

Charlies Journal

-Book One-

The Making Of A Cheesecakeologist

By

Julian C Corbett

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**Smashwords Edition**

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## Chapter One - Leaving Home

The week had been a hectic one for Charlie and Claire. The arrival of their daughter and grandchildren for the holidays was such an exciting and busy affair, the days passing joyfully. So with their time left together growing short now, a sense of enjoyment in their shared company... a quiet contentment seemed to bind them together as it grew dark outside and the winter's late afternoon gathered in.

Charlie tended the blazing fire he had prepared in the lounge, as Claire finished up in the kitchen after another wholesome winter's meal had drawn to a close. Charlie returned the poker and groaned as he straightened himself. Now satisfied with the intensity of the fire, he returned to the comfort of his favourite armchair. His daughter was resting, snuggled deep into one of the sofas.

Savannah, the youngest of the grandchildren, had made herself comfortable by the fireside. Seeing that her grandfather was now settled, she turned towards him with childish enthusiasm and asked, "Grandpa... could I please hear the story again?"

Leaning forward slightly in his chair, he smiled lovingly toward the bright-eyed face peering at him expectantly. Feeling her father's weariness from the stresses of the day and wanting to rescue him from any further retelling of the tale, Charlie's daughter asked, "Don't you ever get tired of hearing about grandpa's adventures when he was a younger, Savannah?"

"No, never," came the loud reply from the youngster.

"Well... perhaps... if you really need to hear the story again, maybe I could tell it this time!" said her mother.

"Come on you two," Savannah called excitedly to Charlotte and Michael who were pestering Claire in the kitchen. "Moms going to tell us the story this time!"

After a moments silence, a loud "yay" was heard as two very enthusiastic children raced in from the kitchen, evidence of chocolate around their mouths. They were closely followed by Claire who carried a large tray, heavily laden with mugs of hot chocolate and a plate of Canelles for them all to share.

She placed the tray on the wooden coffee table; the children all gathering around, enjoying the delicious aromas and the anticipation of the beautiful treats that now sat before them. She then passed around the steaming mugs and was met by welcoming hands and murmurs of contentment.

Pleased with the atmosphere in the room, she walked over to the bookcase and removed the first of the bound journals. She paused for a moment in thought, before handing it to her dear husband as she rested her hand lovingly upon his shoulder. She then leaned over Charlie and whispered in his ear, "Just in case she forgets anything."

Then settling back herself, steaming hot chocolate in hand, she pulled a thick blanket over her legs and smiled warmly at her husband. "If everyone is ready then, shall we begin?" their daughter suggested as all the family members settled themselves down, mugs of hot chocolate in hand.

The day started like any other... Charlie was up early, chores done and room tidied... now time for breakfast! To the casual onlooker this would seem like any other day, but for Charlie, this was the day that the adventure began... "Right, time for breakfast I think," he said as he hurried downstairs to the kitchen, joining his parents who already sat at the large rectangular table, plates piled with a hearty cooked breakfast. "Just what's needed before an adventure," Charlie thought, as he got stuck into devouring this delicious feast.

He rushed through his breakfast with thoughts of what lay ahead. "Where would he go? Who would he meet along the way, and just why was he doing this again?" he thought to himself.

Charlie's daughter paused the story as her children moved restlessly, jostling to find the most comfortable position, anticipating the journey they were about to take. Finally seeing that her children were finally settled, the story was continued.

By now, breakfast had finished, so being the ever so tidy person that he was, he cleared his plate, washed it up, and put it away. He then wiped the table clean; well, where he had been sitting anyway. In all the excitement, he had been oblivious to his mother and father still working their way through their own plates of food, so he returned to the table and once again sat back down, this time even more deeply in thought. He paused for a moment to look at them, both still sipping their morning tea. He wondered when he would see them next, a little sadness in his eyes, as he noticed his mother staring back at him with a loving smile.

"Charlie, Charlie, do you have everything packed?" she asked, which snapped Charlie out of his moment of contemplation. He replied by saying that he had, but before he could finish what he was saying, his father interrupted.

"Good lad, always good to be prepared," he said, and then added that life might be a journey of unplanned discovery, but that it was always good to be a little prepared.

There was a moment's silence followed by everyone bursting into laughter. Charlie's mother pointed out that her husband, however adorable he might be, had never prepared for anything. Joking she added that if it wasn't for her, he would leave the house still wearing his slippers and not more appropriate footwear, at which point the room filled with hysterical laughter once again.

Charlie's father, wanting to defend himself, quickly replied by informing his lovely wife that on this special occasion he most certainly was as he reached into his large cardigan pocket and pulled out a small wrapped package. He leaned forward over the table; he handed it to Charlie saying that it was just a little gift for his travels.

"Thanks dad," Charlie said, as he took the gift from his father, who went on to explain that he was not to open it until later that day. Not stopping there, Charlie's father continued by handing him an envelope. Charlie questioned what this was, and his what this was, his father responded by explaining that the envelope contained a letter which he wanted Charlie to hand deliver to Monsieur Luc. He then proceeded to hand his son a scrap piece of paper with the address on it. Charlie noticed that there was a slight look of sadness in his father's eyes, which he found intriguing. He had always known his father to be a free-spirited, happy-go-lucky sort of chap, always with a sense of adventure... but that's a whole different story.

Charlie pondered on this request briefly, as his father had never previously mentioned Monsieur Luc, and he wondered who this person was and why he must deliver this envelope to him. With little hesitation, Charlie agreed to do as his father had asked him as it surely must be important, he decided.

"Time I was leaving," he thought to himself as he ran upstairs to grab his backpack and to take one last look at his room. "Yes, everything is immaculate, just how I like it, everything neatly sorted and in the correct place," he thought as he took one final look at the long mirror on his wall. Before him was the reflection of a young man of above average height with an athletic build, fair skin, blue eyes, and short dark brown hair which had a natural glossy shine. The reflection he saw was dressed in cargo pants and a fleece top, with sturdy walking boots upon his feet. It happily reminded Charlie of his father's early adventuring and days of travelling.

He took this moment to sit on the edge of his bed, looking at his room one final time and recalling childhood memories. Gazing around, his eyes eventually fell upon his backpack which was propped up against the wall next to the bedroom door. For, this backpack was no ordinary backpack... it had been his father's, steeped in much mystery from the many adventures they had once both shared. But now it belonged to Charlie.

The backpack was still surprisingly in good condition, partly due to his mother's ability with a needle and thread. It had one main, large compartment, a smaller internal pocket, and at the front, two smaller and not-so-wide pockets. The right side had a further two pockets with one single longer pocket on the left.

Charlie unzipped one of the side pockets of the backpack and slipped the small package and envelope that he had just been given inside. Quickly, he closed the zipper, and picking up the backpack, he swung one of the thick straps over his shoulder. Looking around his room had brought back the fond memories of growing up and the adventures that he had dreamed about having himself one day. This due mainly to the stories that he had grown up listening to that were told by his mother and father as they recounted their own travels. But now it was his turn to create his own memories, he decided. He made one final scan of the room, double-checking to see if he had forgotten anything!

"No, nothing forgotten, and if I have, it couldn't have been important anyway," he chuckled to himself. "Adventure waits for no man," he shouted out loud, and with that, walked out of his bedroom for what might be a long time and closed the door behind him.

There, waiting at the bottom of the stairs, his mother and father were watching as Charlie descended. Their only child was about to leave home on a journey that would change his life forever. His mother reached out her hand as Charlie reached the bottom step. Her voice sounding a touch emotional, she said to Charlie that he would not get very far without his passport, which she clutched tightly between her fingers. She was a little concerned that he hadn't remembered this himself, but just sighed as she thought, "Like father, like son." His mother, being the avid organizer before any grand adventure, wanted to make sure it was kept safe until the very last moment before he left. Which was also the very same moment she knew it was time to let Charlie go as he ventured out into the world.

"Mom, Dad, thank you. I love you both so much," Charlie said, and with that it was too much for all of them, tears welling up in their eyes. But before everyone became a blubbing mess, Charlie opened the front door, stepped through, and walked boldly to the end of the path. He stopped one last time, closed his eyes, and felt the warmth of a spring morning on his face. He was about to take his first steps away from home and into an unknown world.

He turned around one last time to look back. Smiling, he stepped over the threshold of the family home, turned to his right, and was on his way. "The train station and adventure awaits," he shouted back to his parents, who watched him disappear out of sight. An excitement brewed within him with every step he took as he made his way down the paved streets of Poxwold, a quaint little town set in the heart of central England.

Once Charlie was out of sight, his mother and father went back inside and closed the door behind them. Looking around arm in arm, they both noticed their home already felt very different, a little more empty and quite. For in that moment, their lives had changed forever. Just when would they see their beautiful son again? Sitting down in the kitchen, Terrence reached out his hand to hold his wife's tightly, the other hand being used to brush a tear from the side of her face.

“He’ll be just fine, Jacque,” said Charlie’s father, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “He’s a sensible lad and has more of your level headedness than my free-spirited nature, so he shouldn’t get into too much trouble,” he continued to say.

Charlie’s mother smiled back at her loving husband while saying, “Thank goodness for that, Terrence.” With this, the mood lightened, and easy laughter filled the air.

“Think I’ll go and potter in the garden for a while, and try to occupy myself,” Jacque quietly said as she rose from the table and went outside. She was a small woman with pale porcelain looking skin and soft brown eyes. Her light brown hair slightly curly, gently touching her shoulders, when not in a pony tail. When she was not helping to write, she could be found tending to her beautiful garden or tucked away in a corner in moments of quiet contemplation. This was helped by valuable techniques she had learned while on one of her many travels.

Meanwhile, his father who was now left on his own sitting at the table, had time to reflect on the journey that his son had just embarked on, the letter that he gave him before he left, and the times spent in this same kitchen with Charlie. This had been special time for them both... making gouramy pastries, laughing together, then presenting Jacque with their latest creations for her to try.

Charlie’s father was of average height with an athletic build, honed from the years spent travelling. He had bronzed skin, brown eyes like his wife’s, and very short, messy, dark brown hair. It wasn’t actually messy as such, as it did get a comb through on occasions. It was more of a natural look... well that’s how he liked to describe it anyway.

He had spent much of his life writing books about his own travels and adventures, mainly travel guides with the occasional personal story thrown in for good measure. He never really talked about his early life, preferring to change the subject quickly when anyone asked him questions about his past. Returning to the present moment, his father stated out loud, “Okay, where’s that recipe book of mine?” as he moved his seat back and then opened the small draw under the bench. Pulling out a rather battered looking cookery book, he flicked through until he found something that he wanted to bake in honour of his son.

Charlie had now arrived at the station, made his way through the crowds of people, all of which were going about their mundane daily lives, and finally arrived at the ticket desk. Looking at Charlie, the ticket master enquired as to the destination he would like.

“Oh, gosh, I don’t know,” announced Charlie. For in that moment, he realised in all the excitement he had not even decided yet where his first stop would be.

Quickly, he turned to the ticket master and asked for a one-way ticket on the first train leaving that would end at the big shipping port. Hearing such a request left the ticket master momentarily speechless. This in itself was a shock, as the ticket master was well known for being a somewhat talkative chap indeed.

“Leaving our little town are we?” enquired the ticket master once he had regained his voice. Charlie replied by saying in an excited tone that he most certainly was. The ticket master responded by informing his young customer that he would need to hurry to platform three as the train would be leaving quite soon. Charlie then paid the ticket master who handed over the ticket stating that he would not wish for the young adventurer to miss the train. He bid the ticket master farewell and raced off towards platform three and the waiting train.

It was not far to the platform, and Charlie could see the waiting train preparing to get underway. The conductor observed the crowds and checked his pocket watch anxiously as the last few passengers said their farewells to family or friends who had come to see them off. While



waiting, Charlie noticed the smell in the air of oil and engine fuel, all wrapped up with the clatter of metal wheels on train tracks from the passing trains.

Rushing up to the side of the train, Charlie heard the conductor shouting for all passengers to board the train in a very loud voice as he quickly hoisted himself onto the train by the handle just as the door closed behind him. "Made it," he muttered as he took a moment to catch his breath, now looking to find a seat as he felt the train jerk forward and slowly gather speed as it began to move.

Finding a seat by the window, he slipped his backpack off. He sat back into the softly padded seat and put his bag on the empty seat next to him. Staring out of the window, he soon realised that he didn't even know the destination of the train. He laughed to himself and tried to decide whether to look at the ticket or wait to be surprised.... "Although at this point, it doesn't really matter," he thought.

Soon, the train increased in speed until it whizzed past small villages and beautiful countryside, making its way to its final objective. Charlie relaxed back in his seat and thought about the adventures that awaited him. He opened the side pocket of his backpack and looked inside, then grabbing the small package that his father had given him earlier that morning, he gently opened up the sides of the rather crumpled paper. Inside it was a most beautifully bound journal and pencil. Charlie lifted the front cover and saw an inscription left by his father. The inscription read, "Death is more universal than life. Everyone dies, but not everyone truly lives... so live the adventure!" It was signed "Dad," so Charlie decided then and there that he would keep a record of his experiences.

This was indeed a special day for Charlie. Not only was it the day he left home, but it was also his birthday, but to Charlie, it was just another day like any other. Although before he left home, while having one of his mother's famous squishy hugs, he remembered her whispering in his ear, "Charlie, when you get on the train, look inside the top pocket of your backpack...." With that, Charlie unclipped the buckle and lifted the flap. There, inside the top pocket, were two little packets, all neatly wrapped. He smiled and wondered what these could be.

He reached in and pulled out one of the packets, smiling at how precise the paper had been folded and tied with string. His mother was quite a meticulous person in that way, quite a contrast to his father. He reflected on how much he was like both of his parents... his mother because of her meticulous attention to detail, and his father for his carefree nature, which at times made for interesting moments for Charlie as he learned to balance the characteristics within himself.

"Tickets, please. Have your tickets ready for inspection," came the booming voice of the conductor as he entered the carriage. Charlie put the small package that his mother had put into his backpack to the side of him and waited for the conductor. As the conductor reached Charlie, he handed his ticket over for inspection. "And where might you be heading?" he asked.

"I'm not actually sure, sir. When I purchased my ticket, I asked the ticket master for passage on the first train leaving the station that was heading to the port," Charlie replied. The conductor looked at Charlie's ticket and asked whether he would like to know his destination. Charlie thought for a moment and replied, "No sir, this is an adventure, and I'd like to wait until we arrive to find out where I am."

"Very well young man," said the conductor as he passed back his ticket, which Charlie carefully put back into his coat pocket for safe keeping. Just as the conductor was about to continue his ticket inspection, Charlie enquired as to how long the journey would take. The

conductor replied by informing him that it would be a couple of hours yet. Charlie thanked the conductor who then proceeded to quickly moved on to check the next passenger's ticket.

Settling back into the soft padded seat, he allowed himself to become comfortable once more, looking out of the small window at the ever changing countryside and quaint villages that the speeding train passed by. Charlie sat in the corner of the carriage and decided that there were not many people travelling, but perhaps more people would board the train along the route.

Remembering the small packet that his mum had lovingly surprised him with, he turned to look for it. Having placed it on the seat next to him when the conductor came along, he reached for it, but it wasn't there! Momentarily stunned, Charlie wondered where it could have disappeared to! In a panic, he wondered if it might have fallen onto the floor with all the movement of the carriage. He then shuffled forward in his chair and leaned over, looking under the seat, and yes there it was. Reaching down, he picked it up, relieved it was safely back in his hands once more.

Holding the package again, he began to wonder just what might be inside, as the corner of his mouth gently curled to offer an ever so slight grin, for he had a good idea what it was as he gave the packet a very small squeeze.

"It's one of mother's famous 'travelling sandwiches.' That's what it is," he concluded, as he chuckled to himself.

"Nom, nom, nom, I will enjoy that later," he mused, his mouth beginning to water ever so slightly at the thought of it. Returning it to the top pocket of his backpack, he zipped it back up, keeping it safe. "No losing that again," he quietly whispered to himself.

Everything sorted... sandwich secure, ticket inspected... Charlie settled back into his seat once more and closed his eyes, relaxing to the clattering sound of the train wheels on the track, thinking of what the future may hold. Charlie thought about the types of people he might meet along the way and the places he would like to visit, thinking that he didn't really have a plan, being the impetuous character that he was, very much like his father in this way. For now, he would sit back and gaze out of the window without a care in the world.

While sitting there, quietly drifting to the hypnotic sound of the train, Charlie thought back to the times spent in the kitchen with just his father. He cherished those moments, as they both loved to create a dish from scratch, taking ideas from different recipes and combining them, often mixing an assortment of different ingredients together, trying to create something delightful that they would all share. He often wondered how his dad had become such a good baker, putting it down to him learning due to the many countries he had visited, picking up recipes here and there. Though one thing was for certain, he did like to bake when at home. They spent many hours in the kitchen, flicking through cookery books and looking for things to try. Charlie had picked up many odd tips here and there from those times.

Knowing he'd have to earn money along the way to cover his travelling costs, he'd thought about looking for work in a café or coffee shop. But as he now sat there, his imagination running away with him, he thought, "Better still, perhaps a bakery." Drifting deeper, he began to envision himself dressed as a chef, controlling a brigade of chefs, much like a conductor controlling an orchestra. Or maybe standing behind a coffee machine, making a variety of cappuccinos, lattes, and macchiatos for the long queue of coffee loving addicts. But he decided there and then that he would only look for work in places that served baked goods or coffee, or better still, both. And with that final thought, Charlie drifted off into a deeper sleep with a smile on his face.

Charlie was woken by a sudden jerk of the train as several carriages bumped together. Opening his eyes, he looked out of the window, and to his surprise the train was slowing, and the ever changing countryside had started to transform into a coastal town.

"We must be almost there," he thought, gently patting his face to wake up. He then turned to sort through his backpack, making sure everything was zipped up or clipped. The train rattled as it started to slow even more. The conductor's voice could be heard over the tannoy.

"Last stop ladies and gentlemen. Please make sure that you take all of your belongings with you."

Charlie arose from his seat, double-checked that he had not left anything, kneeling down to check underneath the seat. No, nothing else had fallen off while he had been snoozing.

He then grabbed his backpack and threaded an arm through one of the straps. He swung it around and then slipped the other arm through. Secured on both shoulders, he turned and started to walk towards the carriage exit. The conductor was standing by the carriage door, waiting for the train to stop. Charlie tried to take a peek out of the window and could see that the train was now slowly edging along the platform. As the conductor pulled down the door window in preparation, he turned his head towards Charlie and wished him well on his journey. Charlie thanked the conductor, just as he opened the door and stepped down onto the platform.

Excitedly, he began to make his way along the platform, following the sea of other passengers who had also alighted from the train.

Making his way along the platform, then through the station concourse, he exited through the main station doors, the smell of the sea air hitting his nostrils. He stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"MMMMMMM, that's the smell of adventure" he said out loud, forgetting for a moment where he was.

"The smell of adventure?" he heard someone say, and with a start, Charlie opened his eyes.

There in front of him stood a local cabby, leaning against the side of his shiny vehicle.

Charlie replied by saying he "knew" that it was, and went on to say that not only was today his birthday, but it was also the start of a great adventure.

"Well then don't let me hold you up any longer" replied the cabby, with a cheeky smirk, whom then went on to ask if he needed a lift anywhere. Charlie replied to the rather scruffy looking cabby driver that he didn't, but if he would be so kind to point him in the direction of the port. Thinking for a moment, as he was used to driving and not walking, he then proceeded to inform Charlie that he needed to cross over the road, turn right and walk about half a mile, turning left at the junction. Then follow the road for about another mile or so until he could not go any further.

Charlie thanked the cheerful cabby for his help and headed off in the direction he had been told, hearing the cabby's voice in the background touting for business.

Thrilled to be on his way, Charlie rushed along having to then stop and think what the cabby drivers directions were again. Before long, however, he was there, amazed at what his eyes saw. Standing at the port gates, lorries whizzing by, both entering and exiting the port, some with containers, or cargo, and some empty. Charlie remembered what his father had told him. That an avid adventurer, whether a seasoned traveller or first time novice, could always find passage on a cargo ship if he asked at the harbourmaster's office.

"So now I need to find where the harbourmaster's office was," he thought, and made his way through the side entrance of the main gate and into the port, being ever mindful of the traffic. He

walked over to where he could see a small group of dock workers standing chatting, and as he approached them, they all seemed to turn in unison toward him.

“Are you lost young man? Not the type of place to be aimlessly wondering around,” one of the group asked Charlie in a rather gravelly gruff tone, which his father had said was generally associated with the working environment of the docks.

Greeting the group, Charlie politely replied by saying that he was looking for the harbourmaster’s office and could they help. This prompted another member of the group to step forward, signalling with his hand for the others to stay back. This younger man, seeming to be friendlier than the others, asked again if it was the harbourmaster he was looking for. Charlie affirmed that was the case, to which the first dock worker suggested that he had better follow him as the docks could be a very hazardous place in more ways than one. As they walked away, he discretely gave a slight nod back at the group of workers left standing together, to which Charlie grinned back.

He followed the dock worker, trying to stay close-by as not to get in the way of any of the trucks or forklifts that were whizzing around in some sort of synchronised, choreographed dance. That thought made Charlie chuckled to himself, and he was unable to muffle the sound emerging. The dock worker, who momentarily lightened his own mood, asked Charlie what he was chuckling about.

Charlie explained that the trucks and forklifts looked more like a ballet, at which the dock worker looked at him with a bewildered look, but then realised that was actually the case and burst into laughter.

It was not long before the two of them had reached the office of the harbourmaster, the dock worker then knocking firmly on the door which was brown with dirt. They didn’t have long to wait until a loud voice rang out telling them to enter. Once inside the office, the dock worker explained to his boss that Charlie was looking for him, but was not quite sure why, having himself forgotten that important question. The harbourmaster suggested that he had better show Charlie in then so he could find out.

The dock worker gestured for Charlie to enter the office and introduced him to the harbourmaster, who then swiftly turned, closing the office door behind him as he left.

“Wow,” Charlie thought as he looked around at all the maps and charts lying around on desks or pinned to notice boards on the wall. The harbourmaster greeted Charlie and suggested he take a seat for a minute while he returned to the conversation that he was conducting over a hand held radio.

He sat patiently in the visitor’s chair and couldn’t help but notice all the dust and piles of seemingly unorderly paperwork that was lying around on various surfaces. This made him feel slightly unsettled as his compulsion for tidiness was starting to take a grip. Charlie became very fidgety where he sat, his right foot starting to twitch in order to settle his nerves.

Several minutes later, the harbourmaster swivelled around in his chair muttering under his breath that it was sorted, then asked Charlie how he could help him.

Charlie began to recount his story so far to the harbourmaster, telling him about his father, and once his story had finished, added that he was looking for passage on a cargo ship, and his father had told him to come and speak to the harbourmaster.

Having patiently listened to the story, the harbourmaster asked Charlie if he knew where he wanted to travel to. Charlie then replied that he was not sure but quickly remembered the scrap piece of paper with an address written on it that his father had given to him earlier in the day.

Charlie slipped off his backpack, unzipped the side pocket, and reached in to get out the paper, offering it to the harbourmaster who then took the scrap of paper from Charlie. Puzzled, the harbourmaster rose out of his seat and walked over to the map to take a look, commenting that he was not sure where that was.

He then glanced at the map for a short while before he jabbed his finger towards it. Then, with a hint of excitement in his voice, he announced to Charlie that he had in fact found the town of Villejacques. The harbourmaster explained that it was inland a little way, but there was a port not far away. He gestured for Charlie to come over so he could show him the location on the map. Leaving Charlie staring at the map for a moment, the harbourmaster then said that he would check to see if any captains were heading in that direction. Just as he reached the day's dispatch sheet, then adjusting his voice to sound a little more official, he turned and said he first needed to make sure Charlie had a current passport to be able to travel. Charlie responded by saying that he had, then patted the side of his backpack while thinking to himself that if it wasn't for his mom, he would have left it at home, and with a sense of relief he brandished a wry grin.

Charlie had been well prepared for his travels, as his mother had always taught him to be organised, he explained. At which point the harbourmaster commented by congratulating Charlie in a more relaxed manner, and said that he would now see if he was able to be of help. He then returned to his seat and started to look at the days dispatch sheet. Charlie heard all sorts of sounds coming from the direction of the harbourmaster until finally he declared that there was, in fact, a ship heading that way, but it would not be the first port of call but would take a few days. He then asked Charlie if he would like this, to which Charlie eagerly agreed, keen to get on his way. The harbourmaster, seeing Charlie's excitement, said he would speak with the captain and find out if he had a berth available.

After a short phone call to the ship, he turned back and informed him that the captain of the ship was more than happy to offer passage if he didn't mind mucking in.

Charlie thought for a moment and said that he would be more than happy to give a hand only to be told that, in fact, that particular captain said that to everyone but never meant it. The harbourmaster then confirmed that it was all sorted and handed him back the scrap piece of paper with the suggestion that he keep it safe. Charlie smiled as he took the paper from him and returned it to the safety of his backpack. The harbourmaster informed Charlie that it would take him a few minutes to collect together some necessary paperwork and suggested that he wait by the jeep that was parked just outside. He would then give him a lift to the ship and introduce him to the captain. Charlie thanked the harbourmaster and left the office, casually making his way over to the jeep that was parked just a few steps away. As Charlie stood patiently waiting for the harbourmaster to join him, his attention was drawn to a payphone on the wall of the office wall. Rummaging through his trouser pocket, hoping that he might find sufficient loose change, enough just to call home anyway, just to let his parents know he had found passage on a ship. The call was brief, as he was interrupted by the arrival of the harbourmaster, but he let his parents know that he would call them again once he had arrived in Villejacques. The harbourmaster now standing beside his jeep, gestured for Charlie to end his call and jump into the passenger side.

Call finished, they both climbed into the jeep, the harbourmaster quickly having to rescue the documents, as Charlie climbed in, that he had just habitually deposited onto the passenger seat. Now seated in the jeep, Charlie thought it looked just as untidy as the office, with dirty seats, a dust covered dashboard, and a pile of crumpled up wrappers in the foot well. A turn of the key and the motor came to life, the harbourmaster now weaving in and out of all the other machinery.

Several minutes later they arrived at the dock side of Pier 8. Charlie jumped out, glad to once again smell the fresh sea air. There was quite a strong odour coming from what Charlie thought must have been some rotten food maybe under a seat.

The harbourmaster gestured for Charlie to follow as he headed towards the gangway of the ship. Stopping at the bottom, he let Charlie know that the captain would join them in a moment. Charlie looked on at the long, thin railing that led to the ship. It looked rather old, rusty, and well worn... weathered by many years at sea, he thought. Before long, the captain appeared at the top of the gangway and slowly made his way down. When close enough, the harbourmaster introduced Charlie, who kindly thanked him for allowing him board his ship. The harbourmaster handed over the paperwork to the captain, saying that these needed urgent attention, who sighed at the sight of more forms. Before the harbourmaster turned to walk away, Charlie thanked him for his kindness, and with that he wished him a bonne voyage and left.

The captain then turned to Charlie and said that he had better follow him on board as they then made their way up the rusty looking gangway that led up to the opening of the ship. He looked back at the busy port one last time and smiled before he turned to follow the captain.

## Chapter Two - Captain Macrina

Having now followed the captain through a maze of small narrow corridors, they eventually arrived at a row of doors. Stopping in front of one, Charlie soon realised these were doors to individual cabins. The sign on the wall that read "Passenger Cabins" in big black letters might have also given it away. The captain opened the door to cabin number four, stepped over the raised step and entered while Charlie followed behind.

"Here you go young fellow, you can stow your backpack here," the captain said in a slight haste. Gathering himself ready to leave, he quickly explained that the ship was due to leave port in less than a couple of hours, once all the cargo had been loaded and secured. The ship also must be ready to leave with the high tide for a safe exit. This being a whole new experience to Charlie, an excitement welled within him at the thought of seeing all this first hand. The captain walking backwards, dispatch papers at the forefront of his thoughts, bumped into the open door while attempting to finish his final words. Lastly, he suggested that Charlie make himself comfortable and come and find him on the bridge a little later.

As the captain rushed off, Charlie shouted a thank you for offering passage before turning around slowly to inspect his new home for the next couple of days. He was now very much aware of the weight on his shoulder, so he felt relief as he slipped off his backpack, placing it on the ordinary looking chair in the corner. His attention was caught by voices outside on the corridor, so he walked over and closed the cabin door.

Charlie took a deep breath in, sighed, and took a seat on the edge of the bunk. He had never been on a boat before, unless you were to count the time spent on a barge during one summer holiday when he was younger. So he was pleasantly surprised by the cabin. He was expecting something resembling a broom cupboard, but instead found himself sitting in what he thought was quite a spacious and almost luxurious room.

The cabin had its own bathroom and a comfy looking bed... a kettle with the usual teabag and sugar selection. There was a big couch along one wall, a coffee table, and a tall cupboard in the corner for hanging clothes. There was a lot of storage space under the bunk with several smaller individual lockers. Charlie giggled to himself as the thought struck him that he could even run around in circles, the cabin was that big. It certainly looked bigger than their guest room back home in Poxwold. But as the captain had pointed out that he was free to roam around the ship, he would not need to run around in circles in the cabin.

"I'm going to make the most of the time before the ship is ready to depart," Charlie thought to himself, and with that he decided it was time to begin his journal. He grabbed his backpack, unzipped the lower pocket on the right hand side where he'd put the journal earlier for safe keeping, removed it, then made his way over to the sofa now feeling more settled. Opening the journal at the first page, pencil in hand, he began to write about his adventure so far.

It didn't take him long before he had filled two sides and excitedly looked down at his watch thinking, "It must be close to leaving," as he sprang up from the sofa to look out of the porthole. It was now getting close to sunset. The sky was beginning to change from the blue hue of the daytime sky, morphing into shades of burnt orange which reflected in the rippling water. Even though it was a busy working environment, with lots of cranes, trucks and noise, smells lingering in the air of fuel and grease and then there were those that he could just not recognise, and perhaps would prefer not to discover, he thought it was still a very magical place.

Gazing out of the porthole, Charlie was suddenly brought back with the sound of the ships horn which reverberated throughout the vessel.

“We must be getting ready to depart,” he suddenly realized, panicking slightly, not wanting to miss the ship leaving the dock. He replaced the journal into the safety of the pocket of the backpack. “Time to attempt to locate the captain on the bridge,” he thought.

Opening the solid cabin door, the ship suddenly sounded more alive in his ears. He heard the distant sound of loud voices trying to be heard over the banging of what he assumed were the last few items of cargo being secured prior to departure. Charlie decided to try to re-trace his steps back to the gangway where he first boarded. He remembered seeing a large sign on the wall next to the main stairs showing the layout of the decks.

He arrived back at the stairs by the gangway entrance, which was now secured, and looked at the sign on the wall. Charlie, in amazement, was surprised at how many decks there actually were... certainly more than he had thought. Having scanned the sign out of curiosity, he found out that the bridge was on the top deck. His heart raced with enthusiasm as he began to climb the steep and narrow stairs, remembering to make a mental note as to which deck his cabin was on. “Note to self, Deck D,” he muttered under his breath while making his way upwards.

While turning a corner on one flight of stairs, Charlie came face to face with one of the ship’s crew.

“Who are you?” demanded a loud grumpy Italian voice.

As he looked up from staring at the belly, Charlie noticed a name badge which read “Federigo Romano - Chief Engineer.”

“My name is Charlie. I’m a passenger, sir,” he replied, trying to appease this man’s tone. Looking up at the face of the crew member, he added that he was looking for the captain. The officer demanded to know just why he wanted to see the captain, adding that it’s normally mid-cruise when that usually happens, asking whether he had a complaint already.

A little puzzled by that last statement, Charlie politely replied by informing the officer that he had been invited by the captain to join him on the bridge, that he had been offered passage for helping with duties on board.

With a look of relief on his face, the officer suggested that he hurry as they were preparing to leave and instructed him to keep going up until he ran out of stairs. He then finished by demanding that he now move out of his way as he had work to do and didn't have time to stand around chatting.

Charlie moved against the side rail as far as he could, and with that the officer brushed passed him and continued to descend the stairs. Before Charlie could thank him, he was gone.

After that he did hope that the rest of the crew were not as grumpy as that person was, otherwise it was going to be a long couple of days.

He then continued to climb the steep sets of stairs, and it wasn’t long until finally he had reached the very last step. “Wow, thigh burn,” Charlie thought as stood on the top deck looking along a short corridor with a door straight ahead. He noticed that there was no handle on this side, but a sign in large bold letters stating, “No Entry to Unauthorised Personnel.” Now Charlie didn’t know what to do, but being the cheeky chap that he was, he decided to knock anyway.

Charlie knocked on the door three times and waited. It was not long before he could hear footsteps getting louder, and suddenly, the door opened. There, standing before him was a smartly dressed female officer.

“Yes, what do you want? Can’t you read the sign?” snapped the crew member.

“Sorry, mam”, replied Charlie, “but the captain invited me to join him on the bridge.”



She told Charlie to wait there, closing the door, disappearing back into the room. Charlie tried to catch a glimpse through the door before it closed and could just make out several crew members busily going about their duties.

Moments later, the door reopened, and this time it was the familiar face of the captain. "Charlie, my boy, welcome to the bridge of the Pierre Tristran," and with that the captain invited him in and formally introduced himself. "My boy, my name is Captain Macrina, and I've been looking after this beauty, as both man and boy, now for near on thirty years."

Charlie was now standing on the bridge, and the captain introduced him to the other crew members who were on duty. It wasn't long before he was explaining, in quite some detail, how the Pierre Tristran was classed as a freighter that, at its maximum, could carry about 4,500 containers and was 65,000 D.W.T.

"D.W.T, what does that mean?" Charlie asked the captain.

"Sorry, my boy," chortled the captain. "Without being too technical, it means Deadweight Tonnage. It's a measure of how much weight a ship is carrying or can safely carry while out at sea."

Just as the captain was about to continue his explanation, he was interrupted by the first officer who announced that the ship was ready to depart and that they were just waiting for the tugs. The captain acknowledged his first officer and turned back to Charlie, saying in an almost excited tone, "Time to go to work! This is the second favourite part of my job, Charlie."

Looking a little bewildered, Charlie responded "The second, Captain, so what is the first?"

"The first, my boy, is when we arrive at our destination. That's my favourite part of my job." And with a broad smile, the captain then instructed Charlie to stand over to one side so he could watch out of the port side window.

It wasn't long before the tugs were in place and the heavy grease covered mooring lines were released from the dock cleats and hauled back on board the ship. The bridge had now come alive with activity as the tugs started to manoeuvre the ship away from the dockside. After about twenty minutes or so, the tugs had positioned the ship so that the engines could be started. After several heated exchanges between the captain and chief engineer over the internal intercom, the engines finally sprang into action. This allowed the tugs to release their ropes, and once at a safe distance the engines were increased and the ship juddered forward. As they took hold, the ship finally made its way slowly out of port.

The phone on the bridge rang and the captain answered. "Yes, permission to come aboard," he replied then promptly hung up.

Charlie wondered just who was coming on board, but before his mind could wonder through all the different possibilities, there was a knock at the door. The first officer opened the door tipping his hat as a sign of acknowledgement, and in walked a very official looking person. The captain looked over to Charlie and explained that this was the pilot. His role was to navigate the ship down the channel and out into open water.

Charlie was watching everything that was happening on the bridge, and it did not take the pilot long before he had masterfully steered the ship into open water and handed control back to the captain. Papers were signed, and with a quick handshake, he left the bridge and made his way back to the waiting pilot boat, which would take him back to port.

Elation and intrigue raced through every fibre of his being, thrilled to witness such an event. Taking a breath now to settle himself, he gazed out of the window... out across the open water, the coastline now beginning to fade into the distance and the sky darkening.

“Well, my boy, it will soon be time for dinner” explained the captain. “I suggest you return to your cabin and come and join me in the mess shortly. Tonight you can be my guest at the captain’s table.”

