

Too Good to Be True

By Kristen Ashley
©2023

Teaser Chapters

Chapter One *Duncroft*

“This makes me nervous,” Lou declared.

I didn’t know how to reply because I found what she said odd.

Though, thinking about it, perhaps not too odd.

Portia wasn’t Lou’s biggest fan, she hadn’t been since the very beginning. Even I was surprised my little sister asked Lou to spend this week in the country at the family home of Portia’s boyfriend.

Me? Yes.

The older sister. The only sibling. It made sense.

Portia and I had our times of strife (a lot of them), but like she always had her father’s devotion, she always wanted her big sister’s approval.

When Lou came along, she took some of the former, which was why Portia had never accepted Lou as part of our family. Dad had spoiled Portia, and when he took some attention from his youngest in order to shower Lou with his brand of love, Portia wasn’t happy.

As for my approval, it wasn’t often forthcoming, mainly because Portia didn’t often make decisions I approved of.

I wasn’t the stuffy older sister.

Portia was the mischievous younger one.

According to me.

Also according to me, that description was being nice.

In other words, Portia could often be a pain in my ass.

Lou’s invitation to this week in the countryside? The much-younger third wife of our now deceased father? A wife Portia had butted heads with for the last decade?

That made no sense at all.

Due to this, Lou feeling nervous wasn't odd...as such.

However, she'd been a member of our family for a long time. She'd sat vigil at Dad's deathbed right alongside Portia and me. And Portia knew I wouldn't be thrilled if she cut Lou out of something as important as a meet-the-family with a man who Portia had been seeing for some months now, her longest-ever boyfriend.

So, Lou's assertion was also odd.

I glanced from navigating the narrow, winding road edged in thick hedgerows to the passenger seat where Lou was sitting, and I saw she wasn't just nervous. And it was important to note, former supermodel Louella Fernsby-Ryan didn't often get nervous, or if she did, she knew how to hide it.

No, now she looked—there was no other way to put it—*terrified*.

Any normal person might be, considering all we were heading into.

That said, Lou wasn't a normal person. She'd been hobnobbing with the rich and famous for the last twenty plus years. She was beautiful. She was confident. She'd been incredibly successful in her chosen career.

But we were to spend the next ten days at Duncroft House, the country seat of the Alcotts. That being Earl Alcott, Richard, his wife, the Countess, Jane, and Daniel, their youngest son, Portia's new beau.

Then there was Ian, their oldest, the heir to the title, who Portia told me promised to make several appearances that week, but she and Daniel were hoping he'd spend the whole week and make it a real family affair.

Yes.

And then there was Ian Alcott.

Hmm.

These folks were old-school aristocracy, and unlike many of their ilk who had lost no status but a lot of capital and assets across the centuries, they were old-school, big-time *money*.

New American big-time money didn't rub against old aristocratic money very well. It never had. And I had quite a bit of experience knowing that our progressive age hadn't changed that.

This all didn't include Duncroft House itself.

A well-known jewel in England's heritage crown. Perhaps not Buckingham, Windsor, Sandringham or Kensington caliber, but not far off.

It was supposed to be extraordinary.

And it had a notorious past.

"It's going to be okay," I told Lou.

"I don't think so," she mumbled to the window.

"Portia's grown up a lot since Dad died," I pointed out.

"Mm," Lou hummed noncommittally. As she would.

Yes, Portia had matured.

This might have had something to do with the fact that Lou and I both managed her trust.

Although Portia had (even I had to admit) an insulting monthly allowance of two thousand pounds neither Lou nor I could touch, the rest of her substantial inheritance was doled out at our discretion.

Though, that discretion had instruction from Dad, and if Portia didn't stay gainfully employed, she didn't get a penny above that two grand until she managed that feat. Further, if Portia remained in a job for less than twelve months, there were strict limits set on what money was forthcoming, again, until she'd accomplished what Dad demanded. Last, if Portia got into trouble with the police, with drugs or alcohol, or with unsavory characters or dubious projects, that money was frozen.

And if this behavior didn't cease by the time Portia hit age thirty-five, Lou's and my trusts were each augmented by half of Portia's, and she received no more. Not even the two thousand.

However, if she managed to keep her shit together for five straight years, the entire trust would be at her disposal without oversight.

At first, Portia took this not as Dad intended, his way to prompt her to shape up, but instead as Dad's beyond-the-grave assertion that he loved Lou more than her.

But recently, she'd been pulling herself together.

Portia getting it together was not due to efforts from Lou. Lou wanted Portia to like her, always had from the first time we met her (that included me, but I was less of a challenge). Now, Lou was the soft touch when Portia asked for money.

No. Portia was learning to toe the line due to me being o-v-e-r *over* her antics.

Dad had given her that two thousand so she wouldn't starve because he knew I'd be a hard-ass.

And hard-ass I was.

So Portia finally seemed to be pulling it together.

And now there was Daniel Alcott.

"Have you met the Alcotts?" I asked Lou.

"I know Richard," she said in a weirdly hesitant voice.

I glanced at her again. "Well?"

"Sorry?"

"Do you know him well?"

"Not really. Met in passing at a party or a dinner here or there."

She said this, but it sounded like a question, like I could confirm she'd met Earl Alcott at a party or dinner here or there.

I didn't inquire further about that.

"Not Jane?" I asked.

"No," she murmured. "I've never met 'The Countess.'"

Yes.

"The Countess," capitalized and in quotes because this was how she was known in the media.

Jane Alcott was quite the mysterious character. Ethereally gorgeous, if the rare photo of her was anything to go by, and highly reclusive. Even when she was younger. Therefore, obviously, with beauty, a title and money, she was an object of fascination, which could explain why she was reclusive.

It was not the same with Richard. Or Daniel.

And definitely not Ian.

They weren't reclusive, and as for the two sons, they didn't shy away from the media at all.

I couldn't say Ian sought it like Daniel seemed to, but it sure sought Ian.

"Have you heard about the house?" I went on, hoping to shake her out of her mood.

"Everyone's heard about the house," she answered.

"What have you heard?"

"It's haunted." I knew she'd turned my way when she asked, "Have you heard that?"

“Yes,” I said. “People tend to die there.”

“It’s been around for hundreds of years,” she reminded me. “There was a fortress there during William the Conqueror’s time, so a dwelling has been there for over a millennium. It’s bound to have had a death or two.”

A death or two?

“When Portia told us things were serious with Daniel and asked us to this week at Duncroft, I looked it up,” I informed her. “Some pretender to the throne was tortured and killed in the castle that sat there in the thirteenth century. The torture was medieval, Lou, literally and brutally. Then they threw him in a pit and starved him to death. Apparently, the new house is built over that pit, and his bones are still there.”

“Why a week?”

From the subject I was talking about, I was confused by her question. “Pardon?”

“Why not invite us for a weekend? Or if she wanted more time for us to get to know Daniel and his family, a long weekend? Or, really, starting off with us all going to dinner in London? That would be easier for everybody. Why are we here from Friday to the next Sunday? That’s a long time, it’s a lot to ask, it’s a lot of pressure for everyone, and it’s strange.”

“It’s Portia.”

