“Eat your ice cream.”

“The heck with ice cream. What a situation! Pierre, the thing is. I can’t live alone. I need a woman.”



“Yes, you do!” Sophie declares. “A great woman. I have somebody in mind.” She points to the old man’s shirt. “Stop spilling food on your clothes. I can’t introduce a slob to my friend.”

“Is she pretty? How old is she? She can’t be more than thirty. I can’t stand older women.”

“Look at you, you are an old fart and think you can be picky. You’d be lucky if any woman wants to even look at you. Oh, I forgot, that’s right, you have money—money talks. The one I have in mind, she doesn’t care about money.”

“Ha! Doesn’t care about money—?”

“She is attracted to great minds.”

The old man raises his index finger to gather drips of ice cream off his plate. “I’d like to meet her. Ask my daughter how many women I’ve charmed, ah ha!”

“Let’s face it, at your age your pecker is probably out of order.” Sophie picks up the old man’s dessert plate. “Stop licking the plate. If you want to meet my friend, who is a great lady, behave like a gentleman.”



Dominique enters the Klosses’ salon dressed in a red miniskirt with a red top. Her hair is cut short, with enough waves to support a large red felt bow. Add a pair of red high heels and a patent red purse clutched between her nervous hands. The old man, instantly engrossed by the apparition, sees one color, one only: RED.

“I love her, she is my next wife,” exclaims the octogenarian Don Juan.

Ecstatic, he shuffles towards his new snuggly red bunny, grabs her, and kisses her cheeks and forehead. He caresses her hair, ears, everywhere he can in the split second before *the pas de deux* ends with the terrified Dominique propelling herself like a leaping gazelle to the safety of Sophie’s arms.

“Sophie, help! This guy is crazy.”

“No, he’s rich. Don’t worry.”

“He slobbered all over my face.”

“We’ll put his mouth covering back on. He will be okay.”

Dominique turns to me with the look of a lamb waiting to be sacrificed on the altar of the lecherous Greek god Eros.

“Keep him away from me.”

“See!” Sophie tells the old man. “She doesn’t want your money.”

“Not one dollar!” screams Dominique.

“No, no... you don’t understand.” Old Papa’s raucous voice rises with desperation. “I have been looking for the perfect wife. You are it. It’s love at first sight. I want to marry you.” He trembles from head to toe, like an old autumn sycamore’s leaf trying to hold on to the tip of a branch under constant attacks from gusty northern winds.

“Why should she marry you?” Sophie pats the mussiness from Dominique’s disarranged hair. “You are not a gentleman. You must behave and not act like a disgusting old goat.”

Sophie’s diplomacy manages to calm the situation on both sides. Sophie’s secret weapon—a glass of Burgundy for the frail red lamb, and for the now somewhat tamed and almost reasonable old fart, a tumbler of vodka straight. She sits Dominique in one of the white leather armchairs, opposite but at a safe distance from her presumed gentleman *prétendant*. For a short time, the Klosses’ living room is quiet.

“Dominique,” Old Papa mumbles, as if the name feels good on his gums, “I have my own place, you know, in Palm Springs.”

“That must be very nice,” our redhead replies. Kloss scoots a little closer.

“If you don’t want to marry me right away, at least can you be my companion.”

Dominique keeps her eyes on the raunchy old man’s hands, which dart towards her hair as he speaks.

“What kind of a companion?” she asks, a measure of warmth creeping into her voice.

“Oh, you know. Go out to restaurants, the theater—you like ballet? I’ve got season seats. I get tickets to all the big movie premieres, with the stars and all—you’ll meet some. Let’s see, we’ll walk on the beach. Party with the top of the top notch of the town. Do you play golf, tennis? I’ll take good care of you.”

“That’s all?”

“A woman’s touch around the house, a feminine presence to make my life...what’s left of it, pleasant and sweet. Someone to look after me...”

“I’m not a nurse.”

“We’ll get one.” The old man doesn’t miss a beat. “You won’t have to raise your little finger for anything, just grace my house with your beautiful self and, ahem, manage my finances.”

Dominique sways in her chair. Old Papa sips his vodka and turns a sad eye on the object of his affection.

“No hanky-panky?”

“Oh, my dear. On my honor.”

“I mean, no sex.”

Old Papa crosses his heart and lifts his glass. It is clear where Madame got her irresistible smile.

“Oh, all right. On trial.” Dominique raises her own glass and leans forward to give the old Kloss’s a little clink. “We’ll see how it goes.”

## Seven

“Sophie, you’re a darling. You got rid of my father!” Madame enters the kitchen with excited hands in the air. “He’s taking Dominique to Palm Springs. How can we ever thank you?”

“It was nothing. I like to bring people together.” Sophie smiles. “But if you want to say thanks, I wouldn’t mind a few days at your Tahoe house.”

Mrs. Kloss laughs with her head thrown back.

“Oh, you and your slot machines. I tell you what, Monsieur and I will do you one better. We have a ranch in Arizona, just outside of Laughlin. I’m sure you’ll love it. It’s a working ranch. Cows, horseback riding, everything.”

Sophie gives me a quizzical look.

“Sounds great,” I say. “I love *Bonanza*. Ben Cartwright, here we come.”

On our way to the golden ranch, we stop in Laughlin at the Colorado Belle Casino. Sophie’s love affair with the slot machines is something inexplicable. She’ll need enough time to allow a kissy kiss with the slots before we settle in to soak up the serenity of the Klosses’ ranch. With nothing more than inspiration, she’s able to pull out dollars from those unforgiving money-swallowing monsters. Any logical explanation for her winnings goes astray. Sophie’s wrestling with the one-armed bandits has added thousands of greenbacks to our Provence nest egg.

The Laughlin gambling dens are packed with well-heeled retirees. I wander in search of a bite to eat and find myself staring out at the great river and the vast, desolate landscape. The lights of the hotels and casinos glimmer as the sun touches the horizon. This speck on the map is a noisy sparkle of glamour in a howling wilderness. I wonder what is waiting for us across the river. The purple sage? Wolves singing in the night? Anyway, there will be loads of cold beer and juicy steaks. Mr. Kloss has a fondness for good whisky. I have no concern not to find a full-fledged bar.

I return to Sophie and help her count her winnings.

“Are you ready to head for the ranch? Is \$500 a big enough win for the night for Madame?”

“I might consider your offer. If you are nice to me, kiss me with a smile, and bring me croissants with my coffee in the morning.” Sophie’s belly laugh leads the way to hysterics on my part.

“Money, money, it’s only money.” I hug Sophie. “I am so glad to have a money machine for partner.”

We are greeted by a sign perched across the tops of two twenty-five foot tall posts. Decorated with silhouettes of riding cowboys, it reads Welcome to Little Creek Ranch.

The gravel path leads us past several car wrecks in various stages of rusting to an agglomeration of trailers, which have been attached together with sheets of plywood, angled to accommodate rainfall.

“A ranch?” Sophie hesitates to step out of the car. “I was expecting something more like the *Little House on the Prairie*.”

“Where is Michael Landon?” My laugh doesn’t persuade my partner to adopt a more jovial appreciation of this rather borderline, shantytown dwelling.

“This is disappointing. I don’t even want to stay here. Let’s go.”

A tall old bearded man, dressed in a frayed checkered shirt and khaki pants adorned with brownish circles surrounding the fly—a sure indication of several weeks of urine overflow—walks towards the car. It is too late to flee unnoticed. “Howdy,” says the man. “Welcome to Little Creek. You must be Sophie and Pierre?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kloss—” Sophie begins an explanation.

“I know, she called. Let me show you to your quarters.” The improvised guide waits patiently for us to join him for a stroll. “My name’s Bill. Anything you might need, lemme know.”

Bill proceeds into the maze of trailers, all furnished with eclectic leftover paraphernalia from the Salvation Army. We follow, bunched together like two frightened cattle, until we come to a small room near the back of the complex. Someone has recently abandoned these quarters, leaving behind many personal items, in a rush to make way for us maybe?

“For the toilet, you have to pump water,” Bill explains, pointing to the fixture in question.

“Use the lever to the right of the bowl, fill it up to three-quarters. Do not put toilet paper in the toilet, it’ll clog the plumbing.” His teeth show an amused smile between the matted rug of beard and his strangely well-coiffed mustache. “This is camping. It ain’t no city dwelling—ah ha. Well, enjoy your stay at the ranch.”

“Thanks, Bill,” I say, with a grin *à la* John Wayne with a dainty lady to protect hanging on his arm. “And how do we reach you if we have a question?”

“Use the house phone hanging on the wall. Breakfast is liver and grits, seven a.m. Hot dogs for lunch at noon. Tonight, dinner’s at six. My mother’s cookin’—beer aplenty in the ice boxes.”

“I won’t be able to stay in this place.” Sophie plunks herself down on a mattress with all the life exhausted from her. “They must put us where the Klosses stay.”

“I can’t see anywhere the Klosses *would* stay. The whole place looks more like a landmine-fill than a millionaire’s getaway.”

“Why did they send us here? This is our reward for dumping her horrible old father on poor Dominique?”

“Look on the bright side. I bet you anything, they’ll have ranch dressing on the salad.”

“You never take anything seriously. Come on, we can’t stay here.”

“We will try for one night.”

“What! Why? What are you thinking?”

“It’s an adventure, Cherie. Like in *Red River* or *My Darling Clementine*. You don’t know what may happen. One night. Then we go back to Laughlin for the rest of our vacation. Did you hear the gong? Hooray—It’s like on a real ranch, the call for dinner.”

Sophie wrings her hands. She is a tough lady underneath her Parisian flare. She rises and checks her hair in the dusty mirror.

“I don’t think I’m gonna like the food.” She takes my hand in hers and squeezes my fingers. “All right. Let’s see what this guy’s mother is cookin’?”

The main trailer is filled with rows of couches lined up like seats on a train. A dozen people roam around the room—young, middle-aged, older—and by the open kitchen the mother at the helm is cooking for the family. Bill waves us over and begins the introductions. “You are meeting my family—children, nephews and their girlfriends, boyfriends—what have you.” They, each and every one, in turn, raise whichever of their hands is holding a bottle of beer, their warm greetings accented with loud belches.

We raise our own beer bottles for companionability’s sake, without any belches, however, and add a classic salutation: “Nice to meet you.” Cheers from the gathering echo back, with a volley of approving belches.

The dining car grows more crowded as men in frayed checkered shirts enter in twos and threes. The air is full of the sweat of men wearing cowboy hats. I attempt conversation while Sophie slips away in the direction of the kitchen. My eye follows my shiny star through this maze of gaseous humanity. She stops suddenly, mummified on the spot by some strange sight.

Eager to tail Sophie, I duck and swing through a gymkhana of tall men and dangling bottles of Bud Light. In my distraction and hurry, I bump into a young woman, who goes over like a bowling pin, landing spread across on a red leather couch.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to dump beer on your shirt.”

“Whoa, cowboy, drink the shit—don’t waste it on people’s clothing.”

She winks at me.

“Sorry again. Maybe I should lick your shirt?”

“Yeah, you and ten thousand dudes would love lickin’ my tits.”

Sophie has materialized at my side.

“Stop the crap, come with me. Look—the mother cooking—she is blind.”

“Oh—You are right. Looks like she’s dumped the salt on the floor. She missed the pan?”

“She has also missed it with the spices, I guess, or something. The floor is covered with...I don’t know what.”

Sophie makes her way into the kitchen, the floor crunching under her sandals, and grabs Mother’s hand just as she is about to send a soup spoon full of gravy onto the kitchen floor.

“Let me help you, ma’am.”

“Leave me alone,” snarls Mother. “I don’t need any help. Who are you anyway?”

“My name is Sophie. We work for Mr. and Mrs. Kloss.”

“Oh, yes, the Beverly Hills folks. That’d be the daughter. I haven’t ever seen *them* at the ranch. You tell her to take time and pay a visit to her property, d’ya hear? She might like it.”

“I’ll make sure to let her know.” Sophie ducks to the left in time to avoid a swinging hot pan of beans. Defeated, she beats a hasty retreat.

“Too dangerous,” she tells me. “Let’s move to the back of the room. What’s going on in the corner?”

The old cowboy and a younger helper are perched on a ladder. They are dropping ceiling panels onto the heads of anyone not clever enough to move out of the way. Water is dripping into a bucket held up by a young girl.

“What are you guys doing?” I inquire.

“We have a leak from the water cooler. Tony and I are a-fix-in’.”

“Need help?” I ask, though my enthusiasm for this adventure is beginning to wear down.

“Yeah,” the helper cries, almost a shriek of gratitude. “Can you run to the Indian store and get five 24-packs of Bud Light?”

“Five—24-packs of beer? Who is coming?”

“Nobody coming isn’t already here.”

“Holy mackerel, that’s a lot of beer.”

“Not for this crowd,” Bill grunts. “We love our beer.”

“I’ll say. Come on, Love.” I gather up Sophie, who’s wilting hands and spinning head have landed with a thud on my shoulder. “Let’s go for a beer run.”

Once outside, Sophie is revived by the crisp desert air. “Do you really need to go and get the beer?”

“Shh. Follow me.”

We walk as if on eggshells to our room, grab our luggage, and scurry across the gravel to the car. Away in the night, the coyotes yip, the cows moo, and from the cantina an uninterrupted chorus of belching indicates our flight has not yet been discovered. Safe in the embrace of the Mercedes’ seatbelts, we drive off in the direction of Laughlin.

## Eight

With Sophie’s winnings, we splurge on a nice room. A morning of water skiing is followed by an afternoon at the spa. The sauna for me; the massage table for Sophie. A swim in the pool, a hot shower, and room service. The food isn’t much better than what Mother was slinging back at the ranch.

