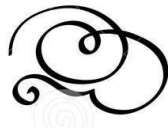


One



Anthony

Rain pelts on the windscreen of my black Jaguar sports car as I push harder on the accelerator. The engine purrs like a cat, filling me with power. So much power, it is becoming sexual. The headlights reflect off the drops, sending colour and mixed messages to my brain but I push aside any thought of slowing down. Anger and the need of revenge swarms through my veins like a potent drug, causing my head to clear. I am invincible. I am in the prime of my life, and I am about to reap the rewards from years of careful planning. I am going to prove all those who belittled me, who said I would never amount to anything, that they were all wrong. With this scheme, I will have all my heart's desire.

At the end of this drive is a young girl, one I have had the responsibility to care for the last ten years, one that should have died alongside her parents. If she had, I wouldn't be in this predicament now. I would already have my heart's desire and then some.

I have worked hard to keep all the trails clean. No one could link me to those murders no matter how hard they investigated. It hit the headlines as the police tried to find a motive.

Of course, the death of my only sister and her handsome, wealthy husband caused me so much grief that I refused any interviews. If only they knew the truth. Ha! What is truth?

‘Truth’ is what I want to make it. I am tired of playing by the rules others set. Finally, I have set up a plan to get what I deserve.

Driving through the dense darkness of the night and the pouring rain reminds me of another such time; one that changed my fortunes for the better. I hope this night will end the same. I had been only eighteen at the time, a typical nerdy kid who longed to fit in with the crowd but never quite making the grade. I just couldn't fit with the hip group. Everyone else had money, but I didn't. My friends splashed it around on fancy new cars while I had to drive a second hand one. How demoralising. That was when I came up with a brilliant idea. Take out a life insurance policy on my parents then arrange for an accident. It was so simple and worked perfectly, better than I had even dreamed it would. Not only did I get the life insurance pay-out but the Will showed just how much my parents were worth. Millions! How dare they make me work and save when they could have given me everything I wanted!

The only catch was the money went into a trust fund, and the allowance was to be shared between my twin sister Concetta and myself. Once we turned 35, we were going to be able to withdraw as much as we needed. What injustice! I wanted the money straight away, but goody-goody Connie agreed to go along with our parents' wishes. Ha! I showed her!

I focussed on becoming the best lawyer this world has ever seen. I was determined to understand the law keeping me from the riches just out of my reach. The only condition I could arrange was when she passed away, I could do what I wanted. How unfortunate for her that she died just before her thirtieth birthday. Of course, I had nothing to do with the tragic murder of her and her husband, Lord David McBride, a slimy goody-goody just like her.

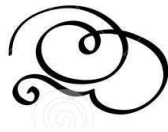
My anger towards David goes back as far as I can remember. His family seemed blessed in anything they did. He was the top of the class, the good-looking football player,

the kind of man the rest of us dreamed of becoming. He never had a bad hair day or case of acne in his life! Straight out of school, he got a job with his father's investment company, pulling in big money. When he was given his royal title due to his good works with the United Earth Charity, it was one he could pass down to his offspring! That was the final straw. He had everything I wanted. Money, prestige, recognition and a beautiful wife. His death satisfied my jealousy, but only for a time. I nearly blew a fuse when I discovered he had changed his will, giving all his wealth and property to his only child. He put in clauses I hadn't expected and that even I couldn't beat.

But I refused to fold my cards and kept my poker face fixed. I had to wait until the time was right before I played the trump card. I hold that in my hands now. With this final game, I will win everything I have ever dreamed of and what I deserve.

I chuckle to myself and soon start laughing hysterically, as I race through the night. My brutal revenge is oh so sweet.

Two



The old sandstone manor house appears in the headlights, so I slow down for the final manoeuvre onto the gracious, sweeping driveway. Plastering a genteel, caring look on my face, I prepare for my grand entrance. Eric, the butler, opens the door and I sweep past him without a glance. Such a tiresome fellow doesn't deserve any acknowledgement. How can there be so many goody-goodies in the world? Don't they know the only way to get ahead in life is through hard work and fine print?

"Call Virginia to meet me in the study," I shout as I make my way into the huge room filled with books and a large mahogany desk. Suddenly I stop, glaring at the girl already sitting on the leather lounge, reading a book on some useless subject that only she would find interesting.

