

Chapter 1

HOW LONG DID it take to examine one little old lady? Patience paced the length of the hospital emergency room for what felt like the hundredth time. What was taking so long?

"Excuse me." She knocked on the glass window separating the admissions desk from the rest of the emergency waiting area. "My...grandmother...has been back there for a long time." She figured the lie would get her more sympathy than saying "my employer." Luckily there'd been a shift change; the previous nurse on duty would have called her on it. "Is there any way I can find out what's happening?"

The nurse gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, we're really busy today, and things are backed up. I'm sure a doctor will be out to talk with you soon."

Easy for her to say. She hadn't found her employer crumpled at the foot of a stairwell.

Ana's cry replayed in her head. Frail, weak. If only she hadn't been in the other room...if only she hadn't told Nigel he needed to wait for his dinner, then Ana wouldn't be here. She'd be having her tea in the main salon like she did every afternoon.

Patience couldn't help her sad, soft chuckle. A year ago she didn't know what a salon was. Goes to show how much working for Ana had changed her life. If only Ana knew how she'd rescued Patience, taking her from the dark and dirty and bringing her into a place that was bright and clean.

Of course, Ana couldn't know. As far as Patience was concerned, her life started the day she began cleaning house for Anastasia Duchenko. Everything she did beforehand had been washed away.

The hospital doors opened with a soft whoosh, announcing the arrival of another visitor. Immediately, the atmosphere in the room changed, and not because of the June heat disrupting the air-conditioning. The conversations stilled as all attention went to the new arrival. Even the admissions nurse straightened. For a second, Patience wondered if a local celebrity had walked in. The air had that kind of expectancy.

His tailored shirt and silk tie screamed superiority as did his perfect posture. A crown of brown curls kept his features from being too harsh, but only just. No doubt about it, this was a man who expected to be in charge. Bet he wouldn't be kept waiting an hour.

The man strode straight to the admissions window. Patience was about to resume her pacing when she heard him say the name Duchenko.

Couldn't be a coincidence. This could be the break she needed to find out about Ana. She combed her dark hair away from her face, smoothed the front of her tee shirt and stepped forward. "Excuse me, did I hear you ask about Ana Duchenko?"

He turned in her direction. "Who's asking?"

For a moment, Patience lost the ability to speak. He was looking down at her with eyes the same shade as the blue in a flame, the hue so vivid it couldn't possibly be real. Lit with intensity, they were the kind of eyes that you swore were looking deep inside your soul. "Patience," she replied, recovering. "I'm Patience Rush."

She didn't think it possible for his stare to intensify but it did. "Aunt Anastasia's housekeeper?"

His aunt. Suddenly Patience realized who she was talking to. This was Stuart Duchenko, Ana's great-nephew, the one who called twice a week. Actually, as far as she knew, the only Duchenko relative Ana talked to. Patience didn't know why, other than there'd been some kind of rift and Ana refused to deal with what she called "the rest of the sorry lot." Only Stuart, who managed her financial affairs, remained in her good graces.

"I thought you were in Los Angeles," she said after he introduced himself. Ana said he'd been stuck there for almost a year while some billionaire's family argued over a will.

"My case finished yesterday. What happened?"

"Nigel happened." Nigel being Ana's overly indulged cat.

She could tell from Stuart's expression, he didn't find the answer amusing. Not that she could blame him under the circumstances. She wondered, though, if he would find the story amusing under any circumstances. His mouth didn't look like it smiled much.

"He was in the foyer meowing," she continued. "Letting everyone know that his dinner was late. Near as I can guess, when Ana came down the stairs, he started weaving around her ankles, and she lost her balance."

He raised a brow. "Near as you can guess?"

Okay, the man was definitely an attorney; Patience felt she was on trial with all the questions. Of course, that could also be her guilty conscience bothering her. "I was in the dining room polishing the silver. I heard Ana cry out, but by the time I got there, she was already on the floor." She shuddered, remembering. The image of Ana crumpled at the foot of the stairs, moaning, wouldn't leave her soon.

Ana's nephew didn't respond other than to stare long and hard in her direction before turning back to the admissions nurse. "I'd like to see my aunt, please," he said. It might have been said softly, like a request, but there was no mistaking the command in his voice.

The nurse nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Finally, they were getting somewhere. "I've been trying to get an update on Ana's condition since we arrived, but no one would tell me anything."

"Nor would they," he replied. "Privacy laws. You're not family."

Well, wasn't somebody feeling territorial. Never mind that she was the one who'd brought Ana in and filled out the admissions paperwork. Anyone with two heads could see she cared about the woman. What difference did it make whether she was family or not?

She had to admit, Ana's nephew wasn't at all what she expected. Ana was always talking about how sweet "her Stuart" was. Such a pussycat, she'd coo after hanging up the phone. The man standing next to her wasn't a pussy anything. He was far too predatory. She could practically smell the killer instinct.

Apparently, his singular request was all they needed, because less than a minute passed before the door to the treatment area opened, and a resident in pale green scrubs stepped out.

"Mr. Duchenko?" He headed toward Stuart, but not, however, before giving

Patience a quick once-over. Patience recognized the look. She folded her arms across her chest and pretended she didn't notice. The trick, of course, was to avoid eye contact.

Easy to do when the man wasn't looking at your eyes to begin with.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," the doctor continued. "We were waiting for the results of your great-aunt's CAT scan."

"How is she?"

"She's got a bimalleolar fracture of her left ankle."

"Bi what?" Patience asked, her stomach tightening a bit. Hopefully the medical jargon sounded more serious than it actually was.

The doctor smiled. "Bimalleolar. Both the bone and her ligaments were injured."

"Meaning what?" Stuart asked the same question she was thinking.

"Meaning she's going to need surgery to stabilize the ankle."

Surgery? Patience felt horrible. She should have been paying closer attention. "Is it risky?"

"At her age, anything involving anesthesia has a risk."

"She's in terrific health," Patience told him, more to reassure herself than anything. "Most people think she's a decade younger."

"That's good. The more active she is, the easier her recovery will be. You know, overall, she's a lucky woman to have only broken her ankle. Falls at her age are extremely dangerous."

"I know," Stuart replied. For some reason he felt the need to punctuate the answer with a look in her direction. "May we see her?"

"She's in exam room six," the doctor replied. "We'll be taking her upstairs shortly, but you're welcome to sit with her in the meantime."

Exam room six was really a curtained area on the far left-hand side of two rows of curtains. Stuart pulled back the curtain to find Ana tucked under a sheet while a nurse checking the flow of her IV. The soft beep-beep-beep of the machines filled the air. Seeing Ana lying so still with the wires protruding from the sleeve of her gown made Patience sick to her stomach. Normally, the woman was so lively it was easy to forget that she was eighty years old.

"We just administered a painkiller, so she might be a little out of things," the nurse told them. "Don't be alarmed if she sounds confused."

Stuart stepped in first. Patience followed and found him standing by the head of Ana's bed, his long tapered fingers brushing the hair from the elderly woman's face. "Tetya? It's me, Stuart."

The gentle prodding in his voice reminded her of how she would wake her baby sister, Piper, before school. It surprised her. He honestly didn't seem like the gentle type.

Ana's eyelids fluttered open. She blinked, then broke into a drunken smile. "What are you doing here?"

"That fall-alert necklace you refuse to wear notifies me when 911 gets called. I was on my way back from the airport when I got a message."

The smile grew a little wider. "Back? Does that mean you're home for good?"

"It does." "I missed you, lapushka."

"I missed you, too. How are you feeling?"

"Good, now you're here." Her gnarled hand patted his. "Is Nigel okay?"

"Nigel is fine."

"He was a naughty boy. Make sure you tell him I'm disappointed in him."

"I'll let him know." There was indulgence in his voice.

"Don't make him feel too guilty. He didn't mean it." The older woman's eyelids began to droop, sleep taking over once again.