I heard Lou sigh.

Yes. The time suck. The drama.

All Portia.

“Then there was that earl’s daughter in the fifteenth century who wasn’t thrilled with the man her father chose for her to marry,” I continued with my theme to take us from Portia’s larks, which I found annoying and Lou had a lot more patience for, but they had to wear thin for her too. “So, on the eve of her wedding, she poisoned her fiancé, and not to leave them out, also poisoned her father, her mother *and* her husband-to-be’s father and mother. Not exactly the Red Wedding, but the story goes that the poison she chose made them expel everything from blood and bile to unmentionables from both ends until they died. I’d call that worse than the Red Wedding...by a lot.”

“It’s pretty gross,” Lou agreed.

“There was also that countess and her lover. I forgot his name.”

“Cuthbert.”

I nearly smiled. Of course she knew about the fortress, the castle and Cuthbert. She’d looked it up too.

“Cuthbert,” I repeated. “Found *in flagrante delicto* with the countess by the earl. They were quite into what they were doing, didn’t know he’d come upon them. He had time to get hold of a dagger, and then he gutted old Cuthbert in his cuckold’s bed while his wife watched in horror, before he turned the dagger on her.”

“Poor Cuthbert.”

“And poor Lady Joan,” I added. “Her blood pooled with Cuthbert’s as she bled to death beside him in that bed.”

“Yes,” Lou replied. “Poor Lady Joan.”

“Four people have hung themselves in that house,” I carried on. “At least two have died in duels in the forest surrounding it, though there could be more. After that practice was outlawed, it still went on. And then there’s what happened to Dorothy Clifton in the twenties.”

Lore had it that Duncroft was possessed of more than one ghost.

Dorothy Clifton, it was said, was the angriest spirit of the lot.

I could tell Lou was warming to my theme when she spoke.

Then again, I suspected she would. She was always trying to get me to cuddle up with popcorn and ice cream and watch things like *Get Out* and *The Shining* and *It*. She loved that kind of thing.

I hated it. That would be *hated* it, with a passion.

It took a while for me to love her, but eventually I did. I wasn’t as ugly about it in the beginning as Portia, but Dad marrying someone I could be friends with in the manner we were actually contemporaries was not fun.

Then we became friends, and things changed.

“What I don’t understand is, why the secrecy?” she asked. “From what I know, never, not once have they opened the house to the public. By invitation only. And those invitations have been scarce. Every generation, rabid privacy. It’s really unusual in a heritage home in England like Duncroft.”

“I know, right?”

“It’s like they’re hiding something.”

It totally was.

“I guess we’re going to find out,” she noted. “Ten days there, plenty of time to see a ghost.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Plenty of time. Plenty of time to uncover secrets too.”

“Yes,” she whispered, again sounding off, and I almost didn’t hear it when she finished, “Secrets.”

I didn’t push further on that either, though I thought it was weird, regardless of the fact I knew Lou had secrets.

We all did.

I didn’t dig for hers, mostly so she would return the favor.

As for what we were soon to face, I’d caved in watching *Get Out* and *The Shining*, because they were classics and I liked films. And I would admit I thought they were both really good. I put my foot down on such as *It* and *The Ring* (and others).

But I wasn’t concerned about Duncroft’s supposed ghosts because I didn’t believe in ghosts.

I was an avid member of the National Trust. I’d been in many a manor and castle in that country (and others). The mustiness. The draftiness. The dank darkness or shadowed corners or secret passageways. I could absolutely see how people could convince themselves they’d experienced a haunting.

But that didn’t make it real.

No, I was more worried about the patrician Richard. The withdrawn Jane. The ne’er-do-well Daniel.

The womanizer Ian.

And secrets.

Theirs.

And ours.

Yes, I was more concerned about the Alcotts than about their supposedly haunted country seat.

Them and us...we were not a good mix.

Dad had moved Portia and me to England twenty years ago. Although I went home frequently for visitations with Mom—and so Portia could have some sort of mother figure, I talked Dad into letting her go with me—for all intents and purposes, we'd never left.

We were still proud Americans and the beneficiaries of massive inheritances of new money. My mother, Dad's first castoff, had been and still was a schoolteacher. Portia's mother, castoff two, had been an incorrigible gold digger.

And then there was Lou, who was only five years older than me.

This sojourn felt more like Lou and I had been called in as reinforcements for a week in the English countryside at the very famous home of a very wealthy and illustrious family.

But nevertheless, we were still outnumbered.

And if you believed in that kind of thing, outclassed.

In other words, I was feeling some anxiety too.

It didn't help that we'd left the motorway forty-five minutes ago. We'd then turned off the A road twenty minutes ago, and not onto a B road, but a coiling, thin ribbon of C road. We hadn't passed a town or village in miles. And according to the satnav, we had another twenty-six minutes on this lane, twisting through...*nothing*.

This was a long way from anything—and call me a city girl (which I was)—I didn't like it.

Lou grew quiet along with me.

And we both (for my part, since I was driving, it was intermittently) watched the arrow on the satnav glide along the snaking road as we kept track of the countdown to arrival.

It was 2:37 and we were to arrive at 3:03.

We broke out of the hedgerows at 2:55 and into rolling countryside covered in green, with vast splotches of purple heather and jutting masts of gray, lichen-covered rocks punctuated here and there by an irregular tree malformed by wind.

Add some mist and I wouldn't have been surprised to see a frock-coated Heathcliff brooding astride his horse in the distance.

At 3:00, the moor gave way to a more cultivated and arboreal landscape.

At 3:02, Duncroft House became visible.

And...wow.

Okay.

Maybe Buckingham and Windsor were the biggest, shiniest jewels in England's crown.

But in my opinion, Duncroft shone brightly as jewel number three.

It was beautiful.

It was huge.

It was sprawling.

And it was overpowering.

“Right. Now *I’m* nervous,” I admitted.

Lou reached out and squeezed my knee.

I drove my Mercedes between the tall, black, elaborate iron gates accented copiously by gold and attached on either side to a ten-foot-tall wall made of thick Yorkstone.

We’d officially arrived at Duncroft.

And I wasn’t feeling sterling thoughts.

Because the second we drove through those gates, a shiver slithered down my spine.

Chapter Two

The Pearl Room

Lou took her first hit within moments of our arrival.

I’d swung the car around the drive made of carefully-edged and manicured blond gravel to come to a stop at the bottom of the wide front steps. We’d both gotten out of the car to see a tall, handsome young man wearing crisp, khaki pants, whiter-than-white trainers, and a light-blue, long-sleeved polo shirt bounding down toward us.

We’d also gotten out to be dwarfed into insignificance by the house and to be viciously bitten by the chill of a cloudless, autumnal, northern English afternoon.

The house had four wings in a cross shape, that being the Scottish cross, diagonal. It was said, the middle intersection was where the fortress had been and under which the bones of the pretender still lay.

It was four stories tall, a mix of red brick and Yorkstone, with two turrets at the ends of each leg of the cross, eight in total, all topped with green domes of tarnished copper. The rest of the roof was dark slate. There were parts of the structure on the ground floor covered in trailing

wisteria. There were enumerable peaks and chimneys and gables. And in the center flew the Union Jack, underneath it, a light-blue flag with a golden shield on it.

