

Chapter One

Manhattan Island, New York, 1886

The day Juliet Foster became insanely wealthy broke bright and clear. Juliet stared with longing out the window at the sunlight bringing the first warmth of spring to Central Park. The Almighty might have planned the weather to honor her dear, departed father. More likely, God didn't think about Gerard Foster one way or the other. No matter. Juliet's father had never paid much attention to God, either.

Gerard's children had assembled in the lavishly appointed office of his lawyer. Juliet's brother and sister and their spouses perched on their chairs, seeming to hover over Mr. Simms as he put on his reading glasses and opened the will. Juliet braced herself; unlike the others, she knew what was coming.

Mr. Simms cleared his throat. "I hope I've expressed my deep condolences at the loss of your father."

"Thank you." Her sister, Ophelia lifted her handkerchief to her mouth and managed a discreet sob into the linen. Very convincing unless you'd witnessed her make the exact same noise dozens over times of the years.

"He was a very great man, my dear," Mr. Simms said. "All of Manhattan admired him."

Indeed. They'd all discover how much that very night at the party Gerard's partners had planned in his honor. Society might think a celebration so soon after the man's death in poor taste, but Papa had no doubt ordered the thing to demonstrate that even in death, he was still in charge.

"Not only a titan of industry, but a great philanthropist," Mr. Simms went on. "The Foster Museum, the Foster Conservatory. The Foster Sanitarium...he even cared for the poor and infirm."

As long as he didn't have to actually meet any of the poor and infirm. Papa had left monuments to his name all over the city the way his prize bulldogs left surprises on the sidewalk outside of their mansion on the park.

"But I don't have to sing his praises to you kind people," Mr. Simms said. "We shall not see his like again for a very long time, if ever."

"Mr. Simms," her brother Richard said. "I hate to seem..."

The lawyer wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"We have preparations," Richard went on. "If you don't mind...the will?"

Mr. Simms' expression cleared. "Ah, yes."

The man shuffled the papers for a moment and then began to read. "'I, Gerard Howard Foster, being of sound mind do here on this twenty-fifth of November, 1885 declare this to be my last will and testament for all matters—'"

"Yes, of course," Ophelia said. "I don't think we need that part."

Mr. Simms glanced at Richard. "Should I skip it?"

"If you don't mind," Richard answered.

The lawyer looked to Juliet.

"Whatever my brother and sister want," she said. Nothing either of them could say or do would change the important contents of the will.

"Very well." Mr. Simms cleared his throat again. "'To my son, Richard, I leave my interests in the railroad and steamship lines that bear my name.'"

Richard smiled broadly and then realized he shouldn't look so happy this soon after the loss of his father. Instead, he settled his features into the expression of a man overwhelmed with responsibility but willing to soldier on. His figurine of a wife played her part like a professional, resting her tiny fingers on her husband's sleeve and gazing up at him in admiration.

"Richard's tried for twenty-three years to wrest control from me," Mr. Simms read on. "May he now sink or swim on his own. Without my help, the sharks among the partners will eat him alive."

Juliet's brother's expression soured. Her father had said nothing but the truth, and they all knew it, but no one had ever dared to say it out loud before. The partners would do their best to make Richard's life hell, and they'd probably succeed. Richard shared their father's greed but not his talent at grinding his opponents under his heel.

Mr. Simms turned to Juliet's sister. "To my elder daughter, Ophelia, I leave the estate in Newport and the country house in Saratoga. No doubt, she and her grasping husband will sell them at their first opportunity."

Ophelia straightened. "Lucas and I would never do such a thing."

Her husband, who was every bit as blond and every bit as beautiful as his wife, pretended shock every bit as well as she did. "Of course, we wouldn't."

"It continues," the lawyer said. "I believe I've thwarted the two of them by hiding her mother's best jewelry somewhere on one of the properties. If Ophelia wants the emeralds and pearls to drape over her bosom, which she pads with God only knows what, she'll have to find them."

Ophelia laid her hand over said bosom and turned a violent shade of pink.

