



On Thin Ice

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: A kiss that shouldn't have happened. A love that can't be denied.

A choice that could ruin us both.

Sinclair Whittier kissed me once—and then promised it would never happen again. But that kiss was a lie. Or maybe it was the only truth we've ever known.

He offers to pay for my future. I'm still paying for my past.

I shouldn't trust him. But then we start to talk. To take long walks in the warm late summer evenings. To sit across a chessboard and see each other clearly for the first time. And every time he looks at me like I'm his, I forget why I ever hated him.

When we fall into each other's arms, it feels inevitable. Like we were never meant to be anything else.

But loving him also feels like betraying everything I've ever known—especially my father. And when he takes me to the ballet and introduces me to his powerful family, I can feel the fairytale cracking at the edges.

Because no matter how much I love him, I know how our story ends.

On thin ice, every step is a risk. And this time, I might fall too far to ever climb back out.

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Chapter 1

The morning after Sinclair kissed me, I felt awful. Not because of the kiss, but because I'd barely slept. So much had happened over the past twenty-four hours and I had no one I could talk to about it, no one to help me process.

That person was usually my father, but there was no way I could tell him what I was going through right now. Although I knew my dad loved me unconditionally, how would he feel about the fact that I had been kissed by our worst enemy—and done nothing to stop it?

In fact, I'd done the opposite. It had been something I'd been craving for a while now, even though it contradicted so much of what I felt.

As I arose, putting on sweatpants and a soft pink t-shirt, I tried not to think about any of it. But it was difficult. I'd spent all night reliving that kiss—the way his mouth felt against mine, the hardness of his chest against my fingertips. The way he smelled...the way he tasted.

His voice in my ear.

His words, though...they'd said the exact opposite of what his body had. And I heard over and over his last words: "Have a good night, Annalise."

Before last night, my body had ached for him but, this morning, it was my heart. He'd said, "I don't know why I did that. I shouldn't have." And I felt the same way—directed at myself.

In my entire life, I could love anyone. Why was I falling for a Whittier?

After washing my face and pulling my hair up into a ponytail, I tiptoed downstairs to take care of the dishes. Even though it was before six, sunlight filled the mansion from all directions.

Everything in the kitchen was where it had been when I'd left—an obscene amount of dishes stacked beside the sink. Again, this was a big reminder of how different this world was from mine. Sometimes, my dad and I would have dessert on a different plate or have a bowl of soup next to a plate that held a grilled cheese sandwich, but we didn't have twelve courses or however the hell many there'd been last night—and each one had been distinct with a different food. It wasn't like someone had asked for seconds.

And the dishes themselves were crazy, full of items I'd never tried and I didn't know that I'd want to. Caviar, crème brûlée—and what was the difference between Romano cheese and Pecorino Romano? And did anyone really care? And yet, while serving, the chef had asked us to be precise.

I may have failed at that a bit.

As I ground beans for the coffee, I tried not to focus on the humiliation I'd felt earlier that night—not just being in that stupid overly sexy outfit, but also receiving all that unwanted attention from one of Sinclair's handsy employees. Even being rescued by Sinclair couldn't wipe away that feeling of shame.

Even as I went through the motions in the kitchen, my tireless brain continued processing the night before. I'd hoped moving—doing something—would help, but it wasn't.

I gave the dishwasher a quick peek and knew there wasn't enough room for

everything in there, and, besides, I was pretty sure this china needed to be washed by hand. I knew there was a dish drainer somewhere around here that Edna used. It was, of course, under the sink. The chef had used a number of skillets but either he or the sous chef had washed them, because they were piled on a dish towel beside the sink, clean and dry, ready to be put away.

I had no idea where anything went—but I managed to find places where I thought everything belonged. I hoped I wasn't making Edna's job more difficult.

Then I filled the sink with hot water and glanced at the intricate details on the delicate china while remembering that the flatware was made of actual silver, and I was glad I was passing on the dishwasher.

And then I remembered—this wasn't all. There would be glasses in the beverage nook as well. I didn't know if Edna washed them in the small sink in there or brought them in here, but I decided to bring them here. My father always had a specific order in which he washed, and I'd always followed it, finding it to be good advice: glasses and mugs first, then dishes, plasticware, silverware, and miscellany. Pots and pans always came last because they were the dirtiest and greasiest.

I was happy I wouldn't have to deal with them.

The beverage nook had a ridiculous number of glasses. There had only been eight guests—nine people dining—and yet there were over twenty glasses of various shapes and sizes that I needed to remove from here. And that didn't include the ones already in the kitchen that the servers and I had taken from the dining room.

When I went into the pantry area to fetch Edna's cart, I saw it again...that master key. Just like the week earlier, I was tempted to snatch it and see if it worked on the doors on the second floor of the east wing.

But I couldn't betray Sinclair's trust again, at least not so soon after all that had happened. It wouldn't be long before he returned to his beastly ways and then I'd have no problem snooping again.

Before long, I was washing glasses, occasionally taking a sip of freshly brewed coffee, and I was glad I'd come down so early. I didn't want Sinclair to know that I'd told Edna I would take care of it—and I wasn't sure what time he arose on Saturdays.

That was why I'd gotten up so early.

After washing all the glasses, I had only rinsed half before the dish drainer was filled. So I found a tea towel and dried them, one by one. As I stacked them all on the tray, I realized some of them belonged in the kitchen.

Soon, I found all the places the other glasses belonged in the beverage nook and returned to the kitchen to continue. When I put the smallest dishes and silverware in the water, I knew they'd need a little time to soak, so I decided to toast an English muffin for breakfast.

Even keeping my hands busy didn't stop my mind, and I decided to play some music. Although I liked a lot of dance music, I usually listened to artists like Korn and Disturbed because many of their lyrics seemed to tell my story. But today I decided I wanted to hear the music from last night, because the lack of lyrics had somehow spoken to my soul.

I remembered Rodrigo had called one of the pieces The Four Seasons. Doing a quick internet search, I found an old band from the fifties or sixties named that, but that couldn't be right. But once I scrolled past them and the hotel, I found an entry for Vivaldi, saying that The Four Seasons was a group of violin concertos written over a period of a few years. But I didn't care about that. I wanted to hear it.

Rodrigo had said with a touch of sarcasm and possibly boredom that “they all” played this piece. I assumed he’d meant every fine dinner he’d had to serve at, but I hadn’t had the opportunity to hear it over and over like he had.

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After eating a few bites, I began washing dishes again, listening to the piece. The first part was familiar but that only lasted for a bit.

And then Sinclair's voice made me nearly jump out of my skin.

"Well...who knew you listened to classical music?"

Fortunately, I didn't drop the plate in my hand. Turning slightly, I looked at him as he walked over to the counter. "Good morning," I replied, drying off my hands and picking up my phone. "I can turn it off."

"No, that's okay. I like The Four Seasons."

Was I the only person who hadn't known what that was called until last night?

Although I left the music playing, I turned it down before returning to the dishes. Sinclair said, "You made coffee. Thank you."

I murmured a slight You're welcome but stayed focused. I hadn't wanted him to catch me working...but now, since I had been caught, I just wanted to hurry up and finish so I could leave. The potential for things to become awkward between us was far too great to push my luck.

As he silently poured coffee, I was once again distracted. Having him so near made my body start to hum as if I were holding a rod in the air as a thunderstorm brewed overhead—and he was a charge in the cloud, ready to become a lightning bolt to strike me. But, if he did, would he hurt me? What would it feel like? Would it be

worth it?

And the most important question of all: how had I fallen for this man, my enemy?
When exactly had that happened?

When he spoke again, I barely caught it. “When will Edna be here?”

“She won’t. I told her I would do these for her so she didn’t have to come in.”

He wasn’t angry about it like I’d thought he might be. And it took me a moment before I realized he was standing beside me—and he started rinsing the plates, stacking them in the dish drainer.

And I couldn’t help myself as I repeated an echo of his earlier sentiment.
“Well...who knew you could do dishes?”

He chuckled. “I watch television once in a while.” I couldn’t help but shoot an incredulous look at him—because it was funny and strange all at once. Before I could ask, he added, “I’ve been in this kitchen with Edna for a good part of my life. I might not know the intricate details but I get the gist.”

We worked in silence as I passed over to him one plate after another, the piles at my left slowly going down. He had begun drying plates and stacking them, leaving them on the counter close to the side of the refrigerator. When the drainer was full for the second time, he said, “Why don’t we eat breakfast and then we can finish?”

My muffin was already cold, as was my coffee, but he’d been pleasant enough. I only hoped it wasn’t an excuse to talk.

But it wasn’t. We continued listening to Vivaldi until it stopped playing and we were almost done eating when it did. It wasn’t until we returned to the sink, resuming our

earlier tasks, that Sinclair decided to move into more sensitive territory. “Are you okay?”

Had I done something that made him think I wasn’t? “What do you mean?” I asked, handing him one of the remaining plates to be rinsed. But I didn’t make eye contact.

“From last night. Are you all right?”

I decided to be honest. “Uh...overall. I have some bruises on my arm that’ll fade after a few days.”

“Can I see them?”

I shrugged, not wanting this attention but realizing that, if I just got it over with, it would be done soon enough. Dropping the dishcloth in the water, I turned and then rotated my arms so he could see the black and purple marks. If he’d tried, he might have noticed them while we were eating, but I imagined he was avoiding looking at me as much as I’d been trying to do the same.

He held my arm reverently, as if it were a delicate flower that could be crushed if he so much as breathed on it. Although his fingers were gentle, I could feel a heat radiating from them, and my mind went right back to last night’s kiss.

I wanted this man. I wanted him badly, and a huge part of me was beginning to wall off everything I knew about him and his family. Just desiring him felt like I was betraying my father.

Slowly, with the lightest of touch, he circled over the bruise with his thumb, as if he could erase it. “Do you need medical attention? Or...a professional to talk to?”

“No.” But I couldn’t maintain this stance. As I pulled my arm away from his light

hold, I said, "I'm fine," returning to the dishes.

I could sense that he hadn't moved, but I couldn't do this. I couldn't keep wanting him when I shouldn't have him. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing or if the kiss he'd given me last night was something he did frequently. Maybe that kiss had meant nothing to him.

We finished the dishes in silence, my fingers pruny from being in the water for so long. As I dried off my hands, I asked, "Where do all these go?" Although I'd managed to find a home for all the glasses, I had no idea where the silverware and best china went.

"I don't know. That's Edna's purview. We'll let her take care of them Monday morning. They're not too much in the way here."

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He'd done a good job keeping up, wiping off the last plate with the now-damp towel. I picked up the dish drainer, tilting it over the sink so the water would pour out, and dabbed it dry before putting it back where I'd found it. "Thanks for your help."

"I could say the same thing."

There was an awkwardness between us that was palpable, and all I wanted to do was get back to my room and take a shower. I planned to spend some time on one of the patios reading a book, settling on the east side where there were more flowers. But before I could wish him a good day, he said, "Why don't we take a walk?"

"Right now?"

"Sure. Walk off breakfast—and before it gets too hot out. If you wanted to change first..."

I was already wearing sneakers, having discovered early on that the marble and stone floors in a temperature-controlled house were chilly under bare feet. It wasn't so bad in my room since I had rugs on the floor, but out here, I always wore shoes. And part of me was surprised my clothing choices, including shoes, hadn't been part of my contract. "No. This is fine...if you don't mind being seen in public with me wearing sweatpants."

He actually laughed, and I tried not to love the way it made his eyes crinkle. "That's honest running gear—but I promise not to make you run."

We left the kitchen and were soon in the antechamber. Before he opened the door, he

lifted the cover of a keypad that I'd never noticed before, because it blended in with the wall beside the door. After he punched a few buttons, he held the door open for me. Although it was still early, the air was warm and smelled good, and I was glad I'd said yes. I only hoped he would enjoy the relative silence like I was.

Silent here was not the same as silence in Winchester, however. Both places had the same sounds of birds, of course—but in the distance, I could hear the constant hum of traffic. That sound—one of vehicles cruising over asphalt—was ubiquitous here and, even though I didn't spend much time outside, I'd already grown used to it, like how you tune out the sound of a refrigerator in the house.

Still, it was quite peaceful and, as we began walking down the block, I took in my surroundings. While the Whittier home was the biggest and most magnificent, it was not the only mansion in the area. Every home seemed as if it were in competition with its neighbors—not just the homes themselves, but the perfectly manicured lawns and shrubbery, carefully tended flowers and ornaments, not a stone or a leaf out of place. Most of the homes were brick in various shades and hues, but no one would mistake these places as belonging to anyone but one of the wealthiest people in this part of Denver.

It was a neighborhood of people just like the Whittiers.

Before I could muse on it any longer, Sinclair began talking, just as we got to the end of the block. "I wanted to apologize to you."

My mind wrapped around his statement, and part of me wanted to ask which infraction he was feeling sorry about—but we'd had a pleasant enough morning so far and I didn't want to ruin it. "For what?"

Like me, he kept his eyes forward as we crossed the street. "I...knew Danny had a reputation for getting a little handsy with women—and I'd seen him push his luck

once or twice. Not anything egregious...but I should have nipped it in the bud from the first time I'd heard whispers. But I refused to believe the rumors, thinking they were just exaggerations, especially because no one had complained to me, even when I asked them directly. And Danny was such a great employee, able to get other organizations and families to open their wallets wide and contribute to the foundation—and I thought, surely a man this good with people wouldn't be predatory.” He was silent for a few moments and I didn't feel like filling the gap. “Obviously, I was wrong. And that's part of why I wanted to apologize. I put you in harm's way when I should instead be ensuring your safety, especially in the privacy of my home.”

“It's not like you're my bodyguard.”

“No, but I made it worse by making you wear that costume last night.”

Costume? Before questioning that word, though, I realized that I had him at an advantage. For once, the tables were turned, and I tried to remember the Employer Obligations clauses in the contract. I was pretty sure there wasn't anything in it about guaranteeing my safety and, even if there had been, what good would it have done me? Did I have legal recourse over any clause he breached?

Even if I did, it wasn't like I had a lawyer to call.

But I did sense I had a little leverage, especially in regard to the uniform I'd worn the night before that didn't look like any other server's clothing. “What was that all about anyway?”

He let out a sigh so heavy, it would have been audible to someone sitting on the ostentatious porch of the home we were walking past. “Lots of things. One was to remind you that I'm the boss.”

“That hadn’t escaped me.”

“And I wanted to see you in it.”

A lump formed in my throat. Between this admission and the kiss last night, there was no denying he felt the same way about me that I did about him. Did he also struggle with how wrong it was?

And why did that sometimes make me even more desirous of him?

“I suppose I need to apologize for that as well. But what happened last night will never happen again. I don’t just mean what I did—but I’m not going to hold the quarterly meetings here anymore.” As we continued walking, I realized he was actually saying he was sorry. After several more silent steps, he said, “Please tell me the truth. Did I get there in time? You said he didn’t hurt you other than your arms, but I need to know if you’re just not saying anything for fear of retribution.”

“I told you: all he hurt was my arms.”

“And psychologically?”

“I’ll be okay,” I said. If Sinclair hadn’t shown up when he had, I might have felt differently, but his appearance had made all the difference. In a way, he’d been my knight in shining armor, there to rescue me from the dragon. Had he not been there, the entire thing might have felt traumatic.

“Sometimes it takes time—so if you later feel like he did hurt you, please tell me.”

“He didn’t hurt me,” I said, carefully keeping the tone of my voice as calm as a summer lake. “But you did.”

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Sinclair's head whipped to the side as if I'd told him I'd stolen his entire fortune.
“What do you mean?”

We stopped walking then, standing in the middle of the sidewalk under the shade of a huge tree. His eyes scanned mine as if searching for the truth and I decided to just let it all out. “By kissing me. You hurt me.”

“My kiss hurt you?”

“Yes.”

Remorse filled his eyes, really driving home with me that he was a real live human being, full of more emotion and empathy than I ever would have given him credit for. “Please accept my apology. I was...overcome with emotion last night—and I'd probably had a bit too much to drink. That will never happen again.”

“That's not what I mean.” Lowering my eyes, I took one of his large hands in both of mine, relieved that he was letting me. “What I mean is,” I said, forcing myself to look in his eyes, “you made me a promise with that kiss—and now you're breaking it.”

“A promise?”

“Yes. You don't go around kissing everyone you meet like that, do you?”

The struggle in his eyes was undeniable. He was at war with himself, just like the internal turmoil I too was feeling. “Obviously not. But...Annalise, if I may call you that...”

“Please call me Lise.”

“Lise...you know we can’t do anything like that again, and we can’t pursue a relationship. You are far too young, and I’m in a position of authority. How do you think that would look?”

“Who cares what it looks like?” Even as I felt my face burning hot, I kept talking. “I didn’t want that kiss to stop.”

His blue eyes were flooded with shadows, and I imagined stormy seas tossing a ship about like it was a toy. “You’ve got to put it out of your mind right now.”

And he didn’t say another word about it. He turned, indicating that we would be walking back to the house. This time, the silence was different. It was still leaden but this time it was filled with shame. Why had I admitted how I felt about him? I’d given him back the power after holding it for a few brief moments.

Now I looked like a pathetic lovesick dummy...another thing Sinclair Whittier could hold over my head. And part of me wondered if that had been his plan all along.

Chapter 2

For the rest of the weekend, Sinclair and I avoided each other—even at meals. When I finally went down for lunch long after one o’clock on Saturday, I saw evidence that he’d already eaten. The place was big enough that it was easy to not run into each other. It was possible that he’d even left the mansion, but I didn’t know that for certain. All I did know was that I was safest in my room. And it wasn’t until I had to turn in my timesheet Sunday afternoon that I saw him again—and then it was only business.

Monday morning, though, it would be hard for us to ignore each other, especially

with Edna there. When I entered the kitchen, the first thing she said was, “Child, thank you so much for cleaning those dishes for me. You don’t know how much that meant.”

Pretending Sinclair wasn’t sitting at the table already, I crossed over to the coffee pot. “Did Mr. W. tell you he helped?” Although I’d consented to letting him call me by my first name and inside I called him by his first, I wasn’t about to cross that line out loud without permission.

“He did?” Edna delivered a butter dish and a jar of honey to the table, but her focus was on Sinclair. “Is that true?”

“Is what true?” he asked gruffly, as if he hadn’t been paying attention to our conversation.

It was the first time I’d looked directly at him this morning. He was wearing a charcoal suit with a white shirt and blue tie—and he looked so damn delicious, I wanted to gobble him up. His admission on Saturday that he felt the same had done nothing to quell my desire. In fact, it had made it worse, and I wasn’t sure what to do about that.

He’d already said no.

“You helped Lise with the dishes?”

His lips quirked up in a sexy smile, subtle but hard to miss. “Is that so hard to believe?”

She frowned, but when she spoke, I could tell that frown was playful. “All these years and you’ve never helped me with the dishes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Technically, I did.”

“Technically. Hmph.” Edna returned to the island just as I was finishing up my coffee. “Sit down and I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

“What are we having?”

“For you, fresh pineapple—and don’t tell Mr. Whittier, but I got you some bagels and cream cheese.”

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I could have cried. Edna seemed to remember every little thing I told her and, while that might not always be a plus, in this instance, it was. I didn't eat bagels regularly, but one day a month, I'd go to the little coffee stand at the community college and buy one. I'd toast it myself, using their rotating toaster and then spread the cream cheese with one of their disposable plastic knives.

It was a way to celebrate making it through another month of school.

Lots of students I got to know during my year at WCC seemed to breeze through their classes, but I wasn't so lucky. I questioned if maybe I was stupid or dense, because it was harder for me. I spent hours upon hours reading and studying and the only thing that kept me going was that I was achieving good grades—mostly As, an occasional B, and a C in Biology...and I was grateful for it.

And, because of my monthly celebration, I'd grown to love bagels, even though I knew they probably weren't the healthiest choice. At least I wasn't choosing the scrumptious looking giant blueberry muffins on display.

Sinclair said, "Might I recommend you have a little protein with that, other than just cream cheese? Otherwise, you'll crash later on."

"Crash?"

"You'll have a glucose spike shortly after eating your bagel and pineapple. The cream cheese will help a little, but that bagel is all simple carbs. In two or three hours, you'll be ready for a nap."

My forehead crinkled. “How do you know so much about food?”

“I...dated my personal trainer for a while. She was also a Registered Dietician.”

Although I knew I had no right, I felt jealous. I’d already begun to feel such a desire, such a need for Sinclair that imagining him with another woman made my insides feel as if they were being wrung like a towel. But I looked down at my coffee before taking a sip, hoping none of those inappropriate feelings were noticed.

“But she was also the Mayor of Crazytown—so after I broke up with her, I had to continue studies on my own.”

As Edna set a plate in front of me, she asked, “Is she the one who keyed your BMW?”

“No.” I wondered if she was also the one who’d used the laptop I now employed in my work. Sinclair took another sip of coffee and said, “An expensive lesson. Never mix business with pleasure.”

I was sure that comment was also directed at me, so I didn’t look up as I spread the cream cheese on that lovely bagel. Edna had even toasted it for me.

“It took you a couple of times to learn it.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” Sinclair frowned but it seemed playful—this was Edna he was directing it to, so of course he wasn’t actually angry with her. “But back to the point,” he said, his commanding voice grabbing my attention, “I’d recommend you eat a few nuts or a piece of steak with that.”

Steak with a bagel sounded disgusting to me—and Edna once again proved how well she knew me. “I believe we’ve got an unopened can of mixed nuts in the pantry. I’ll

be right back.”

I felt a little uncomfortable having my food choices scrutinized, and I wondered if Sinclair had any comfort food of his own—but I wasn’t about to ask for fear of being disappointed. It would probably be yet another reminder of just how different we were.

I preferred to focus on what we had in common.

“Changing the subject, didn’t you say you were earning a general degree back in Winchester?”

“Yes, but they didn’t have any classes on nutrition.”

He chuckled. “Well, they should.” Removing the napkin off his lap, he set it on his plate and looked directly at me. “If I recall correctly, you said something about being interested in archaeology—and then you told me working in the dungeon had inspired some other sort of career idea. I’m curious what that was.”

Did he really want to know? I remembered that conversation because it had been one where he’d bitten my head off, telling me I should have thought of that before destroying the lab or some such thing—it had been his usual response before we’d settled into a more civil relationship.

“Working in a museum. That’s what working downstairs feels like. I’m sifting through pieces of history, determining their worth—and if I continue working with the art down there, I might be tempted to persuade you to switch out what you have in the gallery.” His expression told me he hated that idea, but he didn’t say it. “I think working in a museum might be a lot like that.” Of course, I didn’t tell him part of the history I’d been perusing was his mother’s private writings—but how many museum archivists got caught up in the records they researched?

“You’ve been doing good work here, and it should be recognized.” While he spoke, I could hear Edna pattering in her usual spot behind me. “If you want to get a degree while working for me, I’ll allow it.”

Just the idea floored me—but there were so many questions.

But he continued speaking before I could ask them. “If you choose to attend DU or Metro, I’ll pay for it—so long as it doesn’t interfere with your work. Or, if you find something else you’d prefer online, I’m amenable to that as well, as long as it’s not one of those fly-by-night operations.”

While Edna set a bowl of almonds beside me, I could hardly believe my ears. She squeezed my shoulder, prompting me out of silence. “Are you serious?”

“Do I seem like I’m joking? Education is no laughing matter, and I know it’s important to you. Because you’re working for me, I think it’s imperative that you begin educating yourself.”

How had he known that, aside from being separated from my father, what I missed the most was school? It was such a generous gift and, had we not experienced a bigger connection over the past couple of days, I might have suspected it to be a trick.

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Now, though...I knew it truly was a kindness—and, had Edna not been there, I might have jumped up, gone to the other side of the table, and hugged him, kissing him on the cheek.

Still...I had to ask the question. “Will I...have to repay you?” If he said yes, it wouldn’t be a deal breaker, but it would mean that I’d find an affordable school online if it cost less than the University of Denver or Metro State.

“That was not my intent. I pay for my employees’ continuing education on occasion. I don’t see why your education should be any different.”

That admission made it feel less special...but maybe he was just saying that to make me feel better about it.

When he stood, he said, “So do some research and let me know the results at our Sunday meeting.”

I nodded, feeling warmed by his genuine smile as he picked up his phone and planner and left the kitchen. It would have been easy to think of this as a ploy or another way he could keep me indebted to him...but somehow I knew that wasn’t the case. This was truly a genuine gift, one he understood I desperately wanted—and it helped me see that, even though I had ten years to serve here, it wouldn’t be for nothing.

I would leave with a degree and experience—and it was so odd that it would all be thanks to the man who was the son of my father’s enemy.

Although I should have been working, my conversation with Sinclair had made me so

excited that I'd begun my research on the laptop downstairs.

It didn't take me long to discover I would probably need a master's degree to really be able to do what I thought I wanted. But even if Sinclair was only willing to pay for a bachelor's degree, that would be a huge step.

As I continued researching, I found that there were several degrees I could earn in order to qualify for working in a museum, but I determined that a master's degree in museum studies was the best. So my plan was to get a bachelor's in art, history, or archaeology and a master's in museum studies.

Making that decision helped me with looking at schools. The University of Denver topped Metropolitan State, but I found several online programs that could fit the bill as well. I wasn't quite sure which to go with.

It wasn't until Edna called downstairs to let me know lunch was ready that I realized I'd lost hours researching rather than working. But in my mind, I could justify it easily. If I were earning a degree to work in a museum, then those studies would help me here.

Of course, I'd probably be done working in the dungeon long before I finished school—and it made me wonder what project Sinclair would have me working on after I was done here.

Soon, I was enjoying a salad with Edna on the east patio and we enjoyed our usual banter...until she changed the subject. "Lise, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, but I do want to impress upon you what a generous gift Mr. Whittier is giving you."

Nodding quickly, I said, "Oh, I know it. School is expensive."

“That’s not what I’m getting at. Mr. Sinclair is generous—but to a point. You know that girlfriend he was telling you about earlier?”

Like I could have forgotten. “The personal trainer?”

“Mm-hmm. That little piece of work. She’d wanted to open her own business—a combination gym with some kind of nutrition tie-in. They’d been sitting in the dining room one night discussing it and she presented her business plan to him, something he’d asked for before. And then after he looked at it, he told her it was too big a risk. She was too big a risk.”

I had so many questions, especially because I hadn’t known the woman, but I didn’t think Edna knew what she was talking about. Sinclair had said it himself: he paid for employees’ education on a regular basis.

But Edna was about to blow that thought out of the water too. “And what Mr. Whittier said about paying for his staff’s education? That’s only half true...he pays for half their tuition. They pay the other half, plus books and expenses. But, in your case, Mr. Whittier plans to pay for everything you need.”

Although I’d picked up on the fact that Edna listened in on conversations—that hadn’t snuck past me—how could she know all of this with such certainty? I asked her as much.

And she replied, “Because he told me so. He thinks you’re pretty special.” Please, I thought, please don’t let my face give away my delight. “Eat up, child. We’ve still got an entire afternoon of work.”

Work buoyed by the thought that maybe he really did feel about me the same way I felt about him—it made for a light afternoon.

Chapter 3

At dinner that night, Sinclair wore a crisp white long-sleeved shirt and tie without a jacket, and I was nearly floored at how the white fabric changed his face, making him handsome in yet another way. Sometimes it was hard to gauge his mood before he spoke because his face was an emotionless mask, something that had long been practiced and had become ingrained. I had a lot I wanted to tell him, but only if he wasn't in a bad mood.

As Edna began setting various items on the table, reminding me of when I'd done that same job just days earlier, his eyes seemed to soften as if her presence was soothing. And I imagined it was, considering I felt the same way about the woman. And, of course, considering their history.

So I decided to move forward.

"I started doing some research," I began, hoping he wouldn't comment on the fact that I must have done it during "work hours." But he said nothing, giving me only the slightest of nods to let me know he was paying attention. "And I found four different schools that would suit my needs. If I chose DU, I'd have to attend in person." I wasn't going to tell him about my plan to get both a bachelor's and a master's degree—at least not yet. If I chose DU for both, the master's degree could be completed online—which would be perfect, because I imagined that if I were working full-time and attending school, I might have to take classes here and there as a part-time student...which meant a bachelor's degree could take me ten years rather than four. And I was okay with that, because I could work on that master's degree no matter where I lived at the time.

But DU was just one of my choices.

I proceeded to tell him about the other three and the reasons why I was torn among

the four schools—and it mostly had to do with the classes themselves. One of the schools required that I take a foreign language and I'd struggled with Spanish in high school. I'd done fine with nouns and adjectives and present tense, but once we got into conjugating verbs in past and future tense, I'd flailed. And, although I knew college wasn't easy, I didn't want to set myself up for failure. Two of the other schools had classes that sounded fascinating but neither offered all the same courses.

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So I was at an impasse.

DU was yet another dilemma. I'd already checked out the distance there from Sinclair's residence using a maps app, and it wasn't very far away. My residence, I thought—at least for the next ten years. It was too far to walk, so I'd either have to borrow a car or take the bus—and, after my encounter on the street my first full day here, I didn't want to use public transportation. Another problem with in-person classes as opposed to online, something I'd learned after a year at WCC, was that you didn't get to pick the time you were in class. You had to go to classes when they were held and, if you were lucky, you might have a few different times to choose from. The other three online programs I was looking at offered asynchronous classes, so I could do my coursework whenever I wanted.

We already had salads in front of us when I finished talking. “So I'm having a hard time deciding.”

“It sounds like you've already decided against DU.”

“Yes. I guess I have.”

“Did you check out Metro State?”

I speared a grape tomato with my fork. Metro didn't have a master's program—and I knew that wasn't a huge deal. There was nothing wrong with getting an education from more than one university, but I wanted to choose a school and stick with it. Still, I didn't want to tell him that—not yet. So I simply said, “I did, but I didn't like what I saw.”

“Okay. So which one do you like the most?”

“I don’t know. I’m having a hard time deciding.”

“Well,” he said, setting his salad fork on the plate, “make up your mind. Once you have, you can make a pitch. But I don’t want you to have any indecision. If you’re not sure, you might be a semester or two in and decide you’d prefer a different program—and if you change, that’s a waste of both time and money.”

“Okay.” I nodded, understanding his words but not liking his tone. I’d hoped he could have helped me narrow it down...forgetting we were not partners. At our core, we were still adversaries, and I began to wonder if having me attend school was like the work he did every day—philanthropy. Was I just a charity case to him?

But he continued. “I realize that learning for learning’s sake wouldn’t be considered a waste by anyone else, and some of the courses you take might be transferable, but I want you to be decisive. One of the most important lessons I learned when I was your age was to weigh my options. Sometimes that meant making a list of pros and cons. Other times it involved standing back and taking in all the information like a big picture. And, sometimes, you’ll choose the wrong thing. But I’d rather make a wrong choice instead of being frozen with indecision or waffling between two choices and picking one at random.”

It suddenly became clear to me. I had been a choice he’d made the night of the vandalism at WCC—and it made me wonder if he was beginning to rethink it. Maybe having me attend school lessened the blow. Otherwise, why was he even telling me this?

“So,” he continued, “weigh the pros and cons of each and—”

“No. I know.”

The right side of his lip—the side without the scar—curled as he tilted his head. “You’ve made a decision?”

“Yes.” WCC hadn’t been much of a decision. It was the local community college—less expensive than a four-year university, close to home. It had been a decision that had made itself. I hadn’t had to do what I’d seen other kids pondering, where they had two or more decent offers to good schools and they couldn’t make up their minds. So much of this was new to me. “What you said made sense, and as I thought about it, there was one university that really seemed to speak to me.” But I couldn’t remember which one it was—I’d know for certain when I pulled up their programs again. I’d gotten a “peek” into one of their online classes, and much of it was video, partly professor lecture, partly actual footage of archaeology digs, so that it had the feel of being a documentary rather than a class. Would all their courses be like that? I didn’t know, but my gut was telling me to go there.

“Good. We’ll discuss it at our Sunday meeting. Put together a proposal for me.”

“A proposal?”

Edna was back, clearing our salad plates and replacing them with entrées, but I barely noticed her as Sinclair began talking again. “Yes. I want you to tell me all about the school—the cost, the degree, and why you chose it. Then I want to see a plan from you: how many classes you plan to take each term and how long before you’re done. Can you get that together by Sunday?”

“Yes.” In that brief moment, I felt such gratitude, such joy, and I knew I’d be talking to my father about it when I could. Sometimes we talked during the week but usually it was just text messages. On the weekend, we’d actually talk, catching each other up about our week. He always sounded positive, but I was growing more concerned about him. The isolation couldn’t be good for him even though he didn’t complain.

I suspected he was selective about what he told me...just as I'd been with him.

And the warm feelings I felt for Sinclair Whitter at this moment were something I wouldn't share with my father. I felt guilty—not just about keeping it from him but also for somehow allowing myself to fall for this man in the first place. This man's family was the reason why my father had struggled for the past two decades and I often believed it was the continual stress that had allowed the MS to ravage his body.

Still...had Sinclair Whittier actually done any of that? Or had it only been his father?

Sinclair's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. "Do you play chess?"

"What?"

"Chess. Do you play?"

"Oh...not very well. My dad tried to teach me when I was young, so I know the way the pieces move but that's about it." I was reminded of the kids at the college who played chess in one of the common areas. In April, as the spring semester had been winding down, more and more students would huddle around whoever was playing to see who would win.

"I've never claimed to be a good chess player myself. But, if you're game, I think we should play once in a while."

The thought of spending more time with this man—not as an employee but as an equal—was something I wouldn't say no to...even if we would still be playing adversaries on opposite sides of a checkered board. "Okay. Just don't expect any brilliant moves from me."

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“That goes both ways.”

As I cut a piece of the thin meat on my plate, unaware if it was chicken or a different type of bird, my mind still lingered on my limited time in college...and suddenly I had a question. “Um...how are the repairs going at WCC?”

I’d known it was a potentially dangerous question, as it could rouse all his negative emotions about me—how I’d been the culprit and I was here only because I was paying my debt. If he exploded at me, that would be good, because it would remind me that he was not my friend or potential love interest...and that was probably why I’d asked it.

But his response was quite unexpected. His voice was calm and steady, but his eyes were focused on the asparagus spears on his plate. “The repairs are coming along as expected and should be done no later than the spring semester.”

Why did I feel guilty about that? I hadn’t been the one who’d wreaked havoc on it—and I hadn’t been the person who’d left the lab unlocked...but I had been the one left in charge. Maybe that meant I was responsible in some way. But I wasn’t about to say anything, because in his eyes I’d already been convicted of the crime. I didn’t need to add fuel to that fire.

But it did help me almost embrace my sentence. Looking back, I knew that when I’d left for the print shop that day, I should have sent Jenna on her way and locked the lab myself. Then none of it would have ever happened.

Maybe it would have, though. I couldn’t presume to know what resources the vandals

had. They may have had a key or an idea of how to break in and we'd just given them an easy opportunity. It was clear to me that they'd wanted to do it that day because of Dr. Rakhimov's planned celebration. What better way to make a statement than to have dozens of visitors see it?

Although I kept disappearing into my thoughts, it was clear to me that Sinclair had too. So I asked, "Did you want to play chess tonight?"

When he looked up from his plate, his eyes seemed to devour me. As his pupils widened slightly, he licked his bottom lip—and my mouth went dry. "I can think of nothing better." But I felt like his words meant something else entirely.

Chapter 4

But we didn't play chess—not at first. Instead, he insisted we take a short trip around the block to walk off our meal. "I enjoy walking in all seasons, but this time of year is probably my favorite."

I thought of early fall—before it got too cool out but when you could smell smoke from chimneys and you could hear the crunch of leaves under your feet...when the moon would sometimes look as if it had doubled in size. Although I didn't take many walks, if I'd had to choose a time, that would have been it. "Why is that?"

"So many reasons." He stopped walking and I followed suit. "Do you hear that?"

The noise of the city, yes, the incessant hum and drone of machinery and people and vehicles—but I was certain he wasn't talking about that. "What?"

