



Impossible

Danielle Steel

Life is an art form.

Two hopelessly mismatched people—

Is it possible that this is love?

Impossible ... or not?

IMPOSSIBLE

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DANIELLE STEEL

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IMPOSSIBLE

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THE GIFT

DANIELLE STEEL

IMPOSSIBLE

A Dell Book

To my exceptionally wonderful, loving
children, Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick,
Samantha, Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx & Zara,
who not only make my life possible, but
joyful, happy, and loving in every way.
How blessed and fortunate I am to have
you, with all your laughter, love and
tender moments that we share so
abundantly. I celebrate you, I thank you, I
appreciate you more than I can ever say.
May you be as blessed as I am, with
children like you one day.

with all my love,
Mom

What does that mean—"tame"?

It is an act too often neglected ...

It means to establish ties.

To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you on your part have no need of me ...

But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world ...

If you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow ... Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! ...

Please—tame me!

One only understands the things that one tames ... there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship ... If you want a friend, tame me ...

What must I do to tame you?

You must be very patient ... first you will sit down at a little distance from me—like that—in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me every day ...

As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one ... But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,
The Little Prince

*if you tame me
and i tame you,
you will not lose
your wild
and wonderful,
your freedom
or the air
you breathe,
not lost
but found,*

*once tamed
and joined
together
silently,
you will
find me,
and i will
at last have
found
you.*

d.s

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The Suvery Gallery in Paris was housed in an impressive building, an elegant eighteenth-century *hôtel particulier* on the Faubourg St. Honoré. Collectors came there by appointment through the enormous bronze doors into the courtyard. Straight ahead was the main gallery, to the left the offices of Simon de Suvery, the owner. And to the right was his daughter's addition to the gallery, the contemporary wing. Behind the house was a large elegant garden filled with sculptures, mainly Rodins. Simon de Suvery had been there for more than forty years. His father, Antoine, had been one of the most important collectors in Europe, and Simon had been a scholar of Renaissance paintings and Dutch masters before opening the gallery. Now he was consulted by museums all over Europe, held in awe by private collectors, and admired although often feared by all who knew him.

Simon de Suvery was a daunting figure, tall, powerfully built, with stern features and dark eyes that pierced through you right to your soul. Simon had been in no hurry to get married. In his youth, he was too busy establishing his business to waste time on romance. At forty he had married the daughter of an important American collector. It had been a successful and happy union. Marjorie de Suvery had never involved herself directly in the gallery, which was well established before Simon married her. She was fascinated by it, and admired the work he showed. She loved him profoundly and had taken a passionate interest in everything he did. Marjorie had been an artist but never felt comfortable showing her work. She did genteel landscapes and portraits, and often gave them as gifts to friends. In truth, Simon had been affected but never impressed by her work. He was ruthless in his choices, merciless in his decisions for the gallery. He had a will of iron, a mind as sharp as a diamond, a keen business sense, and buried far, far beneath the surface, well concealed at all times, was a kind heart. Or so Marjorie said. Though not everyone believed her. He was fair to his employees, honest with his clients, and relentless in his pursuit of whatever he felt the gallery should have. Sometimes it took him years to acquire a particular painting or sculpture, but he never rested until it was his. He had pursued his wife, before their marriage, in much the same way. And once he had her, he kept her as a treasure—mostly to himself. He only socialized when he felt he had to, entertaining clients in one wing of the house.

They decided to have children late in their marriage. In fact it was Simon's decision, and they waited ten years to have a child. Knowing how Marjorie longed for children, Simon had finally acceded to her wishes, and was only mildly disappointed when Marjorie gave birth to a daughter and not a son. Simon was fifty when Sasha was born, and Marjorie thirty-nine. Sasha instantly became the love of her mother's life. They were constantly together. Marjorie spent hours with her, chortling and cooing, playing with her in the garden. She nearly went into mourning when Sasha began school, and they had to be apart. She was a beautiful and loving child. Sasha was an interesting blend of her parents. She had her father's dark look and her mother's ethereal softness. Marjorie was an angelic-looking blonde with blue eyes and looked like a madonna in an Italian painting. Sasha had delicate features like her mother, dark hair and eyes like her father, but unlike both her parents, Sasha was fragile and small.

Her father used to tease her benevolently and say that she looked like a miniature of a child. But there was nothing small about Sasha's soul. She had the strength and iron will of her father, the warmth and gentle kindness of her mother, and the directness she learned early on from her father. She was four or five before he took serious notice of her, and once he did, all he spoke to her about was art. In his spare time, he would wander through the gallery with her, identifying paintings and masters, showing her their work in art books, and he expected her to repeat their names and even spell them, once she was old enough to write. Rather than rebelling, she drank it all in, and retained every shred of information her father imparted. He was very proud of her. And ever more in love with his wife, who became ill three years after Sasha was born.

