

The Housemaid: An Absolutely Addictive Psychological Thriller with a Jaw-Dropping Twist

The Housemaid: An Absolutely Addictive Psychological Thriller with a Jaw-Dropping Twist by Frieda McFadden is a fast-paced, gripping read that will keep you on the edge of your seat. The story follows Millie, a woman recently released from prison, who becomes a housemaid for a wealthy family. But as dark secrets unravel and the line between victim and villain blurs, the suspense builds to a shocking, unpredictable twist. McFadden masterfully weaves a tale of manipulation, deceit, and revenge, making this a must-read for fans of psychological thrillers that deliver shocking surprises.

Title Page

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THRILLER WITH A JAW-DROPPING TWIST

Contents

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Prologue

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PROLOGUE

If I leave this house, it will be in handcuffs.

I should have run for it while I had the chance. Now my shot is gone.

Now that the police officers are in the house and they've discovered what's upstairs, there's no turning back.

They are about five seconds away from reading me my rights. I'm not sure why they haven't done it yet. Maybe they're hoping to trick me into telling them something I shouldn't.

Good luck with that.

The cop with the black hair threaded with gray is sitting on the sofa next to me. He shifts his stocky frame on the burnt-caramel Italian leather. I wonder what sort of sofa he has at home. It sure doesn't cost five figures like this one did. It's probably some tacky color like orange, covered in pet fur, and with more than one rip in the seams. I wonder if he's thinking about his sofa at home and wishing he had one like this.

Or more likely, he's thinking about the dead body in the attic upstairs.

“So let’s go through this one more time,” the cop says in his New York drawl. He told me his name earlier, but it flew out of my head. Police officers should wear bright red nametags. How else are you possibly supposed to remember their names in a high-stress situation? He’s a detective, I think. “When did you find the body?”

I pause, wondering if this would be the right time to demand a lawyer.

Aren’t they supposed to offer me one? I am rusty on this protocol.

“About an hour ago,” I answer.

“Why did you go up there in the first place?”

I press my lips together. “I told you. I heard a sound.”

Part I

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PART I

Chapter 1

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ONE

MILLIE

“Tell me about yourself, Millie.”

Nina Winchester leans forward on her caramel-colored leather sofa, her legs crossed to reveal just the slightest hint of her knees peeking out under her silky white skirt. I don’t know much about labels, but it’s obvious everything Nina Winchester is wearing is painfully expensive. Her cream blouse makes me long to reach out to feel the material, even though a move like that would mean I’d have no chance of getting hired.

To be fair, I have no chance of getting hired anyway.

“Well...” I begin, choosing my words carefully. Even after all the rejections, I still try. “I grew up in Brooklyn. I’ve had a lot of jobs doing housework for people, as you can see from my resume.” My carefully doctored resume. “And I love children. And also...” I glance around the room, looking for a doggy chew toy or a cat litter box. “I love pets as well?”

The online ad for the housekeeper job didn’t mention pets. But better to be safe. Who doesn’t appreciate an animal lover?

“Brooklyn!” Mrs. Winchester beams at me. “I grew up in Brooklyn, too.”

We're practically neighbors!"

"We are!" I confirm, even though nothing could be further from the truth. There are plenty of coveted neighborhoods in Brooklyn where you'll fork over an arm and a leg for a tiny townhouse. That's not where I grew up. Nina Winchester and I couldn't be more different, but if she'd like to believe we're neighbors, then I'm only too happy to go along with it. Mrs. Winchester tucks a strand of shiny, golden-blond hair behind her ear. Her hair is chin-length, cut into a fashionable bob that de-emphasizes her double chin. She's in her late thirties, and with a different hairstyle and different clothing, she would be very ordinary-looking. But she has used her considerable wealth to make the most of what she's got. I can't say I don't respect that.

I have gone the exact opposite direction with my appearance. I may be over ten years younger than the woman sitting across from me, but I don't want her to feel at all threatened by me. So for my interview, I selected a long, chunky wool skirt that I bought at the thrift store and a polyester white blouse with puffy sleeves. My dirty-blond hair is pulled back into a severe bun behind my head. I even purchased a pair of oversized and unnecessary tortoiseshell glasses that sit perched on my nose. I look professional and utterly unattractive.

"So the job," she says. "It will be mostly cleaning and some light cooking if you're up for it. Are you a good cook, Millie?"

"Yes, I am." My ease in the kitchen is the only thing on my resume that isn't a lie. "I'm an excellent cook."

Her pale blue eyes light up. "That's wonderful! Honestly, we almost never have a good home-cooked meal." She titters. "Who has the time?" I bite back any kind of judgmental response. Nina Winchester doesn't work, she only has one child who's in school all day, and she's hiring somebody to do all her cleaning for her. I even saw a man in her enormous front yard doing her gardening for her. How is it possible she doesn't have time to cook a meal for her small family?

I shouldn't judge her. I don't know anything about what her life is like. Just because she's rich, it doesn't mean she's spoiled.

But if I had to bet a hundred bucks either way, I'd bet Nina Winchester is spoiled rotten.

"And we'll need occasional help with Cecelia as well," Mrs. Winchester says. "Perhaps taking her to her afternoon lessons or playdates. You have a car, don't you?"

I almost laugh at her question. Yes, I do have a car—it's all I have right now. My ten-year-old Nissan is stinking up the street in front of her house, and it's where I am currently living. Everything I own is in the trunk of that car. I have spent the last month sleeping in the backseat.

After a month of living in your car, you realize the importance of some of the little things in life. A toilet. A sink. Being able to straighten your legs out while you're sleeping. I miss that last one most of all.

"Yes, I have a car," I confirm.

"Excellent!" Mrs. Winchester claps her hands together. "I'll provide you with a car seat for Cecelia, of course. She just needs a booster seat. She's not quite at the weight and height level to be without the booster yet. The Academy of Pediatrics recommends..."

While Nina Winchester drones on about the exact height and weight requirements for car seats, I take a moment to glance around the living room. The furnishing is all ultra-modern, with the largest flat-screen

television I've ever seen, which I'm sure is high definition and has surround-sound speakers built into every nook and cranny of the room for optimal listening experience. In the corner of the room is what appears to be a working fireplace, the mantle littered with photographs of the Winchesters on trips to every corner of the world. When I glance up, the insanely high ceiling glows under the light of a sparkling chandelier.

"Don't you think so, Millie?" Mrs. Winchester is saying.

I blink at her. I attempt to rewind my memory and figure out what she had just asked me. But it's gone. "Yes?" I say.

Whatever I agreed to has made her very happy. "I'm so pleased you think so too."

"Absolutely," I say more firmly this time.

She uncrosses and re-crosses her somewhat stocky legs. "And of course," she adds, "there's the matter of reimbursement for you. You saw the offer in my advertisement, right? Is that acceptable to you?"

I swallow. The number in the advertisement is more than acceptable. If I were a cartoon character, dollar signs would have appeared in each of my eyeballs when I read that advertisement. But the money almost stopped me from applying for the job. Nobody offering that much money, living in a house like this one, would ever consider hiring me.

"Yes," I choke out. "It's fine."

She arches an eyebrow. "And you know it's a live-in position, right?"

Is she asking me if I'm okay with leaving the splendor of the backseat of my Nissan? "Right. I know."

"Fabulous!" She tugs at the hem of her skirt and rises to her feet.

"Would you like the grand tour then? See what you're getting yourself into?"

I stand up as well. In her heels, Mrs. Winchester is only a few inches taller than I am in my flats, but it feels like she's much taller. "Sounds great!"

She guides me through the house in painstaking detail, to the point where I'm worried I got the ad wrong and maybe she's a realtor thinking I'm ready to buy. It is a beautiful house. If I had four or five million dollars burning a hole in my pocket, I would snap it up. In addition to the ground level containing the gigantic living room and the newly renovated kitchen, the second floor of the house features the Winchesters' master bedroom, her daughter Cecelia's room, Mr. Winchester's home office, and a guest bedroom that could be straight out of the best hotel in Manhattan. She pauses dramatically in front of the subsequent door.

"And here is..." She flings the door open. "Our home theater!"

It's a legit movie theater right inside their home—in addition to the oversized television downstairs. This room has several rows of stadium seating, facing a floor-to-ceiling monitor. There's even a popcorn machine in the corner of the room.

After a moment, I notice Mrs. Winchester is looking at me, waiting for a response.

"Wow!" I say with what I hope is appropriate enthusiasm.

"Isn't it marvelous?" She shivers with delight. "And we have a full library of movies to choose from. Of course, we also have all the usual channels as well as streaming services."

"Of course," I say.

After we leave the room, we come to a final door at the end of the hallway. Nina pauses, her hand lingering on the doorknob.

“Would this be my room?” I ask.

“Sort of...” She turns the doorknob, which creaks loudly. I can’t help but notice the wood of this door is much thicker than any of the others. Behind the doorway, there’s a dark stairwell. “Your room is upstairs. We have a finished attic as well.”

This dark, narrow staircase is somewhat less glamorous than the rest of the house—and would it kill them to stick a lightbulb in here? But of course, I’m the hired help. I wouldn’t expect her to spend as much money on my room as she would on the home theater.

At the top of the stairs is a little narrow hallway. Unlike on the first floor of the house, the ceiling is dangerously low here. I’m not tall by any means, but I almost feel like I need to stoop down.

“You have your own bathroom.” She nods at a door on the left. “And this would be your room right here.”

She flings open the last door. It’s completely dark inside until she tugs on a string and the room lights up.

The room is tiny. There’s no two ways about it. Not only that, but the ceiling is slanted with the roof of the house. The far side of the ceiling only comes about up to my waist. Instead of the huge king-size bed in the Winchesters’ master bedroom with their armoire and chestnut vanity table, this room contains a small single cot, a half-height bookcase, and a small dresser, lit by two naked bulbs suspended from the ceiling.

This room is modest, but that’s fine with me. If it were too nice, it would be a certainty I have no shot at this job. The fact that this room is kind of crappy means maybe her standards are low enough that I have a teeny, tiny chance.

But there’s something else about this room. Something that’s bothering me.

“Sorry it’s small.” Mrs. Winchester pulls a frown. “But you’ll have a lot of privacy here.”

I walk over to the single window. Like the room, it’s small. Barely larger than my hand. And it overlooks the backyard. There’s a landscaper down there—the same guy I saw out at the front—hacking at one of the hedges with an oversized set of clippers.

“So what do you think, Millie? Do you like it?”

I turn away from the window to look at Mrs. Winchester’s smiling face. I still can’t quite put my finger on what’s bothering me. There’s something about this room that’s making a little ball of dread form in the pit of my stomach.

Maybe it’s the window. It looks out on the back of the house. If I were in trouble and trying to get somebody’s attention, nobody would be able to see me back here. I could scream and yell all I wanted, and nobody would hear.