"Over there," he said, pointing north. "You can just make out the sound of children playing—laughing and shouting." I had heard that—but sometimes hearing children laugh reminded me of children picking on me when I was younger. But as I tuned in,

almost listening through his ears, I could hear unfettered joy and abandon. Those children didn't sound like they were being mean or bullying anyone. They were having fun.

And I smiled at him. "I hear it."

"And can you smell that?"

Smell what? But, closing my eyes, I took a deep breath—and I did. It was a sweet floral fragrance, one I knew but couldn't quite place. "Yes." When I opened my eyes, he pointed to the yard we stood next to. Not three feet away grew a lilac bush that I hadn't been paying attention to as we'd been walking.

Had a person asked me a month ago what type of person Sinclair Whittier was, I never would have said he was a closeted romantic—and yet that was what I was observing now.

"What else?" I asked, thrilled to be drawn into his world as we began walking again.

"The light. Come late October, it will already be dark—but right now we still have plenty of daylight."

"Without the heat of midday."

"Ah...you're getting it. Exactly. It's still plenty warm but not oppressively hot. And then underfoot. You don't have to contend with ice or snow. Everything's easy."

I never would have expected this man to give me a new appreciation for life—and yet here he was. When he asked my favorite time to walk, I thought long and hard about it, because I'd initially thought autumn—but now I wasn't so sure. "I don't know. I think I'm beginning to appreciate summer walks."

“Well,” he said, looking over at me, his eyes seeming to bore into my soul, “we’ll make sure to walk during every season—and you can tell me if you change your mind.”

It wasn’t long before we were back at the mansion, walking through the perfectly kept yard toward the stately front doors. Once inside, he lingered, pausing halfway through the antechamber to admire a huge red vase with gold accents. “I’ve been told this belonged to my mother...that she bought it on her honeymoon. But I don’t know if that’s true.”

“It’s lovely.”

“It makes me think of her, and that’s why it’s here.”

As I took a couple of steps as if in a museum, not wanting to miss taking in anything, my eyes lit upon a large painting of what looked like Greek gods convening on Mount Olympus. And I decided maybe it would be okay to admit something. “I don’t think it’s any secret that I considered your home stuffy and untouchable when I first arrived. I’m...used to living in smaller quarters.”

“Yes.” He’d been there so he, of course, had known that. He might not have seen my actual bedroom, but based on the size of the living room, he probably could have extrapolated that the room I slept in now was easily three times larger.

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“But everywhere I turn in this place there is something of beauty. There’s artwork everywhere—not just in the gallery—and it’s carefully chosen somehow to work together so that nothing feels out of place.”

“I have a good interior designer.”

Was that what they did? But I continued as if he hadn’t said a word. “From the chandelier way up there to the marble floor, the staircases, the windows, and every piece of art...it feels perfect.”

The only sound he made was hmm.

“And I’ve grown to love it.”

When I turned around, I couldn’t read him—not at all. He asked, “Really?”

“I do.”

“I’ll admit I’m not fond of it. It’s in constant disrepair.”

We began walking deeper into the interior of the house. “It is?”

“Yes. You saw the steps going downstairs.”

But I had a feeling those had been neglected for a long time. “Yes, but—”

“There’s always something around here that needs fixing.”

“Do you think it’s because it’s...such a large place?”

“No doubt,” he said, pausing at the west stairs. “To the game room?”

“Oh, yes.” As we began walking from the first floor to the second, I said, “That’s really no different from my dad’s house. One year we had to get a new roof and then the next we had to get a new water heater. And there were so many little things that constantly needed fixing.” After taking two more steps, I said, “I love how the view of the antechamber changes as you move up the stairs. Everything looks different from this angle.”

He made that sound again—and I couldn’t tell if it was dismissal or if he was actually absorbing my words. So I decided not to say anything else, instead allowing myself to silently admire what I saw.

I didn’t go to the third floor very often, so being here felt almost like a treat. When we got to the game room, he pulled a chess game out of the closet and unfolded the board at one of the tables. Although the sun still hadn’t set, I flipped on the light switch, knowing we would need it soon.

He asked, “Do you remember how to set up the board?”

“I think so.”

“Then you take the white and I’ll set up the black.”

“It’s been a really long time.”

He smiled. “I’ll help.” As I began copying how he set up his side, one piece at a time, I remembered playing all those hours with my dad. It wasn’t until now that it dawned on me that my mother must not have liked playing chess, or she would have played

with us. Sinclair's voice brought me quickly to the present. "I suppose I should thank you."

"I wouldn't. I'm not a good chess player."

He chuckled, his rich voice warming every fiber of my body. "Not about that. For...helping me see this place with new eyes."

"What—your home?"

"Yes. But I've never really thought of it that way—as a home. This mansion has felt more like a ball and chain."

Although I doubted he'd say another word, curiosity got the best of me. "Why?"

As he paused, placing one pawn after another on his side of the board, his line of defense in the game, I could see his personal defenses on his face dropping. "When my older brother graduated from college, he immediately went to work for the company—but he never lived here again. Instead, the company bought him a home in Greenwood Village."

I didn't know where that was exactly, and I wasn't going to ask.

"It wasn't long after that the same thing happened when my middle brother came home from school and got a place in Highlands Ranch. And when I was in college," he said, and I focused on setting up my pawns so that my face wouldn't give away what I already knew because Edna had told me, "my father remarried and moved to Cherry Hills. And I got stuck with this old place."

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Did I dare say anything? “It may be an old place...but it has history.”

“Exactly.” He pointed to the chair behind me. “Shall we?” He didn’t sit down until I did. “Do you remember the moves the pieces can make?”

I started by describing how pawns could move, probably more complicated than some of the stronger pieces. “And then the rook—”

“Wait. Do you remember what happens if your pawn makes it all the way to my side—to here?” he asked, pointing at the edge of the board where the stronger pieces stood ready for battle.

His question tickled my memory. “Oh, yeah. It becomes a queen.”

“Well...it doesn’t have to be a queen, but that’s usually what players turn it into.”

As I explained how each piece moved, working my way from rook to queen, I remembered loving this game and enjoying playing it with my father. Why had we stopped? And then it all came back to me...my mother had been jealous. She’d envied the easy, fun relationship my father and I had and she’d never wanted to learn chess. I remembered a time, probably just a few weeks before she’d left, when she’d thrown the whole board off the table in a fit of rage.

We hadn’t played again after that. And now I wondered if it was because she’d left or because of her tantrum that we’d stopped. Maybe later my father had thought about it again, but his hands had grown weaker over the years. On occasion, he’d had difficulty even feeding himself.

“Are you all right?” Sinclair asked.

Although we had moved into a truce, I didn’t know that I wanted to remind him how much my father meant to me. Blinking, I hoped the tears welling in my eyes weren’t obvious, and I kept my focus on the board. “Yes. Is there anything I’ve forgotten?”

He gave me a quick reminder of the castling maneuver and then he said, “Are you ready?” I simply nodded. “You’re white, so you go first.”

That was something I hadn’t remembered either. But I did recall the common first move I usually made: taking a pawn in front of one of my bishops up two spaces, recalling that this was the only time it could move more than one space. I did that because then it gave that bishop freedom, and I thought I remembered those being fairly good pieces to have in play.

Slowly, we moved many of our pieces toward the center of the board but, thus far, neither of us had captured another’s piece.

Until Sinclair took one of my pawns with a knight. Again, I remembered that a pawn was considered an insignificant piece, one that could be sacrificed without much harm to the overall game.

And that made me think of myself to some degree.

But it wasn’t long after that when Sinclair captured two more pawns, followed by one of my knights with a bishop—and he said, “You’re not putting up much of a fight, Lise.” Just the sound of my name on his lips made all my nerves stand on end.

“Oh, I will.” But I didn’t know if I actually remembered any tactics that could save me. He was obviously a practiced player. I spotted an easy capture, moving my knight to take a pawn, remembering to make sure that wouldn’t put that knight in

jeopardy.

It didn't—but I'd left my king vulnerable.

Still on his side of the board, he moved his other bishop. "Check."

I let out a breath of air because I'd completely missed my king's vulnerability. And now I was having to react and defend rather than attack. So I moved my king one space to the left where Sinclair's bishop couldn't touch it. I tried to study his moves as he made them—but I couldn't recall enough about game play to know what his strategy might be.

I was able to capture one of his knights with a pawn—but I wasn't sure he hadn't sacrificed it intentionally. He said, "You did well in battle, soldier," as I placed it on the side of the board. Three of his pieces were out of play compared to more than double that of mine. "Do you think you'll be able to capture any others?"

I took that as a challenge—but, piece by piece, he wore down my defenses. A pawn, another pawn, a knight, a rook, a bishop, and there was little I could do about it.

But it didn't feel like chess—it felt like he was playing with me.

And then he took my queen. "Ah, the lovely queen, taken for ransom." After placing the piece on the side of the board, he looked me squarely in the eyes. "If you have a pawn who's brave enough, strong enough...he could sacrifice himself to bring her back." His finger tapped his side of the board as if daring me to move one of my last two pawns across that expanse.

I knew better.

Then he said, "Or the queen can stay with me as my prisoner...where her mind and

body will become mine.” For a brief moment, I imagined myself in the garb of Guinevere, filmy scarves and a gold and diamond tiara, what I imagined her and other medieval princesses wearing when I’d get lost in fairy tales and stories as a young girl. Now, though, my adult mind pictured Sinclair as a knight in literal shining silver armor, stealing me away from the castle and taking me to his own—where he would demand of me whatever he wanted...including carnal pleasure.

I hoped Sinclair couldn’t see how my face had flushed.

And I lost that game...just as I knew I was going to lose the real one we were playing every single day.

But by now I was a willing victim.

Chapter 5

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After catching up with my dad on the phone, I spent most of the next Sunday reading an anthology of contemporary short stories, ones I'd never read before and many by authors I'd never heard of. As I began growing sleepy, I got up off the bed to stretch and walk around. I drank the rest of my water and then sat on the edge of the bed, picking up the book again.

And then I noticed.

Inside the book was his name written neatly in ballpoint: Sinclair C. Whittier. Directly underneath I read the words Fernald Hall. I wasn't sure what that meant at first—but when I searched those words on my phone, I discovered it was a dorm at Columbia University. And that must have meant that the book I was reading now had been one of his textbooks—for a literature class maybe?

Just that knowledge drew me closer to him, knowing that, right now, I was probably the age he'd been when he'd read this book—and it had to have meant something to him. Otherwise, why would he still have it?

But before I could muse over that any longer, my phone lit up with a text message from a number I didn't recognize. Anna, I'm sorry I'm just now reaching out to you. How are you doing?

There was only one person I could think of who called me Anna on a regular basis—but I hadn't seen him in over a month, not since the night my life changed forever.

Mr. Sherwood? I texted back.

The response was immediate. Please call me Alan.

No, I wouldn't call him by his first name. He'd wanted to get too friendly as it was. And there was nothing to respond to, so I simply stared at the phone. I reread his first message, but I didn't know that I wanted to tell him everything that had happened to me since my last night at WCC.

But that didn't stop him from sending another message: Dr. R. told me what happened. And I want you to know I told her I refuse to believe you had anything to do with what happened to the sim lab. All she told me was that you're in Denver working off your debt.

That seemed simple enough—so I responded. Yes. It seemed better than jail.

Several minutes passed and I assumed we were done with the conversation, so I picked up the book again and began turning to the story where I'd left off when another message finally came through.

I'm sorry to hear that. I saw your father at the store earlier today and we were talking about you. He's the one who gave me your number.

At first, I wanted to ask him how he knew who my father was. But what a dumb question that would have been. Everyone in Winchester knew who we were. That was the biggest problem with living in a town rather than a city. But then I thought of the Whittiers, imagining that they were recognized even in an ocean as vast as the Denver area.

I had to know. How does my dad seem?

He looked all right. Mr. Sherwood continued. Is there anything I can do to help you out?

My response, though flippant, was true. If you have a million dollars or so, you could put that toward my debt. I followed it with lol.

His reply seemed almost sad, even though he didn't send it with any emojis to tell me so. I wish I could.

I felt relieved when we typed our goodbyes, my thanking him for his concern and his telling me to reach out anytime I wanted to talk.

I didn't return to the book, instead musing over the similarities and differences between Mr. Sherwood and Sinclair. Obviously, there was the difference in class and wealth, and it made me wonder if I was starting to find Sinclair desirable because of those things. Had I not liked Mr. Sherwood because he didn't have those things?

No. That wasn't it. Not at all.

Mr. Sherwood had seemed to cross a lot of boundaries...but then I realized that was the same thing that was happening here and now. Sinclair and I had crossed a line once—and we often threatened to do it again.

But then it dawned on me that that was the difference. Between Sinclair and me, that line crossing was mutual.

Mr. Sherwood's attention had come out of nowhere. One day he was lecturing in the classroom, the next he was stopping me in the hallway, inviting me out for a cup of coffee. And it wasn't as if he'd ever done anything blatantly wrong.

It was just a feeling. A creepy feeling that I couldn't shake whenever I was around the man—and it was now extending through the ether to my phone.

And then I thought of something. Picking up my cell, I shot a quick text to my dad.

Why didn't you tell me you ran into Mr. Sherwood at the store when we were talking this morning?

It was a minute or so later that he replied. Your college professor? I just saw him at the store an hour ago. Did he already call you? I hope it was okay that I gave him your number. He seemed concerned about you.

I didn't want to tell my dad that giving Mr. Sherwood my number was like feeding me to the wolves, even though it almost felt that way. Why should I make him feel guilty over yet another thing he had no control over? So I just told him, Yes, it's fine.

And I left it at that. But having Mr. Sherwood juxtaposed in my mind next to Sinclair, there was no denying that I was falling hard for the man who was deemed by contract my employer.

The Sunday meetings shouldn't have been a thing. At first, I was just supposed to make sure I'd turned in my timesheet by Sunday at five o'clock, and Sinclair had asked that I turn them in to his office. But the first Sunday I'd done that, he'd been sitting there waiting and we'd verbally agreed that I should turn in my timesheet at that particular time—five—instead of sometime before, and that he should receive and review it with me.

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Which meant that it wasn't long before the meetings became more of a formality than I would have liked. Sinclair asked that I be dressed in what he called business casual—and, when I looked up on the internet exactly what that meant, I realized I didn't have much that would be considered appropriate, other than a few dresses and, of course, the jacket I'd worn at the college the night I'd had to leave.

So the dress I put on before heading to his office was one I'd already worn to this meeting twice before. I was able to get away with the sandals, but that also wouldn't last much longer as the bright pink polish on my toenails was beginning to wear off. My nails had already grown enough that there was a thin line next to the cuticles that sported no polish, but that wasn't noticeable. What was obvious was how a little of the polish had worn down at the top of the big toes and the polish on the second toe on the right foot had a chip in it.

It would still be several weeks before I would stop wearing open-toed shoes for the season, so I was probably going to have to break down and ask Edna if she would buy me polish remover—or tell me if there was any in the mansion. Surely a place this big had something like that in one of the bathrooms.

I'd also drawn up a plan for school like Sinclair had asked—but I'd backtracked a bit. The school I really wanted to attend, the one with all the bells and whistles, was ridiculously expensive—and, in the back of my mind, I was afraid. What if Sinclair wound up letting me get saddled with that bill after all? Even if I could get a job at a prestigious museum, would I ever be able to pay it all back? Especially having to wait until I was almost thirty to begin? And would I ever be able to rise up the ladder fast enough for it to be worth it?

So I put together a proposal for three different online universities—my dream one, the one that I would never have been able to afford on my own, and two others with decent programs that I would enjoy, even though they weren't my first choice. The other two were far more affordable—and then I wondered, after all the work to apply, what if I wasn't accepted?

And that would be my argument when Sinclair would ask why I had been, as he'd called it earlier in the week, indecisive.

When I walked into his office, he wasn't sitting at his desk as usual. Instead, he was standing at the window behind the desk, his hands in the pockets of his gray slacks, looking out at the greenery. And I wondered what he was thinking. Whenever I caught him doing this—what looked like contemplating—I thought he was lonely. This evening, he wore a long-sleeved light blue shirt, but the cuffs were unbuttoned and rolled up, as if he were getting ready to perform some sort of manual labor.

It was rare that I got to see anything other than his hands, because he dressed in business attire frequently. There had only been a couple of times he'd worn shirts with short sleeves on the weekends, and I'd admired the swell of his biceps as they disappeared under the fabric.

I knew he had to know I was there, unless he was even more deep in thought than I could imagine. My sandals weren't noisy but they did make a shuffling sound as I walked down the main hall—and then, when I entered his office, the rugs absorbed any noise my shoes might make. But I stopped just inside the doorway, waiting for him to acknowledge me.

When he turned around, I felt my breath catch in my throat. His blue eyes were ablaze, making me think of looking at the burners on the gas stove as a child, how, when the heat was turned down low, the flames were blue instead of orange. Did that mean that he was going to devour me like forest fire, leaving nothing behind but ash?

Or was my mind simply being melodramatic?

“Good evening, Lise,” he said, his voice sounding rather normal.

“Mr. W.”

I could barely hear his sigh before he said, “Please take a seat.” After he did the same, he said, “I’d like for you to call me Sinclair.” In my head, I had been for a while but I couldn’t remember when I’d made the switch from Mr. Whittier. I simply nodded my assent and handed him my timesheet as well as a printout of the spreadsheet showing all I’d catalogued downstairs over the past week.

He flipped through the pages and, as he did, I wondered like I always had what exactly he was looking at. Was he making sure I’d put in an honest week’s work—or, at least, what looked like one on paper? Forty hours with “unpaid” lunch breaks? Or was he seeking patterns or the lack thereof? Did he study his real employees’ timecards like mine?

And then I realized, after having met them as a servant just over a week earlier, that they wouldn’t be the types who had to clock in and out. Every last one of them had to be salaried, and I suspected they probably worked more hours than I did. At least, that was what I’d often heard about business people. Sinclair didn’t seem to, although once in a while he would come home later or have to go back out. But that might have been a perk of being the boss.

When he looked up, he said, “You really think that Downey painting is worth between two and three million dollars?”

I had to fight not to smile, because that was the painting I’d tried talking to him about a while back and he’d blown me off, saying things about art being impractical and not needing more money. “Yes, I do.”

“What did you base this on?”

“Her entire body of work thus far. Many of her recent paintings have sold for millions at auction and—”

“All right. Then I suppose we should find a good place to display it.” He looked up from the papers. “You’re familiar with what it looks like. Where in the house do you think it should be displayed?”

Based on its warm colors—oranges, reds, and pinks, as if it were sunset peeking through a cityscape...or, perhaps, a sunrise—I felt inspired. “I think it should go on the west side of the main hallway.”

“Hmm. I don’t know that there’s room there for another painting.” While I tried to think of another place—or of a painting that could be taken down—he continued. “What else do you have there?”

I looked down in my lap at the remaining three sheets of paper. “You wanted me to bring...an education proposal.”

“Yes. What school have you decided on?”

“Well...I got to thinking. What if I applied to my dream school and didn’t get accepted? I need a backup.” As I searched his eyes, I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Was he buying what I was selling or could he see right through me? Maybe I was indecisive, but I also wasn’t stupid. I didn’t want to place the entire scope of my life in his hands—because, even though I found I was trusting him more and more, I knew he could be ruthless.

I couldn’t take that chance.

But he didn't say a word, so I continued. "So I chose three schools. This one," I said, flipping the sheet of paper so he could read it before sliding it across the desk, "has the lowest tuition of the three. Classes are asynchronous—as all the school's offerings are—but I can only take one class at a time, and most classes last one to two months."

I waited for him to say something, but his eyes were taking in all the information I'd gathered on the sheet, basically a version of the school's About Us page, copied and pasted onto the Word document, after I reformatted the text to match the rest of what I'd written. Unfortunately, I didn't know what information was most important to Sinclair, so I didn't know if I'd overdone it or hadn't given him enough data to make a decision.

Because he still wasn't speaking, I slid the next sheet of paper over to him. "The tuition for this college is slightly higher but their courses are self-paced. You pay tuition by the term and take whatever classes you like—but you have to finish one before you can take another. You can take as many classes as you want for the same amount." If I were paying for it on my own, I had decided that, even though the tuition was a little higher than the first one, I could push myself to complete the coursework fast. At least that was my idea.

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He remained silent, and I didn't like the vibe I was getting from him. Still, I pushed forward. "And this is my third choice." My dream school, the one I really would have liked to attend but one I couldn't afford on my own. It was a prestigious university, one I'd heard of before, so if employers were impressed by names, I'd have that advantage.

But the cost...that was what scared me. It wouldn't bother Sinclair; I already knew that much. But I also knew he didn't necessarily have my best interests at heart.

I told him all the things I loved about the school's online learning approach—how much of the learning seemed less class-like and more akin to entertainment, taking advantage of some of the ways we learned that weren't fostered in traditional classrooms, not even mentioning the tuition until, at the end of my speech, I said, "But it's probably cost-prohibitive."

This time, his sigh was audible, and I got the feeling it was for my benefit. "Lise," he said, looking up from the print, "is this all you think you're worth?"

Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that wasn't it.

And it put me in a bit of a tailspin. What was I worth? If it was the amount I was earning, it was minimum wage, implying I wasn't worth much. If it was based on what my community thought of me, it was equally dismal. Those thoughts were depressing and likely something I should discuss with a qualified professional—but I had to push it all aside to answer his question while, at the same time, not giving away my position. "Well, no...but it's not my money to spend."

“You’re missing the point. I’m asking what you think you’re worth. You’ve got to break out of whatever mindset you’re in. Money does not matter and I want you to stop boxing yourself in. Do you think no more of yourself than to choose a bargain basement college that might not even be accredited—or are you worth the best education money can buy?”

There was something about the way he said it—as if I were a baby bird and his breath pushed against my wings, allowing me to fly for the first time. Those flame-blue eyes told me they believed in me...and so I knew how I had to answer. “The best.”

“Then I suggest you go back to the drawing board. Find one school...the best school. And I expect you to present your decision by Wednesday at dinner.”

He wasn’t going to give me as much time this go round...and I suspected that was probably for the best. When I nodded, he asked, “Would you like to go for a walk?”

I wasn’t sure why I answered, “I thought you’d never ask.”

But I meant it. Every word. And walking beside him on that warm evening, it took everything inside me to not grab him about the shoulders and kiss him for...for what?

For believing in me.

Chapter 6

I hadn’t read any of Sinclair’s mother’s journals in some time, because I’d been so consumed with researching schools. But I’d finally made a decision Monday night and written up a new proposal...for just one school. I didn’t choose it because I thought he’d be pleased, but I thought he would be nonetheless.

Tuesday night after dinner and a walk—something that was becoming a daily ritual

with us...turning us into something I might call friends or companions—I curled up in bed with a different journal. This one was light pink with flowers.

What shocked me was how much her tone had changed—but it didn't take me long to find out why. The second entry said it all.

* * *

I had my appointment today and the doctor said everything seems to be going fine.

I'd hoped I'd have a girl this time, but it's a boy. And that's okay. I love little boys—and I've heard girls can be harder, so I'm happy!

Of course, Gus still can't be bothered. And I don't care anymore. I have this beautiful baby boy growing inside me—and I just know he's going to be perfect. I love Augie and Warren. They will always have my heart, but they feel like their father's boys. This baby feels more like ME.

And so, even though Gus has already chosen a name for him, Sinclair Cornelius, I am going to call him Cory. When I speak to him, rubbing my belly, imagining that he can feel my touch through the stretched skin and all that fluid, that's what I call him.

I love it all the more because I know Gus will hate it...just like he hates when I call him Gus in public.

* * *

I paused...because once or twice, I'd thought of Sinclair as Cory too.

I read almost the entire journal, which was a day-by-day account of the second trimester of her pregnancy, but I fell asleep with a few pages left to go.

That night, I dreamed about him—and, in my dreams, I called him Cory. In there, I saw him as gentle, protective, and loving, much like his mother's words came across to me.

When I awoke the next morning, I realized something else. Had his mother been in his life for longer, she likely would have had more of an influence on him. But the longer I was here, the more that picture began to fill in...and I suspected much of the man was shaped by his father.

Still, I sensed I could feel something of his mother in him. There was something good inside him. I knew it. And all day long I planned to hold onto that dreamy feeling...that one where he held me and comforted me, where he loved me.

I hoped that foolish emotion wasn't obvious on my face at breakfast. Fortunately, he was absorbed in his WSJ and Edna wanted to talk to me about decorating for fall. Apparently, there was a room somewhere in this huge building that I hadn't seen yet, one that held holiday decorations. There were plenty of rooms I hadn't peeked in yet, but there were only a few that I was dying to open.

And I was forbidden from looking.

The only thing Cory—Sinclair—said was “It’s not even September yet, Edna.”

“I know. I’m just excited.”

“Kitchen and dining room only.”

She frowned but shrugged and winked at me. I was curious—how would a person decorate an entire mansion for a holiday? Maybe that was why Sinclair asked her to confine the decorations to two rooms.

After Sinclair left, she promised she’d show me everything in October...and I went to work.

Tonight I’d be presenting him with my new school plan—something totally different. Something worthy of me, just like he’d asked. I would be asking him to put his money where his mouth was. And I’d already made a decision that would protect me if he changed his mind: although I would fill out the financial aid paperwork, I wouldn’t accept any loans. If he wouldn’t pay the bills when they were due, I wouldn’t attend. It would be as simple as that.

Because he hadn’t told me when on Wednesday evening I’d need to submit my new proposal, other than the vague statement “at dinner,” I brought it with me to the dining room. And I wore my prettiest dress—a fuchsia number with a short skirt and shorter sleeves that fit my waist and breasts like a glove. Nothing popped out but it was like another layer of skin. I’d only ever worn it once or twice because, back in

Winchester, I didn't want the attention. When I'd bought it online—on clearance—I hadn't known it would be so form fitting, but it had turned out to be cool on hot days, so I hadn't tossed it.

Here, though, I did want Sinclair's attention. He'd already told me I was worth far more than I valued myself—and so I was going to show it off.

But he wasn't there when I arrived, so I sat at my usual place, trying not to peek at it again. What was done was already done, and I had only to get his approval on it—or his demand that I do it again.

After a bit, I heard his voice in the hallway, and I was surprised at myself—how I sat a little straighter, tried to make sure my expression was smooth yet hopeful...but also trying not to look too hopeful...or lovesick. But that was the road I'd been heading down for the past few weeks. My feelings for him had gone from mere lust to something more.

And I suspected that, if I couldn't get a grip on myself, it would lead to heartache.

As he entered the dining room, he said into his phone, "Get it taken care of. I'll expect a full report in the morning." He didn't look the same as he'd appeared at breakfast. He seemed taller...stronger. The more time I spent around him, the less I felt like I could take a full breath—and that was how I felt in this moment as his hot blue eyes connected with mine.

I'd expected to feel the aftereffects of the conversation he'd been having but instead he smiled at me—and then his eyes shifted to the papers beside me. "Is that your new proposal?"

"It is." I smiled back at him, warmed by his presence. Possibly even heated by it. But that was stupid—he'd already told me I was too young and that his position as my

employer made it all the more forbidden.

Was that why I was attracted to him?

No...it couldn't be. But somehow that made him all the more tempting.

He held out a hand. "May I?" Nodding, I handed him the two sheets of paper that now comprised my new proposal. As he sat down, his eyes skimming the typewritten words, I held my breath, waiting for him to turn me down again.

This particular proposal was quite different from the one I'd given him on Sunday. This one involved my attending the University of Denver in person, majoring in Art History. Then, still with DU, I would focus on earning a master's degree in Art History-Museum Studies. I had already earned 33 credits from WCC, all of which should transfer. If I took two three-credit courses every semester including summer, I could earn my bachelor's degree in five years while still being able to focus on whatever full-time work Sinclair wanted me to do. Then I could turn around and earn my master's in another two.

That met my expectations—finishing my education before leaving his employ, which should mean I'd be completely debt-free. And, if I was lucky, he would start putting that education to good use in some way.

But I was certain he would say no—because it was going to be time-consuming, especially if I had to take a bus to and from campus and it was expensive. Even the cost of a year's worth of textbooks was out of my price range.

It wouldn't have been so bad had I not gotten my heart set on it. After spending hours putting together this final proposal that was detailed to the penny and to the date, I was certain he was going to toss it back to me once more.

When he looked up from the proposal, he had a small smile on his face. Was that because he was getting ready to deal a cruel blow?

But I was completely mistaken.

“This was the kind of proposal I was looking for. Well done.”

Edna came in with salads that she quickly set in front of us before whisking herself back out of the room.

“Thank you,” I said, breathless again but for entirely different reasons. “I realize it’s going to cost a lot.”

“It is. And I’d say you’re worth it.”

I pressed my lips together, finding it hard to believe that he’d just said something so kind and sweet to me...and I believed he meant it. No longer could I hold my lips together, so I beamed and thanked him again.

But then I followed it up with my concern. “What if they don’t accept my application?”

“What was your GPA at Winchester?”

“3.5.”

“What about high school?”

“About the same.”

“Well...why don't we cross that bridge when we come to it? Complete your application and we'll see what they say. I'll have an account set up for you so you'll have a debit card to pay application fees and we'll go from there.”

It was time for yet another reality check. “I probably won't be able to start until the spring semester.”

“That's perfect. That should give you more than enough time to get prepared for the experience. But you'll need to be honest about something.”

“What's that?”

“If two classes wind up being too much for you with work, you'll want to let me know.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, completely understanding why. After all, we'd already discussed that it shouldn't interfere with my work.

“If it does, we'll see about cutting back some of your duties so you can focus on

school.”

My smile was genuine, and it nearly split my face in two. “Thank you, Sinclair.”

“Just don’t make me regret it.”

When Edna came back in the room, he said, “Edna, would you mind finding a bottle of champagne? We have something to celebrate.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and bring a flute for yourself as well.”

I would have sworn she was giggling as she walked down the hall to the beverage nook.

“I’m underage. I can’t drink.”

A shadow passed over his eyes again. “I knew that. Damn. How close are you?”

I wasn’t about to answer. “I’ve had a glass of wine here and there with my dad.”

But he got up from the table, storming off. It made me want to cry, because just moments earlier, we were celebrating, having fun...and I’d never felt so close to him. It made me angry and ashamed that he was upset by something I had no control over.

Edna returned with the champagne and three glasses—and I told her, “I’m not having any.”

“I know, dear.”

Sinclair came back in the room, holding a green bottle that looked like alcohol. After opening it, he picked up a champagne flute and began pouring in the clear liquid. “Sparkling grape juice cocktail.” As he handed me the glass, he winked.

My heart nearly melted. He was respecting my wishes while still wanting to include me...and that didn’t seem to be the work of a villain or an enemy.

After all the drinks were poured and we were holding our glasses, Sinclair said, “A toast: when I first met Annalise Miller, she believed in education but not in herself.” Was that true? Suddenly, this toast sounded like yet another way to shame me—but I kept the smile pasted on my face. Still, he’d somehow seen through me if it were true. “You didn’t know what you were going to school for, Lise...you didn’t have a plan. And that’s the worst way to go about anything. I am proud of you now because you know exactly what you want, and you’ve mapped out a plan to get it. That deserves a toast with the finest champagne.”

I hadn’t expected him to turn it around, but he had. And he wasn’t wrong. The only thing I’d wanted when I’d applied at WCC was a way out of Winchester. And it wasn’t a plan—it was desperate hope.

So I happily clinked my glass to theirs and sipped at the sparkling grape juice in my flute, a liquid that didn’t look much different from the champagne in Sinclair and Edna’s glasses. When we finished, Edna hugged me. “I’m proud of you, dear.” Then she picked up our empty glasses and left. By the time she returned, Sinclair and I were seated again, ready to eat. When she returned, he said, “See if Greg and his wife would like to finish off the bubbly, would you?”

“Of course. And...if not, could I take it home?”

Sinclair’s expression went from neutral to devilish. “If you and Sam want to polish it off, feel free.”

“Thank you, Mr. Whittier.”

Soon, we were eating and Sinclair was telling me about his days at Columbia—and how his father had wanted him to major in business but he chose to major in finance, something he said was stupid in retrospect because he never intended to work as a financial advisor. But investing interested him, as did math, and he considered finance to be “business-adjacent.”

And, although his words were upbeat, I got the feeling that his choice had become a wedge in his relationship with his father. But had there already been a gulf between them? I had no idea, but one thing I suspected, the more that he talked about his family, was that they weren’t like a family at all.

The only thing that had kept me going over the past several weeks was the thought of being able to see my father at some point—and talking to him helped as well. If I believed I’d never see him again, I would lose all hope, all motivation. That was what family meant to me.

But we were soon taking our walk and I still felt like I was floating on cloud nine...because Sinclair believed in me. He believed in me enough to spend thousands and thousands of dollars on me, all while I was working for him to repay him for the damage caused at the college. In the back of my mind, I was certain he probably got some kind of tax break for paying for employees’ education—but that didn’t dampen my spirits, because it meant that he didn’t feel any less about me than he did the employees he’d hired to work at his office, wherever that was.

Near the end of our walk as we entered the iron gate in the front yard, he said, “I just

hope you understand that I'm willing to reward hard work—and I see you're making a real effort.”

“I am. And is it possible for me to earn as a reward the chance to personally take my father to his appointment in October?”

“Possibly. I'm still considering it.”

“Thank you.” And then, to remind him of my true value, I said, “Do you want to look at the Downey painting before you...?” I was at a loss for words, because I didn't know what he usually did after dinner if it wasn't playing chess with me. Did he read a book? Work in his office? In this gargantuan mansion, he could be almost anywhere and I wouldn't know, because most times I would go to my bedroom where I could relax and be myself.

To my delight, he agreed. “No better time than the present, I suppose.”

Soon we were walking down the stairs to the place where I spent a third of my day every day of the work week. I led him to the area near the back east wall where I kept the artwork. I'd draped a sheet over the paintings, hoping that would keep them from getting dustier, but I didn't feel confident about cleaning them. I'd remembered hearing horror stories about well-meaning people trying to clean old paintings and ruining them in the process. I didn't want to be one of them.

When I pulled the sheet off, the Downey painting was the top one. Sinclair stood back, eyeing it, cupping his chin as if deep in thought. “The lighting down here is poor. Why didn't you say anything?”

“It's okay over by the stairs. That's where I do most of my writing and stuff.”

“Well, I'll have Edna get someone in here to work on it.” That gave me huge relief

that it wouldn't be Henry. I'd already grown to love that man and didn't want him hurting himself on a ladder.

"New lightbulbs might do the trick." The chandelier brightened up the place when it was on, but there were plenty of other lights, especially in the back of the room, that just didn't work.

"You're right. But we'll let the experts check it out."

Had the ceilings not been so high, I would have offered to change them myself—and I wondered if Sinclair called this space the dungeon not just because it was in the lowest level with no windows but also because it was dark and shadowy.

"In the meantime," Sinclair said, "if I were to keep this painting, where do you think it should be displayed?"

"Like I said, I think it would go great in the west side of the main hall."

"I don't disagree, but I like the way the art is arranged there. If we put this painting there, we'd have to make a lot more changes. But why don't we take this upstairs and see if we can find a place?"

Once we arrived back in the main hall, I asked, "So you don't want to sell it?"

"You already told me its value. How many people have an early Picasso or O'Keeffe or Warhol and then sell it? I see the value in keeping it." We'd been walking down the west side of the hall but he paused and looked right in my eyes. "When you find a hidden treasure, you don't give it away to the highest bidder."

Why did I feel like he was talking about me?

But then he continued walking. “I think we might find a good place for this in either the study or the library. What do you think?”

“Let’s try the library.” I spent more time in there than in the study...and I thought it would be nice to see it regularly.

When we walked in, he flipped on the light switch because the sunlight was fading. And he must have had a good idea about where he wanted the painting, because he crossed the room to the outer north wall where a smaller painting already hung. “We put this painting here where it would never get direct sunlight—and I think,” he said, holding up the Downey painting, “we could place this here and move the other painting either over here,” he added, nodding to the west wall, “or keep it here, arranged around this one.”

I tried envisioning it in my head—and I liked what I saw. “I think it would look nice to have the smaller painting diagonal from it on the other wall like you said.”

