



GAINING HER
INHERITANCE
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For Peter, Elsie, Charlotte and Henrietta

GAINING HER INHERITANCE

Chapter One

It had all happened before. The emotions and senses seemed always to be the same. She slowly crawled up the steps of a beautiful staircase, as the patterns of the soft, intricately woven carpet beneath her hands and knees swirled and twisted in a beautiful floral display. As she looked up, she saw a soaring, elaborately painted and decorated ceiling, easily sixty feet above her head, with stately columns holding up the stone masonry of the three floors of over ninety rooms that the house contained. Ellie was so happy, and so content. Everything was perfect. But as she looked down at her hands, she didn't see the long, nimble fingers she was used to, and rather saw the short, chubby hands of a baby. She felt someone pick her up from behind. "Now, my little schnitzel," the woman said, "where do you think you're going?" She was swooped away and held in the arms of a kind young woman in a black and white uniform, who snuggled Ellie into her chest. "Do you think you can climb all of those stairs by yourself? I'm twenty-six years old, and even I have trouble climbing all those stairs." Ellie felt kisses rain all over her face as she was taken into a beautiful nursery, decorated all in a pale pink, with creamy white silk fabric upholstering the furniture, and bright floral paintings decorating the walls.

"Now, it's time to settle down for a lovely nap, my little angel," the young woman said, as she sank into a comfortable, overstuffed rocking chair, and moved Ellie gently onto her shoulder. She began to rock her to sleep, singing a lullaby in a language which Ellie couldn't recognize, but yet which seemed very familiar. Ellie slowly drifted into a blissful, calm, untroubled sleep.

But the dream slowly changed, and now she was about two years old and held in the arms of yet another nice woman. "She's just a baby," the woman was saying, "she couldn't help it."

Ellie was crying now, and she didn't know why. She heard her aunt's voice. "If we have to keep her here, then she has to stay away from our things!" her aunt was screaming. "I can't have her slobbering all over my pillows, pulling the stuffing out... my God! Look at this place!"

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I'll be more careful," the kindly woman said.

"No, I've had it. If you can't keep her out of trouble, then we're going to have to get somebody else. I'm calling the agency. Give her to the housekeeper for the rest of the day," her aunt said, turning away.

"I'm so sorry," the woman said, turning toward the kitchen with Ellie in her arms. Ellie cried and reached out for the woman as she was handed over to the housekeeper. "I'll miss you, little Ellie, and I'll pray for you," the woman said, with tears in her eyes, as she turned and hurried out of the kitchen.

Ellie screamed and cried, and the housekeeper attempted to comfort her as best she could. "Good Lord, what a way to treat a child," she said. "There, there. It's not your fault, little one."

Ellie snuggled into the housekeeper's shoulder and cried, wondering why everybody she loved left her.

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Ellie woke, startled, from the dream, and found she was back where she thought she would be, although her eyes were still brimming with tears, and the feeling of the dream lingered with her for a few moments after waking. It was a dream that Ellie had frequently, only part of which was a mystery to her. She remembered very vividly how many times nannies and babysitters were fired, and she knew that part of the dream to be quite true. The other, earlier, part of the dream actually gave her a feeling of calm and peace. Why did she so often dream of that house? Does it even exist? It was difficult to imagine that something so beautiful could possibly exist, and when she had timidly asked her aunt and uncle about the house, they had told her she was being annoying, as usual, and was inventing stories to make herself seem important. She had stopped asking about it long ago.

Ellie sat up in the small twin bed she had slept in for as long as she could remember. She recognized the little picture which hung at the end of her bed from the room in her dreams, and she wondered, as she often did, if it was the beautiful still life with flowers which gave her those wonderful dreams from which she never wanted to wake.

She turned to look at the clock and realized that she had to shake herself awake, and get ready for school, so she swung her long legs out from under the covers and headed for her small bathroom. When she got there, she looked at her reflection in the mirror – at her delicate oval face, with large bright blue eyes and high cheekbones. Her medium brown hair was worn straight, and parted at the middle. She ran her fingers through it now, and wished that it had more body, or that she had perfect blond highlights like so many of the other girls at her school. Ellie was seventeen years old, and was still not allowed by her aunt and uncle, Ariana and Claus Grentham, to wear makeup as other girls her age did. She wished they would relent. All of the other girls in her class at Spence wore makeup – most of them very well, although a few of them took it overboard and veered into the trashy overly-made-up look her aunt and uncle professed to hate.

In Ellie's opinion, her aunt could use a little less makeup herself, but she would never have the nerve to say so. Ellie was grateful her skin was smooth and unmarked, but she longed to wear mascara and eyeliner like the other girls at school she looked up to. Her naughty friend, Mirna Cromwell, always offered to let Ellie wear some of her makeup, because her aunt and uncle would never know, but Ellie always demurred. She knew just how harsh their punishments could be if she flouted any of their many rules, and how easily they could make her life even more difficult than it already was. She just hoped that, with her eighteenth birthday right around the corner, they might allow her some more freedoms, and, soon after that, she would be college-bound and living away from them.

Ellie made her way out of her room and into the kitchen. It was just across the hall, of course, because Ellie had always been relegated to one of the servant's rooms in the enormous eight-bedroom Park Avenue coop that she lived in. When she was younger, she never thought about her room very much, but when she got older, she had ventured to ask if she might have one of the other, more posh bedrooms, in the private area of the apartment. Her aunt looked at her with a perturbed, bothered stare, and assured her that "they might have guests." That was

obviously the end of the story, but they had never had enough guests to fill all of the bedrooms in the house. Ellie simply grew to understand that, although she was their niece, she was tolerated, but not considered to be entirely a member of the family.

Even when her much older cousins had lived there, she had never really played with them, or spent time with them. The servants had always taken care of her, but because none of them stayed for very long, she had learned never to allow herself to become attached. It was too difficult to find people gone in the middle of the night, fired on a whim, as so often happened. The cousins, Theodore and Gabriella, had since gone on to have their own apartments, after flunking out of several colleges, and a few trips to rehab. Ellie thought perhaps her good behavior might earn her some affection from her family, but after being rebuffed several times, she ceased to try to get closer to them. Her friend Mirna lovingly called her “Cinderella,” and it would have been funnier, if it hadn’t been so true. Ellie thanked her lucky stars, though. Her parents had been dead for as long as she could remember, and her aunt and uncle had taken her in, allowed her to live in this lavish, 6,000 square foot apartment, and had sent her to the finest school in the city, even if she did live in a tiny room off the servant’s quarters.

When the school year ended, Ellie planned to go on to Vassar, where she had already been accepted. She planned to board there, and looked forward to the freedom she would have. Her college tuition, room and board would be paid for, but she was assured by her aunt and uncle that there was no extra money for an allowance. Ellie fully expected to work, and was content at the prospect of finally being in charge of her own life, and finally having some amount of control over her future. She always studied hard, and got very good, nearly perfect, grades. She looked forward to making her own way in the world, and looked forward to meeting new girls at Vassar – girls who didn’t know her family.

Ellie’s thoughts were filled with plans for the future as she pulled a cereal bowl down from one of the high shelves in the kitchen. She was proud of her height, but she wished that she would gain weight and grow into it. She thought of herself as clumsy and gangly, and she would have been surprised to find out others considered her slender and beautiful, as well as quite unaffected and lovely. She poured herself a bowl full of Rice Krispies, and tried to stay out of the way of the servants who were attempting to do their jobs. More than fifteen people worked here, in various shifts, and they kept the coop apartment in pristine, germ-free, impeccable shape. Her aunt and uncle were extremely demanding and persnickety, and expected their servants to not only read their minds with respect to what they wanted, but also expected them to anticipate their many changes of mind. It was impossible, of course, and their servants came and went with great frequency.

Ellie made small talk and gave encouraging comments about how nice everything looked, and how hard they all seemed to be working. They were kind to her, but they were never quite sure what her role was. They knew that she was a member of the family, but because she lived in the servant’s quarters, she was one of them in a strange sort of way, too. She understood how they felt, and forgave them for their stiff, somewhat formal behavior toward her.

Ellie ran back into her bedroom and gathered her schoolbooks. She charged back into the kitchen to finish up the remainder of her cereal. She scooped the last spoonful into her mouth,

and took the bowl to the sink to rinse it out. She felt the change in the atmosphere of the room before she even turned around. Everyone became very quiet, and stood up very straight. She turned to see her aunt walk into the room, vastly intimidating in spite of her tiny size. Her aunt couldn't have been more than five feet, two inches tall, but the way she carried herself commanded respect, and the way she treated her staff commanded fear. She stood, with her hands on her hips, and her shiny, black shoulder-length hair combed back from her meticulously made-up face. She was still wearing her bathrobe, and, indeed, Ellie was surprised to see her out of her bedroom at this hour. She didn't know her aunt and uncle to appear from their rooms until at least 10:00 a.m., so there was probably a complaint in the offing. She felt badly, in advance, for the people in the kitchen she knew were about to get yelled at, but hopefully not fired.

"Can someone please explain to me why my breakfast tray hasn't been served yet?" No one even attempted to answer, having known that she wasn't finished talking, and would be even angrier if she were interrupted. "I don't ask for very much around this house, so when I request a breakfast tray be delivered at 9:00 a.m., I don't understand why it can't happen exactly that way. Is that too complicated? Am I the only person here who cares about the details? I have things to do today, and appointments, etc., and with the vast number of servants in this house, I can't understand why the simplest instruction proves to be impossible."

Ellie wanted to step in before any of the servants had to, because even though she was held in very low esteem, she couldn't be fired. "Aunt Ariana," she said quietly, "it's only 8:00 right now."

Her aunt looked at her with such anger and disdain that Ellie flinched. "I think I know what time it is," he aunt spat out.

Everyone remained very quiet. No one wanted to be the one to straighten this woman out. "Honestly, Aunt Ariana," Ellie said. "It's only 8:00. There's a clock right there. You can still get some more sleep, if you want to."

Her aunt's haughty gaze moved from Ellie's eyes to the clock on the wall, which indeed did show that it was 8:05 a.m. Her eyes narrowed, and she barked, "Crandall!"

"Yes, Ma'am," the head housekeeper said quietly.

"I want that damn clock removed from my bedroom," Mrs. Grentham said.

"The Fabergé?" Mrs. Crandall asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Grentham said with dripping sarcasm, "the Fabergé. No one who isn't a bat can read the time off that damn thing. Tell Mario that I need something else."

"Yes, Ma'am," Mrs. Crandall said.

"Well, since we've had this misunderstanding, I can assume that my tray will be delivered promptly at 9:00," Mrs. Grentham said with a toss of her head.

“Yes, of course, Ma’am,” Mrs. Crandall said again.

With that, Mrs. Grentham swept from the room.

Everyone continued to be silent for a moment, as they looked at one another, attempting to hide their smiles. Ellie judged, quite rightly, that they probably wanted to be able to chat about what a monumental bitch Mrs. Grentham was, and they didn’t feel comfortable doing it in front of her niece, servant’s bedroom or not.

“Well, that was an interesting way to start the morning,” Ellie said, reaching for her schoolbooks, and smiling at everyone as she left the kitchen. She dashed ahead very quickly, hoping to catch her aunt before she got all the way back to her bedroom. She knew her aunt was in a terribly bad mood, but if she didn’t waylay her now, she was afraid she wouldn’t have the nerve again. “Aunt Ariana!” Ellie said, running up behind her.

“Yes, Eleanore, what is it?” Aunt Ariana said wearily.

“I’m sorry you had such a tough start to your day,” Ellie said sympathetically.

“Yes, it is tiresome,” Aunt Ariana said, smoothing her hair back from her forehead, “but what can I do for you, Eleanore?”

“Well, next week is my birthday,” Ellie said, noticing that her aunt noticeably stiffened, “and I was hoping to have a couple of friends over for dinner, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble. Then I thought we’d go out for a movie.”

“And which friends were you thinking of?” her aunt asked, sounding very put out.

“Mirna Cromwell and Anna Voronkova,” Ellie said.

Her aunt wrinkled her nose, “the Russian?”

Ellie took a deep breath, but didn’t address her aunt’s rude remark. She could have mentioned that Anna Voronkova’s father was a world-famous, self-made multi-billionaire, but she didn’t bother. She knew it would cause nothing but more trouble. “Yes,” Ellie said simply.

“Well, I don’t know. We might have something planned for your birthday, and I’m not sure what else you’ll have time for,” Aunt Ariana said.

“Really?” Ellie said, not quite believing her ears.

“Is that so surprising?” her aunt said, with narrowed eyes.

“No, I just... never mind... okay,” Ellie said. “I’ll make arrangements for another day with them, alright?”

“That’s fine. We will have a few things to talk about on your eighteenth birthday.” Aunt Ariana turned and went back into her bedroom.

Ellie took another deep breath as the door closed behind her aunt. She could guess what they would have to “talk about” on her eighteenth birthday. She imagined that was probably when her aunt was going to tell her it was time to hit the road. Ellie knew that her aunt and uncle’s hospitality had limits, and she had already planned accordingly. As long as she could have college, she knew she would be alright. She would have a career, and she would be able to take care of herself. She was frightened a little bit to go out into the world alone, but she’d already felt very much alone for such a long time. She knew that she could do it.

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Closing the door behind her, Ellie’s Aunt Ariana reached for the ornate, ivory French telephone next to her bed. She dialed a number from memory, and adjusted her plush robe around her knees as she listened to it ring. “Marsh & Morey, may I help you?” the chirpy voice said.

“Paul Bellamy,” Ariana said.

“May I ask who is calling him, please?” came the question.

“Ariana Grentham,” Ariana stated simply, knowing this would get her immediately through.

“Paul Bellamy here,” came the low, controlled well-bred voice.

“It’s Ariana Grentham,” Ariana said, pursing her lips, and tilting her head to the side, holding the receiver with her shoulder and chin while she inspected her fingernails. “Have you given any further thought to our little problem?”