"To my younger daughter, Juliet, I leave all my other assets in cash, bonds, and real estate," the lawyer read. "She has a headstrong and unfeminine temperament and will never land a husband. But she clings to money with the tenacity of a barnacle. This way, I know she'll never starve."

Starve? She couldn't go through that much money if she tried for the rest of her life. Granted, at thirty-two, she'd put her best spending years behind her, but even if she suddenly developed expensive tastes, she'd hardly make a dent in all that wealth. As to the remark about her nature, if marriage required that she act like the other two females in the room, she'd take headstrong over feminine any day.

What else could one expect? The whole will was another of her father's little jokes—giving most of his estate to the child least likely to want it. Well, she had a few jokes of her own for her dear, departed papa. Maybe he could watch them from heaven. If he really had ended up there.

"That's that, then," Mr. Simms concluded. "You're a very rich young lady, Miss Juliet."

"Not exactly young," she corrected.

"You've all done well," he said. "Mr. Foster was very generous."

Ophelia's blue gaze flitted to Richard's darker one. He, in turn, leaned forward and rested his hand on the edge of the desk. "Is there more?"

Mr. Simms's bushy, gray brows knitted together again. "Some instructions to his partners, a few gifts to the servants that I'll present later."

"About us," Ophelia said. "That can't be all Papa said about us."

The man picked up the will again. "Oh yes, there is this last message."

Ophelia settled back in her chair with the confidence of someone who'd had things made right for her over her entire lifetime.

“Goodbye to all of you,” the lawyer read. “I never would have tolerated any of you except for your mother’s sake. I join her in heaven now, if she’ll have me. The two of us will continue in the bliss we might have shared if the three of you had never been born.”

All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room, leaving nothing but a cloud of embarrassment behind. Gerard Foster had always had a nasty disposition and a way with words that had made him intolerable to everyone but his wife. He’d just taken his last swipe at them all, and he’d made it a good one.

“Ah, Father,” Juliet said finally. “As affectionate in death as he was in life.”

“Oh, do shut up, Juliet,” Richard said.

His wife, Sarah, gripped his arm and turned toward Mr. Simms. “I wonder if we could be alone for a while.”

“Of course.” The man looked relieved at the suggestion and rose from behind the desk. “I’ll leave you to discuss, um, matters. Ring for my secretary when you’re done.”

He left the room as quickly as his bulk allowed, pulling the door closed behind him. Immediately, the others broke into a quartet of protest. Juliet sat silently. After all, she had nothing to complain about.

“It’s not fair.” Ophelia’s voice penetrated the others. She jumped from her chair and looked as if she’d stamp her tiny foot. “Why did he leave all the money to you?”

“Why did Papa do anything?” Juliet answered. “To make someone unhappy. In this case, you.”

“We don’t need houses,” her sister wailed. “We have a perfectly good house on the park.”

Lucas rose and put his arms around his wife. From the desolate expression on his face, you’d think someone had taken his last dollar instead of leaving him two highly valuable properties, one of which held a hidden treasure of jewelry.

Richard rubbed his forehead as if Ophelia’s whining had given him a headache. She had that effect on people.

“It’s not the end of the world,” he said.

Ophelia turned on him. “That’s easy for you to say. You got what you wanted.”

“Along with father’s curse,” he said. “He expected me to fail.”

“He couldn’t,” Ophelia said. “He was your father.”

“Don’t be a ninny,” Richard grumbled back.

Dear heaven. One of Gerard’s favorite expressions. Now that Richard had become head of the family would he turn as sour as his father? Maybe Foster men inherited the trait. Juliet had planned her escape from all this familial bliss, and now it appeared she’d better get away fast.

“The man detested me,” Richard said. “He’s probably set traps everywhere. Poisoned the other partners against me.”

Richard left his seat, went to the window, and stared out, resting his fist against the frame. “He’d have given the companies to Juliet, too, if she weren’t a woman.”

“Oh, no,” Juliet said. “I’d have treated his employees decently. He couldn’t risk that.”

“For heaven’s sake, calm down. None of us will go hungry,” Sarah said. She might have looked like a porcelain doll with her pale skin and green eyes, but she had more sense than the other three put together.

