

EYE IN THE SKY

From THE INGREDIENCE SERIES

(Excerpt: Chapters 1-5)

I.

“She watches me with the strangest expression sometimes. I can’t do business proper with her looking at me like that all the livelong day.” Frangelica Courteline dropped dramatically into one of the two wicker chairs and leaned an elbow on the pine table. She swiped a tanned forearm at the black tendrils of hair straying from her colorful bandana.

Autumn leaned on her broom, accepting its support like an old friend. As she crossed one ankle over the other, she caught her reflection in the surface of the stainless steel refrigerator across the room. Her pose brought to mind a dance routine she once saw on television—a line of broom-wielding chorus girls dressed as chambermaids, their sprightly steps lending a dapper air to a song about household drudgery—and the thought made her grin. Frangelica saw the distraction in her sister’s face and made an impatient sound, clicking the tip of her tongue against her front teeth. The sound had worked wonders when they were youngsters—a signal that Autumn had earned her elder sibling’s disapproval. Once upon a time, it had made her snap to attention. Now she merely arched a brow and eyed Frangelica’s bandana, which she couldn’t help but notice was Hermès. Her sister was all about *peasant chic*, never a peasant.

Noting Autumn's expression, Frangelica realized she had lost a fraction of her former authority. Never one to waste time analyzing what's done, she moved on. "You find something about this situation amusing?"

"Only your designer babushka, darling. As for the kid, why is it my problem if the little one gets in the way of your doing business?"

"I should go into specifics?"

Autumn sniffed. She had benefited from Frangelica's enterprises at times over the years, there was no denying it. She shrugged, uncrossed her ankles, and placed the broom back in its corner next to the refrigerator. She stepped over to the sink, poured a fresh cup of coffee and held the pot out to Frangelica with a questioning glance. Her sister shook her head, quickly bringing a jeweled hand over the top of her mug, as if she feared Autumn would insist. Autumn set the carafe back on the burner and joined Frangelica at the table. With her index finger, she traced the design on her cup—one of a set of twelve, each depicting a sign of the Zodiac. *Aries. Maxou's sign.* "Will we be in danger if she stays here?"

"We?" Frangelica scoffed, then softened her tone under Autumn's glare. "No, there's no danger. I wouldn't do that to you." She leaned closer, speaking in the confidential tone she had always adapted to con Autumn into doing her bidding when they were children. "He's not coming back, you know."

Autumn frowned and started to take a sip of her coffee, pausing to read the cup as she raised it to her lips:

ARIES – Adventurous, vibrant, exciting, a confident natural leader. Enjoys the "thrill of the hunt." Impulsive activists, with low tolerance for boredom. Aries

encourage and give strength, are great friends in times of need. But beware – if the excitement is gone, they seek it elsewhere.

She lowered the cup, leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. “What’d they do with him?”

“No one did a thing with him.”

“So he gave them the slip? *Saperlipopette* ! He’s good.”

Frangelica rolled her eyes. “Can we not?”

“You must admit, he’s clever— ”

“He’s a common thief with a knack for churning out people-pleasing books. He’ll never be anything more, for all that he was once a four-star chef. And must you perpetuate his slang? *Saperlipopette, indeed.*”

“He was in the right, and you know it.”

“Look, between you and me, I agree. It ended badly, they swindled him. But let’s face it, his expectations were unrealistic. It’s his own fault he had to go into hiding.”

“Because he fought for what was rightfully his. Oh, never mind.” Autumn shook her head, annoyed. “Getting back to your request ... this girl, she’s Denzi’s daughter?”

“Yes, her name is Lillian.”

“And the mother, oh dear, what’s her name ... ”

“Madame Marianne Beaumel.”

“Of course! The safecracker, eluded the police for years. She was never a member of Denzi’s crew, was she?”

“No, she always stayed on the outside, what Denzi calls a ‘free agent’. However— ”

“You mean to say she plans to resume her activities, after four years in prison?”

“No, she’s done with all that. Denzi plans to set her up with a business when she’s released, that little storefront in the Latin Quarter.”

“Don’t tell me the Greek mob boss is going legit.” Autumn laughed as Frangelica raised a warning finger. “What’re you worried about, he can’t hear us.”

“He doesn’t like that kind of talk.”

“My dear sister, I don’t judge. Truth be told, I like Denzi. He can be very charming, and he has a good sense of humor. But we both know what his businesses are all about, even his little cabarets where we danced. Personally, I’m glad to be out of it.”

“You were always dancing when we were children.” Having effectively tuned out the bulk of Autumn’s comments, Frangelica smiled at the pleasant memory conjured by the mention of dance. “Why did you quit?”

“We’ve been through this. My ripe old age.”

“You were twenty-five! You’re not yet thirty.”

“You know as well as I do, that type of dancing is a young girl’s game. It wasn’t exactly Ballet Russe. *You* got out of it early, too.”

“Only because I threw myself into my business.”

“The other girls were between eighteen and twenty. I stood out. Like you, I decided to quit on a high note.”

“But don’t you miss it? Dancing, Paris nightlife?”

“Sometimes,” Autumn admitted wistfully. She caught a lock of her thick, russet hair between her fingers and played with it, as she often did when contemplative. “Perhaps I’ll dance again someday, someplace other than a nightclub. And if I’m pining for Paris, I can visit you.”

“Anytime you want.” Frangelica picked up a spoon from the table and examined it, adding, “Denzi would take you back if you change your mind. The gents at the club were disappointed when you quit.”

“That’s very kind, but no thanks.” Autumn took a sip of coffee. “So, his tip sheet, still going strong?”

“*The Benchmark*? Yes, very popular. It may go bi-weekly. The authorities have tried to bust him on it, but it’s all above board.”

“Really!”

“Yes, really!” Frangelica shot back. “Honestly, to hear you talk, one would believe Denzi is a low-life thug and nothing else. He does have other interests. He merely enjoys passing along information to others who share his passion for games of chance. He doesn’t strong-arm anyone, his tips are legitimate. I encourage this effort, and others like it. He swears he’ll go completely straight someday. *The Benchmark* is an excellent start down that path.”

“He stands as much chance of going legit as I have of—” Autumn stopped herself. She was silent for a moment, then looked up and gave her sister a shrug. “Very well, darling. For you, I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. Stranger things have happened. I only want you to be happy, and as I said, I like Denzi. Even though I was furious with him over the way he handled that business with Maxou—” She took a quick drink of coffee, as if to wash down futile words of anger. “Anyway, that was a long time ago. The two of you seem well suited to each other, and you’re looking fine, very prosperous. You’re my sister, I’ll always wish you the best.”

“*Merci, chérie.*”

“Now, his daughter, Lillian ... she’s been staying with a family since her mother’s arrest, right? What happened to them?”

“Not a family, just a young couple, the Sullivans. Nice people, from Ottawa. I think they were recommended to Denzi through some social services program or something. They were able to provide a nice, stable routine for the girl, close enough to Paris for Denzi to visit her. But now, they’re returning to Canada. They had grown very fond of Lillian. They even told Denzi they would love to adopt her. It was one of those half-kidding half-serious comments, but I believe they meant it. Naturally, though, Lillian didn’t want to leave her mother, and Denzi didn’t want to send her away.”

“That surprises me a little.”

“He cares about her, he’s just not in a position to play full-time father, as you can imagine. So, with the Sullivans leaving, he asked me to look after her till her mother’s release. He didn’t see any sense in engaging the services of another family for such a brief time. She’s no trouble, and I know it’s not for long. But I’m having a hard time keeping up with everything, between my shop and other work Denzi wants me to do for him, and now a youngster. I’m just too busy.”

“Won’t she be bored down here?”

“On the contrary.” Frangelica waved a hand around the room. “This bucolic atmosphere is just what she needs. Country, not city! Fresh air, not smog.”

“Ze mistral, not ze breeze that whees-pers Louise!”

Frangelica rolled her eyes. “She’ll love it here. And she’s very good at occupying herself. She has three passions ... nature, drawing, and puzzles.”

“Puzzles?”

“Word games, crosswords, that sort of thing. She’s mad for them. Not just doing them, but making them up. She and her mother enjoyed all sorts of wordplay games together. I suppose they remind her of happier times. You won’t hear a peep out of her for hours when she’s in the throes of it.”

“Curious hobby.”

“She’s good at it, you’d be surprised. Matter of fact, it’s brought her closer to her dad.”

“How’s that? What’d she do, get Denzi in the habit? A nice little puzzle before bedtime with his *chocolat chaud* and madeleine?”

“Very funny. I’m serious. When he found out how much she enjoys drawing and making puzzles, he started printing her work in *The Benchmark*. It’s a sweet thing for him to do. It makes her so happy, seeing her work in print.”

“What does she have to do in return for this honor?”

