

Chapter One

The Offer

“Wingate!”

The prisoners in the rec room all turned and looked as the corrections officer walked into the room.

“Wingate!” She called the name again and this time, a small blonde woman stood from a table where she’d been sitting alone, reading a book.

Amanda Wingate could feel all eyes on her as she walked towards the C.O. impatiently gesturing for her to come to the door. Was she in trouble? She couldn’t imagine why. Did she have a visitor? That was unlikely. *You made your bed, you lie in it. You’re dead to us.* Those had been her father’s words to her the day of the conviction, but they did not hurt as bad as his parting shot. *I knew it was a mistake adopting you.*

He was happy to be rid of her, and no one in the family dared contact her after that. She wondered suddenly if perhaps he’d died. Perhaps his heart had finally given out. Was she about to get bad news? As they walked down the long hallway, Amanda realized she wasn’t going to get anything out of the corrections officer, who’d ignored her single question: “Where are you taking me?”

The room she was left in was the room where she usually met with her attorney – mint green concrete block walls, windowless, bad fluorescent lighting, single table, two chairs. The C.O. left her without explanation.

Amanda waited, staring down at nails she’d chewed to nubs. She could remember having nails and weekly manicures at the salon before going for a midmorning latte with Corinne. She wondered how Corinne was doing. She’d always been so animated, so funny. Did she amuse people now with tales of how her best friend had gone to prison?

She felt woefully unprepared to see anyone, and glanced around the room for the mirror she knew wasn’t there. In an effort to do something to make herself more presentable, she smoothed down her hair, pinched color into cheeks left pale by lack of sun, tugged at the

wrinkled prison uniform she wore and prayed it didn't smell from the kitchen duty she'd had that morning.

The door opened. A woman entered. She was tall – unusually tall, Amanda thought. She wore her hair pulled back tight in a severe bun. She wore a black suit and black heels. She said something to the person who'd let her in the room and then pulled out a chair at the desk and sat down. She had a folder and she opened it now.

“Prisoner 4657984? Amanda Michelle Wingate?”

She raised her eyes to Amanda's.

“Yes,” Amanda said.

The woman dropped her eyes and continued to look through the folder. Amanda craned her neck for a better look. It was the same folder the warden always had whenever she met with him.

“Excuse me,” she finally said. “Are you a lawyer?”

“No.”

The woman continued to study the folder as Amanda sat in frustrated silence.

“Stand up, please,” the woman said.

Amanda considered refusing until she got an explanation. But she'd been at the Singleton County Corrections Institute long enough to know that it was better just to do as you were told.

She slowly stood, feeling uncomfortable under the woman's appraising gaze.

“Turn.”

Amanda slowly turned around.

“It says here you're 5'1, 120 pounds.” The woman looked at the file and back at Amanda.
“You look far skinnier. Bony, even.

“The food here isn't what I'm used to,” Amanda said. “I've lost weight.”

“That can be fixed,” the woman said, almost to herself. “Natural blonde?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your hair? Is it natural? Are you really a blonde? Does the rug match the drapes?”

Amanda's composure gave way.

“Excuse me?” she said again. “Who *are* you?”

The woman looked at Amanda directly now with green, almost feline eyes.

“My name is Viola Prim,” she said. “And I’m the only chance you have of getting out of your current situation, so I suggest you just answer my questions. If you do, all will be explained in due course. Now, again: Are you a natural blonde?”

Amanda stared in silence for a moment before answering. “Y-yes,” she finally said.

The tall woman smirked. “Actually, it doesn’t matter...” She continued to look through the folder in silence. “Wow. Twelve to twenty years for conspiracy in connection with a prescription drug ring...” She made a tsking noise. “According to this, you could have gotten a lighter sentence but you refused to testify against your co-defendant, one David Allen Best? In fact, you ended up taking the fall for him without even realizing it.” She looked up over a pair of horned-rimmed glasses she had donned. Her eyes were amused. “Tell me, dear. Was he worth it?”

The room was silent now except for the ticking of the wall clock.

“I asked you a question,” the woman said. “Was. He. Worth. It?”

Fuck you, thought Amanda. Fuck you and your arrogant bitch face.

“No,” she said aloud, her tone strained. Across from her, Viola Prim raised an elegant eyebrow.

“It is indeed unfortunate when we put our trust in someone undeserving.” Viola Prim reached down to a satchel placed by her feet and withdrew another folder. She laid it atop the prison folder and opened it.

“Hmm,” she said. “Well, this makes sense. He duped you into obedience by playing on your submissive tendencies.”

Amanda felt herself go cold. “What? Where did you...?”

“Dr. Best was your dominant...”

Amanda stood. “Where...what...” She was stammering now. How could this total stranger know about the kind of relationship she and David had been involved in? He’d been her first and only partner. The only other person who’d known about their dynamic had been her lawyer, who’d all but begged her to use her former shrink-turned-lover’s Svengali-like influence as a defense. And now this total stranger sat across from her making casual mention of something she’d refused to tell anyone?”

“All right. Fuck you.” Amanda stood up. She walked to the exit, glancing back at the woman as she began to pound on the door. “Guard! Guard!!!”

The tall woman rose with a weary sigh. Amanda glared at her once before continuing to call for the guard. She wasn't looking when Viola Prim grabbed her by the hair on the back of her head and pulled her away from the door before turning her and slamming her back against the wall. The slap came next, the heat and sting of it so unexpected that Amanda had no time to react. Tears sprung to her eyes, and her breath came in hitching little gasps as she put her hand to her burning cheek.

"Look at me." The words were soft, commanding. The breath that carried them smelled of peppermint.

Amanda dragged her eyes up to a beautiful face, just inches from her own. She could feel the other woman's body pinning hers against the wall.