It was sprawling, stately, handsome, but most of all, imposing.

It was not the genteel country seat of a long-standing aristocratic line.

It screamed wealth, importance...*dominance*.

It said, *You don't belong here*.

The king himself could stand where I was standing and maybe hesitate before he approached those wide steps.

The young man made it to us, and I saw there was a logo stitched into his shirt over his left chest. A golden shield, the same as on the flag flying above us. It looked to be a profusion of sprigs of heather adorning the top edges, the requisite helmet from a suit of armor at the top middle, and in the shield was the full body of a clawing wolf in profile.

He looked between the two of us and delivered Lou's first blow.

“Mrs. Ryan, welcome.” He then turned to me. “Miss Ryan.”

Lou couldn't quite hide the flinch.

Then again, from ages seventeen through twenty-five, she'd subsisted on coffee and cigarettes to keep her curve-less frame. As she aged, this turned to restrictive dieting and obsessive exercise, but neither of these done with a mind to health and nutrition, but instead keeping her size 0.

Because of this, her youthful glow and tremendous genes had slowly morphed to the look of desperation. Now, her forehead seemed too wide, her eyes too far apart, the rest of the features of her face scrunched beneath both, and nothing moved due to regular Botox injections.

She was still beautiful, she'd never not be (at least in my eyes), but she no longer was the young, energetic, rail-thin model. Instead, she was the gaunt thirty-nine-year-old woman who looked thirty-nine and as if she was wondering if a life of living a maxim, “nothing tastes better than skinny feels,” might have been a life wasted.

I was thirty-four and apparently looked my age too, and I'd never met a treadmill I liked, so I avoided them, thus our relationship worked perfectly.

However, there'd been a time when people who didn't pay attention thought I was Dad's wife, and Lou was his daughter. It sickened me, and it never failed to irritate me that Lou would preen whenever it happened.

Things were different now, but I didn't celebrate her pain. It made me sad for her that something so mundane meant so much to her.

Everyone aged, and unequivocally, the more you had of it, the more blessed you became.

The years we lived, people didn't seem to understand, were the gift that kept giving.

Until they stopped.

"I'm here to show you into the house," he announced. "The other Miss Ryan is being informed of your arrival and she's to meet you in the Pearl Room for tea."

"What about our suitcases?" Lou asked.

It was then I winced as the young man quickly hid his expression of revulsion.

One did not touch one's own luggage in a setting like this.

Though, the distaste he was quick to hide was over the top, but perhaps not in a place like this.

Even so, I didn't like it.

Needless to say, Lou had not grown up with money either. She'd lived the first sixteen years of her life on a council estate. For the last thirteen, Dad took care of everything, except, of course, for the eighteen months since he'd been gone. In the years in between, her life was a whirlwind of jet-setting between fashion shows and photo shoots, parties and dating Hollywood actors. Weekends in the country with the hoi polloi wasn't on her agenda.

She didn't know the rules because she didn't have to bother to learn them.

I, on the other hand, had never been my father's favorite, but I'd been adjacent to his money, and as such had learned to make my own way in these worlds long ago.

It was too late to cover her gaffe, so I forged around the car, hooked my arm in hers and turned to the man. "We've been driving a long time. Tea and Portia sound perfect."

He nodded, threw an arm toward the steps, but preceded us, jogging up as we followed more sedately.

Hit number two landed on us both as we entered Duncroft.

Particularly me.

I felt a jolt of electricity hit the second I stepped over the threshold.

I'd traveled widely, and I honestly couldn't say I'd ever experienced something as audaciously beautiful, with the razor's edge of exquisite taste, as the enormous entry of Duncroft House.

It was the joint of the cross, the entirety of it, and the ceiling rose all four stories and was topped with a glass dome. The sweep of the elegant staircase spiraled round and round to the top floor, making the space seem cavernous.

And embedded that feeling that we were insignificant.

The floor was a sea of pristine-white marble, the walls a shade of lilac gray so pale, if the crown molding wasn't an immaculate white, I would have thought it too was that color.

In front of us, opposite the front door, beyond the sweeping staircase (also all white with a thick, dove-gray carpet runner clamped at the top edges of the treads by a thin rod of burnished silver, the color of that carpet having to be insanely difficult to keep clean), all you could see were windows that framed a massive conservatory. And well beyond that, barely discernable through the jungle of plants, were manicured lawns and gardens, and beyond *that*, heathered moors.

Four wide hallways led off of the foyer.

And at the foot of the stairs, atop the broad newel post, stood a figure carved in white marble.

I didn't know who she was, Aphrodite, Hera, Persephone, some other goddess. She was walking tall atop grass and flowers, the flowers rising up to mingle with the graceful folds of the shift that closely skimmed her feminine curves. Flowers also mingled in her flowing hair.

Her head was tipped back, and a serene expression was on her face.

Serene and...replete.

There was something sexual about her. It was nuanced, yet still managed to be overt. As if she was caught walking over the grass through the flowers while orgasming.

She was also tall. If she were on the ground, she'd be as tall as me.

She would seem curious and even wrong anywhere else but in that vast, bleached space, and if the person who sculpted her did it in that exact spot to make her proportions and impact as flawless as it could be, I wouldn't be surprised.

“Your keys?” the young man requested.

I turned to him.

“I’ll get your luggage and park your car,” he explained.

I nodded, took my car fob off the ring and handed it to him.

He dipped his chin and said, “This way.”

I noticed that Lou tore her gaze off the statue when we followed him left, down the hall that led along the front southwestern leg of the house.

We walked to the very first door, and he stood outside it, again with arm extended, inviting us in. “The Pearl Room,” he stated. “Miss Ryan, I’m sure, will join you shortly.”

He did not enter the room, but we did.

The name of the room was apt. There were more colors here than in the entry, but they were all in the same theme, oyster, and the shimmering golds and pinks and silvers and greens of mother of pearl. The massive chandelier that fell from the ceiling rose in the center of the room looked made of swags of actual pearls.

“Holy shit,” I muttered.

“Agreed,” Lou muttered in return, moving her attention from the chandelier, toward the door.

I looked that way too, to see the young man was no longer there.

“Am I wrong?” she asked under her breath. “Should he have introduced himself?”

It wasn’t the first time I wished my father had been less...*my father*.

It was his narcissistic, alpha tendencies that not only made his first wife bitter, twisted and angry, and his second wife banished and forgotten, it had also dispatched his last wife and youngest child as incapable of dealing with the world he’d left them in.

“Yes, he should have,” I told her. “I can’t even imagine how big the staff is in this place, but if he was sent to greet us, and he’s taking care of our bags and my car, we’ll probably see him around while we’re here, and I should know who to ask for by name if, say, I want my car fob back.”

“Okay,” Lou replied, drifting further into the room while taking it in.

I stayed where I was, trying to put my finger on why all of this rubbed me the wrong way.