"He's stubborn, like you."

"You go ahead and get some sleep, Tetya. I'm back home now. I'll take care of everything."

"Such a good boy. Not at all like your grandfather, thank goodness." She closed her eyes only to open them wide again.

"Patience?"

Until then, Patience had lingered at the foot of the bed, not wanting to crowd Ana any more than necessary. Upon hearing her name, she drew closer. "Yes, Ana?"

"There you are," Ana replied. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," she said.

"Yes, I do," the older woman insisted. "You take such good care of me."

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Stuart shift his weight and felt the moment his gaze slid in her direction. She kept her attention on Ana and pretended she couldn't see him. "I was only doing what any person would do. Now, why don't you get some rest?"

"Take care of Nigel while I'm here?"

"I will."

"Stuart, too."

She assumed Ana meant for her nephew to help take care of Nigel. Either that or this was the confusion the nurse mentioned, because the man next to her definitely didn't need taking care of. Certainly not from someone like her.

From the tick in his cheek, Stuart thought the same thing.

They stayed until a different nurse came to check Ana's vitals. The small space was barely big enough for two visitors, let alone three, so Patience stepped outside. To her surprise, Stuart followed.

"You know what's crazy?" she remarked. "That foolish cat causes her to break her ankle and he's still going to get gourmet cat food for dinner." A dinner that, she realized as she did the math in her head, was now several hours late.

Hopefully he didn't kick cat litter all over the kitchen floor in retaliation. Or worse, break her ankle.

Stuart was watching her again, his face as dour as before. Apparently drawing the exam room curtain closed off more than Ana's bed. "Are you positive Nigel tripped Ana?" he asked. That was dumb question. "Of course, I'm sure," she replied. I mean

I don't know for certain. But, it was dinnertime, and the cat does have this annoying habit of bothering the nearest warm body when he wants to eat. Why are you even asking?" Ana had already told him that the cat had caused the accident.

"Just want to make sure I have all the facts." Facts? For crying out loud, he sounded as if they were in one of those hour-long detective dramas. "Trust me,

you've got all the facts. Nigel is one horrendous pest." Not to mention spoiled rotten. "Besides, who else would trip her? I was the only other person in the house and I..." He didn't...

She glared up at him through her bangs. "You think I had something to do with Ana's accident?"

"Why would I think that? Ana blames Nigel." "Because Nigel tripped her." His mistrust was serious. Unbelievable.

No, actually, it was very believable. A guy like him, used to the cream of everything. Of course, he'd suspect the help. "Are you suggesting your aunt is lying?"

"Hardly."

"Then why would I be? Lying, that is."

"Did I say you were lying? I told you, I was simply gathering facts. You're the one who read deeper meaning into my questions." Immediately, she opened her mouth to protest, only to have him hold up a finger. "Although," he continued, "you can't blame me if I am suspicious."

Oh, couldn't she? The guy was practically insinuating—not practically—he was insinuating that she had pushed a helpless little old lady down a flight of stairs. "And why is that?" She folded her arms across her chest. This she had to hear.

"For starters, Aunt Ana hired you directly while I was in Los Angeles."

So that was it. The man was territorial. "In other words, you're upset because Ana didn't talk to you first."

"Yes, I am." Having been expecting a denial, Patience was surprised to hear him agree. "Normally, I vet my family's employees and you, somehow, managed to bypass the process. As a result, I don't know a damn thing about you. For all I know, you could be hiding some deep, dark secret." Patience's insides chilled. If only he knew...

Still, no matter what questionable decisions she'd made in her life, there were lines she'd never dream of crossing. Hurting a defenseless old lady being on top of the list. "You're right," she told him, "you don't know me."

Yanking back the curtain, she returned to Ana's side.

My, my, quite the bundle of moral outrage aren't we? Stuart ignored the twinge from his conscience as he watched Patience sashay behind the curtain. He refused to feel guilty for taking care of his family. After all, until eight months ago, he'd never heard of Patience Rush. Suddenly, the housekeeper was all his aunt could talk about. Patience this, Patience that. No need to worry about me, Stuart. Patience will take good care of me. Patience is moving into the brownstone. And the final straw... Patience takes care of writing out the checks now.

With Aunt Ana incapacitated, Patience would have an awful lot of power. Or rather, she would have, if he hadn't come home. He kicked himself for not being around the past eleven months. Now his aunt was attached to a stranger he knew nothing about. Ana might be sharp for her age, but when all was said and done, she was still an old woman living alone who had a soft spot for sob stories. Her big heart made her vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation.

It certainly wouldn't be the first time a pretty young thing had tried to grab a piece of the Duchenko fortune.

Unfortunately for Miss Rush, he was no longer a lonely twenty-year-old looking for affection. Nor was he still naive enough to believe people were as guileless as they appeared. Ana was the only family he had left. He'd be damned if he'd let her be burned the way he had been.

There was the rustle of a curtain, and Ana's gurney appeared on its way toward the elevator. As she passed by, the older woman gave him a sleepy wave. Stuart grabbed her hand and pressed the wizened knuckles to his lips. "See you soon, Tetya," he whispered.

"The surgical waiting area is on the third floor," the nurse told him. "If you want to stay there, we can let you know as soon as they're finished."

"Thank you."

Patience's soft voice answered before he had the chance. Immediately, his mouth drew into a tight line. "You're planning to wait, too?"

"Of course. I'm not going to be able to sleep until I know you're okay," she told Ana.

Ana smiled. "But Nigel..."

"Nigel will be fine," he said. While he wasn't crazy about Miss Rush hanging around, he wasn't about to start an argument over his aunt's hospital gurney. "Don't you worry."

"Besides, it'll do him good to wait," Patience added, "seeing as how this whole accident is his fault." She raised her eyes, daring him to say otherwise. "I promise, I'll go home and feed him as soon as you're out of surgery."

The sedatives were starting to kick in. Ana's smile was weak and sloppy. "Such a good girl," she murmured before closing her eyes.

Oh, yeah, a real sweetheart, he thought to himself. The way she so casually referred to the brownstone as home rankled him to no end. It was like ten years ago all over again, only this time, instead of a beguiling blonde worming her way into their lives, it was a brunette with hooded eyes and curves that wouldn't quit.

Interesting that she chose to downplay her sexuality. A tactical decision, perhaps? If so, it didn't work. A burlap sack couldn't mute those assets. Even he had to admit to a stir of appreciation the first time he saw her.

She was hiding more than her figure, too. Don't think he didn't notice how she looked away when he mentioned having secrets. There was a lot more to Patience Rush than met the eye. And he intended to find out what.

They spent the surgery on opposite sides of the waiting area, Stuart moving chairs together to create a makeshift work area while Patience made do with out-of-date women's magazines. Having read up on last fall's fashions and learned how to spot if her spouse was having an online affair, she was left with nothing to do but lean back in her chair and shoot daggers at Ana's nephew.

Who did he think he was, suggesting she had something to do with Ana's fall? Like she could ever. Anastasia Duchenko saved her life with this job. Every morning, she woke up grateful for the opportunity. To be able to walk down the street with her head held high. To not have to scrub herself raw to feel clean. Finally, she had a job she could be proud of. Be a person she could be proud of.

Even if the whole situation was built on a lie, she thought, guilt washing over

her the way it always did.

She wasn't proud of her behavior—add it to a long list of regrets—but she made amends every single day by working hard and taking care of Ana. You wouldn't find a better housekeeper and companion on Beacon Hill. She would never—ever—jeopardize the gift Ana had given her.

Tell Stuart Duchenko that, though. If he learned she'd lied her way into the job, he'd kick her to the curb before she could say but... And who knows what he'd do if he learned what she used to do for a living before finding Ana? She shuddered to think.

