

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL



THE HOUSE
OF SECRETS

Cherish

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The House Of Secrets

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The house is special. Alissa Franklin knows this from the moment she walks into the run-down structure. Aided by carpenter Danny Pierce, she launches a restoration project to turn this place into her home. As each layer of decoration is stripped away, they grow closer. They also uncover the century-old mystery surrounding the original owners and a private love affair. The secrets aren't restricted to the past, however. And the ones between Alissa and Danny could jeopardize their relationship. Now she must choose to either walk away or find the courage to embrace a future with him.

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“I need to understand what happened.”

Alissa paused, gathering her thoughts. “I know it sounds crazy, but I feel a connection to them. They were happy here once. I feel like I owe it to them to bring that happiness back.”

“You already have,” Danny said.

She glanced at him, but his face was turned away, looking up at the maple leaves that hung above them. This was the closest he’d come to revealing any feelings for her. She could ask him what he meant. Find out if he thought of her as someone more than the person who signed his paychecks.

Or she could let the moment pass.

Continue living a life without complications.

Dear Reader,

I’ve always been fascinated by historic homes. As I walk the halls, I like to imagine the previous owners taking those same steps. What were their lives like? Were they happy here? While I don’t believe in ghosts in the stereotypical, chain-rattling sense, I’ve often wondered if a home’s past owners leave some trace of themselves behind. That curiosity was the inspiration for *The House of Secrets*.

By tracing the story of two women—Evelyn Brewster in the early 1900s and Alissa Franklin in the present—I wanted to explore how two seemingly different lives can share certain parallels. As a history buff, I believe we can all learn from the past—and if you can solve a long-buried mystery along the way, all the better!

Thanks for following along.

Happy reading!

Elizabeth Blackwell

THE HOUSE OF SECRETS
Elizabeth Blackwell



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a magazine writer and editor, Elizabeth Blackwell has written about everything from designing a dream kitchen to fighting a duel. She lives outside Chicago with her husband, daughter, twin boys and a vast collection of long underwear. Her first novel, *The Letter*, won first prize in eHarlequin.com's epic romance contest and was published by Harlequin Everlasting Love in 2007. *The House of Secrets* is her first Harlequin Superromance book.

To Robert, a wonderful handyman
and even better husband

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CHAPTER ONE

“I LOVE IT.”

It was ridiculous, this sudden desire Alissa Franklin felt for the dilapidated old house. It was far too big for one person: six bedrooms, a huge dining room, a formal parlor the size of a ballroom. It was also a good thirty miles from her office in downtown Baltimore, which would mean a nightmare commute. Not to mention the building’s shabby condition—sagging front stairs, paint peeling off the siding, scrapes marring the wood floors and water damage on some of the upstairs ceilings. It must have been beautiful once, a classic wood-frame Queen Anne with a wide front porch and oversized windows that welcomed the sunlight. Now, the elegant silhouette was all that remained of its past glory.

But as Alissa walked through the rooms and stared at the overgrown garden in back, she felt she belonged. She imagined the gloomy spaces transformed by fresh coats of paint and new curtains. The power of the vision was so strong that she turned to Brad before they had even left the second floor. “I love it,” she whispered.

Brad gave her the look he always did when confronted with one of her spontaneous enthusiasms. His mouth curved in a half scowl, his scornful dark eyes piercing her. Once, that look had been able to stun her into silence. Now, after four years of on-again, off-again dating, it only irritated her. It had lost its power.

“Shh,” Brad whispered, nodding his head toward the Realtor walking a few steps ahead of them.

Alissa followed Brad up to the third floor, where the servants’ quarters were crammed under the roof’s sloping eaves. Although now nearly empty, the rooms were a testament to a time when this was a vibrant home, bustling with life. Through a tiny window, Alissa looked out over the town of Oak Hill, spread out below her. The servants may have been stuck in the smallest, stuffiest rooms, but they’d had the best view.

Alissa moved silently behind Brad and the Realtor as they descended the narrow stairs to the second floor, then along the grand staircase that wound down to the foyer. An elaborate cut-glass chandelier—hazy under a layer of dust—signaled that this was a space designed to impress, even intimidate. Alissa imagined someone from town arriving here, climbing out of a carriage on the circular drive, walking through the entrance and being confronted with this foyer. Taking in the glittering chandelier, the marble floor and the statues that would have been displayed in the now-vacant wall recesses. The people who lived in the simple brick houses of the town would have been dumbstruck by the scale of this mansion. Yet despite its opulence, the place still felt like a home, somewhere Alissa could see herself living.

“So?” the Realtor asked. She was a tall, slim woman who obviously took pride in her appearance, from the ash-blond hair swept into a sleek chignon to her immaculate black patent-leather heels. Her highlights and expertly applied makeup camouflaged her age, which could have been anywhere from forty to sixty. When Alissa had called the phone number on the For Sale sign in front of the house—“Let’s just take a peek,” she’d told Brad, pulling her cell phone from her purse—the Realtor had answered on the second ring and offered to show them the place immediately.

“I live only a few houses away,” she’d said. “It’s no trouble.”

Brad had protested, of course, saying he didn’t want to be driving the country roads after dark. But Alissa knew the real reason behind his impatience. After what was supposed to be a romantic weekend getaway—a last-ditch attempt to smooth over the fault lines in their relationship—Brad was ready to give up the pretense of being a happy couple. Touring this house would only postpone the inevitable, awkward conversation about their future. Perhaps delaying that moment was what made Alissa so anxious to see the house.

The Realtor introduced herself as Elaine Price, and Alissa explained that she was an interior designer interested in historic homes.

“I’d be happy to show you around,” Elaine said as she led them up the front steps. “It’s quite a treasure.”

Brad had scowled as he took in the state of the house, which clearly hadn’t been lived in for years. Elaine led them briskly along, showing each room with a minimum of description, as if the tall ceilings and generous spaces could speak for themselves. Now she stood before them in the foyer, smiling graciously.

“So?”

Alissa heard Brad starting to speak. “Well, if that’s it...” But she wasn’t ready to leave. She needed more time here, time to savor the atmosphere of this magical place.

“When was the house built?” Alissa asked.

“It’s more than a hundred years old—1904, I think. It was built for a young married couple.” Elaine smiled, continuing in a softer tone, “It’s actually a very romantic story.”

Alissa kept her eyes focused on Elaine, ignoring Brad’s impatient sigh.

“You’ve heard of the Brewsters?” Elaine asked, leading them out the front door. The late-afternoon sun sent their shadows sprawling down the wide steps and circular gravel driveway. Alissa shook her head.

“There aren’t any left, at least around here, but they used to be the richest family in the area,” Elaine said. “Made their money in shipping. Do you know Brewster Street near the harbor in Baltimore?”

Alissa nodded. “Yes, my dentist’s office is there.”

“That street was named for them,” said Elaine. “Sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, the family built an enormous country estate, which became their main residence. The city was filthy back then, and the air was supposed to be healthier out here. Which it still is, no doubt!”

Brad nodded politely, but Alissa could tell he was anxious to speed things along.

“So, is this where the family lived?” she asked.

“Oh, no. They had a far grander home about half a mile that way.” Elaine gestured beyond the backyard. “It was one of those sprawling Gothic manors that seem to stretch on for miles. It was demolished in the sixties to make room for the highway. A tragic architectural loss, but the house was completely impractical for modern families.”

Elaine paused, then gestured back toward the existing house’s facade. “This was built for Mr. Charles Brewster, the eldest son of Edward Brewster, who built the original estate. Edward had three children, and homes were to be built for each of them on the property once they were married. Charles was one of the wealthiest, most eligible bachelors in the county. But when it came time to get married, he chose the daughter of his mother’s dressmaker. It was quite the scandal.”

“She must have been very special,” Alissa said.

“Her name was Evelyn,” Elaine continued. “Apparently she was very lovely. Educated as well, which was unusual for someone from a working-class family. Charles’s mother fought the match, but they were simply too much in love. It was a whirlwind courtship, and Charles had workers here day and night to finish the house for his bride. I’ve always thought of this place as his wedding gift to her.”

“And they lived happily ever after, right?” Alissa said.

Elaine shook her head quickly. “I’m afraid not. Charles died only a year later, and Evelyn moved away. The memories were simply too painful. The house eventually passed out of the family. For the past thirty years or so, it’s been owned by Mrs. Foster, who lived here first with her husband, then, when he died, with her sister. After a while, though, it became too much to keep up on their own. A house like this needs a fair bit of maintenance.”

From what Alissa could see, the two sisters hadn’t been able to keep up with the house for some time.

“How long has the house been empty?” Brad asked.