“I do too. It shouldn’t get direct sunlight here...but I’m not the expert there. And I believe we’ll need someone to clean it up a little bit.”

“All the paintings downstairs are like that—dusty and kind of grungy.”

“Well, we’ll get them all cleaned then. Are any of them worth as much as this beauty?”

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“Not that I know of. I couldn’t find much on any of the artists—and one I only know his or her last name.”

He frowned. “Well...maybe your upcoming education can help you with that.”

“Do you think so?”

“Absolutely.”

Suddenly, I felt inspired. I deepened my voice and raised my eyebrows as if playing a part I’d rehearsed. “Here we have an early painting by the artist Ellen Downey. She was born in a small town in Oregon in the late eighties and began her career by painting street art. Much of her early work was controversial—but, by the mid-nineties, she focused on more conventional art and it was there that she began to make a living.”

He was grinning at me throughout my speech. “Is all that true?”

I giggled. “Most of it. I can’t remember all the facts, but—”

He pulled me close in his arms and kissed me then. It wasn’t as desperate as that kiss on the night of his party...but it was deeper, more meaningful. And I was more than willing. I wrapped my fingers around his neck as his tongue explored my mouth, my body waking up, tingling from scalp to toenails.

I could have gotten lost there.

When his lips left mine, he said, “You...make me feel alive.”

“What d—”

“You embrace joy and fun and...it’s something I don’t think I’ve ever done. I’ve always...” But he stopped talking as if he’d said too much already.

And so I got up on my tiptoes and kissed him again. My body and mind had been consumed with him for so long now and I knew I wanted him. I didn’t care if I shouldn’t. It didn’t matter that, underneath it all, we were sworn enemies. The man inside called to me—and my body and soul had answered yes.

We kissed for several minutes—but he kissed more than my lips. He tasted my neck, my earlobe, my collarbone...and, for the first time in my life, I knew I wanted to feel him inside me, wanted him to take me and do whatever he wanted with me.

I was no longer his willing employee...I was his willing everything.

Chapter 7

“I want you, Annalise...but I will not take you without your permission.” Sinclair’s blue eyes were on fire, his pupils large and predatory.

And that made me need him all the more. “I want you too. If you need my permission, you have it.”

Sinclair scooped me up in his arms, just like all the old romantic movies I’d ever seen, and he did it as if I weighed no more than a pillow. Soon, he was taking the stairs to the second floor two at a time, and I felt breathless. Would we go to my room or his? And what would sex for the first time feel like?

I too was on fire, as what felt like an ancient ache throbbed between my legs.

On the second floor, he quickly marched to the end of the hall, managing to turn the doorknob without setting me down. Then he kicked the door closed, walking across the room to the bed, multiple recessed lights in the ceiling giving the room a soft glow.

I only caught a glimpse of the bedroom but what I'd seen left me almost awe-stricken. My bedroom here had seemed big but it couldn't compare to the size of his. It was huge, and I had no doubt his interior designer had been in here. Nothing in the room seemed out of place—furniture made of dark rich woods in deep brown, a buff comforter on what looked to be a king-size bed, a fireplace across from it, the face and mantel colors matching the comforter. A fan overhead spun lazily in the light-colored ceiling as if it knew it didn't have to work hard thanks to central air, and the drapes on the windows, dark brown, reaching from ceiling to floor, were pulled back, revealing sheer buff curtains underneath.

But I couldn't take in any more details as he lay me on the bed. I might have noticed that it felt like I was being laid inside a fluffy cloud, but I was instead tuned in to Sinclair's body above mine. His eyes said far more than words ever could. He was going to consume me, swallow me whole, and I simply had to be strong enough to survive.

I knew I'd been born for this moment.

If I was anything, I was a survivor---and I wanted whatever he planned to give.

He kissed me hard, confirming what I knew already, that we'd been holding back our true feelings for far too long and that this outcome had been inevitable. Up close, he was everything I had imagined and more. Even though we'd shared a kiss the night of his employee dinner, I'd been clinging to what I thought I'd remembered—but now it

was confirmed. He was strong, so strong—and I could feel that more from how he seemed to be holding back than by direct force. He held himself up so that he wasn't crushing me, but his body was like a solid wall, firm and ungiving. And the way he smelled seemed to tickle my nose and my nerves—he wore a spicy masculine cologne...but underneath he had his own scent, one that seemed to call to me...and it resembled how his tongue tasted in my mouth.

And his eyes...it was as if the color had intensified so that it was like two glowing sapphires burned in their place, his pupils like bottomless pits inside, all ready to consume me.

When he spoke, his voice had a gravelly, sexy quality that made my muscles tighten. “Do you have any preferences?”

I could barely catch my breath. “What do you mean?”

“Is there a position you don't like or is there something you really enjoy?”

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It took me a second to realize that he was wanting to make this first time all about me...but I had a confession. How would I tell him? Really, there was no way to do it other than to come out and say it. “I’m...a virgin, so—”

His pupils grew even larger, as if he’d been caught stealing. “In that case, I can’t possibly—”

“Oh, yes, you can—and you will. I want this. I want this with you.”

Already, though, I could feel how he’d cooled—almost as if he’d jumped in an icy shower...and his eyes told me he was at war with himself. Finally, he said, “Your first time can’t be me ripping your dress off and pounding into you, as much as I’d like that.” A small grin spread across his face, probably because he read in my eyes that I wouldn’t mind that either. “Wait here.”

And, with that, he crossed the bedroom, entering another room—the bathroom. It wasn’t long before I heard water running and I wondered what exactly he was doing. I sat up on the bed, taking in more details of his most personal space. While it was attractive, it also felt spartan in that there was no artwork on the walls, no decorative touches like I’d seen in the rest of the mansion. Everything in this room was practical and had a purpose—reminding me of the man who occupied it.

I got up off the bed, kicking off my sandals and walking over to the bathroom. Although he’d told me to wait, I didn’t want to. I’d already told him more than once that I wanted this, wanted him...and I didn’t want to wait.

The colors in the bathroom matched the bedroom—dark and moody—but the large

tub against the wall was white, as were the two sinks across from it, next to the toilet. Against one wall was a shower with floor-to-ceiling glass, dark tiles behind it. Again, beautiful yet austere.

So Sinclair.

I felt a pang in my heart...because it really did feel like the man—strong, brave, intractable...

And so alone.

But I was here now—and it all felt so right.

He was filling the tub with water and bubbles, and part of me wanted to ask where he got bubble bath, because he didn't seem the type to indulge...but, thinking about the laptop I used daily that belonged to a woman who fancied herself the future Missus, maybe I didn't want to know.

At first, I expected Sinclair to be angry with me for disobeying his request to wait—but his eyes said something far different. He pulled me close and kissed my forehead, just holding me close while the tub filled. Finally, he said, "Your first time should be special. I'm no expert, but I'll do my best."

"This looks like a good start."

His rakish smile returned, causing my pussy to clench with rampant desire, and I mentally tried convincing myself that whatever he had planned would be special. I supposed he had a good start, considering I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a bath instead of a shower, much less a bubble bath.

Then he closed the gap between us and kissed me lightly, his hands roaming all over

my back and then my sides, sending shivers throughout my body. Finally, he realized there were no zippers or buttons and, as his lips moved to my neck, he began peeling the dress off me much like he might get to the center of an orange. As he pulled it down my body, his lips followed, kissing the crest of one of my breasts peeking out of the lace pink bra, getting on his knees as he brought the dress over my hips. Then he kissed the flesh just below my belly button, and I thought I might jump out of my skin as he got closer and closer to that pulsating core below.

But he let the dress fall on the floor, having exposed my matching pink panties, and then he stood. The tub was almost full now, so I asked, “Should I shut it off?”

The small smirk reappeared on his mouth. “You should just stand there looking beautiful.” Leaning over, he turned off the water and stood as he took in my body with his eyes. I felt self-conscious because no one had ever looked at me the way he was—and I’d never been this exposed. “And I believe you are the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen.”

Did he really mean that? I bit my lower lip, wondering what would come next—and he loosened his tie before removing it, setting it carefully on the counter between the sinks. Then he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, all while taking me in with his eyes. But soon I was looking at his fingers, curious myself as to what he looked like underneath his clothes. It was almost like he was unwrapping a present.

After he undid the last button, he pulled off the shirt, setting it on top of the tie, and I drank in every detail—the masculine pecs that I wanted to touch, the hard abs, the swollen biceps—and a small black tattoo on his right upper arm. I wouldn’t have imagined I’d find something like that on him. Because of the scar on his lip, I’d expected to find other scars as well, but he seemed to be a perfect male specimen. Below his navel was a small line of hair that disappeared underneath the waistband of his pants.

When my eyes met his again, he gave me a small grin as if he could read my thoughts. “Are you ready to get in the tub?”

“Um, sure.” I still didn’t know exactly where all this was going, but I knew I had to trust him. He could have ravaged me back on his bed and had chosen not to—so, whatever this night promised, I knew I could trust the man I was with.

When I reached behind my back to unclasp my bra, he said, “Here. Let me.” He walked around behind me and took both sides in his hand as his mouth lowered to my neck. Then, once the bra was undone, he loosened it, letting the straps fall down my arms. Sliding his hands around to the front, he cupped both my breasts and I couldn’t help the slight gasp that escaped my lips. He began kneading my areolas between his thumbs and forefingers gently, waking up every nerve in my body once again.

I could hardly wait.

The way my back arched into the pleasure of his hands caused my rear to push into his body—and that was when I felt his hardness against my back...a steel rod of pleasure that I’d read about for years but had never experienced myself.

But I could hardly concentrate as his hands began sliding down my belly to my panties, the area where I desperately wanted his attention. He slid several fingers under both sides along my hips, easing them down my thighs until they too dropped.

Then he backed off and slapped me on the ass. “Get in.”

His slap had been playful and hadn’t stung at all, but it reminded me of the time several weeks ago when I’d taunted him to spank me.

I tested the water with my toe first, and it was overly warm, but I knew I’d get used to it. As I stepped in, I looked at Sinclair again. He was picking up my clothes off the

floor, setting them on the counter next to his.

Far more thoughtful than I'd ever thought he was.

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I wondered if he was planning to join me in the tub or if he was going to scrub my back or something else. As I lowered myself into the water, he sat down on the toilet to untie and remove his shoes. The warmth felt inviting and the bubble bath smelled good, but I couldn't quite figure out the scent. There was a slight almond smell to it, much like a cherry-almond lotion I had back home. The familiar scent and the warmth surrounding my body helped me relax, even though I was nervous about what would happen next—because, despite wanting Sinclair, this was very new territory for me. I began thinking it might have been better if he'd just taken me in the library, because I wouldn't have the stress of anticipation.

But as he stood and unbuckled his belt, I told myself that anticipation was a good thing—and this had been something I'd been imagining for a while now. The ends of my hair were falling in the water, so I tried twisting it all into a ponytail and then a bun, trying to get it to hold itself. After Sinclair set his belt on the counter, he opened a drawer and pulled out a plastic hair clip. "This should help."

Although he was right, I wondered again who this belonged to—but, if I were going to go through with this, I had to put it out of my mind. I hadn't seen Sinclair with another woman since I'd arrived, even though that didn't mean much...but he hadn't brought a woman home to the best of my knowledge and I didn't believe he'd talked to any women on the phone in my presence. Even his female employees who'd been at the dinner didn't seem to have designs on him and vice versa.

So I could either choose to be jealous of what I thought were remnants of a previous partner...or I could let go and trust this man.

And I did—I trusted him. Maybe not completely. There were still business matters

between us that I hesitated over...but here and now, he had my complete and utter faith.

And desire.

Especially when he unzipped his pants and removed them. Underneath he wore a pair of black boxer briefs, hugging him closely, and when he turned to set the pants on the counter, I got a nice look at his rear end.

He was a beautiful man. I couldn't help but think of Michelangelo's David statue. Of course, in high school, no teacher had directed students to it, but I'd been fascinated by the Renaissance and had specifically tried to find every work of art created by both Michelangelo and da Vinci. I'd seen the David statue from every angle, marveling at how Michelangelo had made stone almost bend to his will to create something so perfect. Hundreds of years later, it was still admired.

When I saw Sinclair's ass, I couldn't help but think of that statue.

But when he turned around, Sinclair's work on the weights in his gym made his pecs bigger than what I thought the statue's seemed. And something else...as Sinclair pulled his boxers off, what I saw was far bigger than the statue.

Of course, it was engorged, something I'd learned about in sex ed in middle school, one of those topics that had made half the girls giggle and the rest of us blush and wish we'd been anywhere else. I'd tried to imagine it in my mind and had even checked it out on Wikipedia—but that had been enough. In the flesh was much different from real life.

If he minded that I was staring, he didn't show it. He was bigger than I'd expected and I tried not to think about how it would feel inside me.

But I knew that was what it was meant to do...so it would feel good. That was what I told myself.

Swallowing, I forced my eyes to his and he smiled as he approached the tub. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.”

“Slide forward a bit.” When I did, he stepped in behind me. As he sat, he slid his legs around mine so that, when I slid back, I was cradled in his body.

His manhood was pressed against me. I felt excited and jittery and even silly, wondering what I should call it. Back in high school, I’d heard girls in the bathroom call them anything other than the clinical name penis. Most frequently, I’d heard the word dick, but sometimes they used it as an insult. I’d also heard cock and once a girl called her boyfriend’s member a python.

Well...until he asked me to actually talk about it, I didn’t need to call it anything—but I found it quite titillating against my back.

And it was as if he could read my mind. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Don’t be. I’ll take good care of you.” And then he began kissing my neck. He’d been resting his hands on his thighs, but now they began to explore....one began tickling one of my pebbly nipples while the other eased my leg down on to his before tickling the inside of my thigh. My pussy clenched and ached, wanting to feel him.

And he finally obliged.

I closed my eyes, relishing all the sensations, hardly aware of how I was breathing deeper, how my body was responding to his touch. Soon, his finger was moving through the folds of my lady parts before it arrived at the one spot that was throbbing and needy, and I wondered how he'd found it so easily.

A gasp escaped my throat. He continued the motion and I wasn't about to stop him, because this was a sensation that felt so natural and so foreign at the same time. Then he nibbled my ear and removed his hands so that they both rested on my thighs. "Just warming you up a little bit."

I could barely speak. "I'm plenty warm."

"Then maybe it's time to get out."

Again, my body tensed, nervous once more at what was coming but also excited. He stepped out first onto the mat before holding out a hand for me. There weren't many bubbles left so there were none on my skin, but goosebumps appeared on my arms and my nipples tightened as the water dripped off my body.

Pulling a towel off the rack, Sinclair wrapped it around my shoulders to bring me close and kissed me, long and luxurious, waking up my nerves again. Then he gently dabbed at my skin—my arms, my back, my front, pausing to kiss a nipple before dabbing at my legs. Next, he quickly dried himself off and I couldn't help but look at his dick again—it wasn't as hard as it had been before, but it wasn't floppy either. I couldn't stop myself from touching it. Seeing pictures was one thing—but this was my first real encounter.

I took it in both hands, surprised at how smooth it felt at first—but as I moved along, it engorged fully again, feeling almost angry: hard and swollen, ready to punish something for pleasure.

My pussy grew wet again just thinking about it.

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“He’ll get to feast on you later,” Sinclair said, a finger under my chin. When I looked in his eyes, he said, “But first things first.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I kept my hands on him without sliding them as he removed the clip on my hair and spread it across my shoulders. “You are stunningly beautiful.”

I gave him a shy smile, wondering what else he wanted to say—because it felt like he was holding something back. I thought I knew what it was. Likely, he was feeling the same way I was—that we shouldn’t be here doing this, that we were breaking every possible rule. I knew my own father would be devastated if he knew I was about to lose my virginity to his sworn enemy’s son, but how would Sinclair’s father react?

I suspected he too would be disappointed...angry. And although I knew my father would never disown me no matter how upset I made him, I didn’t know if the same could be said for Sinclair’s father.

As if he sensed my hesitation, Sinclair kissed me again, keeping every fire inside me ignited and hot for him. Then, taking my hand, he led me into the bedroom. I felt a little self-conscious, my body bare, exposed—but he was naked too.

And ever the gentleman.

He pulled back the big gray comforter, exposing black sheets, and he invited me to lie down. As I rested my head against the pillow, I could smell his scent in the sheets, and it was like a pheromone, stimulating all my juices. When he lay next to me, his finger traced a pattern between my breasts, again emphasizing to my body just how

desperate I was for his touch. Between my breasts wasn't good enough. I needed more.

And he was about to deliver.

“Have you ever had an orgasm?”

That question embarrassed me. I hadn't done much self-exploration, not feeling much desire for anyone...until I'd been in his presence. More recently, I'd considered trying, just to relieve the ache I felt for him, but the answer was that I never had. So I told him the truth. “No.”

I felt like he was going to ask another question, but he didn't. Instead, he kissed me once more while that finger continued making a pattern in my cleavage. After getting me steamed up, his lips moved to my neck, my collarbone, then to where he'd been tracing with his finger before he snaked his tongue down my belly. It wasn't long before he settled between my legs—and, although I knew what he was about to do, I had no idea what to expect.

“Relax, baby,” he said—and that made me tense up. But his hands gently spread my legs farther apart, making me feel more vulnerable at first...and then needy.

I could feel his fingers in my folds, and each touch felt like electricity. Rather than look at his head, I shifted my eyes to the languid ceiling fan, trying to focus, because my body wanted to squirm. Finally, his tongue touched me. He began lapping at my slit and I sucked in a breath of air. His tongue seemed to move at the pace of the fan—unhurried but determined.

Everything inside me was concentrated on that one spot.

Closing my eyes, I took in slow, deep breaths, realizing that his attention there was

helping my nerves feel less panicked, less desperate. But it wasn't until after a minute or so that something in my brain seemed to click. While what he'd been doing up till this point had felt good...now it felt like it had purpose, like it was leading to a big payoff.

Because I'd been concentrating on the sensations he was stirring, I hadn't noticed at first how my breathing had deepened. Then he did something with his tongue, something that felt like a swirl, and it woke me up all over again before he returned to his previous pattern.

Involuntarily, a little groan escaped my throat as I found myself trying to grip the silky sheet underneath me. As if in response, the pressure his tongue exerted increased just enough to bring up my heart rate.

Something was going to happen. I knew what it was...but dare I hope? Was it real?

Regardless, there was no mistaking this was building to something. Desperate for something to hold onto, like the bar across one's lap on a roller coaster, I shoved my hand into his hair, trying not to pull but feeling as if I needed to be grounded in some way. The sensation was even stranger, as I could sense the slight motion of his head giving me pleasure from another angle.

I began thinking it wasn't going to happen, yet he stayed in place, lapping at my clit valiantly as if he didn't have a care in the world—and it was his attention, his care that meant more to me than any—

But what felt like another wall in my brain came crashing down, unleashing something. I gasped a deep breath, almost as if to steel myself, as my thighs began to tremble, held apart gently by his warm, strong hands.

And then it was as if I was hit by a wave of the ocean.

“Ohhhhhhh...” I moaned, unable to stop the sound escaping my mouth. It was much like I imagined speaking in tongues might be like, spontaneous and powerful, overtaking any control I had over my mind and body.

The rhythm with which the orgasm overcame me continued to be driven by the stroke of his tongue. Every swell of pleasure I experienced matched the relentless caress he applied to my clit and, after what felt like eons, it continued with less intensity—and, for that, I was grateful, because I felt out of breath and almost exhausted. Still, my body didn’t give up, my thighs now matching the same rhythm as he kept up his slow pace.

It wasn’t until my body finally relaxed in pleasurable exhaustion that I noticed my hand was still tangled in his hair. Weakly, I managed, “Oh, sorry.”

He kissed the inside of my thigh. “You have nothing to be sorry about.” Sitting up, he moved next to me, but I had to force my eyes open. “That was really your first orgasm?”

I chuckled lightly. “Yeah. I’ve never experienced anything like that before.”

As he brushed his lips on my shoulder, I felt a shiver run through my body. God...I was alive but I couldn’t take advantage of it yet. First, I had to rest.

But I hoped we weren’t done.

“I can give you that whenever you want.” Another imperceptible tremor rumbled through my insides as I tried to contemplate the weight of his promise. A greedy part of my mind, a spot I didn’t know existed, pounced on that, imagining him between my legs every night.

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That would certainly make the next ten years bearable.

But had we moved away from that? I was glad my eyes were still closed as I tried to imagine how what we'd just done would again completely change my life.

Chapter 8

Sinclair pulled me into his arms, and I had to simply let him, as if I were a limp rag doll, because I felt like I could barely move. He was warm and smelled good up close. For now, I tried to push the enormity of what had just happened out of my mind, because it was already done.

Hadn't I wanted this?

Oh, yes...and, this close to him again, I wanted so much more.

Grateful that my animal desires eclipsed my noisy brain, I focused on how strong he felt against my body. His chest was nothing but pure muscle, unforgiving and yet smooth beneath my fingers.

"How do you feel?" he asked as my finger swirled on his nipple.

"I can't even describe it. Right now, I feel like I could melt into your bed."

He chuckled, his hand moving over my back. As it made its way to the curve, I wanted him to keep going—to cup my ass, to sneak his fingers between my legs.

How was I feeling so desirous again already?

And yet I was. It had to be because of him. He had this effect on me. But, rather than question it, I kissed his chest.

And I decided to admit it. “I want you inside me. I want to know what that feels like.” Kissing up his chest, I began moving touching my lips to his neck, his chin—and his stubble prickled at me as if warning me.

But I pressed on.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“More than.” I kissed him hard on the lips then, and he returned it with force, as if this had been the moment he’d been waiting for. Then he rolled me on my back and kissed my neck, my nipples, licked and lapped until I was arching my back, practically begging him to tear me in half.

I needed him—and it was as if my body was telling me it had been waiting my whole life for him.

For Sinclair.

Maybe it had.

His legs were between mine, but it was his fingers that touched me there, heating me up all over again. Then he sat up, pulling open a drawer in the nightstand beside the bed. I almost asked what he was doing when I saw the answer in the form of a little square packet. I might have been a virgin, but I knew what that was and felt immense gratitude. I hadn’t even stopped to think how vulnerable I’d been at that moment. Instead, I’d been completely thoughtless. What the hell would I have done if I’d

gotten pregnant?

But his lips back on mine after he put the condom on pulled me from my self-criticism. Again, he maneuvered his fingers between my legs and stroked my slit, but this time, he slid a finger inside as if testing the waters before swimming.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his voice coarse.

“Yes.”

Closing my eyes, I readied myself. Once more, his lips touched mine and I opened them to invite him inside, envisioning every part of me unfurling itself for him like a summer flower. At first, his manhood entering me felt slightly uncomfortable—but as it progressed, the pain increased, and I pictured my walls spreading apart, pushing back, inviting him in.

But there was resistance...as if my own body were betraying me.

Like earlier, an unbidden noise escaped my mouth, but it was not a sound of pleasure.

His voice was soft. “Are you all right?”

“Mm-hmm.” This wasn’t true, but I thought back to that middle grade sex ed class. I knew there was a hymen inside me that needed to be broken—that was the medieval way of determining if a new wife was truly a virgin. It was the blood that came after from the tearing of that thin membrane—and possibly the sensation of breaking through—that told them.

And so I knew this was something I had to do. Afterward, it wouldn’t hurt as much...because there wouldn’t be anything left to break.

And I was giving to Sinclair the one thing I could never give to anyone else.

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But I was fooling myself. I wasn't just giving him my virginity or my body. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was also handing him the keys to my heart.

And as he broke through that wall, my fingernails digging into his back, he possessed every little part of me.

I just didn't know it yet.

Sinclair had been as gentle as could be under the circumstances. We took a short shower afterward and then he'd put me in one of his white cotton t-shirts.

And then we curled up in bed next to each other. The last time I'd glanced at his clock, it had been somewhere around eleven—and I wished I could sleep, but the throbbing pain between my legs and my excited brain were making it difficult.

Fortunately, Sinclair didn't seem to mind. He pulled me into his arms and held me close under that black silky sheet, his hand again lazily stroking my back.

This time, though, my girl parts decided they could wait a day or so before asking for seconds.

Because there was a soft light flowing out from the bathroom, I looked around his bedroom without moving my head—and I spotted the book on the dresser. "Have you started reading it?"

"What?" Although his voice didn't sound sleepy, he might have been getting close.

“Snow Falling on Cedars. It’s on your dresser.”

“No, not really. I’m sorry. I’ve reread the first couple of paragraphs a couple of times—but then my daily reading beckons me.”

“Once you get through the first chapter—”

“I know. You said that. I plan to settle down with it when we get our first good snowstorm on a weekend. I’ll curl up with it in front of the fireplace in the study.”

“You don’t have to read it.”

“I want to, Lise. I promised.”

I ran my hand along his firm shoulder and upper arm. “What’s this tattoo?” I asked, wanting to know anything about him he’d be willing to share.

“Oh, that stupid thing. It’s a lion, the mascot for Columbia.” The college he attended—I remembered. It had been one of the first things we’d talked about, before we discovered each other’s real identity. “I and three other boys had had a long weekend of drinking and wound up talking each other into it. It was an act of rebellion against our uptight parents.”

“Do you regret it?”

Opening his eyes, he grinned. “Not a damn bit.” Then he moved his hand to my arm, running a finger along it. “Besides, my father never found out about it. So much for being rebellious. What difference does it make if the people you’re rebelling against have no idea?”

I didn’t have an answer for that. I’d never rebelled against my father...because he

was all I'd ever had in this world. Rebelling against him would have been like cutting off one of my hands.

Moving his head as if to capture my eyes, he seemed to sense my thoughts—and hoped to keep them light. “What about you? Why no tattoos? Not that I’m complaining.”

Besides the fact that I couldn’t afford them...there was yet another reason. The crowd didn’t accept me, so why would I follow them? “Everybody has one.”

“Exactly. And everyone your age seems to have a dozen—”

“What do you mean everyone my age? You’re not that much older.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “How old are you, Annalise?” The way he said my full first name sent a rumble through my body...because his question suddenly felt like a command—and I was compelled to obey.

Still... “Do you really want to know?”

The smile was fading from his face, even though he didn’t seem angry. “I asked.”

“I’m nineteen.”

He let out a quick breath as if I’d punched him. “Christ.”

“Why?”

“You’re...barely legal.”

Now I felt a bit of a sting. “I’m an adult. Fully legal. I’m old enough to make my own decisions—and to know what I want,” I spat, hoping my vehemence convinced him more than it convinced myself. He continued to frown, so I asked, “How old are you?” I’d guessed late twenties or early thirties, but his hesitance made me wonder.

“I’m thirty.”

It was my turn to let out a breath, but this one felt like relief. “You’re not that much older.”

“I’m—”

“Not old enough to be my dad, not under any circumstances. So it’s fine. I don’t understand why it wouldn’t be.”

He was quiet for a bit before he spoke again. “Regardless, it’s done.”

Although he held me again, something seemed to have shifted, and my mind took it all in. Even though it still hurt between my legs, I was glad I’d done this, happy I’d given myself to Sinclair.

But my heart felt like it was being squeezed—because the feeling didn’t seem to be mutual, not now. He’d promised me earlier that he could make me feel like a queen whenever I wanted, except in this moment it seemed as if he were withdrawing that offer.

Then I thought about my dad...not just what he'd think if he knew I was sleeping with the enemy, but how he'd react if he knew I'd given this man my flower, my innocence.

And part of me was now a woman.

But then Sinclair asked, "How do you feel?"

Was he asking about my body...or my heart? "What do you mean?"

"Are you sore? Does it still hurt?"

I didn't want to lie, but I also didn't want him to feel guilty about what had happened between us. It was something I'd wanted—and I would have had to go through it at some point. I was grateful it was someone I chose...grateful that it was Sinclair. "A little. But I'm sure I'll feel better by morning."

He kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry that hurt you."

"It's fine."

"I just wonder if you'd been with someone your age—"

"Stop that. It would have hurt, no matter the age of my...lover." That word sounded so weird coming out of my mouth, and I wondered if it was even what I'd wanted to say. His eyes were hiding so much, and it pained me that he was hung up on such a minor detail. After all, it wasn't like he hadn't known there was some distance between our ages before we'd done this. So I decided to take a different tack. "What was your first time like?"

At that, he chuckled. "Mortifying—but only because of the circumstances. I was in

high school, home for the summer, and my dad had me taking tennis lessons. I'd never been much good at it. I didn't hate it but thought I was better at golf. Anyway...the instructor was probably in her early twenties." He went quiet for a minute and I looked up, scanning his eyes. They were far away, as if trying to remember all the details. "The week before I had to return to school, we wound up having sex in her car. She didn't know it was my first time until after...and let's just say I didn't perform up to expectations."

"Did it hurt you at all?"

"Just psychologically. But I got over it."

Had he? I'd found that humiliation and shame were like an albatross, hanging on you wherever you went.

In Winchester. Not here. Even though many of my behaviors from dealing with those emotions were ingrained...I didn't feel shame here, not like back at home. Here, I was almost a different person. I'd become angry, defiant—and passionate in every sense of the word. And, even though I was almost like a prisoner, somehow I was also free.

But I wasn't going to say any of that.

"And I'll get over this." I began tracing a pattern on his chest again, a figure-eight just above his pecs. "Can I ask you something?"

Removing his hand from my back, he brushed my hair away from my face. "Of course." With a grin, he added, "That doesn't mean I'll answer it."

I returned my eyes to my finger, feeling shy and silly. "I don't want to call you Mr. W. anymore."

“Thank fuck for that.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “And I’ve grown to like the name Sinclair, but it seems so...formal.”

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“I suppose you say that because you prefer to be called Lise instead of your full name Annalise. Does that sound right?”

“Maybe.”

“Sinclair is my name. You can call me that.”

“But what if I called you Cory instead?” Finally, I made eye contact with him again, hoping to gauge his reaction.

But I couldn’t read him. “Cory...doesn’t sound like me.” I took that as a no, but he was still pondering, so I returned to tracing the figure eight on his chest, as if a tiny ice skater was practicing. “Edna told me once that my mother used to call me that.”

What little I’d read of what I now considered her pregnancy journal had suggested that. “But you don’t remember?”

“I was a baby when she died. I don’t remember her at all. Edna’s the closest thing I ever had to a mother.” Although I didn’t speak, I flattened my hand, now stroking his chest with my palm, as if that could soothe any pain he might feel from her loss. “If I said yes,” he said, his voice soft as he placed a finger under my chin, urging me to make eye contact, “you mustn’t ever call me that outside this room.”

I suspected I knew the reason but I still wanted to ask. “Why not?”

“Outside this room, you are my employee and you need to show respect. Calling me by a nickname that no one else has ever heard would not only make others question

our relationship but might also cause them to lose respect for me—and I will not tolerate that.”

I wasn’t about to say it aloud, but my mind screamed MORE RULES! And the defiant imp inside me wanted to rebel almost immediately.

But then I focused on something else he’d said...something I needed to clarify. So much I needed to clarify.

First things first. “So this...us. This is secret?”

“It must be. We’ve crossed a line, Lise—and it would be foolish to broadcast that.”

“You said relationship.” Now I touched his cheek, those little prickles of stubble rubbing against my hand, reminding me of how my chin was also slightly sore, easy to ignore when there was a stronger pain below. His eyes softened, as if he’d been a savage beast, and all it took was a loving touch to soothe his ire. “This isn’t a one-time thing?”

Then I saw something cross his eyes, pained, as if he’d been stabbed. “Do you want it to be?”

“No.” I shook my head and, impulsively, kissed him gently on the lips.

“I don’t either. But we have to keep this to ourselves.”

That idea didn’t bother me. I would have felt ashamed if anyone knew what we’d done here tonight—not just if my father had found out, but Edna, Gregory, Henry...all the people I knew here. It might have seemed to them as if I were sleeping with the master of the mansion to earn favors. I didn’t want to have to insist to people that Sinclair had offered me the chance to attend college before we’d

become involved with each other.

But...we'd kissed before that, hadn't we? We'd both been attracted to one another, thinking about each other in inappropriate ways long before we'd actually consummated.

Did that count?

I wasn't about to broach that subject. "Okay." And my heart opened wide. "As long as I can have you here and call you whatever I want, I can keep all this to myself."

Chapter 9

I awoke the next morning to the sounds of Sinclair's door opening—but he wasn't leaving. Instead, he was entering, light streaming inside through the sheer curtains.

For a moment, I panicked. Would anyone have been able to glimpse through them last night to see what we were doing? But as I looked over at them, I couldn't see the yard outside. Although they were sheer and let plenty of light in, they weren't so filmy as to be see-through.

As he walked past the bed, I said, "Morning."

He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, no doubt returning from the third floor where he'd been working out. "Good morning, lovely. How did you sleep?"

"Great." It was true—except for twice in the night when I'd had to turn and felt the pain between my legs, I'd slept like a baby.

And he'd held me most of the night. I hadn't expected it, but I'd appreciated it.

Sitting up, I swung my legs over the side of the bed. He asked, “Did you want to shower?”

Remembering what he’d said the night before about discretion, I responded, “I should probably do it in my room.” He nodded as I stood but didn’t say anything. “And I should probably grab my clothes out of the bathroom before you shower.”

“I can buy you new clothing, by the way.”

Where had that come from? “My clothes are fine.”

He didn’t say anything else about them as I began hobbling toward the bathroom. Until I’d stood, I hadn’t noticed that the pain from losing my virginity was far more than I’d expected. It hurt far less when I didn’t move. He asked, “Can I help?”

“No, I’m okay.”

But when I returned from the bathroom with all my clothes gathered up, he said, “We can’t have you moving around like that. Edna will ask questions.”

“What am I supposed to do then?”

He smiled, pulling me into an embrace, the clothes in my arms preventing us from getting too close. “You’ll take a sick day. I’ll let Edna know you’ve texted me that you’re not feeling well, so you’re taking the day off from work.”

“But what about meals? It will still be obvious when I go to the kitchen.”

The way he looked at me made me want to do whatever he asked, no matter how silly. “You’re sick in bed. Edna will bring the food to you.”

“Okay.”

He kissed me on the forehead and swatted me on the bottom. “So you’d better get in

bed.”

I frowned. One day, I wanted to watch him get ready. I wanted to see him work out, then shower and shave, groom every hair into place. I wanted to see how he chose his suit for the day and watch as he put on everything, covering up that rock-hard body and that dick I was beginning to think of as mine.

But that would have to wait for another day.

“Okay. Have a good day at work.”

“I always do.” His smile nearly wrecked me—until I had to make that trek down the hall. Yeah...having him inside me again was going to have to wait a day or two.

After checking my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed anything, I sent Sinclair a real text message, asking if he or Edna could also retrieve my laptop from downstairs. He texted back, It’s a sick day. You shouldn’t be working.

I couldn’t help but sass a little. I won’t be working. I’m going to submit my application to DU.

That can wait until tomorrow.

And, as usual, his say was final. Or I’d let him think as much. But it would not wait until tomorrow. If he wouldn’t bring the laptop, I’d complete the application with my phone. Although it would take a little longer, I considered myself fairly adept at doing things on mobile just as well if not better than on a computer.

If that didn’t work, I’d sneak downstairs to get it myself. If Edna caught me, I’d just say I wanted a cup of hot tea and company.

But I knew she would be in my room soon with breakfast, so I had to figure out what my supposed malady was—and I settled on tummy troubles. It would be far easier to fake a stomachache than it would be a cold or flu, and I'd never had a cold in August anyway.

Meanwhile, I was still wearing Sinclair's oversized white t-shirt. That wouldn't do. I grabbed the short nightgown I'd worn the night before last and put it on, tucking Sinclair's shirt in a drawer.

As I sat there waiting, my mind drifted back to the night before. If someone had told me two months ago that I would fall in love with—and be intimate with—Sinclair Whittier, I would have told them they were crazy.

But it was true. I was falling in love with him. That said, it wasn't unconditional. If I had to choose between him and my father, I'd choose my dad.

But if I had to choose between a life alone and being with Sinclair, it was an easy decision. Although these feelings that had grown overnight from interest, intrigue, and lust into something far more significant, they were strong. I'd never felt like I did right now about another man. It was consuming.