The sound of rustling papers caught her attention. Looking over, she saw Stuart pinching the bridge of his nose. The man looked worn-out. Patience had to admit, for all his jerkiness, he appeared genuinely concerned for his great-aunt. The adoration Ana talked about seemed to run both ways.

"Mr. Duchenko?" A small African-American nurse in a bright pink smock rounded the corner, bringing them both to their feet. "Dr. Richardson just called. He'll be down shortly to talk with you, but he wanted you to know that your aunt came through the surgery without problem and is on her way to recovery."

"Oh, thank goodness." The words rushed from Patience's mouth, drawing Stuart's attention. Their eyes met, and she saw agreement in their blue depths. In this, they were on the same page.

"Can we see her?" he asked.

"She'll be in recovery for several hours, I'm afraid," the nurse replied with a shake of her head. "In fact, considering the hour, they might not move her until morning. You're better off getting some sleep and coming back tomorrow."

Patience watched as a protest worked its way across the man's features. She had a feeling if he insisted, he'd get his way. Better judgment must have stepped in—either that or fatigue—because he nodded. "How long before Dr. Richardson gets here?"

"He said he was on his way down, so I don't think it'll be more than five or ten minutes."

It turned out to be closer to twenty. When he did arrive, Dr. Richardson gave a succinct report, without a whole lot of new information. They'd inserted a plate and some screws to stabilize the break. Ana came through the surgery without issue. They'd monitor her throughout the night for complications. No, he wasn't sure how long she'd need to stay in the hospital.

Still, Patience left the waiting room feeling that Ana was in good hands. Another plus: Stuart was on the phone so she was spared any more accusations. From here on in, she'd do her best to avoid the man.

A pair of angry green eyes greeted her when she unlocked the door to Ana's brownstone. Patience wasn't intimidated. "Don't give me attitude, mister. This whole night is your fault."

With what Patience swore was a huff, Nigel jumped down from the entryway table and ran toward the kitchen. An urgent wail traveled back to her ears a second later. "Puleeze," she called, "like you were ever in danger of starving."

Arms hugging her body, Patience made her way along the corridor, thinking the slap of her sandals against her feet sounded abnormally loud. It felt weird being

in the brownstone alone. While Ana went out a lot, the woman was seldom gone past eight o'clock and so her absence hung thick in the emptiness. A gleam caught Patience's eye as she passed the dining room. The silver set she'd been polishing when Ana fell still sat on the table, the cloth on the floor where she'd dropped it upon hearing Ana's cry. The moment replayed as she curled her fingers around the soft material, the image of her savior crumpled at the base of the stairs making her nauseous. Thank goodness, Ana was going to be all right.

Tomorrow she would work on making the house perfect for her return. Starting with making sure the tea set gleamed.

Nigel had resumed his meowing. Patience tossed the cloth on the table. "Oh, for goodness' sake, I'm coming. Five minutes will not kill you."

She turned around only to walk into a tall, muscular wall. "What the—" Why hadn't she brought the teapot along with her as a weapon?

Stuart Duchenko arched a dark eyebrow. Even in the partially lit hallway, his eyes shone bright. "Did I startle you?"

He knew perfectly well he had. "How did you get in?"

"Same way you did. With my key." He held up a key ring. "Or did you think you were the only one Ana gave access to?"

"Don't be silly. I didn't hear the doorbell is all." They were way too close. Close enough she could smell the breath mint he'd obviously just finished. She wasn't used to sweet smelling breath, not from men anyway. It caught her off guard, which had to be the reason she didn't step back at first contact. She stepped back now, and spied a pair of suitcases at the base of the stairs.

Seeing where her gaze had gone, he gave a shrug. "I sold my condominium before leaving for LA. Until I find a new place, this is more convenient than a hotel."

Convenient for what? Keeping an eye on her?

It was as if he read her thoughts. "Ana made the suggestion back when I first left. Of course, I'm sure she wasn't expecting to be in the hospital at the time. My being here won't be a problem for you, will it?" he asked. The gleam in his eye dared her to say that it was.

Patience would be damned if she'd give him the satisfaction. "Of course not. Why would your staying here be a problem for me?"

"Extra work for you. I know you're used to it being only you and Aunt Ana."

Another veiled comment. The man was full of them, wasn't he? "Extra work won't be a problem. Cleaning is cleaning. Besides, like you said, it's temporary, right?"

"We can only hope. I figure I'll stay until Ana gets back on her feet. Make sure there aren't any problems."

What kind of problems. Was he afraid Patience would take off with the silver? Why didn't he just come out and say what was really on his mind?

"You don't trust me, do you?"

"No, I don't."

Finally, the truth was out in the open. She appreciated the bluntness. Beat phony friendliness any day. Didn't mean she wasn't going to set him straight though.

"Your aunt trusts me. Are you saying Ana isn't a good judge of character?"

She stepped back into his personal space, making sure to maintain eye

contact and letting him know his answer didn't intimidate her one bit. The posture brought her close enough that she could smell his skin. Like his breath, his body smelled clean and fresh, despite having been traveling all day. An antsy, fluttering sensation started in the pit of her stomach. Butterflies, but with a nervous edge. The notion that she was out of her league passed briefly through her mind.

Stuart's eyes stayed locked with hers. A Mexican standoff, with each of them waiting for the other to blink. "My aunt has a generous heart. I, on the other hand..."

"Let me guess. You don't."

Patience sensed rather than saw his smile. "I prefer to lead with my head. Less chance for mistakes."

"Except, in this case, you're already mistaken."

"We'll find out, won't we?" he said. "Since I'll be living here, we'll have plenty of time to get acquainted. Who knows what secrets we'll learn about each other?"

Patience managed to wait until he disappeared upstairs before hissing. What was it with him and secrets? You didn't exactly help your cause, did you? Challenging him like that. A smart person would have let his comments pass, refused to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. But, nooo, she had to call him out. Might as well hold a sign over her head reading I've Got a Secret!

So much for leaving her past behind. She should have known that a future built on a lie—even an innocent one—wouldn't last. Ana was going to be so disappointed in her.

She bit her knuckle, forcing down her panic. No need to start packing just yet. This bluster was probably nothing more than a scare tactic to put her in her place. To make up for not having a say in hiring her, no doubt. A few days from now, after seeing how well Patience did her job, he'd back off and leave her alone.

It could happen, right?

CHAPTER 2

There was a weight vibrating on his chest. He must have left the door open when he came upstairs. "It better be light out, Nigel," he muttered. Freeing a hand from under the covers, he felt around until his fingers found fur. Immediately, the purring increased as Nigel leaned into the touch. A sad voice in his head noted this was the most action he'd had in his bed in way too long.

"Hey, be careful with the claws, buddy," he said when the cat began kneading the blanket. "I might need those parts someday." You never knew. A social life might spontaneously develop. Stranger things had happened.

At work, people considered him a workaholic, but the truth was, he'd never been what people would call popular. He discovered early that being a Duchenko heir meant being judged and misunderstood. As a kid, his awkwardness was labeled snobbery. As he got older, his social desirability was measured in terms of his bank account. He had to be constantly on guard, assessing the motives of every person that crossed his path. The one time he hadn't...well, that had taught him two more lessons: Don't let sex cloud your judgment and even family members will screw you over. Except for Ana, that is. Ana was the one family member who loved him for him.

Nigel's head butted his hand, a not so subtle way of saying more petting, less thinking. Giving a half sigh, Stuart opened his eyes, then blinked when he saw Nigel in perfect focus. He'd forgotten to take out his contact lenses again. No wonder his eyes felt as if they had sand in them. What time was it anyway? Yesterday had wiped him out so badly he barely remembered falling into bed.

Not too wiped out to go toe-to-toe with the housekeeper, though. It was a bit arrogant of him showing up without warning, but he'd wanted to catch her off guard. To see how she'd react to learning she wouldn't have the run of the brownstone.