Her long black hair, deep royal-blue eyes and pale skin are amazing. I have to fight my desire for her, but the surge of sexual lust is getting stronger as she gets older and more beautiful. She is going to be just as beautiful as her mother was. I compare any woman I have ever looked at to her, and they always come up lacking. They never seem to have the same inner beauty that shines through their eyes.

“What is up, Uncle Anthony?” she asks innocently. Oh, if only I could tell her what is up! The poor naïve girl would blush.

“I have come up with a solution to the death threats,” I reply calmly, pouring myself a glass of single malt scotch, then gulping it down before I pour another. I imagine myself in a movie, cast as the villain who finally overcomes the obstacles in his way. Now I have to set the scene with just the right amount of drama.

“I have arranged for you to get married.”

“What! You can’t do that!” she exclaims, putting her book down and standing to face me. Her petite frame and angry stance remind me of a mouse standing up to an elephant. Pathetic. One step and I could crush her out of existence. I raise my eyebrows in disdain and tilt the scotch glass in salute to her feeble attempt to challenge my authority.

“I am your guardian until you are 21. I own you.”

“I am not a THING! You cannot own a person!”

Anger puts a pink shine to her cheeks. My God, she is beautiful when she is angry! My lust escalates, nearly out of control. I grip the scotch glass tightly as my brain struggles to control my need to have her body for my release. Maybe I should just rape her now and get rid of this insane emotion. That would reduce her to the piece of trash all women collapse into when they are forced to acknowledge I can do whatever I want, and no one can stop me.

“I have arranged for you to marry to keep you safe,” I reply, trying to reason with her. I can see she doesn’t want to listen as she continues to glare at me. She doesn’t believe a word I am saying so I may as well tell her the truth.

“His mother is willing to pay a sizeable sum for your title. I will finally get what I deserve. You are getting married in two weeks. I would have made it earlier, but your groom is out of the country until then.”

I slam the papers down on the table and glare back, silently daring her to have a look. They will change her life forever, but she hasn't even asked the man's name. Her eyes hold my own, returning the challenge. She has grown up to be more independent than I had suspected. For a brief second, a flash of doubt enters my brain before I push it away again. No, she will do as I tell her and that is final. I turn on my heel and leave.

Eric has brought my luggage to the master suite on the first floor by the time I get there. There is a large four post bed in the room off to one side, a parent retreats with a lounge and an ensuite, easily equalling a royal apartment at the grandest hotel in the city. The warm, rich tones of mahogany are softened with the reds, golds and whites in the curtains. During the day, the view from the window is breath-taking, rolling green hills and a manicured rose garden. I close the curtains to keep anyone from spying despite the storm.

Carefully I put my briefcase on the table and take out a small box. It is a scanner I use everywhere I go. I don't trust anyone. Slowly I walk around the room, waiting for the tell-tale beep of the alarm, but there is none. Finally satisfied there are no eavesdropping bugs or hidden cameras, I pull out the file I have brought with me.

Being a corporate lawyer as well as a director of a large charity fills my life with the two things I want most in life, Money and Praise. But I want more. I deserve more. I want recognition.

I need to talk to this spoilt, rich girl first thing in the morning. She cannot expect to keep living in luxury without working for it. Just because her father had billions tucked away in a trust fund and had managed to keep it secure despite my numerous efforts to gain access to it, doesn't mean that will always be the case.

I have lodged another will on her behalf, making me the beneficiary. Now I just have to get rid of her without anyone suspecting anything.

Getting her married to some stupid man who is under the thumb of his mother at the age of 20 is just my backup plan. The woman was so excited to purchase a real title for her son that she happily signed on the dotted line without reading the small printed conditions. Oh, how I love the fine print!

If these two meet and marry before Lady Virginia McBride turns 21, I will reap the rewards even if I haven't been the one to introduce them. The chance of them meeting is higher than the mother would ever imagine. Both their fathers founded the United Earth Charity and planned for the two offspring to take control. It is only a matter of time. I hate to wait so I've hurried it up a little.

I smile to myself as I look at the latest death threat she is going to receive. I keep it as childlike as possible, using stick figures and crayons. This time the picture has a sand timer showing her time is running out. She received the first one at her eighteenth birthday party inside a card. I expect she thought it would be more well-wishes. HA! My true wishes are that she had died next to her parents just like the picture showed. I would have been able to get my hands on all that money straight away as I am her only relative left living.