As if watching a movie in my mind, I replayed every moment—from the bath to snuggling in bed—and I decided I needed to be responsible. I would have to get on some form of birth control soon. I was glad Sinclair had used a condom, and I tried not to think about why he had one at the ready—but, more importantly, I knew if I planned to be sexually active, I needed to take precautions as well. Because, as I thought again about last night, I knew I would have probably had him take my virginity anyway, even if he hadn't had protection.

I didn't want to get caught off guard ever.

I also knew there was a possibility that maybe this was just another game—but I didn't think so. Based on past experiences with him, it would be easy to assume that he simply liked the idea of having a young woman nearby to fuck whenever he wanted, and I couldn't help but forget the time he'd offered to cut my sentence in half if I would do just that.

So, yes, in the back of my mind, I recognized that this was possibly a way for Sinclair to have his cake and eat it too. But I couldn't quite accept that notion...because the man I'd seen last night had been vulnerable, tender...loving.

Could that have been an act?

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There was a light rapping at the door, so I said, “Come in,” hoping I’d made my voice sound weak enough that my supposed illness wouldn’t be questioned.

The doorknob turned, but there was a long pause before the door was pushed open. When I saw the huge tray Edna carried in, I understood why. She’d likely set the tray on the table in the hallway so she could open the door before entering. “I’m so sorry you’re not feeling well, child. What’s bothering you?”

“My stomach.”

“Oh, dear. You might not want to eat at all.”

“I do.” After last night’s activities, I was nearly starving—but I hoped I didn’t convey that to Edna. I added, “I think the worst has passed.”

“Good. Fortunately,” she said, bringing the tray to my bed, “most everything here is fairly bland, which is supposed to be good for you when you don’t feel well.”

The tray held two slices of buttered wheat toast, a peeled banana cut into chunks, a small bowl of oatmeal, a glass of water, and a cup of tea, along with a teapot and a small bowl of sugar. “Thank you so much, Edna. This is so kind of you.”

She beamed as she rested a corner of the tray on the nightstand, picking up the pitcher and sugar off the tray and placing them on the polished surface. “I was happy to do it. Do you feel like you could hold this on your lap?”

Sitting up, I replied. “I think so.”

“Would you like me to open your curtains? Get some sun shining in here?”

“Yes, that would be nice.” I wanted to begin devouring my small meal and thought better of it. Someone who’d supposedly spent the night before throwing up might eat gingerly.

“I must admit I’ll miss you at lunch today.” When she finished opening up the drapes around the room, she said, “But there’s always tomorrow. What do you think about grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup?”

More mostly bland food—but that was okay. It was only until I could walk like a normal human being—which I was going to try after I showered.

“That sounds fine, Edna. Thank you.”

Just as she was walking out the door, she said, “I suppose I should give you my cell phone number so you can call it if you need something.” I agreed and added her number to the short list of contacts in my phone. “Otherwise, I’ll be back in a few hours to check on you.”

After she closed the door, I gobbled the food as if I hadn’t eaten in days. It was almost funny, considering how I’d refused food over and over the first week or so I’d been here. As always, Edna’s food soothed my hunger pangs along with my soul—and I got to work.

First, I showered. Part of me was sad that I was washing off every trace of Sinclair—every kiss, every touch, his lingering scent. Although I was a little sticky between the legs, I knew that was because of me and not him, because the condom had prevented those fluids from entering me. But I was curious what even that would feel like.

I could if I were on birth control.

When I got out of the shower and dressed, I was still hobbling around. I couldn't force myself to walk normally unless I moved very slowly. Fortunately, it didn't hurt as much, and I hoped I would be back to normal by tomorrow. It would be hard faking sick two days in a row—especially after I'd told Edna the worst had passed.

But I was suddenly struck with inspiration—and it was based on something that had happened to one of my few friends in high school. She'd become sexually active our junior year and started feeling ill not long after her first time. Like me, she didn't have a mother in the picture, but her father wasn't nearly as caring as mine—so she didn't talk to him about anything.

One day she confided in me. "It's one of three things," she said. "It's either a yeast infection, a bladder infection, or I'm pregnant."

"What?" I had a hard time rectifying all the possibilities. And I'd wanted to ask why she hadn't used protection...but part of me wondered if she'd wanted to get pregnant all along so she could get out of her dad's house.

Of course, her getting pregnant happened at the beginning of our senior year, but when she went to the doctor before that, she found out she had a urinary tract infection. "A bladder infection on steroids," she'd said—but a little medicine cleared it right up.

Maybe I could use this supposed illness as an excuse to see a gynecologist...I could look up the symptoms and tell them to Edna, asking her to get me an appointment. I knew doctors were bound by confidentiality, so whatever happened behind those doors would be my business alone.

So, after doing a little research, I sent Edna a text, asking if I could talk to her for a

minute about seeing a doctor. I expected her to call when she got the message but she instead came upstairs. I'd put on a pair of clean pajamas, a lavender top with long sleeves and pants made of light, breezy fabric. I thought that might add to the belief that I wasn't feeling well.

When Edna arrived, she first asked, "Did you want more tea, dear?"

"No, thank you. I'm all right."

"Ah...you ate it all. Did it not set well?"

"No, it's okay. It's, um...something else. I don't know if it's related to how my stomach felt, but it's in the same area. I'm—hurting below. You know, kind of itchy and painful."

"Oh. In your...feminine area?"

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“Yes.” It wasn’t entirely untrue. There was some residual pain—but not due to an infection.

“Hmm. I could pick up—”

“Would it be possible to see a gynecologist? I’ve never had this before and I’m not sure what’s happening.”

Edna nodded. “Of course. I can make an appointment.”

“That would be wonderful.”

“Do you have your insurance card? Did Mr. Whittier give that to you?”

“Yes.” He’d given me all that information during our second Sunday meeting.

“All right. I’ll be back.”

I hated the idea of Edna having to walk up and down the stairs constantly—and, besides, I had another mission I wanted to accomplish. “You can send me a text—just let me know what time.”

“It might not be for today,” she said, picking up the much-lighter tray off the dresser where I’d set it, along with the teapot and sugar. “But we could always go to urgent care.”

No...I needed a gynecologist. “As a last resort.” If my idea didn’t work, I’d have to

figure something else out—and maybe even involve Sinclair.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do and let you know.”

“By text?”

“Yes.” Soon she was out of the room, and I walked in bare feet over to the door, hoping to hear her progress. But today she wore shoes with rubber soles that didn’t make much noise. And I needed my phone anyway, in case she texted me when I was wandering around. I went back to the nightstand and grabbed it, checking messages like a lovesick girl, wishing Sinclair would text me.

But, of course, he wouldn’t.

I knew there were more reasons for not sending me a message than for it, but I still wished inside he would. I wanted some reassurance that he felt the same way I did even when I knew that was silly and probably stupid. Although I believed with all my heart that what we had shared last night was genuine, it didn’t mean Sinclair had the capacity to love or care.

In fact, all signs pointed away from it.

When I had assured myself that Edna had had plenty of time to make it down the stairs and into the kitchen, I opened my door. I knew, though, that she might leave the kitchen at any time and, if she did, she could easily spot me.

So, as I crept down the stairs, my ears perked for any sounds, I decided that I’d use the excuse I’d thought of before. I wanted tea or water or something and should have asked for it before but didn’t think of it. Walking down the stairs, it was less evident that it hurt to move my legs, at least to me. It looked almost normal.

When I got to the bottom of the staircase, I let out a soft breath. I only had a few feet until I got to the downstairs door.

And then I realized how stupid this had been. If I'd gone to the other side—down the east stairs and the newly fixed stairs to the dungeon, I'd have been less likely to have been spotted by Edna. That too was foolish, though, I thought as my hand wrapped around the doorknob heading downstairs. If she'd caught me on the second floor landing next to the forbidden east wing, I'd have even more trouble. Because, even though she'd never said it, I knew Sinclair would have told her about my transgression. How else could he have explained that offensive maid's uniform at the dinner party?

Finally, the knob was twisted as far as it would go and I slowly pulled the door open. It wasn't until then that I heard Edna's voice coming from the kitchen—but it was muffled, so I didn't know if she was in the pantry or the main area. Regardless, I knew I needed to move, because she was talking to someone who might leave the kitchen at any moment.

Once the door was closed, I hustled down the stairs—but, not wanting another injured ankle, I held onto the smooth railing as I descended.

The laptop was on top of the filing cabinet, just where I'd left it. The thing didn't like to hold a charge, so I took the cord as well and wrapped it up, holding them both in my arms.

What would I say now if I were caught? What would be a good excuse?

Boredom?

At the top of the stairs, I slowly turned the doorknob, holding the laptop and charger in my left arm. Once I slowly cracked the door, I strained my ears, but I couldn't hear

anything. Finally, I stuck my head out and looked all around—down the main hallway both ways and peering over, trying to see down the west rear hallway where the entry to the kitchen was located. But I didn't see a thing.

I couldn't hear anything, either.

So I moved rapidly, closing the door quietly behind me and then all but running to the stairs. It wasn't until one of my feet touched the first tread that I heard Edna's voice again. But it was still muffled, although I imagined it getting closer. So I took the steps two at a time, not looking behind me until I reached the top. Once there, I glanced back down the hall, into the antechamber below, and up to the east side, even to the third floor. But I couldn't see a soul.

Back inside my room, I let out an even bigger sigh of relief, realizing I'd broken a sweat. Wiping my brow, I moved over to the bed and sat down. Then, when I felt my phone vibrate in my pajama pants pocket, I pulled it out. It was a simple message from Edna.

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Gyn appt at 2:00. We'll leave here at 1:30.

She'd worked a miracle, underscoring once more why Sinclair relied on her like he did. And it turned out that she was doing the same thing for me.

Now if I could only keep her from knowing my business as much as she knew Sinclair's—that would be a miracle if I could get away with it.

Chapter 10

By the time Edna and I left for the doctor, I had all but finished my application to DU. I had the matter of making the payment, though—for both the application and to have my transcripts from WCC sent to DU. I'd have to wait until Sinclair gave me the card he'd promised.

Still, I was quite satisfied with my progress—and I wanted to share it with someone. I'd tell my father later this evening over the phone, but there was someone else who might be proud of me.

I sent Sinclair a quick text message: Application to DU all done except for \$\$.

When I entered the kitchen, I tried my best to walk as normally as I could. Although the pain was gradually lessening—especially when I wasn't moving—I still had a way to go.

Of course, Edna noticed. “Oh, you poor dear. I'm so glad the doctor was able to see you today.”

“Thanks for taking me.”

“Think nothing of it. Would it help if I held you on one side while we make our way to the car?”

And have her figure out it wasn't what I'd told her it was? “No, I'll be okay. Thanks.” With that, I tried even harder to walk like I ordinarily would...just more slowly.

We didn't go down the west hall to get to the garage as I'd expected; instead, I followed Edna down the main corridor to the east rear hall, past Sinclair's office. I'd never walked down this side except to enter the office, so I was on full alert. The room past his office looked like a large conference room—rather out of place here. It would have seemed more natural in an office building, but knowing that Sinclair liked to work at home sometimes, it made sense.

There were several more rooms we passed, all with closed doors.

Edna must have sensed my curiosity. “All these rooms back here used to be reserved for staff. One is a break room, and there is also a security room and a room where all the decorations are stored, but the rest are living quarters.”

“Did you ever live here?”

“When Mr. Whittier was a baby, I and my first husband did. If his mother had been alive, we wouldn't have done it—but the little one needed me and his father was gone far too much. He wouldn't have had a clue how to raise a helpless infant.”

I almost said something along the lines that he was lucky to have help—but that wasn't true. Luck had nothing to do with it. Money was why he was able to buy all the assistance he could ever need.

What if Sinclair had been born to a poor family—or one of more modest means? Would his father have been forced to figure out how to be a good parent on his own? Would his mother have killed herself? Even if she were suffering from clinical depression, I started to think, based on her own words, that feeling loved and desired by her husband might have helped. Maybe she would have left him and found a way to be happy and survive on her own.

Then Sinclair might not have even been here.

“Why don’t Greg and his wife live in this hall?”

“You’d have to ask Mr. Whittier—but I suspect it’s because Greg asked. And this place is so big with so many unused rooms, I understand why he wouldn’t object. There’s a kitchenette up there anyway, so why not?”

Soon, we walked through a door at the end of the hall—and into the garage I’d never seen. The cars over here appeared to be more like the kind I’d feel comfortable driving. After all, my little car back at home had been purchased used, already with a few scratches and minor dents. If something happened to it superficially, I wouldn’t have cared.

Still, these cars were slick and shiny, almost like new, even though their price tags were closer to what I could afford.

Edna took a black car in the middle of the garage, and when I saw the H logo on the front, I remembered her saying something about driving a Honda. She’d said it was her favorite and it was practically brand new.

“While you’re at Dr. Anderson’s, I’m going to do some shopping. Just text me when you’re done and I’ll come back. Her office is just a few blocks away from the supermarket I like to shop at, so it shouldn’t take long.”

Although I hadn't left the mansion much, aside from the evening walks I'd been taking with Sinclair regularly, I'd become familiar with the neighborhood. There were several blocks of some of the nicest homes that reeked of wealth, each seeming to want to outdo the homes they were flanked by. Each yard was lush and green and it was rare to actually see anyone in it. The yards were for show, not for enjoyment.

But after traveling those several blocks, we'd move into homes that were less ostentatious, more middle class and then suddenly, without warning, we would be thrust into the city, and this time was no different—from quiet streets to bustle in less than five minutes. Without all the trees blocking the view, the skyscrapers not far off to the north were easy to spot.

Soon, we were on a busy street, heading the other direction. It wasn't long before we arrived in what looked to be some sort of office park with tall rust-colored brick buildings. Pulling over to the curb, Edna said, "The clinic is in here. Do you need me to go with you?"

"No...but how will I pay?"

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“Oh, yes. I forgot.” Quickly, she rifled through her purse and handed me several ten-dollar bills. “That should be more than enough for your copay.”

“This isn’t your money, is it?”

“It is, but I need the card to go shopping. Don’t you worry. I’ll have Mr. Whittier reimburse me.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

When I walked in, I tried not to be intimidated. Back in Winchester, there was nothing like this, not a conglomeration of health professionals. My doctor was in his own building, all by himself. My dentist and eye doctor were in other buildings in other parts of town. There was a new surgery center that they’d built a couple of years ago, and, of course, the hospital had added a few buildings in the past five years, but this set up reminded me that I was a country mouse in the city.

Fortunately, there was a directory on the wall, and I sorted through listings for heart doctors and orthopedic surgeons to find the gynecology and obstetrics practice. It was on the second floor. Ordinarily, I would have taken the stairs but I decided on the elevator so I could give my aching feminine parts a break.

After checking in, I was given several sheets of paper to fill out. I found a seat in the crowded waiting room between two pregnant women—one was clearly closer to giving birth than the other, but I didn’t know how far either of them were along. I felt a pang of something, but I couldn’t tell what it was. Longing maybe? Did I want to be a mother?

Not at this moment...but now that my heart was swelling with love for the man I'd lost my virginity to, I couldn't stop my mind from toying with the idea for just a second.

It made me realize that Sinclair had yet to text me back. Maybe he was busy. I wasn't quite sure what he did at his job, but I got the feeling that he worked hard all day every day.

As I looked over the paperwork, I thought carefully before describing my supposed symptoms. Telling Edna a lie was one thing but I didn't know if lying on paperwork would get me in trouble, even if I did intend to say the truth. So I decided from the start to be honest with my written answers, knowing that my confidentiality would be protected.

Besides, Edna probably wasn't a person I needed to worry about in that regard anyway. My lies were protecting Sinclair and perhaps myself.

But what would I tell the doctor?

Before I could figure out what I would say, a nurse was calling me into the back. She took my weight and blood pressure and then asked me to describe my symptoms.

"Actually, I don't think I have any kind of infection. My, um, friend was assuming. But I do need to see the doctor."

The nurse's brows pinched together but she was making an effort to be friendly. "Okay. What about?"

"I, um...I just became sexually active and I need to...uh, want to get on birth control."

She nodded, having regained her composure. “You should also be sure to use condoms to protect yourself against STDs.”

“Oh, we did—but I just don’t want to take any chances.”

“Smart.”

It wasn’t long before I was having a conversation with the doctor, a woman who had the air of being so busy, she wasn’t sure that she’d make it till the end of the day. But she was polite enough and maybe even relieved that my case was fairly easy. We talked about what I wanted and decided on a simple pill that I’d take once a day.

She asked if I was pregnant and I told her no—and she said they’d call my prescription into the pharmacy of my choice. But I had no idea what pharmacy I should choose. I texted Edna and, after she texted back, I let the receptionist at the front desk know.

Then I let Edna know I was ready whenever she was.

After taking the elevator down to the first floor, I decided to wait just inside. When I thought I saw the black Honda making its way down the road, I walked out of the building. Soon, Edna pulled up in the exact same spot where she’d dropped me off. When I got in, she said, “You look like you’re walking a little better.”

“I do?” Even though I’d told the clinic the truth, I had to maintain the lie with Edna. “I have a urinary tract infection, so I need to pick up a prescription.”

“I thought you might when you asked about the pharmacy.” As she started driving through the parking lot toward the street, I felt as if all the blood was draining from my face. Had she picked it up already? But I was being paranoid. “Did they phone it in or did they give you a paper prescription?”

My muscles relaxed as I realized my secret was still safe. “They called it in.”

“Well, then here’s hoping it’ll be done by the time we get there.”

Because Edna hadn’t given me the name of a pharmacy located in a supermarket or a chain, I thought we might get lucky. It was the same in Winchester—if we went to the hometown mom-and-pop drug store, we knew we’d wait five minutes max for them to fill our prescription. If we went anywhere else, it could be hours. It made me wonder how those places got so much business—business they obviously couldn’t keep up with.

But this was Denver, so I realized it could be different here.

Soon we were driving down another busy street and I realized that I wouldn’t know how to get back to Sinclair’s mansion if I had to do it without a phone. I was already turned around and confused—and I felt like I was surrounded by a jungle of cars and concrete.

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Edna pulled into another parking lot, something that appeared to be an oddity on this particular street. There were a lot of cars crammed along the road parallel parked with not a space between them—but there was a sign inside the parking lot, warning drivers that these spaces were for customers only.

When Edna parked, she got her wallet out and handed me a card. “Run it as credit,” she said. “I’ll wait here. But please send me a message to let me know if it’s going to take a while. I don’t want the food in the back getting too warm.”

Relief coursed through my veins that she wouldn’t be right next to me to see the actual medicine I’d be picking up. As I put the card in my purse, I remembered that I still had some of her cash, so I handed it back to her, and then I walked as quickly as I could manage to the doors of the building.

As I walked inside and made my way to the counter, it dawned on me again...I was now a full-fledged woman. Although I still felt like a girl inside, I’d just passed a milestone.

And I was proud to be Sinclair’s woman...but I had no idea of knowing if he thought of me the same way.

Chapter 11

As I spoke with my dad on the phone later that afternoon, I realized something that made me so sad, I wondered if it seeped through my voice. If I had fallen in love with anyone other than Sinclair Whittier, I would have told my father probably before anyone else.

As it was, I hadn't told a soul.

But I'd gotten good at keeping my voice light, at making my imprisonment seem not so bad that sharing something positive was also easy to brush over.

Still, I had some news I wanted to share. "There is a silver lining to all of this."

"What's that?"

"Mr. Whittier is going to pay for me to get a degree." The phone was so silent for so long that I finally asked, "Dad? Are you still there?"

"I'm here. I just find that very hard to believe. Why would those people do anything nice for you?"

Although I was beginning to suspect it was because Sinclair cared for me on some level, that wouldn't make my father feel any better. So I slapped together pieces of the truth, hoping it would make sense. "Believe it or not, for lots of reasons. In the work I'm doing for him, I found a painting that might be worth over a million dollars—and it was something just sitting in storage, collecting dust. If I hadn't found it and rescued it, who knows what would have happened to it?"

"Hmm. So you've made them money?"

He didn't have to know Sinclair didn't plan to sell it—at least not as far as I could tell. Still, it was a definite asset he could add to his portfolio. "Yes, so maybe he feels obliged to pay me. But that's not all. I'm going to be earning a master's in museum studies—and that will only help me with the work I'm doing now. Plus he said they pay for their employees' education all the time."

"And you're sure this isn't some kind of trick? You're not going to wind up owing

the bill?”

“I thought of that, dad—so I’m going to make sure the tuition is paid each semester before I attend.”

“Smart girl. Of course, you thought of that. Well, good. I say take advantage of whatever they give you while you can.”

We’d already discussed the insurance and my father was no longer paying for that for me, and I hoped that meant a little more money in his pocket that would give him a bit of a cushion for his monthly expenses. I tried to think how I would have worded my sentences before falling in love with Sinclair. “It’ll be good to have a solid education without having that debt hang over my head—even if it is funded by the Whittiers.”

“As much as I hate that part about it, I think you should milk it for all its worth. That would at least be a little repayment for everything that’s happened to us.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard the defeat in my father’s voice, the first time I’d ever sensed just how victimized he’d been by his decades-long beef with this powerful family. It was so hard for me to reconcile that—and the life I’d always known—with my growing adoration for the youngest Whittier son. I had just a glimmer of hope—what if we could mend that fence?

But, of course, that would never happen. The rift between our families was too deep, too far to cross...yet I couldn’t help the way my feelings for him were growing. I just couldn’t think about the future.

My future, at any rate.

“I need to follow up with Mr. Whittier about your treatment in October.” It was so

weird calling him Mr. Whittier now, but it was another necessary pretense I'd have to get used to.

“Don't you worry about that. I'll get it taken care of.”

“Why? What's going on?”

“You've got enough to worry about, princess. I'll take care of it.”

I knew he wasn't telling me everything, but I had no way to find out. Apparently, I wasn't the only one keeping secrets. Maybe Sinclair had already made arrangements and my father was too proud to say what they were.

We spoke a little longer. Dad told me the town had removed a traffic light from a corner of Main Street in Winchester, saying it wasn't necessary, but he thought it was yet another stupid move by Winchester government. Half joking, I told him there were plenty of traffic lights up here. Then we said goodbye, and I found my eyes filled with tears when we ended the call.

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Still “convalescing,” I was lying in bed when Edna delivered dinner: chicken noodle soup and some of her crusty homemade bread, with more tea (this time decaf) and a pitcher of water. “Can I get you anything else before I leave?”

“No, thanks, Edna. You’ve already done so much for me today.”

“I just hope you’re starting to feel better.”

“Yes. Better already.”

“That’s how you know the medicine’s working. And a little chicken soup never hurt either.”

After she left, I got up and walked around the room. Still sore but I knew by morning no one would be able to tell.

I ate the soup but I could tell it had come from a can and not Edna’s kitchen. I imagined she bought it while she was at the store earlier because, after having been in the pantry, I could attest that there wasn’t much processed food—some crackers maybe but most of what was in there was pasta, beans, flour, tomato sauce, sugar...all items that would be used to make meals mostly from scratch. While I respected that, sometimes my father and I would buy a frozen pizza or a few boxes of macaroni and cheese—and I loved them because they were easy.

Soup, however, wasn’t one of those things I bought regularly.

Still, I managed to eat the entire bowl along with the bread and I found it filling. I

planned to take a bath and then I was going to read the remaining few pages of what I was calling the pregnancy journal—Sinclair’s mother’s account of being pregnant—and try to start another before calling it a night.

When there was a sharp rapping sound on my door, I nearly jumped out of my skin. That wasn’t Edna here to retrieve the dishes. Besides already having left for the evening, her knock was much softer.

It had to be Sinclair.

Still, I asked, “Yes?”

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Yes. The door’s not locked.”

When he entered, I was surprised. His face was not the same as it had been this morning when he’d playfully slapped me on the bottom. Instead, his eyes were cold and angry. Had he known I’d snuck out of my room to fetch the laptop despite his admonition not to? Or did he know that I’d had Edna take me to the clinic under false pretenses?

I could explain it all.

But the laptop wasn’t where he could see it, because I’d hidden it, along with the charging cord, under the mattress after I finished the application, and I’d find a way to sneak it downstairs tomorrow. Edna had never seen it, so he had no reason to be angry about that.

Likewise, I could explain the trip to the doctor.

But it wasn't either of those things.

"I received your text message," he said coolly.

"Good. I just need to pay—"

"Don't ever send me a text again unless it's an emergency."

I found that weird—but, for the most part, I was growing used to obeying his wishes.

"Okay. I just thought—"

"And I'm just telling you."

I was struggling because this was starting to feel like I was speaking with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was the man who'd made love to me the night before. Would it always be this way?

Or did that mean what I'd been afraid of? That last night was the only time he'd hold me in his arms?

I could cry about it later—but, for now, I had questions. "Okay. Sorry. It won't happen again. I just wanted you to know I needed to pay to have the application processed."

Reaching into his pocket, he took out a card and handed it to me. It was a credit card in his name. "You can use this to pay for whatever you need in terms of education. For now, it has a limit of five-hundred dollars."

I wouldn't need that much for the application fees or transcripts, but it was nice to know I had a bit of a cushion.

“Thank you.” And, despite how uncomfortable his presence currently made me, I had something else I had to say. “I also wanted to ask about my father’s treatment in October...if you’ve made arrangements for him to get to Colorado Springs.”

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“I haven’t made a decision yet. I’m considering letting you go down there for that—and if you don’t feel comfortable driving from Denver to Winchester, I can arrange for you to have a driver.”

While I appreciated all he was saying...I was trying not to cry at how distant he was behaving.

Like nothing had happened between us the night before.

But my brain caught on something—something big. He was actually thinking about letting me drive from Denver to Winchester. Surely that meant he trusted me.

Maybe that meant he cared.

Still, I wasn’t sure how to act, so I chose to mimic his tone and facial expression. “Thank you. When will you let me know?”

“Soon.” Finally, his eyes seemed to soften—but I still didn’t trust it. “How are you feeling?”

This was closer to the man who’d held me last night—caring and comforting. “Better.”

He gave me a short nod. “Can I get you anything?”

Yes: an inkling that I matter! Instead, I said, “No, I’m okay.”

“Have a good night, Lise.” He walked to the door and the sound of it closing behind him was as loud as the sound of my shattering heart.

After I had a good long cry, I took a shower and started to feel much better. The tissue under my eyes was swollen and puffy and it looked like I was wearing red eyeliner, but emotionally I was steadier. His recent rejection still hurt but I knew I was strong—and I would always resent him for taking my virginity, but I was strong. It wasn’t much different from how I’d been treated by a good lot of the kids growing up.

But it reminded me of a friend I’d had in middle school, a girl named Ashley. She and her mom had moved to Winchester from Colorado Springs to care for her grandmother. Ashley and I became close, and I told her much about my history. But it wasn’t long before she looked at the other side of the proverbial coin, realizing I was the town pariah and she didn’t want to be guilty by association—and, after that, she treated me even worse than most kids.

Those wounds cut deeper because I’d let her in. I’d let her get close. I’d told her my secrets. And when she bothered to look at me or talk to me, she used my words and fears against me.

And I’d vowed to never let anyone get close again.

So even though I had a couple of friends in high school, I kept our relationships superficial, because I didn’t know who to trust. Still, it was nice to have someone to eat lunch with and study with.

I told my journal all the things I couldn’t even tell my dad...until now. I’d allowed myself to trust someone completely, to let him inside, and he’d let me know tonight that I didn’t mean a thing to him.

It was a reminder that I had to protect myself.

But thinking about journals reminded me that I wanted to read more of Sinclair's mother's writings. I suspected—no, I knew—he had to be the way he was because of how he was raised...and I wished he'd had a chance to know his mother. Through her words, I could feel who she was—and she was not a cold, cruel, heartless person, although I suspected she'd been married to one.

Fortunately, I hadn't had to meet the eldest Whittier. I already despised the man.

And I knew it for certain: if he'd treated his children the way he treated his wife...no wonder Sinclair was the way he was. I'd only survived because of my father's love for me. It was deep and unconditional.

Tears filled my eyes again. I missed him so much.

Swiping at my cheeks with the back of my hand, I sat on the bed and became absorbed in reading the journal, the one that chronicled Sinclair's growth inside her belly. It was almost boring with its minute detail of how her body was changing—but there was one entry that caught my attention.

* * *

I heard from Xavier for the first time in a long time today. He's in New York at the moment but he's planned a trip to Spain, still in search of rare, undiscovered paintings. He's convinced he'll find gold.

I didn't tell him about my pregnancy. If he'd come to see me, it would be hard to deny it. I was starting to show and it was all in my belly. But what would he say?

I wouldn't want to hear it. He left in a hurry all those months ago and, as much as I

enjoyed talking to him, his absence hurt. All those unspoken words.

* * *

I read through the rest of the journal, hoping to find more about this mysterious Xavier person, but there was nothing. Instead, it ended abruptly, not long after that entry.

I only had two more journals left. The one I chose had a light purple glittery cover and, when I read the date of the first entry, I understood that this journal was started about a year before the pregnancy one—and, as I kept reading, I realized this journal came right after the red one, the one I'd read first.

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It started out in January of the previous year with an entry about a birthday celebration for Warren who had just turned six—and it sounded like a disaster. They'd invited kids of many of their family friends and Warren had thrown a temper tantrum about the cake. He'd wanted chocolate with chocolate frosting but it was a white cake with chocolate frosting—and when they'd cut it, he'd had a complete meltdown.

It sounded like his nanny was part of the problem as well.

But I was reading rapidly, hoping to find out more about her friend Xavier.

It wasn't until I was a quarter of the way in that I found an entry about him—early February, the year before Sinclair was born.

* * *

Gus brought to dinner the most intriguing man. His name is Xavier Zelinsky and he has the darkest eyes I've ever seen—like little pools of onyx.

Gus has him looking for rare artwork. He built that gallery a year ago and we have one pathetic statue in it. Gus wants to fill it with art that will make his colleagues jealous. I don't know why he cares so much. This mansion is impressive enough. It's like his entire life is one big dick contest.

Maybe that was what attracted me to him in the first place—that raw passion for winning, regardless of the cost, that need to be not good but the best. And not just to be the best but making sure everyone knew it. One time he'd said he wanted his

competitors to feel like they were sucking his dick and had to pretend they were enjoying it.

I should have known then.

* * *

I paused. What did she think she should have known? That her marriage would have been unhappy? But she didn't explain. Instead, she moved back to the dinner guest.

* * *

Anyway, Xavier promised to obtain whatever it was Gus wanted, but that it would cost. More than once, Gus said price was not an issue—so long as it was something he wanted. Xavier promised to show his portfolio after dinner so that Gus could see firsthand all the treasures the man had already dug up for wealthy customers.

Xavier himself appeared to be pretty well off. I know an Armani suit when I see one. And I'm pretty sure he wore a Bruguét watch, but it kept disappearing under his suit jacket. Gold and diamond cufflinks, highly polished black leather shoes. This guy didn't look like a million bucks. He looked like he was WEARING a million bucks.

And Gus was obviously impressed.

* * *

As I continued reading that entry, I thought to myself that she too was impressed. And, the way she described the man, I didn't wonder why.

Most of the next few entries centered around Xavier. He was at the house a lot, especially for dinners, where he would show the Whittiers the art he had found for

them, letting them decide if they wanted it. Or, rather, letting her husband decide—because there was one painting she adored that he said no to.

* * *

Gus left for Europe again this morning and Xavier showed up unannounced—with that painting I'd fallen in love with. Gus said it looked like a “glorified Kinkadee” and he would “never have that shit in my house.” But I didn't care. I loved it. It was a painting of a small stream surrounded by pines, just like my grandparents' house I used to visit when I was a child.

It was like Gus was rejecting my past. And, of course, he was. More than once he'd said he shouldn't have married below his station. And every time he said that, I reminded him that I'm the reason why his company is so successful today.

I would never tell the children this because I want them to love their father. He'll come around. He has to. But he only married me because I was one of his top executives, and I was being courted by one of his rival companies. Of course, he's never said that. He's said he loves me, but his behavior of late is proving to me that this marriage was nothing more than a business deal. I was an acquisition, one he'd been forced to make, and he was making the best of it.

I now know he never cared about me.

But Xavier is helping me get over it. Today, when he brought that painting, I knew he cared. But I told him I couldn't take it. “Where would I put it?”

“Wherever you like,” he said, with that teasing smile.

“I can't pay for it,” I said. “Gus would find out.”

“Not if I didn’t charge you for it.”

I told him I couldn’t possibly accept it—but then he told me he had other ways of getting paid and I didn’t need to worry about it. Still, as much as I wanted that beauty, I ultimately told him no. Finally, he said, “In a home this big, you couldn’t find a place to hide it from your husband?”

I toyed with the idea of putting it somewhere he’d never look—like in the game room upstairs. Or in my closet. But he’d find out. I know he would. He hated that painting so much, he’d never forget what it looked like.

It was like he was rejecting me. But I knew he was—he’d already done it.

* * *

I set down the journal, thinking to myself that trait must run in the family.

Chapter 12

I stayed up far too late reading that journal. Xavier continued showing up more and more on the pages—both when Gus was there and when he wasn't. And it was clear to me by what she was saying that Sinclair's mother was falling in love with the other man. The way she described his eyes and his perfectly styled black hair, his clothing, his hands—poetic, appreciative, musing. But not once did she mention kissing or even touching him, other than on the arm.

Maybe, though, she left all that out—sex behind closed doors in the movies, unmentioned in a diary.

One entry in particular made me wonder.

It was written mid-April and, by that point, Xavier was almost all she talked about, other than the children and an occasional mention of her husband.

* * *

I invited Xavier to lunch. When he asked what the occasion was, I told him I wanted to talk to an adult. Fortunately, he didn't ask other questions.

He stayed the entire afternoon, but we finally went upstairs because the staff wouldn't

leave us alone—constantly filling drinks, asking if I needed something. Had Gus put them up to that? It wouldn't have surprised me a bit. He wants to control every aspect of my life and I'm sick of it.

We stayed upstairs for hours but Xavier had to leave before dinner. I have to say I haven't felt that fulfilled in a long time. I hope we can do it again.

* * *

Had they made love that afternoon? I knew there were plenty of other activities they could have engaged in "upstairs." She didn't say if they were on the second or third floor or if she just wanted to get away from the staff. And wouldn't they have wondered where the couple had disappeared to, what they were doing? If they were reporting to Gus as she suspected, surely that behavior wouldn't have gone unnoticed.

And then I wondered—how long did their affair last? Was Xavier Sinclair's father?

I glanced at the clock: eleven-thirty. I really needed to sleep, but I was hoping to find evidence that would confirm my suspicions. Right now, there was no definitive answer, but I would have bet on it. A court of law would have called it nothing more than circumstantial evidence.

As I continued reading, Xavier's presence remained, but he seemed to move a bit in the background when Augie came home for the summer from his first year at boarding school. It was clear that she adored her children but was especially fond of her oldest, perhaps because he seemed to be so "steady and strong," in her words.

In early August, there was an entry that put Xavier's possible fatherhood into doubt.

* * *

Gus came home from yet another Europe trip, but this time I wasn't about to greet him at the door or ask him how the trip was or anything. I decided I wasn't going to keep desperately seeking my husband's attention or approval. All it did was break my heart further when he rejected me yet again.

I knew he was due to arrive sometime after 8:00. I kissed the boys good night and told them they could stay up until ten as long as they played quietly. They promised to keep their Game Boys turned down low. I trusted them, especially because Warren adores Augie, and he clings to him even more now, knowing that Augie's going to be heading back to school at the end of the month. When Augie says it's bedtime, Warren will listen.

He wound up sleeping in Augie's room again.

But I retired to the bedroom, taking a long bubble bath and then putting on my favorite lavender lotion before sliding between the clean sheets. My goal was to be sound asleep when Gus got home so he would get the message that I would no longer be the doting wife.

And it worked!

I hadn't managed to fall asleep, and I even heard the low rumblings of what I thought was his voice in the hall—so I got out of bed and tiptoed to the door in the dark, pressing my ear up against the cool wood. He was talking to the boys—who were either in the playroom or Augie's room. I rushed back to the bed, noting that it was just a little after nine o'clock—and I rested my head on the pillow, closing my eyes just before the door opened.

