

# STORMY

A NOVELLA



# SOPHIE

STELLA & PHILLIP LEMARQUE

Book 1: Bonjour Never Land

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**A Novella**

## **Stella and Phillip Lemarque**

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Baba Rum International Publishing

Stormy Sophie  
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# ONE

## The House of a Thousand and One Nights

*Why am I here?*

My mind wanders to a better time, when money flowed. From the corner of my eye I look at Sophie. A warm feeling fills me. She does all this for me—I love her. The sharp turn from Sunset onto Mountain Drive brings me back to reality. “Easy, Cherie. Don’t kill us before we get our first job.”

The car winds through the snazzy Beverly Hills neighborhood of the super rich. Hidden at the ends of long gated driveways, guarded by centennial cedar trees and mammoth bougainvillea in full bloom, are the most prized and coveted addresses in the world. I remember my house in Mandeville Canyon. I could have been driving around here like I owned the place, in my own car, not so long ago.

Sophie’s Mercedes takes another sharp turn, onto Schuyler Road. She gives me a quick look. “What’s going on? You look spooked, all curled up in your seat.”

“Thinking about stuff, you know—”

“No time to think.” The Mercedes slows as we run out of road. “We have arrived.”

Mr. S’s house is at the end of the cul-de-sac.

“Whoa!” I can’t help an outburst. “This must be the house of a Thousand and One Nights.”

“Where do you think we are?” Sophie has already cast off her seatbelt as we turn into the drive. She checks her lap for wrinkles, all business, but throws both her beautiful hands in the air, giving the whole block a dismissive flick with them. “This is Hollywood.”

I am more impressionable. The glitz is blinding. “What a huge house!” I say, unable to contain myself. “Columns everywhere. Are you sure you want to talk to these people? Who knows what’s going on inside those walls?”

“The electric gate’s open,” she answers, imperious and irresistible. “They expect us. Let’s go meet the man who lives in this hideous castle.”

Sophie brings the car to a gentle stop between two chalked lines, the Mercedes’ star hood ornament facing off with a metal sign labeled GUESTS. She looks at me, turns off the ignition, and says, “Restrain yourself from going into your usual endless diatribes. I’ll do the talking.”

She is right. I am talkative, what can I say? But people like to talk. They *love* to talk to me. They made me rich, talking to me—coming to my restaurant, for the food, yes, to eat, yes, but also to talk to me. But she is right. I shouldn’t have talked it all away. “What’s the secretary’s name?”

“Eglantine.”

“That sounds like a French name!” Eglantine! The name is comfort to me. I instantly start to relax. “Gonna be easier to understand each other.”

“On the phone, she didn’t sound French.” Sophie pulls

down the visor in front of her face to adjust her makeup.

“Cherie, you don’t need an overhaul. You look stupendous.” I reach for Sophie and pull her close, plant a kiss on her full lips. Never mind smudging the lipstick, I know how to make up for that. “Your blue dress is a smash hit!”

Sophie gives me a fake pout and rubs the color off my mouth with her long, beautiful thumb. “You didn’t say anything about my hair.”

It is my turn to buck *her* up.

“I love your look, Cherie.” Sophie could step from Paris to Los Angeles and back again, knocking the socks off both continents. Her swirl of bright blond hair brushes her neck and shoulders, a rainbow of colored streaks framing one side of her face. “Not one strand out of place, just right.”

“What about my purse, my shoes?”

“Cherie, the whole setup is excellent.”

“Why do I have to *ask* my soul mate for compliments?”

“You’re beautiful—the best. Better than best, you’re smashing, a real stand out.”

“Too much, too late.”

Knowing when to zip it, I jump out of the car and jog around to the driver’s side where Sophie is tapping the steering wheel with two fingers, waiting for me to demonstrate my new hop-to door opening technique. Together we climb the broad marble steps, me holding Sophie’s soft hand tight. At the top is a gigantic

ornately carved slab of wood studded with copper hardware, a grotesque aberration in the history of front doors, sure to impress guests and neighbors.

I press the golden button—silence.

“I wonder if they heard us. Should we—?”

Before I can utter the next word, a tiny woman dressed in black, her little head sticking up out of a white Peter Pan collar, blinks at us through the crack of the door. “Good afternoon,” she says, looking us up and down. “You must be the Martins?”



# TWO

## The Gun on the Top of the Night Stand

The Martins. That was something new. A surprise to me. To Sophie, too, I guess. But here we were, a couple in name as well as other things. On Sophie's terms, not mine, but who am I not to trust her instincts? After all, she still had her Mercedes, immaculate, fully gassed up. I had a bicycle, taken down in hurried departure from the wall of my restaurant—the Bike Shop, the cultural heart of a city, the labor of years, the loss of a lifetime—but that is another story. I soon discovered the tires would not hold air. The bike and I were two sad, deflated souls when Sophie came to our—to *my* rescue.

Fresh off our ruinous divorces—I lost my business, she lost the million she invested in a well-tailored husband—we found each other. It wasn't hard. LA isn't such a big town, especially among restaurateurs. We had known each other for years, tasted each other's sauces, loved and cut each other's exes, called to each other across Third Street—*Bonjour! Les feves sont fraiches!* It was only natural I should gravitate to her, though I don't think I would have found the heart in my despair if she had not insisted.

Our story begins here, two steps back from the morning Eglantine opened the door to the house on Schuyler Road and gave us our first big job in this

strange world, behind the curtains of the rich and famous. Our epic, five-year undertaking begins modestly enough, amidst squalor and desolation of soul.

The gun on the top of the nightstand is the first thing Sophie sees when she walks into my studio apartment on Seventh in Santa Monica. She does not so much as raise an eyebrow. Instead, she puts one hand on her hip and says in a voice like a woman scorned:

“I called all day—Where were you?”

“I, I was . . . going to call you.”

We had spent a gorgeous weekend in Puerto Vallarta on the little money I had left in the bank, but somehow it only made me feel worse. How could I show off for this woman? She could get a new rich husband easy and make her million back in no time. I did not even know how to begin again.

“I wanted to invite you for dinner,” she says. “Denise mentioned this new Chinese restaurant in Westwood—only been open for two weeks. It won’t be overcrowded.”

“I hate Chinese food. No thank you.”

“Are you kidding? Last week you took me to the Golden Dragon—one of your *favorite* restaurants, you said.”

Using my own words against me.

“That was last week. Today, I hate Chinese food. Please go, leave me alone. I need to be alone.”

“You look so depressed,” Sophie says. “What’s eating you?”

I have no answer to give her. My knees don't want to hold me up any more. Clutching my head between my hands, I bounce down on the bed and notice I have a hole in my sock's big toe. It is the lowest point of my life.

"I have a great idea how to get a smile on your face," Sophie says, all business. "First, I need to take a quick shower." She drops her bag on the couch and walks into the bathroom. The gun on the nightstand seems somehow inappropriate to the occasion now and worries me almost to death. I wait for the shower to start up, then pick the clunky thing up and look around for a place to put it. The nightstand drawer is full of junk, and all the other hiding places that come to mind—under my pillow or the couch cushions or even the kitchen cupboard—seem like good places for a gun to go off accidentally. If I were going to shoot myself now, I wouldn't want it to be a surprise. I put it in the little market basket on the nose of my bicycle. It seems as good a place as any.

In a few minutes, Sophie emerges from the bathroom holding her black panties in her hand. If she has noticed the gun is gone, she doesn't show it. Only, except, she gives me her most radiant smile and throws herself among the pillows, one beautiful arm stretching for the phone. "Okay, let's call the Panda, they deliver."

She rises early. Unlike me, she had gone straight out from her divorce and gotten a job. A hard one. No one could be better at running a kitchen, but the bistro is beneath her talents and she hates being tired and sweaty

—and greasy too—at the end of the day. Still, morning for Sophie is always a new beginning. She tries to slip out the door without waking me, but I feel her going. Seeing me open my eyes, she pauses in the doorway and blows me a kiss. Dressed as she had come, there is one little difference. The gun inside her purse makes an unusual bulge. The thing weighs a ton, I know, but she settles the strap on her delicate shoulder and bears it away from me like a good angel.



I should tell you, when Sophie makes her mind up, she makes it up quick.

“Let’s go to Norms. I need to talk to you.”

Sophie called on a Monday—unusual for her.

Monday, she always said, was Sophie Day. What she did all day remains a mystery to me still. It was none of my business, I know, but those were hard Sophie Days for me. I missed her. I was so happy when she called, I forgot that I could not bear the thought of Norms. The place was haunted for me, full of reminders.

Chefs may be choosy about what they cook, but they are sometimes not so particular about what they eat, especially when they are not rich and famous yet.

When I first came to the United States, I ate at Norms. But so did Claude Poulet, Alain Veau, Michel Jambon—most of those guys. And Sophie was there too.

Maybe our story would be different and have begun then, but she was already attached to the famous pizza guy, though she had a profitable little cafe of her own

going on La Brea. That was where she made her first and last million.

I pull something presentable out of a drawer and shake it out. It is a warm morning, heading towards noon. I am not used to eating so early, but I walk out and stroll up Seventh to Lincoln. Norms' famous pointy sign comes into view, and my pace picks up. As I enter, a waitress zooms up and sticks with me as I pass familiar booths all the way to the back. I find Sophie ignoring her iced tea and drumming her fingers on a table in a quiet corner. Instead of hello, she says:

“I talked to some friends about your situation. They agree you cannot find a job. It's your age. You will always be too qualified.”

“Yes, I know,” I say. “That's why I decided to end the suffering once and for all.”

“Can I start you with something to drink?” The waitress seems determined to contribute to the conversation. Perhaps it is best to get the preliminaries out of the way.

I order a cheeseburger. I know it is a mistake from an emotional and gastronomical point of view, but I am broke and full of self-pity.

“I will also take the cheeseburger, well done. Pierre—Yours should also be well done. Whenever you deal with ground beef, always order well—that will kill all possible bacterias.”

It took me back, being there, to those golden days, before we were all rich and famous. Our toques were petites but our futures—as big as we could imagine.

And I have a big imagination. Americans love Norms cheeseburgers. What would they not do for a really good burger ala Pierre? My restaurant would make the best burgers, a dozen varieties, all my own invention. And people loved my cheeseburgers. And steaks. My beautiful cuts, done just so. And salads, their names familiar, as Americans would have known them from Norms' menu, but with fresh, gorgeous ingredients and dressings you could drink. Almost.

Sophie grabs my hand and I stop drooping. She leans in and speaks firmly, so close I could kiss her. "Those people I met a few weeks ago, they work as chef for Robert Stack."

"Yes."

"They claim that they saved a hundred thousand dollars in less than three years. This could be an opportunity for us too."

Robert Stack pays well. But what is Sophie saying?

"You want to join me to work in people's homes?"

"For you, Darling. I love you, you need to find a job."

"You will have to quit your job. To help me?"

"I do not see any other alternative," she declares and slaps the table with her open hand for good measure.

"It will not be a sacrifice. I love you. We will join our talents for a worthy goal."

A goal? Now Sophie is really cooking! She has made up her mind, but what about I have no idea. Cooking for Robert Stack is no doubt a good job, but a worthy goal? How can it be.

"What would be this famous goal?"

“Working together and saving our money,” she says like a frugal American housewife. “We would have very little overhead—only your studio. We will quickly save enough money to buy a house in Provence.”

Ah.

“You and I are French, ain’t we? It will be nice to go back to the old country and live in the South of France. The climate is similar to Southern California, and it is a more relaxed life than in Paris.”

“My Chickadee, I think that you have a plan. As a matter of fact, it is a great plan—I like it.”

“Good. I already called Simone. She gave me the name of the agency for those jobs. It is in Beverly Hills, on Beverly Drive south of Wilshire Boulevard. Only, we need a solid resume with good references.”

I begin to dream of bills of fare. Sophie is telling me a great many details but my mind runs free and wild, concocting all-night dinner parties unconstrained by a restaurant menu. I am suddenly aware of Sophie’s fingers snapping in my face. Our fries have arrived.

“Burgers will be up in a few minutes. Do you folks need anything else?”

“References!” cried Sophie angrily. She seemed to see a hitch.

“We are fine!” I said, pouring my newfound sunshine down on Sophie. “We are fine,” I say to the waitress and smile charmingly at her as I shoo her away. “We know enough people to vouch for us, don’t you think?” I have already begun flipping through the hundreds of contacts in my mental Filofax.

“They need references for the same kind of work, but we have none.”

“That’s okay, Chickadee.” It is my turn to be the hero of the day. We have come to my specialty. “We are going to build our own references.”

“How can we? They will have to be verified.”

“Well, first we need testimonials from people we work for. Right?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. We ain’t got any.”

“Yes, we do. I can make as many testimonials with authentic signatures as we need.”

“What about if they call our references?”

“I still have friends to be our references. All we have to do is clue them in, let them know what they have to answer when the agency calls.”

“I don’t like the idea of false references. I never did anything illegal in my whole life.” An uneasy Sophie wags a fretful fry. But I know, if there were another way, she would have found it already. I suppose that’s why it took so long—two weeks!—for her to make her proposal.

“Mother Teresa, you just got a change of life. You are now a scoundrel.”



# THREE

## We Need Crafty People in Our Kitchen

Sophie looks beautiful, in a dark purple dress with a light blue scarf hanging from her shoulder, a leather Hermes handbag, shoes to match the bag. Classic style. Nothing that has gone out of fashion in the last twenty years, let alone since the demise of her credit card. The Dior sunglasses add a Hollywood charm. Her blond hair floats, buoyed but undisturbed by the breeze, as she moves her head to look back at the agency's building and its big copper plaque: Mona International. Sophie is the picture of confidence, but I am queasy after our interrogation.

"That woman, Mona, asked so many questions. Where we worked, how long we stayed on our last job, why we left. What was our salary—"

"I think she is okay. She was doing her job." Sophie raises her chin and gives me the smirk of the newly criminalized. "We must have done all right. I didn't think she would have a job for us right away."

"You have the address?"

Sophie hands me the agency's envelope, stuffed with papers, and strides off towards the car, her hips swinging, her arms making waves of their own.

"Mona said these folks own the Cougar Film Studios. If we get hired it will be a secure and well-paid position," she says as soon as I catch up. Suddenly she

flings herself sideways, crashing into me with a mama grizzly hug. “Our first interview, how exciting!”



The next afternoon, we take the Mercedes for a wash and wax and then drive to the address, which is guarded by a gate and an old guy in a sweltering kiosk. He checks a clipboard and lets us through. There is a space at the curb in front of the house.

“Don’t wipe your sweaty hands on your pants. Are you nuts? I have spent so much time to dress you for this.” They can see us sitting in the car, if they were to peek out, so Sophie has to be content with only verbally slapping at my hands. She eyeballs my tie and shoes and suggests I button my jacket, though it must be 90 degrees. It strikes me that not being my own boss is going to be a lot of work.

“I can’t fathom we are applying for a job as servants.”

“Too late to think about it now.” Sophie squashes her cigarette in the ashtray.

“Should we go ring the bell?” I ask. She has put her bag in her lap but is just sitting there.

“When are you going to open the door for me?”

I jump out my door and run around the front of the car to open for Madame Sophie, Queen for a day, giving her my best musketeer bow as she steps out.

“They will expect it,” she says. “You might as well practice.”

“Maybe I should practice the chauffeuring too, huh? Your car will do.”

“No.”

The Davidsons’ house hangs over the Pacific in Malibu’s select, guarded enclave—the Colony. The two-story house is barely visible, covered by thick ivy to the top of its red tiled roof. Sophie walks ahead of me to the nested porch, where two jeweled pier windows stand guard on either side of a wooden Spanish Colonial door studded with étoile nails and adorned with forged iron pull handles and hardware. If the Davidsons choose to peep out through the high peephole’s stained glass, they may be able to make out the top of Sophie’s hair-do. She grabs the heavy iron knocker and raps it sharply against its plate.

A young lady opens the door. “You must be Sophie and Pierre?”

She seems all right. She is so happy to see us, I think she might hire us on the spot.

“My name is Catherine. Please, come in.”

Catherine leads us over a blue slate floor, an elegant touch for a relatively modest beach house. Rococo and art nouveau light fixtures adorn the walls in a typically California mashup of antique and eclectic styles. A few watercolors of seascapes from Jim Black or one of his disciples are hanging in the dining and living rooms, asserting the daringly sophisticated tastes of the inhabitants.