Marjorie's illness was a mystery at first, and had all their doctors stumped. Simon secretly believed it was psychosomatic. He had no patience with illness or weakness, and thought that anything physical could be mastered and overcome. But rather than overcome it, Marjorie became weaker with time. It was a full year before they got a diagnosis in London, and confirmation in New York. She had a rare degenerative disease that was attacking her nerves and muscles, and ultimately would cripple her lungs and heart. Simon chose not to accept the prognosis, and Marjorie was valiant about it, complaining little, doing whatever she could for as long as she was able, spending as much time as she had the strength for with her husband and daughter, and resting as much as possible in between. The disease never snuffed out her spirit, but eventually, as predicted, her body succumbed. She was bedridden by the time Sasha was seven, and died shortly after she turned nine. Despite all the doctors had told him, Simon was stunned. And so was Sasha. Neither of her parents had prepared Sasha for her mother's death. Sasha and Simon had both grown accustomed to Marjorie being interested in all they did, and participating in their lives, even while in bed. The sudden realization that she had disappeared from their world hit them both like a bomb, and fused Sasha and her father closer together than they had ever been. Other than the gallery, Sasha then became the focus of Simon's life.

Sasha grew up eating, drinking, sleeping, loving art. It was all she knew, all she did, and all she loved, other than her father. She was as devoted to him as he was to her. Even as a child, she knew as much about the gallery, and its complicated and intriguing workings, as any of his employees. And sometimes he thought, even as a young girl, she was smarter about it and far more creative than anyone he employed. The only thing that annoyed him, and he made no bones about it, was her ever increasing passion for modern and contemporary art. Contemporary work irritated him particularly, and he never hesitated to call it junk, privately or otherwise. He loved and respected the Great Masters, and nothing else.

As her father had before her, Sasha attended the Sorbonne, and got a "license," a master's degree, in the history of art. And as she had promised her mother she would, she earned her PhD at Columbia in New York. Then she spent two years working as an intern at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which rounded out her education. During that time, she returned frequently to Paris, sometimes just for a weekend, and Simon visited her as often as possible in New York. It gave him an excuse to visit his clients, as well as museums and collectors in the States. All he really wanted to do was see Sasha, and he used any excuse to do so. What he wanted more than anything else was for Sasha to come home. He was irritable and impatient during her years in New York.

The one thing Simon had never expected was the appearance of Arthur Boardman in Sasha's life. She met him the first week of her doctoral studies at Columbia. She was twenty-two at the time, and married him, despite her father's grumbling protests, within six months. At first, Simon was horrified at her marrying so young, and the only thing that mollified him, and made him consent to the marriage, was that Arthur assured his father-in-law that when Sasha was finished with her studies and apprenticeship in New York, he would move to Paris with her and live there. Simon nearly made him sign it in blood. But even he couldn't resist seeing Sasha as happy as she was. Simon finally conceded that Arthur Boardman was a good man, and the right one for her.

Arthur was thirty-two, ten years older than Sasha. He had gone to Princeton, and had a MBA from Harvard. He had a respectable position in a Wall Street investment bank, which conveniently had a Paris office. Early on in their marriage, he began lobbying to run it. Within a year, their son Xavier was born. Two years later, Tatianna arrived. In spite of that, Sasha never missed a beat with her studies. Miraculously, both her babies managed to arrive in the summer, right after she finished her classes. She hired a nanny to help her with them while she was in school and working at the museum. She had learned how to keep many balls in the air, while watching her father run the gallery when she was a child. She loved her busy life, and adored Arthur and her two children. And although Simon was a somewhat hesitant grandfather at first, he warmed to it quickly. They were enchanting children.

Sasha spent every spare moment with them she could, singing the same songs and playing the same nursery games her mother had played with her. In fact, Tatianna looked so much like her maternal grandmother that it unnerved Simon at first, but as Tatianna grew older, he loved just sitting and watching her, and thinking of his late wife. It was like seeing her reborn as a little girl.