Charlie thanked the captain for his invitation and left the bridge. Making his way down the stairs, Charlie tried to remember which deck he needed to stop at. In all the excitement he had forgotten. Pondering for a moment he thought, “Yep, that’s right, it was 4C.” Wondering down the corridor, Charlie pushed open a rather heavy cabin door and saw something that no impressionable young man should ever see! In a panic he quickly shut the door, muttering a very nervous apology to the occupants of the room, then quickly remembered, “Oh no, it was 4D, not 4C!”

Hastily, he rushed down the corridor back to the stairs, climbed one more level, finally making his way back to his cabin. Before opening the door he double-checked the number, and with great relief the sign read... "4D."

He opened the heavy cabin door, the weight of which he had not appreciated until that moment. The first thing his eyes were drawn to was the bunk. Suddenly, he felt tired and realised that it had been a long day, and although elated with joy, his body needed rest. Closing the door behind him, he walked over to the bunk and lay down. As soon as his head touched the pillow, he was asleep. Exhaustion had gotten the better of him.

It was still dark outside when Charlie woke. Sitting bolt upright and feeling a little disorientated, he wondered just how long he had been asleep for.

He rubbed his eyes and looked up at the clock on the wall. It was after midnight already. Charlie had slept through dinner, and now he realised that he was feeling hungry as he hadn’t eaten anything all day. Thank goodness his mother had sneakily packed some food in his backpack before he left. With a smile on his face at the anticipation of opening the parcel, Charlie leapt off the bunk and straight over to where he had left his backpack earlier that day. With great excitement, he opened the pocket and pulled out the little package.

Sitting down now on the sofa, Charlie placed the package on the table in front of him. His mouth was beginning to water at the thought of the taste sensation that lay ahead. It had been a while since he had tasted one of his mother’s famous "travelling sandwiches." He began to peel back the ends of the neatly wrapped parcel, first the left side, then the right. He finished by opening the middle section to reveal something very special indeed.

To the uninitiated, the travelling sandwich looked just like any other sandwich, but to Charlie it had history... it had sentiment... it had a story. Looking at what lay before him on top of the grease-proof paper, Charlie decided it was time. Carefully he picked up the sandwich with both hands, lifting it slowly towards his mouth. He closed his eyes and bit a big chunk out of one corner. The explosion of flavours in Charlie’s mouth were so intense, he let out a rather loud groan of sheer delight. Realising what he had just done, he wondered if anyone heard him and laughed within. He savoured that first mouthful... the marriage of the differing flavours.... To Charlie this was a little piece of heaven. Then once that first mouthful was finished, it did not take Charlie very long to finish the rest. The last mouthful always being the saddest to take, but what a new memory he now had.

Being late, his hunger now satisfied, he decided to go back to bed, not taking long to wash his face, clean his teeth, and crawl back into his comfy bunk. He wondered if the noise of the ship slicing through the water would allow him to fall back off to sleep but guessed he would soon find out. Removing his watch and setting the alarm, Charlie climbed into the bunk, pulled the crisp white sheets up to his neck, closed his eyes, and settled down to sleep. Soon he could

feel himself drifting, helped by the rhythmic drone of the ships engines and the gentle motion of the ship moving through the water.

Woken by his alarm, Charlie rubbed his eyes and was soon sitting up in bed, surprised as he normally woke before the loud beep sounded. "Well, I guess I didn't have to worry about the noise of the ship keeping me awake," he chuckled to himself. It was morning already, and the sun was streaming through the porthole. "No time to waste; there's a ship to explore!" Charlie stated out loud, and with that, Charlie sprang out of his bunk, straight into the bathroom.

Usual bathroom jobs taken care of, it did not take Charlie long before he was rummaging deeply into the main pocket of his backpack, looking for something suitable to wear. He neatly removed items of clothing until finding just the right thing... a cleaner version of exactly the same thing he wore the previous day. For, Charlie was not one for clothes based on the current trend but went more for practicality.

Dressed, bunk tidied, the wrapper on the table left from the midnight snack scrunched up and discarded into the waste-bin, Charlie left the cabin and headed back to the main stairs. Looking at the sign on the wall, the officer's mess was just two decks above. Charlie quickly turned towards the narrow stairwell, and without delay extended his stride to take two steps at once, arriving on Deck F in no time. Charlie now faced another sign on the opposite wall to the stairs, showing directions again to the mess.

A short brisk walk and he was standing outside the entrance. Charlie tried the handle, but found it to be locked. He realised that in all his excitement, he hadn't checked the time. Looking at his watch he realised he had another twenty-five minutes to wait until the mess would be open and breakfast served. Fidgeting on the spot after only a minute, he decided to have a walk around and hopefully not get into any trouble. After all how could he stand at a door for twenty-five minutes when there was a whole ship yet to explore?

He headed back to the stairs... then a decision to be made... up or down? As he couldn't decide, he thought he would flip a coin. Rummaging through his trouser pocket, he pulled out a coin and decided that heads would be up, tails would be down.

With a quick flick of his fingers, he sent the coin spinning skywards with a little too much excitement; the coin then hit one of the many pipes traversing the ceiling and ricocheted down the corridor. Charlie saw it disappear rapidly under the gap of one of the doors. Moments later, as Charlie tried to decide what to do, the door flew open and there stood the very grumpy looking "chest" that Charlie had bumped into the day before.

Before he could look up, he heard a grumpy harsh voice saying "You again. I assume this is yours," as the coin appeared in front of Charlie's face.

Charlie confirmed that it was indeed his, but before he could finish his explanation, the officer told him to choose heads or tails. Charlie was informed that if he won, he would get it back, and if he lost... well he knew the answer to that he thought, as he stared into the face of the grimacing officer.

Without a moment of hesitation Charlie called, "Tails."

"Tails it is then," responded the officer, and with a quick flick it was up in the air, caught by one hand, with the other placed over the top. Removing the hand that was covering the coin, the officer's slight brazen grin turned upside down, as he realised he had thrown tails, noting the rather ugly portraiture of the king staring sternly back at him from the coin. Begrudgingly, he handed it back to Charlie, stepped back into his room, and slammed the door behind him. Standing there for a moment, Charlie looked at the coin in his hand and smiled knowingly at the image.

“Tails wins again,” Charlie whispered, and turned the coin over... “every time,” as the exact same image became visible on the reverse side of the coin. “Most people know about the double-headed coin, but not one with two tails,” Charlie thought, letting out a cheeky snigger. The coin safely back into his pocket, he walked back in the direction of the officer’s mess, taking his time to look at the various signs pointing towards several of the communal rooms. “Wow, this is so exciting,” Charlie thought, smiling broadly as he arrived back at the mess.

By the time he had arrived back at the officers mess, he did not have to wait for too long before a member of the crew unlocked the door from inside then invited him in.

“You must be one of our passengers. Please come in and find a place to sit. I’ll be with you in a moment,” the crew member told Charlie, and with that disappeared through a revolving door into what Charlie assumed must be the galley. Having entered the mess, Charlie looked around the room. There were four tables which had been set up for breakfast and another long table against one of the walls. The air in the room was filled with the various aromas you would expect at breakfast: baked bread and croissants, eggs being fried, the smell of sweet smoked bacon being grilled, and all accompanied by the smell of freshly ground coffee.

Charlie was not in the room by himself for long as other people began to filter in and find a seat. Then Charlie saw the captain enter the room through the revolving door who, upon seeing Charlie, walked over.

“Good morning, Charlie. Did you sleep well?” the captain asked.

“Good morning, Captain. Yes, I did, though I think I was more tired than I realised,” replied Charlie politely and proceeded to explain to the captain the events of the previous evening.

Breakfast was soon underway, and the room was busy with activity. Busboys dressed in grey jackets were rushing here and there, taking orders from the mix of officers and passengers that had now descended on the mess. Returning rather promptly with hot plates of cooked breakfasts, or bowls of steaming porridge out of the kitchen, as well as bringing out jugs of tea and coffee that were then placed in the middle of the tables before empty plates were cleared and taken back to the kitchen. It was all quite hectic, yet efficient, Charlie realised, as breakfast was only served during very specific times due to the operation of the ship.

Breakfast now over, Charlie received an invitation from the captain to see the workings of the ship, which he eagerly accepted. Upon leaving the mess, they made their way to the bridge stopping every so often for a brief chat with a crew member or passenger. The captain’s presence intrigued Charlie. Although seeming stern, he had a certain disposition about him that didn’t seem to fit. First on the list of duties for the captain would be a hand-over briefing from the night watch. Once finished, they would be dismissed and a briefing for the day watch would be conducted.

Charlie’s attention was caught by the sound of boots scuffing along the steel deck, and voices with different accents grew louder as the officers arrived on the bridge. With everyone now present, the meeting promptly commenced and was conducted in a very precise manner. Everyone present, apart from Charlie, knew their role... what to report and when to report it. The meeting was swift, with details of events that occurred during the night quickly discussed. The captain was informed of any important radio messages that had been received, before the meeting was concluded. As quickly as everyone had arrived, they were gone... going about the days duties. But not the night duty crew.... They were off to their bunks for a well earned sleep.

The next job on the captain’s list was an inspection of the ship. He invited Charlie to continue on with him if he’d like. Charlie instantly accepted, explaining that it would be

awesome to keep tagging along, anticipation raising the tone of his voice. Charlie was eager to see as much of the workings of the ship as he possibly could.

“Okay then, let’s go!” the captain informed Charlie, smiling back at the enjoyment he saw in the young lad’s eyes.

The captain was off like a greyhound out of the trap as Charlie tried to keep up. “Much to get done, and not much time to do it in,” the captain explained.

“I’ve heard of a running commentary,” Charlie chuckled to himself while simultaneously trying to not fall behind.

All the while as they made their way upstairs and through corridors, opening and closing large heavy bulky doors as they went, the captain was telling Charlie about his ship. He described the various operations in quite some detail. At times, it was difficult for Charlie to understand what the captain was saying. He noticed that in the captain’s own enthusiasm, at times, he forgot to speak in English!

They were in and out of various rooms with quick exchanges of words between the captain and many of the crew members that they met along the way. Charlie had noticed the captain took time to speak to every member of his crew, often exchanging a random joke along the way. Sadly for Charlie, they were always in Italian. Charlie had to keep pinching himself to remember that this was not a dream. As he was on board a working cargo ship and only days before this was sitting at home in the small cosy town of Poxwold.

After some time and having passed through the laundry room, they arrived at a big heavy looking door at the end of the corridor, located deep in the bowels of the ship. As they walked through the door on the side of the passage, it was like they had entered a whole new climate zone. They had entered... the engine room!

The door itself was intimidating with big notices that read; "Danger! High Noise Level. - Wear Ear Protection." "Caution! Wear Eye Protection." "When Alarm Sounds, Vacate at Once!" Once you opened the door, you were immediately overcome by the piercing whine of the engines. Thankfully, one of the engineers handed both the captain and Charlie a pair of ear phones each.

The captain, having to raise his voice over all the noise, went on to explain that the ship had six engines. Charlie leaned in uncovering one of his ears to hear what was being said. The forward three, which were 2,100 horse power each, were used to power the ship’s motors. The rear three, which were much smaller the captain explained, ran the ship’s services such as lights, computers, kitchen appliances, washing machines, air circulation, and also ran the ship’s motors in an emergency. The captain was continuing to inform Charlie that not all the engines ran at once, however, as usually only one of the large engines would run at a time

The captain was so distracted explaining about the engine, he was momentarily unaware of the appearance of the chief engineer.

“Charlie, let me introduce you to the ship’s Chief Engineer, Federigo Romano. We have sailed together since we were young lads starting out,” the captain said, hand on his shoulder.

“How’s she running?” the captain asked.

The response Charlie heard from the chief engineer led him to think all was not going well, even though he didn’t fully understand the terms used.

Despite enjoying the experience, once they had finished their exchange, Charlie asked the captain whether they could leave the engine room, saying he was getting rather hot, which was made noticeable by the beads of sweat now forming on Charlie’s brow, and dripping down his

back, a sure sign it was time to leave. The captain grinned and took the ear phones off of Charlie, handing both pairs back to the engineer as they hastily exited the engine room.

Once out, Charlie asked if everything was okay as he thought the chief engineer did not look too pleased. The captain responded by saying he, too, was displeased as the engine had been giving them some trouble for a while, and the owner would not agree to have it looked at until the next dry dock date. But with a look of relief on his face, he explained that the ship was due for its five year overhaul very soon, and the engine would be looked at then. But until then, the chief engineer would remain somewhat tetchy because he continually had to patch it in order to keep it going. Charlie asked whether he was always that grumpy with people or was it just the engine trouble. The captain went on to explain that the chief engineer was a little "old school" and thought that passengers had no place on board a cargo ship.

"That explains a lot," Charlie said, and he told the captain about the earlier incident with the coin.

Pulling the coin out of his pocket, Charlie showed the captain, first one side and then the other. The captain laughed, labelling Charlie a cheeky chappie, but insisted that Charlie keep that between the two of them, for the chief engineer would not see the funny side.

Once the two of them stopped laughing about the coin, they continued their journey again down the many corridors and passing many rooms entering just a few more.

Several hours had now passed, and they were again standing on the top deck which was the same level maybe as the captain's quarters. The captain stood outside his door, and explained that he must leave him now as he had paperwork to catch up on. Charlie happily thanked him for the tour and decided to return to his cabin for a while. The captain's parting words were to invite Charlie to join him for dinner later again but to try not to sleep through it this time. Parting company, there was laughter in the air from the captain's comment as he entered his quarters, now securing the door behind him.

What the captain hadn't mentioned was that he had to get back to his quarters to let out his pet Cockatiel, Bubbles, who travelled everywhere with him. While docked at a middle eastern port, having been delayed by a late arriving shipment, the captain took the opportunity to visit one of the local souqs. While passing one of the many street traders, his attention was drawn to a small bird cage buried beneath several others. The commotion that was coming from this cage prompted the captain to stop and inspect it. He knelt down and looked inside to see a small, grey and white ball of feathers cowering in the far corner in fear while being pecked by several larger birds.

Witnessing this dismal sight, the captain felt compelled to rescue this poor little creature and provide it a safe, loving home. He haggled for many minutes until finally a price was agreed that included a small cage. Hands were shaken, and the small bundle of quivering feathers was rescued.

The captain looked on as the trader reached in and grabbed the bird in his grubby han, before unceremoniously depositing it in the smaller cage. He handed it over to the captain who immediately headed back to his ship. Looking at the new member of his crew, he knew that this bird would require much love, care, and attention, and he was just the person for the task.

Bubbles loved to sit on the captain's shoulder while he was at his desk, often grabbing the attention of the captain with a gentle nibble, her way of asking for more scratches. That's if she wasn't sitting on the ledge of the closed porthole investigating what was going on in the world outside. She had been the captain's companion for so long now, he had even had a mobile aviary

made on ship, beautifully disguised as an old shipping container as to not incur too much attention.

Every so often he would let her out into the aviary, open up the sides, and the two of them would sit there for hours looking out over the sea. It was a little escape for the captain, and he cherished moments like these.

Once back in his cabin, Charlie reached for his journal inspired by the day's events so far, wanting to record all he'd observed and experienced. He mulled over what he had seen, the crew he had met, and his thoughts about life at sea. He remembered something the captain had said... that he preferred cargo over passengers since containers couldn't talk. Charlie found that quite amusing, although he had asked him to explain it further as it didn't seem to fit the side of his character Charlie had witnessed.

The captain responded by telling him about his much older brother who was also in the merchant navy but had opted for life on board passenger liners. It had been one day when they had both been in the same port on the same day. His brother had invited him to join him for lunch on board the passenger ship as he was already first officer and in line to be the next captain.

Well, during that lunch he had witnessed first-hand just how demanding being a captain of a passenger liner could be. Not from the ship or the crew, but because of the passengers. There were endless requests from passengers, complaining or asking for the captain's individual attention. That's when he knew that life on cargo ships was going to be the life for him.

Charlie then made an entry into the journal describing what the captain looked like. He had a rather round face with a neatly trimmed grey sea-faring beard, and his face had been slightly weathered from all the years at sea. He was also a little on the short side with a rounder midsection to match his face.

Satisfied his journal entry was now complete, he returned it to its usual home and grabbed his favourite book. Wanting to enjoy the smell of the sea air, he made his way out of his cabin and headed towards the stairs. Walking down the corridor, he bumped into the Canadian couple Carla and Bernie Waters, also passengers on the ship, whom he had met earlier that morning at breakfast. They reminded him of his parents and home.

"Where are you off to young Charlie?" asked Carla.

Charlie replied by saying that he was heading on deck to look for a place to sit and read for a while. With a smile Carla replied, and leaning forward, she whispered into his ear that he was in luck as they had found the most lovely little spot the previous week.

Having received the directions and thanking Carla, he headed off, trying to remember just what she had said as it sounded a little confusing. But with luck on his side he managed to find the spot that Carla had suggested, and it was perfect he thought. It was out of the way, sheltered a little from the noise of the ship, but with breathtaking views reflected sunlight sparkling and dancing across the aqua blue sea.

"Perfect," Charlie thought... and with that he found a cosy spot to sit. Leaning up against the wall, he opened his book and began to read.

The rest of the day passed without Charlie realising as he was so engrossed in his book and with occasional sleepy episodes of day dreaming mixed in.

The air starting to chill made Charlie realise he was now feeling the cold, his light shirt not providing much warmth. Then, looking up from his book, he saw the sun was already starting to set on the horizon.

"It must be almost dinner time... better not miss it this time," he thought, musing to himself.

Closing his book, he walked over to the railing to take a last look at the beautiful sunset. There in the distance he could see a pod of dolphins skimming the water as the day turned seamlessly to night. He breathed in deeply the sea air, feeling the joy of beginning a new adventure. Moments later, he was making his way inside and back to his cabin, returning his book to the backpack. Looking up at the wall clock, he realised that it was in fact almost dinner time, so he rushed to freshen up before making his way to the officer's mess.

By the time he arrived, it was already busy with every table almost full. As he entered the room, the captain spotted him and called him over to a saved seat at his table. Also seated there were Carla and Bernie, whom the captain formally introduced to Charlie, and explained that they were old friends who had been passengers on and off for many a year.

Dinner was a much more formal experience than the breakfast sitting had been, and it felt more like being in a fine restaurant than on board a ship, let alone a cargo ship. The evening waiter, well actually it was the same crew member from earlier who were just wearing a white waiter's jacket this time, arrived to take the orders. Wine was then served and the conversation light and humorous. As the evening progressed, each new course was a new taste sensation to Charlie's palate. It was only when the dessert arrived that Charlie's enthusiasm increased even more as he was trying to discern what each flavour was that exploded inside his mouth. He tried to make a mental note for his journal entry later.

The final course was now cleared and coffee was then served. The waiters were very efficient, even "crumbing" down the table prior to coffee being served and as for the food... Charlie was surprised at just how good it had been.

The evening was drawing to a close, and the mess was starting to empty out with the crew heading back to continue their duties or returning to their cabins. The few passengers that were on board either stayed to chat further or took a little walk on deck before retiring for the night. For Charlie, well, he decided to do the latter, but firstly he thanked the captain, as he was about to leave the table, then Carla and Bernie for a lovely evening.

But before Charlie could leave the table and make his way out on deck, Bernie warmly grasped his hand and shook it firmly. He wanted to wish him well with his onward journey. While Charlie and Bernie were saying their farewells, Carla reached into her purse and pulled out a 20 franc note. When Charlie had finished conversing with her husband, she took Charlie's other hand in hers. Pressing the 20 franc note into his hand, she said, "Here Charlie, make sure you have a warm meal once you arrive at your next destination."

Smiling warmly at Charlie, a tear welled up in her eye, for Charlie had reminded her of her own son and of when he had travelled out into the world to begin his own life's journey. Carla then said her goodbyes, and both she and her husband left the table.

Now alone at the table, Charlie decided it was time to head out on deck, to experience the ship at night. The crisp night sea air had made Charlie quit relaxed so he thought he would not stay out too long. But before retiring for the night, he walked over to the railing to look over the sea. The lights from the ship glistened over the rolling waves that were now lapping up the side of the vessel. It was much rougher sea's now with even the occasional spray of water hitting his face making him feel invigorated as the ship coursed ahead. Tomorrow, they were to arrive at the Port of Frausseilles, which is where Charlie would be leaving the ship. In the distance, he could faintly make out the coast and some lights. A voice from behind Charlie announced that it was the Port of Frausseilles off in the distance and that they were due in at about 5:00 am.



Turning around to thank the owner of the voice, Charlie was again face to chest with the chief engineer, as he was somewhat of a tall chap. “Maybe another reason for his grumpiness,” Charlie thought, “as to move around the ship couldn’t be easy.”

“Thank you” Charlie replied, and turned back to watch for a moment longer.

With tiredness now taking hold of Charlie, he decided it was time to head back to his cabin to get some sleep. Thanking the chief engineer as he passed him for pointing out the landmark, he wished him a good evening. Turning, Charlie began to make his way back indoors with the words, “Good evening? What’s good about it?” hanging in the air from a still grumpy chief engineer.

Being a little tired, he double then triple checked the cabin number on the door before entering, not wanting a repeat vision. Safely inside, he firmly closed the door behind him and decided to tidy up and repack his backpack now so there would be less to do in the morning. Through sleepy eyes he checked the room one last time, and when Charlie was satisfied that he had done as much as he could, it was time to sleep.

Getting ready for bed, Charlie again set the alarm on his watch as he was not going to miss the ship arriving in port. That done, he rested his head on the pillow and soon started drifting with the sound of the engines and the motion of the ship. As he drifted off to sleep, he realised he now understood why the engines were making that strange, yet rhythmic sound that helped him to relax into a deep sleep.

### Chapter Three - Monsieur Luc

Charlie woke early, before his alarm even had the chance to sound. This time, a large shudder from the ship jolted him from a deep sleep into wakefulness. Suddenly, remembering they would be docking that morning, he sprang upright in bed, full of excitement and quickly rolled out of his bunk, legs hanging over the side. He grabbed his watch and disabled the alarm, chuckling as he did. "No need for that with faulty engines driving the ship," Charlie quietly chuckled to himself.

Surprisingly, although it was still only 3:00 am, he felt quite refreshed. So he went about his morning ritual of bathroom duties and was soon dressed for a new day. Being so early, the only thing Charlie could think to do now was tidy the bunk, straightening out the bottom sheet and quilt, and fluffing up the pillow. Next was to return all his remaining belongings into his backpack, making certain it was fastened securely before it was placed on top of the bunk, ready for departure.

A little time had passed from when he had woken to finishing the tidying of his temporary cabin. He looked down at his watch, noting the time was now nearly 4:00 am. Determined to not miss the arrival of the ship into port, he headed off, his legs seeming to lead the way before his body could catch up.

Charlie had only been on deck for a few minutes when he saw the pilot come aboard. It was quite the thrill seeing so many boats around and the whole hustle and bustle of a ship being steered through the narrow canal. He now began to understand just why Captain Macrina enjoyed this part of the voyage the most. First the pilot came on board, due to his expertise and knowledge regarding the currents and location of sandbanks that could catch the novice by surprise. It was his job to steer the ship safely into the inner port and finally position it along the dockside. Charlie watched with bated breath as the powerful tugs pushed and manoeuvred the Pierre Tristran into her berth, carefully avoiding all potential hazards. Soon, the ship was alongside the docks and being secured in place by the many large heavy and greasy mooring ropes.

After some time, the yelling officials and sounds faded away, and all that hung in the air were a few faint lingering voices that still commanded attention. The once palpable tension was greatly lessened now that the ship was securely moored in place. Charlie had also noticed the dimming groan of a disgruntled engine as the power was cut; all that now remained was the stench of marine fuel and oil leaking from the stern of the ship.

"What an amazing experience that has been," Charlie thought.

It would still be awhile before he would be allowed to disembark, so he decided to join the other passengers and officers for some breakfast before saying his farewells. Then the next phase of his journey would begin.

The officer's mess was already busy by the time Charlie arrived, but Carla had saved him a seat next to herself and Bernie; for, Carla was quite a motherly type, especially around Charlie it seemed.

He was going to miss the medley of aromas that constituted breakfast and hastily filled up on a selection of pastries followed by eggs benedict. This sent his thoughts homeward again as he was reminded that his mother always made this on Sunday mornings or on special occasions. He washed the meal down with a mug of freshly ground aromatic coffee. On this occasion, Charlie and the other passengers were offered something very special indeed.... On this particular morning, the captain had given the gallery some of his own special coffee. Charlie was

especially entranced and keen to discover just where it had come from, making a mental note to ask the captain before he left the ship.

It wasn't long before breakfast had come to an end, and passengers and crew started to leave the mess. Charlie, Carla, and Bernie were the last remaining people at their table, as they were lingering a little while saying their farewells. Bernie passed Charlie a piece of paper, motioning to him to read the words, duly inviting Charlie to visit them in Canada one day, along with another piece of paper displaying their home address. Charlie was visibly moved by such a kind gesture and felt compelled to give both Carla and Bernie a hug before saying his goodbyes and wishing them a safe and happy time throughout the continuation of their journey.

Leaving the mess, he returned to his cabin, as he had to wait there until the Immigration Officer had been to check and stamp his passport. Charlie left the door open and sat on the sofa fidgeting as the minutes passed by. Even though it hadn't actually been that long, it felt like an eternity to an excited Charlie. He felt like he knew every mark, scratch, or tiny pinhole on the furniture and walls as he looked for something to occupy his mind while he waited.

Soon, Charlie heard a knock, and standing in the doorway was a very official looking gentleman... the immigration officer, who greeted Charlie and asked to see his passport. Being prepared, Charlie held out his passport to the official who by this time had entered the cabin and met him halfway across the room. He was quick to check his documents and asked the purpose for his visit, to which Charlie explained that he was on his way to the town of Villejacques.

"Ahh, Villejacques. I know that town very well as I have relatives there," explained the immigration officer.

Charlie noticed that he had now stopped looking at the passport in his hand and looked as though he had drifted off to a time of fond memories.

"Are you okay sir?" he asked apologetically.

The official smiled reassuringly and began to recount a fond memory of the first time that he visited a little patisserie shop in the town. He told Charlie of an almost magical experience he had encountered, tasting the most exquisite of pastries while there.

Pausing momentarily in thought, and lifting his gaze to meet Charlie's, he continued by saying, "It was owned by a gentleman whose first name was Montaine. I have longed to return, but sadly, with work commitments, I have not found the time. Maybe one day I will visit again. After all, I do have to visit the family, too, once in a while," stated the official with a slight grin.

Now returning his attention to his job, he stamped Charlie's passport and handed it back. Before leaving the cabin, he recommended that Charlie visit that little shop, if he could, before he turned and continued on his way.

Intrigued by the suggestion, Charlie returned his passport to the safety of the backpack and once more made certain that everything was fastened. He then slipped an arm through one of the straps and swung it onto his shoulder. "Yay," he quietly said out loud. "Now onto the next adventure." Leaving the cabin, he made his way to the gangway ready to disembark the ship. Standing there, looking a little anxious, was the captain who was waiting for the "all clear" from immigration before allowing passengers and crew to go ashore. It seemed that the captain also had a tradition where he bid farewell to every passenger that left his ship. There was also another reason for the captain's presence and that was to take delivery of his personal supply of roasted coffee beans, which came from a small supplier near his home town. Every few weeks he would request a fresh delivery and personally collect it from the dockside, securing it safely in his cabin.

The captain received the "all clear" over the radio and the gangway was opened. Like a shot, he was scurrying off down the gangway to greet his coffee delivery man who had been patiently waiting to hand over the valuable package... valuable not in monetary terms, although it was not cheap to courier this package, but valuable more in sentimental terms. Package signed for and safely in his hands, the captain was now free to bid farewell to the departing passengers from the end of the gangway.

Charlie looked up at the sun peering through the clouds every so often and realised it was now nearing mid morning. Keen to get on his way, backpack over his shoulder, he briskly made his way down the narrow metal gangway and towards the waiting captain.

"So, my young friend, it's been a pleasure to have you travel with us, even if for only a day or so. My crew commented on how inquisitive you have been and how eager you were to learn, and so I would like to offer you my contact details. If you ever wish to travel with us again, please do not hesitate to get in touch," the captain said to Charlie, with a warm hearted, seafaring smile.

"Thank you, Captain Macrina. I had a lovely time on your ship and will absolutely be in touch at some point," Charlie replied. He then continued to say that he'd had a thoroughly memorable time on board whilst firmly shaking the captain's hand.

Ready for the next adventure, Charlie merrily set off to locate the train station to make his way to Villejacques.

The Port of Frausseilles was not as busy as the last port that Charlie was in, but nevertheless, it was still impressive. "Perhaps it is just not a busy day for deliveries," he concluded.

Standing still for a brief moment, he could see that the dock workers were already busy off-loading cargo from the Pierre Tristran. Next would come the repositioning of the cargo that would remain on board before the final loading of new cargo bound for other destinations. Charlie watched and marvelled at the precision with which the machinery was navigated, each piece being operated seamlessly to get the job done. He thought he would love to find out more about the workings of a cargo ship one day, perhaps even spending more time on board one.

"Who knows just what the future holds," pondered Charlie, as he walked towards the port exit.

While standing at the exit looking for some indication as to which direction to take, the chief engineer walked past. Seeing Charlie's confusion, he sighed, then stopped to ask if he needed any help. In his gruff manner he let him know which streets to take, and then headed off, continuing on his way, his body language quite clearly conveying a message of, "Don't talk to me."

While watching the Chief Engineer walk away, Charlie came to the conclusion that he must always be in a grumpy mood. "Perhaps he was born grumpy," Charlie surmised. "Right, station it is," Charlie muttered to himself and set off in the direction that had been offered just moments ago.

The town of Frausseilles was a small market town... very picturesque, but a little behind the times when it came to its architecture Charlie observed, as he made his way through the streets. It was alive with locals going about their business, the one thing standing out above all else being the small food businesses he passed and the myriad of street cafes, all of which seemed full, even at that time of the day. This truly was a town that took its food culture very seriously, Charlie concluded.

Eventually, he arrived at the town's small train station and made his way through the grand entrance towards the ticket counter. While standing in the small queue, Charlie reached into his

backpack and pulled out the piece of paper which his father had given him, and read the address. "12 Rue de Muniers, Villejacques, France." Charlie was none the wiser as to why his father had wanted him to visit this person and deliver the letter he had been entrusted with, but he thought, "What better way to start an adventure?"

After a short wait, a ticket window became free and Charlie was called over. Upon approaching the window, piece of paper in hand in case it was needed, he quickly asked the person behind the counter whether they spoke English. To Charlie's relief the reply came back, "Yes, young sir, I do."

Charlie smiled and promptly asked for a one-way ticket to Villejacques.

"Ahh, Villejacques," came the response. "Did you know that it is famous for its patisserie, and rumour has it that there are two very fine patisseries there," continued the staff member.

Charlie cheerfully replied, "I do very much enjoy pastries, and I will have to visit these two little shops if I can find them." With that, Charlie purchased a ticket, and the lady pointed him in the direction of the platform. Thanking her, he made his way to the platform, putting both the purchased ticket and piece of paper back into the side pocket of his backpack. Not needing to rush, as the train was not due to leave for at least another hour, he slowly made his way in the direction she had pointed listening to groups of gathered people. He admired the way the French accent flowed so eloquently to his hearing, the words seemly flowing together with such grace. The staff member had also explained to Charlie that, as this was the end of the line, the train would need to be cleaned and prepared for departure before any passengers would be permitted to board.

Once at the platform, he found an empty bench that he could sit on and placed his backpack on the ground next to him. He decided to continue writing in his journal, removing it from the safety of the side pocket. Charlie opened it to the last page of his previous entry and began to write. Not only did Charlie want this journal to be a memory of his travels, but he also wanted it to be a record of the many flavours and tastes he experienced along the way. The inscription inside left by his father, and the beautiful memories of cooking, had inspired him to follow his dreams. As one of these dreams was to learn more about fine pastries, he had decided it was important to keep a written record of these experiences as well.

Time passed quite quickly as he filled pages of his journal, until the train rattled into Frausseilles bringing Charlie back into the here and now. Smoothly and with some haste, passengers who had travelled to Frausseilles, alighted from the train and continued their onward journey. A small group of cleaners, the new driver, and conductor quickly boarded to make ready for a prompt turnaround. Time seemed to vanish as Charlie became mesmerised watching the efficient flow of the cleaning staff preparing the train for departure, so he was suddenly startled when an announcement came over the speaker that boarding was now possible. He sniggered to himself as he watched as some of the passengers suddenly sprang into action, grabbing their various belongings, whether they be a bag or several suitcases, and pushed to board the train. It seemed very chaotic to Charlie who assumed these people didn't want to be left without a seat for the journey ahead. Charlie, more relaxed, waited with the last few for the rush to ease, and glanced over his shoulder to reveal a small group of other passengers shaking their heads in dismay at the behaviour of some. Once the chaos had subsided, he grabbed his backpack, and putting one strap on his shoulder, made his way to one of the open carriage doors.

Charlie climbed the little step up into Carriage-D and shuffled down the aisle to see if there were any remaining seats all the while having to quickly jump to the side as there were still passengers barging past, scurrying to grab the few remaining seats. Charlie luckily found a place

to stand in the carriage entrance by the opposite door, pulling down the window in preparation to watch the world zoom past. "Ahh, peace," he sighed to himself.

Soon, all the passengers were on the train, and Charlie could hear the banging of carriage doors being closed along the length of the train. All suddenly went quiet... then a loud whistle, and the train jerked forward. Pulling out of the station, little could be seen of the passing scenery as being an old fashioned steam engine much of the view was masked by clouds of steam billowing from the straining locomotive engine.

Before long, Charlie felt the train stop struggling to get all the carriages moving and ease into a more fluid and smooth motion. He gazed out of the carriage window, the passing scenery soon changing from grey lifeless buildings to fields and meadows full of colour. Charlie thought the carriage was rather full, as he was not the only person standing in the entrance, which explained the earlier pushing for a place as he recalled the prior chaos.

Suddenly, a loud sound vibrated through the crowd as the conductor called for tickets as he moved throughout the carriage. To Charlie's surprise, he spoke in both French and English. As the conductor was now in close proximity, he reached around to get his ticket from the side pocket where he had placed it earlier for safe keeping. Fumbling, he grabbed what he thought was the ticket and pulled, only to realise that it was the first train ticket that he had purchased, along with an assortment of other important papers. To make matters worse, all of these papers now scattered in all directions, blown by the wind as it whistled in through the train window.

In sheer panic, Charlie quickly bent down to try and recover not only his current train ticket, which could be anywhere, but also to rescue the other pieces of important paper. Amongst them were the addresses of not only Carla and Bernie Waters, but also of Monsieur Luc. Charlie let out a short scream as he realised the dilemma he now faced. Frantically, he manoeuvred around his fellow passengers who were not only standing in the entrance way of the carriage but also those few passengers who were standing in the aisle itself. Charlie found himself having to crouch low and move around people, almost in a harmonised dance with the rocking motion of the train as his partner. Moving bodies and shuffling feet, all being repositioned to counteract the movement of the train, did not make Charlie's task any easier.

In his haste to recover the items lost from his backpack, Charlie could not help but to bump into a few of his fellow passengers. Most were unresponsive to his predicament, not bothering to be particularly helpful in aiding Charlie, with a few noticeable mutterings in French filling the air. Charlie thought it was probably a good thing that he wasn't able to understand what was being said, although the looks that they gave him said enough.

Finally, after scrabbling sufficiently to recover all but one of the items, Charlie was about to grab hold of the final, but elusive piece of paper, when he was suddenly and abruptly stopped in his tracks by a big black boot. Looking up, Charlie was confronted by the rather stern looking face of the train's conductor, who demanded to know just what was going on, firstly in his native tongue and then in English.

"Now young man, just what are you doing causing all of this turmoil?" demanded the conductor.

"I'm sorry, sir. The draft from the window blew away my ticket and pieces of paper," Charlie answered, feeling rather unsettled in that moment, his voice slightly quivering.

Not yet satisfied, the conductor continued to question Charlie, standing over him in a rather intimidating manner, and demanding to know just who had opened the window in the first place.

