

Tom's car wasn't a Bentley, (I made a mental note to WhatsApp Vix) but a top of the series, carbon-black Range Rover. As the electric gates swung open, Mags sprung up from her knitting and eyeballs popping, glued herself like a lumpy limpet to the window. Praying she wouldn't embarrass me in front of Tom, I purposefully slammed the door harder than usual and teetered self-consciously up the drive, already regretting the white Prada boots that pinched at my big toe.

“Jesus! Where the hell is this place? Thought I'd never arrive!” Casually dressed in a blue jacket, scarf and jeans, Tom jumped down from the cabin and butterflied my cheeks. “Well thank God for gorgeous sights like you. Here, let me.”

With a cheeky grin he held open the passenger door. As artily attired as he was handsome I could have ravished him on the spot. Within seconds I'd appraised a firm torso, lean thighs and sexy salt and pepper hair. A waft of Arabian oud stimulated my nethers as he leant over to strap me in, tugging at the belt with a satisfied grunt to ensure its worthiness. Scarcely believing this delectable god was taking me out for the evening, I was anxious to get going. Mags had been portraying unpredictable signs of jealous madness earlier triggered by two gins and a large tumbler of red wine and I didn't trust her. As we waited for the gates to yawn apart, a loud banging from the villa startled us both.

Twirling a red feather boa between her legs my landlady was performing some sort of ridiculous cabaret act in the window whilst fluffing up her hair and blowing Tom kisses. She looked worse than hideous. Silently cursing her audacity, I cringed, not daring to look at my date. Making a noise somewhere between a splutter and a snort Tom gunned the engine down the lane.

“Strewth! Is that thing for real? Almost enough to put me off my dinner. Like I said, you need to get down to the coast sharpish if that broken grenade’s your daily company. Get in before the season kicks off. That’s my kiwi dollar’s worth.”

I had a feeling he was right.

“So anyway,” he continued, placing a hand on my thigh. I exhaled. Forgiven. We were en route, sailing down the mountain, Tom manfully steering with one hand. “Enough about what I think. There’s a great family-run place by Antibes market I know. Wanna give it a try?”

I smiled and nodded and tried to keep calm, serenely ecstatic to be the object of his attention. What was it about gorgeous guys who drove luxury cars one-handed? High up in his spacious four-by-four, chilling to Buddha Bar, I soon settled, soothed by masculine protection. This was heavenly, the warmth, the opulence, a gentle heat rising from the footwell. But within minutes, an irritation drove my fingers to fiddle with the neckline of my new woollen dress. Doing my utmost not to itch the allergy, I focused on Tom, relieved to find his conversation as confident and collected as our first encounter. Reaching the coast in record time we were circling the ramparts.

“Tell me you’re hungry. Can’t stand it when girls don’t eat. All that skinny stuff does my head in. Now, help me find a spot, would you? There’s never anywhere to park round here.”

Eventually Tom reversed his jeep into the entrance of a private garage. I shot him a look as he killed the engine.

He shrugged. “What? It’ll be fine. It’s winter. No-one’s around. Besides, we’re late and I’m starving.

The restaurant exuded old-world propriety. A pretty, pony-tailed assistant stored our coats then escorted us through into a hushed, low-beamed dining room to our table. Suddenly shy opposite Tom, I was grateful for the excuse of an ocean view and rushed down a glass of champagne aware my date sipped on sparkling water until the Meursault arrived. During a feast of lobster Thermidor, greens and garlic potato purée, Tom divulged he’d moved to Monaco from Lake Como a few months ago and had a young daughter, Skye, who lived at the Italian home with his ex-girlfriend, her mother. For the past few years he’d been widely travelling for business whilst overseeing his oil companies in Wellington.

“Well, that’s enough about my boring life,” he said. Nudging his plate to one side, he planted both elbows on the table and leaned in. “I’m far more interested in this divine goddess having dinner with me. So remind me again, what in Christ’s name are you doing up in hinterland with that insane witch for company? And by the way, don’t think I’m taking you out again if I have to drive for over two hours to pick you up.” Suggestive mahogany eyes teased and danced. “Move closer, to me.”

I purred, working my game. With his swarthy looks, wealth and magnetism, surely he could have his pick of the crop and Monte Carlo was hardly short of beauties. “Hmm, I’ll think about it. Mags has her moments. But you’re giving me a hard time and I’ve only just arrived!”

“Ah, excuses not accepted. You gotta be more central. Get with the action. I’d offer you one of my witch-free properties by the marina but they’re being renovated before the season kicks in. Shame, I could have stowed you away as my secret lover.”

