

"Tell me again what I was on when I agreed to this?" Jessie asked as they neared the estate.

"Pizza. And, they think we'll soon be hitched."

"Nice," sarcasm laced the word. "I can't imagine who planted the seed and then fuelled the idea. Is it too late for me to wonder about insanity in your family?"

"There is the question of Grandma Margaret, who was known for bizarre behaviour, but that's another tale altogether. Just a hug here, a kiss there, one of those looks..."

"I'll give you a look all right. I'm not implying they're incapable of acceptance, but how did you explain my visit?"

"I told them your name is Lewis."

"What?" Horror spread on her face. "You got me here under false pretences! How am I going to avoid awkward questions now?"

"You worry too much."

"Hah!" She tried to calm the uneasiness that crept over her. "You know perfectly well people such as our parents always ask questions, lots of them. They want to know everything—including blood groups."

John roared with laughter.

"When the charade blows in our faces, and it will, I'll hold you personally responsible. Now, I also know I'm going to regret it dearly but for some reason I can't demand you take me back." She flashed her eyes angrily at him. "Let's see, James: twenty-eight, dark blond, brown eyes. Mathew: twenty-five, brown hair and eyes. Mark: twenty-three, dark blond, I don't recall the eyes. John, the maddest twenty-one-year-old I know."

He pointed to the tall iron gates in the distance.

"Oh, gosh, it's so much grander up close." She placed a hand on her chest. "I think I'm developing a heart condition."

"You'll be fine. You know, people have come, pretended to rearrange the furniture, didn't bother throwing anything out, and left it as crammed as ever. I wish mom would ask you to do something about it. But it's a waste of time, father won't let her. Or more correctly, Aunt Monica would have a conniption."

"And I'm hardly qualified to give advice on a house this size." It was old, grey, and magnificent, all four wings of it. The view instantly transporting her to an unforgettable summer she had spent in England with her family when she was fourteen. "When they ask, what shall I say my father does?"

"Make something up."

"And that's exactly when they'll ask questions I can't answer. Can't you see what we're doing?"

"Yes, having an adventure." Stopping the car, he turned to her. "Obviously, we can't tell them who you are because then they'd be suspicious of everything you did and I'd have to fight everyone, ruining a perfectly good weekend. To save ourselves unnecessary grief, we'll be slightly deceitful, and you get to tour the museum." He smiled encouragingly.

"It's just..."

The lies started at the front door when John introduced her to the butler, Mr Adams. She felt terrible, hoping she could be truthful, but imagining how her family might receive him one day, she bit her tongue and followed his example.

The interior was everything she imagined, and more, precious pieces on every surface and she felt almost dizzy as she tried to catalogue eras and centuries mentally.

She saw Grace Barrymore, the short blonde bob a perfect frame for the still beautiful face, who although looking younger, Jessie knew that like her own mother, was fifty-five. The curious and interested gaze regarded her firmly, making her feel shy. Not much flew past that powerful blue scrutiny.

“Mom, my best friend,”

“Hello, Jessie,” Grace smiled warmly, extended a hand, and eyed the young woman with interest, liking the demure look of her. “Welcome to our home.”

“So, this is she.” Monica said from a wingback and an intense appraisal followed. The girl was casually dressed in a pair of jeans and silk blouse, and her expert eye told her those were designer labels. She also had a pair of Nine West shoes on, a matching belt, and a pretty decent handbag. None of the items were new, so she had not rushed off to buy them to impress. Good, she might have some means and taste.

Tea was served in the Louis XIV salon and Jessie struggled to keep her gaze on the two older women, simply wanting to look at and absorb everything. It was a gorgeous room; polychrome commodes, bureaux, gilded chairs, mirrors... No, she could barely focus on Grace Barrymore, who was enchanting, entertaining, and an absolute gem as a hostess and enjoying the company of another woman who was not Monica.

Now there was an extremely critical individual. If something wasn’t to her liking, it was wrong, and this applied to every avenue, be it yard paving or the way one turned a collar. From the little Jessie had gleaned and John harped on, Monica sounded exactly like Margaret, who had been another strange character.