Charlie was quick to admit that he had been the one to open the window, having been taught the importance of honesty, and well, he also knew the conductor had seen that it was Charlie that

had caused the disturbance. In an abrupt fashion, he pointed furiously to the sign above the window, which clearly stated that the window should not be opened while the train was in motion. Admittedly, the sign was in French, but Charlie thought better than to point that out, choosing to apologize, not wanting to cause any further trouble. Finally, the conductor, now satisfied that he had made his point, asked Charlie to produce his ticket.

"Ticket, oh, no, my ticket," Charlie quivered, frozen with anxiety, his breathing hastening. In all the confusion and mayhem, he was not sure where his ticket was! Then, out of nowhere, a hand appeared through the sea of passengers.

"Is this what you are looking for?" a female voice asked. Charlie grabbed the ticket, for fear it may disappear a further time, and showed it to the conductor.

"You're lucky then," Charlie heard the conductor say, distracted as he was trying to see who the female voice belonged to. "Here, take your ticket back and read the signs in the future," the conductor said in a harsh tone, tapping Charlie on the shoulder.

Charlie turned to acknowledge the return of his now stamped ticket and apologised once again. "Very well," responded the conductor as he continued on to inspect the remaining passenger's tickets in the carriage.

That situation over and the carriage returning to normal after all the disarray, Charlie took a deep breath and calmed himself. Once settled, he again tried to discover just who the owner of the female voice was. Trying to look through the gaps between the standing passengers, Charlie suddenly heard the voice again.

"Are you looking for me?" said the voice.

"I'm not sure. Are you the owner of the talking hand?" Charlie chuckled.

"Excuse me!" came the response from the faceless voice.

Charlie was not quite sure how to reply and was still feeling a little nervy, so he quickly thanked the faceless voice for saving his ticket and returned to where he had first been standing by a now closed carriage window.

Again, quietly staring out of the window at the passing scenery, Charlie wondered just how much longer before the train would arrive at Villejacques. Looking at his watch, he realized it was already past lunch time. He giggled as his stomach rumbled loudly. "If only I had another of my mom's travelling sandwiches," he thought to himself.

Several stations had come and gone, and it seemed like more passengers were getting on than off, filling the train even more. "Now I know how sardines feel," whispered Charlie under his breath when suddenly another voice piped up in a very soft French accent

"Oh, yes, sardines, marinated in a little virgin olive oil with some finely chopped onion, shavings of fennel, crushed garlic, a bay leaf, and some chopped tomatoes for about an hour. Then removed from the marinade and lightly grilled, making the skin a little crispy, with just a hint of smokiness with the flesh moist and tender. Then you take the marinade and lightly sauté until the fennel is soft. Then you carefully spoon the fennel onto a warm plate, and finally add the sardines ... c'est magnifique."

Charlie's hunger had now grown exponentially, and his mouth watered at the description... but again he was not sure just who was speaking. The one thing for certain was that whomever had just spoken truly had a passion for food.

The train began to slow once more and several passengers were saying, "Excusez-moi," in French tones as they made their way through a wall of passengers towards the exits. As the train began to slow into the station, he was able to catch a glimpse of the sign on the platform which read "Villejacques."

“Finally,” Charlie thought, for any further descriptions of food like the one he had just heard, and he was certain he would faint with hunger. As the train slowed and came to a halt, the carriage door flung open, and eager passengers clambered to disembark from of the train.

“After you,” said the female voice that Charlie recognised and whom had rescued his train ticket, and himself, from a world of further embarrassment.

He smiled, but as he was raised to be a gentleman, he promptly responded, “Thank you, but please, you first,” gesturing towards the open door. The female passenger thanked Charlie and made her way off the train, quickly followed by Charlie. He wondered whether she was local, and if so, knew the way to Rue de Muniers.

“Excuse me, madame,” said Charlie, “but do you know the way to this street?” As Charlie, very carefully this time, pulled out the piece of paper with the address on it and showed it to the petit lady that stood before him.

“Ah, yes, I know that street, and more importantly, I know Monsieur Luc, too... a bit of a celebrity in this town,” came the reply. With an air of eminence she then proceeded to explain to Charlie the best route to take.

Once she had finished with her directions, Charlie gratefully thanked her, then said, “My name is Charlie.”

The female replied, “Bonjour, Charlie. My name is Claire,” which left Charlie momentarily silent as he was captured by her soft, yet mildly clipped, French tone.

Charlie quickly gathering his words again, thanked Claire for her help earlier on the train, as well. They both had a little chortle over the sternness of the conductor. Claire then, quickly composing herself, brushed her shiny black hair neatly behind her ears, nodded, and was off.

Charlie headed in the direction that Claire had given him, turning from the concourse onto a small cobbled street. He felt instantly that he had stepped back in time as he gazed at the small old style shop fronts along the narrow street. The air was full of delicious smells, reminding him of his hunger. He couldn't help but to stop and look into the windows of most of the shops that he passed. It was now, he realized, that although the outside looked old worldly, the inside of most of the shops had beautiful modern architecture.

The other thing that became prevalent was most seemed to be selling some type of food. It seemed to Charlie that if they were not food outlets, then they were small bistros or cafes. The air was full of the most exquisite aromas, and there were so many Charlie couldn't pick them apart, deciding in the end to just take them in and savour the moment. It had quickly dawned on Charlie just how important food was in this region that he had travelled to. He was now getting more and more excited about his journey and wanted to explore the town further. Then, remembering the 20 franc note that Carla had kindly given him, he rushed into the next inviting bistro to stifle his still lingering hunger.

A quick bite to eat, and then on to the task his father had set him. He settled on a croque monsieur, a lightly toasted ham and cheese sandwich with cheese melting to perfection over the entire sandwich. What seemed like a simple snack was a taste sensation. Feeling now full and content, Charlie decided it was time to get back on route to deliver the letter entrusted to him. It was curious, Charlie thought, that in all these years his father had not once mentioned Monsieur Luc, or not that he could remember anyway. But he was so adamant that Charlie visit him first, before he travelled anywhere else. “The plot thickens,” Charlie thought as he chuckled to himself.

All the thinking, combined with the most amazing smells, had distracted Charlie, and he had not realised that he had already turned on to Rue de Muniers.



“Now I wonder where number 12 is,” Charlie thought. Looking up at the decorative number on the shop before him, he realised that he was not far from the letter's final destination. Moments later, Charlie arrived outside number 12. Standing there for a moment, he examined the shop front. It had a large front window, a solid shop door, and a sign above which simply had two initials, "ML," written in white on a black background. Looking through the glass shop window left Charlie mesmerised by the delicacies that were elegantly displayed. Charlie pondered on whether they were even edible as they looked so exquisite. Having gazed in awe for several minutes, Charlie decided to remove the letter from his backpack before entering the shop.

He placed his bag on the cobbled street momentarily in order to retrieve the letter, not wanting a repeat event as on the train. Then, swinging his backpack onto his shoulder, he firmly pushed open the solid door to the shop. Inside it was beautifully clean and very modern looking, which was quite a contrast to the building's exterior. Along the length of one wall was the display cabinet. This was made up of varying sized boxes, some large, some small, all stacked together.

Each box had been placed in such a way that in itself it looked like a piece of contemporary art. Each of the individual boxes then played host to an equally impressive patisserie creation. Turning around to face the serving counter, Charlie was presented with the longest chilled display case that he had ever seen. Inside were what looked like miniature pieces of modern art. Charlie stood there in total disbelief that something so beautiful could also be edible. He quickly skimmed over the descriptions neatly written on perfectly sculptured cards, describing each of the flavours within each work of art. Charlie was now salivating at the thought of biting into one and spent some moments trying to convince himself that he was not dreaming. “I should pinch myself,” Charlie thought, just to make sure. “Maybe I should,” Charlie mumbled.

“Should what?” came a reply as Charlie had obviously been thinking out loud again. Greeting the woman that was standing behind the counter, Charlie explained that he had never seen edible works of art such as these before and that he wanted to pinch himself to check that he was not dreaming.

“Let me help,” replied the woman behind the counter, a wide smile spreading over her face as she leant across and pinched Charlie's arm quite firmly.

“Ouch,” said Charlie as they both began to laugh. As the laughter abated, the woman confirmed that he was not, in fact, dreaming, and then asked how she could be of service.

“I have a letter that my father asked me to deliver to Monsieur Luc,” Charlie replied. The woman suggested that Charlie wait there for a moment while she went to see if he was available.

Several minutes passed before the woman returned, followed closely by a gentleman whom Charlie assumed must be Monsieur Luc. He was quite tall and of slender build with just a hint of over indulgence in fine food. He had deep blue eyes and short, slightly wavy brown hair. He introduced himself as Monsieur Luc, a curious expression on his face as he enquired as to who Charlie was.

Charlie started to explain that his father, Terrence Warner, had asked him to deliver a letter. Monsieur Luc looked taken aback and went quiet for a moment, before asking, in a hesitant tone, to see the letter. Charlie passed the letter to Monsieur Luc, who hurriedly walked back in the direction that he had first appeared.

Charlie stood bewildered for a moment, not quite sure whether he should stay or go. The woman who Charlie had first encountered was now also quiet as she stood there. Gone was the cheekiness and laughter, which was replaced by a look of sadness as if something very dear had been lost.

Charlie decided to walk around the shop once more, taking a mental note of all the flavour combinations. No, surely not; he wasn't ever going to leave! he thought to himself. Plus a pondering of growing curiosity within him as to the letters content.

Monsieur Luc reappeared after quite some time and asked Charlie to follow him, leading him beyond the busy shopfront to where they could speak in more private surroundings. They walked down a long corridor, one side brick with the occasional door, the other one long glass wall looking out upon the most amazing kitchen. Monsieur Luc and Charlie then walked through a small office door, where Charlie was offered a seat.

“So my boy, you must be very curious about this letter and the reason behind it. Well, let me explain a little. I knew your father many, many years ago and he has asked me to become your mentor. He has asked me to train you to become a patissier like myself. Normally my boy, I would not consider such a thing, as I no longer take on apprentices. However, I owe your father a great debt, and so after much thought and consideration, I will agree to take you on!”

Monsieur Luc then asked Charlie if this was something that he would like to do, and how he felt about this, as there must have been a look of confusion on his face. Charlie was in fact left speechless... mouth wide open and unable to utter a coherent word. It took several minutes for Charlie to regain his composure, closing his mouth and cautiously accepting the offer. Seeing the confusion, Monsieur Luc again asked Charlie if this was what he would like. Charlie was not sure how to respond as this had come as a huge surprise. Just moments earlier, he was wondering the beautifully cobbled streets with only a letter and many delightful smells guiding him. Now he sat before a master patissier, being offered an opportunity of a lifetime, but his mind filled with so many questions. What kind of debt could this man owe his father, and how did they know each other.

“Why don't you sleep on it my boy, and give me your answer in the morning?” Monsieur Luc warmly suggested. As they both stood, he reached out to shake Charlie's hand, saying that no matter what he decided it was a great honour to meet him. He continued on to explain that there was an empty flat on the top floor that Charlie could use that night while he contemplated his decision.

With a nod from Charlie, Monsieur Luc gestured for him to follow, both men still in a state of some what shock over just what had occurred. They made their way back down the corridor, stopping about halfway to walk through a door which led them to stairs, which they proceeded to climb. Four floors later found them standing at the doorway to the small flat. Fumbling to find the correct key amongst many, he eventually came upon it, turning it within the lock and pushing open the door. Looking around, Monsieur Luc explained that the flat had not been used much lately and so was in need of a cleaning. He continued by telling Charlie that there were bed linens in the cupboard, plenty of hot water, and that the appliances in the small kitchenette should work just fine.

Monsieur Luc paused to study Charlie, commenting thoughtfully on how amazed he was at the resemblance he bore to his father at his age. Feeling overwhelmed by the events of the past hour, he departed for the evening, handing Charlie some keys... one for the flat door and a second for the shops side entrance, suggesting Charlie get a good night's rest and that when his decision was made, he could speak with him in the morning.

Before Charlie could say thank you to Monsieur Luc, he swiftly left the flat and closed the door behind him, leaving Charlie a little bewildered standing there alone. After collecting his thoughts for a moment, Charlie decided to waste no more time and to make himself at home. He looked around and realised that Monsieur Luc had not been joking when he said that the flat did

require some cleaning. Charlie thought this would at least keep him occupied for the rest of the evening and set about the task in hand. Perhaps it would even give him time to think about the events of the day and to come to a decision.

He found the distraction of cleaning cleared his mind and invigorated him. Charlie cleaned everything that evening, nothing was left untouched, and by the time he had finished, he thought Monsieur Luc would not recognise the place. It was now late in the evening and in Charlie's excitement (yes, Charlie did find cleaning exciting), he had forgotten to eat! Not speaking French, he thought it best to stay indoors, but he was feeling a little peckish. Being the slightly cheeky chappy that he was, he decided to sneak downstairs to the kitchen as he was certain everyone had left for the evening. Quietly making his way down the wooden stairs, he arrived in the darkened kitchen. There was just a hint of a light coming from the office, which was just enough light for Charlie to see his way around. He paused for a moment, trying to listen for any noise and was convinced that he was all alone. He walked over to the fridges, opened the door just enough, and peeked in hoping to find something to eat. It was several fridges later when he finally found some pastries. He reached in and picked out two different cakes that he hoped would not be missed. Quickly, he closed the fridge door behind him, turned, then bumped into one of the many storage racks, knocking loose something that fell to the ground. Charlie held his breath as it hit the floor, making a small sound. He heard a voice mutter something in French, coming from the direction of the office, and as he froze, the door was flung open and Monsieur Luc made an appearance. "Is everything okay, my boy?" he enquired, as a nervous Charlie held out his hand to reveal the evidence. Quickly, Charlie explained that he was hungry and not being able to speak any French, was left with little choice. He was extremely apologetic, which was met by a broad smile from Monsieur Luc. He reassured Charlie that it was okay on this occasion, but not to make it a habit. He himself then apologised to Charlie for not realising this in the first place and making sure he had at least some food to eat. They agreed to keep this to themselves and both smiled back to each other. Monsieur Luc then suggested to Charlie that he might like to phone home to let his parents know that he was safe. He offered Charlie the use of the office phone, declaring that he had better head off home or he would be in trouble himself. Before leaving, as Charlie could not speak any French, Monsieur Luc placed the call for him as international calls had to go through the telephone exchange. Call placed, he handed the receiver to Charlie and bid him a good night, asking him to make sure that all the lights were turned off when he had finished.

Charlie spoke briefly to his mother, as his father was already sleeping, and reassured her that he was just fine. He chatted for a while, explaining about his journey so far and how kind Monsieur Luc had been. His mother soon suggested that he go and rest as he had a decision to make by the morning, and a clear head was required for moments like those. They said their farewells, and the call was ended. Charlie sat there for a few moments, thinking about his parents, how loving and supportive they were, yet never stopped him or interfered, always allowing him to find his own way. His moment of reflection was interrupted by sounds coming from the direction of his belly. He picked up the cakes, made certain that the lights were all turned off, and returned to the small flat at the top of the shop.

Back in the flat, he quickly settled his peckishness, bought his journal up to date, set the alarm on his watch, then to bed to sleep on the dilemma that lay before him... which is exactly what he did!

## Chapter Four - Charlie's Apprenticeship

Charlie's daughters storytelling was interrupted by one of her children's constant fidgeting. Claire noticing asked if everything was okay, to be informed that one of her grandchildren needed the toilet, which was followed by cries of, "me, too" from the other children. Claire then looked at her husband, who by now was drifting, caught in memories of his past, asked if he too required a break.

Opening his eyes he turned and sheepishly nodded, too. "Okay, you lot, go do what you have to and we'll continue once you are all back," suggested Charlie's daughter as her gaze ended at her father, who lovingly smiled back.

As everyone got up to leave the room, Claire offered to make some more hot drinks for people and was met by a unanimous shout of, "Yes, please, Gran," as she then ventured off into the kitchen. About ten minutes or so then passed, and grandchildren were making their way back into the lounge to once again make themselves comfy, ready for more of Grandpa's story. Finally, Charlie arrived back in the room and settled back into his armchair. Claire had returned with fresh mugs of hot chocolate and yet more cakes, checking that everyone had washed their hands, to which she was answered by a sea of nodding heads. Satisfied that the room was once more settled, Charlie's daughter continued with the story.

It was still dark outside when Charlie woke. He lay there in bed, feeling a little disoriented at first, until he had shaken himself awake. Then, as he looked around the small apartment it all came back to him... the offer of apprenticeship, Monsieur Luc... the letter... his father. A broad smile spread across Charlie's face as he realised how excited he felt about the offer. Perhaps if he accepted the offer all of his questions would be answered. How did his father and Monsieur Luc know each other? What kind of debt did he owe that would warrant such a generous offer?

Charlie knew he had reached his decision. "I will accept," he thought with enthusiasm as he rolled over to turn off his alarm before it sounded. Too excited now to lay there any longer, he jumped out of bed and ventured into the small cosy bathroom. Charlie was not in there long but long enough to be cleaned and refreshed. He still had another hour or so to wait until he was supposed to be downstairs and so wondered what he should do. He was tempted to take a sneaky peek downstairs, something that he seriously contemplated, but in the end chose to be patient.

In the corner of the lounge area was a small table with two high backed chairs and a cosy little sofa under the large window. The view out of which was spectacular, if you could contort your neck in such a manner to appreciate it. Still, it was nice to have the window open to listen to the morning chorus of the birds and to watch the street slowly come alive as the townsfolk began their working day. Charlie spent his time thinking about just why his dad had sent him to meet Monsieur Luc. He was thinking of the offer he was about to undertake and then recalling the enjoyment of spending endless hours with his father in the kitchen back home. But they never produced anything as beautiful as the offering Charlie had seen in the shop when he arrived the previous day. Why did Monsieur Luc agree to take Charlie on as a student so quickly in the first place? What was in that letter he had handed over? So many questions now raced through his mind, he was starting to develop a headache!

The time soon approached for Charlie to make his way downstairs, and it was now that the excitement started to mix with a little bit of nerves. His heart raced and his mind began to jumble with a mix of doubts. "Was this really the right decision?" he questioned. He couldn't delay this moment any longer. He took in a deep breath and exhaled all the nervous energy that was coursing through his body. This was a little trick his mother had taught him, and now feeling

much calmer, he ventured downstairs. He tried to brush off the thoughts as to why he had been sent there. After all just who was Monsieur Luc anyway? he thought.

Now downstairs and standing in the office once more, Charlie felt uneasy, as if he were a naughty schoolboy waiting on the arrival of the headmaster. Finally, Monsieur Luc appeared, dressed in his chef's whites that looked so bright, crisp, and clean. He greeted Charlie and enquired as to how he had slept, but before Charlie could respond, he continued by apologising for the mess in the flat.

Now seated in his large office chair, Monsieur Luc asked Charlie whether he had reached a decision. After a short pause, Charlie replied by saying that he had, and if it wasn't an imposition, he would very much like to accept the generous offer. With a look of pleasure on his face, Monsieur Luc extended his hand which was met by Charlie's, and with a firm grip he was welcomed to the team. He then promised Charlie that he would get Madame Luc to clean the flat for him later that day. Charlie happily replied that he had cleaned it the previous night before he had gone to bed, having managed to locate all the cleaning products that he needed under the sink. A stunned Monsieur Luc recoiled in his seat at Charlie's admission, though secretly he was a little relieved as he really didn't fancy the idea of asking Madame Luc.

Monsieur Luc then began to outline what Charlie would learn while under his tutorage, informing him that from now onwards he must call him Chef Luc, as this was the etiquette for any kitchen. He then went on to explain that it's the foundations and the basics that really make the difference from being a fine cook to the best patisserie around. It would be these basic tenants, or principles, that he would first spend much of his time learning before being taught anything further. He proceeded to talk to Charlie about the history of patisserie back several centuries to the noble houses where fine pastries were first developed. All the time, Charlie was drinking in the words of Chef Luc as the way he spoke reminded him of his father. But Chef Luc had a more tangible passion oozing out of his heart when he spoke. After several hours of constant talking, Chef Luc finally stopped, rose out of his chair, walked over to a cupboard and opened the door. After much searching, he pulled out a new uniform for Charlie. He ceremoniously handed it to his new apprentice and then explained that once Charlie put this uniform on, his life would be forever changed. Chef Luc asked whether Charlie was ready to change. He instructed Charlie that once he changed into his new uniform, he should join him back in the kitchen where they would officially start his apprentice. Charlie now felt settled in his decision after all he'd heard Chef Luc say. The previous nerves were now gone with only an excitement left at what lay ahead.

Charlie left the office without speaking, but heard a mumbled, "He's just like his father," from behind him.

He pondered on why chef had said that. What had been the connection between them? The thought slowly faded as he arrived back at the small apartment. In a flash, Charlie was changed. Now standing there in his new whites, he began to feel different inside. Just like a light switch being turned on. How could I feel this way? he thought as he eagerly made his way back downstairs and headed toward the kitchen. As Charlie entered the room, Chef Luc was quick to comment on how smart and clean Charlie appeared, adding he wondered just how long that would remain the case. Charlie looked down at himself and felt proud to be wearing his new uniform. He declared that it would remain pristine from the moment it was put on until the moment it was taken off, adding hastily, and with a cheeky grin, that he could not be held responsible for its cleanliness once he was not wearing it though. Laughter and a shared sense of anticipation filtered through the air as the two men embarked on this new journey together.

Hearing the commotion now coming from the back kitchen, Madame Luc came bursting through the doorway, demanding to know just what all the noise was about. She had barely entered the room when she was stopped in her tracks, her mouth slightly open.

"Oh, my goodness," she was heard to say. As quickly as she had entered the kitchen, she had turned on her heels and left in somewhat of a fluster. With a look of confusion, Charlie turned to Chef Luc and asked why Madame Luc had reacted that way. Chef Luc answered by telling Charlie that they, and Charlie's father, had all been good friends a very long time ago when they were not much older than Charlie was now. He continued to say that it was a long story and better left for another time.

"Now is the moment to start your training to become a fine patissier," Chef Luc said, pointing to Charlie's whites. Charlie nodded in agreement and suggested, with a broad smile on his face, that they begin.

The remainder of the day was spent with Chef Luc discussing what he considered to be the foundation of fine patisserie work, emphasising there was nothing more valuable than experience when it came to developing fine patisserie. Charlie, taking in all that Chef Luc had just said, posed the question as to where did that experience come from? Did it come from working in pastry kitchens for many years? Did it come from studying pastry in school?

Chef Luc contemplated the question for a moment before continuing by explaining that working and reading would not, by itself, be enough to produce the finest patisserie. He explained that you have to combine that knowledge with practical experience and also learning achieved by working with your peers. All the time never forgetting the foundations of patisserie, which Chef Luc liked to call the, "Four Cornerstones of Patisserie."

One of the cornerstones of fine patisserie, Chef Luc explained, was to constantly absorb information, to have a curiosity as to what other patissiers were doing. Experience and constantly test the recipes of others. Read as much as you could, all the time testing and refining the recipe.

Chef Luc stated that he interpreted things according to his taste. From that, and on rare occasions, there might arise an original idea. Although he stressed the point that those times were somewhat of a rarity. "Not everything," Chef Luc explained, "could be new or have never been seen before, but everything had to start somewhere." From this basic principle the creative process would begin and then expand out... from seeing a dish in your mind, to working out the different ingredients and components, to finally producing it. "That first part," he explained, "could be quite simple, however to turn that part into the finished masterpiece, now that was where the creativity really came in."

Chef Luc continued to explain that the creative process started with the brain, which was usually swimming with ideas. Those ideas arose from a compilation of all the learning you had undergone throughout the years, both knowledge based and practical experience. Then, within the brain, you create a mind map of tastes, flavours, textures, and temperatures, etc. The mind of a patissier was constantly ticking over... always looking for something new, but to get to that stage would take many many years of experience. Even then it does not mean that every idea or creation will work, yet nothing is ever wasted, as bad pastry is just another experience or another way of not doing something.

Charlie listened intently to every word that Chef Luc spoke, and after a short pause asked, "What would start the process of creating something new in the first place?"

Chef Luc thought for a moment, answering that the inspiration may come from just a single beautiful ingredient that you are curious about. Or something that you saw another patissier use, or perhaps speak about, even something that you may never have come across before. Then

maybe it could come from a new method or technique other than what you had used before. Or perhaps even a familiar dish that you decided to create in a different way.

He then went on to say that it was good to start with a small picture in your mind of something you would like to see. Something pleasing to the eye, which was an approach that he had developed over many years to create heavenly pastries. Then you worked through your mind map of ingredients and flavours for the right combinations, “Using your imagination and opening your mind,” Chef Luc added.

Charlie relaxed back into the chair which, until a moment ago, had seen him leaning forward attentively, totally entranced by the words of Chef Luc. He thought deeply, soaking in the experience and wisdom that seemed to spill from his mentor.

“Is it also acceptable to work with tried and tested recipes Chef Luc, the recipes of other patissiers?” Charlie enquired.

Chef Luc pondered on this question, taking a moment to appreciate Charlie’s obvious delight in the conversation so far. “Yes, Charlie,” he replied. “This is all part of the learning process, but it is not a pattern that you want to repeat to the point that it restricts your creativity as a chef. It is a tool that you can utilise to expand your mind map; for then you must develop your own distinct style based on the principles you have learned. It is this capacity to exhibit your creative ability, Charlie, that distinguishes a great patissier and makes him stand out from his peers.”

The passion and truth of Chef Luc’s words left an imprint on Charlie’s heart. He was pleased with himself that he understood without question the knowledge he was being gifted and pleased also that it gave him so much pleasure to do so. “I feel like a child unearthing a treasure chest,” Charlie thought to himself. “I feel that same sense of mystery, and sweet anticipation of something magical.”

“You know Charlie,” Chef Luc continued, after a moments' hesitation, “for those that manage to develop their own unique style within this craft, they truly possess the opportunity for greatness. For those that can become the source of some new technique, or perhaps develop a totally new and unique creation, a food sensation, they truly can reach great heights. It is the passion Charlie that drives inspiration, and from this a patissier may take a slightly different approach, or just dare to perceive his creation a little differently. From un-revolutionary thoughts may come the greatest achievements.”

Chef Luc’s gaze changed, and now he looked directly into Charlie’s eyes. With a firm tone to his voice, he stated that he wanted to make absolutely certain Charlie knew and understood at least most aspects of what it takes to create the finest patisserie! He wanted to be certain himself before they began Charlie’s apprenticeship.

Charlie took a moment to think, then confirmed to Chef Luc that he did understand, at least the basics, now. He also added that he understood about creating his own mind map, style, and creativity, and that the most important quality before all else was to be respectful... respectful of the ingredients, to your surroundings, and to your equipment and utensils. Then, and only then, could you think of flavour, texture, temperature, and contrast.

Chef Luc attempted to hide the corner of his mouth from giving away a smile before patting Charlie on the back. He showed his delight by acknowledging that Charlie was correct and that he was beginning to understand. With a look of gratitude on his face, Chef Luc said that customers were going to come to taste what was a labour of love, and that there was nothing more personal than that. “We should, therefore, always be humbled by this and remember the trust that our customers have in us, which needs to be respected,” Chef Luc said.

The rest of the day was spent with Chef Luc discussing how important flavours, textures, temperature, and contrast were to the patissier. He explained that flavour is probably the first most important starting point for any patisserie's work. Without having flavour, a patissier's work would be pointless. He explained that the first question he would need to ask himself when creating something would be, "Does it have flavour?" Chef Luc continued to say that as a patissier you have to get inspired by flavours, whether it was from a seasonal fruit or a high quality chocolate. Without flavour, mastering the basic techniques became pointless. He finished by emphasising that the finest patisserie is only as memorable as the flavour of the main ingredient.

Charlie listened intensely to every word, becoming more and more mesmerised by Chef Luc's passion for his craft. In Charlie's eagerness he asked what Chef Luc thought was the place to start when developing a new creation? Without delay, Chef Luc responded by stating that the place to start was taste. Always taste, taste, taste, and taste some more. Taste the main ingredients first that you are hoping to use. That is when you begin to learn and to develop your palate and add to your mind map. Seeking further clarity, Charlie asked Chef Luc just how did he know what to add to the main ingredients?

Chef Luc began answering the question by saying that the way you start is to, "Taste the main ingredient first, then taste the main ingredient with various combinations of other ingredients. In that way you find out what will work and what is just 'wrong.'" Charlie smiled as Chef Luc's face contorted to fully emphasise the importance of his words. Charlie could only assume he was remembering past experiments that did not turn out so well.

Continuing on, Chef Luc added that once you have a flavour, then you need to put it into a category.

"What do you mean by putting it in a category?" Charlie enquired. It was then explained that he had to consider whether the flavour would be the dominant flavour or a backdrop.

"Is the flavour soft and subtle, or does it pack a kick? Does it taste sour or sweet, bitter or acidic? Then, of course, you have flavours that could be floral or smoky, spicy, or herbal," Chef Luc instructed. Then, noticing Charlie's facial expression change to look slightly confused, he explained further. "What on the surface could look like something quite simple, could actually be very complex indeed."

Chef Luc then continued educating Charlie on the next basic foundation by talking about textures. He began by saying that texture was an essential part in any patisserie's work. "This is where we, as an artist of patissiers, have to carefully choose each element," Chef Luc said. "This will then give life and personality to the finished item. If we have done our job masterfully, then the customer will remain captivated until the very last mouthful."

Chef Luc explained that if you took a simple creamy mousse, on its own it had limitations. Yet, paired with a sponge layer perfectly soaked in a syrup, suddenly you had something more memorable. An ice-cream would become much more enticing with the addition shards of praline or a tuile.

During a moments pause, Charlie, intrigued, quickly asked Chef Luc to explain in more detail just how did texture play a role in creating fine patisserie? He stopped to ponder the question for a moment, then replied by saying that in his opinion textures described a sensation, something that is going on in your mouth when you eat patisserie. "We could have textures that are creamy or crunchy, or perhaps grainy or flaky. Then we might have dense or light, or maybe chewy, sticky, hard, or soft. So to answer the question Charlie, texture adds another dimension to the finished dish."



He carried on to say that, "Once we have decided on our flavours, next we must consider what textures to introduce, as each texture has its own characteristics. The use of the correct texture will act as the backdrop to the flavour of the main ingredient, which will only add to the eating pleasure."

Chef Luc paused for a moment again asking whether that had made sense to Charlie, as he wanted to ensure that he was taking in what he was trying to impart. Charlie again nodded, so engrossed by the words and passion as Chef Luc spoke of his craft, his own mind was absorbing the information with ease. Chef Luc smiled back, happy to see his future apprentice so captivated by the craft he treasured so dearly. Continuing, he asked Charlie to, "Think for a moment of a fruit tart, fresh from the oven, which has a crisp nutty case. Now compare that to one where the case has turned soggy and lifeless by the moisture in the fruit. There will be no comparison as to which will offer up the greatest eating pleasure."

Chef Luc then finished up by saying that, when we start to look at textures in patisserie work, we need to always keep in mind the importance of using several textures. So the hardest part in this aspect of the creation is to decide which ingredients to use that will create the desired outcome. "So does that now answer your question Charlie?" Chef Luc chuckled, as he stretched his arms up in the air while leaning back in his chair.

It was now starting to get late in the day. Madame Luc had closed the shop and the staff had gone home. Charlie was beginning to feel tired from his first day, but didn't want this day to end, happily invested in all that Chef Luc was sharing. He could feel the passion and the love in his heart for the work he did overflowing as the words rolled out of his mouth. So, as far as Charlie was concerned, he could continue talking all night as he lingered on chef's every word. The switch that had turned on the moment he put on his whites was fuelling him to continue for as long as possible.

Chef Luc noticed Charlie trying to stifle a yawn and so enquired to whether he was okay as he was sure he had noticed a yawn trying to sneak out. Quick to respond, Charlie said that he must be mistaken, with a slight chuckle in his voice. With a broad grin, Chef Luc continued by saying, "Well, if that is the case, I will continue."

"Next, then, we have temperature, which for us in this shop is not really a factor, as we sell chilled, frozen, or ambient delights. However, to become truly masterful, it is an important factor to consider. Temperature for a patissier can either be in a hot filling, or the presentation on a plate, to the topping." Chef Luc instructed. "Think of the difference between a hot chocolate sauce on a beautifully creamy Tahitian vanilla ice cream. Then, compare that to the same ice cream, but this time with a sauce at room temperature," he said. "The eating experience would be very different. So as an experiment, if we were to make something that had a sauce, the test would be to taste it with the sauce at different temperatures and see what the overall difference would be."

Reflecting for a moment, Charlie turned to Chef Luc and stated that to produce something that had different elements at different temperatures would be quite complex and would require more attention. Chef Luc remained quiet, his agreement being signalled only by the smile which spread slowly across his face.

Before Chef Luc had a chance to continue talking, Madame Luc, this time calmly, walked into the rear kitchen, carrying a large tray. She walked over to the workbench and placed the tray down, stating that as they had been talking now for many hours; it was time they had a break. Charlie's eyes widened and lit up at the delights that she had presented to them.

On the tray, besides three mugs of piping hot coffee, was a jug of cream and a small bowl of rustic looking brown sugar cubes. But what had really caught Charlie's attention, however, was the plate of what looked like small cakes. Trying to mask his excitement, Charlie asked what the little cakes were. Before Chef Luc could answer, Madame Luc informed Charlie that they were her little weakness and something that she loved to bake. She turned to look at her husband, who stopped what he was doing for a moment and looked warmly into her eyes before his attention once again returned to pouring some cream into his coffee.

Madame Luc then explained to Charlie that these were very special. indeed, and then pointed to each while saying what they were. "We have some madeleines, we have some financiers and finally some caneles," she explained. Then with a kind smile, she advised Charlie he had better be quick before they were all gone. Continuing to say she thought they might be a little peckish, and if she did not interrupt now, then Chef Luc would still be talking by morning, at which point the room filled with laughter once again.

Chef Luc again encouraged Charlie to tuck in as he could see that he was deciding what to try first. Tempted by the canele, Charlie picked one up and took a bite of this little thing of beauty. It had a caramelised crust, and as he bit in, he found a rich custard centre. He was left speechless with how something so simple could taste so incredible. Charlie savoured the moment, thinking about all that Chef Luc had been talking about. He wanted to test his palate looking for flavours, noticing textures as something had now clicked inside. He was now starting to understand some of what Chef Luc had discussed. It wasn't long before the tray was cleared of cakes and the coffee drunk. Madame Luc jokingly waved her finger at her husband saying that she was now heading home and to not keep talking for too much longer. To which he answered, "Of course, dear," with a cheeky smile. She was well aware of what her dear husband was like when he got talking about his art. Madame Luc, before she left, then invited Charlie to join them for dinner. The thought of a traditional home cooked French meal was too much for Charlie to refuse, and he graciously accepted.

Madame Luc then firmly said, "Now boys, dinner will be in one hour so don't be late," before she picked up the tray and left the rear kitchen, leaving them to continue.

Both now feeling a little more refreshed, which might be due to the deliciously rich coffee, Chef Luc continued by explaining to Charlie about contrast within patisserie. He explained that contrast within fine patisserie is how seeming opposite ingredients can work in harmony with each other. Whether it is something that is tart and sweet, or perhaps hot and cold, or maybe crunch with something that is silky smooth. Then the next vital part was to have the ability to discern how each of those elements would work together in beautiful accord. He finished by stating that if he could do all of that, then he could grab the attention, tantalise the palate, and engage the senses of the person that is eating the finished item. So for Charlie to reach the very highest as a patissier he must constantly experiment with taste, test, read, and to make meticulous notes of all that he learnt.

It was with those closing remarks that Charlie made the decision to not only use his journal to hold the memories of his adventures, but he would also use it as his recipe book. He decided that he would start from the back page of the journal and flip it upside down as a perfect way off keeping his recipe notes.

