

Freed by Carly Phillips

Chapter 1 Preview

What do you buy the man who has everything for his birthday? Juliette Collins had discarded many gift ideas for her father, Andrew, and finally decided on purchasing a bottle of his favorite wine. He was the ultimate connoisseur and collector and had a wine cellar of his own. There was nothing else she could buy or surprise him with that he couldn't get for himself. At least this would be a personal present, showing him she knew him well, and a gift he'd enjoy. But to order his favorite, she needed access to his wine journal, something he kept in his safe.

She handled his business dinners and social events, his doctor and other personal appointments, and coordinated with his assistant at his office, yet he hadn't shared the combination to his private safe. It was a good thing she'd spent hours as a child playing under his desk while he worked, sitting in a Queen-Anne-styled chair in the corner of the home office. And when he went to his safe, he'd mutter the combination out loud, not knowing she paid attention. With her head for numbers, she'd memorized the combination years ago.

"Juliette," her father called from across the penthouse where they lived, an immense space in Manhattan where she had her own wing.

"Yes?" She heard his footsteps making his way toward her bedroom.

As an investment banker, he often wined and dined his many wealthy clients. He also brought her along to chat with the wife or significant other while he handled more business-type conversations during the meal. Tonight was one of those evenings, she thought, pasting a smile on her face, although she found the dinners, and often the company, tedious. At least dinner out was preferable to the parties she hosted for him where too many of his so-called friends had grabby hands. Not that he knew. She was his princess and he'd be furious. She didn't see the point in upsetting him when she'd learned to deal with the too pushy men herself.

She was twenty-six. She'd been at his side since she turned eighteen, doing what he asked her whole life. She'd gone to New York University and majored in business, but instead of heading out into the world, as she'd been excited to do, her father's unexpected heart attack had kept her home, helping him and feeding his overprotective nature. She ran his schedule now, including his cardiologist and cardiac rehab appointments because, despite his young age of fifty-two, he had a bad heart.

To say she was sheltered was an understatement. Her father, by virtue of his personality, took the term *helicopter parent* to the extreme. He held her back from living her life, claiming to need her by his side, and as he'd raised her since the death of her mother when she was an infant, and the doctors were concerned about his weak heart, she felt obligated to do as he asked. He was all she had... and vice versa.

He stepped into her room, where she'd just finished getting ready for the day. Wearing his usual three-piece gray suit and a red tie, he was a handsome, distinguished-looking man, with salt-and-pepper hair and a goatee. His looks belied his actual state of health. His heart, after a quadruple bypass at forty-four and some damage from the heart attack, always worried her.

"What time is tonight's reservation at Chez Mathilde?" he asked.

“Seven o’clock and before you complain it’s too early, the doctor said it was unhealthy for you to eat too late and go to bed on a full stomach, remember?”

He held out a hand, indicating he wouldn’t argue. “Yes, and I appreciate you looking out for me. I don’t know what I would do without you.” He tended to throw that last line on most conversations, a way of reminding her how much he needed her.

She adored him. Sometimes she just wanted ... more than she had in her life now. “Are you leaving for the office?” she asked him.

He nodded. “I’ll be back home in time to rest before dinner.”

“Have a good day.”

He strode over and kissed the top of her head. “You, too. What are you doing today?”

“I’ll come by the office and coordinate with Georgia,” she said of his assistant. “Then I’ll probably do some shopping.”

“Take my driver. I’ll send Eric back after he takes me to the office.”

She shook her head. “I can take the subway.”

She caught his scowl. “You know I don’t think it’s safe.”

“Then I’ll walk for a bit, get some fresh air, and grab a cab. I don’t need—”

“Humor me, please? I don’t want to worry about you.” His hand went to his chest. “Eric will be here for you by the time you’re ready to leave.”

She sighed. “Fine,” she said, giving in as she always did.

“I’ll see you later.” He strode out of her room.

She watched him go, struck by how easily he manipulated her, and she let him.

She wasn’t about to second-guess the choices she made in her life. It was what it was. He was her only parent, she loved him, and she felt as if she needed to take care of him. Included in that care was keeping him calm about her own life.

She waited a while until she was certain he’d left for work, and she headed into his home office. She’d furnished the office herself, one of the tasks he allotted her, decorating the apartment, room by various room, a job she actually loved. She was good at it, too. So good his friends’ wives often asked for her help when they were decorating a new home or redoing one they already lived in.

She’d begun to take photographs and document her accomplishments on Instagram, gaining a solid following. As she didn’t have many friends—she’d lost contact with the few she did have when she couldn’t go out often—those photographs were the mainstay of her account.

The dark-paneled room had black leather furnishings, including the Queen Anne, a love seat, and the chair behind his desk. The office always had a welcoming feel to it. That and it smelled of her father. Since she was a little girl, she associated that scent with home and found it comforting.