Naturally, it was Monica who asked what her father did. She was silent for a second and then told her that he was in plastics. Which was not a lie; Taylor had recently acquired Amalgamated Plastics in Durban.

Mark trudged in, draped himself over a velvet sofa, started on some interior decor conversation, and asked if she would be willing to do his penthouse in New York.

No one had to tell her interior design had not yet entered his mind; the blue eyes were hard to read and yet, it was all so easy to understand. Those designs were not what she wanted to inspire.

He beckoned to James, who appeared in the doorway, and told him to come have an audience.

She took a deep breath, trying to ignore the annoyance she felt.

James was quiet and polite, but after a few minutes, excused himself and disappeared.

“Mom, is tonight very formal?” John asked.

“It’s such lovely weather that I asked for the summer dining-room. Something light will do, and the gentlemen don’t have to wear ties.”

The look of disapproval on Monica’s face was instantaneous.

John saw it too. “Aunt Monica, if you’re not careful, traditions and rituals will take you to the grave. But I appreciate the gesture, mom. Come, Jessie,” he took her hand.

They walked through salons, chambres, salles, and corridors, stopping often to touch and study. Jessie wondered who, in prior generations, had been so taken with French décor, although, some rooms were the epitome of 40’s and art deco. They reached a passage where

19th century animal paintings adorned the panelled walls and she was delighted to recognise the artist's name. When they reached the end, her hand ran over a wrought iron balustrade then stopping on the landing, her fingers slid up a marble column. "It's exquisite."

"Thought you'd like it, and I'll show you more after dinner and tomorrow morning." Pausing outside a beautifully polished door, he told her. "From today this is your room."

She made an incongruous sound. "Ah, the youthful dreamer. Please come in and show me what your mother meant by light."

"After I introduce you to Mathew,"

Their colouring was different, but Mathew was John's taller, mature, and more handsome version.

"Hello, Jessie." He neither smiled nor offered a hand.

She did likewise. "Mathew."

"When did you get here?" Mathew asked John.

"In time for tea."

Mathew's brows rose. "Are you ill?"

Jessie suppressed a giggle. It was common knowledge at college that he would rather die than touch the liquid.

John laughed. "I had to keep her company as Aunt Monica grilled and Mark gawked. You know how intimidating the Barrymores are."

"Absolute ogres," Mathew agreed then turned to her. "But don't let any of them frighten you. And I apologise, but I have to make a call." He smiled, raised a hand, and continued down the passage.

As soon as they entered the room, John threw himself onto the four-poster bed, and fixed his gaze on the sunburst roof. "I've always liked this room, and it suits you. What do you think?"

She glanced around the well-proportioned room, velvet sofas, delicate silk bedspread, Adam open armchairs, and exquisite ornaments. "Straight out of a fairy-tale."

He patted the place beside him and stretched out his arm in invitation.

As her head dropped on it, she queried. "What are we doing?"

"This," turning his head, he kissed her.

All the ingredients were present for a perfect romantic interlude; gorgeous setting, handsome boy, beautiful girl, and he did everything right, his mouth sweet and gentle. Jessie snapped an eye open and looked at him, he was as much in this as she was.

Over the past year, she had vacillated between wanting and not wanting at all, and at times imagined he might be in the same boat. Now, it felt forced, contrived, put on, and uncomfortable. Something was wrong between them but right now, she didn't care. In fact, a wave of relief flooded her and before he did anything else that was even more stupid than that kiss, she caressed his face, smiled, and sat up.

"I do love you but also knew it would be like this."

"Some things aren't meant to be, and lovers is not for us."

"You didn't feel anything either?" He asked between concern and relief.

"It was like kissing one of my brothers and we never have to do it again." Squeezing his arm reassuringly, she got off the bed, opened the small suitcase, unpacked the few items she had brought, and held up two dresses. "Which is it?"

John was good at putting outfits together, as he excelled in textile studies and pointed to what she should wear. Then after a few minutes, he announced. "I'm bushed, going to rest. You should do the same before dinner, which is at seven-thirty. Promptly."