“Nothing,” Frangelica insisted. “It’s something he wants to do for her, that’s all.” She paused, looking down at her hands. “Most people never see this side of him. This is why I stay with him, why I believe we have a future. All right, so he hasn’t been a model father. At least he’s trying. He’s done more for Lillian than a lot of men would’ve done for a child born out of wedlock.” She opened her handbag, pulled out a copy of *The Benchmark* and passed it to Autumn. “Here, see for yourself. Back page, the drawing of the squirrels.”

Autumn took the paper and unfolded it. “She drew this? And the puzzle ... she drew the boxes by hand, did the lettering?”

“The whole thing, wrote the clues and all.”

“It’s really good.” Autumn grinned. “Do the guys give Denzi grief over this? A young girl’s drawings alongside betting tips?”

“They teased a little, at first. Not much. Some of the guys have children of their own, so they get it.”

Autumn folded the paper and handed it back to Frangelica. “If Denzi’s so fond of her, why is he willing to have her live down here, so far away?”

“It’s not *so* far away. He believes a little distance is beneficial, at least till she’s older. It’s like when she went to live with the Sullivans, he thinks it’s best to shield her from certain aspects of our thing. And with Madame Beaumel’s release from prison next month, he’d like to have her away from Paris for that. It’ll be a media circus, the woman is a celebrity. I’m sure he’ll bring Lillian back to live with her mother after the dust settles.”

“Approximately how much ‘dust’ are we talking here? How long?”

“About six months, maybe less.” Frangelica returned the paper to her handbag. “Please, darling, it’s so seldom I get the chance to nurture Denzi’s benevolent side.”

“Such as it is.” Autumn gazed out the kitchen window, watching a butterfly’s meandering path. “All kidding aside, it’s impressive to see him showing responsibility for his daughter. And to take an interest in what she fancies, encouraging her talent, that’s above and beyond. Gives me hope for him. Which gives me hope for the pair of you.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“What’s my compensation?”

Frangelica took a thick envelope from her handbag. “First installment, for one month. You’ll receive the same every month, on the fifth. And like I said, it may not be for that long a time. If Madame Beaumel is settled sooner, it might be as early as September.”

Autumn opened the envelope and stared at its contents. “My, you really do want me to do this, don’t you?”

Frangelica eyed her coolly, then displayed a hint of uneasiness Autumn had seen only once before, long ago, when the nuns had caught her smoking cigarettes with a girlfriend and two boys, not twenty minutes after communion. “Yes, I do.”

“All right,” Autumn agreed, touched by the genuine humility in Frangelica’s voice. “We’ll try it, see how it goes.” She held out a hand to shake.

Frangelica took her hand gratefully, then raised it, appalled. “Oh, darling, what *have* you been *doing*?” With her free hand, she slid a dainty pair of spectacles up to her nose, peering at Autumn’s hand like a rare archeological find.

“It’s called work.” Autumn snatched the hand away from her. “Hadn’t you best get her in here?”

Frangelica stood up, smoothing her dress, stood at the kitchen doorway and called out, “Come in, sweet, it’s all sorted.”

Shuffling feet, slender fingers sliding around the edge of the doorway, followed by the rest of her – all arms and legs, like a colt, and a thin, solemn face partially concealed by a mop of thick, ash-blonde hair. Autumn guessed her to be about twelve or thirteen years old, and if the shapeless shift were any indication, she was growing fast, swiftly overtaking hemlines. She would need new clothes straightaway.

“Lillian, say hello to your aunt,” Frangelica said.

The girl pushed her hair back and nodded a greeting, and Autumn instantly saw what Frangelica was on about. Her expression ...

“Well! Just look at the time.” Frangelica’s voice was shrill with mock good cheer as she consulted her Chanel watch. “I must leave immediately or I’ll miss my train.” She swept Autumn into an embrace and whispered, “*Merci*,” in her ear, then she crossed the room and spoke to the girl. “I know you’ll fare well here, you’ll find it much more to your liking than my tiresome milieu. Do as you’re told, and stay out of trouble.” She leaned in and gave her a light peck on the cheek; the girl’s expression didn’t alter. Frangelica cast a grateful smile in Autumn’s direction, and was out the door.

Autumn waved the girl over. “Come, sit down. Would you like something? Are you hungry?”

She shuffled to the table and plopped down in one of the chairs. “She’s not my mother.”

“Yes, I know. I know about your mother, and your father, too. I suppose it’s hard to think of my sister as a mother, or even as a stepmother, isn’t it? She’s more like a guardian.”

“She’s more like a pain in the butt.” The girl watched Autumn stifle a snicker and added, “An’ you’re not my aunt.”

“No.”

“So I don’t have to call you Auntie, or some such rubbish? Unless you think we should keep up appearances around here.”

“That won’t be necessary. I learned early in life that one can waste a dreadful amount of energy worrying about what other people think. You can call me Autumn.”

“Autumn? That’s lovely.”

“Frangelica called you Lillian. You remind me of a friend I had in school when I was about your age, and her name was Lily. Would you mind if I go with that?”

“That’s what Maman calls me. Denzi an’ Frangelica prefer Lillian. I’m trying to break them of it.” She crossed her legs and spoke in a chatty tone of one adult to another, as if they were two young mothers swapping stories on how they cope with problem children.

“I see. You call him Denzi?”

“It never sounded right, calling him Papa or Daddy.” She brightened. “I like Lily.”

“Good. Then allow me to welcome you to my inn, Auberge de Castagna. You’ll find the rules are simple here. A few chores, tending occasional paying guests, and so on. One of the most important things in the world to me, Lily, is respect. I believe in giving it as well as getting it. If you respect me, our home, and the beautiful nature all around us, I’ll respond in kind. Your room will be your domain. I only ask that you maintain it in keeping with the standard of cleanliness throughout the house. I – ” Her speech was interrupted by a clatter, as one of her many cats jumped to the sink and lapped enthusiastically at the remains of a cheese plate. Autumn tossed a napkin and it sprung from the basin, leaving the dish spinning. “Well, some days the standard is lower than others.” She turned back to Lily. “What’s your pleasure, dear?”

“I’d like to go to my room an’ rest. Please.”

“Follow me.” Autumn gave Lily a brief tour of the house, finally bringing her to a corner room on the northeast side. “Take this for now. After you’ve rested and had a chance to look around, if there’s another room you prefer, you can switch. Bathroom’s down the hall, to your right. We’ll have a supper later.”

“Thank you.” Lily pushed her hair back, and again Autumn felt the eerie sensation. She shook it off, and gave the girl a light pat on the shoulder. Lily smiled slightly, entered the room and closed the door.

Autumn stood listening to the sounds of a bag dropping to the floor and the soft creak of the bed, then she reproached herself. This snooping, after her promises of respecting the child’s privacy. She returned to the kitchen, where she chased a second cat away from the dishes and started planning supper.

II.

Frangelica emerged from the Metro station and paused before crossing the street in the Marais district—quiet now, in this early morning hour, the workday not yet started. She walked up to the shop entrance, dug out a silver key ring, unlocked the door and stepped inside, closing the door. She stiffened at the familiar acrid tobacco odor, and she sighed and leaned her head against the door. “It’s done, Denzi, so let’s not make a big thing of it,” she said without turning around.

“I have plans for her, you knew that.”

The cordial voice could have belonged to an attentive waiter describing the *plat du jour*. In the silence that followed, Frangelica could hear the *ssss* of Denzi’s cigar as he took a leisurely puff. “This doesn’t change any plans,” she replied. “She hasn’t been exiled to another country.” She turned to face him. “We can send for her anytime you want.”

Denzi watched her from a low overstuffed chair near the counter that held a cash register and a display of women’s accessories, strategically placed to tantalize and encourage impulse purchases before checkout. “You might have told me what you were doing. I’m not fond of surprises, Frange.”

“Neither am I. You drop her on me out of nowhere, no warning, leave her in my care, along with everything else you expect me to do? I’ve only got two hands.” She crossed the room briskly and stood behind the counter.

“Can I help it if those Canucks had to go back home? Just a few weeks till her mother gets out of prison. All I asked was for you to watch her till then.”

“I tried. I simply can’t properly run the business end of things and care for a girl that age at the same time. Besides, you know it’ll stretch to more than a few weeks.” She found a tiny key on her silver holder and unlocked the register. “The child needs to continue with a nice, uneventful, orderly life, like what she had with the Sullivans. She wouldn’t have had that if she stayed here.”

Denzi gripped the arms of the chair and rose slowly, unfolding his large, muscular frame. His boyish expression belied his thirty-seven years and his cool, calculating mind. Whip-smart from the moment he picked his first pocket as a youth in his native Crete, his potential didn’t go unnoticed. A local nightclub owner took him off the streets and under his wing, taught him the finer points, and Denzi was off and running. He advanced rapidly, focusing on racketeering and gambling, earning well his status of rising star. He was respected and praised for his cool head and diplomacy. It was often said, “You always know where you stand with Denzi Kottabos.” Still, even those closest to him knew that his charm and gregarious nature should never be taken for granted. Business was business with Denzi; no exceptions.