Turned out she reacted to the blind side better than most of his legal opponents.

Most of his legal opponents didn't have eyes that lit up like chocolate diamonds, either. Dark and sinfully rich, their spark got his adrenaline going in a way practicing law sure didn't. A guy could make a career out of looking for ways to make those eyes light up.

What was that about not letting sex cloud his judgment? Ignoring Nigel's protest, he rolled onto his side and reached for the phone on the nightstand. It was early, he thought, noting the time, but not so early to reach an associate.

The ambitious ones practically slept at the firm. A few minutes of scrolling through his contacts found him the name he wanted.

Just as he expected, Bob Cunningham answered on the first ring. "Welcome back. I hear congratulations are in order." He was referring to the LA case.

"Too bad the former Mrs. Wentworth didn't come to her senses last year." Instead, she'd put her late husband's family through hell and sentenced Stuart to months of aggravation, not to mention opening the door for Patience Rush.

"There are a couple details to iron out that I'll talk to you about later. In the meantime, I need some background research done. A woman named Patience Rush."

"Is that her real name?"

Good question. Strangely enough, he hoped the quirky moniker was real.

"That's for you to tell me." He gave him what details he knew.

"You're not giving the investigator much to work with," Bob replied.

"He's worked with less."

"True. What client number should I bill?"

"SD100." On the other end of the line, there was a soft intake of breath. Stuart seldom used his discretionary fund, but the firm's investigator was the best around. He'd reimburse the firm later.

"Um..."

"What?" Stuart asked.

The associate paused. "This might take a while. We've tapped him for a couple other projects."

And clients always came before personal. Stuart understood. "Just tell him to get to it as soon as he can."

In the meantime, he'd just have to keep a close eye on Patience Rush. Thinking about her eyes, he couldn't help but smile. There were worse jobs in the world.

A short while later, having showered and changed, he headed downstairs only to hear muffled voices coming from the kitchen. One muffled voice actually. He found Patience crouched over Nigel's food dish, brandishing a dustpan and broom. "You'd think a cat who acts like he's starving wouldn't drop pieces of food all over the place," she muttered. "One of these days, I'm going to toss the whole bowl out. Let's see what you do then."

A chuckle rose in his throat. Nigel had a way of making all of them talk as if he understood. He leaned a shoulder against the door frame. "Not a cat person, I take it."

She gasped before looking up at him with a glare. "Do you always sneak up on people?"

There they were again, those chocolate-diamond eyes. He crossed his legs to keep his jeans from growing tight. "I didn't know walking around the house was considered sneaking."

"Then you should walk louder," she replied. "Or wear shoes."

He looked down at his bare feet. "I'll keep that in mind. May I ask what the cat did to earn your wrath?"

"Nigel isn't a cat. He's a four-legged spoiled brat."

As had been all of Ana's cats. His aunt tended to overindulge the strays she adopted. Pushing herself to her feet, Patience swayed her way across the room to the trash can. Stuart found himself wondering if the seductive gait was natural or on purpose. "Sounds like the two of you have a great relationship," he remarked.

"Mine and Nigel's relationship is just fine. Why?" She took her foot off the receptacle latch, causing the lid to close with a loud slap. "Afraid I'll try to push him down the stairs, too?"

"Nah. A woman as smart as you would know hurting Nigel is the quickest way to getting on Ana's bad side."

She gave him a long look. "Was that supposed to be a compliment?"

In a way, yes. He did think she was smart. "If you want to take it as such."

"Gosh, thanks. I'll try not to let it go to my head."

Smart and quick-witted. She was dressed similarly to yesterday in jeans, a tee and a cardigan sweater, her hair pulled back with one of those plastic hair bands. For the first time he looked closely at her features. Yesterday, he'd been too distracted by her eyes, but today he noticed more intricate details like the long slope of her nose and the way her teeth met her lower lip in a slight overbite. A two-inch scar cut across her right cheekbone. Time had caused it to fade. In fact, with makeup, it'd be barely noticeable, but since she was again bare faced, he could see the jagged edges of a cut that should have had stitches.

The scar bothered him, like seeing a crack on the surface of a crystal vase. It didn't belong.

Patience cleared her throat. Realizing he'd been staring, he covered his action by adjusting his glasses. This might be one of those rare moments when he was grateful for them. He detested wearing the heavy black frames. The look might be considered stylish now, but it simply reminded him of his younger, awkward days. Then again, maybe a reminder was a good thing, given the awareness swirling around his insides this morning.

He reached for a change of topic. "Do I smell coffee?" There was a distinct aroma of French roast in the air, a unique scent in his tea-drinking aunt's home.

Patience nodded her head toward a stainless steel coffeemaker tucked in the faraway corner. "Cream and sugar are in the dining room. Do you prefer a full breakfast or continental."

"Neither." Was she offering to make him breakfast? Considering the circumstances, he wasn't sure if he should be flattered or suspicious. "Are you waiting on me?" he asked when she took a coffee mug from the cupboard.

"Why?"

"Because it's my job," she replied. "I serve breakfast every morning. So long as someone's here, I'll keep on serving it." Filling the cup, she handed it to him.

Stuart stared into the black liquid. What gives? Last night, Patience had made it quite clear that she didn't appreciate his staying at the brownstone, yet here she was pouring him coffee and offering breakfast. Citing her job. Was she truly that dedicated or was this some kind of tactic to throw him off his game? If the latter, it was working.

"Something wrong?" she asked. "Would you feel better if I drank the cup first?"

"All right, you've made your point," he said, setting the coffee cup down. "You didn't appreciate my questioning Ana's accident."

"Not the accident—me. You all but accused me of pushing your aunt down the stairs."

Yes, he had. Now that he thought about it, the accusation wasn't his finest moment. Treating the woman like a hostile witness wouldn't accomplish anything. A situation like this called for a more delicate touch. "I'm sorry," he said. "I tend to be wary when it comes to strangers around my family."

"Well, I tend to have a problem with being accused of crimes I didn't

commit," she replied, snapping his olive branch in two. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a job to do."

"Can you believe the guy? I think he actually considered that comment an apology."

"Some people aren't very good with apologies." Her sister Piper's face filled the screen of her smartphone. Thank goodness for Wi-Fi and internet chat apps. She so needed a friendly ear right now and Piper was the one person in this world she could trust. Patience called her as soon as she sat down at Ana's desk.

"Maybe he's one of those people," her sister continued.

"Probably because in his mind he's never wrong." She sighed. "I can't believe I'm going to be stuck working for the man while Ana's in the hospital. Talk about a nightmare."

"Oh, come on, it won't be that bad."

"Are you kidding? We're living under the same roof. How am I supposed to avoid him?"

"I doubt he's going to be hanging around the house."

Wanna bet? Patience caught the smirk in his eyes last night. He probably considered the arrangement the perfect opportunity to vet her. Who used words like vet anyway? Couldn't he say check her out like a normal person.

"I don't like him," she said. "He's..."

"He's what?"

Too imposing. With his unwavering blue eyes and long lean torso. "There's something about the way he looks at me," she said, keeping her thoughts to herself.

"Guys are always looking at you."

"Not like this." Those guys were skeezy. All hands and leers. "It's like he's trying to read my mind." She wasn't used to a man looking at her as anything more than a chick with a nice rack. It was unnerving to have a man look deeper. "Plus, he keeps talking about secrets. I'm worried one of these times I'll slip up and say something incriminating."

"So, don't talk to him. There's no rule that says a housekeeper has to be chatty."

"True." Except she seemed unable to help herself.

"If it helps," Piper added, "I watched a movie the other night where the woman drugged her husband's dinner so he'd leave her alone. You could always try that."

"Oh, sure." It was exactly the laugh she needed. "Because my life isn't enough like a made-for-television movie. Seriously, though, what am I going to do?"

"You could try telling the truth."