But who am I kidding? I would be lucky to live in this room. With my own bathroom and an actual bed where I could straighten my legs out all the way. That tiny cot looks so good compared to my car, I could cry.

“It’s perfect,” I say.

Mrs. Winchester seems ecstatic about my answer. She leads me back down the dark stairwell to the second floor of the house, and when I exit that stairwell, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. There was something about that room that was very scary, but if I somehow manage to get this job, I’ll get past it. Easily.

My shoulders finally relax and my lips are forming another question

when I hear a voice from behind us:

“Mommy?”

I stop short and turn around to see a little girl standing behind us in the hallway. The girl has the same light blue eyes as Nina Winchester, except a few shades paler, and her hair is so blond that it’s almost white. The girl is wearing a very pale blue dress trimmed in white lace. And she’s staring at me like she can see right through me. Right through my soul.

Do you know those movies about the scary cult of, like, creepy kids who can read minds and worship the devil and live in the cornfields or something? Well, if they were casting for one of those movies, this girl would get the part. They wouldn’t even have to audition her. They would take one look at her and be like, Yes, you are creepy girl number three.

“Cece!” Mrs. Winchester exclaims. “Are you back already from your ballet lesson?”

The girl nods slowly. “Bella’s mom dropped me off.”

Mrs. Winchester wraps her arms around the girl’s skinny shoulders, but the girl’s expression never changes and her pale blue eyes never leave my face. Is there something wrong with me that I am scared this nine-year-old girl is going to murder me?

“This is Millie,” Mrs. Winchester tells her daughter. “Millie, this is my daughter, Cecelia.”

Little Cecelia’s eyes are two little pools of the ocean. “It’s nice to meet you, Millie,” she says politely.

I’d say there’s at least a twenty-five percent chance she’s going to murder me in my sleep if I get this job. But I still want it.

Mrs. Winchester pecks her daughter on the top of her blond head, and then the little girl scurries off to her bedroom. She doubtless has a creepy doll house in there where the dolls come to life at night. Maybe one of the dolls will be the one to kill me.

Okay, I’m being ridiculous. That little girl is probably extremely sweet. It’s not her fault she’s been dressed in a creepy Victorian ghost-child’s outfit. And I love kids, in general. Not that I’ve interacted with them much over the last decade.

Once we get back down to the first floor, the tension leaves my body.

Mrs. Winchester is nice and normal enough—for a lady this rich—and as she chatters about the house and her daughter and the job, I’m only vaguely listening. All I know is this will be a lovely place to work. I would give my right arm to get this job.

“Do you have any questions, Millie?” she asks me.

I shake my head. “No, Mrs. Winchester.”

She clucks her tongue. “Please, call me Nina. If you’re working here, I would feel so silly with you calling me Mrs. Winchester.” She laughs. “Like I’m some sort of rich old lady.”

“Thank you... Nina,” I say.

Her face glows, although that could be the seaweed or cucumber peel or whatever rich people apply to their faces. Nina Winchester is the sort of woman who has regular spa treatments. “I have a good feeling about this, Millie. I really do.”

It’s hard not to get caught up in her enthusiasm. It’s hard not to feel that glimmer of hope as she squeezes my rough palm in her baby smooth one. I want to believe that in the next few days, I’ll get a call from Nina Winchester, offering me the opportunity to come work at her house and finally vacate Casa Nissan. I want to believe that so badly.

But whatever else I can say about Nina, she's no dummy. She's not going to hire a woman to work and live in her home and take care of her child without doing a simple background check. And once she does...

I swallow a lump in my throat.

Nina Winchester bids a warm goodbye to me at the front door. "Thank you so much for coming by, Millie." She reaches out to clasp my hand in hers one more time. "I promise you'll be hearing from me soon."

I won't. This will be the last time I set foot in that magnificent house. I should never have come here in the first place. I should have tried for a job I had a chance of getting instead of wasting both of our time here. Maybe something in the fast-food industry.

The landscaper who I saw from the window in the attic is back on the front lawn. He's still got those giant clippers and he's shaping one of the hedges right in front of the house. He's a big guy, wearing a T-shirt that shows off impressive muscles and just barely hides the tattoos on his upper arms. He adjusts his baseball cap and his dark, dark eyes lift briefly from the clippers to meet mine across the lawn.

Chapter 2

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TWO

When you live in your car, you have to keep things simple.

You're not going to be hosting any major gatherings, for one thing. No wine and cheese parties, no poker nights. That's fine, because I don't have anyone I want to see. The bigger problem is where to take a shower. Three days after I was evicted from my studio, which was three weeks after I got fired from my job, I discovered a rest stop that had showers. I almost cried with joy when I saw it. Yes, the showers have very little privacy and smell faintly of human waste, but at that point, I was desperate to be clean.

Now I'm enjoying my lunch in the back seat of the car. I do have a hot plate that I can plug into the cigarette lighter for special occasions, but mostly I eat sandwiches. Lots and lots of sandwiches. I've got a cooler where I store the cold cuts and cheese, and I've got a loaf of white bread—ninety-nine cents at the supermarket. And then snacks, of course. Bags of chips. Crackers with peanut butter. Twinkies. The unhealthy options are endless.

Today I'm eating ham and American cheese, with a dollop of mayonnaise. With every bite I take, I try not to think about how sick I am of sandwiches.

After I've forced down half my sandwich, my phone rings in my pocket. I have one of those prepaid flip phones that people only use if they're going to commit a crime or else they've traveled back fifteen years in the past. But I need a phone and this is all I can afford.

"Wilhelmina Calloway?" a woman's clipped voice says on the other

line.

I wince at the use of my full name. Wilhelmina was my father's mother, who is long gone. I don't know what sort of psychopaths would name their child Wilhelmina, but I don't speak to my parents anymore (and likewise, they don't speak to me), so it's a little late to ask. Anyway, I've always just been Millie, and I try to correct people as quickly as I can. But I get the feeling that whoever is calling me isn't somebody I'm going to be on a first-name basis with anytime soon. "Yes...?"

"Ms. Calloway," the woman says. "This is Donna Stanton from Munch Burgers."

Oh right. Munch Burgers—the greasy fast-food joint that granted me an interview a few days ago. I would be flipping burgers or else manning the cash register. But if I worked hard, there was some opportunity for advancement. And better yet, an opportunity to have enough money to move out of my car.

Of course, the job I really would've loved was at the Winchester household. But it's been a whole week since I met with Nina Winchester. It's safe to say I didn't get my dream job.

"I just wanted to let you know," Ms. Stanton goes on, "that we have already filled the position at Munch Burgers. But we wish you luck with your job search."

The ham and American cheese in my stomach churn. I had read online that Munch Burgers didn't have very strict hiring practices. That even if I had a record, I might have a chance. This is the last interview I've managed to book, ever since Mrs. Winchester failed to call me back—and I'm desperate. I can't eat one more sandwich in my car. I just can't.

"Ms. Stanton," I blurt out. "I'm just wondering if you might be able to hire me at any other location. I'm a really hard worker. I'm very reliable. I always..."

I stop talking. She's already hung up.

I clutch my sandwich in my right hand as I grip my phone in my left.

This is hopeless. Nobody wants to hire me. Every potential employer looks at me in the exact same way. All I want is a fresh start. I'll work my butt off if I have to. I'll do whatever it takes.

I fight back tears, although I don't know why I'm bothering. Nobody will see me crying in the backseat of my Nissan. There isn't anybody who cares about me anymore. My parents wiped their hands of me more than ten years ago.

My phone rings again, startling me out of my pity party. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and click the green button to take the call.

"Hello?" I croak.

"Hi? Is this Millie?"

The voice sounds vaguely familiar. I squeeze the phone to my ear, my heart leaping. "Yes..."

"This is Nina Winchester. You interviewed with me last week?"

"Oh." I bite down hard on my lower lip. Why is she calling back now? I assumed she had already hired somebody and decided not to inform me.

"Yes, of course."

"So if you're interested, we would be delighted to offer you the job."

I feel a rush of blood to my head that makes me almost dizzy. We would be delighted to offer you the job. Is she serious? It was conceivable that Munch Burgers might hire me, but it seemed outright impossible that a woman like Nina Winchester might invite me into her home. To live.

Is it possible she didn't check my references? Didn't do a simple background check? Maybe she's just so busy, she never got around to it. Maybe she's one of those women who prides herself on gut feelings.

"Millie? Are you there?"

I realize I've been completely silent on the other line. I'm that stunned.

"Yes. I'm here."

"So are you interested in the position?"

"I am." I'm trying not to sound too ridiculously eager. "I definitely am.

I would love to work for you."

"Work with me," Nina corrects me.

I let out a strangled laugh. "Right. Of course."

"So when can you start?"

"Um, when would you like me to start?"

"As soon as possible!" I'm jealous of Nina's easy laugh that sounds so different from my own. If only I could snap my fingers and trade places with her. "We have a ton of laundry that needs folding!"

I swallow. "How about tomorrow?"

"That would be wonderful! But don't you need time to get your stuff packed?"

I don't want to tell her that everything I own is already in the trunk of my car. "I'm a fast packer."

Chapter 3

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THREE

I arrive at the Winchester home the next morning, after Nina has already dropped Cecelia off at school. I park outside the metal gate surrounding their property. I've never been in a house that was protected by a gate before, much less lived there. But this swanky Long Island neighborhood seems to be all gated houses. Considering how low the crime rate is around here, it seems like overkill, but who am I to judge? Everything else being equal, if I had a choice between a house with a gate and a house with no gate, I'd pick the gate too.

The gate was open when I arrived yesterday, but today it's closed.

Locked, apparently. I stand there a moment, my two duffel bags at my feet, trying to figure out how to get inside. There doesn't seem to be any sort of doorbell or buzzer. But that landscaper is on the property again, crouched in the dirt, a shovel in his hand.

"Excuse me!" I call out.

The man glances over his shoulder at me, then goes back to digging.

Real nice.

"Excuse me!" I say again, loud enough that he can't ignore me.

This time, he slowly, slowly gets to his feet. He's in absolutely no hurry as he ambles across the giant front lawn to the entrance to the gate. He pulls

off his thick rubber gloves and raises his eyebrows at me.

“Hi!” I say, trying to hide my annoyance with him. “My name is Millie Calloway, and it’s my first day working here. I’m just trying to get inside because Mrs. Winchester is expecting me.”

He doesn’t say anything. From across the yard, I had only noticed how big he is—at least a head taller than me, with biceps the size of my thighs—but up close, I realize he’s actually pretty hot. He looks to be in his mid-thirties with thick jet-black hair damp from exertion, olive skin, and rugged good looks. But his most striking feature is his eyes. His eyes are very black—so dark, I can’t distinguish the pupil from the iris. Something about his gaze makes me take a step back.