He stepped around to the front of the counter, facing her. “Just a cool captain of industry, that’s you, eh? No maternal instincts?”

Frangelica pressed a key on the cash register, and the drawer slid open. She removed a stack of bills and waved them playfully before his face. “*These* are my babies. They bring out my nurturing side.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Mind your tongue, baklava,” Frangelica purred as she touched his lips lightly with a fingertip, inwardly admiring her flawless manicure. When he didn’t respond, she frowned

petulantly, returned the money to the cash drawer and slammed it shut. “Spare me your lectures on parenthood. I’m a businesswoman, and this isn’t a day care center. Besides, it just so happens I *am* considering the girl’s welfare. She’s too young to be exposed to our enterprises, and you know it. She’s much better off at Auberge de Castagna with Autumn.”

Denzi removed the cigar from between his teeth. “The dancer.”

“Don’t be like that, you’ve got no reason to hold anything against Autumn. She’s been out of our thing for years and she left it fair and square, you said so yourself. You should see her on her little parcel of land, so content. Believe me, it’s the perfect place for Lillian.”

He studied her for a moment, then he shrugged. “Maybe you’re right.” He returned the cigar to his mouth.

Frangelica hid her surprise; she had expected more of an argument. “I *am* right, you’ll see. And she’s not very far away, just a few hours by train. You don’t have to change any plans you have for her.” Denzi nodded slightly, turned away and walked around the room, absently examining articles of clothing on scented, padded hangers. “Let her grow up a bit, see what she wants to do,” Frangelica continued. “Her entire disposition will improve. She’ll be much more receptive to any ideas you have for her future.”

Denzi stopped before a coat-rack display of totes and handbags. He pulled one bag out away from the others, a large square tote with the shop’s logo – Frangelica C – embroidered in stylish crimson letters on a royal blue field.

Frangelica smiled. “Those turned out nice, didn’t they? Who knows, maybe someday the Frangelica C brand will give Chanel a run for its money.” She busied herself arranging items

on the counter top. “Your concern for Lillian is admirable. I’ve often wondered why you didn’t marry Madame Beaumel, or at least set them both up somewhere — ”

Her words were cut off as Denzi picked up the coat rack and hurled it through the storefront window, glass shattering, bags flying, a mannequin smashing into pieces as it struck the sidewalk. He moved swiftly to the counter and grabbed Frangelica by the shoulders, pulling her close. “You and I go way back, so I let a lot of things slide. But certain subjects are nobody’s business, understand?”

“S-sure, lover, take it easy,” Frangelica stammered. Another inch or two, and the cigar would burn into her left eye. She kept her cool, and worked to conjure the smile that seldom failed to charm him. “I meant no harm.”

“Just remember your place. You’re a businesswoman because I put you in business. You’re not a *consiglieri*.”

“I know that.” She marveled at the calm voice that sounded so far away, finding it hard to believe it was her own. “You put me in business because you knew I would be successful. I’ve never given you reason to complain, have I? I’m not about to start now.”

He released her, stepped back, and the heightened color in his face receded. “Look ... you don’t want the kid under foot. I understand. And your sister, she’s all right. You did good.” He patted her cheek, giving her an approving nod. He turned and walked to the door, stopped and waved a hand toward the demolished window. “I’ll send a couple of the guys over, have this good as new by lunchtime.”

“Thanks,” Frangelica said, a trace of sarcasm in her voice. As he opened the door, she added, “Denzi, I’ve got nothing against Lillian, honestly. She’s a sweet kid. But ... she frightens me.”

Denzi looked at her, and she was surprised to see a fraction of trepidation in his eyes. “I’ll see you later, baby.” He stepped outside and closed the door softly behind him.

Frangelica watched him go, shaking her head. “I may be more *consiglieri* than you realize,” she muttered. She approached the storefront gingerly, mindful of her suede pumps around the shards of broken glass, and she sighed. Damn his temper! It was just like him to pull something like this. Only an hour before she opened. And Friday was one of her busiest days.

* * *

“Madame Beaumel! *L’photo, s’il vous plait ? Merci !*”

“Madame Beaumel! Over here, please!”

The questions and exclamations flew fast and furious as the crowd crept along the cobbled sidewalk of Paris’ fifth *arrondissement*, ignoring the heavy raindrops that slid down from the putty sky.

“Madame Beaumel! What are your plans for the future?”

Madame Marianne Beaumel, pausing to consider this query, turned toward the crowd. Her forty years of ups and downs had had little impact on her statuesque bearing. Her abundant hair, the same ash blonde as Lily’s but streaked with silver, was piled on top of her head loosely, as if one good sneeze would send it tumbling down around her shoulders. Her face was squarish, the cheekbones sharp, and only a few faint lines marred the exquisite, light bronze complexion, clear as golden treacle, stunning against the pale tint of her hair. Scanning the faces before her,

uncertain which reporter had asked the question, she favored them all with her dazzling smile.

“The future? I never plan that far ahead. However, for the *immediate* future, I plan to slip out of these wet clothes and into a dry martini.”

Hearty laughter, then another voice rang out. “Madame Beaumel! Is it true you have a love child with Denzi Kottabos, the famous racketeer?”

Madame Beaumel’s smile faded, and her searching gaze finally discerned the speaker. “Your publication, monsieur?”

“*Saucy Magazine*, Madame,” the young reporter answered with a cocky grin.

She kept her gray eyes fixed on him as she gave a barely perceptible nod to the man who stood beside her. He caught the eye of a heavy-set man at the back of the crowd, who in turn signaled a third man at the far left. The latter two moved in, threading their way through till they reached the *Saucy* reporter. They flanked him on either side, grasped his arms and swiftly carried him away, the others parting to give them room to pass. When the men disappeared around a corner, Madame Beaumel asked sweetly, “Any further questions?” The remaining reporters shuffled feet, mumbled their thanks and quickly dispersed. Madame Beaumel watched this procedure with great satisfaction, and spoke to her companion: “Influential friends and associates, Salvatore. Never underestimate them.”

“No, Madame,” Salvatore said as he opened the door of the storefront behind them. She entered, and he followed her inside.

A flip of the light switch near the door illuminated the long, rectangular room, and Madame Beaumel exclaimed with delight at the brightly-painted café tables and chairs, the Art

Nouveau architectural details, the lively art on the walls. “Oh, this is lovely.” She clapped her hands like a child on Christmas morning. “Denzi! Where are you? I know you’re here.”

Double padded doors at the far end of the room swung open and Denzi emerged from the kitchen area, coming toward her with a beaming smile, arms outstretched. “Welcome home, gorgeous.” He embraced her and kissed both her cheeks. “The day finally came, eh?”

“Not a second too soon. So, all this ... it’s really mine to run?”

“Yeah. Marianne, I ... ” He hesitated, and spoke to Salvatore. “Sal, how ‘bout some coffee for all of us?” Salvatore nodded and walked to the back, through the swinging doors, and Denzi continued. “As I was saying ... this is for you. Do anything you want with it. Café, bar, full restaurant, club, whatever. I’ll take my taste of the profits, but it’ll be minimal.”

“So generous. It’s very sweet, you really don’t have to do all this.”

“You’re the mother of my child. And she’s a hell of a kid. I ... I want to take care of you both, as much as I can.”

“Short of marriage,” Madame Beaumel laughed softly.

Denzi grinned. What a laugh she had! She had always been able to say things to him that others wouldn’t have dared. Even now ... never mind her words. The laugh that followed her comment made it clear she honestly didn’t expect a proposal, that she knew him exceedingly well and accepted him for exactly what he was. No wonder she had maintained his fascination longer than any other woman he had courted. No wonder he felt such pure, genuine love for their daughter, who reminded him more of her mother every day. “Yeah, that’s right,” he finally said. “Short of marriage. You’re better off, not saddled for life with an inconsiderate old crook like me.”

“You’ll notice I’m not arguing,” she laughed again, fishing a pack of cigarettes from her coat pocket. She pulled one out and offered the pack to him. He took one, found his lighter and lit first her cigarette, then his. She leaned back against the mahogany bar and blew several smoke rings. “And how is our Lily? When can I see my darling girl?”

“Well, it’s like this,” Denzi said slowly. “See, I’ve sent her – that is, Frangelica an’ I, we agreed—”

“Oh yes, Frangelica. The girlfriend.” Madame Beaumel flicked the ash from her cigarette. “Of course she would have something to say about it. How very civilized.” Her tone remained light, but some of the amusement faded from her eyes.

“C’mon, don’t be like that.”

She sighed. “You’re right. Apologies, pet, I know our time has passed. I’m grateful you still wish to be part of our lives, Lily and mine.” She patted his hand. “Go ahead, tell me what you’ve decided.”

“I’ve always said I’d do right by you an’ her, and I meant it. She’s staying with Frange’s sister, in Provence. We thought it would be best for now, with you coming home, all the news stories, the reporters.”