She walked to the safe, located behind a painting, a cliché if ever there was one, and spun the dial—he’d never upgraded to a more modern numerical touch keypad – and let herself into the safe. The dark space forced her to pull out the contents for viewing in order to search for the item she wanted with the listing of his wines.

There were folders on top and leather-bound journals underneath. She shifted the folders, which were identified by typeset labels, and caught sight of her name. Curious, she placed the other items onto a table and flipped through the folder to see what was inside.

A private investigator’s report.

Subjects: Phoebe and Halley Ward, females, ages eighteen and twenty. Photographs of attractive women, one pale blonde and another with light brown hair like Juliette’s.

Another page. Subject: Meg Ward Gifford, which was her mother's name. Another photograph. She'd seen pictures of her mother before, one of the day her parents had met, another of her mother holding her as a baby. But this one showed a woman who looked older, more tired and worn down by life.

Juliette froze. She continued reading, gleaned quite the education on the parent she'd thought was dead.

The woman she'd believed her father had loved so unconditionally there hadn't been another female for him since. Instead, Juliette was reading that the woman had sold drugs, been incarcerated, and lost two children to foster care. The report had been updated periodically over the years up through this past winter. The sisters, now thirty and twenty-seven, lived in a beach town in Connecticut called Rosewood Bay, and Meg – her mother – lived in a city not far from there.

If Meg had other children, that meant those women were Juliette's... sisters. Legs shaking, she lowered herself to the nearest chair, reeling from the news.

Her mother was alive?

She had siblings?

Her father had lied to her all these years?

Betrayal rippled through her. Her father, the one she'd given up her life for and trusted unconditionally, had been keeping the mother of all secrets, pun intended.

She didn't know where to begin to sort through her emotions. Shock, for sure. Anger at her father, for certain. And a growing sense of excitement over the fact that she had family.

For years, it had been just Juliette and her father. Lonely, but at least she'd had one parent and he'd loved her in his own suffocating way. But to have sisters? Grown women who shared her blood, who were out there. Did they know about her? According to the report, they'd been young when they'd entered foster care. Ages six and three. Juliette had obviously ended up with her father before they'd gone into the system or she might have wound up there, as well.

She bit down on her lower lip, thinking. Wondering why her father had withheld this information from her. Why not tell her the truth about her mother? Her sisters? Hadn't she deserved to know? Had he really taken his overprotectiveness this far? Or was there another reason he'd kept her in the dark?

She spent the day nursing her anger, not taking the walk she'd planned, and definitely skipping the trip to her father's office.

Instead, she researched her family on the internet. Phoebe was a Realtor in Rosewood Bay, Halley an artist, a painter who had showings in New York City. So close, Juliette thought, and she'd had no idea.

Tears formed in her eyes as she took in the pictures of her sisters on the screen. The three of them looked nothing alike, but the more she read about them, the more her heart filled, and she suddenly realized what that empty feeling in her life had been about all these years. The hole in her heart was where her sisters should have been.

She waited until her father came home, meeting him in his office, where he always stopped first.

He placed his briefcase down onto his desk before turning to her. "Juliette. You didn't come into the office today. Are you feeling all right?" he asked, sounding concerned.

She straightened her shoulders in preparation for the upcoming confrontation. "I'd like an explanation," she said, holding out the folder she'd been reading and rereading all day. The papers trembled in her hands.

He stared at the papers, shock on his face. “What were you doing in my safe?”

That was his concern? “Looking for your wine journal so I could buy you a birthday gift.” She shook the folder at him. “Tell me something that makes sense. Give me a reason you’d tell me that my mother was dead?” she asked, her voice rising.

He swallowed hard, his throat moving up and down, but she had to give him credit, he didn’t flinch. “Would you rather I told you she was a drug addict?” he asked. “Because that’s what she is.”

“Yes, considering it was the truth.”

He met her gaze, no remorse in his eyes or expression. “I was protecting you from life’s harsher realities.”

And there it was. The reason she’d feared. Overprotectiveness was the cause for basing her life on a lie. “You weren’t doing me any favors. I had a right to know. Was my mother a drug addict when you met her?” she asked, desperate for more information about the parent she’d never known.

He shrugged, lifting his shoulders. “I don’t know. She didn’t seem to be at the time. We met at a bar I had gone to after a business dinner. She was there having drinks with a friend. One thing led to another... We got together a few times afterwards.”

“So she got pregnant by accident,” Juliette murmured, making an obvious assumption.

“She saw a mark,” he said with a shake of his head, eyes narrowing, his gaze hard, the change taking her by surprise. “I never thought to discuss this with you, but if you must know, she supplied the birth control. I realized when she came to me for money because she was pregnant, she must have planned it, to the extent one can plan such things. A desperate woman poking holes in a condom. Or at the very least, if it was an accident, she wasn’t disappointed, because she’d figured out by then I had money.”

