Truly Madly Guilty

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Flatiron

CHAPTER 28

The Day of the Barbeque

“This is some backyard,” said Sam.

“It’s . . . amazing,” said Clementine.

Vid and Tiffany’s house had been impressive, especially the artwork, but this lavishly landscaped backyard, with its tinkling water features, its fountains and urns, its white marble statues and its scented candle-lit, luxuriously fitted-out cabana, was another level of extravagance altogether. The fragrance of roasting meat filled the air, and Clementine wanted to laugh out loud with delight, like a child walking into Disneyland. She was enchanted by the opulence of it all. There was something so hedonistic and generous about it, especially after poor Erika’s rigidly minimalist home.

Of course she understood the reasons for Erika’s obsession with minimalism, she wasn’t completely insensitive.

“Yeah, the backyard is all Vid’s. He goes for the understated look,” said Tiffany as she indicated a seat for Clementine, refilled her glass of champagne and offered the plate of Vid’s freshly baked strudels.

Clementine wondered if Tiffany had some experience in the hospitality field. She almost had one arm folded behind her back as she bent at the waist and poured drinks.

From where Clementine sat in the long, low cabana, she could see her daughters playing on a long rectangle of grass next to a gazebo with ornate columns and a wrought-iron dome. They were throwing a tennis ball for the little dog. Ruby had the ball at the moment and she was holding it up high above her head, while the dog, taut and trembling with anticipation, sat in front of her, poised to spring.

“You must tell Dakota to let us know when she gets sick of looking after the girls,” said Clementine to Tiffany, although she hoped it wouldn’t be anytime soon.

“She’s having a great time with them,” said Tiffany. “You just relax and enjoy the view of the Trevi Fountain there.” She nodded at the largest, most extravagant fountain, a monolithic creation built like a wedding cake with winged angels holding uplifted hands as if to sing, except they spurted great crisscrossing arcs of water from their mouths. “That’s what my sisters call it.”

“Her sisters have the wrong country,” said Vid. “The Garden of Versailles was my inspiration, in France, you know! I got books, pictures, I studied up. This is all my own design, you know, I sketched it out: the gazebo, the fountain, everything! Then I got in friends to build it all for me. I know a lot of tradies. But her sisters!” He pointed his thumb at Tiffany. “When they saw this backyard, they laughed and laughed, they just about wet their pants.” He shrugged, unbothered. “I said to them, it’s no problem that my art has given you joy!”

“I think it’s incredible,” said Clementine.

“No pool?” asked Sam, who had grown up splashing about in a backyard aboveground pool with his brothers and sister. “You’ve got enough room for one.”

He looked about the backyard as if planning a redesign, and Clementine could tell exactly where his mind was heading. Sometimes he talked wistfully about selling up and moving out to a good old fashioned quarter-acre block in the suburbs, where there would be room for a pool and a trampoline, a cubby house and a chook shed and a vegetable garden, a house where his children could have the sort of childhood he had, even though nobody had childhoods like that anymore, and even though Sam was more urban than her, and loved being able to walk to restaurants and bars and catch the ferry into the city.

Clementine shuddered at the thought of the third child in that suburban dream of his, now at the front of his mind thanks to Erika’s request. God, there might even be a fourth child romping about in his imaginary backyard.

“No pool! I’m not a fan of chlorine. Unnatural,” said Vid, as if there was anything natural about all this glossy marble and concrete.

“It’s incredible,” said Clementine again, in case Sam’s comment could be interpreted as criticism. “Is that a maze over there in the corner? For lovers’ trysts?”

She didn’t know why she said “lovers’ trysts.” What a thing to say. Had she ever said the word “tryst” out loud in her life before? Was that even how you pronounced it?

“Yes, and for Easter egg hunts with all of Dakota’s cousins,” said Tiffany.

“Taking care of that topiary must take up a bit of your time,” commented Oliver, looking at the sculptured hedges.

“I have a good friend, you know, he takes care of it.” Vid made giant snip-snip movements with his hands to indicate someone else doing his hedge clipping.

[. . .]

Everyone had another sort of life up their sleeve that might have made them happy. Yes, Sam could have been a plumber married to a stay-at-home domestically minded wife who kept the house in perfect order, with five strapping football-playing sons, but then he probably would have dreamed of having a fun office job and living in a cool, funky suburb by the harbour with a cellist and two gorgeous little girls, thank you very much.

She took a bite of Vid’s strudel. Sam, who was already halfway through eating one, laughed at her. “I knew your eyes would roll back into your head when you tasted that.”

“It’s spectacular,” said Clementine.

“Yeah, not bad, hey,” said Vid. “Tell me, do you taste a little hint of something, like the idea of a flavor, you know, the dream of a flavor, and you just can’t quite put your finger on it?”

“It’s sage,” said Clementine.

“It is sage!” cried Vid.

“My wife is so sage,” said Sam. Tiffany chuckled and Clementine saw the pleasure on her husband’s face that he’d made the hot chick laugh.

She said, “Don’t encourage the bad dad humor, Tiffany.”

“Sorry.” Tiffany grinned at her.