Patience shook her head. "I can't."

"Why not? I bet Ana won't care, especially once she hears the whole story. I mean, it's not like you had other choices. Surely, Ana would understand that you did what you had to do."

Maybe, but what about the reason Patience stayed for as long as she did? There were some secrets Piper didn't know and was better off never knowing. That particular shame was Patience's and Patience's alone.

Again, she shook her head. "I'll just have to stay on my toes is all. Hopefully, when Ana starts to feel better, he'll lose interest. A rich, handsome lawyer? I'm sure he's got better things to focus on than the hired help."

"You didn't mention he was handsome," Piper said, giving her a smirk.

"He's...good-looking," Patience replied rolling her eyes. Handsome wasn't the right word. "Not that it makes a difference. I'm more concerned about keeping my job."

"You're going to be fine, You're one of the most resilient people I know."

Patience wished she shared her sister's confidence. "Let's talk about something else," she said. She was tired of whining. "How's school?"

"Um...good. French pastries are turning out to be a challenge."

"Bet yours taste fantastic. Any way you can mail me your homework?" She was so proud of Piper. Winning a scholarship to study cooking in Paris. Piper's success made everything worthwhile. "And how's work?" Her sister was earning room and board as a live-in maid. "Your boss must be psyched to have a gourmet cook on staff."

"Frederic doesn't eat home much."

The grainy camera image failed to mask the shadow that crossed Piper's face, immediately sending Patience's maternal instincts into high alert. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," Piper replied quickly. "I'm just bummed not to have someone to cook for is all. I miss you."

Homesickness. Of course. Patience should have realized. This was the longest the two of them had ever been apart. Hard as it was on her, it had to be doubly hard on Piper, alone in a foreign country. "I miss you too Pipe. But, hey, we've got Wi-Fi. You can call me anytime you want."

Piper smiled. "Back at you." Offscreen, a noise occurred, causing her sister to look over her shoulder. "Hey, I've got to go," she said. "The boss just walked in. Don't let Ana's nephew intimidate you, okay? You're just as good as he is."

"Thanks. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Patience's smile faded as soon as she clicked off. Piper had such faith in her. It wasn't that she was completely ashamed of everything she'd done in life, she thought, setting the phone aside. Raising Piper, for instance. She couldn't be prouder of the woman her baby sister had become. Giving Piper a chance for a real future had always been what mattered the most. Her baby sister would never have to degrade herself to pay the bills.

A knock sounded behind her, making her start. "You can't accuse me of sneaking up on you this time," Stuart said. "I knocked."

Yes, he had, and he now stood in the doorway with his arms folded like a long, lean statue. It wasn't surprising that he managed to look as regally imposing in jeans and bare feet as he did in a suit. Patience had a feeling he could wear a bunch of rags and still look wealthy. Even the glasses that, on someone else would look geeky, looked more geek-chic on him. Actually, much as she hated to admit it, the frames looked adorable on him.

Some of her bangs had slipped free of her hair band. She brushed them aside

to disguise her reaction. "Do you need something?" she asked.

"It dawned on me that I sounded—are you writing out checks?"

His gaze had dropped to the ledger that lay open on the desk. What now?

"I'm reconciling the checkbook. Ana likes a paper record in addition to the online version." She considered adding that his aunt had asked her to take over the task because her math was getting a bit fuzzy, but that would only make her sound more defensive than she did, and she refused to feel guilty for doing her job.

"I never did understand her insistence on two records," He replied. She'd expected a far more snide comment. Walking over to the desk, he studied the laptop screen from over her shoulder. "Seems like way too much opportunity for mistakes."

"I've tried to tell Ana the same thing." As much as she tried not to be, Patience found herself acutely aware of his chest hovering behind her ear. The scent of his body wash lingered in the air. Clean. Crisp. She couldn't help herself; she inhaled deeply.

"You forgot to record check number 3521," he said, pointing at the screen.

Sure enough, there was an unrecorded check. "This is the biggest problem," she said. "Ana always forgets to mark the checks in both places."

"I thought you wrote the checks?"

"I write out the monthly checks for the bills. That doesn't mean your aunt doesn't write out her own occasionally. Especially when she want to give money to the humane society. See?" She pointed to the written ledger. "Check 3521 in her handwriting."

She shifted in her hair, so she could better confront him. "Are you going to question everything I do while you're living here? Because if so, it's going to make for a very long stay."

"I wasn't questioning anything. All I did was point out you missed a check."

Right. And his pointing out had nothing to do with his distrust. "Look," she said,

"I know you don't like me—"

"I never said I didn't like you."

Patience blinked. "You didn't?"

"No. I said I didn't trust you. There's a difference."

Not much. "Gee, thanks. I feel so much better."

A hint of color found its way to his cheeks. It, along with his quick, sheepish smile, dulled her annoyance. "I'm not saying this right at all," he said. "I came in because I realized what I said back in the kitchen didn't come out as apologetically as it should have. What I should have said was that I'm sorry for treating you like a trial witness last night. I should have let the matter drop after Ana corroborated your story."

"Actually," Patience replied, "what you should have said was that you're sorry for even suggesting I'd hurt your aunt."

Stuart grabbed the edge of the desk, trapping her between his two arms. Body wash and heat buffeted the space between them, the combination making

Patience's pulse quickened. She looked up to meet a gaze that was bright and resolute. "Ana is the only family I have," he said. "I won't apologize for trying to protect her."

This was where Patience should retaliate with angry defiance. Unfortunately, she understood where Stuart was coming from. When it came to keeping your family safe, you did whatever you had to do. No matter what.

Still, she wasn't ready to let him off the hook. "Let's get something straight," she said, straightening her spine. "I like Ana. She's been good to me. Real good. I would never hurt her. I don't care how good your reason is—you are a jerk for thinking otherwise."

They were back to Mexican standoff territory, with their eyes challenging one another. Patience focused on keeping her breath even. She didn't know if it was his scent, his close proximity, or the thrill of having held her ground, but she could feel the adrenaline surging through her. When Stuart broke the moment with a slow, lazy smile, her heart jumped. The thrill of victory, she decided.

"Yes, I was," he said. "A jerk, that is."

"Finally, we agree with something." She sat back, only to realize the new posture placed her in the crook of his arm. Instinct screamed for her to straighten up again, but that would imply she was nervous, and since she wasn't nervous-not very- she forced herself to look relaxed. "Apology accepted."

Stuart responded with a low chuckle before—thankfully—shifting positions and releasing her. Patience was surprised how much she missed his scent when it disappeared.

"How about we start over with a clean slate?" he said. "Hi. I'm Stuart Duchenko."

She stared at his extended hand. For some reason, the gesture kicked off warning bells. "Why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why the one-eighty?" A dozen hours ago, he was smirking with suspicion. Now he wanted to be friends?

He'd obviously expected the question, because he chuckled again. "Because you're right, I was being a jerk. And, because Ana would have my head if she saw the way I was acting. Our bickering like a couple of twelve-year-olds won't help her. Therefore, I'm hoping we can be civil for her sake."

He had a point. Ana would expect better of her, as well. "Does this mean you've decided to trust me?"

"Let's not go crazy. I am, however, willing to give you the chance to prove me wrong."

"Well, isn't that mighty big of you." Although, in truth, they had something in common. She didn't trust him, either.

His hand was still extended, waiting for her acceptance. Fine. She could be the bigger person, too. For Ana's sake.

"I'm Patience Rush," she said, wrapping her fingers around his palm.

His grip was firm and confident, more so than she expected. Patience was shocked at the power traveling up her arm.

You're playing with fire, a tiny voice whispered in her ear. Stuart wasn't some sour-smelling creep she could hold off with an expressionless stare. He was a man whose clout and influence could ruin her life. But, like a shining red sign blinking "Do Not Touch", she couldn't resist the challenge.