It has taken six months of careful planning since the first one. As much I would love to finish the job quickly, I have to take my time. There cannot be anything to link this to me.

It is well after midnight by the time I am sure all the nosey servants have gone to bed, giving me the privacy I need for my next step. I change my clothes and pull a black mask over my face then unpack a small pair of pliers. Even if a security camera picks me up, there is no way anyone can tell who it is. Carefully, I close the back door and make my way around to the front. It has to be done to look like someone has come from outside.

Going to the front door and snipping the security cameras wire is easy but my hands tremble, and nervous sweat breaks out on my palms. It is the first time I have been brazen like this. Usually, I leave the dirty work to others, but this has to be done tonight to put a

fright into the girl's very soul. Between the marriage contract and the death threat, she will react like a scared mouse and scurry out of her safety hole, and then my men can pounce. I hate playing these kinds of games but my partner, Frederick Mahoney, has insisted. We have to flush her out of the security of this house and get her on the run. Then when she is found dead, it can't be linked to Fred or me. I can already imagine the expressions I will use when I appear on Crime Stoppers or Missing Person programs. I have been practising my 'grieving uncle' looks for the past few weeks.

If she doesn't run after this, then she will be married. Either way, a large sum of money will soon be mine!

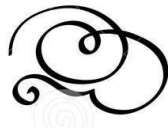
Back in my suite, I think about how things have unfolded over the years and how it could have been so different.

David and Connie set up the United Earth Charity to have a hands-on approach to helping others. They, along with two other families, went around the world, looking into disaster situations, not believing the reports sent to them by those looking for handouts. In the process, they discovered a tangled web of corruption and deceit. Instead of being like every other philanthropist and accepting that is the way things are, these pathetic do-gooders set up a way to unblock the processes. I worked along with them for a time until I set up a charity of my own.

Unfortunately, they discovered my most lucrative scheme and nearly destroyed all my hard work in the process. I have finally got it back where I want it, all these years after their deaths.

I finally drift to sleep, wondering what the new day will bring.

Three



Everything seems normal in the morning. No police sirens. No alarms are going off. I guess that means the envelope hasn't been found, or Virginia is getting used to the thought of others wanting her dead. I smile to myself as I dressed, carefully combing my black hair into place. Looking closer at the mirror, I frown for a moment. Grey hair is starting to show along the sides. I need to get that seen to once I return home.

There is a strange quiet over the house as I enter the dining room. No happy chatter is coming from the kitchen. I know the staff don't like me, but I don't care. I am the Lord of this Manor. They are nothing but servants, employed to obey, born to submit.

"Virginia seems to have slept in," I say casually, as I tuck the napkin on my lap and Elizabeth puts a cooked breakfast of bacon and eggs in front of me. I wish there were some way I could get the food tested before I take a bite. I wouldn't put it past these simpletons to try to poison me.

"I will ask Jessica if Lady Virginia is well," Elizabeth replies formally. Her voice is fixed and emotionless as if she is constipated. I can feel her dislike towards me, but I don't care as long as she does her job.

Jessica is Ginny's ladies maid, and I don't trust this girl. For a nineteen-year-old, her eyes see more than she lets on. There is something about her that makes me uneasy, and it is only partly due to the fact the United Earth Charity employed her to care for Ginny, and I had no say in the matter.

Jessica comes in with her usual air of disdain. If she doesn't like getting beckoned, then she shouldn't be a maid.

"What is wrong with that girl this morning?" I demand. "Can't she get out of bed? She has gotten lazy under your care."

"No, she is not in her bed, Mr Shepherd," she replies. Contempt drips like poison from her lips.

"Where is she then? I need to speak with her." Why can't these stupid servants answer a simple question?

"She is gone."

The answer shocks me more than I expected it would.

"Gone? As in..."

"Yes, sir. Gone. Not in her room. Not in the house nor anywhere on the Manor grounds."

"Where has she gone? What do you mean 'gone'?" I yell. Of course, I know what 'gone' means. Excitement and adrenaline of the chase ahead jumps through me, but I try to portray it as anger.

"I do not know," she replies calmly despite my growing agitation. I know she is lying, but she is careful not to show it on her face. "There was nothing to indicate where she has headed."

I notice she didn't add "Or why she ran away."

By now Eric and Elizabeth, the mousy maid who I can never remember the name of and one of the boys from the stables have come into the dining room to find out why I am shouting. They each have the same dumb, blank look. Do they practice that or is it natural?