The room was spotless, as was the entry. There not only wasn’t a speck of dust, but also nothing was out of place. And the two porcelain-white sofas looked like no ass had sat in them since they’d been laid facing each other. They were set perpendicular to the white marble

fireplace with its veins of gray and lilac and gold. The same unused look with the two armchairs covered in pearlescent leather that sat at angles at the apex of the couches, facing the fireplace.

I knew the living quarters of houses like this tended to be a lot homier than the formal areas.

Daniel and Portia had been seeing each other just over six months. We were to be there for ten days. It wasn't lost on anyone what this week was about.

We'd barely stepped into the house, and the choice of this room to be our landing spot for tea upon arrival spoke volumes.

And every word was an insult.

"This room is...scarily beautiful," Lou noted.

She wasn't wrong.

"All the white is...a lot," she continued.

She wasn't wrong about that either.

"Daphne!"

I turned at my name, then froze, because Portia was sailing through the door.

Though, the reason I froze was spying this version of Portia, a version I didn't know, who was sailing through the door.

She was wearing an ivory sweater, the deep fold of the top made it off the shoulder, the matching skirt was a swish of falling ruffles of ivory tulle. It tumbled in an uneven hem to her ankles, exposing the ivory, velvet, Mary Jane ballet flats with a thin strap and delicate rhinestone buckle.

Her honeyed hair was pulled back at the crown, the rest toppled in waves and ringlets down her shoulders.

For a moment, I felt such an overwhelming sense of nausea, I was worried I'd throw up.

My sister did not wear tulle. Or ruffles. Or velvet ballet flats.

My sister was the cutting edge of Prada mixed with the nuanced macabre of McQueen.

Our citizenship and accent set us apart in this country, and Portia leaned into the rock and roll aspect to make sure no one forgot she was different, she was cool. She'd come over when she was young, but she carefully nurtured her accent so she'd never lose it.

And when it came to the American version of her that she wanted to convey, she was Miley Cyrus, not Taylor Swift.

She threw her arms around me and hugged me.

I was so surprised by her appearance, I had to force myself to return the gesture.

When she broke away, she grabbed both my hands, beamed up at me and said, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I opened my mouth but didn’t have the time to say anything before she let me go, turned to Lou and greeted disinterestedly, “Hey, Lou.”

“Hello, lovey,” Lou replied, sounding choked.

At the note in her voice, I glanced in her direction to see she wasn’t injured by Portia’s attitude (she was very much used to it). Her eyes were wide and aimed at Portia’s outfit.

Yes, this version of Portia did not jibe.

“C’mon, they’re going to be bringing tea in soon, we need to talk before they get here.”

She dragged me to the porcelain-white sofas and completely ignored Lou.

I didn’t, capturing her gaze as we moved, holding my hand her way.

When Portia noticed Lou coming with us, she instructed, “You can sit over there,” and gestured to the couch across from us.

Lou was much better at hiding the hurt Portia’s behavior caused her, so she didn’t balk before she shifted her trajectory to the other couch.

“Okay, so, you have to be, like, *really cool* with Daniel and his folks, all right?” Portia demanded before I’d even settled into the sofa.

“Hey, thanks for taking off for a week and driving over four hours from London to meet my new boyfriend and his family in the middle of nowhere. And by the way, you both look lovely, but do you need anything? I know you’ve been in the car for a really long time, so would you rather stretch your legs or something?”

I spoke these words and they were an admonishment because Portia should have said them.

Portia’s eyes narrowed, and she stated, “Yes, things like that. Don’t say things like that in front of Daniel and his parents.”

She didn’t miss my point, so I didn’t belabor it.

“What are you wearing?” I asked instead.

She peered down at herself. “I’m trying a new look.”

“For Daniel?”

She didn't quite catch my eyes. "He likes more feminine clothes."

"What do you like?" I pressed, even though I knew what that was, and it wasn't a ruffled, tulle skirt, as pretty as it was.

She caught my gaze.

"*Daniel*," she stressed.

"Portia—" I began, but I got no further because she leaned into me.

But it wasn't with anger or attitude, as it usually would be.

It felt like what had been filling the car from Lou on the way there.

Fear.

"I like him, okay? Don't mess this up," she begged. "I need you guys,"—she turned her head Lou's way—"both of you guys, to be really cool and not mess this up."

"How exactly would we mess this up?" I inquired.

"Portia."

At her name intoned in a man's cultured voice coming from the direction of the door, we all looked that way.

And I knew exactly what we might mess up.

Yes, Richard and Jane, the Earl and Countess Alcott, were the upper crust. Tall. Straight. He was ageing almost preternaturally well: his dark hair only touched with silver, his perfect bone structure offering the foundation for his continued good looks even though (I'd looked him up), he was nearly sixty-five. And she was a goddess. Cool and blonde. Ethereal didn't describe her. The house didn't need to be haunted, her beauty was haunting enough.

They walked into the room, and we all stood.

"Your family has arrived," Richard stated like an accusation.

"Yes, I sent word," Portia said.

"Which is why we're here," Richard replied frostily. He turned to Lou. "You must be Louella."

You must be Louella?

I thought they'd met.

Lou didn't remind him of that.

"Yes, yes. Hi. Hello." She moved forward, holding up a hand.

Both Richard and Jane stared at it for a scant moment as if trying to cypher some way to avoid touching it before Richard reached out and took it briefly and let her go.

Jane did not.

Richard also didn't look Lou in the face.

Then again, Lou managed the whole encounter with her eyes pinned to some point beyond Richard's shoulder.

Weird.

"Welcome to our home," Richard droned.

"And this is Daphne," Portia declared, pushing me a bit toward them.

I, however, did not offer my hand.

"My Lord, my Lady," I said aloofly, matching their welcome. "Thank you for having us."

Richard's attention was sharp on me. Jane remained expressionless.

Richard looked to Portia. "You'll explain the rules?"

The rules?

And, hello, how do you do to you too.

Asshole.

"Of course," Portia assured quickly.

"We'll let you catch up," Richard declared. "And we'll see you at dinner."

With that, breathing not another word nor gifting us with another look, they left the room, Richard closing the door like he didn't want someone passing and seeing us in there.

Slowly, I turned my head to regard my sister.

She read my expression.

"It takes a while for them to melt," she explained.

"Have they melted toward you?" I demanded to know.

She shrugged.

Meaning: No.

Right, we'd get into that later.

I pressed on. "Rules?"

“I told you they dress for dinner.” She suddenly appeared panicked. “Did you bring clothes to dress for dinner? They’re sticklers about it. Cocktails at six thirty sharp, seating at seven fifteen, also sharp. The men wear suits and ties, the women, cocktail dresses at least.”

I didn’t mention we weren’t on a cruise ship, and it was just plain weird that we’d be expected to dress up for dinner for ten days straight (for goodness’ sake, I’d had to pack two suitcases for this shindig). I didn’t do it now, and I didn’t do it when she’d asked me to come and told me what to pack.

I just said, “Yes.”

My sister showed immediate relief, the extent of which worried me.

“Portia—” I started again.

“You’ll get a tour,” she said. “Either from Daniel or Richard, not one of the staff. After tea, you’ll be shown to your rooms to rest and freshen up and prepare for dinner. You aren’t allowed to, um...wander the house until you’re shown what areas are accessible and what are off limits.”

