

## The Best of Everything

This family was maybe a little fancier in some ways than others I'd cheffed for, but in other ways a little less fancy. There were four of them in that big white London house: Mrs Ackland and her three children. It wasn't that the father was dead, just that he wasn't there. Not at first in any case. They liked to eat what everybody likes to eat: pasta and salads and bread. And if I put a little more salt into anything, they liked to eat it even more. All except the little one.

There was a big gap between the little one and the older children. The others were at college and she was still at primary school. She didn't eat very much of anything at all. I kept it simple at first, making little jam tarts with strawberries from the gold-spined greenhouses in the grounds, using the old recipe I found in the old family Bible before I'd pawned it for Da. She wasn't interested. I spent a whole day putting together croissants, the way you can only learn in Paris. She bit the ends off two of them and then went back to the TV. Mrs Ackland ate three of those croissants and then had to book an extra session with her personal trainer for the next day. But nobody seemed to bother about the little one, even with her bouncing eyes. It wasn't like me to notice things, I certainly was never looking for anything, but anyone could see that the kid was all alone with nobody to care for her.

One day she came and found me shredding cabbage in the kitchen for Mrs Ackland's fermented salad.

'Pop-Pop is coming,' she said, her face tense. 'He wants us to meet him up in the Highlands.'

They wouldn't let me bring any of my kit, or any food. 'It's all there,' Mrs Ackland said. 'Mr Ackland will decide what we will eat. He assures me all of the ingredients and utensils will be in place.'

We all rode in separate cars, but little one said she wanted to go with me. A few hours along the motorway, lights started flashing overhead and the driver took off at the next exit for a diversion through the city. I hadn't been there for decades, but Glasgow's red sandstone looked cleaner and newer now than when I had left. The docks had shrunk back and were missing the part where Da had worked until he couldn't stand up. I glimpsed half remembered street names and then felt the shock of seeing a door I recognised. I shut my eyes and by the time I opened them again we were in a grainy camouflage palette of heather and gorse.

Near the base of a dun mountain, the car pulled in by a small wooden building. 'Chocoloco Chocolatier' read the lettering burned into the wooden sign.

'It's the best,' the little one said in answer to the question she could see on my face. 'And Daddy says that to not have the best of everything is a waste of the earth's treasure.'

Inside the place was full of damp families and walkers in waterproofs, eyes wide at their mugs of hot sweet chocolate, smiling and laughing as they compared flavours.

Mr Ackland was at the back with his older children at either side of him. He was a big man and looked out of place in his suit, wearing no socks with his brown loafers. He didn't look at me the whole time we were there. Sure, the chocolate was good, but only because they'd used Viennese Chocolate House Cocoa. They'd overheated the milk and I could taste the bitter burn of it cutting through the sweetness. The little one didn't even touch hers.

Back in the cars we made our way north, a cold clean taste in the air. Finally we drove down to the old stone house along a lane fringed with blasted lavender and fierce rosemary. The others had already arrived.

‘He wants you to go and see him, through there,’ Mrs Ackland said as I walked in, pointing to a room. The little one stayed at my elbow. The kitchen had whitewashed walls and a rusty old spit in an alcove. On a gnarled table was a cage with something inside.

‘Daddy, daddy, there’s a bunny!’ She went right up to the cage and peered into it. The rabbit froze, its baby pink ears rigid, its silver fur standing out and glittering.

‘That’s for Chef,’ Mr Ackland said, his voice a little like mine. He must have grown up in the city too, but on the Westside. ‘I want him to make me my mother’s stew.’ He would eat it tomorrow night. The sauce had to cook down for hours before the meat was added, because that was how long it used to take him to get the buckshot out of the rabbit when he was a child. The thing would be warm in his hands when he started, and stiff and cold by the time he began to skin it.

Little one’s eyes stopped bouncing as he spoke.

‘How do you want me to prepare it, sir?’ I said, careful not to be crude and upset little one.

‘Have you never had to end one before? Here,’ he looked at the girl. ‘Bring me a broom. One with a short handle.’ He pointed to a cupboard and her little legs moved quickly across the flagstones. She dropped the broom at his feet and rushed back to my side.

