

**CHEF MAURICE
AND A SPOT OF TRUFFLE**

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**PURPLE
PANDA
PRESS**

PROLOGUE

It had not been a good day. Hamilton knew about good days, and this was not one of them. First there'd been that rude early morning awakening, the sky still dark outside, and a bumpy car ride out into the middle of nowhere.

Then came a long walk through endless unfamiliar woods, the only bright spot being the mud—oh, how he loved a good patch of mud—to a clearing surrounded by tangled trees. Finally, a rope loosely tied to his collar, a convenient tree stump, and then they disappeared back the way they came. Forever.

The sun was high before he managed to wriggle his way free, and close to setting by the time he stumbled across a pitted dirt track leading, presumably, to somewhere better than nowhere.

A veering car, screeching tyres, a man jumping out, shouting, “Crikey, is that one of those—” And then a large cardboard box, rough but kind hands, and Hamilton was trapped. Again.

Now he sat in his cell, picking at the evening's meagre

dinner, listening to his nearby cellmates yowl and snap and whimper.

It was a dog's life; it really was. No, scrap that.

A dog's life would have been *better*.

CHAPTER 1

Chef Maurice, proprietor and head chef of Le Cochon Rouge, Beakley, was facing a problem of mushrooming proportion.

He stood in the walk-in fridge, hands thrust upon hips. They were all gone. The chanterelles, the cèpes, the oysters, even the humble white button—not a mushroom in sight.

“Where are all my *champignons*?” he demanded, striding back into the kitchens.

Patrick, his sous-chef, looked up from behind a half-peeled pile of carrots and glanced at the wall calendar.

“Ollie should have been by now, chef. Want me to give him a call?”

Ollie was the village’s resident wild food importer and local forager, rooting through the Cotswold countryside to turn up edible flowers, herbs and leafy greens and, come autumn, picking his way through the medley of wild mushrooms that sprung silently in the nearby woodlands.

“Bah,” said Chef Maurice. “*Probablement*, he has found the woods empty and is ashamed to put his face at our door.”

He strode over to the kitchen's back entrance, stuck his head out and sniffed the morning air, his large moustache aquiver. Autumn in Beakley was turning out unseasonably warm thus far, and the leaves were still undecided as to whether to shed their summer hues. But even so, the recent heavy downpours should have heralded a plentiful crop of mushrooms this week.

"Mais non, the weather, it is correct. It is impossible that he has found no mushrooms! So why does he not come?"

"I bumped into him down in the village the other day," said Patrick, peeling away industriously. "He seemed pretty chuffed about something."

Chef Maurice frowned. A happy supplier was not necessarily a good thing. For years he'd had the pick of Ollie's foraged findings, but recently the capital's haute cuisine brigade had cottoned on to the riches of the English countryside—no doubt encouraged by how the word 'wild' prefacing any ingredient now made it doubly desirable in the eyes of their diners—and Chef Maurice had found himself outbid for Ollie's produce on more than one occasion.

As owner of Beakley village's one and only restaurant, he felt that Ollie should have at least displayed him a little neighbourly consideration—ideally in the form of a generous discount—but the local forager was apparently a firm believer in free market forces.

"Oh, and he mentioned he might have something new for our menu too," added Patrick.

“New?”

That was enough. The chance to berate his mushroom supplier about the late delivery and recent price hikes, coupled with the possibility of snagging a new ingredient for the day’s menu, was incentive enough to propel Chef Maurice out of the door and down into the village, where Ollie rented half a cottage on the southern outskirts.

He rang the doorbell, then, no response forthcoming, ambled round to the back. Chefs were generally more comfortable with back doors, anyhow; the front was for guests, the postman, and the forcible ejection of unruly customers who, for some unfathomable reason, had yet to grasp the concept that the chef is always right.

At least in the case when the chef in question was Chef Maurice.

He rapped on the back door, which creaked open at his touch. Glancing down, he took in the splintered mess where the lock had been and the door knob now dangling awkwardly off one screw.

“Allo?”

He nudged the door open with his boot. It swung inwards halfway, stopped by a pile of assorted muddy footwear. Chef Maurice sucked in his stomach and squeezed himself through.

They say one should never trust a thin chef. By this measure, Chef Maurice was very trustworthy indeed.

“Allo?” he called again. No reply. He turned to go, but then a thought gave him a nudge. Seeing as he was here . . .