“I see.” She took another puff from the cigarette. “What’s this sister like?”

“She’s very nice. She owns a bed and breakfast, Auberge de Castagna. She isn’t in our thing.” He paused to see if Madame Beaumel would comment on this; when she didn’t, he went on. “This isn’t a permanent situation. It’s just to give Lily a place to stay till you’re settled, get your business runnin’, that sorta thing.”

Madame Beaumel examined her nails. “What’s she doing with herself down there?”

“She’s helping out. And she’s still our little artist.” He leaned over, reached out to one of the café tables, picked up a copy of *The Benchmark* and passed it to her. He watched her open the sheet to the last page, and he smiled broadly at the pride in her face.

Madame Beaumel brushed away a tear. “She’s quite grown up, isn’t she?” She tossed the paper to the table and turned away. “Oh, what I’ve missed.”

“She’s thirteen,” Denzi said comfortingly, bringing his hands to her shoulders. “You still have a lot of time with her.”

Madame Beaumel nodded, blinking away tears. She composed herself and looked at him. “And what about the other thing?”

“What other thing?”

“You know what other thing. Her little quirk you were so interested in not long ago.”

“*Interested* in? I was concerned.” He removed his hands from her shoulders.

“Come on, I know you. The minute I explained it to you, you started thinking about how you might profit from it.”

Denzi scowled. “What do you take me for? Frange saw her walkin’ around like a zombie, so I asked you about it because we were worried, that’s all.”

“All right, all right, if you say so. But you can’t be too surprised at me for being a little suspicious.” She finished her cigarette and stamped it out in an ash tray on the bar. “Let’s just forget the past, shall we? Nothing like a stint in the slammer to make one wish to simply move on.” She cast her eyes around the room again, and her good temper returned. “This is a sweet place, to be sure. Such potential.”

“Well, I don’t want to influence your decision, but ... I was thinking ... considering the setup of the room, the location ... it’d make a perfect night club, to feature live music. Maybe go with a style you don’t hear every day in Paris, something traditional yet unique ... ”

“Something like *laikó*?” Madame Beaumel suggested archly.

“Now that you mention it ... ” Denzi eyed her keenly, smiling. “You wouldn’t have to twist my arm to get somethin’ going here. You know, dust off the bouzouki, get some of the guys back together. You remember that night in Ayia Napa, you an’ me, Stratos an’ Giovan? That cabaret on the beach, they asked anyone who wanted to come up on stage an’ play. Remember how surprised everyone was when we went up an’ played some of the old songs?”

“Here we go, memory lane!”

“You were a hit! That old-timer at the bar, he said you looked and sounded just like Rita Abatzi. He was right.”

“I dyed my hair dark back then. Wasn’t such a bad look, was it?”

“You looked like a movie star.” He leaned closer and sang, “*Your eyelashes shine like flowers on the field’ ...*”

“*Search till you’re blind, you won’t find one like me,*” Madame Beaumel finished.

“Markos Vamvakaris.”

“The master,” Denzi said, with quiet reverence. “Did you ever hear the story of how he got started? He heard someone playing bouzouki, an’ he swore if he didn’t learn to play it within six months— ”

“ — he would cut off his hand. Yes, pet, you told me, many times.”

“He was a genius. He’s the reason— ”

“ — you took up bouzouki in the first place,” Madame Beaumel finished. Denzi frowned, miffed, and she gave him a nudge. “I think it’s a superb idea for this place. Not sure if I still have the chops to sit in with you and the virtuosos, but we’ll see.”

“It’ll come back to you. Like ridin’ a bike.”

“We’ll see,” she repeated. “So, once I get this place up and running, how soon can we bring Lily back? I can’t wait to ... ” Her voice trailed off at his expression. “Now what?”

Denzi gently guided her to a chair and sat her down, then sat across from her. “The thing is, she doesn’t want to come back. Not just yet.”

“Oh. Well ... of course, she didn’t want to be here for that mess with the reporters. Very wise of you, sending her away from all that. But that’ll die down soon, and then— ”

“It’s more than that. She doesn’t want to see *you* right now.”

“What? That’s absurd.”

“No, it’s really pretty typical. I talked to Sal about it, he’s got three daughters. He told me they all went through the same thing, sort of a judgmental attitude. He said they just about drove him crazy. Then after awhile, they snapped out of it, and it was like it had never happened.”

“Judgmental ... toward me? Does she hate me?” Madame Beaumel whispered, trying to steady her voice. She felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach.

“No, she doesn’t hate you! It’s a phase, it’ll pass. Don’t you remember a time when you were a kid and you didn’t want to be around your mother? Maybe because she did something you didn’t like?”

Madame Beaumel didn't have to give the question much thought. Several dozen examples of her mother's cowardice toward her father's abuses rose in her mind's eye, like a fatal accident that commanded her attention. "Yes ... but that was different. Lily never minded how I put food on the table. Matter of fact, she used to think it was all rather glamorous."

"She's a teenager now, Marianne. More easily embarrassed."

Madame Beaumel thought again, and sighed deeply. "I had forgotten what it's like to be that age. How you're convinced the whole world is watching your every move. It's debilitating, especially for girls. It takes us much too long to grow out of it." She fell silent, lost in thought, a faraway look in her eyes.

Denzi, growing uneasy, cleared his throat. "The way I figure it, the best thing you can do is stay here, work on this place, and in a few months—"

"Months!"

"Maybe not that long. Just give her some time to get used to the idea of you being back and making an honest living. Write to her, talk on the phone. Let her think she's calling the shots." He took her hand. "You push too hard, you'll push her away. She's got a stubborn streak—"

"Can't imagine where that comes from."

"I'd say we both contributed to that particular trait." He squeezed her hand. "She'll come around. She's a smart girl."

"Yes, she is." Madame Beaumel drummed her fingertips on the tabletop distractedly. "Very well, if that's what you think we should do. But if nothing's changed after awhile, I'm going to pay that little Provençal sanctuary a visit."

“Don’t worry, you’ll be together again before you know it.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Sure.” They stood up, and she walked him to the door. “About the other thing ... did you ever talk to her about it? Did you tell her I told you about it?”

“It never came up. Frange an’ I, we only saw it the one time. Once you explained it, I didn’t see any reason to bring it up unless we had to.” He grinned. “Frange is sorta, I don’t know, easily spooked, I guess you could say. She didn’t want to discuss it. All she said was she hoped it wouldn’t happen again.”

Madame Beaumel watched him carefully. “And you swear you’re not using her?”

The grin faded, the cheery eyes grew dark. “You gonna believe me, or not?”

“Okay.” She brought her hands up to straighten his tie. “Bear with me, pet, it was a long four years. Thanks for everything, and thanks for the escort home. *Mon Dieu*, those reporters, gave me such a headache.”

Denzi took her face in both hands and gently kissed her lips. “Take it easy.” He looked toward the kitchen and called out, “Sal! Let’s go.”

“Damn, we never had our coffee,” Madame Beaumel remarked.

“I couldn’t find any,” Salvatore said as he joined them.

“Put a list together, gorgeous,” Denzi instructed. “Write down everything you need, an’ we’ll get you set up. You’ve got my number, call anytime.”

“*D’accord.*” She smiled at Salvatore. “*Merci*, Salvatore.”

“*De rien*, Madame. Welcome back,” Salvatore replied, and he followed Denzi out.

As Madame Beaumel closed the door, all the stress of the eventful day seemed to cave in on her. She sank into a chair near the door, contemplating her bittersweet homecoming. That first moment of freedom on leaving the prison ... the deep breath of fresh air, the euphoria ... and the naïve fantasy she had nourished as tenderly as an exotic flower, the vision of her release day that had sustained her throughout her incarceration: Lily, standing outside the prison gate, watching excitedly, then hopping up and down and waving as she spied her, calling, "*Maman!*" How foolish. Lily had been only nine years old at the time of the arrest; of course she was humiliated. "Oh, Lily," Madame Beaumel murmured aloud, "I'm so sorry ... "

Outside the shop, Denzi and Salvatore crossed the street to Denzi's Mercedes. Salvatore opened the passenger door. "Is everything good?" he asked, as Denzi lowered himself into the seat.

Denzi nodded. "Everything is great." Salvatore closed the door, walked around to the driver's side, slid in behind the wheel and turned the ignition. The car pulled away and headed east, toward the main thoroughfare leading out of the city.

III.

My dear Frangelica,

Thank you and Denzi for the generous payments for Lily's support. Honestly, you don't need to send so much. Expenses are minimal and business is good this season for Auberge de Castagna, I've had a lot of customers. But the money is appreciated, and I've taken the excess and set up an account for Lily, in case of emergency, heaven forbid.