French doors open to the terrace, disclosing large ceramic planters with trimmed bougainvillea and a red-brick landing surrounding a swimming pool suspended over the beach. Catherine steps aside as we follow her

out and adopts a demure pose. Two people in white bathrobes and Ray-bans are reclining on comfortable chaise lounges and sipping Bloody Marys. For company, they are joined by two amputee statues of Greek goddesses, who gaze mournfully at the patio as if they can't make out where their lost limbs have disappeared to. The lady's left hand touches the water in a complete *laissez-aller* attitude.

Catherine, who I now realize is merely the door opener, announces us, but neither of them moves. Catherine does not move. Sophie does not move, except, I think, to grow two inches taller. I do not move except to look around at all the people not moving. For such high powered movers and shakers, they are slow. At last, Madame raises her eyes just barely, a little at a time, until Sophie's bright form takes shape before her in the light of a full sun. The dismal goddesses themselves, if they had feet of flesh, would slink from their pedestals and hide in the bougainvillea. "I like your shoes."

Madame Davidson smacks her lips on the top of her tumbler, but then her eyes wander away to the open ocean. "We need someone who is great with food. My husband and I are avid entertainers."

Mr. D. rouses himself. "We need someone dedicated to this house." His voice is dainty and soft although he's a fairly big guy, not real tall, but muscled across the chest and shoulders and a little pudgy everywhere else. He impresses me as a man who is not afraid of laying out his two cents to whoever might be around

for the asking. “We love this house. We come every weekend. We even spend time here during the summer.” He sends his orders skyward, into the atmosphere, but that is all right. I don’t have to look at him either.

Madame, her robe gaping and her bikini spread thin like a couple of strokes of watercolor from a stingy hand, is obviously under the supervision of a personal trainer, keen on keeping his client to an expensive, high maintenance program. “We understand that you are professional chefs.” She sits forward, swings her long blond hair in an ephemeral flash of energy, like a dozing horse swatting a fly, and begins combing it with her fingers. “We need crafty people in our kitchen.”

“We’d like to give you a tryout next Friday,”

Monsieur stands and walks to the far edge of the pool, looking out to sea. “I can never be tired of the view, the ocean—cradle of all life on Earth.” As he speaks, he drops his bathrobe and strides towards the steps leading to the beach. His striptease reveals a gaudy pair of trunks, which sets Dolly Parton humming in my brain her famous song, “Coat of Many Colors.”

He pauses on the top step and turns to gaze at the roof. “Whenever we are not here, this whole house is yours. When we are away we expect you to look after it like we do, as if it were your own baby.” Then to Madame: “You continue the interview, hon. I need to cool off.”

He steps down the wooden planks leading to the beach.



# FOUR

## A Matter of Honor for a Chef

“Pierre, you bought too much!”

If Sophie has one fault, it’s her overabundance of caution.

We returned to the beach house early on Friday so we would have plenty of time to prepare the big dinner. Catherine and her husband Dennis are overjoyed to see us and insist on giving us the nickel tour. Their bedroom, which will be our room, if we choose to accept it, is on the second floor. They both open their arms wide and swing them like a pair of Vanna Whites tempting us with this tastefully furnished grand prize bedroom, complete with private bathroom emitting a faint odor of dankness and the tinkle of a running toilet. On the walls are further examples of nautical watercolors. The remains of endangered seafood clutter the shelves. In total square footage, they assure us, this bedroom is as large as the master, which is not on the tour, the chief difference being a view of the highway instead of the ocean.

The oversized kitchen is crammed with the shiny trinkets and hyper-steroidal appliances that usually impress people who do not know how to cook. After the tour, they give us a credit card and a Land Rover to put the groceries in. My first task is to drive this classy clunker to the Petrossian Boutique in Beverly Hills, a

taste of Paris and the best place to pick up the caviar, and then to the Malibu Ranch Market. The shopping takes longer than I had expected, but eventually, with a little thoughtful engineering and the help of a couple of box boys, everything I need for a spectacular dinner party is packed into the car.

Meanwhile, Sophie takes charge of the house and directs the production of this fabulous dinner party from top to bottom. She clears the decks and inventories the serving dishes and utensils. By the time I return, she is rearranging the flowers. Catherine is biting her nails, but Sophie cannot bear a halfhearted floral arrangement and attacked the bouquets almost before the delivery guy had time to reach his truck. As Dennis and I unload the groceries, the house fills with gorgeous sprays and ingenious explosions of color— not exactly what Madame ordered but a big improvement, even Catherine concedes. The real problem is finding room for all the food. This kitchen, as huge as it is, was not designed to properly contain all the groceries that had fit so neatly in the car. When Dennis pops out to the Land Rover to retrieve another load, Sophie's overabundance of caution bursts forth.

“You think you are still running a restaurant! Look at all this!”

“We need to impress these people, spare no one, spare no effort, and spare no trick of the trade,” I say. It is the rule by which I have lived, and it has worked for me all these years.

“Yes, but look how much you spent. What are you



thinking! We only have eight people for dinner tonight.”

“Eight *guests*,” I remind her, “plus you and I, and we have to include Dennis and his wife.”

“Plus the army?”

“I have a very special menu planned, one that will make us the most wanted couple in the business,” I tell her. “Money saving is not anywhere mentioned in the job application. Tonight we have to cook for eight VIPs. Let’s impress them.”

“Yes, you are right,” Sophie says as she runs her finger down a checkout receipt. “The case of Dom Perignon and the caviar are the reason for the excessive tab.”

After emptying the Land Rover, Dennis and Catherine join us in the kitchen. Dennis is eager to see us deploy all the goodies, gadgets, and paraphernalia in preparing a genuine gourmet banquet. I gently rebuff their offer to help, as I do not want them to touch anything, so they begin to make chitchat. I don’t mind, but Sophie is all business.

“We need to cook,” Sophie says, meaning “Disappear, please.”

“For professionals like you guys it shouldn’t be a problem.” Dennis raises his right fist with a thumb up. Sophie also raises a thumb, over her shoulder towards the exit. Dennis nods his head understandingly but continues to lean his lanky frame against the counter on which I need to start chopping. “Of course, if you need anything tonight, anything at all,” he says, “we’ll be

upstairs. Don't hesitate to call."

He and Catherine obviously do not yet feel ready to disappear to their spacious quarters with the view of the highway. Dennis puts his thumb away and begins a sales pitch on why we should take their job away from them.

"What's great about this job," says Dennis, "we have the whole house, the pool, the beach, the ocean, all for just the two of us."

"Except when they come to visit," Catherine adds.

"Which is barely ever," Dennis finishes his wife's sentence.

"Do they move around much when they aren't sunbathing?" Sophie scoots Dennis aside and removes a pasta drier from my chopping space.

"Well," Dennis looks at Catherine and together they have a little silent conference. Something is quickly settled between them. "They come here to relax. They sleep late, which means you get to sleep in too."

"They don't like anybody moving around in the house before they get up."

"They have a thing about intruders."

"They get death threats, so it's totally understandable."

"Okee-doke."

"The only thing is, and it's not a big thing, the keypad for the alarm is in their room."

"They turn it on before they go to bed. The doors and windows are wired and so are the floors in the foyer, living room, and upstairs hall. So as long as you're

quiet...”

“and don’t leave your room before they get up...”

“...then they totally leave you alone.”

“It has been a *great* job for us,” Catherine adds, just to make sure we understand what a terrific situation we would have if only we would relieve them of it.

“Why are you guys leaving this job?” Sophie asks.

“Well—” Another little conference follows. “We’re from Canada,” says Dennis. “My father-in-law runs a hotel in Toronto. He needs us.”

“From Malibu to Toronto. That’s a big move,” I say, warming up to the conversation.

Sophie slaps my forehead with the palm of her hand.

“Pierre, you forgot the wine!”

“No?”

“Yes, you did. Remember, Catherine told us. Madame likes the California wine named after her. Dennis, you must go. Pierre, give him back the car key. Catherine, you go too. Get some Jordan red. And some white.”

“Get a case,” I said. A case would be enough. “Of each.”



“Dennis and his wife are very nice,” Sophie says after they have gone. “I wonder they are not heartbroken to leave this job. If it is such a great one?”

“They are so eager to find a replacement.” I wave a finger in Sophie’s direction. “‘We are here to help, anytime.’ They said it so many times, isn’t that a red flag?”

“If they are so happy here, why are they going back to the cold country—and work with the family for added punishment?”

“That’s why we are trying this job out,” I say, on the same suspicious wavelength as Sophie, “to find out if we will like these folks or not. Now, I wear the big toque tonight. I need to get cooking here. The table is set? All right. You go get ready. You must be smashing when you sling the dishes. Those people have never been so impressed in their lives as we will make them with his dinner.”

Little do I know about the turn of events that will knock the toque off my head forever.



The preparation is intense. Time is of the essence.

I jump from pot to pan, one step to another, but one thing I must work on is my sense of coordination. To be fair, I am not at home in this kitchen. Everything is too far away from everything else and it takes half an hour to get from the fridge to the stove. My amazing chopping speed is handicapped by the countertops, which are too high. My shoulders are cramping and already I see little scratches giving life to the neglected butcher block. I cannot afford to be cautious, but the vandalism makes me nervous.

“Appetizers will keep them busy for at least forty minutes.” I wave a big spoon at Sophie. “Pour the wine as quickly as they empty their glass.”

“You want them rolling on the floor?”

“That will be all right. At least, it gives me time for the next dishes.”

I am frantically assembling the appetizers, which are monopolizing all my fingers. Mentally, I am far ahead, pacing out the frying and splashing and stirring and pouring, but the clock in my head is trying to catch up with the one on the wall.

“Do you want me to serve the cold cuts with the pot stickers?”

“Yeah, anything you can think of will do. Let them nibble on something to keep ’em busy. The caviar! Where is it? That must be ready to go.”

I want to make sure there are no delays between courses to slow up the meal. No matter how impressive the food is when it finally gets to them, people will find a bone to pick if they have to wait.

“It’s fine. It’s in the fridge. Don't worry, I can do the blinis. The vodka is where?”

"There, behind you."

“What do you think, red or white with the cold cuts?”

“I don’t know. Both I guess. Do not get them too giddy before the entrée.”

“Do you know what you want, Pierre? Pour wine, more wine, but do not get them smashed. Which one it is?”

“Okay, okay, Chickadee, please help. I am swamped.” My fingers turn to butter. The pan I have gently lifted from its flame splashes a jet of oil on my shoes. I drop the whole shebang on the tiled floor with a deafening noise.

“Pierre, calm down.”

“Where are the shrimps? Someone is hiding stuff from me.”

“In front of you, in the white paper bag. Let me handle the appetizers. Take your time for the rest.”

“Okay, Chickadee.” Saved again. With the cold cuts off my mind, I can concentrate. Somewhere in this house is a pot big enough for this fleet of restless lobsters.

“What wine do I serve with the bisque?”

“We have a whole case of Dom. That’s what you serve unless they ask for something else.”

“Catherine seemed pretty sure Jordan would want her Jordan cabernet. We only have one case of it.”

“Well, one case of Dom, one case of Jordan, one of chardonnay, for eight people. I think that should do it. Oh, I forgot you and I and our new friends. We will need more wine.”

“I’ll check the the bar.”

I am ahead of her, for once. “Just booze, no wine there.”

“We will have to go with what we got.” Sophie raises her shoulders in a sign of abandon. “We are not going back to the market, no time for it.”

“We could send Dennis?” I drop my spoon and pick up the intercom to call for help.

“No! They are like two puppies. They will only get under your feet, and you will start talking and no one will eat tonight. Leave them alone until dessert is served. Then all us working stiffs can sit together and

relax over our own dinner. We'll have some Champagne. Then you can talk all you want, eh? We'll find out why *really* they are so eager we should take their job."

"Aha!"

Sophie is an expert confession wringer. I admire her technique. She's pretty good with cold cuts too. She has them arranged in a jiffy.

"Come to think of it," I say, "they may want something from the bar. Be ready to mix a cocktail or two, but only if they ask."

"Whee!" Sophie shakes her hand. "For sure they'll be rolling on the floor before dessert."



Preparation, trimming the meat, cleaning and pre-cooking the vegetables takes the rest of the afternoon. Sophie's frown indicates concern about the piling up of cooking utensils.

"How many pots and pans are you using? It is ridiculous."

"For the soup, the entrées, sauces, veggies...I need pots and pans."

"Why don't you clean as soon as you are finished using?"

I told you already, Sophie runs a tight kitchen. This is a philosophical difference that has resulted in culinary wars of reformation over the centuries. The way I see it, if I clean, no cooking will be done.

"And don't forget the dessert." I press my point.

“I can’t even walk in this kitchen, dirty pans are everywhere, you are a slob.” Sophie raises her arms to the ceiling. “What in the world!”

“Forget the dishes, Chickadee. I need more platters. Look at the time—It is already seven o’clock. Guests will be coming soon.”

“They are already here. At least, four of them are out by the pool.”

“Serious? I never heard the bell ring.”

“Catherine opened the door for them as they pulled up to the house.”

“You were right. We should have kept those two locked upstairs.”



With guests in the house and more arriving by the minute, I kick into high gear. My plan is to allow them time to kiss each other hello and talk about the weather, but prevent them at all costs from gorging themselves prematurely on liquor and appetizers. This is a dinner they must remember and tell their friends about, spread the word, start a hiring frenzy. I want them well oiled but hungry. I am up to my elbows in shrimp when Sophie returns with news.

“Guess who is here for dinner?”

“An important personage, I suppose. I am cooking, can’t you see?”

But Sophie does not take the hint.

“Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver.”



“Arnold!” The bodybuilder had wanted in on the Bike Shop, years ago, when he was shopping for solid investments. “Maybe I should say Hi?”

“Not now, they are drinking cocktails and hitting the appetizers. Besides,” Sophie adds after thinking it over, “you are only the cook now. You can’t go swaggering about people’s houses starting chit chat with their guests. Be serious.”

“All right, all right. Time to round them up and drive them to the dinner table anyway. I am just putting the finishing touches on the scampi.”

Sophie smooths her hair and cools her forehead with the back of her hand. It is a good moment to compose herself before reentering the dragons’ den and announcing dinner. “I still can’t believe what a mess you did.”



The dinner is served with brio by Sophie, who makes sure that all the wine glasses stay full. Happy laughter reaches me as I tidy up a couple of glasses of Champagne. The Dom is going more quickly than Jordan’s personal favorite, but Sophie has used her impeccable foresight to stash four bottles for the hardworking help.

I am at a critical juncture. Nothing impresses people more than lobster, unless it is something on fire. The entrée therefore is lobster Thermidor, with a flambé Cognac Courvoisier XO sauce, which requires all my concentration. Too much flame and the whole thing

goes zaboomb. A great chef must give his full attention to all his dishes, so in addition to never losing track of the entrée, I must simultaneously devote a steady hand and cool head to the starchy vegetable. Soufflé potatoes have to be cut to a quarter inch of thickness, cooled in the refrigerator and dumped in 180° oil. They are taken out half cooked and cooled off, then fried again at 225° until they inflate like small balloons. It is a matter of honor for the chef to get those little devils to puff.

The door to the dining room opens and Sophie brings in a load of dishes. Plates are coming back clean, a good sign that the guests do appreciate their dinner.

“The lobster, the veggies, and potatoes are ready. I only need to flambé the crustaceans—*et voila!*”

Pots, pans, dishes, and utensils are all over the kitchen table, the counters, the floor. “You are crazy, this is unbelievable,” Sophie overshoots composed and goes straight to stupefied.

“Come on, Chickadee, I need all those dishes and things to come up with great food. The tools of the trade make a chef.”

The door flies open again and a man walks in. My pulse begins to race, but it is not Arnold Schwarzenegger. It is only a stout, bald guy.

“Hello, everybody. The food smells great. Who’s the chef?”

I wave my spoon. “Here—Who is you?”

“I’m Bernie, the projectionist.”

“Another guest!”

“No, no,” Bernie’s hand is already rubbing his tummy.

“But if there are any leftovers . . . ?”

“Always. Leftovers is one of my specialties. You can join us. Is there going to be a movie?”

“They want to see the new Arnold movie with dessert.”

“Fantastic. What’s the title?”

“*Terminator 2.*”

“Perfect title. We have just nearly ‘terminated’ our tryout.”

“Not yet, we haven’t.” Sophie sweeps up a platter and head for the door. “Don’t keep Bernie talking, Pierre. Finish the lobster, and then get this place cleaned up.”

I take a reverent smack of Courvoisier for luck and splash the rest into the sauce. I am sorry I have only Bernie to witness the touch of the match, but I accept the kindred spirit he offers and the two of us alone watch the flames leap up and slowly dwindle. Such is life.