“I don’t know,” Sophie says pensively over a glass of decent but overpriced champagne.

“We can shift to Las Vegas tomorrow if you are tired of this place already.”

“No, I mean, I don’t know what to tell Mrs. Kloss.”

“Tell her her ranch is crap.”

“There is only one way to tell her that—with a demand for our wages.”

“Uh oh.”

“I did her a great favor, and this is her thanks.”

“They’ve never been there. Maybe—”

“Maybe, maybe. When I asked for Tahoe, did she think I wanted to punch cows on my days off?”

“On the other hand, Cherie, they have been good to us.”

“That’s true. I like this job. Madame Kloss is so easy.”

“How is Dominique getting on with the old guy?”

“I don’t know. I tried calling her today, several times. She doesn’t answer.”

“I guess he keeps her busy.”

“I left a message. Perhaps she will call tomorrow. I’m worried. I’m not sure she can handle that sort of a job.”



The white-water rafting takes most of the next day. On our return, we are met by the concierge, who races to catch us as we board the elevator.

“I hope it’s all right,” she says, holding the doors open with her manicured hand. “You have a visitor. She was so upset when I told her you wouldn’t be back till four—She asked if she could wait in the room. We checked on her several times.”

This is alarming news.

“Who? Who is in our room? Is it my daughter? Who?”

“Is your daughter named, uh, Dawn, no, Donna, no...”

“Dominique?” Sophie offers.

“That’s it! It’s all right, then?”

“I hope so.”

After opening the door for us and giving Sophie a quick hug, an exhausted Dominique drops on the couch and closes her eyes.

“He fired me. I can’t do it.”

After a single early evening at Benny Hana, Dominique tells us, the perks dried up. No theater, no ballet, no golf. And not a whole lot of money either. Mrs. Kloss sends her father an ample allowance, but it is hardly ample for his demands, especially when a racehorse gets involved.

The fancy dining turned out to mean feeding Papa, who sometimes swings into a depressive mood and needs to be cuddled like a baby. “I have to put him down to sleep with a lullaby—’Frère Jacques!’ He won’t stand for anything else. It’s ‘Frère Jacques,’ over and over.”

“You don’t say.”

“I rub his feet, for goodness sake, but—he insists on sex.”

Sophie is outraged. “The old fart is not eating in my kitchen anymore. He is banned. I don’t care who created the family empire, he is forbidden to come and eat at his daughter’s home. He insulted my niece—and myself by the same token, firing my flesh and blood. I will tell Madame, your father is a sick man, not even sick—a pig!”

“But what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Oh,” Dominique picks at a nail, which looks like she has been chipping away at it for some time. “I didn’t want to tell you on the phone. I was afraid you’d be mad at me.”

“Mad? At you?”

“I know you went to so much trouble to set this...job...up for me.”

“Wasn’t such an exciting occupation, rubbing the old man’s feet.”

“Plus, well, Sophie’s messages—I guess I was envious of all the waterskiing. How was the ranch?”

“Not to our taste.”

The hotel phone rings by the bed. Who can it be? Sophie picks it up.

“Hello.”

A man’s voice. I cannot make out what he says.

“Yes, we are. Who are you? Why?”

There is a long explanation by the male correspondent while Sophie ransacks the nightstand for a pencil and a sheet of hotel stationary. Her face is illuminated with a profound joy but she keeps her answers businesslike. “Yes, we are interested. Eleven o’clock tomorrow morning. We will be there. Thank you, Mr. Marlow. Have a good night.”

“Marlow?” I say. “Who is Marlow?”

“We will have to drive back tonight,” Sophie announces. “Dominique, the room is paid for. You stay and enjoy yourself. You need a good rest.”

“What will the Klosses say? D’ you think they’ll blame you somehow for me not, you know, keeping Papa happy?”

“Keeping Papa happy is their job, not yours.”

“Who is Marlow?” I ask. “Why are you so happy? What is going on?”

“We have a job interview—Tomorrow!”

## Nine

We whizz through Barstow as the moon rises. The road is ours.

The agent, Marlow, has clients who are frequently in France and need a couple who can accompany them when they travel. They favor a couple who can speak the language. The position will be partly in Bel Air, partly in France.

“It’s perfect for us, Pierre. We must get this job.”

It occurs to me. I have not been back to France in twenty years. Same for Sophie. This may be a test, to find out if we can readjust to our lost roots. The last four years, we have scrimped and saved and toiled away in the homes of the rich, all just to take our nest egg to Provence and enjoy a quiet retirement within the walls of our own dream house. We don’t need any millionaire’s mansion; whatever it will be, it will be a castle to us.

“How did he find us in Laughlin?”

“He tracked us to the Klosses and pretended to be a long-lost cousin. They gave him the number at the ranch, and they said we had left. He put two and two together and started calling all the hotels between Bullhead and Las Vegas.”

“Easy on the driving, Love. We want to arrive at our interview in one piece.”

“He wants us, Pierre. We must be a hot item for him to go to so much trouble. We are going to ask a bundle.”

I raise my thumb up. “But, what’s the saying? Don’t sell the bear before you get the fur or something like that.”

“Perrette et le pot au lait.”

“Oh, yes—I haven’t heard this expression for quite a while. It will translate, Don’t sell the milk before it’s milked from the cow.”

“I like it best in French,” Sophie says as the lights of Victorville glimmer ahead.

Marlow has a vintage ivory pince-nez stuck on top of his nose. His thick fingers run along the edge of the folder, pressing the loose sheets of paper inside. The cigarette burning in the corner of his mouth stands out like a sore thumb in the middle of an office wasteland stacked with cardboard boxes. My catty-corner look in Sophie's direction is met with a quick jut of the chin.

"These people are very important," the agent tells us. "They've been my clients for a long time." Marlow gives us the customary lecture. "I need you to stay on the job for several years. This is not a fly-by-night type of job. This is a steady job."

Sophie nods. "That's exactly what we are looking for—a steady job."

"It's an easy one too. Only the two of them. There's a live-in maid. They need French speaking people. They own a chateau in the French countryside and their daughter lives in Bordeaux. They visit their grandchildren at least twice a year."

"When do we start?" asks an eager Sophie.

"We're waiting for Mrs. Constantine. I sent her your dossier last night, but she'd like to interview you herself first."

As if on cue, the door opens and Madame appears.

Most of the time the lady of the house is in her early forties, the hubby somewhat older. This time, she is a slim sixtyish lady. Her face bears fine lines as if they were costly accessories; she must have been very pretty a few years back. She stands straight, a pearl necklace and matching earrings glow against the skin of her neck and her blown-up white hair. She wears black from hat to shoes; very unusual for California. Her hands are covered with a pair of gloves, also black. Her bright pink lipstick is the only spot of color visible on her whole persona. She steps into the room with assurance, then stops as if waiting for someone or something to happen.

Her eyes skip over us and find the agent, who has already risen from his chair and is making his way around the desk. Pointing a finger in our direction, Mrs. Constantine asks, "Are those the two—the two you recommend?"

Marlow, with a beaming smile, rushes to slide a worn out green patent leather chair under his prized client. "Yes, they are. They are, Madame—A cup of tea?"

"Yes, you know the one I love." She stealthily pulls her dress down in a smoothing motion as she sits and sets her Gucci purse on top of her knees. From it she extracts a folded piece of paper, her eyes fixed on Sophie. She pauses before reading from it with a perfect French accent. "*Vous êtes Sophie et Pierre Martin?*"

I have learned after a succession of interviews that it's best to let Sophie take care of the quizzes—the usual succession of questions regarding our past and what our goals are, how long we expect to work for Madame and Monsieur Constantine, and in this case, whether we are willing to travel to France. The daughter, who is married to a French businessman, has a chateau along the Loire River in the neighborhood of the Kings' Chateaux.

Sophie explains that our own apartment in Santa Monica is managed year-round in such a way that we are able to both live in, if the employer requires, and travel as necessary. In fact, our neighbor across the hall waters the plants when he remembers. The studio is rent controlled, so it costs us very little to retain a modest home base between jobs. I know Sophie's heart beats as hard as mine through the inquisition. It does not show in her cool demeanor.

The money part usually makes or kills the deal. Madame Constantine must have been forewarned by the agency as she doesn't squawk at the amount she has to shed to enjoy our company. She concludes the interview with, "When can you start?"



# Ten

Our new home with the Constantines is high above Sunset Boulevard. We live in a separate cottage from the main house at the top of a sprawling Japanese garden that meanders down the hillside.

“Have you talked to the maid?”

Sophie and I spend our first day in separate spheres. Mr. Constantine sees me as a kind of human appendage. I accompany him to his club, though I mostly wait in the lobby with the chauffeur. We make a quick stop at the bank, where I open the door for him. One more stop on the way home. This time Monsieur waits in the car while I run into the shop and get him a box of his favorite cigars. He checks my purchase to make sure I got the right stuff. Satisfied, he relaxes into the leather upholstery and begins a conversation with the chauffeur about smog filters and the smog preventer being the death of the automobile. Sophie and I meet again in the late afternoon. She has already begun dinner preparations.

“The maid? No, I haven’t met her yet. What’s she like?”

“She is French.”

“You don’t say.”

“Her name is Therese.”

“What does she say about the job?”

“I didn’t even ask. She must like it. She’s been with them for twenty-five years.”

“Holy smoke. Can you imagine twenty-five years from now, you and I—”

“Don’t even think of it. Just hearing it, I was ready to call it quits.”

“What— I shouldn’t unpack the bags?”

Sophie shrugs. “They are too old. It’s going to be boring.” She chops the parsley with a disappointed air. “The house is so depressing. The windows are never open, there is no fresh air. Everything is dark. They keep the lights dimmed, and they want the curtains kept closed. Those paintings, on every wall in the house, so many—they are so dark and somber.”

“They are worth a fortune. They are from the Rembrandt school. All the paintings are rigged to an alarm system, in case someone tries a heist.” I cannot tell if Mr. Constantine likes the artwork, but he is very attached to his alarm system. Sophie’s shrug is followed by a sudden smile.

“A package from Perigord came today. Their daughter sent a *foie gras*. They want it for dinner tonight.”

“A real foie gras from France? Do they understand what foie gras is?”

“I am sure they do. The daughter in Bordeaux must feed them all the French delicacies when they visit.”

“Bah!” I am dubious. “They probably have the same palate as most Americans. Out of tune from eating too many Big Macs and drinking Diet Cokes to oblivion.”

“These people have never eaten fast food in their life.” Sophie is adamant. “Although ... it would be a shame if the foie gras went to waste.”

“Yes, a shame. A crime! What about a substitute?” I suggest. “Say, the market foie gras from Olida? It’s French. Not like the real thing, I have to admit—not the same price either. Would they ever know the difference?”

“I don’t know. They might,” Sophie says, as she starts cooking. “Can you help me with tonight’s dinner?”

“Yes, what do you want me to do?”



Madame descends the huge mahogany staircase carved with roman figurines. The red carpet is a private touch, reminiscent of her heyday when she walked the one in front of the Chinese theater. Framed pictures on the mantelpiece attest a glorious past. Her long green evening dress sparkles at every step; she holds her head straight and with the arrogance of a princess. A simple gold choker adorns her neck, while a huge diamond overshadows her wedding band. Her majesty is preceded by a whiff of the Shalimar perfume that she has poured all over herself. She looks ready for the director to yell: Action! Monsieur in his jammies is already seated at the head of the table with fork and knife in hands, salivating on account of the pungent aroma of Sophie's Peking duck.

"You will never guess what the old man did?" I blurt, returning to the kitchen after the first course.

"He did not like the appetizers?"

"To the contrary. With his fork, before I was finished serving Madame, he stretched out and picked a slice of prosciutto from the platter, which he swallowed in one gulp before I was even next to him—as if it was the last time he will ever be allowed to taste one again."

"He is starving or what?"

"I guess."

"What about her?"

"All she cares about is more Champagne. They are on bottle number two right now. She really likes the Alfred Gratien Cuvée Paradis."

"Ah, now I understand why she looks like she floats on a white cloud most of the time. By the way, why don't you open a bottle for us? I could use a glass of Champagne myself."

The dinner progresses. Sophie's master dishes are eaten without complaint, and I whisk each new course to the table in a timely manner, including the mostly untouched faux foie gras. As the pair leave the table, Madame surprises me with an unusual request.

"Guess what she asked me?"

"What?"

"She asked me to save her last glass of Champagne and to put it in the refrigerator for tomorrow."

We have seen and heard many strange things from the rich for whom we have worked. This is a new one on us. Sophie raises her glass. "To you and me, to stale Champagne!"

We quickly clean the kitchen. It has been a long day, but we are buoyed by the Constantines' Cuvée Paradis. The dishwashing machine croons, while I attempt a pas de deux with the broom.

"Do you think you are Nureyev?" Sophie laughs at me. Her laughter is contagious. "I'll serve our dinner when you are finished with the floor."

I throw the broom on the floor and grab a glass of Champagne. The table is set, the duck keeping warm in the oven.

"What do you think? Is this job for us?"

I raise my glass to Sophie.

"Good Champagne. Foie gras, direct to us from France. At first impression, all right!"

# Eleven

A picnic for a dozen women has been suggested by Madame. The garden is beautiful, with a gracious lawn surrounding an Olympic size swimming pool. Beyond the house's own backyard garden is the upper edge of the botanical garden, full of exotic specimens. Technically, the garden belongs to UCLA. The Constantines' philanthropic donation has relieved them of the expenses and incidentally a chunk of their taxes.

