



Chef

By

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The minute I set my baby blues on his chartreuse pants I know I'm looking at a genuine, bona fide character. But he cannot be my father-in-law, the man I just traveled over three thousand miles to see. There is not one thing about him that even closely resembles his son, Francois, the man I fell in love with.

As he maneuvers his body, not much larger than my own, between the restaurant tables, my jet-lagged brain takes in his straw Fedora-style hat, his black-rimmed glasses and his ear-to-ear smile. My fingers tighten around the keys of the rented Peugeot as he advances toward me, a brilliant smile on his face and his arms wide, ready for an embrace.

I take a quick step back and, over his shoulder on the art covered wall behind him, spot an unusual creation. It is composed of a lavender mannequin leg with a furry toy mouse perched atop its big toe. Staring at it, I mentally scrounge through my dusty arsenal of college French, hoping to resurrect

a gracious apology for wandering into this stranger's restaurant in spite of the closed sign in the window.

I jump, half expecting the mouse to leap from the mannequin toe and scurry across the tiled floor when the man's voice bounces off the strange and brilliantly colored collection of art that covers the walls.

"*Bonjour! Bonjour!* Ah! My Francois chose a little bird. A lovely little bird."

I clamp my jaws together to keep my mouth from falling open. This IS the right man, the father of my late husband. Barely late husband - if I dig through the ashes in the silver urn, snugly seat-belted in the car out front, I most certainly could find a few still-warm spots.

I attempt a smile until his fingers clamp down on my shoulders and he pulls me close. "Welcome to Provence," he says. Then his day-old beard, rough as a file, scrapes my cheeks when he kisses them. Three times.

He pulls his head back and stares at me as if I am the special of the day. I stare at him, wondering if I will have permanent indentions when he finally removes his fingers from my flesh.

"And my Francois, *mon fils?*" he says, "You bring him to his papa?"

Oh my gosh. I glance over my shoulder to the bumper, the only visible part of the car through the restaurant window. *He thinks Francois is still alive?*

"You go get him, *oui*? Bring Francois to his *papa*."

Words fail me. So does my balance when he releases my shoulders. Having risen to my tiptoes in an effort to ease his grip, I now totter to one side, crashing my hip against the curly-cue back of a wrought iron chair.

The fingers of one of his hands find me again, this time my forearm, and he pulls me upright. "Ah! But what am I thinking? The little bird is tired. And so hungry." He wags his finger in my face, or more precisely, in both our faces, as we still stand almost nose-to-nose. Then his face falls and his voice takes on a note of sadness. "The - how you say?" he frowns, "The ashes - they wait. I cook for you." His smile returns and he kisses the fingertips of his free hand, then splays his fingers wide. "Something *merveilleux*! Something special for Francois' little bird."

Fast thinking, never one of my fortes, abandons me completely. Or maybe it's just lack of oxygen from holding my breath against the grip he still has on my arm.

"No, thank y-" I say to his nose, then stumble behind the chartreuse pants as he turns and pulls me between the tables toward the leg and mouse object d'art.

"My art." He waves his free hand toward the wall. Francois told you, oui?" I could swear that the mouse grins at me from behind his whiskers as we pass.

I am certain at least fifty per cent of the use of my right arm has been compromised by his continued grasp and fifty per cent of the use of my left shoulder by the swinging door slamming into it when he pulls me into his kitchen. Forget food. I need physical therapy.

"Voilà," he announces and, in one fluid movement, pulls a stool from under a stainless table, sits me on it and, thank the Lord, releases my arm. He draws his eyebrows together and I stare at them over his glasses, thinking how they resemble unraveling Brillo pads, all curly and wiry.

Chef pushes his hat back, holds his palms up and shrugs. "So. We cook what?"

I search the kitchen, looking for the other half of 'we'. But nope. It's just the two of us. And if he thinks I know how to cook he is so mistaken.

Then, with one hand on his hip and the forefinger of his other hand tapping his thin lips, he scans the kitchen as if seeing it for the first time.

It's his thin lips that get to me, make me catch my breath and close my eyes. They are Francois' lips - sensitive lips that had curled in sweet smiles when he knew he had pleased me. I

only saw them if I remembered to look up at him, towering above me with his head cocked and his dark eyes shining.

Chef's voice comes to me though the briny odor of raw shrimp. "You clean. *Oui?*"

Overgrown shrimp stare, eye-level, at me from the plate in chef's hand. I stare back at them and the panic in my eyes doesn't dissuade Chef one bit.

"Ah." He raises his eyebrows. "I teach you."

Another fluid movement (maybe fluid movements are one of the criteria for becoming a chef) and the plate sits on the prep table beside me. A fat shrimp, pinched between his fingers, dangles in front of my eyes.

"*Premier*. The head."

Maybe it's only exhaustion creeping through my veins, but I could swear I hear a tiny voice cry for help. Then the head is off, followed by a rush of rust-colored fluid. I didn't know shrimp had blood.

"*Comme ça*." He jerks the legs off and they join the head on the tabletop. A dozen naked shrimp lay on the plate a minute later.

I might not know a single thing about gourmet cooking, but I do know how to throw away disgusting body parts. In one fluid movement (maybe I have chef potential) I grab a neatly folded

cloth from the end of the table, swipe the dismembered parts into my hand and head for the trashcan by the back door.

"Non, little bird! Non!"

I turn to him, shells and tiny black eyeballs spilling from my over-filled hand. Chef's widened eyes fill the frames of his glasses as he flaps his hand toward a pot on the range. A grin splits his face. "Prawn stock."