A deep breath came from the lawyer, “I told you Ariana, there’s only one way, and that’s to get her to sign the papers. Next week, she’ll be eighteen years old, and everything will revert to her. And even if you do get her to sign the papers, it will only buy you another three years. It would be extremely unusual for such a trust to be held beyond her twenty-first birthday. There would almost have to be something wrong with her.”

Ariana sat up, her interest piqued. “Like what?”

Paul spoke slowly. He had heard the wheels turning in Ariana Grentham’s head all the way across town. “Well...” he said, “she’d have to be incompetent. You’d have to prove she’s incapable of managing her own affairs.”

“Well, how difficult would that be, I mean she is an unusual child, after all. She’s quiet and boring and bookish...”

“She’d have to be more than just merely odd, Ariana. She’d have to be off her rocker. Certifiably, as testified to by experts.”

“We can buy experts,” Ariana said easily, “I watch CourtTV. I know how that goes.”

“God save me from my clients who watch CourtTV,” Paul thought. To Ariana, he said, “But there would be witnesses coming out of the woodwork to testify that she is an honor student at Spence, that she’s got nearly a 4.0 average, that she’s practically a Grand Master in chess, that she’s been accepted by early admission to Vassar...”

“Oh, shut up, Paul,” Ariana spat out, “I know about the girl. I just want you to think of something... and fast. I’m going to need help getting her to sign those papers, and you should probably try to remember that you’ve done very well with the Foundation all these years... I’m sure you wouldn’t like anything to change too drastically, either.” She slammed the telephone down and sat meditatively considering her thumbnail. She almost felt like biting it, but she didn’t want to ruin her manicure.

Ariana Grentham was used to the finer things in life. She had been born into genteel poverty, the only child of parents who had squandered nearly all of their inherited wealth. When she had married Claus Grentham, he had money – not enormous money, but enough to make her much more comfortable than she had been. But when Claus’ older brother had died, the amount of money that was then at their disposal was simply mind-boggling. Her life had become the stuff of her wildest dreams. She had servants and clothes, jewelry and handbags, and all of the comforts money could buy – and she felt she deserved it. She huffed quietly to herself, and then lay back on the pillows, to wait for her breakfast tray.

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Ellie flipped through one of her uncle’s financial newspapers as she killed a few moments before she had to leave for school. She had always gotten very good grades, and had a special talent for numbers. She took advanced placement classes in mathematics, and studied economics on a college level. She found a certain predictability and dependability in numbers that she found in so few other things in her life. It was nice to know no matter how many times you ran an equation, the answer would always be the same.

Ellie looked at the clock above the mantel in the large drawing room, and saw it was time for her to get going to school. Luckily, her school was less than a block away, and she could get there in about five minutes at a brisk walk, or three minutes at a jog. She rarely had to jog, because she was always extremely punctual, but she had timed it once, just in case she ever did need to. Today, though, she took her time as she walked there, knowing she had a few minutes to kill, and, though wanting to be on time, she did not like to be early.

Ellie enjoyed school, and had a handful of close friends she had fun with, but for the most part she didn’t fit in at Spence. The girls who attended came from the most wealthy, and the oldest, families in New York City. They were well-groomed, and well put-together. They had virtually unlimited budgets for shopping, and even though they had to wear a uniform, they stood

out for their beautiful diamond stud earrings and their Cartier watches. Perfect highlighted blond hair was the norm, and many of the girls liked to hike up their skirts as far as they could get away with before they got yelled at by one of their instructors. Ellie often wondered why they would bother, since there were only other girls at their school, but she realized that to some girls negative attention was as good as positive attention.

While Ellie's good friends called her "Cinderella," and meant it in a kind way, some of the other girls weren't motivated so nobly. Their only frame of reference for whether a person was worthwhile or not was their net worth, or rather their parent's net worth. Ellie knew rationally that they had been raised that way, by extremely shallow parents, and she tried to forgive their rather brutal dismissal of her as a person, but it stung.

Ellie hopped into the apartment's private elevator, paneled in mahogany, and rode it down to the lobby floor. She said a quick "hello" to Ralph, the daytime doorman, who held the door for her. She walked out onto Park Avenue, surely one of the loveliest streets on Earth. It certainly held most of the wealth of the world. Ellie had read once in one of her business magazines, that the combined wealth of the people who lived on Park Avenue alone was larger than the wealth of some of the smaller countries of the world. Ellie knew enough of the social world to know an apartment on Park Avenue was a must-have for the competitive uber-wealthy. She wasn't exactly sure how it was her aunt and uncle made their money. Well, actually she was quite sure they hadn't made it themselves, but had rather inherited it quite effortlessly. But she didn't know where from... she was left out of such discussions.

She did know her aunt spent her day getting pampered and coiffed and rubbed and buffed and adjusted, and when she wasn't busy doing that, she had some rather select charities she worked with. Her uncle spent his day in the library of their apartment, looking through Sotheby's catalogs and examining his various collections of who-knows-what, including books, figurines and various collectibles. Ellie thought he probably fancied himself as something of an intellectual, but she had never actually seen him read any of the books he collected.

Ellie walked past the various doormen at the grand buildings, noting the Lincoln Town Cars pulled up at the doors, ensuring that the occupants never got their shoes dirty. Ellie watched the pampered pooches being walked by their equally posh dog-walkers. It was a bright, sunny late spring day, and Ellie was enjoying the view while it lasted. She was fairly certain that once she started college, she wouldn't be asked back for holidays or school vacations. And because she would be making her own living, she suspected that these may be her last days enjoying the view from Park Avenue. The thought didn't bother her, really, but it was a big part of her life, and she was nostalgic about it.

She turned onto East 91st Street, and trotted up to the doors of her school. She went in, and was immediately assaulted by her friend Mirna, with her blue eyes, bouncy blond curls and voluptuous figure. "Hello, beautiful!" Mirna said, "It's going to be a fantastic day! Olympia Shore has a huge, absolutely makeup-proof zit on her chin! I can't believe she came in today. Her Zeno must not be working."

Ellie couldn't help but laugh. Olympia Shore was one of the most nearly perfect of the perfectly-perfect Upper East Side girls of the Spence Ruling Class. "Now, now, Mirna, it's not kind to gloat over someone else's misfortune. It's very unbecoming."

"Then why are you laughing?" Mirna said. "She's wearing a turtleneck today, so that she can keep pulling the collar up over the gigantic mound, but it's going to get warm, and I don't know what she's going to do." Ellie reached up and straightened her friend's collar, as they both set off down the hall to go to their homeroom. Spence was a very small school, with only about 50 girls in each class, so all of the girls had been together for years and years. And even though it was small, there were still cliques, and special groups that kept themselves exclusive. Ellie had heard from several alumnae that after school is out, girls tend to remember everyone as being great friends, and all one big happy family. Ellie doubted she would ever remember it that way.

Ellie smiled at her vivacious friend, but quickly changed the subject. "Have you heard anything yet about the Chess Championship?"

"Oh, my gosh, you're such a geek," Mirna said. "No, I haven't heard anything, why would I? I wouldn't exactly be breaking my neck running to find out about a silly old Chess Championship."

"Well, it's not silly," Ellie said. "We've got a very good team this year, and I really think we're going to win. I'm just waiting to hear when and where they're going to hold it, because I'm just hoping, hoping, hoping I can go."

"Why wouldn't you be able to go?" Mirna said.

"Well, if it's out of town at all, I'll have a big problem convincing auntie and uncle it's worth their while letting me borrow the car and driver. And they're convinced if they let me take the train anywhere, I'll get kidnapped and they'll end up getting hit up for a ransom they're not inclined to pay," Ellie said.

"Oh, I don't know how you put up with it at all," Mirna said. "They're hideous. You'd think since your uncle had only one brother that he would be nicer to his only child. I mean, I don't know the details, but you'd think some of that money he's got had to have come from the same place your money should come from."

"I don't know the details myself, dear, but from the way they treat me, I'm pretty sure that I don't have any money, and don't have any coming, either. I'm definitely going to have to work for my living."

"You poor thing," Mirna said. "Not that there's anything wrong with working, but imagine the pressure of knowing that your very existence depends on having to make a living. I'm glad I'm going to inherit some money, so I can decide whether I want to work or not."

“Yes, I’m very happy for you, you spoiled brat,” Ellie said, ruffling her shorter friend’s blond curls.

Together they went into their homeroom, and sat, listening to the standard morning announcements, and hearing about yet another charitable cause at which their attendance and help would be required. Mirna caught Ellie’s eyes, and rolled hers up into her head. Ellie smiled. There were an extraordinary amount of charitable commitments they were subjected to. She understood the importance of giving back to the community, but she also understood that most of these charities trolled Spence for volunteers, because they wanted to groom the girls to take on bigger roles as they matured and married. And because the girls at Spence were already known to be so privileged, it was considered very bad form for the school to turn down any request. Each girl was expected to put in at least twenty hours every month at any of the hand-picked fine causes the school chose for them.

At that moment, Anna Voronkova ducked in the door, trying to sneak to her desk while the teacher’s back was turned. It didn’t work, however, as Mrs. Vicks had eyes in the back of her head. “Miss Voronkova,” Mrs. Vicks began.

“Yes, Mrs. Vicks,” Anna said quietly. Anna was absolutely beautiful. She had very, very pale blue eyes, and long, black hair which hung straight and shiny almost to her elbows – fashionably slim, but with quite a womanly figure.

“This is the second time this week that you’re late, my dear. I’d like you to go down to the Head of School’s office, and discuss it with Mrs. Macumber, if you don’t mind.”

Anna exhaled weakly, “No, of course not, Mrs. Vicks.” Anna looked over and gave a grim smile to Mirna and Ellie. Both smiled bravely back at her, although they knew she was definitely in for it. She’d already gotten so many demerits for being late, they knew she was going to have to spend her afternoon in detention yet again. She was the sweetest girl in the world, but she just couldn’t seem to get out of bed on time. Ellie had seen her bedroom, and didn’t really wonder why. Anna’s Russian telecoms multi-billionaire father unashamedly spoiled his only female child. Anna’s bedroom was as large as the grand drawing room in the apartment where Ellie lived, and was decorated to the hilt, with elaborate moldings and paneling, lavish draperies and only the very finest bedding to sleep on. Ellie thought, “If I slept on Porthault sheets, I’d probably have trouble getting up, too.”

Ellie smiled, and was glad to have found such wonderful friends. They may be a little bit flighty and a little bit spoiled, but they had good hearts. So many other girls at their school were already tiny little versions of her Aunt Ariana, with their unashamed materialism, and their judgment of people based solely on their bankbooks.

* * *

Paul Bellamy sat in his office, and examined the papers in front of him. If they could work it properly, and if the girl didn’t look at the papers too closely, they might just be able to get another three years of income out of the vast resources of the Grentham Foundation.

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Anything more than that would be extremely difficult to manage. He would make out very well himself, but aside from the Foundation, he had other interests. He doubted that Ariana Grentham and her family would have any idea how to take care of themselves without the income the Foundation provided to them. It paid for their homes, the Park Avenue coop, the house in Palm Beach, the condo in Aspen, the private plane... and the enormous giving power of the Foundation itself gave them the social clout they so desperately needed.

Having nearly \$300 million at her disposal wasn't something that Ariana Grentham was going to give up easily.

Chapter Two

The morning of Ellie's birthday dawned, and she felt wonderful. She was finally eighteen years old. She had a long summer ahead of her, and she was going to go to college in the fall. She hugged herself, and her small Steiff teddy bear, and thought with glee about the future. Pretty soon, she wouldn't be living here in one of the servant's bedrooms. She'd probably be in a much smaller room, with a roommate, but it seemed like heaven to her. How wonderful to be out from under the disapproving, watchful eyes of her aunt and uncle. How truly, truly great.

She didn't want to be late on this of all days, so she quickly jumped out of bed and got herself ready for school. Today, however, when she strolled into the kitchen and reached for a cereal bowl, one of the housekeepers cleared her throat. Ellie turned around questioningly.

"Your aunt has asked us to prepare you a hot breakfast in the dining room this morning," she said.

Ellie looked puzzled. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm quite sure. We've set up a selection on the sideboard. Please, come this way."

Ellie still looked puzzled as she followed the woman through the doors of the kitchen, and into the large formal dining room. The walls were decorated with a scene from a fairy tale wood, with birds and butterflies and trees and flowers all hand-painted onto silk. The French Empire style dining table, chairs and sideboard had all been purchased at a Christie's auction several years ago. Ellie's elaborate place setting was at the head of the table, with *The New York Times* neatly folded next to her napkin. Several dishes were being kept warm on the sideboard: toast, bacon, scrambled eggs and pastry. There was also a selection of juices and coffee and tea. Ellie sat at her place while the housekeeper put the final touches on tidying the dishes. "I hope everything is to your liking," she said, and exited the room.

Ellie sat quietly, with her eyes narrowed, staring at the food, then at the beautiful china and flatware, and then at the crisp, untouched newspaper. She didn't claim to understand it, but at the very least she felt that she could appreciate it. She took up her plate, went over to the sideboard, and began to load food onto it. She sat back down in her place and unfolded the newspaper with a grin. Well, she was going to enjoy her birthday, she decided, and all of the surprises that might come with it.

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Ellie's uncle, Claus, was in the middle of a rare visit to his wife's bedroom. He sat next to her dressing table as she made herself up, scolding her for what he felt to be her foolishness. "What have you done? You had breakfast prepared for her in the dining room? Don't you think she'll know something is up? She'll be suspicious!" He wore a tweed jacket with a silk shirt and yellow patterned bow tie. His puffy, round face looked squeezed by his collar, and he probably would have benefited from going up one size.

“I’m trying to butter the little brat up,” Ariana said calmly.

“Bah!” said Claus.

“Look,” she said, turning toward him and sticking out her index finger, “all she knows is it’s her birthday, and we’re doing something nice, okay? Nice? It’s not that big a deal. As far as she’s concerned, she’s still a hapless little orphaned waif without a cent to her own name, grateful to us for taking her in and educating her just as though she were one of our own. She’ll love the little treat of breakfast, she’ll appreciate it, and she’ll just think we’re being nice, because she’ll be leaving us soon, and we’ll be rid of her.”