"Should I set tablecloths and picnic baskets on the lawn?"

"She did not mention the lawn—she wants the lanai."

"The lanai, why?" I am perplexed. "It's beautiful outside."

"No outside—You need to set up the lanai for twelve. Only ladies. They are part of the organization Just Say NO to Drugs."

"A picnic inside the house. That is a first."

"They are afraid to catch a cold."

"It's in the eighties!"

"So are they." Sophie winks at me. "No luck for you."

"What's the menu?"

"Salads, sandwiches, and apple tart with ice cream for dessert."

"Any wine?"

"You are to serve cocktails, then Champagne for the rest of the meal."

"How are you doing with your women?" Sophie inquires as she hands me a tray loaded with cold cuts, a variety of ten different salamis, all imported from France. The pantry at this house is the best stocked we have ever encountered. "Do they eat their salads and sandwiches?"

"Some do. Others concentrate on a wet lunch. Those ladies drink." I deliver my report. "Heavy stuff—vodka straight and a few repeats, mind you. It must be their way to fight colds. Listen, Love." I am eager to tell Sophie the latest. "I just heard the very best speech."

"A speech?"

"Yes, one of the women got up and gave a brief speech. I was mesmerized."

"What did she say?"

"NO!"

"No?"

"You just have to say NO to drugs."

"Did she really say that?"

"Yes, she did. All the other crows stood up and applauded. Problem solved, I guess."

"Stop criticizing everybody and start clearing the table."

"Okay, Sweet Pea. Do you care for a glass of Champagne?"

"Too early. You shouldn't either. Wait for me. Six o'clock will come soon enough."

"It's six p.m. somewhere in the world." I raise my glass. "To the well-thinking ladies. N-O, NO is the word of the day."

Most of the entertainments at the Constantines' are of the philanthropic sort. Early, elegant, and elderly. The money flies among the favored charitable foundations on these occasions, but dinner is invariably for two. Madame and Monsieur's Francophilia unexpectedly pushes Sophie to greater and greater culinary heights. We eat well. But between meals, the atmosphere of the

house is stifling and dull. We have heard nothing of the family's chateau and little of the daughter in Bordeaux. An oppressive sense of dread seeps into our bones. One night, Sophie's head drops upon the pillow.

"I feel I am dead before my time."

"Does this mean we pack?"

I feel a tear deep in my soul. Mr. Constantine isn't particular and offers no criticism, but he needs company and allows me little time to myself. I am always on call to fetch whatever little thing he wants but doesn't care to fetch himself. Cigars, brandy, a newspaper. If Therese is late with his pills, I must fetch her too. Still, he's easy, and there is a steady supply of imported goods that smell and taste of home. My heart clings to the promise of a trip to the old country.

"Not yet. It's only been a month. Something may happen ... soon."

## Twelve

Sophie bursts into the kitchen as I prepare a sandwich for my lunch.

"Therese just walked into the boss's office wearing diamond earrings and a diadem studded with diamond and pearl—for this special occasion, I guess?"

"Which is?"

"Anytime Madame leaves the house."

"What do you say—something is going on—right now in the old man's office?"

"Obviously," Sophie snorts. "Madame is gone and Therese is all dressed up with high heels and a short dress."

"Hard to picture."

"She ain't the maid that we know."

"Did she tell you anything about it?"

"Of course. She and Mr. Constantine have had a sexual relationship since she came to work for them."

"The old man is a Don Juan?"

"She bought a house in France with the money she has saved—I guess from the extra duty residuals."

"It is not with her maid's salary that she would ever be able to buy a house."

"The usual story. He has always told her that he will divorce Madame and marry her. That was a very long time ago."

"Twenty-five years, I bet."

"She is still waiting."

"She is a real believer."

"I guess." Sophie takes up the baguette and begins to assemble a sandwich for herself.

"Should I walk in right away?" I feel the warmth of a beaming smile overtaking my face.

"Don't, Pierre!" Sophie stabs the knife into the mayonnaise. "Wait five minutes—until they are right in the action, then walk in."

"I'll pretend I have to come to organize the office, as per Madame's orders."

"That's good."

"What do you think he will say?"

"He won't say anything. Someone caught red handed is always in a weak position. It will be all yours."

“We will be able to make him sing any song we want.” My twisted mind is already at work. “‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ maybe?”

I attack my lunch like a wolf, with one eye on the clock, as Sophie muses. “He is afraid Madame could discover the plot. It could mean a disastrous series of events.”

“Just what this place needs,” I say between bites.

“Not too disastrous—I am beginning to like it here.”

“Should I go in—Now?” It’s a minute short of five, but I am eager.

“Go—” Sophie can’t help herself and smothers a burst of laughter.

With an air of nonchalance, I walk into Mr. C’s office.

Shuffle, brouhaha, chair screeching on the parquet.

“Hey... hey, what are you doing?” Monsieur, red in the face, tries to swing the armchair in the opposite direction from where I come.

“Hello. Madame told me to organize the office for you. She has specifics, a whole list. Do you want to see it?”

“See it ... No. Don’t stay where you are—Don’t stay here... Come back later. Much later. I’m busy.”

I can see blonde hair between Mr. Constantine’s open legs. Romeo is keeping the busy head down, way down, with a manila folder, which he uses to thump Theresa’s diadem while attempting to screen the view.

“Don’t mind me,” I say cheerily. “Keep on doing what you were doing. I will not be in your way. I have this whole list to do before Madame comes home.”

“Pierre, please, go. I need to be alone. You understand—” His crimson forehead has broken out in a sweat. He clenches his dentures. “Alone!”

“I will be quick. I have to complete this job before Madame comes back from her lunch.” A little hand slithers up from the mound of blond hair, swats at the folder. The old man’s face gets redder and redder. He is now gasping for air, and I can only chuckle at the idea of what Therese is doing to breathe. The old fart doesn’t know what to do. He squirms in his armchair as I lift the wastepaper basket. The anxious glance of the old guy begs for a reprieve. But the game is not yet up. The cat will not give him an inch of leeway—not while he still hopes to escape. As I dust and straighten, the face of the one-time powerful CEO grows haggard. He must be calculating in his head how much it is going to cost him to get out of this situation. The expenses of the lady cooped up between his legs is one thing, but now there is a third person in the picture. His guilty conscience knows this is not going to resonate too well with Mama when she comes home—just how much will my silence cost him?

Don Juan whimpers softly. “Please..., go.”

“Pardon, may I help you?”

Monsieur wiggles on his seat. He doesn’t try anymore to move Therese’s head out of sight, but puts his own head in his hands.

“Can I pour you a drink, sir?” I move directly behind him and open the chest where he keeps his favorite bottle of scotch.

“No, no thanks—please.” The voice is pathetic. Shall I take pity?

Therese, crammed under the desk, still with her head down, cups the old man’s penis with both hands to protect it from unwanted observation.

“Does Mademoiselle need some water?”

At a shake of her head, I walk from the room. On the threshold, I turn and give the frayed Casanova the full warmth of my beaming smile.

“Mr. Constantine, do you want me to close the door?”

The disastrous series of events do not ensue. No explosion of tempers, no looting of the Rembrandt school, no matters of honor. A day, two days, three days pass and things are just as usual at the Bel Air mansion. The old fellow behaves as if nothing ever happened. Madame has not uttered so much as a puff of steam. Therese, back in maid’s duds, giggles but says naught.

But all is not as quiet as it seems. There is a stir, barely detectable at first—an uptick in phone calls, a change of hair style, the purchase of new luggage.

“Guess what?” Sophie’s joy lights up the morning. “We are going to France.”

“We are going to France? We are not leaving the job yet?”

“Madame says they will be attending their granddaughter’s birthday party. She turns eleven in two weeks. Two weeks!”

I hug Sophie and swing her in a languorous tango. “Cherie, you always wanted to go to France. Here ‘tis.”

“I am so happy. Although it’s only temporary. Only two months.”

“Two months is better than nothing. Sweet Pea, that is plenty of time to find a house in Provence!”

“Oh, Pierre. My France, I have been missing her for so long.” Sophie picks up a bottle of Bordeaux. “Open it up, please. We are celebrating tonight.”

## Thirteen

“Direct flight 237 from Los Angeles has landed. Passengers will exit through Gate 21. All visitors, please stay behind the yellow line. Thank you.”

The French female’s voice on the airport’s public address system makes Sophie smile.

“We are home!”

I dash in the direction of the baggage claim, instantly swallowed by the crowd, while Sophie leads the Constantines through Charles de Gaulle airport. The party needs to hire two cabs to account for Madame’s extra suitcases. Parisian cabs do not accept more than three pieces of luggage per haul. On arrival at the hotel, the cab driver asks for a horrendous fee for the ride.

“This is more like New York!” I take Mr. Constantine’s elbow to keep him from reaching for his wallet and use my choicest French insults to shout at the cabby. “You cab drivers must have an international code—Twelve thousand francs we will never pay. It’s an outrage. I will call the police.”

The charge is adjusted and a grateful Mr. Constantine gives me a tap on the shoulder.

“He heard us speak English,” I explain. “He thought he could get away with tripling his rate.”

“Well, thanks for taking care of us. We never could have figured this out by ourselves.”

Mr. Constantine stands grinning with embarrassment, patting himself down looking for cigars. His baffled wife leans on Sophie’s arm, her fine white hair floating in the breeze.

These seasoned travelers are such easy targets. They will need love and tender care.

The Hotel Crayon 25 Rue du Bouloi, right in downtown Paris and minutes away from Le Louvre, is a five star, old-fashioned hotel. The subdued lighting from a chandelier, which hangs as a centerpiece, gives a warmth to the lobby. The furniture is art deco with a twist of modernism. The concierge, a middle-aged man, takes his time informing the new arrivals of all

the shows, nightclubs, and every possible entertainment for the night, without forgetting details of all the ways to eat one's way to oblivion with any type of cuisine offered in this world, French on top of the list.

We dedicate the next couple of days to escorting the Constantines to museums and art galleries, which is Madame's passion. Several paintings are purchased and ordered shipped to Los Angeles.

"Money's no object! They have already spent over \$25,000 on artwork and we are in Paris less than three days." Sophie undresses, uncharacteristically letting her various garments drop to the floor. "I am pooped. I forgot how much one can walk in Paris. The bed is so comfortable—this will be a well-earned good night's sleep."

The last leg of the trip to the chateau starts at Gare de Lyons. The four of us arrive at the station and await the luggage, which has multiplied with last minute purchases. The train station is crowded with travelers. As I keep a lookout for danger, the baggage arrives. I inspect the suitcases and turn to Sophie, only to see over her shoulder that the Constantines have wandered off. They are approaching the pier with the sign: DIRECTION ANGERS.

"Those porters are thieves, always trying to stick it to tourists. Nobody is going to do it to our bosses. That is our job—can't have competition."

Sophie keeps watch over the giant pile of luggage, while I chase down the Constantines. A deal is quickly arranged with the conductor, and we are off to the south of France.

The super fast trains crisscrossing Europe travel at more than 200 miles an hour. The chateau, in the small town of Montlivault on the Loire River, near the famous Chateau Chambord, is a mere two-hour ride from Paris.

Max the housekeeper, a stout man with dark brown, deep-set eyes, greets Monsieur and Madame with warm greetings and hugs. To us, he extends a weak handshake. "Welcome to *le manoir*." His salutation is a tour guide's mix of English and French, his tone aloof, his face like stone.

Max has set up the fire in the imposing fireplace of the grand salon. "It wakes up the traditional chateau ghosts," he says. They come alive in the quivering shadows and flashes of subdued light that flicker on the stone walls of this four-hundred-year-old construction. The logs of rosewood crackle, the heat fills the room. A bottle of Dom Perignon chills in a silver bucket. On a glass table with a base of carved cherry wood is a tray of cheeses, ham, cold turkey, and a selection of salamis to tantalize the weary travelers, all catered by the Constantine's favorite local restaurant, La Cheminée.

The Constantines are tired, though, and long for bed. We are soon left alone with the undecipherable housekeeper. He gives us elaborate details about life at le chateau. He hands us a slew of old-fashioned keys, meant to open all the various doors—bedrooms, cellars, attics, and oubliettes—of the property. Sophie swings a couple of the large keys in her hands.

"I am going to need help, just to even carry the front door key."

Max emits a chilly laugh. Understandable, of course. The chateau is his when the Constantines are away. Our presence has displaced him. Another word, and he has fulfilled his duties. For the next two months, he will be with his wife in Marseilles.

"The house car is a silver Renault," he tells us, adding a slender car key to the pile. "The tank is full. It was serviced a couple days ago. It's ready to go. All yours."

Once settled in our quarters, we can't wait to set out for our first load of groceries. Sophie's pace gets upped a notch as we approach the supermarket.

“Whoa!” I can’t help stopping in amazement as we enter the store. “This has to be ten times bigger than a Walmart.”

“Ten times,” Sophie laughs. “Not quite—maybe one and a half times.”

“Food, food—only food.”

“Look at the salami section. They must have a hundred choices.”

Ham, dozens. Chickens, from different regions of France. Corn fed. “And see, le Poulet de Bresse,” Sophie sighs. It is expensive—twice the price of any other chicken. But an unforgettable savor.

“Well,” I say, “Madame will not compromise. How many should we get?”

Right away, we need a bigger cart. Section after section, it is impossible to stock up too much.

“Look... look, here. Eggs from Poland, from Hungary, from the Ukraine.”

“This is Europe, the common market. Look here, cheeses from Spain, Italy, Holland, Ireland, the UK.”