She didn’t want to think through the specifics of her father’s sex life.

“But the fact is,” he went on, “she was a calculating bitch.” His voice was like ice.

She’d seen him this cold before, when things didn’t go his way in business or when she fought him too hard to get her own way. Even so, she shivered at the toneless way he spoke to her, as if this weren’t her past, her life, her mother he was discussing but an inconvenience that annoyed him.

“I paid her for a while, but when I realized you weren’t in the kind of home you deserved, I made it worth her while to give you to me and go away. And I won’t apologize for protecting you from her ever since.”

Tears welled in her eyes at how he was missing the point. That it was all based on lies. “What about my sisters?” she asked. “You just left them with her?”

“They weren’t my children,” he said simply.

“So you walked away even though you just said she wasn’t fit to raise *me*?”

“I met her when I was twenty-six and building my career. I took you, had to hire a nanny, to change my life. There wasn’t anything I could have done for them. As I’m sure you read, the state ultimately stepped in and took them away. I’m sure they were better off.”

It was such a stark, brutal reality. The kind he’d been protecting her from for years, as he’d said. The irony was, he’d also protected her from the knowledge that he was just as cold as her mother apparently was.

Juliette turned away, wiping her tears. “What about once I was an adult? Why didn’t you tell me I had sisters?”

“Because for all I knew, they’re no different than your mother.”

She spun back to face him, horrified by that statement. “I looked them up. You had them investigated. You know they’re accomplished women. You just wanted to keep me for yourself.” Locked away in this ivory tower, taking care of him and not living her own life, making her own decisions.

“You’ve had a good life, haven’t you, Juliette?” he asked, his voice softening. “You and I? Together?”

His question cemented the truth she’d just come to accept. She realized now the extent of his selfishness. Because he’d gotten sick when she was eighteen, she’d let herself believe he truly needed her, but the fact was he just wanted her around. She had no doubt he loved her, but his brand of love wasn’t healthy.

“You had no right to keep the truth from me,” she said. “None.” Without another word, she turned around and walked out of the room.

* * *

Juliette didn’t sleep that night. She tossed and turned, thinking of the fact that she had a family out there she didn’t know. Her mother, well, there was every chance Juliette wouldn’t want to know her, but her sisters? Her heart leapt at the chance to meet the two women, to find them, to have a family beyond her father and the walls of this penthouse.

By the time the sun came up, shining into her room, she knew what she had to do. Rosewood Bay was waiting for her and, with it, the sisters she longed to know and just maybe a brand-new life.

She took her time over the next few days, planning her next move. She had a difficult time finding an apartment in Rosewood Bay because summer rentals were all taken, as it was late June. But she managed to find a one-bedroom furnished apartment in town. It sounded small but she didn’t care. She rented it sight unseen. She wanted to get a job, too. She didn’t think her father would cut her off, but if she was going to make a stand, she might as well go all the way and be a self-sufficient adult. She’d worry about what kind of job when she got there.

She was packing the things she needed in her suitcase when her father knocked on her door.

“Come in.” She didn’t stop what she was doing, folding her summer dresses and placing them in the open luggage.

“What are you doing?” The first hint of true panic since he’d been found out sliced into her father’s voice.

“I’m leaving.”

He rushed over, placing a hand on her suitcase. “Juliette, no. We can work this out. I want to make this right.”

“You can’t.” The damage was done by withholding information about her family.

“Be reasonable before you storm out. You’ve never been away from home alone. Never held a job. What are your plans?”

“And whose fault is that? You’ve kept me dependent on you, but now it’s time for me to be an adult. To meet my sisters and live my own life.” She closed her suitcase and zipped it around before turning to face him. “I can promise you, I will be perfectly fine.”

“I only ever had your best interest at heart. You have to know that.” He stepped back, a defeated expression on his face. “Would you consider taking a bodyguard?” he asked. “Someone to watch you from afar?”

She snorted at that. “No. I’m an adult and it’s time you started treating me like one. I’m taking the summer for myself. I’ll decide what happens at the end of August. Until then, please respect my privacy.”

He hesitated, then perhaps seeing the determination in her expression, hearing the certainty about her decision in her voice, he lifted a hand and stepped back. “Fine. I’ll expect to hear from you. Often.”

She shook her head. “Sorry, Dad. You’re not telling me what to do anymore.” She hesitated, knowing he had a bad heart and not wanting to upset him more despite how hurt and angry she was. “I know you love me,” she said, voice softening. “And I love you, but it’s way past time for me to be on my own.”

“So be it.”

She narrowed her gaze, surprised at his capitulation. She’d expected him to turn his chilly anger on her, but he was letting her go without too much of an argument.