“So, um, can you help me?” I ask.

The man finally opens his mouth. I expect him to tell me to get lost or to show him some ID, but instead, he lets loose with a string of rapid Italian. At least, I think it’s Italian. I can’t say I know a word of the language, but I saw an Italian movie with subtitles once, and it sort of sounded like this.

“Oh,” I say when he finishes his monologue. “So, um... no English?”

“English?” he says in a voice so heavily accented, it’s clear what the answer is. “No. No English.”

Great. I clear my throat, trying to figure out the best way to express what I need to tell him. “So I...” I point to my chest. “I am working. For Mrs. Winchester.” I point to the house. “And I need to get... inside.” Now I point to the lock on the gate. “Inside.”

He just frowns at me. Great.

I’m about ready to dig out my phone and call Nina when he goes off to the side, hits some sort of switch, and the gates swing open, almost in slow motion.

Once the gates are open, I take a moment to gaze up at the house that will be my home for the foreseeable future. The house is two stories plus the attic, sprawling over what looks like about the length of a city block in Brooklyn. It’s almost blindingly white—possibly freshly painted—and the architecture looks contemporary, but what do I know? I just know it looks like the people living here have more money than they know what to do with.

I start to pick up one of my bags, but before I can, the guy picks up both of them without even grunting and carries them to the front door for me. Those bags are very heavy—they contain literally everything I own aside from my car—so I’m grateful he volunteered to do the heavy lifting for me.

“Gracias,” I say.

He gives me a funny look. Hmm, that might have been Spanish. Oh well.

I point to my chest. “Millie,” I say.

“Millie.” He nods in understanding, then points to his own chest. “I am Enzo.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say awkwardly, even though he won’t understand me. But God, if he lives here and has a job, he must have picked up a little English.

“Piacere di conoscerti,” he says.

I nod wordlessly. So much for making friends with the landscaping guy.

“Millie,” he says again in his thick Italian accent. He looks like he has something to say, but he’s struggling with the language. “You...”

He hisses a word in Italian, but as soon as we hear the front door start to unlock, Enzo hurries back to where he had been crouched in the front yard

and makes himself very busy. I could just barely make out the word he said. Pericolo. Whatever that means. Maybe it means he wants a soft drink. Pericola—now with a twist of lime!

“Millie!” Nina looks delighted to see me. So delighted that she throws her arms around me and squashes me in a hug. “I’m so glad you decided to take the job. I just felt like you and I had a connection. You know?” That’s what I thought. She got a “gut feeling” about me, so she didn’t bother to do the research. Now I just have to make sure she never has any reason not to trust me. I have to be the perfect employee. “Yes, I know what you mean. I feel the same way.”

“Well, come in!”

Nina grabs the crook of my elbow and leads me into the house, oblivious to the fact that I’m struggling with my two pieces of luggage. Not that I would have expected her to help me. It wouldn’t have even occurred to her.

I can’t help but notice when I walk inside that the house looks very different from the first time I was here. Very different. When I came for the interview, the Winchester house was immaculate—I could have eaten off any surface in the room. But now, the place looks like a pigsty. The coffee table in front of the sofa has six cups on it with varying amounts of different sticky liquids in them, about a dozen crumpled newspapers and magazines, and a dented pizza box. There’s clothing and garbage strewn all over the living room and the dining table still has the remains of dinner last night.

“As you can see,” Nina says, “you haven’t arrived a moment too soon!”

So Nina Winchester is a slob—that’s her secret. It’s going to take me hours to get this place in any decent condition. Maybe days. But that’s fine—I’ve been itching to do some good honest hard work. And I like that she needs me. If I can make myself invaluable to her, she’s less likely to fire me if—or when—she finds out the truth.

“Let me just put my bags away,” I tell her. “And then I’ll get the entire place tidied up.”

Nina lets out a happy sigh. “You are a miracle, Millie. Thank you so much. Also...” She grabs her purse off the kitchen counter and rifles around inside, finally pulling out the latest iPhone. “I got you this. I couldn’t help but notice you were using a very outdated phone. If I need to reach you, I’d like you to have a reliable means of communication.”

I hesitantly wrap my fingers around the brand-new iPhone. “Wow. This is really generous of you, but I can’t afford a plan—”

She waves a hand. “I added you to our family plan. It cost almost nothing.”

Almost nothing? I have a feeling her definition of those two words is very different from mine.

Before I can protest further, the sound of footsteps echoes on the stairs behind me. I turn around, and a man in a gray business suit is making his way down the stairwell. When he sees me standing in the living room, he stops short at the base of the stairs, as if shocked by my presence. His eyes widen further when he notices my luggage.

“Andy!” Nina calls out. “Come meet Millie!”

This must be Andrew Winchester. When I was googling the Winchester family, my eyes popped out a bit when I saw this man’s net worth. After seeing all those dollar signs, the home theater and the gate surrounding the property made a bit more sense. He’s a businessman, who took over his father’s thriving company, and has doubled the profits since. But it’s

obvious from his surprised expression that he allows his wife to handle most of the household matters, and it's apparently flat out slipped her mind to tell him she's hired a live-in housekeeper.

"Hello..." Mr. Winchester steps into the living room, his brow furrowed. "Millie, is it? I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

"Andy, I told you about her!" She tilts her head to the side. "I said we needed to hire somebody to help with cleaning and cooking and Cecelia. I'm sure I told you!"

"Yes, well." His face finally relaxes. "Welcome, Millie. We could certainly use the help."

Andrew Winchester holds his hand out for me to shake. It's hard not to notice he is an incredibly handsome man. Piercing brown eyes, a full head of hair the color of mahogany, and a sexy little cleft in his chin. It's also hard not to notice that he is several levels more attractive than his wife, even with her impeccable grooming, which strikes me as a bit strange. The man is filthy rich, after all. He could have any woman he wants. I respect him for not choosing a twenty-year-old supermodel to be his life partner. I thrust my new phone into my jeans pocket and reach out to take his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Winchester."

"Please." He smiles warmly at me. "Call me Andrew."

As he says the words, something flickers over Nina Winchester's face. Her lips twitch and her eyes narrow. I'm not exactly sure why though. She herself offered to let me call her by her first name. And it's not like Andrew Winchester is checking me out. His eyes are staying respectfully on mine and not dropping below the neck. Not that there's much to see—even though I didn't bother with the fake tortoiseshell glasses today, I'm wearing a modest blouse and comfortable blue jeans for my first day of work.

"Anyway," Nina snips, "don't you have to get to the office, Andy?"

"Oh yes." He straightens out his gray tie. "I've got a meeting at nine-thirty in the city. I better hurry."

Andrew gives Nina a lingering kiss on the lips and squeezes her shoulder. As far as I can see, they are quite happily married. And Andrew seems pretty down-to-earth for a man whose net worth has eight figures after the dollar sign. It's sweet how he blows her a kiss from the front door—this is a man who loves his wife.

"Your husband seems nice," I say to Nina as the door slams shut.

The dark, suspicious look returns to her eyes. "Do you think so?"

"Well, yes," I stammer. "I mean, he seems like... how long have you been married?"

Nina looks at me thoughtfully. But instead of answering my question, she says, "What happened to your glasses?"

"What?"

She lifts an eyebrow. "You were wearing a pair of glasses at your interview, weren't you?"

"Oh." I squirm, reluctant to admit that the eyeglasses were fake—my attempt to look more intelligent and serious, and yes, less attractive and threatening. "I... uh, I'm wearing my contacts."

"Are you?"

I don't know why I lied. I should've just said that I don't need the glasses that badly. Instead, I have now doubled down and invented contacts that I'm not actually wearing. I can feel Nina scrutinizing my pupils, searching for the lenses.

"Is... is that a problem?" I finally ask.

A muscle twitches under her right eye. For a moment, I'm scared she's going to tell me that I should get out. But then her face relaxes. "Of course not! I just thought those glasses were so cute on you. Very striking—you should wear them more often."

"Yes, well..." I grab the handle of one of my duffel bags with my shaking hand. "Maybe I should get my stuff upstairs so I can get started." Nina claps her hands together. "Excellent idea!"

Once again, Nina doesn't offer to take either of my bags as we climb up the two flights of stairs to get to the attic. By halfway through the second flight, my arms feel like they're about ready to fall off, but Nina doesn't seem interested in pausing to give me a moment to readjust the straps. I gasp with relief when I'm able to drop the bags on the floor of my new room. Nina yanks on the cord to turn on the two lightbulbs that illuminate my tiny living space.

"I hope it's okay," Nina says. "I figure you'd rather have the privacy of being up here, as well as your own bathroom."

Maybe she feels guilty about the fact that their ginormous guestroom is lying empty while I am living in a room slightly larger than a broom closet. But that's fine. Anything larger than the backseat of my car is like a palace. I can't wait to sleep here tonight. I'm obscenely grateful.

"It's perfect," I say honestly.

In addition to the bed, dresser, and bookcase, I notice one other thing in the room that I didn't see the first time around. A little mini-fridge, about a foot tall. It's plugged into the wall and humming rhythmically. I crouch down and tug it open.

The mini-fridge has two small shelves. And on the top shelf, there are three tiny bottles of water.

"Good hydration is very important," Nina says earnestly.

"Yes..."

When she sees the perplexed expression on my face, she smiles.

"Obviously, it's your fridge and you can put whatever you want in it. I thought I would give you a head start."

"Thank you." It's not that strange. Some people leave mints on a pillow.

Nina leaves three tiny bottles of water.

"Anyway..." Nina wipes her hands on her thighs, even though her hands are spotless. "I'll let you get unpacked and then get started cleaning the house. I'll be preparing for my PTA meeting tomorrow."

"PTA?"

"Parent Teacher Association." She beams at me. "I'm the vice president."

"That's wonderful," I say, because it's what she wants to hear. Nina is very easy to please. "I'll just unpack everything quickly and get right to work."

"Thank you so much." Her fingers briefly touch my bare arm—hers are warm and dry. "You're a lifesaver, Millie. I'm so glad you're here."

I rest my hand on the doorknob as Nina starts to leave my room. And that's when I notice it. What's been bothering me about this room from the moment I first walked in here. A sick feeling washes over me.

"Nina?"

"Hmm?"

"Why..." I clear my throat. "Why is the lock to this bedroom on the outside rather than the inside?"

Nina peers down at the doorknob, as if noticing it for the first time.

“Oh! I’m so sorry about that. We used to use this room as a closet, so obviously we wanted it to lock from the outside. But then I converted it to a bedroom for the hired help, and I guess we never switched the lock.”
If somebody wanted, they could easily lock me in here. And there’s only that one window, looking out at the back of the house. This room could be a death trap.

But then again, why would anyone want to lock me in here?