“Oh, certainly, certainly,” Claus said, his soft Viennese accent becoming more pronounced, “and how are we going to get her to sign the papers so that we remain in charge? She’s not an idiot. She’ll read them.”

“Oh, no, she won’t,” Ariana said, “I’ll make sure of that. I’ve already decided I’ll put the papers in front of her and tell her they’re the papers to free up her remaining money to pay for college, and to continue her allowance until she graduates. She won’t look at them.”

“What makes you so sure?” Claus asked.

“Because if she does ask to look at them, I’ll be very, very hurt that she doesn’t trust us,” Ariana said, as she touched up her already perfect hair in the mirror, “and I’ll let her know it. The child looks up to me. She won’t want to disappoint me.”

“It seems as though you’re putting a lot of eggs into one basket. If she doesn’t sign the papers, then it’s over. We won’t even be able to keep up this apartment, let alone our other houses, or the plane, when we start to get the pittance the Foundation will give us then.” Claus looked around the room without really seeing it. “If my dear brother Wilhelm was going to die young, why couldn’t he just have done it before he had a child?” he said, “None of this would even matter if I could just inherit the way I was meant to.” He paused and picked at his manicured fingernails, “I was meant for better things than this groveling to a teenager.”

Ariana looked at him out of the corner of her eye, once again completely disgusted by his presence. “Just leave it up to me,” she said patiently.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said petulantly.

“Why don’t you run along, dear? I need to finish getting ready,” Ariana said.

“Humph,” he muttered as he hauled himself off of the chair and flounced out of the room.

“Oaf,” Ariana said to her reflection.

* * *

Ellie finished up her breakfast with relish. She seldom ate so much in the morning, and having first access to the copy of *The New York Times* was just too wonderful. "I could get used to this," she told herself, before she quickly reminded herself to do no such thing.

Her aunt opened the door and strolled in, helping herself to a cup of coffee and sitting down in the chair on Ellie's right. "So, Happy Birthday, Eleanore," Ariana said, delicately sipping her coffee.

"Thank you, Aunt Ariana," Ellie said unsurely.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast?" Ariana asked pleasantly.

"Yes, very much," Ellie said. "It was a nice surprise."

"Well, not such a surprise, I hope. I always thought it strange that you would choose to eat in the kitchen."

Ellie was not sure that she had ever made such a choice, but she let it go.

"As I told you, we're having a little dinner for you tonight. Just the family, of course, and a family friend or two. Nothing too fancy, but it should be fun." Ariana smiled an uncomfortable smile.

Ellie said, "Yes, thanks. That's very nice."

"Yes, well..." Ariana said, looking around her, "enjoy your breakfast. See you at dinner."

"Bye," Ellie said.

Ariana exited the room, leaving a trail of Chanel No. 5 behind her.

"That's the strangest breakfast I ever had," Ellie said to herself. "But, it was delicious." She wiped her mouth with the corner of her napkin and gathered her things for school.

* * *

Ellie sat down in homeroom and was instantly inundated with gifts from her two best friends. Overwhelmed, she was near tears as she looked at the pretty packages on her desk. "We didn't give you presents to make you cry," Anna said, handing Ellie a tissue.

"Ladies," Mrs. Vicks said, "separate and save your personal time until after this half-hour, please."

"Yes, Mrs. Vicks," they all said. Ellie scooped up the wrapped packages and put them into her book bag.

At lunchtime, they sat together, and watched expectantly as Ellie unwrapped the gifts. The first present was from Anna, and it was a state-of-the-art, newest, nobody-can-get-it iPod. “Wow,” Ellie said, “this is amazing. You’re so sweet!”

Mirna was equally impressed, “how did you get that?”

“My father got it for me. I got one last week, and I told him to get another one, and he did.” Anna slipped her long hair back over her shoulder, “he does whatever I tell him to.”

Ellie smiled at her, “I know – you’re horribly spoiled.”

Anna said, “Oh, I don’t know... maybe only in a good way.”

“Open mine,” Mirna said, “I can’t wait to know what you think.”

“There are two from you,” Ellie said.

“I know, but they go together,” Mirna said, sitting on the edge of her seat. “Here, open this one first,” she said, indicating the smaller of the two packages.

Ellie opened the first package and laughed. It was a book entitled, “Living Away at College,” and it was a how-to guide for spending time away from home for the first time. “I will be able to use this,” she said, laughing, as she reached for the next gift. It looked like it had been difficult to wrap... as it was an unusual shape, and very squishy. When she unwrapped it, however, she saw it was a cleverly rolled-up black quilted leather Chanel tote bag. Ellie took in her breath, “Oh, Mirna, this is gorgeous! You shouldn’t have!”

“Of course I should have,” Mirna said. “Now you’ve got a fancy-schmancy tote bag to wow those new girls at Vassar. I knew your aunt and uncle weren’t going to get you anything nice.”

“Really,” Anna agreed.

Ellie reached over and drowned Mirna in a big hug. Then she did the same thing to Anna, tears brimming in her eyes. Anna hugged her back really hard, and smoothed her brown hair. “Now, now, don’t get all sappy over it,” she said.

Ellie wiped away a tear that had overflowed. “Thanks, you guys. You don’t know what this means to me. And you’re right, nobody else got me any birthday presents today.”

“Well, that’s what friends are for,” Mirna said, smiling.

“But I did get the weirdest reception this morning,” Ellie said.

“What do you mean?” Anna asked.

“Aunt Ariana arranged for a beautiful, elaborate breakfast in the dining room, and the New York Times was freshly folded next to my napkin. I didn’t know what to make of it,” Ellie said.

“That is weird,” Mirna said. “I mean, it’s normal for most people... I eat breakfast in the dining room every day, but I know that little Cinderelly isn’t usually allowed to eat in there.”

“I know... and they’re having a dinner for me tonight, too,” Ellie said.

“What?” Anna said. “That’s very strange, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Ellie said, “but I think it’s just because they know I won’t be around for much longer, and they’re probably celebrating or something.”

“I guess,” Anna said, “but if I were you, I’d have somebody tasting your food.”

“I don’t think it would be worth their while to kill me. I’d probably be more trouble than I’m worth.” Ellie said.

“It’s strange all the same,” Mirna said, with Anna nodding in agreement.

* * *

That evening, Ellie took out a simple black dress to wear for dinner. Her meager allowance didn’t leave her much money for clothes, and she had little other than her school uniforms in her closet. It was an inexpensive dress from H&M, but she loved it, and thought it looked terribly sophisticated. She was nervous about dinner, not only because it was so unusual for her aunt and uncle to be taking an interest in her, but also because she really didn’t like them anyway. Ellie figured she would just look at it as a duty to be fulfilled, and she would just do it, and get it over with.

She went into the dining room and saw a beautifully laid out table. Her aunt’s favorite Flora Danica china was being used, along with the best silverware and crystal. Candles had already been lit, and Ellie took in the whole picture. “It’s a beautiful table, isn’t it?” said her Aunt Ariana from somewhere behind her.

Ellie turned around, “Yes, it is. It’s beautiful. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, no trouble, my dear,” Aunt Ariana said. “In fact, I was thinking that we should spend a little more time together before you head off to school,” this was said as she looped her arm through Ellie’s, and drew her toward the grand drawing room. Ellie tried not to flinch at her aunt’s unfamiliar touch.

“Is that little Eleanore?” said Paul Bellamy, as he got up and put his drink onto the coffee table in front of him. “The last time I saw you, you were about three years old.” Ellie shook

hands with the gentleman, noticing his politician-perfect brown hair, and his somewhat muddy hazel eyes.

“Yes,” Ellie said, smiling. “That must have been around the time my parents died,” she thought to herself. Out loud, she said, “I’m trying very hard to place you, but I’m afraid I don’t remember...”

“Oh, Eleanore,” Ariana said, “this is Paul Bellamy, a dear old friend of the family.”

“Good to see you again,” Ellie said, shaking his hand. “Good evening, Uncle Claus.”

Ellie saw her uncle sitting sunken into one of the plush upholstered chairs near the fireplace. He looked very put out as he sipped a brown drink which, from experience, Ellie knew to be scotch. It seemed obvious to her this little birthday party was not his idea. She wasn’t surprised, though, because if she had little contact with her aunt and cousins, she had had even less with her uncle. He spent most of his time in his library, sipping on scotch and examining his many collections with a magnifying glass. Ellie wondered what had drawn him out of his library tonight.

“Happy Birthday, Eleanore,” he said grouchily.

Ariana looked over at him with narrowed eyes. He caught her glance and found himself sitting up a bit straighter.

“Can I get you a cocktail, my dear?” Ariana said.

Ellie looked surprised, “Oh, no. Thank you.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Ariana said, “no drinking until age twenty-one, not eighteen.”

“It used to be eighteen when I was growing up,” Paul Bellamy said. “I suppose they changed it because of all of the teenagers killing themselves drunk in automobiles.”

“Yes,” Ellie said, “I guess so.” Ellie had snuck a beer or two, or a glass of wine, with her friends, but she certainly wasn’t about to do it in front of her aunt and uncle.

“But here we have a very responsible young woman,” Paul said, “she could have accepted the cocktail with no one being the wiser, and none of us would have given it another thought, but she turned it down. Well done, young lady. Well done.”

“Yes,” Ariana said, “well done, indeed. Can I get you a soda?”

“A Coke would be fine,” Ellie said, sitting down in the cream damask silk Bergere chair near her, and crossing her legs at the ankles, knowing for Ariana to “get her a soda” would entail nothing more than a tinkle from the little bell by her side.

Ariana reached her perfectly manicured hand to ring the bell, and immediately one of the younger maids came out to take Ellie's order. For all of Aunt Ariana's complaints, her house was extremely well-run. There were enough servants to ensure everyone's needs were promptly met, and a rigid schedule was adhered to. Ellie often thought Aunt Ariana was very lucky to be so wealthy, because she couldn't imagine how she would get along if she weren't.

Ariana was dressed impeccably, as usual, in a black silk Yves Saint Laurent blouse with a loose bow at the neck, a cream and gold patterned pencil skirt that hit at mid-knee, and a pair of 5-inch black pumps, whose rich red soles revealed them to be Christian Louboutain.

Her Uncle Claus was still dressed in his usual uniform of wool jacket and pants, with his signature brightly-colored bow tie. Paul Bellamy looked typically lawyerly in his dark grey suit, crisp white shirt and red patterned tie.

The maid came back with Ellie's soda neatly poured into a Baccarat crystal highball glass. Ellie thanked her sweetly.

"So, young lady, I suppose we should talk about your future," Paul Bellamy said.

"Oh," Ellie said, "certainly." She sat up a little straighter in her chair.

"I understand from your aunt that you'll be attending Vassar in the fall."

"Yes," Ellie said.

"And you were accepted there on an early acceptance as well?"

"Yes."

"You must get very good grades," Paul said.

"I'm on the honor roll," Ellie said.

"Well, good for you," Paul said, "so many young people don't understand the value of a proper education until it's too late." He said this looking at Ariana, who met his gaze with a hollow stare. She knew he was referring to her own children, who had gotten dismal grades, and whose schools had consistently been bribed to keep them. "Bastard," Ariana thought.

Ellie said nothing, but waited for the next question in what she assumed would be an interrogation and negotiation. "This is just what I thought would happen," she said to herself, "they're estimating how much it's going to cost to get rid of me."

"What do you intend to study when you're there?" Paul asked.

"Finance and economics," Ellie said, quite naturally, having had all of this well thought-out for years.

“Well, that’s not light work, is it?” Paul said.

Ellie merely smiled.

“We’ve told Eleanore we’re happy to continue paying for education, but that there is very little left for her after that,” Ariana said.

“Yes,” Paul said, clearing his throat, “unfortunately that’s true.” He heard the high-pitched sound of his own voice as he said that, and chalked it up to a remaining desire not to lie to one’s client. Unfortunately, he had already traveled too far down this one particular road to travel back at this point. “I understand your aunt and uncle are happy to pay for your college education, which is not an inconsiderable expense by any means.”

“No, I understand that, and I’m grateful,” Ellie said.

“Do you know what you’re going to do after that, in order to be able to support yourself without assistance?” Paul asked.

“I don’t think I have to worry about that too much,” Ellie said. “I’ll be getting a first-rate education, and I’ll be working hard. I plan to find a job immediately after graduation, if not before, and with some of my school connections, I don’t think it will be difficult. Hard work doesn’t scare me, and I don’t see why I wouldn’t be able to find a very good job, and have a very successful career.”

Paul looked impressed, “Well, I can see you’ve given this a lot of thought, Eleanore. Good for you.”

“You’re also a very attractive young woman,” Ariana said, looking a bit confused by all of the career talk. “There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be able to find a suitable young man and make a good match.”

Ellie looked over at her and smiled. “Yes, of course,” she said, thinking to herself it was very unlikely she’d let herself be financially dependent upon another person. But knew that was the limit of her Aunt Ariana’s experience.

“Certainly,” Paul Bellamy said, looking amused by Ariana’s narrow world view.

The butler walked in at that moment and indicated dinner was ready in the dining room. Ellie’s Uncle Claus hauled himself up out of his chair with seemingly great effort.

They went into the dining room, and Ellie found herself seated to her Uncle Claus’ right, with him at the head of the table. Mr. Bellamy was seated across from her, and her aunt was seated all the way at the other end of the table.

“Parker, this won’t do,” Ariana said. “It’s a party. I’d like to be seated to my husband’s left, and we can move Mr. Bellamy down one chair.”

Parker didn't say anything about this change, but looked very surprised. Not more than an hour ago, Mrs. Grentham had specifically requested this particular arrangement. The places were swiftly changed, and everyone sat down to their soup.

"Well, as I was saying," Paul said, "it seems as though you've given a lot of thought to your future."

"I have," Ellie said. "I'm sure I'll be just fine."

"That's wonderful," he said.

They all ate for a moment in silence.