“We’d hardly go poking around their home without permission,” I noted.

“They just wanted me to make sure you wouldn’t,” she returned.

“Please assure them we’re not going to ramble around the house looking for Instagram-worthy photo ops or filming video to splice into TikToks,” I told her.

“That’s another thing. No social media. At all,” she replied.

I pressed my lips together, because...*obviously*.

“Right, of course,” Portia mumbled, “I just...well, I promised them I’d make things clear.”

“When you speak to them, you can share you did just that.”

“For the most part you’ll be guided where you need to be by staff,” Portia stated. “Until, you know, you get the lay of the land.”

“We’ll be the perfect guests,” Lou promised.

Even though she gave a slight nod to note she’d heard the words, Portia barely looked at her.

I let that slide too and asked, “When are we going to meet Daniel?”

“He’s at work,” she told me.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I told her.

“He’ll be here by cocktails.”

I nodded, wondering how she was there on a Friday afternoon. She had a job too, and it was in London.

I let that go (for now) as well.

So no tour, unless Richard decided to endure our presence for the hours it would take to show us his house. Then again, if he did that, we wouldn't have time to dress for dinner. Or, if it was as it seemed to be, for the few minutes it'd take to show us the small portions of his house we were allowed to inhabit.

“Daniel’s lovely,” Portia said softly.

He better be, I let my expression say for me.

The door opened and two women wearing dove-gray dresses with mandarin collars, white cuffs on the short sleeves and sensible black flats, came in bearing our tea on silver trays.

The tea service, I’d look up later and find was “Pearl” Nymphenburg, which was used exclusively by Bavarian royalty for a century.

But of course.

No scones and cream, instead, lifeless finger sandwiches and painstakingly decorated but completely tasteless petite fours that I could make better blindfolded.

During tea, I didn’t say the many things I wanted to say or ask any of the myriad questions on my mind, because both my sister and stepmother seemed on pins and needles. They both needed to calm down.

And *then* I’d get into it.

But it would seem the shiver that went down my spine when we passed the gate, not to mention that bolt of electricity when I walked in, were an indication of intuition I didn’t know I had until then.

And that same intuition was telling me it wasn’t going to get any better.

But it could get worse.

I just didn’t know at that time it was going to.

Or how bad it was going to be.

Chapter Three

The Wine Room

My bedroom was a feminine extravaganza in the colors of cream, carnation pink and deep, rosy red.

It was mammoth. It was spotless. It had a bed with four posts that was so tall, I had to climb into it using the step beside it, and heavy, highly embellished but workable curtains. The room also had a seating area complete with a puffy, inviting couch in front of the pink marbled fireplace, and a delicate writing desk in the corner.

And the en suite was a dream.

If I were in a hotel, I'd be in seventh heaven, wouldn't leave the room for the entire week, and instead I'd read a half dozen books, take daily baths, and drink nothing but champagne from breakfast until I fell asleep.

I wasn't in a hotel, and I didn't enjoy the idea of liking the choice that was made for me, because this room wasn't insulting. It was the belated welcome Lou and I should have had when we arrived.

However, the weird part was that an hour ago, a maid had knocked on the door and asked if I needed any help dressing, "Or with your makeup and hair, Miss Ryan?"

Fabbergasted, hopefully politely, I'd declined.

One could take that as a very nice offering from the Alcotts, but who had lady's maids anymore?

Stylists for special events, sure.

Someone to help you do your hair for dinner at home? No.

But I was ready and it wasn't time to go down yet, so I grabbed my phone and texted Lou.

Can I come over?

It took mere seconds before she returned, *Sure!*

I left my room, walked across the hall and down two doors, and knocked on the one I'd watched the maid lead Lou to before I'd entered mine so I'd know where she was.

My windows faced the lawns and forest at the front of the house.

Hers would face the wing that made the other strike of cross.

She opened the door with perfect hair and makeup, but still in her robe.

"Hey," she greeted.

“I feel like I should leave a note on my door so our guide will know where to find me when they come up to get us,” I replied as she stepped back, and I entered her room.

I stopped a few feet in, closing the door behind me and making the decision to do everything in my power not to let her see my allocated space.

Hers was not as big and it was oppressively filled with furniture, all of it high quality, maybe even priceless, but it was still mismatched. Likely discards from other rooms, or pieces that were too valuable to throw away, but where they used to reside had been updated and they were no longer needed.

It was fashioned into a usable room, the colors and fabrics were all in lovely shades of pale green and blue, with a theme of flowers, but it seemed close, disorganized and suffocating, not airy, artful and appealing.

In other words, I was welcome.

Lou wasn’t.

“Rabidly private, as I said. I guess not a surprise,” Lou noted as she shrugged off her robe and tossed it on a flowered chintz chair to stand unabashed in her underwear like she was backstage at a fashion show.

She reached into the opened wardrobe, and I saw she was unpacked, as I found I’d been after we were escorted to our rooms.

We hadn’t asked them to do that, or not to do it as I’d have preferred.

I wondered what they thought when they put my vibrator into the top drawer of one of the nightstands.

It had been a wild idea to pack it, but I figured I’d need every avenue open to find ways to relax this week, so in it went.

And now the staff knew it did.

Fodder for discussion downstairs.

“It’s good you’re here, you can zip me up,” she said. “We’re running out of time. They said they’d be here at six twenty to escort us down, yes?”

“Yes,” I confirmed as I watched her step into a column of sequins and pull it up her body.

It was a midi sheath dress, fully sequined in burgundy, except the twin bands of silver around the waist. It was high necked and sleeveless.

And totally not Lou.

She looked like the mother of the bride, not like she'd walked hundreds of runways wearing haute couture and wasn't even forty years old yet.

I felt my heart warm and my temper flare, seeing yet again how badly Lou wanted Portia to like her. How badly she wanted to do what she could to make this go smoothly for her stepdaughter.

Lou looked the picture of appropriate, middle-aged-woman elegance when I didn't even think she'd admitted to herself she'd hit middle age.

I, on the other hand, was wearing a dress I'd thrown in as a spare, not expecting I was going to wear it.

It was pine green, totally simple, except it was skintight, had a plunge V that showed cleavage down nearly to my midriff, which meant my breasts were swaddled in support tapes to give them the perfect curve at the expanse of skin that was showing.

It hit the floor in a trumpet skirt with a high slit up the right leg, and I'd paired it with the fan-shaped, Divas' Dream Bulgari necklace of rose gold, diamonds and malachite Dad bought me, with its matching earrings, bracelet and ring.

My shoes were rose gold Sophia Websters with four-inch skinny stiletto heels and the requisite dramatic butterfly embossed with crystals at the heel. I'd likely have to take them off to walk back up to my room after dinner, but by damn, I was teetering in on those damned shoes.

And my hair was fashioned in a side bun that took four tries to make look nice.

It was in your face, the tens of thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry, the flesh bared, the shoes that were so far away from velvet Mary Jane flats it wasn't funny, and I had zero fucks to give that it was.

I zipped up Lou and she moved to sit on the arm of the chintz chair to put on her own high heels, pretty silver sandals that showed off her beautiful feet but made no statement at all.