“Could I have the key to the room?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I’m not even sure where it is.”

“I’d like a copy.”

Her light blue eyes narrow at me. “Why? What do you expect to be keeping in your room that you don’t want us to know about?”

My mouth falls open. “I... Nothing, but...”

Nina throws her head back and laughs. “I’m just kidding. It’s your room, Millie! If you want a key, I’ll get you one. I promise.”

Sometimes it feels like Nina has a split personality. She flips from hot to cold so rapidly. She claims she was joking, but I’m not so sure. It doesn’t matter, though. I have no other prospects and this job is a blessing. I’m going to make it work. No matter what. I’m going to make Nina Winchester love me.

After Nina leaves my room, I close the door behind her. I’d like to lock it, but I can’t. Obviously.

As I shut the door, I notice marks in the wood. Long thin lines running down the length of the door at about the level of my shoulder. I run my fingers over the indentations. They almost seem like...

Scratches. Like somebody was scraping at the door.

Trying to get out.

No, that’s ridiculous. I’m being paranoid. Sometimes old wood gets scratched up. It doesn’t mean anything ominous.

The room suddenly feels unbearably hot and stuffy. There’s a small furnace in the corner of the room, which I’m sure keeps it comfortable in the winter, but there’s nothing to cool it down in the warmer months. I’ll have to buy a fan to prop up in front of the window. Even though it’s way larger than my car, it’s still a very small space—I’m not surprised they used it as a storage closet. I look around, opening the drawers to check their size. There’s a little closet within the room, with just barely enough space to hang up my few dresses. The closet is empty except for a couple of hangers and a small blue bucket in the corner.

I attempt to wrench open the small window to get a bit of air. But it doesn’t budge. I squint my eyes to investigate more closely. I run my finger along the frame of the window. It looks like it’s been painted into place.

Even though I have a window, it doesn’t open.

I could ask Nina about it, but I don’t want it to seem like I’m complaining when I just started working here today. Maybe next week I could mention it. I don’t think it’s too much to hope for, to have one working window.

The landscaping guy, Enzo, is in the backyard now. He’s running the lawnmower back there. He pauses for a moment to wipe sweat from his forehead with his muscular forearm, and then he looks up. He sees my face through the small window, and he shakes his head, just like he did the first time I met him. I remember the word he hissed at me in Italian before I went into the house. Pericolo.

Chapter 4

In Chapter Four, Millie embarks on a strenuous cleaning spree throughout Nina's remarkably dirty house, spending seven hours tackling the mess left behind. The living room presents the first challenge with a pizza box stubbornly stuck to the coffee table due to a sticky, disgusting spill. The kitchen proves to be a nightmare, with overflowing garbage, a dishwasher crammed with dirty dishes, and pans coated in days-old food. After much effort, Millie manages to restore some order to the kitchen, feeling a sense of accomplishment despite the daunting task.

Her day takes an unexpected turn when she encounters Cecelia, Nina's daughter, who surprises Millie with her silent presence and penetrating pale blue eyes. The initial encounter is unsettling, but Millie attempts to make a connection by offering to prepare a snack. Cecelia's responses are cryptic and unhelpful, making the interaction awkward. Despite the rocky start, Millie prepares a snack of peanut butter and banana on crackers, only to discover in horror that Cecelia is allergic to peanut butter. The situation escalates quickly as Cecelia alarmingly accuses Millie of trying to harm her, bringing Nina rushing in, concerned and upset.

Caught in a misunderstanding, Millie tries to explain, only to be rebuked by Nina for neglecting Cecelia's allergies, an accusation Millie contests silently as she was never informed. Nina eventually calms down, warning Millie to not make such a mistake again. The chapter concludes with an irritated yet compliant Millie, puzzled over Nina's decision to keep the peanut butter and tasked unexpectedly with preparing dinner, showcasing the unpredictable and challenging nature of her job and her relationship with Nina and Cecelia.

Chapter 5

By 6:45 that evening, dinner was nearly ready, with marinated chicken breast from a service instructing preparation already in the oven. The delightful kitchen aromas welcomed Andrew Winchester home as he arrived, loosening his tie and complimenting Millie on the meal's scent and her work on the kitchen's cleanliness. Despite her successful day, Millie withheld mentioning an earlier mishap with peanut butter to Andrew, partly to avoid any concerns about her capabilities in his family's home, which he credits Nina, his wife, for maintaining.

Nina entered, impeccably dressed, yet revealing a visible change from the casual and slimmer person in an old photo Millie had observed earlier. Andrew's affection for Nina was evident, sparking a light moment of who missed whom more between the couple. This moment, however, quickly turned awkward for Millie, who felt out of place witnessing such intimate exchanges.

Amidst this, Andrew's remark on Nina's inability in the kitchen and his light-hearted acknowledgment of relying on takeout since his mother moved to Florida, positions Millie as a savior for their mealtime struggles. Despite his jest, Nina's discomfort was palpable, reflecting on the dynamics within their relationship and the pressure and expectations often placed unfairly on women in households.

Andrew's invitation for Millie to join them for dinner exposes Nina's apprehension towards her husband's casual interaction with another woman, even in a professional or casual context. This tension reveals the complexities within their marriage, showcasing a mix of affection, dependency, and underlying insecurities. Millie, sensing the delicate situation, declines the offer, choosing to distance herself from potentially escalating the moment into a deeper domestic conflict.

This chapter paints a detailed picture of the Winchester household, showing the layers of relationship dynamics, expectations, and social norms within a seemingly perfect yet subtly strained family life.

Chapter 6

Chapter Six summarizes the protagonist's newfound comfort and subsequent unease upon moving from sleeping in their car to sleeping in a real bed for the first time in a long while. The cot, despite being lumpy and noisy, represents a significant upgrade from the car, offering the luxury of convenience and safety—a stark contrast to the restless nights spent at rest stops, clutching mace for protection. The relief and safety the protagonist feels are palpable as they describe the simple pleasure of being able to use a bathroom without fear and the luxury of falling asleep quickly in a proper bed.

However, this sense of security and comfort is short-lived. After briefly waking in the middle of the night, the protagonist experiences a moment of panic upon realizing they're no longer in their car; this disruption in their routine brings an initial fear until they recall the recent positive changes in their life, such as accepting a job offer from Nina and moving into a new room. The darkness of the night and the quiet of their surroundings bring a moment of peace that is quickly fragmented by the unexpected: a door that won't open.

This shift from comfort to unease encapsulates the chapter's essence, highlighting the protagonist's struggle with adapting to new circumstances and the fear of unforeseen obstacles, symbolized by the unyielding door. Their attempt at normalcy and the physical movement from a car to a cot in a secure room symbolizes a broader journey towards stability and safety. This transition, however, is not without its challenges, as indicated by the locked door—a metaphor for the unforeseen challenges that lie ahead in their journey towards a new life. The protagonist's experiences reflect a significant thematic element of change and adaptation, emphasizing the complexities of moving on from a life of uncertainty to one of relative security and the emotional and physical adjustments involved in such a transition.

Chapter 7

Upon descending to the kitchen, the scene is one of utter chaos. Nina, in the throes of havoc, has disassembled the contents of the kitchen, scattering pots, pans, and broken dishes across the floor. Amidst her frenzied search through the refrigerator, she launches a container of milk onto the floor, creating a milky maelstrom amidst the kitchenware ruins.

Her agitation peaks upon spotting me, as she desperately inquires about the whereabouts of her missing notes for the evening's PTA meeting. Convinced they vanished from the kitchen counter, her distress is palpable. Despite my uncertainty regarding their fate, I deny any knowledge of their disappearance. My suggestions of alternative locations for the notes only fuel her frustration.

The commotion summons Andrew Winchester, Nina's husband, whose entrance in a suave suit contrasts sharply with the turmoil. Observing the destruction, his concern turns towards Nina, who accuses me of discarding her crucial notes. Although I attempt to defend myself, Nina's conviction and Andrew's presence render my efforts futile.

Andrew, trying to mitigate the distress, hints at a partial digital salvation of the notes, yet Nina's dissatisfaction redirects towards me, assigning me the task of cleaning the kitchen's devastation as restitution. Seizing the moment, she departs, leaving me to ponder the daunting cleanup ahead, a mosaic of kitchenware and dairy underfoot.

Chapter 8

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EIGHT

Nina must have thrown half the contents of the refrigerator on the kitchen floor, so I have to make a run to the grocery store today. Since apparently, I'm also going to be cooking for them, I select some raw meat and seasoning that I can use to throw together a few meals. Nina loaded her credit card onto my phone. Everything I buy will be automatically charged to their account.

In prison, the food options were not too exciting. The menu rotated between chicken, hamburgers, hotdogs, lasagna, burritos, and a mysterious fish patty that always made me gag. There would be vegetables on the side that would be cooked to the point of disintegration. I used to fantasize about what I would eat when I got out, but on my budget, the options weren't much better. I could only buy what was on sale, and once I was living in my car, I was even more restricted.

It's different shopping for the Winchesters. I go straight for the finest cuts of steak—I'll look up on YouTube how to cook them. I sometimes used to cook steak for my father, but that was a long time ago. If I buy expensive ingredients, they'll come out good no matter what I do.

When I get back to the Winchester house, I've got four overflowing bags of groceries in the trunk of my car. Nina and Andrew's cars take up the two spots in the garage, and she instructed me not to park in the driveway, so I have to leave my car on the street. As I'm fumbling to get the bags out of the trunk, the landscaper Enzo emerges from the house next to ours with some sort of scary gardening device in his right hand.

Enzo notices me struggling, and after a moment of hesitation, he jogs over to my car. He frowns at me. "I do it," he says in his heavily accented English.

I start to take one of the bags, but then he scoops all four of them up in his massive arms, and he carries them to the front door. He nods at the door, waiting patiently for me to unlock it. I do it as quickly as possible, given that he's carrying about eighty pounds' worth of groceries in his arms. He stomps his boots on the welcome mat, then carries the groceries the rest of the way into the kitchen and deposits them on the kitchen counter.

"Gracias," I say.

His lips twitch. "No. Grazie."

"Grazie," I repeat.

He lingers in the kitchen for a moment, his brows knitted together. I notice again that Enzo is handsome, in a dark and terrifying sort of way. He's got tattoos on his upper arms, partially obscured by his T-shirt—I can make out the name "Antonia" inscribed in a heart on his right biceps. Those muscular arms could kill me without him even breaking a sweat if he got it in his head to do so. But I don't get a sense that this man wants to hurt me at all. If anything, he seems concerned about me.

I remember what he mumbled to me before Nina interrupted us the other day. Pericolo. Danger. What was he trying to tell me? Does he think

I'm in danger here?

Maybe I should download a translator app on my phone. He could type in what he wants to tell me and—

A noise from upstairs interrupts my thoughts. Enzo sucks in a breath. "I go," he says, turning on his heel and striding back toward the door.