After Sophie carries off the lobster, I consider my next task.

“What about a glass of wine?” I offer the congenial projectionist his choice of a half dozen open bottles.

“Oh, red, please.” Bernie quickly becomes a great admirer of the Jordan wine. Sophie wants the place cleaned up, and lucky for me, I can see my new friend wants to help. We get to work with gusto on those half empty bottles. When Madame enters the kitchen, she finds her projectionist sitting, or maybe rolling, to be more exact, on the backstairs with your hero, occupied in belly laughs, hugs, and shoulder slaps. We have done

our part for the planet, not letting a single bottle go unrecycled.

“Bernie, we’re ready for the movie.”

I am relieved. For a flash, I thought I had been caught red-handed, falling behind on the dishes, but it was not Sophie. Madame Jordan does not look at the mountain of pots and pans. She doesn't even turn her head in our direction. In she had floated, drifting in a slow turning current, as if she is still trailing her hand through a watery ether. “Bring out the dessert. We’re waiting.” And out she floats again, back into the dining room.

“What’s for dessert?” asks Bernie, sniffing regretfully and rubbing his eyes.

“Baked Alaska.”

“I love Baked Alaska. Hopefully, there will be a piece for me?”

“You bet.” I console him with the promise of a big piece.

Bernie rises to the call of duty as Sophie returns, carrying a tower of platters balanced on one arm. She clears a place and deposits them on a counter before we can stagger over to help.

“Are you guys coming for the show?” Bernie asks.

Sophie jumps forward and arrests my progress with one finger. “You must be kidding, we ain’t got no time to play, can’t you see the kitchen?—It is a mess.”

Bernie finds his feet and is gone in a flash.

“Don’t worry, Chickadee. We can clean up the whole shebang in no time.”

“What is this *Chickadee*? It is sexist. I don’t like it. I

want you to stop.”

“But!”

“No. No more Chickadee. We are going to be up all night cleaning this. We still have to eat, and Dennis and Catherine must be hungry.”

“All right, Ch—Cherie. All right. But now is the time for the Baked Alaska. Do not forget it is flambé. Light the darn thing with Cognac.” I gently hand Sophie the silver platter adorned with the decorated masterpiece. It is the end of the night, but she suddenly looks fresh, lifting the heavy platter as if it and the Alaska are made of air. I kiss her cheek and open the door for her. The inebriated guests all say Ahhh! I watch for a moment, just to see her slice through the room.

“Pierre?”

It is Arnold. I had forgotten about him. Maria is smiling that big smile and Arnold is squinting at me from the other side of a melted candle.

“Hello,” I say. I want to go over and have a chat but Sophie is giving me a look as she sparks the igniter. It seems to me she has gotten hold of a flamethrower.

“Good to zee you!” he calls. “Hey, I went to the Bike Shop on Surzday.” Speaking American is no easy feat. People love my French accent, but still they say What? What? Arnold’s Austrian accent is mixing with the Dom, creating a whole new version of the language. I am perhaps the only one in the room capable of understanding his “The boorgahs were bahd.” I am touched. “You should have let me be your partner when you had the chance.”

“C’est la vie.”

“So, you are catering here, or what? These guys can afford you?” Arnold swivels his mighty skull around and finds his host standing at the head of the table, a glass of California cabernet under his nose and his eyes gazing at a lock of hair blocking the view from his swollen eye sockets. “Hey,” says Arnold to Mr. D, “so you guys are hot shots now, huh? You know who this is?”

The Baked Alaska roars to life, casting a flickering orange light on eight sets of bulging eyes. I think Sophie has used Mr. Wizard instead of Cognac. Davidson batters convulsively at his wayward hair and throws his wine at the flames.

# FIVE

## The Toque Is Knocked from My Head

The guests are lolling in the living room, watching their movie. Either they are mesmerized by the Terminator or they are falling asleep. Catherine and Dennis walk down to the kitchen from their upstairs room with a view of the headlights on the highway. “Oh My God!” says Catherine.

“We can help you...to clean,” says Dennis. He does not sound quite so eager to pitch in.

Catherine shakes her head and swings her arms, right and left, like a marionette. She wants to chime in but she is speechless.

But Sophie has already laid out her battle plan for tackling the kitchen mess. I am up to my elbows in hot water, both kinds, scrubbing pots and pans in the sink. Sophie orders Dennis to clear everything off the kitchen table while Catherine finds a cloth and napkins and clean dishes for our dinner. Somehow, magically, Sophie has arranged a plate of caviar to start us off.

Once they have eaten and put away a bottle of Dom between them, Catherine and Dennis are ready to get their hands dirty. The mess takes five hours of hard work from the fabulous four to clean the kitchen, stoves, utensils, plates, and glasses. By the time the last glass is put away, the guests are gone and the Davidsons tucked in their bed.

The night is too lovely to waste now that we have time to relax and enjoy it. We sit on the patio, overlooking a black ocean. Streaks of bright silver dance along the foaming edge of soft waves, which roll in one after another, breaking on the black stones that cover most of the small strip of beach. The highway is so quiet, we can hear the splashes kissing the wooden piles supporting the artificial garden. Armed with the last bottle of Champagne and four fresh glasses, I suggest a glass of Dom. Dennis stands up, raises his glass, and with a grave voice toasts our triumph: “We are glad to have met you guys. A little more constraint in the use of pots and pans might help to make your life easier.”

Sophie has fallen into Madame’s comfy chaise lounge and looks as though she might never rise again. Beside her, one armless statue, its white marble skin lit by the moon, gazes sympathetically at her exhausted figure. “If I had arms,” it seems to say, “I would drive you home.”

“My Chickadee,” I say coaxingly, to inject a little energy into her now that the night belongs to us. “Come and relax. A glass of Champagne?” I raise a glass to our new friends, expecting such a gesture to raise Sophie too.

The patio lights are not very bright, but I can see she is looking at me. At last, she raises a hand. Waving a finger in my direction, she says, “Don’t you chickadee me. I will make our life easier. From now on, you do not wear the toque. It’s all mine. You are not the chef anymore. You are from now on forbidden to ever cook,



either at home or any other place where I will be involved. Certainly never to cook where we will be working. Got it? The chef is NOW Sophie!”

# SIX

## Mona International

Two days after the Davidsons' party, Mona left her agency's version of a subpoena on our answering machine. "You have an appointment with me tomorrow at ten. If you have other plans, cancel them. Don't call to confirm—just be here."

I play it again.

"Does she sound mad? I can't tell."

"She's all right," Sophie shrugs one shoulder. She is absorbed in detesting the walls of our studio. I admit, at the time, they were not of the best. I had detested them myself on many gloomy occasions, but other than bolting a bike with flat tires to one, I never knew what to do to give them whatever successful walls need to succeed.

Sophie's furnishings, however, were always of the best, but as we were pooling our resources, and her resources would have to put up with mine, the culling had been ruthless. Putting into storage the pieces set aside for our house in Provence, Sophie has sold all the rest of her treasures. Only my couch she has replaced and the bed, and she has bought a nice coffee table with hidden drawers somewhere cheap. The kitchen has made room for a few of Sophie's own favorite spatulas and things, but for the most part, my pots and pans will do. At least, she says, they are well seasoned. The tiny

studio can't hold much else.

"I'm going to tell the landlord we need life in this room," she says abstractedly, the corner of her mouth meandering thoughtfully until she comes to a firm decision. "We need paint in here. The walls are greasy."

"The exhaust fan over the range is broken."

"He will fix that too. Otherwise, he will lose his best tenants."

"Okay, you talk to him. But remember, this place is rent control. Don't get us thrown out."

"Okay, okay." Then, out of nowhere: "Mona is suspicious, Pierre. She has found something out."

"She can't. No one would snitch on us. We gave only our most trusted friends to call for references."

"I don't know." Sophie opens the refrigerator, her face clouded with sinister forebodings. From the fridge's buzzing innards she retrieves a mostly full bottle of Jordan red and holds it up to the light of the window. "Maybe they complained."

"Are you going to drink that?"

The little shoulder goes up and down. "Might as well."

"Pour me one too."

She passes me a glass and together we brave a sip. Drinkable—a good omen.

"How could they complain?" I say. "Everything was perfect."

"You got their projectionist drunk."

"They were in no condition to notice."

“Did you break something?”

Miraculously, I had not. Other than the knife wounds in the countertops, we had left the place just as we found it.

“Well,” Sophie says, and she is done with the subject, “they could not set the alarm last night. They were probably murdered in their beds.”

“Ah, and Mona International Private Eye has pinned the bloody deed on us.”

Sophie laughs and runs her beautiful finger around the lip of her glass, making it sing.



At five after ten sharp the next morning we are escorted into Mona’s office. There is a white enamel clock ticking loudly above the door, behind us as we sit. The wallpaper resembles gray burlap. Gray vertical blinds block out the sunlight. Everything else in the office is some shade of black, except the manila folder on Mona’s big black teak desk.

“I have a question.” Mona’s hand rests like a pale, carnivorous spider on the crisp new folder. “A very interesting question?”

Is it a question? The way Mona converses always makes me feel like I am about to commit perjury. I sit in a hard imitation leather chair across from her. The stuffing seems to be made of bricks. There is a gooseneck lamp on the corner of her gruesome desk that I keep expecting her to shine in my eyes. I can’t tell if I’m supposed to answer or ask, but my natural

instinct is to say something in my defense, so I say:  
“The countertops are crap.”

Mona turns to stone for a moment.

“Residential counters are too high for professional service,” Sophie adds, and Mona becomes flesh, such as it is, once more.

“The address on one of your references.”

I figure she is finally about to get going but she just stops there, apparently so she can bore a hole in my forehead with her cold gray eyes.

“Yes?” Sophie snaps. If Mona is going to get tough with us, I pity her.

“Mrs. Smith on Hamlin Street in Hidden Hills?”

We two remain motionless. We will volunteer nothing. It is the only way to find out how much Mona knows.

“Seventy-five hundred square feet?”

Sophie tips her head, as if to say So?

“Which, by the way, is not in Hidden Hills but in Woodland Hills.” Mona pauses and gives me a look that wordlessly carries a sworn oath that I am never to be blessed with the light of another sunny day. From her agency’s executive throne, she deigns to address us scoundrels, to embarrass this hard core liar, to expose our cunning and bring our professional futures to a dark conclusion.

I feel a cold invisible hand rubbing my back up and down. The frisson doesn’t last more than two seconds—enough for me to search my mind for a quick answer that would crush her hubris and obliterate her

doubts.

“Oh?” I say, with brio and looking Mona straight in the eyes.

Mona flattens her spider hand and slides the folder to the center of the desk. She opens it gingerly, with her fingertips, as if the evidence is sure to come pouncing out and finish us off.

“Peter, my office clerk, checked the city records and couldn’t find any house bigger than 1,200 square feet within a mile of the address you gave me. This neighborhood is all bungalows.”

“What are you saying?” Sophie charges in. “Are you calling us liars?”

Mona stops looking at me and switches to Sophie. Deep inside, the agent must feel the shattering blow to her timbers. She will capitulate now or be annihilated.

“No, of course, not.” She tries on a little indignity—affronted to be accused of accusing unimpeachable people of being liars.

“Were the Dickinsons not satisfied with our work?” Sophie is throwing down gauntlets left and right now, daring Mona to produce a customer complaint.

“No, NO!” Mona slaps the folder shut. “No, in fact, the *Davidsons* loved you. They want you permanently. In fact, they’re willing to let their current staff go tomorrow if you can be there to take over.”

“If we have given no reason for you to complain, then you should not complain. We can go elsewhere.”

“Don’t do that! I’m only saying, there’s a discrepancy.” She gives me another Medusa stare. “It’s

nothing as far as I'm concerned, but it's important to get these things right. Your reputation is my reputation, and I'm not the only one who will ever check. I need you to fix it."

"Don't worry," I say, happy to play the humble scapegoat. "I'll fix it tonight."

"No hurry." Sophie picks her purse out of her lap, as if she is about to rise and storm out. "We don't want the job."

Then an unexpected thing happens. Mona smiles. I don't know what to make of it. Is she happy or just creepy?

"I don't want you to take the job either," she says.

Sophie sets her bag back down and looks inquiringly at Mona. I don't know what the two of them are thinking but they seem to have made some kind of truce behind my back.

"I don't blame them for wanting to keep you. I heard the dinner was fabulous. They even authorized me to offer you twenty percent more than their original offer, plus a signing bonus."

"No." Sophie is sticking to her guns. I long to have one of those silent conferences like Dennis and Catherine. This deal sounds too good to pass up to me.

"Apparently one of the guests told them you were a bit above their league."

That one is definitely a question, even to my untrained ear, but Sophie remains unfluffed and waits for more.

"But a bad fit is a bad fit, so let's move on and find you a better place."

“A-huh,” Sophie parries Mona’s attempt to turn the battle. “You have one?”

“I have a line on one.” Mona leans in and puts her spider-hand back on our folder. “I expect a situation to come up this week or next. Probably not much longer than that. I don’t want to say any more at this point, but I will say it is worth the wait.”

“What sort of people?” Sophie demands.

Mona slides her eyes to one side, consulting with an imaginary partner, then confides just one little detail to satisfy our burning curiosity.

“*Person*,” she corrects our assumption. “One man, highly cultured, with exquisite taste and a very large house in Bel Air. Amazing—you’ll see. Like a temple to the best of world culture. He has other staff as well, of course. I think, for you, it will be a very good fit. If I can talk you into waiting for it?”

Sophie gives me a little gesture with one hand, like a conductor telling the bassoon to reach for the sky. We rise together, as one. Sophie says: “We will wait. It is convenient for us. We are redecorating our home. You let us know when Monsieur Good Taste is ready, and then we will see.”

“Perfect.” Mona jumps to her feet, but as we start to leave, she shoots around her desk and cuts us off at the pass. “One other thing.”

She is blocking the door or I might grab Sophie’s hand and bolt. I want to get out of there before we have to answer any more questions. Forced to stand my ground, I take Sophie’s hand anyway.



“Aaaw.” Mona yodels like a slide whistle. She thinks we are adorable? “I know how this sounds, believe me, but as your agent I have to give you my professional advice.”

“Oh?” Between Mona’s Aw and Sophie’s Oh, I am afraid of someone losing an eye.

“People like the Davidsons wouldn’t care, but by and large, I have to warn you, this is a very conservative world you are working in. I know you’re experienced, but, well—I don’t know if you have come up against this before, but it would frankly surprise me if you haven’t?”

Is she asking us? What is she talking about?

“I notice you’re using your maiden name.”

“I use my own name.”

“No, I mean...”

“I know what you mean. You think we are married and I should take his terrible name.”

Mona’s face puckers in the middle.

“You’re not married? At all?”

“We are partners. That is all.”

“But.” Mona pulls a hair out of her lipstick. She looks as if she is searching for a reset button on the conversation, which is not going her way.

“We are partners in love and work,” I throw out, in the spirit of peace and fraternity.

“Okay. So.” Mona holds up a finger, as if she has found the button and is going to push it. “With people who are not like the Davidsons, that isn’t going to fly.”

“We do not care. We don’t want to work for narrow-

minded people.”

“No, but they pay the best. Candidly.” Mona winks at me. The effect is horrible.

Sophie becomes still, quietly digesting this nugget.

“Look at it from their point of view,” Mona relaxes into her naturally crusty, businesslike self and begins using her fingers to enumerate her arguments. “A married couple doesn’t take more than one bedroom. They are less likely to break up and create staffing issues. You only have to write one check. Between you and me and these four walls, I can tell you a woman will be more at ease in her own home if she can count on an employees’ husband to keep his wife in line around the master of the house—know what I mean?”

“And vice versa,” Sophie reminds her.

“And, I know it’s the twentieth century, but there are lots of people out there who don’t want their staff shacking up under their roof.” Mona has used up all the fingers on her left hand. I hope she won’t start on the right one. Instead, much to my relief, she wraps it around the doorknob. By all the signs, we will be set free soon. I cannot wait to fly from there. “I’m only saying this because *I know*. I can place you in extremely well-paying families, but you have to get married. I’m sorry, but that’s how it is.”

# SEVEN

## Princess Mrs. Martin

Sophie sits naked at the end of the bed combing her long blond hair. I think of the armless goddesses. No wonder they looked so depressed.

“Is coffee ready?” squeaks an ethereal morning voice, seeking me in the kitchen.

I sneak up behind her.