“It’s not fair,” Ophelia tried one last time before plopping back into her chair.

“If you’re really that miserable, I could buy one of the estates from you,” Juliet said.

“Oh, would you?” The storm cloud over Ophelia’s face vanished, and the sun shone in

her eyes.

“Of course,” Juliet answered. “Although I might end up with mother’s jewels.”

That got her a look from her sister as if she’d smelled something bad. Ophelia hadn’t considered the implications of the offer, but then, she never had been able to see beyond the end of her nose.

“Never mind, then,” Ophelia said.

“I guess we’re done.” Juliet got up and straightened her skirts around her. “Ring for the secretary so we can leave.”

Richard found the bell pull next to the drape and gave it a vicious tug. After no more than a few seconds, the door opened. Mr. Simms’ thoroughly starched and thoroughly efficient assistant stood on the threshold. “May I be of service?”

“Call us a carriage, will you?” Richard said. “We’re ready to leave.”

“I think I’ll walk,” Juliet announced. “It’s a lovely day.”

“I’ll see you out.” The secretary accompanied her to the front of the house and pulled the door open.

”Thank you.” She took a step and hesitated, turning back to the man. “I’d get that carriage quickly, if I were you. They can all be very unpleasant.”

“I’ll do as you say, miss.”

With that, she climbed down the stairs into the sunshine, smiling to herself.

Juliet found her friend, Millicent Rhodes, sitting on a bench in the park. When she spotted Juliet, Millie smiled and rose. “That was fast.”

“The siblings made sure we got to the important things quickly.”

“How did it go?”

“Pretty much the way I expected,” Juliet answered. “My father called me unfeminine and compared me to a barnacle.”

Millie’s jaw dropped. “How cruel.”

“Papa was a mean, old coot, but he had great insights into people.”

“How can you say that?”

“Let’s walk home, and I’ll explain it.”

Juliet found the path, and the two young women went along, side by side. The Foster mansion wasn’t Millie’s actual home, of course. Or, it hadn’t been, but she could live there now for as long as she wanted. An orphan with no family, Millie had been a charity case at Miss Sedgewick’s Academy for Young Ladies, which Juliet also attended. Because the two of them stood taller than any of the other girls, they’d become best friends. In fact, they could share each other’s clothes, although Millie filled out the bodice of Juliet’s dresses better than she did.

“Why would your father call you unfeminine?” Millie asked. “You’re a desirable woman.”

“I don’t particularly care if I am or I’m not. I have no plans to marry or even to form an attachment with a man.

“What about Mr. Carter?” Millie said.

“Jack’s a sweetheart, but he doesn’t count.”

They’d approached a bridge that spanned one of the many culverts in the park. Millie stopped and turned to Juliet. “Mr. Carter’s very handsome, and the two of you would make a wonderful match.”

“He is a good-looking devil, and I adore him,” Juliet said. “But he’s not interested in

women.”

“What does that mean?”

“Do you remember Miss Adams?” Juliet said.

“The English teacher.”

“Right. And her friendship with Miss Eustace?”

“I see.” Understanding flashed in Millie’s eyes. “Mr. Carter’s that way with men.”

“He’s a lot of fun and a great dancing partner. No more.” Juliet looped her arm through Millie’s and walked with her a bit. They passed granite outcroppings as they went. Small pockets of snow still clustered in the crags, but even those were giving way to crocuses. The tiny yellow, purple, and white flowers were the first promise of spring. Soon, the whole landscape would give way to a riot of color. She planned to be on a steamship toward London before that happened.

“All right, not Mr. Carter,” Millie said. “But, you must have had offers of love and marriage.”

“Dozens.” Juliet waved dismissively with her free hand. “Undying love, declarations that they must marry me or perish! All of them completely dishonest.”

“How do you know they were dishonest?”

“Money, money, money. They had no interest in me,” she said. “None of them would have given me a second look if my name were Juliet Smith.”

“Surely, one of them must have been sincere,” Millie answered.

“It doesn’t matter, anyway. Marriage is a trap. A husband owns you and all your possessions. The man could turn me into a pauper and lock me in the house if he wanted.”