Sitting forward, Chef Luc half whispered, as if telling an important secret, suggesting that Madame Luc was in fact correct, as she usually was, and that they had done enough for one day. He then suggested they quickly tidy things up and Charlie change out of his whites before they

headed home for supper. While busy making sure every surface was spotless in the kitchen, Chef Luc explained that his wife was well known for her cooking, so he would be in for a real treat.

Once everything was immaculate, Charlie quickly raced up to his new home, getting out of his still beautifully clean whites. He neatly hung them up and put on more casual clothes. He freshened up and raced back downstairs where Chef Luc had finished locking up his pride and joy. They both exited through the rear door, Chef Luc saying to Charlie that they would be in trouble if they were late anyway, with a cheeky grin. Chef Luc was renowned for coming home to a cold dinner having got caught up experimenting in his shop kitchen, although Madame Luc was well used to this by now, and would just sigh at him each time.

It was a beautiful spring evening as they both walked the short distance to the home of the Lucs. They barely spoke two words to one another, probably due to the amount of talking throughout the day. The streets were alive with local residents out for an evening stroll and tourists looking for somewhere nice to eat. It was a new experience for Charlie who was beginning to soak in the atmosphere of his new surroundings. The silence was then broken, by the appearance of Claire whom Charlie had met the previous day on the train.

“Good evening Chef Luc,” Claire humbly spoke in a soft fluent French tone before quickly turning towards Charlie and wishing him a good evening also.

“So you two have already met then?” asked Chef Luc.

“Yes, Chef. We met on the train on my way here, and Claire kindly saved me from an embarrassing situation with my ticket,” Charlie replied.

“So how do you know each other?” Claire asked with a hint of curiosity in her voice.

“Well, Claire, it is somewhat complicated, but I knew Charlie’s father many years previously, and he has asked me to take young Charlie on as my apprentice.”

Recoiling slightly with shock, then taking a moment to compose herself, “You have taken an apprentice then?” she asked Chef Luc, her posture straightening and her once soft flowing accent changed into a more abrupt nasally tone.

Hesitating for a moment, Chef Luc responded by acknowledging that he had in fact accepted Charlie as his apprentice. With this said, there followed an uncomfortable moment of silence before each party bid the other a good evening and continued on their separate ways.

Charlie and Chef Luc continued their silence as they walked the remaining steps to his home, each other mulling over what had just happened. Charlie was wondering why Claire had reacted in such a manner but was not sure whether to ask Chef Luc just at that moment. Before he could give it any further thought, however, the silence was broken by Chef Luc saying this was their home. They stopped in front of an immaculate looking cottage, an array of small boxed flowers in full bloom gracing the windows. Charlie was still getting used to the unique beauty of each of these graceful buildings. Chef Luc fumbled through his pocket and pulled out his keys, turning the lock of the heavy wooden door, decorated with a stunning sculptured brass door plate with each of their initials woven within. As soon as Charlie stepped over the threshold, his nostrils were filled with a hodgepodge of beautiful fragrances... of herbs, saltiness of the sea, the deep bouquet of red wine..., and as he drifted in this sea of aromas, Madame Luc suddenly came bustling out of the kitchen and welcomed him with a huge motherly-type hug. Charlie bid Madame Luc a good evening, at which she insisted that, while in her home, he must call her Gabrielle.

She then suggested that Charlie make himself comfortable in the lounge while Chef Luc went and freshened up, looking him up and down with one eyebrow raised. Once home, her rule was no chef whites on; it was family time then. Chef Luc showed Charlie through to the lounge and

suggested that he make himself at home, indicating to an awaiting comfortable armchair. Chef Luc explained that he would be back shortly once he had changed out of his work clothes, cheekily whispering to Charlie that he wasn't getting into trouble again for wearing his whites to the dining table.

Now in the room on his own, he could hear Gabrielle singing softly to herself in the kitchen, accompanied by the rattle of pots and pans. Charlie made himself comfortable in the armchair and surveyed the room. It was very cosy with heavy looking wooden bookcases, a rustic looking sideboard covered by a smattering of pictures, ornaments, and several decanters filled with liquids of varying colours. There was one other single seat armchair and two large and snug looking sofas ideally positioned in front of a large open fire inset into the brick wall.

It was not long before Chef Luc returned, and almost as soon as he had, Gabrielle entered from the kitchen and proudly announced that dinner was served. Making their way out of the lounge and into the dining room, Chef Luc enquired of Charlie as to whether he was hungry, as Gabrielle always went overboard when cooking, even more so when guests were present. Charlie confirmed that, indeed, he was as they arrived in the dining room, and presented before them was a beautifully laid out table, with fine silver cutlery, crisp looking linen napkins, and a beautiful flower arrangement in the centre of the table. There were also two already-opened wine bottles on the table, just waiting to be poured.

Charlie and Chef Luc took their seats as Gabrielle disappeared out to the kitchen, soon returning with their first course. Masterfully carrying three plates, she placed the first in front of Charlie, then Chef Luc, and finally herself. Chef Luc then rose out of his seat, and taking both bottles of wine, asked Charlie which he would prefer. Charlie replied by saying that he would rather the white and his glass was then filled three quarters. Moving to Gabrielle, he filled her wine glass with red, her wine of choice, and finally his own. On this occasion, he opted for white as well.

Charlie looked down at the beautifully presented food. Gabrielle declared that the starter was a traditional French dish and was called lotte a l'Imperatrice, or monk fish mold. On the plate before Charlie was a beautiful rectangle shaped fish dish accompanied by a classic garnish of hard boiled egg, tomatoes, and black olives. A toast was then made by Chef Luc welcoming Charlie into their home, and thanking his lovely wife for the dinner before them before everyone tucked into their first course.

Charlie took his first mouthful. The sweet flavoured flesh, combined with just the perfect amount of cognac and the hint of tarragon all held together with a not too rich cream, combined to provide a taste sensation that was exciting on Charlie's palate. He continued to enjoy his starter and relaxed deeply after his first long day. It was not long before all three plates had been cleaned of all trace of such a wonderful first course.

At this point, the conversation was light and cheerful, but Charlie couldn't help but think about Claire's reaction earlier on the street. Chef Luc stood and quickly cleared the plates before returning to hear what Charlie had thought of the first dish.

The next course was Gabrielle's favourite, a garbure, a kind of meat and veg soup, explained Chef Luc. Arriving at the table, Gabrielle placed the big heavy looking earthenware bowl in the middle of the table and returned to the kitchen to collect three large individual bowls. Chef Luc also explained that a garbure could be served as two separate dishes, but they liked it as one main meal. He then instructed Charlie to help himself as he then picked up the ladle and took a big scoop, pouring the contents into his bowl. Now full with a wholesome medley of chunks of pork, ham, comfit of duck, haricot beans, cubes of potato, shredded cabbage, and celery. Charlie did

not hesitate to get stuck in and was left speechless once more at how something so simple looking could pack in so many different flavours. How the garlic added contrast without being overpowering.

The wine became more free flowing as glasses emptied and the conversation cheery with laughter filling the room. As Montaine and Gabrielle shared stories of their earlier days together, including many of their experiences in discovering, through trial and error, the perfect pastries which now graced their display counters.

They were now on to their final course of tarte a la rhubarb, and Charlie began to once again think about why Claire had reacted the way that she had. Unable to hold out any longer, Charlie posed the question to Chef Luc asking why Claire reacted the way she did earlier that evening. There was a moment's silence around the table, eventually broken by Gabrielle wanting to know what happened. Chef Luc explained to his wife that they had bumped into Claire walking home and that she did not react well to Charlie being made his new apprentice. Gabrielle then responded with a hint of concern in her voice that she had thought this might happen but that not much could be done.

She continued to explain that Claire Marion was a young patissier who excelled while at pastry school and whom worked at a small restaurant in the town. She was not happy there, and for several years had been begging Montaine to take her on as his apprentice because of who he was. However, Montaine had always turned her request down, adamantly stating that he would never take on another apprentice again. So, she probably felt betrayed with finding out that Montaine had actually gone back on his word and did now have a new apprentice. Confused, Charlie asked why had he accepted him then, if he had vowed never to take on a student again? This was quickly followed by another question before Chef Luc could answer, "And why was Claire so insistent to train under him?"

Pausing for a moment, Chef Luc explained that he had agreed because of Charlie's father. This just left Charlie even more confused. Gabrielle again continued the explanation by adding that Claire had been desperate for several years to train with Montaine because he was a former winner of the coveted Kings of Patisserie Competition. This was the highest honour that a patissier could win. It now began to make sense to Charlie as he had heard mention of this competition by his father but never thought anything of it.

Chef Luc suddenly rose from the dining chair and walked out of the room, which left both Charlie and Gabrielle a little bemused. Several minutes later he returned clutching in his hand an old, slightly battered looking book. He then passed the book to Charlie, and while a little confused, he gently took the book from Chef Luc. Relaxing his hands slightly, the book fell open several pages in. The page was quite discoloured and the writing in pencil. Chef Luc explained that the book once belonged to a naturally gifted patissier, and now he wanted to pass it on to Charlie.

Lost for words, Charlie kindly thanked Chef Luc. Reflecting for a moment, he could feel the night growing late. Added with feeling rather wiry from a long day of learning, followed by a delicious meal, and then maybe just a little too much wine, he decided he should probably head home now and leave them to their night. Taking a moment to thank Gabrielle for a beautiful meal, Charlie rose up from his chair and again thanked chef for the book, plus for the honour of being his apprentice. Chef Luc shook his hand and said, "No, the honour is mine. You will make a fine patissier." He then informed Charlie to be bright and early in the morning as they had much work ahead of them. They both accompanied Charlie to the front door, and he wished them a good evening.

Walking back to the shop, he admired the soft light from the lampposts cascading down, creating a warm feel to the cobbled streets and store fronts. "The evening had been lovely," he thought to himself, but it had also left him pondering, his mind racing through all kinds of scenarios. Before he knew it, though, he was back to the familiar entrance of his temporary home. He hurried upstairs to his flat, tired but content from the days training. He carefully placed this new gift on the table, freshened up, and decided that it was time for sleep. Having climbed into bed, Charlie lay there for a while thinking about the Lucs... how they may know his father... Why had chef given him this book...? What lay ahead for Charlie? Pondering these thoughts as he lay in bed, he soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

## Chapter Five - The Competition

Many months had now passed, and Charlie's apprenticeship had gotten more intense as the days turned into weeks, the weeks to months. The days were long, with relentless preparing of the same base ingredients, over and over again, until both teacher and student were satisfied by the result. Chef Luc had been right. From the moment Charlie had been handed his crisp whites, his life was changed forever. Charlie, now fuelled by his own drive and determination, had developed a love and passion for the craft. Nights were spent reading and experimenting in the small kitchen of his now temporary home. He wanted to build his mind map of experiences, flavours, and textures, for which his persistence had started to pay off.

Those nights were only broken by Madame Luc's insistence that Charlie join them for supper at least one evening each week. For her, their time spent together was priceless. Never having had a child of her own, she found enjoyment in being able to nurture young Charlie. Charlie used these evenings, every few weeks, to call his parents from the phone in the office. He would laugh as both of them would fight over the phone, always inquiring as to all he'd done since his last call. On occasion, he found he was unable to answer a question fully before they had moved onto the next.

Madame Luc secretly liked to use these times to show off her own unique style of cooking. The evenings were often filled with gentle banter and light hearted stories shared between them all.

Chef Luc had become very impressed by how Charlie had absorbed information. How he had started to develop his palate and acquire a true pâtissier's lightness of touch. Although, up to that point, Chef Luc had not allowed Charlie to prepare any of the fine pastries that were sold in the shop. Chef Luc had been a hard task master and stickler for detail. Impressed by Charlie's development, he wanted to make sure that Charlie was ready before his work was offered to paying customers as Chef Luc had a reputation to protect.

Driven by an inner desire to master this craft, Charlie had always arrived in the kitchen early, usually before the first rays of dawn had broken through the shop's windows.

The working environment for Charlie from the very first day had been the small rear kitchen which had become like his second home. Though small, the kitchen was perfect and fitted out with various items of equipment, which included small ovens, mixers of different sizes, refrigeration units, freezers, a chiller, and a whole variety of utensils. Chef Luc had always kept up to date with the latest equipment that had been available and was seen as very modern and a pioneer by many of his peers. Quite possibly anything that a pâtissier could think of, was probably available to use. Then if there had been something specific that Charlie wanted, Chef Luc had always been willing to get hold of that item. So Charlie really had been in pastry heaven.

Chef Luc had grown very fond of his young student and felt delighted that his skills were being passed onto someone as deserving as Charlie. Chef Luc wanted to instil within Charlie a strong foundation of techniques and understanding of basic components. If mastered correctly, it would allow him to not only become a fine pâtissier, but also allow him the freedom to develop his own particular style as Chef Luc's own mentor had done with him all those many years previous. Chef Luc explained to Charlie that, "Like an artist, a pâtissier must have a strong foundation in technique before they would be free to learn by experimentation."

Each new skill that he taught to Charlie would take the same format. Chef Luc would spend the first few days discussing the relevant technique and would then go on to demonstrate. He had

shown a deep passion with all he had done, which had been very evident in how he had tried to structure Charlie's apprenticeship. Only after several days of discussion, followed by more demonstration, would Chef Luc then allow Charlie to practice himself. First under his watchful eye, then eventually on his own.

Weeks were often spent becoming proficient on only one thing. At first, Charlie had found that way of learning dull and boring. Chef Luc would, on occasion, catch his Charlie attempting to conceal a yawn, which would be met by a gentle tap on the back of the head. That would then be followed by Chef Luc saying, "Shall we stop for today, if this is not of interest?" for which there was always the same response from Charlie of, "No, Chef, I'm wide awake."

That would only lead to laughter, which was an excuse for Madame Luc to come bustling through into the back kitchen declaring "You gentlemen should be working and not having fun," only to be met by the same response of, "But work is fun," from both Charlie and Chef. Madame Luc would always then walk out of the room brandishing a little smile herself.

At first, Charlie had been a little restless with Chef Luc's style of teaching, wanting to just practice. Excited by each new technique Chef Luc spoke of it did not take long until he began to appreciate just how he did things. He soon realised the benefit of his style. "I guess that is why he had achieved the highest honours," he thought and wanted do his very best to emulate his new mentor. As Charlie would lay in his bed before he drifted off, he often reflected on the day just gone. He felt a deep passion within, well and truly ignited. Then one night while he rested on his bed, a light breeze blowing on his face, he made the decision that he would see the journey through, no matter where it took him.

Charlie spent days being shown the fine art of blending several ingredients at a time so they were in perfect harmony and balance. He would be educated in the correct method to cream ingredients, which to the untrained eye seemed a very basic thing. But to the professional, it was the foundation by which great things could be created. Chef Luc expressed that, "To get this technique correct is important as it is the basis for the creation of cakes, cookies, or tart dough, and this method helps to incorporate more air into a mixture."

Charlie then asked "Why is that so important?"

To which Chef Luc would reply, "This will help to lighten the finished texture, thus producing a more refined product."

He also explained how important temperature was for all the ingredients. How butter should be soft and eggs slightly warmed. He was questioned again, as Charlie wanted to make sure he understood it all, to which Chef Luc would further explain that it would create a better emulsion. He explained that if the ingredients were too cold, you would not get the desired emulsion. Too warm, and you would lose much of the air out of the mix. He would then continue to explain the importance of the type of sugar used. Granulated sugar would help to trap more air, but baker's sugar would create a much smoother texture. All the time that Chef was explaining these things, Charlie would be making notes in his journal. Charlie did, on occasion, make mistakes, mixing up the wrong ingredients, which would result in a tap on the back of the head by Chef Luc as he pointed out his mistake. This would then turn into laughter, which again would grab the attention of Madam Luc.

Then Charlie was then taught about making the various types of custards and how there were three basic types. Chef Luc explained what the different types were, and that each technique required precise temperature control. He explained how important it was in order for the custards to set or thicken correctly. Once Charlie was able to meet Chef Luc's highest standards and could make each type of custard flawlessly, only then would they move on to learn the next new topic.



There were moments when Charlie had been tested to ensure that he was paying attention. Chef Luc would often try to catch Charlie out. For instance, he might change the temperature, turning the heat up or down. But Charlie had gotten wise to his mentor's tricks by this time and had been much more vigilant. It had been moments like that which had helped to break up the pressure of such intense training.

During the daytime, Charlie would practice to Chef Luc's exacting standards, but at night, while in his flat, Charlie would spend that time experimenting, seeing what was possible and what really wasn't. The creativity within was growing with every dish he attempted to create, a work of art or a decoration for the waste bin.

This style of teaching continued for many months as Chef Luc continued Charlie's education in all sorts of patisserie work. Whether it had been in making the various types of pastry or perhaps the differing types of meringues or the precise nature of using gelling agents, to the beauty of frozen patisserie. Chef Luc had also been keen to instruct Charlie in the fine art of the chocolatier. The last thing that Chef Luc wished to teach Charlie was the precise art of working with sugar as he thought this to be one of the most technical of all to master. As the months had progressed, Charlie never failed to impress Chef Luc more and more. He had been impressed by Charlie's dedication, his obvious natural talent, and the deep passion that he also possessed.

Then on one particular morning, Charlie had wandered downstairs as normal and entered the smaller kitchen. Normally, he was the first one to arrive, yet on that particular morning, Chef Luc had arrived only moments earlier and cheerfully greeted Charlie. Uncertain if this was another sort of trick, Charlie cautiously acknowledged Chef and enquired to his wellbeing. "Have you received some good news?" Charlie enquired.

"Well Charlie, you could say that. Good for me anyway, not sure whether you will agree," chuckled Chef Luc. He then continued to explain that he had received a letter out of the blue late yesterday from an old friend. He explained to Charlie that this friend organised a patisserie competition every two years and that he always invited the shop to enter, but they never had. "Until now that is.... As I have entered you!" said Chef Luc while he tried to conceal a cheeky grin.

With that news, Charlie suddenly felt a little light headed, and grabbed the table for support. "Me, Chef?" Charlie exclaimed.

"Yes, Charlie, you," replied a grinning Chef. "I have entered you for several reasons, Charlie. Firstly, for you to get some experience, and secondly, to see what other patissiers are doing." Chef continued to explain that this would be the perfect opportunity for Charlie to put into practice all that he had learned so far. There was silence from Charlie, as Chef Luc smiled back before he said, "What do you think Charlie? Are you up for a challenge?"

After a further pause, Charlie replied by saying, "Yes, Chef, I think I am," but inside he was petrified.

Charlie pondered for a short time and thought about all he wanted to know about the competition. "So when is the competition, Chef?" asked Charlie.

"The competition is in two weeks' time, Charlie," came the reply. Chef Luc reassured him that he would help him through the process.

"Just two weeks," Charlie thought as he felt his heart rate increase, but he remembered to breathe slowly as that would help.

Chef Luc suggested that Charlie take the next week to think about what he wanted to produce and work on the various components. The second week would then be spent pulling it all

together. "Are you okay, Charlie?" Chef Luc asked playfully, as he had noticed the look of panic on his face.

His breathing had shallowed, and a slight sick feeling had developed in the pit of his stomach, which was evident by the look on his face. "Yes, Chef," replied Charlie, determined not to let this feeling stop him.

He reflected back on the journey he had travelled so far. He thought about the opportunity that had now been presented to show Chef Luc all that he had learnt during those long lonely nights spent in the flat. The nights which he had spent practicing, tasting, testing, pushing what he had learnt. How he took a recipe a little further each time as he attempted to make it his own. He hoped that it would not end up like several of the disastrous mosaics of conceptual art which had previously decorated his bin.

Chef Luc was quick to say, "Charlie I'm so very proud of you," then with a light pat on his back, he finished by saying, "I am also very delighted by your decision," all the time offering a reassuring smile.

The tension now eased as he suggested that Charlie take all his notes, the journal he had been given, and spend the rest of that day coming up with ideas. They would then discuss them the following day.

Charlie grabbed his many notes along with several of Chef Luc's recipe books and rushed back upstairs. His nerves now replaced with an enthusiasm, as this was his first time he felt fully entrusted to create something of his choosing. What made that even more exciting was the fact it was for a competition.

He had returned to the flat and placed all his notes, the journals, and books on the table by the sofa. Before beginning, he had considered changing out of his whites but chose to remain in them to help with the creative process. He then put on a pot of his now favourite coffee to brew. The aroma brought back fond memories as this was the very same coffee that Captain Macrina had shipped out to every port where he docked.

Charlie had kept in touch with the captain and had written several letters since being in Villejacques. Being perhaps a little fortunate, if not a little cheeky, he had managed to get the details from the captain of the small coffee roasters, so he would be able to enjoy the coffee for himself. Coffee brewed, warm mug now in hand, filled to the brim, Charlie sank back into the comfortable sofa. He opened one of Chef Luc's recipe books and began to flick through the pages. There were a vast assortment of different types of recipes. Many of the pages were covered in hand written notes as Chef Luc had obviously looked to adapt the recipes to his own style. Charlie turned over each of the pages looking for inspiration or something to just jump out at him. Book after book, he kept reading, but so far nothing.

He slumped back into the sofa and swigged down the second mug of this fine Italian coffee. Looking around the table in a mild sort of daydream, his attention was drawn to the old journal that Chef Luc had given him that very first evening. It was not something that he had properly looked at so far, apart from a quick flick through some of its pages. Being so busy, he had not really given it much attention.

He picked up the old journal, his fingers brushed over the rough texture of the faded front cover, as his eyes glanced down. Gently, he opened the cover to discover an inscription that read, "The only things that life denies you are the things that you are willing to let pass by. Fight for the things you love, and love the things that are worth fighting for."

"What a beautiful inscription" he thought and one that he felt he had heard or seen before. He began to carefully read each page of the journal, taking care to turn each page gently, as he

looked for ideas and inspiration. The deeper he ventured into the book, the more he felt a familiarity within. The notes were similar to his own. Even the cursive had a style similar to his own, but where had he seen this before, he questioned?. Whomever this journal had belonged to, Charlie felt they must have had a strong desire and passion to become a masterful patissier.

He was halfway through that journal, when he found a page with the words "Baked Cheesecake, If It's Not Baked, It's Not Cheesecake," What an interesting statement, Charlie thought. He knew a little about Cheesecakes and had to agree with the author of that statement but still found it a curious thing indeed. Investigating those pages further, he found all kinds of notes about cheesecakes, which included recipes, notes that resembled research, comments, some of which had been crossed out, and a page with the heading, "Cheesecakes, a New Concept." Charlie read intently as his interest grew.

He sat forward in the chair, his hand combed the ruff textured page as he continued to read. Underneath the heading, he discovered an outline of the authors idea, lots of crossings out of what Charlie thought must have been things that didn't work and then nothing. Left somewhat bewildered, he turned over every last page in the hope to find a clue as to what might have happened. But nothing, the rest of the pages of that journal were blank, not another word written. "How disappointing," he thought, as he turned the journal upside down and shook it violently in the hope that some misplaced note might fall out. But still nothing. Now Charlie felt bemused and could not help but wonder as to what might have happened to the author. "Just why had that person, with an obvious passion for patisserie, just suddenly stopped?" he wondered.

There was now a mix of mild frustration, wonder, and curiosity. He slumped once more back into the sofa, having poured yet another steaming mug of coffee, and placed it on the table in front of him. The coffee's aromatics reminded him of Captain Macrina's steely determination, his greying seafaring beard and the crazy cockatiel named Bubbles, which secretly Captain Macrina would call Bubbies, but only when he thought no one was listening.

Charlie, more settled, again picked up that journal and read through the notes and comments that the author had made on cheesecakes. The author, he concluded had a real fascination and creativity to think outside of what was considered acceptable. Motivated by the authors own determination to create a new concept, he announced out loud with authority in his voice, "This is what I will do, a cheesecake for my entry," then chuckled to himself at his own enthusiasm.

After the initial exuberance had subsided, he started to think deeper about the decision he had arrived at. "How would Chef Luc react?" Charlie thought as doubts began to creep into his mind. He couldn't decide whether to venture down to the kitchen straight away or to think about it further and speak with Chef Luc the following morning.

"No time like the present," he decided, unable to sit still any longer. He gulped down the rest of his coffee which thankfully had now cooled enough. He sprang up from his seat, grabbed that old journal, and sprinted down the stairs, falling over his feet in his haste to speak with his mentor. He felt that a little of the captain's resolve had rubbed off on him. "Or perhaps there was something in that coffee after all." He could not decide.

He finally reached the bottom of the stairs in one piece, then entered the small corridor and headed towards the office. Seeing Chef Luc seated at his desk, he hurried in hast and knocked on the office door.

Chef Luc gestured for Charlie to enter, surprised to see him at such a late hour. "Have you sneaked down to the kitchen because you are hungry, Charlie?" asked Chef Luc. Once the laughter had eased, Chef then posed the question "What can I do for you, then Charlie?" Charlie took in a deep breath, now finally seated, and drawing on his own steely determination said,

“Well, Chef, I have decided what I want to make for the competition. I had been flicking through the journal and found a whole heap of notes on cheesecakes, so that is what my entry will be,” announced Charlie now with a sense of pride. Finished, he sat quivering in the seat trying to read what Chef Luc’s somewhat startled look meant.

After a lengthy silence came, “Interesting choice, Charlie, and if that is your decision, I will support you on this,” responded Chef Luc.

He then said, “But now you need to carefully plan out your dish, so give this some thought this evening, and we will make a start in the morning.” Now looking directly at Charlie, Chef Luc said, “Let me offer you some advice.” He continued on to explain about the competitive world of patisserie, which is the same no matter where it is. It is always taken very seriously indeed. “So Charlie, there is little doubt in my mind, the most important factor when creating a winning entry is flavour, my boy. Amongst my peers, there were differing schools of thought, however, the general consensus was to have no more than three main flavours,” he explained. Chef Luc then continued to say, “If you were to have too many main flavours, you would end up with a fruit-salad effect on the palate. There would be too much confusion. Don’t get over excited as many competitors have and try to impress with far too many flavours Charlie,” said Chef Luc. “Then,” he continued, “the next important consideration is how your entry is presented. I feel that most judges prefer to see something that appears simple, yet is technically difficult. And finally, contrast and texture. Only add something that can be eaten. Don’t use a garnish purely for decoration.”

Charlie looked at Chef Luc momentarily, and then responded with, “WOW, okay, Chef, lots to consider,” as he grinned from ear to ear. He then thanked Chef for his guidance and support before heading off to start his planning. Chef Luc smiled as his young student left his office, an obvious spring in his step, eager to get his planning underway.

Charlie had made his way back to his flat, this time at a much steadier pace. He realized, when he reached the top of the staircase, that in all his haste, he had forgotten to shut the door to the flat behind him. But once inside, door now shut, everything as he had left it, he began to think about Chef’s reaction. He thought he might have been disappointed and tried to persuade him to reconsider, but no.

He once again sat back down on the sofa, picked up his own journal, and flipped it over to the back recipe section that he had started. He turned to a new blank page, picked up his slightly worn pencil from the table where he had left it, and wrote a new heading “Cheesecake, A New Concept--Part Two.” This was going to be a special adventure in its own right, his own unique creation and his first competition. This he certainly wanted to keep a record of that journey.

He made himself more comfortable on the sofa; the gentle crisp evening breeze blowing in through the open window enlivened him once more. Charlie then started to repeat the words, “Flavour, looks, contrast. Flavour, looks, contrast,” over and over again like some sort of chant. Wanting to get ideas, he again opened one of Chef Luc’s recipe books and started to look through at the various recipes searching for inspiration. The hours passed by quickly; it had gotten dark outside and Charlie could hear the street below coming alive with the sound of evening revellers. He listened momentarily at the mix of French accents, laughter, and even the occasional English voice was heard, which then made him feel more at home.

So far, nothing that he had read provided him with the inspiration that he searched for. Having now gone through all the recipe books, his gaze turned to the old journal. He reached across the table and picked it up and started to look through its once much loved pages again.

About halfway through, in the bottom corner of one of the pages, he noticed a comment which read, "Meyer Lemons and Blueberries."

"That's it!" shrieked Charlie as he jumped out of his seat in excitement, the book and pencil tumbling from his lap. He remembered the open window, then chuckled to himself and wondered what people might have thought. He then gathered himself, picked up the book and pencil, and sat back down.

"Simple and clean flavours yet quite classical," he thought as he opened his journal, flipped it over, and began to scribble down the idea. Next, he had to decide what flavour went well with lemon and blueberry. He pondered for a while before the idea of chocolate. "Or better still, a dark bitter chocolate," came to mind as yet another shout was heard, this time startling even Charlie, which made him jump slightly, even though it had come out of his own mouth. He laughed at himself and thought he really must learn to stop doing that.

He began to feel quite proud and excited that he had actually found an idea and was certain it would work. Well, at least he thought so anyway. He did wonder, though, whether Chef Luc would be as equally impressed. Once again, he sat back into the sofa twiddling the pencil between his fingers, as the next decision Charlie had to make was how he would present his entry. Cheesecakes were always traditionally large and round and so dull and boring. Therefore, he had to come up with something new.

Opening the old journal again, he turned to the notes on cheesecakes and started to read through the recipes, notes, and comments, searching intensely for the next idea. Charlie would read something, think about it for a moment, and if it resonated with what he wanted to create, he would make a note in his own journal. Next, he would make a little sketch, then sit back in the sofa and mull it over in his mind. This went on for several hours until an exhausted Charlie fell asleep where he sat.

The next day, Charlie was woken with a start by a loud noise outside on the street, which had caused him to sit bolt upright. He still felt somewhat disorientated, but lent forward and picked up the pencil. Settling back into the sofa, a picture appeared before him of just how he wanted to present his cheesecake entry. It would be unique, if it was going to be possible. He then started to sketch out the idea he'd seen in his mind as a sense of excitement coursed through him. He knew just what he wanted to do. He knew what the various components would be and just how he wanted to present it at the competition.

Eager to inform Chef, he quickly freshened up and changed into clean whites. He swiftly grabbed both journals, then raced downstairs to wait in the office for Chef Luc to arrive. He tried to sit patiently, but the nerves and excitement were beginning to get the better of him. Charlie had all sorts of thoughts and ideas that now rushed through his head. "Stay focused, Charlie," he commanded himself, letting out a little chuckle.

"What's so funny Charlie?" Chef asked as he strolled into the office.

Charlie replied by saying, "I know what I want to do, but now my head is just running away with itself, so many ideas," he said in a rushed, garbled manner.

"Oh Charlie, my boy, you do remind me of someone else, full of ambition and ideas. Don't ever lose that, no matter what anyone else says, now will you?" Chef replied. "So tell me your idea then for your entry," as Charlie's excited enthusiasm began to rub off on a smiling Chef.

Charlie then began to recount his evening, how he pondered, the thought processes mixed with utter confusion, until he found a comment in the old journal. Well, it was more of a flavour combination. He explained what the main flavours would be, that of Lemons and Blueberry. Chef Luc stopped Charlie for a moment and said, "So, just to clarify, you have chosen lemon and

blueberry as your main flavours?” to which Charlie nodded. “So how do you intend to make his entry different and stand out from other entries” enquired Chef Luc.

In Charlie’s excitement, he quickly blurted out the words, “Lego, Chef. I want to make a Lego shaped Cheesecake.” Chef Luc's silence had Charlie trying to gauge his reaction. Struggling to determine what Chef might have been thinking, Charlie was quick to add, “It brings a sense of childhood nostalgia, and if it works, it will look amazing.” Still unable to work out whether his Mentor was content with his idea, he promptly continued to explain that what he wanted to do was to create a square pattern of four Lego pieces, alternating between lemon and blueberry. Chef Luc remained silent the whole time with Charlie unsure if he should continue or not.

Now feeling very anxious, he asked, “Would it even be possible to get some square Lego shaped molds made, Chef?” Still no response, Charlie quickly enquired if Chef Luc thought that his idea was creative enough and had suitably covered flavour, look, and contrast.

Now standing, and before he answered, Chef Luc had walked around to where Charlie had been seated and placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder. He gave an encouraging squeeze accompanied by a warm smile of reassurance. He then said, “Well, I’m not sure about molds like that, but I’ll make some calls to find out.” With that response, Charlie now felt a sense of comfort combined with a hint of paternal like encouragement.

Although Chef Luc had always considered himself innovative, this concept had challenged even his creative mind. Hence, why even he had to take a moment to think about all Charlie had put before him. Quietly, he felt very proud and protective of young Charlie. Reminiscing for a moment, he thought of a dear old friend and how his dreams and aspirations had been shattered from this type of out-of-the-box way of thinking. After a further pause, Chef Luc suggested that Charlie should go and set up the rear kitchen, and he would make some enquiries. Now he was just hoping he could find what would be needed to create the entry that Charlie had imagined.

Charlie nodded enthusiastically, then left Chef’s office and made his way to the small kitchen, the place that now excited Charlie and pushed him to reach new heights within himself. While he waited for Chef, he started to plan out his vision in much greater detail. Writing out recipe ideas for each of the components he thought he would need, making small sketches of what he thought the finished dessert would resemble. The nerves that had been there regarding the competition had now been firmly replaced by an eager excitement, which Charlie felt was down to his mentor's training and continued encouragement.

Chef eventually made an appearance and informed Charlie that one of his suppliers who specialised in producing custom molds thought they would be able to produce just what Charlie had requested. But it would take several days as they would have to be specially made. That out of the way, Chef Luc then encouraged Charlie to explain in much greater detail every component so he could have a better mental picture.

Charlie then set about and explained each and every component, the flavour, texture, and the overall look he envisioned in his own mind. He explained that he wanted to create the finished cheesecakes in the shape of a small square Lego piece. They would look just like a toy Lego piece and have the raised circles. There would be four Lego pieces altogether, of which two would be the blueberry flavour and two would be the lemon flavour. He had read in the old journal about the use of dried fruits, which had been converted into a powder. He felt this would not only provide an intense flavour but also contribute to the natural colour. Charlie then wanted to create two different flavoured pâte de fruit that, when set, would be inserted into the centre of each Lego shape. A blueberry pâte de fruit in the lemon cheesecake and a lemon pâte de fruit

inserted in to the blueberry cheesecake. These pâte de fruit would then be hidden within the cheesecake cream. All four would then have a chocolate sable biscuit placed inside which would cover the pâte de fruit before the remaining space would be filled with more of the cheesecake cream. The consumer would have a taste delight as they bit into the seamless outer case, which would reveal the inner surprise. He then wanted to coat the outside with a flavoured coating that would not only enhance the flavour but create a textured like finish. Charlie then finished by saying he felt that to taste the pâte de fruit and the biscuit as enticing inserts would cover the three fundamentals he was taught; flavour, texture, and contrast. But yet, the overall look would be elegant but also technically challenging.

With Chef Luc's knowledge and experience, combined with Charlie's creative mind, they spent the remainder of the day creating Charlie's entry, well on paper anyway. They were both just as enthusiastic as the other and Chef bounced around the kitchen like a young excited apprentice himself. It was as if Charlie had breathed new life into him and ignited a spark long extinguished. The reason for this change remained a mystery to Charlie, but for Chef Luc it was a chance to heal the past.

The day had drawn to a close; the dish that Charlie had envisioned had been constructed on paper, recipes had been written, ingredients sourced and ordered. They were then able to end the day feeling very proud of themselves.

"Well Charlie, shall we call it a day there? Let's tidy up, and tomorrow we can begin to put into practice what we have here," said Chef while waving the notes in front of Charlie's face. The small kitchen was promptly tidied, the rest of the shop had already been closed down, and the staff gone home. "I'll see you in the morning, young Charlie, and good work today," stated a weary looking Chef. With a large smile, Charlie replied with a "Thank you, Chef" and wished him a good evening then headed off to his flat and a well earned rest.

Chef Luc suggested that they end there and get tidied up; for, the following day they would begin to put everything into practice as he waived the notes in front of Charlie's face.

The small kitchen was quickly cleaned, the rest of the shop had been closed down, and the staff left for the night. Madame Luc had looked in on them a few times but could see all was well. Happy with what she was witness to, she knew they had embarked on a creative journey that thrilled her husband.