"Nice to meet you, Patience. I look forward to getting to know you."

"Same here."

She wasn't sure what to say next and, based on the awkward silence, neither did he. The strangest energy had begun humming around them. Wrapping them together, as if the two of them were suddenly on the same page. Weird. Other than Piper, Patience had always made it a rule to keep an invisible wall between herself and the rest of the world. To feel a connection of any kind left her off balance.

Stuart's smile mirrored her insides. Tentative and crooked. "Look at us being all civil."

"Let's not go crazy," she replied, quoting him. "It's only been a minute. Let's see how we do at the end of the day."

"I'm up for the challenge if you are."

Oh, she was more than up for it. If being civil led to him dropping all his talk of "secrets," then she'd civil him to death.

Chapter 3

To her complete and utter amazement, he didn't insist on supervising her work. Instead, he left her with a friendly "Don't forget to mark down check 3521."

Probably planning to double-check her work later, Patience decided. She took more care than usual to make sure the ledgers were perfect.

After lunch, Stuart went to the hospital to spend time with Ana while she stayed behind to wage war with the brownstone windows. She thought about visiting as well, but decided to wait until evening so Stuart would see how seriously she took her job.

And, okay, maybe part of her wanted to avoid him. Being civil would be a lot easier if they didn't see each other. The energy shift when they shook hands still had her thrown. Ever since, there'd been this inexplicable fluttering in her stomach that no amount of window cleaning could shake. A reminder that she wasn't dealing with an ordinary man, but rather someone a class above the creeps and losers who'd crossed her path over the years. Talk about two different worlds, she thought with an unbidden shiver.

All the more reason to avoid him as much as possible.

And so, armed with cleaner and crumpled newspaper, she polished glass until the smell of vinegar clung to her nostrils and there wasn't a streak to be found. As she stretched out the small of her back, she checked the clock on the parlor mantel. Five o'clock. Time to feed the beast. She was surprised Nigel wasn't upstairs with her, meowing up a storm. He wasn't in the hallway, either.

"You better not be hiding somewhere thinking about pouncing on me," she called out as she trotted down the stairs. "I can tell you right now scaring me won't get you on my good side."

"I'll keep that in mind," Stuart replied. He looked impossibly at home, standing at the counter with a cat food can in his hand and Nigel weaving in and around his legs.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, only to realize how abrupt she sounded. They were supposed to be acting civil after all. "I mean, I thought you were visiting Ana." That sounded much nicer.

"I got home a few minutes ago and Nigel met me at the door. Nearly broke my ankle demanding supper."

"No way!" She purposely exaggerated her disbelief. "Good thing you weren't on the stairs." Her smirk couldn't have faded even if she wanted it to. Go Nigel.

Kitty earned himself extra tuna.

To his credit, Stuart had the decency to look apologetic. "Point made. I was wrong."

"Told you so." Since they were being civil, she kept the rest of her gloating to herself. Instead, she bent down to retrieve Nigel's bowl, making sure she gave the cat an extra scratch under the chin when he ran over to see her. "How is Ana?" she asked.

His expression changed in a flash, growing somber. "They've got her on pain medicine so she mostly sleeps, and the couple times she did wake up, she was confused. The nurses told me that's pretty common, especially at her age." He breathed hard through his nostrils. A nonverbal but...

Patience felt herself softening toward the man even more. Seeing Ana so weak had upset her, too, and she had been around to see how active Ana had been.

Goodness only knows how shocked Stuart must have felt having missed the last eight months. "I'm sure she'll be back to her feisty self in no time," she said, trying to reassure him. And herself, too, maybe.

"That's what the nurses said."

"But...?" There was a hesitancy in his response that once again left the word hanging in the air.

"Did you know one-fourth of senior citizens who break a hip die within six months?"

"Not Ana." No way was he going down that road. "She'd kill you if she heard you. Besides, she broke an ankle, not a hip, so your statistic doesn't apply."

"You're right. It doesn't." A smile graced his features. Forced maybe, but it erased the sadness from his face. Patience was glad. He looked much better with his dimples showing. Not that he didn't look good when serious, but his appeal definitely increased when his eyes sparkled.

"And Ana would kill me," he added, and they shared another smile before Stuart looked away to finish feeding Nigel. Patience waited until he'd scraped the sides of the cat food can before placing the bowl back in its place. "I was planning to visit Ana tonight," she told him.

"Me too. Right after dinner."

Shoot! She'd completely forgotten about dinner. Normally, by this point in the day, she'd have started cooking, but she'd been so engrossed in cleaning the windows—and trying not to think about Stuart—that everything else slipped her mind. "I... um..." Combing the bangs from her eyes, she caught a whiff of vinegar and winced at

the odor. "I hope you don't mind simple. I forgot to get the meat out to thaw."

"Don't worry about it. I'll grab something on the way. I've been dying for an Al's Roast Beef."

"No way."

"What, you don't like Al's?"

"No, I love it." She was surprised he did. Al's was a little hole-in-the-wall near the subway overpass. The kind of place you weren't one-hundred-percent sure passed the health inspection, although it did have the most amazing burgers and roast beef sandwiches. She would have pegged Stuart as preferring something more upscale and elegant, like the wine bar up the street. "Can't beat their barbecue special."

"Would you like to join me?"

Join him? The hair on the back of her neck started to rise, much the way it did when he'd suggested they start over. She didn't trust this warmer, gentler Stuart. Especially since he said he still didn't trust her. What was he up to?

"We both need to eat," he replied, picking up on her hesitation. "We're both going to the hospital. Why not go together?"

Why not? She could give a bunch of reasons, starting with the fact she should be avoiding him, not giving him an opportunity to dig for information.

"Plus, I owe you an apology for being wrong about Nigel."

"You do owe me that," Patience replied.

"So, is that a yes?" His expectant smile was so charming it caused her stomach to do a tiny somersault.

As sure a sign as any that she should say no. Playing with fire, the voice in her head reminded her.

Except that smile was too darn hard to refuse. "Sure," she replied. "Why not?"

*

She regretted her response as soon as they arrived at Al's. Actually, she regretted it as soon as the words left her mouth and Stuart flashed a knee-buckling smile, but arriving at the restaurant sealed the deal—restaurant being a loose description. Beacon Hill types considered the banged-up booths and ketchup stains "atmosphere." Patience considered it dirty. The place reminded her too much of the old days.

"We could do takeout if you'd rather," Stuart said, correctly interpreting her expression. "Go eat by the river."

Patience shook her head. "No. Here will be fine." A picnic by the river sounded too nice, and, frankly, the situation was strange enough without the atmosphere feeling like a date.

This kinder, gentler Stuart made her nervous. They weren't friends—not by a long shot—and she wasn't really sure she bought his apology excuse. So why were they out to dinner together?

After placing their orders, they took seats in a booth toward the rear of the restaurant. One of the cleaner tables, if that was saying anything. Immediately, Patience took out a package of hand wipes and began cleaning the crumbs from the surface, earning a chuckle from Stuart.

"You do realize you're off the clock, right?" he asked.

"You want to eat on a dirty table?" she shot back. She was beginning to dislike his laugh. Rich and thick, the sound slipped down her spine like warm chocolate syrup, making her insides quiver every time she heard it. Doubling down on her cleaning efforts, she did her best to wash both the crumbs and the sensation away. "I don't even want to think about what the kitchen looks like," she continued.

There was a splash of dried cola near the napkin dispenser. She went at it with vigor. "Piper would have a nutty if she saw this place."

"Who's Piper?"

Drat. She didn't realize she'd spoken aloud. This really was a mistake. Not five minutes in and she'd opened the door to personal questions. Fortunately, Piper was the one personal subject she could talk about forever. "She's my sister."

"Let me guess, she's into cleaning, too?"

"No, cooking." Her chest grew full. "She's studying to be a chef. In Paris." She made a point of emphasizing the location.