Ellie looked up every now and again at her Uncle Claus, who to her knowledge hadn't set eyes on her yet. He looked glumly at his plate while he finished his soup. A servant took the plate away, and replaced it with the main course, a roasted duck breast with green and white asparagus and herb ravioli.

"Everything looks delicious," Ellie said.

"Thank you, my dear," her Aunt Ariana said. She had taken only a spoonful or two of the soup, and Ellie doubted that she would take more than a tiny bit of the main course. Ariana's nearly skeletal skinny frame depended upon very, very small portions of food, and she also seldom ate after 6:00 p.m., convinced that everything she ate after that time turned immediately into fat. She did not seem to have the same prohibition for alcohol, as she continued on to empty yet another glass of Pinot Noir.

"It's exciting, isn't it?" Paul said.

"What's that?" Claus said belligerently. It was the first words he had spoken since they had sat down to dinner.

"Well, the beginning of a young life," Paul said. "A young person making their plans with their entire future ahead of them. It's exciting." He looked around the table for someone to agree with him.

"Hmm," Claus muttered.

As the dessert course, a strawberry sorbet, was being served, Paul said, "Well, I suppose we should get those papers signed before we forget."

Ariana looked at Ellie over the rim of her wine glass as she raised it yet again to her lips.

Ellie didn't even look up, as she didn't realize what they were talking about had anything to do with her.

“Yes, Paul,” Ariana said, “why don’t you fetch those from the other room?”

Claus looked warily between his wife and his niece, who quietly ate her sorbet without noticing the drama that was taking shape around her, as Paul went into the drawing room for his briefcase.

“Well, here we are,” Paul said, putting his briefcase on the table, and removing a small sheaf of papers, stapled with a pale blue cover. He took the papers, and rolled the top pages over, revealing only the signature page. He took a pen out of his jacket, and slid the papers over to Ellie. “If you would just sign these, my dear.”

Ellie looked up, surprised. “Me?”

“Of course, dear,” Paul said, an uncomfortable smile frozen on his face, handing her the pen.

“But I don’t understand,” Ellie said, still not taking the papers.

“It’s just the papers to free up the money to pay for your college. It’s nothing to worry your pretty little head about,” he said, shaking the pen in his hand, willing her to take it.

But she didn’t. Instead, she looked around the table. Her Aunt Ariana looked at her expectantly, the lawyer held out the pen, and her Uncle Claus sipped his scotch without looking at her at all. She picked up the papers, and flipped to the front page. The title page said “Voluntary Trust Extension,” and she sat back to read the rest.

“Oh, my dear,” Paul said, getting up. “You don’t need to be bothered reading a lot of dry legal language,” he said. “It’s all quite standard – you can just sign.” He came around to her side of the table and took the papers out of her hands, turning them again to the signature page, and handing her the pen.

Ellie certainly wasn’t looking for an argument with anyone, but she also wasn’t about to put her signature to anything that she hadn’t read. “I’ll be happy to sign it, just as soon as I’ve read it.”

Ariana spoke up with a cool voice, “Mr. Bellamy just told you there’s no reason for you to read it, my dear.”

Ellie looked at her aunt, surprised and suspicious that she was receiving pressure from her, too.

“But I would rather read it,” Ellie said simply.

There was silence around the table for a moment.

“Are you suggesting you can’t trust Mr. Bellamy, Eleanore? He’s been a friend of the family, and a trusted family advisor, for many, many years,” Ariana said.

“I’m sure that’s true,” Ellie said, trying to remain diplomatic, but gradually realizing they were coming to an impasse. She spoke slowly and distinctly. “And since Mr. Bellamy is such a fine lawyer, then he will certainly support my decision to read these papers before I sign them.”

“Just sign the goddamn papers, you little ingrate!” Uncle Claus boomed from his chair.

Ellie jumped.

“Claus!” Ariana shouted. “There’s no need for everyone to get overheated. Eleanore, these are papers that will continue your trust to pay for your college education. Now, I would like you to sign them immediately.”

“If that’s what they are, then why can’t I read them?”

“It’s not that you can’t read them; it’s just that there’s no need,” Paul said, still smiling his uneasy smile. He seemed to realize this was not going well. He put the papers in front of her again, with the signature page facing up, and with his hand firmly holding them to the top of the table.

Ellie looked around her at her aunt, standing at her place at the table, looking at her with an icy glare. She looked at her uncle at the head of the table, angrily drinking his scotch, and refusing to look at her. Then she looked up at Paul Bellamy, with his strange smile, and realized she was stuck. She knew there was no way out of this argument.

Tears filled her eyes. She may have been smart, and her life may have made her tough, but she was still young enough to feel intimidated by so many adults pressuring her. Ellie took up the pen, and before signing, said, “I’ll sign them, but you haven’t let me read them, and I have no idea what’s in them. I think that’s wrong.” She signed the papers, threw the pen down on the table and ran out of the room.

“Well,” her aunt said, “that wasn’t easy, but thank God it’s over.”

“It’s not over,” Paul Bellamy said, looking at her as though she were stupid. “You can’t hold a gun to somebody’s head and make them sign papers. It’s not legal, and the papers aren’t legal, either.”

“What are you talking about?” Claus said belligerently, the scotch making an impact on his speaking voice, “we just had to get her to sign, and now she’s signed. What’s she going to do about it?”

“That’s right, Paul,” Ariana said, “We told her that the papers extend her trust to pay for her schooling, and that’s exactly what’s going to happen. She says she thinks it’s ‘wrong,’ but how will she know the difference?” She sat down again at her place at the table and said,

“Tomorrow morning, everything will be as usual... I might make some small comment about her rude behavior, and she will forget it.”

“She seems pretty smart to me, Ariana,” Paul said. “I’ve got a lot at stake here. I could lose my license for coercing someone into signing a document.”

“Just leave everything to me, Paul,” Ariana said, “and don’t worry so much.”

Chapter Three

Ellie ran to her room and locked the door behind her. After sitting on the edge of her bed, seething, for a few moments, she realized she was probably overreacting. The papers she likely were just harmless trust documents dealing with her college education, and nothing more. The lawyer and her aunt and uncle had definitely been acting weird, but for her aunt and uncle, at least, she knew that wasn't unusual. Besides, what in the world would anyone want from her? She wasn't the Queen of Sheba, and she knew she couldn't have signed away her firstborn child or anything like that.

She took a deep breath and pushed herself up off the bed. She went to her bathroom and took off the dress she had worn to dinner, tossing it lightly into the hamper. She put on a comfortable nightgown, slowly washed her face, brushed her teeth and brushed her hair. It was a little early for her to be going to bed, but she was worn out. It was probably nothing more than emotional exhaustion, after having to deal with her aunt and uncle all day. And the scene at dinner – that was definitely a freak show. From beginning to end, her birthday had been unusual in all respects.

She went over to the side of her bed where she had thrown her book bag and the gifts her friends had gotten her. She took all of the books from her worn, tired book bag, and transferred them lovingly into the buttery-soft Chanel tote bag that Mirna had gotten for her. It was such a generous gift, and she wanted Mirna to know she appreciated it. She would bring it to school tomorrow. It wouldn't even raise an eye among her classmates, who routinely brought their books to school in Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, and even Hermès bags. She settled down onto her bed and took out her new iPod. Anna had downloaded quite a bit of music onto it already, Ellie was grateful to see. She smiled as she leafed through the brochure, figuring out how to work her fancy new gadget while she listened to some distinctly Anna-type music.

* * *

Ellie tossed and turned during the night. Several times she woke, having begun to have the same dream, about the beautiful house with the incredibly high painted ceilings, and the beautiful nursery that she knew was hers. She felt the softness of the crib bedding, and her plush pink blanket. When she woke, she would spend a few moments wondering about the house, and wondering about her recurring dream. Perhaps at college, she should study the meaning of dreams – maybe take a few psychology courses. A dream of a beautiful nursery, and an idyllic childhood, was probably something quite normal for children who were orphaned at an early age. Ellie would spend a few moments thinking about these things, and then turn over, finding a more comfortable spot on the bed, closing her eyes and falling fast asleep again, until the dream intruded.

Once she woke, she realized she had probably been bothered more than she thought by her aunt and uncle's odd behavior. She hadn't slept well, as she usually did, but had tossed and turned and woken up and dreamed, and when she finally got out of bed, she felt barely more rested than she had when she had put her head down. She went into her bathroom and splashed

very cold water onto her face, hoping the bracing chill of the water would remove the dark circles and slight puffiness under her eyes.

She dressed quickly, and went into the kitchen for her usual breakfast. She had no illusions, and had never even given a thought to finding a hot breakfast waiting for her in the dining room, as there had been the morning before. She reached up to the top shelf and got her usual, large white cereal bowl. She went to the cupboard, and got the box of Rice Krispies they always kept there for her and helped herself. She tried not to catch anyone's eye, in case they might be embarrassed that here she was again, back in the kitchen among them after her brief stay in the private areas of the house. She didn't want anyone to feel badly for her, so she went about her morning routine as though nothing had ever been different.

Although she had since determined she had overreacted to signing the legal papers the night before, she decided she was going to mention it to her friends, Mirna and Anna. They each came from families with lots and lots of money, although Mirna's mere hundreds of millions paled next to Anna's billions. Ellie was fairly sure she could explain the situation to them, and they would have some ideas. They might even be kind enough to offer the services of one of their own family attorneys, just to be sure that Ellie was safe and secure, and hadn't gotten herself into trouble. Ellie had next to nothing, but she knew that was preferable to having less than nothing, which was certainly possible in this world. She never bothered to feel sorry for herself, in comparing herself to her rich friends, because she had read enough, and knew enough about the world, to know that a young woman, who had her health, a roof over her head, and a good college education, had found herself in the top ten percent of lucky people in the world. She wouldn't let herself forget it, and she certainly wouldn't let it get her down.

She ate her breakfast quickly, and took her bowl to the sink where she rinsed it out and placed it in the dishwasher. She grabbed up her new tote bag, threw it over her shoulder and took her usual route out through the servant's door.

Ellie jogged down the back stairs of the building, and headed out into the lobby. She tended to take the servant's stairs, especially when she wanted to avoid her aunt and uncle, but she felt comfortable going out the front door, especially since the doormen were always so nice to her. They probably thought she was a proper member of the family, since they didn't live with her, and watch her eat and sleep with the servants. The doorman today held the door for her, and she thanked him pleasantly.

It was another gorgeous day. Late spring was giving way to summer, and the end of school was coming soon. Ellie thought she would probably get a job working at one of the shops on Fifth Avenue – her connections should be good enough for that. She could sock away some money for school, and hopefully also get herself some quality, beautiful clothes at a discount. She let the thoughts of her future take over, and she gradually forgot about the oddness of the night before.

She turned the corner and headed up 91st Street. There weren't very many people on the street, she noticed. It took a little while before the city really got going, and the people running around her neighborhood at eight o'clock in the morning were more likely to be the servants and

deliverymen of the wealthy who lived there, rather than the inhabitants themselves. She walked at her usual, brisk pace, and, on the very fringe of her consciousness, noticed a dark green van to her right as she walked up the sidewalk. The van had no windows, and she vaguely thought, ever so briefly, they must be delivering flowers or something.

That was the last thought she had, however, before the doors on the van flew open, and two men with black ski masks covering their faces jumped out and grabbed her. She didn't even have a moment to scream before one of them had an arm around her waist and a hand over her mouth. The other one grabbed her legs around the knees, and together they moved her into the van, and the doors closed shut behind them. The entire process took about a fraction of a second, and, even in New York City, it was surprising no one had observed what had occurred. The man at the wheel of the van said something in a language Ellie didn't understand, but what she thought was German. The man who had grabbed her legs said something in response, and used his free hand to grab a length of rope.

As soon as Ellie realized what was happening, she began to struggle, but unfortunately for her, it was after the doors had already been shut, and the men were unbelievably strong. The man who held her legs wrapped the rope around them and tied them as the other man held her tight. She flailed with her arms, but they didn't seem to reach anything but the sides of the van, and her captor held her in such a way that she couldn't reach his arms or face, as he held her in an iron grip. Once her feet were tied, she saw the second man take out a small plastic bottle and pour liquid over a handkerchief. He handed it to the man behind Ellie, and he took his hand off of her mouth for one instant to grab the handkerchief. In that moment, she yelled, "What do you want?" That's all that she was able to get out, before the man's hand clamped down on her mouth again, this time with the handkerchief, coated in a sickly-smelling liquid. She suspected it was something she shouldn't inhale, and fought while she attempted to hold her breath. After a few moments, though, her lungs began to scream from lack of oxygen, and she unwillingly took a deep breath.

That was all it took. She began to see stars before her eyes, and slowly drifted off into unconsciousness.

* * *

The telephone rang in the Park Avenue apartment's foyer. The butler strolled slowly to pick it up, and gravely answered it, "Grentham residence. May I help you?"

A voice spoke quickly on the other end as he listened, "Yes, I understand. Just one moment."

He laid the receiver down on the table and strolled slowly to Ariana Grentham's dressing room, where she spent most of her morning, get ready for the day, making telephone calls, flipping through magazines, etc. He rapped his knuckles lightly on the door.

"Come in," Ariana said.

"Mrs. Grentham, the Spence School is on the telephone for you," he said.

Ariana looked puzzled, and then a bit worried, thinking about the events of the night before. “What in the world has that girl pulled now?” she wondered.

Out loud, she said, “Thank you, I’ve got it.” She picked up the telephone to the right on her desk and said, “Yes, Ariana Grentham here.”

“Mrs. Grentham, Mrs. Augustine here, Head of School at Spence.”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Augustine, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I just wanted to double-check with you. Eleanore isn’t in school today, and I wanted to find out if she was ill, or if she had scheduled some time off, and if perhaps you had forgotten to inform us.”

“Eleanore is not in school today?” Ariana said, perplexed.

There was a pause. “No, she’s not. Were you unaware that she wasn’t going to be in school today?”

“Certainly, I was unaware of it,” Ariana said biting. Her mind was churning, though. Had she underestimated Eleanore’s intelligence? Had she played the whole thing all wrong? Where was the girl?