Chef Luc congratulated his young apprentice on what he had achieved, then bid him a good night, suggesting that he got some sleep in his bed this time. He was well aware that Charlie often fell asleep in his chair at times. For much like himself, he was enthusiastic and determined to be a master of his craft. As Charlie headed out the kitchen door, he turned back chuckling and said that he was in fact ready for his bed and a good night's rest.

He knew that the remaining days would be filled with lots of practice as he had just been informed that on the day of the competition, all entrants in Charlie's category would have only four hours to prepare their entry from scratch. So lots of practice would be in order to get the timings just right. Charlie decided that before his head hit the pillow and he was out for the night, he had better write out the new, more refined recipe in his journal. Once done, he would then headed off to bed with a clear settled mind. What a mixed day of emotions it had been from uncertainty to excitement, concluded by an idea that took shape and become a reality. Journal entry completed, he could then rest well in his bed as he slowly drifted into a peaceful and contented deep sleep.

The following week was then spent working on perfecting the base components. They refined the recipes and practised over and over again so that they would get the timings just right.

Both were equally invested in the work and just as stubborn as the other. They kept going day in, day out, until exhaustion would cause them to stop. Then they were back at it again early the following morning.

As Chef Luc had taken part in many competitions in his younger days and been judge at many more, he knew just how to structure the allowed time. He knew how to best maximise production while still leaving sufficient time to allow for errors. Everything had now come together very nicely for Charlie's entry. The main component, the cheesecake cream recipe, had been refined to almost perfection. Now they just had to await the arrival of the molds from Chef Luc's supplier. Following several telephone calls, Chef Luc was able to express the importance of these molds to his supplier, who had promised to have them finished and delivered by the week's end.

Once the molds had arrived, they were able to try them out. The first few attempts had not gone well at all. The cheesecake cream was perfect; the problem had been the unmolding that had caused them both much concern. Frustrated by time fast running out, they both put in as many extra hours as they possibly could. Their sheer passion, mixed with determination, drove them on. The endless hours had only been broken on occasion by Madame Luc bringing in hot coffee and sugared delights, which refreshed them both, allowing for further hours of tedious attempts.

They had to discover the perfect timing for the filled mold to sit in the freezer that would allow the cream filling to unmold perfectly within the four hours that were allocated. After several more days and many more attempts, far more than either would have liked to admit to, they finally perfected it.

As that had taken many days to perfect, there were now only two days remaining until the competition. One day would be spent in final run throughs, the other spent packing of equipment and ingredients, ready for an early start the day after. The tension of just two days left had begun to show on Charlie. Chef Luc suggested that a rest would do Charlie better than anything and invited him to join them for supper. That way he could keep a watchful eye on young Charlie, making certain he relaxed.

Both felt refreshed and enjoyed the cooler night's air and the light shower that fell upon them as they headed back to the home of the Lucs. After many days and nights spent in the kitchen, nothing was more refreshing than light drops of rain hitting their faces.

Gabrielle had lovingly prepared another hearty French meal. Laughter filled the room, especially as the wine flowed a little more freely than usual. Charlie was grateful to have his mind distracted from thoughts of the competition and to be able to relax in such wonderful company.

Chef decided he would attempt to teach Charlie the game of Backgammon, this being a favourite past time of his. Not only to help distract Charlie, but to also teach him a little about planning and strategy.

It had been another wonderful evening spent in the company of the Lucs. Gabrielle had surpassed herself yet again by providing another fine supper. The wine had flowed and the conversation as always had been joyful and light-hearted. Charlie had begun to learn the art of Backgammon. Chef Luc amused himself as he watched Charlie decide which counters to move. He suspected that the game commanded the same respect as patisserie and would require many years to master. That was if taken seriously, but that night was just a fun game aided by wine and humour. The evening ended in the usual manner, with warm hugs all round, before Charlie returned happy and contented to the flat and his bed.



The next day's final run through went very well indeed, and both were so pleased, they decided to offer samples to any of the loyal customers who might venture into the shop on that day. Very few words were spoken by the majority of customers fortunate to sample a cheesecake. As each person bit into the sample offered, all that filled the air were moans of sheer delight. But the expressions on faces together with the sounds that were made, were all that Chef and Charlie needed in order to feel thrilled. The one and only complaint had come from the elderly gentleman who visited the shop each and every day who complained about everything. Whether it had been his old achy bones, the weather outside or the local councilman. So when he complained about the sample being too soft and not enough flavour, Charlie and Chef took that with a pinch of salt.

There was now just one day left, which Charlie firstly spent going over everything in his head. His mind raced through all possible scenarios--what he might do if this or that should happen. How would he handle it and well... was there a quick escape route if he completely messed it up?

The previous night in order to settle his nerves, he had written out a very long checklist of equipment and ingredients that would need to be taken. He found, by writing the list out on paper, he felt like he had everything under control and better organised.

All of the ingredients had to be weighed out as per their recipes as this was part of the rules set down by the competition officials. This went towards part of the overall score, which would test the skill of the competitor. Charlie had also written out all of the individual recipes. This included timings, and he constructed a timeline of what needed to be done and how long it should take in meticulous detail. He did not want to leave anything to chance. He had even doubled up on equipment and was probably taking way more than was necessary. Partly from nerves, but better safe than sorry he thought. The last day drew to a close and Charlie was ready. The ingredients were all boxed up in cooler boxes, equipment had been packed, and everything was put into Chef Luc's van ready for a quick getaway in the morning.

All that remained would be for Charlie to gain control of the anxiety that he felt within. He then thought back to a little technique his mother had taught him several years earlier for moments of stress; while breathing in, mentally count to four, followed by breathing out counting to ten. This had been something she had discovered while off on one of her own adventures travelling through a remote region of Tibet. Making himself comfortable, he began to concentrate on his breathing. He continued until his body felt relaxed and his hands were resting peacefully on his lap.

Now feeling much calmer, he made his way over to join the Lucs for supper, as they had insisted he join them for the evening. Knowing the stresses of competition, neither of the Lucs wanted Charlie to spend his time alone in the flat on that evening. He always enjoyed spending time in their company and always felt very honoured whenever he was invited into their home. He was not there for long on that particular occasion but had a lovely evening before he made his way back down the beautifully cobbled streets to the flat then retired for an early night. He wanted to be well-rested for the competition the following day, so he ventured straight to his bed and was asleep before he knew it.

Charlie had a knack of waking before his alarm, well most of the time anyway, no matter when he was to get up. He woke and reached for his watch on the side table. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and gazed at the time, sure enough two minutes to spare. He leapt out of his bed and prepared himself for the day ahead. He grabbed his coat then raced down the stairs to

wait outside in the crisp morning air. His feet would not remain on the same spot as he paced back and forth while he waited for Chef Luc to arrive.

It would take a couple of hour's drive to get to the competition venue, so Chef had asked him to be ready and waiting outside early that morning. He eagerly waited as patiently as he possibly could to be picked up. It was still early and dark out; they were even up before the morning bird song had begun. Charlie breathed a sigh of relief as the lights from the van appeared in the distance. Chef Luc pulled up, and they were on their way exactly on time.

While he watched the landscape pass them by, Charlie could not decide whether he felt nervous butterflies or perhaps sheer adrenalin flowing through his veins. Whatever it was, he had never felt so alive as he did in that moment. The journey to the competition went by relatively quickly. The conversation, what little there had been, had been cheerful. Chef Luc tried to avoid speaking about anything that was competition related.

By the time they arrived, rays from the morning sun, looked light a stage spotlight over the venue as they pulled into the car park. Chef Luc parked his van and they made their way into the venue to register Charlie as an entrant. They were one of the first few to arrive, so registration was sorted quickly, and there was time then for both of them to have a walk around. There were many people that Chef Luc knew, and Charlie had been introduced to each as they met. Charlie witnessed some friendly pats on the back and firm looking handshakes as Chef Luc was welcomed back into a world that he had not been a part of for some time.

Charlie was fascinated by the whole buzz that was growing within the venue as the morning progressed. Not only were there the competition kitchens for the different categories, but there were demonstration areas; there were trade stalls ready to sell all manner of things from a small palate knife to a whole kitchen setup. It was amazing, Charlie thought as he walked around, soaking up the atmosphere. Smells galore began to fill the air, as did chatter from sales people and competitors that were now all around him. The morning progressed slowly. Charlie and Chef Luc made the most of the opportunity to watch as many demonstrations as they could.

Then came the announcement of Charlie's category. The call sent a shiver down his back, but he could not back down now, he thought. He straightened his posture and remembered to breathe as he announced to Chef that they had thirty minutes to set up his station and be ready to start.

Together, they made their way back to the van, which thankfully had not been parked too far away. Busy working together, they quickly emptied the van. Boxes now in hand, they made their way back inside. They found Charlie's workstation and began to set up. Once ready, Chef Luc let Charlie know just how proud he was of him and his innovative creation. He wished him good luck then walked over to find himself a seat.

"Competitors, five minutes," announced an official in a loud authoritative tone.

Everything was ready, in some type of order, Chef Luc had taken his seat nearby and looked on. Nerves returned while waiting to start, Charlie looked around his surroundings and noticed Claire at one of the nearby competitor stations. With all the mayhem of setting up, neither Chef nor Charlie had seen her arrive earlier that morning. Now he felt even more anxious as his thoughts briefly turned to his mum in that moment, "Remember your breathing," his mum would have said to him. He took a deep breathe in and out, and before he could finish the out breathe, there came a loud voice that declared "Ladies and Gentlemen, your time starts now. You have four hours to prepare and present your dish. We will provide a fifteen minute warning. Good luck," announced the official and with that all of the competitors sprang into action.

Charlie took another deep breath in while looking at the bench which was now filled with all his ingredients and utensils, offering only a slight sense of comfort. He looked at the crib sheet

and recipe card in front of him for a few minutes then calmly began. He started to slowly and methodically work his way through the to-do list he and Chef had created prior to the competition. Charlie firstly went about getting the two different flavoured cheesecake creams underway as they needed to be made very gently and slowly, so would take the longest time. Low heat, gentle stirring to just the correct temperature; too hot or too cold and the mix would spoil. That process took a while, so Charlie stepped away every so often to prepare the molds or get the next lot of ingredients ready. As small traces of sweat appeared on his forehead, he used the crisp white towel that rested on his shoulder to carefully wipe the beads away. Once he had meticulously made both the cheesecake creams, they were then placed to one side. While they cooled, he moved on to make the two different flavoured fillings and inclusions, the *pâte de fruit*. Once made, they would also be placed to one side in order to set firm.

Even though four hours seemed like a long time, it was in fact going past very quickly indeed. Every so often, he stopped to look up at the clock to compare the time against his crib sheet. There was not a moment to waste; as one thing was finished the next would have to be started.

Next, he had to move on to making the very small chocolate flavoured sable biscuits. The raw dough had been carefully made, making sure the dough was not overworked. It was then spread out onto lined baking trays and then placed into the hot oven. These would only take minutes to bake, as they were quite small, so needed to be watched very closely indeed. Once baked, the trays with the sables were removed and placed on cooling racks. Charlie then returned to his cheesecake cream mix which had now cooled sufficiently but was still thin enough so that it would evenly fill the molds. Pouring gently, Charlie hoped that there would be no air pockets. The four molds were filled almost to the top then put to one side. Now back to the *pâte de fruit*, as these would now need to be carefully inserted into the four molds. This is something that Charlie took his time over, taking extra care to make sure they were all placed exactly. They needed to be millimetre perfect. After a nervous few moments, the job was done and they were again set to one side. This allowed the cheesecake cream mix to relax before the sable bases were added. While Charlie rested his cream mix, he trimmed the sables to a size slightly smaller than the mold but larger than the filling. Once sufficiently rested, the sable base was added, then the rest of the Lego mold filled with the cheesecake cream mix before being neatly levelled off. Once finished, they were put briefly into the freezer until they had firmed up. That would make it easier to unmold prior to finishing and the final plating. With a sense that time was drawing to an end, he again looked up at the clock and realised that he did not have long left to make the two flavoured sprays, which would be the finishing touch for his creation. He also had to make sure that the workstation was cleaned down, all utensils cleaned and safely put away, which was also a competition requirement.

All along, there had been judges walking around, marking as they went. Charlie had felt a little unsettled by this level of scrutiny but had not let that phase him. "Just fifteen minutes remaining, ladies and gentlemen, fifteen minutes," came the announcement from the official. Charlie could now feel his heart race as the nerves returned.

He looked over at the small group of spectators where he could see Chef Luc sitting and watching everything that he did intensely. He smiled and winked at Charlie, which made him relax enough and bolstered his confidence further. Now he felt ready to finish his dish and present it for judging. Charlie quickly fetched the Lego molds out of the freezer, turned them upside down, and gently eased out the shaped cheesecake cream. One down, three to go, he thought to himself as he controlled his nerves. All four successfully unmolded, Charlie's

attention now turned to the finishing touch--the spraying. He just had to remember to spray the right Lego shape with the right flavour or that could spell disaster. He was very pleased with how the finished Lego bricks looked. All that remained was the final plating. Charlie had chosen plain looking white square porcelain plates. Carefully, he placed each of the Lego shapes on the plate in a row of two bricks, alternating the colour. Simple, yet elegant, Charlie concluded as he stood back from the finished plate. He then finished tidying his station then placed the dish on the designated spot ready to be judged. Very proud of himself as he stood back, he thought that only a few months earlier, he would not have dreamt that he could have created such an imaginative dish as the one that was now plated before him. While waiting to be dismissed, he felt a little saddened that his father could not have been present to witness what he had just achieved.

“Time, ladies and gentleman,” shouted the official. “Please grab your personal items, and leave the station,” the official continued. That was it, the competition was all over. Charlie picked up what he could and then walked over to join Chef Luc. “Excellent my boy, you have done me very proud,” Chef Luc remarked as he gave Charlie a firm pat on the back. “Well, the marking is conducted in private at this competition, so we won’t find out the result until much later,” Chef informed Charlie. They both decided to have one last quick look around the venue before the long drive home. Charlie then collected the rest of his equipment and made his way out to the van while Chef Luc arranged with the organisers to be contacted about the result later that evening. It had been a long day and Charlie now felt more relaxed as he sat in the van waiting for Chef Luc to arrive. He knew that he had done all that he could. “Come on then, let’s get you home,” said Chef Luc when he finally turned up.

By the time they arrive back in Villejacques, Charlie had dozed off, and Chef Luc had to shake him a little in order to wake him up. “Charlie, we are home. Go get some sleep and we will see what tomorrow brings,” said a tired looking Chef.

“Thank you for everything” replied Charlie who was happy to have had the chef’s support throughout the day. He stepped out of the van and waved goodbye to Chef as he drove off. He then entered the shop via the rear door and headed upstairs to the flat and his waiting bed. The door had barely closed. By the time Charlie had collapsed on the bed, his head hit the pillow, and he was swiftly away in patisserie dreamland.

## Chapter Six - Paris Awaits

The day after the competition, Charlie sat bolt upright, woken by a loud knock at the door of the flat. He was soon aware of his name being repeatedly shouted in an excited tone.

Charlie gathered his thoughts, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then thought this behaviour very much out of character for Chef Luc, having finally recognised the voice. Was there a fire downstairs perhaps? He leapt out of bed, then quickly opened the front door of the flat. Standing before him was a very excitable looking Chef Luc.

All that Charlie heard next were the words, "You won, my boy, you won!" before being embraced by a bone crunching bear hug.

Unable to splutter a response, Charlie wriggled free and asked Chef to calmly explain. Some moments later, once Chef Luc had regained his composure, he began to explain to Charlie that he had received a telephone call from officials later the previous evening. The organiser had explained to Chef Luc that in Charlie's particular category there had been two clear winning dishes. But they could only choose one as that was the rule. They had deliberated and voted for several hours before they unanimously agreed on the winning entry.

After a short pause, Chef Luc with loud enthusiasm said, "Charlie, it was your dish that was the winner." Then followed a moment of silence as Charlie stood mouth open in a mild stake of shock.

Chef Luc then suggested that Charlie take the morning off, maybe have a walk around Villejaques, which was something he had not really had a chance to do since his arrival, but that he should return by midday.

Charlie enquired as to why midday, as it all began to sink in. He felt an overwhelming sense of pride within himself, mixed with excitement and disbelief. Wow, he thought, as he stood in complete bewilderment before Chef Luc.

Chef Luc explained that Charlie would need to be back by then as they had a surprise waiting for him. Then he would drive his young apprentice to the train station as he would spend the following week in Paris.

Surprised by what he had heard, but still in a sense of shock, he managed to splutter out the words, "Why Chef, now what? Why Paris?" Chef Luc calmly explained that the winner of Charlie's category would be invited to spend one week private tuition with Fleurette Celeste, who was hailed as the finest patissier in the world, at her famous establishment in Paris. This left Charlie speechless by such an incredible prize.

Chef Luc's final words of "See you at midday, Charlie," still echoed in his head as with great enthusiasm Chef Luc disappeared down the wooden staircase. This had left Charlie in a daze for a moment or two. Paris he thought. Fleurette Celeste, he thought.

Now alone once again in the flat, he decided the best course of action was his usual morning coffee ritual, which would help to settle the shock and excitement that had now begun to settle in. He enjoyed every tantalizing sip, which helped him to put it all together in his mind and gather his thoughts. Charlie decided to make the most of that morning. Pack now or pack later, he could not decide, but chose the former option out of ease. But first he washed, then dressed, and once that was out of the way, he swiftly packed his backpack. He decided he would only need some basic essentials, so in no time at all he had finished.

Once packed, he decided to heed Chef Luc's advice and go for a walk and stretch his legs. So with that, Charlie grabbed his journal and headed off to sit down by the river, via a walk through the town. He headed out of the flat door, down the wooden stairs, and through the open rear

door; it wasn't long before Charlie was strolling through the narrow paved streets of Villejacques stopping every so often to take in the atmosphere of that beautiful little town. Since his arrival, Charlie had spent most of his time either in the small rear kitchen learning his craft or in the flat with his nose buried in an assortment of patisserie books experimenting or in a deep sleep. So he intended to make the most of the time while he could.

He allowed the delicious smells that seemed to waft out from open doorways of the quaint food shops determine his direction. Making sure he entered, then sampled as much as he could and tasted as many flavours as possible all the while looking at textures and contrast to add to his mind map. Charlie now felt very full and content having just left one of the smaller artisan chocolatier shops in the town. He had sampled some of the finest chocolates yet in all their different forms.

Then, while still drifting in chocolate heaven, he bumped into Claire who had been rushing down the street.

“Good morning, Claire,” said Charlie rather happily, expecting a more jovial reply than the one he did receive.

“Morning, what’s good about this morning?” came the harsh reply, the once soft flowing accent now became more harsh and rushed.

“What's happened?” Charlie enquired as Claire went on to explain how she had been robbed at the competition and should have won.

“I’d spent months practicing and the trip to Paris should have been mine. Chef Fleurette is my idle,” explained a very upset and somewhat grumpy Claire. Her jet black hair hid a tear that had formed in the corner of her eye from the disappointment that welled within her.

Once she had finished her moaning, Charlie decided it best to make his excuses and leave before she questioned him about being at the competition.

“Sorry Claire, but I have to go. I have an errand for Chef. Was nice to see you, but farewell!” With that Charlie was quickly off down the street, which left an even more disgruntled Claire standing by herself.

“That was close,” Charlie thought as he continued his walk still feeling a little unsettled by the reaction of Claire. Then he remembered what it was he had planned to do that morning as he continued towards the river not stopping to visit anymore food shops along the way. “That was probably enough sampling for today,” Charlie thought and it wasn’t long before the river bank was there before him.

He found an empty bench and took a seat and gazed across the river in each direction. The river looked a little murky that day and rushed past with an occasional gentle splash as the water lightly touched the jagged rocks. It was a fairly quiet spot he had found; only the tranquil sound from the water, blended with beautiful birdsong helped to mask the background noise of the town. He could just enjoy the peace and quiet for a while. He opened his journal, grabbed the pencil neatly tucked within the binder, and began to continue with his entries, paying special attention to the day of the competition and all that had happened transpired since. Caught up in the beauty of this place, mixed with writing, it suddenly dawned on him he had places to be. He looked at his watch then realized an hour or so had passed, and it was now close to midday. He jumped up and swiftly started to make his way back to the shop. He ran back as quickly as he could, bursting through the rear entrance out of breathe and almost colliding with Chef.

“Steady on Charlie!” said Chef Luc, as he neatly side stepped to avoid a disaster.

Once Charlie had regained his breath, Chef called all the staff into the office. With everyone now gathered, Chef Luc presented Charlie with his very own patissiers tool box. A rather large

grin appeared on his face, as Charlie graciously accepted this wondrous gift from his mentor. The box itself was very unassuming to look at, but once opened it would reveal an assortment of utensils that you would only expect to find in the toolbox of a world class pastry chef. Charlie could not believe his eyes at being the recipient of such a generous gift. After the box was handed over to a delighted Charlie, Chef Luc then went on to make a short speech. Something that he was not really known for, but wanted to, as he had begun to think of Charlie as family during the time that he had been there. A short round of applause then followed before staff promptly returned to their duties.

Charlie then disappeared back upstairs to the old yet comfy flat to grab his trusted backpack. One arm through the strap, he swung it over his shoulder and again rushed down the stairs arriving in the kitchen. Once there, a staff member let Charlie know that Chef Luc was bringing the van around. With haste, he hurried outside just as Chef Luc's van pulled up.

Ready for the next adventure, he climbed in, and the door had barely closed, before Chef Luc sped off. Time was running out fast as Charlie was to be at the station to meet the 12:40 pm to Paris train. Holding tightly to the door handle stopped Charlie from slipping in the seat as Chef screeched around several sharp corners. They arrived at the town's small train station with only minutes to spare. Chef winked at Charlie before handing over the train ticket, which had been picked up earlier that morning.

“Enjoy, my boy. I’m proud of you,” Chef Luc warmly said.

Charlie replied by kindly thanking him for the gift and of course the speedy lift. Jumping out of the van, he rushed towards the platform to which Charlie could see the train had just pulled in. With barely any time to spare, he raced to catch the train, ticket in hand, waved in the air, and just managed to jump on board as the conductor held the door for Charlie. He promptly found a seat, placed his backpack and toolbox in the rack overhead, then made himself comfortable before he breathed a sigh of relief.

Several hours had passed before Charlie felt the train slow in preparation to arrive into Paris. The train rattled as the brakes were engaged. Charlie sat upright, a little disappointed at having dozed off, so he had missed much of the train ride. “But the next part of the adventure awaits, and that is far more important than French countryside right now,” he thought to himself. The train soon ground to a complete stop as it had now terminated at its final destination. Charlie disembarked and made his way to the concourse where he had been told that someone would be there to meet him.

And sure enough, amongst the throng of arriving and departing passengers, he could see a small sign, lifted high over the heads of the crowds, that bore his name. Charlie walked up to the person then introduced himself to the friendly face that had been sent to meet him. Before him now stood a tall slender young man with dark perfectly arranged hair that complemented his bronzed coloured face.

“Hello,” said Charlie, “I believe that you are here to meet me?”

“Bonjour, Charlie. My name is Théo,” replied the young man.

Théo explained that he had been sent to collect him from the station and take him to meet Fleurette. Theo gestured to Charlie to follow him, then gleefully informed the weary traveller that he would be provided with a room at the staff annex while he was there. Charlie felt immediately relaxed in Theo's company, being similar in age, together with Theo's friendly manner. In the few minutes that it took them to get back to the car, the staff annex rules had been explained and Theo explained the roster system that allowed the Desert Cafe to be open from breakfast until late.

They soon arrived at a rather battered looking car. “Well then hop in. I know it’s not much, but it is mine” Theo stated with a slight cheeky smirk.

Charlie didn't think that the car matched the appearance of Theo. But there must be a reason, he thought, although the car was immaculate inside. Theo climbed into the driver's side, then reached over fiddling with the lock until it released to open the passenger door. Door now unlocked and open, Charlie quickly climbed in then placed his backpack and toolbox onto the backseat. With a quick grin from Theo, the engine was started, and they were off. Charlie was amazed by how busy the roads were, discretely gripping the seat as Théo zipped through the traffic. He whizzed down a collection of little side streets until eventually he turned into a small car park at the rear of some old Parisienne buildings.

Having exited the car as quickly as they had entered, Théo was quick to show Charlie just where he would be going to sleep during his stay. It was a small room with very little in it apart from a bed, table, cupboard, and washbasin and that was pretty much it. Charlie was informed that the bathroom was at the end of the corridor. Théo then happily informed Charlie to change into his whites while he waited downstairs; he would then take him through to meet Fleurette.

He felt decidedly nervous, yet extremely excited all at the same time as he quickly changed before he made his way downstairs to a waiting Théo.

“Follow me,” Théo cheerfully announced as they made their way across the little car park towards the rear entrance of the stone building, through an open door, around several corridors that resembled a simple maze, until finally they arrived at the office of Fleurette.

Théo stopped outside, and knocked on the door. Almost instantly came a quiet response of, “Entree.” He gently pushed the partially opened door and walked into the office. Charlie was then introduced to Fleurette Celeste, who shook him by the hand and directed him to take a seat. Charlie quietly settled himself in one of the high back grey chairs.

She thanked Théo for collecting Charlie from the station as it had been his day off, to which he replied, “Not a problem, Chef,” then grinned at Charlie and promptly left the office, closing the door behind as he went.

From what Charlie had heard about Fleurette, he expected to see someone who looked rather intimidating. Yet, before him sat a middle aged lady, her blonde hair tied back in a short pony tail. She looked of average height and build, yet a glimpse of someone formidable could be seen within her piercing blue eyes.

She leant forward and shook Charlie's hand, which made him feel very welcome.

“Well Charlie, firstly let me congratulate you on winning the competition. I hear you caused quite a stir with the judges by entering what would normally be considered such a simple dessert to make. However, you won, for which you should be commended on,” said Fleurette.

She explained to Charlie a little of her background within the industry, her own journey, and what drove her to open her business. She explained how she had met with a tremendous amount of resistance to the opening of such a venture as this. Many of her peers had called her crazy to think that such a venture would work, and so it was seen to be a very foolish venture indeed.

She was very open and frank with Charlie as she explained how at first the cafe was very small and could only seat a small number of diners at a time. But even then there were days when they were less than half full. There were times when she did not know how she would pay bills at the end of the week, let alone pay her staff. “But my small brigade were loyal each having a similar passion for patisserie that equalled my own ambition,” she told Charlie. Continuing she said, “They could see my vision, were inspired by my creativity, ambition, and drive and so were fully supportive in the early days.”



Fleurette then explained how, eventually, her passionate determination and drive paid off. She was helped by a chance encounter with a food writer who had only ventured in by accident to get shelter from a particularly severe rainstorm. He was somewhat confused to be seated at a table, then presented with a dessert only menu. Many minutes had past, several members of the staff had attempted to take an order, and all he could do was to stare at the menu in a state of confused bewilderment.

Fleurette continued her story by saying, “As it had been another unsurprisingly quite day, I had been at the front of house conversing with an elderly couple who had become regular customers. I had been made aware of the customers' confusion, excused myself from that conversation, then made my way over to speak with the gentleman. I introduced myself as the Chef Patron, then proceeded to explain to him that my passion was for fine desserts and pastries. I had always wanted to open a business that focused entirely on fine desserts, and then I talked him through the menu, describing each of the twenty-four desserts that were currently being served. Gradually, the customer began to understand my concept, so I decided to explain about my innovative tasting menu, which I saw as a connoisseurs delight.

I explained the format of the tasting menu, that it was a collection of twelve desserts, each small enough to not be filling, but large enough to please the palate, that would offer a variety of flavoursome explosions in the mouth. I told him that the menu always followed a theme, which changed monthly, and always contained a combination of hot and cold, soft and firm, subtle and full-flavoured desserts. The customer was so intrigued by that style of menu offering that he placed his order, and said he would give it a try. The gentleman ate each of the various courses which we presented to him, only acknowledging the member of staff that cleared each plate before being bought the next. He soon finished, then settled his bill and left without any further word.”

“So what happened next?” enquired a curious Charlie.

Fleurette then continued to say, “Several weeks had past and suddenly the cafe was getting busier. People would telephone to make reservations which had been unheard of until that point. We started to turn customers away at the door as every table was filled as soon as the doors opened right through until closing. All of a sudden, we had to consider hiring more staff and possible expansion. We were fortunate in being able to purchase the building next door, and so we closed our doors for several months to renovate before we reopened.

“That proved to be the perfect opportunity for a complete redesign of the menu. Having chosen to expand, I thought it the ideal moment to rethink what we offered and how it was offered, and so myself and all of my loyal team sat down and together we created a whole new menu offering. Having been with me from the start, I wanted them to be a part in the creative process and also to put in ideas of their own. We decided to open earlier, and so a breakfast menu was created. We wanted it to offer a selection of light, fruity desserts or pastries that would not be too heavy for early morning customers. We spent many hours working out how each dish would be married with a beautiful house blended tea or a lightly roasted coffee bean. We wanted something to excite and stimulate the palate, but nothing heavy for the start of the working day.”

Charlie sat there speechless as he took in every word of Fleurette's incredible story. Mesmerised by her passion and obvious drive, he wanted to know more.

She then continued, “Breakfast menu complete, we then set about refining our daytime menu as we wanted to change the whole look and feel. Many weeks were spent on the creation of this menu as we wanted to get the offering just right. We wanted a menu that was not too overwhelming, yet full of variety. We took some old classics and put our own unique style to

them. We created new things that would challenge the customer's taste and palate, and after much trial and error we eventually arrived at our finished menu. Our tasting menu also underwent an overhaul and became more refined, but that was somewhat easier to create as the desserts on there were just miniature versions of the main menu. Well, almost anyway. We made the decision that we would change these menus every quarter so that we were always using ingredients currently in season. As soon as one menu was finalised, then the next began its development cycle. The new menus eventually arrived back from the printers with only days before we re-opened.

"The day of the reopening that same gentleman made a return, having previously made a reservation. He then introduced himself as Quentin Watson, a food writer for a national newspaper, and said he had been so entranced by my business venture and passion, he felt compelled to write about the cafe.

"The rest is history," she said to Charlie.

He was now able to see past that first impression he had of her and had more than just a glimpse of the formidable person she really was. As she had shared her story, he could clearly see what have driven her to for fill her dream. But more importantly, Charlie realised that although she had fulfilled her ambition, she did not stop there. He could see, just by listening to her that she continued to develop and grow in her chosen craft.

"Thank you for sharing your incredible story," Charlie said, to which Fleurette responded and said, "If you are truly passionate about something, you need to stick with it no matter what. If you have genuine belief, then no matter what others may think, always believe in yourself."

Charlie enquired as to what he would be doing during his time spent with Fleurette. She replied by saying, in her quiet French tone, that she would teach Charlie how to prepare one new dessert from her menu each day. She would teach him how to make each of the components that would go to make up the completed dish. She explained to Charlie that each dish and its components would be very different, so he would be learning something new every time. They would start this in the morning; he could just observe, absorb, and take notes.

"If I might ask, Charlie, during your stay here, I would be delighted if you would recreate your winning entry for me," Fleurette asked a blushing Charlie. He was quick to respond, saying that he would be delighted to do that. With a smile on her face, Fleurette then asked Charlie to provide her with a list of all the ingredients that he would require, handing him a notebook and pen.

"When you have finished your list, come and join me in the kitchen, Charlie," she said, at which point she stood up, putting her interesting and colourful chef's hat back on.

He had to muffle a chuckle to hide his surprise as this was no ordinary looking chef's hat but was bright pink with large black checks, although keeping the same traditional shape.

He then sat forward in the seat, and fiddled with the pen. He began to think about the ingredients that he would require. He made a special note of where the main ingredients were sourced from. The list was carefully create, so that nothing was forgotten. Before leaving the office, he placed the notebook back onto her immaculate and well organised looking desk. With a quick scan of the room, Charlie admired the orderliness she seemed to have in place, knowing this is just as he had pictured his office would be one day. He then stood to leave and followed Fleurette's direction and ventured into the kitchen.

As he entered the kitchen, he was quick to notice it was more military-type coordination than the hustle and bustle that you would usually associate with a busy commercial kitchen. That in itself was an eye-opener for Charlie. It was large, modern looking for its time, and spotlessly

clean, even in the middle of a busy service. The kitchen was kept quite cool, due to the nature of food that was being served. The main area was primarily where the desserts and pastries were finished prior to being checked one last time by either Fleurette or her sous chef. As this was an award winning establishment, nothing left the kitchen without being first approved. Just one little mistake, an ingredient left off, or a component in the wrong place, and that could spell disaster, indeed.

Charlie made his way over to where Fleurette stood as she inspected each and every plate meticulously. A delicate turn of her wrist which finished with a flick of her fingers was the signal that plates were ready to be taken by a member of staff to the waiting customer. Even though it was only early evening, the kitchen was busy. Very busy, indeed, Charlie thought. Having been instructed to stand to one side, so as not to get in the way, he was amazed by how the kitchen moved. Orders were received by Fleurette from the waiting staff, which were then read out to the small kitchen brigade, who would then acknowledge the order in unison. Orders were being called on while other orders were called away by the very same waiting staff. This was beautifully coordinated with those staff members whose sole responsibility was to serve the drinks that specifically went with each dessert. This was also part of the experience at Fleurette's, as each dish was beautifully and carefully paired with some type of drink, which could either be hot or cold, alcoholic or non-alcoholic. Charlie was left in awe by what he had witnessed.

"This was pure genius...", he thought to himself as the evening progressed.

Every so often, he would be called over to the pass to be shown a finished dish as it was carefully placed on to a waiter's tray. He would try to make a mental note of everything that he saw, smelled, or heard, eager to fill his mind map as much as he could.

During the very rare lulls, Charlie would try to ask questions, being the ever inquisitive chap he was, but just as an answer was about to be given, a new order would either arrive or be called away. Charlie was amazed at how few staff could send out so many incredible looking desserts with what seemed like little effort. But he was certain it was much harder than it looked.

He also noticed, unlike some other Chef Patron's, Fleurette would check on each Chef's progress when time allowed, with words of support, encouragement, and guidance. Maybe it was how she treated her staff, Charlie thought, which made it look so effortless. He felt so honoured to be watching such a thing firsthand and was only now realising why Claire had been so upset about not winning the competition herself. He felt a little guilty about winning since it had been Claire's dream but grateful for the opportunity himself.

He looked forward to the next week where he would learn more and be part of the whole process. Service was coming to an end as there had been no new orders coming in for a little while now. Remaining orders going out had decreased ever more rapidly as staff could see the end of their shift nearing. Charlie had not realised how late it had gotten with being so caught up at the moment. As the final order was called away and approved by Fleurette at the pass, there was a sense of gratification amongst the staff. Another night of producing taste sensations for delighted customers had come to a close.

As soon as the waiter had left the kitchen with the last order, a round of applause from the happy staff rang through the kitchen, while a smiling Fleurette performed a small twirl, something that Charlie later found out was a tradition at the end of each day. The more that Charlie was witness to, the more he wanted the life of a patissier, to be a part of such a creative process, something that he now started to feel deeply within himself.

Once the applause had subsided, the staff suddenly sprang into action and cleaned down the kitchen, wrapped unused items up, placed ingredients back into one of the various fridges dotted around the kitchen. It looked like military precision in motion, but it had earlier been explained to Charlie that the kitchen was broken down into areas, or stations, so specific ingredients and components had their specific home. There were stations for hot desserts, chilled and frozen desserts, and pastry desserts.

Then there were the preparation areas, where many various ingredients and components were made, before being transferred into the main finishing kitchen. This reminded him a little of Captain Macrina's well organised crew. Each member of the team worked together; this resembled the intricate inner workings of a mechanical watch. If just one part was out of sync, everything would grind to a halt.

It was not long before the kitchen looked clean, neat, and tidy and the floors glistening having just been mopped, ready for the whole process to start again the next day. The one thing that remained on the bench was a jar almost full to the brim of loose coins, by its side a small notepad, envelopes, and pencil. Charlie was intrigued as to its reason, but thought better to ask right now. "That's a question for another night," he thought. Fleurette, having cleaned down the pass area, which she did each night, then spoke with all the staff individually about that shift's service. She then asked Charlie to join her in the office once the kitchen was closed down, for which he did. Sitting across from Fleurette once again, he was asked what he thought about what he had seen.