Elaine adjusted her necklace, avoiding his eyes. “A few years.”

“How many, exactly?”

“Oh, about three.”

“And it’s been on the market since then?” Brad asked. This, he seemed to imply, was the kiss of death for real estate.

“Oh, off and on,” Elaine said vaguely. “The family considered renovating, then thought they’d try to find a buyer as is—so many people prefer to do their own updating. There have been some offers, mostly from developers looking to tear it down. The family would prefer to see the home remain intact, so they’re waiting for that special person who sees its potential.” She gave Alissa a hopeful smile.

“Well, thank you for showing us around,” said Brad, reaching out to shake Elaine’s hand. “We’ve got your card if we have any questions.” He walked swiftly down the steps and started along the driveway.

Alissa hung back. “You didn’t tell us the price,” she reminded the Realtor.

Elaine smiled. “Well, as I said, the family is looking for someone who appreciates the historic nature of the home. For the right person, I believe they’d be willing to be flexible.” She named a figure so absurdly low—a number not much higher than the price Alissa had paid for her condo a few years before—that Alissa let out a shocked laugh.

“You’re kidding,” she said.

Elaine lowered her voice and leaned in closer. “This isn’t an easy house to sell,” she confided. “The family doesn’t need the money. If they did, they would’ve sold to the developers. They have a sentimental attachment to the house, and I know they’re happy to make accommodations for someone who truly cares for the place.”

Alissa glanced at Brad, who was already standing by the gate at the end of the long driveway. He jingled his car keys impatiently.

“Thank you,” Alissa said, shaking Elaine’s hand. “It’s a wonderful house.”

“It’s just waiting for a nice young family,” Elaine said with a wink.

“Oh, we’re not married,” Alissa protested. For years, she had halfheartedly daydreamed about standing at an altar, saying “I do” to Brad. Those fantasies had gradually faded.

“So sorry,” Elaine said with the practiced grace of someone used to extracting herself from awkward situations. “Well, I can see you’re in a hurry. Do call if you have any questions.”

“Yes, I will.” Alissa scurried down the driveway and nudged Brad forward with one hand. “Okay, we can go now.”

As they drove off, Alissa stole one last glimpse at what she already thought of as the Brewster house. She imagined herself as a young bride, being carried over the threshold by a man who had risked everything to marry her. Their house must have been a refuge from a disapproving world. What would it be like to be so in love that you were willing to defy your family and break all the rules?

Alissa had always had an active imagination. It was the key to her professional success. Being an interior designer took more than sorting through paint chips and fabric samples; it took a talent for envisioning a space as it should be, not as it was, then convincing clients that she could make it happen. As soon as she was old enough to hold a paintbrush, Alissa had begged her mother to let her paint her room. By her teens, she was sewing slip-covers for the living-room furniture and making her own bedspreads. Bringing the Brewster house back to life would be the ultimate test of her talent.

Brad eyed her from the driver’s seat. “That place looked cool from the outside, but c’mon—it was a dump.”

Alissa felt her shoulders tense. “It just needs some work,” she said.

“And you think you can save it?” Brad asked. “You’d go bankrupt.”

“There’s the money from my mom...” Alissa began, then stopped. The money her mother had left when she died of cancer a year ago, which she’d told Alissa to use to “follow her dreams.” Alissa had assumed she’d put it toward a wedding, a fairy-tale affair so magical it might make up for her mother’s absence. Clearly that wasn’t likely now, given the state of her relationship with Brad. Had her mother hoped for something else?

“Besides,” Alissa continued after a moment, “wanna guess the asking price?”

Brad perked up with surprise when she told him.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Alissa said. “Plus, Elaine more or less said they’d be willing to drop the price even lower for the right person. If I sold my condo and took out a loan, I might have enough for renovations. I could get fabric and furniture from some of the firm’s suppliers at cost, so I’d be saving a ton of money there....”

“Hang on. You took one tour of the house and now you’re selling your condo?” Brad asked. He didn’t bother to hide his disbelief.

“I said if,” Alissa protested. But in her heart, she had already let go of the downtown loft, with its exposed-brick walls and stainless-steel kitchen. She saw herself at the Brewster house, stripping the paint off the elaborate crown molding in that beautiful parlor, or washing the streaked windows so the sun could shine in once again.

“The commute would be awful,” Brad said.

“I know.” Already, Alissa dreaded going to the office each day; a long drive would only give her more time to be miserable. Maureen, her boss, hovered over her as if she were still an intern, even though she had been a licensed designer for nearly three years. Now that clients had started specifically requesting Alissa, Maureen had become even more competitive and distrusting. If Alissa moved out to Oak Hill, maybe she could arrange to go to the office only part-time.

Or better yet, not go in at all. For years, Alissa had dreamed of running her own business. Finally working the way she wanted to, without the distraction of a temperamental boss. It was impossible, of course—there was no way she could buy a massive house and quit her job. It would be crazy. And yet, Alissa felt a stirring of excitement at the prospect. The Brewster house, which had captured her imagination despite its neglected condition, now seemed like the key to a whole new life.

Brad laughed sarcastically. “I can’t believe you were seriously thinking of buying that place,” he said.

I still am, Alissa thought. But she remained silent.

They drove on, the sound of the humming wheels mesmerizing them until they drifted into their own thoughts. In the end, it was Brad who spoke first. His ability to cut to the truth was one quality she still admired about him.

“So this is it, huh?” he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Alissa started to ask him what he meant, then stopped herself. What was the point? Their passion for each other—once so exciting, so all-consuming—had fizzled in the face of their ultimate incompatibility. Brad was a good-time guy who wanted to keep the party going even as he passed thirty; Alissa was happiest cocooning at home and getting to bed before midnight. Brad liked hot summer nights and tropical beaches; Alissa preferred cool fall afternoons and vacations at mountaintop lodges. It was no one’s fault. They should be able to say goodbye without regret. Still, Alissa didn’t want to make the final decision.

“Are you calling it quits?” Alissa asked.

“Don’t put this on me,” said Brad, still gazing at the darkening road. “You’ve wanted out for a long time. Why else do you think you got so worked up about that old house?”

As their conversation continued, reaching its unavoidable conclusion, they both remained calm and detached. Later, thinking back on that drive, Alissa was amazed by how effortlessly her future with Brad slipped away.

“I’ll come by after work tomorrow to pick up my things,” Brad said as he pulled the car up in front of her building. “If that’s all right with you.”

“Sure,” said Alissa. There was nothing left to say, so she got out, closed the door and walked inside without looking back.

Once inside, she walked around the condo, looking for evidence of Brad that would have to be cleared out. Considering how long they had dated, he hadn’t left much of a mark. A few framed pictures on a bookshelf. His college sweatshirt lying over the arm of the couch. The extra toothbrush she had bought for him, lying next to hers on the side of her bathroom sink. Erasing him from her life would only take a few minutes. It wasn’t supposed to be so easy, was it?

Logically, Alissa knew they had done the right thing. But she couldn’t relax, couldn’t concentrate. The stark, gleaming metals and thickly varnished wood surrounding her felt cold and unwelcoming. She had been inspired by contemporary design when she’d decorated her home, determined to make it feel clean and modern. But after touring the Brewster house, the space felt soulless.

Alissa flashed back to the day she started at design school. How she had rushed home that night to call her parents, giddily describing the projects she would be working on that semester. She had tried to recapture that joy many times in the following years, etching that love of her work into her brain so it wouldn’t be forgotten among the day-to-day frustrations of Maureen’s disapproval. But now, thinking about the Brewster house, Alissa felt a flash of excitement that echoed that first day of class. She let the feeling wash over her. I’ll buy it, she decided, and I will be happy there.

CHAPTER TWO

1904

EVELYN O'KEEFE'S wedding day passed in a blur. For years afterward, only one image remained clear: the sight of Will Brewster pulling up in front of the church in his lurching, dirt-spattered motorcar, exuding such vitality that everyone else seemed to fade into the background. Evelyn had never believed in love at first sight. The idea of losing her heart to someone she had just met—on her wedding day, no less—had always struck her as absurd. But from the moment Will arrived, she couldn't stop watching him. He stepped easily from the car and greeted the guests mingling around him. His smile dazzled her as he pulled up his goggles and caught her eye. The attraction was instantaneous.

Until that point, the wedding and reception had progressed as smoothly as any other social event held at the Brewster estate. Alma Brewster, her new mother-in-law, had made all the arrangements. It was never suggested that Evelyn be involved in the planning. Alma knew what food was appropriate for the sit-down dinner and which flowers would be in season. Since Alma was paying for everything and hosting the reception in her home, Evelyn acquiesced immediately. It was a relief to be spared potential social disaster.