I smirked, cheekbone practised. “Well thanks for nothing then, show-off. Besides, if you want to see me, I guess you’ll just have to get used to the drive.” The aperitif bubbles had livened my tongue. “Mags isn’t so bad but bring a bottle next time if you want to butter her up. Anyway, her place is somewhere to hunker down for now and I’m loving the mountain air.”

Tom shook his head in disbelief. “Nice try, but nah. You need the beach, girl. You’ll get bored up there. Trust me. It’s no-mans-land. Wait for the summer and you’ll be gasping. Try pushing the boat out to Villefranche or Beaulieu-sur-Mer. I’ll show you both...if I pass the test.”

“Mmm. So is that a date, Mr Petersen, hill climbs or not?”

“It’s a date, Miss Rose. Your wish is my command.”

“Oh, well in that case, if you really want to impress me, you can take me to the opera.”

I wasn’t expecting him to stand up and kiss me full on the lips.

“Sweetheart, absolutely no way am I sitting through hours of wobbling sopranos and paunch-bellied tenors prancing around in frilly costumes.” He sat back and studied me quizzically. “Is that the best you can do?”

Sweetheart? I could get used to this. He tasted delicious. “Well,” I said coyly. “How about the races? Come on, you must love horses? All that braying flesh and action. What man doesn’t get turned on by sport and competition?”

It didn’t warrant another kiss but it did spur him to get the bill and lead the way to Picassos, a dimly-lit bar tucked down a cobbled side street. Once through the low-levelled door, Tom ordered brandies, his arm falling across my shoulders, his kiss still tingling. He chose a cosy corner and curled his fingers into mine.

“You know what I’d like?”

Anything for you, Tom. This date was closing in on my idea of heaven.

“I’d like to tell you... no wait.” He uncrossed his legs and shifted closer. “This is gonna sound corny but if I told you, you were one of the most interestingly wonderful women I’d ever had the honour to take on a date, would you believe me?”

Another surprise. His parted mouth rested only inches away, his tongue obligingly patient in that horny hollow. Don’t blow it, Hunter.

“Why thank you,” I said carefully. “But such an attractive man like you must know many women.”

He smiled and reached for my other hand. “Sure I know a few, but no-one as special as you. You’re smart, funny, talented, and you’ve got the sexiest pair of puckers I’ve ever seen and right now they’re driving me crazy.”

“Puckers? Oh, lips you mean.” I beamed on full wattage having secretly applied a twist of lipstick at the bar. “A girl can be flattered. Um Tom, would you excuse me a moment?”

He appeared puzzled and stood to let me pass. Unsteadily, I walked towards the ‘toilettes,’ desperate for a neck itch and a pee. His proximity was making my head swim. Within the past few moments, the food to alcohol ratio had precariously slipped out of balance. Flushing the chain, I naughtily unhooked my silk panties and stuffed them into my clutch. Tom would go wild! I imagined we’d go back to his place. Keen not to keep him waiting, I stumbled out of the tiny booth and checked my reflection, aghast to discover not only my front teeth were smeared in bright red but an army of angry hives had joined forces to create a bumpy neck ring, the rash steadily marching north. Shit! I looked like a pantomime idiot.

The bar had emptied. Tom was standing at the entrance, my stole draped over one arm.

“Ah, finally. What took you so long? Thought I’d said something to piss you off. Look, if you don’t mind, I think we should head back. Couple of morning meetings in Monaco and at this rate, I’d like to be home before sunrise.”

A familiar trigger spluttered and split. “Oh sure, That’s cool. Got a busy day tomorrow too.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “That so? Seem to remember you had nothing on except exercising. Shall we?”

A solitary bell clanged twice mimicking the beeps on Tom's key fob as he hastened me towards the car. Two a.m.? No wonder he wanted to get home. From seducer to ice-man in less than fifteen minutes. Surely I hadn't taken that long in the loos. An allergic, clumsy, size ten girl was not the cool, classy image I wanted to portray but within moments that was exactly how he made me feel. Gone was the sophisticated alluring Hunter. We didn't speak much on the return. He throttled the engine up the mountain, anxious eyes darting every so often to the dashboard clock. By the time the hilltop glow of Pont-sur-Loup drew into sight, my inner knots had screwed themselves into a pulsating hell-pit. The villa was dark on approach. At least Mags hadn't waited up. Tom tilted my chin with a thumb and lightly kissed me on the lips. A brief smile failed to reach his eyes.

"I'll call you."

"Sure, that'd be great," I murmured. "And thank you, for a lovely evening."

I hopped down. There was nothing more to say. But anything would have been preferable to the backlights of his jeep steam down the lane and out of sight. Under a lonely blanket of stars I let myself in and all but drowned in despair.