“I hardly remember my parents,” Millie said. “Were yours like that?”

“My mother deferred to my father in everything, so he adored her. Who knows what that old bastard would have done if she’d dared to speak her mind on anything?”

“I can’t believe all men are like that.”

“Enough are. Some women have to put up with them to support themselves. I don’t.” Juliet patted Millie’s arm. “Now that I’m filthy rich, you don’t, either.”

A pair of men came walking along the path in the other direction. No one Juliet recognized, just people headed toward their own destination. Both touched the brims of their hats as they grew near. Both pairs of eyes lingered on Millie as they went by. Only a few years younger than Juliet, Millie had entered spinsterhood herself, but she was still a beauty with her clear skin, blue eyes and hourglass figure. Even the red of her hair looked warm and not garish. If she had any wealth at all, a dozen men or more would court her.

“Barnacle?” Millie prompted.

“I’m sorry. My mind wandered.”

“It was those men, wasn’t it?” Millie said.

“I’m only human. I can’t help but look.”

“They looked back.”

“At you, not me.”

“You’re a striking woman.” Millie stopped again. “You could choose from any number of men if you wanted.”

“That’s what I plan to do. Only I won’t have to choose.”

Millie’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“My father said I cling to money like a barnacle,” Juliet said. “I’m going to let loose of some. A lot, in fact, and you’re going to help me spend it.”

“It’s not my money.”

“It is if I say it is.”

“Juliet, you’re making me dizzy. What are you talking about?”

Juliet guided her friend back along the pathway. They still had a lot to discuss, and they were nearing the house. Then, they’d have preparations for the party.

“We’re going to travel, you and I,” Juliet said. “England and the Continent. I’m going to have a fling.”

“Oh, dear.” Millie groaned. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those women who’ll give herself one brief affair before she settles down into spinsterhood.”

“Of course not.”

Millie heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank heaven.”

“I’m much more ambitious than that,” Juliet declared. “I’m going to have affairs in the plural. Dozens of them. More, if I can manage.”

This time, Millie jerked to a sudden stop. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. I plan to sleep my way across Europe.”

“But, you can’t!” Millie’s voice went close to a shout.

“Why not?” Juliet shouted back.

“It isn’t decent.”

“Hang decency!”

Millie glanced around. Sure enough an older couple had stopped nearby and appeared to be listening in on the conversation.

“Lower your voice,” Millie said.

“You’re the one who started shouting.”

“All right.” Millie took a steadying breath. “You can’t mean to sleep with dozens of men you’re not married to.”

“Of course, I do. I have it all planned. I’ll start in England to get my feet wet.”

“Your feet?” Millie repeated.

“Figure of speech,” Juliet said. “Everyone knows the English are stodgy. Safe. I’ll practice on them until I feel ready for Paris.”

“Juliet, dear. You’ve lost your mind.”

“No, I haven’t. Nor my virginity, unfortunately.”

Millie groaned. “That’s not a bad thing, you know.”

“I’ll learn finesse from the French. How to act sophisticated in bed. Blasé, even.”

Millie walked to a bench and sank onto it as if her legs wouldn’t hold her. “Oh, Juliet.”

Juliet sat beside her and patted her hand. “Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“After France, Spain. Hot-blooded Spaniards to add some spice to my palette before my ultimate destination.”

Millie gave her a baleful look. “Please, not Russia.”

“Don’t be silly. Italy.” The mere word sent a thrill through her. “Italian lovers. Could there be anything more delicious?”

Millie cradled her head in her hand. “I certainly hope not.”

“Just think...all the passion of the French combined with the ferocity of a Roman warrior.” She shivered with delight. “*Che cosa passione. Il mio desiderio del cuore.*”

“*Ce qu’une catastrophe.*”

“Now, don’t start writing my eulogy. I’ll be fine.”

Millie stared up at her. “You know what the siblings will do if they get wind of this plan,

don't you?"

"I'm not afraid of them."

"You should be," Millie said. "They'll have you declared insane and put you into an institution."