True to his word, Arthur moved the entire family to Paris when Sasha finished her two-year internship at the Met in New York. The investment bank was literally giving him the Paris office to run, at thirty-six, and had full confidence in him, as did Sasha. She was going to be even busier there than she had been in New York, where she'd been working only part-time at the museum, and spent the rest of her time caring for her children. In Paris, she was going to work at the gallery with her father. She was ready for it now. He had agreed to let her leave by three o'clock every day, so she could be with her children. And she knew she would have a lot of entertaining to do for her husband. She returned to Paris, victorious, educated, excited, and undaunted, and thrilled to be home again. And so was Simon to have her home, and working with him at last. He had waited twenty-six years for that moment, and it had finally come, much to their mutual delight.

He still appeared as stern as he had when she was a child, but even Arthur noticed, once they moved to Paris, that Simon was softening almost imperceptibly with age. He even chatted with his grandchildren from time to time, although most of the time, when he visited, he preferred to just sit and observe them. He had never felt at ease with young children, not even Sasha when she was small. By the time they moved back to Paris, he was seventy-six years old. And Sasha's life began in earnest from that moment.

Their first decision was where to live, and Simon stunned them by solving their dilemma for them. Sasha had been planning to look for an apartment on the Left Bank. Their small family was already too large for the apartment the bank owned in the sixteen-

arrondissement. Simon volunteered to move out of his wing of the house, the elegant three-floor domain he had occupied for his entire marriage, and the years before and after. He insisted it was far too big for him, and claimed the stairs were hard on his knees, although Sasha didn't quite believe him. Her father still walked for miles. He volunteered to move to the other side of the courtyard, on the top floor of the wing they used for additional offices and storage. He quickly set to work remodeling it with charming *oeil de boeuf* windows under a mansard roof, and put in a funny little motorized seat, which sped up and down the stairs and delighted his grandchildren, when he let them ride it. He walked up the stairs beside them while they squealed with excitement. Sasha helped him with the decorating and remodeling, which instantly gave her an idea. Not one he liked at first. It was a plan she had for years, and had dreamed of all her life. She wanted to expand the gallery to include contemporary artists. The wing that had previously been used for storage was perfect for her plan. It was across the courtyard from their offices and her father's new home. Admittedly, opening the ground floor would cramp their storage space, but she had already consulted an architect to build highly efficient storage racks upstairs. At her first mention of selling contemporary work, Simon went through the roof. He was not going to corrupt the gallery and its venerable name, selling the garbage that Sasha liked, by unknown artists he insisted had no talent. It took her almost a year of bitter arguments to convince him.

It was only when she threatened to leave the gallery and set up shop on her own that Simon finally re-lented—albeit with considerable rancor and a ferocious amount of grumbling. Although gentler in style, Sasha was as tough as he was, and had held her ground. Once the plan was agreed to, she didn't even dare meet her new artists in their main office because her father was so rude to them. But Sasha was as stubborn as he was. A year after they moved back to Paris, she opened the contemporary arm of the gallery with style and fanfare. And much to her father's astonishment, to unfailingly great reviews, not just because she was Sasha de Suvery but because she had an eye for good, solid contemporary work, just as her father did in what he knew best.

Remarkably, Sasha kept a foot in both worlds. She was knowledgeable about what he sold so competently and brilliant about newer work. By the time she was thirty, three years after she had opened Suvery Contemporary on his premises, it was the most important contemporary gallery in Paris, and perhaps in Europe. And she'd never had so much fun in her life. Nor had Arthur. He loved what she did, and supported her in every move, every decision, every investment, even more than her father, who remained reluctant though ultimately respectful of what she'd accomplished with contemporary work. In fact, she had brought his gallery into the present with a bang.

Arthur loved the contrast between her business life and his own. He loved the playfulness of the art she showed, and the zaniness of her artists, in contrast to the bankers he dealt with. He traveled with her frequently to other cities when she went to see new artists, and loved going to art fairs with her. They had transformed their three-floor wing of the house into nearly a museum of contemporary art by emerging artists. And the work she sold at Suvery Contemporary was far more financially accessible than the Impressionists and Old Masters sold by her father. Their business thrived on both.

Sasha had been running her arm of the business for eight years when they faced their first real crisis. The bank Arthur had become a partner of years before insisted that he come back

to Wall Street to run it. Two of the partners had died in a private plane crash, and everyone insisted Arthur was the obvious choice to run the bank at home. In fact he was the only choice. There was no way for Arthur to refuse to do it, in good conscience. His career was important to him too, and the bank was not letting him off the hook. They needed him in New York.

Sasha cried copiously when she explained the situation to her father, and there had been tears in his eyes as well. For all the thirteen years of their marriage, Arthur had fully supported her and every aspect of her career, and now she knew she had to do the same for him, and move back to New York. It was too much to ask of him to expect him to leave his career for hers, so she could stay at the gallery with her father, although, undeniably, he was growing old. Sasha was thirty-five by then, and although he didn't look or act it, Simon was eighty-five years old. And they'd been fortunate that Arthur had been able to stay in Paris for as long as he had, without damaging his career. But now it was time for him to go home, and for Sasha to leave with him.