“Well, if you add all those cheeses to the more than one thousand French cheeses it might take a bit of time to get a complete cheese tour.”

“Who is in a rush? And what a fun tour.”

We save the wine section for last.

“More than ten thousand chateaux in Bordeaux—We’d better start drinking if we have any idea of visiting even a tenth of those.”

“This store is paradise on earth.”

“A temple to the pleasures de la table.”

“I find a renewed life ... my youth!” Sophie wipes a tear away as we pile our purchases on the conveyor belt. “All the wonderful foods I grew up with. You cannot find such a variety anywhere else in the world.”

“Considering the climate and its geographical situation,” I say, “France is the California of Europe.”

It has taken only a few days to feel like we never left France.

## Fourteen

While the Constantines are on a trip to Périgord to attend their granddaughter’s birthday, we have four days free. We are ecstatic.

“Provence, here we go! Let’s find our nest.”

Sophie drives the Renault the first part of the trip. Provence is fairly large, from Avignon to Marseilles to the west, and up and east to the Italian border. “The smell, the smell, I remember. This is Provence. Fields of lavender, a smell impossible to forget. It’s heaven on earth.” Sophie has opened the car window and fills her lungs with the divine perfumes exhaled from the countryside. “Look, look, the houses—all with terracotta roof tiles and painted wood shutters on every window.”

Sophie’s eyes are everywhere to take in every bit of scenery rolling in front of us, while the car follows tortuous country roads through Provence. “Hey, here, I have an idea,” she says, “to sell wooden shutters in the states. They are so efficient to keep the hot or the cold out.”

“Good idea, but impractical. The windows in the US are not designed to support heavy wooden shutters.”

“True. We must look for a place with beautiful wooden shutters.”



We stay in local B&Bs to get the real feel of Provence, and there are a couple of must stop-in Michelin starred restaurants. Most of the trip is dedicated to working with real estate agents to visit as many for sale houses as possible—three to four visits a day. With only one day left, Sophie is quite disappointed. Our quest for a quick purchase has been futile.

“Everything is more expensive than we thought.”

Maurice the real estate agent, who has guided us for the last two days, waves a flyer when we enter his office on our final morning of shopping. “I think I have what you are looking for.”

The gem is a watermill with a big wheel still in place. It has two bedrooms, a spacious kitchen, a living room with a gargantuan stone fireplace, and a large room adjacent to the house, obviously used as a stable and big enough to keep four or five cows.

Sophie inspects the plumbing, the little there is of it—the house is unspoiled by modern pipes and fixtures—while I stand with my back to the great hearth, imagining a roaring fire warming the seat of our pants and contemplating the big wheel. I love it. On the edge of the river, the house is solid, made of stone—big ones, carried from the river banks and laid by someone’s hands eons ago. The rooms are large. We can convert the stable into a very comfortable guest bedroom. The property is the right size, no neighbors on top of us. It has big wooden shutters, a little rotten but nothing a coat of paint won’t hide.

Back at le chateau, we scan through the list of homes visited. We have many notes and penciled out projections to show for the tap, tap, tap of the adding-machine, calls to contractors, sorting out feasible opportunities. It is a mere exercise. Some of the houses are beautiful but far beyond what we could afford, even if we worked another decade. One by one, we strike out the dozen or so rejects. All along, our preference leans towards the run-down watermill, but we are almost afraid to say it, shy of jinxing our dream. At last, it cannot be avoided. Sophie heaves an exaggerated sigh and says, as if such a long shot is hardly worth mentioning, “What about the one with a lot of overgrown land sloping to the river. Yes, I know what you are going to say. It’s a fixer-upper.”

“A fixer-upper with six acres to trim and keep up. Did you see that big oak? And the fruit trees, and the vineyard. A lot of work.”

“I like the kitchen. With all the old beams and the posts in the stone walls,” says Sophie. “Although the cement floor—I don’t know?”

“Not a lost cause. Artfully painted with a rubbing of colored cement, it will be stunning.”

“Stunning but cold.”

“Thick carpets will do the trick. The fireplace will come in handy. There is plenty of grapevine and rootstock to replenish the old ones in the region.”

“Oh, yes, you are right, and it smells so good. But, Pierre. A fixer upper...?”

“There is nothing wrong with the building,” I assure her. “They used granite stones. It will need electrical and all new plumbing and some paint...”

“Sounds expensive. How much will it cost to fix it?”

“Maurice got three bids. \$35,000 to \$60,000.” I push the agent’s note and the watermill flyer across the table to Sophie. “We almost have the money to buy the house. We can make an offer. Looks like they haven’t had an offer for a while—they might be eager to sell for a little less. For the remodel, we can pay our way through each job. By my calculations, we will need to work two more years, but it will take that long to fix the place up anyway.” I drop my pencil and smile at my partner, offering her a big high five.

“I am going to find someone who will do the job for even less.” Sophie winks. “We have almost achieved our goal.”

“Shall we call Maurice?”

“Yes, let’s do it.”

I seize a Champagne bottle from the fridge. In my eagerness, I splash some in a glass, without forgetting the tablecloth.

“Be careful, this bottle is a good one, no waste allowed.” Sophie raises her glass as I fill my own. “Cheers.”

But I am not destined to share Sophie’s toast. Madame Constantine, from across the chateau, calls for help. I put my glass down and set off to rescue the aged damsel from her distress. Monsieur has gone off to a French club to smoke a round of cigars. She is alone, her plaintive cries echoing across the high, vaulted ceiling. I find her in the library, standing straight, her arms folded, her eyes rolled upward.

“Madame?”

“Please, Pierre, can you help me to reach a book on that shelf.”

“Certainly.”

“I can’t reach this upper shelf. Can you lift me?”

“Tell me which book you want, I’ll get it for you.”

“You don’t understand. I am not sure which book I want.” Her voice is sharp. It has punctured my mood. “The top shelf, just above here. Please lift me.”

Lifting the old lady is not the worst of tasks—she barely outweighs the gold on her body, but the scene is as close to awkward and incongruous as could be.

“Lift me higher.”

Her piercing voice gets right into my backbone.

“To the left more. Higher. I keep drooping.”

“Are you nuts or something?” I drop the old lady like a sack of potatoes. “Who do you think you are? I am not your slave to carry you around in my arms.”

Stunned for a moment, Madame Constantine seems to have lost control of all the words that she ever gathered since childhood. She stares at me as if she is going to burst. Her tiny eyes start to bulge, her mouth stretches to speak, but no words come out to express her stupor. I leave her, to find Sophie for, I hope, a good belly laugh.

Monsieur returns and dinner is served. The chateau seems draftier and more poorly lit than usual, but otherwise there is no sign of any mishap from the old lady.

“Do you think that we are fired?” Sophie opens the window to let the warm air flow into the bedroom.

“She came into the kitchen after you left. She asked for a glass of milk and chocolate chip cookies for the old guy. She did not mention anything about our little episode in the library.”

“This little old lady is resilient. I like that.”

“It’s like nothing happened.” I shrug in my perplexity.

“That’s good, don’t complain. You keep trying to get us fired.” Sophie stretches her arms and heads for the shower. “I am so excited about our house. With so many improvements to be done, we have to stick to this job for a while.”

# Fifteen

Mrs. Constantine and Mrs. Garland face off across the dining table. The Gs are rare guests at the chateau. The husband is the reigning baron in an ancient lineage of rum barons dating back to the pilgrims almost. Mrs. Garland married into the money with a vengeance. She is overdressed and easily recruited—for a staggering sum—to join the board of one of Madame Constantine’s charities. Her eyes wander towards me, looking me up and down. I have the strange sensation of being weighed.

“Every time I go in there, I feel like a prized sheep.”

“What prized sheep?” Sophie concentrates on the dessert. “What are you talking about?”

I pile the dirty plates on the counter. Mrs. Garland has practically licked hers clean. Madame has hardly touched hers.

“Something is up. Mrs. Constantine is off her feed.”

“Is she sick?”

Sophie looks up, concerned.

“I don’t think so.”

Madame does not speak to me these days if she can help it. And when she must say something, she turns her ear in my direction instead of her face. Monsieur has noticed. He runs his daily rounds without a word to me. The chateau has grown noticeably frosty.

Still, they pay on time. Our nest egg grows every week as we await the close of our real estate deal. The Constantines plan to return to Bel Air at the end of next week. The temptation to quit and remain in Provence grows day by day—if only we didn’t need the money so badly.

“It’s ready,” Sophie puts down her piping bag and gestures towards her masterpiece. “If Madame does not eat that, we may as well resign.”

“You think...”

“I don’t know. But she would not look me in the eye all day. Take it in now. Go.”

Mrs. Constantine carves off a thin piece of the dessert and places it on her tongue like a Roman senator savoring hemlock. Mrs. Garland forks a wad in her cheeks and spins her eyeballs as it melts down her throat. She winks at her husband, who has already inhaled his piece.

“Deal,” she says.

Mrs. Constantine examines her napkin. “Pierre?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“Ask Sophie to come out.”

“Yes, indeed.”

It is not unusual for the chef to emerge after a spectacular meal and take a bow. I am relieved that she continues the practice. She can’t be ready to fire us if she drags us out for the guests to applaud. I am back in a flash with Sophie, who has tossed her apron and arranged her hair. You could never tell she has been in the fiery inferno of cooking a ten-course dinner party. We present ourselves, ready for our plaudits.

“Sophie,” says Madame. “Pierre. I know how much you would like to remain in France. The Garlands have consented to buy out your contract.”

I am flabbergasted.

Sophie’s chin pops out a little. “Was the meal satisfactory?” she says in a frozen voice.

“Oh, yes!”

The four of them put their hands up and clap.

“We have not been consulted,” Sophie resumes as the hands all drop into laps. “We are quite happy working for you, and we have a home of our own in Santa Monica, which makes our job with you quite convenient for us.”

“Ten percent more,” says Mrs. Garland.

“And we spend half the year in Palm Beach,” adds Mr. G. “You can fly over to Santa Monica on your days off, if you like.”

“We have a private hotel near L’ Etoile. Of course, it’s nothing like this...” Mrs. Garland swept her glance over the cavernous dining room with its dark walls and dark floors and heavily draped windows. “But Paris is lovely in spring. Won’t you come to us?”

## Sixteen

I hand Sophie a wire for Madame Garland from her staff in Switzerland. “What do you think about this?” It is signed: “Your most obliged servants.”

“If she expects us to be her servants, she is in for a rude awakening.”

The Garlands live in an exclusive neighborhood in Paris, but it was a wrench to leave our windmill in Provence just as the ink was dry on the deal.

The rooms are bright but the atmosphere is tense. There are two maids, a chauffeur, and a guy with a bicycle who runs errands for Mr. Garland. We are told to expect two decorators, who will be staying for several weeks.

“Did you see the plans for the new Palm Beach house?”

“Is that what the pile of scrolls is in the salon?”

“Yeah. Fifteen thousand square feet. She wants it built in a year.”

“A year? Then I hope it’s nice. We may actually live there.”

“Not likely,” I tell her. “They haven’t even torn down the old house yet.”

The next week, the decorators arrive. Skinny, fair, of middle height, impeccable from the tips of their hair to the toes of their shoes, they are in the middle of the living room, their shirt sleeves rolled up, stepping over plans, brochures, architectural magazines, and what not. They are so alike I cannot remember which is which. I wave my arms and call both at once. “Beau and Ambrose!”

“Pierre!”

“What are you doing here?”

“Where’s Sophie?”

“Not up yet. Café?”

“Love some.”

“Ahem.”

Mrs. Garland is on the sofa, a white feather boa draped casually over her shoulders, a white ivory cigarette holder in her right hand. On either side of her is a cigar-shaped dog with droopy eyes. They leave dark hair on her white sweatpants.

“Back to business, if you don’t mind. Bring the coffee out here, Pierre.”

Sophie is delighted our dear friends from Montecito will be joining the household. In some ways, this bright Paris hotel is more dismal than the Constantines' lightless chateau. Even the tekels lack the fidelity of self-respecting dogs and turn a cold shoulder to us in the presence of Madame.

"We're going out to buy them a basket." Beau or Ambrose winks at Sophie.

"Mrs. Garland wants them to shed in it instead of on her clothes," explains the other one.

"So could we have our lunch now?"

"What about a caesar salad with a glass of Beaujolais?" Sophie offers. "I have a great selection of cheeses."

"Sophie, you are the best."

After they are gone to ransack all the pet stores of Paris, we sit down to our own lunch. The Beaujolais is fair. Mr. Garland keeps the keys to the main cellar and we make do with a supply put up for the staff.

"That is going to be an expensive basket," I say.

"Yes, it will be. Those dogs have her well-trained."

A routine is quickly established. Beau and Ambrose escort Madame to select wallpapers and wood panels. Marbles are discussed at length for the kitchen counters and bathroom floors. The threesome are chauffeured to lighting stores for chandeliers. After dinner discussions in the living room center on all the plans to be deployed, like an infantry colonel planning the onslaught of the enemy. The brothers or whatever they are masterfully handle Madame in all her piques and rages. She listens to them, enrapt.

"Madame, you have great taste."

"Yes?"

"You really do, but..."

"But?"

"Adding the blue to the lanai is counter-effective. We need to go for yellow or pink or maybe purple, to pick up the colors in the Picasso. A million dollar painting has to be featured in its proper surroundings, every detail refined. Right?"

The silver-templed decorator winks at Sophie, who unfolds her arms and rocks one hand in a so-so gesture. His face falls with disappointment and he turns to his partner for support.