This was not how she envisioned the weekend unfolding and she lay on the bed ruminating. The occasional fostering of romantic notions came and went, as he never showed actual interest in that avenue. So today, it wasn't just the surprise that he finally tried but that she had her concrete answer, numb disinterest. Turning a few times, she watched the lace curtains float gently in the afternoon breeze, a soft laziness enveloping her as her lids drooped slowly.

Being the only young woman at a dinner table had its advantages and she smiled with amusement as four bachelors vied for her attention, though, each had a different approach. James was careful with his compliments, seeming to take more pleasure in watching and listening. Mathew wasn't outrageous or extravagant. Mark had a way of giving double meanings to everything, which she found disturbing, and John was plain ridiculous.

After dinner, Mark annoyed her again when he asked if she could estimate a vase's worth. She had quickly realised there were pieces of dubious origins scattered among the treasures, a crazy practice from Margaret's days as lady of the house. It was as if he imagined she had come with a cash-register and put price tags on everything already. She was in no mood for his nonsense.

"Why does he do it?" She queried when John led her down a garden path.

"Because he thinks you're after my money. I may only be fourth in line but my inheritance is sizeable."

"Ah, of course," she made an odd gesture. "So is mine."

"But he doesn't know that. And who's ever heard of a rich Plastics Baron?" He teased. "It's usually Aunt Monica's job to scrutinise everyone with a magnifying glass, but he sure gives her a run for her money lately. I say it's grandma's fault; he was her favourite and she taught him weird stuff. But cheer up, he'll be gone on Monday so who cares what he thinks. How about a swim?"

She looked at the beautiful swimming pool area on the side of the house, white marble statues standing guard next to a fountain. "I have no wish to prance around half naked."

"Not here, we also have an indoor pool you haven't seen. And for your peace of mind, Mark is not into water sports anymore." Walking down the side of the house, he pushed open two wooden doors. "What do you think?"

"Not what I expected." She stared at the pool filling most of the room.

"It used to be a courtyard, but when grandma moved to the south wing after grandpa died, she requested all passages, doors, rooms, and windows be sealed off. We were all at school and in various swimming teams and mom hated watching us turn blue in winter, so father had it built, with only that door leading into the house." He pointed. "And just so you know, no one goes into the south wing, it's creepy there. Therefore, I won't be showing you that."

The freedom they felt in each other's presence turned them into children as they laughed and raced each other, and knowing they were making a racket, neither was surprised when Mathew peered in.

"Come join us." John beckoned.

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“Pfft. Besides, I haven’t raced you in years.” John grinned, which meant he had complete confidence in his own abilities.

Mathew drew closer and gave his brother a lopsided smile. “If I win, what’s my reward?”

John scratched his head. “What do you want?”

“What did medieval heroes get?” Mathew asked curiously.

“I think they got a handkerchief. Or a kiss from the princess, or some such silliness.”

Jessie blushed as two pairs of male eyes turned to her. She made a gesture, implying she didn’t know anything.

“You’ll be sorry.” Mathew warned.

Sitting on the edge to watch, Jessie was engulfed in a blur. John wouldn’t give up and kept losing, Mathew laughed and kept winning, and she reached a state of confused stupor. Not only her cheek and lips were smacked, but also a calf and thigh landed under his mouth.

“How am I doing?” John gasped.

She told him. “Not at all, shame on you.”

“Is that so?” Reaching her, he pulled her into the water. “Let’s see you do better.”

She spluttered. “Wait until I get my hands on you. And it’s unfair competition. Look at him, he’s taller, stronger, broader, will be there long before me.”

“Okay, two second head-start.” Mathew conceded.

John laughed. “No way, she’s trying to sucker you in. Ready...”

Mathew discovered how right his brother was, Jessie swam like a fish and was just as fast. “Now I know what you were doing,” he wheezed. “You put me out of commission and then she finishes me off. Clever.”

Jessie climbed out of the pool and wrapped herself in a towel. “Thanks for the workout, guys; I’m going to change.”

“Thoughts?” John queried.

“Interesting,” Mathew managed out of breath.