Ollie's kitchen was a mess of old dried plants and the crusted remains of microwave meals. Chef Maurice tut-tutted and made his way over to the large double fridge—refrigeration being a key tool in the mushroom supply business.

Et voilà! Lined up neatly inside the fridge were several plastic boxes, each with the name of a restaurant scrawled on the side.

Chef Maurice pulled out the one labelled *Le Cochon Rogue*—he rather liked how the misspelling lent the name a somewhat rakish air—and lifted the mesh lid. It wasn't quite full, but at least Ollie had managed a decent selection; a handful of fat cèpes, a generous pile of hedgehog mushrooms (so called because of their soft, spiky undersides), a bag of little white puffballs, and a sizeable chunk of chicken-of-the-woods (a thick, fleshy mushroom and one of Chef Maurice's favourites).

He had a peek into the other boxes, to check that no rival had secured a better selection. Thus engrossed, he didn't notice the shadowy figure creeping up behind him until it hit him hard across the head.

CHAPTER 2

Chef Maurice spun around with a yelp and ended up with a face full of feather duster.

“Thief!” crowed Mrs Eldridge, who lived next door in the other half of the cottage and had the sort of countenance that brought to mind that of a particularly aggrieved turkey. She prodded him in the stomach with the duster. “I saw you, don’t deny it!”

“Thief? Do I have the look of a thief?” Chef Maurice drew himself up and puffed out his chest.

A slim figure with a neat blond ponytail appeared in the doorway.

“Right, what’s going on here?”

It was PC Lucy Gavistone, of the Cowton and Beakley Constabulary, and the only member of the force who lived in Beakley itself. She ate at Le Cochon Rouge every Sunday lunch and always tipped well.

“Ah, Mademoiselle Lucy! Let me explain—”

“I saw ’im! Breaking in the back like a common criminal—”

“That is a lie! The door, it was already broken.”

“So you thought you’d just help yourself, eh? These foreigners, think they can just waltz in and take anything they—”

PC Lucy held up a hand. “That’s enough, both of you. Mrs Eldridge, I’m sure Mr Manchot had no intention of theft in mind. Don’t worry about the door, Mr Manchot, Ollie already reported the break-in last Friday. I told him to get that lock fixed sooner than later.”

“I had to make him call ’em, you know,” said Mrs Eldridge, nudging Chef Maurice. “Just like ’im to not want to call, but I said what happens if they took something valuable?”

“But they did not?”

“Not a thing, he said.”

Chef Maurice shook his head at the ineptitude of burglars these days.

PC Lucy pulled out her notebook. “Mrs Eldridge, you said on the phone just now that you haven’t seen Ollie for a few days?”

“Not since Saturday morning, I haven’t. He went off early as usual, and I ain’t heard a peep from him since.”

“And he has failed today to make his weekly delivery,” added Chef Maurice, turning back to the fridge.

PC Lucy scribbled this down. “Well, it’s Monday now, so that’s only two days so far. Ollie knows his way around the woods, I doubt anything serious has happened to him. But if he doesn’t turn up in the next few days—”

She broke off at the sight of the large box in Chef Maurice's arms.

"It is my delivery," he said. "I simply come to collect it."

"See, told you," said Mrs Eldridge smugly.

PC Lucy looked unimpressed. "Unless you have written permission from Mr Meadows, I'm afraid I can't let you take anything away from the property—"

"But they will spoil!" The tone of his voice suggested this was a crime worse than murder.

"Then we better hope that Ollie turns up soon. In the meantime . . ." She pointed meaningfully towards the fridge.

Reluctantly, he placed the box back inside and shut the door.

Never mind, he thought as PC Lucy shooed him and Mrs Eldridge back out the way they had come. There was always Mushroom Liberation Plan B.

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A late evening breeze ruffled the leaves overhead. Arthur Wordington-Smythe drew a deep breath of the cool night air and sighed in satisfaction. Autumn in Beakley didn't get much better than this.

By his side, Horace, his Great Dane—or to be more accurate, Meryl's—padded along, nose hanging to the ground, occasionally looking up at Arthur with an expression of doleful reproach.

These postprandial walks had been Meryl's idea, a

chance for her two favourite males to bond, she'd said.