"I have to agree with Sophie. A Picasso by itself is such a monument it doesn't need a background. A white wall is the answer."

The basket of tekels spills as Madame rises from the couch. "This is my house. MY house." She is near hysteria. "Why are you asking the cook—I mean chef? Who buys the Picassos around here?"

Mrs. G's rages are unpredictable but short-lived. They are usually followed by some weird gesture, to showcase her good nature.

"Madame gave me a pair of pants." Sophie enters our quarters with a silky garment over her arm. She shows me the label inside.

"Hermes. That was generous." I raise my thumb up. "A peace offering maybe?"

"Don't be fooled. They do not fit her. That's why I inherit those pants." She drops them over the back of an armchair. "She is two faced. I do not trust her."

"Come on, Sweet Pea. It's our night off. Let's go out for dinner."

On our return, Sophie stops on the threshold.

“Pierre, someone has been here.” She inspects the room, seeing the invisible-to-me traces of the intruder, who has apparently rifled through everything in the room. “Yes!” she declares. “The pants! They were on this chair and now they are on the bed.”

“The culprit tried to steal your new Hermes pants?”

“Oh, look! Look what she did.”

“What? Who?”

“The label—the Hermes label. She cut it off!”

For a moment, Sophie is speechless, staring into the empty waist of her burgled pants.

“How can anybody be so crass?” I offer. It is truly mind boggling. “Cutting off a label that nobody sees anyway? Unless somebody peeks, and that should be me, right?”

Sophie laughs.

But the sense that our quarters, our very clothes, were not safe from prying hands did not leave us all night.

Luckily, in the morning, Mr. Garland announces that Sophie and I will be going to Palm Beach. They want caretakers in the vacant house until it is torn down. Demolition is to take place next month, and after that we will wait for our employers in their downtown penthouse.

We are sorry to leave our friends Beau and Ambrose, and we are depressed about leaving France. But it is only for a little while. And I am not sure Sophie would last another day in the same house with Madame.

## Seventeen

We arrive in Palm Beach expecting the Haunted Mansion. Madame has told us the place is a rotten, falling down old pile of lumber with snakes and crocodiles in every room.

“I love this house,” Sophie moans. It is a stately hundred-year-old mansion with a mantle of ivy and bougainvillea. “It has character and charm and a grandmother’s personality.”

But there is a building boom. The grand old places go boom and shiny new boxes go up in their place. The beautiful house is doomed, but for a few weeks we pretend it is ours.

A storm is scheduled for our final night.

“A tornado.”

“You mean a hurricane.”

“I guess.” I shrug. “I’ve never seen one.”

“Sounds exciting,” Sophie says. “A nice send off for us.”

“Well, we are here. Want to take a walk on the beach?”

“Let me get a sweater.”

The wind picks up as soon as we leave the porch. The news says we are only getting the tail, but the tail is packing quite a punch. We walk about five minutes along the waterline.

“The wind is strong,” I say. It is getting stronger. “Are you okay?”

“The sand is blasting my legs.”

“It’s like walking through a sandblasting machine.”

“Let’s go back. This isn’t fun.”

“It’s a bad habit, giving up an activity after only five minutes.”

“I don’t care. It hurts too much. Let’s head back home and straight to bed.”

“Well, I guess that’s it for you, tornado.”

We turn for home, the sand in our faces, and are glad to reach the porch. Our ten minute walk has exhausted all our saved energy.

“I have a bad feeling.” Sophie falls into the bed. Her hunch arrives rather later than her usual premonition, “Something is going to happen.”

“Should we go to a hotel? I don’t like to drive in this, but...”

“No, no. I am tired. Come to bed.” She reaches out her arms. “I don’t know about this job...”

“It pays well. We won’t see the people for another month.”

“Yes, but I want to look around. Let’s call that agency—that Marlow. There is something...not right, yes, there is something bizarre about the Garlands.”

“We have worked for worse.”

“Mmmm. I don’t know.”

The house creaks through the night but stands straight in the dawn, sparkling wet with rain, as if the storm were no more than a refreshing bath. We are sorry to leave her, but the demolition crew is already arriving.



In the penthouse, we are bombarded with messages from Paris. A swarm of faxes come in every day. Urgent this, High Priority that. Lists of chores, food to stock, things to do and not to do. A basket arrives, with love from Beau and Ambrose. Then the tekels, who wag their tails and follow Sophie everywhere.

“Don’t let them fool you,” I warn. “They will turn their backs and ignore you as soon as Madame arrives.”

“I know, but look at those eyes.”

“Droopy. Listen, Cherie!”

I am checking the answering machine for important messages. Madame has left six unimportant ones so far. This one, I play back for Sophie.”

“Pierre, this is Marlow. This may not be in your line, but it’s not far from where you are right now. Thought you might want to at least check it out. Client’s a retired sea captain with a historic property on the bay. Says he wants...here, let me read this to you: ‘a magic touch with squid and a sense of adventure.’ How does that sound? Call me.”

“Well,” Sophie is more interested in scratching the tekels’ bellies. “I don’t know. Let’s wait a bit. Perhaps Mrs. Garland will be more natural in her hometown.”

A beep.

“Pierre!” Mrs. Garland’s shrill voice comes from the answering machine. “Don’t go anywhere today. There’s an important shipment arriving, and I want you to personally put it in the cellar.”

Beep.

“The cellar!” I rejoice. “Mr. Garland isn’t here to hold the keys. I guess they have to trust me now.”

We await the arrival of French wines with anticipation. Close to three o’clock, a van pulls up. The driver drops the ramp and begins to load his dolly with boxes from Bordeaux, Saumur, Lyon, Champagne—each with a warning stenciled in red.

NOT TO BE CONSUMED BY STAFF

In a stupor, I sign for the delivery. The dogs sniff at the forbidden towers. I can find no words, but Sophie has no difficulty.

“That is it. This is outrageous. I told you there was something very wrong with our employers. Go. Go now. Call Marlow. Find out about that sea captain. We won’t stay another day.”

# Eighteen

The Mercedes crawls along the coast. “Where is the house?”

“The captain’s home is a landmark.” I waved the brochure at Sophie. “Should be easy to find.”

According to the Biscayne Bay Travel Bureau, we are looking for not one, but a pair of famous art deco constructions on the water’s edge. All we can find is a kind of junkyard dominated by the hulks of some half-demolished buildings.

“Have you noticed all those tourist boats,” Sophie points out to the sea. “They stop in front of that place—people take pictures.”

I look at the brochure, then at the mess. Those art deco beauties are now specters of themselves, torn up every which way, with boarded windows, walls removed showing the inside with furniture piled up like packrats’ loot. The scenery doesn’t project a rich pacific nest for a retiree, but rather a holocaust out of a Stephen King nightmare.

“That’s it, Sweet Pea. It should be highlighted in the tourist guide: ‘Landmarks of the Rich Over the Edge.’ “

Sophie swings the car onto the causeway, contemplating a swift U turn. From this perspective, we can still make out some of the original details of the main house. She shakes her head.

“Florida is not for us. It’s as they say, everything is in the eighties—the age, the temperature, and the IQ. We should head back to California.”

Sophie’s pout gets to me every time.

“You are right, Cherie. But before we do...”

“Yes?”

“Remember what the agency said? Billionaire shipping magnate in need of direction. That’s a billionaire—not a piddling millionaire.”

“How can it be?”

“Wants a couple to give his personal life—direction. See how much he needs it? Let’s give it a shot.”

“WHAT?”

“Come on, Sweet Pea. I love these interviews. We meet so many weirdos. We don’t have to take the job. Let’s do this one just for the fun of it.”

Sophie nods her head from side to side, considering my strange proposal. “All right. For you, we’ll go see.”



I have gathered from previous stints in the homes of the one percent that no millionaire can be part of the In Crowd without ongoing construction projects. But this beats them all.

We are taken on a tour of the spread by the billionaire’s right hand, Roberto. Crazyness is going on all over the property. Walls half finished, stairways to nowhere, freestanding towers of various sizes—half-demolished, half-built. To keep busy, the old sailor has cooked up a master plan. He keeps half a dozen construction workers on the ready. They report early every morning, and he keeps the team busy. As we walk, Roberto points to circles with colored spray paint in the



back, front, and side yards of the two properties along West Broadview Drive, both facing the causeway that connects Bay Harbors Island. The circles on the soil are where the team is instructed to work for the day.

A woman's voice crackles through the air.

"No FATS!"

"That's Amelia," Roberto explains. "The Cap'n's daughter. Don't worry. The kids aren't around much."

"Just the protein shakes, Dad," Amelia's holler rings out as we come near. "Doctor's orders, you understand?"

"Quack!"

"He is not, and you do as he says! No FATS, no FISH, and no RUM! Aha!" Amelia sees us and leaves her dad making another circle in the sand with a can of spray paint. Middle-aged, orange with an artificial sun, she speeds towards us in spotless white deck shoes. "You're the cook he wants to hire," she bellows, still from a great distance. "Forget it! Unless you can open a protein shake. Can you do that? Just open a shake and pour it in a glass?"

"I am an expert," I say. She finally reaches us, but she barely stops.

"He's on a very special diet. His doctor is a renowned genius, so don't question. Just follow the instructions. They're in the kitchen."

Away she goes, rapidly picking her way through piles of construction debris. Then, without a pause, she lifts her head and yells: "Don't listen to him. He doesn't know what he wants."

Sophie looks at me, her eyes so wide her eyebrows are lost in her hair.

"Cherie, we are already hired!"

I eagerly salute the tall man. His broad proportions are topped with a roughened face, reddened and creased by long, deep lines and outlined by an unkempt beard. Thick eyebrows rather on the dark side give him the look of a quick temper. He greets us in a white T-shirt and worn-out painter's pants pulled up high. On his head, cocked to one side, is a sweaty, washed out blue captain's cap. He addresses us in a gruff voice.

"Don't understand nothing 'em kid, rather knit me a snatch 'em strap for my noggin flask."

We are thrown into the strange life of this semi-retired old man, stranded on shore by his children, who have asserted themselves and taken the helm of the old man's business. The idle life, he says, is worse than death. It takes no time to discover the old Cap'n can't stand to be still for more than a minute. He hands me a can of spray paint and points to where he wants me to make a circle.

"What will happen here?" I ask.

"Drawbridge. For the moat. You'll be in charge."

"Okee doke."

"I will not open any shakes," Sophie interrupts with a firm declaration. "Pierre will not open any shakes either. I know how to cook for you."

"No shakes?" The Cap'n straightens his shoulders and squints his eyes.

"Absolutely. No!"

He turns to me. "Pierre, eh? Pierre, see—the drawbridge will lead to the house there." Cap'n points to the actual front door laying against the side of the building.

"Sounds like a great project. I hope you'll keep that beautifully carved door."

"Yes, I love my Spanish door."

He rubs his beard like a magic lamp, then squints at the sun high in the sky.

“S’pose you’ll need to get your gear, eh?”

Cap’n has taken a fancy to Sophie.

“Well, I’ll see you at dinner then.”

“Dinner tonight?” Sophie is flabbergasted by how swiftly events have unfolded.

“You’ll be ready to start?”

“Yes, but we’ll have to hurry.”

“You cook my favorite squid recipe—boiled in rum, lots of rum—D’ya stand?” he growls, leaning over from all his height towards Sophie, wavin’ and lickin’ his fingers in anticipation of future delights. “I’ll love you forever if you cook the squids with plenty of good—good, ya hear?—ol’ rum.”

He turns on a dime with a grimace for a smile—at the thought of the darn squids, no doubt.

## Nineteen

Dinner is served in half a dining room. This section of the house, like most of the rest of the building, is under heavy remodeling. The windows facing the bay are boarded up, setting the room in a penumbra of half-light. Furniture is shoved and stacked to the sides to clear the center of the room. Cap’n takes possession of the high seat, a majestic armchair with worn red leather cushions at the head of a twenty-seat mahogany table. Carved sirens holding cornucopias pouring out plastic grapes adorn this rather unconventional throne. On the table is a heavy silver candelabra intricately decorated with angels holding white, melted-down, flickering candles. These opulent divinities and their siren sisters preside over every lunch and dinner served in the dining room.

Roberto follows the boss into the dining room. Under his arm are rolls of blueprints.

While they discuss the state of the master plan, I lean through the kitchen door to check on the state of Sophie.

“Is everything tip-top?”

“Comin’ up!” Sophie passes me the boss’s clam chowder.

“Are you staying for dinner?” I ask Roberto.

“Me? No!” He pinches his nose and laughs. “The Captain needs a-changin’—woohoo wheee!” Dropping the blueprints on the table, Roberto retreats, making wild gesticulating waves with his hands. A pungent non-food odor is filling the dining room. “See ya mañana. Enjoy your dinner, Cap.”

With a grunt, Cap’n sinks his spoon into the phyllo crust covering the top of the bowl.

“Glad to have you aboard,” Cap’n says. “I can use your help.”

“Yes? What do you need?”

“Says here you went to a civil engineering school.”

I realize this scoop is sitting on our resume, which is before him on the table. His finger finds the line.

“A long time ago,” I say. “In another country, another life.”

“I’m building a castle. I want you to draw the blueprints.”

Why not? As a majordomo, I have had strange duties or hardly any duties at all. I will enjoy myself.

Avidly slurping his soup, he manages to reach his mouth with only a few droppings of Sophie's nectar landing on the floor and his clothes. After a few servings, like Roberto, I retreat from the scene.

"I'm not sure why Cap'n wipes his mouth with the bottom of his hanging shirt instead of the napkin in front of him?" I examine Sophie's almost empty glass. "More champagne?"