“Do you think perhaps Eleanore is just skipping school for some reason?” Mrs. Augustine said, “Although, of course, I hate to make such an assertion, and it is very unlike Eleanore, who, I believe, has nearly perfect attendance.”

“Are her friends in school today?” Ariana said, thinking quickly.

“Which friends are you particularly concerned about?”

“The Cromwell girl, and the Russian... I forget her name, although I’d doubt I could pronounce it, even if I could remember it.”

Mrs. Augustine cleared her throat. “Yes, well, Eleanore’s particular friends, Mirna Cromwell and Anna Voronkova,” she pronounced the name slowly and distinctly, “are both in school today, and have, in fact, mentioned their concern that Eleanore wasn’t here.”

Ariana sat back in her chair. “I see,” she said, not seeing anything at all. “Where the hell is that girl?” she thought.

“Is there anything I can do?” Mrs. Augustine said, after waiting a few moments.

“No, no... certainly not,” Ariana said. “Please just let us know if Eleanore does come to school at some point. We’ll take care of things here. Thank you for your concern.”

Ariana slammed down the phone, and screamed “Claus!”

* * *

Across town, Ellie woke briefly, fighting through the fog over her consciousness to open her eyes. She did manage to pull them open for just a moment, but was immediately assaulted by the bright white light that pierced her brain and brought forward a monstrous headache, and a wave of nausea.

She vaguely recalled the struggle in the van, and the foul smell she had inhaled. She tried to put some of her thoughts together, but everything was fractured and nothing made sense in any linear fashion. She attempted to move, and found she was bound, with her wrists behind her, and legs bound at the ankles. She tried to roll over, but another wave of nausea caught her, and she struggled to breathe, keeping her eyes clamped shut. She felt the blackness and the stars coming over her again, and she didn’t fight it as she slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

Ariana sat in her dressing room, with Claus by her side, nervously nibbling on the skin around his fingernails. “I need a drink,” he said.

“It’s ten o’clock in the morning,” Ariana said.

“I don’t care. Maybe if she had decided to run away in the middle of the night, it might have been more convenient,” he said sarcastically.

“We don’t know that she’s run away, Claus,” Ariana said, nervously waiting for a knock on their door. She had telephoned Paul Bellamy immediately upon hearing from the Head of School, and had instructed him to waste no time in coming over.

“Well where the hell else could she be? The little bookworm never misses a day of school, so it’s not like she’s blown it off to go shopping, not like one of our own children. One of ours could go missing for weeks on end without it being terribly unusual.” He paused, and asked as an afterthought, “In fact, when did you last talk to the two of them?” Claus said.

“Oh, I can’t remember, Claus. Can you please focus? We are not talking about a teenager running amok. We’re talking about hundreds of millions of dollars! In fact, we’re talking about LOSING hundreds of millions of dollars. Do you understand that?”

“Well, what’s she going to do? We’ve got the papers... even if she never turns up again, we’ll be all set for at least three years,” Claus said.

They heard a knock on the door, and turned quickly. The butler announced, “Mr. Bellamy is here.”

“Please send him right on in,” Ariana said.

They went through the pleasantries of shaking hands and saying their “hellos” until the butler went out and the door shut.

“Ariana, what have you done?” Paul asked.

“What have I done?” Ariana was stunned. “You think I did this? You moron. What do you think? Do you think I have minions around the city just waiting to do my evil bidding? Besides, what good would it do? We’re screwed, whether she’s gone or not. I mean, if you would mind using that head of yours, where do you think she’s gone? She studies economics and finance, you know... she’s gone to find an attorney!”

Paul sank into one of the plush yellow chairs in Ariana’s dressing room. He rubbed his forehead with his hand, and looked around him. “Where the hell am I?” he said, looking at the flocked yellow silk wall covering, opulent cream draperies, and the wall of floor-to-ceiling closets that housed Ariana’s extremely expensive collection of clothes.

“This is my dressing room,” she said, as though he were an idiot.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, rubbing his forehead again, “your dressing room... you have absolutely no friggin’ idea what the outside world is like, do you?”

“Careful,” Ariana said, her eyes narrowing, “don’t take too many liberties, Paul. I think we all need each other right now.”

“I need a drink,” Claus said, and got up.

“Claus...” Ariana said warningly.

“Bring the bottle back with you,” Paul said.

“Aye-aye,” Claus said, walking out the door in the direction of the drawing room.

Paul leaned forward as soon as Claus was out of earshot. “Seriously, Ariana,” he said in a low voice, “what did you do?”

Ariana leaned forward, too. “Seriously, Paul... I did nothing. I have no idea where the girl is.”

Paul sat back again, attempting to get his thoughts in order. “Okay, we don’t know where she is, but we do know that she’s not where she’s supposed to be...”

Claus walked in with a glass in each hand, and a bottle of Glenfiddich under his arm. He handed one glass to Paul. Ariana gave him a disgusted look as he sat back down again in one of her chairs.

Paul downed half the glass in one drink. “As I was saying,” he said, “we know she’s not where she’s supposed to be. Should we be notifying the authorities?”

“Are you insane? Do you want us to put on our own handcuffs, too?” Claus said.

“Just think for a minute,” Paul said. “What would you do if you were totally above-board? Your beloved niece is missing, and she never misses school.” They both looked at him blankly. “You can’t even pretend?” he asked.

“Oh, shut up, Paul,” Ariana said, “just tell us what you’re getting at.”

“If your conscience was clear, you would inform the police that your niece was missing,” he said.

“Wouldn’t that be premature? Teenagers ditch school all the time,” Ariana said.

“And that’s exactly what they’ll tell you when you call,” Paul said. “You call them and tell them that you heard from the headmaster, that you’re worried, but you don’t know if you should be bothering them or not. They’ll take your report, but tell you that you’ve probably got nothing to worry about, and that you should get back to them once a day has passed, or something like that.”

“That makes sense,” Claus said, sipping on his drink.

“Hmm...” Ariana said, rubbing her chin.

* * *

Ellie woke again, this time with a splitting headache. Tears came from her eyes as she was finally able to open them, but not without a lot of pain. The bright light in the room felt blinding as she tried to look around her. She still felt sick to her stomach, and was afraid that she would vomit. She tried hard to control this feeling, breathing deeply through her nose, because she didn’t want to throw up where she was, not knowing how long they would let her lie in it. It didn’t take her long to figure out she had been kidnapped. What she didn’t know is, why? It didn’t seem like the act of a few sickos who wanted to have sex with her, or torture her. She heard them talking in the next room, and thought she recognized German again. At least it sounded like German.

Ellie kicked herself again because she had never taken German. She had taken Latin to get her SAT verbal score up higher. She should have taken German, because her family was Austrian, but she had never bothered. It would have come in handy now, as she listened to a muffled conversation outside the door.

Her head began to clear and she looked around her. She was on a simple fold-away cot, which was clean enough, it seemed to her. She was looking at a wooden door that couldn’t have been too thick, considering the amount of talk from outside that she was able to hear. The wall

in front of her which housed the door seemed to be made of simple cinderblock. She gradually found the strength to lift her head. She took in the other three walls, and saw they were also cinderblock. She lay still for a few moments gathering her strength, and managed to swing herself up to a sitting position, with her feet on the floor. Another wave of nausea hit her, and she tucked her head between her knees, waiting for it to go away. She was surprised that she wasn't gagged, and that her eyes weren't covered, obviously because there was no need. She could safely assume no one would hear her if she screamed.

* * *

"Hello... yes, I'm not sure who I want to speak with," Ariana began. She was talking on the telephone in her dressing room, with Claus and Paul listening raptly. They had decided she would be the best one to call, not the least because the two men had already had two drinks apiece, but that a woman might seem more likely to make such a nervous, mothering-type-of call. She was connected to the Missing Persons Department, and spoke to one of their desk sergeants, laying out why she was worried, and answering all of their questions. "No, no, I understand... I wasn't sure whether I should bother you or not. Yes. Yes, I hope so. I'm sure it's something like that. Yes, with summer coming, and her senior year... yes. Oh, believe me, I hope she's at the beach, and she'll just be horribly grounded when she finally comes home. Yes. Thank you, sergeant. Yes. Thank you. I'll be touch. Thank you." She hung up the telephone and looked at the two men.

"Well," Claus said.

"Well," Paul agreed.

They sat for a moment in silence. "Is that it?" Ariana asked.

"Well, yes... until we hear anything else," Paul said. "Maybe if you haven't heard from her by dinnertime, you could call her friends at home."

"I'd really rather not," Ariana said, wrinkling her nose.

"Well," Paul said, "maybe that can wait. I guess you can just wait until maybe tomorrow, and then call the friends, if she doesn't come home tonight."

"You don't think..." Ariana said, looking down at her fingers and examining her manicure, "you don't think that perhaps something did happen to her?"

"What do you mean?" Paul said.

"What do you think I mean?" Ariana said, "She's probably one of the richest young women in the world, especially considering the amount of money the Foundation holds. Do you really think the three of us in this room are the only ones who know that?"

They were all silent for a moment.

Paul finally spoke. "I hadn't thought of that."

* * *

Ellie had sat quietly where she was for more than an hour. Now that the physical symptoms of whatever they had drugged her with was wearing off, she had room in her consciousness for fear. She kicked herself for not having the foresight to fight as soon as she saw the men jumping out of the van. She had heard enough public service announcements, seen enough of "Law & Order," and had read enough crime fiction, to know that if someone tries to grab you, you should fight them to the death right there, and never, never go with them, because things are only going to get worse, and you're probably dead anyway.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked them away. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she forced herself to think clearly. She thought again of the flimsiness of the door. If she could hear them talking through the door, it couldn't be terribly thick. She wondered if a well-placed kick or two, or throwing her entire body against it, might bring it down. She abandoned that idea very quickly, realizing there were at least three strong, able-bodied men on the other side of the door, and she would definitely have to deal with them once the door came down. She saw that the door opened outwards, too, because the hinges were on the other side, and she couldn't get at them, either.

She wondered again why this had happened at all. They hadn't assaulted her, so she thought they probably weren't rapists – she hoped. She thought briefly of the white slave trade, but quickly put that out of her mind. There were far easier places to kidnap young women for something like that than in her neighborhood. It had to be a kidnapping for ransom. If someone saw her coming out of her posh building, with her Spence school uniform on, they would assume she was rich. If they thought they were going to get some lavish ransom for her from her aunt and uncle, though, they would be sorely disappointed. Ellie wasn't sure they would part with more than a few hundred dollars to save her neck, if that.

She looked about the room, and saw her new tote bag, with all of her schoolbooks, was gone. She wondered if it had even made it into the van with her. Considering the trouble she was in, it was probably a foolish thing to think about, but it bothered her quite a lot. It had been such a sweet thing for Mirna to do, and Ellie had never had anything quite so nice before. She fought back tears again, as she wondered how much she was going to lose.

Just then, she heard some motion at the door, and saw the knob turn. She sat up straighter and braced herself for God-knows-what as one of the men came in. She couldn't be sure it was one of the men who had grabbed her this morning, but he was dressed the same, all in green, with green work pants and a green work shirt that looked something like a janitor's uniform, but with a black ski mask a janitor wouldn't have need for. He looked at her for a moment before reaching behind him, to the side of the door. He brought in a folding tray table, and set it up in front of Ellie. He went back out and lifted a tray from the floor. He placed the tray on the table, and reached around behind Ellie. She was holding her breath with fear, and felt as though she were frozen solid. He unlocked her handcuffs and removed them in a clean gesture as he moved back quickly, apparently not sure whether she was going to lash out at him

or not. Ellie was clearly too frightened to try anything like that, and with no knowledge of what waited behind that door, she wasn't prepared to be foolishly brave.

"Iss," he said, pointing at the tray. Then he walked out, locking the door behind him. Well, she supposed she didn't need to understand much German to understand that command. She was to eat to please her captors.

Ellie rubbed her wrists, and looked down at the red marks the cuffs had left as it bit into her skin. Then she looked down at the tray in front of her. She had never been less hungry in her life, considering the nauseating effects of the drug, and her choking fear, but she imagined if she were to keep her head about her, she should keep from fainting. She looked down at the food, and thought it looked edible. There was a turkey sandwich on white bread, a carton of milk, and a container of pineapple. It wasn't the gourmet food that was prepared in the Park Avenue kitchen where she ate, but she had definitely had worse school food in her life.

Ellie thought for a moment about poisoning, but then decided that would be the least of her problems. They wouldn't go to these elaborate lengths of locking her up, if they were going to poison her. Plus, the guy certainly didn't act like a rapist, either, thank goodness. He had been standing very close to her as he reached behind her and unlocked the cuffs that held her hands, and he had made no attempt to touch her at all. She thought that was a very good sign, indeed. The whole thing seemed more organized than a bunch of sexual perverts would be able to pull off. She reached for the sandwich and took a bite, her clever brain already starting to work, trying to figure out just what was happening to her, and what she might do to escape.

Chapter Four

After a long night of untroubled sleep, Ariana reached for the telephone by her bed and called Claus, asking him to come into her room. They hadn't shared the same room since their children were young, when Claus' disgusting habits, such as clipping his toenails on the bedroom floor, instead of in the bathroom, and worse, made her banish him to one of the guest suites. He was happy, too, and the arrangement worked well for both of them. They certainly had no other reasons left to share a bedroom. Ariana had no inclination whatsoever in that regard, and Claus had his needs taken care of by a series of high-end call girls who were paid to put up with him.

Claus hadn't dressed yet, either. He came in wearing his silk dressing gown over his pajamas. "No word from Eleanore?" he said.

"No," Ariana said.

He sat in one of the chairs by the foot of her bed. She hadn't yet bothered to get up. She was feeling one of her nervous headaches coming on, and she felt she needed to rest. "I think we should call the police again," she said.

"What does Bellamy think?" Claus asked.

"I haven't talked to him yet," Ariana said, "but I can do a little thinking on my own. If we don't call, and she's still missing, what will the police think? They'll think we don't care."

"Ha!" Claus laughed to himself, looking out the window.