"You should be you," I said quietly.

Lou didn't look up from her shoes. "I need to be what Portia needs me to be."

Dad had married Lou because she was famous for being gorgeous and she made him look to his cronies as cronies like Dad's envisioned the world. Like he could pull a beautiful young

woman due to his looks, virility and prowess, and not due to the sole fact he had billions of dollars.

What Dad saw only at the very end, was that Lou may have married him because her career was waning, and she had a life she wanted to sustain. But she'd stayed married to him because somewhere along the line she'd fallen in love with him, and she was going to stick, no matter what wasted him away.

And she did, through cancer wasting him away.

"I'm going to talk to her tomorrow if I can get her alone," I vowed.

"You don't have to do that," Lou said.

"Part of growing up is learning how to treat people who've done not one thing to hurt you."

At that, she looked at me. "I know it was a shock to you girls when your dad married me."

"Louella, that was thirteen years ago. It's time she got over it."

"I get it. My dad spoiled me."

I didn't have to say her dad was a bus driver, so how she was spoiled was nowhere near the privilege Portia enjoyed, so I didn't say it.

But I never played poker, and not only because I didn't like gambling.

Thus, Lou read my expression.

"I don't want you two girls fighting about me," she asserted.

"We won't fight."

"It's obvious this boy is important to her."

"He's not a boy. He's a thirty-five-year-old man. And Portia is a twenty-eight-year-old woman. We're all grown-ass adults here, Lou. It's only that Portia isn't acting like one."

"I remember what it was like, that first flush of love."

I did too.

It was a trick of hormones and pheromones, and millennia of a dizzying number of behavior patterns, all designed so we'd find someone with whom to procreate to make sure we didn't allow the human race to die out.

Sadly, that first flush of love could hide what would someday become searing rivers of hate.

I just hoped my sister wasn't following in my mother's footsteps.

Or mine.

“What it shouldn’t be like, is losing yourself to the guy you like and trying a different look because he likes more feminine clothes. He either likes Portia as she comes, or he doesn’t. We’re going to find out soon which way that goes.”

“This, I can’t debate,” Lou replied, again appearing anxious, but not about our sojourn to the bucolic north and a possibly haunted house, but that perhaps Daniel Alcott wasn’t the right man for Portia.

There was a knock on the door. I went to open it.

It was a uniformed maid, not the one who’d asked about my hair and makeup, nor one of the two who had brought in tea. She was the one who’d escorted us to our rooms in the first place.

It seemed this massive house had a massive staff.

Guess it was six twenty.

“Hello,” I greeted.

“Miss Ryan,” she said, glancing at Lou. She dipped her chin then asked, “Are you ready to go to the Wine Room?”

If it had alcohol, absolutely.

Lou rose from the arm of the chair and went to the bed to nab her evening bag.

Watching her do that, I realized I’d forgotten mine.

“I have to stop by my room to get my bag,” I told the maid.

“Of course,” she murmured, then her brows drew down and she called, “You don’t have to turn out the lights. While you’re at dinner, we’ll be preparing your rooms for the evening. We’ll take care of the lighting.”

Lou halted in position of dousing a bedside lamp, her head turned to the maid.

“Um...” she mumbled.

Lou had her moral epiphany a few years after she came to understand what it meant in reality how ridiculously wealthy my dad was. Which meant, at first, she’d gone mad, but since then, she’d whittled down her charitable causes to being avidly climate change conscious and an animal rights activist, getting photographed repeatedly while protesting fox hunts and the like. She threw some of her billions of pounds at the same.

Now, I had to stifle a laugh at how in pain she looked to leave a room with the lights on.

“It’ll only mean another day of flooding in Pakistan sometime in the future,” I drawled.

“Not funny,” Lou said, walking away from the lamp.

“I wasn’t meaning to be.”

When I glanced at the maid as we moved out of the room, her face was blank, and I knew the staff would not be coming in to turn off the lights, then rushing back up to turn them on when we headed to bed, all in an effort to make sure the globe didn’t warm to the point of catastrophe in a few decades. But instead, they probably did turn down service, so although the lighting we’d return to would be subdued, at Duncroft House, they didn’t care about flooding in Pakistan in the slightest.

We walked to my room, and I realized my mistake as we neared the door.

“I’ll be out in a jiffy,” I said while sliding through the door without fully opening it, nearly closing it behind me, then racing on my four-inch heels to the bed to grab my bag, teetering once on the brink of a sprained ankle, catching myself in the nick of time, and racing back out.

“I’m not going to throw a fit because you left your lights on,” Lou assured me huffily.

I was relieved that was why she thought I wouldn’t let her see inside.

The maid started walking.

We followed, and as we did, I pulled my phone out of my bag. I noted we had five minutes to get to cocktails, and even though we were a good walk away, I didn’t think it would take five minutes.

Punctuality obviously was key at Duncroft House.

“Are you allowed to share your name?” I asked the maid’s back.

“Brittany.”

“Nice to meet you, Brittany,” I replied.

She didn’t look back as she said, “You as well.”

I stared at her back thinking this maid was different. Chilly, instead of just formal and professional.

Lou and I exchanged looks, and neither of us spoke again as we followed Brittany to the Wine Room.

Newsflash: sadly, it wasn’t filled with wine.

It was the color of wine: all burgundies and currants, with mahogany furniture. The walls looked papered in wine-colored leather (and I hoped they were not). The furniture was definitely

leather, with some dark tapestry. And there was an interesting picture of a medieval couple on the wall.

Honestly, I didn't get to take much in before Daniel Alcott was upon me.

"The big sister!" he cried, moving my way, dragging my sister with him.

She was in ivory again, a full pleated skirt that reached her ankles and a pleated top, the halter neck a ruff of chiffon, her shoulders and arms bare.

And she definitely had help with her makeup and hair. She was good with both, but her elaborate updo was not something a layperson could do, no way, and her face looked like a TikTok influencer had been at it.

Daniel let Portia go in order to take hold of both my biceps and touch his cheeks to both of mine.

He smelled cloyingly of cologne that stated a little too boldly, *I'm a man!*

He pulled away but didn't let go as he looked down on me and smiled broadly.

Startling blue eyes. Thick, golden-blond hair, the same as his mother's color, if a shade darker. A healthy tan. He was tall. He was fit. He was handsome.

He was fake as shit.

I'd seen pictures of him, more when I started researching the whole family after Portia hooked up with him, then deeper when she'd asked us to this week at Duncroft.

He was not the financial wunderkind his brother was. He was his mother's light to his father's dark. And Daniel's reputation was more of a happy-go-lucky playboy than his older brother's inveterate philanderer.

But regardless of his effusive welcome, he did not want me there, and the fact he'd not even glanced at Lou told me how he felt about her.

In other words, the edge I was riding about this week got sharper.

Sharp enough to cut.

When I said nothing, he finally let me go and looked to Lou.

"Louella," he muttered far less enthusiastically, as was his touching only one cheek to hers.

I watched this and turned annoyed eyes to my sister before I moved in and did the touching cheeks thing myself. "Portia."

"You look pretty," she said.

We moved away and I let my gaze wander her head and hair before I replied with grudging honesty, “You do too.”