I adore the girl, but you were right, there is something unsettling about her. I sometimes catch her with the queerest look on her face, like she's a million miles away. Not the usual daydreaming you see in youngsters. It's as if she's in a trance, like part of her has traveled to another time and place. It lasts anywhere from a half hour to several hours, then she comes out of it as though nothing has occurred. I'm guessing it's due to her difficult life so far, poor thing, with her mother serving time in prison and all. She's obviously sensitive about it. I want her to trust me, and I find the less I react to her strange ways, the more comfortable she is. But my calm was put to the test last week, with an incident involving a raccoon.

Lily overheard me complaining to a neighbor about a troublesome raccoon that had been wreaking havoc with my garden and my poor chickens. The next day, I found the raccoon inside the mud porch. I knew it was the culprit because I'd seen it several times, running from the henhouse. As I had told my neighbor, it was missing most of its tail from some mishap. I was amazed to see it trapped in the mud porch, and I was about to go call the local animal control to come collect it and release it somewhere, when I noticed how still it was. I moved closer to get a better look – and this is what I don't know how to describe to you. The creature appeared to be frozen, in a state of suspended animation. Its expression was horrific, almost human, as if it had

gone through the devastating shock of its life. I screamed, then I heard someone behind me; it was Lily. She said, 'You wanted to be rid of it, I was just trying to help,' and she burst into tears and ran to her room. Frangelica, I can't tell you how dreadful it was. I had to push my fright aside as I stood outside her door, trying to speak some comfort, telling her I appreciated that she wanted to help. I didn't see her the rest of the day. (I was relieved to hear her raiding the pantry after midnight; I hated thinking she might go all night without something to eat.) She came out the next morning, and it was clear she didn't want to discuss it. So I let it go, we settled back into our routine, and nothing like that has happened since. Can you two shed any light on this? Needless to say, I'm wondering, what in the world did she do? I'm not sure I want to know. I've had no trouble from raccoons since; it's as if they network! But frankly, I think I would prefer that normal challenge of country living rather than such a disturbing solution.

On a lighter note, I have to tell you how impressed I am with Lily's artwork. Her wonderful sketches, she has a true naturalist's eye. And those games. Not only her obvious talent, but I'm also amazed at how quickly she churns them out. I went into her room one day and found dozens of puzzles, mostly crosswords, pages and pages, clues neatly printed and numbered, the diagrams drawn to nearly technical perfection. Extraordinary! She caught me looking at them, I'm embarrassed to admit, and I expected a well-deserved scene after all my talk about her room being her domain. But she wasn't upset at all. As a matter of fact, she was shyly proud of them, as children often are about a skill they possess. She gave me a few of them for my own enjoyment. The clues are fairly simple, in keeping with her age and level of education, but still quite clever. Such an eye she has, and what a gift for draftsmanship. She could have a career in art or graphic design.

So overall, she's faring well. Her earlier sullenness has vanished. I was certain she would grow bored, with no kids her age around, but she's sweet and helpful, seems to enjoy living here as much as I do. I think you would both be pleased; her mother, too.

Speaking of Madame Beaumel, we read about her release. I tried to get Lily to talk about it, didn't have much luck. Please tell Madame Beaumel she's welcome here anytime, and Lily can come to her whenever everyone agrees the time is right.

One more thing to consider as we come closer to fall – we need to give some thought to Lily's schooling. Don't want to neglect her education. If Denzi and Madame Beaumel aren't ready to bring her back to Paris by September, tell them to consider possible boarding schools or perhaps private tutoring, either here or another suitable location. I would miss her if she must go, but she might benefit more from exposure to others her own age rather than being tutored here with no classmates. Just something to think about.

Everything else is status quo. And no, he has not returned. Spare me your gloating, sister, I still say he'll be back. You'll see! Regards to Denzi,

Your loving

Autumn

* * *

“It's a long way to Roussillon, but longer still to Cannes.”

Maxou Fondant swung the machete with gusto, clearing a path through the brush. He peeked through the fresh opening, and turned to his companion – a small bird perched on his shoulder. “*Voilà !* I wasn't too keen on the sentence I came up with yesterday as an opening line

for the preface. Strike it, use this one instead, it's a keeper: 'It's a long way to Roussillon, but longer still to Cannes.'"

The bird cocked its head, regarding him mildly with a shiny black eye. About a foot long, its plumage was a dark, iridescent sheen, ever changing as it moved in the sunlight. A round, beardlike tuft of white feathers at its throat, and a lacy collar of wispy white feathers along the sides and back of its neck, stood out in sharp contrast against its shimmering body of deep bluish-purple and green.

Maxou's smile faltered under the bird's gaze. "Come now, Tip, don't be so critical. It's just a first draft, something to get the juices flowing."

"Flowww-ing," Tip repeated. Its voice was tinged with the rich, oily baritone of a seasoned orator accustomed to swaying public opinion.

"Yes, flowing, dash it! Don't get cheeky." Maxou stepped through the newly-cleared path. "Now, as I was saying ... 'It's a long way to Roussillon, but longer still to Cannes. That is to say, the latter location may be closer in proximity, but farther in spirit, given its glamour, its *glitterati*, as it were. Life in the flash lane is a jungle in and of itself, oftentimes requiring a metaphorical machete to navigate. As in cooking, when facing challenges in life, one should always select the tool best suited to the task'." Maxou nodded to himself. "Yes, that's it." He turned to look at Tip. "I trust you're getting this all down?"

"Get down." Tip bobbed his head as if keeping time to a tune.

"Good." Maxou swiped again at the foliage. "Unless I miss my guess, we're approaching our destination. Leave it to her to choose a remote backwater for early retirement." He paused, then snapped his fingers. "Addendum, Tip ... 'Sometimes, those weighed down by a

fear of life will construct protective walls for themselves, figuratively and literally. Barriers can manifest as secrecy, or private addresses, clandestine contacts ... or high unscalable stone walls surrounding their sanctuary. Guard dogs, moats ... ” he swathed a wider path with another stroke of the blade, “ ... or impermeable forestation. And yet, no man is an island—or woman, for that matter. Eventually, what once was built up must come down’.” He pulled a branch away from his line of vision, continuing his narration to the bird. “*J’arrive !* I’ve reached a clearing at last, and there’s the sign ... *Auberge de Castagna*. I see the house and a couple of utility buildings. Charming, classic Provençal style, ocher walls, tile roofs, blue shutters’.” He smiled and sighed dreamily. ““Their blue reminds me of her eyes’ ... ”

“Brown,” Tip said quietly.

Maxou frowned. “I know, I know, her eyes are brown. Just a little fact-bending to add some poetry to the piece. It’s a literary device.” He cleared his throat. ““Yes, blue like her eyes. Time cannot erase certain tender memories that tumble through our consciousness like fresh mountain streams, growing clearer and sweeter with the passing of the hours ... the days ... the months ... ””

“The years.”

“ ... the years.” Maxou stopped his narration and blinked. “Years? Has it really been years?” His eyes shifted to the house and he scratched his head. “Well ... I’m confident she’ll understand. After all, it was dire straits, wasn’t it? Desperate times, desperate measures, that sort of thing. Surely, seeing me return unscathed will override any disappointment she may have harbored all this time over my hasty getaway.”

“Get away!” Tip warned, flapping his wings emphatically.

“Nonsense,” Maxou scoffed, but he eyed the house uneasily. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Who can predict how these things will pan out—”

“Crêpe pan!”

“The memory on you. She did have quite the pitching arm, didn’t she?” Maxou winced, rubbing his head as he recalled the argument that had concluded with Autumn flinging kitchen utensils at his retreating form. “*Saperlipopette*, what a woman.” He stepped around a bush, into the clearing.

Tip flapped his wings again, maintaining his perch on Maxou’s shoulder. “‘*He who has the steerage of my course, direct my sail.*’ Shakespeare.”

“Very nice, and I daresay appropriate, but omit it from the final draft, all right? Let’s not add plagiarism to my list of misdeeds.” He approached the house warily, and resumed his prose.

“Ahem ... ‘Having braved adversaries and adverse conditions to reach my destination, I cannot help but wonder whether I am choosing the optimal path ... a path that may lead to a reunion ranging anywhere from cool indifference to elation, from sulky silence to joy, or anything in between. I could be entering into a homecoming of grand *esprit*, or I could be walking into ...’” His voice trailed off as he stopped dead in his tracks. He lowered his eyes and dolefully regarded the pile of horse manure that had arrested his cautious tread.

“*Merde.*” Tip tugged at his hair.

“*Oui*, Tip,” Maxou sighed. “*Merde.*”

“Hey! Who are you?”

Maxou jumped at the voice. “Who said that?” He looked up at the young girl perched in the tree. “Oh, I say, a lookout.”

“Look out,” Tip cried, as the girl swung down from the branch, landing solidly on her feet before them.

“I’m Lily,” she said, holding out a hand. “I’m stayin’ here with Mademoiselle Courteline. Do you know her?”

“Ah! Yes, she and I go way back. Maxou Fondant, at your service.” He took her hand and offered an engaging smile, hoping to divert her attention as he tried to extricate his foot from the manure.

“I like your bird. What kind is it, does it talk a lot?”

