

the  
Last  
Chance  
Hotel

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## 1. THE LAST CHANCE HOTEL

In the kitchen of the Last Chance Hotel, the loudest sound you were usually likely to hear was the gentle bubble of a lone egg coming to a boil.

But today, the air was alive with yells from Henri Mould, the balding head chef, bent double with old age, barking out orders as he hobbled around the kitchen.

“Seth—those tarts! Out of the oven. Now!” yelled Henri, causing kitchen boy Seth to twist around on his spindly legs and hurtle to the other side of the kitchen. All around him, the air was filled with the smell of garlic butter and roasting meat, and cloudy with a dust of flour, herbs, and spices. Steam ballooned, jellies set, and saucepans bubbled.

If ever Seth Seppi wished he could be even the tiniest bit magic, it was now. Because a spell to split himself into three

was surely the only way he was going to get through all the tasks he'd been set by his three nasty bosses—crotchety Henri and the two owners of the Last Chance Hotel, snappy and spiteful Norrie Bunn and her oily, penny-pinching husband, Horatio. It felt like the hotel had been preparing forever for these special guests that Mr. Bunn had been bouncing on his toes about, and today was the day they were due to arrive.

“I need more pepper. Quickly, boy!” screeched Norrie Bunn from the stove, sending a long dribble of peppercorn sauce flying across the kitchen as she launched a dripping spoon in Seth's direction. Her long, brittle gray hair was tied back from her pointy face as she sweated over the sauce, trying not to sneeze.

At least the Bunns' monstrously unpleasant daughter, Tiffany, was at her posh chefs' school, far away from her favorite entertainment—tormenting Seth.

Mr. Bunn burst into the kitchen flapping his hands and squealing, “They're here! They're here!” like a small kid announcing Christmas, before rushing back out into the lobby.

Even more startling, Mr. Bunn was wearing a cherry-red

waistcoat and striped trousers, rather than the familiar drab gray suit he had worn every day for years.

Norrie Bunn tugged off her apron and, smoothing down her long gray hair, rushed to attend to her guests in the lobby.

Seth managed to be the first to reach the crack in the kitchen wall where it was possible to see through to the lobby and sneak a glimpse of the arriving guests. As he put his eye to the hole, he could hear the sound of keys being jangled and Mr. and Mrs. Bunn, on their best behavior, greeting the new arrivals.

Henri moved across the kitchen with unusual sprightliness, poked Seth out of the way with a very sharp elbow, and peered through the crack. “Is *that* our VIP guest, Dr. Thallomius? The one we’ve put in all this hard work for? Not very impressive. All this work,” Henri groaned as he pressed his paunch tenderly, “gives me gas.”

Seth had not expected their VIP guest to look like a miniature Father Christmas. Dr. Thallomius had white hair, a round tummy, and eyes that twinkled, but he must have only come up to Seth’s shoulder.

“And the chap with him—proud as a peacock.” Henri continued his spying. “Guess that’s his security he’s insisted

on bringing with him. Security! Looks about as good at security as a chicken. Strutting about with a ridiculous mustache.”

“That’ll be Mr. Gregorian Kingfisher.” Seth had glimpsed a young man in a tight-fitting bright green suit with well-combed dark brown hair, a very large and luxuriant brown mustache, and a sprinkle of freckles across his nose. “He’s the one who asked for a room with a picture of people playing sports.”

Guests often made special requests, but it was the first time anyone had been fussy about the artwork in their room. These guests were so fascinating. Seth had never known this many people staying. Probably because outside the hotel the whole world was nothing but never-ending trees. Seth had only heard about the days when the Last Chance Hotel had always been full. That had been when his father had been chef here. In those days, people had relished the challenge of traveling to so remote a place just for the reward of trying his famous cooking.

Seth longed for a summons from Mr. Bunn that someone needed help with their bags so he could get a closer look.

“Can see why Thallomius wanted Miss Squerr along as

his assistant,” growled Henri, turning his head and giving Seth a momentary chance to take another peek.

Angelique Squerr’s head was held as high as if she were making an entrance to a grand audience of thousands. Her hair was long, straight, and dark, except for one long section of red down the right-hand side. It looked as if it had been polished. A film star? Under the twinkling chandelier, she made the clutter of well-polished wooden furniture and pictures in old frames seem faded and worn.

“Back to work, Seth,” snapped Henri, picking up a knife and heading to chop some vegetables. “Or that washing-up will reach the ceiling.”

But before Seth could make a start, Henri let out a cry and the knife in his hand fell with a clatter to the cool flagstones of the kitchen floor.

An insect flew past Seth’s nose to batter against the window. Henri cowered.

“It’s just a bug, Henri,” soothed Seth, gently teasing the little creature toward the open window. It looked like it was on fire, with a glowing phosphorescent tail.

“That’s not just any bug.” Henri’s eyes grew wide. “That’s a *luciole*. Do you know what that means?”

“You mean it’s a firefly. Must have got lost from the

glowworm glade. It's beautiful; come and take a look. They look like magic, don't you think?"

"But it's inside!" Henri hissed, dabbing his sweating upper lip. "In my country, if a lightning bug flies in the window, it means—it means a *death*." Henri gripped Seth's arm hard. "Seth, someone is going to die."