The only decision Evelyn made was the style of her wedding dress, which was sewn by her mother, Katherine. Evelyn's earliest memories were of Katherine holding a needle, with a pincushion and scissors tucked into a white apron wrapped around her waist. Even when Evelyn's father, Thomas, was alive and Katherine spent most days helping him at the family's general store, she'd always had fabric and needles tucked behind the counter, waiting for a lull. When Thomas died and they were forced to sell the store to cover unexpected bills and debts, Katherine refused to despair. "We'll get by," she told Evelyn. "I always have my sewing."

And so, Katherine had transformed herself from meek assistant to breadwinner, eventually becoming the dressmaker to many of Chesapeake County's richest families. And it had all begun with a wedding. Evelyn could still remember the day Katherine had flung open the front door and shouted for her.

"What is it? What's happened?" Evelyn asked breathlessly as she raced down the stairs, bracing herself for bad news. Though only sixteen, she had none of the naive hopefulness common among girls her age. Already, life had taught her to be wary of change.

"Lavinia Brewster's getting married," Katherine announced. "Mabel Goodridge and two other ladies have already asked me to make dresses for them, and I'm sure there will be more to come. If they like my work, they'll hire me again, I just know it. Thank heavens for the Brewsters!"

The Brewsters. The richest family in Oak Hill. The ones who set the tone for everyone else to follow. If Alma Brewster, the matriarch, wore purple ostrich plumes in her hat at church, the rest of the women in town scrambled to find purple feathers for the next week. The lives of her three children were tracked and discussed as if they were royalty. William, the eldest, known as the family ne'er-do-well, had been shipped off to boarding school at a young age and was now reportedly doing his best to squander his allowance in Europe. Charles, the middle child, was the heir apparent. After graduating from Harvard University and spending a year in London, he was being groomed as the future leader of Brewster Shipping. Their younger sister, Lavinia, had been given a lavish coming-out ball in Baltimore and had dazzled her way through cotillions and debutante dances in New York and Paris.

Now Lavinia was getting married. Half the women invited to the wedding hired Katherine to make their dresses. Although it meant working well into the night for weeks, the money earned from that one event brought Evelyn one step closer to her dream of going to college.

Thanks to Lavinia Brewster's wedding, Katherine was able to set aside enough money for Evelyn to enroll in a teacher-training program when she was eighteen. Over the next five years, she continued her studies in fits and starts, completing courses whenever she had earned enough money tutoring the spoiled children of rich Baltimore families. During visits home, Katherine would update her on the local gossip, usually dominated by news of the Brewsters: William hadn't come home for his father's funeral, Lavinia had given birth to a baby girl. To Evelyn, the Brewsters seemed more like legendary figures than real people. Until the day she was summoned to their mansion on the hill. The place where her life changed forever.

It was a few months after she had received her teaching degree. Evelyn was accompanying her mother to a meeting of their church's Bible study group, which usually focused more on gossip than Gospel. She had recently received an offer to teach at a private girls' school in Philadelphia. The salary was tempting, but Evelyn was torn at the thought of leaving her mother. As the two women walked through town, Evelyn was distracted by the decision she faced. Then a carriage clattered past and stopped suddenly just a few steps ahead of them.

"That's Mrs. Brewster," Katherine noted, walking quickly toward the carriage.

As they approached, an elegant older woman leaned out a side window. An enormous plumed hat only partially obscured her high forehead. She held her neck and shoulders rigid, as if to counteract the drooping skin around her chin and eyes. Her thin lips curved in a perfect half-moon of a smile, but her deep blue eyes held no trace of warmth.

"Mrs. O'Keefe," she said.

"Mrs. Brewster." Katherine tilted her head in submission. "Allow me to introduce my daughter, Evelyn."

Evelyn started to bow, but quickly pulled herself upright. It was bad enough that her mother was acting like a servant.

"You're the one attending the ladies' college?" Mrs. Brewster asked, her soothing voice at odds with the stiffness of her posture.

"Yes," Katherine confirmed. "Evelyn received her degree in June. She was the top-ranked student in her class."

Mrs. Brewster stared at Evelyn intently. "Do you plan to pursue teaching?"

"Yes, I'm considering an offer in Philadelphia."

Mrs. Brewster nodded thoughtfully. "Lavinia's daughter, Beatrice, has just turned six, and she's beyond the capabilities of her nanny," she said. "We shall have a proper English governess once she is older, of course, but for the next few years she needs someone to teach her writing and comportment and that sort of thing." She raised her shoulders slightly in a hint of a shrug. "If you're free Friday morning, we can discuss the position in further detail." It was phrased as an invitation, but Alma's tone made it clear she wasn't used to being denied.

"Thank you so much," Katherine gushed, filling the void of Evelyn's silence. "She can be there at whatever time is convenient."

"We'll say ten o'clock sharp," Mrs. Brewster declared. "See Hayes at the front entrance when you arrive."

Katherine thanked her effusively, but Evelyn said nothing as Mrs. Brewster slid the carriage window shut and drove away.

Katherine grabbed Evelyn's arm and pulled her daughter close.

"Oh, darling, how wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Imagine, a position with the Brewsters!"

"Until the real English governess arrives," Evelyn said.

"You can't possibly take offense at that!" Katherine scolded with a gentle slap to Evelyn's arm. "Besides, you weren't planning on working more than a few years, were you? After you earn some money, you'll want to think about getting married."

"I suppose," said Evelyn.

“And she wants you to come to the front entrance,” Katherine gushed. “That’s a very good sign. When I started doing alterations for her, I had to use the servants’ entrance. It was years before I was welcome at the front door.”

“No matter which door I walk through, I’ll still be a servant,” Evelyn said, not bothering to hide her irritation.

“Have those professors at school been filling your head with socialist nonsense?” Katherine scoffed. “The Brewsters’ money has supported us through difficult times, as you should know. Mrs. Brewster deserves the courtesy of your consideration.”

“Yes, Mother,” Evelyn said.

“I know she seems high-and-mighty, but that’s just her manner. Besides, if you’re Lavinia’s daughter’s governess, you’ll hardly see Mrs. Brewster. Lavinia has her own home on the estate.”

“Then why is Mrs. Brewster arranging the interviews?” Evelyn asked. To that, Katherine had no answer.

In the days before the interview, Evelyn came up with a plan. The more she thought about the position in Philadelphia, the more appealing the offer became. This could be her chance to make a mark on the world by teaching young girls to value themselves and their intelligence. She could still visit her mother every weekend. Katherine might even be convinced to move to Philadelphia with her.

But she couldn’t insult the Brewsters. The key was to make sure Alma Brewster didn’t want to hire her. She could accomplish that by being herself: independent and outspoken. She would not beg for the position, and she would not cater to Alma Brewster’s snobbishness. Mrs. Brewster would dismiss her, and that would be that.

It was only when the butler Hayes—his rotund body waddling on two thin legs like Humpty Dumpty brought to life—led Evelyn into what he called the morning room, that her self-confidence faltered. She had prepared herself to stand up to Alma Brewster. But she hadn’t expected to be faced with a roomful of people, all eying her curiously as she entered.

Mrs. Brewster immediately took charge.

“Miss O’Keefe, I appreciate your promptness,” she said. “I am often appalled by the tardiness of people your age. Please, come in. I will make the introductions.” She led Evelyn toward a pale, nervous-looking young woman clutching the hand of a small girl whose flushed face was surrounded by tangled blond ringlets.

“This is my daughter, Lavinia Preston, and my granddaughter, Beatrice.” Lavinia nodded at Evelyn, while Beatrice stared at her resentfully.

“Beatrice was attempting to hurl herself into the garden fountain a few moments ago,” Alma said. “It is precisely this willfulness we need to remedy. Isn’t that right, Lavinia?”

Lavinia nodded again, but still said nothing.

“This is Beatrice’s father, Winslow Preston,” Mrs. Brewster said, indicating a middle-aged man with a bloated stomach that strained against his waistcoat. He bent his head and shoulders quickly in a brief acknowledgment of Evelyn’s presence.

“And, of course, Charles,” Mrs. Brewster added, as if the other person in the room needed no introduction.

Charles Brewster was a favorite subject of local gossip. Nearly thirty and still a bachelor, his marriage plans were the topic of endless speculation. His wealth and status put the most prestigious possibilities within reach. But for all the discussions of his money, his social connections and his talent for business, Evelyn had never realized how handsome he was until now. He had his mother’s erect posture, but what came across as snobbish in Mrs. Brewster made him appear dignified. His dark brown hair was combed carefully back from his forehead, not a lock out of place. A moustache was neatly trimmed. His deep blue eyes focused on Evelyn, observing everything about her but giving nothing away.