Clementine smiled back and found her eyes drawn irresistibly to Tiffany’s cleavage. It was like something from a Wonderbra ad. Were those breasts real? Tiffany could probably afford the best. Clementine’s friend Emmeline would know. Emmeline had perfect pitch and an unerring eye for a fake boob. That glorious cleavage had to be as unnatural as this backyard. Tiffany adjusted her T-shirt. Oh God, she’d been staring for too long now. Clementine looked away fast and back at the children.

“This strudel is very good,” said Oliver, in his careful, polite way, wiping a fragment of pastry off the side of his mouth.

“Yes, it’s excellent,” said Erika.

Clementine turned her head. Erika had slurred the word “excellent,” just a little. In fact, if it were anyone else, Clementine wouldn’t have used the word “slur,” but Erika had a very precise way of speaking. Each vowel was always enunciated just so. Was Erika a little tipsy? If so, it would be a first. She always hated the idea of losing control. So did Oliver. Presumably that was part of the reason why they were attracted to each other.

“So now you’ve passed that test,” said Vid. “I’ve got another one.”

“I’ll win this one,” said Sam. “Bring it on. Sporting trivia? Limbo? I’m great at limbo.”

“He is surprisingly good at limbo,” said Clementine.

“Oh, me too,” said Tiffany. “Or I used to be. I’m not as flexible as I once was.”

She put down her drink, bent her body back at an extraordinary angle so that her T-shirt rode up, and thrust out her pelvis. Was that a tattoo just below the waistband of her jeans? Clementine strained to see. Tiffany took a couple of steps forward and hummed limbo music as she ducked under an invisible pole.

She straightened and pressed her hand to her lower back. “Ow. Getting old.”

“Jeez,” said Sam a little hoarsely. “You might give me a run for my money.”

Clementine stifled a giggle. Yes, my darling, I think she would give you a run for your money.

“Where are the kids?” he asked suddenly, as if coming back to reality.

“They’re right there,” said Clementine. She pointed at the gazebo, where Dakota and the girls were still playing with the dog. “I’m watching them.”

“Do you do yoga?” Oliver asked Tiffany. “You’ve got great flexibility.”

“Great flexibility,” agreed Sam. Clementine reached over and discreetly pinched the flesh above his knee as hard as she could.

“Ah-ya.” Sam grabbed her hand to stop her.

“What’s that, mate?” asked Oliver.

“Bah! It’s not a limbo competition!” said Vid. “It’s a music competition. It’s my favorite piece of classical music. Now, look, I will be honest with you. I don’t know anything about classical music. I know nothing. I’m an electrician! A simple electrician! What would I know about classical music? I come from peasant stock. My family—we were peasants! Simple peasants!”

“Here we go with the simple peasants.” Tiffany rolled her eyes.

“But I like classical music,” continued Vid, ignoring her. “I like it. I buy CDs all the time! Don’t know what I’m buying! Just pick them at random off the shelf! Nobody else buys CDs anymore, I know, but I do, and I got this one day, at the shopping center, you know, and on the way home, I played it in the car, and when this came on, I had to pull over, I had to stop on the side of the road because it was like . . . it was like I was drowning. I was drowning in feeling. I cried, you know, I cried like a baby.”

He pointed at Clementine. “I bet the cellist knows what I mean.”

“Sure,” said Clementine.

“So let’s see if you can name it, hey? Maybe it’s not even good music! What do I know?”

He fiddled with his phone. Naturally the cabana had a built-in sound system that was linked to his mobile phone.

“Who says only the cellist can enter this competition?” said Sam. Clementine could hear him imitating Vid’s speech cadences without realizing he was doing it. It was so embarrassing the way he did that, picking up waiters’ accents in restaurants and coming over all Indian or Chinese. “What about the marketing manager, eh?”

“What about the accountant?” Oliver followed the joke with heavy-handed jolliness.

Erika said nothing. She sat with her forearms perfectly still on the armrests of her chair staring off into the distance. It was unusual too for Erika to disengage from a conversation like this. Normally she listened to social chit-chat as if she’d be sitting for a quiz later.

“You can all enter!” cried Vid. “Silence.”

He lifted his phone as though it was a conductor’s baton and then dropped it in a dramatic swooping motion. Nothing happened.

He swore, jabbing at the screen.

“Give it here.” Tiffany took the phone and pressed some keys. Immediately, the lush opening notes of Fauré’s “After a Dream” cascaded through the cabana with perfect clarity.

Clementine straightened. It almost felt like a trick that out of all the pieces of music he could have picked, he’d chosen this one. She knew exactly what he meant when he’d described “drowning in feeling.” She’d felt it too, when she was fifteen, sitting with her bored parents (her father’s head kept snapping forward as he dropped off to sleep) at the Opera House: that extraordinary feeling of submersion, as if she’d been drenched in something exquisite.

“Louder!” cried Vid. “It needs to be loud.”

Tiffany turned up the volume.

Next to her, Sam automatically adjusted his posture and assumed his stoic, polite, I’m-listening-to-classical-music-and-hoping-it-will-be-over-soon face. Tiffany refilled glasses with no discernible reaction to the music, while Erika continued to stare into the distance and Oliver wrinkled his brow, concentrating. Oliver could possibly name the composer. He was one of those well-educated private school boys who knew a lot about a lot of things, but he couldn’t feel the music. Clementine and Vid were the only ones feeling it.

Vid met her eyes, lifted his glass in a secret salute and winked as if to say, Yeah, I know.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

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