

Chapter 1

Poetry and Prose

1954

Adina Bancroft was having a poorly day. She swore as she stubbed her toe for the fourth time against the unpaved driveway, then promptly dropped her new suitcase into a puddle. She hobbled around until the pain subsided and glanced up at the large property just ahead. It was a beautiful building with large, clean windows and a chimney that could be seen for miles away and yet, despite all of the design that had gone into making it so aesthetically beautiful, no one had thought to deal with the gravel pathway leading up to it.

She had purchased a new suitcase—specifically for such an occasion—with wheels at the bottom of it, but there was no way she'd be able to wheel it up this terrain without it tipping. So, with a *humph*, she picked up the case, shook the water off it, and marched defiantly onwards. Adina was nearly at the front doors when something caught her eye and she turned to see a man staring at her, from just within the property's fence. He was rather handsome, though he sported grass stains on his trousers and dirt on his hands. She gave him a once-over, looking for any trowels or other gardening tools on his person, but he seemed entirely unprepared.

"Hello," she said. Then, thinking he might not have heard her, she said louder, "HELLO."

"Are you one of the writers?" the man asked.

Adina straightened proudly. "Yes, yes, I am. Are *you*?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, then are you going to give me a hand with my bag?"

Her question glided past the man as he looked toward the estate. "McCarthy will be waiting for you inside," he said.

"McCarthy?" Adina looked at the doors, wondering if she had misread the newspaper posting. "I thought this was the Somerset Estate."

She turned back to the man, but he was gone. The only proof that he'd ever been there was the sound of wet grass beneath shoes as she heard him walking away. She looked at the large building again and, trying to shake the feeling of being so small, pulled a discreet flask from her purse and took a final sip. She turned it over for good measure and watched, disheartened, as

nothing came out. Tucking the empty flask back in her purse, she oriented herself and raised her shoulders high.

“A new start,” she said, lifting the suitcase again. “Now, let’s just hope the inside of this place is better mannered than the outside.”

She knocked on the door a solid three times but instead of someone opening it for her, the large oak swung open with a low growl. The fanciest buildings she had were hotels, usually on the rare occasion she was hired as a caterer. The room she entered now made all of the hotels seem like a part of a Hooverville.

The floors were a dark, polished wood that must have cost a fortune, but they were hardly noticeable beneath the beautiful rugs covering them. They were Moroccan—they must have been—like the ones she had seen in catalogs. Adina was certain there were intricate patterns she couldn’t see from her vantage point and she almost felt guilty for walking across them. But she held her head up high and reminded herself that she was meant to be there.

The walls were similar to the floor’s coloring and instead of paintings, there were large tapestries that matched the rugs’ color. The hall was dimly lit and there were no uncovered windows; that was perhaps the only strange thing. She had seen large windows from the driveway, but on the inside, they were covered by ragged curtains, and certainly not expensive ones at that. There were loud voices coming from a room farther down and she lifted the suitcase as she walked to avoid scratching the floor.

One of the voices had a Midwestern accent. The other sounded more detached in their words, like they were proofing their grammar before speaking. She rounded a corner and the voices became clearer.

“I s’pose it’s not every day you get a chance like this,” the louder of the two was saying. “And by pure happenstance! Not like me to get the paper. How’d you end up here?”

They were still speaking when Adina entered the room.

“An old friend in the publishing industry.” The second voice belonged to a tall individual with shoulder-length hair and narrowed eyes. “They presumed it would be a good opportunity for uninterrupted work.” They turned to Adina. “And you are?”

“Adina Bancroft,” she said, stepping forward to take the Southern man’s outstretched hand. He gripped her hand with a firm confidence.

“Rhett Wilkens,” he said.

“Mandela,” the taller one said. “I’m a professor at Rutgers.”

“I’m a doctor,” Rhett added.

“Wonderful,” Adina said, glancing around the room.

There was a large fireplace wedged between two bookshelves and a seated area in the front of it. The windows here were just as large as ones at the front of the estate, but these had new curtains. The rug in the center of the room was made from some type of animal fur and there was a chandelier above them. The net worth of this room alone put her family’s home to shame and she smoothed the wrinkles in her dress, hoping no one would notice the tears she had done her best to sew shut.