"I sure need more than one glass. I have never served meals in a half-torn-down building before. Maybe it's an old sailors' habit?" Sophie's expectations of being complimented on her cooking might not be fulfilled by the absentminded Cap'n. Through every course, he is involved with the blueprints scattered on the table.

"Does he like soft shell crabs?"

"It appears that way, he ate 'em all. Didn't say a word of complaint. One thing, Cap'n is a musician for sure."

"A musician?" inquires Sophie, big-eyed at my comment. "What, does he sing while he eats?"

"He has been playing music all the way through the whole dinner."

"I can't hear anything. The fan of the exhaust hood makes a lot of noise."

"I don't think his music would be to any of your likings."

"What are you talking about? Is he singing offensive old sailors' stuff?"

"Ah, ha!—That would be much better. He has been making a steady tune of farting and belching the whole time while eating."

"Oh, no—If I'd heard any of it... I would have dropped the soup on his head and left."

"I know. That's why I only tell you now. What about dessert?"

"So-o-o-phie!" Cap'n's gruff holler penetrates the kitchen, even over the noisy hood.

"Ah, Sophie," he says when we present ourselves. "That was the proper way to boil a squid."

Cap'n is inquisitive and asks Sophie about the kitchen accommodations. "Is everything okay?"

"I would have liked more space in front of the stove, but it'll do."

## Twenty

It is a treacherous affair making our way to bed in the evening. A gangway is suspended mid-air between our quarters—a smaller habitat across the battle lawn of the main house—and the kitchen. There are no lights to help us navigate this awkward contraption of wooden beams and precariously spread-out plywood boards.

"It's even dangerous to go to bed." Sophie grabs my hand to feel more secure.

"Lucky the moon is at the rendezvous—always eager to help, I assume."

Thanks to the moon's sliver, I can make out Sophie's smile.

"Are you sure about this job?" she asks.

"Nothing with the Cap'n is ordinary."

I slip away into a pipe dream. These new challenges beat any expectation of a quiet and monotonous job.

The days pass, never one like the day before. This morning arrives with a big dose of Florida sunshine.

"What's that noise? It sounds like a bomb."

"Oh, nothing, dear," I reassure Sophie. "It's only the Cap'n sliding head first into the pool."

"He finally got it to work."

“Yes, he has been diving back and forth all morning.” I gobble down a gulp of black coffee. “Love, if we win the lotto, will you allow *me* to build a slide from our bedroom to the pool?”

“There are probably better ways to spend money, don’t you think?”

“You have to admit, living with the super-rich makes life exciting. How many folks out there in the world get to enjoy all this?”

“What time is it?”

“Seven o’clock.”

Sophie burrows back into the bed and disappears under the covers.

“Wait, Cherie. I have discovered some secrets.”

“Secrets?”

“The Cap’n has ships.”

“I thought his children took all the boats away from him when they took over the cruise line.”

“These are secret ships. Roberto says he has six big square-rigged pirate-style ships. These shove world tourists from island to island for two, three days, a week, or more, following the paths of the pirates who roamed the Caribbean Seas two hundred and fifty years ago. They come from every corner of the world in search of pirate adventures.”

“You don’t say.”

“Makeshift buccaneers handle the ships and those adventurers who reach the islands’ shores are told hair-raising stories at dinner tables by Cap’n himself. He plays the part in a swashbuckler’s outfit, to add a cinematic look to the legends.”

“This sounds like some Hollywood fantasy—”

“Right on. You betcha—all of it anchored in the minds of those willing to shed a few thousand dollars to be Errol Flynn for a weekend with the flair of the 1935 movie *Captain Blood*.”

“You mean you?” Sophie teases.

“I would not mind.”

“Well, he likes you. Maybe Cap’n Hook will take you along.”



Stepping out onto the wobbly corridor without walls or ceiling, we have a fresh panoramic view of where we live. No part of the house is even close to completion in the overall remodeling program. The lumber, cement mixers, jackhammers, scaffolds, compressors are spread any old way throughout the compound without any sense of organization or purpose. Astounded by the chaos, our eyes finally turn to our destination at the other end of the bridge—Oh, surprise!

“Do you see what I see?” Sophie points at the kitchen on the other side of the abyss.

“He didn’t waste any time attending to your suggestion.”

“How am I going to cook breakfast without any wall?”

Sophie’s kitchen is now exposed to the world through the missing back wall. All the equipment, stove, and refrigeration are still in place, but no back wall.

“It looks like Cap’n wants to give us all the space and fresh air possible.” Sophie’s observation is well founded. We have discovered how walls have a way of disappearing around here. None of the missing walls will reappear during our three months stay with the Cap’n.

# Twenty-One

Cap'n walks past the dinner table to the window, trying to get a gander at the sunset through the planks boarding up the view. "Bring me a noggin of rum. I need one."

Just a guess—he must have addressed his request to me. There are only two people in the room.

"Well, I don't know. You shouldn't... doctor's orders... Your daughter..."

The Cap'n slowly turns his head. I wave one hand in a sign of resignation and walk in the direction of the bar.

"The heck," growls the old sailor. "I can't stand 'em docs. All they do is give prescriptions, even if you don't need any."

"In your case, it's probably 'cause you need one?" I pour some dark rum in a shot glass.

"What do they know what I need? I am a seafaring man. I've been through heavy weather, tempests, even hurricanes. I'm still standing... standing here... right here." Cap'n peers between the planks and holds out one hand for his glass.

"One noggin'," I say as I put the shot glass in his palm.

"What are you doing? What's this? I need a glass of rum—A GLASS. Not a baby bottle. Why don't you hand me a baby sucker while you're at it?" Cap'n throws the empty shot glass on the floor. "Pour me a glass of rum—understand?"

"Why don't you sit down at the table? Dinner is ready. Sophie has fixed your favorite BBQ ribs with the secret recipe of your grandma—with the spicy honey sauce."

"Great! Honey! YES!" Cap'n lumbers to the table and scrambles into his mermaid throne. "Ain't no substitute for rum. I can't live without my rum. It's an old pirate's tradition."

"Okay, okay, rum on its way."

"Good man, GOOD MAN." Cap'n pounds the table with happiness. " 'Melia brings in a lot of quacks, with all kinds of restrictions. Tell ya, I got my own doctor. Says one little shot won't hurt. I salute my doctor." A beaming Cap'n raises the tall glass and downs it before I can say, Your health!

The number two tumbler, a Plantation XO from the Barbados Islands, which after starting the aging process in its home country, finishes to mature in hundred-year-old oak kegs in Cognac, France. That's where subtle tastes of caramel, banana, vanilla, and dry spices add the aura of the exotic. The next tumbler doesn't sit long in front of Cap'n, who seizes it without a second thought. Banana, spices, vanilla flavors, and all, down the hatch it goes.

"Aye, aye, Cap," I salute the downing of the third tumbler.

Cap'n stands up with spirited words.

"Bring the grub for a starving high seas sailor," he orders.

Cap'n starts to hum some old pirate songs about drinking rum aplenty. My resistance is in ruins, I keep on pouring more rum until Cap'n huddles on the old tattered leather couch and passes out.

"Let's call it a night," I tell Sophie.

"What about Cap'n? He hasn't finished his dinner."

"His dinner finished him. We'll throw a blanket on the old salty sailor. It's all we can do for him."

"Well, sit down. We'll have our dinner, and you can tell me all about tonight's musical accompaniment." Sophie has already set the table for us. I help transfer the boss's lobsters from

the brass platter to our own plates. Sophie disappears into the large fridge, looking for the Cap'n's champagne.

"Good news," I tell her. "Tomorrow morning, away we sail."

"What?" A head emerges. "What's going on? What did you say? We sail?"

"Cap'n wants us on his ship."

"Tomorrow? Without any warning? Is he nuts?"

"Bring a toothbrush. That's all you need. Cap'n's orders."

"How can he sail? What about his heart? Does Amelia—?"

"He claims the children know nothing. He's gonna show 'em how it's done."



All aboard but me.

The Cap'n has sent me back to get his favorite chair. There is a stiff breeze. I am half afraid the boat will cast off without me.

"It won't leave for a while." Roberto has come to see us off. "Cap'n's whole concept of safety is: 'Watch the weather report.' Any sign of winds more than ten miles an hour, you'll stay in port and wait for conditions to improve."

"I am excited about this new adventure," I tell him.

"Adventure all right," he chuckles. He is not going on the voyage.

The tall ships rock gently in the harbor.

"What beauties," I say.

"Yeah," Roberto agrees. "From here."

"Anything wrong with them?" I cannot believe these graceful gazelles of the ocean may be rotten. Sophie has gone ahead, onto the flagship, and she hasn't come running back down the gangplank to report any leaks.

"Cap'n's fleet is somewhat clandestine," Roberto tells me. "Can't be registered in the United States."

"No, why not?"

"His boats will never pass as fit for commercial use. It's all right, though. That's why he sails under a Panamanian flag."

The Cap'n's ships wear the names *Bounty*, *Queen Anne's Revenge*, *Long John Silver*, *Jolly Roger*, *Calico Jack*, and *Hispaniola*—Cap'n's flagship, the one we will be aboard for this cruise. The fleet is manned by bosuns who look the part of weather-beaten, bloodthirsty pirates.

"Those guys couldn't sell cotton candy at Disney World," Roberto snorts.

"As long as they are good sailors," I shrug.

Roberto bursts out with a belly laugh. "They can't tell latitude from longitude. And don't ask 'em what a compass looks like. They don't use instruments to navigate Cap'n's rusty fleet."

"They steer the old way, by the stars?"

"Their sailing skills go as far as their ability to see an island on the horizon—What they see is where they go."

"Chancy?"

"Yeah, well. Wear your Mae West."

"My Mae West?"

"Your life jacket. Put it around your neck and lay it flat against your chest."

"Why is it named for Diamond Lil?"

"You'll know when you inflate it."

“Ah, ha!”

I leave Roberto on the dock and climb aboard, dragging the heavy chair over the gangplank. The boat is strange, the noises—It sounds more like a car which runs without any oil. The hull is all metal, with lots of rusty spots. The winches screech like they are on their last leg. And the sails have patches. We are well out to sea before I can find our cabin, where Sophie is waiting for me. When I enter, she leaps to her feet.

“This cabin stinks. Where is Cap’n? If he wants me on board I want a better cabin with a porthole. I don’t want to be shackled away in a closet. I won’t stay in this pig’s trough, even for triple the pay.”

“He’s on the bridge. Lemme come along. I love when you bargain. You have the perfect touch. Ah, ha!”

One hour later, our toothbrushes are transferred to other accommodations.

“Ain’t you glad I asked for an upgrade?”

“I thought Cap’n was gonna pass out. You are amazing.”

“Who does the thinking here? See, now we have an officer’s cabin. Better?”

“Much. I would not have thought there was a decent room in the whole boat. This ship looks more like a phantom ship.”

“You mean like the Flying Dutchman?”

“I hope not, the crew is not dead yet? Are they—?”

Sophie has not wasted any time aboard.

“Did you get a look at the pantry?”

“No good?”

“Only cans, cans of everything. No veggies, fruit, salad—nothing fresh.”

“Lucky for our early shopping before boarding this wreck.”

“We have fresh groceries for you and me for a couple of days. We’ll have to keep our stash a secret.”

“The cap’n and the gold diggers won’t even notice what they eat,” I remind her. “They will be too engrossed in their quest for the treasure.”

“I’ll drink to that if you want to open a bottle of champagne.” Sophie produces a welcome bottle from a sturdy padded bag packed with ice. In a moment, we are gazing out the porthole, toasting our rusty *Hispaniola*.

“Seven days, it’s not the end of the world,” Sophie purrs.

“On our way to the swashbuckler territory,” I sing. “Yee, Yee.”

## Twenty-Two

Biscayne Bay is soon lost to view. We are explorers, intrepid, out in the wild, without even a map. We navigate the Caribbean Seas, without fear of Black Beard or Francis Drake—the Sea Dog. We are in search of...what? Nothing else than finding a treasure!

“I have here in my hands,” Cap’n announces to the assembled tourists on the bridge, “this old pirate map of a buried treasure. This treasure is somewhere on a remote island. Somewhere we’re gonna sail. Some place where all of you will have a chance at discovering the treasure chest.”

Cap'n raises the map in his hand and waves it before the ship's people, standing with their mouths open and their sunglasses reflecting the bright sunlight.

"I have the map," Cap'n claims in a ferocious roar, "and I am the only one to have it. The treasure is here, in these waters. But the island is not on any other map. I am the only one who knows where it is."

Who cares about wearing a Mae West, when the pirate stories take the audience dreaming aplenty. Every single adventurer, all coming from far away places, claims their share of excitement, listening to old Cap'n, who strives to play the part of Long John Silver. His deep and brash voice dazzles the tourists between noggins of rum.

"Do you really think he knows?" Sophie grabs my arm. "I think he is full of it."

I put a finger on my lips.

"I reckon we are heading our schooner to the island on this map." The captain towers on the deck, pointing to the horizon and then placing his pointing finger on the map. "Each one of you will be given a copy of the actual map recovered by Silver himself, back in the day. I acquired the map from an old sailor in a buccaneer black market, just before his death from a gunshot."

Cap'n scans the open mouths of his audience with his dark blue eyes, like electric drills protected by thick black eyebrows. They have come from every old corner of the world to live a dream, a buccaneers' dream, to unearth a treasure buried two hundred years ago on an island now within reach, while navigating a square-rigged old vessel, like the pirates who populated those ancient seas.

The schooner holds its course under the gusty southeast wind.