Charlie struggled for a moment to get a coherent word out, which had given Fleurette reason to giggle, but when he had settled himself, he said, "That was the most incredible thing I have ever witnessed and I attempted to take in as much as I could."

"Excellent, Charlie" responded Fleurette and continued to tell him that she looked forward to imparting a little of her knowledge starting in the morning.

Charlie let her know that he had left the note on her desk with the ingredients he would need. She thanked him then let him know that she would sort out the order in the next couple of days as some items she may have to order in specially.

She then wished Charlie a good night's sleep and suggested that he head back to his room for a well-earned rest.

He bid her a good night and thanked her for the opportunity, which she warmly replied, "It is my pleasure. Good night, Charlie".

Before long, he was back to his room relaxing, coffee in hand. Of course, it was Captain Macrina's special coffee, as to Charlie this fell under the "essential" list. Sitting quietly upon his bed, he pulled the journal from his backpack, wanting to write up the events of that day before it became a blur. The journal sat opened in front of him for a short while as he tried to find the words to express the day's events, from the moment he had been woken by Chef Luc's overly excited banging on the door, to the moment he returned to the staff annex for his first night's sleep. Pinching his arm, saying to himself, "No, not a dream," as he chuckled quietly before wrote his journal entry with sheer exhilaration.

The next day he was up bright and early, managed to get into the shared bathroom, but did pass along the corridor two members of staff who definitely had expressions on their faces of, "Dude, just leave me alone." Once washed, he dressed into his new whites which had been a gift from Chef Luc as these had his name and the shops logo embroidered onto the left breast of the jacket, the logo only on the left sleeve. Now dressed, new tool box and journal in hand, he made his way to the kitchen and to start his day.

He made his way downstairs and across the small car park and joined Théo standing outside waiting for the rear door to be unlocked. They greeted each other, Théo shaking his hand vigorously while asking how his first evening had been.

Charlie replied in an elevated tone of excitement by saying, "I have never seen something so amazing, let alone been anywhere where only desserts were sold. It was incredible."

Charlie then continued by asking how Théo had started to work for Fleurette. Théo explained that while he was still studying at college, he would turn up every day after finishing and stand outside the backdoor. He would then wait there until Fleurette came out, and he would then ask her for a job. The first time Fleurette was polite and said that there were no vacancies and sent him on his way. But Théo said that he still came back every day, saying how in the third week he thought he was going to get clobbered by the kitchen porter, but being more slight of foot, he got away, and giggled while he recalled that specific evening.

They were both still laughing by the time Fleurette arrived to open up, "Good morning gentlemen, and just what is so funny?," she asked.

"I was just telling Charlie here how I managed to get a job working for you" explained Théo.

"Oh, I see," smiled Fleurette who continued to tell Charlie how his persistence got the better of her. When she finally gave in, she told him that if he was able to convince her in the kitchen of his abilities, then the job would be his.

Charlie then looked at them both in turn responds before saying, "I guess he did then, Chef?" which then bought further giggles from all three of them this time.

Moments later, more staff began to arrive, so having collected herself, Fleurette found the keys in her bag and opened the door, allowing everyone to enter to start their day.

Charlie followed the group of other staff members, trying to blend in and not draw too much attention to himself as they all changed into their pristine whites. Fleurette headed to her office to check messages and place the urgent orders that needed her attention first thing.

She then joined Charlie where she had signalled for him to wait in one of the smaller production areas. While he patiently waited, Charlie had thought how similar the main working area was to the space that he had been accustomed to back at Chef Luc's little patisserie in Villejacques. But then Fleurette's kitchen was even more modern than Chef Luc's was. It looked like it was fitted out with all the very latest items of equipment. It truly was patisserie heaven.

The next five days all followed the same pattern where Fleurette would spend much of the morning and afternoon teaching Charlie how to produce one of her gourmet desserts from the current menu. The only thing that seemed to change were the array of different chef's hats that graced her head. She would choose a different colour or pattern each and every day. She would break Charlie's training down so that the production of each component was taught in meticulous detail. Charlie expected nothing less from an award winning patissier. Once all the various components had been made, she would then go on to create the finished dessert.

During each stage, she would have Charlie taste each ingredient, sometimes while wearing a blindfold in order to test and challenge his pallet. For the most part, Charlie answered correctly. However, on more than one occasion, he had provided an answer that raised a giggle from a nearby member of the kitchen staff. Fleurette, on those occasions, would mutter some words under her breath while slapping her forehead with her hand.

During this time Fleurette would only step away momentarily to take an important telephone call or to speak briefly with a sales rep who had turned up unannounced.

This gave Charlie time to taste further and update his journal with all that he had been taught so far. He would make notes on recipes, flavours, cooking times, everything that he possibly

could make a note of, he would. He would even make a note at the back of his journal which would list all the various items of equipment that they used in order to make the desert the masterpiece it was. That might come in handy one day he thought, eager to take in all that he possibly could.

During the evening, Charlie helped with evening service, and although the Desert Cafe was open all day, the evening was always a little busier. Charlie at first would work with Theo where he could, as Theo was a passionate teacher, willing to share all he knew with Charlie. By mid-week he was allowed to be more involved in the finishing of a dessert, but still under the watchful eye of Theo and Fleurette. Charlie demonstrated tremendous enthusiasm, very keen to learn. On occasions, this enthusiasm would be reined in by Theo, a very different young man when it came to his craft. He always acted with the highest level of professionalism as Theo had learnt the hard way that mistakes could be costly. He was therefore a fine role-model for Charlie which he began to realise as the week progressed.

Towards the end of the week, Charlie had greatly impressed both Theo, but more importantly, Fleurette so much that he was given total responsibility for a dessert. He would still be under the watchful eye of Theo but would have full responsibility for its production, from start to finish. Grateful for the opportunity, Charlie was thrilled to show what he had learnt. Fleurette also wanted to test him to make sure he understood and appreciated the dish completely and the importance of timing and working within a team. Should anything go wrong, Theo would be on hand to jump right in. Being encouraged continually by Theo, Charlie did exceptionally well with Theo only having to remind him on two occasions that he had forgotten a component. Fleurette was even more suitably impressed by Charlie's level of knowledge and craftsmanship. She had praised him on several occasions over his natural ability, which for someone without formal college training, had impressed her even more.

The evening always ended the same, with a round of applause accompanied by a twirl from Fleurette once the last order had been sent out. The team would then set about getting the kitchen cleaned and everything put away. The only other thing that remained a mystery to Charlie was the ever increasing number of coins in the jar that sat on the end of the bench. Sighs rang out as an envelope was opened, followed by each member placing their coin in the jar.

The final day had arrived and it started the same as all the previous days had. Charlie was always waiting eagerly outside, Journal in one hand and his patissier's toolbox in the other before Fleurette had even arrived.. Theo would turn up just as Fleurette pulled into the car park, soon followed by the remaining staff who were on duty that day. Fleurette opened the door, everyone would get changed quickly, and the working day would begin.

Charlie's last lesson began the same as before. He would be taught how to make the various components that made up the finished dessert. As usual, he would taste, make notes in his journal, and ask Fleurette numerous questions. All the time he would be coming up with imaginative ideas for his own possible future creations.

Then during a short break, Charlie was called into the office by Fleurette. She then informed him that Quentin Watson would be visiting that evening as he was in Paris for his work. She asked Charlie if he would like to reproduce his winning entry cheesecake that evening for Quentin. At first, he was a little nervous by the thought and once again called on the breathing technique that his mother had taught him to settle his nerves. He finally responded by saying he would be delighted to make his winning cheesecake entry that evening.

Charlie had not had a chance earlier in the week. Due to a delay in receiving the specific cream cheese, and not wanting to use a substitute, he had not been able to do this so far. After

there break, Fleurette and Charlie completed the final dessert for that day; they both cleaned down there work bench so it was spotless, ready to begin work on the cheesecake for later that evening.

He now stood alone at the work bench, with only four hours to recreate his desert, so he thought back to the competition. He found the plan that Chef Luc had helped composed in his journal then placed all his utensils in front of him, along with all his ingredients, and promptly began.

Every so often, Fleurette would peek, stealth-like, around the door to see what was going on. Though she was intrigued, she also wanted to wait to see the finished result. Having noticed how nervous Charlie felt at presenting his dessert to Quentin, she chose to leave him to his own creative flow.

The afternoon slowly morphed into evening, and Charlie had just added the finishing touches to his creation. Relieved it had all come together with much more ease than he anticipated, he realised that every day of his training had made him a much more proficient patissier.

The main kitchen was suddenly getting busier with the evening rush of dessert aficionado's and those who just loved desserts for being just that.

His Lego shaped cheesecake was now ready, and all that was left to do was to unmold and plate. Charlie made his way back into the main kitchen and informed a cheerful Fleurette, who once again was sporting yet another rather colourful hat. She let Charlie know that his timing was perfect as Quentin had just arrived with three guests and was just being seated.

Giving his table fifteen minutes or so to settle and to place a drink order, she made her way through into the dining room to speak with Quentin. After she greeted him and the rest of his guests, she went on to explain about Charlie and asked if he would be willing to sample his winning entry, not telling him just what it was, as she was aware he may have a strong opinion, just as she had, not realizing just how creative a cheesecake could actually be.

He agreed, and Fleurette made her way back into the kitchen to brief her staff and instructed Charlie to begin plating his dessert. She reminded Charlie to take a chance and to follow his dreams. That this was the time to stand out from all the other patissiers out there. She briefly recalled her own first encounter with Quentin to Charlie so as to remind him just what might be possible if Quentin liked his creation.

He kept himself calm, then carefully unmolded his Cheesecake and carefully positioned each one, four to a plate. Four plates finished and a fifth for Fleurette, then carried them to the pass for Fleurette to inspect.

She was thrilled by what she gazed upon and carefully placed each of the four plates onto the waiter's tray. Then in her own unique manner, she rolled her wrist which ended with a finger pointing in the direction of the waiter as he picked up the tray and carefully left the kitchen.

They were then out of Charlie's hands and making their way to the table where Quentin and his three guests sat. Charlie could not help but pace back and forward, which had not gone unnoticed by Fleurette. She asked Charlie to talk her through his cheesecake dessert as to keep him distracted for a while. He explained how the idea had come about, the old journal that Chef Luc had given him, and the fact that the author seemed to have this huge passion for cheesecake that Charlie felt he would like to honour. So the idea was born he just then added a more modern twist.

Fleurette was surprised by the way that Charlie had taken such a simple dessert and one that she had not really invested in herself, and turned it into something special. She took a scoop out of one of the Lego shapes and placed it in her mouth. Not a word was uttered as Charlie looked

on, waiting anxiously for a comment. He could see how Fleurette was working the cheesecake around her mouth, exploring texture and taste across her palate. She took another scoop from the second flavour, then did exactly the same thing again which was making Charlie even more nervous. She then placed her spoon down and was about to speak to Charlie when the kitchen door from the dining room burst open, and Quentin strode confidently into the kitchen which startled everyone.

Fleurette asked if everything was okay as this was unusual behaviour, to which Quentin asked to speak to her and Charlie in private. They all made their way to her office and the door was closed, safe from prying ears.

Charlie was fidgeting nervously as the three of them sat there. After a moment of silence, Quentin suddenly spoke and explained to Fleurette that in all his years he had only ever tasted cheesecake once before. He looked slightly down as if a little embarrassed to say what came next. But after another short pause, continued to explain that the first time, he had just started out as a food writer and had wanted to make a name for himself and was not concerned about whom he offended along the way.

While visiting a patisserie competition he was asked to comment on an entry by a young patissier who had presented a cheesecake entry. In his naivety, he belittled the entrant for lack of creativity, imagination, and inspiration, and from that day forward had vowed never to taste cheesecake again. The tone of his voice was now slightly shaky. So he said, at first when Charlie's dessert had been placed before him, he felt a little angry, but now with his experience, he decided to try the dessert as it had been Fleurette's wish.

Turning to face Charlie, Quentin then went on to say that after trying Charlie's dish he now had great admiration for cheesecake as that dessert had been by far the best thing he had tasted in a very long time. The simplicity, married with the mix of flavours, the lightness of texture that melted on the palate leaving just the right explosion of flavour, had left him wanting more. The whole dessert, from presentation, to taste and texture, had left him speechless. For a writer, this was an amazing feat in itself.

He then asked Charlie for his full name, as he would very much like to write a small article about this moment. But only if he agreed. Charlie, taken back by Quentin's admission, looked to Fleurette for guidance as this was new territory for him. She smiled back at Charlie with a nod, and feeling more confident, he provided Quentin with his full name. Thanking Fleurette, Quentin stood to leave the office and return to join his guests, when he suddenly turned, stopped, and commented that the surname was the same as the young patissier he had belittled all those years ago. Leaving the room in silence for a moment, he nodded towards Fleurette and then left.

Fleurette excitedly congratulated Charlie for impressing Quentin, acknowledging the fact that it was quite an honour, indeed. She then threw her chef's hat in the air, followed by her signature twirl, which made them both burst into a fit of laughter.

Once the excitement passed, his thoughts then focused on the passing comment made as Quentin had left the office. Moments later, Fleurette and Charlie re-joined the kitchen brigade to finish out the night's service.

The rest of the evening flew past but left Charlie with all manner of questions which only interfered with his concentration. But service soon drew to a close as did Charlie's final day spent at Fleurette's.

The evening ended as normal, the kitchen tidied and cleaned down, but not before the ceremonial applause and Fleurette's usual twirl.



Then came an announcement, “Well it looks like we have a winner,” as the jar full of coins was held up in the air by Fleurette's sous chef Hugo. “The lucky person to guess the correct colour and pattern of chef’s hat today is...,” followed by a short pause and an attempted drum roll, “Armand!” With that, the whole kitchen erupted in loud cheers as Armand was handed the jar as Charlie thought to himself, “Poor chaps got to count that now,” which just made him laugh even louder.

Fleurette, who was still laughing from the uproar in the kitchen, remembered to ask Charlie to come and see her before he left in the morning for a chat. Still being playful she said that Theo would love the honour of driving him to the train station. After now collecting herself, she then congratulated Charlie once again and wished him a good night. She then turned, still feeling rather joyful herself to make her way to her office to finish up.

Charlie then left the kitchen and returned to his room one final time. It was as he sat on the bed, writing his journal as was usual at the end of his day, that his thoughts again returned to the parting words of Quentin as he left. “Just why did he have the same surname as this other patissier? Just who was this person? What really happened?” he thought. All these questions filled Charlie's mind as he disliked like riddles or questions left unanswered. But his journal now complete, he rested his head on the fluffy pillow and mulled over these questions until finally he drifted off to a deep sleep.

## Chapter Seven - The Truth Discovered

Charlie woke early as usual, though on that particular occasion he'd had a restless night's sleep. But he was very keen to return to Villejacques and the Lucs, whom he now saw as his second family. But not before he had spoken with Fleurette as she had requested he do the previous evening. Having got dressed in normal attire for a change, he finished packing the remaining items into his backpack, then buckled the top flap. Plagued by questions, he then sat on the edge of the bed, and once again thought back to those comments that had been made by Quentin the previous evening. Not only that, there had been the journal that Chef Luc had given him and the familiarity he had felt while flicking through the its pages.

"Could this have been my father's journal after all?" Charlie pondered. "If that had been the case, how did Chef Luc come about having it in his possession? Then if it had been his father's, that would mean his father would have been a patissier like Chef Luc. Just what was the connection between his father and Chef Luc? Why had his father never said anything to Charlie before? Why had he never spoken of this?" he pondered

His mind overloaded, he looked over to see his now cold coffee sitting on the side table still untouched. Even any thoughts of patisserie were now being suppressed by this new dilemma. He desperately needed answers to those questions.

But first he must see Fleurette to thank her for such an incredible week and for sharing just a little of her vast knowledge with him. "She must have arrived by now," Charlie thought. So he grabbed his backpack and swung it onto his shoulder, picked up his toolbox, and scanned the room one final time to make sure he had not left anything behind. Plus as usual, Charlie wanted to check that the room had been left neat and tidy. Next, he made sure the buckles were tight and the old journal safely within his backpack as it had now taken on a whole new level of importance for Charlie.

Everything checked, he promptly left the room, closed the door behind him, and made his way towards the office. He made his way across the car park, past Fleurette's small neat car, which meant that she had already arrived, and before long he could be on his way.

By the time he arrived at the office, Fleurette was sitting behind her desk just finishing up a telephone conversation. She gestured for Charlie to enter and take a seat while she ended the conversation she was having. In what seemed like an eternity to Charlie, she finally ended her call and replaced the receiver.

Fleurette looked at Charlie and asked how he was feeling that morning. "I wish I could say I felt good," he replied, going on to say that Quentin's admission on the previous night had left him a little bewildered and wanting answers. "I'm confused by the similarity of surnames, and I still don't understand the meaning behind this old journal," he said, as he pulled it out of the safety of his backpack. She went on to reassure him that she was sure he would get his answers all in good time.

Now settled in Fleurette's presence, he proceeded to thank her for making him feel so welcome and for taking the time to teach him during his stay. She responded by saying that it had been a pleasure having Charlie there and remarked that she thought he had a natural talent for this work. She had been pleasantly surprised by his thirst for knowledge and had enjoyed the endless questions that Charlie had almost made his mission to ask on a daily basis. She finished by saying he would be welcomed back anytime and that she was always at the end of the phone, if he ever required help or guidance.

Fleurette then reached across her desk to gently touch Charlie's hand in a reassuring manner, she said, "All will be fine, and I'm sure you will find the answers to your questions in due course!"

She then passed Charlie a copy of her book entitled *Not Another Patisserie Book*, which was half-biography and half-recipe book and reaffirmed that the natural ability he had demonstrated should never be hidden or stifled. Charlie graciously received the book and offered his warmest thanks; they both stood up as Fleurette made one final request of Charlie, "Promise me now, Charlie, don't you let anyone or anything stand between you and what I believe is your true calling!" holding his hand firmly as she said it.

Charlie smiled back at her, while he thought to himself, "Wow, what a grip she has," then responded with, "I will stay true to my chosen path." With that, he thanked her one final time then placed both the journal and the book she had kindly given him securely into his backpack.

He stood and turned to walk out of the office and only made it as far as the door before a final word from Fleurette was said, "Oh, and don't forget to let me know what happens with Quentin's article, Charlie," and at that, he turned his head back, nodded, and then continued to walk away.

Charlie quickly said his farewells to the staff who were on duty that morning and whom he had briefly got to know during his week there. "I will certainly miss this bunch, so many different personalities," he thought to himself and had been surprised at how well they blended together to support one another in their different roles. "It had felt like one big family and maybe one day I will get the opportunity to get to know some of them better," he thought as he made his way out to the car park. Theo, who by now was leant up against his battered car, patiently waited for Charlie, as he would then take him back to the train station.

Charlie had now exited the building and had made his way across the small car park, to be greeted by a grinning Theo, and Charlie watched with amusement as Theo seemed to start chatting before he had even arrived at the car. He explained with great excitement about the movie he'd seen the night before with yet another girlfriend, forgetting to give Charlie the chance to respond to his earlier greeting.

He finally finished his tale, then looked at Charlie before saying, "You ready then?" this time pausing for an answer.

Charlie responded by patting his backpack, holding up his toolbox, and saying "Just waiting on you, Theo," as he grinned and rolled his eyes a little.

On that note, they both climbed in. Charlie carefully placed both his backpack and toolbox onto the backseat once again. The car rattled and shook alive; a plume of smoke from the rusted exhaust engulfed the car as Theo attempted to start it. Once the car's engine had settled into its rhythm and the plumes of smoke dissolved, Theo asked what time Charlie's train was. "About an hour," came the reply, followed by a comment of, "Let's hope the morning rush hour traffic has eased then," at which point the air filled with adolescent giggles.

But as Theo was a local, he knew all the many shortcuts and narrow side streets and what would normally be a thirty minute fight through the morning traffic turned into a twenty minute rally down narrow side streets. It wasn't long before they were pulling up to the train station entrance, Charlie feeling a little pale faced. Theo pulled his car into the passenger drop off zone, as Charlie turned to Theo held his hand up and promptly said, "Thank you for dropping me back to the station, Theo." Not allowing his new friend the chance to reply, Charlie continued to say that he greatly appreciated his help during the week while in the kitchen. "Thank you for the

brief, but fun night out too, Theo. We must do that again one day soon,” Charlie had continued to say. All of which Charlie had made a note of in his journal so that he would not forget.

Charlie then stepped out of the car as Theo leapt out, too. With a few short strides, he was besides Charlie and excitedly said, “Next time you visit Paris, be sure to let me know as there is somewhere very special I’d like to take you to!” which left Charlie intrigued, which only added to all that was going on in his head already.

“Sure will,” replied Charlie, happy he had got to meet Theo as the two of them had enjoyed their time together.

Theo draped his tall lanky body over Charlie almost using him as a leaning post, hugging him tightly, which let Charlie know he would miss his company. Charlie responded by letting Theo know that he, too, would miss hanging out together, and with that Theo looked down at his watch, said he’d better go or he’d be in strife with Fleurette, which caused further laughter as they parted then parted company. With a quick wave, Charlie turned and made his way into the station building as Theo disappeared out of sight, just the unique sound of his car engine still ringing in the air. Being Paris’s main train station, this was by far the busiest he had encountered so far.

Charlie squeezed his way through the throng of weekend getaway passengers and managed to chance a look at one of several departure boards. He found the platform number for his train, then proceeded to fight his way through the deluge of train passengers as he headed towards the platform to wait for the train. By the time he had walked the short distance and arrived at the correct platform, it was already wall-to-wall with waiting passengers. “Looks like I may have to stand again,” Charlie thought as he weaved his way along the platform looking for a suitable place to stop. He had walked about two-thirds of the way along the platform before he found a spot to stand and wait. With the several train journeys he had now taken, this was the first platform he had seen so full.

The departures board had said the train was running slightly late, so it gave him a little time for his mind to wonder again. His thoughts returned to his parents, whom he had not seen now in almost ten months. He missed his mother’s famous “travelling sandwiches,” which weren’t just for days spent travelling, but she would often make this tasteful delight just out of the blue, if the moment took her. For Charlie, those occasions never came around often enough, he concluded. Then his thoughts turned to his father and once again he mulled over what had been discovered so far. In that moment, his mind fantasised about being a Sherlock Holmes type character, trying to deduce the truth from the evidence that had been presented so far. He even went to far as to raise his hand as if smoking a pipe but was quickly reminded where he was, by a rather grumpy sort of coughing noise, followed by a sneer, from a rather portly gentleman whom had been standing next to him, who just happened to be holding a pipe. “Pardon,” said Charlie as he shuffled slightly in the opposite direction. “That gentleman must have thought I was making fun of him,” Charlie thought, as he tried to conceal a giggle which was itching to escape his mouth. “Breath Charlie,” he said to himself, which settled him down, and his thoughts once again return to his father. He tried not to overthink the current situation and decided to wait until he was back in Villejacques where he would be able to speak with Chef Luc directly. “He must know the truth,” Charlie decided, just as the train arrived at the station and pulled alongside the platform where he had been standing.

The train came to a stuttering halt, doors were flung open as a wave of eager, or perhaps impatient, passengers disembarked. Moments later, Charlie was able to board, but as he'd suspected, he would have to stand. The carriages had been rapidly filled by the waiting

passengers by the time he was able to board. He found himself an empty doorway to stand in, and rested his backpack and toolbox at his feet on the floor. He leaned back against the wall of the carriage and gazed out of the small window. The train jerked forward, slowly at first as it left the station, then quickly increased in speed, faster and faster until it was tearing through the countryside and raced past small villages and towns on its way to the Port of Frausseilles, via the Town of Villejacques.

The journey would only take a few hours before Charlie was back at the shop and able to speak with Chef Luc. "It's going to be late afternoon by the time I arrive back, but Chef Luc should still be working," he thought. He then started to drift into a light sleep, mesmerised by the ever-changing colours of the landscape that passed by and the motion of the carriage. As quickly as he had drifted off, he stumbled awake again, having to regain his footing and check his backpack and toolbox were still by his side. "Better stay awake," he now thought to himself as he lightly rubbed his eyes.

Several hours had now passed, and the train had stopped and started on a number of occasions before finally arriving into the Town of Villejacques. Charlie grabbed his backpack, checked that all the buckles were secure, and swung it over his shoulder, picked up his toolbox and was ready to spring into action as soon as he could. Charlie stood by the door, foot twitching as he waited patiently for the train to pull into the station. The train finally ground to a halt, brakes squealing as it came to a stop; the door was then opened by an impatient passenger who was waiting to board.

Charlie hastily jumped down from the carriage exit and quickly made his way towards the station concourse along the platform. Through the building he raced as he headed towards the main exit door, when he found himself face to face with Claire. In his haste, he had almost knocked her off of her feet. "Someone's in a hurry," stated Claire as they both regained their composure after what could have been a rather unpleasant incident.

Charlie hadn't noticed that she was carrying a large white box, the contents of which had been a beautifully decorated birthday cake that she was to deliver to a customer of the restaurant where she worked. "I'm so sorry," Charlie replied, forgetting for a moment where he was and who he had almost knocked over. He continued by telling Claire a little about his week with Fleurette, the old journal that Chef Luc had given him, and the remark made by Quentin.

In Charlie's excitement to explain, all Claire had heard or focused on was the name Fleurette. "So it was you that won then?" came the response from Claire, now with a rather annoyed tone in her voice, supported by an obvious frown. "I knew someone had beat me to first place, but never for one minute thought it would be you," she added, and with a flick of her head, she turned and was gone before Charlie even had chance to reply or defend himself.

He stood there by himself for a moment, gathered his thoughts, before he himself then raced off to get back to the little patisserie shop and to the Lucs. Charlie rushed through the little narrow streets of Villejacques, and it was not long before he had turned the corner of Rue de Muniers and was heading towards the shop. He arrived at the shop, but was stopped in his tracks by the locked front door and the closed sign facing out. "Now that was very strange," he thought as the shop was never closed during the daytime.

Now instead of just his own questions that filled his head, a sense of fear and worry had also taken up residence in his head. Quickly, he made his way around to the rear door of the shop, rummaged through one of the side pockets of his backpack for the shop key, eventually found it, unlocked the door, and entered. The whole place was empty; he touched the side of several ovens

and even they were cold, a sure sign that the shop had not been open for at least the day, if not longer.

Charlie rushed upstairs to dump his belongings in the flat. Then, not wanting to waste another minute, he ran back downstairs and out of the rear door to the shop, locking it behind him. All kinds of emotions now ran through his body as he quickly rushed around to the home of the Lucs. He arrived at the front door, almost out of breathe. He knocked quite firmly and waited. He waited and waited. He knocked again, and finally the door was opened, by a very somber looking Madame Luc. Startled by seeing Charlie standing there, she stood in silence and was motionless. Charlie entered then flung his arms around her and asked if everything was okay as he had found the shop to be closed. She Squeezed him tightly, before she softly said, "It's been a sad few days Charlie, you had better come in." Now free from his hug, she closed the door, then watched as he disappeared through the door to the living room.

As she entered the room, she told Charlie to make himself comfortable and she would return shortly. He now felt even more concerned, as he had never seen Madam Luc look so saddened. "Just what had happened?" he wondered, as many different scenarios now ran through his head, all at once. Then he had a dreadful thought, "Was Chef Luc okay? Had something happened?" Every muscle in his body now tensed as he feared the worst. "How will I cope?" he thought, if something had happened to his mentor. Thankfully, moments later he heard a familiar voice from behind him and quickly turned to see Chef Luc enter the room. Charlie leapt towards Chef Luc and met him half way across the room then flung his arms around him. The tension now began to ease in his body, then he realised that he still had no idea what had happened.

Before he was able to open his mouth to speak, Charlie heard something else in the background. An even more familiar voice had now entered the room. "Dad," he thought as the voice belonged to his father. Charlie was even more confused, as he released his arms from around Chef then ran over to where his father was, then wrapped his arms around him in a tight grip as he uttered the words, "Dad, er, why, er what?"

Before he was able to say anything further, he heard his father's voice say "Charlie, my son, it's so good to see you" which was followed by a hug with a bear like grip from his father.

Several minutes passed before the silence was broken when fear suddenly hit Charlie again as he asked, "Mom, she's..." but before he could finish a complete question, his father's voice interjected again and said, "Yes Charlie, your mom is just fine."

Charlie then wriggled free from his father's bear-like hug and took a step back, his voice still quivered from the adrenalin that coursed through his body and then asked "So just what has happened then?"

The reply came from Charlie's father who suggested that they all sit down as Madame Luc walked in carrying a big tray with a pot of hot tea and some of her pastries. They all made themselves comfortable as Madame Luc poured out the tea for everyone then placed a plate full of her petit pastries on the table.

Charlie sat forward in anticipation, too anxious to eat or drink, "I suppose we should start at the beginning, Charlie," said his father, seconded by a nodding Chef, who then said to Charlie's father, "He has your journal!"

Charlie thought to himself, "Well, that's one piece of the puzzle solved!" as Charlie's father began to explain the reason he was there in Villejacques. It was due to the passing of a mutual friend of theirs, and someone that his father had not seen in a very long time. Chef Luc had called him by phone two days previous to let him know the sad news and suggested that he visit and to pay his respects at the funeral, which was to be held later that week. After much

deliberation, he decided to catch the first flight out the next day and had not long arrived before Charlie turned up.

“So who was the friend that you both knew?” Charlie now questioned, as he felt even more frustrated and confused.

But before waiting for a reply, he posed another question, “Well, the old journal was that yours then? Where you a patissier, too, father?”

But before Charlie could fire off any more questions, his father stopped him by saying, “My dear boy, I will try to answer all your questions as best I can. There is much about my past that I never spoke of as it was something that I wanted to forget and keep in the past where I thought it belonged. So let me start at the beginning,” Charlie's father said, then looked at him with an air of sadness.

He began to explain how he had enjoyed baking when he was a young boy and spent many hours each day in the kitchen with his own grandmother. He would help her make all kinds of cakes and pastries; they would laugh and joke around, often covering each other in flour. She would always let him lick the spoon or dip his finger in the bowl to taste things. She was a natural in the kitchen. When she passed, in honour of her memory, he decided to travel to Paris to join the famous Rochelle Catering School to train as a chef, but it quickly became apparent to the lectures that he had a natural talent for pastry work. So the faculty agreed to let him change courses and to join the specialist class in patisserie. This is where he met Montaine, Chef Luc and the love of his life Gabrielle. "All three of us were in the same class, and at first they would compete to be the best in class, to win the highest of praise. Gabrielle was a natural at patisserie work, too, and it was not long before we all became the closest of friends."

Remembering back to that time, Charlie's dad slightly faltered in tone, as his own emotions overcame him. This was the first time he had even thought about that time in so many years. He preferred to just block it out because of the pain he felt from the memories he had. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, hoping no one noticed, he continued again. "We would work together and play together and would often travel far and wide to discover new culinary delights. We would go to check out every new restaurant that had recently opened, only to check out there dessert course, really. We would order separate desserts, sometimes twice, and then try to figure out what ingredients had been used. On occasion, we were politely asked to leave the restaurant as our enthusiastic nature had gotten the better of us. Not sure if our noisy nature had disturbed other customers or the managers where concerned me might take their ideas.

Nevertheless, we were inseparable, and then after we graduated from college, we all found jobs working close by. Chef and I managed to secure apprenticeships working for the respected Chef/Patron Matthieu Brazier. He later became our mentor, but who had now sadly passed, hence the reason for the visit. Gabrielle had found work at a local bakery as her passion and forte lay in breads, cookies, and who soon became known as the Cannelle Queen as she was unsurpassed at creating that French classic.

"Chef and I worked long hours under the tutelage and guidance of Chef Brazier; we were in the pastry kitchen morning, noon, and night always being pushed and tested.

We all shared a small rundown apartment that was close by. It was small, pokey, wall paper peeling off the walls, plumbing that rattled every time you turned on the tap and was freezing during the winter months, but it was home for us. We certainly enjoyed life. It was about that time that we both started to keep a journal of our experiences. In mine I wrote about my training, and more importantly, my ideas which helped to build my own mind map, which I believe you now understand," he said as he raised a slight grin.

"Then one beautiful spring morning, on a rare day off, we decided to visit a small village that was not too far away. In that place was a tiny bakery that specialised in baked cheesecakes, and so it was suggested we pay it a visit. We managed to find this little shop, tucked away down a very narrow cobbled street. If you did not know it was there, you would never have found it. But, fortunately, we were provided with directions. Inside, there was barely any room to move, just a display counter and cash register. In the display was a selection of cheesecakes of differing flavours, pre-cut into small wedges for the customer to choose from. After much deliberation between us about which flavours to choose, we finally agreed, made our purchases, and left. Back sitting in our little car, we ate this delight, which none of us had ever tried before. It was incredible, the smooth creaminess, with a fruity flavour and only a subtle hint of cheese. It was an unusual thing indeed. Was it a dessert or a savoury dish? They debated, but one thing for sure it was a taste sensation.

"Then back at work, I started to experiment with cheesecake, researching the different types that there were and quickly decided that it had to be baked and not the set type that I had also discovered. The phrase, 'If It's Not Baked, It's Not Cheesecake', was created, which when mentioned to Chef Brazier, left him roaring with laughter, stating that I should really keep that to myself as it could be seen as controversial amongst his peers. But no, I wasn't to listen and stuck to my guns, which did cause a few heated arguments from time to time with our mentor. My research continued and I learned all about the main ingredient, cream cheese, and was so surprised to find that it could be made in so many different ways. I spoke with numerous dairies, sampled many different types of cream cheese, until I found the one I felt provided me with the right taste, flavour, and texture. It came from a very small, family owned dairy who still produced things by hand the old fashioned way and methods. Then I need to work on recipes, cooking times, and temperature which almost became a scientific process. By now, my activities had caught the attention of the chef, and he started to offer advice and made several very helpful suggestions."

Pausing his story, Charlie's father pointed at the journal in Charlie's hand and said, "As you can see from the journal, Charlie, I conducted a lot of research."

His gaze lingered for a moment on the book that never left his sight. "So if this is your journal, how did Chef Luc end up with it in his possession?" Charlie asked.

He could see that the question had struck a deep emotional cord within his father, for he noticed his eyes water slightly. Composing himself, Charlie's father continued with his story. "After many weeks and months of fine tuning my recipe I then began to play around with presentation ideas and flavour combinations to see what was possible. I tried to use various shaped molds. Some worked and would turn out, but many had to be scooped out with a spoon. I wanted to push boundaries, which is what Chef Brazier had always tried to instil within his many apprentices. Then late one evening, Chef called Montaine and myself into his office and informed us that we had been entered into a local Salon Culinary competition the following month. That was our chance to showcase what we were doing here at the restaurant with our dessert menus but also to put some of our own creative ideas into our entries. Both Montaine and I left the Chef's office in giddy excitement, and as soon as we had finished our shift, we both raced home to share the news with Gabrielle. Her excitement matched our own when she heard and we all danced around the small lounge room like children playing some game in the schoolyard.

"The next month was spent in planning and trying out our ideas. The planning alone took us both a week as there were so many things that we wanted to try. We helped each other to make



our decisions, and eventually, Montaine decided to do passion fruit and banana parfait, while I chose to make a cheesecake with caramelised ppples and apple sorbet. Chef Brazier was pleased with our choices of entry and so every spare minute, when not on duty, was spent practicing and practicing, often till very early in the morning. We were driven by the excitement of our first competition, and the closer competition day was, the more competitive we became. It was the way we were back then, the dearest of friends, yet fiercely competitive. The day of the competition arrived, and we all made our way there. Chef had even closed the restaurant for the day as this was a big annual event. Anyone who was anyone in the industry would be there; it was our time to shine and show off to our peers, for after al,l we were apprentices of Chef Brazier.