I turned my attention to Daniel’s parents, and I saw that Portia had told no fibs. Like Daniel and Portia, Lou and me, they were decked out. Exquisitely tailored suit and tie for Richard, a one-shouldered, deep-rose satin gown with a knotted waistline and some gathering to give it some interest, for Jane.

“Lord and Lady Alcott,” I greeted.

“Oh, it’s Richard and Jane, of course,” Daniel invited, to his father’s jaw growing tight, the same happening around his mother’s eyes.

“Drink, Miss Ryan?” I heard said low, and I looked to my side to see a tall, thin man in a black three-piece suit and pale-blue tie that had the family shield emblazoned on it standing there, though also slightly behind me.

A new member of staff.

The butler.

That meant I’d seen four maids, whatever they called the guy who took care of the bags and car, and a butler.

Already a lot of staff, but I figured there was even more.

A number of them.

As I thought: massive house, massive staff.

I had no idea, but maybe the Alcotts were even more loaded than we were, and that was saying something.

“Champagne, if you have it,” I ordered. I turned to the room at large. “We’re celebrating, correct?”

“Absolutely,” Daniel brayed cheerily.

Richard and Jane remained mute.

“Mrs. Ryan?” the butler asked Lou.

“Champagne too, please.”

He dipped his head and floated away.

Daniel had retrieved his own drink, what appeared to be a G and T, and he lifted it my way.

“I’m not ashamed to admit, I’m addicted to your éclairs,” he proclaimed. “When I’m in the city, I try to swing by your shop. This was even before I met Portia,” he declared, sliding an arm along my sister’s waist and tucking her to his side.

“Well, thank you,” I replied.

“Best patisserie in London, even *The Guardian* said so,” Daniel told his parents.

Portia piped up. “Daphne studied in Paris. *Grand diplôme* from *Le Cordon Bleu* with an internship with François Perreault. He’s known to have the best patisserie in Paris. It’s in the Latin Quarter.”

Unspoken by my sister, but probably known by all the Alcotts, was that I fell in love with and married François Perreault, and then, after the third time I discovered he’d cheated on me, I’d fallen out of love and divorced him.

The courtship lasted two years.

The marriage lasted two more.

The divorce was five years ago.

The bitterness remained.

Although everyone knew François, I suspect even the Alcotts—he was that famous because he was that good—they were completely unimpressed.

I wished I could have filmed their non-reaction at the mention of Frankie’s name. He’d lose his mind that they hadn’t sighed with reverence.

Though, Lady Jane had a figure like Lou’s, so I doubted she’d had an éclair or a mille-feuille in a long time.

Or ever.

The butler handed me a coupé glass of champagne.

I checked to see if Lou had hers (she did), before I raised mine and asked, “Shall we toast to family and new friends?”

“Perfect!” Daniel cried. “I’ll toast to that!”

Lou and Portia raised their glasses with Daniel, Richard and Jane slightly held theirs in front of them.

I ignored their lukewarm participation (they were still participating) and said, “Cheers.”

And then I drank half the glass.

Chapter Four

The Turquoise Room

I already knew something was going wrong, I just didn't know what it was, before we entered a dining room that was a study of turquoise.

The tablecloth was white.

The wood was cherry.

There was a massive tapestry on the wall that looked ancient.

But everything else, including the trim on the china, the vases that held extraordinary flower arrangements, the embroidery on the serviettes, and the cast to the crystal glasses and candelabra, was turquoise.

The table could seat three times our party, but even so, the fullness of it was set for us.

Head to foot.

Two place settings swimming in the long trail of the port side, three on the starboard.

We had not all been arranged at one end so we could easily see and talk to each other.

We were all going to have to yell at each other.

The thing was, there were only six of us.

Richard led Jane to the foot, Daniel leading Portia to the two-seating side.

Daniel explained things as Lou and I lingered in confusion at the door.

“Allow the seat between you, Ian will be here...eventually.”

Hang on.

The prodigal son was returning?

And no one thought to mention that?

Of course, during our allotted forty-five minutes of cocktail time, the feel of the evening deteriorated as the minutes ticked by, but I thought it was because Richard and Jane were more and more beleaguered at having to spend time with us.

Now it would seem, considering the hard mask (or *harder* mask) that slammed down over Lady Jane's face at the mention of her eldest, it was because they were growing more and more annoyed that he'd broken the rules and not turned up at the appointed cocktail forty-five minutes.

And now we were to start dinner without him.

Which was what happened after Richard did triple duty of seating Jane, then moving to Lou to push her chair under the table, then to me, simply to stand there in a wasted display of chivalry, his hand on the back of my chair, for I was already seated and had tucked myself under the table.

His expression said I should have waited for him.

He was a man. Even if he'd seen my shoes, he couldn't know that no way was I standing on them for longer than I had to. Nor generally waiting for someone to help me do something I was perfectly capable of doing myself.

I ignored his expression, took hold of my napkin and flung it out to the side before draping it on my lap.

And thus, Richard had a hard(er) mask on his face when he finally seated himself.

He immediately turned to the butler who was hovering. "Soup, Stevenson," he murmured.

The man bowed then took off at a good clip to disappear behind a hidden door in the cherrywood paneling.

"This table is beautiful," Lou tried gamely, offering this to Jane.

The woman slowly tipped her head to the side in a regal, yet birdlike manner that had me glaring at Portia.

If recent memory served, Lady Jane hadn't uttered a single word since we'd met her.

Portia shot me a pleading look.

I took a fortifying breath.

And then another one.

"I hope our cook can impress the likes of a student of *Le Cordon Bleu*," Richard remarked.

I turned to him and saw his tone might have been dull, but he was attempting to be game too.

"You have excellent taste in champagne," I noted.

"I'm glad you approve," he replied.

"So I have every hope."

He jutted his chin toward me.

"Daniel's taking us to some ruins tomorrow," Portia announced as Stevenson returned with the young man who took my car. He was now wearing a black vest, matching trousers, a black

tie (again adorned with the family shield), a crisp, painstakingly ironed, white shirt, and a long white apron tied meticulously around his waist.

He was also carrying a turquoise and white soup tureen on a gold platter.

“We’re having a day of it. Starting with a tramp around the village. I hope you girls brought warm clothes,” Daniel declared.

The soup was served to Jane first. I watched carefully as she helped herself. Although I’d been formally served before, the traditions of the house could vary.

I should have known in this house they would not.

The man went to Lou next, and fortunately she’d been watching too.

“Portia gave us deep insights on what to pack,” I assured Daniel.

“Excellent,” he squawked.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know the story. How did you two meet?” Lou asked.

Portia blushed. Daniel fidgeted with his tie. I halted in the endeavor of serving my own soup, because Portia had told me they’d been set up by mutual friends, which should not earn a blush or a tie fidget.

“Weren’t you set up?” I asked.

“Yes,” Portia answered quickly.

Meaning: Lie.

I finished ladling my soup.

Nothing more was said on the subject of their meeting, though I made a mental note to bring it up when I had some time alone with my sister.

We all fell into uncomfortable silence as we sipped our soup.