He turned on the light, rude as usual, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of showing that it bothered me. Instead, I kept pretending to sleep. To my surprise, he shut the light back off—and I heard him lock the door. His driver would have to leave

his luggage in the hallway.

But I was shocked. Was Gus actually being thoughtful? Did he really care that I get my sleep?

He went in the bathroom, the light spilling into the bedroom, and I slightly opened the eye closest to the pillow. He still wore a suit, but he was removing the jacket and tie—and then he closed the door.

I hoped I could truly fall asleep before he came out.

I heard him turn on the shower and tried so hard, but sleep wouldn't come. Soon, he exited the bathroom again, but I didn't open my eye this time. It wasn't long before I felt him get into bed on the other side and I assumed he would go right to sleep as he often did. I anticipated hearing his light snores long before I would actually go to sleep.

But I was so wrong.

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He got close to me, pressing his body up to mine, and even through my filmy lingerie, I could tell he was naked. His heat radiated through the fabric, and he wound his arm around me, sliding his hand onto my belly. His breath was hot against my ear. “Constance, are you awake?” I didn’t say a word, even as he began nibbling on my earlobe.

Could it be? Did he still love me?

His erection pressed into the small of my back as he began kissing my neck, his hand moving up to cup my breast—and I was unable to help my response. I arched into his hand, wanting him to take me. Even had I lay completely still, the wetness that appeared between my legs would have been a dead giveaway.

I gave myself over to him, just as I had years ago, and as I came, tears welled into my eyes.

I had my husband back.

* * *

But it was a fluke. As I kept reading, my heart broke for Sinclair’s mother as she discovered her husband had just been horny for her that one particular night. Even the next morning at breakfast was more of the usual.

It wasn’t hard for me to do the math, though. Sinclair very well could have been his father’s son, conceived in a brief fleeting moment of love and passion.

There was doubt, though...and I wondered how much Sinclair knew—and if he wondered too.

By the next morning, I had the old psychology question of nature versus nurture rolling through my head. Sinclair was obviously his father's son, regardless of if he'd inherited his traits through genetics or environment. As if to present that evidence, he was cold and quiet at breakfast, and it made me angry—so I only said good morning to him and then got up and ate my breakfast at the island where I could talk to Edna.

What I was doing was almost like his mother pretending to be asleep in that journal entry I'd read last night—but I doubted my tactic would work. Of course, it wasn't a tactic to get him to come running back to me; instead, I wanted to send a message that I could ignore him too.

But that night at dinner was a different story.

After Edna had left and Sinclair and I were finishing our entrées, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." He didn't deserve any more detail—and it was true. I was. Although there was a little residual soreness, it was barely anything to speak of. I was walking fine as if nothing had happened. Even Edna had mentioned earlier in the day that my medicine seemed to be working.

"I would like to spend some time with you this evening—if you're up for it."

Suddenly, I was his mother, so eager to capitulate for such a small token. I only hoped it didn't show on my face, because it took me a few moments to regain my façade: I couldn't care less. But there was more to it than that. I had been angry with him for stripping me of the one thing I could give my future mate and then leaving me like a ragdoll that he didn't care about at all.

Did this mean he cared...or was he just toying with me now?

I didn't even look up from my plate when I answered. "You would?" I hoped my tone had the sound of indifference I was trying to project.

His voice took on a steely edge—but I didn't know what that meant. "I would." I looked up at him then, unable to stop myself. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "I know I've been preoccupied and I get the feeling that's upset you. I've had a situation at work I've needed to deal with. But when I haven't been focused on that, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

I nearly dropped my fork as saliva pooled on my tongue. Was it true? God, I wanted it to be. I wanted to mean as much to him as I'd foolishly allowed myself to feel about him. After swallowing, I opened my mouth...but no words would come out.

I couldn't read his cobalt eyes as they searched mine. "Don't feel obligated. I don't ever want you feeling like you have to spend time alone with me due to our contract. This is something else entirely—and if you don't want to come to me willingly..." His voice drifted off as if he was sure that was what I was thinking.

Maybe I too was hard to read—but my heart was no longer willing to have him believe that I didn't want him too.

"I do. I would like that." I was no longer hungry for the food on my plate.

One corner of his mouth turned up, emphasizing the small scar on his lip, and my entire body responded. My skin turned warm and all nerves stood at attention like a battalion awaiting orders. I bit my lower lip as I searched his eyes, and he pushed his plate away. "No better time than the present." Reaching his hand over, he touched my cheek. It was warm and gentle, and I brushed the side of my face against his knuckles, closing my eyes. "Why don't we head upstairs?"

For a moment, I'd almost hoped he'd make love to me right there on the table—but the dining room windows, though far away from the sidewalk, did face the street, and anyone curious enough would have been able to see anything we did.

Regardless of loving this man, I wasn't ready for our relationship to be public, especially in that way. I took his hand as he walked me through the mansion and up the stairs to his bedroom on the second floor.

It looked just like it had the other night—bed made, nothing out of order. I knew Edna made his bed during the week and the sister cleaning crew changed the sheets on Monday. I made my own bed, although Edna had offered more than once to “tidy up” for me. But telling her no was more than not having her take over that chore—it was also not wanting anyone getting that close to what little I owned here.

And I also didn't want to get caught with those journals.

“You're sure you're up for this?” he asked, closing the door behind him.

“Oh, yes.”

It started with a kiss that eventually transported me to heaven.

Chapter 13

This time didn't hurt nearly as badly. It was still a tight fit, him inside of me, but I wasn't in excruciating pain—and I could imagine how much better it would feel the next time.

And, of course, he made sure I was fully satisfied before I curled up next to him in that giant bed.

He was quiet as he held me close, and I rested my head on his pec, loving the feel of it against my cheek, appreciating how he smelled. As usual, I refused to let my mind dwell on all the reasons why this was so wrong...because I wanted it to be right.

Instead, my mind went to those journals—and I needed to get Sinclair's perspective. "Cory," I said, testing that intimate nickname he'd agreed I could use in his bedroom. When he didn't respond, I wondered if it was because that word was so foreign to him—or if he'd fallen asleep. So I decided to march onward and state my query. "Tell me about your family."

"What?" he asked, shifting slightly, his hand beginning to rub my back. I wondered if maybe he had been dozing off.

Turning just a bit, I looked at his face. "Tell me—"

"Ow. You have the boniest chin. Did you sharpen it earlier?"

I smiled. “What?”

“Your chin. It’s cutting into me. That thing is a lethal weapon.”

I couldn’t contain my laugh, but I slid my hand underneath it as a cushion. “Is that better?”

“Much.”

I was still grinning at the idea that such a big strong man could be bothered by something as small as my chin—which was not pointy. But then I wondered if that had simply been a ploy to avoid my question.

I was much more determined than that. “Okay, so now tell me about your family.”

Sinclair’s eyes were closed again, but was it because he was sleepy or because he wanted to avoid my gaze? “I’d rather not.” There it was again—an invisible door that he closed when I got too close to something he didn’t want me to know. That was a reminder for me that we might have been lovers, might have finally found ourselves unable to resist each other...but we were still enemies. And he didn’t want to give me any information I could possibly use against him later.

But I didn’t plan to do that and I didn’t want to. I wasn’t sure why I was asking, other than curiosity spurred by reading his mother’s journals, but I had no intention of using anything he told me to harm him.

Maybe he would do that to me, though.

My heart ached for him. All the time I’d spent with him, regardless of how successful he was, there was something about him that felt lonely...cut off from the world, and I wondered if that was because he wouldn’t let anyone get close.

I wanted to.

As I lay there trying to think of a way to explain why I wanted to know, I had to convince myself first. And I knew why. It was because I really was falling deeply in love with him, but it was hard to reconcile the two men I knew him to be. He was first the ruthless son of an even more ruthless father, a family who had stopped at nothing to crush my father into the ground and, consequently, me. I'd seen it from Sinclair first hand. After all, that was why I was here.

But I also knew him to be gentle and loving. Just thinking back over the weeks I'd been here—carrying me from downstairs to take me to urgent care for my sprained ankle, rescuing me from the two dangerous men downtown the first night I'd been here wanting to escape, even the way he made love to me gently.

The ruthless man? He made me wear a slutty maid costume to humiliate me for disobeying his wishes.

The loving man? He punched and fired the man who thought that costume was an invitation for groping.

The question was which side of Sinclair was the dominant one?

But if he wasn't going to talk, how could I ever find out?

Before I could think of something else to ask him, he said, "Tell me about your family."

What was there to tell? "You probably already know all about us."

"Tell me anyway." Was that an acknowledgment that he did, in fact, know everything?

Still, I was compelled by his gentle request. As he began stroking my hair, I rested my cheek against his warm flesh again and started talking. “My family is just me and my dad. My mom left when I was still in elementary school. I’m sure you know why.”

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His voice was soft, soothing, and I could feel it reverberate in his chest even as I heard it. “I don’t.”

I almost laughed, unbelieving—but I decided to take him at his word. Maybe he didn’t know. Although he was a decade older than I, he might not have been privy to everything his father did back then. Sinclair would have been younger than I was now...and I’d already had a good idea how cold his father had been, how little he told his wife about anything. It was possible he’d been the same way with his sons, even as they got older.

“Well...I don’t know how much you know about what happened to my father—and I was little, so a lot of this is what my dad told me. But your family had a mining operation in Winchester. It was a strip mine, tearing up the natural landscape of the hills just west of town. The evidence still exists, as you know from the time you’ve spent there. My father was vehemently opposed to that.”

I paused for a bit to see if he wanted to contradict anything I was saying or if he wanted to give me another perspective, but he didn’t. He was simply listening.

So I continued. “I don’t know what all he did to stop it, but I know he fought with local government officials and your family’s company for several years. More than once, he said he’d be okay with traditional mining, because it was less invasive. We still have boxes of books and articles on our back porch, things that tell in great detail how different kinds of mining impact the environment. My dad said it’s not just about how strip mining ruins the view; it’s how it ruins the planet.”

Sinclair made a noise, but I couldn’t tell what it meant, so I asked, “What?”

“Nothing.”

I wasn't convinced that his reply had truly been nothing, but now that I'd started, I wasn't going to stop. “My dad had no proof of it, but he was certain your father had created some kind of smear campaign against him. At first, it was like no one in town cared what my dad was fighting about, although there were a few people at the college and where he worked who said they cared about the environmental damage and appreciated what he was doing. And there were a couple of others who called him crazy. But everyone else just let him do his thing. After a while, though, sentiment changed. People who worked at the mine began accusing my father of wanting them to lose their jobs. And it got worse. I remember going to the store with my mom one time and her getting in an argument with someone in line behind us. That night, she told my dad it was all his fault because he just couldn't let it go.”

I was proud of myself, how I was acting like the neutral storyteller, simply relaying the facts as I'd seen and heard them...but I couldn't stop the emotions that were beginning to well up inside my chest.

“Things like that happened more and more frequently. At first, I didn't notice it, but as I got older, most kids avoided me, like I had an infectious disease or something. It turned to bullying later on. It wasn't that I couldn't fit in; it was that I wasn't ever allowed to try. I had a few friends, ones who were also at the bottom of the social ladder, kids who came from homes where they were either neglected or abused. I always told myself I at least had the love of my family.

“That changed, though. My mom left one day—just left. She never even said goodbye to me. I know it killed my dad but, for me, he kept a stiff upper lip. As you know, my dad ultimately won his cause, if you could call it that, and your family wasn't allowed to strip mine in Winchester—but no one in town thanked my father for that. Instead, they blamed him for losing their jobs and ruining Winchester's economy.”

He stirred beneath my head and I expected him again to say something—but he didn't.

“And then my dad got sick. It was subtle at first—where he'd feel tired or weak and would go to bed early some nights. There were other things too, things he didn't tell me about back then, but he finally went to a doctor—and it was still a long time before he was diagnosed...an even longer time before he was able to draw disability.”

Sinclair's hand again moved over my back, comforting me. “You had a rough childhood.”

I wondered what Sinclair's had been like, other than what I already knew, but I was certain he wouldn't have told me. I'd already asked. “Yes, but my father is a good man, loving and caring, and I wouldn't have survived without him.” I paused for a bit, wondering if I wanted to say more. I made a circle with my index finger on his chest the size of a penny and finally decided it wouldn't hurt to tell him what else was on my mind. “That's why I was going to college. I wanted to earn a degree to make myself more employable, and my goal was to move us out of that horrible town.”

At first, he didn't say anything, but when he did, his voice was soft. “Ironic. Your father tried to save Winchester from being ruined because he loved it, and now it's become ugly as the people turned against him.”

“I don't think he hates Winchester. In fact, if you asked him now, I know what he would say: that sometimes you have to sacrifice your personal comfort for a worthy cause. So, no, he doesn't hate Winchester—but I do.” And, suddenly, I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I'd told him about my family as I'd promised and maybe that would help him open up sometime in the future. But I did want to shift the focus of our conversation—or, more accurately, I wanted to stop monologuing. “What do you do for your family business?” Turning my head so I could see his face again, I let my chin dig into his chest again until he opened his eyes. “Unless that's off limits too.”

His eyes flashed and I grinned. “Only if you stop tormenting me with that chin of yours.”

My smile grew wider as I obliged, but I wanted to keep looking at him. The way his face was lit up made my heart sing. “Deal.”

Sitting up a little, he took my face in his hands and kissed me before rolling on his side. There we lay our heads on the silky pillows so we could look in each other’s eyes.

I could get lost here. If I could forget about the whole world outside this room, I thought, it would be easy enough to be the person I knew I could be—the one without the fetters of Winchester, of my childhood. And in that moment, I saw me as that woman through Sinclair’s eyes.

No wonder I’d grown to love him.

He ran a finger along the side of my face. “How much do you know about the Whittier Corporation?”

Everything I thought I knew wasn’t something I wanted to share with him. “Not much.”

“Even I don’t know all the pies we have our fingers in, but it’s a lot. We own hotels and real estate. We have divisions dedicated to textiles, transportation, agriculture...and mining, as you know. But even though I’m a member of this family, there’s lots I’m not privy to.”

Oh, God...I wanted nothing more than to ask why. But I knew deep down that if I asked, it could cause Sinclair to clam up. After all, he hadn’t wanted to talk about his family, and it seemed like it would be difficult to separate family from business in

this interest.

“I run the philanthropic division. In fact, I’m the Executive Director of the Whittier Foundation. I’m given a percentage of the entire company’s profits to manage. I have good accountants working for me, grant directors and writers, fundraising staff—”

“Fundraising?”

“Yes. That wasn’t my father’s idea, but it’s allowed me to increase the good we can do. Anyway, at the dinner party, you met most of my senior staff, my right-hand people. It’s thanks to them we’re able to do so much good.”

I understood now exactly why Sinclair had been at WCC and had paid for the simulation lab. His job was to spend money for good causes. That alone assured me that there was something good inside him, which had to be why I’d fallen so hard for him. Something inside me must have known.

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As if he'd read my mind, he said, "Of course, I can't have you believing it's all a selfless cause. Most of what I do for my father's company results in tax write offs. That's why I have several accountants working for me. There are certain percentages that have to be spent a certain way—which means I don't even have complete control over the division I run."

I couldn't miss the bitter tone of his voice—and I hoped my hand on his chest was soothing. Even so, I remained still, just letting him say whatever he could manage.

"Fortunately, I do control a good chunk of the funds—but my budget is limited and I have clear guidelines I must follow."

"Is that why you fundraise? Because your budget is limited?"

"Yes. If my job—my purpose—in this company is to do good, then I want to do the best job I can. And I don't want my hands tied by whatever funds my father's lawyers and accountants deem is appropriate for the year."

"Your father must think a lot of you to give you such an important job."

When he scoffed, I glanced at his face. He was no longer focused on my forehead but he had a faraway look, as if he wasn't staring at the door across the room but beyond it. "My father gave it to me because he thought it was the one thing I couldn't fuck up. He said it himself. It's kind of funny if you think about it. I'd wanted to go into politics, but dear old dad thought it was beneath a Whittier and he had to have me working at the company. After all, my brothers head up their own divisions—and my oldest brother is no doubt being groomed to run the whole goddamned thing when

dad kicks the bucket.”

I tried not to breathe, because suddenly the picture had become pretty clear. He didn’t want to talk about his family but we’d wound up there anyway.

And it didn’t surprise me a bit that I found myself despising his father more than any other person on the planet.

Chapter 14

The distant look in Sinclair’s blue eyes suddenly cleared like a summer storm being blown away. And he said the same thing I’d been thinking: “So much for not talking about family. Let’s change the subject.”

There was so much I wanted to know about this man, especially because the more I learned, the more I grew to love him. Was there anything he could ever say that would send me running?

I was starting to doubt it.

Touching his lip right past the cupid’s bow, I fingered the thin scar. If I’d seen it on any other man, I would have imagined he’d gotten it from a nasty fight or maybe a childhood injury, and it was another thing I wanted to know. “How did that happen?”

“The scar?”

“Yes.”

“It’s nothing I remember. I’ve been told it’s from forceps. My mother had a hard labor with me and I got stuck in the birth canal. The doctor had to use forceps to pull me out.”

“Oh, my God. That must have been so scary for your mother.”

“Probably. Edna said my father had my baby pictures destroyed because he didn’t want the first photos of me to be with the bruises I had. My oldest brother told me one time that I was ugly when I first came out—and I was lucky to only have this one scar.” Leaning forward, he pressed my head into his lips, probably so I couldn’t see his eyes. “Even though I don’t remember her, this scar reminds me of my mother—and how I almost killed her.”

What a gruesome thought. “You couldn’t help getting stuck.”

“Tell my father that.”

What I wanted to do was tell Sinclair that his father was a heartless asshole, that he didn’t care as much about Sinclair’s mother as he’d let his son think—but then I’d have to admit that I’d been devouring his mother’s journals like a series of novels.

But then Sinclair pulled back and said, “What about you? How did your birth go?”

“From what my dad tells me, it wasn’t a picnic either. My mom said she wouldn’t have another child after me, it was so bad. But...” I stopped, trailing off. I didn’t necessarily want to talk about painful family matters any more than Sinclair did.

“But what?” he said, touching his nose to mine.

How could I ever tell him no when he looked at me like that?

“I wonder if she had any other kids after leaving us.”

“Have you ever tried looking her up on social media?”

I frowned. “When I was younger.”

“Did you find anything?”

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“No. I looked all over social media and just did general searches but came up with nothing. I started thinking she maybe changed her name and moved out of the country.”

Sinclair’s hand brushed my arm, sending chills down my spine. “I could help with that if you want. If you have enough money, you can find almost anyone.”

It was a reminder that the man beside me had far more power than I and my father ever would. But my mother...I’d put her memory to rest years ago. Part of me still wanted to know—but the rest of me had decided she was dead to me, and I’d managed to convince myself that she was, in fact, dead. Otherwise, how else could she go the rest of her life without trying to connect with her daughter? Even though I didn’t have children of my own, I understood the bond and wondered what the hell was wrong with the woman who’d given birth to me.

“Thanks—but I don’t want her in my life.”

His short nod told me he understood—and I knew he did. His voice took on the same bitter tone when he spoke of his father. Maybe we had a lot more in common than I’d thought.

“Lise?” I looked up then, not having realized I was digging my nails into his chest. Maybe I had a lot more letting go to do than I’d thought.

“Oh, sorry.”

I had to change the subject—and pretend I didn’t know any of the history I’d read

about or even what Edna had divulged. “So why don’t you ever talk about your mom?”

His eyes grew dark again. “She died when I was a baby.”

My words echoed an earlier sentiment. “I’m sorry.”

When he shook his head, his eyes looked like his mind was far away again. “I guess she called me Cory too.” Finally, he shifted his focus to my face once more. “That’s why I didn’t mind you calling me that.”

I simply nodded and smiled, not planning to spill the beans.

“Even my brothers called me that until my father forbade it. He said it was a childish name and I was to be called by my first name from then on. He did the same thing to my oldest brother too. I guess my mom was the one who called him Augie and, after she’d been gone a few years, my father decided it was foolish. My brother was a teenager at the time and told our dad everyone at school called him that and he wasn’t going to change it. But...it wasn’t long before my dad got his way.” Almost under his breath, he added, “He always does.” Then he said, “But it didn’t stick forever, because our middle brother started calling him Augie again when my oldest brother and his wife had a boy and named him Augustus the fourth.”

“I’m sorry I made fun of your name. You know, when we were signing the contract.”

He laughed then, so loudly that it filled the room, and I couldn’t help but smile. “You were such a little shit that first week.” I joined his laughter, finding it strange that we both had an entirely new perspective. “And I didn’t tell you then, but my name was made fun of.”

“Oh, no. I guess that does make me a shit.”

His smile warmed my heart. “It’s not what you think. When I was young, third or fourth grade maybe, we had our names on our cubbyholes. Mine said S. Whittier. And at recess, the kids would say that equaled Shittier, and they’d say I was shittier than the rest of my family.”

“That’s awful.”

“That’s just kids. Even kids from affluence can be mean. But I imagine, from what you’ve told me, that you had it worse.”

But I didn’t want to talk about it anymore—and he might have felt the same way. “It’s in the past now.” Even being treated as an outsider as a young adult was behind me...because I was here now.

And, as I fell asleep next to him, I couldn’t think of another place I’d rather be.

Almost a week later, I’d finally finished and submitted my application to DU for the spring semester.

But it wasn’t applying to college that made me feel so giddy. I’d spent every night with Sinclair—Cory—since the night we’d talked about our pasts, and he made me feel like a woman. One thing I was fairly certain about was that he didn’t feel the same way about me. I could tell he found me irresistible and he enjoyed our time together, but he wasn’t falling over the edge of an emotional precipice like I was.

That had to be due to one of two things: either experience or gender.

As the days passed, though, I realized I couldn’t stop my heart from embracing him fully—and my brain didn’t want to. So I simply let my feelings buoy me throughout the day until I could return to his arms at night.

Sex didn't hurt at all anymore and it felt so good, every last second of it—and then being held by him throughout the night was like icing on the cake. I'd never felt so loved, so free—and I tried to push the shame to the back of my mind...because, regardless of how I felt about him, my lover was still Sinclair Whittier. If a leopard couldn't change its spots, could a Whittier?

Still, I clung to the hope that he was not his father. I realized that every word he uttered could be a lie—and, even if it wasn't, it was possible that he was wrong. If he despised his father, he surely wouldn't admit to himself that he was like the man...even if he was.

So I tried not to focus on all that and only dwelt on what I knew for certain. I knew he made my body feel good, and that somehow seemed to help my heart, my soul. It was a kind of validation I'd never had growing up. That wasn't my father's fault. He'd done everything he could to make sure I knew I was loved and how many times had he told me how brilliant and clever I was? Although I didn't need the validation of my peers back in Winchester, it felt good to have it here. I didn't need it, but I certainly appreciated it.

And after spending so many nights with Sinclair, I truly felt I could fully embrace womanhood in a way I never had before. He showed me what my body was meant for, and it responded to his touch like he owned it. Although I'd never been with another man, I was certain Sinclair was a good lover—based on how good he made me feel and how attentive he was to my needs.

My body had already become his willing slave.

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The next Friday morning, I lay in his bed forcing myself to wake up. He'd gotten up just moments before, responding to his alarm. After brushing his teeth and pulling on his workout clothes, he'd kissed me on the forehead. When he saw that I was awake, he said, "Don't wait up for me tonight. I've got a function to attend."

I frowned, exaggerating my down-turned lips.

"I'll make up for it tomorrow night." Just the promise made me smile as he left to head upstairs to the gym on the third floor. In the gray shorts, the muscles of his thighs were more obvious than in his business slacks and his ass was much easier to make out.

Oh...I had it so bad for him.

After he left, I sat up, trying to decide if I wanted to sleep for another hour in my bedroom or get up and shower. Instead, after I slipped my robe on, I wandered around his room, looking at it almost as if seeing it for the first time. Walking through the space, I touched the top of the rich mahogany dresser, opened the door close to it to see inside the closet that was three times the size of mine down the hall, every article of clothing neatly arranged as if in an exclusive boutique.

As I passed the fireplace, I wondered if he used it in the fall and winter, and I imagined us curled up on the floor in front of it. As I continued awakening sexually, I was eager to experiment, and I hoped we could make love in that very spot in front of it.

I'd never actually peeked out the windows of his room, so I first looked through the

ones just past the fireplace deeper inside, close to the bathroom. Although the sun wasn't up yet, it was light enough to see. Out of this window I saw the west side of the yard, including the extra parking spaces on the side of the building and, when I got closer to the glass, I was able to see the patio. When I moved to the other wall, I took in a view of the north, with the fountain and a good portion of the majestic yard. It was a beautiful vista, and it felt somewhat secluded because of the position of the trees. It would look even lovelier in the winter.

My room only looked over the north, the front part of the yard, and although I had plenty of windows, I didn't have as many as Sinclair.

My bedroom reminded me of one of the rooms I'd seen in the east wing—the space I'd determined had been Augustus's childhood bedroom. As I pondered it, I realized it was the exact opposite of mine, a mirror image, with the windows on the other side and the bathroom and closet matching proportionally.

It dawned on me then. Although the mansion had unique rooms, I was pretty sure if I had a map of it and folded the second floor in the middle of the antechamber, the sides would match perfectly.

Almost.

I'd already determined there weren't as many rooms on the second floor of the east wing as there were here on the west.

I was only thinking of this because I still had a burning desire to see the rooms I hadn't had a chance to explore before. Then I thought back to the dinner where I'd had to wear that embarrassing maid costume and had to deal with Sinclair's feelings of scorn.

But it was different now. Our relationship had evolved far beyond that.

I found myself heading back to my room turning it over in my head. First, that dinner—or what happened afterward—was what had caused Sinclair to reveal his true feelings for me. I wouldn't be walking away from his room, the smell of sex clinging to me as a reminder, had that not happened. It had forced his hand.

And, second, I believed he wouldn't react that way again. After all, he'd let me inside...not just his room, but his heart. Even after telling me he didn't want to talk about his family, he had, and I hoped he knew his secrets were safe with me.

But I had the suspicion that he wasn't telling me everything...and I wanted to know.

I hadn't read much of his mother's journals since spending every night with him, but her words, her experiences still spun around my brain, and something told me I might find answers in that abandoned space.

Of course, I couldn't do it right now—but soon.

I hoped the east wing held the answers that Sinclair was reluctant to give...and especially the ones he couldn't possibly know.

Chapter 15

I squeezed an honest day's work into the morning before enjoying lunch with Edna as usual. She would be leaving early, sometime between one and two as she always did on Friday—and that was when I planned to explore. I never ran into Greg in the middle of the day and had yet to meet his wife, so I wasn't worried about being caught by them.

Still, I knew there was a first time for everything, so I'd have to be smart about it anyway.

On Fridays, Sinclair sometimes came home as early as four o'clock, and that would give me a window of a couple of hours to explore freely. So, plan in place, I worked downstairs until Edna popped her head in at the top of the stairs. "I'm off, dear. I'll see you bright and early Monday."

Peeking my head in the stairway, I looked up at her. No matter how hard she worked, she always had a tired smile on her face, and today was no different. And, despite our age difference, I had grown to consider her a friend. But I was no dummy—I knew her loyalties and love still lay with Sinclair. Now, I understood that it was more to her than employer/ employee—she felt like a mother to him.

I realized it wasn't unlike my relationship with him—it, too, had moved beyond simple boss/ worker. Maybe it was that way with Greg too. It was possible that they were friends and hung out together once in a while...although I doubted it. Sinclair didn't talk about him much.

But it was possible. I knew that simply by looking at how blurred the lines of his relationships with Edna and me were.

Was that because he was searching for family?

Real family? Not just blood...but heart?

I hoped I could find answers in the east wing—not just for me but for him. He'd never said it out loud, but I could feel an emptiness in him, like he was searching for something that would fill it, something that belonged there. Part of me yearned to be that something—but in the back of my mind, I suspected I was just a plaything, and he'd grow tired of me at some point.

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But maybe if I could help him mend whatever inside him was broken...perhaps we could avoid the inevitable.

“See you then. Have a good weekend, Edna.”

“You too.”

And the door closed as she walked off.

I didn't want to go up right away—because what if she forgot something she had to backtrack for? What if she hadn't yet checked the doors like she always did when she left? What if she bothered telling Greg goodbye?

I wasn't going to take a chance. So I spent a good fifteen minutes researching the potential value of two antique lamps before I powered down the laptop.

Ugh. That stupid laptop. Even though I'd been able to change the screensaver and background, the other woman had etched her initials with Sinclair's into the bottom. I hadn't noticed it at first, mainly because it was so tiny. Nowadays, I took the laptop to my room every night with the intention of checking the status of my application to DU but I always wound up in Sinclair's bed. One morning when I'd fetched it, I noticed the etching on the back, just below the battery slot: NS + SW =4ever.

Although it seemed as if Sinclair had tried to erase her existence from the mansion, there was no denying that she'd had a presence here sometime in the past, from the laptop to the hairclip he'd used to pull back my locks the first night we'd spent together.

But it wasn't evidence of her I wanted to find. I suspected that, if I'd asked, Sinclair would more willingly talk about her than his own family.

Finally, I crept up the stairs to the main floor, breathing in the fresh air cooling the long hallway. It was silent, although when I strained, I could hear the air moving from the vents. Still, it was so quiet, I couldn't even hear the sounds of summer outside. Here, near the heart of the mansion, it was easy to believe this was the world, that there was nothing outside these walls.

But I wasn't about to stay put.

I made my way into the kitchen. As always, the lights overhead popped on with my motion across the space. Not all the rooms had motion sensors but this one did, and I'd grown used to it. After walking past the island, I turned toward the pantry door, hoping that key was still hanging on a hook.

Of course, it was. I didn't know how often Edna used it. I didn't even know if Sinclair still locked his bedroom door when he left for the day—but, if I wasn't mistaken, that key was a master key that would open up most if not all doors in the mansion. If I was wrong, I'd explore in Sinclair's office again. If I couldn't get to the key ring, I'd look up how to unlock doors without a key. The movies and television made it look so easy, but I doubted it was. Still, I would resort to that tactic if I had to.

When the lights in the pantry came on as I opened the door, I looked over at the post where I thought I'd seen the key before—but it wasn't there. I got closer, realizing there wasn't even a hook on it—so I looked at the next post and there it was: a big black key with the letters MSTR etched in it near the top. From here, I couldn't read it but when I got close enough to pull it off the hook, it was easy to see the letters.

I prayed I was right—but there was only one way to find out.

As I crept through the main hallway again, I noticed that the sound of my footsteps was imperceptible. It dawned on me that that must have been why the shoes I wore were called sneakers, because they made it easy to sneak around undetected. And even though I had no chance of getting caught, I found it comforting that I wouldn't be making a lot of noise. Even walking up the marble staircase, my steps sounded as soft as a feather stroking a baby's cheek.

My heart was beating harder now that I was again on the second floor of the east wing. All the memories of being here before—and getting caught—rushed back to me, but I only had to will myself to relax. This plan was foolproof.

Before moving to rooms I hadn't seen, I wanted to check the key first. If it didn't work, I'd have to return it and find the big ring. So I picked the first door, the one that used to belong to Sinclair's oldest brother, and held the key up to the lock.

It slid in without a hitch.

But fitting didn't mean it would work, so I turned it and felt satisfaction when I heard a click. To confirm, I turned the doorknob.

It worked.

Locking the door again, I walked down the hall, this time paying attention to the layout—and, as I made my way east, I confirmed what I'd suspected, that this wing was the mirror image of the west.

Only it wasn't—and I again confirmed it when I got to the end of the hall. A room was missing, the one that should have been to the north just before the big door to the master bedroom. Now I was more curious than ever. More than any other room on this side, I wanted to see inside the master bedroom. I'd already formed an image in my head based on the journals and even Sinclair's room, but I wanted to see what it

really looked like.

Of course, I realized as I held the key up to the doorknob that the room may have been remodeled since the passing of Sinclair's mother. Based on how the elder Whittier seemed to feel about his wife, it wouldn't have surprised me a bit. Still, I was compelled to go inside that room, almost as if I would be able to channel her spirit.

But there was another reason, I realized as I turned the key in the lock. There was the gigantic question of why. Why did Sinclair forbid it? What up here was so awful that he had to pretend it didn't exist?

That was why I couldn't resist.

Turning the knob, I slowly pushed open the door as if I expected a ghost to greet me at the door—but there was no such thing. As I stepped into the room, I noticed that the air felt stuffy and stale—and the room was bathed in shadows. All the drapes were closed, making this room like a coffin buried deep in the earth. When I'd peeked in the other rooms a few weeks earlier, they hadn't seemed like this at all, making me wonder if the air ducts to this room weren't working.

Instead of turning on the light, I crossed the room, throwing open the drapes in front of the first window I reached—and I did it in several places until the space was bathed in light. Dust danced in the air in front of me, no doubt sent flying by my swift motions to pull apart the drapes. Then I checked out the window I was closest to, figuring out how to get it open. Then I opened another across the room.

Ah. Fresh air.

Although it wasn't cool at all, there was an undeniable quality of outdoors coming inside, taking with it the dead air that felt like it had been trapped in here for

years...possibly decades. Because I had no idea when this particular section of the mansion had become forbidden, I couldn't know how long the air in this room had aged, turning sour and bitter from neglect.

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Taking in the space, I saw immediately that it was bigger than Sinclair's bedroom—which was rather large for what it was. I realized fairly quickly that the missing room on this wing had become more space for this bedroom. In addition to two large dressers, there was a desk, a large low table with a mirror and a lovely stool—likely a makeup table, and a sofa with a coffee table. The king-sized bed had a canopy and two large nightstands on either side. There was also a beautiful stone fireplace that practically dominated the room.

On the other side of the room were three doors. The one against the outer wall was a large bathroom, slightly bigger than Sinclair's. The other two doors led to walk-in closets. One of them was empty.

The other was full of women's clothing. Or, rather, a woman's. I had no doubt in my mind that these items belonged to Sinclair's mother. Had the elder Mr. Whittier simply closed the closet door, planning to never look inside again? I was certain at some point Edna had said Sinclair's father didn't like living here after his wife had died.

Maybe he had loved her—but had a horrible way of showing it.

Now that I'd flipped on the light switch, I stepped inside. I touched a few of the beautiful dresses hanging on one side and walked around the space, wondering why I felt a little disappointed. Had I really expected to feel her presence here?

Still, it was fascinating that no one had done anything with her belongings. Was that why Sinclair had closed off this section of the mansion? But that didn't make sense. He really hadn't known his mother. Surely, he wasn't grieving her loss.

But that didn't mean he didn't feel her absence in his life.

I realized I'd been sitting on the bench in the middle of the space, and I didn't know how long I'd been there, musing about all the questions I'd probably never have answers to. So I stood, deciding to methodically look inside every drawer, every nook and cranny. What I was looking for, I didn't know, but I suspected I'd never have this opportunity again.

First, I looked in all the shoe and hat boxes stacked on the upper shelf, using the folding stool I found tucked behind some of the dresses. Then I looked in all the drawers. Although I found plenty of items, including what I thought was inexpensive jewelry, I didn't find anything that would help me solve any mysteries.

When I stepped out of the closet, I shut off the light and closed the door and immediately my body filled with panic.

I'd left the main door to the bedroom open.

I knew why I had: it had been so stuffy and dark in the room, my instinct had been to get the windows open quickly. But I knew that anyone walking through the main hall or antechamber downstairs would notice the shaft of light shining through this hallway—because the second floor of the east wing was always dark.

Quickly, I peeked out the door, my heart thudding in my chest—and, when I was certain the mansion was still empty, I closed the door. Leaning against its back, I almost started laughing at how hard my heart continued beating, almost as if I'd just sprinted down the block.

I moved over to the bed, peeking first underneath it. There were several dust bunnies on the shiny wooden floor but nothing else. The first nightstand was empty, save for a pair of glasses in a soft pouch and a book called *The Intelligent Investor*.