“Close your eyes,” I murmur. Without giving Sophie the time to respond, I drop a crown of lilies on top of her head. “You are now my legally declared wife.”

“What’s all of this? Are you crazy? We are not married and I don’t want to marry you.”

“Well, well...,” I say, prepared to argue the point with infallible logic. “That’s not what Mona wants. We need to be married if we want to work for the rich and famous.”

“I don’t believe it, why?”

“Obviously rich folks strive for steady employees. A married couple for them is more steady than an unmarried one—I guess?”

“That’s ridiculous. I will not play that game, Pierre. Just think. Sophie Martin. It’s horrible.”

“Sorry, Chicka—pea, Mrs. Martin you are.” I pull a rolled up document from the inner sanctum of my bathrobe and hand it to my Dulcinea. “Martin is better than yours, Vaskikovsky.”

“Ha. It’s beautiful. I love it, it’s my first husband’s name. He was a count in the tsarist Russia, and that makes me a princess.”

“A tsarist princess in 1991?”

“Why not?”

Sophie drops her comb, but being a princess, she immediately forgets about it instead of stooping to get it off the floor. She unrolls the document and stares at it for a second or two.

“You are crazy, this will not work.”

“It’s a legal document,” I said. “You and I have been wedded in Las Vegas yesterday. It was the dream wedding you always never wanted to have. You see, this way we can show Mona our eagerness to comply with the regulations.”

“I don’t know, Pierre. It’s one thing to forge a former employer. This is...this is more illegal. It’s a government document and you are guilty of impersonating whoever gives these out in Las Vegas.”

“Cherie, Sweet Pea,” I explain, armed with the facts of life against a vast sea of moral ambiguity that has bedeviled philosophers for millennia, “the real world is full of self-promoters who con people out of their money. We are not self-promoting to steal anything. All we are doing with this,” presenting Exhibit A, an authentic reproduction of Clark County’s finest marriage certificate, “is to make a slight adjustment in our lifestyle to get ahead of the competition. We are the best?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then, in justice, we can’t let other couples push ahead of us by cheating and getting married.”

Sophie sighs deeply and winds a lock of hair around her index finger, as the Italians will do, to show disregard for the law.

“But I like our arrangement. We have been happy.” I sense a weakening.

“Sweet Pea, don’t cast away all the beauty of married bliss. What is a name after all, eh? You know, I will be nagging you the rest of your life. You might as well pretend in the meantime. It will get us to Provence all the faster.”

Sophie bites her lip thoughtfully.

“You have something there.”

“That’s right. Listen, if we must play this game, we’ll play it our way.”

“Right.”

“And it’s Mona’s fault, so you don’t need to blame me.”

Sophie leans over and sweeps the hairbrush off the floor. “Hmmpf,” she snorts and waves the brush in my face. “I am telling you,” she says, “that Mona is something else. She couldn’t care much if we have done this or that. If we burned the Davidsons’ house down, it would be okay with her, as long as she collects her fee. She got a big one, too, for that one little tryout. Jordan was drunk so I asked her and she told me. Believe me, that Mona is looking out for another fat commission. That’s why she doesn’t want us to take the Malibu job. Hmmpf.”

Sophie hops up and straightens her lily crown in the mirror. I guess she is working this princess fixation. “From day one, when we came to apply for a job, she was mesmerized by us—Remember?”

“Yes, I do. She was very impressed by your outfit. You looked like a model from a fashion magazine, Sweet Pea.”

“Stop with the sweet peas. My name is Sophie and don’t you forget it.”

“Okay, Chicka—. Dear.”

“She had not seen such a presentable couple for some time—that’s what her secretary Peter said.”

“Was he drunk too?”

“Shut your mouth.”

I could tell her mood was lighting up. Shut your mouth means, You are too funny.

“She is a shrewd business woman,” I say. “She knows she can get the highest price for us, which means the highest commission.”

“Right.” Sophie began poking through the dresser for things to put on. “A problem with our resume. Pah!”

“Oh, I fixed that while I was getting us married. I had a very productive morning while you were dreaming, Sleeping Beauty.”

Saved by the bell. Mona is calling.

I pick up the phone. “Yes... I guess... We could. When?” I lean in Sophie’s direction. “A piece of paper.”

Sophie scrambles for the junk mail in the bike’s basket. There is a pencil where I used to keep the gun.

“Who?” she blows the whispered word to me like a kiss.

I press a finger on my lips and murmur, “Mona... a job.”

I copy down the address she is telling me on Schuyler Road. I can tell from her directions, it’s a swanky establishment.

“Yes, Mona . . . . Okay, tomorrow, 10 a.m. Will do. Thanks.”

“What kind of a job?” Sophie’s *moue* makes me smile.

“The rich guy in Bel Air with all the culture. He needs a congenial couple, savvy in the kitchen.”

“That will be my job. You will have to manage the house. *If we take the job.*”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it, if I have to.” I try to sound chastened. Then I cannot help laughing, remembering how hopeless things had seemed only a few weeks before. “Haha! We are off to a roaring start. The Davidsons laid the foundation for our nest egg, and now we are off to stuff the nest with Mr. S.”

“Mr. Who?”

“I don’t know. I can’t read my writing. We have an appointment at ten, but we are supposed to call the secretary first and confirm we are coming. You talk to her. I don’t know what to say. There’s the number. Call and lay down the law. Tell them we must be free to get up in the morning whenever we want.”

“Too much blabbering.” Sophie kisses me. “Shut your mouth.”





# EIGHT

## We're Standing in the Vatican!

And that is how we came to be the famous Martins, standing between marble columns and ringing the golden doorbell at one of Bel Air's most Xanadu-ish dream palaces. As you will recall from the opening of our great adventure, the giant door creaked open and out peeked prim and bespectacled Eglantine, faithful personal secretary to the rich, if not famous, mall magnate Milton B. Skirtypantsky. I admit, I might be wrong about the name, which I never quite got the hang of, but that is neither here nor there.

Eglantine stands just within the threshold, one hand preventing the massive door from swinging shut. She is a birdlike woman, tiny, with hollow bones and beady eyes on either side of her head. Coral framed glasses dangle down her front on a bright pink cord, and around her wrist is a springy orange coil like a dayglow telephone cord deformed into the shape of an upside down teardrop by a heavy tangle of keys.

"You must be the Martins."

"Yes, we are Sophie and Pierre. Here's our introduction from the agency." Sophie hands her a large envelope, which she takes with her free hand. With the other, she shoves the door wide. "Please, come in."

Eglantine leads us through a dark foyer, which opens

onto a huge lobby. A half dozen full-grown palm trees, planted in six-foot terracotta pots studded with Arabian ceramics of red, blue, and turquoise, stand in a semicircle, their fronds unwavering and a little yellow in the meager morning light struggling in through the high windows. Each pot is suspended just above the marble floor by four small but sturdy beads, and beneath each a drain is barely visible. Between each palm, a Byzantine column reaches to the top of the grand rotunda, drawing our eyes upwards and around the ceiling. Sophie pulls her wide-open eyes down from the dome and looks at me. “We’re standing in the Vatican!”

Sophie knows. She’s been there. I take her meaning, but Eglantine doesn’t.

“Almost!” says the secretary, one hand heedlessly crumpling the satin edge of her prim white collar. Above, cherubs blow trumpets, in search of hearts to pierce with love arrows, bolts of lightning flash through the clouds. Angels with flaming swords and horses’ wings keep a close guard on the edge of this incredible ceiling.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Eglantine’s smiling face is illuminated, as if with secret joy. “Mr. S commissioned a French artist, flown in from the Beaux Arts in Paris, who hand painted the ceiling, after Michelangelo. You’re right, we’re in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.” The woman sighs. “It took six months to complete this masterpiece. I won’t even mention the cost—”

The tour continues through a succession of white marble steps, along a hallway twelve feet high and embedded with colorful tiles adorned with Arabic script and designs. Along the way, crisp new replicas of Greek gods and goddesses stand guard—maybe against lost angels gone astray from the cupola, I figure. More marble floors, hallways, steps, on and on, to a small dark hole of an office, tucked like a broom closet at the end of a windowless second-floor corridor.

Our guide drops herself into an oversized leather armchair. She furrows her brows in an attempt to look suitably intrigued. I take the chair next to Sophie and sit down looking straight at my interlocutor; only her face is visible over piles of baskets full of documents, which cover the massive oak desk. She might as well be a CEO of General Motors for all the papers she is responsible for watching.

Mona's grilling comes in handy. Eglantine is a lightweight, and I am now a practiced hand at bandying the usual questions. Where did you work? How long? Why are you looking for a new position? What was your salary at the last job?

Eglantine shuffles through our paperwork with her crackerjack paper pushing powers. She finds what she is after. "Well, your references are—" Eglantine stops and grabs her collar. "I see, splendid—Oh!" With short intakes of breath, she holds a sheet of paper adorned with gold leaves and a crown. She stares at us wide-eyed. "We, we never—never had anyone who worked for royalty before. Mr. S will be very impressed."

“Yes, we worked three years for Prince Rainier of Monaco,” I say with a smile. While Eglantine reads and re-reads the document, Sophie shoots a look at me. It resembles panic, but I smile reassuringly to let her know I have it all under control.

Pausing on each syllable Eglantine murmurs, “That’s . . . excellent.” She keeps glancing at Sophie, then me. After inhaling a deep breath she hands us printed forms. “The next step is to fill out the application, which is just to have on file, of course. I will have a contract for you this afternoon.”

“Anything else?” Sophie says.

“No, that’s all I need from you for now. You can take these with you and bring them back when you’re done filling them out. Sophie, Mona tells me you’re a chef supreme, and, Pierre, you also cook?”

“In a past life.”

“Oh, uh-huh. Well, that’s fine. Always nice to have backup.” Eglantine bares her teeth at Sophie, her professional smile, so unlike the beatific ecstasy of the foyer.

“Not in my kitchen,” says Sophie.

Eglantine drops her upper lip and blinks, once at Sophie and once at me.

“Wonderful!” she says at last. “Managing this house will keep Pierre more than busy. Now, of course, you need to meet Mr. S.” Eglantine picks up the house phone and a moment later there is a sound, like a fly. “We’re ready to meet you,” she says to the fly.

A loud voice resonates back through the intercom:

“I’ll be RIGHT OVER!”

# NINE

## A Temple to Bad Taste

Eglantine rises. She smooths her skirt, flattens her Peter Pan collar with all ten fingertips, throws her shoulders back, and folds her hands before her in breathless anticipation. I look at Sophie and she looks at me, giving an inquisitive shrug with just her eyes. We too rise and turn to face the patter of loose bedroom slippers approaching fast along the echoing corridor.

In an Eglantine-like gesture, I reach for my throat. My tie is still tight and straight, the edges of my collar sharp as knives. My chest swells against my waistcoat, which, as Sophie says, enforces discipline in me, like a straightjacket.

In a moment, a shortish, fifty-something man smoking a cigar and dressed Hugh Hefner-like in silk pajamas blows into the room. Rather than a natty dressing gown, he is sporting a surprisingly disreputable bathrobe, the cashmere worn to a shine, elbows almost transparent—and the backside, too, though we do not get a gander of that until later.

The man blinks rapidly, furiously seeking Eglantine through our bodies, which appear to be blocking his view. The faithful secretary darts around the desk and sprints to his aid, tenderly reaching with her nervous fingers and removing his glasses for him. Now he can see us, but he doesn't seem to want to.

As short as he is, he towers over Eglantine. Zeus-like, he shouts: “They’re OKAY? Did you ask them if they can start RIGHT AWAY?”

Mr. S has a sweaty bald head, which he rubs with a gargantuan red checkered handkerchief. Without waiting for Eglantine’s answer—from her fluttering I believe it would have included something about the prince of Monaco’s warm approval of the service we rendered him during the time we kept the palace running like a well-oiled machine—he turns his blinking eyes in our direction, shaking his upraised, spread-out hands to emphasize the urgency of his concern. “I’m leaving FOR HAWAII next weekend.”

“For some much deserved recreation,” says Eglantine. She doth protest too much, I think. I would swear she is silently wringing the blood from her heart with her own birdlike little hands.

“Yeah,” says Mr. S. “GOOD. Eglantine’ll take care of you.” And off he goes. Without even a Hello and welcome to Baghdad, he disappears down the long hallway, his slippers smacking the bottoms of his flat feet.

Eglantine watches him go. I turn to Sophie and put my thoughts into my eyes: *What are we, chicken shit?*

Sophie returns a pout, which means: *Fuck that asshole.*



As the echoes of Monsieur’s slippers fade into the distance, Eglantine leads the way out of her little office

and continues her walkaround with us. We follow as she shoots to the left and banks 'round the corner. We emerge from the gloomy corridor onto a vast landing. Here, light pours in from skylights above and glitters off the garish treasures parked along the walls and occupying arched niches.

“That way lies the master suite, Pierre. The spa is through this door and the bedroom is at the end.”

We can hear the master's voice penetrating the bedroom door, deafening somebody at the other end of a telephone. A lingering breath of humidity, like a thin cloud, fragrant with bubble bath, hangs in the air outside the half open door of the spa. I take advantage of the pause in Eglantine's stride to peek inside. The floor is wet and a fog dims the mirrored walls, but aside from a teak chair and a damp bath towel sprawled in a shallow puddle, I can't see much.

“Ahem,” says Eglantine.

The corridor at this point opens wide, exchanging one wall for a fantastical gilded balustrade.

“I'm taking you down the grand staircase, but when he calls for you—for breakfast, or whatever—use the back stairs, you know, the way we came up.”

“Shorter, eh?” I envision an efficient backstage, with household staff hurrying and scurrying from kitchen to spa.

Eglantine emits a burst of chuckle, as if to say I am a funny man.





The Arabian castle is puzzling. Eglantine tells us it was built by a Saudi prince, but it looks more like an endless Hollywood set, a pastiche of confectionary palaces from every era and every continent. The architect's instruction must have been: "More, more, more." More height, more rooms, more gold. The present owner had made his gigantic fortune building shopping malls that are almost indistinguishable from theme parks and theme parks that are basically shopping malls with gate prices. No doubt, if this house had not existed, he would have had to build it himself.

The twenty thousand square foot house wraps like a U around an Olympic sized indoor pool lined with deep dark blue ceramic tiles, a watery abyss that exerts a magnetic pull on the innocent bystander. I pause to contemplate this chlorinated suicidal ideation. Sophie whispers in my ear: "Imitation Hearst Castle. This is a 'good fit' for us, heh? Thanks a lot, Mona! This is a temple to bad taste."

I agree but have no time to express my own amazement. We have to keep up with our leader, who must be on steroids. We fly through large reception halls, parlors, smoking room, library, and Monsieur S's private office. Eglantine pauses here to allow us to savor a recent addition by the squire of the marble castle—a majestic bar from a Western movie bought at auction. I slide my hand over the top of the oak bar studded with carved names, here—John Wayne's! It's the very same bar from my favorite movie when I was a kid back in Brittany. I fondly recall watching *Fort*

*Apache* in my hometown's theater, and I warm up a little to the place. Mr. S must be an old movie buff, like me. It seems we will get along better than I expected.

The bar is in need of inventory. I see a lot of dusty shot glasses and an untouched bottle of Black Label. Inside a drawer is a red plastic swizzle stick.

Underneath the counter are two cabinets. One contains half a bottle of tequila, some ouzo, a fair selection of expensive booze, and a very fine Cognac.

"That's more like it," I say out loud. The other cabinet is locked. "This is where he keeps the absinthe, eh?"

Eglantine is more confused than amused. "No," she sniffs. "It didn't come with a key."

"John Wayne could have left a boot in there," I say, determined to derail our relentless tour guide and wring a friendly laugh from her. She merely looks skeptical. "There's a mystery in the house. Aren't you curious?"

"Oh!" she says, baring her teeth as high and wide as her lips can stretch. Her eyebrows fly up, and she has to resettle her coral framed glasses on her nose. "I have something that will beat that!"

Eglantine pokes her fingers between shelves, and the bar swings out from the wall to reveal a wooden stairway. "There's another secret door in the gala dining room downstairs, behind the drapes. The staircase runs down through the hill and opens on a plain gate above the street."

"A priest hole," says Sophie.

Eglantine clutches her collar and giggles. "That's what the contractor called it. Is that one of those

unmentionable European terms?”

“You might say that.”

“Anyway, it’s good to have an escape route from any dangerous situation. Earthquakes or...whatever. Mr. S is always very careful about safety,” Eglantine says.