Relief and excitement filled her soul. She was going to meet her family, experience everything she’d missed out on, and finally, live her own life.

For herself and nobody else.

* * *

Legs up on his desk, Braden Clark disconnected the call he’d been on, surprised at the lengths some people would go to in order to maintain control of the people in their lives. But if Andrew Collins, New York City investment banker, wanted him to keep tabs on his daughter, who was coming to Rosewood Bay for the summer, Braden figured it was a job.

A damn well-paying one, he thought, thinking of the number he’d quoted the man and how easily he’d agreed. It required hands-on work, which prevented him from handling something else at the same time, so it was only fair. Not to mention how much he needed the extra income, what with knowing he’d have to put his father into a nursing home soon, something he was loath to think about.

“New job?” Mike Graham, his best friend and new partner, asked from his seat at the desk across from Braden’s.

Braden had taken over Clark Investigations from his dad, Jonathan, who’d had to retire due to his recent Alzheimer’s diagnosis. Braden had returned a little over a year ago when his dad had started showing signs of forgetfulness, leaving his job with the NYC police department to come home. Needing a change of pace, Mike had come along and bought into the company, which was now known as Clark and Graham Investigations. This new case had come in as a referral from a Manhattan PI Braden knew from his days on the force.

“New and *cushy* job,” Braden replied to his partner’s question. “Keeping an eye on some rich guy’s daughter for the summer.”

“How old is she? Under eighteen? That ought to be fun, hanging out at the cheap bars in town. Better you than me,” he said, chuckling.

At thirty, they preferred the more upscale Blue Wall restaurant and bar to the cheaper kid hangouts closer to the beach.

Braden shook his head. “She’s more like twenty-six years old.”

Mike’s eyes widened. “And Daddy’s still keeping tabs? Spoiled little rich girl coming to the beach for the summer?” he guessed.

“Sounded like it. Sheltered and first time out on her own.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t seem like a difficult assignment.”

“Unless she’s a troll.” Mike smirked at the possibility.

“He’s sending a photo.” Braden pulled up his laptop and checked his email. “Yep. Here it is.” He clicked to open the picture and sucked in a breath at the sight of the woman in the photo.

“That bad?” Mike asked.

“That good.” Braden let out a low whistle, feeling the kick in his gut again as he looked at the beautiful woman on the screen.

Light brown hair, porcelain skin, and a delicate profile that took his breath away. She wore a tiara in the photo, obviously a picture from a party of some sort, and she looked every inch the princess from a fairy tale.

His cock, dormant and, he thought, immune to women since his ex did her damage, stiffened behind his jeans.

Well, damn.

“You going to show me?” Mike asked.

Braden felt suddenly possessive of the photo and the woman in it. Reluctantly, he turned the screen toward his friend.

Mike let out an appreciative whistle. “Damn, you’re going to have a fucking fun summer.”

Braden scowled at him. “You know she’s a job and that means hands off.”

Mike tilted his head back and laughed hard. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

His friend had a point. Just looking at the woman had his cock hard and ready. Ignoring the obvious attraction on paper wasn’t going to be easy when he saw her in person. Still, he was a professional.

He could handle the job. And the woman.

“How’s things with your dad?” Mike asked, changing the subject to one Braden really didn’t want to discuss. But nothing could alter the painful reality that was his father’s life. *His* life.

Still, Mike meant well by asking. “He’s holding steady. He can still be at home with Mrs. Mulligan next door looking out for him while I’m out.” She was a former nurse, and Braden paid her though she’d offered to do it for free, knowing he was supplementing her income and helping himself out at the same time. He wanted to keep his dad at home for as long as possible, especially while he still knew who and where he was.

Mike nodded. “Good. I hope it stays that way for a while. It’ll be tough to have to consider nursing homes.” He nodded to the stack of pamphlets on Braden’s desk.

Braden had been looking into places so he’d be prepared when the time came. He just hoped to postpone the decision as long as possible. And it would be his choice, which hurt his heart.

He was an only child and was close to his dad. He’d appreciated not having to share the father-son moments growing up, the trips they’d taken, the games they’d played. Except now, as an adult, he understood the value of siblings. Of sharing the burdens. His mom was gone ten years now, and dealing with his father’s illness and care was all on him.

And that was all he wanted to dwell on his problems. He’d rather focus on work.

His gaze zeroed back on the laptop screen and the more pleasurable part of his life, the job he had coming up. He’d have to find Ms. Juliette Collins in Rosewood Bay. Despite the influx of summer visitors, it shouldn’t be hard for him to locate someone new looking to find a job in town and fit in. Newcomers usually stood out.

And with looks like hers, he’d at least enjoy the view for the summer, even if he had to keep his hands to himself.