"And gain control of my inheritance. Very handy all around for them," Juliet answered. "Don't think I haven't thought of that."

"For heaven's sake." Millie waved her hands in the air in a gesture of frustration. "Gerard Foster was famous in Europe, too. Anyone who recognizes you can cable here, and you'll be in a nice asylum before you can say *che bella ragazza*."

"Calm down, Millie. I won't be Juliet Foster but a fabulously wealthy and eccentric young American widow. I'll think up a name."

"Now, I know you've lost your mind." Millie put her hands on her hips. "Won't your first lover realize you never consummated your marriage?"

"Hmm. I see."

"You see? You didn't think of that? That proves you haven't thought this through."

"Don't worry." Juliet waved her hand. "A mere detail. I'll find someone on the ship to rid me of my virginity."

"Isn't there anything I can do to talk you out of this disaster in the making?"

"Absolutely not," Juliet said.

"Well, I hope you know I'm not going to indulge in any of this with you."

"Of course, not. You'll be my spinster cousin. We'll be on our way to Geneva to get treatment for you."

"Treatment?" Millie's voice approached a high-pitched squeal. "What for?"

"Nervous exhaustion. You're about to collapse. I don't know how you can stand."

"I'm sitting," Millie answered. "But, if you like I could cough myself hoarse."

"That's the spirit."

Millie groaned.

"Chin up," Juliet said. "While we're there, we'll get you a husband, if you insist on wanting one. Whatever kind you want. You'll come home with him, and I'll come home to my money."

"Just how rich are you, anyway?" Millie asked.

"You see that building?" Juliet pointed toward the most luxurious set of apartments on the park. "I'll give it to you as a wedding present."

"The Dakota? You could afford that?"

"I could buy the whole park if the city would sell."

Millie blanched. "How do you know that? You haven't even met with your father's accountant yet."

"Oh, but I have. Papa worked the poor man half to death. I used to pay him late-night visits."

"Don't tell me you promised to sleep with him, too."

"I wouldn't do that. He's a happily married man," Juliet said. "With quite a thirst for gin."

"You got him drunk."

"Nothing limbers the tongue like liquor." Juliet rose. "We got to be great friends. I plan to give him a substantial gift to thank him. And an endless supply of gin."

"You've made him an ally."

“I may need one if the siblings go snooping,” she said. “Now, come along. We need to get ready for the party. Manhattan will meet its latest fabulously wealthy spinster.”

The last thing Juliet had expected at the sedate party in Gerard Foster’s memory was for one of his partners to pin her against the billiard table and declare his undying love. For heaven’s sake, Oscar Price was almost as old as her father and had a perfectly good wife out in the ballroom.

He put his stubby arms around her and tried to pull her against his chest. “My darling Juliet. Now that Gerard is no longer here to keep us apart, I can tell you how much I’ve loved you since I first laid eyes on you.”

She pushed him away. “I was a child.”

“I meant since you came back from school.”

“I wasn’t much more than a child then.”

He tried to shove his lips over hers again, but she managed to get her hand between their faces.

“You’ve always been a woman to me,” he mumbled against her palm.

“That’s disgusting.” He didn’t mean an iota of this nonsense, of course. She’d soon take possession of most of Papa’s assets. Price had discovered that somehow and was making a play to get control of all that and cut everyone else out including her brother. How stupid did the man think she was?

“I’m offering myself to you. Heart and soul.” He dropped to his knee and put his palm over his chest. “Please, make me the happiest man in the world.”

“What on Earth do you mean by that?”

“Marry me, my darling. I can’t live without you.”

Of course. Nothing short of marriage would make all her possessions his. If he felt honest lust for her, he’d want an affair. If he loved her, he’d leave her the hell alone.

“You’ve done well enough without me so far,” she said.

“I’m bereft. Heartbroken. Desperate,” he answered.

“What about your wife? The woman you’ve been married to for over twenty years?”

“She means nothing to me. I’ll divorce her.”

“Is that your idea of ‘til death does us part’?” she said. “I don’t think I want anything to do with it.”