"Or they'll think that we have something to do with it," she said, quietly and carefully.

That got his attention. "You don't think they'd imagine..."

"Of course they would, Claus, the police have very good imaginations. And it wouldn't take much thought to figure out who would benefit most from her disappearing," she said.

"Yes, disappearing," he said, "but if she's been kidnapped, then what motive do we have for that?"

"They could think we've faked the kidnapping to cover up a murder," she nearly choked on the word, "or they could think we're trying to get some money, in the form of ransom, out of the Foundation before we have to turn it over."

"Jesus," Claus said, reaching up to straighten his bow tie, but realizing he wasn't wearing one. He wore one so often it had become an integral part of his personality. "I don't understand how things have gotten so far. All I'm trying to do is to preserve my family legacy!" His face grew red.

“Oh, Claus, I understand how you feel, but the fact is we’ve cut a few corners, and, because of that, we’ve drawn a little bit of suspicion upon ourselves. Now, we haven’t done anything truly wrong, so I don’t think we have anything to worry about, and I sleep very well at night, knowing I have only done what is right.”

“Yes,” Claus said.

“Now this thing has happened, whatever it is, and we have to deal with it. If she has run away, then we’ll just wait until we hear from her. Until then, it’s business as usual. Also, if she has been kidnapped, or disappeared for whatever reason, then we’ll just have to wait until we hear about that, too. We have to notify the police, and just sit tight until something happens.”

“I suppose you’re right. Are you going to call Bellamy?” Claus asked.

“I’ll call him right now, and ask him to come here. We’ll call the police together,” she said, picking up the receiver.

* * *

Ellie woke up, extremely sore and still tired. It didn’t make for a restful night to have her hands and feet tied together. She had no idea what time it was, but guessed it was morning, based on how she felt.

She heard the door opening, and forced herself upright, even though her muscles were screaming from the effort. She was sore and tired from having slept in such a strange position. Another man came in, dressed exactly the same as the man she had seen yesterday, first when he brought her lunch, and again when he came to take it away and handcuff her again. Then he had come some time later, had uncuffed her hands and removed the shackles from her feet and walked her out through another room with cinderblock walls, where the other two men sat watching television, and led her to a small, cramped bathroom. She was so grateful for that relief that she didn’t notice how filthy and disgusting the bathroom was. They had allowed her to go to the bathroom one more time before closing her up again for what she believed was the night.

This man was taller, though, and leaner. That’s how she knew it wasn’t the same man from yesterday. He brought her in another meal, this also the same turkey sandwich, milk and fruit cup she was getting used to. She couldn’t tell if it was breakfast, but she supposed so. This time, the man unlocked both her cuffs and her shackles. She was surprised, because yesterday when they fed her, they had only uncuffed her hands. The man stood up and indicated jumping jacks with his arms and one leg. “Oh,” Ellie said, nodding, “Okay. Thank you.” He walked out again. She realized she was being given an opportunity to stretch and exercise, and not a minute too soon.

Her meal could wait. She immediately stood and stretched her arms above her head. She then went through a modified version of the yoga and Pilates routines she had been taught at school, and felt much better. Then she sat down to eat her meal. After a short time, the man

came in again, and took the tray and table out. This time, however, when he put her handcuffs and shackles back on, he left her hands in the front, which was a vast improvement.

Ellie said “thank you,” very politely. The man didn’t say anything, just stood and left the room. She wanted to be careful not to be too grateful to them, but to be polite enough not to make them angry. Yes, it was nice when they made things easier on her, but if it weren’t for them, she’d be in school right now, hanging out with her friends, and getting ready for graduation.

* * *

Paul Bellamy sat in the same chair he had yesterday in Ariana’s dressing room. Ariana was standing at one of the closets, with the door open. She pulled open one of the drawers, which were lined with silk, and trimmed with silk cording. Inside were some of her Hermès scarves. She drew one out, and tied it around her neck, examining herself in the mirror which was built into the inside of the closet door.

They had spent the past hour on the telephone with first the police, and then with the Spence School. Ariana had called and asked to speak with both Mirna and Anna, to find out if they had any knowledge of where Eleanore might be. They didn’t, and to Ariana’s untrained ear, they sounded sufficiently worried and upset about Eleanore’s disappearance that she didn’t think they were lying.

The police had opened a Missing Persons file, and they were sending a sergeant over to talk to them. Ariana wanted to be prepared for the meeting, and to look the part. She turned toward them, “Claus, what do you think of this scarf? I think it looks sophisticated, but casual, what do you think?”

“Oh, I agree,” he said, not even looking at her.

“Paul?” she said.

“Absolutely,” Paul said, giving her a grim smile.

Claus was dying for a drink, but both Paul and Ariana had warned him against drinking before noon with the police coming.

There was a knock on the door, and both Paul and Claus rose from their chairs. “Come in,” Ariana said.

The butler walked in alone, and the two men sat down with a huff. The butler came to Ariana, and said, “This note just came to the doorman downstairs, and they brought it right up.”

“Thank you,” Ariana said, looking back into the mirror, adjusting her scarf.

“Ma’am,” the butler said, shifting slightly on his feet, “it’s very unusual.”

“What do you mean?” Paul Bellamy said.

In answer, the butler showed the note to him. It was a plain, white business-sized envelope, and on its front had been written, with hand-blocked letters, ARIANA GRENTHAM.

Ariana came forward and snatched it out of his hands. “What the hell is that?”

“Be careful, for God’s sake, Ariana,” Paul said. “Just put it down on the table and let’s look at it.”

“Look at it, what are you talking about?” Claus said.

“It’s probably evidence,” Paul said, very slowly, “it’s probably a ransom note.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, how dramatic,” Ariana said.

Paul took the note and laid it down on Ariana’s dressing table. “Do you have a letter opener?” he asked.

“Yes, in the top drawer,” Ariana said.

Paul found the letter opener and carefully slit the envelope open, attempting to handle it as little as possible, in case there were any fingerprints. He turned it on its side, and a single piece of paper fell out. He turned it over and read, “We want \$20 million for the girl unharmed. You have two business days to accumulate the cash. We will be in touch.”

“\$20 million!” Claus exclaimed. “Well, problem solved. They can kiss my ass, and kill her, and we’re all the better for it,” he said.

“It’s not that simple,” Paul said, “you most likely have a responsibility to pay the ransom. You probably have to.”

“\$20 million! Are you crazy?” Claus yelled.

“Paul, what are you talking about?” Ariana said.

“You two have to try to remember that you’re not wealthy people,” Paul said, knowing that would really bother them. It did. They stood up much straighter, and Ariana pursed her lips. “You are merely the trustees for an extremely wealthy young woman.”

“Not if they kill her,” Claus said.

“You’re merely the trustees for her money,” Paul reiterated. “You have to pay the ransom. You have to.”

They both still looked at him as if he were crazy. “Okay, let me put it this way, if you don’t pay the money, and she is killed because of that, then you will have broken your fiduciary duty as trustees, and you will forfeit all the rights and benefits of trusteeship. Trusteeship will revert back to my firm, and then the Foundation would be dissipated as though there were no heir.”

“Oh,” Claus said, sitting down.

“I see,” Ariana said. She thought for a moment. “Well, do we have that kind of money handy?”

“Actually, we do,” Paul said. “The Foundation keeps an enormous amount of liquid assets, in money market accounts, that can be liquidated before the end of the day today, if required.”

“So that won’t be a problem,” Ariana said.

“No,” Paul answered.

“And there is always a chance that we could give them the money, and they’ll still kill her,” Claus said hopefully.

“Oh, shut up, Claus,” Ariana said.

There was another knock on the door. The butler came in and announced the sergeant from the NYPD was in their drawing room, waiting for them.

“Well, let’s go,” Ariana said. “Let’s save our little niece. Claus, don’t say anything stupid.”

They walked into the drawing room together to see a large black man standing there. He could easily have been a linebacker, so wide were his shoulders, and so thick was his neck. He was dressed in a brown shirt, and a darker brown suit. His receding hairline left a forehead which reflected the light from the chandelier above his head. “Mr. and Mrs. Grentham,” he said, shaking hands with Ariana, but looking back and forth between Claus and Paul, trying to determine who Mr. Grentham was.

“I’m Mr. Grentham,” Claus said, offering his hand.

“I’m Paul Bellamy, I’m a family friend, and also the family attorney,” he said.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Ariana offered graciously. “Can I offer you anything to drink?” she asked. The butler stood waiting to take care of anything he should require.

“No, thank you, Ma’am,” he said, taking out his notepad. “I just have a few questions to ask...”

“I’m afraid you haven’t introduced yourself, Detective... or is it Sergeant?” Paul said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the man said, standing again and extending his hand to Paul, “I’m Sergeant Ross.” He took Ariana’s hand, “Sergeant Ross.” Then to Claus, “I’m Sergeant Ross.”

Ariana and Claus looked at each other a little suspiciously. They were already nervous, and this sergeant didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

“Now, when did you first notice that your niece was missing?” he asked, flipping open his notebook again.

“It was yesterday morning, after she left for school. She never arrived,” Ariana said.

“I see,” Sergeant Ross said, writing it down.

“Actually, Sergeant,” Paul said, “I wonder if matters have changed.”

“I’m sorry?” Sergeant Ross said.

“We’ve received a ransom note, just about fifteen minutes ago,” Paul said.

“Oh,” Sergeant Ross said, “well, things have changed. Do you mind if I make a telephone call?”

“No, not at all,” Ariana said, “there’s a telephone in the foyer where you can have some privacy.”

“Oh, that’s alright, I have a telephone. It’s just... thanks,” Sergeant Ross said as he pulled out a mobile phone and walked into the foyer, punching numbers.

“What was that all about?” Claus demanded, looking at Paul.

“It’s federal now,” Paul said simply.

“What?” Claus said, now looking at Ariana.

“I have no idea,” Ariana said.

“Kidnapping is a federal crime. They’re going to have to call in the FBI,” Paul said. “I only thought of that right now.”

“Oh, really,” Ariana said, whispering now, hoping that Sergeant Ross wouldn’t hear. “I would think with the amount you make per hour, you might have thought of that before now.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Paul said, ignoring the sarcasm. “It’s a kidnapping; they’re calling in the FBI. There’s no other way it can go. And it’s fine. They know what they’re doing.”

“That’s wonderful,” Ariana said sarcastically, as Sergeant Ross came back into the room.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said. “I thought they’d pull me off, and they have. The FBI has been notified of your problem, and they’re going to be sending a couple of special agents over here, probably within the hour.” He made the rounds around the room again, shaking everyone’s hand, before the butler showed him out.

* * *

Ellie lay, facing the wall, this time with her hands in front of her, and it was much more comfortable. She was having great difficulty keeping track of time. Because there was nothing to do, she dozed quite a bit, and it made her sense of timelessness that much more acute. But she did know her uniform was filthy from the van, she felt dirty, and her head felt itchy. She wondered how long they were going to keep her, because at some point, she was going to want to get clean. When a man came in with her next meal, she asked him, “Am I going to be allowed to have a shower?”

The man looked at her without speaking. She wondered if he didn’t understand her English. She put her hand over head, as though it held a shower head. “You know,” she said, “a shower?” The man walked out of the room without saying anything.

Tears filled her eyes as she reached down and rubbed her wrists again, and stared at her fifth turkey sandwich. She suspected that if she ever got out of this alive, she was never going to eat turkey lunchmeat again.

* * *

Within an hour, as promised, Special Agents Howard and Crosby appeared at the door of the Park Avenue apartment. They immediately took over the situation, questioning each family member carefully and separately, and taking possession of the ransom note, to be sent to “the lab.” Where Sergeant Ross was comfortably inefficient, Special Agents Howard and Crosby were annoyingly efficient.

Claus, Ariana and Paul sat together in the drawing room, while Howard and Crosby searched Eleanore’s room. “That was simply horrible,” Ariana said. “I can’t remember the last time I was treated with such disrespect. I can’t understand how agents of our own government can come into a private home, from which, it should be blatantly obvious, it derives a great deal of money in the form of taxes, which pay their paltry salary. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been treated that way. I felt as though I were a criminal. It was right off of television, ‘where was I on the evening of blah, blah, blah.’ I would have laughed out loud if I weren’t so angry.”

“Quite right,” Claus said, “I didn’t know the answers to half of the questions they asked me, but that didn’t stop them from asking the questions over and over and over, phrasing them in different ways each time, as though I were going to know the answer if they changed the verb tense. It was humiliating. What does Eleanore like to do in the evenings? What does she like to eat? What are her daily habits?”

“I know,” Ariana said. “It was awful. ‘Why does Eleanore sleep in the servant’s wing when there are other family bedrooms available?’ And when I told them I understood that’s where she wanted to sleep, well the look I got! And now they’re in there questioning the servants. Who knows what they’ll say?”

“Indeed,” Claus said. “They would joyfully take any opportunity to say something against us, I’m sure, out of sheer jealousy. I have half a mind to fire the entire lot if they make so much as one derogatory statement.”

“I would support you wholeheartedly,” Ariana said, silently seething. She was also wishing that she could have a drink. Since it was now well into the afternoon, it was certainly appropriate, but the agents had upset her so much, and made her feel so guilty, she didn’t want to take a drink until after they’d gone.

Paul looked with amusement at the two of them. “They’re just doing their jobs, and if they made you feel guilty, then they’re doing their jobs well.”

Ariana gave him a glare.

“I’m serious, Ariana. As uncomfortable as it may have seemed, those men are trained in the method of interrogation, and they probably learned an awful lot more about you than you were willing to tell them. That’s what they do. But I wouldn’t worry, I’m sure they just discovered that you are in charge of a lot of money, and that you are both very self-protective because of that. Because they deal with kidnappings, I’m sure they deal with wealthy people all the time.”

“Yes, well,” Ariana said, “it’s uncomfortable, and I can’t wait until it’s all over.”

“Hear, hear,” Claus said.

* * *

Ellie asked for a shower again, the next time someone came in with her food, and they said, in German-accented English, “tomorrow.”