“We were just talkin’ about how we showed up here,” Rhett said. “Was it in your paper, too?”

Adina nodded. “The restaurant where I work—part time,” she added, “has a classified bulletin board. It was a compelling advertisement. I’m a writer full time, you see.”

“How are you somethin’ half time and somethin’ full time?” Rhett said.

Adina ignored him, turning to Mandela. “Rutgers, you said? I’m surprised the advertisement reached that far.”

Mandela shrugged. “They must have cast a wide net.”

“I wonder where our host is,” Rhett muttered, taking a few paces toward the door.

Three heads turned as there was a loud yell and thump from the hallway. A young woman tripped into the room, dropping her bags on the way in and only stopping midair when Rhett threw out his arm to catch her. She clung onto him, catching her balance, as dark curls flew across her face.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, as Rhett let go of her. “Hi. Thank you. Sorry. Um,” she looked around quickly, “hello.”

“Hi,” Adina said, biting back laughter.

She was the youngest of the group and her wrinkled clothing matched her uncombed hair. Her eyes were wild and she looked like the type of person to jump at a leaf falling.

“Um, this is the writers’ retreat, right?” she said in a small voice. “Only, if it isn’t, I should flag down the taxicab before they leave.”

“You’re in the right place,” Mandela said.

The young woman hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Sure. I’m Zoë. Um, Zoë Whitaker, that is.”

Four things happened next in a very important order. First, the window nearest to Mandela rattled—angrily. At the same time, a piece of wood atop the fire cracked, and Adina wondered why she hadn't noticed it was lit. As half of the group looked at the window and the other half looked at the fireplace, an odd pair entered the room. A man as wide as he was tall, in a pinstripe suit, accompanied by an elderly woman with a permanent hunch and scowl drawn across her face.

The man walked with amusement in his step—the woman hardly lifted her feet—as they entered the room, and this was the third thing that happened, though no one noticed it until the fourth thing occurred. The man cleared his throat, waited until four pairs of eyes were on him, and then said loudly,

“Welcome to the Somerset Estate. My name is McCarthy and I'm delighted to have you here.”

It was the doctor who spoke first. Rhett leaned back in his chair, slinging one leg carelessly atop the other.

“So, McCarthy, tell us about this place. I ain't ne'er seen a gate that large before.”

At this, the scraggly gray-haired woman who sat across from them frowned, as though she were personally insulted that Rhett didn't know the history of the estate. McCarthy took this in stride. He nodded graciously and exchanged a look with the woman, which had to hold some significance, for the housekeeper scurried off and returned with five glasses in one hand and a champagne bottle in the other.

“Wonderful question, Mr. Wilkens,” McCarthy said, taking a glass. “Thank you, Vera. I hope none of you mind imbibing.”

“No, thank you,” Adina said, as a glass of champagne was offered to her. She bit the inside of her cheeks as her mouth filled with saliva. “I'm a...Methodist.”

“Ah, we'll find some ginger ale then.” McCarthy directed Vera to do just that, as he continued with his introduction. “The Somerset Estate was built at the start of this century, but its renown exceeds its age. Along with the rooms you've already seen—the grand foyer, kitchen, dining room, and this fireside room, of course—the estate also has a billiards room, indoor swimming pool, outdoor swimming pool, conservatory, library, study, armory, eleven bathrooms, and fourteen bedrooms.”

“An armory?” Rhett repeated, eyes wide.

McCarthy smiled. “I doubt this property has ever been inhabited by enough people to fill every room, but the architect who designed it loved to have company.”

“The architect lived here?” Zoë said. “That explains why it’s so, um, grand.”

McCarthy nodded. “Mr. Somerset and his wife loved throwing parties. I imagine that he saw it as a way to present his work, as well.” He glanced around at the half circle of writers. “Now, the invitation did mention that this is a *structured* retreat, correct?”

This led into an explanation of the rules within the estate. Each occupant would be given their own bedroom and bathroom. Writing was not allowed in private quarters, though the occupants were encouraged to brainstorm and mull over ideas in any room at any hour they felt necessary. This, McCarthy explained, was modeled after popular food diets: the longer an individual could not eat, the more fat they burned; the longer a writer was separated from their story, the greater their ideas would be when finally reunited.

