
Playing with Fire

Diana Appleyard

Chapter One

Laure

'Mum!'

'What?'

'Where's my book bag? It's disappeared again.'

'Sophie, chérie, you're so hopeless. It's where you left it.'

'You always say that. If I knew where I left it then it wouldn't be lost, would it, dur?'

'Don't use that horrible expression. And don't be so cheeky. I shall ban television completely. You watch too much of that American rubbish.'

Sophie's footsteps echo away down the York stone of the wide hallway, palely lit by winter sunlight filtering through the arched stained-glass window above the front door.

'We're going to be late, darling,' Laure calls after her retreating back.

'No, we won't be. You fuss too much. We never are.' Sophie's voice drifts out from the snug door, where she is pulling plum-coloured cushions off one of the two large squashy cream sofas. Laure sighs as she hears the cushions thump against the wooden floor. She loathes mess, cannot think if a room is untidy.

In the five years they have owned the Rectory, she has created her own contemporary style within the gracious framework of the big old house. In rooms filled by the previous owners with country-house clutter, hulking antiques and chintz, Laure has placed large, comfortable sofas, low polished tables with just one thoughtfully placed ornament and on the walls hang striking works of modern art. The rooms, which used to be glaringly lit by ornate chandeliers, are bathed in pools of light from elegant table lamps and small, discreet spotlights regulated by a dimmer switch. Her friend Cassie says it is like living in a Country Interiors spread and too irritatingly perfect for words.

'Ah ha. Here you are. How did you get there?' Sophie's voice, finding her bag, precedes her through the doorway.

Laure picks up her car keys to the Renault people carrier, winding a pink and blue checked scarf around her neck, vivid against the plain black cashmere polo neck. She knots it in the fashionable way around her neck, and buttons up the tailored black velvet frock coat against the cold February wind outside. Her hair is caught up in a bun, carelessly, with a glittery bulldog clip belonging to Sophie, and shining tendrils of her long, wavy light brown hair escape around her heart-shaped face.

She peers into the oak-framed mirror above the halfcircular ormolu hall table, pulling down her mouth to tighten the unlined, lightly freckled pale skin on her cheeks and rub away a tiny smudge of mascara from under one eye. She slips the keys into the pocket of her coat, and her eyes flick back to the kitchen table, just visible through the double pale-oak doors. She hates leaving any breakfast plates on the table, but she is coming straight home. She surveys the stone hallway, looking for Bobo, the ginger tomcat who will lick Sophie's bowl, still half full of Weetabix, clean, if unattended. There is no sign of him. In fact, he is already in the kitchen, lying low under a chair until he hears the front door slam. Like all cats, he is a master of tactical planning.

'Don't care if we're late. It's double maths first thing anyway.' Sophie emerges from the snug, swinging her maroon book bag. Laure reaches out to smooth down a bump Sophie's hasty brushing has left in her blonde hair, pulled back into an untidy ponytail. Sophie twitches away from the grooming hands of her mother.

'Nick rang last night.'

'Did he? When? How is he? Why didn't you wake me?' Sophie's face lights up. She adores her older brother. In the holidays he forgets his teenage cool and they roll and tussle together like puppies, just as they did when they were younger.

'You were fast asleep, he rang after prep. Anyway, you know Nick. All he did was grunt, I hardly got anything out of him. He's in a rugby match today. I said I'd try to get up to watch.'

'Oh, I wish I could go. You never come and watch me,' she adds, wickedly and untruthfully. Sophie nurtures an unfounded belief that her mother favours Nick. It is a useful weapon when she wants something, and she is a born manipulator. The rows between Nick and Gerard fuel this opinion, as Laure has been forced to stand Nick's ground increasingly against his father.

In the last year, there have been many more rows. Laure knows that when Gerard shouts he is not genuinely angry with them, they are simply the whipping boys against the growing pressures of his work. Understanding it does not make it any easier to bear, however, and she feels she is running out of excuses for his bad moods. Not enough, is Gerard's criticism of Nick. Not enough achievement, not enough academic work, not enough helping around the house, not enough respect, not enough thanks for all the money they were spending on his education, money they could ill afford. During the Christmas holidays father and son were like two fireworks, set to ignite each other. Laure was caught between them, trying to douse the simmering embers. If allowed to explode, she knew that unforgivable things could be said. Sophie, ever the drama queen, picked up on the emotional tension straight away and became far more confrontational, to divert attention to herself. By the end of the holidays Laure felt worn out by constantly having to placate Gerard, and keep the children away from him when he was tired, as he seemed so often to be.