In typical Sasha fashion, it took her exactly six weeks to come up with an idea. They were moving back to New York within a month. She took her father's breath away and horrified him at first. He was totally opposed to it, just as he had been when she suggested selling contemporary art. But this time she didn't threaten him, she begged him. What Sasha wanted was to open a branch of their gallery in New York, for both traditional and contemporary work. Her father thought the idea was insane. Suvery Gallery was the most respected gallery in Paris. Americans contacted them daily for important purchases, as well as museums around the world. They had absolutely no need to open a branch in New York, except now Sasha would be there, and she wanted to work for her father, and the gallery she loved, as she had for nine years.

It was a turning point for them. Arthur thought it was brilliant, and gave the idea his full support. In the end, he convinced her father for her, although even when they left, Simon insisted it was a mad idea. Sasha offered to put her own money into the project, and Arthur volunteered as well. But in the end, her father came through for her, as he always did. As soon as she got to New York, she found an apartment on Park Avenue for them, and a brownstone on Sixty-fourth Street, between Madison and Fifth avenues, for Suvery New York. And as always, when Sasha put her mind to something, and backed it with an incredible amount of energy and work, it turned out to be a brilliant idea. Her father came to visit several times, and grudgingly admitted that the space was perfect for them, on a small scale of course. And by the time he came to the opening of the New York gallery nine months later, he was wreathed in smiles. Sasha was the toast of the art world in New York. At thirty-five, she was becoming one of the most important dealers in the world, as her father had been and still was, and she had just joined the boards of both the Metropolitan and Modern Art museums, an unheard of honor for her, to be on both.

Xavier and Tatianna were twelve and ten by then. Xavier loved to draw, and Tatianna would grab any camera she could lay her hands on and take incredibly funny pictures of startled adults. Tatianna looked like a small blond elf, and Xavier looked like his father, only with his mother and grandfather's nearly jet-black hair. They were beautiful and loving children, and both were bilingual. Sasha and Arthur agreed to put them in the Lycée in New York, and Tatianna talked constantly about wanting to go back to Paris. She missed her

friends. Xavier decided almost instantly that he preferred New York.

For the next two years, Sasha enjoyed running her gallery in New York. She traveled frequently to Paris, usually twice a month. Sometimes she took the Concorde for important meetings with her father, and returned the same night to Arthur and her children in New York. And in summer, she always took the children back to France. She spent time with her father in the house he had rented for years in St. Jean Cap Ferrat, but she stayed at the Ede Roc with the children. Although Simon loved them, the children made him nervous if he spent too much time with them. And although Sasha didn't like admitting it, her father was getting old. He was eighty-seven, and little by little, he was slowing down.

With great regret, they had talked about what she would do when she would be alone running the business. She couldn't imagine it, but he could. He had led a long life, and had no fears about moving on. And he had trained his people well. In time, she would be able to live in New York or Paris, and have competent people to work for her in either place. She would have to spend time in both galleries, of course, and commute regularly, but the choice of where to live was hers, thanks to her father's competence and foresight. They had excellent managers in both places. But Paris still felt like home to her, although she enjoyed living and working in New York. There was no question that Arthur was too entrenched at the bank to then to live anywhere but New York. She knew she was stuck there until he retired. And since he was only forty-seven years old, he was nowhere near retirement. She was just lucky that her father was still running his end of the business at eighty-seven years of age. He was remarkable, although he had slowed down almost imperceptibly. But despite that, or perhaps because of it, Sasha was stunned when he died suddenly at eighty-nine. She had expected him to live forever. Simon died exactly as he would have wanted to. He had a massive stroke at his desk. The doctors said he didn't suffer. He was gone in an instant, having just concluded an enormous deal with a collector from Holland.

Sasha flew to Paris in a state of shock that night, and moved around the gallery aimlessly, unable to believe that he was gone. The funeral was dignified and important. The president of the French Republic attended, as well as the minister of culture. Every person of importance in the art world came to pay their respects, his friends, clients, Arthur and the children. It was a cold November day, and pouring rain, when they buried him at Père Lachaise cemetery, in the twentieth arrondissement, on the eastern edge of Paris. He was surrounded by the likes of Proust, Balzac, and Chopin, a fitting resting place for him.