Mr Ackland mimed the action of trapping the rabbit’s neck beneath the broom handle and pulling back on its head. He made a snapping sound with his tongue on his teeth. The little one jumped. He threw the broom into a corner after that and left the room. The little one frowned up at me, her eyes wet. I turned my attention to the small piece of paper with

the recipe written out in an old hand, stained with smudges of oil and spots of gravy. When I looked up again to check what supplies they'd left me with, the little girl was gone.

The recipe listed pretty much everything I would have used for an English rabbit stew: prunes, brandy as well as wine, thyme - everything apart from bay. I doubted Mr Ackland's mother had used agen prunes and Halen Môn salt. There was a huge swatch of French narrow leaf thyme, with new soft leaves that couldn't have been grown anywhere near here. I sank my nose into it and let the scent hit the back of my throat.

The wooden spoons in the cracked earthenware jug looked like they'd been there since the house was built. The best ingredients were one thing, but the first lesson I ever learned was that the right tools were the real game changer. I got to work and soon the room was full of the scent of frying onion, warm and sweet. As I tipped in the wine, the vapours rose up and I breathed them in, calculating how much sugar it would take to balance it.

When I was done, I set a lid on the pot and climbed the big stone stairs. The silence of the house rang all around me and trying to sleep in that tall bed in the dark room, my eyes kept on pricking open and seeing that doorway in the city.

The memory of trying my key in that lock and realising it didn't fit still had the power to make me sweat. I'd dashed back home to fetch Da his last wee bottle of Drambuie to take to the hospital. Before he'd been admitted, he had made the landlord promise to honour the lease until I was sixteen, had given him a roll of notes while the ambulance waited. But the landlord hadn't even waited till Da was gone to change the locks. I never said. I just slept on the floor by his bed those last few days. When it was over Cousin Margaret took me in, as she said, 'To soak up the grief, you poor wee thing.' But after the wake, all the men in thin black suits gone, the handled pint glasses massed on the bar in smeary ranks, she put her hand on my shoulder and said, 'You'll be alright from here, eh kid?'

On my way out, above the hastily written *Private Function* sign at the main entrance, there was another notice: *Help Wanted*. I was already in my suit and so it was no bother to traipse back inside and show myself to Chef. There's still no kitchen I would rather find myself in than that one, the sparse few utensils, the one hotplate that we would all fight over in the mornings during breakfast service. And the lessons: how to chop a cabbage so it would taste sweet; how to rescue a bechamel; how to boil an old piece of broccoli and make it bright. 'There's nothing you can't make delicious,' Chef would say, 'if you're good enough.'

The memories wouldn't let me sleep. I got up and went to the window. Stars swept out across the sky and the SUVs below were glossy in the moonlight. I caught my breath and cracked open the bedroom door.

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It was a two hour drive but it felt like less. I filled up the SUV and went inside to pay and pick up what I needed. The service station was odourless and cold. Sickly light bounced off the bottle fridge and the polystyrene tiles in the ceiling. The man behind the counter was wearing a tabard. I could feel the scratchy electricity of its texture as he smoothed it down before asking if I would like a bag for my items.

When I arrived back at the house it was nearly dawn. I had some business in the kitchen and once that was done, I padded my way to little one's room. She didn't question me when I took her tiny hand in mine and led her down the stairs, through the kitchen and then out of the back door. The dawn outside was as pale as a melting piece of ice.

I rested the cage on the crystal grass and the rabbit's head darted up and down, freezing between movements. Its eyes were like huge seeds, bright in the first light.

'He's not tame,' I said. 'So you won't be able to hold him.'

She nodded, her eyes sharp and awake.

‘But you can open his cage.’

Her small fingers snatched at the catch and with a resolute look at the soft creature, she slid the bolt aside.

The rabbit sniffed at where her hands had been and then tried the door with its nose. Finding a little give in it, he pushed lightly and it swung open. The little one laughed from under her eyes.

The rabbit crept out and walked a few paces, snuffling the grass, and then began to run, his front legs meeting his back in an exuberant bounce.

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That night by the fire, after dinner, Mr Ackland nodded to me to sit down next to him and filled my glass with Macallan Sherry Oak.

‘Good God, Chef,’ he said, ‘that really was like my mother used to make.’ Then he came close to me and whispered. ‘Don’t tell her if you see her in the next life, but yours might have even been a little better.’ Then he leaned back and said, ‘But then she didn’t have the best of everything.’

Mr Ackland took a contented breath and closed his eyes, before plucking a tiny shred of anaemic battery-farmed chicken breast from his teeth.