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss O’Keefe,” he said smoothly, tipping his head. “Mother, if you intend on a lengthy interrogation...”

Mrs. Brewster silenced him with a wave of her hand. “If Miss O’Keefe is to become a member of this household, I expect you to show an interest. Your business affairs can wait.” She turned back to Evelyn. “Come—sit down.”

Evelyn watched as the family members took their places along two parallel sofas in the center of the room: the Prestons on one side, Mrs. Brewster and Charles on the other. After a moment’s hesitation, Evelyn settled on a narrow wooden chair.

Mrs. Brewster began by quizzing Evelyn about her education and her qualifications, nodding approvingly when she mentioned the Baltimore families she had worked for. Beatrice sulked, Winslow looked bored and Lavinia watched silently. But it was Charles who unnerved Evelyn the most. For someone who had tried to avoid the interview, he appeared surprisingly interested in Evelyn’s answers.

“I’m curious,” he interrupted. “What is your philosophy on education for women?”

Evelyn smiled. “I believe women should receive as much education as possible.”

“But if every respectable woman’s goal is marriage,” Charles continued, “why the need for any education? Beyond the simple requirements of literacy and perhaps familiarity with household finances.”

“I believe a successful marriage is one between intellectual equals,” Evelyn responded, echoing a sentiment that had often been debated at college. “A husband will grow bored with a silly wife, but an educated woman is a worthy companion for life.”

“Hmph,” Mrs. Brewster snorted. “Do you think all young ladies should renounce marriage and family to attend college?”

Her face flushed, Evelyn rose to the bait. “Of course not,” she said quickly. “However—and with no offense intended—women used to be considered educated if they had a few years of French and could play a waltz on the piano. We have now entered a new century. Times have changed.”

“Indeed they have,” Charles agreed. To Evelyn’s surprise, he looked pleased.

“I certainly wish Beatrice to have every opportunity,” Mrs. Brewster said. “College is not necessary for someone in her position, but I can see how it would be advantageous for a woman like you, who has to make her own way in the world.”

Evelyn nodded, fairly certain she’d been insulted.

“Now, do you have any questions?” Mrs. Brewster asked.

Evelyn remembered Mrs. Brewster’s offhand comment about her becoming part of the household. “Is this a live-in position?” she asked. If so, she wouldn’t hesitate to decline. Being surrounded by these people every day would be intolerable.

“Given that you live in town, a daily schedule could be arranged,” Mrs. Brewster said. “I see no need to deprive your mother of your company. I know all too well what it is to be a widow alone in this world.”

Hardly alone, thought Evelyn, with three children and a household full of staff.

“I assume lessons would be held at Mr. and Mrs. Preston’s home?”

Mrs. Brewster shook her head. “We have a proper schoolroom here,” she said. “My own children took their lessons there. It’s fully supplied, but there will be funds set aside for books and any other necessities that may be required. Well then,” Mrs. Brewster continued, rising to her feet. “That will be all. We have a few other candidates expected today, but we hope to make a speedy decision. It’s high time Beatrice’s wild ways were tamed.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for considering me.” Evelyn said her goodbyes quickly and almost raced out of the room. How foolish she had been, thinking that she would reject the Brewsters! Of course they would interview other governesses, all of them more experienced and more sophisticated than her. This meeting was simply a gesture of goodwill toward her mother, a gracious signal to the town that the Brewsters weren’t above hiring locals on occasion.

In her hurry to leave the house, Evelyn dashed toward the front door, barely giving Hayes the chance to open it for her. As she made her way swiftly down the drive, she heard her name being shouted behind her. “Miss O’Keefe!”

She stopped and turned, stunned to see Charles Brewster taking the front steps two at a time.

“Your hat, Miss O’Keefe!”

He held up Evelyn’s best hat, made of dark blue straw and decorated with a ring of woven white ribbons. Against the backdrop of the Brewster mansion, it now appeared worn and faded.

“Oh, thank you,” Evelyn muttered as she gingerly took the hat from his hands, careful that their fingers didn’t touch.

“Hayes is far too corpulent to catch you, so I thought I’d try,” he said.

“Yes.” Evelyn was rarely at a loss for words, but she couldn’t think of a thing to say. Especially since Charles, rather than turning back to the house, continued to stand in front of her, apparently waiting for something.

“Miss O’Keefe,” he began, then coughed in an uncharacteristic display of nerves. “I hope I didn’t offend you with my questioning. I’m afraid I may have been somewhat overbearing.”

“Oh, not at all,” Evelyn lied. “An educated woman—especially one who intends to teach children—should be able to defend her opinions.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He smiled reassuringly, and his voice softened. “Mother can be chilly, but she only wants what’s best for the family. You acquitted yourself quite well.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brewster.” Once again, an awkward silence settled between them.

“It was a pleasure to meet you,” Charles said finally, clasping her hand briefly with both of his. His touch sent a thrill of sensation up Evelyn’s arm, and her heart began to pound. Then he was gone, back to his sprawling home, while Evelyn wondered if she had only imagined the question in his eyes.

WHEN MRS. BREWSTER OFFERED Evelyn the governess position, at double the salary she would have received in Philadelphia, Evelyn felt she had no choice but to accept. She began her duties warily, keeping to the schoolroom and avoiding her employer except when summoned to provide reports on Beatrice’s progress. Yet most days, seemingly by chance, Evelyn found herself crossing paths with Charles. Gradually, she realized these encounters were no accident. Charles’s tone moved from respectful to flirtatious, and Evelyn was flattered by his attention. There were moments stolen in the hallway of the Brewster mansion, his hand brushing hers as if by accident. Visits to the schoolroom as she tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on Beatrice. His whispered confession that she intrigued him as no other woman ever had. From then on, she was at his mercy.

At the time, she thought it was love. Why else would she weaken at the thought of his hand resting around her waist? It wasn’t the grand romance she had once imagined—there were no intimate conversations or tender declarations of affection. Yet Charles had a hold over her that she had no wish to escape.

When Evelyn first confided the new developments to her mother, Katherine almost fainted with delight. She insisted on making new dresses for Evelyn and admonished her to be on her best behavior. When Charles finally appeared at the house one evening and asked for Evelyn’s hand in marriage, Katherine could only nod and stammer before dissolving into tears of happiness.

The reaction at the Brewster home was considerably less joyful. When Charles brought Evelyn into the drawing room later that evening, announcing that she had accepted his proposal, Alma fixed her future daughter-in-law with an expression of such horror that Evelyn had to turn away.

“Nonsense,” Alma declared after an agonizing silence.

Charles took a step toward his mother, his body stiff with self-righteous anger. “If you won’t welcome my future wife, Mother, we are prepared to settle in Baltimore.”

Alma eyed Evelyn up and down. “That won’t be necessary. Charles, will you give us a moment alone, please?”

It took all of Evelyn's self-control to keep from clutching Charles's hand. Charles glanced at her, then back at his mother.

"Whatever you say to Evelyn, you can say in front of me."

"Very well." Alma paused, pacing in circles in front of them as if rounding up her thoughts. "Charles, if you are attempting to prove your independence, the point has been made. I urged you not to rush into marriage, yet you ignored my advice and proposed to someone who is utterly unsuitable." She turned to face Evelyn. "Miss O'Keefe, I am not unsympathetic. I understand your position, your family's precarious finances. You saw an opportunity with my son..."

"I assure you, I didn't," Evelyn protested. "Charles pursued me."

Alma glanced at Charles, taking in his amused smile. Then she smiled coldly at Evelyn.

"Very well," she conceded. "My son showed an interest, and you took advantage of it. No doubt you are quite skilled. I confess I was completely unaware of this turn of events. However, if you are willing to consider an alternate solution, I'm prepared to be quite generous."

"I have no interest in your money," Evelyn said. "Charles and I love each other."

Alma flinched.

"As you see, Mother, this is not a commercial transaction," said Charles, a note of contempt lurking beneath his cheerful words. "I have proposed, Evelyn has accepted, and we will be married. With or without your blessing."

Though Evelyn was heartened by Charles's resolve, she felt momentarily chilled by the fury in his eyes.

Alma nodded slowly. "If you are determined to go through with this, you will have it. Miss O'Keefe, may I offer my congratulations." But the words were a mere formality. Alma did not offer an embrace or even a handshake. Her body remained rigid, as if she were afraid she would crack into pieces if she moved.

"Don't worry, our house will be finished soon enough," Charles reassured Evelyn as they waited for the carriage to take her home. "You won't have to spend a night under this roof."