"Is that so?"

Based on the spark in Stuart's eye, Patience decided it was admiration and not disbelief coloring his voice, and her pride expanded some more. "She was accepted last fall. It's always been her dream to become a famous chef."

"You must be proud."

"Proud doesn't begin to cover it. I think she's going to be the next Top Chef, she's that talented. Ever since she was a kid, she had a knack for taking ingredients you'd never thought would go together and turning them into something delicious. Once, I came home and found her making jalapeño pancakes."

"Were they any good?"

"Believe it or not, they were. Although she got flour everywhere. Took me all night to clean the film from the countertop." A waste of time since the roaches came scrounging anyway. The thought only made her smile fade a little. As always, her pride in Piper's talent overruled the bad.

Their conversation was interrupted by a group of college students settling into the booth behind them.

Their laughter barely disguised the popping of beer cans.

"I forgot this place was BYOB," Stuart remarked. "We could have brought a bottle of Merlot to go with our meal."

"I'm not sure this is a Merlot kind of place," Patience replied.

"Good point. Beer then."

She tried and failed to stop her grimace.

"You don't like beer?"

"I don't like the smell." He wouldn't either if he'd spent years breathing sour, stale air.

Stuart was clearly curious, but thankfully he didn't push. At least not right then. Instead, he stretched his arms along the back of the booth, the position pulling his shirt taut across his torso and emphasizing the contours beneath the cotton. Patience wondered if he realized he was the most superior-looking man in the place.

"So, your sister's dream is to become a famous chef," he said. "What's yours?" To make sure Piper's dream came true. Patience busied herself with pulling napkins from the dispenser.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, come on. Surely you didn't always want to be a housekeeper?"

He was fishing. Looking for clues about this so-called agenda he thought she had

regarding his aunt.

What would he think if she told him her childhood hadn't allowed for dreams or aspirations? Or that there was a time when even being a housekeeper seemed out of her reach? Would he trust her more or less? Patience could guess the answer.

"I thought we called a truce," she said, dodging the question.

"Hey, I was just making conversation. I didn't realize I'd asked you to reveal a state secret."

He had a point. Maybe she was overreacting just a little. It certainly wasn't his fault he'd stumbled too close to a bad topic. "Teacher," she said softly. "When I was little, I wanted to be a teacher."

"There now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Damn him for having a charming smile as he spoke. "What changed your mind?"

"I grew up," she replied. The words came out sharper than she intended, causing a stunned expression.

"And my mother died, leaving me to raise Piper." She was probably telling him way too much, but she figured revealing some facts was smarter than acting prickly. "Hard to go to school and raise your kid sister." Not that there was money for school to begin with, but he didn't need to know that.

"I'm sorry. How old were you?"

"Eighteen."

"That must have been tough."

"We managed. How about you?" She rushed to change the subject before he could ask anything further. "Did you always want to be a lawyer?"

He laughed again. "Of course not. No little boy wants to be lawyer. I wanted to be a professional baseball player."

"What happened?"

"I grew up," he said, repeating her answer. In his case, instead of sounding prickly, the words came out sad, despite his clearly trying to sound otherwise.

"Turns out you have to have athletic ability to be a professional athlete—or a child athlete, for that matter."

Looking at him, she found his protest a bit hard to believe. "You look pretty athletic to me," she said. His arched brow made her blush. "I mean, I'm sure you weren't as bad as you make it sound."

"I had bad eyes, allergies and childhood asthma. Trust me, no one was ever going to confuse me with Babe Ruth. Or John Ruth for that matter."

"Who's John Ruth?"

"Exactly." He grinned, and she got the joke. He was worse than a guy who didn't exist.

"So," he continued, "with the Hall of Fame out of the picture, I found myself steered toward the family business."

"I thought your family business was mining?" Ana was always talking about Duchenko silver.

"Not since the turn of the century. Grandpa Theodore turned it into law.

Thankfully. Can you see me coughing and squinting my way through a silver mine?"

No, she thought with a laugh. He definitely belonged to suits and luxury surroundings. His choice of words did make her curious, however. "You said steered. You didn't choose?"

"Sometimes you find yourself on a path without realizing it," he replied with a shrug.

Patience could sure relate to that, although at its worst, his path couldn't hold a candle to the one she'd landed on. "Do you at least like it?"

"For the most part. There are days when I'd rather be in the mine."

"No offense," she told him, "but I'll take the bad day of a rich lawyer over the bad day of a poor maid anytime."

"Don't be so sure," he said. "You've never had to draft a prenuptial agreement for your step-grandmother."

At that moment, the girl at the counter called out their order, and he slid from the booth, leaving Patience to wonder about his answer. Writing some document hardly seemed a big ordeal.

Stuart returned a few minutes later with a tray laden with food. The smell of fresh beef made her stomach rumble. Grimy location or not, Al's did have good burgers.

She waited until they'd divided the burgers and French fries before picking up the conversation. "How is writing a prenuptial so awful?" she asked him. "It's not like unclogging a toilet or something."

"You wouldn't say that if you met Grandma Gloria."

"Harsh."

"Not harsh enough," he said, biting into his burger.

So Patience wasn't the only person Stuart had issues with. Maybe he didn't like outsiders in general. Or was it only women? "She had to have some redeeming quality. I mean if your grandfather loved her..."

"Grandpa Theodore wanted her. Big difference."

"She must have wanted him too," Patience replied. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to defend this Gloria person, unless it was because exonerating Gloria might improve her own standing in his mind.

"She wanted Duchenko money." There was no mistaking the venom in his voice.

"And she went after it like a heat-seeking missile. Didn't matter who she got the money from, or who she had to hurt in the process."

Like who? The way his face twisted with bitterness made her think he was leaving something out of the story. It certainly explained why he had issues with her befriending Ana.

"This Gloria woman sounds lovely."

"Oh, she was a real peach. Did I mention she turned thirty-four on her last birthday?" he added abruptly.

"Thirty-four?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hasn't your grandfather been dead for..."

"Ten years," he supplied. My grandfather died ten years ago."

Making Gloria...ew. Patience wrinkled her nose at the image.

"Exactly. And now I'm stuck dealing with her for the rest of eternity."

Patience took a long sip of her cola. His comments had opened the door to a lot of questions, about many of which she had no business being curious, and yet seeing his frown, she couldn't help herself. "Ana doesn't talk much about her family," she said. "Other than you, that is."

"Unfortunately, there wasn't much love lost between Ana and Grandpa Theodore. From what I understand, they stopped speaking to each other around forty or fifty years ago. People were shocked when she traveled to his funeral. She told them it was only out of respect for me."

"Wow." To not speak to your sibling for decades? She couldn't imagine going more than two or three days without talking to Piper. "That must have been some fight."

"True. I asked Ana once, but all she said was Grandpa Theodore stole her happiness."

"How?" Ana seemed like one of the happiest people she knew.

"Beats me. I remember my father grumbling once that he wished my grandfather would make things right this one time, so whatever happened was his fault. Unfortunately, unless Ana decides to open up, we might never know."

"Your poor dad. Sounds like he was stuck in the middle."

"For a little while anyway. He uh..." His eyes dropped to his half-eaten meal.

"He and my mom died in a car accident when I was fourteen."

"Oh." Patience kicked herself for bringing up the subject. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

Time didn't mean anything. There was nothing worse than having the ground yanked out from under you, leaving you with no idea where you belonged, what would happen next, or who would catch you if you fell. The teenage Stuart would have held in the pain, put on a strong face. She could tell by the way he held himself now, closed and protected.

Just like her. No one should be forced to grow up before they're ready.

Again, it was as if she'd spoken her thoughts out loud, because Stuart looked up, his blue eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity and gratitude. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say you grew up earlier than I did."

His words twisted around her heart. If only he knew... For a crazy second, she longed to tell him everything, thinking that he, having been in her shoes, might understand.