“Did she say anything to you last night when you tucked her in?” Two can play this game of contempt. The difference is that I don’t have to pretend to like Jessica since she works for me. She is only a servant. “I can’t understand why a girl her age would need a personal maid to care for her. It is childish.”

“No, sir, she didn’t say anything.”

“Call all the servants inside. Meet me in the drawing room.”

I turn to storm out of the room, leaving before a smile can break onto my face. Everything is going as planned, but I can’t slip up now. No matter how much I lack respect for such lowly slaves, the courts value their testimony.

“Excuse me, sir,” Eric says, stopping me in my tracks, holding a white envelope. It is the one I left on the step last night. “I found this at the front door this morning.”

I snatch it out of his hand as I continue on my way to the drawing room, not bothering to open it. I know what is in there. Her time is running out. My time is running out. She is on the run. Now I have to get my team into motion and track her down. I have to make sure she meets her end quickly. Excitement rushes through me. The chase is on! The fox is out, and the hounds are baying to be let loose on the scent. I have to handle this situation with the utmost of care.

As soon as the servants come into the room, they line up like a bunch of school kids in front of the principal. How pathetic.

“I want to know how she got out of the house without anyone noticing,” I tell the eager, frightened faces of the seven subservient individuals. “What time did she leave? Where did she go?”

The gardener looks down at his dirty nails, so I storm in front of him and yell in his face. “Did she escape out the window of her room?”

Shocked, he looks up and gulps, “No, sir.”

Eric stands next to him. I can tell he is hiding something, so I focus on him next. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“It is your job to keep this house safe. If she was wandering around late at night, you should have known about it.”

“Yes, sir but I didn’t hear anything,” he replies way too calmly.

I ball my fists tightly to keep from punching his arrogant lights out. He knows more than he is letting on. How dare this group gang up against me!

The maid who always seems to have a duster in her hand starts whimpering, so I focus on her. Finally, I remember her name so I change my tone to see if it will bring something out of her. She is the weakest link in this battle of wills.

“So Bethany, dear sweet Bethany, you know something, don’t you? Where has our little girl gone?” I croon. Does my sudden caring nature fool her? Probably, the stupid girl.

Bethany catches her breath as she fights to control her tears. How weak and pathetic she looks with her mousy brown hair coming loose from her headscarf. Why do I have to put up with such weakness? I should demand her head gets shaved if she can’t keep herself tidy. However, that may not be appropriate right now when I should be worried about Ginny.

“I have no idea, Sir. I..I just thought she must have left through the back door since she didn’t see the envelope on the front step. Unless it was left there after she disappeared.”

I pause for a moment. Why am I doing this? They will not tell me where she went. They have all conspired against me. The only one who knows anything is standing there,

looking straight ahead with a fixed expression on her face. I haven't even bothered to ask her as I know she would lie. Jessica is the spy in the ranks. A thorn in my side.

So they want to play games, do they? After considering them closely for a moment, I pretend to be beaten and sigh dramatically.

“Get out of here and back to work!” I growl at them. “If any of you are found to have helped her run away, you will be instantly dismissed.”

Jessica pauses as the others leave to return to their menial tasks. Should I sack her now or should I wait a bit longer? She can't be a ladies maid if the 'lady' is gone.

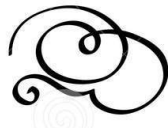
“What do you want?” I ask impatiently.

“I would like to know what is in the envelope,” she says.

“It's just another death threat. Her time is running out,” I reply, dismissively. I just want her to leave so I can get my men on a search for her.

She gives me a strange look before she turns on her heel and leaves. What was that look for this time? Suddenly it occurs to me. The envelope is sitting on the table, still unopened. A flash of disaster enters my brain before I push it out again. I hope this mistake doesn't come back to bite me.

Four



Virginia

From my earliest memories, I had two important principles to live by drummed into my head. The first one is “There is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving,” and the second one is “Laughter is the best medicine.”

Someday, I hope I will understand the first one but the second is giving me a lot of trouble at the moment.

“Humour is good for the soul,” Elizabeth would say every time I got depressed or frightened. “Happiness comes from within. It is in the way you look at things or situations. You just have to look around and find something to make you happy again.”

That is easier said than done. Elizabeth could find happy things all around her instantly but me? Not a chance.