After the funeral, Sasha spent the next four weeks in Paris, working with the lawyer organizing things, putting away her father's papers and personal effects. She stayed longer than she had to, but she couldn't bear leaving this time. For the first time since she had left Paris, she wanted to stay home, and be near where her father had lived and worked. She felt like an orphan a month later, when she finally flew home to New York. The stores and streets decorated for Christmas seemed like an affront after the loss she had just sustained. It was a long hard year for her. But in spite of that, both branches of the gallery flourished. The ensuing years were peaceful, happy, and productive. She missed her father, but slowly put down roots in New York, as her children grew up. And she still returned to Paris twice a month, to continue to oversee the gallery there.

Eight years after her father's death, both galleries were strong and equally successful. Arthur was talking about retiring at fifty-seven. His career had been respectable and

productive, but he privately admitted to Sasha he was bored. Xavier was twenty-four, living and painting in London, and showing at a small gallery in Soho. And although Sasha loved his paintings, he was not ready for her to show. Her love for him did not blind her to the progress he still needed to make. He was talented, but as an artist not yet fully mature. But he was passionate about his work. He loved everything about the art world he was part of in London, and Sasha was proud of him. She thought he would be a great artist one day. And one day, she hoped to show his work.

Tatianna had graduated from Brown four months before, with a degree in fine arts and photography, and had just started a job as the third assistant to a well-known photographer in New York, which meant she got to change film for him occasionally, bring him coffee, and sweep the floors. Her mother assured her that that was the way it worked at first. Neither of her children had any interest in working at the gallery with her. They thought what she did was wonderful, but they wanted to pursue their own lives and work. Sasha realized how rare it had been to learn all she had from her father, the opportunity he had given her, and the priceless education she'd had of growing into the business with him. She was sorry she couldn't do the same with her children.

Sasha wondered if one day Xavier would want to work at the gallery with her, but it seemed less than likely for the time being. Now that Arthur was talking about retiring, she felt as though she was drifting toward her roots in Paris again. As much as she loved the excitement of New York, life always seemed gentler to her when she went home. Paris was still home to her, despite dual nationality, thanks to her mother, and sixteen of her forty-seven years, a third of her life, spent in New York. At her core she was still French. Arthur wasn't opposed to the idea of living in Paris again once he retired, and they had been talking about it more seriously that fall.

It was October and the very last of the hot weather, on a sunny Friday afternoon, as Sasha made a brief inspection tour of some paintings they were planning to sell to a museum in Boston. They kept their Old Masters and more traditional work on the brownstone's two upper floors. The contemporary work they were also now famous for was on the first and second floors. Sasha's office was tucked away in a back corner on the main floor.

After her tour of the upper floors, she put some papers in her briefcase, and looked out at the sculpture garden behind her office. Like most of their contemporary work, it was a reflection of Sasha's taste. She loved looking out at the pieces in the garden, especially when it snowed. But snow was still two months away, as she picked up her bulging briefcase. She was going to be out of the gallery the following week. She was leaving on Sunday morning for Paris, to check on things there. She still made a routine visit every two weeks, as she had since her father's death eight years before. She was a hands-on dealer, in both cities, and was used to the commute by now. It seemed easy to her. She managed to have a life, and friends as well as clients, in both cities. Sasha was as much at ease in Paris as New York.

She was thinking about the weekend ahead, as the phone rang, just as she was about to leave her office. It was Xavier, calling her from London, as she glanced at her watch and realized it was nearly midnight there. She smiled the moment she heard his voice. Both her children were precious to her, but in some ways she was closer to Xavier. He had always been easier for her. Tatianna was closer to her father, and also like Sasha's father in some ways. There had always been something hard and judgmental about her, and she was le

inclined to bend and compromise than her older brother. Xavier and his mother were so mates in many ways, equally gentle, equally kind, always willing to forgive a loved one or friend. Tatianna had a harder line about people and life.

"I was afraid you'd already left," Xavier said with a smile and a yawn. As she closed her eyes, thinking of him, she could see his face. He had always been a beautiful child, and was now a handsome young man.

"I was about to leave. You just caught me. What are you doing home on a Friday night?" Xavier had an active social life in the London artists' scene, and a weakness for pretty women. Lots of them. It always amused his mother, and she teased him frequently about it.

"I just got in," he explained, defending his reputation.

"Alone? How disappointing," she teased. "Did you have fun?"

"I went to a gallery opening with a friend, and then we had dinner. Everyone got drunk and things started to get a little wild, so I thought I'd get home before we all got arrested."

