

Anna could not believe her eyes. He made it.

“You have no idea how excited I am!” she said in his embrace, followed by a courtesy kiss on his cheek. “You look amazing.”

She had made a terrible understatement. Martin looked devilishly handsome in his plain white tee shirt and jeans. His eyes glimmered in the daylight when he smiled, and seeing him outside school was thrilling beyond words.

He’d brought nicely wrapped presents for the birthday girls—Mary-Anne and Lucia.

The house was a frenzy of kids running all over the place and more adults chattering and getting the party set up.

In the wake of preparations, Anna had protested against making the birthday a “church affair”, but it was too late, Lady Lydia Hampton had her way in the end and *viola*.

“Debbie!” Anna called out when she found her sister decorating the terrace. Debbie’s face lit up on the sight of their much-expected guest. She had never met him in person before but figured it was Martin that was approaching her, flanked by Anna.

A prompt introduction followed and Debbie was enthralled about the presents. “Thank you so much, Martin; the girls will love it.”

Martin was amazed at the elaborate setup and was particularly stumped by the variety of food and drinks, not to mention and the array of birthday cakes on a massive table on the terrace.

“I thought you mentioned that this is their first-year party?” Martin had to ask when they left the terrace to find Anna’s parents.

“Yep. The twins are one today,” Anna affirmed. She knew exactly what he was thinking. “I told you my mom was a handful.”

“Whoa,” he giggled. “This is...a lot.”

“You have no idea. And for the umpteenth time, are you sure you wanna do this?”

“What, meet your parents? Of course, I do. Can I be here and not say hello to them?”

*Touché.*

Lydia appeared out of nowhere, and not without her friends Pastor Bridgette, also known as *The White Witch*, and Mrs. Greene. Those two lurked around every single Hampton family occasion since Anna was born. *Sickening.*

Age was manifest in their greying hair and creasing skin, but nothing about their piercing gazes and skills in snide commentary had changed. Knowing this, Anna was prepared to protect Martin from the vultures.

“Mom, this is my friend, Martin St. Claire,” Anna began.

“Hello, Mrs. Hampton,” said Martin, extending his hand to her.

Lydia scanned the dashing young man from head to toe and was not subtle about it. “Hello, Martin,” she finally responded, accepting his handshake.

“St. Claire?” interrupted the *White Witch*. Of course, she couldn’t help herself. “Southside St. Claire?”

*You have got to be kidding me.* Did she know Martin’s family too? Anna discarded her surprise before it found expression on her face.

This wasn’t far-fetched.

When she was not being self-aggrandizing, Pastor Bridgette knew almost every family in the state of Georgia...and that was no exaggeration.

Names and places; she was a walking directory. It was like a superpower.

“Yes, ma’am,” Martin responded.

Pastor Bridgette smiled in recollection. “You’re Councillor Jameson’s son? Clara’s youngest?”

Martin affirmed.

“That...that’s a nice family...”

Anna had spent the better part of her life loathing this woman, but that was the first time that she’d approved of anything concerning her. Splendid.

She whisked him away to meet her father, giddy as a child.

It was beyond tentative now; Martin St. Claire was *the* man for her. And just when she’d thought that the day couldn’t get any better...

“Anna, would you...go out on a date with me?”

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Date night.

As Martin St. Claire had come to discover, Anna Hampton knew how to make a captivating entrance. Several minutes after her arrival, he wasn’t over her breathtaking presence.

He stole glances at her beauty and relished how she blushed under his occasional scrutiny as they ate. She looked ravishing in that bottle green velvet halter-neck dress that clung to her svelte body, showing off her supple skin, and contrasting mesmerizingly with her cookie-brown irises.

“You’re beautiful, Anna,” he reminded her as often as he got the chance, and her cheeks would go bright red, enough to light up a small room.

Perfection was the night's theme. The moon was out in all her glory, flanked by a smatter of sparkling dots scattered all over the night sky.