“This is Tip. He’s a Tui, from New Zealand. He talks very well. He has two voice boxes, imagine! But he chooses his words, and his time to speak, most carefully. He’s a great pal and helpmate. He assists in my stories, you see.”

“Telling ‘em, or making ‘em up?” Lily smiled as Tip winked at her.

“*Ma poupée*, I assure you, the stories are sufficiently captivating as they stand. No need to embellish. Many are the times I’ve found myself in sticky situations—”

“Now’s the time,” Tip squawked.

“Yes, well ...” Maxou pulled his foot away from the mess and regarded his boot with a critical eye. “Some situations are more difficult to escape unscathed than others.”

“You would know all about that.”

They spun around to see Autumn watching them with a bemused smile, her arms laden with a large bunch of wildflowers. She handed the bouquet to Lily and turned to Maxou, kissing his cheek. “It’s good to see you again, Maxou.” She looked at Tip, on his shoulder. “And you too, *Beau Oiseau*.”

“*Bonjour, perle,*” Tip replied in a cultured tone.

Relief washed over Maxou at Autumn’s cordial welcome, and he smiled, emboldened.

“Mademoiselle, you are a sight for sore eyes.”

“And I often feel I’m a sight too old to be referred to as mademoiselle ...”

“Rubbish!”

“... but I’ll take it just the same. As for sore eyes, I doubt you allowed much time to pass without a dose of remedy for that affliction.” She looked at Lily. “Lovely ladies seem to have a remarkable effect on Maxou’s memory. A pair of bright eyes, a glimpse of a swanlike neck, and all his previous promises fly straight out the window.”

Maxou coughed. “Isolated incidents from my wayward youth, I assure you. The Maxou you see before you, he’s the sadder but wiser gent, sober as a judge—”

“*Merde !*” Tip commented.

“I’m inclined to agree with Tip,” Autumn said.

“I think Tip means your shoes,” Lily suggested to Maxou, pointing down. “Why did you come through the brush? If you’d come by the main road, you wouldn’t have had to cut up all the bushes, an’ you probably wouldn’t have messed up your shoes.”

Autumn suppressed a laugh at the ragged trail Maxou had blazed. “Dramatic entrances are a Fondant trademark, Lily dear. Especially when he’s not quite sure how he’ll be received.”

“You know me well, petite,” Maxou conceded. “And now that you’ve eased my mind on my reception, if you’ll continue this warm welcome, I’ll repay your generosity by turning the hodgepodge of foodstuffs currently occupying your pantry into a feast of rare beauty.”

“He’s a chef,” Autumn murmured to Lily, “we’re in for a treat.” She noted the position of the sun. “Fortuitous of you to arrive at cocktail hour, Maxou.”

“What can I say? It’s a gift. Then again, here in the heart of superb wine country, I surmise that cocktail hour is up for grabs, which is a state of affairs I applaud. Remember, ‘The time for restoratives is governed by the senses, not the sundial.’ You may recognize that adage from my book, *Pipes of Pancakes: Mythological Brunches Fit for Gods and Goddesses*. I dedicate an entire chapter to breakfast-appropriate aperitifs for those under the unfortunate delusion that spirits should be relegated to evening hours.”

“Oh, *that’s* who you are,” Lily exclaimed. She looked at Autumn. “He talks like he writes, doesn’t he?”

“Best foot forward,” Tip interrupted.

Autumn looked down at Maxou’s shoes and hid a smile. “Come along. It won’t be the first time I’ve helped you out of a mess.”

Maxou followed meekly. “I hear it’s good luck, stepping in horse manure,” he said, as they strolled toward the house.

“Time will tell,” Autumn replied. She hoped there was nothing in her demeanor to reveal the hammering of her heart, like a delicate instrument sprung to life after a lengthy period of neglect. From the corner of her eye, she peeked at him and reveled in the sight ... the tall, slender frame, disheveled black hair, the slight growth of beard that gave a dash to his ready smile ... the expressive hands with long fingers well-suited for anything from a Three-Card Monte swindle in the streets of Marseille to selecting premium tomatoes for his award-winning Ratatouille ... the shabby style that suited him so well, faded jeans, black wool jacket, red

paisley scarf and Cuban-heeled boots ... and the glorious green eyes she had wondered if she would ever see again. No, that wasn't true; she had never doubted. She always knew he would come back. Wait till she told Frangelica.

IV.

Professor Cranston Bisk, standing across the road before Auberge de Castagna, consulted a dog-eared page in his spiral notebook. He looked up at the house again, nodding as he confirmed his destination. He closed the notebook, tucked it inside his tweed jacket and flicked a speck of dust from his lapel, taking care to adjust the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the fragrant air, and released it with a contented smile. “Brilliant!” he murmured aloud. He rubbed his hands together and reached down to grasp the handles of two meticulous, black suitcases that stood on either side of him like bookends. He started for the door of the farmhouse, then cried out and staggered backward as a dark Mercedes seemed to appear from out of nowhere, screeching before him and skidding to a halt. “I say! Just who do you think you are, driving about so recklessly?”

The car’s ignition cut, the door opened, and Salvatore stepped out, eyeing Cranston as he might examine a mildly interesting insect. He crossed to the passenger side of the vehicle, opened the door and helped Denzi out. He shut the door, and the two men stood side by side, silently staring at Cranston.

Cranston considered Denzi’s size. “Ah! Well, these things happen, ay? No harm done.”

Denzi nodded. “I apologize if we startled you. But you had nothing to worry about. Sal here, he’s an excellent driver.”

“Yes, I’m sure he is,” Cranston agreed shakily, offering a timid smile. Salvatore and Denzi continued to stare at him, their expressions inscrutable. “Right! Well, I’d best be checking in.” He picked up his luggage again.

“Wait here,” Denzi said to Salvatore, who nodded and resumed his place behind the steering wheel of the Mercedes. Denzi followed Cranston. “So, you’re gonna be staying here for awhile?”

“Yes,” Cranston replied. “In my research for my holiday, I read many glowing recommendations for this inn. Are you a guest as well?”

“No, I’m just dropping by. The owner is an old friend.” They stepped up to the door and Cranston set his bags down. “Allow me,” Denzi offered, reaching out and pressing the doorbell.

Maxou opened the door with a flourish. “*Bonjour !* Welcome to Auberge de Castagna, we’ve been expecting you. Mademoiselle Courteline will be along presently, she asked me to see that you’re ...” His voice trailed off as he saw Cranston’s companion. “Well, well ... Dionysus Kottabos.” He bowed slightly, a sardonic gleam in his eye.

Cranston snapped his fingers. “*That’s* the name! I knew you looked familiar,” he said to Denzi.

“You know who I am?”

“Certainly. I’ve seen you in the news, of course. But I also know you through your publication, *The Benchmark*.” He leaned closer to Denzi, speaking in a confidential tone. “You see, I play the horses on occasion, and I’ve found the tips in *The Benchmark* to be most informative. Fancy meeting you here, of all places.”

“Yeah.” Denzi shifted his eyes to Maxou. “Small world.”

“Miniscule,” Maxou agreed, matching Denzi’s gaze.

Cranston felt the tension between them, and swallowed uneasily. “Ah, perhaps I should
—”

“— come in,” Maxou said, swinging the door wide. “Yes, do come in.” He led them to Autumn’s small office just past the entryway. “You’re Professor Bisk?” he asked Cranston.

“Correct.” Cranston set his bags down and smoothed back his hair. “Professor Cranston Bisk, from Oxford. I’m delighted to be here, it’s my first trip to France, and it’s my first real holiday in nearly eight years.”

Maxou held out a hand. “Maxou Fondant.”

“Not *the* Maxou Fondant?” Cranston shook his hand vigorously. “You write those splendid adventure cookbooks. My mum absolutely swears by your volume on your travels through Scotland, *Highland Coup d’Etat*. I don’t know how you write such clever anecdotes to coincide so seamlessly with the recipes.”

“*Merci*,” Maxou replied graciously, with another sidelong glance at Denzi. “Actually, it’s remarkable what one can do when one’s hand is forced.”

“Monsieur Fondant is too modest,” Denzi said. “He’s resourceful, and he’s got talent and guts. He knows that when life throws curves, it’s best to cut your losses. Start with a clean slate.”

“Sound advice, to be sure,” Cranston remarked. “I must pass that along to the lads at the track next time.” He clapped his hands together. “Well! I simply can’t believe the dashed good fortune, meeting two celebrities at once. And the pair of you, just as worldly and philosophical as I would’ve imagined.” He waited for them to respond, growing uncomfortable as they continued to stare at each other. He clapped his hands again, a little louder than he had intended. “Yes, small world indeed!”

“Here I am,” Autumn said breathlessly, appearing in the doorway. “Sorry to have kept you waiting—oh! Denzi!” She entered the room, smiling and holding out her hand to him.

“This is an unexpected pleasure. Is Frangelica with you?”