Reality quickly squashed her fantasy. He'd never understand. The two of them came from two different worlds. Rich versus poor. Clean versus dirty. Sitting here, sharing childhood losses, it was easy for that fact to slip her mind.

"It's not really a contest I wanted to win," she heard herself answer.

"I don't suppose anyone ever does." Picking up his soda, he saluted her with the paper cup. "To happier subjects."

That was it? No questions? No probing? Patience studied his face, looking for evidence that the other shoe was about to drop. She saw nothing but sincerity in his smoky eyes.

"To happier subjects," she repeated. She'd gotten off easy this time.

Or had she? Stuart smiled over the rim of his glass, causing her insides to flip end over end. All of a sudden, Patience didn't feel she'd gotten off at all. More like she was falling into something very dangerous.

*

"Ana seemed a little more with it tonight," Patience remarked a few hours later. They were walking along Charles Street on their way home from the hospital.

"Yes, she did," Stuart replied. The change from this afternoon made him hopeful. Interesting, how his aunt's improvement seemed tied to Patience's arrival. Much as he hated to admit it, the housekeeper and his aunt had a real rapport. Patience was so, well, patient, with the older woman. Gentle, too. Getting Ana water. Making her comfortable. Everything about Patience's behavior tonight screamed authenticity. If her kindness was an act, Patience deserved an award.

Then again, he'd seen award-worthy performances before, hadn't he? He'd purposely brought up Gloria over dinner to gauge Patience's reaction, thinking the topic of fortune hunters might at least cause her to reveal some kind of body language. Instead, he got sympathy, felt a connection...

"You're frowning." Patience remarked.

"Sorry, I was thinking how little Ana ate this evening."

"She never eats much. You know that."

Yes, thought Stuart, but he needed something to dodge her question.

They walked a few feet in silence. The night was balmy and clear. Combined with the

warm breeze, it created an almost romantic feel to the air around them. Stuart stole a glance in Patience's direction. She had her arms folded across her chest, and her eyes were focused on the pavement. Even so, he could still sense the undulating of her hips. It was, he realized, unconscious and natural. Otherwise, he suspected she'd attempt to downplay the sensuality the way she did her figure and her looks. Hell, maybe she was trying and failing. She certainly wasn't having much luck minimizing the other two.

That plastic hair band was failing, too. Strands of hair had broken free, and covered her eyes. One of them needed to brush the bangs away so he could see their sparkle again.

He rubbed the back of his neck instead.

Patience must have mistaken the action for him being warm. "You can definitely tell it's going to be the first day of summer," she remarked.

"Longest day of the year. Did you know that after tomorrow, every day gets a few seconds shorter? Before you know it, we'll be losing two and a half minutes a day. Sorry," he quickly added. "I did a graph for a high school science fair. The fact kind of stuck with me."

"In other words, you were blind, asthmatic, unathletic and a science nerd. No wonder you gave up on baseball."

He felt his cheeks grow warm. "For the record, I'd outgrown the asthma by then."

"Glad to hear it."

"Hey, we can't all be homecoming queens."

If he didn't know better, he'd swear she hugged her body a little tighter. "I didn't go to many school dances," she said.

Another piece to what was becoming a very confusing puzzle. One moment she was sexy and sharp-witted; the next, her eyes reminded him of a kitten—soft and innocent. What the heck was her story? He was no closer to knowing if

Patience had an agenda than he was this morning. They might say you get more flies with honey, but all he got was more questions.

Along with a dangerously mounting attraction.

*

Cool air greeted them upon entering the brownstone. Stuart shut the front door and

turned on the hallway light. Nigel, who had been sitting on a table by the front window greeted them with a loud meow before running toward the kitchen.

"For crying out loud," Patience called after him. "It's only been a few hours."

At the other end of the hall, the meows grew louder and more indignant—if such a thing was possible. She rolled her eyes, earning a chuckle from Stuart. He said, "You think he's bad, you should have met the other Nigels."

There were more? "You mean he's not the first."

"Actually, he's the third. Nigel the Second lived here while I was in law school."

"Wow, Ana must really like the name Nigel." Either that or the woman wasn't very good at pet names.

"I asked her once why she gave them all the same name," Stuart added. "She told me it was because they all have Nigel personalities."

"If that's true, remind me to avoid guys named Nigel."

Their chuckles faded to silence. Patience toed the pattern on the entryway carpet. What now? There was an awkward expectancy in the air, as if both of them knew they should do or say something. The problem was, neither knew what.

At least Nigel had stopped his meowing.

"Thank you for dinner," she said finally.

"You're welcome." He smiled. "Maybe we've got this being civil thing down."

"Maybe. I have to admit, you're not bad company when you aren't accusing me of things."

"Never fear, tomorrow's another day," he replied. Patience would have laughed, but there was too much truth to his comment. This temporary truce of theirs could break at any time.

"By the way," he added, you're not such bad company yourself. When you aren't dodging questions."

"Like you said, tomorrow's another day." She turned to leave only to have her left foot tangle with something warm and furry. Nigel. She maneuvered herself awkwardly, trying to avoid stepping on the darn cat. Her ankle twisted, and she pitched sideways, toward the stairway. That caused her right knee to buckle, and before she knew it, she was falling in a heap.

Stuart caught her before her bottom touched the floor. "Stupid cat," she muttered.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Nigel on the other hand might have used up another one of his nine lives." She looked around, but the creature was nowhere to be found.

"He ran upstairs," Stuart replied, helping her to her feet.

"With his tail between his legs, I hope. If you didn't believe me before about Nigel causing Ana's fall, you have to believe me now."

"The evidence is definitely in your favor. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Positive. My butt didn't even hit the ground."

"Good. Hate to see you bruise something you might need," he said with a smile.

That's when she realized he still held her. His arm remained wrapped around her waist, pulling her close, so that their hips were flush. The odd angle gave Patience little choice but to rest her hand on his upper arm.

They might as well have been embracing.

He smelled of soap and laundry detergent. No aftershave—a testimony to his innate maleness that he didn't need anything more. Awareness—no, something stronger than awareness—washed over her, settling deep in the pit of her stomach.

Fingers brushed her bangs away from her temple. Barely a whisper of a touch, it shot straight to her toes. Slowly, she lifted her gaze. "I've been wanting to do that all night," he said in a voice softer than his touch.

"I—I'm growing out my bangs. That's why they keep falling in my face." Why did she think he wasn't talking about her bangs?

Maybe because his attention had shifted to her mouth. Staring, studying.

Patience caught her lip between her teeth to stop it from trembling. All either of them needed to do was to move their head the tiniest bit and they would be close enough to kiss.

"I should check on Nigel..." She twisted from his grasp, combing her fingers through her hair in a lousy attempt to mask her abruptness. She needed to...she didn't know what she needed to do. The blood pounding in her ears made it hard to think.

She needed space. That's what. Turning on her heel, she headed upstairs, forcing herself to take one step at a time. She lasted until the second flight, when Stuart was out of sight, before doubling the pace.

Smooth going, Patience, she thought when she finally closed her bedroom door. Why don't you break out in a cold sweat while you're at it?

What on earth was wrong with her anyway? She'd dealt with literally dozens of unwanted advances over the years. Losers, pushy drunks, punks who couldn't keep their hands to themselves. And she freaks out because Stuart touched her hair? The guy didn't even try anything.

Oh, but you wanted him to, didn't you? That's why she'd bolted. In spite of everything that had gone on between them in the past twenty-four hours, she actually wanted Stuart Duchenko to kiss her.

Heaven help her, but she still did.

Keep Reading! Download your copy of A Millionaire for Cinderella from [Harlequin](#), [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), [Kobo](#) or [iTunes](#). And don't forget Book 2 of In Love with the Boss, [Beauty and Her Billionaire Boss](#)