“Well, at least they’re studying their English, so they can speak to me,” Ellie thought. She was still having a great deal of trouble figuring out how much time was passing, although she knew it was passing unbelievably slowly. She could make guesses, based on the fact that she believed they were bringing her three meals a day. She thought she might go mad, not having anything to read, or anyone to talk to, to pass the time. She jealously thought of the little television that sat in the other room, and wished they would let her watch it for awhile. After the man had taken out the tray and table, and bound her again, Ellie laid down on the cot and let herself really cry for the first time. She knew she had been kidnapped, and that they weren’t bunglers, either. They knew what they were doing. They were constantly on their guard, and they never let her see what they looked like, or guess where she was. The only problem was her aunt and uncle were the only ones who could possibly get her out of this mess, and she was quite

certain they weren't going to bother. These men had made a terrible miscalculation, and they were probably going to take it out on her once they realized she wasn't going to bring them any money.

Ellie let the tears pour down her cheeks as she cried silently. She wondered what she should be doing to prepare her soul, in case of the very real possibility that her life was going to end soon. She attended an Episcopalian Church with her aunt and uncle every now and again, but she had never had any sort of religious instruction. She felt sure there was some type of God, but she couldn't guess what form he took. She laid back and let herself begin praying, trying to think of the times that she had been rude, or selfish, or thoughtless, and asked forgiveness. She didn't hesitate to ask God to help her out of the fix she was in, either.

* * *

Special Agents Howard and Crosby now sat side-by-side on the couch in the drawing room, looking down at their notes, while Ariana, Claus and Paul waited, not so patiently. "Okay," Howard said finally, "here's what we know so far. We've got a ransom note. It was hand-delivered to the doorman of your building. It was hand-delivered by a downtown messenger service. It was given to them by a man who walked into their headquarters and paid in cash. He was approximately 5'10" tall, about 180 pounds, had medium-brown hair, and probably hazel eyes... essentially Joe Normal. The only distinguishing feature we have is a potential accent. Of course, the receptionist at the desk who talked with the man couldn't place the accent, because the man didn't talk much, and she didn't recognize it, but we'll keep working with her, to see if we can get any more."

Crosby said, "If we're lucky, I think we can expect them to continue using this method of communication. It's very smart. They'll go to a different messenger service the next time, but we've notified all of the messenger services in the area, and there are a lot of them, to be on the lookout for cash transactions."

The bell on the door rang quietly. Ariana and Claus looked at one another expectantly. Howard and Crosby looked back and forth between the two of them. "Are one of you going to get that?" Crosby asked.

Ariana looked shocked, and said, "Certainly not."

The butler glided by, and went out in to the foyer. They heard the door opening, and a muffled conversation. The two agents stood and moved toward the door. The butler came back in, with another envelope, and he handed it to Howard. "I've asked the doorman's assistant to wait in the hallway. I assume you'll want to speak to him."

"Thank you, very much," Crosby said. "We certainly will." He went out into the hallway.

Agent Howard took the envelope and dropped it onto the table. He took a pair of plastic gloves out of the large brown case he had brought with him. He very gently used an extremely

sharp letter opener to slit the top of the envelope. Taking a pair of tweezers, he tipped the envelope on its side until the paper inside fell out onto the table. He then turned the piece of paper over with his tweezers, and leaned over to examine it.

Ariana, Claus and Paul all leaned over as well, trying to get a good look at what the note said. Howard looked up at all of them, and, at his look, they all sat back down. Ariana looked over at Claus and said, "Really!"

Howard continued to look at the note, examining it carefully. "Can't you at least tell us what it says?" Claus said. "I assume it was addressed to one of us, and not to you."

Howard looked up at Claus with a puzzled surprise. He seemed not to be terribly interested in the social niceties and formalities associated with the note. He continued to work on the piece of paper, taking out his fingerprint kit, and brushing it all over with a black powder. Ariana exclaimed as she saw the fluffy black dust floating in the air, knowing that it would be settling on her lovely furniture.

"Nope, nothing," Howard said to Crosby, who had come back into the room, and was now leaning over the note, watching Howard work.

"Well, we assumed that," Crosby said.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Paul said, very quietly and politely. Agent Crosby looked up. "May we know what the note says, please?"

Crosby stood up straight. "Yes, of course," he said. "It says that Mrs. Grentham, here, is supposed to take the subway tomorrow afternoon to Canal Street, go into The Golden Duck, a Chinese restaurant, and leave the money in a case in the cupboard underneath the sink in the ladies room there."

"Good Lord," Claus said.

"Oh, my goodness," Ariana said.

"Yes, it's upsetting," Crosby said.

"I have to take the subway?" Ariana said.

Paul looked over at the agents, quickly changing the subject. "That shouldn't be very difficult to stake out, should it? I mean, assuming that's what you want to do."

"Yes, that's probably what we'll do," Howard said, ignoring the subway comment. "I think they'll assume that we'll be involved, and they'll have taken precautions. We're very interested in following if we're able to, but these things are a gamble. We can only hope the girl will be returned safely once the money is turned over. There is no proof of life offered, and no

guarantee, either, that we'll be able to track them. I assume your major concern is getting the girl back."

Ariana and Claus said nothing, looking instead at the note. Paul spoke up quickly, "Yes, certainly; that is our main concern."

Howard paused a moment, "Yes, well, we will be watching you every step of the way, so don't worry about being in any danger yourself."

Ariana obviously hadn't even thought of that. Her eyes flew open, and she said, "I'm not going to do this."

Howard and Crosby looked at her. She repeated, "I'm not going to do this. It's bad enough one member of our family is in horrible danger. I'm not going to just put myself in the line of fire. I'm not going to place myself in a position where I have to deal with exactly the same people. Who's to say they won't kidnap me?"

"Well, I don't think they would have kidnapped Eleanore, either, if they suspected she was being watched. And they certainly will suspect that you will be watched," Crosby said.

"I agree; I think it's an unreasonable risk," Claus said.

Paul stood. "Agents Howard and Crosby, would you mind if I spoke to my clients privately?"

"No," Howard said, "not at all."

"Thank you," Paul said, "Ariana, Claus, may I speak with you in the other room, please?"

The two shrugged themselves up from their chairs like a couple of adolescents, and followed Paul into Claus' study, just off the drawing room.

"Are you insane?" he whispered.

"I think I'm the only one who's not insane," Ariana said, "I'm not putting my neck in a noose."

"First of all, Ariana, it's not an unreasonable risk. They'll be following you," Paul began.

"On the subway..." Claus interrupted.

"It's not a sewer, Claus," Paul snapped, but turned back to Ariana. "Look, I'm just going to explain this one more time. You have to do everything you can to save the beneficiary of the trust... Eleanore... or you can kiss the money goodbye, and I mean, like, immediately."

Ariana took a deep breath. "Well, it seems there's nothing I won't have to stoop to."

Claus clapped her on the shoulder, “Steady, dear. I think you’re being remarkably brave.”

Paul opened the door, and the three walked back into the drawing room, where Crosby and Howard waited patiently.

“I’ll do it,” Ariana said.

“Okie-dokie,” Crosby said. “Let’s get down to business then. He spread out some papers in front of him. “Here’s how it’s going to go.”

Chapter Five

Ellie woke the next morning, she guessed, and received yet another turkey sandwich. However, this time when the man came back to take her tray and table, he removed her leg shackles, but put her hands behind her back again. She was about to protest, but when he pushed her to her feet, she let the words die on her lips. Something different was happening, different from the schedule she had been kept on for the past few days. She was taken out into the center room, and the men quickly put a blindfold on her, and then put a gag into her mouth. Her heart was beating madly, her nerves jangling uncontrollably, and she knew she was visibly shaking. “What in the world is happening now?” she wondered, feeling like crying, but being far too scared to.

They led her forward, and through a couple of sets of doors. She didn’t know how long they were walking before they came to a stairway. The man holding her arms kicked her leg forward, so that her toe hit the bottom stair. She felt very carefully, and found her foothold, and slowly made her way up the stairs without her eyes to help her, or her hands to find her way. A man stood on either side of her, with hands on her elbows, helping to guide her so she wouldn’t fall. They went up approximately three flights of stairs, she guessed, before coming again to smooth ground, which felt like concrete beneath her feet. She felt so frozen and scared that it was difficult to walk, and she thought she might vomit at any moment. She walked along another few feet, she guessed, and then was lifted bodily by two of the men. She was grateful that when they grabbed her, they didn’t attempt to touch her anywhere private. Perhaps they were deliberately attempting not to violate her, or perhaps, after three days without a shower, she was so disgusting that they wouldn’t bother.

She was placed, she guessed, back into the van in which they had taken her. One of the men helped her to sit on a little rise, which felt like the tirewell, and held her arm, so she didn’t fall off to either side. Ellie wanted desperately to ask them where they were taking her, but her gag prevented it, and she guessed that they were unlikely to tell her, even if they understood what she was asking. She felt the nappy fabric of the gag against her tongue, and tried not to concentrate on it, because it was literally making her gag. She did not want to throw up. She sat still and prayed to the God she knew that she would be alright.

* * *

Back at the apartment, Ariana was being wired by a female agent. She held her tongue as the woman fumbled and fought with the device. It was being clipped to the back of her collar, and she winced inwardly as the female agent’s hands touched her neck. Ariana didn’t even like her own husband touching her, let alone a complete stranger. She had known her masseuse, Hulda, for years, and knew how often Hulda washed her hands, so that didn’t bother Ariana, but the female officer did, with her calloused fingers. Ariana felt a bit faint, and breathed deeply through her mouth as Claus looked on with sympathy in his eyes. “Easy there, old girl,” he said.

Ariana turned and glared at him. At that moment, Paul walked in the door, together with a young man in a Brinks security uniform. The young man put down two large black duffel bags, which contained the \$20 million. “Good Lord,” Ariana said. “Is that the money?”

Paul said, "It is." He signed a form and handed it back to the security guard.

"I thought they said to have it in a briefcase," Ariana said. "What's all in there?"

"Ariana," Paul said patiently, "\$20 million dollars, even in \$100 bills, doesn't fit into any known briefcase."

"That's all \$100 bills?" Claus said, amazed.

"Yes," Paul said, looking back and forth between the two of them, watching them nearly drool. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes," they both said together.

Paul looked over to Agent Howard, who nodded. He reached down and opened first one duffel bag, then the other. Inside, were neatly bound and stacked \$100 bills. "My goodness," Claus said. "That's \$20 million sitting right there. I can hardly believe it."

Agent Crosby said, "That's your niece's life, right there." He was put off by the Grentham's attitude, and although he had dealt with many odd rich people in this, his specialty, he didn't think he had ever met a couple who were so unconcerned about their loved one. He had them pegged within the first two minutes as shallow, selfish people who had to think twice about paying their niece's ransom, even though they could easily afford to part with the money.

Ariana ignored him and stared at the money. "Well, it's impertinent to discuss it, because whether it's a beautiful new home in Hobe Sound, and a boat to anchor at the dock, or the money that will bring Eleanore back, the fact is it's no longer ours, and not worth thinking about." Of course, though, she had thought about it. For a split second, it occurred to her that she might grab the bags and run like hell. The only thing that wiped it quickly out of her mind was the presence of the FBI agents, who would certainly be only a step or two behind her. It was fun to think of for a moment, though. Just grabbing a bunch of money and heading for the hills, all by herself. Although it seemed great in theory, Ariana knew it wouldn't even be twenty-four hours before she was calling, asking to return. She was helpless without her staff, her financial advisors, and her many beauty appointments. When she thought about all the money could buy, though, she was sick to have to turn it over.

"A new home in Hobe Sound," Claus said, looking at the money and clicking his tongue.

Agent Crosby looked at him with disgust. "Alright," he said. "Are we ready?"

"Yup," the female officer said, putting the final touches on Ariana's monitor, and testing it against the listening devices they had set up across the length of the large table in the drawing room. She determined it was, indeed, functioning correctly, and she gave the other agents the thumb's-up sign.

“Let’s get going,” Crosby said, taking Ariana by the arm, and lifting the two bags himself. Together, they took the elevator down to the first floor and walked out of the building. He accompanied Ariana as far as the 96th Street subway station, and helped her put the two bags onto her shoulders. Then he stood and waited.

Ariana seemed puzzled. “You’re not coming with me?” she said, looking very nervous.

“No, I’m not, but there will be somebody watching, don’t worry. And don’t look around, trying to figure out who it is, either. The agents will do a much better job if they are unobserved. But we won’t let you get mugged.”

Another look of fright passed over Ariana’s face. Clearly, she hadn’t thought of that. “Well, what do I do now?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “You just go down there and buy a token and get on the Subway. You’ll take it about 14 stops, to Canal Street.”

Ariana looked at him blankly. It took everything he had not to roll his eyes. “I’ll go down with you.” He walked with her down to the booth, and bought her a token. He walked her to the turnstile and said, slowly, “You’re going to get on the next train going this way,” he pointed in the right direction. “You’re going to find a seat. You’re going to sit down, and listen carefully. Every time the train stops, the conductor will announce the name of the station. In about 14 stops, he will say ‘Canal Street.’ You’ll get off the train. You’ll follow the signs to Canal Street, and go up there. When you reach the street level, you’ll see the restaurant directly in front of you. Cross the street, take the bags upstairs to the ladies room, and leave them there in the cupboard underneath the sink.”

“Won’t somebody take them from the cupboard?” she asked.

“We’ll be watching, and making sure just any old girl doesn’t walk in there and grab the bags,” he said.

“How will you know who’s who?” Ariana asked.

“We’ve been doing this for awhile,” he said. “We’ll be able to tell the difference between the professional pickup, and any random opportunist who sees an unguarded bag in a bathroom.”

“Okay,” she said, still hesitating.

He gave her a little shove, perhaps a little harder than it needed to be. “Off you go,” he said.

Ariana went through the turnstile, and readjusted the bags on her shoulders. She hoped it looked like she was just another tourist on her way to the airport, or to her hotel. “Of course,” she thought bitterly to herself, “when I travel, it’s on a private plane, and my bags are Louis

Vuitton, not these plastic crappo gym bags.” She looked around at the variety of people around her, and tried not to look too disdainful. It was a cross-section of humanity she was unused to.