Their house. The thought of it was almost enough to distract Evelyn from the memory of Alma's insults. Construction had begun long before Charles's proposal to Evelyn, but she had been delighted by the building when he'd shown her around a few days before. She had never imagined a place so elegant could also feel so welcoming.

When the carriage arrived, Charles held the door open for Evelyn, then climbed in beside her. He closed the door behind him and drew her toward him for a kiss that obliterated her fears. Until now, Charles had given her nothing more than fleeting pecks on the cheek. Now, his lips explored her face in a frenzy of pent-up passion, his hands roaming along her shoulders and down her arms. Evelyn felt her body melt into his and wondered how she would manage to resist him until their wedding night.

It was only much later, as Evelyn lay in bed, that she felt a pang of doubt. She had told Alma that she and Charles were getting married because they loved each other. Yet Charles had never once told her so.

By the day of the wedding, however, any lingering worries about her future husband were overshadowed by the event itself. Evelyn moved through her duties as if in a dream. She glided down the aisle and repeated her vows in a firm but quiet voice. She smiled graciously as Charles escorted her back through the church and out the front doors.

Then she saw Will Brewster, and the haze lifted.

Charles hadn't expected his brother to come. Will had gone abroad years ago—"To study art," Alma had told Reverend Alderson's wife, in the same hushed tone she might have used to discuss a fatal illness. Charles had informed his brother about the wedding in a letter, but when no response arrived, Alma had crossed Will's name from the seating chart. Yet there he was, standing at the bottom of the church stairs, pulling off his grimy driving glasses and greeting Evelyn with a delighted smile.

“Will Brewster,” he said cheerily, waving his hand. “I take it you’re my new sister-in-law? Can I give you a lift to the reception?” Evelyn looked into his blue eyes, the same piercing shade as Charles’s, but sparkling with an amusement she’d never seen from her husband. His dark blond hair was tousled from the drive, but despite his disheveled appearance, he held himself with the same strong confidence as the rest of his family. Evelyn couldn’t help but smile back.

“A lift? In that monstrosity?” Charles asked incredulously.

“Nice to see you, too, Charles.” Will laughed.

By this time, guests were filing out around them, and friends called out Will’s name as they rushed up to greet him. It wasn’t long before Alma pushed her way to the front. She hurried toward her eldest son, then stopped in her tracks when she saw the condition of his car and clothes.

“Oh, Will!” she admonished. “You look frightful!”

“There was no time to change,” Will said. “I was trying not to miss the wedding—although apparently, I did anyway.”

“Go to the house and clean up,” Alma ordered. “We’ll be serving dinner in one hour.”

Will tipped his goggles in Evelyn’s direction. “I’ll look forward to getting acquainted this evening, Mrs. Brewster,” he said. His voice had a light, teasing tone, as if acknowledging how ridiculous it was that she should now bear that name.

She meant to ask Charles about his brother, but she didn’t have a chance. Three hundred guests had to make their way through the receiving line, then she and Charles had to be presented as man and wife and take their places at a table with Alma and an assortment of elderly Brewster relatives. Evelyn became aware of Will only later, after the dessert dishes had been cleared and the orchestra began playing. Evelyn looked at Charles expectantly, only to have him announce, “I never dance.” There were so many things she didn’t yet know about him.

A figure in an immaculately pressed tuxedo appeared at Evelyn’s side.

“If my brother won’t take his bride for a pass on the dance floor, perhaps I might be permitted the honor.” Will’s words were courteous to a fault, but Evelyn sensed an undercurrent of amusement.

Evelyn glanced at Charles, who waved her off. “Of course,” he said, before continuing a discussion of trade tariffs with his great-uncle.

“Only Charles would discuss business during his wedding dinner,” Will said, as he lightly took hold of Evelyn’s waist and pulled her across the wood floor. “But I suppose you’re used to that by now.”

In truth, she wasn’t. But revealing how little she really knew about Charles might seem disloyal. “The business keeps him very busy,” she said.

“Oh, Charles was born an old man,” Will said with a wink. “He’s always been the serious one.”

“And what are you?” Evelyn asked.

“Haven’t you heard? I’m the black sheep.”

Evelyn laughed, but she knew it was true. Charles seldom discussed his brother, and when he did, it was usually to criticize him.

“You’re not at all what I expected,” Will said. “When I heard Charles was marrying a governess, I pictured a humorless old spinster, the sort who used to rap my knuckles with a ruler when I misbehaved.”

“Did that happen often?” Evelyn asked lightly.

“More than I care to admit.” Will smiled, and Evelyn caught a glimpse of the boy he once was, his eyes twinkling with mischief, but without malice.

“You’re not what I expected either,” she admitted.

“Ah, now things get interesting,” Will said, twirling her gently around the edge of the dance floor. “You imagined a clubfoot or some other deformity?”

Evelyn laughed again. “No, not at all. I suppose...well, you don’t act like a Brewster.”

“I take that as a compliment,” Will said. “There were many times growing up when I didn’t feel like a Brewster. And just think—now you’re one, too.”

Evelyn flashed back to the moment Will had addressed her as Mrs. Brewster. How the sound of her new name—her new identity—had filled her with dread.

“I understand how it is.” Evelyn could barely hear Will’s voice over the sound of the violins. He continued to watch her with a bright, unconcerned expression, but his tone was serious. “It’s hard work fitting into this family,” he whispered. “I have no doubt you’ll make a great success of it—you seem like that kind of girl—but I hope you’ll think of me as a friend. Someone you can talk to if things get sticky.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said. Uncomfortable with his intimate words, she glanced toward the table where Charles sat. He had his back to her, still engrossed in conversation. She saw people at the other tables watching her. Her behavior must be above reproach. She was a Brewster now.

“Will you be staying long in town?” she asked in her best society-hostess manner.

Will nodded. “I’ve caused enough of a stir in Europe. Time to recuperate.”

“Then I’m sure I’ll be seeing you at the house regularly,” Evelyn said. The music was building to a climax. “I’ll look forward to continuing our conversation.”

“As will I,” Will said smoothly. But the superficial chatter couldn’t erase the bond their moment of honesty had already formed between them.

The orchestra paused before starting the next dance. Evelyn pulled her body away from Will’s as he leaned over and gently kissed her hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, sister,” he said. His lingering hold on her hand made Evelyn blush. Was he flirting with her at her own wedding?

Evelyn lifted the skirt of her gown and walked back to her table. She laid her hand on Charles’s shoulder as she sat down and smiled when he turned to look at her. Evelyn felt she was playacting the part of a dutiful wife. Inside, her stomach was churning with excitement, her mind replaying every word of her conversation with Will.

With a sinking feeling, she wondered if she had married the wrong Brewster.

CHAPTER THREE

ALISSA COULD TELL Constance was surprised by her appearance, but she was too tired to care. She reached forward for a hug, then pulled back as she saw her friend stiffen. No wonder—Constance, as usual, was immaculate in a pressed cotton blouse and tailored trousers, while Alissa looked like a refugee from a construction site. Her greasy hair was jammed under an old college baseball cap. A paint-splattered, stretched-out T-shirt was paired with saggy pants that had a rip across one leg, and a fine layer of wood dust was sprinkled over her skin. The two women looked each other over, then broke into laughter.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Alissa exclaimed. “Ready for the tour?”

Constance clapped her hands together and pressed them to her chest, one of the prim, old-lady gestures that made her appear far older than she was. Although, at thirty-five, she was only a few years older than Alissa, Constance Powers seemed to belong to another generation. Even when her job as an architect had her traipsing through dusty building sites in a hard hat, Constance managed to stay elegant. Somewhere between a mentor and older-sister figure, Constance was the person Alissa aspired to be.

“Is this still a good time?” Constance asked. “If you’re in the middle of something...”

“I’ll be ‘in the middle of something’ for the next ten years, from the look of it,” Alissa said cheerfully. “Come in—I’m ready for a break. I even made sandwiches.”

Constance stepped into the middle of the foyer, then gasped as she took in the soaring staircase and chandelier hanging high above her.

“Oh, Alissa!” she exclaimed. Alissa grinned with delight. She could tell from her friend’s expression that Constance saw past the paint cans and the tarps on the floor. She felt the magic of this house.

“I know it’s a disaster zone,” Alissa apologized. “I’m not going to invite anyone else over until I get the place in better shape.”

“It’s fantastic!” Constance said. “Even more so than I imagined. Give me the full tour.”

Alissa guided her friend through the rooms, talking nonstop and pointing out her favorite architectural details along the way. They ended in the master bedroom, just off the landing at the top of the main staircase. Constance pulled open the French doors that opened out onto a narrow balcony above the back garden. She looked down on the white stone patio and walkway below. Bushes and weeds had long since taken over the flower beds, but the outline of the garden’s elegant design was still clear.