The sails crack like July 4th fireworks. The treasure hunters swing and bang against the rails, holding each other, hooked up along the lanyards to the abaft. A barrage of waves splash with hollow sounds against the metal hull. Their safety harnesses keep them from tumbling into the scuppers or being thrown overboard.

Against all safety rules, Cap'n takes over the wheel.

"Hold on to your panties," screams Cap'n. "The ride is gonna be rough."

At last, the ship's sails drop one by one as the outline of Skeleton Island appears on the horizon. The breeze serves the old sailor admirably. All sails down, the husky hull scuds like a skipping stone past the rocky hill that guards the inlet to a coved bay. The old rusty square-rigged schooner flops over the surf until the bosun orders, "Drop the anchor!" and it stops with a screech. The vessel quivers, swings from starboard to port, then comes to a full stop when the second anchor is dropped from the aft.

A shiver runs through the crowd.

A raucous voice bellows, "*Hispaniola* is now anchoring in old Captain Kidd's secret anchorage. Here he hid while escaping the British Armada determined to rid the Caribbean Seas from his dreadful shadow."

The ship rocks slightly, tugging against the hawsers holding the anchors.

The Cap'n continues: "Poor seamen dead, so is Captain Kidd. Do you take it, a man is dead—for good. Does he come alive again?"

Cap'n rejoices at the stupor showing on all the tourists' faces. He hands tobacco chews to the group.

"Wanna quid?"

He pulls out his spyglass from his breeches—A quick glance.



“We have arrived,” he announces. “Everybody ashore. Don’t need any compass—take your bearings along the lines of ’em bones. Yo-ho and a bottle of rum!”

That’s the moment every tourist, with wide eyes, fixed on the gesticulating six-foot old sailor, his large square-rigged bones making him look like a refrigerator, has only one thing in mind: Their investment in these extraordinary adventures. Buried dreams come alive and make all the faces bright and shiny in the morning sun. The sharp voice of Cap’n rings out over the treasure hunters ready to dig in.

It takes a while to get everyone into the dinghies, but at last, the little fleet is lowered into the water. It floats patiently, waiting for the captain’s launch to come down with a splash. Sophie and I, as his trusty stewards, come with Cap’n in his big comfy vessel, which is almost a small yacht.

He stands at the rail waving a trident. Accompanied by barking sea lions, Cap’n’s voice bursts out like a preacher grabbing the attention of the half-asleep Sunday congregation.

“This is Poseidon’s Trident,” he shouts. “A very powerful weapon, it gives me power over the ocean. When the sea is big and furious, I calm it by waving my Trident. The sea turns as calm as if it was a sweet pussy cat. I got to claim this amazing tool off the coast of Mykonos Island in Greece while treasure hunting those ancient seas.”

A swing of the trident up in the air.

“My team after weeks of scuba diving and retrieving only algae, finally found it under massive stones that must have belonged to the ancient city of Atlantis, buried by a volcanic explosion way back in the ol’ times—”

When the boats reach the beach, the tourists spill out and congregate around Cap’n. They have paid their hard-earned dollars to be treasure hunters, and they emit awes and ha-has, admiration in their eyes, hands gripping their knees. More stories are a-coming. The canoodled crowd gobbles up whatever Cap’n decides to spare from his well-supplied bag of pirate stories. Their anticipation is ratcheted up to the greatest tension.

Now comes Cap’n’s favorite part. He divides the adventure seekers into groups and starts dishing out treasure hunting kits. Between noggins of rum, he greets and praises each newly initiated treasure hunter, urging on their sense of discovery.

“Grab on to your kit, you DODOS!” Cap’n yells at the top of his voice. In each kit is a canvas bucket holding:

One army-type folding shovel

One pick

One compass

25 feet of cordage to haul the treasure chest from its uncovered pit

Two Band-Aids, enough for rough gold diggers.

And an essential part of the kit—a copy of the Treasure Island Map, showing bays and inlets and any rock sticking out of the sounds.

Cap’n’s voice resonates, like the blast of a shotgun sending a shudder among the gathering. “To be added, for a small extra fee:”

A water bottle

A spyglass

A few salty biscuits for anyone in need of chewing away stress

A pirate’s necklace adorned with a skeleton head, to keep away the bad spirits

A knapsack to gather loose gold bullion

“The whole package rents for a mere \$75—a bargain—,” Cap’n proclaims, “I heartily recommend.”

Silver collects his cash from the eager fists of the tourists, who clutch their kits in their sunburned arms. For what they pay, there should be some rum in those buckets, but they don’t complain.

At last, Cap’n gives his orders.

“Go and dig, dig till you find what you came for!”

## Twenty-Three

Sophie says it’s easier to get gold from a slot machine. I admit it is—for her. While I dream of precious pearls and shining pieces of eight erupting from the wet sand, Sophie goes in search of fresh produce.

Cap’n gazes at her determined face. She is not to be dissuaded. Perhaps he imagines every can in the pantry going overboard if he does not concede the battle.

“Well,” he growls. “Can’t have all these tourists coming down with scurvy, now. Since we are cruising the Bahamas, we can put you ashore at Cat Island for your shoppin’.”

“Great idea, Skipper,” I say. A smile invades Sophie’s stern mask.

“Will have to anchor off shore.” Cap’n screws up his blue eyes and considers fresh dangers. “We ain’t got no map of shores and sounds for that island.”

A few hours later, the bosun helps lower the skiff to the water. With steady strokes, I bring the boat up to the sand beach, and the bosun pulls the line and coils it around a large rock sticking out of the sand beach. I hook the spinner on the edge of the gunwale. We step ashore, Sophie and I to make a grocery run and the bosun on an errand of his own in town.

Inside the store are electric lights and air conditioning, soft bread, butter and cheese, olive oil, dried herbs, and a meat counter. The twentieth century. The produce section is ample for our needs. Sophie gathers enough to fill ten shopping bags.

“That’ll do, at least for you and I,” Sophie hands over the *Hispaniola* credit card, “till Cap’n Hook heads back to civilization.”

The bosun is waiting for us in the boat, which is already laden with Budweiser, Gatorade, antiperspirant, and other items requisitioned by the increasingly desperate crew. Seeing us struggling towards him with our load, he grabs an oar.

“Can row back if you’re too tired.”

“Come on,” I bellow like Cap’n, “help with the bags.”

“You haven’t got enough for the crew and seventy-nine guests—”

“We cannot carry fresh groceries for everybody.” Sophie drops her bags on the sand. “Nothing for you if you just sit and row the boat.”

The crestfallen bosun drags himself out of the skiff.

“Never mind,” I say gently. “Tonight we’ll share. Bring the ribs. Don’t let them sit on the hot sand.”

At the end of the day, the gold hunters return exhausted after diggin’, diggin’, and more diggin’, without even taking time for a piss. They’ve kicked and shoved rock after rock until they could not see any opportunity to dig up anything but more sand. One by one, they drop on the beach as Cap’n moves among them, inquiring about their luck.

The sea breeze has set in, higher than usual. Cool draughts of air begin to overtake the gathering, carrying a soothing perfume of wild lilies. While pork ribs sizzle on a makeshift BBQ under Sophie's wooden spoon supervision, the wide-eyed tourists, with their mouths dropped in ecstasy, witness the insatiable Cap'n downing more noggins of rum.

"Come, come," Cap'n howls, conjuring Blackbeard, Jean Laffite, and even Robert Surcouf, calling on their apparitions to host the unearthing of their prized treasure chest. "Let the good wind bring you here."

He consoles the famished treasure hunters with quids of tobacco. His throne has been placed on a dais of packing crates, which creaks as he lowers his bottom onto the velvet seat.

"Not a loss by any means, not a loss," he assures his weary pirates, "more a way of the treasure sayin', 'I am hard to find, but worth it—more than ever. Worth it!'"

Cap'n raises his triple noggin to the haggard faces. They have been turning the island over for five days now. Only a couple more to go before we head back to boring Florida. "You're all good fellows. For the plenty of diggin' today, you must have some ale."

The bosun, without waiting for another word, starts to pour Budweiser for all.

"I have here a few clues—another noggin of rum there, Pierre." It is Cap'n's gift that he is able somehow to keep them eager to get up in the morning and grab their kits for another day of digging. "We've already dug up enough sand to fill the Boston harbor. Har-har. We are getting close to finding it. Now, remember! Everyone participating when the chest is found will have an equal share. Minus a cut for the bosun and your host of this venture."

Cap'n has already made quite a tidy profit off these people. But he is sure, at every opportunity, to make a lot of fuss over this clause in the contract—his cut of the loot, in case of a miracle. Can there really be a treasure? Perhaps he senses doubt creeping over the people of *Hispaniola*.

"Pirates plundered and sank ships on these same seas we now travel." He leans toward the crowd and pounds his knee with one heavy fist. "Two hundred and fifty years ago, the loot was gathered and buried for safety. The treasure was safe, YES," he bellows with fury, "but not the pirates. Killed off, one by one, till none lived to reclaim it. THE TREASURE IS WITHIN REACH!" He leaps to his feet and sweeps his mighty, if a little shaky, arm over his audience. "All we need is to dig, dig some more."

I am moved by his passion. He believes his stories, I believe. Like Tom Sawyer, who managed to have all those kids paint the fence for him, Cap'n gets these poor treasure seekers to dig and dig, more than they could have ever thought possible, for such a foolish dream.

The island chosen by Cap'n for the treasure hunt is always a brand new unmapped desert paradise to the guests, though it is the very same island used for all the previous tours. For a week, the treasure hunters dig here and there, turning over the whole island. The participants savor the searches, led by a character bigger than life, Cap'n himself. Their labor is rewarded every evening with another round of Cap'n's stories.

Still on his feet, though not for long, Cap'n begins another whopper.

"William the Kidd, heading for Hispaniola aboard *Queen Anne's Revenge* under full sail..." The rough voice of Cap'n sounds like it's coming from way above our heads—the clouds maybe? The Cap'n looks bigger than his breeches can hold. His intonations always hit a crescendo as he tells the most formidable and famous pirate stories of all time. Tonight, the last night of our enterprise, the entertainment is about how L' Olonnais would hack his victims to pieces bit by bit, or squeeze a cord around their neck until their eyes popped out.

"Once, he even, just on the suspicion of betrayal, cut a man's heart out and took a bite of it."

The wide eyes of the audience try to fathom the words coming out of the bearded character, furiously chewing tobacco and pushed by more noggins of rum.

“Misfortune came to this nasty pirate in an unusual manner.” A shiver spreads like a lightning bolt through the gathered treasure hunters as he tells of L’ Olonnais’ exit from this world through the stomachs of cannibals.

The soft cool breeze floats over the mesmerized and shivering listeners. Cap’n’s face turns grim.

“I smell sulfur,” murmurs Cap’n, loud enough for all to hear. “The devil is among us.”

All the guests quiver and clutch their neighbors’ hands for comfort, forgetting for a moment the roasted pork ribs on their plates.

“BOSUN,” Cap’n barks his orders at the top of his gigantic lungs. “Tomorrow, scatter ’em over the southern side of the island!”

“Cap’n,” I ask when the old sea dog has climbed into his hammock for the night. “Your cut doesn’t amount to much unless some unsuspecting tourist walks by pure luck over the buried loot.”

“You never can tell. The sands of these islands have many secrets. There are tales...”

“Anyway, they spend a lot of money digging for you.”

“Hmmm,” Cap’n grunts, covering his eyes with his hat. “Treasure is treasure, long as people put it in your pocket instead of their own. Ever seen a treasure, Pierre?”

I have seen Sophie’s jackpot winnings. That is always an impressive sight. And, of course, there was the safe of the junkbond king, bursting at its iron seams with ill-gotten cash.

“Y’all right, Pierre? You look a little unsteady in your boots there.”

It still makes me queasy to think of it, almost at my fingertips, all that cash quivering to be taken in my arms and turned into a French villa.

“Treasure, yes. A fortune. Once.”

Cap’n’s eye swings in my direction, bleary but interested, as if he had never seen me before. “Aye?”

“We worked for a pirate one time—a real pirate. A first-class crook, robbing old ladies of their savings.”

“Investment banker, eh? They’re bad ’uns.”

“He kept his loot in a safe in his wife’s closet. She left it open one day when she left the house.”

“And there it was—calling to you like the sirens. Pulling and tearing at you with its beautiful promises.”

“Yes.”

“But here you are, workin’ for me.”

“Sophie closed the door.”

“Just as well. Bankers can be awfully dangerous.”

“In the end, the crook’s own wife and her boyfriend made off with the loot in her candy apple red Ferrari. They live in Scottsdale now.”

“There’s justice for you, Pierre,” Cap’n says sleepily. “I’d like to see a treasure. A real one, not a pile of cash, not a bank account. I mean a box of doubloons. The gold of lost empires. Rings and collars and...coins.”

A snore informs me Cap’n is in dreamland with his golden hoard.

# Twenty-Four

The adventures with the old buccaneer are far from being over. After our gaste on the high seas, Cap'n wants me to get involved in the construction and demolition going on in the two tangled houses.

"What can I do?" I ask.

"You can start on those blueprints.

"Blueprints?"

"You told me you went to a civil engineering school. I want blueprints. Go to work."

Without waiting for my answer Cap'n waves to Roberto and walks in the direction of a truck pulling in to deliver construction materials.

"I need a desk and drawing tools for the job." I follow along.

"Go buy what you need and set up in a quiet place."

"A quiet place?" I give a wink to Roberto. "That may be the most difficult part."