"But..." I hurry after him, but he's much faster than me. He's out the front door before I've even cleared the kitchen.

I stand in the living room for a moment, torn between putting away the groceries and going after him. But then the decision is made for me when Nina comes down the stairs to the living room, wearing a white pants suit. I don't think I've ever seen her wear anything besides white—it does complement her hair, but the effort of keeping it clean would drive me crazy. Of course, I'm going to be the one taking care of the laundry from now on. I make a note to myself to buy more bleach next time I'm at the grocery store

Nina sees me standing there and her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline.

"Millie?"

I force a smile. "Yes?"

"I heard voices down here. Were you having company?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"You may not invite strangers into our home." She frowns at me. "If you want to have any guests over, I expect you to ask permission and give us at least two days' notice. And I would ask you to keep them in your room."

"It was just that landscaper guy," I explain. "He was helping me carry groceries into the house. That's all."

I had expected the explanation would satisfy Nina, but instead, her eyes darken. A muscle twitches under her right eye. "The landscaper? Enzo? He was here?"

"Um." I rub the back of my neck. "Is that his name? I don't know. He just carried the groceries in."

Nina studies my face as if trying to detect a lie. "I don't want him inside this house again. He's filthy from working outside. I work so hard to keep this house clean."

I don't know what to say to that. Enzo wiped his boots off when he came into the house and he didn't track in any dirt. And nothing is comparable to the mess I saw when I first walked into this house yesterday.

"Do you understand me, Millie?" she presses me.

"Yes," I say quickly. "I understand."

Her eyes flick over me in a way that makes me very uncomfortable. I shift between my feet. "By the way, how come you never wear your glasses?"

My fingers fly to my face. Why did I wear those stupid glasses the first day? I should never have worn them, and when she asked me about them yesterday, I shouldn't have lied. "Um..."

She arches an eyebrow. "I was up in the bathroom in the attic and I didn't see any contact lens solution. I didn't mean to snoop, but if you're going to be driving around with my child at some point, I expect you to have good vision."

"Right..." I wipe my sweaty hands on my jeans. I should just come clean. "The thing is, I don't really..." I clear my throat. "I don't actually need glasses. The ones I was wearing at my interview were more... sort of, decorative. You know?"

She licks her lips. “I see. So you lied to me.”
“I wasn’t lying. It was a fashion statement.”

Chapter 9

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NINE

Nina is at her PTA meeting tonight—the one I ruined by throwing out her notes. She is grabbing a bite to eat with some of the other parents, so I’ve been tasked with making dinner for Andrew and Cecelia.

The house is so much quieter when Nina isn’t here. I’m not sure why, but she just has an energy that fills the entire space. Right now I’m alone in the kitchen, searing a filet mignon in the frying pan before sticking it in the oven, and it’s heavenly silent in the Winchester household. It’s nice. This job would be so great if not for my boss.

Andrew has incredible timing—he comes home just as I’m taking the steaks out of the oven and letting them rest on the kitchen counter. He peeks into the kitchen. “Smells great—again.”

“Thanks.” I add a little bit more salt to the mashed potatoes, which are already drenched in butter and cream. “Can you tell Cecelia to come down? I called her twice but...” Actually, I called up to her three times. She has not yet answered me.

Andrew nods. “Gotcha.”

Shortly after Andrew disappears into the dining room and calls her name, I hear her quick footsteps on the staircase. So that’s how it’s going to be.

I put together two plates containing the steak, mashed potatoes, and a side of broccoli. The portions are smaller on Cecelia’s plate, and I am not going to enforce whether she eats the broccoli or not. If her father wants her to eat it, he can make her do it. But I would be remiss if I didn’t provide vegetables. When I was growing up, my mother always made sure to have a serving of vegetables on a dinner plate.

I’m sure she’s still wondering where she went wrong with raising me.

Cecelia is wearing another of her overly fancy dresses in an impractical pale color. I’ve never seen her wear normal kid clothing, and it just seems wrong. You can’t play in the dresses Cecelia wears—they’re too uncomfortable and they show every speck of dirt. She sits down at one of the chairs at the dining table, takes the napkin I laid out, and places it down on her lap daintily. For a moment, I’m a bit charmed. Then she opens her mouth.

“Why did you give me water?” She crinkles her nose at the glass of filtered water I put at her place setting. “I hate water. Get me apple juice.”

If I had spoken to somebody like that when I was a child, my mother would have smacked my hand and told me to say “please.” But Cecelia isn’t my child, and I haven’t managed to endear myself to her yet in the time I’ve

been here. So I smile politely, take the water away, and bring her a glass of apple juice.

When I place the new glass in front of her, she carefully examines it. She holds it up to the light, narrowing her eyes. “This glass is dirty. Get me another one.”

“It’s not dirty,” I protest. “It just came out of the dishwasher.”

“It’s smudged.” She makes a face. “I don’t want it. Give me another one.”

I take a deep, calming breath. I’m not going to fight with this little girl.

If she wants a new glass for her apple juice, I’ll get her a new glass.

As I’m fetching Cecelia her new glass, Andrew comes out to the dining table. He’s removed his tie and unbuttoned the top button on his white dress shirt. Just the tiniest hint of chest hair peeks out. And I have to look away. Men are something I am still learning how to navigate in my post-incarceration life. And by “learning,” I of course mean that I am completely avoiding it. At my last job waitressing at that bar—my only job since I got out—customers would inevitably ask me out. I always said no. There just isn’t room in my messed-up life right now for something like that. And of course, the men who asked me were men I wouldn’t have ever wanted to go out with.

I went to prison when I was seventeen. I wasn’t a virgin, but my only experiences included clumsy high school sex. Over my time in jail, I would sometimes feel the tug around attractive male guards. Sometimes the tug was almost painful. And one of the things I looked forward to when I got out was the possibility of having a relationship with a man. Or even just feeling a man’s lips against mine. I want it. Of course I do.

But not now. Someday.

Still, when I look at a man like Andrew Winchester, I think about the fact that I haven’t even touched a man in over a decade—not like that, anyway. He’s not anything like those creeps at the seedy bar where I used to wait tables. When I do eventually put myself back out there, he’s the sort of man I’m looking for. Except obviously not married.

An idea occurs to me: if I ever want to release a little tension, Enzo might be a good candidate. No, he doesn’t speak English. But if it’s just one night, it shouldn’t matter. He looks like he would know what to do without having to say much. And unlike Andrew, he doesn’t wear a wedding ring—although I can’t help but wonder about this Antonia person, whose name is tattooed on his arm.

I wrench myself from my fantasies about the sexy landscaper as I return to the kitchen to retrieve the two plates of food. Andrew’s eyes light up when he sees the juicy steak, seared to perfection. I am really proud of how it came out.

“This looks incredible, Millie!” he says.

“Thanks,” I say.

I look over at Cecelia, who has the opposite response. “Yuck! This is steak.” Stating the obvious, I guess.

“Steak is good, Cece,” Andrew tells her. “You should try it.”

Cecelia looks at her father then back down at her plate. She prods her steak gingerly with her fork, as if she’s anxious it might leap off the plate and into her mouth. She has a pained expression on her face.

“Cece...” Andrew says.

I look between Cecelia and Andrew, not sure what to do. It hits me now that I probably shouldn’t have made steak for a nine-year-old girl. I just

assumed she had to have highbrow taste, living in a place like this.

“Um,” I say. “Should I...?”

Andrew pushes back his chair and grabs Cecelia’s plate from the table.

“Okay, I’ll make you some chicken nuggets.”

I follow Andrew back into the kitchen, apologizing profusely. He just laughs. “Don’t worry about it. Cecelia is obsessed with chicken, and especially chicken nuggets. We could be dining at the fanciest restaurant in Long Island, and she’ll order chicken nuggets.”

My shoulders relax a bit. “You don’t have to do this. I can make her chicken nuggets.”

Andrew lays her plate down on the kitchen counter and wags a finger at me. “Oh, but I do. If you’re going to work here, you need a tutorial.”

“Okay...”

He wrenches the freezer open and pulls out a giant family pack of chicken nuggets. “See, these are the nuggets Cecelia likes. Don’t get any other brands. Anything else is unacceptable.” He fumbles with the Ziploc seal on the bag and removes one of the frozen nuggets. “Also, they must be dinosaur-shaped. Dinosaur—got that?”

I can’t suppress a smile. “Got it.”

“Also”—he holds up the chicken nugget—“you have to first examine the nugget for any deformities. Missing head, missing leg, or missing tail. If the dinosaur nugget has any of these critical defects, it will be rejected.”

Now he pulls a plate from the cabinet above the microwave. He lays five perfect nuggets on the plate. “She likes to have five nuggets. You put it in the microwave for exactly ninety seconds. Any less, it’s frozen. Any more, it’s overcooked. It’s a very tenuous balance.”

I nod solemnly. “I understand.”

As the chicken nuggets rotate in the microwave, he glances around the kitchen, which is at least twice as large as the apartment I was evicted from.

“I can’t even tell you how much money we spent renovating this kitchen, and Cecelia won’t eat anything that doesn’t come out of the microwave.”

The words “spoiled brat” are at the tip of my tongue, but I don’t say them. “She knows what she likes.”

“She sure does.” The microwave beeps and he pulls out the plate of piping hot chicken nuggets. “How about you? Have you eaten yet?”

“I’ll just bring some food up to my room.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You don’t want to join us?”

Part of me would like to join him. There’s something very engaging about Andrew Winchester, and I can’t help but want to get to know him better. But at the same time, it would be a mistake. If Nina walked in and saw the two of us laughing it up at the dining table, she wouldn’t like it. I also have a feeling that Cecelia won’t make the evening pleasant.

“I’d rather just eat in my room,” I say.

He looks like he’s going to protest, but then he thinks better of it.

“Sorry,” he says. “We’ve never had live-in help before, so I’m not sure

Chapter 10

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TEN

A week later, I come down to the living room and find Nina holding a full garbage bag. My first thought is: Oh God, what now?

In only a week of living with the Winchesters, I feel like I've been here for years. No, centuries. Nina's moods are wildly unpredictable. At one moment, she's hugging me and telling me how much she appreciates having me here. In the next, she's berating me for not completing some task she never even told me about. She's flighty, to say the least. And Cecelia is a total brat, who clearly resents my presence here. If I had any other options, I would quit.

But I don't, so I don't.

The only member of the family who isn't completely intolerable is Andrew. He is not around much, but my few interactions with him have been... uneventful. And at this point, I'm thrilled with uneventful. Truthfully, I feel sorry for Andrew sometimes. It can't be easy being married to Nina.