Constance turned and walked back inside. Her eyes scanned the high-ceilinged room. A double bed, one dresser and an armchair sat forlornly in the middle of a space that could have easily held twice as much furniture. The floral-patterned wallpaper was peeling off the walls. A full-length mirror mounted in a gaudy gold frame made the room seem even larger and emptier. Constance fingered the floor-length white curtains.

“These are new, at least?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Alissa said. “The old ones were so dusty, I couldn’t stand it.”

“Once you get this wallpaper down and put on a fresh coat of paint, it will look great,” Constance said.

Alissa shrugged. “I’m concentrating on the downstairs for now.”

“At least you’ve got indoor plumbing,” Constance joked as she peered into the en-suite bathroom. “When would you say this was done—the late fifties?”

“Whenever peach and black were considered the height of fashion.” Alissa laughed.

“Well, I’m glad you’re finally getting some help,” Constance said. “What time did you say that guy was coming?”

Alissa glanced at her watch. A contractor recommended by Elaine, the Realtor, was due in half an hour for an interview. Alissa had hoped to hire some of the workmen she'd used in projects around Baltimore, but none were willing to drive this far.

"One o'clock," Alissa said. "C'mon—I've got lunch set up in the dining room."

The round, glass-topped dining table and silver aluminum chairs—brought from Alissa's modern condo—looked especially incongruous in the middle of the formal room. Dark wood wainscoting covered the lower half of the walls; the upper half was covered in worn burgundy velvet.

"I know it's silly to eat in this giant room when it's just the two of us," Alissa said, pushing an open bag of potato chips toward Constance. "But the kitchen is such a mess. Plus, it's so dark—it's not my favorite place to hang out."

"Ah, yes, the days before eat-in kitchens," Constance mused. "Half my jobs these days are kitchen expansions. Have you thought about knocking down that wall between the kitchen and conservatory? It would open up the whole back of the house."

"I'm not ripping out any walls," Alissa said firmly. "I want to keep the original character of the house."

"Suit yourself. You know me—always ready to tear things apart!"

"Any other changes you'd make?" Alissa asked.

"Oh, plenty," Constance teased. "But that doesn't mean the house isn't lovely as is."

"Really? You don't think I'm a complete fool for buying it?"

Constance carefully wiped her lips with her napkin, then leaned toward Alissa.

"Between you and me, I think you got the bargain of the century," she said.

Alissa laughed with relief. "Thank you. I mean—I was so sure I was doing the right thing when I signed the papers, but lately, I've wondered what I've gotten myself into."

"Of course you have. I feel like that on every job I take. There's always a hidden support beam that can't be moved or some other random complication. But this place—Alissa, it's wonderful."

Alissa grinned.

"It's got such great bones," Constance continued. "The rooms, the way each one opens onto the other, with fantastic sight lines...it's really ahead of its time. Now, I'd open it up even more, as I said, but even just updating it will make such a difference. Didn't you say something about a bed-and-breakfast?"

"Maybe," Alissa said. "A lot of people come out here from Baltimore and Washington for the weekend. I could make extra money renting out rooms in the summer if I had to. It all depends on how my design business goes."

"And how's it going?"

"All right, I guess," Alissa shrugged. "A few of my clients from Marsh and Mason said they'd like to keep working with me. Nothing fancy—mostly basements and kids' rooms. Honestly, I've been so busy here that I don't have time to drum up new business."

"Whenever you're ready for more work, let me know," Constance said. "I've got a lot of contacts who could help get you started. Anything I can do to keep you from going back to that miserable office."

"Walking out the door was one of the greatest days of my life," Alissa agreed. "No regrets there."

"Look." Constance pursed her lips with concern. "I'm really sorry I didn't make it to your goodbye party. I wanted to be there."

"I know," Alissa said. Despite all the confidences that the two women had exchanged over the years, there was one topic Alissa didn't know how to address: Constance's desperate desire for a child. Years of trying unsuccessfully to get pregnant had finally given way to tests and doctors' visits and fertility treatments. Now, Constance and her husband, Colin, were at the mercy of a constant, ever-changing schedule of tests and procedures. When a few of Alissa's coworkers had thrown her a

combination leaving-work and leaving-Baltimore party, Constance had called to say she wouldn't be there because she had a hospital appointment early the next morning. Alissa hadn't needed to ask why.

"So, the hospital?" Alissa asked carefully.

Constance shook her head slowly. "No luck. But thanks for asking. There's some good news, though," she said with a determined smile. "I met with another specialist, and he thinks I'm a good candidate for a new kind of treatment. I'll spare you the gory details—it probably won't be pleasant—but it's worth a shot."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed," Alissa promised. "If you ever want to talk about it..."

Constance nodded. "I know."

Alissa took in her friend's wistful expression and changed the subject. "So, how does Colin like his new job?" Alissa asked.

"It's good enough for now. Keeping the books for a dysfunctional family business was never his long-term ambition, but at least he'll get some decent stories out of it." Constance's husband had been laid off from a large accounting firm a year earlier, and Alissa had watched them both grow steadily more frustrated with his fruitless job hunt. Constance had even implied they would have to take a break from fertility treatments because of financial worries. But now that Colin was employed again, things seemed to be looking up.

"Have you heard from Brad?" Constance asked.

"Nope. Thank God. I don't need the distraction," Alissa lied. In reality, she was hurt that he hadn't called once, even though she'd left her new number on his voice mail. After talking every day for years, it seemed impossible that they now had nothing to say. Not that she wanted to get back together. It just felt strange to have him so absent from her life.

"His loss," Constance said. Their laughter was interrupted by a knock on the front door.

"Ah, it's your new handyman!" Constance announced. "Should I get going? I don't want to be in the way of the big interview."

"No, please stay," Alissa urged. "I'd love a second opinion."

As the two women walked toward the front door, Constance whispered, "Do you think he's still got all his teeth?"

"I don't care if he's toothless and bald," Alissa whispered back. "As long as he's strong enough to pick up a hammer."

Still smiling, she pulled open the heavy wood door. Her smile froze and her eyes widened in surprise. The man standing before her was far from the grizzled, feeble handyman she had envisioned. Instead, she faced a man not much older than herself, with muscular shoulders and biceps that nicely filled out his gray T-shirt. She was struck by his green eyes, which stared at her intently as if equally taken with her. He ran one hand through his longish, dark brown hair, shaking her out of her reverie.

"Alissa Franklin?" he asked.

"Daniel Pierce?"

His eyes crinkled amid laugh lines as they shook hands. "Call me Danny," he said.

"Danny." She stood unmoving, still trying to reconcile this vigorous man with the decrepit figure she had expected.

"Can I come in?" Danny asked, gesturing to the hallway behind her.

"Of course," Alissa said, embarrassed by her awkwardness. "Um, this is my friend Constance. She's just visiting. I mean, she's an architect, so she might have some questions for you, too. Just, you know, to get another perspective."

Constance stepped forward to block Alissa's nervous chatter. "Nice to meet you, Danny." She gripped his hand with both of hers, then turned her back to him and gave Alissa a wide-eyed smile. "Hot!" she mouthed.

Danny ran a hand down his face as though stifling a laugh. Mortified that he might have caught Constance's reaction, Alissa stiffened her shoulders and fixed Danny with her best professional expression.

"I'm sorry," Danny said good-naturedly. "I shouldn't be surprised. I just thought you'd be much older."

Alissa relaxed. "I thought the same thing about you."

And with that, the nervousness lifted. Alissa felt like herself again. How many times had she interviewed workmen for projects? She could do this almost without thinking. As they sat at the dining room table and Alissa described her plans for the house, she ignored Constance's meaningful looks and teasing asides. Constance—happily married for almost ten years—could enjoy a harmless flirtation. Alissa, on the other hand, would be this man's employer. She had to make it clear she wasn't angling for a date. No matter how hot he was.

Taking Danny on a walk through the house, Alissa was struck by his silence. He didn't try to impress her, although his occasional comments showed a more than passable knowledge of architecture and design. Unlike so many other men she'd met in construction, he didn't come on strong. If anything, he appeared too thoughtful—something she had never encountered in a workman before.

"I'll need to check your references," Alissa said as they returned to the front door.

"Sure." Danny pulled a crumpled, folded piece of paper from his jeans pocket. "There are some names and numbers on here."

She took the worn sheet and unfolded it gingerly. He hadn't put much effort into the presentation. Would he be this cavalier about his work?

"Thanks," Alissa said. "I'll be in touch."