“Good afternoon, junior.” Denzi took her hand and kissed it. “I told Frange I’d bring her next time, when we could stay longer. I’m on my way to a business meeting, thought I’d stop in and see Lily. Sal’s waiting in the car.”

“Sal’s here? Have him come in for a drink, at least. I’d love to see him.”

“Another time. I’ll give him your regards.”

“Autumn, this is Professor Bisk,” Maxou said, indicating Cranston. “Why don’t you get him checked in while Denzi and I have a chat?”

“Y-yes, good idea.” Autumn hid her anxiety and turned to Cranston. “Welcome, Professor.”

“This way,” Maxou said to Denzi as they left the office. “There’s a bottle of ouzo with your name on it.” He led him to the kitchen, mixed two glasses of the aperitif with water and added ice cubes. He handed a glass to Denzi, held up his own glass and offered a Greek toast: “*Stinygiasou.*”

“So, *chef de coquin*. I’d heard you were back. I wondered if it was true.”

“What did you wonder? Whether I *had* returned, or whether I *would* return?”

Denzi shrugged. “I knew you don’t scare easy. That’s one of the things I liked about doing business with you. We all of us know when it’s smart to lay low. There’s a big difference between that and being a coward. Lotta people in our thing, they don’t get that. You did.” He took another drink.

“You and your guys, you were wrong.” Maxou remarked bluntly.

“Some of us were, shall we say, hasty. Still, you didn’t have to do what you did.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You bloody well know what I’m talking about.” Denzi’s face darkened. “That book.”

“Oh.” Maxou grinned, swirling his glass, watching the ice cubes spin. “I think that was a small price to pay, considering how you and the boys cheated me.”

“Are you kidding? You expect it to be business as usual when you put out a book called *Just Desserts: Continental Wise Guys Reveal Their Sweet Spots?*”

“What’s the big deal, I didn’t name names. It was popular, though. I suppose it did shine an unwelcome spotlight on you boys for awhile.” Maxou drained his glass and fixed Denzi with a steely eye. “I did the only thing I could do, to replace some of the money I lost in our ill-fated venture. If it came back to haunt you, I call that poetic justice. You reap what you sow.”

Denzi finished his drink and held out the glass. “How about another round? You always were the best bartender on the Mediterranean.” Maxou took his glass without a word, and Denzi went on. “That earlier business between us ... it was unfortunate. I propose we bury the hatchet. You’re here with Autumn, I’m with Frangelica, my daughter’s here, at least for awhile. We’ve all known each other for years, we’re practically family.”

“Don’t get carried away.” Maxou gave him the refreshed glass. “What’re you up to?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. I know time heals, but I would’ve thought ... ” Maxou stopped, and a smile slowly spread across his face. “Oh, I get it. Of course, why didn’t I think of that before ... ”

“Think of what?”

“Chanya.” He enjoyed watching Denzi flinch at the mere mention of the name.

“Chaniatiko Bareki.”

Denzi scowled. “So, what about her?”

“Our little misadventure can’t have earned you any gold stars with her.”

“We did good, she got her cut.”

“*Oui*, but not without some undesirable attention. She’s notorious for keeping a low profile, hates publicity.” He chuckled. “She must’ve despised that book.”

“You saying she runs things?”

“You saying she doesn’t?” Maxou narrowed his eyes. “Listen, you and your boys may have won this round, but I’m not a wide-eyed kid. I learned in the streets of Marseille, I learned the value of paying attention, of peripheral vision. And I’ve fine-tuned it since we parted. Word of advice, Dionysus – when it comes to sizing up an opponent who possesses a keen eye for detail and a thorough understanding of the word *payback*... never underestimate a chef.”

Denzi set his glass down. “Paris isn’t very far away from here, *mon ami*. I could still make things bad for you.”

“The feeling is mutual, I think we both know that. Your initial proposal, that we put the bad blood aside for keeps, is a sound one. For all the reasons you mentioned, and more. The way I see it, we have several choices. We could bring plenty of trouble down on each other ... or we could completely ignore each other, live and let live ... or we could pull together toward a greater good. Synchronicity. Harmony.”

Denzi perked up at this. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you might respond to musical terms. You still play the bouzouki?”

“Well ... yeah. Not as much as I’d like to, but— ”

“You were an artist on that thing!”

“You were no slouch as a musician, yourself,” Denzi replied generously, warming to the subject. “Concertina, right? Or was it the urganettu?”

“See, that’s how I could tell you were someone who really knows music. Not everyone understands the differences between accordions and concertinas, much less the urganettu.”

“Hails from Corsica, like you.”

“But *mon Dieu*, you and the bouzouki ... ” Maxou raised his glass reverently, and Denzi respectfully returned his toast. They drank, and Maxou lowered his glass. “So ... truce?”

Denzi studied him for a moment, then finally nodded. “It’s for the best, for all concerned,” he replied evenly. “At least, for now.”

“Fair enough.” Maxou finished his drink. “Now, as long as we’re no longer plotting any mayhem toward one another, I suggest we repair to a room at the other end of the house, one that Autumn has designated a music room. It houses a piano sorely in need of tuning, a guitar or two, a mandolin ... I fear she hasn’t got a bouzouki, but you’ll manage on something else. And I never travel without my urganettu.”

“*Coquin*, your powers of persuasion are sharp as ever. That suits me right down to the ground, and you bloody well know it.” He emptied his glass and set it down firmly. “I have time for just a coupla songs, then I gotta get back on the road. But before that, I want to see my daughter.”

“*D’accord*. Wait here, I’ll send her in.” Maxou held out a hand. Denzi took his hand and shook it, then pulled him in for a quick embrace and hearty slap on the back. Maxou started

to leave, then stopped at the doorway. “I have to ask ... how did a redoubtable old charlatan such as yourself sire a girl so remarkable as Lily?”

“Beats me. I must’ve done something right in another life.”

Maxou grinned. “That smile of hers, those big eyes. It’s enough to make a soldier turn civilian.” He left the kitchen to fetch Lily.

Denzi watched him go, and sighed. “Almost.”

V.

“Penny a point, deuces wild,” Lily announced, shuffling the cards. She dealt to herself and to Maxou, sitting across from her at a small table near the fireplace in Autumn’s living room. She squinted to read her cards in the waning daylight.

Autumn entered, carrying a sewing basket, and paused to switch on a lamp near the table. “If you insist on losing to Maxou, you may as well be able to see what you’re doing wrong.”

“Who says I’m gonna lose?”

“He always wins. You’ve been warned.” She settled into a loveseat near the window, opened the basket and started threading a needle.

“Now, petite, don’t discourage the child,” Maxou admonished Autumn as he arranged his cards. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“Autumn, was there a letter today?” Lily asked.

“I forgot to check,” Autumn said. Lily started to rise. “No, stay put, play your round. You can fetch the mail after. It’s not going anywhere.”

“How is your mother?” Maxou asked, as Lily returned her attention to her cards a little impatiently.

“She’s fine. She says I can be with her as soon as she gets settled. I don’t know why it’s taking so long.” She selected two soda crackers from the pile beside her elbow and tossed them to the center of the table. “I’m in.”

“She probably wants everything to be just right,” Maxou said, matching her ante. Tip, from his perch on the back of Maxou’s chair, chirped insistently. Maxou took another cracker

and held it out to the bird. “This is why I always need to win,” he said to Lily as Tip took the cracker. “It’s not easy, keeping this one in biscuits.”

“Two for the dealer.” Lily took two cards from the deck, fit them into her hand, and mused softly, “Sometimes I wonder if she really wants me to be with her.”

“Balderdash,” Tip scoffed, with such conviction that Lily had to smile.

“Tip’s right,” Autumn said.

“I was thinkin’ maybe she’s afraid I’ll cramp her style.”

“‘Cramp her style?’” Autumn lowered her work and looked at Lily sharply. “Where did you get that?”

“James M. Cain,” Tip interjected. “Pulp fiction.”

Lily colored slightly. “It was in your library. It looked good.”

“Not sure that’s the type of thing you should be reading at your age.”

“Good stuff, though, all those femme fatales and toughs,” Maxou said. “Like *Double Indemnity*, in the ending, where ...” His voice trailed off as he sensed Autumn’s disapproving stare. “... but no, Autumn’s right! Better for you to read those when you’re a bit older. One card for me.” He took the card Lily offered. “Anyway, I don’t think that’s the case with your mother. I think she’s scared.”

“Scared? Of what?”

“Imagine how she must be feeling. She’s been away all this time, she left you in other peoples’ care, and now she’s trying to go straight and create a home for you. She’s probably terrified that whatever she can manage won’t be good enough, maybe you won’t like it after living in other places, that sort of thing. Lot of pressure.” He tossed another cracker in the pot.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Lily examined her cards. “Y’know what? I’d rather she come here. I really don’t wanna go there so much. I like Paris, but I love it here.”

Autumn looked up, surprised, and smiled. “I’m glad, dear.”

“Eventide, all’s well,” Tip crooned.