The other side was not empty. Instead, it was filled with the kinds of things I might put in a drawer beside the bed: a small sewing kit; several facial tissues folded neatly; several books; a dish holding coins, bobby pins, rubber bands, and hair clips; pens and pencils; dental floss, and a silver ring with opals shaped to resemble a tiny butterfly's wings. There was also a small bottle of lotion, a jar of body butter, and a tube of lip balm that should have been thrown away ages ago. Although there were a lot of items, they were neatly arranged, just as everything in the closet had been.

But I realized...these were the things his mother used. In fact, they probably still had her DNA all over them. Suddenly, I felt like I was in an Egyptian pyramid, finding all of the pharaoh's belongings, placed inside his tomb so they would be available to him in the afterlife. Only, just like those ancient rulers, Sinclair's mother didn't need these items there and so they remained, almost like haunted remnants of a past life.

Shaking off my macabre thoughts, I crossed to the short table sitting between two windows. I sat on the stool to look in the drawers. These were crammed full of things—and, although they were feminine and undoubtedly belonged to the same woman everything else here did—these items weren't arranged with the care that I'd seen everywhere else. The bottom drawers, yes, but the two top drawers were stuffed, as if someone had swept everything on the table into them—perfumes, makeup, and skin care products piled on top of hair accessories. Rifling through the mess, I didn't see anything that merited more of my attention.

But it was sad how it felt like someone hadn't wanted to see her presence here—because, after having spent some time there, I was able to feel her...through her things, through what she'd left behind.

Standing, I pushed the stool back underneath the low table and turned to the dressers opposite. Just as I'd suspected, one was empty while the other was not. Like with the table, the top drawer was overfull. On the top layer were several jewelry boxes and picture frames while underneath were panties, slips, hosiery, socks, and a couple of

pairs of gloves and scarves. Oddly enough, though, the jewelry boxes were mostly empty. The picture frames were not. They weren't big pictures, but they were sweet—and, even though I'd never met any of these people, I knew exactly who they were. The first photo was formal. It was Sinclair's mother and father with his two older brothers—but his brothers were both young. The oldest was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes closed in joy, his wide grin exposing the gap where his top two front teeth should have been. The younger boy didn't seem happy to be there but he still sat on his mother's lap and looked forward stoically as if enduring torture.

I focused on the woman, Constance Whittier. Her smile seemed genuine as it reached her eyes. They shone like emeralds in her face and her happiness radiated from her cheeks, her lips. As if I could read her mind in that moment, I knew she was satisfied with her lot in life—she had a man she adored and two healthy, beautiful sons she'd given birth to. Even Augustus Sinclair, their father, seemed to be content. Despite everything I'd read in her journals, I knew from this piece of evidence that they'd been happy once.

This picture was definitely worth a thousand words.

I knew the child sitting on Constance's lap, the one who didn't seem to be happy in the moment, was Warren and the older son sitting between the two adults was Sinclair's oldest brother, the one Constance affectionately called Augie.

What had happened to ruin this picture of bliss?

There were three other photos: two I was certain were school portraits, one of Warren and the other of Augie, taken a few years later. The last was a baby picture, one of a newborn child, not in a frame at all. In fact, it had been on the very bottom of the drawer underneath everything else. It was of a baby boy with sapphire blue eyes, a peaceful expression—and a large bruise. It was a U shape. Above his lip was a cut, much more noticeable than now, because it was red and angry looking, an actual gash

in the flesh. The line went down to his chin where it curved and moved upward again onto his cheek. Sinclair had said that the doctor had had to use forceps to get him out—and, even though I'd never seen forceps, I now had an idea of what they looked like, based on the impression that they'd left on this baby. He was probably lucky the only permanent damage was the scar above his lip...one that actually made him look unique, distinguished—and even sexy. And he likely knew that; otherwise, he would have likely grown thick facial hair.

I felt a shiver as I realized...Constance had managed to keep this one newborn photo from her husband. Had he destroyed all the photos before or after she'd died? Either way, she'd managed to preserve one for history.

Again, I'd been staring too long at the pictures, but I couldn't help wanting to take them all in, especially Sinclair as a newborn. As I glanced a final time at the family portrait, resting them back in the drawer, I could see the family resemblance and suspected I would be able to recognize his brothers today.

After closing the top drawer, I began to again methodically look through the others. The second drawer was full of bras and camisoles and even swimming suits. The next drawer held jeans, t-shirts, and shorts, and the lowest drawer was full of nightclothes, from lingerie to simple nightgowns and pjs. But, as I began to slide it closed, I realized I hadn't been searching through everything. If I hadn't combed through the top one, I never would have found Sinclair's newborn photo. So I lifted up the clothing in that last drawer, not wanting to disturb its neat arrangement. There was nothing there.

Same with the second-to-bottom drawer. Underneath the jeans and t-shirts was nothing more than the bottom of the smooth drawer. The next one, however, the second from the top, the one filled with bras and such—in there I found something.

Another journal.

My eyes grew wide as I realized it was this that I was searching for. I opened it to be sure—and, based on the handwriting I'd grown so familiar with and the date of the first entry, I knew this was probably the last journal she'd ever written. Wanting to confirm, I rifled through the pages to the back of the nondescript gray book, discovering only about one-third of the pages had been written on.

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What would I find in here? Would I discover who Sinclair's real father was? Would I find out why his mother had killed herself—if, indeed, she had?

More importantly...should I read this journal here or elsewhere?

I knew I was pushing my luck up here. And having spent at least half an hour exploring this room, I had no doubt it hadn't been opened in years—meaning no one would miss this journal. I started to close the windows, realizing I hadn't looked through the bathroom yet. So I searched as thoroughly as I could while a clock ticked in the back of my mind. When I was certain I'd already found the most important item in these rooms, I shut and locked the two windows I'd opened, pulling the drapes back into place. It was still quite sunny and bright outside—and hot—but it wasn't until I closed the windows that I realized I'd been sweating. Even with the windows open, the air had been oppressive and it had only been because I'd been eager to find some history here that I'd been able to ignore my discomfort. Now, though, as I sealed this room in its former state, I almost felt as if I couldn't breathe. I felt silly when I closed the curtains, feeling as if I were burying a family pet that had died all too soon.

Chiding myself, I crossed to the door and closed it. After locking it, I debated if I wanted to look in the other room I hadn't yet seen, deciding against it. Something inside told me I needed to get moving.

Walking down the dark hall toward the light streaming into the antechamber and main hallway, I listened for any sounds that might tell me what had been happening out here since I'd disappeared into the forbidden section of the east wing. But there was nothing other than the usual sounds of silence. When I strained, I could hear air

moving from somewhere above.

No people sounds, however.

So I looked around, both up and down, and made my way toward the stairs. Before stepping on them, I tucked the journal in the front of my jeans and draped my shirt over, just in case I ran into someone as I headed back downstairs. Fortunately, the key was already hidden from sight inside my right pants pocket.

Soon I was at the bottom of the stairs, and I began walking down the main hallway toward the kitchen. Almost free.

It was only then that I heard a man's throat clearing...behind me.

I'd been caught again.

Chapter 16

When I turned around, there was Sinclair. He sat on one of the chairs from the antechamber, ones I'd thought were simply there for decoration. Even if so, he was sitting in one and the look on his face reminded me of my father's, how, when I was much younger, he would take me on a fishing trip and sit patiently, waiting for the pole to bob, announcing that some unsuspecting creature had taken the bait, and he was being rewarded for waiting.

Sinclair was again the hunter.

How long had he been here? And how had he known I'd been in the east wing?

Worse yet, he looked handsomer than ever. He wore a tuxedo and his hair was slicked back. His everyday suits made him look irresistible and gorgeous, but this

look moved him up a notch in my eyes.

But he wasn't observing me with adoring eyes as he had this morning or during all the intimate moments we'd enjoyed all week. Instead, his eyes were branded with anger, like the blue on the bottom of a flame, ready to burn me up.

"Going somewhere?"

I swallowed but my mouth was dry, as if I'd been vacuuming up the dust bunnies underneath that king-sized bed with my tongue. It wasn't that, though—it was that old fear I'd felt for Sinclair when I'd first arrived here. I knew his temper was scary...and, even though I'd thought maybe the way our relationship had progressed would make this a more forgivable offense, I knew under the spotlight of his gaze that I'd been sadly mistaken.

In fact, I was beginning to think he was angrier because he'd been growing to trust me—because, underneath the rage simmering in his expression was another emotion...and I was certain it was something akin to disappointment.

"Um...yes. I'm going back to work," I said, not knowing if he knew or simply suspected what I'd been up to.

When he stood, he seemed taller somehow, as if he'd grown several inches since I'd last seen him...but that was only because his presence was intimidating. With precision, he picked up the chair and carefully moved it back to its place against the wall between two decorative tables—and then he turned back at me. I readied myself to take the full brunt of his anger.

But his voice was low, like a wolf's growl. "Where you should have been already. Would you like to tell me what you were doing?"

It rushed out of my mouth before I could stop it. “Just looking around.”

“Would you like to try that again?”

Again, I tried swallowing, but he took two steps closer and I could feel his wrath simmering just below the surface. I could keep trying to tiptoe around, but I was certain he already knew exactly where I’d been and had been sitting there, just waiting for me to reappear. I could lie—but the truth felt easier. “I was in the east hallway.”

His voice exploded. “You were breaching our contract!”

I hadn’t expected that—but I remembered the last time this had happened. He’d reviewed that stupid handful of papers to tell me exactly which terms I’d broken, at least three of the dozens of clauses I’d agreed to with my signature. This time, though, I’d broken one or two more, both of which I suspected constituted even bigger infractions.

I had the key and the journal on me, and both of those violated different clauses.

But, more than that, I’d broken his trust.

The only way out of this would be contrition. Rebelliousness, defiance...those had simply landed me in more hot water before. But if I were repentant, soft-spoken, reminding him of our nights together, maybe he would find it in his heart to forgive me.

“I did. I’m sorry.”

Clearly, he hadn’t expected that, because whatever words were on his tongue melted like cotton candy. But it didn’t take long for him to regain his footing. “The key.” He held out his hand so I could give it to him.

Carefully, I fished in my pocket with a sweaty palm, hoping I’d tucked the journal deep enough in my jeans to keep the outline from showing through my shirt. If he knew about that, I had no idea what the consequences would be.

When I handed him the master key from the kitchen, he asked, “Where did you get this?” At least now his voice was calmer.

“The kitchen pantry.”

He shook his head, wrapping his fingers around the key to form a fist. “You are proving to me that you can’t be trusted.”

Was that true? “I was just curious—”

“Yes, that’s always been the problem. Haven’t you ever heard that curiosity kills cats?”

“I’m not a cat.”

One of his eyebrows arched—and, even though it scared me, it also made me want him to take me in his arms and make love to me like he never had. “Lucky for me or

you might not have been caught.” What did he mean by that? “Well, kitten, you must be punished for breaking the rules.”

I felt a little hurt—because hadn’t we moved past that? But I realized he was probably thinking the same thing...that he thought I’d moved past the need to snoop. I envisioned myself scrubbing the bathrooms again or helping Henry pull weeds in the flower beds. Because I’d breached not only the contract but his trust, I would willingly face whatever punishment he had for me.

And then, at some point, I’d have to find the courage to tell him about the journals. But now was not the time.

“Okay. What will it be?”

For the first time since I’d snuck down the stairs, he smiled. “I haven’t decided yet. It’s evident to me that the previous punishments didn’t make an impression on you...so I need to come up with something that will.”

That sounded ominous—but I wasn’t about to say it.

I was warring with myself, trying to determine if he actually would do something now that we’d become intimate.

But this was Sinclair Whittier we were talking about. What would our intimacy have to do with it?

Before I could say anything, he added, “You’re on your own for dinner tonight. I suggest you eat and then spend the rest of the evening in your room.”

“I need to finish up downstairs.”

“Fine. But I want you to think long and hard about this. I might even have you tell me what an appropriate punishment would be.”

The sound of footsteps caused me to look up to see Greg descending the stairs from the third floor—a first. I didn’t see Greg very often, but I understood that if Sinclair would have a late night, so would Greg—unless, of course, the event was here at the mansion like the dinner when I was last punished. But I would have known about something happening here.

I didn’t know if I should say anything else, so I decided to simply turn so I could head downstairs. Every second I was out here, I was exposed—giving him a better chance of spotting the journal...and then my snooping would have been for nothing.

As I began walking away, Sinclair said, “I suggest you stay away from the entire east wing tonight. I’ll know if you’ve been back here, so be smart.”

I couldn’t help glancing back. Was he serious? Had he installed cameras after my last infraction? If so, that would explain how I’d been so easily caught. I felt so stupid. I hadn’t even looked for anything like that. And in a mansion this ornately decorated, I suspected it might be easy enough to hide monitoring devices.

So I gave him a quick nod and walked calmly to the door that hid the stairs to the dungeon—but I didn’t breathe again until it closed behind me.

Despite Sinclair’s admonition, I planned to push my luck a bit.

After I straightened up downstairs so that I would have a clean slate on Monday, I headed to the kitchen to see what Edna had left in the fridge. In case there were cameras everywhere that I was unaware of, I acted like nothing looked good and went to the pantry to look over what was there. But I really wanted to see if Sinclair had returned the key to its proper place.

Of course, he hadn't.

Still assuming I was being monitored, I acted disappointed that there was nothing in there to catch my eye either. So I came back to the fridge and pulled out one of the containers again—but I really wasn't hungry. I was far too upset that Sinclair was angry with me, a sure sign that I'd fallen hard for the man.

Finally, I grabbed an apple out of the fruit bowl on the table and took it with me.

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But I wasn't ready to go upstairs yet.

Technically, I thought, the antechamber wasn't the east or the west wing. Instead, it was the center of the house—and although the stairs and balconies of both wings surrounded it, I thought of it as neutral territory.

At least, that would be the argument I would make if I was caught again.

But I only intended to be in the antechamber itself. And, as I pretended to look at the artwork I'd already examined extensively in the past, innocently eating the apple while I did, my eyes actually focused on the walls up high. It took some time, but I ascertained that, if there were cameras here, they were tiny and well hidden, not like the big one that pointed at the doorway. I couldn't find any other cameras that looked like the ones on the doorways, or even like others I'd seen in banks or on neighbor's garages.

I also knew that Sinclair could afford the best money could buy—so, if there were cameras here, I didn't recognize them.

Still, I'd have to find a way to get up to the second floor again—not just to look but also to return the journal.

Or maybe I didn't need to, I pondered, moving to the west wing stairs. I already had other journals belonging to his mother. When I would finally share the information I'd found, I didn't have to tell him where it had come from.

When I got to my room, I set the journal on the bed. I wasn't going to read it until I

finished the last one, but I wasn't sure I was in the mood. Instead, I was worried about how much I'd damaged my budding relationship with Sinclair.

Had I blown it for good?

I needed to get my head on straight and push those thoughts out of my mind before talking to my father. I couldn't talk to him about any of that, because, as far as he was concerned, Sinclair was still our worst enemy.

And maybe he was right.

When I picked up my phone to call my father, though, I noticed a text message notification on the screen.

It was from creepy Mr. Sherwood—but at least he wasn't so creepy when it was just a text. He asked, How are you holding up, Anna?

So annoying. How many times had I told him I preferred Lise? Maybe he would get it if I put it in writing.

Still...I had that habit of being too friendly, asking politely rather than demanding. Please call me Lise. And things are going fine.

Which was a total lie. They weren't. I'd fallen in love with the man I was indebted to for a decade—and I was pretty sure he didn't love me back. And, even if he did, I'd broken his trust and might not ever be able to get it back.

Everything was peachy.

There was a long gap while I finished eating my apple. As I tossed the core in the trash, my phone screen lit up again. Glad to hear that. I'd like to talk to you

sometime.

That was the last thing I wanted. After mulling it over, I came up with what I hoped was a convincing lie. I'm not allowed a lot of time to talk, and I'm sure you can understand why I'd prioritize talking with my dad.

Again, there was a long pause. Finally, he texted back something that made me almost reconsider.

That's too bad. There's something you need to know about what happened to the Whittier lab at WCC.

Chapter 17

What did that mean? Was he talking about the destruction back in July or did he mean something that happened since I'd left?

For that, I considered reversing my earlier lie.

What? I asked, hoping he'd decide he could just let me know via text message.

But I wasn't that fortunate.

I'm not putting it in writing. A few seconds later before I could even begin tapping a response, he added, I probably shouldn't tell you over the phone either.

What is it? I asked, but he didn't respond.

After ten minutes of staring at my phone, I grew frustrated, realizing he wasn't going to say another word. But then I reminded myself this was Mr. Sherwood. He'd coaxed me into having a coffee date with him by hinting that I might learn something

that would help me when studying for finals. When I pressed him about it after getting our coffee, he'd said, "I recommend lots of caffeine next week. It'll help you study late into the night."

So as I called my father, I decided Mr. Sherwood was full of it once again. He didn't deserve my attention. If he really wanted to tell me something, he knew how, but I wasn't going to let him manipulate me anymore.

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The next night, Saturday, was like normal—meaning Sinclair and I ate dinner together, took a walk, played some chess, and made love like nothing had happened Friday afternoon.

The same was true on Sunday. And Monday. And so on. By Friday, I thought maybe he'd forgotten all about it. Although I knew better than that, I was hoping and believing he'd changed his mind.

I wasn't about to ask, though.

Because we were spending so much time together, I'd barely finished the last journal written by his mother, one of the ones I'd found downstairs, and had only read two pages of the new gray one that I'd found in her room—but that was all I needed to confirm that this was definitely the last journal his mother ever wrote. It didn't hurt that I peeked at the last few pages that had been written on, determining by the last few entries that Sinclair was an infant when she'd recorded her thoughts.

But I wanted to read it from beginning to end because it might explain her state of mind those last days and weeks of her life. I also hoped it would reveal who Sinclair's father was—and, if I found out, would I tell him?

That was a burning question I still didn't have an answer for.

Friday evening, Sinclair met me in the kitchen for dinner, a few minutes late. Although that was unusual for him, he was sometimes late due to work, so I didn't think much of it. While I was getting food out of the refrigerator, he said, "Put that away. We'll be eating dinner later—and Greg will be picking up something different

for us.”

I turned around, excited to see him. “Oh? What will that be?”

“It’s a surprise,” he said, a subtle smile lighting up his face. “But first it’s time for your punishment.”

Suddenly, I was glad I didn’t have food in my stomach because that news felt like a lead balloon settling in it. Why now? And what could it possibly be that dinner would have to wait? To buy a little time to allow my brain to fully grasp it, I played dumb. “Punishment?”

“Yes. For your infractions a week ago. Do we need to go back over what you did?”

For some reason, I was intimidated again, just like I had been when he’d caught me coming down the stairs, thinking I’d escaped the scene of the crime unnoticed. Maybe that was why he was punishing me—for believing I was smart enough to get away with it. My voice was meek when I replied, “No.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

I followed him out of the kitchen and into the main hall. I took comfort in knowing that he planned food for later, which told me my punishment probably wouldn’t last more than two to three hours. That also meant I probably wouldn’t be cleaning all the bathrooms again, because that would take far longer.

But, for all I knew, this punishment would not be over tonight.

When he paused at the west wing steps, he said, “After you.” As he walked beside me, my mind continued to race. Where exactly were we going and why? I wondered if whatever he was going to have me do would be either a harder task or a longer one,

considering I was a repeat offender.

All this in addition to the original punishment of being here...which wasn't starting to feel like a prison sentence anymore.

At the top of the stairs on the second floor, he indicated that we would be going down the hall, so I figured the punishment would take place in his bedroom. And that made me all the more curious.

Instead, he stopped at the door across from my bedroom. After turning the knob, he opened the door, flipping on the light. At first glance, it seemed like a normal guest room, arranged similarly to mine. But, as I stepped in, it didn't take me long to notice the differences.

The bed was stripped with nothing but a light blue bottom sheet.

Black straps peeking out from under the bed at the top and bottom.

Other items bunched together on the nightstand.

The drapes tightly closed, blocking out the early evening sunlight.

What was going on?

As he closed the door behind me, he said, "This is your punishment...but I also want to give you a safe word."

"A what?" I'd heard of them but what the hell was happening here?

"Just for the hell of it, how about we make the safe word Rakhimov? After all, you wouldn't be here if not for her."

My mind was reeling. “Wait—are you saying it’s her fault that I’m here?”

“No,” he said, his voice suddenly tender, and he stroked my cheek. “But if she hadn’t chosen you as her assistant, we never would have met.”

Was he saying that was good?

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Before I could even answer, he was unbuttoning my blouse. “Would you rather undress yourself?”

Although I still didn’t fully understand what was happening, I didn’t feel like his hands removing my clothing would be a punishment. “No, that’s okay.”

In fact, I rather liked it—and he must have seen it in my eyes as he pulled the shirt over my shoulders. “Actually, I’m going to sit down and you will finish undressing yourself.”

Swallowing, I nodded, all while my nipples were pebbling inside the sheer bra. Whatever was going on, I realized he didn’t want me to enjoy it—but that was going to be difficult, and I didn’t know that I’d be able to hide my pleasure.

Unless I was way off base about what I thought was going to happen here. After pulling off my sneakers and socks, I undid the zipper of my jeans and shimmied them over my hips. Knowing Sinclair preferred neatly stacking the clothing, I picked them off the floor and placed them on the dresser.

As I turned back around, I made eye contact with him for just a moment. What was he thinking? It was impossible to tell if he liked what I was doing or not—but he didn’t say a word.

When I pulled the panties down, I was surprised at the wetness between my legs. Obviously, even if my conscious brain knew this was supposed to be discipline for breaching our contract yet again, my body eagerly anticipated what was coming next.

Finally, I removed my bra, and when the cool air grazed over the nipples, they grew more rigid. Then I stood there, awaiting his instructions, every nerve in my body attentive as it anticipated whatever he had planned.

When he stood, there was no mistaking the erection in his pants—telling me that either he found my naked body arousing or he would be doing something with it.

Maybe both.

I reminded myself that he couldn't rape the willing.

“Get on the bed,” he ordered in a voice that communicated he meant business.

I didn't even nod. Instead, I turned and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for him to tell me what to do next.

He walked over to the nightstand and my eyes followed. He was now so close I could feel his body heat, smell his cologne, and I was suddenly hungry. Not for food, but for him—but I wasn't about to say it.

As he took an eye mask off the top of the items on the nightstand, I took inventory: a large ostrich feather, an ice bucket with a green bottle, a box of condoms.

Was he planning to fuck me over and over again until—?

But I couldn't finish my thought as he slipped the eye mask over my head and made it snug. “Is that too tight?”

“No, that's okay.” And again my pussy agreed—only that it was far more than okay.

“Lie down in the middle.”

Without my eyes, I had to do it all by feel. That wasn't too difficult, and soon I was lying as instructed. But then I felt his warm hands on me—but not where I wanted them. He slid them underneath, moving me farther on the bed, perhaps closer to the center.

And then there was silence for a bit, and the anticipation—and fear—followed. Without my eyes, I couldn't prepare for what he was about to do. Maybe this was punishment after all. After a few more seconds, he took my right hand and stretched my arm away from my body, and then he secured it in a restraint. The cuff bit at my wrist, so I tried to relax.

What was he going to do?

Part of me wanted to scream and shout, maybe even beg for mercy, because I didn't know what to expect. I was about to be his captive.

As he cuffed my lower right leg, I reminded myself that Edna would be here Monday. So would the cleaning ladies. If nothing else, I only had to last two days.

But was that his plan? To simply restrain me naked and walk away?

I supposed that might teach me a lesson about not taking my freedom in the mansion for granted.

Based on his earlier promise of dinner later—and suggesting a safe word—I didn't think so.

So, even in the tense darkness of my mind, I tried to relax, finding that I trusted him, even now.

It was less than a minute before he had my other arm and leg restrained so that I

could see in my mind's eye that my body looked like an X. Straining in the darkness, I realized my ears were trying to do their usual job, only enhanced to help my eyes. For quite a bit, I couldn't hear anything, not even Sinclair's breathing, and I suspected that was part of the punishment too.

The unknown. Hanging in suspense.

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Then I caught a sound, that of fabric sliding across fabric, and I imagined Sinclair sliding his unknotted tie out from his collar. Next, several barely audible steps, and I knew he was putting the tie on the dresser next to my clothing.

In that way, he was predictable—and I held onto that hard in this sea of uncertainty.

I thought I might have heard other movement by the dresser, but I couldn't be sure. When he walked back, I couldn't tell as much by sound as by some disturbance in the air I thought I felt.

And then a light touch—just a feather, but it made me gasp just the same. He stroked it lightly over my breast, the softest of sensations, but it was enough to ramp up my arousal.

Why was he doing this? Was this truly his idea of punishing me?

Because it wasn't. Not at all.

I couldn't focus on the whys any more as the feather wandered all over my body, touching every bit of exposed skin from my cheeks to my toes and back again. It didn't take much for my pussy to feel like it was on fire, begging for him to do more.

Maybe that was the punishment.

I would be okay with that.

He continued stroking me softly with the feather until I was nearly squirming.

And then he stopped.

Again, silence fell over the room. Had the mask been off, my eyes would have been intent upon him. Instead, my ears and even my nerves were doing the work, trying to figure out what was coming next.

I heard a sound but didn't know what it was until he placed an ice cube in my cleavage. Immediately, my nipples pebbled again but not from desire. Before I could fully adjust to the new sensation, he began swirling the cube around, leaving drops of water in its wake as the heat of my skin melted it. Soon, he slid the cube up the mound of my breast before circling it over my areola, making it so rigid it ached.

And then he rolled it back down and up the other breast before doing the same thing on the other side. Although the cold had shocked me at first, I was growing used to it...about the time he stopped. Then, with his tongue, he lapped up the tiny pool of water between my breasts, and all I wanted him to do was tend to my nipples as well.

But he didn't.

Soon, he was fanning the upper half of my body, allowing the residual wetness to evaporate, and it took me a moment to realize he was probably using the feather for that as well. The sensation had the effect of cooling me off, not just literally but figuratively, even though I was still anticipating what would come next. It wasn't long before he was brushing my skin with it again, teasing and tantalizing, bringing me back to the edge of arousal.

But even as he feathered my thighs, I wanted more. The light touch had heated me up but I wanted to feel him.

When, once more, the feathering stopped, followed by nothing but expectation, I wondered what would come next. There was the sound of foil crinkling and, at first, I

thought he was opening a condom, especially when I couldn't hear anything for a bit. But then there was a loud pop, followed by a hiss, and it didn't take me long to realize he'd opened the bottle of what must have been champagne or sparkling wine.

What was he doing?

I got my answer quickly when I felt his hand near my belly. Soon, he poured some of the champagne into my navel. The sensation caused my nipples to turn rigid again and, moments later, I felt his weight on the bed. Straining to puzzle out exactly where he was, I tried to make my muscles relax and failed. They were taut, blindly waiting in anticipation.

Finally, I felt him—his body between my legs—and I hoped he was going to put me out of my misery at last. As much as I'd ever wanted him before couldn't compare to my need for him now. And that was what it was—not just desire but need. In this moment, I felt as though I would die if I couldn't have him.

His bare leg brushing against one of mine assured me that satisfaction was near. By this point, my pussy was throbbing, desperate for his touch, and for the first time in my life, I could understand how close I was to letting it all go. Earlier in the summer, before I'd met this man I couldn't even see at the moment, I hadn't had a clue what an orgasm was, much less how it felt. And now I'd already enjoyed so many I was beginning to lose count.

His mouth enclosed my navel and he sucked the champagne out of it. Then he ran his tongue along its surface before snaking it down my lower belly...and then into the area where I desperately needed him.

Just like the feather, though, he teased with the lightest of touch. His tongue tickled a trail along my slit, barely grazing my throbbing clit. And yet it elicited a moan from deep inside me, something primal. He continued that motion, up and down, barely

touching me in the slowest way, and then I knew for certain.

This was my punishment—having to wait. Being denied.

How naïve. The punishment had barely started.

At the time, though, I had no idea, and when he finally applied a little more pressure and just slightly more speed, my body responded, believing relief was just a few strokes away. I began taking deeper breaths as my body readied itself to give me that explosion in my brain...

And then he stopped.

Chapter 18

I'd been on the brink of coming when Sinclair lifted himself off the bed. In response, my entire body screamed silently.

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Had I whimpered in disappointment or had it shown on my face, even underneath the mask? Regardless, he knew. He knew exactly what he was doing. “Did you think your punishment was going to feel good, Annalise?”

Oh, but it had. It still did—but in a different way.

But I knew better than to say a thing. I’d known this man long enough to understand that anything I said could and would be used against me in his private court.

He made a sound, but I couldn’t tell if it was a hoarse chuckle or if he was clearing his throat to get my attention. As I lay there, I tried my best to ensure my face was as neutral as possible. Maybe if he didn’t know I was enjoying it, he’d bring me to satisfaction sooner rather than later.

Once more, he began stroking the feather over my skin—and as much as my back wanted to arch up in response, I forced myself to remain on the bed. Although there wasn’t much play to be had because of the straps restraining my arms and legs, I could still move somewhat. As I allowed my limbs to melt into the bed, I admitted to myself that even this position contributed to my feelings of desire. I didn’t think I would tell that to Sinclair, but there was something about being unable to respond like I normally would...and of being helpless to do anything that made me more desirous.

And something about it felt dirty...which also fueled my need.

I wondered if he already knew this.

The feather was again followed by the ice and I had to bite my lip when he slurped up the melted water. But he didn't go back to the feather again. This time he took another ice cube and slid it between my legs and all I wanted to do was close them so he couldn't continue tormenting me with the cold. But I couldn't.

And, just as I grew used to it, he stopped.

Soon, his body took up residence between my legs again and he warmed everything up with his tongue, no doubt trying to bring me close to climax. This time, though, I fought against arousal, not wanting him to win this game. I kept telling myself in my head that I didn't enjoy how it felt, and I tried to think of anything I could to keep my brain off the delicious sensations he was creating. But when I reminded myself that he was my enemy, that we shouldn't even be here doing this...my body remembered that, oh, yes, it really loved his tongue.

What should have made me angry, upset, and able to fight him had the exact opposite effect.

And there was apparently no way I could hide it—because he stopped giving my clit the attention it wanted shortly after.

For hours, he tortured me this way. He'd take the feather to my body; then he'd play with a couple of ice cubes or pour more champagne into my navel. At one point, he actually poured a line of it from my collarbone down to my pussy, letting it drip between my legs, and he'd lapped it all up, starting at the hollow in my neck. One moment, he'd have me panting, close to the brink, and then he'd literally cool me off with ice. He even put a cube in my mouth one time.

Finally, I was exhausted—and, if he'd asked at that point, I would have told him he'd won. It wasn't until that moment that I realized this had truly been punishment. He'd brought me to the edge and back so many times, I lost count—and, rather than feeling

fulfilled and satisfied, I felt so fatigued, I couldn't even remain frustrated. As if he could hear my brain talking out loud, he kissed me, and I tasted the champagne on his tongue. "Do you want me to make you come?"

I couldn't lie. "More than anything."

"Do you promise to stop disobeying me?" I was silent, knowing what he wanted to hear—but mustering up the anger below the surface despite the weariness that weighed me down, I resolved not to give him that satisfaction and clenched my teeth together. But his index finger slid between my legs where he lightly tickled my clit, just enough to remind me that I truly was at his mercy.

"Yes."

His voice was low, almost a growl, when he muttered, "I have to admit, though, I think I like you naughty."

As he snaked his tongue back down my body, I doubted I'd even be able to orgasm, though, because I was so exhausted, I didn't even feel like I could lift my head.

"The things I could do to you," he said, his mouth drawing in my nipple as if it were a delicate bit of chocolate. He circled it with his tongue, reminiscent of the feather. My body tingled all over, letting me know that maybe, just maybe I had it in me.

Still, I was like a lump of jelly melting into the sheets.

Soon, he was licking his way down my torso and I offhandedly wondered if he could still taste the champagne on my skin. As he lowered himself between my spread legs, he didn't waste time giving my clit the attention it had been begging for all night. At first, it all felt numb, like it had been teased too much and refused to respond.

But then it was as if it woke up. It started with a little tingle, and my brain focused on that area as if it was all that existed. It wasn't long before he slid a finger inside me, something he hadn't done before, causing an entirely new sensation, dividing my attention. But as his tongue continued caressing my clit, my body tensed up again, willing to expend the last of its energy to take me to that place on a cloud where only extreme bliss existed. My breathing deepened as I had to take in more air, and Sinclair continued delivering that delicious sensation to the one area my body craved.

And finally my brain let go, an explosion of fireworks in my head causing me to lose all control. Sinclair didn't let up, continuing to deliver stroke after stroke, each touch causing another shower of pleasure to explode in my brain.

When he stopped, I felt like I was going to die—or, at the very least, sleep until Monday morning.

I could barely feel him as he moved up the bed, grabbing a condom off the nightstand. I heard him tear the packet and imagined him sliding it over his rigid, thick cock. And, although I was overfatigued, I ached to feel him inside me.

“Would you take off my mask, Cory?”

Instead of answering, the warmth of his hands on my head gave me his response. Soon, I could see him in my line of vision, and I marveled at how bright the light seemed...and how beautiful he looked. This man wasn't just the man I loved; he was the ideal, perfect for me.

And, as he slid inside me, fitting like we were made for each other, I knew I would never love anyone else like I loved him right now.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt refreshed and oh, so happy.

And starving to death.

After making love face to face the night before, Sinclair had hopped out of bed and put on a robe, leaving the room for a few minutes. When he returned, I'd been asleep but woke at the sound of the door—and the smell of Indian food. I'd never eaten it before, but I was too tired to try. Soon, I fell back asleep, even though Sinclair had gone to a lot of trouble to set up a table and chairs, complete with a lovely linen tablecloth and a single red rose in a simple vase.

But when I awoke, I was in Sinclair's bed, so I knew he must have carried me here—and I was happy he had, even though I had no memory of it. Although the ultimate outcome of last night's "punishment" session had been amazing, it had also been quite trying, and I didn't want to think about it.

Sitting up in bed, I stretched my arms and back. Sinclair was probably already working out, something he did even on the weekends. Saturdays were my day to do all the things I didn't have time for during the week.

Like reading the last journal—and I was dying to do it.

As I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, I realized I was sore. It was mostly in my arm and leg muscles but even a little bit in my pussy, making me think last night had been too much of a good thing...bordering on punishment territory for sure. But the rose in the vase was now on the nightstand next to my side of the bed, and I smiled. It was such a simple gesture, but it told me so much.

He really did care for me.

I was afraid, though, that my feelings for him had grown out of control, like the weeds in the flowerbeds outside would do if Henry didn't diligently tend to them. And I really did equate my emotions to that very concept, because I was falling in love with the wrong man. Although I didn't have a "right" man in my life to choose instead, Sinclair was certainly not the person my father would want to walk me down the aisle toward with the intent of giving me away.

Oh, God, I hoped my father would be able to do just that one day. Some days he could walk well while others found him bound to a chair and using a walker. In fact, over the past year, he'd had to use that walker more and more.

Which was why I wanted him going to that appointment in October. It offered hope when there was little of it available.

As I stood, I looked around for my clothes and couldn't find them anywhere. Maybe they were still in the other room. So I took a t-shirt out of Sinclair's dresser and slipped it on—and then I decided to head to my room to shower without locating my clothing.

And I wanted to take the rose with me.

I glanced at his bedside clock and realized I only had about a half an hour before breakfast—and I could hardly wait to see Sinclair, so I moved quickly, even while feeling tired and sore...because I was fueled with the buoyancy of love.

When I headed down to breakfast, Sinclair was already there—but he wasn't eating. Instead, he was at the stove.

Cooking.

"There she is," he said, using a long metal spatula to fold over one side of an omelet

on the big flat grill next to the stove.

“Ooh...I’m impressed.” I made a beeline for the coffee pot, not far from him.

“Do you like Denver omelets?”

“I have no idea.” What I more than liked—and what I really wanted to do—was approach him and wrap my arms around him, but that would have been breaking our unwritten rules. Although Edna was gone for the weekend, there was always a chance that Greg or his wife could appear at any moment.