My feet are killing me. So far, we have not seen another living soul in the house, but we have only just penetrated the west wing—it is possible someone will turn up yet. Eglantine does not say that we are hired, but then no one has indicated that we are not hired.

At last, we pass through a grand salon and unexpectedly come out on a patio, cantilevered over a steep hillside planted thickly with a great variety of vicious looking cacti. As large as the patio is, I see only one way in and out. All the other outlets appear to have been sealed up and marbled over. The door is outfitted with heavyweight hinges, two deadbolts, and pins locking the door by both the lintel and the threshold. Mr. S is careful about burglars, for sure.

From the salon, the spectacular view is partly blocked by an enormous fountain, encircled by a frieze of plunging and pawing horses hitched to a chariot drawn by an insane seamonkey. A series of jets runs around the fountain in concentric circles spouting here and there, and then, whoosh, it must be a hundred altogether throw up a curtain of water in a ring around the fountain. It falls away a moment later, revealing an inner curtain, which also falls away. We watch the

curtains fall, one after another, in a watery Dance of the Seven Veils until all that is left is a leering faun playing a concrete pipe.

“The fountain is eco-friendly,” says Eglantine. “The water recirculates, so Mr. S never has to worry about turning it off during a drought.”

The view is further blocked by a raised platform, which appears to hold a tall, skinny reproduction of the Lincoln Memorial, minus the president and two or three columns in the front, which gives it a gap-toothed look.

“A funny place to hide the plumbing,” I remark, pointing to the array of pipes running up and fanning out along the inside back wall of the faux shrine.

“Oh, no!”

I see Eglantine’s faith in me falter in her eyes.

“Don’t you see?” She gives me a moment more to come to my senses. “It’s an organ.”

“Ah, yes. I can see it now. Who would have thought to put one in the yard?”

“Mr. S is a genius,” she says, with a little tug at her collar. “He’s a true Renaissance man, if ever there was one.”

Sophie is speechless. She is staring mutely at the gleaming white temple of the organ.

“Does Monsieur play?” I ask. A very important question, I think.

“He can do anything. But no,” Eglantine turns her head away and looks sadly at the leering faun. “No, he’s so busy. He hasn’t played since it was installed.

I'm not sure it even works at the moment. I've noticed the lights at night don't change color anymore."

"Lights?"

"In the fountain." Eglantine leads us up to Neptune's team of angry war horses thrashing in the waves, where we can get a good look inside at the burnt out floodlights encrusted with algae and hard water deposits. "It's all connected, you see. As the organ plays, the water changes color, the spouts go higher the louder the note. He can make the whole thing shoot up all at once in a rainbow. It's wonderful!"



The tour is complete with a turn in the house kitchen. A professional self-cleaning hood is fitted with an automatic fire extinguisher system and looks like a battery of small guns crowning an eight-foot open grill. On the opposite wall, two six-burner ranges. Next to it, two sub-zero refrigerators—a must-have for any rich home. The butcher-block island is adorned with a large stainless steel sink. Counters, shelves, and white cabinets are bursting with cooking paraphernalia, some of it from trends at least a decade old, some still in the box, and almost none of it used.

"There is enough stuff in this kitchen to impress Martha Stewart's aficionados," Sophie says.

I wink and return a smile. Among all the shiny gadgetry, I spy a respectable family of German knives. Sophie twirls a pretty decent spatula she has found in a crowded drawer. It will take some work, but with a

little housekeeping, this kitchen will enable us to produce world class dinner parties guaranteed to send rich people climbing over each other to hire us. As for Sophie and me, this beats my malfunctioning oven and greasy walls at home.

Eglantine without further ado moves to the north side of the kitchen and slides open a pocket door. On the other side is a staircase to an upper floor. “This is the access your quarters.”

Unexpectedly, the one-bedroom apartment is full of sunlight. The windows are open and uncovered. A balcony overlooks a pleasant garden and commands a view of West Los Angeles all the way to the coast. The sitting room is full of comfortably arranged modern furniture. Like the pool, the bathroom is lined with deep blue tile but balanced with fresh white walls and properly lit, so that you do not feel you are being pulled under and drowned without even climbing in the tub. The bedroom itself holds a king-size bed in its center, with plenty of space all the way around to engage in morning calisthenics, if one should want to do that instead of watching the cable TV or listening to soft music on the stereo’s Bose speakers cleverly hidden in the ceiling.

“Is it big enough for you?” Eglantine asks. I detect a worried note. She does not know Princess Vaskikovsky and the royal majordomo from Monaco live in a studio apartment on Seventh Street half this size.

Sophie looks contented. “This’ll be fine,” she says, after a pause and a sniff. She gives Eglantine an

indulgent smile.

She's now in charge. I feel safe.

# TEN

## In It up to the Wazoo

We bounce up and down on the bed to assess the mattress and associated springs, and Sophie lets me take my jacket off for half an hour while we fill out our paperwork. Before we are quite ready to sally forth again, a voice from the hidden speakers somewhere above our heads suggests we meet in the drawing room. After a few detours, we find the secretary, all freshened up—lightly scented with a variety of department store perfume samplers and in a new blouse, a missed tag dangling from a seam under her left arm.

“The most important meal of the day for Mr. S is breakfast. He wants to be presented with three different fresh-squeezed juices. None of those juices are to be repeated; new ones have to be selected every day. No repeats, *please*.”

Eglantine pronounces her boss’s bizarre breakfast specifications as if such dainty neuroses would pose a pleasing challenge for professionals used to complying with the very best whims. With such demands, Sophie will have to juice whatever comes through her hands. If we last a month, she might even have to juice the pasta to fill the request.

Mona is right about one thing, though. The pay will ease a lot of pain in the neck or anywhere else. She had not been able to coax him into matching the Davidsons’



signing bonus, but the weekly rate more than makes up for that. Mona was happy. We did a little math of our own, and we are happy.

Eglantine's voice grows more animated as she describes our new job and jumps an octave when she gets to dinner. "Mr. S is very specific. He looks for balance in everything, especially his meals. He approaches food spiritually. What goes in... well, you know what I mean. Three is the number of balance."

"Like a stool," I say.

"Yes. He wants three different vegetables, never the same as those of the previous evening."

"Does he want them juiced?" I ask.

"Only at breakfast."

Eglantine, I can see, is impenetrable.

"Dinner is to be served at seven o'clock sharp." She looks at her watch with a grave expression. "It's getting late. You two had better get going. Gelson's in Century City. Here are the credit and gas cards you'll need. Come to me for the ledgers when you get back—I need you to keep super accurate records of all the household expenses. Now, for dinner—anything you want. Go ahead and surprise him. Mr. S loves surprises, but for his appetizer tonight he wants an artichoke."

"An artichoke."

"Yes. I've had the car moved out front for you when you're ready. The blue Rolls. And don't underestimate the traffic. You need to be back in plenty of time. Punctuality is primordial."



We retreat to quarters to pretend to make a grocery list. I walk onto our balcony. “Come here, look, ma cherie, we are in the opposite wing of the boss, with the same view of Beverly Hills.”

“What do you think, Pierre?”

“I think this guy thinks we start today.”

“Okay for you?”

I shake my shoulders. “I guess—You?”

Sophie shrugs too, but adds, indicating her silk dress and killer stilettos, “I can’t cook in this.” And I certainly can’t serve in my pressed navy straightjacket. “We will have to go to the studio and pick up our clothes.”

“I can do that,” I say, already in a mode to manage all household dilemmas. “I will drop you at Gelson’s and go home and pack while you do the shopping. What about those juices tomorrow morning?”

“Forget about the juices. Look—What a view!” Beverly Hills spread in front of us, further on the horizon Palos Verdes, and a little smidgen to the right, the ocean. “I feel like we are millionaires—Forget a house in Provence.”

“Yesterday there was no place like Provence,” I remind her. “Don’t flip-flop on me.”

“Don’t pay attention to what I say. I get carried away by the view. Provence is still number one.”

“Right. Remember our goal.”

Sophie blows me a kiss. Suddenly she laughs. “Prince Rainier of Monaco! That’s a bit much? You even put the coat of arms on the references.”

“If you make up references why not go for the kill. The bigger the better. They ain’t gonna call Prince Rainier for verification—Ah, ha?”

“You’re right.”

“The rich folks have money—It doesn’t mean they are street smart.”

“Okay, you’re right, you’re right.” Sophie takes my arm and leans way out over the rail to see what else she can see. “Anyway,” she says, “we’re in it up to the wazoo.”

“This is all right, then?”

“All right? You are my hero.”

Her hero. Ah! Then, I do as I do when I am deeply moved, and quote a hero of my own. “ ‘When I am good, I am very good. When I am bad I am better.’ ”

Sophie gives me a stern look.

“What are you doing there with your hips?”

“One of my great Hollywood impressions. Mae West, my little chi—Never mind. That’s what she said. It’s our motto from now on.”

“You and your movies.” I think she is about to say more, but she is suddenly overtaken by one of her epiphanies. Sophie straightens like an arrow and snaps a finger. “I know why Mr. S wants an artichoke,” she says. “This is a test, I know it. He will not get me. I know the game.”

“What game?”

“He’s an Israeli. My first husband Roger was Israeli.”

“I thought he was a tsarist prince.”

“Pah, don’t talk. I know the way they like their

artichokes—in chicken broth, white vinegar, lots of lemons.”

Sophie dashes from the balcony, checks her face in the mirror. “Don’t linger, we have to go buy the food.” She grabs up her purse in her fist and shakes it at me. “Time is money, hurry.”

“Ah, ah, you have barely started to work for a billionaire. You already sound like you are talking to your stockbroker. Time is money—Ah . . . ah.”

# ELEVEN

I want MY glasses. MY glasses, I WANT THEM—

Dinner is served in the dining room. The gala dining room is for big affairs. This regular dining room is spacious enough, with a double wide arch leading in from the drawing room and a swinging door leading out to the kitchen. In the center is a gleaming glass tabletop sitting on a base made from a massive tree root. A few paintings by unknown artists hang without a sense of color balance or purpose on the walls, which are themselves that special shade of real estate agent white. The ceiling needs a good sweeping. The overall effect is refreshingly modest but dingy and dismal, as if the room had been stripped of its hideous splendors and knocked back together with the artsy junk from some forgotten public storage unit and avoided by the cleaning staff ever since. Sophie has added some color with her ingenious floral arrangements—a centerpiece that fills the table top with reflected flowers and vines and I don't know what else, and on the sideboard a smattering of bud vases to fill the emptiness between two enormous candelabras. The dusty candles were only for show, I guess, but Sophie tosses me her matches anyway, just in case.

“You must be prepared for anything,” she says.

A remote control activates an outside metal curtain,

which rolls down to cover the ribbon of dining room windows, which are covered in water spots. I play a few times with the gadget, while Sophie prepares the artichoke.

“Instead of fooling around, why don’t you set the table.”

“Right, Cherie. I’m on it.”

But setting the table takes only a moment. Covers for two, for every meal, according to Eglantine. This in case someone will happen to stop by. The host wants to be able to invite this impromptu guest for dinner.

At seven sharp, Mr. S storms in and sits at the head of the table. We have not seen the man since we were introduced and he does not look at me now, but the first words of the evening fly from his mouth as if I have been majordomoing his dinner for generations. “Pierre, LOWER THE CURTAIN, please.”

How can anyone want to block the view of such a gorgeous sunset? I press the remote. As the room grows dark, the last sun rays of the evening sneak through the cut-out patterns of the curtain as it rolls down. Mr. S watches it with the fascination of a child following the delightful clockwork movement of a special toy. Small flickering shapes of red and yellow flash on the mysterious man’s face. Mr. S looks like the devil.

“This curtain is BULLETPROOF, designed to my specifications, capable of sustaining an AR 15 bullet,” Mr. S says turning in my direction.

“Are you afraid of snipers?”

The prompt answer: “You never know.”

Which is true. Conspicuous consumption makes you conspicuous. Murder and money walk hand in hand in these fancy neighborhoods, and the police are sometimes not meant to find the culprit. My house in Mandeville Canyon had a gate, an electric fence, a little sign in the yard to scare intruders off the lawn. I can tell you, when money is no object, paranoia becomes a prime hobby. I bought guns, ammos, even grenades to keep the faceless killers from the door. I was then in the same spot as this rich devil. He is maybe not such a bad guy.

The bell rings. Sophie is calling.

“Pardon me, Monsieur. The artichoke must be ready.”

The devil perks up.

On my way out, I flip on the lights. I regret returning the room to its ordinary squalor, but after all, to serve a proper dinner with panache, I need to see what I am doing.

“Serve the hot mustard vinaigrette on the side,”

Sophie says. The presentation is beautiful. A simple manly choke on a bed of parsley, lemon slices, and pimentos.

“Pimentos?”

“I had to think of a third thing.”

I pick up the tray and give Sophie a kiss for luck.

Without warning, loud screams from the dining room fill the whole kitchen and then some.

“MY GLASSES! Where are my GLASSES?”

I drop the artichoke and rush to the rescue. “What’s happening? What’s wrong?”

Mr. S stands waving his arms. His chair has shot away and left a skid mark where it ricocheted off the wall. His face all the way over and around his head is bright pink. “I want MY glasses. MY glasses, I WANT THEM—”

“I beg your pardon, sir. Your glasses? Ain’t you wearing them?”

He ground his teeth and squinted his eyes and tore his eyeglasses from his nose, skipping them across the glass surface of the table. He was out of air, but only temporarily. He wound up once more and let it rip.

“I want my FANCY glasses. I bought them to have with my dinner—they cost plenty, Pierre. Please, place them in front of me, ON THE TABLE.”

He wrung my heart with his desperate cries.

“I beg your pardon. What glasses are you referring to—” I thought it might calm him down to throw in a little flattery, “sir?”

“My *expensive* glasses,” he said, straining, I could see, to be precise. “They have to be served with the food. I CAN’T EAT WITHOUT THEM.”

Seemingly he would die if we did not find his fancy glasses.

“Where can I find those glasses?” I asked, bringing back his chair and lowering him into it. Lucky the artichoke was chilled. It would keep.

“How would I know? Ask Eglantine, SHE KNOWS.”

Baffled, I walk back to the kitchen. Sophie stands behind the kitchen door with inquisitive eyes, trying to decipher the plot.



“What have you done to him, Pierre? Our first job, don’t mess it up.”

“I didn’t do anything—He wants HIS GLASSES. Who knows what glasses he is talking about. He says ask Eglantine.”

“Eglantine left for the day. What should we look for?” Sophie is obviously worried.

We both dive head-on in a methodical search of the kitchen, the pantry, the wine cellar for the mysterious glasses.

“Any idea what those glasses look like?”

“Not a clue.”

A closet under the stair! On the top shelf, it might be? There! A cardboard box labeled FRAGILE-DO NOT DROP GLASSES in heavy black marker.

Saved. They are here, wrapped up in cellophane and tissue paper and packed in peanuts.

“Careful,” Sophie says. “Those are Lalique—they cost a fortune.”

I wonder if our job description includes repackaging MONSIEUR’S GLASSES between meals. Sophie gives each a wipe with a cloth and I arrange them on a big cork tray.

There are six tall stemmed glasses—two in each primary color, angels’ wings filling the round bowls with feathers and flapping up the sides in elaborate facets cut to clear. Each hock has a slew of junior companions in a matching color, one for every form of fluid. There is a tall, deep water glass with a short stem, a dainty mate for white wine, a skinny temptress for

champagne, a squat glass for cognac, and a range of little guys for aperitifs and liqueurs. I enter the dining room with the loaded tray. Mr. S is now able to share a smile.

“Ah, yes, MY GLASSES. I love those glasses, Pierre. I want to see my glasses every time I sit down for dinner.”

“No problem.”

Sophie has followed me out with the artichoke, but she is invisible so she says nothing. Just delivers the choke like a helpful poltergeist and glides back to the kitchen, suppressing giggles all the way.

“They won’t be of any use WHEN I AM DEAD,” Mr. S explains, receiving a glass with both hands and slowly twirling it by the stem.

“That is for sure,” I agree sympathetically, setting out a crystal rainbow for each empty chair. By the time the tray is empty, the table is full.

What a scene to witness this middle-aged bald man caressing glasses as if they were flesh and blood. The pink has faded from his head, but so have the little hell flames from the window curtain. I know what to do. On the sideboard are the two big candelabras, all locked and loaded. I grab one and swap it for the table’s floral centerpiece. I light the tapers with Sophies matches and dim the lights. The glasses refract the flickering candles, sending little colored fireworks all over Mr. S’s face and noggin. He looks contented, satisfied, and at peace.