It was a heavy, but delicious cream of brie.

I was on spoonful number three when a deep, droll, silky voice noted, “It seems the family text string has failed us yet again.”

I had my spoon over my bowl and my eyes on the double doors that led into the Turquoise Room as Ian Alcott sauntered in.

Well, hell.

He wasn’t just dark to Daniel’s light.

He was two inches taller than Daniel at least. He was broader. He had the thighs of a rugby player. And if the Alcott blue eyes were startling with Daniel's fair coloring, they were disconcerting with Ian's dark.

Striking blue, the deep color of the Mediterranean.

I tore my gaze from him to see Portia's face pinched in a way reminiscent of when she was studying for an exam she should have started studying for days earlier, and Daniel's face was creeping with red, because his cover had just been blown.

Handsome, magnanimous younger brother was out the window.

He was the spare.

The real deal had just strolled into the joint, and damn, but if Ian Alcott didn't make that brutally clear.

I'd seen pictures of him too, and his good looks were not lost on me.

However, the man in the flesh was so much better, I was suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

He was magnetic.

And he knew it.

"And the family expands," he drawled, those preposterously beautiful, blue eyes pinning me to my seat. He stopped at my side. "I take it you're Daphne."

I put my spoon down and offered him my hand. "I am."

He didn't take my hand at first, not out of rudeness, he was caught up in the perusal of my cleavage.

And *that* was rude.

There was a slight smirk on his full lips when his fingers finally closed warm and tight around mine.

He also, I didn't fail to note, had big hands, and he might have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but somewhere along the line, he'd earned callouses on his fingers.

"Pleasure," he murmured, the word roaming my skin like a physical touch.

I pulled my hand from his and replied in a way it couldn't be mistaken I didn't mean, "Mutual, I'm sure."

The smirk turned into a sexy sneer.

While I dealt with that, he looked beyond me.

“The famous Louella Fernsby,” he greeted Lou, moving her way.

She offered her hand.

He held it for a shorter period of time before he shrugged off his suit jacket and slung it with sheer and unmistakable in-your-face nonchalance on the back of the empty chair between Lou and me, a gesture that seemed like the smack in the face I was sure it was to his father. His tie was already gone, if he’d been wearing one, and his light-blue shirt was open at the tanned column of his throat. His blue suit was three pieces, the vest still in place, and the cut was superb and fashion forward.

He’d barely seated himself before the man was there with the soup tureen.

“Cream of brie,” Ian stated, helping himself. “Bonnie isn’t pulling any punches.”

“Dinner is at seven fifteen,” Richard asserted at this juncture.

The man with the tureen slunk away.

Ian shifted only his eyes to his father. “Thirty-seven years of that drilled into my brain, Dad, I didn’t forget.”

“It seems you did, since you’re late. You were to meet us for cocktails. Those start at six thirty on the dot,” Richard decreed.

“I texted I’d be late.”

“We hardly bring our phones to cocktails,” Richard sniffed.

“Perhaps you should,” Ian suggested. “You’d not waste needless emotion at me running late if you knew that was the case.”

It was then Lady Jane broke her long silence with a practiced, “Can we not?”

“Yes, can we not?” Daniel chimed in.

“Delighted to drop it,” Ian murmured as he bent to his soup and took his first spoonful.

Richard wasn’t delighted to do the same, I knew, when he declared, “We have guests.”

Ian looked to me. “My sincere apologies for my tardiness,” he said insincerely.

“You said you were going to drop it,” Daniel reminded him.

“I’m apologizing to our guests,” Ian retorted.

“Let’s move on,” Lady Jane requested.

“It’s insufferable,” Richard denied her.

“Jesus Christ,” Ian growled to his soup.

“It’s a simple request. Be in the Wine Room at six thirty, *properly attired*,” Richard demanded.

Yes.

I knew that suit jacket thing was a slap in the face.

Ian rested the side of his hand to the table and said to his father, “I’m here now.” He raised his dark brows. “Shall we eat?”

“Yes, let’s eat. I’m happy you could make it, darling,” Lady Jane put in.

“Thank you, Mum,” Ian said to her.

“I’m going to vomit,” Daniel declared.

“No need to be dramatic,” Richard chided.

Portia was staring at me with big eyes that shouted, *Do something!*

But I had no idea what to do.

Someone else might find this amusing or be diplomatic enough to smooth things over by offering an interesting conversational gambit.

That wasn’t me.

I detested confrontation, any I might be involved in, and even more, witnessing the same. I thought it was rude beyond bearing for anyone not to have enough control of their mouths to be able to leave it until they could discuss things in private.

And at that moment, I was painfully aware I not only didn’t have my car fob, I didn’t even know where my car was.

But from the moment my little sister’s mother took the millions my father offered, she disappeared without the barest shadow of a care of what became of her daughter after her absence, and I’d slid in to do the best I could in that role.

Which was what I endeavored to do now.

“I know there was a castle here before Duncroft, but when was this home built?”

“Mason work started in 1617, and the house was finished in 1632,” Daniel answered swiftly.

“Fascinating,” I said.

And that was the end of my attempt at an interesting conversational gambit.

Ian made a noise in his throat that was part amusement, part something else, and the something else part I felt in my nipples.

He was bent over his soup.

I glared at his profile.

He ignored me, continued eating and, I decided, doing both knowing perfectly well not only that I was inept at salvaging a dinner party gone awry, but also what he did to my nipples.

“Was the castle razed before Duncroft was built?” Lou asked.

Ian answered her. “Yes. It and the murder and mayhem within its walls were swept clean away. Except the house might have been new, but the bent toward murder and mayhem remained.”

“*Ian!*” his father snapped.

“If they have Google, Dad, they know the history of the house,” Ian reminded him.

“We don’t talk about such things,” his father bit off.

“No, *you* don’t. Everyone else in Great Britain and beyond does,” Ian retorted.

“You goad him on purpose,” Daniel accused.

“And?” Ian asked his brother.

I almost laughed, but not with amusement (well, not entirely).

And I thought Dad and his marital high jinks, Lou being my stepmother and young enough to be my older sister, Portia and her shenanigans, and me with my rabid bent toward cynicism were a mess.

These people put the dys in dysfunction.

It was my experience it was always the ones who thought they were superior who were, in reality, anything but.

And I still didn’t know where my car was.

“Do you think that perhaps this dinner might mean something to me...and Portia?” Daniel asked.

“Portia, my love, I forgot about you,” Ian drawled.

Oh...hell no.

“You may be the future king of all you survey, but that’s my little sister, so be careful,” I warned.

Ian turned instantly to me.

“Daphne, no,” Portia begged.

My eyes clashed with pure blue.

And I didn't fucking back down.

It took some time before he said, genuinely this time, "My apologies." He looked to Portia.

"Apologies, petal."

Her cheeks turned pink.

I harrumphed.

"Can we *please* just enjoy our dinner?" Jane requested.

At that point, it was an impossible request.

But I exchanged a glance with Lou, and we both sent careful smiles in Portia's direction.

Which meant we were going to try.

It ended up an epic fail.

But we gave it our best shot.

Too Good to Be True will be unleashed

October 31, 2023

in all formats!