"That sounds interesting." Sasha sat down at her desk again, and looked out at the garden, thinking of how much she missed him. "What were they doing to get arrested?" Despite her fondness for women, most of Xavier's pursuits were harmless and fairly tame. He was just a young man who liked to have fun and still acted like a boy at times, full of mischief. His sister liked to claim she was far more respectable than he was, and thought the women he went out with were disgusting. She never failed to say so, not only to her mother but to her brother, who hotly defended them, no matter who they were, or how racy.

"I went to the opening with an artist I know. He's a bit of a madman, but a hell of a good artist. I want you to meet him sometime. Liam Allison. He does fantastic abstracts. It was a pretty good show tonight, although he didn't think so. He got bored at the opening, and got drunk. Then he got drunker when we had dinner at the pub." Xavier loved calling her and telling her about his friends. He had few secrets from her. And his tales of his exploits always amused her. She had missed him ever since he left home.

"That's charming, his getting drunk I mean." She assumed his friend was about his own age. Two boys misbehaving, all in good fun.

"Actually, it was. He's very funny. He took his pants off while we sat at the bar. The funniest thing was that absolutely no one noticed, until he asked some girl to dance. I think he forgot it himself by then, until he got out on the dance floor in his jockey shorts, and some old woman hit him with her purse. So he asked her to dance and swung her around a few times. It was the funniest damn thing I've ever seen. She was about four feet tall, and she kept hitting him with her purse. It looked like a scene from Monty Python. He's a terrific dancer." Sasha was laughing as she listened, imagining the scene, of the artist in jockey shorts, dancing with some old woman while she hit him. "He was very polite to her, and everyone was laughing their heads off, but then the barkeep said he'd call the police, so he took him home to his wife."

"He's married?" Sasha sounded startled by that piece of information. "At your age?"

"He's not my age, Mom. He's thirty-eight years old, and he has three kids. They're cute kids. Nice wife, too."

"Where was she then?" Disapproval crept into her voice.

"She hates going out with him," Xavier said matter-of-factly. Liam Allison had become one of his closest friends in London. He was a serious artist, with a light touch about life, a

outrageous sense of humor, and a fondness for practical jokes, mischief, and pranks.

"I can see why his wife hates going out with him," Sasha commented about her son's friend. "I'm not sure I'd enjoy going out with a husband who takes his trousers off in public and asks old ladies to dance."

"That was pretty much what she said when I got him home. He passed out on the couch before I left, so I had a glass of wine with her, and then I left. She's a good woman."

"She'd have to be, to put up with that. Is he an alcoholic?" Sasha sounded serious for a moment, wondering what sort of people he was hanging out with. Xavier's friend didn't sound like an ideal companion, or not a good influence in any case.

"No, he isn't an alcoholic." Xavier laughed. "He was just bored, and he made a bet with me that no one would notice for an hour if he took his pants off in the pub. He won. No one noticed till he started dancing."

"Well, I hope you kept yours on," she said, sounding like a mother, as Xavier laughed at her. He adored her.

"Actually, I did. Liam thought that was pretty cowardly of me. He said he'd pay double if I took mine off, too. I didn't."

"Thank you, darling. I'm relieved to hear it." She glanced at her watch then. She had promised to meet Arthur at six, and it was already ten after. She loved talking to her son, but she hated to do this, but I promised to meet your father at home ten minutes ago. We're driving out to the Hamptons after dinner."

"I figured you would. I just wanted to check in."

"I'm glad you did. Anything special planned for this weekend?" She liked knowing what he was doing, and Tatianna as well, although she checked in less often. She was trying to spread her wings. And she was more likely to call Arthur these days than her mother. Sasha hadn't spoken to her all week.

"I'm not doing anything. The weather has been disgusting. I thought I'd paint."

"Good. I'm flying to Paris on Sunday. I'll call you when I get in. Do you have time to come over and see me this week?"

"Maybe. I'll talk to you Sunday night. Have a nice weekend. Give Dad my love."

"I will. I love you ... and tell your friend to keep his pants on next time. You're lucky you didn't both wind up in jail. Causing a riot, or indecent exposure, or having too much fun or something." Xavier always had a good time wherever he was, and apparently so did his friend Liam. Xavier had mentioned him before, and always said he wanted his mother to see his work. One of these days she would, although there was never enough time. She was always rushing, and when she went to London, she had artists to visit whom she already represented, and wanted to see Xavier. She had told him to tell Liam to send her slides of his work, but he never had, which suggested to her that he was either not serious about it, or he didn't feel ready to show it to her. Either way, he sounded like a somewhat outrageous character. She already represented several of those, and wasn't sure she wanted one more, no matter how entertaining Xavier thought he was. It was a lot easier dealing with artists who were serious about their careers, and behaved like grown-ups. Badly behaved nearly forty-year-old men who took their clothes off in public were a headache, and she didn't need any more of those. "I'll talk to you Sunday."