“Now, I need some wine.” He looks straight at me for

the first time, his eyes moist and twinkling with dancing lights. “Don’t pour wine in any of those glasses. They are only for show,” he says. “Get me another glass—a REGULAR wine glass will do.”

“Which wine do you want, sir?”

“A bottle of the wines which came yesterday from the Firestone winery.” He thinks it over. “The red one, Pierre—please. THE RED WINE.”

Back in the kitchen: “Guess what?” I murmur to Sophie’s ear. “He doesn’t even drink out of those fancy glasses.”

“What? Does he drink out of the cat’s dish? Hasn’t he got every glass in the house out there?”

One thing I can say for Mr. S—he is rich in glassware. I pour Monsieur’s pinot noir in a plain burgundy glass.

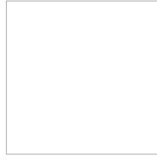
Stella’s work of art is soon devoured with gusto.

“This is delicious, even better than my sister’s.”

Such news! I burst into the kitchen with a beaming smile.

“You pass the test, he loves it.”

The rest of the dinner is easy. Sophie surprises him in threes for each course. He eats only one item from each and enjoys himself from start to finish. He eats the chicken, potato, and truffle. Which means Sophie and I will have lamb chops and scampi *a la Provenç le*, Caesar salad and petit pois, and chocolate torte from Gelson’s bakery with vanilla ice cream.



“Is he gone?” Sophie whispers. The kitchen is already immaculate and I am still bringing in the dirty dishes from the table. Upstairs, she has set up a little table on our balcony, with sturdy paper plates and a candle of our own. I have not figured out yet where he keeps the good stuff, but there is still half a bottle of the pinot noir and almost a full bottle of chardonnay. Mr. S drinks like a bird. But we are tired; it won’t take much to knock us out.

“Nope, he is smoking a Havana with a glass of Cognac, and not just any Cognac—a Louis XIII.”

“We are done for the evening. Go round up the glasses and let’s have dinner.”

At last, all is in its place. Monsieur has tootled off with his cigar and nightcap to wander the empty corridors of his pleasure palace while I package up his playthings and restore them to the closet. I check the doors and turn out the kitchen light. Sophie is waiting for me, glass in hand. Somehow, some way, from some where, she has laid her hands on a bottle of Dom Perignon and is getting ahead of me.

I fill a glass and breathe in the scampi, when a ding, ding, ding resonates in the kitchen below.

“He needs you—Go,” Sophie gives me a hurried wave of the hand.

I find the boss in the smoking room. He’s done

smoking. He has his arm deep in a large plastic bag. Mr. S digs out several remote controls and places them at random on the coffee table.

“Pierre, I have new remotes for the living room TV and CD player, and also for the salon.”

“I am sorry, sir, but . . . I am a bit confused, with all those remotes. Which one to use?”

“Get rid of the old ones and USE THE NEW ONES. I have more in my bedroom.”

Some of the gadgets are to dim the chandeliers and others to work the hallway’s fixtures; others control the music, the TV sets, the ventilation, the skylights. One makes bubbles in the pool. There are three or four per room. He takes me through the house again, showing me which to keep and which to throw away. I am confused, unable to figure out which one does what to who? I even wonder if one of those might sing “Frère Jacques,” to put the boss to sleep, and if so, could we put it on quick.

“Sophie,” I report, dragging up to our cold meal on my last legs. “We are drowning in remote controls. There must be a hundred, all types and categories. I need a PhD in computer sciences to sort them out.”

“I have a hunch that our Mr. S has a fetishism with remote controls.

“Among other things.”

“Go back and ask him at what time he wants breakfast?” Sophie says. “I will warm up our food again. Then we will lock the doors and hear nothing all night.”

No sooner asked, soon to be done.

“What time do you want your breakfast, sir?” I ask, pouring a second glass of Cognac for the king of the castle. He is by now floating high in company of the angels of the rotunda.

“I’ll call you and let you know. The food was excellent, thank you. Good night, Pierre.”

With no legs left, I return to our little nest and cast myself in a patio chair. Dinner is warm and my glass is full. Sophie joins me in my chair. “Well done for our first try,” she says. A hug from a partner in love and work is worth a thousand thanks.

# TWELVE

## A Misogynist and a Mythomaniac to Boot

At eight-thirty, the call wakes me up from a deep sleep. The telephone beside our bed is ringing. Who can it be? Who knows to find us here?

“Pierre, I am in the Jacuzzi. Please, bring MY JUICES.”

The day begins. Rush...No time for a shower. A shave, nope? Dress? First things first. “Sophie, my clean underwear, where are they?” No answer from the heap of blankets occupying three-quarters of the bed. The old ones will do, what the heck—This guy gets up too early for me.

On the kitchen counter, Sophie has left a basket that looks like Carmen Miranda’s hat, piled high with bananas and oranges, kiwis and pink grapefruit. I scan the place for a juicer, which I am pretty sure is around somewhere. I come up empty, and there are about a thousand cupboards and cabinets it might be hiding in. Time is of the essence. Sophie, I know, is never without a backup plan and I look hopefully in the fridge. One, two, three canned juice extracts, nice and cold. I load up a trio of tumblers and head for the master’s suite.

Monsieur is in the spa at the top of the grand staircase. I have lost track of those back stairs and there is no time to lose, so I take the direct route, careful not to

spill. The house is still in shadow at the bottom, near the floor, but above, around the high windows and skylights, the air is full of dust motes drifting in the California sun. As if to guide me, a sunbeam strikes the door of the spa. Inside is a heavy fog, the mirrored walls opaque with the dew of Mr. S's morning bath. I find him in his private Jacuzzi, the steam beading up on his nose and cheeks, a torrent of bubbles and white foam frolicking all about him. Three granite nymphs carrying amphoras surround the man's pink shoulders, spewing jets of water from their nipples and vaginas at the top of his head.

The scene is mesmerizing. I stop in my tracks for a few seconds, without knowing what to do—but to burst out laughing.

“WHY SO JOYOUS?” asks Mr. S.

“Such a glorious morning, always makes me laugh.” I lower the tray with the selection of juices in front of the Adonis in the making. He picks one and downs it with eyes closed. With a contented nod of the head, he says, “You know, Pierre, when I sit at my table, reserved the year around...”

He heaves a sigh and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. The Beaux Arts artist had been busy in the bathroom too, supplying bathing maidens and flying babies to keep the amphora ladies company in their off hours, I suppose. I don't understand what he is saying about reserving his table. More glasses business?

“Your table?”

He pulls his eyes off the Venus of the heat lamp and



gives me a pitying look.

“At the BISTRO GARDEN. My table is the first one you see when you walk in. Those WOMEN down below, when they walk in, they see ME before anybody else. YOU KNOW WHAT?”

“What?”

“They greatly appreciate my fit figure.”

Still half asleep and thinking the boss has had too much juice, I can't wait to report our superhero's comments to Sophie. When I return to the kitchen, she is up and making our breakfast.

“Look at you!” Her eyes are filled with horror. “You could not even brush your hair?”

“He didn't seem to notice.”

“Why are you all sweaty? Did you run all the way?”

“He kept me talking in that sauna.”

“I'll bet! He kept *you* talking!”

“Cherie, believe me, I was speechless.”

I describe the delicious scene for her as we eat our omelets.

“He's a pig!” she says, shaking her head between bites. “I can't believe about those statues. Who would buy such crap? Sitting there in his Mr. Bubbles, getting squirted at by women sex objects! He has no respect for women. He is a misogynist. I hate this kind of man, a mythomaniac to boot.” Sophie is now up, hurling her empty plate into the dishwasher in a display of fury. “I am not cooking for him today.”

“Relax, Cherie, it could be worse.”

She angrily swipes an orange from Carmen Miranda's

hat. I am hoping we will not have to quit now.

“Think, Sweet . . . heart,” I say coaxingly. “He leaves on his trip this weekend. We have just started and we will already be on vacation for a couple of weeks.”

“Well,” Sophie growled. I love her growl. It means she is about to purr. “Talk him into eating at his Olive Garden or whatever that place he has his table. I bet the women walk in, look at him, and lose their appetites.”

“Okay, Cherie. I will get you the night off. I will tell him the kitchen is not up to snuff, we need time to get it organized.”

“But that is the truth!”

# THIRTEEN

## You Can Never Have too Many Rolls Royces

Eglantine’s voice from the intercom rains down all over the house and tells us to meet the boss in the grand salon. It is early in the morning, the day before his departure, so we are naturally expecting some last minute instructions. We find him on the patio staring dolefully at the fountain, like a statue of himself. He comes back to life in response to our coughing and ahem-ing near the door. He asks me a few unimportant questions—have I fed the fish? Do I think the palms need more water? Would I make sure the cars are serviced while he is away in the “Hula-Hula Islands”? Then he looks at the floor and surprises me.

“Sophie, could you PREPARE MY SUITCASES for Hawaii. You are the ONLY ONE I can trust to do it right.”

Without looking in Sophie’s direction, Mr. S leaves the salon without uttering another word.

“Did you hear what he said?”

“Yeah, I am the only one—”

Huh. This mission creep of Monsieur strikes me as impertinent.

“There isn’t anyone else here beside you and me, anyway?” I say.

There is Eglantine, of course. And the gardener and

the gardener's helper on Thursdays. A big crew comes in every week to clean, but today, I guess, Eglantine is out of favor and the gardener is busy cutting the grass.

Until this minute, I am not sure he even knows Sophie's name. And now, she is his favorite? What now?

"He is right," Sophie says. "I am the only organized one around here. Eglantine does not know how to pack a filing cabinet. You . . . are out of the question. He can trust me."

"Why can't he pack himself?"

Sophie snorts as if I had suggested he fly himself to the moon.

"He's helpless, Pierre, like a child."

"You called him a pig."

"Well, yes, he is."

"A swinish child?"

"Exactly."



I don't think Mr. S knows how to use the intercom. Eglantine buzzes him, but I have never heard him buzz her back. When he wants us, he uses the phone or tinkles the dinner bell or roams the house until he finds us.

He finds me stocking the John Wayne bar, a task which has considerably soothed my temper. While spiffing up the shot glass display and securing the Jack Daniels to the shelf with some museum putty (to prevent catastrophe in case there is an earthquake and

Mr. S has to open his escape hatch in a hurry), and also adding some recommendations of my own to Monsieur's liquor supply, I have found the missing key. Maybe the swizzle stick, coated with a long history of dusty grime and well stuck to the bottom of the drawer, had discouraged previous searchers, but the key was very nearly in plain sight—taped to the back. The mystery cabinet contained nothing but a paper cup and a 78 rpm record of Hoagy Carmichael singing "Barnacle Bill the Sailor."

Mr. S shuffles into his office and shouts at me in a disconsolate voice: "PIERRE."

He doesn't look like a man on the eve of entering paradise.

He is dressed to kill in a dark blue suit with a yellow ascot casually thrown over an open cream shirt. His black shiny shoes sparkle at every step. He holds a portfolio matching the color of his suit. But his face is sad, like one who pines for lost youth or a first love. "I'll have lunch at the house today. Ask Sophie to fix me SOMETHING LIGHT. A salad will be fine."

"Okay, what time will you be in for lunch?" I apply myself to looking attentive.

"Not sure—FIRST, I'm going to BUY A ROLLS."

"Oh, how exciting!" I say, endeavoring to infect him with enthusiasm for the chore. "But I thought you have two in the garage."

"Yes, but..."

He heaved a world-weary sigh.

"The fact is, I'M BORED, Pierre."

Clearly, power and money are a burden to the restless mastermind. I remember those desultory days when I was torn between taking a walk on the beach or going to work. In my defense, I nearly always went to work, at least, while things were good and Zagat was merely one voice in the choir singing the praises of the Bike Shop. It was only towards the end, for reasons I will let pass, I began to slack off, let the staff assume a greater share of the burden. That was my mistake. Bored? Never. Not at my restaurant. Of course, if I spent my days building shopping malls, that would be different.

“I don’t know what to do until tomorrow. I like TO BE PRODUCTIVE. I don’t want to waste a whole day DOING NOTHING. Come walk me to the door and I’ll tell you about it.”

“Okee-doke.”

I follow Monsieur through the labyrinth to the portecochère.

“You might have noticed,” he says, “I’m building A NEW GARAGE.”

“I saw the construction.”

“I’ve decided to START A COLLECTION. You know, FANCY CARS. The new garage will be on two levels, WITH A RAMP, you see?”

“Uh huh.”

“With one of those lifts that make the cars go UP AND DOWN so you can change the oil.”

“Wonderful.”

“I’ve designed it to hold A COUPLE DOZEN.” He takes a deep breath and looks me in the eye. Some dark

cloud obviously hangs over his plans. “I’m going to need MORE CARS to fill it up.”

“Great project,” I say. “You can never have too many Rolls Royces. Enjoy your shopping, sir.”

A break, at least, from building shopping malls, I think.

Tragically, the boredom overtaking Mr. S’s life has a deeper root. The Bistro Garden ladies apparently are unresponsive to the physical effects of Sophie’s juices. But there is more.

It doesn’t take long for Sophie the sleuth to find the truth. She’s the best at putting one and two together. A few words with Eglantine exposes the man’s plight—plus a phone call received, requesting Sophie to convey the message that the lady who will accompany the boss is on her way and to have her check ready.

Sophie’s report: “Do you know who he is taking to Hawaii? A high-class call girl. She wants her money upfront. Can you believe?”

I am not surprised. I only hope he is paying her as well as he is paying us. “Well, Cherie. Have pity. He has no one like you. How could he? I have the only specimen.”

“Yes, you are right.”

“I will never clone you, no matter how many millions I am offered. You will always be the one and only Sophie.”

“You are ridiculous.”

“One Sophie is worth all his billions. Don’t grudge our misogynist mythomaniac a little companionship if

he is willing to shell out for it.

“No one ever comes to visit him,” Sophie says. “Not even his daughter. Did you know he has a daughter? She doesn’t even call. He is a sad man. All his money...this hideous mausoleum . . . that obscene Jacuzzi tub.” She is waving the cucumber she intends to slice for Mr. S’s salad of three baby lettuces like a weapon of justice. She slaps it down on the butcher block and points a knife at me. “And we haven’t seen any woman—or man either, for that matter—keep company with the master of the castle. I tell you, this billionaire is lonesome as can be—a hooker’s bonanza. Eglantine showed me the gal’s check.”

“She did?” This surprises me. I cannot imagine the faithful secretary showing such a document to the cook.

“Fifteen thousand dollars! Eglantine was miffed.”



# FOURTEEN

## 4336—Is This the Mileage?

Our main mission while Mr. S frolics in Hawaii is to take care of the car collection. The new one will be delivered on Mr. S's return, but the brown and the blue need to be let out of their stalls and exercised.

"Let's go bring the cars for service," I suggest. "After the oil change, we can pay a visit to Santa Monica. Which one do you want to drive?"

"Heck, none. When I was married to Roger we had one of those. I always hated it. This is a car for old folks who need to impress the Schmucks next door."

"Okay, Cherie, for you I will take the hit. I'll be your chauffeur. Let's take the blue one, first."

I pick a navy captain's cap from a rack of hats in Mr. S's smoking room. "This must be a headpiece he wears when he hosts parties at the Marina Yacht Club in Del Rey."

"Not if it fits *your* head," Sophie laughs. "It's just for decoration. He doesn't give any parties, can't you tell?"

I pull the cap off from the top of my head. No parties! No visitors is one thing. No parties? If true, this would be bad news for us. Our specialties would go to waste. We would have no life but to sit on the balcony and look out to sea.

Clowning, I swing the cap in my best chauffeur's musketeer bow. "Princess, where to?"

Sophie cocks her head and considers. “Tijuana. We can get a little fortune for the car.”

I join Sophie in a contagious laugh. “We were just shopping, Monsieur, and the car went poof! Do you want me to go pick up another one for your collection?”

“No, no,” Sophie laughs. “A Rolls won’t be so easy to get rid of. James, take me to the ball game!”

For a collector’s item, the Rolls could use the attention of a vacuum cleaner. The back seat is sprinkled with litter and the smell of In-N-Out combo lingers in the air.

“We will tell them to detail it too as long as they are changing the oil.” I start the engine and open the windows.

Sophie waves her hands at the fast food fumes and cranks up the fan.

“Hoo,” she says, “what a pig!”

“He’s a pig again?”