"I hope so," Danny said. "It's a great house. I've driven by it so many times, wondering if anyone would ever fix it up. If I had the money, I would've bought it myself."

Afterward, Alissa deflected Constance's teasing about the hunky handyman.

"I can't hire the first person who shows up," she protested.

But deep down, she knew she would, because he felt the same way about the house as she did. He would give it the respect it deserved. His good looks were just a bonus.

TO AVOID LOOKING too eager, Alissa waited a full twenty-four hours before calling Danny and offering him the job. If he guessed that she hadn't interviewed anyone else, he didn't let on, telling her he was glad to be chosen and would be there the next morning to get started. About half an hour later, Elaine Price called.

"So, I hear you've hired Danny," she announced cheerily.

"Word travels fast," Alissa said.

"The downside of life in a small town, I'm afraid. Everyone knows everything. Danny's mother and I are old friends, and I told her to call me as soon as she heard. He's a very responsible worker—you won't be disappointed."

"Thanks for the recommendation." Elaine's words echoed the description she had gotten from Danny's references the night before. Dependable. Honest. Hardworking. No one volunteered the information she really wanted: why someone like him—handsome, smart, well-spoken—was working as a glorified carpenter in the middle of nowhere.

"I'm glad you're finally getting some help," Elaine said. "Though I'm impressed with what you've accomplished on your own."

Elaine seemed like the kind of person who'd call an electrician to help her change a lightbulb.

"There was one more thing I wanted to mention," she continued. "I was at the library yesterday—have you been there yet?"

“No,” Alissa said. “I’ve barely left the house since I moved in, except to run to the hardware store.”

“I got to talking with Claire Polley, who’s been the librarian there for ages. I mentioned you and the house, and she said the library has a whole box of materials on the Brewsters. You should talk to her. That is, if you’re still interested in the history of the house.”

“Oh, yes,” Alissa said. “Very much so.”

“Good,” Elaine said. “Claire works Mondays through Thursdays. On Fridays and Saturdays, the new girl’s there. She’s sweet but quite useless. Claire’s the one you want.”

“I’ll try to get down there later this week,” Alissa said. But as soon as she hung up the phone, she found herself distracted from her latest project, stripping paint off a doorway molding. She glanced at her watch. Three-thirty. If she hurried, she would have an hour or so to glance through the documents. There might even be pictures of the house. Maybe, if she found one of the home’s interior, she could restore the rooms to their original decor. She could bring the house back to the way it used to be, when it was filled with happiness and love.

Alissa spotted Claire as soon as she entered the library. She was a delicate older woman who looked as if she had been living among the stacks for decades. Her curly white hair was almost the same shade as her pale white skin, and when she reached out to shake Alissa’s hand, her arms were nearly translucent, revealing the veins beneath the surface.

“No one’s looked at this for years,” she said, “so it’s all a bit dusty.” She pointed to a document box in a corner behind her desk. “I’m not even sure what’s here. The contents were never cataloged, I’m afraid.”

Alissa carried the box to a long table in the center of the room. She removed the top and saw a stack of magazine and newspaper clippings piled loosely inside. She scanned the headline on the first article: Brewster Mansion Falls to the Wrecking Ball.

“I don’t know much about the family,” Claire said, “but I’ll try to help you if I can.”

Alissa nodded distractedly. Claire’s voice had already faded into the background. She dug through the articles, going back from the 1960s to the 1920s, reading stories about the Brewster Shipping Company and tea parties given by women of the town. Then, toward the bottom, she spotted a headline.

Lavish Brewster Wedding Dazzles. The date on the newspaper was April 21, 1904.

Alissa read the subhead: Charles Brewster Introduces His Bride to Baltimore Society.

She pulled out the article, staring at a photo of a young couple standing together, facing the camera. Charles and Evelyn Brewster. He seemed stiff and serious; she clung to his arm, wearing a formal gown with puffed sleeves, a shy fairy-tale heroine clutching her dashing prince.

Suddenly, Alissa envied them with a force that caught her by surprise. For months, she had heard her new home described as the Brewster house. But the Brewsters themselves had remained shadowy figures. Now, finally, she would find out who they’d really been—and what had happened to them.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON HER FIRST DAY in her new home, Evelyn awoke to find her husband gone. A slight young woman was standing in the doorway. She almost dropped the tray she was holding when Evelyn sat up.

“Excuse me!” the girl said, hunching her body as if to hide behind the tray.

“It’s Peggy, isn’t it?” Evelyn asked. She remembered the maid’s face from the night before, when she and Charles had returned from their honeymoon and been introduced to the household staff Alma had hired.

“Yes, Mrs. Brewster.”

Evelyn patted the quilt next to her. “You can put that down here,” she said, pointing toward the tray.

“Mrs. Gower wasn’t sure what you took for breakfast and asks if you’ll speak with her later. She can make anything you want. Some ladies hardly eat anything in the morning, as you know, but I said I thought you’d want a hearty meal after all your travels. Oh! I was supposed to ask if you take coffee, because I could get you that instead of tea if you prefer.”

Evelyn smiled at the maid’s nervous chatter.

“This smells delicious,” Evelyn said, looking over the plate of eggs, toast and fresh berries. “Tea is perfect. Is it customary for the ladies of the family to take breakfast in their rooms?”

Peggy’s face crumpled with concern. “Oh dear, I don’t know, Mrs. Brewster. I do what Mrs. Gower tells me. She worked in the kitchen at Mrs. Brewster’s. I mean, the older Mrs. Brewster, Mrs. Brewster.”

Evelyn smiled reassuringly. “Thank you, Peggy. Oh—one more thing. Is Mr. Brewster downstairs?”

“No, ma’am. He went out quite early. Six o’clock or so, I’d say.”

“Thank you.”

Peggy pulled the door shut behind her, and Evelyn was left to face the beginning of her new life alone.

It had been just a week since her wedding, but the days had passed in a blur of activity. Charles and Evelyn had spent their first night as man and wife at the Palace Hotel in Baltimore. As soon as they’d entered their suite, Charles had started pulling at the hooks and tiny buttons that fastened her elaborate gown.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed. “This must be the true test of a husband!”

She joined in his laughter, and that shared moment calmed her enough to face what came next. Once her gown was discarded, Charles pushed her onto the bed and pulled her underskirts aside. She lay nervously rigid beneath him, not knowing what to expect. He thrust into her body while she held her breath, wincing and wondering how long the pressure would last. After a few minutes, Charles rolled off her.

“That’s it, then,” he sighed. “You should find it less painful next time.” He paused and gave her a quick assessing look. “Wash up, darling, you look a fright!”

In the bathroom, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her face was flushed in embarrassment. Her hair hung in tangled ringlets. She turned on the tap and took a few moments to enjoy the luxury of warm water spilling over her hands and wrists. She washed up as best she could, then changed into one of the silk nightgowns her mother had sewn for her trousseau. She listened for a moment at the door when she was ready, but heard nothing. What happened now? Would Charles pounce on her again?

She opened the door slowly and peeked out. Charles lay on the bed in his underclothes, his jacket and trousers flung on the floor. He was snoring.

Evelyn tiptoed to the other side of the bed and slid under the covers, careful not to disturb him. Her body was exhausted, but her mind hummed with thoughts that kept sleep at bay.

The following day, Charles whisked her off for a week in New York. There were dinner parties every night, a visit to the opera, carriage rides through Central Park and shopping trips to expensive boutiques.

“You’re a Brewster now,” Charles said. “You need to look like one.”

Charles insisted on socializing with his friends from Harvard and their wives. Confident and sophisticated, these young couples intimidated Evelyn into silence. She did little more than hang on to Charles’s arm and look up at him adoringly when required. He was easy to admire then, with his elegant clothes and impeccable manners. The way he pulled her to his side and took her hand when he introduced her as “my wife” made her blush with pleasure.

Their only moments alone came late at night. Evelyn would retire to their hotel room first, while Charles enjoyed a cigar or a last card game downstairs. She would change into her nightgown, brush her hair smooth, then lie in bed and wait for him. When he came in, he would toss his jacket off in the darkness with the abandon of one who has always been catered to. There were no words, only his hands pulling her body close, his lips kissing her urgently. She lay stiff and quiet, unsure what he expected of her. He did what he needed while she concentrated on breathing until he was done. Overall, it wasn’t as bad as she’d feared it might be. But not as life-altering as she’d hoped for, either.

Now she was home. A beautiful place where she felt like an intruder. After picking at her breakfast, she got dressed and went downstairs. She walked through the rooms aimlessly, wondering how she was supposed to fill her day.

“May I help you, ma’am?”

It was Mrs. Trimble, the housekeeper, a gloomy woman who shuffled through the foyer as if sleepwalking.