"I'll call you in Paris. 'Bye, Mom," Xavier said cheerily, and then hung up, and Sasha smiled.

as she rushed out of her office. She didn't want to keep Arthur waiting, and she still had to make dinner for them. But it had been wonderful talking to her son.

She waved at everyone as she left the office in a hurry, and hailed a cab for the short ride to the apartment, still thinking of Xavier. She knew Arthur would be waiting for her, and was anxious to leave town. The traffic was always awful on Fridays, though slightly better if they waited until after dinner. The weather had been gorgeous. Even though it was October, it was warm and sunny. She sat back in the cab for a minute, and closed her eyes. It had been a long week, and she was tired.

The apartment she was going home to was the only thing in their life she felt she had outgrown. They had lived there for twelve years, since they had moved back from Paris, and now that the children were gone, it seemed much too large for them. She kept trying to get Arthur to sell it, and move to a smaller co-op on Fifth Avenue, with a view of the park. But when they were going to move back to Paris when he retired, they had agreed to wait until they had firmed up their plans. If they moved to Paris, all they needed was a tiny pied-à-terre in New York. It was one of those rare times in their lives when she felt their life in flux. It had never seemed that way to her since Tatianna graduated and moved to her own place. Sasha's life felt empty at times now with the children gone. Arthur teased her about it whenever she said it, and reminded her that she was one of the busiest women in New York, or anywhere else. But she missed the children anyway. They had been an integral and vital part of her life, and she felt sad at times, diminished and less useful now that they were gone. She was grateful that she and Arthur enjoyed traveling and spending time together. If possible, they were even closer now than they had ever been, and even more in love. Twenty-five years had not diminished their love and passion for each other. If anything, familiarity and time had added a bond to them that attached them more and more to each other with age.

Arthur was waiting for her at the apartment when she got home, and smiled the moment he saw her. He was still wearing the white shirt he had worn to the office, with his sleeves rolled up. His jacket was casually tossed over the back of a chair. He had already put a few things into a bag for the weekend at their house in Southampton. She was planning to toss a salad and put some cold chicken on a plate. They liked leaving after the traffic; it was murder on summer and fall weekends.

"How was your day?" he asked, planting a kiss somewhere on the top of her head. She wore her dark hair pulled back in a knot, as she had for her entire lifetime. In the Hamptons on the weekends, she wore it down her back in a long braid. She loved wearing old clothes, jeans, tattered sweaters, or faded T-shirts. It was a relief not to have to be dressed as she was in the gallery every day. Arthur loved to play golf and walk on the beach. He had been an avid sailor in his youth, as their children were, and he loved playing tennis with her. Most of the time, on the weekends, she did some gardening, or curled up with a book. She tried not to work on weekends, although she brought papers with her sometimes.

Like the city apartment, the house in the Hamptons was too large for them now, but it bothered her less there. She could easily imagine grandchildren there one day, and the children often came to stay and brought their friends. The house in the Hamptons always seemed alive to her, perhaps because of their view of the ocean. The apartment in the city seemed lonely and dead to her now.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she apologized as she hurried into the kitchen, after kissing him. After

all these years, they still loved each other and had fun together. "Xavier called just as I was leaving."

"How was he?"

"A little drunk, I think. He'd been out with some very badly behaved friend."

"A woman?" Arthur asked with interest.

"No. An artist. He took his pants off at the pub."

"Xavier took his pants off?" Arthur looked stunned, as Sasha tossed the salad.

"No, his friend did. Another crazy artist." She shook her head as she put the chicken on a platter.

Arthur stood and chatted with her, as she organized dinner for them, and set it on the kitchen table, with linen placemats and napkins, on pretty plates. She enjoyed doing things like that for him, and he always noticed it, and complimented her.

"That's a mighty full briefcase you brought home, Sasha," he said, eyeing it as he served himself some salad, looking relaxed and happy. He loved their weekends at the beach. They were sacred to both of them. They never allowed anything to interfere with their weekends except major illness, or some sort of unavoidable event. Otherwise, every Friday, rain or shine, winter or summer, they were on the road to Southampton by seven P.M.

"I'm leaving for Paris on Sunday," she reminded him as they ate their salad, and she served him a piece of the chicken the housekeeper had left for them.

"I forgot. How long are you staying?"