"We nervously waited for our category to be called, and after what seemed like an eternity our time came. We were placed in opposite ends of the competition space, so neither could see how the other was faring or even offer a look of support. We were on our own, over-looked by crowds of delegates, our peers, and not forgetting the constant scrutiny of the judges' eyes. We had four hours to prepare and present our desserts for judging. The official started our category and we were off. Four hours flew past, especially when there were so many eyes watching your every move. Chef Brazier had helped us with a timing sheet for each phase, so as long as we stuck to that, we would be fine, but it was going to be close. Being such good friends it concerned us how the other was doing and if they had managed to produce their planned desserts. Not able to catch even a glimpse of each other, we had to remain focused and concentrate on completing our own tasks. The competition ended. We cleaned down ours stations then presented our desserts for the judging panel.

"The waiting was definitely more nerve-racking than the actual preparation. We had to wait by our dessert and then a panel of three judges would come and score our work based on taste, flavour, texture, appearance, and organisational ability. Once we had been seen by the judges, we were free to leave as the results would then be posted soon after. Pleased with my work, I rushed to find Montaine. Seeing his satisfied expression, we gave each other a quick hug and then eagerly told the other how we had done. We both spoke very little while waiting after that. We just found a quiet corner where we both just leant up against a wall. I think the nervous exhaustion had got the better of us, and several more hours would pass before the results came in. We hastily made our way over to the results board as many of other contestants fumbled to find their own results. Thankfully, there were several result boards around, so we managed to get to a board without much delay. We then scanned the results sheet. It was Montaine who spotted our category first. He found his name first and with a grin as wide as his face, announced, 'Third! I was third.' Warmly congratulating my closest friend, my attention went back to the results sheet and eventually I found my name. Reading across, my heart sank slightly as I read 'Sixth place,' next to my name. I was disappointed. I felt that my entry was good enough to place higher. Montaine noticed my posture and attempted to lift my spirits with words of encouragement.

"I decided not to hang around at the show as I didn't wish to dampen Montaine's exhilaration, so I slipped away to be on my own for a while. To go over the competition, dissect my entry, think about what I could have changed or improved on. I wondered around the city for many hours, immersed in my own thoughts. I couldn't even tell you if there were many other people passing by or not; all that enveloped me was how to improved my dish. The only other thing I can remember was finding a park bench. Being that it was a mild night, I felt contented to just sit on my own there. I remember thinking I would have to stop myself from being overly critical about the result, but I thought I was a better patissier than that.

"Night morphed into early morning, and my surroundings began to come alive as another new day was beginning. I had fallen asleep on the last park bench that I found and was only woken by the sound of the dustcart rattling bins as it was continued its round. So I needed to get back to the small flat and freshen up for work. Then, while I made my way across the park, I passed a news stand and noticed that the daily paper had a special article in it that morning on the Salon Culinary from the day before. Excited to read through, I bought a copy and found the nearest empty seat and flicked through until I found the article. Quickly, I scanned through the words, picking out odd paragraphs here and there, until I came across a passage that would change the course of my life forever.

"It started by saying, 'And the low light of my time at the Salon Culinary, was the moment my tastebuds were subjected to a taste and texture combination that should never have graced the bottom of a garbage can, let alone be present at such a prestigious event as the Salon Culinary, a cheesecake entry...'

"I was not able to continue reading any further. My heart sank, my confidence shattered, and my world had fallen apart in that moment. The person who wrote this article, for all to see, had destroyed my dreams and aspirations in just a few short words. How could I carry on now? How could I face people? Chef Brazier, Montaine, and Gabrielle. Although no names had been mentioned, it was clear to see that these words were directed at me. The people I held so dear and in such esteem would know the comments were about me. All of the other entrants had seen my dish and I knew word would spread what a failure I had been. There was no way I could face my mentor or wish for him to be associated in anyway with me after something so critical had been written, for which I had thought was my best work.

"The decision was made to leave Paris, everything that I knew, all that I held dear and walk away from that life. It was a hard decision to take, but my thoughts were first of protecting my mentor's good name." Charlie's father then paused again, his head drooped and now resting in his raised hands. As he recalled the events of that sad day, it started to get to be too much for him. Before anything further could be said, he made his excuses and not only left the room but also the house in order to gather his composure once more. He had barely thought about that day, let alone spoken of events that had transpired, and so needed to be by himself. After a short walk, he found a quiet place to sit, resting his head in his hands, feeling defeated once more.

The lounge was silent; no one really knew what to say as this was the first time the Luc's had heard how Charlie's dad had truly felt as he had just disappeared. Chef Luc finished the story as they new it by saying that he had just left the flat and all his belongings. There friend had walked away from what should have been a bright career as he had such a natural ability and flair. No one knew what had happened to him and had tried to track him down for many months, but he was unsuccessful in that endeavour and eventually had to give up and move on with his own life. He concluded that if his friend wanted to contact him again, he knew where he would be.

Charlie was left speechless; thoughts of his father raced through his mind. Many moments passed before Charlie asked about the old journal. "Well, after your father left, we packed up his belongings and kept them safe for many years, until one day we decided that it was time to let them go. Our local homeless shelter was in need, so we decided to take them there. The old journal we kept safe as this was your father's dream, research, and life's work up until the day he left, and this was priceless. It was the one thing that needed to be kept safe, and now it belongs to you, back where it should be, in the family once again," explained Chef Luc. Several hours then passed and still there was no sign of Charlie's father. Chef Luc suggested that Charlie should use the other spare room that evening as he was starting to look drained from the events of the day.

Chef Luc promised to go and look for Charlie's father if he went to rest, which he reluctantly agreed to do. Madam Luc made Charlie a mug of hot chocolate, with a little hint of cognac to help him sleep, and he made his way up to the room to rest. He had just closed the door and was resting on the bed when he heard Chef Luc leave to look for his father.

He quickly finished his delicious hot chocolate and did not remember anything else until being woken the following morning by his father sitting on the end of the bed. "Charlie my son, Charlie," his father quietly whispered, "there is a cup of tea for you, just how you like it, strong with milk and no sugar." His father placed the mug down on the bedside table. Gently touching his arm, he quietly said the funeral was later that morning, but when he returned they could talk further. Charlie barely woke, but mumbled some warm words to his father before dropping back off to sleep. His father then left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

Charlie's daughter paused for a moment herself, her own emotions also began coming to the surface by recalling what her father had gone through. Taking a moment to look at her own children still listening intently, sitting on the floor in front of her, she posed a question to them. "So what do you think about what happened?" Expecting a more sentimental answer, Michael looked up at his mum, and said, "Grandma was grumpy when she was younger wasn't she, Mum?" Being that he was the youngest of the three, she just laughed at his response to her question. Saying, "Well maybe, but remember I'm her daughter and you had better remember that, or I'll be grumpy next... So lets continue with the final part shall we?" as Charlie's daughter continued the tale...

## Chapter Eight - Returning Home

Several days had now past since the funeral service for Chef Brazier. Charlie decided not to question his father any further as he had seen all the emotions that being there had brought back for him. He had overheard Chef, Madame Luc, and his father talk many times often starting with in depth conversations which turned into drinks and laughter. He could see how important that time was for him. Charlie witnessed the once close bond that the three of them had begun to rejuvenate.

Then, after a few more days had passed, Charlie's father, Terrance, decided that it was time to return home, back to his beautiful wife. Charlie had spoken with Chef Luc about his father and decided that he would take a break from his education and join his father on his journey home. "It would also be a nice break and good to see mother again," he resolved. He still wanted to speak to his father about his past so thought it would be the perfect opportunity to do so. Charlie suggested that they meet up at the shop before they set off for the airport, which his father reluctantly agreed to. Was this a cunning ploy, cooked up between Charlie, Chef, and Madame Luc to get his father to set foot into the environment that once upon a time had been his entire world? They hoped it would seem like just a happy coincidence.

Charlie was in the shop bright and early, helping out with the day's preparations while they waited on his father to arrive. Chef Luc was in early, too, having to sort out some paperwork as he would then be driving Charlie and his father to the airport later that morning.

His father was back at the Luc's home with Gabrielle, passing the time with heartfelt memories of the fun times together being ever mindful not to mention anything more about that competition or anything related to that day. In his own way, his father had tried to delay, for as long as possible, having to leave the house to head to the shop. Since the day he made that painful and life changing decision, he had never set foot inside a patisserie shop, let alone walked into a professional kitchen. Gabrielle could see his apprehension as the time drew ever closer to where he could not put off the inevitable. Although much time had passed since those days, Charlie's father still felt the pain inside caused by those words put down on paper for the world to read. Still, he had Charlie to think about now. After all, he could see that he had a natural talent, hence, the reason for sending him to meet Montaine in the first place. He didn't want Charlie to miss out on what could be an incredible career like he could have had. Who better than to have his dearest friend mentor Charlie in the same way that they had both been mentored all those years before by the late Chef Bravier?

Charlie's father could not put off the moment any longer. He picked up his small overnight bag and prepared himself to leave. Gabrielle insisted on accompanying him on the short walk to the shop. Once they had left the house, she engaged her old friend in yet more light-hearted banter, secretly distracting his attention. With every footstep they took along the cobbled street, Charlie's father's pace slowed ever so slightly, his heart raced a little more, but before long, they were standing outside the little patisserie shop.

Gabrielle took her friend's hand in hers and gripped it tightly, turned the handle, opened the shop door, then waited. He has to decide when the moment is right to enter, she thought, as no one could make that decision for him. This was an important moment for his father, a chance to heal old wounds. He had already begun to rebuild bridges with the Lucs and old friendships formed once again. He turned to look at Gabrielle, her face softly smiling back at him. He thanked her for being there, then gently squeezed her hand. He then followed his own wife's advice to help with situations such as these. He took a slow, deep breathe in then gently exhaled

and only then would he take a step forward over the shop door threshold and walk in. In a sense, it would be like stepping back in time as the smells began to get caught in his nostrils and sounds buzzed through his ears. As he stood there, his eyes tightly closed, Gabrielle still holding his hand, he allowed himself to drift for a moment as memories of what had been came flashing back. Before long, Gabrielle could feel him start to quiver as memories became more vivid, squeezing his hand, followed by a comforting soft whisper in his ear, he settled once more and opened his eyes.

Before them both, was a sight that made him feel deeply proud. It was his son, dressed in full whites and resembling a younger version of himself who now stood there, young, keen, enthusiastic, and brimming with creativity. For a brief moment, all his worries disappeared as he gazed upon his son, a smile now beginning to appear as his father said, "My son, you have made me feel so proud to be your father," as a tear escaped his eye.

Before he could say anything more, his son said, "Its me that feels proud, proud to have such a caring father, proud to have a father that believes in me as you do." Charlie moved forward to give his father the biggest hug that he could muster as he could see his father's eyes well up. Not able to stop the tears, they now started to overflow into a stream against his cheek. He wiped away the tears, as Charlie's dad took a step back and held his son by the shoulders and looked at him once more with sheer pride.

"Let me go change, Dad, and we can get going," Charlie said, a loving look in his eyes saying the rest.

Although not eager to leave the shop that he thought of as his second home, he did want to support his father. Leaving Gabrielle, Chef, and his father standing in the shop, Charlie raced upstairs to change out of his whites. He was quick to pack the last few items, along with both journals. Lovingly he felt the textured surface of his father's journal as it now had greater sentimental value. All secured, one arm was through a strap as he swung the backpack over his shoulder. He surveyed the room one final time to check it was immaculate, that every surface glimmered to his high standard. Satisfied, he then locked the door behind him hopeful he would return one day very soon.

In the meantime, Chef Luc had taken his old friend through into the office, down the long corridor, so that his father could see the kitchen. Chef Luc, was not sure how his friend would react, so he tried to make light of the situation. Chef Luc wanted to explain just how many masterpieces Charlie had made during his time there, as well as a few disasters. The remark had left them both laughing as they recalled their own mistakes. Though at the time they would explain them away by saying they were not mistakes, just another way of not doing something. Charlie soon arrived and sat quietly in the corner so as not to disturb their ongoing conversation.

The two of them sat chatting, reminiscing about the past. A feeling of contentment came over Charlie as he observed how much more relaxed his father had become. There was a difference now in his tone, as he and Chef Luc talked more about the past, conversation only broken by sounds of chuckles here and there. The general topic was mainly about what they used to get up to when they were not at work, the trouble that they would cause, if they wanted to wind up a new member of the waiting team. They recalled that on one particular occasion, they had knocked the used espresso grounds out of the coffee machine then formed them into a perfect puck shape. It was then chilled, enrobed with chocolate, and then they would ask the new waiter to sample the new mini chocolate cake. That caused Chef Luc to sit back in his chair then place a hand over his mouth like a young boy that had just pulled off a grand prank. There was also the time that they had frozen everything that belonged to a new trainee chef. They had frozen his

clothes, his keys, and everything else they could find of his. They placed the various items in a bowl of water before putting it in the freezer. Then, just as the trainee was about to go off shift, they returned everything to its place. That might have been a step too far, as they did get into serious trouble with their mentor over that prank. Though, secretly, they thought he saw the funny side, or had that slight smirk on his face been for some other reason? Only he would know, they thought! But they did enjoy themselves; life was fun back then.

Charlie could have sat there for hours and listened to their stories. Chef then caught sight of the clock and was startled by how the time had gone by.

Chef, now standing, said, "Well, you two, if you're going to make your flight, we had better hustle."

Chef Luc then bent down and picked up the toolbox from under his desk then passed it to Charlie, letting him know he had collected it from the kitchen. "Thank you, Chef Luc," Charlie responded, a smile of appreciation on his face

Chef Luc said that he would fetch the van around to the front of the shop while the two boys said their farewells to Gabrielle who had been busying herself tending to customers, having now opened the shop for business. It had also been an emotional few days for her, seeing Charlie's father once again after so many years had passed. The thought of him going again changed her disposition, hence, why she had tried to distract herself. Charlie and his father walked through to the front of the shop, stopped to say a sentimental farewell to Gabrielle. With luck, no customers would enter the shop, which would allow them both to express what they wished.

Charlie stood back once again to allow his father to be the first to say farewell. He threw his arms around Gabrielle who did the same in response. She desperately tried to keep the tears in check as they both stood there, Charlie's father being subjected to one of her legendary hugs. Charlie had plenty of firsthand experience of these. He then took a step back to allow for his son to say his farewell.

One hug down, now it was Charlie's turn to receive a hug from the person whom he had begun to see as his second mother. Having never had any children of her own, she absolutely saw Charlie as her son. Much of that was also due to who he was the son of. Arms wrapped around each other for several minutes and with Gabrielle not wanting to let go.

Chef Luc now started to get a little impatient as he waited outside in the van. He would sound the horn several times to make his presence known. He kept an eye on the time, and sounding the horn was the only way he felt he could get them all moving before they missed their flight. Charlie's father was first to exit the shop, glancing a smile in Gabrielle's direction as he passed her, followed by a tap on the shoulder of his son, letting him know that it was time to leave.

Charlie wriggled free from Gabrielle's hug then, as he picked up his belongings then raced outside to a waiting Chef Luc. His father had already climbed into the passenger side, securing his luggage in the space behind the seat. Charlie promptly did the same before climbing in the passenger side, as his dad slid over. He waved one last time to Gabrielle who by now stood in the doorway, rivers of tears flowing down her cheeks. As soon as the van door slammed shut, Chef Luc put his foot down and accelerated away, leaving Charlie straining to wave as the shop disappeared behind them.

As they raced through the busy midday traffic, the van remained remarkably quiet, no one really spoke. Chef Luc busy concentrating on the road ahead, Charlie watching the world pass him by out of the window, and his father drifting off in memories of the past. They arrived

hastily at the airport and pulled into the drop off zone. Once at a stop, Charlie jumped out, slowly followed by his father.

They retrieved their respective bags and Charlie's toolbox from the van as Charlie spoke first and said to his mentor, "Thank you for everything that you have given me this past year."

He went on to say that he had learned so much, not only about patisserie, but about passion, honour, respect, and that he would never forget. He reached across his father, who was still seated in the van, and offered his hand which was received by an emotional looking Chef Luc, who took Charlie's hand in his own, then said, "You are just like your father Charlie. You have a natural talent; you make the craft look effortless, so keep up the good work that you have started," as their hands were clasped in a firm handshake.

Handshake over, Charlie took a step back as he wanted to give his father and Chef time to say what he knew would be a sentimental goodbye for them both. There would be plenty of time ahead to ask his father about his life back then, so for now he would give the two old friends as much privacy as possible at an airport drop off point. Then, sure enough, after only a short time their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a very grumpy airport official demanding that Chef Luc move the van straight away or be towed. After a rushed embrace, Charlie's father stepped out of the van and caught up with Charlie as they walked away waving. Passenger door closed, Chef Luc drove away, beeping the horn as he went. Both had promised to keep in touch as Charlie's father had been quick to extend an invitation to both the Lucs to come and visit one day soon, and of course, Chef Luc accepted graciously.

Charlie's Father now felt a sense of peace, knowing that a large part of the past had been healed and only good wishes remained between the good friends. Charlie and his father made their way into the terminal to check in for their flight. Standing in silence, side by side, they waited in line until it was finally their turn. Due to the flight being only two-thirds booked, securing a second ticket for Charlie was easily obtained. All checked in, they went through security and passport control having to undergo the usual checks. They walked quietly side by side until they found a seat by the boarding gate for their flight.

The conversation between them both was of everyday mundane things. The events of the past few days had started to catch up with them both. Talk about everything but those revelations was just what they both needed. Before long, they were both brought out of their haze by the echoing sound of their flight being called. Feeling worn out they both followed the trail of people, until they were greeted by the usual air stewardess pleasantries and directed to their seats. Luggage stowed in the overhead locker, they both then made themselves as comfortable as they could and relaxed for what would only be a short flight. Charlie's hand was warmly squeezed by his father, grateful to have his support.

The in-flight meal was served and then a quick doze, both being woken by an announcement from the flight deck that they were about to start their descent. The neatly presented stewardess informed the passengers of the local time and temperature before wishing a good onward journey. Thirty minutes later and the plane had landed on time and taxied to the appropriate stand. The seatbelt sign being turned off was followed by a usual dash of hurrying passengers looking to get off the plane as quickly as possible. Charlie and his father waited for the rush to ease then ambled slowly off the plane themselves.

Safely through customs, they were met by Charlie's mother who was so pleased to see her son, evident by the rather large grin followed, by a big hug, and way too many kisses on Charlie's cheek for him to count. Her attention then turned to her dear husband as she looked deep into his eyes, and a love passed between them in a moment that seemed to make time stand

still. She knew this would have been a very emotional journey for him as there were no secrets between them, although it had never been mentioned between them, after he had shared the truth with her. She embraced her husband in a loving hug and whispered softly spoken words that only he would hear. Emotional reunion over, the three of them hand-in-hand made their way back to the car for the drive home.

Few words were spoken out loud as the feeling of them being together once more seemed to make all their problems vanish for at least that moment. Charlie was content to once again be back in the familiar surroundings of Poxwold and his childhood home. It was late evening by the time they arrived home. Both Charlie and his father freshened up before they all sat down to enjoy a bowl of Jacque's homemade corned beef hash, a hearty warm meal they all loved to share together.

Charlie knew that everyone felt rather tired from the days travelling, so offered to make a special mug of hot chocolate for everyone. His offer was warmly received, so he melted down some rich bittersweet chocolate before adding just the right amount of cinnamon, followed by warmed milk. Drinks now ready, he called for a loving group family hug with Charlie squashed in the middle. Maybe just a little too much love, he chuckled to himself then decided it was time to head off to get some sleep.

Back in his room, it felt like only days had past since he was last there, everything just as he had left it. Getting his journal out of the backpack, he wanted to make sure that it was up to date before collapsing on the bed to sleep and some much needed rest.

Several days had now past since Charlie and his father had returned home, and life was slowly returning to some form of normality. Charlie had been up early and had decided to take a walk around his childhood town while his parents were still sleeping. While out and about, he exchanged cheerful greetings with people that he met then decided to call into the local bakery to pick up a selection of freshly baked croissants to add to their breakfast. Next, he needed a jar of local homemade jam and some freshly churned butter and he was all set. The coffee he already had at home so his parents would wake to the aroma of fresh ground coffee, courtesy of Captain Macrina's coffee supplier.

Next stop was the local newsagents to get the local paper, then back home to warm those fresh croissants. By the time Charlie arrived home, his parents were up and in the kitchen; his mother was about to start making her favourite Sunday morning breakfast, eggs Benedict, which had been a tradition for as long as Charlie could remember.

"Morning sleepy heads. What a beautiful morning it is," Charlie said as he bounced through the kitchen door. "Picked up freshly baked croissants," he continued to say as he opened one of the kitchen cupboard doors, pulled out a small baking tray to place these delicious pastries on, before putting them into the aga cooker to warm.

Charlie poured the jam into a bowl and sliced butter on to a small plate before placing on the table. His father had found the coffee and was warming his hands around a mug of hot coffee steaming. Charlie grinned as he knew his father's nose would lead him straight to that delightful aroma. His mum was gently humming away to herself in the kitchen as she finished cooking the breakfast. Charlie sat next to his dad and casually flicked through the local paper, his father finishing the final few pages of his latest book. Nearly jumping out of his seat, Charlie noticed the advert for the Food Festival that happened each year in the area. This event attracted artisan food producers from all over the district and visitors from even further afield. With all the events of the past year, he had completely forgotten about the Food Festival, but sitting there with all



the breakfast smells filling the air, an idea had started to form in his mind. "Hmmm, I wonder," Charlie thought, a grin sneaking out, looking at his father.

"Are you okay, Charlie?" asked his dad having now finished reading the final page of his book.

He looked up at his son's blank and far away expression as Charlie then grinned and quickly closed the paper he said, "Yes, Dad, all good here!"

His mother by now had finished cooking and delivered three plates of beautifully presented eggs Benedict to the table. Tucking into their breakfasts, the room fell silent, apart from the occasional groan of delight as they all took their time slowly devouring their food. Once finished, Charlie cleared the dishes and put them neatly into the sink ready to be washed. He then returned with three clean smaller plates followed by the warmed croissants and then sat back down. None of them wasted any time before they started on the croissants, each breaking them apart. A crisp sound was heard as their lightly toasted edges crumbled slightly. They were then smothered with home churned butter followed by a dollop of jam. The groans from earlier were nothing compared to the sounds that were heard this time as the tray of pastries were rapidly devoured. The table then cleared, Charlie's father left the room, leaving just Charlie and his mother seated back at the table. This was the perfect opportunity to quickly ask for his mother's advice regarding an idea that had started to form in his head. Charlie, having learnt that his mother knew of his father's past, thought she would be best suited to ask.

Charlie looked around to double-check that his father was not within ear shot before he leaned into his mother and quietly said, "I could do with some advice, Mom. It's about Dad."

Curious to know more, she replied, "Is everything okay, Charlie? Are you worried about your dad?" Charlie replied with a nod. "He's okay, really. We have talked in depth since he returned, and he feels much better having his friends back in his life. It was good for him to go," she said.

"No, it's not that I'm worried about him. I just think it's really sad that Dad never continued his career as a patissier," he said.

He then explained about an idea he had, that he wanted to convince his father to take a stall at the Food Festival with him. He reached out for his mother's hand expressing how he wanted to get his father to believe in himself again and to show the world just how talented he really was. The time that he had spent with Chef Luc had opened his eyes to so much and if his father was as talented as Chef Luc, then he just had to bring that out of him again. "What do you think, Mom?" he asked.

There was a long silence as she mulled over Charlie's idea, her facial expression gave nothing away.

Finally, she answered "Well, Charlie, I'm not sure how your father would react, but I'm so proud of you for thinking how to help your father." She paused for a moment to reach out and put her hand on her son's cheek and smiled warmly before she continued. "Walking away from that life was extremely hard for him, and to walk away from his friends, even harder. I think it's a great idea, though, and between the two of us and a little extra persuasion from me, we will give it a go," as the warm smile was now accompanied by a glint in her eye. Before she left the table, she turned back and added one last thing. "Just let me speak to your father first, Charlie" With a slight skip to her step, she quickly disappeared outside to tend to her garden, her mind now filled with ideas of how to broach this delicately with her husband.

Several days had past and nothing further had been mentioned by his mother, leaving Charlie wondering what was happening. But wanting to be ever the optimist, he was still hopeful,

knowing just how persuasive his mother could be when she wanted. He wanted very much for his father to at least continue his work in cheesecakes, if nothing else, and he thought, if he could just get him to the Food Festival, it might just be enough to restore confidence in himself as a patissier. Not only was Charlie driven by his love for his father, but he wouldn't be where he was now if it hadn't been for his father's early work. For him to go no further would be like starting a book and never getting to the end; the reader would never know what happened to the main characters and how the story had ended. His father obviously had a passion for cheesecakes and this was now picked up by Charlie himself.

So while waiting for news from his mother, Charlie decided to contact the organisers of the Food Festival to see whether they even had room for a late comer, as without that, all this would be a waste of time. Charlie didn't want to get his father's hopes up again to be hurt once more. Later that day, Charlie managed to make contact with the organiser, a very polite gentleman who informed Charlie that there was, in fact, a space, due to a last minute cancellation, if he wanted to reserve it. Charlie didn't hesitate for a moment and decided that, if his father wouldn't help, he would just do it on his own. He also thought that just maybe seeing the preparations may just entice his father to join him after all.

With time now an issue, he thought of how to arrange for all the right ingredients. To find a supplier of cream cheese locally, that was the right quality for his needs, was not going to be easy. He decided to give Chef Luc a call to see whether he could arrange to have some of that artisan cream cheese they had found shipped over to Poxwold on his behalf. After all, it helped to create my winning entry, Charlie he thought, so what better.

While Charlie was speaking with Chef Luc, he explained his little plan to try to encourage his father back into the world of patisserie. Thrilled by Charlie's plan and without a moment's hesitation, he said, "Leave it to me, dear Charlie. I'll make sure you get your cream cheese on time, and let me know if you need anything else!" Hearing Chef's enthusiasm with the idea, Charlie went on to ask, "The only other thing I would need would be a selection of different shape molds, not just the Lego shaped one I had used for my entry. Could you speak with your supplier, Chef, and see what they might have or could produce?"

"Consider it taken care of, my boy. I'll make sure they arrive in plenty of time for you," Chef Luc added.

Charlie thanked his friend and mentor as a sense of exhilaration rushed over him as he ended his call. "This could actually work," he thought to himself.

Now to continue his planning, the other ingredients he needed he would be able to find locally without too much difficulty. So having found a pad and pencil, he began to scribble himself a to-do list. He would tick off various things as they were organised. Next, he would need to organise his own gazebo and display equipment for the day. This would take a little more planning, he decided. His main concern, though, was how best to display his cheesecakes so that they would not only remain cool but also so that they were displayed well.

He now had only two weeks to prepare for the festival. Still nothing from his mother but a silent knowing nod as they exchanged looks. "But what did that mean?" Charlie thought. But still undeterred, he moved forward with his plans. He heard back from Chef Luc, who enthusiastically informed Charlie that he had firstly secured his cream cheese order and it would be delivered to him by the middle of the following week. He had also obtained his young friend an assortment of shaped molds that he thought would be perfect for Charlie to use having seen how creative he could be. He explained that it took several calls later before he managed to find

just the right molds. He had arranged for those to be shipped straight away, so they should arrive within a few days. Charlie was excited about this news and thanked Chef Luc for all his help.

Charlie was curious if his father had begun to wonder why he was continually disappearing into his room or to take an occasional phone call. He knew that his mother was aware of his enthusiasm by her smiling gaze whenever they were in the same room. There was more planning as Charlie had to work out just where to do the baking for the festival. There would be enough room in the family kitchen to do what Charlie needed as not only did they have an aga but his father had insisted on having the finest oven that he could find installed just recently. It would be perfect for Charlie's needs. He quietly smiled to himself knowing his father was going to find out one way or another once he started his practice runs in the kitchen. Getting very anxious for an answer by now, he had secretly hoped that his father would question what he was up to.

The sun had begun to set. As another day came to an end, Charlie headed back up the stairs to his room to refine his plans further. Whilst Charlie rested on his bed, he picked up his to-do list to check what was next to organize. Most things were now in place but he still had to decide how he was going to display his cheesecakes. He would have to investigate that still further, maybe even a call to Fleurette for some advice, perhaps. They had both kept in touch after his days of working with her. Fleurette had been a great support for Charlie, not wanting his passion or dreams to ever be dulled. She had great belief in Charlie after spending time with him and then there was the small write up that Quentin had eventually published in one of his columns, "Wow," she had thought. Charlie now realized that he could do no more until the molds arrived and see just what they Chef Luc had organised for him. Then he would have a better idea, so he decided it was time for sleep.

The following morning, Charlie was awoken by his mother's voice. He had woken, list and journal still in his hand from the night before. He jumped out of bed then made his way downstairs, as his mum said, "Another phone call dear." smiling as she handed the phone over.

It had been a call from a local friend who had offered to loan Charlie his gazebo for the event and he could collect it the day before. Relieved and happy that he now had a gazebo and knowing the colour, this then gave him an idea for theming his stall on the day of the festival. He could now cross yet another thing off his list but now he then had to add a new section entitled, "Branding." He chuckled to himself as he thought the list should be getting shorter, but instead it was actually growing again. Now he had to consider branding as he began to ponder ideas. He thought back to his winning cheesecake entry as another picture appeared of just how he wanted his pitch to look. He was quick to jot down the things he would need to create what he had envisioned it would look like. Under the new heading, he began his list... "Blue Tablecloth, Menu Board, and A Logo." Charlie then paused before adding, "Packaging, Disposable Spoons, Napkins, Labels, and Carrier Bags." Now to organize this, he thought, thrilled with his ideas.

Later that morning, his father asked him to come sit so they could have a chat. Charlie sat down at the kitchen table, feeling somewhat nervous as he turned to face his father. Seeing that his father looked a little emotional, he was not sure if that was a good thing or not. He wondered as he patiently waited for his father to speak. He began to say, "Charlie your mother spoke to me a couple of nights ago about your idea, and I was deeply touched by your thought, but it's not for me. I'm sorry, my boy."

Charlie's heart had now sunk with slight disappointment but he calmly replied by saying that he understood but would love him to be there on the day to support him, if he felt he could. His father looked up into nothingness for a brief moment as he thought about his own deep hurts, but then returned his gaze back to his son and placed his hand over Charlie's before he said, "I

would be honoured to see your work.” His father then got up and left the room, leaving Charlie to think about his father’s words.

But he was not going to give up, he thought, as he made a fist, similar to the one he had seen Captain Macrina make. Affirming out loud, “I’m going to find a way.” Later that day when he could catch a moment alone with his mother, he again spoke with her letting her know what they talked about but that he was not going to give up. Somehow, he was going to get his father involved. She smiled back at him as she did like his persistence, saying, “Good for you. I think it would be really good for him. But being stubborn, he just wouldn’t change his mind. I did try Charlie! Maybe when he can see you working...who knows,” she said. Not put off by what his mother had said, he continued with his planning.

After several more days that seemed to fly past, he had managed to arrange almost everything on his to-do lists. He had the gazebo sorted and managed to borrow some tables. His mother had found just the right coloured tablecloth to cover the tables. As his mother's handwriting was so eloquent, she would write out the menu boards and menu cards ready for the event. She also wanted to do all she could to help keep Charlie excited by the event. How even the smallest step forward for her husband would be healing for him! If he was just to see some preparation and then stand at the event, it would be the closest to the food industry he had been since the day he walked away from it all.

Later that morning, there was a loud knock at the door and a delivery driver announced a package for Mr. Charlie Warner, which Charlie promptly signed for. He thanked the delivery driver and went back inside. His mother merrily commented on it being like Christmas when he was a child as she watched him rip into the packaging as quickly as he could, excited to discover the contents inside. He thought it had to be the molds, as although the box was rather large, it was also decidedly light. Fighting his way through all the packing tape and sea of polystyrene filling, Charlie finally got to discover what was inside. Charlie found ten very different molds and at first wondered about his mentor’s judgement, but on closer inspection he could see just why Chef had selected these particular shapes. Each mold was a large rectangular shape that then consisted of five rows of eight, so forty cheesecakes per mold. Ten molds altogether, so four hundred cheesecakes for the event. Perfect, he thought and then, of course, there was his award winning design that Charlie wanted to use to make a centre piece on the day.

He felt very proud of what he had achieved, none of which would have been possible without his mentor's support. But most importantly was his father, seeing the potential within him in the first place, despite his own hurt. Now that he had the molds, he could give further thought as to how to best display his creations. The remainder of the day was then spent planning out his ten different flavours based on the mold shapes that he had and using all the knowledge that he had gained thus far. This is exciting he thought as he wrote down various flavour combinations. Then, once that was sorted, he needed to decide how to finish them to make each flavour look very different. By the time he had finished, it was late into the evening.

His mother knocked on his bedroom door bringing him out of his creative world. Sitting up, he invited her in. There in her hand was the ever so special traveling sandwich and a steaming mug of hot chocolate. Always grateful, he immediately picked up the mouth-watering sandwich and took a large bite out of it. She then left his room with a slight laugh as she gave Charlie a kiss on his forehead as she left Charlie to enjoy the sandwich. Once he had devoured this absolute delight, he quietly made his way downstairs, the house now quiet as his parents had already retired for the evening. He washed his plate and mug before he made his way back up the

stairs having to use the wooden railing to pull himself up as he felt so exhausted. He then crawled into his bed, fast asleep in seconds.

Charlie was up early the next morning, as usual, wanting to make a start, but first he needed to make some calls to see if he could find some display cases, having woken with an idea of just what he wanted. A couple of hours later the display cases were located and purchased with priority shipping to arrive the next day. This would leave him just two more days until the festival. There was no sign of his cream cheese as yet, but he was not overly concerned just yet as he had seen Chef Luc push to make sure everything arrived within enough time and of the highest quality. There was just one final item that Charlie needed to get hold of, which wouldn't be that difficult, but would require a last minute delivery. Items sorted, it was time to start making the various components and finishes that he needed. As Chef had taught him, making a list is always a good start, no matter what and then you stand less chance of forgetting something. Apart from the cream cheese, all the other ingredients had arrived, menu boards eloquently written by his mother and the finishing touches to his branding sorted. While he talked with a packaging supplier, Charlie had an idea that could solve two problems in one. He had managed to find a company that could supply tin cans with lids that would be the perfect size for his cheesecakes. Not only could these tins be used for take away purchases, but if the customer couldn't resist until they got there purchase home, the tin would also serve as a bowl. Perfect, Charlie thought, and better still they could provide them in a blue colour. All he had to sort were the labels now. Charlie had noticed an absence of his father being around, once he knew what was really going on, as he chose to keep to himself and not get involved. Charlie was worried if this had been a good idea for his father but also still ever hopeful that once the smells of various sauces, jellies, the tempering of chocolate started, it might just be enough to draw him to the kitchen. Surely, this had to be a good idea he thought.

Charlie wanted to use as many techniques as he could. He wanted to impress his father but he also wanted to do this for himself, another test of his own abilities. The rest of the day was spent busying himself in the kitchen, but he still wondered where his cream cheese was. Time was running out and there was only one more day before the festival.

Charlie was just finishing up for the evening as he had managed to do as much as he could. Now, it was just the cheesecakes to do the next day. Charlie was just about to call Chef Luc in case there was some news, when there was a knock at the door. "This must be my delivery," Charlie thought. He raced to the front door and opened it wide. It certainly was his cream cheese delivery, but what he didn't expect to see was the face of Chef Luc standing before him. "Chef!" Charlie shouted in shock, "er what are you doing here?" as he was lost for words.

"Well Charlie, it's good to see you, too," he laughed and explained that he received a call late yesterday from the small dairy who supplied the cream cheese. They informed Chef that there delivery driver had been taken sick and would not be able to ship the order. Understanding the importance of the event to Charlie, he went on to say he didn't want to let down his young apprentice or his dearest friend, so decided to deliver the order himself.

A beaming grin on his face, Chef finished by saying, "So here I am and here is your order," as he pointed to the van.