Arthur, however, had suspicions that this new evening regime had been precipitated by the newfangled exercise videos Meryl had found down at the library—the type that required leg warmers, copious amounts of buttock-wagging, and a skinny lady in a leotard and headset yelling encouragements about the size of your thighs.

Up until this point, Arthur had never paid much attention to the state of his thighs. If pressed, he'd have had to concede that they did a jolly good job keeping his knees and hips attached to one another, though nowadays his right hamstring was giving him the occasional twinge on a cold winter's night.

He'd said as much to Meryl, perhaps in rather too strident a tone, as these mandatory strolls had been instituted very soon after.

Horace, who was now reaching an age where nothing but a big bowl of bone marrow and liver could move him from his oversized basket, looked up at Arthur again and rolled his eyes.

Nevertheless, Arthur was in a good mood. He'd returned from London having experienced lunch at a restaurant so epically ill-conceived that the review would practically write itself. The readers of the *England Observer* were particularly partial to the well-placed metaphorical boot when it came to food criticism; the greater the vitriol—masked, of course, in the arch and the urbane—the more they lapped it up. And Arthur, their long-standing

restaurant critic, was more than happy to oblige.

It wasn't as if the reviews were utterly undeserved. Some places, especially those temples to glitzy fashion and expense-account-fuelled eating that sprang up every year in Central London, like toadstools after the rains, positively begged to be taken down a peg or two—or, at least, down a padded hanger with an engraved coat-check number. But today's lunch had been a disaster of quite a different ilk . . .

Just off Hoxton Square, occupying the ground floor of a converted warehouse, he'd made his first (and no doubt last) encounter with Soil, the recently launched down-to-earth endeavour of Marcus Motley, previously best known for his short-lived fish restaurant, the baldly named Sea.

That review had been quite the corker too. It turned out that most diners were unaccountably squeamish about tucking into their pan-fried sea bream when surrounded by a giant circular aquarium filled with its staring brethren, while the sharkskin seating had turned out to have a particularly abrasive quality that ruined more than a few Savile Row suits before being swiftly removed (the seating, that is, not the suits).

Now there was Soil. Taking the recent trend in locavore-ism to the next level, Motley's latest venue only served ingredients foraged from within a five-mile radius of the restaurant. All rather admirable, except for one problem: the only wild food growing within a five-mile radius of Hoxton appeared to be about fifteen different

types of weed that all tasted like parsley.

As for local game, one just had to take a look at the nearby feral pigeon population to immediately turn vegetarian for the duration of dinner.

Arthur paused under a handy street lamp to rummage in his pockets for a pen and notebook. Horace took the opportunity to sniff out the latest canine gossip, then lifted one arthritic leg to add his own comment.

They were now down past the end of the village, where the street lamp budget had petered out. A movement in the shadows back up the street, near the end cottages, caught Arthur's attention.

Tugging on Horace's lead—Horace harrumphing as they went—Arthur inched forwards to get a closer look. There had been something about the way the shadow had moved . . .

As they neared the building closest to them, the left half of which belonged to old Mrs Eldridge, Arthur saw a tall figure, slim and clothed in black, slip around the far side of the cottage, the half that was rented by that forager fellow, Ollie Meadows. There was the sound of a door creaking open and closed, but no scrape of a key and, odder still, no lights came on inside.

Arthur considered his options. There was a small possibility that Ollie had just come home—young people these days kept all kinds of hours—and possessed excellent night vision plus the frugal desire to reduce his electricity bills. On the other hand . . .

He glanced down at Horace who, given the short pause, had taken the opportunity to lie down in the middle of the road and had started to snore.

No, Horace would be of little use if it came to confronting an opportunistic burglar. Better to—

Another indistinct form, prowling in the shadows, was approaching the cottage from the direction of the village. Except this second figure was of significantly more robust proportions, and wore a white jacket and dark checked trousers. Moonlight glinted off steel-capped boots.

The figure turned its head this way and that, and for a moment Arthur caught sight of a very large, very familiar moustache.

What in the devil—

“Maurice!” hissed Arthur, but his friend was too far away. Soon, the chef had crabbed his way around to the back of the cottage and disappeared too.

Arthur broke into a run, or at least what his knees declared to be a run at this point in life. Horace, waking up with a grunt, pulled himself to his paws and lolloped along after his master.

They were halfway to the cottage when they heard an almighty crash and a muffled cry.

“Maurice!” shouted Arthur.