I hover at the entrance to the living room, trying to figure out what Nina could possibly be doing with a garbage bag. Does she want me to sort the garbage from now on, alphabetically and by color and odor? Have I purchased some sort of unacceptable garbage bag and now I need to re-bag the garbage? I can't even begin to guess.

"Millie!" she calls out.

My stomach clenches. I have a feeling I'm about to figure out what she wants me to do with the garbage. "Yes?"

She waves me over to her—I try to walk over like I'm not being led to my execution. It's not easy.

"Is there something wrong?" I ask.

Nina picks up the heavy garbage bag and drops it on her gorgeous leather sofa. I grimace, wanting to warn her not to get garbage all over the expensive leather material.

"I just went through my closet," she says. "And unfortunately, a few of my dresses have gotten a tad too small. So I've collected them in this bag. Would you be a dear and take this to a donation bin?"

Is that it? That's not so bad. "Of course. No problem."

"Actually..." Nina takes a step back, her eyes raking over me. "What size are you?"

"Um, six?"

Her face lights up. "Oh, that's perfect! These dresses are all size six or eight."

Six or eight? Nina looks like she's at least a size fourteen. She must not have cleared out her closet in a while. "Oh..."

"You should take them," she says. "You don't have any nice clothes"

I flinch at her statement, although she's right. I don't have any nice clothing. "I'm not sure if I should..."

"Of course you should!" She thrusts the bag in my direction. "They would look amazing on you. I insist!"

I accept the bag from her and nudge it open. There's a little white dress on top and I pull it out. It looks incredibly expensive and the material is so

soft, I want to bathe in it. She's right. This would look amazing on me—it would look amazing on anyone. If I do decide to get out there and start dating again, it would be nice to have some decent clothing. Even if it is all white.

“Okay,” I agree. “Thank you so much. This is so generous of you.”

“You're very welcome! I hope you enjoy them!”

“And if you ever decide you want it back, just let me know.”

When she throws back her head and laughs, her double chin wobbles. “I don't think I'm going to drop any dress sizes anytime soon. Especially since Andy and I are having a baby.”

My mouth falls open. “You're pregnant?”

I'm not sure if Nina being pregnant is a good or bad thing. Although that would explain her moodiness. But she shakes her head. “Not yet. We've been trying for a bit, but no luck. But we're both really eager to have

Chapter 11

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ELEVEN

“Millie!” Nina's voice sounds frantic on the other line. “I need you to pick up Cecelia from school!”

I've got a pile of laundry balanced in my arms, and my cell phone is between my shoulder and my ear. I always pick up immediately when Nina calls, no matter what I'm doing. Because if I don't, she will call over and over (and over) until I do.

“Sure, no problem,” I say.

“Oh, thank you!” Nina gushes. “You're such a dear! Just grab her from the Winter Academy at 2:45! You're the best, Millie!”

Before I can ask any other questions, like where I'm supposed to meet Cecelia or the address of the Winter Academy, Nina has hung up. As I remove the phone wedged under my ear, I feel a jolt of panic when I see the time. I've got less than fifteen minutes to figure out where this school is and retrieve my employer's daughter. Laundry is going to have to wait.

I type the name of the school into Google as I sprint down the stairs.

Nothing comes up. The closest school by that name is in Wisconsin, and even though Nina makes some odd requests, I doubt she expects me to pick her daughter up in Wisconsin in fifteen minutes. I call Nina back, but naturally, she doesn't pick up. Neither does Andy when I try him.

Great.

While I pace across the kitchen, trying to figure out what to do next, I notice a piece of paper stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet. It's a school holiday schedule. From the Windsor Academy.

She said Winter. Winter Academy. I'm sure of it. Didn't she?

I don't have time to wonder if Nina told me the wrong name or if she doesn't know the name of the school her daughter attends, where she is also

vice president of the PTA. Thankfully, there's an address on the flier, so I know exactly where to go. And I've only got ten minutes to get there. The Winchesters live in a town that boasts some of the best public schools in the country but Cecelia goes to private school, because of course she does. The Windsor Academy is a huge elegant structure with lots of ivory columns, dark brown bricks, and ivy running along the walls that makes me feel like I'm picking Cecelia up at Hogwarts or something unreal like that. One other thing I wish Nina had warned me about was the parking situation at pick-up time. It is an absolute nightmare. I have to drive around for several minutes searching for a spot, and I finally squeeze in between a Mercedes and a Rolls-Royce. I'm scared somebody might tow my dented Nissan just on principle.

Given how little time I had to get to the school, I'm huffing and puffing as I sprint to the entrance. And naturally, there are five separate entrances. Which one will Cecelia be coming out of? There's no indication where I should go. I try calling Nina again, but once more, the call goes to voicemail. Where is she? It's none of my business, but the woman doesn't have a job and I do all the chores. What could she be doing with herself? After questioning several irritable parents, I ascertain that Cecelia will be coming out of the very last entrance on the right side of the school. But just because I am determined not to screw this up, I approach two immaculately dressed women chatting by the door and ask, "Is this the exit for the fourth graders?"

"Yes, it is." The thinner of the two women—a brunette with the most perfectly shaped eyebrows I've ever seen—looks me up and down. "Who are you looking for?"

I squirm under her gaze. "Cecelia Winchester."

The two women exchange knowing looks. "You must be the new maid Nina hired," the shorter woman—a redhead—says.

"Housekeeper," I correct her, although I don't know why. Nina can call me whatever she wants.

The brunette snickers at my comment, but doesn't say anything about it.

"So how is it so far working there?"

She's digging for dirt. Good luck with that—I'm not going to give her any. "It's great."

The women exchange looks again. "So Nina isn't driving you crazy?" the redhead asks me.

"What do you mean?" I say carefully. I don't want to gossip with these harpies, but at the same time, I'm curious about Nina.

"Nina is just a bit... high strung," the brunette says.

"Nina is nuts," the redhead pipes up. "Literally."

I suck in a breath. "What?"

The brunette elbows the redhead hard enough to make her gasp.

"Nothing. She's just joking around."

At that moment, the doors to the school swing open and children pour out. If there were any chance to get more information out of these two women, the chance is gone as they both move in the direction of their own fourth graders. But I can't stop thinking about what they said.

I spot Cecelia's pale blond hair near the entrance. Even though most of the other kids are wearing jeans and T-shirts, she's wearing another lacy dress, this one a pale sea green. She sticks out like a sore thumb. I have no problem keeping her in my sight as I move toward her.

"Cecelia!" I wave my arm frantically as I get closer. "I'm here to pick

you up!”

Cecelia looks at me like she would much rather get into the back of the van of some bearded homeless man than go home with me. She shakes her head and turns away from me.

“Cecelia!” I say, more sharply. “Come on. Your mom said I should pick you up.”

She turns back to look at me, and her eyes say she thinks I’m a moron.

“No, she didn’t. Sophia’s mother is picking me up and taking me to karate.”

Before I can protest, a woman in her forties wearing yoga pants and a pullover comes over and rests her hand on Cecelia’s shoulder. “Ready for karate, girls?”

I blink up at the woman. She does not appear to be a kidnapper. But there’s obviously been some misunderstanding. Nina called me and told me to pick up Cecelia. She was very clear about it. Well, except for the part where she told me the wrong school. But other than that, she was very clear.

“Excuse me,” I say to the woman. “I work for the Winchesters and Nina asked me to pick up Cecelia today.”

The woman arches an eyebrow and places a recently manicured hand on her hip. “I don’t think so. I pick up Cecelia every single Wednesday and

Chapter 12

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TWELVE

Even though I had resigned myself to minding my own business about Nina’s mental health history, I can’t help but wonder. I work for this woman. I live with this woman.

And there’s something else strange about Nina. Like this morning as I’m cleaning the master bathroom, I can’t help but think nobody with good mental health could leave the bathroom in this sort of disorder—the towels on the floor, the toothpaste hugging the basin of the sink. I know depression can sometimes make people unmotivated to clean up. But Nina motivates herself enough to get out and about every day, wherever she goes.

The worst thing was finding a used tampon on the floor a few days ago.

A used, bloody tampon. I wanted to throw up.

While I’m scrubbing the toothpaste and the globs of makeup adhered to the sink, my eyes stray to the medicine cabinet. If Nina’s actually “nuts,” she’s probably on medication, right? But I can’t look in the medicine cabinet. That would be a massive violation of trust.

But then again, it’s not like anyone would know if I took a look. Just a quick look.

I look out at the bedroom. Nobody is in there. I peek around the corner just to make absolutely sure. I’m alone. I go back into the bathroom and after a moment of hesitation, I nudge the medicine cabinet open.

Wow, there are a lot of medications in here.

I pick up one of the orange pill bottles. The name on it is Nina Winchester. I read off the name of the medication: haloperidol. Whatever that is.

I start to pick up a second pill bottle when a voice floats down the hallway: "Millie? Are you in there?"

Oh no.

I hastily stuff the bottle back in the cabinet and slam it shut. My heart is racing, and a cold sweat breaks out on my palms. I plaster a smile on my face just in time for Nina to burst into the bedroom, wearing a white sleeveless blouse and white jeans. She stops short when she sees me in the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" she asks me.

"I'm cleaning the bathroom." I'm not looking at your medications, that's for sure.

Nina squints at me, and for a moment, I'm certain she's going to accuse me of going through the medicine cabinet. And I'm a horrible liar, so she'll almost certainly know the truth. But then her eyes fall on the sink.

"How do you clean the sink?" she asks.

"Um." I lift the spray bottle in my hand. "I use this sink cleaner."

"Is it organic?"

"I..." I look at the bottle I picked up at the grocery store last week. "No. It isn't."

Nina's face falls. "I really prefer organic cleaning products, Millie. They don't have as many chemicals. You know what I mean?"

"Right..." I don't say what I'm thinking, which is I can't believe a woman who is taking that many medications is concerned about a few chemicals in a cleaning product. I mean, yes, it's in her sink, but she's not ingesting it. It's not going into her bloodstream.

"I just feel like..." She frowns. "You aren't doing a good job getting the sink clean. Can I watch how you're doing it? I'd like to see what you're doing wrong."

She wants to watch me clean her sink? "Okay..."

I spray more of the product in her sink and scrub at the porcelain until the toothpaste residue vanishes. I glance over at Nina, who is nodding thoughtfully.

"That's fine," she says. "I guess the real question is how are you cleaning the sink when I'm not watching you."

"Um, the same?"

"Hmm. I highly doubt that." She rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I don't have time to supervise your cleaning all day. Try to make sure to do a thorough

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THIRTEEN

I'm busy vacuuming the living room when the shadow goes by the window. I wander over to the window, and sure enough, Enzo is working in the backyard today. As far as I can tell, he alternates houses from day to day, doing various gardening and landscaping tasks. Right now, he is digging at the flower bed in the front yard.

I grab an empty glass from the kitchen and fill it up with cold water. Then I head outside.