“Oh, yes,” Evelyn said, summoning an air of confidence. “I’d like to discuss the household arrangements. That is, if you’re not otherwise occupied.”

Mrs. Trimble stared at Evelyn blankly. Clearly, there were no other demands on her time.

Evelyn began by asking Mrs. Trimble to tell her about the domestic staff. Peggy, the nervous housemaid, did the cleaning and served meals. Mrs. Gower, the cook, produced three-course lunches and dinners daily. Mrs. Trimble supervised Peggy, kept the house organized and handled all transactions with shopkeepers and tradesmen. Her husband and adolescent son tended the garden. The Trimbles lived in a small house on the edge of the property, next to the garden sheds; Peggy and Mrs. Gower had rooms on the third floor.

“Mrs. Brewster brought us on as a courtesy,” Mrs. Trimble told Evelyn, “until you’ve hired the rest of your staff.”

“Who else could I need?” Evelyn asked. Weren’t six people more than enough to look after one married couple?

“You’ll want a lady’s maid, surely?” Mrs. Trimble asked. “Another housemaid or two. Perhaps a kitchen girl to help Mrs. Gower, once you start entertaining.”

“Are newlyweds expected to entertain so soon?”

Mrs. Trimble shrugged. “You may do as you please.”

This, Evelyn soon discovered, was Mrs. Trimble’s response to most of her questions. After a frustrating day sitting around the house, waiting for Charles to return, Evelyn realized there was one other person she could turn to. Someone who would tell her exactly what life as Mrs. Brewster entailed. She wrote a note to Alma, inviting her for tea the next day. Just before asking Mr. Trimble to take it to the main house, she scribbled at the bottom of the page, Will is welcome to join us.

Later, Evelyn was grateful she had added that postscript, because the afternoon would have been excruciating without him. When Alma arrived, she greeted Evelyn at the door with a stiff handshake.

Will, by contrast, embraced her with a delighted cry of “Sister!” The warmth of his welcome gave her strength for the ordeal ahead.

After they had settled in the parlor, Alma looked around and said, “You’ve certainly got work to do.”

“The house, you mean?” Evelyn asked.

“Did no one give a thought to decor?” Alma asked, shaking her head disapprovingly.

Evelyn glanced around the vast, mostly empty parlor. There were no curtains on the windows, no rugs over the dark wood floors. The furniture had been placed haphazardly in the middle of the room.

“Mother redecorates constantly,” Will said. “She believes a room is not fit to live in until every piece of furniture has been draped in fabric and every surface invaded by china figurines.”

“One’s house is a reflection of oneself,” Alma said, ignoring him. “If a home appears neglected, one may assume the owner is as well.”

“I agree,” Evelyn said. “That’s why I was anxious to talk to you. I need guidance on so many things. Decorating is certainly one of them. Also, which activities I might occupy myself with, while Charles is at work.”

“My dear, I cannot be your nursemaid,” Alma said. “I lead a very busy life. In fact, I canceled another engagement to come here today.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize—”

“However,” Alma interrupted, “I can share a few thoughts.” From her tone, it was clear she was issuing orders, not suggestions. “You’ll want to start with the house. My secretary can give you a list of workmen and suppliers—the people to see about wallpaper and drapes and whatnot. They are mostly in Baltimore, but I assure you it’s worth the journey. Did Charles hire a driver for you?”

Evelyn shook her head. “I don’t think so. He hasn’t mentioned it.”

“How irresponsible of him.” Alma sighed in annoyance. “I suppose you could use one of our carriages, when they are not otherwise engaged.”

“Or I could take you in my motorcar,” Will offered.

Evelyn smiled. “I’ve never ridden in one.”

“Then I insist,” Will said. “Tell me the day.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Alma scolded. “You’ll do no such thing, Evelyn. It’s no way for a lady to travel.”

“Ladies in London and Paris travel by motorcar all the time, Mother,” Will said.

“I’ll arrange for a driver,” Alma insisted, looking at Evelyn. She reached into her embroidered bag and pulled out a piece of paper. “This is a list of families we socialize with. I took the liberty of ordering visiting cards for you. You’ll have a few weeks to settle in, but then you’ll need to make calls and introduce yourself. Lavinia will host a lunch next week where you may get acquainted with the young married women in her circle. You’ll be expected to hold dinner parties at least once a month, although you must coordinate with my secretary to make sure we’re not entertaining the same day. And don’t forget to speak with Charles’s secretary at the office. He usually spends a few nights each week in the city.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized,” Evelyn murmured, trying to keep up with Alma’s admonitions.

“I do encourage charity work,” Alma continued, “but it must be an appropriate cause. We can discuss that another time. It’s nearly four o’clock, and I still have errands in town. Charles did tell you I’m having you both to dinner this evening?”

“No, he didn’t,” Evelyn said, flustered. “Thank you, that sounds lovely. Oh—before you go, there was one other thing I wanted to ask. About Beatrice. Since she is now without a governess, and I’m not very busy at the moment, I thought we might continue our lessons.”

Alma stared at her in horror.

“Only until you can find her a new governess,” Evelyn offered.

“Absolutely not!” Alma exclaimed. “What a preposterous idea!”

“Seems rather convenient to me,” Will said.

“It would never do,” Alma said sternly. “Perhaps you do not understand your new position, Evelyn. You are Mrs. Brewster now. Soon enough, God willing, you’ll have your own children to tend to.”

“Of course,” Evelyn said, trying to hide her disappointment. “It’s only—I miss her. We used to spend so much time together.”

“You may call on Lavinia whenever you please,” Alma said. “She is your sister now, not your employer.” She stood up and walked toward the front door. Without looking back, she called for Will to join her.

Will remained in the foyer next to Evelyn. “Mother, I’d rather walk back to the house. I have no reason to go into town.”

“Very well,” Alma said. “But I won’t have you moping around much longer. It’s time you were out, being seen.”

“Yes, Mother,” Will said. “A Brewster must always be seen. Otherwise, he might as well not exist.”

Evelyn and Will watched from the front doorway as Alma’s carriage took off down the drive.

“Thank goodness she’s gone.” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Now we can have a real talk!” Evelyn smiled in relief.

“No doubt you’ve heard I’m a terribly bad influence,” Will said in a mock-serious tone.

Evelyn shrugged, unsure how to respond, and Will leaned toward her.

“It’s all true, I’m afraid,” he confided. “Come—I want to show you something.” He took her by the hand and led her back through the parlor. Although she barely knew him, Evelyn felt immediately at ease with Will—just as she had at her wedding reception. With him, she could be simply Evelyn, not Mrs. Brewster.

They walked through the conservatory, a glass-walled room lined with potted palm trees and ferns. Opening a door at the far end, Will led Evelyn outside. They emerged onto a patio, facing a marble fountain. Beyond them, a wide lawn extended down a hill, framed by flower beds along either side. Gravel walkways led off to the right and left, disappearing behind evergreen hedges as tall as Evelyn.

“This way.” Will pulled her along behind him, following the walkway to the right as it curved along the hedges. They passed a stone bench shaded by trees, then stepped into a field of wildflowers.

“Look over there.” Will pointed across the field, toward a grove of trees in the distance.

“Oh!” Evelyn exclaimed as she spotted the gray stone walls of Alma’s house in the distance.

“It only takes about five minutes to walk from here,” Will said. “Not that I’d suggest traipsing through the fields before dinner. Mother would not approve.”

“She most definitely would not,” Evelyn agreed.

They stood together quietly for a few moments, listening to the wind rustle through the tall grass. Evelyn felt cut off from the rest of the world. From everything that made her life so complicated.

“I was wondering...” Will began, then paused.

Ask me anything, Evelyn wanted to say. Instead, she waited in silence.

“How are you settling in?” Will asked finally.

“Very well,” Evelyn said. “Or—I should say, as well as could be hoped.”

“Mother’s a terrible snob. But you know that already. Don’t let her lectures discourage you.”

“There’s a lot to live up to,” Evelyn said. “The Brewster name and all it entails.”

“The Brewsters,” Will snorted. “We’re lucky to have you. Charles should be grateful.”

Charles. The name hovered between them like a warning sign.

“He’s my brother, and I probably shouldn’t be saying this,” Will continued, “but he can’t be an easy man to live with.”

Evelyn thought back to her wedding night. Charles pinning her to the bed as she lay silently.

“Charles plans on spending much of his time in Baltimore,” she said slowly. “Perhaps that will make things easier.” She smiled to show she was joking, but Will looked at her seriously.

“There you have it,” he said. “Charles, with a lovely young wife, is never at home. And I, a hopeless bachelor, am at home too much.”

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