“It’s a goal with him. Ah, let’s see what ghastly obscenities he keeps in the glove compartment.” There is nothing interesting inside. Just a stubby pencil and a little wrinkled piece of paper. “Stop, wait! Look at this?” She snaps the paper straight and sticks it in front of my eyes.

A number jotted down in pencil reads 4336.

“I know what this is. Look at the meter. This is the mileage of the Rolls, I bet.”

Sure enough, they match.

“He wrote the mileage to see if we are using the car

while he is gone!” Sophie looks horrified. She can never believe what people are capable of.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I can make a new one when we get back.”

“With your handwriting? He will know.”

“No, he won’t. Look, I will take the pencil and change the three to an eight. See? Can’t tell.”

“Well.”

“Now we just have to drive exactly fifty miles. That should be easy.”

Sophie pops the paper and pencil back in the glove box. “Fifty miles. We will have to go out for dinner.”

“Anywhere you like, Cherie. I can always add a digit or two.”



The next two weeks are easy sailing. Other than remaking the kitchen, bringing in the mail, and turning the lights on and off to fool the burglars, we have few official duties. I beeswax the bar; Sophie juices carrots, pumpkins, artichokes, turnips—whatever comes under her thumb—which she stockpiles in the freezer for Monsieur’s return. The cleaning crew comes, and I supervise a thorough sweeping of the dining room’s ceiling. I insist on a thorough window cleaning, top to bottom, but that requires another crew and another day of supervising. We exercise the cars and feed the fish.

Of Eglantine, we see almost nothing. We hear the front door open sometimes in the morning, but she is always gone before we can invite her to join us for

lunch. Once, we sneak up on her, with a sandwich on a tray, when we know she has come in. She is not in her office, but we track her down and find her behind John Wayne's bar. She sniffs when we come in and abandons a little tequila in the bottom of a shot glass when she leaves.

She came once in the evening, too, as we were enjoying aperitifs on our little balcony.

*Sophie and Pierre?*

The intercom rings with her birdlike voice—like a wretched screech owl on a forlorn nest.

“We are here, Eglantine. Why don't you come up?”

There is a brief silence.

“I only popped in to let you know the arborist is coming tomorrow.”

“Arborist?”

“To switch out the palms. They're dead so we're having new ones put in.”

“Are you sure you don't want to join us for a little sherry?”

“I'm sure.” Another silence. We know she is still there because we can hear the papers moving around on her desk. “I'm just going to take a walk around the house. I'll turn the lights out when I go.”

“Okay.”

“They should be here about nine.”

“Okee-doke.”

“I've asked the gardener to be here, just in case.”

“Excellent. The house is in good hands.”

“Thank you.” Another silence—a short one.

“Goodnight, Sophie. Goodnight, Pierre.”

Eglantine, it seems, is more ghost than secretary when her employer is away. But our little suite is very comfortable and a pleasant refuge from the big hollow house and its black hole of a pool. We enjoy Mr. S’s Hawaiian vacation—more than he does, as it turns out.

Eglantine reports, instead of being entertained with private showings of paradise’s volcanic abysses, Romeo is sick during the whole two weeks.

# FIFTEEN

## No Gelson's—Ralphs!

The return of the king of the palace does not lift the gloom from the empty rooms. I bring Monsieur home from the airport in the blue Rolls, spanking clean inside and out, but he hardly says a word. I drop him at the front door and he runs straight up to bed. Sophie makes him chicken soup fortified with white wine and alphabet noodles—all Ss.

“Tell him it has three kinds of chicken,” Sophie says. “That will cheer him up.”

I find him among a pile of pillows, curled up in his ratty bathrobe with an issue of *Road and Track* I left for him on his nightstand.

“You killed THREE CHICKENS for this?” hollers Mr. S, but he slurps and says it's good to be home.

The next morning, he is back hard at work building shopping malls. He takes his juice as he dresses for the office and returns in the evening to brood over his fancy glasses.

“How are you this evening, Monsieur?” I risk a round of friendly banter.

“What? WHY?”

I don't know what to say. Eglantine has told us of his lengthy trial of dysentery. Perhaps I should not mention it. I veer off on another tack, just to be safe.

“I hope you worked up a good appetite working all

day. Sophie has outdone herself for your homecoming.”

Cobb salad, coq au vin—stewed in port, sherry, and one of the Firestone reds—and a chocolate, vanilla, strawberry parfait.

“Oh,” he said and gave his favorite glass a desultory twist.

For his amusement I try closing the curtain, but he merely glances at the dying sun and turns his face to the wall.

“Pierre?”

“Yes?”

“I went into business to MAKE MONEY, but in doing so I made a GREAT SACRIFICE. In reality, I’m a VERY GIFTED MUSICIAN.”

“Really!” I do a monumental impersonation of shock and delight. “I did not know.”

“No, of course not. Because I NEVER PLAY.”

“That’s a shame.”

“I think I may take it up again. Tomorrow morning, I want you to BRING ME THE GARDENER.”

“The gardener?”

“Yes. And now I’d like my wine, PLEASE.”



“Party time!” Eglantine announces with her most professional snarl.

Sophie is at the kitchen table snapping the ends off the haricots. Mr. S had gone off in the Rolls, first thing in the morning, whistling a happy tune.

Since the mall king's return, Eglantine has been a constant presence in the house. We can hear her restlessly patrolling the corridors in her little low heeled pumps from morning til late.

Now she stands in the kitchen baring her teeth at us.

"You look pleased, Eglantine," I say. "The boss must be feeling better. There's to be a party? Hurrah!"

"Friday night. About a hundred and fifty people. Mr. S wants it simple: cold cuts, popcorn—you know, finger food."

Sophie looks at me sideways and raises her eyebrows to her hairline.

"Got it," I say. "A hot summer night—we can serve a nice Pinot Gris. It will be very elegant."

"No, no!" Eglantine waves a schoolteachery finger at my face. "No fancy French wines or anything like that. Budweiser for the drinkers, maybe a reasonable domestic wine for people who don't like beer—Gallo is fine. Sodas. Just make sure it's cold and that will be enough."

"What kind of party is that, with cold cuts and beer?" Sophie has given up on the beans and swung around in her chair, appealing to Eglantine, woman to woman. "And Gallo wine, to boot?"

"Mr. S has no intention of feeding these people fancy foods and connoisseur wines. He knows why they come to see him." Eglantine's little fists don't know whether to be open or closed. She grinds a heel and reaches up to straighten her coral framed glasses. "Favor seekers," she spits out. "Keep it simple."



“Gelson’s has cold cuts on a plastic platter?”

“No,” Eglantine says firmly. “No Gelson’s—Ralphs!”

# SIXTEEN

## Fellini in Bel Air

Friday night, the first guests arrive around six-thirty. Mr. S is nowhere to be found. This vanishing act takes me by surprise. What am I supposed to do after I let these people into the house? Am I here to entertain the guests? The heck no! I hide in the kitchen with Sophie.

I have left ice buckets full of beers and soda bottles out to keep the scavengers busy.

“Those trays look good love, they look better than average cold cuts.” I snatch a slice of ham.

“Keep your hands off my masterpieces.” She smacks my mitts with her hand, still beautiful even in latex gloves. “Just wait. I have something great for us. Why don’t you keep the guests busy?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Just circle around, give everybody a drink.”

“They are helping themselves.”

“Here, serve one tray.”

Sophie is in an artistic mood.

“You have done a great job, Cherie.” The cold cuts are adorned with grape leaves, apples, orange slices, walnuts, and figs. They may be cold cuts but nothing about them is simple. “I think the boss is going to have a fit when he sees the wrapped melon slices with Prosciutto.”

“I can’t make a tray with cold cuts only. If he says

anything, tell him to come and talk to me.”

“He won’t say anything. He doesn’t seem to be here. I can’t find him anywhere.”

“What! He throws a party and runs away? No, that makes no sense. He’ll show up. Go with the tray.”

The dining room table becomes an instant focus of attention.

“Pardon,” I say to a lady scrunching up to me.

“*Magnifique!*” she says. She smells well-Budded *and* Galloed.

A man sticks his head practically under my arm as I set the tray down carefully, trying not to upend Sophie’s arrangement. “Honey,” he calls, hocking one right into the salami. “Want some of this delicious looking food?”

“Beautiful!” squeals his companion, spooning her mate to get closer to the meat. “Isn’t this platter the best you’ve ever seen?”

A woman in a severe up-do wearing a long, dark blue, red-carpet gown lifts a paper plate in the direction of a tall blond man in an improbable double-breasted suit he must have picked up at a vintage shop on Melrose. He contemplates the slender offering wavering tremulously in the air before taking his hands out of his oversize trouser pockets and accepting the plate. For a hushed moment he stands undecided about his next move. He hesitates, then gathering courage, thrusts his plate towards the food. It’s the signal for the guests to rush the tray, like piranha stripping an unfortunate gazelle.

“Here.” Scrunchy woman puts her Bud against my

chest. There is a piece of gum stuck to the top of the can. She releases her hold almost before I can catch it.

“Oh, are you collecting?” A barrage of wet, crumpled napkins, cans, and bottles descend on me as I beat a speedy retreat. The way back to the kitchen has become a gauntlet of garbage.

“Hey, there, Jeeves,” from a man holding up an empty, “any Michelob in the house?”

“Excuse me,” one pointing to my burden, “you are recycling those, right?”

“Don’t trip, old boy, hahaha.”



“I can’t stand those people. They are obnoxious.”

“What do they do?”

“The way they talk to me.” I sit down. I am on strike. No wonder Mr. S did not want to feed these people, but why did he have to bring them into the house in the first place and then give them to me. “I am not used to this kind of treatment. Remember, I was my own boss for thirty years.”

“Too bad,” Sophie crosses her arms and gives me no consolation. “If you did not stupidly lose your money, we would be on the French Riviera now instead of stuck in Bel Air, working for a jerk.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll manage.”



The guests devour tray after tray as soon as they are put out. Sophie more than once has to drive invaders from the kitchen door. The liquor, such as it is, is also

giving out, and I find myself stationed before the bar, guarding its precious contents. I have moved all but the Black Label into the locked cabinet, but from the cigar smoke fumigating the angels in the rotunda, I deduce the hoards have breached Monsieur's humidor. It is only a matter of time before they come for the booze. Nothing is safe. Things are looking grim, when Mr. S, in a casual outfit—no jacket, no tie—makes a magical entrance in the gala dining room. He must have been in the priest hole the whole time.

People are spread out on Moroccan poufs or Louis Napoleon loveseats, holding their paper plates haphazardly on their knees. The mishmash combination of old world-any world furniture, marble columns and oriental rugs, the smell of cheap perfumes and Mr. S's stolen cigars fill the house with a surreal atmosphere, as euphoric as it is tacky. Like a Fellini movie in which all the decadents are American hangers-on in the retail and construction sectors.

The finale is to come on the balcony of the grand salon.

# SEVENTEEN

## No One Leaves Before the Last Note Is Played

“PIERRE?”

“Here.” Here is back in the kitchen with Sophie. The stock of bad liquor has been depleted, the cold cuts are all in the early stages of digestion. There is nothing more I can think of to do.

“I need you. I’m moving the party OUTSIDE. I want you to tell everyone SOMETHING SPECIAL is happening at nine o’clock sharp. Get everybody out of the house even if you have to use a RED HOT POKER.”

“This is not going to be easy.” I turn to Sophie the moment his majesty has gone.

“I don’t envy you.”

“They won’t listen to me. I need a bull horn *and* a red hot poker.”

“Go. Tell them the evening’s revels are just beginning, but they will be held out under the stars and they will miss all the fun if they stay inside like fuddy-duddies.”

“Okay, Chicka—”

“No!”

“Sophie, my love.” I trudge to the door with a heavy heart. “I will tell them.”



“Attention!” I put my hands around my mouth in a hopeless attempt at amplification. “Attention, everybody. If you will exit through the grand saloon, you will find a big surprise. Mr. S,” that sounds wrong but for the life of me, I cannot remember the man’s name. “Your host has gone all out. It’s outside. Out you go.”

I move from room to room, bellowing the news, but always there are people planted too deep in a couch or mesmerized by the sound of their own conversation to stir from the spot. I try once or twice to use the red hot poker of my authority as majordomo of the house, but am rebuffed with such indifference I decide no amount of pay is worth another attempt.

“Nine o’clock, people, nine o’clock.” I make a perfunctory second pass through the house. “You need to get going, folks, the show is about to start.”

Then a screaming comes across the ceilings. The ear-piercing feedback from the intercom makes even the most comatose guests jump. “Time’s up!” Sophie has cranked the intercom until it splits every atom in the place. “The house is now closed. We will be cleaning and fumigating for cockroaches. Now move it!”

A last wave of humanity heads for the door. As the last guest squeezes onto the balcony, Sophie joins me.

“They are all out,” she reports. “What is he up to out there?”

Mr. S is sitting at the keyboard of the organ with his eyes half closed ready to perform for the guests. Expanding his chest and rolling his head, he caresses

the keyboard like a lover with a woman in his arms.

“Close the door,” says Sophie. “Let’s go eat.”

Just as the door clunks shut, it begins to vibrate. The patio lights go out. A scary flurry of notes make the door and all the windows begin to rattle. Jets of water shoot into the air, each drop hit with a powerful strobe light, a fresh squirt for every note and a rainbow of color illuminating the spray. I turn the deadbolts and back away.

“That fountain runs on recycled water. This could go on all night!”

“Come on,” says Sophie. “Time for our dinner.”

No escape is possible for the guests; the balcony stands at least eight feet above the cactus garden. The organ is audible all the way in the kitchen. So are the knocks, fists banging on the door, faint at first but which become louder and louder. Sophie has made us a glorious Cobb salad and filet mignon. We follow up with a cheese course and finally *salut* each other and Monsieur’s first party with a dose of Cognac, our glasses warmed by the light of a candle.

Mellowed, we wander the house and survey the damage. The crew will be in tomorrow to clear away the rubble. From the windows, we stare out at Purgatory, the sinners writhing and tearing their hair, or maybe they are clutching their ears. Let them bang away, I will not open the door. I stand by my orders, arm in arm with Sophie, my red hot poker. They will stay out there and enjoy Monsieur’s gifted performance for as long as he pounds away. No one will leave



before Mr. S hits the last note.

# EIGHTEEN

## The Morning After

My dreams are arrested by a blow to the rib cage.

“The house is too quiet.”

Sophie is awake before me, sitting upright among the blankets and listening hard to the stillness. I look at the clock. It is nearly time for lunch and Mr. S has not called for his juices.

“He had quite a night,” I say. I’m for rolling back into my dreams. The man doubtless needed his beauty sleep.

“No, what do you not hear? Listen.”

“’Tis the lark?”

“No. Be serious. Do you hear a vacuum cleaner?”

“No.”

“Or a floor polisher?”

“No.”

“Or a boom box, huh? Or anything? Look at the time—when were they supposed to be here.”

“Eight.”

“You saw that mess. Is it possible they could be done by now, huh?”

“You think they turned tail and ran?”

Sophie whips the covers aside and flings on her negligee.

“I don’t think they came. Did you call and make the appointment?”

“Yes, of course. I made sure to call. Eglantine was going to be here at eight to let them in.”

“Then something is wrong. Get up.”

Together we creep down the stairs. The kitchen, as always, is immaculate, but beyond the swinging door, the house is a wasteland—even worse in the morning light. We pick our way through broken bottles and paper napkins filled with I dare not contemplate what. A smear of red stains the white marble wall and brings me up short in my steps.

“It’s lipstick,” says Sophie.

“Explain that,” says I, relieved.

“I cannot explain. But I hear a mouse. Let’s go ask her what happened to our cleaning crew.”



Eglantine looks at us over her glasses. She seems surprised to see us.

“We live here,” says Sophie. “And this is our day off.”

“Mine too,” Eglantine shoots back. “No rest for the weary, they say, but here I am. How was the party?”

“Memorable,” I chime in.

“What happened?” Sophie is not having small talk.

“We get up and the house is a disaster.”

“Well, *I* didn’t leave it like this. Unlike you, I wasn’t even here.”

“You came in today to let the cleaning crew in. Did you forget? Where are they?”

Eglantine puffs herself up.

“A bit extravagant, don’t you think?”

“Heh?” pipes Sophie. I make harmony with a squawk of my own: “Wha?”

“It isn’t that hard, but let me explain.” Eglantine is nervous, her voice brittle, her breathing—well, it comes and goes in no regular order. “This was supposed to be a simple party. Bringing in a special cleaning crew” (huff) “when you know the regular one will be in on Wednesday is” (puff) “completely unnecessary and blows the budget for this *simple* party” (big breath) “right off the scales!”