I'm not entirely sure what I hope to accomplish here. But ever since those two women talked about Nina being crazy ("literally"), I can't stop thinking about it. And then I found that antipsychotic medication in her medicine cabinet. Far be it from me to judge Nina for having psychological problems—I met my fair share of women struggling with mental illness in prison—but it would be helpful information for me to know. Maybe I could even help her if I understood her better.

I remember how on my first day, Enzo seemed to be warning me about something. Nina is out of the house, Andrew is at work, and Cecelia is at school, so this seems like a perfect time to interrogate him. The only tiny complication is that he hardly speaks a word of English.

But it can't hurt. And I'm sure he's thirsty and will appreciate the water. When I get outside, Enzo is busy digging a hole in the ground. He seems intensely focused on his task, even after I clear my throat loudly. Twice. Finally, I wave my hand and say, "Hola!"

That may have been Spanish again.

Enzo looks up from the hole he was digging. There's an amused expression on his lips. "Ciao," he says.

Chapter 14

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FOURTEEN

I've been living with the Winchesters for about three weeks when I have my first parole officer meeting. I wanted to schedule it for my day off. I don't want them to know where I'm going.

I'm down to monthly meetings with my officer, Pam, a stocky middle-aged woman with a strong jaw. Right after I got out, I was living in housing subsidized by the prison, but after Pam helped me get that waitressing job, I moved out and got my own place. Then after I lost the waitressing job, I never exactly told Pam about it. Also, I never told her about my eviction. At our last meeting a little over a month ago, I lied through my teeth.

Lying to a parole officer is a violation of parole. Not having a residence and living out of your car is also a violation of parole. I don't like to lie, but I didn't want to have my parole revoked and go right back to prison to serve the last five years of my sentence. I couldn't let that happen.

But things have turned around. I can be honest with Pam today. Well,

almost.

Even though it's a breezy spring day, Pam's small office is like a hundred degrees. Half the year, her office is a sauna, and the other half of the year it's freezing. There's no in-between. She's got the small window wrenched open, and there's a fan blowing the dozens of papers around her desk. She has to keep her hands on them to keep them from blowing away.

"Millie." She smiles at me when I come in. She's a nice person and genuinely seems like she wants to help me, which made me feel all the worse about how I lied to her. "Good to see you! How is it going?"

I settle down into one of the wooden chairs in front of her desk.

"Great!" That's a bit of a lie. But it's going fine. Good enough. "Nothing to report."

Pam rifles through the papers on her desk. "I got your message about the address change. You're working for a family in Long Island as a housekeeper?"

"That's right."

"You didn't like the job at Charlie's?"

I chew on my lip. "Not really."

This is one of the things I lied to her about. Telling her that I quit the job at Charlie's. When the reality is that they fired me. But it was completely unfair.

At least I was lucky enough that they quietly fired me and didn't get the police involved. That was part of the deal—I go quietly and they don't involve the cops. I didn't have much of a choice. If they had gone to the police about what happened, I would've been right back in prison.

So I didn't tell Pam I got fired, because if I did, she would have called them to find out why. And then when I lost my apartment, I couldn't tell her about that either.

But it's fine now. I have a new job and a place to live. I'm not in danger of being locked up again. At my last appointment with Pam, I was sitting on the edge of my seat, but I feel okay this time.

"I'm proud of you, Millie," Pam says. "Sometimes it's hard for people to adjust when they have been incarcerated since they were teenagers, but you've done great."

"Thank you." No, she definitely doesn't need to know about that month when I was living in my car.

"So how is the new job?" she asks. "How are they treating you?"

"Um..." I rub my knees. "It's fine. The woman I work for is a bit... eccentric. But I'm just cleaning. It's not a big deal."

Another thing that's a slight lie. I don't want to tell her that Nina Winchester has been making me increasingly uncomfortable. I searched online to see if she herself had any kind of record. Nothing popped up, but I didn't pay for the actual background check. Anyway, Nina is rich enough to keep her nose clean.

"Well, that's great," Pam says. "And how is your social life?"

That's not technically an area a parole officer is supposed to be asking about, but Pam and I have become friendly, so I don't mind the question.

"Nonexistent."

She throws back her head and laughs so that I can see a shiny filling in the back of her mouth. "I understand if you don't feel ready to date yet. But you should try to make some friends, Millie."

"Yeah," I say, even though I don't mean it.

"And when you do start dating," she says, "don't just settle for anyone."

Don't date a jerk just because you're an ex-con. You deserve someone who treats you right."

"Mmm...."

For a moment, I allow myself to think about the possibility of dating a man in the future. I close my eyes, trying to imagine what he might look like. Unbidden, the image of Andrew Winchester fills my head, with his easy charm and handsome smile.

My eyes fly open. Oh no. No way. I can't even think it.

"Also," Pam adds, "you're beautiful. You shouldn't settle."

I almost laugh out loud. I've been doing everything I can to look as unattractive as I possibly can. I wear baggy clothing, I always keep my hair in a bun or a ponytail, and I haven't put on even one scrap of makeup. But Nina still looks at me like I'm some kind of vamp.

"I'm just not ready to think about that yet," I say.

"That's fine," Pam says. "But remember, having a job and shelter is important, but human connections are even more important."

She might be right, but I'm just not ready for that right now, I have to focus on keeping my nose clean. The last thing I want is to end up back in prison. That's all that matters.

I have trouble sleeping at night.

When you're in prison, you're always sleeping with one eye open. You don't want things to be going on around you without you knowing about it. And now that I'm out, the instinct hasn't left me. When I first got an actual bed, I was able to sleep really well for a while, but now my old insomnia has come back full force. Especially because my bedroom is so unbearably stuffy.

My first paycheck has been deposited in my bank account, and the next chance I have, I'm going to go out and buy myself a television for my bedroom. If I turn on the television, I might be able to drift off to sleep with it on. The sound will mimic the noise at night in the prison.

Up until now, I've been hesitant to use the Winchesters' television. Not the huge home theater, obviously, but their "normal" TV in the living room. It doesn't seem like it should be a big deal, considering Nina and Andrew go to bed early. They have a very specific routine every night. Nina goes upstairs to put Cecelia to bed at precisely 8:30. I can hear her reading a bedtime story, then she sings to her. Every night she sings the same song: "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from The Wizard of Oz. Nina doesn't sound like she has any vocal training, but there's something strangely, hauntingly beautiful about the way she sings to Cecelia.

After Cecelia goes to sleep, Nina reads or watches television in the bedroom. Andrew follows upstairs not long after. If I come downstairs after ten o'clock, the first floor is completely empty.

So this particular night I decided to take advantage.

This is why I'm sprawled out on the sofa, watching an episode of Family Feud. It's nearly one in the morning, so the high energy level of the contestants seems almost bizarre. Steve Harvey is joking around with them, and despite how tired I am, I laugh out loud when one of the contestants gets up to demonstrate his tap-dancing skills. I used to watch the show when I was a kid, and I always imagined going on it myself; I'm not sure who I would've invited to go with me. My parents, me—that's three. Who else could I have invited?

"Is that Family Feud?"

I jerk my head up. Even though it's the middle of the night, Andrew

Winchester is somehow standing behind me, as wide awake as the people on the television screen.

Damn. I knew I should have stayed in my room.

“Oh!” I say. “I, uh... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

He arches an eyebrow. “What are you sorry for? You live here, too. You have every right to watch the television.”

I grab a pillow from the couch to conceal my flimsy gym shorts that I’ve been sleeping in. Also, I’m not wearing a bra. “I was going to buy a set for my room.”

“It’s fine to use our monitor, Millie. You probably won’t get much reception up there anyway.” The whites of his eyes glow in the light of the television. “I’ll be out of your hair in a minute. I’m just grabbing a glass of water.”

I sit on the couch, clutching the pillow to my chest, debating if I should go upstairs. I’m never going to fall asleep now because my heart is racing. He said he was just getting some water, so maybe I can stay. I watch him shuffle into the kitchen and I hear the tap running.

He comes back into the living room, sipping from his water glass.

That’s when I notice he’s only got on a white undershirt and boxers. But at least he’s not shirtless.

“How come you poured water from the sink?” I can’t help but ask him.

He plops down next to me on the sofa, even though I wish he wouldn’t.

“What do you mean?”

It would be rude to jump off the sofa, so I just scoot down as far as I can. The last thing I need is for Nina to see the two of us getting cozy together on the sofa in our underwear. “Like, you didn’t use the water filter in the refrigerator.”

He laughs. “I don’t know. I’ve always just gotten water from the sink.

Like, is it poison?”

“I don’t know. I think it has chemicals in it.”

He runs a hand through his dark hair until it sticks up a bit. “I’m hungry for some reason. Any leftovers from dinner in the fridge?”

“No, sorry.”

“Hmm.” He rubs his stomach. “Would it be really bad manners if I eat some peanut butter right out of the jar?”

I cringe at the mention of peanut butter. “As long as you’re not eating in front of Cecelia.”

He tilts his head. “Why?”

“You know. Because she’s allergic.” They really don’t seem very respectful of Cecelia’s deadly peanut allergy in this household.

Even more surprising, Andrew laughs. “No, she’s not.”

“Yes, she is. She told me she is. The first day I was here.”

“Um, I think I would know if my daughter were allergic to peanuts.” He snorts. “Anyway, do you think we would keep a big jar of it in the pantry if she were allergic?”

That was exactly what I thought when Cecelia told me about her allergy. Was she just making it up to torture me? I wouldn’t put it past her. Then again, Nina also said Cecelia had a peanut allergy. What’s going on here? But Andrew makes the most valid point: the fact that there’s a big jar of peanut butter in the pantry indicates nobody here has a deadly peanut allergy.

“Blueberries,” Andrew says.

I frown. “I don’t think there are any blueberries in the refrigerator.”

“No.” He nods at the television screen, where Family Feud has entered the second round. “They surveyed a hundred people and asked them to name a fruit you can fit in your mouth whole.”

The contestant on the screen answers blueberries, and it’s the number one answer. Andrew pumps his fist. “See? I knew it. I would be great on this show.”

“The top answer is always easy to get,” I say. “The tricky part is getting the more obscure answers.”

“Okay, smarty pants.” He grins at me. “Name a fruit you can fit in your mouth whole.”

“Um...” I tap a finger against my chin. “A grape.”

Sure enough, the next contestant answers “grape” and is correct.

“I stand corrected,” he says. “You’re good at this, too. Okay, what about a strawberry?”

“It’s probably up there,” I say, “even though you wouldn’t really want to put a whole strawberry in your mouth because it has the stem and all that.”

The contestants manage to name strawberries and cherries, but they get stuck on the last answer. Andrew is cracking up when one of them says a peach.

“A peach!” he cries. “Who could fit a peach in their mouth? You’d have to unhinge your jaw!”