"Four days. Maybe five. I'll be home by the weekend."

They exchanged the classic patter of people who have been married forever, and were used to each other. Nothing important was said, it was just good to be there together. He told her about someone retiring, a minor business deal that hadn't gone according to plan. She told him about a new artist they'd signed, a very talented young painter from Brazil. And she mentioned that Xavier had said he'd try to come to Paris to see her the following week. He was good about doing that, and made his own schedule, unlike Tatianna, who was at the mercy of the photographer she worked for. Her employer worked long hours, and she liked spending the rest of her time with her friends. But then again, she was two years younger than her brother, and still fighting for her independence.

"Who's the girl of the week?" Arthur asked with a look of amusement. He knew his son well, as did Sasha. And as she looked over at Arthur with a smile, she noticed, as she often did, how handsome he still was. Tall, lean, fit, with chiseled features and a strong chin. She had been in love with him since the moment he walked into her life. More so now than ever in fact. She knew how lucky she was. Many of her friends in New York were divorced, one or two were widowed, and none of them ever seemed to be able to find a man. They never failed to tell her how lucky she was. She knew it anyway. Arthur had been the love of her life since the day they met.

"The last time I asked it was some artist's model he met in drawing class." Sasha grinned. Xavier was famous among his friends and in the family for having a constantly changing chorus line of adoring women at his feet. He was extremely handsome, and a nice person on top of it, and women always found him irresistible. He was equally unable to resist them. "I don't even ask their names anymore," Sasha said, clearing the table, as her husband smiled admiringly at her. She put their dishes in the dishwasher. They had a low-maintenance li

these days, although when the children were still at home, they had had serious dinners together every night. Now he and Sasha ate a light, easy meal at night in the kitchen, which was simpler.

"I haven't asked Xavier the names of his girlfriends in years." Arthur laughed at her comment. "Every time I called one of them by name, it turned out he'd had five since then. I know better now." He went to change into khaki pants, and a comfortable old sweater, and Sasha did the same.

Twenty minutes later they were ready to leave, and took off in Sasha's station wagon. She still kept it after the kids left, because it was useful to pick up work from young artists. She had some groceries in the back, and a small overnight bag for each of them. They kept their beach clothes in Southampton, so they didn't have to bring much with them. She also had her suitcase for Paris, and the bulging briefcase he had mentioned. She was planning to go to the airport from Southampton on Sunday morning, and would be leaving nearly at dawn, in order to get to Paris at a decent hour in the evening. When she had to, she took the red-eye, but there was nothing pressing, and it made more sense for her to take the day flight, although she hated to miss Sunday with Arthur.

They were in Southampton at ten o'clock, and Sasha was surprised to realize she was tired. As always, Arthur had done the driving, and she had dozed off on the trip out, and was happy to climb into bed with him before midnight. They sat on the deck before that, and looked out at the ocean in the moonlight. The weather was warm and balmy, the night crystal clear. And once in bed, they fell asleep the moment their heads hit the pillow.

As they so often did at the beach, they made love when they woke up in the morning. Afterward, they lay together and cuddled. Their loving had not suffered from boredom over the years, if anything it had gotten better from familiarity and deep affection. He followed her into the bathroom afterward, and she bathed while he showered. She loved their lazy Southampton mornings. Afterward, they went down to the kitchen together, she made breakfast, and they took a long walk on the beach. It was a glorious day, hot and sunny, with barely even a breeze. It was the first week in October, and fall would put a chill in the air soon, but not just yet. Summer still seemed to be here.

Arthur took Sasha out to dinner on Saturday at a small Italian restaurant they both loved. They sat on the deck at the house afterward, drinking wine and talking. Life seemed easy and peaceful. They went to bed early that night, as Sasha had to get up early the next morning to go to the airport and catch the flight to Paris. She hated to leave him, but it was an ordinary occurrence in their lives. Leaving him for four or five days was nothing. She snuggled up to him in bed that night, and kept her arms around him, her body pressed close to his as she fell asleep. She had to get up at four, and leave at five, to be at the airport by seven, for her nine A.M. flight. It would land her in Paris at nine P.M. Paris time, and she'd be at the house by eleven at night, local time, and get a decent night's sleep before working the next day.

When the alarm went off at four, she heard it and turned it off quickly, held Arthur for a long moment, and then got up regretfully. She tiptoed to the bathroom in the dark, and dressed in blue jeans and a black sweater. She wore a comfortable pair of old Hermès loafers that had seen better days. But she had long since stopped dressing fashionably for long flights. Comfort seemed more important. She usually slept on planes. She stood for a long moment

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