“We’ll have breakfast at seven in the dining room, lunch at noon, and dinner at six,” McCarthy said, occasionally eying Vera for a confirming nod. “After that, we’ll have some brandy in the fireside room and you’ll each have time to share what you’ve written in the day.”

Adina pursed her lips as the taste of brandy fluttered through her mind.

“Or ginger ale, of course,” McCarthy added.

“A month,” Vera interrupted. Her voice was old and raspy, matching her appearance quite well. “You have a month to write and then the retreat is finished. Isn’t that right, McCarthy?”

“That’s right. And in that month, well, we can provide you with little in the way of craft,” McCarthy admitted, “but we are delighted to offer you lodging, warmth, and perhaps even a little inspiration. After all, stories are the best sustenance.”

“The architect built this room as an addition to the home,” McCarthy explained, as the occupants followed him down a long, stone hallway. It was the last stop on their tour for the day, with him promising that they’d see more of the property in due time.

Adina buttoned up her coat with frigid fingers. As they approached the conservatory, the hallway became more reminiscent of an outdoor path, with large windows carved into the stone, missing their glass. It couldn’t have been the original intention of the architect for there to be this wide-open space, permitting hail or rain or snow or animal to crawl into the estate whenever it so chose, but the moss that adorned the edges of the window suggested that they had been this way for years.

“In the winter months, it became apparent that his wife, Anna, needed spring,” McCarthy said, coming to a halt in front of a large glass door. He pulled from his pocket a key, hanging from a long red ribbon.

The writers entered the room and fanned out at the top of a small staircase, which led down into the sweltering room. Decorated with glass windows that started at the floor and ended at the ceiling, the conservatory was at least fifteen degrees warmer than anywhere else in the estate, through heat conservation alone. There were hundreds of plants, some crawling towards the tops of the windows and others sprawling horizontally across the floor. There was a buzzing noise from the other end of the room, like there might have been an apiary nearby.

The only relief from the heat was a small pond in the center of the room, with a man-made waterfall emptying into it. The group trailed behind McCarthy as he launched into an elaborate tour that included both the English and Latin names of every plant they passed, enunciating each name with the kind of pride that could only come from preserving such a place.

“This would all be good for a recipe book,” Rhett said as they went. “Like for medicines and such.

“A recipe book,” Adina scoffed. “You’re not thinking big enough, doctor. Think of all the stories you could set in such a beautiful room. A green-thumbed widow falling in love or...or a dinner party that turns into a whodunit! Classic. Wouldn’t you agree, professor?”

Mandela, at her side, shrugged. “It’s less about where you set your story and more about the story you’re planning to tell. If you don’t know your story, then your setting won’t save you. Even if it is filled with an impressive amount of peperomia orba.”

“Peperomia rotundifolia,” Rhett corrected them. “Creeping jade.”

“Indeed,” said McCarthy. “This conservatory has some of the most exotic plants and animals. It’s a true gem.”

“A play, then!” Adina announced. “That’s what I’ll write.” She looked over at the professor. “What better way to tell a story than to have your characters tell it themselves?”

Zoë nodded but said nothing.

“Animal?” Mandela said.

“Koi.” None of them had noticed Vera joining the group. She pointed to a small, stone-bordered pond across the vast room. “Fish and stuff.”

McCarthy waved the group along towards a rhododendron bush near the window. The conservatory had been built onto the eastern side of the estate, allowing them to go farther in that direction than any of the occupants had ventured before. It was a strange revelation to look out the windows at a view that they’d assumed would be obscured by fog, and instead be treated to an ordinary looking plot of land, no different than the grounds they already knew. Mandela asked a question regarding a plant, using its Latin name with a strange accent out of principle, and the

occupants trudged along through the conservatory, each silently working through character arcs in their minds. They were nearly out of the conservatory when Adina paused at one of the windows.

“Mr. McCarthy,” she said, “what’s that?”

“A maze,” Mandela replied, passing by her. “It’s not too challenging to find your way through. I tried it yesterday. Took maybe an hour.”

“No,” Adina pointed at a small stone structure across the grounds, well outside of the maze’s orbit. “*That.*”

“Ah, that is the Somerset Chapel,” McCarthy said. “Another gem. I do believe that it’s lunchtime, though. Perhaps you can visit another time.”