Their first date was at a nice rooftop restaurant with more empty seats than people, but with an ambiance that soothed the soul. The waiter had been prompt and friendly, and the food was moderately-priced and exquisite.

“So, I was thinking; is there a remote chance that we ran into each other at least once while growing up? I refuse to believe that we lived in the same town and completely missed each other. Any chance you remember running into a little lump of a boy? Curly hair, stubby nose?”

Anna giggled. “What? You had curly hair growing up?”

“You make that seem like a bad thing. Make no mistake, Madame, I was very handsome.”

“Oh really? Tell me about it,” laughed Anna.

“I looked like a cherub, but chubbier.”

“Fascinating. Now I'm having images in my head of younger, cherub you.”

“Ha-ha, how's it coming?”

“Bizarre. You were probably cuter than all these versions my mind is coming up with. Put me out of this curiosity with a photo or something?”

Martin belly-laughed. “Sure. But I don't have one here. I'll get you one the next time we see, hang in there,” he teased. “Okay, so, enough about me. Let's turn the spotlight to you for a bit, if you don't mind, of course.”

Anna took another chunk of steak into her mouth and chewed noiselessly while Martin waited.

“Well, there isn't much to tell. As you may have noticed, I had an incredibly strict Christian mother...”

“I told you she'd like me,” Martin chipped in.

“Oh yes, you did. And at this rate, I cannot help but suspect that you're a wizard or something.”

Martin laughed again. “I'm sorry I interrupted...proceed, please.”

“Nah, it's okay. Where was I? Oh yeah, strict mom, and my dad...he was not around all the time, so, I didn't get to move around as much as I'd have loved. It was school, church, and then home for me.”

“Oh, that triangle movement. Sounds like you hated it,” Martin said, lifting the glass of white wine to his mouth.

“More than anything. I mean, it seemed to work well for my sister, Debbie, but me? I was a social butterfly in a steel cage; do you realize how frustrating it could get?”

“I can imagine.”

Anna hated talking about her childhood, but Martin was so easy to talk to. She had feared that this conversation would claw at past wounds and make her upset, but it felt oddly soothing, telling Martin all about it. She was having so much fun and she couldn't stop.

She told him everything there was; all the drama featuring her mother and the infamous White Witch.

Martin found the nickname pretty amusing.

“Did you ever call her that to her face? *The White Witch*?” he teased.

“And have my mother condemn me to death at the gallows? No, thank you. I did have a nasty exchange with her once, though. Shortly before she got transferred to our church parish in Alabama. And that day, my mom nearly got me kicked out of the house because I'd been ‘possessed of the Devil.’”

Anna smiled faintly.

“I'm sorry you had to go through all that, Anna.”

“Oh come on, don't be silly. It's all in the past now, and I'm putting all that toxic junk away...behind me. Now, my only commitment is living my best life, one day at a time.”

“You should do that; you deserve it.”

Another wonderful moment of silence took over, and they reveled in it.

The gentle music that was played in the background and their heartbeats found a rhythm, and he wouldn't stop staring at her at intervals. Chills surged down her spine every time he did it, after which she'd long for him to do it again.

“I...have a question,” Anna broke the silence.

“Let's have it.”

His hands reached across the table for hers and his fingers interlocked with hers. Her question faded away from remembrance faster than heated wax.

That moment, it became clear that there was no going back on what Anna felt for Martin. That whether she was willing to admit it or not, she had fallen in love with him.

What was not to love about Martin? He was a holy blend of everything she'd seen and loved in men.

Anna Hampton had been through a couple of relationships in the past, most of which were dead on arrival. Not one of those other men came close to Martin St. Claire. He was in a league of his own.

This had very little to do with his physical charm; she was mentally attracted to this man. She loved his mind and his soul. Much about him was still shrouded in mystery, but time was generous.

And with every passing day, she found stronger conviction in that he had come to stay.