He clutched at her hand, pressing a sloppy kiss on the back. “I’ll devote myself to you and only you for the rest of my life.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, get up. You’re making a fool of yourself.”

He did rise and proceeded to grab for her again. This time, she ducked under his arms—no small accomplishment because in shoes with heels, she stood an inch or two taller than he did. As fast as she could manage in those heels, she skirted the table and stared at him from the other side. “Leave me alone, or I’ll scream for help.”

“It won’t do you any good. We’re too far from the ballroom, and there’s too much noise in there for anyone to hear.” He lunged to one side, and she countered, keeping the table between them.

“What do you hope to accomplish with this?” she said.

“I want you as my wife, and I won’t give up until you promise to marry me.”

“You don’t want me, Mr. Price.”

“Oscar,” he corrected.

He turned a corner of the table, and she ran around the other end. Now, they faced each other across the narrow dimension. He could almost reach her, and he flung himself toward her. He landed on his stomach on the top, and she took the opportunity to run to the door. While he flopped around behind her, she twisted the knob. It didn't budge. Good Lord, he'd not only locked the others outside, she couldn't get out, either, and there was no sign of the key anywhere.

She turned. "Let me out of here. Now. I insist."

Instead, she found herself shoved back against the door as he crushed his mouth against hers. What a pig of a man. She pushed at his shoulders but couldn't make him move. Worse, his hands went to her bodice, tugging on the fabric in an attempt to undo the buttons. If the man thought this was the way to win a woman's favor, may God have mercy on his wife.

Juliet managed to twist her head, freeing her mouth. "Release me now, or I'll call for the police."

"They won't hear you, either," he answered.

"You won't win anything this way."

"I will," he said. "If I can prove that we're lovers, you'll have to marry me."

"No one would ever believe that," she answered.

"Once I have you undressed, they will," he said. "Richardson's outside waiting to confirm it. I only have to let him in."

Dear Lord, two of them. A plot. No doubt, they'd made an agreement to divide the spoils once Price had gotten his hands on her money. The bastard might even succeed if she didn't do something drastic and soon. He'd already managed to get a few buttons open.

"I'll only tell you one more time," she said. "Let me go."

"Never, my darling. I love you too much."

"All right. I warned you." Taking careful aim, she thrust her knee upward into the space between his legs. She'd never tried to do such a thing, but that was supposed to stop men in a second. It worked. He released her and fell to the floor, clutching himself there and moaning loudly. Now, she had to find the key before he recovered. He'd probably hid it on his person somewhere, so she'd have no choice but to look for it on him.

"Curse it," he gritted. "Why did you...?"

"You deserved it." She knelt next to him and stuck her hand into one of his pockets. Nothing in his jacket, so she had to try his pants. The first pocket was empty, and he kept squirming, but she finally got to the other, and her fingers met metal. The key.

She rose quickly and went to the door.

"Come back here," he shouted.

"Go to hell," she answered. That felt good. No, *damn*, that felt good. From now on, she'd swear like a sailor if she wanted. Who could stop her? Right now, she needed to get out of this billiard room.

She opened the door and went out into the hallway. Sure enough, Mortimer Richardson stood right in her path.

He stared at the disarray of her dress for a moment and then formed his features into a mask of shock and disapproval, the hypocrite. "Miss Foster, what have you been doing? You look a disgrace."

"You're the disgrace." Just because she could, she slapped him across the face—hard enough to leave the red marks of her fingers on his cheek. "You'd better see to your friend. Convince him that molesting women doesn't pay."

"What..." He went into the billiard room. "Good Lord, Oscar, what happened to you?"

She didn't stay to give him an explanation but headed off, doing up her buttons as she went. Her hair was no doubt mussed, and she'd have to find a mirror and do her best to repair it. For now, she needed someplace quiet to get her breath and, with any luck, a stiff drink.

She turned a corner and headed down another corridor toward the library. But that wasn't empty, either. Juliet could hear a high-pitched girlish voice from inside the room.

The young female in question was in the library doing something she shouldn't, and it involved a man. A rich baritone joined the sounds inside. Mischief. No doubt about it. Had every male at the party lost his mind? She was about to find out.