I doubted that would happen, but I did know I’d be in trouble if I broke a rule, in the contract or not—and, after last night’s punishment, I didn’t know if I’d have the energy to do it again so soon.

“Then that’s breakfast—with toast and strawberries. And we’ll have leftover Indian for lunch.”

“Sounds great. What can I do to help?”

While I buttered the whole wheat toast, Sinclair finished up the second omelet, and it wasn’t long before we were sitting at the table. I couldn’t help but look at him smiling, hoping I wasn’t giving anything away. This time I wasn’t worried about someone else figuring me out. Instead, I wondered if Sinclair had determined how I really felt about him now. Because I had no idea if the feeling was mutual. I wanted to believe it, thinking the rose was a symbol of words he couldn’t say, but there was always that smidgen of doubt.

What if Sinclair had an ulterior motive, a plan I wasn’t privy to for obvious reasons?

What if his whole motivation had been nothing more than a ruse to make me fall for

him? And, once I was head over heels, I'd be even easier to manipulate.

And I wondered if that was already happening. When I'd first arrived, Sinclair had offered to slash my service time in half if I slept with him—and I'd refused. Now he got to sleep with me and have me working for him for the entire decade we'd agreed to. As much as I didn't want to believe he would do that, I knew it was a possibility.

But if that was his plan, he hadn't revealed a bit of it yet. I would observe—but there was no way I could keep my heart out of any of it. I'd fallen hard and I didn't see a way to stop that.

No, not true. I knew there were a couple of ways I could fall out of love with this man. The first would be to find out that he was, in fact, only using me...that he didn't care for me at all, that he wasn't irresistibly drawn to me as he'd indicated.

The second would be to neglect my father who needed help.

There was a third way—lying and deceiving—but I hadn't thought of that yet.

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Eager to fill my belly, I cut off a corner of the omelet he'd made me, putting it in my mouth and chewing. I tasted cheese first, followed by sautéed bell pepper and onion and bits of ham. "You said this is a Denver omelet?"

"Yep. Sometimes it's made without cheese, but I had a hell of an appetite this morning—and I imagine you did too."

Did I ever. I probably could have eaten a dozen eggs, I was so hungry. "It's good—but I expected something fancier."

Sinclair laughed. "Does Denver feel fancy to you?"

Smiling, I shook my head—but I wasn't about to tell him that Denver often felt foreign to me. I had yet to experience the whole city, only being exposed in bits and pieces. Here in the mansion—and even in our walks through the neighborhood, I was sheltered from much of the real urban experience.

So I carefully answered his question. "Not really—but I guess I expected more. I think my dad accidentally made a Denver omelet once or twice."

"So you're not impressed."

Shaking my head, I swallowed another bite. "I didn't say that!"

Nodding, Sinclair looked up from his plate, already half empty. "Have you ever been to the ballet?"

His question threw me completely off until I realized it might simply be a response to my fancy comment moments ago. “No,” I admitted. I’d only seen snippets of ballet—on television and YouTube—but it wasn’t like I’d sought it out.

“Would you like to?”

My answer was a knee-jerk response but completely honest. “Of course, I would. At least once.”

“I’m glad you said yes because I need a date a week from Friday.”

Wait. Was I understanding this right? He wanted me to be his date—publicly?

Swallowing, I didn’t say another word...because surely I had misunderstood.

But he kept talking, probably unaware that I wasn’t keeping up. “I’ll have my tailor over on Monday so he can fit you with something appropriate.”

Now my brain kicked in—and I had so many questions. “None of my dresses would work?”

“They might—but I want you to look like a million bucks.”

“Where will it be? Should I study anything beforehand? What should I know about it before—”

His smile covered his face as he interrupted me. “I know you’re excited, Lise—but maybe you should manage your expectations.”

“What do you mean?”

“The entire Whittier family will be there...and I suspect you’ll be even less thrilled than I’ll be.”

It felt like a cold, hard slap. The entire Whittier family? I didn’t know what exactly that meant or how many people his phrase encompassed...but I imagined that included his father, the man who’d ruined my family’s entire life.

If exposed to that man, would I be able to bite my tongue?

Or would I be able to use that opportunity to exact the perfect revenge?

As my brain continued to process, I focused on the food I could no longer taste. Sinclair, however, kept talking, not realizing my conundrum. “But I hope you’ll like it. Edna’s told me more than once that the ballet was my mother’s favorite thing to do outside the house—other than tennis. She didn’t go to the movies or music concerts and she apparently wasn’t a fan of opera...but she went to every single ballet that came through Denver—with or without dear old dad.”

There was no way I could miss the sarcasm as he spoke about his father...which led me to believe that maybe Sinclair and I weren’t so different.

Maybe we both despised his father.

But, of course, it was far more complicated than that.

Chapter 19

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The rest of the weekend was a whirl. I didn't get to read any of the journal because I spent my time researching ballet, particularly its performance and etiquette when attending. I didn't want to come off as an ignorant hick—especially since I'd have to be in the presence of Augustus Whittier II, Sinclair's father.

When I spoke to my dad over the weekend, once or twice I was tempted to tell him about what was coming, who I'd be meeting—but I didn't want my father's emotions to become dark or depressed, because I didn't want his mood affecting his health. If I were going to do anything to the eldest Whittier, I'd have to share that with my father after the fact.

For now, I needed to keep him optimistic about his appointment in October, now only weeks away.

After pondering it for most of the weekend, I decided it would be best to put off any thoughts of revenge. I had never met Sinclair's father—so this initial meeting would be like reconnaissance. I had to observe my enemy and then come up with a strategy.

I had another thought as well. When I'd first arrived in Sinclair's mansion, he had been on the phone, telling his father about the Miller girl he'd brought home to serve him. Did his father know I would be Sinclair's date? Would I be tormented by his entire family?

But, if that were the case, why go to the trouble of taking me to the ballet?

Sinclair didn't seem to have any ulterior motives other than really wanting me to be his date—and the events of the week seemed to prove it.

Monday morning started off much like it usually did...except Sinclair told Edna his plans. He'd already informed her by the time I came downstairs, so I wasn't sure exactly what he'd said—but when I poured a cup of coffee, Edna said, “The ballet, eh? I know you'll enjoy it, dear.”

“Have you ever been?” I asked.

“Once or twice. The Whittiers sometimes give tickets as a gift. The Nutcracker is probably my favorite.”

It was good to know Edna might be able to give me answers I couldn't find online—and if she suspected there was anything else going on between Sinclair and me, her face and tone of voice didn't indicate it.

Still, when I sat down to breakfast, Sinclair winked at me—and I couldn't do anything other than grin back.

Edna called me from the top of the stairs around two o'clock that afternoon, long after my eagerness had calmed, settling into the background of my brain so I could focus on work.

But I immediately perked up as I took the stairs heading to the main floor. “He's waiting for us in the great room.”

The great room? I couldn't recall either Edna or Sinclair showing me such a room—and I didn't believe I'd stumbled across it—before this. But I simply nodded and followed her down the west rear hallway—past the kitchen on the left, the dining room and beverage nook on the right, as well as the small laundry and cleaning room. On the left was a final door that was open, but I'd never looked inside.

Which I found odd, considering all the other snooping I'd done.

But both the east and west rear hallways ended with doors leading to different garages and I'd never thought about much in between. After all, there was the kitchen and it had no windows except for a skylight in the ceiling. I'd known then that the back half of the mansion was only one story—while the front, the part that was seen by people driving and walking by, was grand, majestic...and so I'd never thought much about the back part, because there wasn't as much to see.

Or so I'd thought.

The great room was breathtaking, with a huge skylight overhead that would have allowed sunlight to stream in and flood the room—but the skies today were gray, and it had been raining most of the day. There was also a bank of glass at the top of the south wall to the ceiling—and I knew if I'd had a ladder to look out of them that I would have seen the roof to the garages. Even with all the windows, the skies were dark, not giving much light. But that didn't stop this room from shining in its own brilliance. On both the left and right side of the skylight hung two beautiful chandeliers, but my eyes were drawn to everything in the room, accented in white and gold. In the middle was an arrangement of furniture around a large square coffee table. In here on the walls there were several pieces of art, but I noticed that they hung on the south wall where they'd be guarded against sunlight.

On the north wall there was a television and sound system, bookshelves, and the biggest fireplace I'd ever seen—but it was obvious this room was never used. Not just because I'd never seen it but there was a feeling of stillness here, of the pillows on the sofa never being used to lie or rest on. Like the second floor of the east wing, this room felt forgotten. Even the two large books artfully positioned on the coffee table felt neglected and old. One was a book about the Titanic while the other was about trees.

I didn't have much more time to take things in as a thin man with a thinner black mustache entered the room, several gowns draped over one of his arms. For just a

moment, he had a confused expression and quickly said, “You’re not Natasha.”

As if this whole thing hadn’t felt weird and foreign enough. “No, I’m Lise.”

He nodded. “Marco. Edna has told me that I need to find a gown you like for an upcoming event. Don’t worry if something doesn’t fit. If you like it, I’ll alter it so that it’s perfect for you.”

Meanwhile, I was wondering who Natasha was.

Marco removed a long dress from underneath a cloth cover—and I nearly lost my breath. It was pure black—long, sleek, and sleeveless, but I wouldn’t be able to tell much simply looking at it, other than it looked elegant. Marco said, his dark brown eyes lit up in amusement, “Try this on.”

I took the dress and decided I’d go to the nearest bathroom on the west side of the main hallway before Edna touched my elbow. “There, dear.” With her other outstretched hand, she indicated a screen in the northeast corner of the room that I hadn’t noticed because of everything else in the space. So I nodded and walked across the room, also noticing for the first time that there was another door on the east side which no doubt led into the rear hallway on that side.

Quickly, I removed my jeans and blouse, trying to decide the best way to get the dress on. I decided that it would be logical to step into it. It wasn’t until I put my feet inside the skirt and pulled it up that I realized there were no zippers. Instead, it was form-fitting. Fortunately, it wasn’t too snug but it did fit like a glove. Down the back was a ruffle and a bow on top while my back was completely bare. My gray tennis shoes didn’t show under the bottom of the dress or I would have taken them off—and, before I stepped out, I removed my bra so it wouldn’t ruin the illusion.

Considering I usually wore a bra...I felt weird without it.

But I stepped out from behind the screen and Edna gasped. “That dress looks like it was made for you.”

Thank goodness for Edna. Instantly, I relaxed. “Thank you.”

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Marco, however, was all business. “Please turn around.” As I did, he asked, “How does it feel?”

“Okay.”

He continued standing back, evaluating the dress on me. “If you like it, we’ll find you some strappy open-toe heels to go with it.” Then he turned to Edna. “Are we choosing jewelry as well today?”

“No.” Yet another reminder that Edna was Sinclair’s right-hand woman. She knew exactly what his wishes were.

Marco waved me toward him and this time he evaluated the dress up close. “Is it tight or pinching anywhere?”

“No.” Snug, but I believed that was the point of the dress—to show off my curves without blatantly doing so. After all, it was black, and I imagined, in the darkness of an auditorium, it wouldn’t stand out.

I was okay with that.

But this dress—the feel of the fine fabric against my skin, the way it almost seemed to have been made for me—was amazing and beautiful.

Marco asked, “Do you like it?”

“I do. I love it.”

“Let’s have you look in the mirror.” Just behind Marco was a large full-length mirror that I’d seen somewhere in the mansion before...I just couldn’t remember where.

At least now I didn’t have to try to picture myself in it. Although the dress didn’t look like something I’d ever have picked out for myself—I couldn’t deny it made me look beautiful. All I could do was smile.

“Well, let’s see what you think about these others.”

This time, he handed me a chiffon satin dress that felt sumptuous against my hands. It was a soft pink with a top that was like a corset with spaghetti straps, meaning I’d have to continue going braless. The skirt was layered with ruffles, and I wondered how it would look on me.

This dress was a little more complicated to get on. I stepped into the skirt but had to zip it up the back from my waist to the top. It, too, fit well, although it was a little loose.

It revealed my cleavage, something the other dress hadn’t done. Regardless, I’d have to find a way to feel comfortable in whatever dress we settled on.

Like before, I stepped out from behind the screen. Edna smiled widely, no doubt enjoying the break from her routine, and Marco asked me the same questions as before. But when I saw myself in the mirror, much as I loved the dress and the slit at the front where I could show a little leg, I felt like this was a dress that would look best at a high school prom. A few years earlier, I might not have minded the chance, but I didn’t want anything reminding me of my high-school days in Winchester to sully what I hoped would be an unforgettable event.

Although I didn’t say it out loud, I decided that one was not the dress I’d wear. Maybe had it been in a different color, but I’d never know for certain.

I wound up trying on more than ten dresses. One was a gown with a light green skirt embroidered with metallic threads so it sparkled. If I chose it, the skirt would have to be shortened so I wouldn't trip on it. Although it was snug, it had a slit at the back. The top was plain light green with sleeves that ended at my elbows with a big lapel and plunging neckline, but what made this gown fun was a cape-like effect in the same plain fabric surrounding the skirt. But when I saw myself in the mirror, I didn't care for how it looked.

I tried on a couple of little black dresses too, but I knew I didn't want something that barely covered anything—and one of those fit that particular bill. I tried on a teal gown that was plain but pretty, a ruffled burgundy dress, and then the dress I knew I wanted.

I didn't think so at first until I put it on. It was red and fitted as well—and exposing more skin than I thought I'd be comfortable showing off...but something about it spoke to me, and I thought Sinclair would love it. It had short sleeves that didn't go up to my shoulders, instead only hugging my arms, and the neckline showed off just a hint of cleavage. But the back wasn't exposed—just my shoulders—and the skirt flowed to the floor in a few layers.

When I saw myself in the mirror, I knew this was the one—but I wanted to hear what the others thought.

Marco, of course, simply asked the same old questions. Edna, however, said, “You are stunning, Lise. I'm afraid you'll put all the other women at the ballet to shame.”

I smiled, looking at my reflection. For probably the first time in my life, I truly felt beautiful...almost like Cinderella going to the ball.

Was I an imposter?

Before I could ponder it further, Marco said, “What do you think?” When I didn’t answer right away, he added, “If you don’t like any of these, I can come back with more.”

“No. I think I can pick one.”

“Do you want my opinion?” I didn’t know if I did, but I nodded anyway—and he didn’t hesitate. “Your eyes look like they’re on fire in this dress. It’s something about the way the green in your eyes reacts to the red. The green dress also reacted with your eyes, but it was subtle. You’ll make a statement in this one.”

Was that good or bad? Did I want to make a statement?

He must have seen the doubt on my face. “You look stunning in red. My recommendation is this dress.”

“I agree.” Edna’s vote was vehement.

“If you’d rather look at other gowns, I can bring more in red.”

“No, I do like this one.” They did as well. I loved the dress and how it made me feel—and, with their agreement, I was certain.

“Perfect.” We spent the next few minutes with Marco tugging here and there, making sure he knew exactly how it fit on my body. He promised to make a couple of alterations and he’d return the next week with it, as well as a pair of shoes and a wrap of some kind. “The next time you put this on, you’ll believe it had always been made especially for you.”

While Edna showed Marco out, I got back in my clothes. When I stepped back out from behind the screen, I was looking around the room until Edna returned. She said, “I guess I’ll leave the mirror here until then in case he wants you to try on a variety of shoes.”

Which opened the door so I could ask the huge question I’d had earlier. “I love this room. Why isn’t it ever used?”

“Mr. Whittier never said it explicitly, but I think it’s because it’s kind of a family room. The eldest Mr. Whittier one time told me about watching football games in here with friends they’d invited for Thanksgiving one year. When the boys were younger, we would sometimes give them an hour of television time in here.”

I stopped myself before I referred to the man of the house as Sinclair rather than as

Mr. Whittier—which might have tipped Edna off. Strange enough that the new girl was chosen to go to the ballet...but now she's getting familiar with the boss too? Edna was a smart woman. I suspected it wouldn't take much to tip the scales to make her suspicious. When I finally spoke, I felt a little nervous, realizing just how close I'd come to giving it all away. "Mr. Whittier showed me the television room one day."

Nodding, Edna began walking toward the door to the west hall. "The one in the main hallway. So think about it. If it was you all by your lonesome, would you rather watch TV in this giant room or over there in a more intimate space?"

I almost laughed, because no space in this mansion was intimate, not even the closets, and especially not the television room—and, knowing she probably lived in a place not unlike my father's house in Winchester, she would no doubt agree if we'd had a rational conversation about it. But her perspective was relative: and here, in this mansion, the television room on the first floor of the east wing—a room that was larger than the living room back home—was far cozier than the overwhelming, large great room. However, that giant space was cozy in its own way, thanks to the way it had been decorated. The designer had an eye for how to create small spaces inside a large one, so that, even when watching television on a huge sectional, a person might feel comfortable.

Hardly thinking about it, I answered, "I guess so." But I was pondering Sinclair again. Did he avoid this room for the same reason he avoided the second floor of the east wing?

I wondered.

As we walked back down the west rear hall, Edna said, "Next Friday, you'll have someone here to do your hair and makeup for the ballet."

“What?”

As if it were an everyday occurrence, she said, “Yes. That afternoon. So you’ll probably only work a half day that day. I’ll stick around to make sure the woman gets here, so maybe we’ll eat a quick lunch together. Then you can shower if you want and, when she gets here, I’ll leave the two of you to it.”

“So...what will happen exactly?”

“Probably just what you think,” Edna said, pausing when we arrived at the main hallway. “She’ll make you look like a princess.”

“I should probably paint my nails.”

“Or,” Edna said, her eyes lighting up with mischief, “we can get mani-pedis Friday morning.”

I giggled. “Both of us?”

“Why not? I’ll ask Mr. Whittier later. He’s been in such a good mood lately, I can’t imagine him saying no.”

I couldn’t help growing more excited. The polish on my toenails had begun to chip worse and, even though Sinclair hadn’t said a word about them, I was sure he noticed when we were intimate together. He didn’t miss much.

And I suspected I knew why he’d been in such a good mood lately—because I had been as well.

“I guess I better get back to work,” I said, turning to walk toward the door leading downstairs.

“Wait. I needed to ask you if you have any allergies.”

“Allergies?”

“Yes. Like...gluten sensitivity or latex or anything like that. The makeup/hair woman wanted to know.”

“Oh.” I smiled again, feeling quite spoiled. “Not that I know of.”

“I’ll let her know.”

In just a few moments, I was back downstairs, trying to pick up where I’d left off, looking through a box of small objects, some which looked like mere trinkets and some that appeared to be worth a fortune.

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Unfortunately, now that I felt like Cinderella being wooed by the prince, I couldn't concentrate.

If I'd been working a real job, I would have taken the afternoon off.

Chapter 20

The following Friday couldn't come fast enough. Although I spent every single night with Sinclair, I'd been afraid to ask about the ballet. I didn't want to come off as an ignorant yokel, and I also didn't want to seem overly eager. The few times he mentioned it, he made it sound much like a business transaction.

Soon, it became clear to me that it was. This ballet was an obligation and I would be there because he was expected to have a date. Still, I refused to let that knowledge disappoint me because I would be doing something I'd never done before.

With a man I loved, whether he knew it or not.

And I didn't know all the details, but I knew I'd be meeting his family—which I assumed were his father, stepmother, and brothers. I got the feeling he wasn't close to any of them, so it was possible I would also be serving as silent moral support.

As Edna had promised, we had a bit of a girls' day. Sinclair even told us to "have fun" on his way out of the kitchen that morning, and Edna confessed that she'd done all her Friday work the day before.

Marco had returned on Wednesday with the dress and, as he'd promised, it fit like it

had been made for me. I felt beautiful and even a little sexy in it, and I hung it in my closet with the garment cover over it as if it could get dusty in two days. He'd also provided three-inch red heels, close-toed, and a light white shawl, but I didn't think I'd need it. Even though we were a week into autumn, the weather still felt warm, even in the evening.

On our way to the nail salon in the Honda, Edna asked, "Have you thought about what color you'll want your nail polish?"

"No." I was just excited about the experience. I'd never had a mani-pedi. The closest I'd ever come was when a middle school friend and I had painted each other's fingernails. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Maybe we can ask the nail tech. We'll tell her what you'll be wearing, and she might have a few ideas."

Almost twenty minutes later, we arrived at a salon. As we got out of the car, Edna said, "There are lots of places closer to the mansion, but I know the people here—and I never have to worry about finding a parking place."

"True." In the few times I'd been around Denver with either Edna or Sinclair, I'd noticed that parking was at a bit of premium—and many streets were narrow and packed, with cars crammed along with road with barely an inch between bumpers.

"Aurora's a bit more spread out."

"Aurora? We're in Aurora?"

"Yep."

"I didn't even notice when it changed."

As she closed the door to the car, Edna grinned. “You like to look all over—and I don’t blame you one bit. But there was a green street sign just past the light at one of the major intersections that you missed. I can’t remember which. It’s just a city limit sign.”

We started walking toward the building. “I’ll look for it on the way back.”

“For some strange reason, there’s not one announcing we’re returning to Denver. I couldn’t tell you why.”

One thing I definitely noticed, just like Edna said, was that the traffic and buildings here were less like sardines packed in a can. It was still far bigger and more overwhelming than Winchester, but it felt like there was a little more room to breathe.

Edna’s tech was a girl who looked to be about my age, whereas my tech was a black man who I would have guessed was closer to Sinclair’s. Both were fun and funny, joking with each other and us while pampering us by making us look a little more beautiful. When we left, our nails were dry—and mine a little longer due to the acrylic tips he’d added. My tech had told me a French manicure would add a touch of sophistication to my look and Edna agreed—so I didn’t have to worry about what color would go with my gown.

We had far more fun with my toenails—but again we didn’t go with what I would have considered a traditional color. Instead, the polish was silver, and my tech said it would go with anything.

The tips on my fingernails weren’t terribly long and I was glad for that, considering I’d be back working downstairs on Monday.

For now, though, I let myself revel in the feeling of being a princess, sought and loved by my handsome prince.

Instead of making lunch, Edna took us to a nearby sandwich shop, also on Sinclair's dime.

Close to two that afternoon, I was beginning to feel antsy. I'd hopped in the shower and combed out my hair, letting it air dry, not knowing exactly what the makeup/hair person would need. I considered staying in a robe and decided I should probably be dressed when she arrived—but not in my gown for the evening. I didn't want to get anything on it, especially not makeup. So I got in a t-shirt, sweats, and sneakers and waited.

While I did, I checked my email. Still no word from DU.

I texted my dad, just asking how he was doing. I still hadn't told him about the ballet tonight and wasn't sure how. It seemed to be a big giveaway—and, yet, we'd managed to fool Edna.

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Or maybe Sinclair had fooled me. Maybe I was being stupid...still serving my remaining sentence: just over nine years and ten months. Despite realizing my feelings for Sinclair were growing minute by minute, I had no assurance he felt the same way—and that was due to our pasts.

Fortunately, the makeup artist showed up to pull me out of my thoughts. Edna knocked on my door and, when I answered, she stood next to a woman my height but at least ten years older. She was absolutely gorgeous, as if her made-up face and wavy blonde hair were her billboard. “Hi, I’m Emma,” she said, her bright white teeth nearly glittering like a model for a toothpaste commercial.

Edna said, “I’ll leave you girls to it.” After she offered us drinks which we both declined, Edna waved the other woman the rest of the way in. “Have fun tonight, Lise.”

“Thanks.”

Emma rolled in a case the size of luggage as Edna walked down the hall, ready to begin her weekend. “Where do we want to do this?”

I grimaced. Having Marco in the great room when we tried on dresses had made sense—but for what she’d be doing, we’d need a different space. “This probably won’t work here.”

“Well, you have a bathroom. There’s a mirror and a counter, and you could sit on the toilet seat. Would you be comfortable there?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Want my vote?” When I nodded, she said, “Of course, you wouldn’t be able to relax. Let’s go somewhere where there’s a table and lots of natural light. I have a mirror in my case we can use, so we don’t have to have one in whatever room you choose.”

I thought of the kitchen and dining room. They would be okay...but then I remembered the first place Sinclair had kissed me—and, somehow, it seemed perfect. “I know just the spot.”

“First, why don’t you show me what you’ll be wearing? That way I can make sure whatever I do with your face and hair works with it.”

I agreed, stepping into my closet and pulling out the dress. After I removed the garment bag, I held the gown up to my body and stepped into the room, hoping she’d get a good idea of how I would look in it.

“Wow. You’re gonna be a knockout.”

After thanking her and trying not to blush, I led her down the hallway toward the stairs she’d already ascended, feeling bad that she’d brought the case up for nothing. “Can I help you carry that down?”

“Believe it or not, this baby isn’t too heavy and I work out on the regular. It’s taken me years to perfect it, but I’ve got it down to an art. I have clients all over the U.S.—and it costs less to transport and takes way less time when I can carry my bag on the plane instead of checking it.”

As we descended the stairs, I asked, “You’re not based in Denver?”

She laughed. “Nope. Not that there’s anything wrong with Denver, but I live in Manhattan.”

“Oh.” I was pretty sure that was part of New York City, but I didn’t want her to know just how unworldly and naïve I was. Once we were in the main hallway heading west, I said, “So you flew all the way here just to do my makeup?”

“Sure did. Mr. Whittier is friends with one of my clients—and he paid plenty to entice me to rearrange my schedule.”

Although that didn’t completely surprise me, it also comforted me. Obviously having me look the part of a well-put-together sophisticate was worth a lot of money to Sinclair. “Is there a certain time you have to leave?”

“My flight is booked for seven—so you’ll have me as long as you need me. But it shouldn’t take long. Your skin is flawless. I don’t have much work to do.”

Even when I blushed? “Thanks.”

“Yeah—I feel like I’m gonna owe Mr. Whittier a refund.”

Near the end of the hallway, we entered the library. Just as she’d requested, we had access to several tables and chairs—and plenty of natural lighting. As the sun lowered itself in the sky, we’d have direct sunlight shining through the west windows as well.

It wasn’t long before she’d taken her case apart. It was actually several smaller cases that snapped together, and she set the two top ones on the table. There were tons of products and makeup tucked inside them, along with an assortment of brushes. “Is there a trashcan around here?”

“Maybe.” While I looked around, she unhooked the other cases from the whole,

setting the other two a bit farther away on the table while leaving the biggest one on wheels on the floor. Meanwhile, I found a waste basket tucked just under the small desk up against the wall. Little did I know, she'd be using it a lot to throw away disposable sponges, Q-tips, and tissues. Before she got started, she plugged a curling iron into a socket on the west wall, resting it near the edge of the table, and then she had me sit. Before she did anything else, she covered my clothes with a black plastic cape.

As she began applying a foundation to my face, I asked, "You said you fly all over the United States?"

"I go wherever I'm needed," she said, dabbing at my cheek with a sponge.

"So you have clients who need makeup for special events?"

"Yep. That's a great way to put it. I do makeup for weddings, proms, television appearances, fashion shows, you name it. It's pretty fun because I get to go all over the place and I make great money. If I'm in a new place, I might stay overnight and check it out, but that doesn't happen as much now as it used to. Another perk of the job is I get to meet people I never would have met before. And the more I do it, the more well known I become—so I get to charge more money as time goes by."

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“Makes sense.” I didn’t feel comfortable talking much because I didn’t know if it would make her job harder. It wasn’t like being at the dentist’s office, but I still wasn’t sure if the movement of my mouth was disrupting her work.

Instead, as she worked on my face, she kept talking—and she didn’t seem to need any prompts from me. As she applied blush, she told me I had beautiful cheekbones. Before I could even ask what she meant, she told me they were high, giving me a bit of an exotic look.

At that point, I thought she was simply flattering me to pass the time and make me feel better about myself.

“Okay,” she said, stepping back for a bit. “How do I want to do the eyes? Mr. Whittier said I needed to keep it conservative—but that’s pretty hard when you’re wearing red. You’ve got the perfect hair and skin tone for red lipstick, so we’ll do that and keep everything else subtle.”

I gave a quick nod, acting like I agreed—or maybe like I fully understood what she was talking about.

She worked rapidly, far faster than I could have done my own makeup, underscoring her expertise. I closed my eyes and felt the liquid eyeliner being applied to my upper lid along the lash line. Barely a minute later, she was applying shadow and talking again. “I’m using golds and browns here because they’ll look subtle and make the green of your eyes the star. Next to the red lipstick, of course.”

I’d never worn red lipstick before, never had a reason to even try, so I wondered how

I would look—but that would have to wait.

After much blending, she asked me to open my eyes. When I did, she said, “That’s fantastic.” But she wasn’t done. She added tiny lashes to make mine appear longer before adding mascara and moving on to my brows. “Last but not least,” she said, pulling out a tube of red lipstick that she applied with a tiny brush. “By the way, this gives you twenty-four hour coverage, so you won’t have to reapply it all night long. You’ll look as fresh and beautiful five hours from now as you do right now.”

“Wow.”

“Yep. I use waterproof mascara too, because you never know.” After she seemed happy with my makeup, she said, “Let’s work on your hair.” Closing my eyes, I enjoyed feeling her brush move through the strands down my back before she began manipulating it as one big mass, making it conform to a shape against the back of my head. As she did so, she said, “I wish Mr. Whittier hadn’t said conservative. With your eyes, I would have loved having you wear red shadow and taupe lipstick. You’ve got the right face for it.”

“I’d say let’s go for it, except for the—”

“Twenty-four hour lips. Yeah, that pretty much sealed the deal, cupcake.” I nearly laughed but the way she twisted my hair brought me back to the present. “Sorry about that.” Part of me thought she might have been a fun friend if I’d been born in a different place and different time. I’d never had the pleasure of keeping friends, because when you’re at the bottom, people are content to leave you there—especially if you can be a stepping stone.

It dawned on me then...whether I liked it or not, Denver was for me a clean slate—exactly what I’d hoped to get when I left Winchester someday. Sinclair, my sworn enemy, had rescued me from that awful place—and when my ten years was up,

I wasn't going to look back. By then, I would have a degree and, I hoped, a line on a good job. And, if he continued to be a stand-up guy, I might even leave with a good reference or maybe even a shoe in somewhere, considering his family's connections. And I'd take my dad away from there and we could live in Denver—or anywhere in the world, so long as we shook the dust of Winchester off our shoes.

That damn town didn't deserve a man the likes of my father.

After sliding several bobby pins in place, whatever she'd done was making my hair stay put. But she wasn't done yet. She'd left two long locks at the front of my face, hanging down past my cheeks, and those she took the curling iron to. Its heat radiated against my cheek as Emma worked her magic.

Seconds later, she said, "All done!" Then, after pulling the cape off my shoulders, she shook it over the trashcan before whisking over to her big case still on wheels and pulling out a hand mirror. Holding it up to my face, she asked, "What do you think?"

I stared...and stared and stared. I could barely recognize the strikingly beautiful woman looking back at me through the glass. All I could manage was "You're a miracle worker."

Would Sinclair even recognize me?

Emma laughed, removing the mirror. "I've had to perform miracles before, but not today. Your skin and bone structure made it easy."

I smiled, feeling a little uncomfortable. When Emma began putting everything back in the cases, I asked, "Can I help with anything?"

"Thanks, but I've got a system. If you want, you could wipe the evidence off the table." When I looked, I noticed a few flecks of various powdered colors on its

surface—something the cleaning ladies might not appreciate wiping up on Monday. But Emma had me pegged correctly: I still didn't feel comfortable asking others to clean up after me. I'd barely gotten comfortable leaving dishes overnight for Edna to deal with the next day, regardless of how many times she told me she liked having something to do.

Quickly, I made my way to the nearest bathroom and rolled off several squares of toilet paper so I could simply brush off the powder on the table in the library into the trashcan. Before I left, though, I caught another look at my face—and it dawned on me.

Tonight, I really would be like Cinderella all dressed up for the ball, ready to enamor the prince.

Unfortunately, deep down I knew that glass slipper would never fit my foot.

Chapter 21

Soon, Emma and I were upstairs again. She was there to make sure I could get the dress on without ruining my makeup and hair.

The gown almost completed the look.

After Emma left in an Uber, I headed back upstairs and slipped my feet into the heels Marco had chosen. Then I stood in front of the full-length mirror in the bathroom and took a selfie, because I knew I would never look this beautiful again.

But I had to ask myself—was I really beautiful? I didn't even look like myself. I looked like a stranger...which made me feel like I was an imposter.

Thus, the picture. It would remind me of this night, an evening I still anticipated with

glee, although seeing myself in a mirror filled me with some apprehension as well.

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When I glanced at my reflection again, I realized something was missing—jewelry. Ordinarily, I wouldn't even care—but my neck and ears, completely exposed thanks to the dress and updo, seemed so naked. I hadn't brought much jewelry with me and what I had brought would probably look cheap.

Still, I had to try.

Inside the nightstand were the pair of faux pearl studs I'd worn to the college on that fateful day when I'd first met Sinclair. They would have to do. Fitting them in my ears, I walked into the bathroom again to look at myself in the mirror.

Good enough.

Then I sat on the bed, feeling jittery, wondering when Sinclair would arrive and tell me it was time to go. I wasn't just nervous because I was again going to be a foreigner pretending she belonged...but I was going to meet Sinclair's father, rotten-to-the-core Augustus Whittier II—and what made me almost scared was wondering if he would know who I was. After all, Sinclair had told his father I'd be working for him, repaying a debt when I first arrived here at the mansion.

But that was two months ago—and Sinclair wouldn't have necessarily reminded him.

Unless that was the whole point.

I hadn't gotten that feeling from Sinclair, though. Why would he go to all this trouble to make me feel special and cared for if it was only to deride and mock me?

Leaning over, I decided to grab the final journal out of the bottom drawer to read as a distraction, because I was making myself sick with worry. But then I heard footsteps outside my door.

He was home.

It wasn't until I answered the knock on my door that I realized he'd been home and had probably arrived while I'd been waiting for the Uber with Emma inside the library.

I took a deep breath, not sure what to expect.

If I'd thought I'd undergone a transformation, perhaps he had too. His black tux made him seem all the more masculine, all the more handsome and put together. He'd allowed a couple days' worth of whiskers to shadow his cheeks, making him look a little more rugged, a tad more dangerous—and all the more captivating.

Yet I still trusted him.

But it was his eyes and the way they took me in that grabbed me by the heart.

Mine probably told him back that I belonged to him.

“You are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on, Annalise.”

Pursing my lips, I fought against two tiny tears that threatened to spill over my perfectly made-up cheeks. Were the foundation and blusher also made to wear for twenty-four hours? I highly doubted it and fought the tears back.

“I feel the same way about you...Cory.”

His smile was subtle as his eyes continued searching mine. Apparently, he had the same thoughts as I about what Emma's hand had done to me—I simply didn't look like the same person he'd seen at breakfast. "Take off those earrings. They're fine, but I have something else for you to wear."

It was then that I noticed he was holding in his hand a rectangular box. So I pulled the fake pearls out of my ears, placing them on the dresser. Then he opened the hinged lid of the box, setting it next to them as I looked inside.

What I saw nearly took my breath away.

"Gold and diamonds go with everything," he said, lifting the delicate necklace out of the box.

It was beautiful—diamonds, more than I could count, on a silver necklace that reminded me of icicle lights dangling from a house's eaves at Christmas.

He'd said gold, and I didn't disagree with his statement, but that wasn't what I was seeing. "As does silver."

He grinned, cocking an eyebrow. "And white gold."

"Oh." And here I'd been thinking the silvery tones would match my toenails.

"May I?"

I could barely nod as I turned around, allowing him to place the stunning necklace so that those diamonds graced my bare neck. At first, it felt cool against my skin—and heavy. It was probably the most beautiful piece of jewelry I'd ever seen, with a pear-shaped diamond at the center of the necklace, and all around my neck were little rain drops of diamonds so that I would sparkle from every angle.

I had no doubt that this necklace was probably worth my father's house in Winchester.

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As he clasped it on my neck, he asked, “How does that feel?”

“Expensive.”