"Don't stand there talking about it. I'm building a-plenty. There'll be more work than you can imagine." With a jerk, Cap'n pulls up on his striped pants and speeds up so I am left behind. Roberto pats my shoulder.

"Looks like you're Cap'n's new partner," he says with a grim chuckle. "You need to get a clear picture of what we are doing."

Roberto takes me to a room on the top floor of the main house. He points to the left, to the right, up and down. Craziiness is going on all over the property. Walls half finished, stairways to nowhere, freestanding towers of various sizes half demolished, half-built. While we were on Skeleton Island, a glass construction two stories high sprouted on top of the captain's diving board.

"Cap'n's church," Roberto explains.

"A church on top of the diving board?" I am dumbfounded. What could be weirder? "How long have you been working for Cap'n?"

"Four years. I started to work for him shortly after I got married."

"I guess you are happy working for him."

Roberto grins. "Very different from anything else I've ever done."

There are so many unfinished projects. I need to pick one. Where to begin?

"What is that?" I ask, pointing to a ditch wrapping halfway around the smaller building. I have wondered about this ditch. It crosses under the plank Sophie and I use to go between the buildings.

"That's the moat."

"Moat?"

"Haven't worked on it in a while. Cap'n doesn't stay focused on one thing very long. He'll remember it one of these days."

The moat. I remember now, Cap'n said at our first meeting—I am in charge of the moat!

"Here are the last sets of plans."

I slide a bunch of blueprints from the drawing table and hand them to Cap'n. I managed to build a drawing table with crates, old stumps of antique furniture, and a cowhide, fairly smooth, to top my drawing area.

“Lemme see those, where are we?” Cap’n shakes his Havana and grabs the plans with his other hand.

“These are for the drawbridge and the moat.”

“I thought you were working on the flybridge.”

“Flybridge?”

“To link both houses?” Cap’n thunders.

“You said I was in charge of the moat. You never mentioned a flybridge.”

“I don’t need plans to dig a ditch. I want you in charge AFTER it’s built.”

I am confused and downcast. My beautiful plans are for nothing.

“See, I’ll have sharks in the moat,” Cap’n continues, growing red and warm with the topic. “I want you to feed them every day. Feed ’em well. If my guests drink a bit too much and they fall in the moat, I don’t want any of them to become a meal for the beasties.”

“I see.”

“I want you to work on the flybridge. It will connect both houses, understand?”

Not really. I picture the dizzying planks Sophie and I cross over and back every morning and night. “I’ll need more time to come up with new plans.”

“Have them ready for Thursday.”

“Is this going to be a flybridge, à la Indiana Jones?”

“Whoa,” Cap’n roars, “that’s a grand idea! Let’s do it, a flying bridge—I like it. Where’s Roberto? Yo, ho—Hello gang,” he greets the gathering crew, drawn by this song. “Let’s celebrate a great idea. Pierre—tell Sophie to put her feet up. Let’s go to the Ol’ Sailor’s Bunghole for lunch.”

## Twenty-Five

Off the starboard, I can see that our stay with Cap’n is coming to a crisis. Amelia is hovering around her father. Cap’n has an infinite number of hidey-holes for his rum, but his daughter discovers them one-by-one as if she can read his mind.

“Pierre!” Her orders are loud and without mercy. “No rum!”

“Get me a noggin, man, understand!” Cap’n’s orders are almost as loud, and I am caught between the battling father and daughter.

Worse, my Dulcinea is close to detonation. The doctor’s orders will lead to starvation from the blandest of meals. Sophie is instructed to prepare dishes of boiled chicken and yogurt-coated romaine lettuce.

We seek consolation in our quarters across the plank bridge.

“Who is the boss?” Sophie shakes her fists. “We do not work for her.”

“Yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Roberto says she’s taken over the bookkeeping.”

Sophie considers this development. “You’ll have to be more creative with the receipts.”

“Yes, or she’ll have us eating boiled chicken too. No butter, no foie gras.”

“And think of our wine bills—the champagne. Your cognac.”

“My new executive suite office furniture has not arrived. I may have to make do with crates.”

“Oh, Pierre. It is bad.”

“Sweet Pea, I will make one more trip into town tomorrow and lay in a good stash. Cap’n wants a load of drills and things from Harbor Freight. I’ll mix in the extra expenses, so she won’t notice.”

“You’re so good with the receipts. But how long will the stash last?”

“We’ll see, Cherie.”

I am thinking it won’t have to last long.

Roberto is waiting for me in the truck. The bed is loaded up with new tools—Cap’n’s crew runs through tools every couple of months. We also hit a cheese shop with a nice selection of imported items and a fresh seafood market. I return from our last stop with two bags of good French wines, a case of champagne, and a bottle of Cognac. Also Cuervo and a keg of Molson’s for Roberto and the crew.

“Check that out,” Roberto nods his head in the direction of a gas station in the corner of the lot. “Wish Cap’n would get one of those for me to run errands in.”

“What? Where?”

“Center pump. See it? The red Ferrari?”

I see it. And beside it, the tall, broad-shouldered man with the hangdog face. Is he looking at me? No? His droopy eyes make it hard to tell whether he is burning a hole in you or merely admiring the shopping center behind you.

As we move the stash from the cart to the backseat of the truck, the man climbs into the car and peels away, tires squealing as he maneuvers out of the lot and across six lanes into the garage of a nameless hotel.

“Must be doing a bit of local business,” I mutter.

“Figures,” Roberto laughs. “That place—poolside of the underworld.”

“Yeah?” I hand off the keg and give the cart a push into the cart return. “Maybe I should pay a visit there sometime.”



A week does not pass before Amelia finds that she alone must take upon herself the care of Cap’n’s health.

“The last tests from the doctor are back,” Cap’n’s daughter announces, with a sharp snap of her Florida twang. “Whatever you do here, it ain’t working. His cholesterol, blood pressure—he’s a mess!” Amelia dumps a shopping bag on top of the kitchen island.

“I always cook healthy. Whatever he eats from my table doesn’t hurt him.”

“Oh, really?” Amelia yanks open the fridge. “This looks like fish to me. Is seafood on the list?”

“It is the best thing for him.”

“And what is this? Olive oil! He can’t have this—his heart can’t take it.”

Amelia is throwing open all the cupboards.

“Cumin! Cinnamon! Look at all these spices. Have you been seasoning his food?”

A storm has ravaged the kitchen since this morning. Amelia has gone to make arrangements for moving in with us. Sophie casts bolts of lightning from her ears and eyes. She paces like a lioness across the linoleum.

“I can’t believe it, Pierre, she is taking over the whole food department. Purchase, preparation, menus, *and* the cooking.”

“Cap’n will be none too happy, his squids boiled in protein shakes.”

“She is leaving her own house to come to take care of Papa.”

“No problem, Sweet Pea,” I offer in my most soothing tones. “I have already taken care of the next move.”

“What next move? What have you done?”

“I called the airline this morning and ordered first-class tickets to LAX.”

“We’re leaving?” As expected, Sophie is ecstatic. But she covers her smile with her hands and composes a charming pout. “Oh, but Pierre, you love this job. Are you sure?”

“Amelia will be here this weekend,” I reply. “We depart Friday before she can move in.”

“Friday! Two days!” Sophie throws herself in my arms and like a woodpecker kisses every place on my face. “First class, did you say?”

“We can do with some comfort, don’t you think?”

## Twenty-Six

Thursday. A stunning morning, sunny and warm.

A tall fellow wearing a cowboy hat steps out of a flatbed truck loaded with five full-grown palm trees. After a short talk with Cap’n and Roberto, there is an exchange of money. Cap’n always carries a wad of one hundred dollar bills in his pants pockets. The tall and lanky truck driver cranks up the flatbed of his truck and dumps the palm trees right in the middle of the front lawn.

Roberto explains. “Cap’n got a deal he could not pass up. Those trees are *reaaal* nice. Today, we’ll plant ’em wherever the old guy wants.”

Friday. A beautiful Friday morning, much like the last one.

“Honey, wake up. Come and see. The sheriff has put the cuffs on Cap’n.”

“What are you talking about? What cuffs? Are you crazy this morning? Did you drink too much coffee?”

“Nope, they want to jail Cap’n for buying stolen goods.”

“The Cap’n’s bought stolen goods? What are you talking about?”

“Well, as far as I can tell, the palm trees that Cap’n bought yesterday belong to Gloria Esteban. At least, they were stolen from her property.”

Sophie springs from bed and half-dressed, without makeup, runs to the scene. I am beside her all the way, parting the crowd—the whole crew has gathered. Hands cuffed behind his back, Cap’n stands ready to walk the plank, one sturdy sheriff clutching each elbow.

“Sweet Pea,” I whisper in her ear. “Look!”

A familiar red Ferrari sweeps up the causeway and turns into Cap’n’s yard.

“It can’t be,” Sophie gasps. “I...I can’t believe...”

We duck behind some tall fellows and watch the convertible slide up behind the squad car.

“Yes, it’s him—Preston the coin-man con man. That’s him.” Sophie whispers excitedly.

“What does he want?”

“Maybe there is something more to Cap’n’s treasure hunt? A loose doubloon or two?” I suggest. “What can he be saying to the sheriff?”

“Look—look, he is handing him something.”

A business card, no doubt. But, whatever, it has worked a miraculous change.



“Aw, Cap’n is loose—no fun.” Sophie’s disappointment spreads through the crowd like a bad cold. “Let’s get out of here before the coin man sees us.”

“I cannot go, Cherie,” I say, with a big dose of mixed regret and curiosity. “I have to know.”

“What do you have to know? He slid something into the sheriff’s hands. So what?”

“Money?”

“Of course, money. His only game is MONEY. What else can we expect with the king of the gold coin collections?”

“That’s what I want to know—what we can expect.”

“What?”

“I mean, what brought him here, in the nick of time?”

The crowd is soon gone. The cops speed away. We are alone on the lawn with the Cap’n and the coin man. The husky, droopy-eyed, doglegged man winks in my direction.

“Pierre,” he reaches out to shake my hand. “What a surprise. Hello, Sophie.”

“This is the boss.” I make the introductions. “Call him Cap’n.”

“I have heard of you,” Preston says, eyeing the old sailor from boots to the bald spot. “I was in the middle of a big deal with Gloria...”

“Did you haggle the singer for a gold coin collection?” Sophie scolds.

“Gold coins?” echoes Cap’n.

“Almost,” the coin man says wistfully. “Beautiful set of doubloons. Very rare. I had her all ready to sign the dotted line when her business manager popped in with the stolen palm trees bit. It upset her. Changed her mind.”

“It didn’t take much for your singer to forget about gold and embrace nature,” I said.

“Gold!” Cap’n’s blue eyes filled with admiration for his rescuer.

“Well, she loves her palm trees,” Preston drawls. “The thief was seen dropping the goods on the lawn here.” The coin man gives the Cap’n a reassuring pat on the back. “Believe me, she was shocked, Captain, shocked. Said she’d been on one of your treasure hunts and couldn’t—wouldn’t believe you’d go around stealing other people’s palm trees. She was really distraught, I can tell you. That’s when I offered to help. Popped right over.”

“I’m obliged.” Cap’n shakes the coin man’s hand. “She didn’t buy your gold coins?”

“Ah, well,” Preston hangs his heavy head. “All in a good cause. I don’t believe her heart was in gold anyway. Takes a special kind of appreciation, very unusual, very rare. *True* collectors are hard to find.”

Cap’n quivers.

“I’d like to see your gold coin collection.”

“You don’t say? Nothing easier. I have it at my hotel safe.”

“Just let me run in and get my hat.” Cap’n pauses in his dash for the house. “I suppose she’ll want her trees back?”

“She might be willing to make a deal. Let me see what I can do.”

Cap’n disappears in his rush to see a real treasure. We are left alone with the coin man.

“And here you are,” Sophie says. “How do you manage to follow us across oceans and continents? Always popping up in the same place as us.”

“No mystery.” Preston winks at me with one big eyelid. “You’re like me. You fancy pesetas and glamour. Ah, ha. I greatly appreciate the intro to the Cap’n. The diversion has been well worth it. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Yes,” Sophie folds her arms across her negligee and takes up her bargaining persona. “Ought to be worth something, I believe. Say, twenty percent?”

The coin man's lips make a jagged shape at their corners. A smile? He turns his eyes on me. "She never loses her touch," he says. "Let's say fifteen, with an extra three percent if he goes over a million."

"Great!" That is surely enough to close our real estate deal on the watermill in Provence. "It's a cinch—he dreams of golden treasure."

"You'll hear from me. You'll be at the, uh, palace here tonight?"

"Our own palace in Santa Monica. We leave today."

Cap'n is back in a flash with his faded blue captain's hat. The two gigantic men lumber off towards the Ferrari, which looks too frail to carry them. As the car peels away, more trouble appears on the horizon.

Amelia has arrived a day early with a small moving van.

"Sweet Pea, she will want help with all that baggage."

"No," Sophie declares. "We are packing ourselves. It's time to go."

"Ah, ha—Our luggage is already packed, my sweet buns."

"Already? When did you...?"

"I started to pack as soon as Amelia started giving you cooking lessons."

We make our way to the main house, to collect our wages from the new mistress of the castle and to walk the gangplank between the kitchen and our quarters one more time. I pause on the edge of what will maybe someday be a flying bridge and look down into the empty, unfinished moat.

"Too bad," I mutter to no one but myself.

"What?"

"I am sorry I won't be around to feed the sharks."

Sophie gives me a hug. "You will miss the swashbuckling? Do you want to stay?"

This was the best job ever. I don't hesitate with my answer.

"It's already too humid for us and the heat is on its way."

Adios, Florida.

End

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