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about 775 words

Breaking the News

by Corinne Kalet

Zoe pressed the button on her grandfather's front door and winced at the buzz of the doorbell. That buzz was afternoons fumbling miserably at the piano, summer mornings in stiflingly humid greenhouses, evenings sitting perfectly still as the adults droned on about politics. Her finger was barely off the button when the door opened, and Bernard the butler was standing in front of her.

"Miss Zoe," Bernard said, inclining his head slightly.

"Bernie!" Zoe exclaimed. "How the hell are you?"

"Fine, Miss Zoe. Do come in." Bernard stepped back as Zoe crossed the threshold. He motioned to the first door on the right. "Your grandfather will see you in the study."

Of course he would, he always did. Sure, they were family, but everyone who visited was received in the stuffy room, complete with a dark mahogany desk, forest green velvet curtains, and plaid wall paper. Zoe perched on the overstuffed leather couch. Her legs once swung over the edge of this couch. That annoyed her grandfather to no end, leading to her first lessons in sitting like a little lady. She was tempted to throw her legs across the couch and lounge out, but she decided against it. Maybe it would be better not to anger him right off the bat. This discussion would be bad enough.

"Zoe, my dear, what a pleasure to see you," Grandfather said as he walked into the study. Zoe stood up automatically, inwardly cursing herself for the ingrained reaction.

"Hello, Grandfather."

"To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?" Grandfather asked.

"I would like to invite you to my house for dinner tonight. To, um, well--"

"Zoe, please speak clearly. You know muttering is unbecoming."

"Yes, Grandfather. I would like you to meet my, uh, ahem, my friend. No, I mean, the person I'm going to marry." Whew, it was finally out.

Grandfather's eyebrows raised. "Well, it's about time you settled down and started a family!"

"Yes, well, does that mean you'll come?" Zoe asked the ground.

"Certainly. Six?"

"Six will be fine."

"Wonderful!" Grandfather said. "I look forward to meeting him!"

Zoe opened her mouth, and then she closed it. She stood and faced the door to the room, itching for her escape. "We'll see you tonight, then."

“Tonight.”

* * *

Zoe sat on a barstool at her kitchen counter, head in her hands. She had picked up the phone to call her grandfather to cancel at least ten times. Maybe a snack would help get her courage up. She was reaching for a bag of chips when the back door opened, and a grocery bag with legs walked in. Immediately, a smile broke out across Zoe’s face. She jumped off the stool and grabbed the bag.

“Perfect, you got everything I listed!” Zoe said, peering into the bag.

“Of course I did, but I need a shower desperately. He’s coming at six, right?”

“Yep, you better get that butt in the shower! I’ll get dinner started.”

Zoe unpacked the groceries onto the counter and started cooking. Before she knew it, the doorbell rang. Her heart stopped for a moment.

“I can do this, I can do this,” she said to herself, wiping her hands on her apron. She called out toward the bedroom, “He’s here!”

A muffled reply came back, “I’ll be right out!”

Zoe opened the front door to find her Grandfather on the step, bottle of wine in his hand.

“Hello again, Grandfather.”

“Zoe, my dear,” Grandfather said, walking into the foyer. “Thank you for having me. Where is your husband-to-be?”

Zoe motioned with her arm toward the bedroom and lead her grandfather into the living room. They were just about to sit when the clatter of heels could be heard in the hallway. Zoe’s face lit up in a wide smile as a beautiful brunette in a long black skirt and a flowy flowered blouse walked into the room. Zoe stood and linked arms with the brunette.

"Grandfather, I would like you to meet Danielle. My fiancée."

Grandfather stood. His mouth opened and then closed. He glanced at the front door.

Zoe's face fell as she noticed his reaction. She and Danielle looked at each other. Danielle stepped forward, hand held out.

"It's so nice to finally meet you, Sir. Zoe has spoken of you often."

"I cannot say the same, unfortunately," Grandfather said.

He glanced at the door again and then back to Danielle's outstretched hand. With a visible sigh, he reached out and grasped Danielle's hand.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Danielle."