He chuckled. “You’d be right.” When I turned around to face him, his eyes said far more than his lips ever could—and I hoped my eyes communicated the same. I wondered how poets came up with their perfect phrases and metaphors—because I was completely speechless, as was the well-spoken tall man in front of me. But he finally managed. “This necklace belonged to my mother—and it hasn’t been worn in decades.” It wasn’t until then that I worked up to protest—but he stopped me. “I know my mother would have loved you. Even though I never got to know her in person, I’d heard stories from my brothers and their nannies when I was young—and even the occasional snippet from my father. She was a kind if misguided soul and I can’t think of anyone else she’d rather wear her necklace.”

It wasn’t until then that I touched it with my fingers, splaying my hands against the sparkly gems dangling from my neck. How many little diamonds were on this necklace? I couldn’t even guess. And I wondered if Sinclair was right. After all, he’d been correct about the kind of person his mother had been. Having read several years of her innermost thoughts, I felt like I’d grown to know her—and she was a kind person, one who’d wanted nothing more than to be loved by her cold, heartless husband.

Was I any different from her? Over time, would Sinclair prove to be like his father?

Before I could muse any further, Sinclair’s voice silenced my thoughts. “But that’s not all,” he said, reaching into the rectangular box again. “I had the jeweler design

matching earrings just for tonight—but I'll let you do the honors this time.”

Picking up the dangling earrings, I looked at my reflection in the dresser mirror, inserting an earring into one ear and then the other—and if Sinclair hadn't told me, I would have guessed the earrings and necklace had always been a set. I remained speechless.

“The earrings are for you to keep, Lise.”

My natural inclination was to protest. “I couldn't possibly—”

“Yes. You can and you will,” he said, his tone indicating that there would be no arguments. “No time for discussion. We have to leave. Dinner is at five-thirty, and if we don't go now, we'll be late.”

“What about the ballet?” I asked, picking up the red clutch purse Marco had given me for the evening, along with the shawl that I draped on my arm.

“It's at seven and just down the street and around the corner from the ballet—and the restaurant is expecting us. But we have to go now. Greg is standing by.”

As we walked down the marble stairs toward the main hallway, for the first time, I knew I looked like I belonged there.

And I also felt like the world's biggest pretender—but Sinclair's firm hand against my back gave me strength. I had to believe he would guide me through this foreign world, even while I felt like I was more lost than I'd ever been in my life.

For the first time since leaving Winchester, I rode in the limousine with Sinclair to our destination. I thought to myself, this is how the wealthy live. My dad and I on rare occasion would go to the movie theater in Winchester, eating at Chili's or

McDonald's first. But either he or I would drive and we wouldn't get dressed up.

This, I thought, was the rich person's equivalent...and, even though I'd loved everything up to that point—trying on gowns and choosing one, having it tailored to fit me perfectly, having my hair and makeup done by an expert, wearing expensive jewels—I'd give it all up just to be with my father in our living room, eating microwave popcorn and watching a movie on our television.

That was truly where I belonged. I didn't belong here. Pretending had been fine...but now I was about to be exposed to an entire family who would see right through me.

Another knot formed in my intestines.

I looked out the side windows as Greg drove out of the neighborhood, and soon I understood why Sinclair had wanted to leave quickly. Traffic was tight with lots of cars moving slowly. This was the rush-hour traffic I'd heard him talk about from time to time—hundreds of people getting off work around the same time, each desperate to get home so they could begin their weekend.

I felt desperate too...but I wasn't going home.

Sinclair must have sensed my anxiety. "Are you all right?"

Turning my head from the window, I tried forcing a smile. "Yeah."

He narrowed his eyes and took my hand from my lap, holding it in his. "You're not. What's wrong?"

"I'm just a little nervous."

Nodding his head, he gently squeezed my hand. "It'll be fine. I promise. And I think

you'll love the ballet." I wanted to protest, to tell him I was going to hate all of it and ask him to take me back...but to what? To the mansion? It too remained a place where I didn't belong.

But he was here—and he would help me through it. So I just nodded back, trying to communicate that I was a good sport.

The longer we rode, though, and the farther away we got from the mansion, the sicker I felt. So I just held onto Sinclair's hand, reminding myself that I could get through anything with him by my side.

Soon, we were downtown with buildings so high, they blocked out the sun that was dipping low in the west. Again, the traffic was tight and moving slowly, but when we turned onto a one-way street, it eased up a bit. When the limo pulled over to the curb, Sinclair got out before Greg had a chance to. Then he turned, holding out his hand for me to grab. Gripping my purse and shawl in the other, I took Sinclair's hand and drew in a deep breath, trying to shake the awkward feeling.

"Have a good time," Greg said, almost like a father dropping off his kids at a birthday party.

"I'll text you when we're ready," Sinclair said, shutting the door once I was on the sidewalk. Greg had dropped us off right in front of the restaurant and Sinclair ushered me toward the door as the limo disappeared in traffic, swallowed up in the sea of cars all heading away from us.

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Again, Sinclair held the door for me and in I walked, deeper and deeper into this foreign land. The smells of the restaurant were appealing, but the atmosphere was stark and cold—lots of whites and blacks and sharp edges. The lighting was dim but it appeared that each table had its own lamp overhead.

A maître d' greeted us and Sinclair said, "We're with the Whittier party."

The man seemed impressed by that, but maybe he did that for all guests to make them feel special. "Right this way, please."

The restaurant already had lots of full tables, so I figured the food had to taste good—although I didn't know if I'd be able to stomach anything at the moment.

Soon we were near the back and the maître d' opened a glass door that led us into a private dining area. Here there was a huge round table—and lots of people already seated around it.

At that point, I had to fight the nausea...but Sinclair's hand on my back gave me strength.

Then I took in the view: this was the Whittier family...the people who'd ruined my father's life. What would my dad think if he knew where I was and what I was doing at this very moment?

I had to push it out of my mind because I was already struggling—and if I thought of my father and our history, I'd never make it out of this evening intact.

The men all stood up and there was no denying that they were related. I could see Sinclair in each of his brothers' faces—they all had the same jawline, similar eye shapes...and the same coldness. Their father, however, was colder than them all, but his features were different, meaning the shape of their eyes must have come from their mother.

Sinclair said, without missing a beat, "This is my father, Augustus." This was the man whom his first wife had called Gus. With everything I knew about him—from my own father's experience to the words of his dead wife—it was a feat to appear neutral, especially when there was no getting out of shaking his hand.

Consorting with the enemy.

His hair was gray, causing the blue of his eyes to appear like what I imagined the center of an iceberg would look—but his smile seemed genuine.

He didn't know who I was.

"This is Lise," Sinclair said quickly. "And this is my father's wife Madeline, my oldest brother Augustus the third, and his wife Vivian." By that point, I was shaking his brother's hand. "And Warren, my middle brother," he said, pointing to the other side of the table.

Warren also took my hand—but he kissed the top of it, something I didn't think anyone had ever done to me. I tried not to let it freak me out. He said, "Nice to meet you. Sinny, my date is Hannah West." At that, he gave his brother a look as if to communicate something. Sinclair shook her hand, smiling.

As we took our seats, with Warren on the left of Sinclair and his father on my right, I felt my stomach clench again...and I tried to solidify everyone's names in my head. But what stuck with me the most was Warren calling his youngest brother Sinny, the

nickname Edna had called him once or twice. Had that been a sign of disrespect or love?

I had no way of knowing.

But I tucked my purse and shawl in my lap and made the biggest effort of my life to hold a pleasant expression, trying my damndest to hide the turmoil inside.

It was just a few hours.

I could do this.

Chapter 22

Halfway through dinner, my stomach had calmed down and I tried enjoying the food. It helped that the servers hadn't made me feel like I had to have wine like everyone else at the table. Fortunately, the salad, though delicious, had been small—and I'd completely ignored the bread served with it.

Was this—dinner and a ballet—something the Whittiers did fairly frequently or was it a once-a-year event? It was clear to me how important it all was to them—all four men wore tuxes, their wives (or date, in Warren's case) wearing expensive jewelry and fine clothing, and I wondered if the women's days had gone like mine with someone fussing over their hair and makeup as if they were royalty.

We also had this room to ourselves and it was connected to the kitchen. The staff from time to time would tell us what they were doing or what would be coming next, but the elder Whittier seemed to ignore it. Instead, he was dominating the conversation at the table, talking about a recent shareholder meeting.

But I was glad for that—because, even though I found it boring, it helped me relax.

There was no attention on me.

Their father's wife—Madeline?—and the younger Augustus's wife whose name I couldn't remember were talking quietly between themselves, while Warren and his older brother chatted when their father wasn't talking, with Warren's date interjecting with an occasional comment. But she blended right in, making the two men laugh. Once in a while, father Augustus would demand a refocus of their attention while he began talking about another important angle regarding the shareholder meeting.

Sinclair was the only son who seemed to really pay attention. Once, he squeezed my hand under the table—but I didn't know if it was for my benefit or for his.

Soon, when our main courses were delivered to the table, I wasn't sure that I wanted any of it: A steak garnished with some sort of greenery, next to a bowl of mashed potatoes and delicious-looking glazed brussels sprouts, served on a huge plate. Fortunately, the steak looked small...but I wasn't in the mood and I wondered who'd made the decision that everyone here would be eating steak.

Sinclair must have read my mind. Leaning over, he whispered, "This is the best steak you'll ever taste. It's raised locally, and the chef works magic with it. Just taste it."

Turning my head, I tried to think of something snappy to say, but it died on my lips. Sinclair's eyes and his earnest expression did much to quell my nerves again, and I quickly nodded.

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Then Warren asked, “How did you two meet, Lise?” When I shifted my focus to him, I was again amazed at how much the brothers looked alike—dark hair and the same strong jawline. But Warren’s eyes were brown, rather than blue. It also didn’t escape my attention that Augustus got his mother’s green eyes, and I wondered how Sinclair felt about that.

Sinclair answered. “She works for me.”

“Ah...the good ol’ Foundation. Gets ‘em every time.”

What did that even mean?

Sinclair just shook his head, cutting his steak.

But Warren wasn’t done. “So what do you do there?”

“She’s my personal assistant,” Sinclair said, obviously wanting to keep my real work secret.

And then it washed over me, confirming what I’d already suspected in the back of my mind—none of them knew who I was or that I was repaying the debt I owed for the destruction of WCC’s simulation lab.

I had a clean slate here.

Instantly, my muscles relaxed and then I realized that much of the dread I’d been experiencing had to do with multiple factors—not just that the Whittiers were so

different but that we were enemies...and especially because Sinclair and I had crossed a big line.

But they didn't know any of that—although Warren's curiosity had him digging.

So that Sinclair wouldn't get stuck answering everything for me, I said, "I'm still pretty new...learning the ropes."

"Not even letting 'em settle in yet before putting the moves on, eh, little bro?"

Already, I didn't like Warren—but that didn't mean he wasn't saying something I shouldn't be listening to. My mind began racing all over the place, wondering what Sinclair might be hiding from me.

Did he always date employees? Was I just another notch on his proverbial bedpost?

But their father once again overrode the conversation. "That's enough. Warren, why don't you enlighten us all on how business negotiations are going with West Communications?"

More boring business talk—but I immediately understood that Warren and his date were only there for business. Even if there was attraction between the two of them, they were here first and foremost to solidify a business partnership.

"I'd say just fine—wouldn't you, Hannah?"

The blonde woman next to Warren could have been a model. She was simply gorgeous with exotic looks. I couldn't quite explain what it was about her face that made her look so stunning, but she reminded me of the models I'd seen in fashion magazines I'd glanced through while waiting in line at the store when my father and I shopped together—sharp, angular bones, hollow cheeks, and artfully applied eyeliner.

I reminded myself that she might have had some help, just as I had.

I couldn't tell how old she was, though. She could have been just a couple years older than I or even Warren's age. There was nothing about her, from the way she looked and dressed to her behavior and speech, that gave anything away.

When she spoke next, I wasn't able to tell if she was joking or dead serious. "Isn't it impolite to discuss negotiations before they're finalized?"

It was as if I could feel the elder Augustus's rage, and maybe it was because I was sitting next to him—but his face and words didn't betray a thing. "With the public or the press, it would be rude and even premature—but aren't we all family here?"

I noticed the slightest twitch of Hannah's brow—and I thought I could see the future. There wasn't a thing to base it on, though, because I didn't know these people. I couldn't even remember all their names. And I certainly wasn't able to empathize with anything they were going through, any more than they would be able to understand what it was like to figure out one-hundred different ways to cook beans and rice.

The future I thought I saw was that negotiations with West Communications would fail. That was what Hannah's almost imperceptible brow movement told me.

For a split second, I thought maybe she and I were alike...that we were both outsiders. But I knew that wasn't true, because it was evident that she still felt comfortable here, like she was in her element.

She wasn't the sheep in wolf's clothing that I was.

She too was a wolf.

And it was evident by her next few words. “You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you, Augustus?” Her gaze darted to the younger Augustus’s wife as she stood to lean over the table. “Vivian, right?”

It was the first time I’d heard the other woman speak. “Yes?”

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“Does the family usually talk about negotiations...say, at Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner?”

Vivian didn't seem too happy at being called out—but her loyalty was clear. “They talk about business all the time. Sometimes Augie even talks about it in his sleep.”

Her husband laughed but it didn't quite reach his eyes—and not because he didn't appreciate his wife's save, but because he wasn't happy with Hannah.

About that point, I was feeling relieved that I had blended into the background—but that wasn't the case at all. Hannah was looking for blood and turned to me next. “What about you...Lise? Do you feel like we're all family here?”

Why had she dragged me into it? I'd hoped to be a fly on the wall—and I was only here to support Sinclair. Regardless, I didn't want to get dragged into whatever game this woman was playing. I immediately thought of the chess games Sinclair and I played on occasion. Pawns were sacrificed because they were viewed as unimportant and dispensable—and I believed she thought of me this way.

But I wasn't about to make things difficult with Sinclair and his family...because I suspected that happened enough as it was. And I would not be this woman's pawn, regardless of how I felt about the Whittiers. “I just met everyone this evening—but Sinclair has been a gracious and kind employer and he has most certainly made me feel like family. If everyone else here is like Sinclair, then I think I might feel that way after getting to know them.”

Just as I'd been able to feel their father's wrath at the woman interrogating me, I

could sense Sinclair's satisfaction with my answer—but I wasn't about to look at him for approval.

Hannah let out a short, sharp laugh, one indicating she found my answer unbelievable. "So I guess you want to hear all about the negotiations our two companies are going through?"

"There are worse things you could talk about."

She sighed then narrowed her eyes at me into a glare, sitting back down in her chair. Well, there was one friend I hadn't made this evening.

Warren let out a nervous chuckle. "I think we're going to need more wine." He and Hannah began talking quietly between the two of them, but I was tense and poised, covered by that strange sensation of waiting for another shoe to drop.

It never did.

And Hannah still didn't give the head of the family what he'd asked for.

The younger Augustus—Augie—said, "I saw the numbers you raised last quarter. Pretty impressive, Sin."

As Sinclair and his oldest brother began talking, I felt my muscles relax once again—until I sensed the eldest Whittier's eyes on me. After taking in a long, slow breath, I turned to meet his gaze.

And he was smiling at me. "In case you're still around at Thanksgiving, I'm extending an official invitation to the family dinner. It's clear you know a good deal when you see one."

Such nice words...but would he be saying that if he knew who I really was?

After dinner, we all casually walked down the block and around the corner—less than five minutes—to arrive at the auditorium. The dessert we'd enjoyed had filled me up and was yet another experience I hadn't had till now: a chocolate torte that tasted heavenly.

At least I could agree with his family about chocolate.

It wasn't until we arrived that I found out we would be watching Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. Although I didn't know what to expect, I hoped I wouldn't hate it.

If having our own private dining area at the restaurant hadn't been enough to convince me of the Whittier family's wealth, the auditorium did. The place was huge—but we weren't escorted into the main house. Instead, we were taken to a box close to the stage and it was as if it were made for us. There were seats for eight of us—and Sinclair and I wound up taking the seats farthest away from the stage. But there were no bad seats in there. All eight of us had an up-close view of the stage from slightly higher up so that we could see everything, including all the other audience members as they arrived in various areas of the house.

Sinclair leaned close to me, putting his lips next to my ear. It reminded me of how much I wanted this man, even while drowning in his world, feeling like I was losing a part of myself. I was here for him, because of him—and if anyone had told me several months ago that I'd be falling in love with this man, I would have laughed.

"You are amazing," was all he whispered.

I grinned and turned my head to him. "Why do you say that?"

"You won my father over. How the hell did you do that?"

I simply shrugged, feeling the food in my stomach lurch as if I were suddenly on a roller coaster and going down fast—because if his father knew who I really was, he probably would have asked the staff at the restaurant to serve my head on a platter.

Sinclair saw it on my face. “Are you all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I lied. “I think I ate something that disagreed with me. I need to find the ladies’ room.”

Already standing, Vivian leaned over behind us. “I’m heading there too.”

Although I was irritated at first that she’d overheard part of our conversation and didn’t mind that we knew, I was glad for her to lead the way. The bathrooms weren’t too far from where our box was, but the place was huge and I could have easily gotten lost.

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When we entered the restroom, she said, “Sinny’s right. You look pale.”

“I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything else. Hurrying, I went to the stall farthest away from the main door and barely lifted the toilet seat before the contents of my stomach came rushing out. And once it started, there was no stopping it. Although I would continue to blame it on something I ate, the truth was my nerves just couldn’t take it anymore. My body had needed to do something to get rid of my anxiety—and apparently this was it.

I didn’t know how long had passed when Vivian quietly rapped on the door. “Are you okay? Can I get you something?”

Out of habit, I almost told her no. But then I said, “Please let Sinclair know I’ll be out as soon as I can—but I need a few minutes. Please don’t wait for me. I don’t want you to miss anything.”

“Only if you’re sure...”

“I am.”

Once she left, I took several deep breaths and then rolled off some toilet paper so I could wipe off my mouth. My breath was still shaky and my stomach muscles hurt from the exertion—but I was feeling a little better, even if empty.

At the sink, I ran the water and scooped up several mouthfuls—first, to rinse out my

mouth and then to rehydrate. An older woman came out of the stall that had been next to mine, but I didn't know if she'd heard my retching, so I gave her a tiny smile.

"Would you like a mint? I always carry extras in my purse."

Her kindness warmed me through and through. "Yes, thank you."

"Just a second." After she washed and dried her hands, she opened her purse and handed me a little red-and-white candy wrapped in plastic. "Do you feel like you'll be able to enjoy the show?"

"I think so," I answered, unwrapping the candy.

"Well, they say peppermint is good for an upset stomach, so it'll do double duty." With a wink, she headed toward the door, and I followed.

She stopped at the door to the box behind ours and gave me a wave. Soon, I was entering the Whittier box and Sinclair stood, waiting for me to sit. "Are you all right? We can leave—"

"No, I'm okay."

With that, he smiled. His voice was soft as we sat back down. "Well, you got here just in the nick of time." Just after he said that, a roar of applause filled the space—and, when I looked down, I saw the orchestra poised to begin, the conductor holding a barely visible wand in the air.

And then the strains of an instrument, an oboe, something I didn't know at the time but learned later. Its sound was soft, quiet, mournful—and yet it filled that entire space.

I'd heard this tune before, but I couldn't place it.

As the oboe continued telling its wordless story, it was as if I could collectively feel everyone in the auditorium holding their breaths to make space for its sound. Soon, though, the entire orchestra was in motion, even though the music was still restrained, as if holding back its whole power.

Something about the tune sounded familiar to me, but I wasn't sure why.

I was fascinated simply watching the orchestra play from above—how the conductor would move his hands to keep time while also subtly pointing at different sections and how they would respond. I would see woodwinds brought to musicians' mouths or bows begin moving in unison.

And then the red curtain on the stage opened as the music became livelier and louder, celebratory—and the entire auditorium erupted in applause at the sight of dancers posed on stage.

I got caught up in it—in the splendor, the story, and the costumes. The dancers held my attention, and I quickly learned that when one did something extra special—such as leap across the stage like a graceful deer in front of bowing ballerinas—clapping was expected.

Soon, I was caught up in the beauty of the story unfolding before my eyes—and so many sections of music sounded familiar. I didn't know if I'd heard them played in the background somewhere or in commercials or movies, but I recognized so much of it while never knowing that it had come from this ballet.

There were two intermissions and we got up for drinks and to use the restroom, but I was eager to get back both times.

But, aside from all that, at the beginning of the second act came that same refrain that the oboe had played at the beginning, the one that sounded most familiar, like something I'd heard recently. It was the first appearance of the villain and Odette—and the music, dancing, and story brought tears to my eyes, even as the ballerina received applause for her graceful movements.

I was shocked at how I could experience this story without a single word.

When the ballet ended, I was happy, my eyes once more filled with tears. And I was on the verge of giggling with giddy happiness from the curtain call that was just as lovely as the entire performance before it. I could hear several men in the audience below shouting through the applause—and I finally figured out that they were yelling *bravo!*

The conductor came on stage and kissed the hand of the ballerina who had played Odette and she danced to the edge of the stage, indicating the orchestra, who also deserved immense applause.

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I felt bad for the other dancers who were relegated to the back while the three main characters received all the applause and attention, because they added to the beauty and splendor of what I'd seen.

When we stood from our seats to leave the box one final time, I felt breathless. I'd been taken away to another world for two hours—during that time, I hadn't thought about my youth growing up in Winchester any more than I'd pondered the next ten years of my life. I'd been whisked away to another world.

Sinclair and I walked behind the rest of his family and he leaned over to whisper in my ear. "What did you think?"

Although I was smiling, I was on the verge of tears again, marveling at how moved I'd been by the entire production. All the stress and discomfort from dinner had vanished. "I loved it."

And it dawned on me, something so corny that I wouldn't share it with Sinclair but something that felt so true: art soothes the soul. I'd seen it with the art Sinclair had kept in his mansion, hardly noticing it anymore—but I'd felt it here tonight.

But it was true...and so I had one thing to say to Sinclair. As we continued to make our way down the corridor, I squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

Chapter 23

Once we'd made it outside into the cool September evening, I wrapped the dainty shawl over my shoulders. Although it wasn't as warm as a jacket, it helped keep

some of the chill off my arms. The entire Whittier family and plus ones—meaning Hannah and I—made our way to the sidewalk.

The street seemed as busy now as it had been when we'd arrived at the restaurant earlier but, this time, I was sure that the vehicles packing the street belonged to some of the hundreds who'd been in the auditorium with us.

I was prepared to spend more time with his family, reminding myself that this was a special evening for them. For all I knew, we'd go out for coffee or drinks now—and I was glad that not only had my makeup been done by a professional but that my stomach had calmed down. The last time I'd gone to the restroom before leaving, I checked myself in the mirror. The lipstick still looked fresh and perfect while the mascara and eyeliner had stayed in place, despite my crying off and on.

Sinclair once more whispered in my ear. "You're the most beautiful one here."

A blush heated my cheeks, making me grateful that the muted light outside would make it less obvious. I shook my head, getting ready to tell him I wasn't, when his father approached. "Bring this girl to Thanksgiving dinner," he all but barked at his youngest son. "Hell, she's welcome at all our family functions."

His wife—Madeline?—wrapped her arm in his and said, "Please do. I think Vivian gets lonely."

From behind them, Warren and Hannah said goodbye. Warren shouted, "I'll call you on Monday, Pops." Then the two of them all but ran down the sidewalk away from us.

The eldest Whittier's face turned red, and a vein seemed to pop out on his forehead, something even visible in shadowed lighting. But then his oldest son said, "Ready, dad?" Both he and his wife approached a limousine—something far flashier than the

one Greg drove—and were getting in.

Madeline, letting go of her husband, reached over and took my hand. “It was lovely meeting you.”

“You too.”

Sinclair and I waved as their limo began crawling down the street. “We’ll have to walk a block if you don’t mind.”

“No, that’s fine.” In fact, I thought it might help me readjust to real life.

As we began walking in the direction the traffic was moving, Sinclair wrapped an arm around me. “Are you cold?”

“I’m okay.”

We walked in silence for a bit before he spoke again. “Greg and I figured out last year that it was easier for him to pick me up over here,” he said as we turned the corner. “There’s still a lot of traffic but not that mess in front of the complex.”

I knew that was true, considering we’d walked past the Whittier limousine stuck behind several vehicles a minute earlier.

As we continued walking slowly down the block, I took in the surroundings. At this time of night, Winchester would still have a few places open and a couple of cars driving about, but it was much quieter and darker. Here it seemed almost as bright as day and as lively as a bees’ nest with the constant motion.

Finally, we stopped in the middle of the block and Sinclair turned around to look at the cluster of oncoming traffic. “There he is.” Sinclair pointed toward the signal light

where his more modest limousine waited patiently for the light to turn green. Even when it did, the car was slowed by congested traffic. It made me glad I wasn't the one driving.

When he reached us, Greg didn't pull over and he didn't have to. Even though traffic was moving a bit, it reminded me of snow and ice in the gutter back in Winchester when the sun would heat it just past freezing, where the water would almost reluctantly make its way down the street over and under the ice. But no one seemed to care that Greg had stopped for moment. There was no honking or yelling through open windows while Sinclair opened the back door for me to get in. As soon as he closed the door, though, Greg put the car in motion.

As the limo crept down the block, Sinclair said, "So tell me the truth. What did you really think?"

"Of the whole evening—or the ballet?"

Grinning, he said, "I'm pretty sure I know what you thought of the whole evening. But now that it's just you and me, I wanted to know if you really loved the ballet or if you were just saying what you thought I wanted to hear."

"Oh, no! I loved it. I...I've never been so moved by anything like that. I was literally crying at the end of the performance."

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At my admission, his face softened and he smiled, taking my hand in his. “Imagine what you’d have done if it hadn’t had a happy ending.”

“I had to read *Romeo and Juliet* in high school. I didn’t like it, if that tells you anything.”

“Then you’re lucky your first experience was watching this particular performance. The original version of *Swan Lake* has a tragic ending. Odette dies. And there are other tragic variations as well.”

A shiver ran down my spine, but I didn’t know if it was because I was cold or because of what Sinclair was telling me. “You’re right. I don’t know if I would have liked that ending.”

“It’s also beautiful—but I prefer the happy ending too. There are lots of versions, which is part of why I like to watch it often.”

“Even the tragic endings?”

“Yes, even those. There’s something about that story that speaks to me.”

The music continued swimming in my head, even as we rode in the limo, and then I figured out where I’d heard so much of it before. Although I hesitated to say it, I wanted to ask. “Was the music from the ballet played at the event for the simulation lab?”

Sinclair actually chuckled. “Yes. Leona knows it’s one of my favorites, so she plays

it at every function I attend.” That seemed creepy, but I wasn’t about to say it. As my mind wandered back to that fateful night, I found it strange that only a few months had passed, but it felt like it had been far longer since I’d seen Dr. Rakhimov. Sinclair continued, “She always panders to me. She likes the money.”

I couldn’t help the next words that came out of my mouth. “Can you blame her?”

“No. Schools have limited budgets. They get some tax money and, of course, tuition, but those income streams aren’t always enough, especially for smaller schools. That’s why we help.” By now, he was looking out the side window, even though one of his hands still held mine. “And we like to give special attention to Winchester. It’s a special place for the Whittiers.”

It was all I could do to not rail out against the place of my birth—or speculate verbally why it was so special to them. Was it the place itself or was it because of the minerals they wanted to mine?

And, of course, that sent me back to thoughts of my father. How was he doing? How many bad days had he had without me around to help?

Before the sadness could overwhelm me, Sinclair looked at me again. “You really seemed to capture my father’s attention.”

“Did I?”

“Yes. He doesn’t normally warm up to guests like that.” As if it were an afterthought, he squeezed my hand. “By guests, I mean dates. My father’s barely accepted Augie’s wife Vivian, and they’ve been married twelve years and have three children. Then again, Warren usually brings inappropriate women to these functions. Hannah was quite the exception.”

Asking what he meant by inappropriate might bring up topics I didn't want to hear...because I'd probably been just that before my makeover earlier in the day. Had I fooled them? The poor girl, daughter of the enemy, in the disguise of the wealthy? So I kept the conversation light. "And even she seemed to rub him the wrong way."

"You picked up on that, did you?"

I wasn't going to tell Sinclair something he probably already knew, that his father's anger with the woman had been almost palpable. So I just nodded, relieved that I didn't have to spend every day around those people.

I'd probably take prison over a sentence like that.

Sinclair said, "But maybe we should thank Hannah. My dad might have given you a frostier reception had he not been disappointed by her." Oh, lucky me—liked only because I was the lesser of two evils—and he must have seen it on my face. "I'm being sarcastic. I know the exact moment my father became enamored of you."

"Really?" I thought I did too, even though it hadn't made sense to me. Augustus Whittier the second, the man who didn't actually seem to value his family, had wanted to discuss negotiations with Hannah West's family's company—and she'd turned him down, even when he'd suggested that they were all family.

"Of course. She was trying to pick a fight with the old man, and she tried to get you on her side. But you showed your loyalty, even though you'd only just met the rest of the family. My father appreciated that."

Loyalty? Who was I becoming?

As my stomach churned again, reminiscent of earlier in the evening, Sinclair continued talking. "I'm almost jealous at how easily you won his affection."

I couldn't tell if he was serious—but I was dealing with my own internal crisis at the moment, feeling like I had betrayed my father tonight. Offhandedly, I said, “I have that effect on people.”

That was probably the biggest lie I'd ever told Sinclair. I'd never had that effect on a soul—with the one exception of Mr. Sherwood, the WCC instructor who had an inappropriate interest in me. When you spend your life trying to blend into the background to avoid barbs and pokes, you never have a chance to even try to influence people in any sort of way.

Fortunately, Sinclair didn't pick up on any of the struggle at my core—because he said, “I believe it.”

And, if I continued lying to him, how long would it be before I started lying to myself?

Was I already?

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When we arrived back at the mansion, Greg walked down the main hall toward the east steps while Sinclair and I took the ones on the west. He'd kept up the illusion that I was simply filling in as a date even as we entered the hall—because if Greg had really been curious, he might have discovered our secret. If I'd gone straight to Sinclair's room, for instance, it might have been obvious.

Sinclair didn't seem to care and he appeared to assume that I was going to follow him to his room. It took him a few seconds to realize I'd stopped at my door. "Probably a good idea," he said, taking two steps back to join me. "I can help you hang up your dress and take off the necklace."

"Actually...I'm feeling tired."

His cool blue eyes softened as he ran the back of his fingers along my cheek. "It has been a long night—and I'm sure it was far harder on you."

Although my insides were roiling with conflict, I really was grateful to Sinclair. Our heightened relationship wasn't dictated by contract; it had been purely consensual—but, at this point, he might have demanded that I bend to his will. That he didn't sparked in me again those feelings that had been escalating for the man since the moment I'd met him. "Thank you."

So, after we entered my bedroom, I let him remove the necklace, replaced by his warm lips on my delicate skin. And I allowed him to help me out of the gown, revealing that I was only wearing a pair of white panties.

Under the heat of his gaze, I wanted him again, pushing back the thoughts that I had

deserved my lot in life. After all, my brain said, why would you sell out so quickly?

But as my fingers unbuttoned Sinclair's crisp white shirt, I forced out all the negative thoughts. I cared about him too—and it was nothing I could help.

By the time Sinclair was moving inside me, I had given myself over to pure passion and unmitigated desire. If I could have stayed in that altered state, I might have been able to sleep that night.

Sinclair held me close in his arms as his breathing slowed so much, I could hardly hear it. It was strange having him next to me in my bed—my one sanctuary in this place—but I found his arms comforting, nonetheless.

After a time, I thought he'd fallen asleep—until he spoke. “Would you like to see Swan Lake again?”

“You mean, like, in the next week or so?”

“No. Next time it's in Denver again.”

“Oh.” This was yet another reminder that I would be here for a long time. “Yes.”

“You'll just have to be prepared for a tragic ending. In the original, they die together but they've broken the curse. You mentioned you didn't like Romeo and Juliet because of the ending—so I fear you might not enjoy any of the tragic endings. Most of them are quite reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet.”

“Then maybe not.”

Behind me, I felt him sit up. “Why not? You're older now. You might appreciate it.”

Rolling over, I looked in his eyes—those captivating sky-blue eyes that had, over the past few months, managed to help me see other possibilities, even while I doubted all of them tonight. “I don’t think I would. I’ve never understood why people like tragedies.” My life had been enough of a tragedy—I escaped into books and movies for happy endings, not sadness...even if a sad story might have made my life seem less depressing.

“I can’t speak for everyone, but I appreciate them because they make me feel something.”

I had no retort for that, but he’d managed to make me feel more for him—because if he had to watch a ballet to experience emotion, to feel something that was more than his day-to-day...

And then my mind began putting pieces together. Earlier, Sinclair had been careful to not mention the fact that he’d probably brought other “dates” along to his family’s functions, but I knew it had to be true. And had those previous relationships been cold and unsatisfying, just like his childhood might have been?

I had to know.

“I wanted to ask you about something.”

Apparently, basking in the glow of good sex and having his current date enjoy what he did made him receptive. His eyes were mere slits when he answered. “Anything.”

“Who is NS?”

“What?”

“NS. The woman who called herself Mrs. Sinclair Whittier.”

Curious, he propped his head in his hand, his elbow denting the pillow underneath.
“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“The laptop I use to record everything downstairs—that was the screensaver, the text Mrs. Sinclair Whittier moving and bouncing around. And then, on the underside, initials: NS + WS.”

Sinclair smiled, his brows softening. “I think I might know who that is.”

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I wasn't going to present my other evidence—the hair clip, the bubble bath in his bathroom, items fairly feminine. And, even if not, Sinclair's short hair would never require a clip. Because I knew some deep-seated part of himself desired his father's approval, I suspected he'd never even considered letting his hair grow longer.

“That would be Natasha Sullivan. And, if you need my reassurance, we were never married.”

“Clearly she wanted to be.”

“Are you jealous?” he asked, a twinkle in my eye.

“Maybe a little.”

Leaning over, he kissed my nose. “There's no need. Did we have a relationship? Yes. But I learned pretty early on that she was psychotic. She'd said something about marriage the first night we slept together. We were never even engaged.”

As much as I hated thinking about him with another woman, I was comforted by the fact that she hadn't meant anything to him.

But was I the same? Was I nothing more than a woman he had sex with because he could?

As we rested our heads on my pillows again, I closed my eyes, praying for the sweet release of sleep—and still it wouldn't come. My thoughts drifted back to the ballet, an experience I would forever be grateful to him for—but, unlike Odette and

Siegfried, I knew in my heart that Sinclair and I could never be together, regardless of how much I loved him.

Regardless of if he felt the same way for me...even though I suspected he didn't.

And that meant that my story would be more like Swan Lake's tragic endings.

Still, the words tumbled out of my mouth for the first time as I felt his arms tighten around me, my head nestled against his chest. "I love you."

Silence fell over the room like a blanket but, as it continued, it grew loud, ringing in my ears. And his body felt stiff against mine.

Was he really asleep? Even if so, was his subconscious rebelling against my words? Or was he merely pretending so that he wouldn't have to reciprocate?

His silence was a confirmation. He too must have understood that we would never work, no matter how much I loved him. Even if he felt the same way—our fathers would never accept us together.

In that way, we were like Romeo and Juliet. And why would my life, destined to be a tragedy, end any differently?

Except that I didn't simply want to accept fate.

But as I lay there long enough for Sinclair to truly fall asleep, his arm becoming a heavy weight against me, something that happened earlier popped up in my head again. When Sinclair had introduced me, it had simply been with my nickname Lise. Not Annalise and no mention that my last name was Miller.

Sinclair hadn't had the courage to tell his father who I was, any more than he'd let the staff know we were in a relationship. He too understood that we couldn't be together

forever.

We would never work.

The only difference between me and Juliet was that I would survive. That was the one damn thing on this earth I was good at. And even though I'd grown to love Sinclair to the depths of my soul, he was most certainly the one thing I had to survive above all else.

With that realization, I didn't sleep a wink that night. Still, I spent that weekend trying to figure out how I could continue with this charade even as I built walls inside my heart to stop the progress of this disease called love.