"Oh, look at the flower. It is smiling at you," she would say.

"Yeah, it is a weed. It thinks if it smiles it won't get pull it out," I would grumble.

I have always been good at popping her happiness bubbles, but it got worse as I entered my late teens. Life is just not a candy store for me but I still try to apply her advice. I can't get her voice out of my head. Happy thoughts! Ugh.

A storm rages outside the walls of the whitewashed beach cottage. Fierce winds howl like a banshee with tree monsters trying to reach out with their branches to rip the roof off. Terrifying shadows leap out, trying to grab hold of my body, frozen in fear and inert on the queen size bed in the darkness.

Flashing lights and broken scenes of the nightmare takes over my conscience, holding me paralysed, unable to react to threats inside or outside these four walls. Nope, nothing to laugh about here. Finally, I succumb to the terror as the images in my mind flash like a movie scene transporting me back to a time and place long gone but never forgotten.

Suddenly, I am eight years old again.

Breaking glass shatters the silence, three masked men come rushing towards where my mum, dad and I are sitting on the patio, looking out at the night sky.

"Who are you?! What do you want?!"

Guns fire, people screaming. The smell of death.

"Ginny, run!" Dad yells as his body jerks with bullets, falling to the ground.

"Daddy!" I scream.

I know I have to run, but my legs are frozen, refusing to obey. Finally, I break free of the terror in front of me, and my legs start to work. I run as fast as I can, deeper into the darkness, focusing on the stables and the hiding places they offer, my face wet with tears. I am almost there, when suddenly a strong hand grasps my arm and spins me around, yanking me off my feet and to a stop.

"Let me go! Let me go!" I scream, thrashing my arms around, trying to break free.

How dare they hurt my parents! How dare they come here like this! Anger floods through me. I sink my teeth into the hand holding me, harder and harder, tasting the tangy mix of sweat with blood as it starts to flow. I want to gag, but I bite harder still, letting my anger flow through my teeth. The man shouts in pain and eases his grip on my arm. I'm free! Sharp agonising pain strikes the side of my head as he uses his gun to knock me away. I stagger off balance. Then another hit across the top of my forehead snaps my head back then blackness.

I finally manage to break free of the images, breathing heavily, wide-eyed with terror. My throat is sore and dry from screaming. I hate the dark now, but I can't turn the lights on. I am still not safe, even in the present.

Quietly, I make my way through to the kitchen where I gulp down a refreshing glass of cold water and splash my face. There is no one else in the house and due to the loud howling of the wind, I can make a little noise but the glass clinking on the sink still makes me cringe. The cold night air is breaking through my drenched skin, and my traumatised brain is starting to register the need to get warm, but it is pointless going back to bed.

While standing in the kitchen, in the dark and clinging to the bench, the memories surge back like a tsunami, drowning me with hopelessness and guilt. The psychologists call it 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' and 'Survivors guilt'. They say I should be grateful the intruder thought I was dead and left me on the ground, bleeding heavily from a head wound. I should be thankful that the maid, Carol, picked me up and raced me to the hospital, while the other servants fought the intruders, finally sending them running away like the cowards they were.

I know I should be grateful, but I am not. I wish I had died that night. A part of me did. Every time I look in the mirror, I see the reminder. The hair over the scar grew back white

instead of black like the rest. I have kept it dyed ever since, but it is always there. Although there is only the one visible scar on the outside, there is an awful lot more inside.

Yes, Elizabeth. I am still looking for something to laugh about like you said. Can't seem to find one yet.

I make my way to the living room where I can look out a window into the darkness. During the day, the three seat leather lounge and the two separate reclining chairs take up most of the space. They face a large glass wall that looks out onto white sand and deep blue ocean. I keep the blinds and curtains closed all day and night. Although I long for peace, my brain keeps jumping around the traumatic images of the past that have put me where I am today. It is going to be another long night before I can get back to sleep.

“Go away!” I mumble angrily, too afraid to say it out loud, but needing to break the hold somehow.

A thought hits me as I look around the room for some 'happiness' inspiration. I wonder if the spider in the corner knows how to make shadow figures with its legs? I bet it could make an amazing rabbit. A smile creeps across my face as I picture it making a whole herd of different shadow animals with each lightening flash. Poor thing would end up with its legs in knots.

Gradually, the storm outside the house and inside my head subsides.