“What do you expect us to do with all this mess? Live with it until Wednesday?”

“Well,” says Eglantine, edging past me and making for the exit. “Figure it out.”

We watch the secretary winging down the corridor. What a sour mood she is in. She slips a bit on something slick but recovers neatly and disappears over the horizon.

“No!” says Sophie, meaning something definite. I hope it is not what I think it is.

“Breakfast, Cherie?” I try in vain.

“Come, Pierre. Upstairs. We must have a little business conference, just the two of us.”

Along the way I pluck a bottle of Champagne and two glasses from the bar, a pitcher of orange juice and two hard-boiled eggs from the fridge, and the remains of a crusty loaf from the shiny breadbox on the counter. My arms are full and I let some crumbs fall, marking my ascent of the stairs. What does it matter about the crumbs? It seems they may lay there unmolested by our

footsteps forever, if my intuition is correct.

# NINETEEN

## Mr. S Doesn't Require Your Services Anymore

Over mimosas, Sophie grows quiet. The view from our balcony, the warm sun, the private moment in our haven apart has smoothed her ruffled feathers. She is calculating our wages, which we have still not received, though technically, we should have gotten our first check before Eglantine left the day before. Preparations for the party had distracted us.

An airplane roars over head. We watch it go.

"I don't want to leave this job," says Sophie, unexpectedly.

I say nothing. I don't want to push my luck.

"We have it good here. I love this balcony. And our bed. The TV is better than our TV at home."

"The company is better at home." I can't help myself. The words come popping out on their own.

Sophie smiles. "But look at that." She waves her arm and I imagine fairy dust descending on Beverly Hills. "Even the horrible Vatican angels have grown on me. They are so silly, but..."

"Ma cherie. All I can give you to put on our ceiling is a bicycle."

Sophie laughs.

"I tell you what," she says, rapping the table with her knuckles and pouring the last bit of Champagne into

her empty glass. “We are not cleaning up this mess. That’s for sure. Eglantine can *figure it out* herself. We will go home for the weekend and see what’s what on Monday. How about that?”

I’m all for such a peace plan, but it is not to be. The speakers in the ceiling crackle.

*Sophie and Pierre?*

Ouch! We had forgotten to turn the intercom down. Eglantine’s voice fills our suite with thunder.

“We are here, Eglantine,” I shout at the ceiling.

There is a birdlike squeak followed by a moment of staticky crunching. Eglantine returns at normal volume, but her voice is scraping a chalkboard in a higher than usual register: “I want to talk to you both—now, please. In my office.”

“Yes, I’d like that very much,” Sophie’s former outrage is back and her words fly up like rockets. I hear the click of the intercom being turned off. Sophie looks at me, but she is on fire now and must say out what is already on her lips. I stand-in for the role of Eglantine in this production of *Stormy Sophie: Day of Wrath*. “Let’s have a talk, Madame Secretary! We need to clarify our functions. I was hired to be a chef, not a maid. I will not clean the mess after his disgusting friends trash the house. Today is the day to clear the broth!”



Eglantine at her desk peeks at us from an opening between the mountain of folders, which has not

changed much since we first sat for our interview. She appears very uneasy, without a hint of a smile, severe, and troubled. She clears her throat and in a voice, grim but determined, she says: “Mr. S doesn’t require your services anymore.” She hurries on. “Here is your check, less two weeks. Mr. S feels that since he was away for two weeks...So. Your compensation, of course, covers room and board.” Eglantine looks bruised and exhausted. She has gotten it all out in one burst and is now breathless from the exertion.

Sophie and I stand dumbfounded. We are fired, and not even a hint of explanation. I can’t believe it.

“Because of the mess?” I can’t help asking.

“No, no.”

“Don’t lower yourself, Pierre. We have given perfect satisfaction.”

Eglantine gulps.

“Oh, absolutely,” she says. “Outstanding. We will be happy to give you a reference. But...” she pushes the check toward Sophie. “I’m afraid it just hasn’t worked out.”

Sophie puts one finger on the check and pushes it back. “We want our money—all of it. And we are not leaving until we know why we are fired.”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say.”

“There is no reason! He is trying to skip out on paying us!”

“Oh, no. No!”

“I want to talk to Mr. S.” Sophie’s voice fills the room. “Right now!”



Eglantine shakes her head *and* her hands.

“Mr. S is not available. He’s sick in his bedroom, resting.”

“What? Sick in bed? I’ll show him who we are. Nobody kicks us out like bums, without any explanations. We’re the best and most reliable couple in all of California.”

“I know, I know, but...”

“But what? This is ridiculous. We have a contract. You have to give a reason.”

“I can’t say,” Eglantine bends her head pleadingly.

“You *can say*—to our attorneys!”

“Oh, no... There’s no need, really. It’s nothing *bad*.” Eglantine weighs her choices, looking from Sophie to me. I remain stern and silent as adamant. The air crackles with tension. Something is soon to break. “He promised to give this English couple a tryout.”

# TWENTY

## Stormy Sophie

Before our eyes, Sophie turns from hot volcano to cold marble.

“What are you talking about? An English couple!”

Without another word, she turns and walks out the door. Eglantine raises a little claw and clutches for the collar of her blouse, finding only beads and the unsatisfying edge of a common V-neckline. She lifts the check and offers it to me. I look down my nose at it and follow my shooting star. I try to catch her but she is like lightning, zipping from a stormy heaven straight to the master’s bedroom.

“You can’t...,” cries Eglantine, bringing up the rear. “You can’t do that. Mr. S is sick.” She is so tiny, she cannot catch us on those spindly legs, clicking along in her little heels. “Do not disturb him. *Please*—” I cannot resist the plaintive wail and look back. Poor frail Eglantine, her mouth open, hands on either side of her face, much like the famous Edvard Munch painting, *The Scream*. A look of animal terror crosses her face as Sophie advances towards her master’s lair.

In a move of despair, Eglantine kicks off her shoes and charges full bore down the corridor. I step aside like a matador who knows when he’s in the way. Sophie is reaching for the knob. It seems nothing can stop her, but Eglantine in a superhuman effort makes a

long jump and bumps Sophie slightly to one side, landing splat against the door.

“Don’t be insane, Eglantine. Move out of the way.”

Eglantine flips herself around and crucifies herself against her boss’s bedroom door. “You can’t go in there. He’s sick, I tell you, sick.”

Poor bony Eglantine is no barricade. Sophie yanks her away from the door with one hand. “Here, Pierre, hold this.”

Appalled and stunned, the secretary can only watch as Sophie tries the knob with her hand, then gives the door a push with her shoulder, then kicks it open with her foot.

The bedroom is dark, the burning California sky locked out by bulletproof shutters, their angled louvers letting in only narrow slivers of daylight. A rumpled bed, a polar bear rug, a half dozen of vases holding artificial flowers are crisscrossed with brilliant slits of sun. Against the far wall, a huge aquarium glows eerily, its little light bulb glinting off the stripes of exotic colored fishes swimming endless miles back and forth in its depths.

Mr. S is spread out on his bed in his boxers and a T-shirt. The pungent smell of marijuana hangs in the air. The scene takes me back to Brittany—the dark theater, the projector’s flickering light, and one of my top favorite films, *Sunset Boulevard*. Dramatic tension fills the bedroom. The stage is set, the players are all assembled: a hypochondriac, a frantic secretary, and a hot-tempered woman. The pool is downstairs. All we

need is a gun and a dead monkey.

The pale Adonis rises in a long slow sit-up, his haggard eyes drawn hypnotically to the gesticulating tornado before him. He fishes blindly for somewhere to lay his roach, but finding no refuge for it, he holds it out and squints against the light from the hallway.

“Eglantine?”

Eglantine, in the role of Erich von Stroheim, frees herself from my orbit—there was nothing, after all, but gravity keeping her nailed to the floor—and throws herself into the breach. That is, like a fond grizzly defending her divine idol, she crash lands on top of Mr. S, seizing the man in an embrace, an obvious effort to absorb with her own back such lightning bolts as Minerva the goddess of war might hurl down in her fury. The secretary, however, has miscalculated her employer’s ability to withstand the impact—as well as his instinctive reflex to keep the precious torch from being snuffed. He reels, she loses her grip, he lifts the joint aloft, her fingernails find a purchase in the meat of his right arm, he achieves lift-off in a wild arc.

Eglantine’s bum hits the floor and the boss comes cartwheeling down on her head.

Sophie has been unloading her mind all this time, but this is too much.

“What’s all this craziness?” she claps her hands until the creatures on the floor blink up at her. “Do you hear? Why are you getting rid of us? The other day you told us that we were the best couple you ever hired?”

Sophie is stooping over the entwined pair, ready to

smack whoever will make a wrong move. Mr. S manages to free his right arm from Eglantine's grip to point to his forehead.

"I have a head . . . sorry . . . ache . . . a head . . . ache, but . . . but . . ."

"No butt here, not even mine to talk to. I want an explanation, now!"

"Well, I promised . . .," Mr. S plucks a fingernail out of a hole in his arm, "you see, I promised this ENGLISH COUPLE . . . to give them a try. I'm sure you're better," he turns his sad, red, dilated eyes to me. "I like you, I really do. But I did PROMISE."

"That's complete bull. You mean we are too expensive for you? You want to pay half price and get off cheap. That's what you mean—Don't you?"

"Look, I—I didn't agree to anything. I was just giving you a trial. That's standard practice. Everybody knows that." Mr. S gets an elbow in the ear from Eglantine, who has reluctantly extricated herself and put her glasses back in order. She staggers to her feet, one hand hovering protectively over the boss' shining dome.

"Ha!" returns Sophie. "You are firing us without reason and withholding our salary. This is not legal. You will not get away with it, so don't even try."

"I told Eglantine to pay you. EGLANTINE, didn't you give them their check?"

"Minus two weeks," Eglantine reports, sharp as a corporal.

"That's right," Mr. S interrupts the hit he is taking off his weedy cigarette to shake it at us. "That's right.

Minus two weeks, 'cause I WASN'T HERE.”

“Pierre, help me, he’s trying to cheat us out of our salary. Take care of Eglantine—knock her over the head if you have to—keep her quiet.”

Mr. S peeks around Eglantine’s caboose and looks at me. Eglantine, poised like a sumo wrestler on the bear’s boneless shoulders, looks at me too. From between her feet, the bear turns his glass eyes up at me as if to say, Brother, how did we get here? I can’t help smiling.

“You remember,” I say, “we have a contract. The agency negotiated a weekly salary.”

“Yes, weekly.”

“We have been here a month—four weeks. It doesn’t say anything about *you* having to be here. While you were off having the time of your life, we were sticking our noses to the grindstone, just like Eglantine here, working our fingers to the bone for you, making things nice for your return. Remember the three chicken soup?”

“Yes, I remember.”

Monsieur broods. Eglantine bites a lip. Monsieur brightens.

“Look, you may have a point. We can talk later. I...I need to think. You see, I don’t feel good.”

“Yes,” cries Eglantine, “he’s sick. Can’t you see?”

“I bet you feel like kakadu!” Sophie is without mercy. “Give us our money or we will talk to you later—in court. Maybe you will like to bring one of those for the judge, huh?”

Mr. S looks carefully at the remains of his dwindling doobie.

“Come, Pierre. We will ask for damages too. We can’t allow these libels against our reputation.”

“No, wait, wait,” Mr. S calls us back before we can even leave. “I don’t want you to go away MAD AT ME. I tell you what’s fair. Let’s split the difference—I’ll pay you for one week of vacation. And Eglantine will write you A BEAUTIFUL RECOMMENDATION. I’ll sign it myself. It’ll be a big help to you. What do you say? Pierre?”

I trade a look with Sophie. A week’s salary in the hand is better than finding a lawyer to get two in court and then having to pay the lawyer.

“For the sake of world peace, we will take it,” I say.

“Oh, good.” Mr. S is all smiles. “HAPPY, Sophie?”

“You are a shitty guy.” Sophie makes a motion like washing her hands, flicking the invisible rinse water off her fingers at the billionaire. She spins one hundred and eighty degrees and storms from the room. A stupefied Eglantine looks down at her boss, who is contentedly leaning back against the bed, his hairy legs sprawled on the bear rug, smoking and rubbing the long scratches on his arm.

“We’ll just pack,” I say. “We’ll pick up the check on the way out?”

The secretary looks at me. Her eyes behind her coral framed glasses are full of surprise. “Yes,” she says. “I’ll be in my office.”





# TWENTY-ONE

## Goodbye to All the Angels

Our suitcases are in the Mercedes, which is out front waiting for us. The Rolls Royces we leave languishing in the backyard construction site that will someday be a big empty garage with room for two dozen cars. The check is in my pocket, and all we have left to carry out is a handbag, a book, and a cardboard box with a few of our favorite things.

We take a long farewell of our balcony view and follow my trail of breadcrumbs down the stairs to the kitchen. To our surprise, Mr. S is poking around in the refrigerator. He has found the cheese and a bunch of grapes. The table is already a mess of broken crackers, orange peels, and ladies fingers.

“Just wanted to make sure there was something in here for my dinner.” He has covered himself in his ratty bathrobe and looks pleased to see us.

“So, you’re going?”

“I am afraid so,” I say. “We are packed up and on our way.”

The master of the castle takes a wet sponge from his pocket and rubs his noggin with it. The cooling effect seems to please him very much.

“Well, good-bye. No hard feelings. Listen, whenever you’re in the area, stop by. We’ll have tea, we’ll talk.”

“Pierre,” Sophie interrupts, “time to go!”

Mr. S sees us to the kitchen door and waves the sponge amiably as we leave him. The door swings shut as he returns to his snacks.

Through the forlorn dining room we go, across the silent drawing room. Hand in hand Sophie and I tread the echoing corridors. With a pinch of the heart, Sophie turns back. The house is quiet, the same as when we came, except for being buried beneath the wreckage of the night before. The new potted palms have already lost their green enthusiasm, their fronds drooping stiffly towards the floor.

“I wonder how the new English couple will react when he wants his glasses,” Sophie muses.

“They will hop-to and search high and low, just like we did, huh?” I chuckle, quietly, not to disturb the awful silence of the lobby. Sophie chuckles too.

“Only,” I add, “they will not find them as quick.”

“What do you mean? What did you do?”

“I thought they should be kept somewhere safer. In case of earthquake, that top shelf was pretty dangerous.”

“Where?”

“You remember that secret cupboard under John Wayne’s bar?”

“In there? You are a devil. They won’t find them for hours.”

“A good sturdy place. It’s perfect. But, of course, they will need the key.” I hold up the little key, which I had conveniently forgotten to put on the keyring I reluctantly surrendered to Eglantine’s outstretched

hand. “What should I do? I hate to go back and disturb them.” I look right, I look left. “I know! I will leave it here, under this palm tree.” The key fit very well in the gap between the marble floor and the underside of the gigantic pot. “That’s safe.”

“Safe! They will never find it.”

“It will turn up the next time they have to replace the palm trees.”

Sophie gives me a sideways look and leads the way into the rotunda. “So it is true. You have made me a scoundrel, eh?”

“Shh,” I caution her. “Not in front of the angels.”

We gaze up for the last time at the hideous masterpiece painted on the ceiling.

“You know,” Sophie says, squinting her eyes and putting one finger in the air, “this is all very fishy.”

“Fishy?”

“Yeah, it stinks.”

“The cupola?”

“No, Pierre, listen. You remember what he said—standard practice! Everybody knows! Think. We had a better deal from the Davidsons. With the signing bonus, we would be way ahead now.”

“But we didn’t want to work for those folks, did we?”

“That is beside the point. Mona didn’t want us to take that job; she right away got us another job, with another fat commission for her and never mind our signing bonus. I bet she knew he was going away and wouldn’t pay us. I bet he never keeps anybody once they discover his tricks, and I bet Mona keeps him supplied

with new couples, one after another, so she can get her commissions. I bet she's waiting by the phone right now with another job for us."

"Whoa!" I say. "That Mona turns out to be one bad character. What should we do now?"

"I'll ask around. There are lots of agencies. We'll find a good one."

"Hey," I say, patting my pocket. "Guess what? We got a letter of recommendation for our collection. It's a good one too. As good as the others."

Sophie offers a high five. It feels like we are halfway to Provence already.

"Lunch, Cherie?"

"Sure. Let's go blow some of our new fortune. We'll drop all this junk off at the studio and walk to Norms."

We wave goodbye to all the angels and cherubs. Turning back for a last glimpse, I could swear they were waving back at us.

The End