“Moment of truth time, *poupée*,” Maxou said to Lily, tapping the table. “Showdown.”

Lily spread her cards on the table. “Two pair.”

Maxou slowly nodded and set his cards down before her. “Royal Flush.”

“*What?*”

“I told you,” Autumn murmured.

“That’s impossible,” Lily cried. “You didn’t have that king. You cheated!”

“What’re you talking about? How would you know what I had?”

“Penny a point, deuces wild,” Tip said, his voice so eerily similar to Lily’s that Maxou and Autumn both looked at him.

Lily blushed crimson. She cast her eyes around the room evasively, then pointed over Maxou’s head at the opposite wall. “The mirror behind you! I saw your cards in the mirror.”

Maxou turned around. “Oh.” He held up a card. Although he could see it in the mirror, he could barely make it out. He looked at Tip, still perched on the back of his chair, now staring with great concentration at the card he held. Then he turned to face Lily and, noticing her pleading expression, finally said, “Well ... all I can say is, you have an eagle eye to be able to read cards in the mirror from that distance.” He gathered the cards. “Autumn, it looks like I’ve been hustled. She’s her father’s daughter, isn’t she? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“So it would seem,” Autumn chuckled, her eyes on her sewing. “Now perhaps you should confess to the apple about your *own* transgression.”

“Ah! I, er ... I may have given myself a little extra assist.”

“So you *did* cheat,” Lily said.

“I prefer to think of it as creative manipulation of circumstances for the greater good.”

“Cheating,” Tip said firmly. He peered at Lily. “Two of a kind.”

Lily blushed again. “I guess so.” She sorted the pot evenly and pushed Maxou’s share toward him. “Here, we won’t count that round. I’ll fetch the mail, an’ when I get back, let’s play again. No cheating.”

“Agreed. Hold on, there’s something amiss.” Maxou beckoned her. She stood before him questioningly, and he reached up to straighten a fold in her collar. He withdrew his hand, and she stared in amazement at the card he held up, its face toward her. “Don’t tell me, let me guess ... Queen of Hearts.”

“H-how did you— ”

“Off with you, hurry up, it’s getting late.” Maxou pulled back his sleeve to look at his watch. “It’s almost ... Where’s my watch? It was— ” He looked up and saw Lily holding the watch triumphantly. She tossed it on the table and ran from the room, giggling.

“Delinquent,” Maxou mumbled, slipping the watch back on his wrist. He frowned at Autumn’s laughter. “This is partly your fault! Detective novels all over the house, giving her notions.”

“Hammett!” Tip barked. “Tough eggs. On the lam! Don’t let ‘em get the drop on you. Let’s get stinko!”

“*Merci*, Tip,” Autumn said as she set her work aside and stood up. “I appreciate that subtle hint to remind me it’s martini time.” She saw Tip open his beak and she raised her hand. “I remember ... shaken, not stirred.” She smiled at Maxou. “Perhaps a drink will help soothe your disillusionment at the loss of innocence so prevalent in today’s youth.”

Maxou grinned. “It’s a start.”

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EYE IN THE SKY

Glossary

Word/Phrase	Origin	Definition
<i>à la mode</i>	French	Fashionable, stylish
<i>Amuse-bouche</i>	French	Lit. 'mouth amuser'. Small <i>hors d'oeuvre</i> , different from appetizers because they are offered by chef, not selected from menu by patrons.
<i>apéritif</i>	French	Alcoholic beverage served before a meal to stimulate appetite
<i>à votre santé</i>	French	To your health - used as a toast
<i>arrondissement</i>	French	Districts; administrative divisions of France, the Netherlands and other Francophile countries
<i>Auberge de Castagna</i>	French/Italian	Autumn's inn. 'Auberge' is French for 'inn'; Castagna is Italian for 'chestnut.'
<i>Beau Oiseau</i>	French	Lit. 'young man/boyfriend' and 'bird'. Autumn's pet name for Tip
<i>bonjour</i>	French	Hello
<i>bouzouki</i>	Greek	Musical instrument in the Lute family; descendant of ancient Greek and eastern instruments
<i>brocciu</i>	Corsican	Traditional Corsican cheese from sheep or goat's milk; comparable to ricotta
<i>canapé</i>	French	Type of appetizer: toast or cracker topped with savory spread (caviar, cheese)
<i>Carte blanche</i>	French	Unrestricted power to act at one's own discretion
<i>cassoulet</i>	French	Slow-cooked bean stew (casserole) originating in south of France
<i>Castagniccia</i>	Corsican	Interior region of Corsica
<i>chansonnier</i>	French	Writer or singer of French <i>chansons</i> (songs) - cabaret ballads, often satirical or topical
<i>chef de coquin</i>	French	Coquin - mischievous. Denzi's nickname for Maxou.
<i>Chemin de Fer</i>	French	Version of Baccarat that offers players some choices, enables strategy
<i>chérie / chéri</i>	French	(fem. / masc.) term of endearment - dear, sweetheart
<i>consiglieri</i>	Italian	Advisor or counselor
<i>Coup d'Etat</i>	French	Sudden, extrajudicial deposition of a government, not necessarily by force
<i>cruciverbaliste</i>	Latin	Constructor of crosswords; enthusiast of word games
<i>D'accord</i>	French	In accord; agreed
<i>De lit et de petit déjeuner</i>	French	Breakfast in bed
<i>dénouement</i>	French	Conclusion of a story, traditionally resulting from wrapping up loose ends rather than from a quick/surprise ending
<i>De rien</i>	French	Literally 'nothing' - polite response of 'you're welcome'
<i>Efharisto</i>	Greek	Thank you
<i>entremets</i>	French	Course between first and main course (often sorbet, to cleanse the palate between dishes of fish and meat)

Word/Phrase	Origin	Definition
<i>esprit</i>	French	Spirit
<i>hors d'œuvre</i>	French	Appetizers (e.g., canape) <i>Note:</i> This spelling is singular and plural in French.
<i>incendie</i>	French	Fire
<i>J'arrive</i>	French	I have arrived.
<i>Je suis desole</i>	French	I am sorry.
<i>la souche</i>	French	Sacrificial vine used in traditional Provençal ceremony of thanksgiving for good wine season
<i>laïkó</i>	Greek	Greek music genre - 'song of the people' or 'popular song'
<i>le petit déjeuner</i>	French	Breakfast
<i>le terroir</i>	French	Term to denote characteristics of geography, climate, etc. that contribute to the unique qualities of the crop
<i>Lune de Miel</i>	French	Honeymoon
<i>mais oui</i>	French	But of course
<i>merci</i>	French	Thank you
<i>merde</i>	French	(slang) Sh*t
<i>mince alors</i>	French	(slang) Gosh!
<i>Mignardises</i>	French	Tiny, bite-size desserts; a type of petit four
<i>modus operandi</i>	Latin	Mode of operating; habits
<i>Mon ami</i>	French	My friend
<i>Mon Dieu</i>	French	(mild oath) My God
<i>n'est-ce pas ?</i>	French	Isn't it so?
<i>non</i>	French	No
<i>Ouais, tu parles</i>	French	You can say that again!
<i>oui</i>	French	Yes
<i>papillon</i>	French	Butterfly
<i>parfait</i>	French	Perfect
<i>Pelúcia</i>	Portugese	Plush
<i>perle</i>	French	Pearl
<i>petit tresor</i>	French	Small treasure
<i>Place du Trocadéro</i>	French	Area of Paris, across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower
<i>plat du jour</i>	French	Daily special (café)
<i>poulette</i>	French	Lit. Allemande sauce with chopped parsley; one of Maxou's terms of endearment for Autumn
<i>poupée</i>	French	Little doll (term of affection)
<i>raison d'être</i>	French	Reason for existence
<i>relevé</i>	French	Originally a ballet term; culinary definition is to indicate a course after appetizers and before the main course.
<i>rôti</i>	French	Lit. Roast. Indicates main course/entrée
<i>s'il vous plait</i>	French	Please
<i>Sacré-coeur</i>	French	(mild oath) Sacred heart

Word/Phrase	Origin	Definition
<i>sacrifice rituel de la souche</i>	French	Ceremony performed during an annual wine festival in the Vaucluse
<i>Saperlipopette</i>	French	Mild oath (obsolete)
<i>stinygiasou</i>	Greek	To your health (informal toast)
<i>tout de suite</i>	French	Immediately
<i>trelos</i>	Greek	Crazy
<i>urganettu</i>	Corsican	Diatonic accordion, native to Corsica
<i>Vacqueyras</i>	French	Commune in the Vaucluse department of France's Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region
<i>Vaucluse</i>	French	Department in the southeast of France
<i>Vieux Boulogne</i>	French	Unpasteurized, unprocessed cow's milk cheese made in France. Arguably the 'world's stinkiest cheese'
<i>Voilà</i>	French	Used to call attention, to express satisfaction or approval
<i>Yasas</i>	Greek	Hello