I know about stock. Chicken stock. I have seen it in a carton at the grocery store and I feel certain it does not contain body parts. I frown. Prawns are overgrown shrimp?

"Vite - quick. I chop *oignon*."

The thought of running out of the restaurant zooms through my mind. Maybe I could give the stock-worthy prawn parts a decent burial in someone's flower bed, but Chef sort of fills the kitchen, swooping here and there, blocking my escape. So, into the pot go the eyeballs, heads, and legs.

"Now." Chef pours water over the mess waiting to be alchemized into something edible. He thrusts a spoon into my hand and gently elbows me out of the way as he turns on the burner. "You stir."

I stir. The burner radiates heat. The prawn pieces move as if they are swimming. Sort of a phantom memory, I guess.

"*Oignon*!" Chopped onion flies into the pot, covering the carnage like an odorous blanket. "Fennel!" More ingredients and

seasonings I don't recognize come next. I guess he has never heard of canned soup, my specialty.

I stir for a moment, then turn to see him at the prep table butchering a melon, disemboweling it with an oversized spoon.

"For you? Melon. But first? Some fun." In a flash, he holds a curved slice of the apricot-colored melon under his nose. It looks like a smiling, cartoonish mouth. Then he raises his unruly eyebrows over his glasses and laughs, "Hee, hee, hee."

I laugh, too, the sound strange to my ears. There has been no laughter since the night tires skidded on a rain-soaked street only three weeks ago and my world turned dark.

"Now. I tell you-" Chef points the knife at me. "Francois? The kitchen?" He wags the knife. "Non." He drops the knife, then mimics holding a camera in front of his glasses. "For him? The camera. Click click. Always the camera." He frowns and circles his hand. "Stir, little bird."

I stir and watch him slaughter another cantaloupe, then dump the orange flesh, along with the seeds and stringy guts, into a v-shaped colander.

"And you?" He squishes the cantaloupe against the sides of the colander with something that looks like a small baseball bat, then gives me another grin. "The kitchen? Like Francois. Not for you. *Oui*?" He nods toward the stool. "Sit, little bird. I finish."

I sit. My shoulders slump as I think how not one single thing I intended to do upon meeting Francois' father, Monsieur Feraud, has happened. My intentions were to murmur a few words about Francois, lead his father to the car, then give him the urn.

I had told friends in the U. S. I would be staying with Francois' family for a few weeks. And I planned to tell Monsieur Feraud that I would travel to Avignon where vacationing friends wait to share my grief. Both are lies.

My plans, instead, are to go straight back to the apartment in Atlanta where I will lock myself in, draw the drapes, then curl up in our now too-empty bed. Only then do I dare release the memories of my achingly short time with Francois. I know each memory will slice my heart. I don't know if I will survive.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Chef slaps his palm against his forehead. "What am I thinking? *Café*. For you."

I might manage to consume soup with tiny eyeballs, but there is no way I can choke down even a sip of French coffee. The closest thing I can think of to compare it to is melted brown crayons.

I sit up straighter. "Ah, *Monsieur Feraud?*"

He wheels around from plugging in a coffee maker and raises his finger. "No, little bird." A wide grin curls the corners of his mouth until they almost touch his ears. "You call me *Papa*."

I will call him anything he wants, including 'your eminence', if it means I don't have to drink melted crayons.

"Papa?" The word feels strange, but surprisingly comforting as I speak it. "I would like... is it okay if I have some wine instead?"

His expression of sheer delight tells me I have spoken magic words. I never could have guessed that Papa and wine could have such an effect on anyone.

Seconds later, I hold my hand up to halt the flow of crimson liquid into a glass he has spirited from a cabinet. "Only a little, please. I'm driving."

Chef turns the bottle upright, his body grows rigid, his smile vanishes. "But *non*, you cannot leave, little bird."

I tell him the lie about friends waiting to help me through my grief and, as I talk, his expression almost cracks me wide open. It is identical to Francois' expression when he had been considering the correct angle, the best lighting, the right distance for one of his hundreds of breath-taking photographs.

Chef sets the wine bottle down, then pulls another stool from under the table. We sit face-to-face, our knees touching. He takes my hands into his own and his touch is gentle, like Francois'. My heart hurts and I feel the tears that, if allowed to flow, will never stop.

"Your friends. Bring them here. They are welcome. All who loved my Francois are welcome."

His words shatter my ability to continue denying my grief. I wrap my arms around my body, drop my head, and begin to sob.

When he lifts my chin, I see the tears in his eyes too, magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses. His voice quavers. "You stay here. With family." He wipes my cheek with his wide thumb. "We cook, we eat, we remember." He swallows, then continues, his voice stronger. "We talk of Francois. We cry. And we place Francois in a grave beside his mama."

He strokes the side of my cheek, never taking his eyes from mine. "We comfort each other. By our presence. And the grief? We bear it. Together."

He pulls a dishcloth from his apron and hands to me. I wipe my wet face, then stare at the cloth in my hands. It smells like shrimp and cantaloupe. And it smells like a place where Francois lived and grew up, a place where I am welcome. And it is a place where, by loving Francois, I belong.

I continue to wipe tears as gratitude and grief intermingle in my heart and as my mind grasps the depth of the gift he has offered. Finally, I am able to speak.

"Papa? I think," I stop and swallow, then begin again. "I think I do want to stay. A few nights, maybe?" I smile at him through my tears. "And who knows? I might even learn to cook."

Once again I am rewarded with his huge grin and I manage a smile in return. "And *Papa?*" I say, "Will you please tell me where I can get a pair of those chartreuse pants?"