"No one is coming to get you," she said. "At least until I'm finished. So I suggest you sit down and shut up. Because if I walk out of here without you, by the time you leave, you'll be a washed-up ex-con approaching middle age with no friends and no prospects. And don't think being a good girl will get you paroled, because the people powerful enough to dig up the information I have on you are powerful enough to pull strings to keep you here for your entire sentence. Understand?"

Amanda did not want to believe what she was hearing. But she knew somehow that it was true. She swallowed hard and then nodded.

"Good." Viola Prim released her and walked back to the table, motioning for Amanda to retake the seat across from her. Amanda continued to rub her stinging cheek as she sat down.

"I represent a group which scans institutions just like these, looking for young women we consider qualified candidates for a very unique rehabilitation program. We are private, and our backers are personal proponents of our methodology and dedicated to its success, so dedicated in fact, that they have chosen to underwrite the program at great personal expense.

"The demands of the program are rigorous and you will technically remain incarcerated while in attendance, although rather than a ward of the state you will be a ward of the program. However, the accommodations are far better than what you'll find here at Singleton County Correctional Institute."

She paused, eyeing Amanda. "Have you ever been in a five-star hotel?" She didn't give Amanda time to answer. "Wait... of course you have. Your father was a hotel magnate, after all." She smiled. "I would imagine you miss the luxury of that former life. Imagine leaving here

for something even better – a private room, soft bedding, expensive clothes, the best food – seconds if you want – movies, amusements, new friends, beautiful grounds to stroll on, and not just for an hour a day in a cage, but real, honest manicured grounds....”

“What’s the catch?” Amanda found her voice for the first time since being struck.

“The catch is that if you turn me down – and that is within your right – you get to stay here at Chez Singleton.” Viola Prim’s face held the smile of someone who already knows she’s going to win. “But if you accept, upon completion of this program in two to five years, you will rejoin society with your record fully expunged.” She stuck out her arm and looked at her wrist in an almost exaggerated fashion. “Oh my, look at the time.”

She stood up and reached into her pocket. “The warden will meet with you in the morning to get your answer. Should you choose to accept, you’ll be out of here by noon.”

“I’ll think about it,” Amanda said weakly, standing.

Viola’s hand was already on the door but she turned back now and smiled. “Well, I imagine you will. I look forward to seeing you again, Amanda. I really do. I’m not the type to forget when someone curses me.” She winked. “Goodbye for now, dear.”

She left, the heavy door clicking behind her. As Amanda watched her go, she suddenly felt as if her legs had turned to rubber. What the hell had just happened? And why was her heart pounding? Since coming to Singleton, she’d had so many reasons to be terrified. She’d been threatened with rape, had stood by helplessly while her belongings were stolen and had even been punched in the face by another inmate who’d thought Amanda had been laughing at her when in fact she’d been laughing at something on television in the common room.

But the kind of fear she felt in the presence of the woman she’d just been alone with was entirely different. It was the same kind of fear she’d felt standing before the judge - a helplessness that could not be overcome by wits or savvy or quick thinking.

“Wingate?” The door opened and the guard who’d escorted her to the room stuck her head back in.

Amanda stood and walked out to follow the woman down the hall. Before they turned the corner, the guard looked back and Amanda could tell from her expression that she clearly saw the handprint on her face. But it went unacknowledged as they continued to walk.

“I don’t guess you’re going to tell me what that was all about,” the guard asked.

“Nope.”

The corrections officer led her back to the dorm. “You’re to stay here under orders of the warden.”

“I can’t go to the common room?”

“No. You’re to stay in your bunk. Your dinner tray will be brought to you.”

“I don’t even get to go to the cafeteria?” Amanda stepped to the edge of the four-bed dorm area but stopped short of the entrance as the guard left. An order was an order, after all. With a sigh, she flopped down on her bunk and turned her face to the wall. Her sore cheek throbbed against the scratchiness of the blanket she’d pulled over her pillow on the thin mattress. She shifted, feeling the springs underneath.

What had just happened? She had more questions than answers after her meeting with the mysterious Viola Prim. Why had she been singled out for this program? Who had given this woman her private prison file? How did she get the additional information about her relationship with David?

She raised her eyes to the photos taped to the wall by her bunk. One was a shot of her and some co-workers from the pharmaceutical company where she’d worked as head of public relations. It was taken at a New Year’s Eve party, the same party where she’d met David. In the shot, he sat at a table to the left of the group, his eyes clearly trained on Amanda.

After the trial when she was awaiting sentencing, she’d gone home and burned every photo of her and David. But she’d kept this one, telling herself that it was because it was a shot of her and friends. But she knew the truth, even now. Even after the betrayal, even after she’d been set up to take a fall for him, Amanda still could not forget how he’d made her feel.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she turned to lie on her back, staring up at the empty bunk over her head. The man she loved, the man who’d promised to take care of her and lead her, the man who she’d submitted to body and soul, had not just betrayed her, but had left her here to rot.

She was told when to wake up, when to go to sleep, what to eat, what to wear. She was given chores and threatened with punishment when she broke the rules. When David told her he’d fulfill her dreams of living a life of submission, she never realized how prophetic those words would be.

Amanda blinked back tears of self-pity. If she just had it all to do over again, she’d have fought against those submissive desires. She’d have been stronger. But she couldn’t go back.

Or could she. Viola Prim had said she would be in the program for two to five years. She'd still be young. If she stayed in the full five years she'd be out just before her thirtieth birthday. With an expunged record and a job, she could start over. And she could correct the personal flaws that had landed her here in the first place – the trust, the naiveté, the sexual and psychological desires that had made her an easy mark for a man like David Best.

She rubbed her still-sore cheek and for a moment wondered what she was getting into. But then Amanda pushed the thought aside. Whatever it was could not be worse than this. Not at all.