The train came, and Ariana got on. She looked around for a seat and saw all of the seating surfaces were made of an unyielding metal surface, thinly covered by a leather imitation of some sort. There was painted graffiti and stained surfaces, and many of the seat covers were torn or cut with knives. She sniffed and determined that she would be brave. She sat down, and put the two bags down in front of her feet, hanging onto the handles. She tried not to look as though the bags contained \$20 million in cash. She felt as though anybody who looked at her could read her mind, though. A man sitting across from her caught her eye, and gave her a wink. She was momentarily stunned, but recovered herself, and looked away. From that point on, she studiously avoided making eye contact with anyone. She sat gripping the handles of the bags, and watching the train stops as they went by.

“Good Christ, what is that smell?” she asked herself, feeling herself nearing tears. It was all she could do to sit calmly and pray for the Canal Street stop to come soon.

Eventually, the conductor said, “Canal Street,” and Ariana rose. She slung first one bag onto her shoulder, and then another. She took a deep breath, and waited for her turn to exit the train. As she stepped out into the station, she thought, “I sincerely hope that is my first and last ride on the subway.”

She saw the signs for Canal Street, and walked in that direction, following the steps that took her up to the street. The Golden Duck Chinese restaurant was directly in front of her, as they had told her. She hurried across the street, thinking how close she was to being done with this terribly dangerous and unpleasant thing she was doing.

She walked into the restaurant, and looked around immediately to find the stairs. They were directly in front of her, about 20 feet away. She realized she probably shouldn’t draw attention to herself by being in such a hurry, but she wanted it to be over so badly she could barely restrain herself from running. She went up the stairs and opened the door to the ladies room. She went in and was immediately assaulted by a stench that was worse than the subway. She didn’t know whether to burst into tears, or to vomit. She decided to just hold her breath and chuck the bags underneath the cabinet and get the hell out of there. She opened the cabinet, and discovered there was nothing inside, no cleaning products, no nothing. That might have seemed unusual, but she thought with this class of clientele, the management was probably afraid anything they left out would be stolen. She stuffed the first bag underneath, and then gave it a shove with her foot, in order to make plenty of room for the second bag. She stuffed that one in, and gave it a shove with her foot, too. It wasn’t tidy, but it fit in well enough to shut the cabinet doors. She did that, and left the bathroom, and then the restaurant as fast as she could.

She stepped outside onto Canal Street, and took a deep breath of what was comparatively clean air. She then immediately hailed a taxi, having no intention whatsoever of taking the subway back to her home. She jumped into the first available taxi, and nearly shouted at the poor driver, “Park Avenue!”

* * *

At the same time as Ariana was having her near-nervous breakdown, Agents Howard and Crosby were keeping track of her movements from back at the apartment via radio communication with the other agents who were placed around the subway route, and then the restaurant, in order to keep an eye on the money. Several times during her trip, the agents had transmitted information about her behavior, and it was hard not to laugh. If they hadn't been so closely observed by both Claus and Paul, who had each stationed themselves firmly, right by the communications equipment, the agents might have had a chuckle or two at her expense. After the placement of the bags was made, they all stayed in their places and waited. "Any movement yet?" Howard asked.

"Nope, nothing," said a businessman, seated at one of the tables of the Golden Duck, seemingly intently reading his copy of The Wall Street Journal. As the minutes ticked by, and innocuous people came in and out of the bathroom, the agents began to become more nervous. "What should we do?" asked the agent/businessman.

Agent Howard breathed deeply as he sat lost in thought. He said, "Alright, Jackson, you go in, real quiet, and tell me what you see."

A young woman, dressed colorfully as a bicycle messenger, who had been reading a book and idly picking at her Chicken Lo Mein, got up and folded her book under her arm. She threw her container into the trash, and walked up the stairs to the Ladies Room. She walked in, closed the door behind her, and said "All clear."

The agent/businessman who was observing her trip up the stairs saw that no one was following her, and said, "All clear."

She quickly opened the doors to the cabinet and saw the large, empty space. "It's gone," she said simply. She got to her knees, and looked underneath the cabinet to get a better view.

"It's gone?" Agent Howard said, standing up.

Claus and Paul had been watching all of this exchange with interest. Claus looked over at Paul with a question in his eyes. Paul shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a false back to this cabinet," the female agent said.

"Dammit!" Agent Howard shouted. "Move in."

The restaurant was all-of-a-sudden buzzing with activity. Three other agents revealed themselves as diners, and sprung into action, rushing up the stairs. Other agents with FBI jackets came in through the front and side doors of the restaurant. The doors were secured, and as soon as the agents discovered the opening to the false wall in a neighboring apartment, they secured that building as well.

"Somebody tell me something," Agent Howard said. The front door opened, and Ariana walked in, pale and shaking weakly from her ordeal.

“There’s nothing, Sir. They’re gone.” There was no trace of the kidnappers, either in the restaurant, or in the building next door. There was a vacant apartment, through which a large hole in the wall had been cut, leading into the cabinet in the Ladies Room. They had obviously set up shop in a few days, and had breezed out with the money seconds after Mrs. Grentham dropped it off.

Claus, Ariana and Paul had all been listening to the turn of events. “Excuse me,” Claus said, “didn’t you people check that out before today?”

Agent Howard looked over at Claus with irritation. “We did check it out. They had masked the wall with a piece of cardboard, painted the same shade as the wall, and the hole wasn’t visible.”

“If it were me, I would have rapped on the wall with my knuckle,” Claus said, clearly enjoying Howard’s annoyance.

“If we had gotten too close, they might have shied away,” Howard said, turning away from Claus and effectively ending the conversation.

“These are the people we’ve trusted with \$20 million? Not to mention Eleanore’s life?” Claus asked Paul. The agents pretended not to hear his snide remark.

Paul said nothing for a moment, and then asked, “Well, what happens now? When will we be getting Eleanore back?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Howard said, seemingly caught up in the paperwork in front of him.

“We’ve probably just given away \$20 million for nothing,” Ariana said. “And I know that I need a shower.” She headed off toward her bedroom, “I don’t think I’ll ever feel clean again.” She took off her brown trench coat, and tossed it to the butler, “Throw that out,” she said.

Claus watched Ariana head out of the room, briefly looked over at the three agents, talking on their radios. He asked Paul, “How did you get the money out of the Foundation, anyway? Where was it pulled from?”

“We took it from the discretionary account for this year,” Paul said, knowing that Claus was about to have a conniption.

He wasn’t wrong. Claus sat up in his chair. “Is it going to be reimbursed?”

Paul shook his head, “It was nearly all of the discretionary funding amount for this year. There won’t be additional discretionary funds available until February of next year.”

“February?” Claus shouted. The agents turned to look at him.

Paul saw them turn to look, "Claus, keep your voice down," he said.

"We won't have discretionary money available until February? Don't you realize how important the discretionary money is? We have to have the flexibility to dispense funds in an instant if a particularly valuable giving opportunity presents itself. That's the most important part of the Foundation. Certainly, its scheduled giving is extremely important, but the discretionary funds... well that's our freedom to help out our friends when they come to us," Claus said, his face turning slightly red just above his tight collar and pale blue polka dot bow tie.

Paul knew exactly what he was talking about, and he had already known Claus and Ariana would be angry. They derived a great deal of their social power and prestige from their ability to command funds from the Foundation. Their society "friends" came to them, and kissed up to them, and, in return, were given large donations to the charities of their choice. The Grentham's social status would take a small blow this year.

"Of course you can explain to your friends what led to the change of circumstances, and I'm sure they would be more than sympathetic," Paul said.

Claus looked at him with disdain. "Bloodsuckers. They will understand no such thing. They only thing they understand is a big, fat check." He sat quietly seething, imagining the reception he would get at his private club after turning down anyone who came to him. He would immediately slide in estimation, and he knew that. "I need a drink," he said.

"Claus," Paul warned, hoping to point out that it wasn't even noon yet.

Claus ignored him, and went over to the corner cabinet, which housed a fully-stocked bar, and exquisite Baccarat crystal glasses. He poured himself a scotch and tossed it back quickly. He poured himself another one, and took that one with him as he stalked toward Ariana's room.

The agents watched the entire process, and their keen investigatory abilities told them Claus' rather florid complexion, and rather swollen-looking nose, was due to taking many such drinks prior to noon.

* * *

Claus tapped on the door that led into Ariana's dressing room. When there was no answer, he went in. He shut the door behind him, and heard the shower running. He sat down in one of Ariana's comfortable chairs, and sat, feeling sorry for himself, while he waited for her to finish. He heard the water shut off, and took another sip of his drink. A few moments later, Ariana came out, without makeup, and with her hair wet and slicked back against her skull. She jumped when she saw him sitting in the chair. "Claus!" she said. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

“You nearly gave me one, too,” he said. “I can’t remember the last time I saw you without makeup on.”

“You’re a shit,” she said, sitting down at her makeup table, switching on the lights that surrounded the mirror.

“Oh, that’s fine talk,” he said. “Did you hear that one on the subway?”

She pointedly ignored him and she gathered her makeup, with various labels of Dior, Chanel, Lancôme and La Prairie, and meticulously set it out on the surface of her dressing table.

“I can’t believe you got your hair wet,” he said. “Who’s going to blow it out for you?”

“It couldn’t be helped,” Ariana snapped, turning toward him. “Do you have any idea what I’ve just been though?” she asked. “I got on the subway. The subway... with its disgusting mass of humanity, and complete lack of quality control. A man winked at me, for God’s sake.”

“Oh, dear,” Claus said.

“Then I rode that subway for about fifteen minutes, watching people come and go, with \$20 million sitting on the floor by my feet. At the Canal Street station,” she said, spitting each consonant out, “I went upstairs and went into an extremely low-rent Chinese food restaurant, and proceeded upstairs to their completely public bathroom. The smell in there was something I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

“Steady, dear,” Claus said, sympathetically.

“So I think you can understand why I felt I needed to disinfect myself from head to toe,” she said.

“Yes, dear. I was being thoughtless.” He paused for a moment. “What are you doing about the hair?” he asked.

“I explained the situation to Geoffrey, and he’s on his way,” she said.

“Ah, wonderful,” Claus said, pausing a moment. “Of course, that’s not the worst of it,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Ariana asked, running her wide-tooth Frederic Fekkai comb through her hair.

“Guess where the \$20 million came from?” he said.

“From the Foundation,” she said, beginning to apply her Yves Saint Laurent foundation.

“Yes, but do you know from where in the Foundation?” he said.

“Stop being so mysterious,” she said. “What are you trying to say?”

“It’s from the discretionary fund. In fact, it’s nearly all of the discretionary fund,” he said, waiting for that to sink in.

It only took a moment for the smooth movements of Ariana’s foundation brush to slow and then to stop. She turned around, “from the discretionary fund?”

“Yes,” he said simply.

“The discretionary fund is gone?” she asked, not quite believing it.

“At least for this calendar year, it is,” he said.

“You’re kidding,” she said.

“I’m not kidding,” he said, “that’s what Paul just told me.”

“Well, what are we going to do? Do you have any idea how important that discretionary fund is to us? That’s everything! This apartment and the houses and the airplane are great, and our allowance tides us over, but without the ability to give to our friend’s charities at a moment’s notice, we’re nothing. We’re nothing in New York City, or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“I understand that, dear. Can you imagine my standing at the Union League Club without being able to give financial support to the charities of my peers?” he said, feeling quite terrible for himself.

“Can you imagine my standing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art? I might conceivably lose my board seat. Our table at the Costume Gala is out of the discretionary fund.” Ariana turned pale.

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” he said, sipping on his drink. “\$20 million of our contributing power, just gone, like that,” he said, snapping his fingers.

“Just think of all the good that we had intended to do with that money,” Ariana said self-righteously. “And I had to stuff it into a cupboard in a filthy public bathroom, all because of Eleanore.”

“If it had been up to me, I wouldn’t have given two cents,” Claus said.

The two of them sat quietly together, contemplating the bruising their social standing was going to take that year.

* * *

At that moment, Ellie still sat in the back of the green van, wondering what was to happen next. She was jounced up and down uncomfortably several times, when the van went over a bump, her tailbone smacking repeatedly on the tirewell. Her thoughts were chaotic, and filled with fear. Were they going to let her go? Were they just transferring her to another place? If so, why? Or, far worse, were they taking her somewhere to be killed? She sat praying quietly to herself as she felt the van pull to a stop. She was breathing very heavily as one of the men removed her blindfold. She looked about the van to see a total of three men, all dressed as they had been all along, with their black masks and green work clothes.

The man who had just taken off her blindfold gave her gag a gentle tug. Then he moved his gloved hands up to his mouth, and made a turnkey motion. She nodded her head, showing that she understood that they were about to take off her gag, and that she wasn't to make any noise. They did so, and she remained quiet. The man reached down and removed the shackles that bound her ankles, and then removed the handcuffs that bound her wrists. She reached up and massaged the tender skin, which had been rubbed nearly raw. That man turned around to the other man by the door and nodded his head. The door was slid open, and the man who had removed her shackles took Ellie by the hand. He gently helped her out of the van, and onto the sidewalk. She stood there, shocked and unbelieving, as the man gave her a little salute, and slid the door shut again. The van drove off, leaving Ellie standing with her mouth open.

Eleanor Grentham is, living with, and barely tolerated by, her wealthy aunt and uncle on the Upper East Side of New York City. Having been orphaned at an early age, she has no clear idea of her place in the world, but she is tops in her class at the most prestigious school in the city and has big plans for herself. Her world is turned upside-down when she discovers a family secret that's been hidden from her since her birth. Nothing is what it seems, and she finds herself making her way in an unfamiliar world.

From the exclusive streets of Manhattan to the castles of Austria, the finest resorts and game preserves of Kenya, and back, can Ellie succeed with all of the new challenges placed before her, and can she choose the right man to help her do it?



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