Charlie could not believe his eyes. "Dad, we have a visitor," he shouted. His father replied, demanding to know who was calling at this late hour.

Chef cheekily suggested that he come to the door and deal with the caller himself, which Charlie thought would be a wonderful idea. Charlie called to his father saying it was someone that was here to see him. Charlie then moved from the door, just as his father arrived to reveal

his old friend Montaine. His father's facial expression turned from frown to a rather large grin within seconds once he saw who the visitor was. "My dear old friend, how, why, errr?" He was speechless momentarily but quickly invited his friend in while trying to find the words.

Chef repeated the story to Charlie's father who was so pleased to see his friend here in his home. "Maybe Chef could talk father around," Charlie thought as he left the two old friends alone to chat for the rest of the evening, letting them know he was off to bed. He also knew that it would be a long night chatting, and he needed to sleep. He cheerfully said goodnight to his father and Chef, advising that they not stay up too late, and chuckled as he walked out of the room. He made sure he was set for the following day, bought in the cream cheese delivery from Chef's van, and sat it safe before making his way to his bed.

He interrupted his mum reading her book, already cosy in bed, to let her know what had happened, before heading to his own room to settle in for a night's rest. "Tomorrow is going to be a very long day," he concluded as he made himself comfortable in his bed, eventually drifting off to sleep with faint sounds of laughter from the room below.

The next day came around quickly, and Charlie had not had much sleep, having been kept awake by lots of joyous laughter coming from downstairs. The two old friends are making up for lost time, he thought. Charlie was up, dressed, then made his way downstairs to get a good start with cheesecake production. He was surprised to see both Chef and his father sitting in the kitchen waiting on Charlie's appearance. "Good morning Charlie," said Chef. "I talked your dad into helping us this morning, but don't ask me to explain how I managed to do it," he continued to say while winking at Charlie.

"I don't care how, I'm just so pleased Dad agreed," he said as Charlie looked at his father who was sitting quite quietly in his seat looking just a little uncomfortable. Whatever it was, Charlie thought, it must be a big favour Dad owes chef. Either way, he was not bothered. He had his two favourite patissiers with him, so today was going to be exciting and fun. Having written out and improved his father's old recipe for cheesecake, they all got down to work.

At first, Charlie could see how apprehensive his father was, but as time went by and the first few cheesecakes were molded, he could see his father starting to relax and laughter started to fill the kitchen. This was not the usual behaviour in a working kitchen, but Charlie was thrilled that they were all working together. His father and Chef looked like young patissiers just starting out again. He had never seen his father look so happy as the day progressed. "Was it the same person there in the kitchen?" Charlie thought, as he watched his father work. The last cheesecake mold was then filled and placed in the fridge once it had sufficiently cooled. Time to clean down, make sure everything was ready for the following day as it was going to be a very early start. They would then finish each cheesecake at the event, so nothing further left to do.

Then came a loud shriek, "The gazebo!" Charlie shouted, "I forgot to go and pick it up," he said, forgotten by the days excitement. But before Charlie could panic any further, his mother calmly walked into the kitchen and told her son not to worry as she had taken care of it.

She had seen how much fun the three of them were having earlier. She had taken it upon herself to go around to collect the gazebo and tables herself. She then explained how she had gone around to the site and with the help of two very lovely workmen, managed to erect the gazebo and set up the tables ready for the next day. She had set out the tablecloths, the menu boards were made ready, and the gazebo sides were all zipped ready for the morning. A huge sigh of relief then rang out through the kitchen. For, Charlie's mother had saved the day, once again. All that was left was to get a good night's sleep and be up bright and early.

A small glass of champagne was poured before bed as they toasted a wonderful day. Charlie said goodnight to everyone and thanked his mum, Chef, and his father for all their help.

Before he could make his way up to bed, he was grabbed in a big hug by his father. His father expressed his feelings as best he could; he wanted to thank Charlie for allowing him to be a part of the day. Secretly, he thought Charlie had planned the arrival of Chef Luc, but couldn't prove it, and neither Chef Luc nor Charlie was letting on if that was actually the case. Either way, his dad felt that the past was healing and he had Charlie to thank. Charlie felt very touched by his father's words and felt very moved himself by his father's journey. They all finished the last of their drinks, then decided to call it a night before everyone became too emotionally fuelled by the drink, as the next day was going to be extremely busy, and they would need to be well rested. With that, everyone went their separate ways but not before hugs and smiles all around. Getting to his room, he was too exhausted to write up his journal so decided that it was straight to bed. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he was away in patisserie dreamland once again.

## Chapter Nine - The Food Festival

Darkness still seeping through the opened windows told Charlie he had not overslept, even though he could hear voices coming from downstairs. His mother, father, and Chef Luc were already in the kitchen by the time Charlie had got himself ready and strolled into the kitchen. His mother was busying herself preparing a hearty cooked breakfast. Charlie's father and Chef Luc were sat at the table. She couldn't possibly send her boys off to work on an empty stomach.

The atmosphere was positively jovial that morning. Even Charlie's father looked relaxed as he sat at the table drinking his morning cup of earl grey tea. "Good morning, Charlie," came a very jolly greeting from his father, "ready for a busy day are we?" he asked.

"Err yes dad, are you feeling okay?" Charlie asked his father.

"Never better!" came the response.

Sitting down at the table to join the others for breakfast, Charlie was bemused by his father's exceedingly good mood. His father was pretty much in a joyful mood for most of the time. Apart from when a knock at the front door would interrupt his rest...

But on that morning, it was more than just a joyful mood Charlie found his father in; there was an inner look of someone at peace as well. They all tucked into the delicious looking cooked breakfast that Charlie's mother had lovingly prepared for them all. Charlie quickly put on a pot of his favourite coffee to add to the beautiful aroma that filled the kitchen. Before long the table fell silent as they all sat together enjoying every mouthful of their breakfast, washed down with the finest coffee. The first rays of light started to illuminate the kitchen. Bird song started to fill the air outside. "It was going to be a beautiful spring day," Charlie thought, "perfect weather for a Food Festival."

Breakfast over, not a morsel left on anyone's plate, so it was time to pack the van ready to leave for the festival site. Charlie checked on the cheesecakes that had been left in the coldest part of the fridge, still in their molds, overnight. "They look perfect," he thought to himself. "We'll turn them out now and finish them at the venue," he'd decided. Thankfully, Chef Luc's van was the refrigerated kind, so they would keep perfect stored in the polystyrene boxes.

The plan was, once they had arrived at the venue, the three of them would finish decorating the four hundred cheesecakes and gently put them into the tins before they were sealed ready to be displayed. Chef Luc finished loading his van with the various containers that held the various finishing touches, the tins for packaging, and the three display cases for the finished cheesecakes. Charlie and his father were busy chatting all while carefully removing each of the cheesecakes from the molds, placing them on a cellophane sheet. They were then placed into one of the polystyrene boxes that would keep them chilled. Soon the boxes were all filled; they were sealed with their lids and were ready to be placed carefully into the van, and just in time, too.

Charlie noticed his dad wipe a bead of sweat from his face as the last boxes were placed into the van and the van door closed. A look of concentration changed into a look of relief at the sound of the van door closing. All exhibitors had to arrive at the event at a specific time, and that time was fast approaching. Charlie's mother looked at the wall clock in the kitchen, then with a slight tone of concern in her voice, said, "You boys had better get a move on. You don't want to be late, now do you!" Wanting the event to go as smoothly as possible for them all, for differing reasons, she had kept an eye on everything they did. Wishing them a wonderful day, she then winked at her husband, a loving gesture that was shared between them. The three boys all climbed into Chef Luc's van, as she watched them carefully drive away before she returned to tidying the kitchen, then headed back to the warmth of her bed for a little more sleep.



Charlie was very excited about the day ahead. Not only could he show off his cheesecake creations to festival visitors, but better than that, he would be working with his father. Now he knew the truth of his father's past, and actually getting him to be a part of the festival had been nothing short of a miracle. In his mind, he couldn't wait for the moment he would be standing next to him selling the creation, that were inspired by his father and then made together on this special occasion. The drive to the festival site, which only took them about ten minutes even driving careful, as they had precious cargo on board. The entrance was already bumper to bumper with an assortment of different vehicles all trying to make their way on to the festival site.

They joined the end of the queue and slowly crept down the dirt drive still a little wet from a light shower during the night. Once near the front of the queue, Chef rolled down the driver's side window in preparation, until they stopped before the official. "Good morning, gentlemen. Name please?" asked the steward that had been directing exhibitors to their appropriate pitches.

"Morning, Bill," came the reply from Charlie's father.

"Morning, Terrance. Surprised to see you here," came the slightly bemused response from the steward. Charlie's father just grinned back, as the steward handed them a site map and pointed them in the direction of their pitch. Chef Luc thanked the official and slowly drove off in the rough direction that the official had indicated.

Having to watch the traffic closely, with all the cars going in different directions, Chef threw the festival map into Charlie's lap, who promptly opened it so he could locate where they were supposed to be. The organisers had set the whole site out in a large wheel shape. "Left, left down there," Charlie shouted excitedly to Chef Luc as he turned carefully down one of the makeshift roads, being mindful of the slippery surface. "We should be about halfway along here on the right, looking at this," Charlie said as he attempted to keep count as they passed each pitch. The search was narrowed a little, thankfully, as there were only several blue gazebos in that particular spot where they had been assigned. "Stop now, here," came another shout from an overly excited Charlie. "This should be us right here." Chef Luc pulled up along the rear of the row of gazebos as Charlie jumped out of the van to go and check if the one they had stopped next to was in fact the one they had managed to borrow. He hurried around to the front and carefully unzipped one of the side panels and peered inside.

What he saw momentarily took his breath away. He stood motionless as he took in the sight. Remembering his father and Chef Luc were waiting on him, he quickly zipped the panel back up and ran back to the van. "Yep, this is us," he eagerly said as he flung open the passenger door, which made his father jump a little.

"I'm guessing you found our pitch then Charlie?" said his father now smiling back at his son.

"Yep, Dad, I certainly did. So come on, you two. Time to get to work," he announced, as he walked around to the rear of the van and opened the door. He was quickly joined by the other two once Chef Luc had turned off the engine. The three of them starting this adventure together had brought an air of exhilaration to all three of them and had just strengthened their friendship even further. "Let's just take in the display cases for now," Charlie instructed them both as they picked up one each. They all walked around to the front of their gazebo, and while Charlie carefully balanced the case that he had been carrying on one arm, he carefully unzipped the side panel to allow them to access the gazebo. Once inside, they were all left speechless by what was presented before them.

Charlie's mother had not only set up the gazebo, but she had done something very special indeed. Charlie knew that his mother had organised the blue table cloths to cover the tables, but

what he did not know was that she had asked for them to be printed with the words, "Cheesecake Charli,"e in big bold white letters and then underneath she'd had printed, "The Little Cheesecake Shop." To add to that, she had also written out the two large menu boards that were hanging at the rear of the tent. Each board had, "Cheesecake Charlie," written at the top and then underneath listed the ten flavours that Charlie had produced for that day. Sitting neatly at the side of the table were business cards that she had printed with the family's phone number. She had also arranged for leaflets to be printed with the different flavours, followed by a short description of each. Not one of them could speak as they looked at the boards, the printed table cloths, the leaflets, and the cards.

Charlie then noticed, resting on top of one of the tables, a note, left by his mother which he read out loud, "My Dearest Terrance and Charlie, I knew you would do it and you both make me very proud indeed, not only as a wife but also as a mother. Thank you to dear Chef Luc for helping to make this day possible. Have a fabulous day. Sell out, drink lots of water, and most importantly, have fun. Love Mom/Jacque." The three men looked at one another, the sentiment of the moment now began to sink in. Charlie, his father, and his old childhood friend all shared the same passion and had enjoyed working together as a team. After several minutes of reflection for each of them, Charlie cleared his throat from the knot within and said, "We really should get set up as there was lots to do before the gates opened in a couple of hours." There was just one last thing that he was waiting on to be delivered, which he really hoped would turn up on time.

The three of them merrily set about getting ready. Charlie had assigned his father and Chef the task of unloading the van while he sorted out the tables and putting the display cases out. The tall round display case would sit in the middle and either side of that would be a long rectangular display case. The centre case would hold Charlie's award-winning cheesecake, a show piece to draw customers in. While the rectangular ones would hold five flavours on one side and five the other. As he briefly stood alone waiting for the return of Chef Luc and his father, Charlie turned around to look at the boards, thrilled by what he had managed to accomplish. In no time at all, the van had been unloaded and now they had the task of finishing off the individual cheesecakes before placing them in the special tins.

Charlie would keep back just one of each shape that would sit in the front of the display case to excite the customers to want to buy. The other 390 cheesecakes would be placed inside the special tins and then sealed. They all got stuck in to finishing the cheesecakes; it was like a production line, each doing a specific task as they worked through one flavour at a time. When finished, each one was carefully placed into a tin, sealed with a lid, labelled, and placed back into the polystyrene box to keep chilled. It took them longer than they anticipated to complete this task, partly due to fooling around and joke-telling which left them all reeling in laughter.

It was only when an official poked his head through the opened side panel and announced there was just thirty minutes until the festival gates were opened that they realised they needed to get finished quickly. They felt like naughty school boys not completing an assigned task, so they agreed they had better knuckle down, as by now, only fifteen minutes remained. Together they finished off the final few cheesecakes, and without any more delay they put the tins into the display case and the award-winning cheesecake took the pride of place in the centre display. This stood slightly higher than the other two so was more easily seen.

Just as Charlie had given up waiting for his special delivery, that very same official stuck his head through the side flap and asked whether Charlie was waiting on a delivery. "Yes, yes I am sir," he replied, as his tone elevated with exhilaration as his special delivery had now arrived, not a moment to soon.

The official nodded and radioed back to the gate to let the courier through, and minutes later he arrived at the slightly opened tent entrance. "Delivery for a Charlie," announced a gruff sounding courier driver.

"Yes that's me," came the reply from Charlie.

"Sign here, sir," as the courier placed a clipboard with a document in front of Charlie. The document was quickly signed as the courier then said, in a more serious tone, "Now I need to explain how to handle this stuff," before he turned and walked back to his van.

Intrigued by this mysterious arrival, Charlie's father and Chef couldn't contain their excitement and questioned Charlie about what this delivery might be. Charlie remained tight lipped as the courier returned, carrying a medium sized insulated box. He put the package down on the small table at the rear of the gazebo then opened the package. He then proceeded to describe how the item inside should be handled, insisting that all three of them understood just what they were doing, as if they messed it up it would be his job on the line. Having now explained things several times, the courier felt he'd done enough to leave them now and continue with his deliveries. Once he left, Chef Luc turned to his apprentice. "Wow," said Chef Luc, "you really do know how to put on a show don't you?" He then added, "It must have been my fabulous teaching," as they all burst into fits of laughter.

All that now remained was to put out this final item before they opened up the front flap of the gazebo ready to begin trading. The courier had left three specialised trays with the order that Charlie placed on the bottom of each display case. Next, he carefully opened the insulated box, and using the special scoop, took out some of its contents and placed a scoop carefully into each of the trays before sliding them into the bottom of the display cases. All that now remained was to open the front of the gazebo. While Charlie and his dad were unzipping and then folding the front panel, they heard a booming announcement over the loud speakers. "Good morning, exhibitors, and welcome to the annual Poxwold Food Festival. We have perfect weather, so we expect it to be a busy show. If you require any assistance throughout the day, don't hesitate but to speak with an official who will be wandering around wearing high-vis jackets. On that note, we have five minutes remaining and the gates will be opened. Happy sale's everyone." There tent now open, Charlie noticed frantic movement around him as last minute preparations were made by all the surrounding exhibitors.

Carefully, the three of them moved the large front table forward, slightly back from the edge of their gazebo before Charlie's surprise was put into action.

As Chef and Charlie's dad stood eagerly by looking on, a small drop of water was carefully poured into the three specialised trays which set off a reaction with the contents. This reaction caused plumes of wispy clouds that filled the bottom of the display case and spilled out over the table like a low cloud on an early morning. It caused gasps of delight as several of the traders who stood opposite and had noticed the display. Charlie walked around the front of their stand to carry out one final check, beaming back with complete delight as he could now clearly see the magical effect the three of them had created.

A loud clacson sounded and the festival was open. A mix of nerves and excitement as they waited for their first customer, as the three of them tried to make themselves look busy. They were either straightening the pile of small menus, lining up the carrier bags, or perhaps brushing away invisible dirt off the tablecloth. The gentleman next to them, who was selling pies, noticed the three of them rushing around, clearly doing jobs that didn't need doing. The gentlemen wondered over to their stand, which stopped them all in their place, letting them know that it would be quite for the first hour while people made their way in. After a brief chat, they found

out he was a regular trader there himself. The tall well-groomed man went on to inform them when the busiest times were. Charlie thanked him politely before he casually made his way back to his own stand.

Looking at one another, they all then laughed at how nervous they must have looked. After all, this wasn't just a day for sales but a day for the three of them to heal old memories and create wondrous new ones. Over the next hour, they had the occasional visitor that would walk past, doing what they soon discovered was the first reconnoitre walk around. This was usual, as visitors would walk around the whole site at least once, checking out what was there. Only when having done that, would the buying commence. Then you had the fellow exhibitors who would walk by, checking out potential competition. Pass stalls with a friendly smile, a polite greeting but really seeing what was on offer, what the price was, and how much stock they had on show.

This being a new thing for Charlie, he was initially delighted to have people to the stall only later to discover they were competition. A conversation began over how lucky they were to have such a warm sunny day which then came to an abrupt halt as a familiar face appeared around the corner, that of Charlie's mother. "Did you forget something this morning?" she asked Charlie, who's relaxed state had now turned in to one of mild panic.

Quickly, he scanned the gazebo, trying to see if there was something he had forgotten. Everything was there in its place as far as he could tell, but still with a slight panicked tone in his voice, he replied by saying, "Er no, Mom, I think we have everything," panning around the space one final time.

With a cheeky grin on her face, from behind her legs she revealed a large carrier bag and handed it to her son. Looking inside, he quickly removed the contents with delight. "Mom had done it again," he thought as he saw what she had done, a grateful feeling welling within. His mother, at the same time as organising the beautifully printed tablecloth had also ordered three white and three blue polo shirts of differing sizes. On these shirts she had had embroidered, "Cheesecake Charlie," on the front with, "The Little Cheesecake Shop," underneath, and then on the back was printed a little cheesecake shaped character, "Cheesecake Charlie."

His mother then said, "I wanted to keep this as a surprise to, but had to wait until first thing this morning to pick them up as there had been a problem."

Charlie gave his mother the squishiest hug that he could muster, then standing back slightly, held her hand and said he was the luckiest boy in the world to have a Mum like his. "This was the icing on the cake," Charlie said out loud, then realising just what he had said, the tent came to life in fits of laughter. Once composure had been regained, they one by one snuck around the back of the gazebo to change into their new tops. Charlie opted for a blue one, while his father and chef chose the white.

Looking very smart in their new uniform, Charlie's mom, who loved taking pictures, asked them to pose as she snapped as many pictures as she could. It started as three proud men standing together but before long ended in bunny ears, face pulling and joyous sniggers. Joining in on the laughter, she then put her camera down, trying to act serious through buried squeaks of laughter saying, "Alright enough then. Haven't you boys got work to do?"

Terrance then facing his loving wife said, "Yes, mam, straight back to work with us," he said with a wide cheeky grin. Smiling back, she said farewell and decided to take herself off and have a walk around the show ground. She secretly thought she had better leave before she ended in a pool of tears. She was so proud to see her husband and son standing side by side working together having overcome so much.

Slowly, the morning morphed into lunchtime. The event had gotten busier and busier; by now they was a sea of people having to turn sideways at times to quash through to the next stand. Sales had started slowly, having only sold a small number by lunch, as inquisitive visitors looked at the stall, read the menu board flavours then looked at the display cases. It was confusing to some people that came from this small village to comprehend just what was being offered at this stall. The tablecloth said, "Cheesecake," the boards read, "Cheesecake," and even the polo-shirts had "Cheesecake" written across the breast. But cheesecakes were not what these beautiful works of art looked like. At the beginning, it was a hard sell or to convince potential customers what these were.

However, before long, people started to purchase, several deciding they wanted to savour this delight once they were home, but many more chose to eat there's straight away, having already scoffed down a pulled-pork roll, or a chimichanga, maybe even an oven fired pizza, well, in fact, any of the vast assortment of foods on offer. Once a number of people had purchased their little tin filled with cheesecake and dug the spoon in for that first bite, the word soon spread. They watched from their gazebo as customers, with expressions of heavenly delight, pointed their friends over to the Cheesecake Charlie stand.

Suddenly, there was purchase after purchase, poly-box after poly-box being emptied, and stock getting less and less. It was non-stop sales by mid-afternoon, and all that was left were those in the display case and one poly-box of assorted flavours. The three of them had worked in perfect unison through the rush to keep up with the demands, although not forgetting to have fun with it all. Then by mid-afternoon, most of the visitors that had been there since morning were now occupying themselves milling around the various array of exhibitors who were selling kitchen or food related gadgets. Or perhaps buying the array of jams, pickles, or flavoured olive oils in order to stock up their pantries at home.

Charlie looked around at their diminished stock, grateful and contented with how well the day had gone so far. He then looked at his shirt that he proudly wore, the small cheesecake character that now stood as their emblem. He looked at the smiles of his father and Chef, truly grateful this had all come together. He then suggested that his father and Chef have a wander around the show for a little while. They gladly took Charlie up on his suggestion and were off. Charlie had not seen his father this happy in a long time, and to have Chef here with them was a welcomed delight. He also got to see a different side to Chef that he had not seen so far, a playful elation of two old friends once again working together. When those two got together, Charlie thought, there could be trouble. He witnessed them behaving like young teenagers as they attempted to out sell each other.

While there was a lull in the crowd, Charlie took the opportunity to straighten the stand and brush away any rubbish that had been discarded in front, ready for the next rush of expected people. There were not very many cheesecakes left, as just the occasional visitor walked past and purchased or an exhibitor who quickly popped by having seen visitors filling their faces and groaning with delight. Charlie was having the time of his life.

While his back was turned, Charlie heard a faint cough behind him in order to catch his attention, and upon turning he realised that it was none other than the acclaimed food critic, Quentin Watson, standing there. Seeing Charlie's centre display and remembering the change it had brought about within him, he wanted to stop and pay his respects. "Good afternoon, Mr Watson," said Charlie, continuing to say that he had not expected to see him this far out at the food festival. Then, he quickly remembered to thank him for the gracious words he had written about his cheesecake. Quentin had sampled at Fleurette's.

After looking over the remaining cheesecakes on display, Quentin looked up at Charlie and responded by saying, "It's excellent to see you again, Mr Warner. Your cheesecake certainly left a lasting impression on me. So when I saw that you had a stall here, I wanted to come over and see how you were doing." He then went back to examining in closer detail the cheesecakes that were in the display cases then trying to match those with the flavours listed on the boards. Though several of the more popular flavours had been crossed out, there was still a good selection left.

Quentin then began to remark at how creative Charlie had been, that with all his travels he had never seen cheesecakes finished in this manner before. After much deliberation, he chose four flavours to take home with him. As a last comment, he said, "If these are as good as the one I tasted while at Fleurette's, you will be hearing from me," and with that he thanked Charlie, picked up one of his cards, paid for his purchase, and disappeared once more.

Just moments later, while Charlie was thinking about what had just transpired, his father and Chef returned, happy and content, having filled themselves up with chargrilled bourbon flavoured steak burgers. Charlie said he would like to take a short break now, not mentioning anything to his father about seeing the person that ruined his life all those years earlier. It was a long shot, but he wanted to try and locate Quentin while still possible. They both nodded in agreement, feeling too full to utter the words. Already on his way, he shouted back to his dad that he would be back shortly, taking off in the direction that he thought he saw Quentin head in. There was now a band playing slightly beyond the festive stands where many people were now gathering. Thinking Quentin maybe in that area, he raced towards the crowd, trying to soak in the atmosphere as he hurried towards the music. There were sounds of people enjoying themselves, the smells from the hot food traders drifting on the gentle breeze. But many of the crowd had headed or were heading into the direction of the musician, transfixed by her energy and her love of music.

Almost giving up hope, he finally caught a glimpse of Quentin who had by now pasted the music and crowd looking as though he was heading to the exit. Racing after him, he managed to stop him only metres short of the exit gate. Out of breathe, he grabbed Quentin's shoulder and sort of jumped in front of him. Trying to catch his breath, the word "wait" sort of spluttered out.

A bemused Quentin stood for a moment and then said, "Did I forget something?" to which Charlie responded by saying, "No but I did." Breathe regained, Charlie felt this was his moment to defend his father and no amount of stature within the food industry that Quentin held was going to stop him. Holding back as much anger as he could, he wanted him to understand the damage that he had done to his father all those years previous. He went on to explain, that it WAS his own father whom Quentin had written about all those many years previous. How his father seeing those words, walked away from the industry he loved, moved and great friendships were lost. Charlie explained about the old journal, how it was his father's notes and work that had inspired him all along, and that he was immensely proud of his father. Quentin, left speechless, stood listening intently, a blank expression on his face. Charlie went on to say, that his father was actually here today, he and his mentor had finally, after all these years, encouraged him to be a part of all the preparations, the making of the cheesecakes, and the sales today. He explained that it took his father a tremendous amount of courage to do this. So if he was, in fact, going to make any comment, it had to be directed at his father and not to Charlie. Taking a deep breathe, he waited for a response from Quentin, his face and posture giving nothing away.

Had Charlie said too much? Had he overstepped the mark, blurting all that out? Then the fear rose within him that events of the past might be repeated again. Now trying to back track,

Charlie quickly tried to retract what he had said, but it was too late. Quentin turned on his heels and quickly left. Standing there for a moment, Charlie wondered about what he had just done. How could he face his father if something went wrong? In trying to help his dad, had he now made things worse? "What to do, what to do?" Charlie thought anxiously.

Charlie made his way back to their pitch deciding to not say anything, and let his father just enjoy the day. He hoped that just maybe Quentin would remember being a teen himself and would let it go as over enthusiastic adolescent behaviour. Charlie took the long route back to their pitch, taking a little time to again check out the other stands and delight in the sounds, smells, and atmosphere. Then with his mood once again cheerful, he made his way back to "Cheesecake Charlie" where only half a dozen cheesecakes remained and he could see Chef and his dad were still acting like children. It brought a wide smile to Charlie's face, as he walked back into the gazebo, and with a chuckle in his voice, told the two of them to behave. That just caused even more laughter, which seemed to attract a customer who decided to buy all the remaining cheesecakes. They were quickly bagged, payment was received, and once she was out of sight, they did a secret little high-five under the table with a gleeful grin. "What a day it had been, all sold out with only an hour to go," Charlie said. He gave them both a great big manly hug as they were out in public. Then rapidly they started to pack things away quickly, wanting to get away before the rush of other traders if possible. Banners were folded, display cases and tables dismantled, leaving only one thing. Charlie noticed the bright vest of an official and eagerly walked over to ask permission to leave early. With the help of his Lego shaped cheesecake as a little bribe, permission was happily granted.

The three men worked together in harmony, packing the last of their things, dismantling the gazebo quickly, and placing it neatly in the van. One last check that nothing had been left, a quick farewell to the exhibitors who had been there neighbours for the day, and they were off. Chef had to slowly edge his way around the outskirts of the gazebos, looking for the official crossing place, until finally they arrived at the trade exit. The van slid slightly as Chef Luc edged forward through the churned up wet sand then onto the main road.

The first stop was to drop the gazebo and tables that had been kindly lent back to their rightful owner. Then home to unload, count the taking for the day, freshen up, and then decide what they would do to celebrate that evening. Charlie, overcome with joy and appreciation, didn't want this day to end, so decided to treat everyone to a meal out at one of the local bistros. They caught a taxi back into the village, his Mum elated to join them as well. The bistros served good wholesome food, much like Madame Luc's, good wine, but more importantly, he was spending time with those he loved. That, amongst all else, was priceless. That night they all ate well, drank way to much red wine, shared some beautiful memories, and just enjoyed spending time with dear friends and family. It was early morning by the time they fell through the front door of their home. Exhausted by the past few days, and after drunken hugs all round by the men, they all disappeared to their separate rooms to fall into bed.

A couple of weeks had now past since the Food Festival. Chef Luc had stayed a few more days before receiving a telephone call from Madame Luc needing him back at the shop. As he had wished his old friend goodbye, he presented him with a special apron he had made before his journey out. Opening it, they both fell to the floor laughing. The wording read, "T and M, dangerous when bored." Charlie walked over to see what they were laughing at this time, getting used to their antics together. Now composed, Chef warmly hugged Charlie and made sure he knew he would always be welcome to either continue his traineeship, or as a guest, or employee.

The good-byes were full of emotion; many old wounds had now been healed. Only a more positive future lay ahead.

Charlie had forgotten about Quentin as he had not heard anything further. Instead, he had been planning his next adventure. His career was now set on course, life as a patissier was for him and the world his playground. Now taking a little time out, he decided to take a trip into the nearby town to sample some coffee which wasn't a match for the one that his friend Captain Macrina had introduced him to. Slowly swirling the liquid in his mouth, he tried to work out what bean this coffee house had used, then a fellow customer who was leaving hurriedly bumped into him dropping his newspaper. Before Charlie had a chance to give it back, he was swiftly gone. He decided to pass the time, while trying to finish a poor excuse for a coffee, flicking through the newspaper. Several pages in, something caught his attention and made him sit up straight in his seat. There was a small article written by Quentin Watson and it was just a small paragraph that got Charlie's attention. The passage read...

"To my dearest loyal followers and to those who are reading my column for perhaps the first time, I feel duty bound to right a wrong that was made by me in my naive early days as a food critic. As many of you know, I can be out-spoken at times and decidedly abrupt with my opinions and conclusions. However, my failings as a responsible food critic were recently highlighted only a few weeks ago by a chance meeting with someone I did not expect to see again. This gentleman pointed out that, in my ignorance when I was just starting out, I ruined a very promising career of an up and coming patissier. I now wish to recant what was previously said, and ask that Terry Warner, father of Charlie Warner aka Cheesecake Charlie, accept my humble apologies. For recently, I was honoured to sample what can only be described as the finest cheesecake that I have ever tasted. In fact, I would go as far as to say the finest dessert that I have had the pleasure to eat. What Cheesecake Charlie produce can only be known as a taste sensation as well as a breathtaking work of art. This was only made possible by the relentless work that was previously started by Terry Warner and rudely interrupted by myself. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Terrence Warner, and to all those people reading these words, go and find Cheesecake Charlie," listing a contact number at the end of the article.

Charlie was left speechless. He sprang out of his seat, paper in hand, and raced back home to show his father. Arriving home, bursting through the door, he found both his parents sitting around the kitchen table drinking tea. Before anyone could speak, Charlie slammed the paper down in front of his father, and jabbing his finger at the passage, shouted "Read."

Replying, "Oh okay, I guess," Charlie's father lowered his eyes and began to read. Charlie could see the pulse in his neck increase, his breathing change, and his eyes well up as he carefully read every single word. Charlie's father had to read that passage several times more before he was able to comment, and even then he did a mash-up of words that made no sense coming out. Jacque looked upon her husband with concern, then at Charlie, demanding to know what he had just put in front of him to read. Seeing her distress, he took his mother's hand and asked her to come with him and to give his father time. Sitting in the garden, he explained what had just happened, meeting Quentin at the Food Festival, telling him about his father, and what had happened to his father's life as a result from the article. Charlie, still stunned himself, expressed to her that he had not for one minute thought he would hear anything, let alone such a public admission as that. So he was equally as shocked as his father. His mother, also now taken aback by what she heard, said they might just check in on him then maybe give him a chance to mull over the implications of the article.



Jacque walked up to her husband, leant down, and wrapped her arms around him where he sat. He caressed her back in the loving manner they shared. This was enough for her to know he would be okay. He just needed time to sort out all the broken pieces in his mind.

She nodded and gestured to Charlie that it was now time to leave. Picking up her bag, they left the house in quiet. Once out, they decided a walk into the village would be just the answer they needed.

By the time they returned, Charlie's father, although still sitting at the kitchen table, looked much more relaxed. Charlie and his mom took a seat at the table, and cautiously Charlie asked his dad if he was okay...

After several minutes of just staring, he responded by saying, "Yes, Charlie, thank you." His wife then interjected by asking what he thought, and had he made any decisions about what he would do now. Silence again fell over the kitchen until suddenly Charlie's father announced, "Seeing as the phone has not stopped ringing since the two of you left me alone, we had better do something about filling these orders from people all over the country wanting your cheesecakes." A smile creasing the corners of his cheeks, as he revealed a pad full of orders from under his hand

"No, Dad," responded Charlie with a slight waiver in his tone, "They are yours...!"

As Charlie's daughter finished the story, sounds of, "Wow," was heard as three excited and slightly tired looking faces looked on at their grandfather, who had drifted off to sleep. "Tell us another, tell us another, Mom... Please," Charlotte demanded as she looked over at the shelves full of other journals which she knew were full of new adventures.

"Come on now, its late and way past your bedtime," responded Charlie's daughter. "There will be plenty of time for other stories, but now its late and way past your bed times. So off to bed you lot and I'll be up to check on you shortly."

Once the grandchildren had left the room, Claire looked over at her husband as he looked so peaceful sitting there, journal balanced in his lap, a warm and loving expression on her face. "I never tire of hearing that story myself," Claire said to her daughter. "Let's sort those grandkids out, then I'll make us all a warm drink before bed," Claire said. They left Charlie where he was as they disappeared to say goodnight to the kids upstairs.

It didn't take them long before they were back down. By now, Charlie had woken from his sleep. Claire had now returned with mugs of warm hot chocolate and sat back in the cosy sofa. Charlie got up and joined her as he then wrapped his arm around his beautiful best friend and loving wife. The three of them stared at the dancing burnt orange and yellow coloured flames of the fire as they each drifted off thinking about the story that had just been retold...

THE END...For Now!

## About The Author



Julian is a former classically trained chef, catering manager and cheesecakeologist, which included a short detour into the world of Chinese Acupuncture and is the author of this series of journals. These journals tell the story of Charlie and his adventures into the world of the Patissier and although these journals are a work of fiction, there are many parts that are taken from the author's own personal experiences within the catering industry.

Julian became a cheesecakeologist when an ardour for baking and a passion for desserts, lead him to the wonderful world of the cheesecake, in all its forms. Eventually ending with the creation of an artisan cheesecake company. The dream for the author was to redefine this classic dessert and transform it into something new, which remains still very much the case to this day.

When not in the kitchen causing mayhem experimenting with various flavour combinations, or conducting further research and pushing the cheesecake envelope, you can find Julian sitting in a boutique coffee shop. This is where he will be soaking in the atmosphere, people watching, a favourite pastime, while planning out and scribbling down notes for the next chapter of Charlies Journal. Or perhaps he'll be working on charlie's recipe book, while not over doing the coffee intake.

And finally when not spending quality time with loved ones, you can find the author indulging in his other passion, a love of flying, well flying a desktop flight simulator any.

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Julian Corbett

## One Last Thing

Thank you for taking the time to read the first installment of Charlie's Journal and my wish is that you enjoyed the journey so far. But were you, the reader left with some unanswered questions, so as

*How did Charlie and Claire end up together ?*

*Just what was in the Letter that Charlie was asked to deliver ?*

*What were the five desserts that Fleurette taught Charlie how to make ?*

The answers to these questions and many more can be found at the following website:

<http://www.charliesjournal.com>

By visiting the website often, you the reader, will discover more information about many of the characters that Charlie met along the way. There will be news, short-stories and snippets from the other journals before they are officially launched.

There will be recipe corner where Charlie will reveal many recipes and components that made up many of his cheesecake creations, as well as some useful tips to get the best results possible.

If you enjoyed this book I'd be very grateful if you'd post a short review. Your support really does make a difference and I read all the reviews personally so I can get your feedback and make these journals even better.

Thanks again for your support!