I giggle. “Better than a watermelon.”

“That’s probably the answer! I bet anything.”

The final answer on the board turns out to be a plum. Andrew shakes his head. “I don’t know about that. I’d like to see a picture of the contestants who said they could fit a plum in their mouth whole.”

“That should be part of the show,” I say. “You get to hear from the hundred people surveyed and get the rationale behind their answers.”

“You should write to Family Feud and suggest that,” he says soberly.

“You could revolutionize the whole show.”

I giggle again. When I first met Andrew, I assumed he was a stuffy rich guy. But he’s not like that at all. Nina is certifiable, but Andrew is nice. He’s completely down-to-earth, and he’s funny. And it seems like he’s a really good dad to Cecelia.

The truth is, I feel a bit sorry for him sometimes.

I shouldn’t think that. Nina is my boss. She gives me paychecks and a place to live. My loyalty is to her. But at the same time, she’s awful. She’s a slob, she’s constantly telling me conflicting information, and she can be incredibly cruel. Even Enzo, who’s got to be two hundred pounds of solid muscle, seems afraid of her.

Of course, I might not feel that way if Andrew wasn’t so incredibly attractive. Even though I have sat as far away from him as I possibly can without falling off the side of the couch, I can’t help but think about the fact that he is wearing his underwear right now. He’s in his freaking boxers. And his undershirt material is thin enough that I can see the outline of some very sexy muscles. He could do a lot better than Nina.

I wonder if he knows it.

Just as I’m starting to relax and feel glad that Andrew joined me down here, a screechy voice breaks into my thoughts: “Gosh, what’s the big joke you’re laughing about down here?”

I whip my head around. Nina is standing at the foot of the stairs, staring at us. When she’s in her heels, I can hear her coming a mile away, but she’s surprisingly light-footed in her bare feet. She’s wearing a white nightgown

that falls to her ankles, and her arms are folded across her chest.

“Hey, Nina.” Andrew yawns and climbs off the sofa. “What are you doing up?”

Nina is glaring at us. I don’t know how he isn’t panicking right now. I’m one second away from peeing in my pants. But he seems totally cavalier about the fact that his wife just caught the two of us alone in the living room at one in the morning, both of us in our underwear. Not that we were doing anything, but still.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Nina retorts. “You two seem to be having a lot of fun. What’s the joke?”

Andrew lifts a shoulder. “I came down to get some water and Millie was here watching television. I got distracted by Family Feud.”

“Millie.” Nina turns her attention to me. “Why don’t you get a television for your own room? This is the family room.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “I’m going to buy a television next chance I get.”

“Hey.” Andrew raises his eyebrows. “What’s so wrong with Millie watching a little television down here if nobody’s around?”

“Well, you’re around.”

“And she wasn’t bothering me.”

“Don’t you have a meeting first thing in the morning?” Nina’s eyes bore into him. “Should you really be awake watching television at one in the morning?”

He sucks in a breath. I hold my own breath, hoping for a minute that he’s going to stand up to her. But then his shoulders sag. “You’re right, Nina. I better turn in.”

Nina stands there, her arms folded across her ample chest, watching Andrew trudge up the stairs, like he’s a child she’s sending up without supper. It’s unsettling to see the extent of her jealousy.

I get up from the couch as well and shut off the television. Nina is still lingering at the base of the stairs. Her eyes rake over my gym shorts and tank top. My lack of a bra. Again, it strikes me how bad this looks. But I thought I would be all alone down here.

“Millie,” Nina says, “in the future, I expect you to wear appropriate attire around the house.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say for the second time. “I didn’t think anyone would be awake.”

“Really?” She snorts. “Would you just wander around any stranger’s house in the middle of the night because you assume they won’t be around?”

I don’t know what to say to that. This is not a stranger’s house. I live here, albeit up in the attic. “No...”

“Please stay up in the attic after bedtime,” she says. “The rest of the house is for my family. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

She shakes her head. “Honestly, I’m not even sure how much we need a maid. Maybe this was a mistake...”

Oh no. Is she firing me at one in the morning because I was watching television in her living room? This is bad. And there’s no chance Nina is going to give me a good recommendation for another job. She seems more like the sort of person who would call every potential employer to tell them how much she hated me.

I’ve got to fix this.

Chapter 15

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FIFTEEN

This Saturday afternoon, Nina is throwing a small PTA gathering in her backyard. They're meeting up to plan something called "field day" in which the kids play in a field for a few hours, and somehow it takes months of planning to prepare for it. Nina has been talking about it nonstop lately. And she has texted me no less than a dozen times to remind me to pick up the hors d'oeuvres.

I'm starting to get stressed because, as usual, the entire house was a mess when I woke up this morning. I don't know how this house gets so messy. Is Nina's medication treating some sort of disorder where she gets up in the middle of the night and makes a mess in the house? Is that a thing? I don't know how the bathrooms get so bad overnight, for example.

When I come into her bathroom to clean in the morning, there are usually at least three or four towels strewn on the floor, sopping wet. There's usually toothpaste caked into the sink that I have to scrub to get free. Nina has some sort of aversion to throwing her clothes in the laundry basket, so it takes me a good ten minutes to gather her bra, underwear, pants, pantyhose, etc.

Thank God Andrew is better at getting his clothing in the laundry basket. Then there's the stuff that needs to be dry cleaned, of which there is a lot. Nina doesn't distinguish between the two, and God forbid I make the wrong decision about what goes in the laundry machine and what needs to be run to the dry cleaner. That would be a hanging offense.

The other thing is the food wrappers. I find candy wrappers stuffed into nearly every crevice in her bedroom and bathroom. I suppose that explains why Nina is fifty pounds heavier than she was in the photographs of when she and Andrew first met.

By the time I have cleaned the house top to bottom, dropped off the dry cleaning, and completed the laundry and the ironing, I'm running very short on time. The women are going to arrive within the hour, and I'm still not done with all the tasks Nina assigned me, including picking up the hors d'oeuvres. She's not going to understand if I try to explain that to her.

Considering she nearly fired me last week when she caught me watching Family Feud with Andrew, I can't afford to make any mistakes. I've got to make sure this afternoon is perfect.

Then I get to the backyard. The Winchesters' backyard is one of the most beautiful sights in the neighborhood. Enzo has done his job well—the hedges are trimmed so precisely, it's like he used a ruler. Flowers dot the edges of the yard, adding a pop of color. And the grass is so lush and green, I'm half tempted to lie down in it, waving my arms around to make grass angels.

But apparently, they don't spend much time out here, because all the patio furniture has a thick layer of dust on it. Everything has a thick layer of dust on it.

Oh God, I do not have time to get everything done.

“Millie? Are you okay?”

Andrew is standing behind me, dressed casually for a change, in a blue polo shirt and khaki slacks. Somehow, he looks even better than he does in an expensive suit.

“I’m fine,” I mumble. I shouldn’t even be talking to him.

“You look like you’re about to cry,” he points out.

I wipe my eyes self-consciously with the back of my hand. “I’m fine. There’s just a lot to do for this PTA meeting.”

“Aw, that’s not worth crying over.” His brow crinkles. “These PTA women are never going to be satisfied no matter what you do. They’re all awful.”

That does not make me feel any better.

“Look, maybe I have a…” He digs around in his pocket and pulls out a crumpled tissue. “I can’t believe I have a tissue in my pocket, but here.” I manage a smile as I accept the tissue. As I dab my nose, I catch a whiff of Andrew’s aftershave.

“Now,” he says, “what can I do to help?”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“You’re crying.” He props one of his feet up on the dirty chair.

“Seriously, I’m not completely useless. Just tell me what you need me to do.” When I hesitate, he adds, “Look, we both want to make Nina happy, right? This is how you make her happy. She’s not going to be happy if I let you screw this up.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “It would be incredibly helpful if you could pick up the hors d’oeuvres.”

“Done.”

It feels like a giant weight has been lifted from my shoulders. It was going to take me twenty minutes to get to the store to pick up the hors d’oeuvres and twenty minutes to get back. That would’ve left me only fifteen minutes to clean this filthy patio furniture. Could you imagine that Nina sat in one of these chairs in one of her white outfits?

“Thank you,” I say. “I really, really appreciate it. Really.”

He grins at me. “Really?”

“Really, really.”

Cecelia bursts into the backyard that moment, wearing a light pink dress with white trim. Like her mother, she doesn’t have so much as a hair out of place. “Daddy,” she says.

He turns his gaze on Cecelia. “What’s up, Cece?”

“The computer isn’t working,” she says. “I can’t do my homework. Can you fix it?”

“I absolutely can.” He rests a hand on her shoulder. “But first we are going on a little road trip and it’s going to be super fun.”

She looks at him dubiously.

He ignores her skepticism. “Go put on your shoes.”

It would have taken me half the day to convince Cecelia to put on her shoes, but she obediently goes back into the house to do what he says.

Cecelia is nice enough, as long as I’m not in charge of her.

“You’re good with her,” I comment.

“Thanks.”

“She looks a lot like you.”

Andrew shakes his head. “Not really. She looks like Nina.”

“She does,” I insist. “She has Nina’s coloring and hair, but she has your

nose.”

He toys with the hem of his polo shirt. “Cecelia isn’t my biological daughter. So any resemblance between the two of us is, you know,

Chapter 16

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SIXTEEN

It’s safe to say I hate every single woman at this PTA meeting.

There are four of them total, including Nina. I’ve memorized their names. Jillianne (Jilly-anne), Patrice, and Suzanne (not to be confused with Jillianne). The reason I have memorized their names is because Nina will not let me leave the backyard. She’s been making me stand in the corner, constantly at attention in case they need something.

At least the hors d’oeuvres are a success. And Nina has no idea Andrew picked them up for me.

“I’m just not happy with the field day menu.” Suzanne taps her pen against her chin. I’ve heard Nina refer to Suzanne before as her “best friend,” but as far as I can tell, Nina isn’t close with any of her so-called friends. “I feel like there needs to be more than one gluten-free option.” “I agree,” Jillianne says. “And even though there is a vegan option, it’s not vegan and gluten-free. So what are people who are both vegan and gluten-free supposed to eat?”

I don’t know? Grass? I’ve honestly never seen women more obsessed with gluten. Every time I brought out an hors d’oeuvre, each of them questioned me about the amount of gluten in it. As if I have any idea. I don’t even know what gluten is.

It’s a sweltering hot day today, and I would give anything to be back in the house, under the air conditioner. Hell, I would give anything to have a drink of the pink sparkling lemonade the women are sharing. I keep wiping sweat from my forehead every time they’re not looking at me. I’m afraid I may have pit stains.

“This blueberry goat’s cheese flatbread should have been heated up,” Patrice comments as she chews on the morsel in her mouth. “They’re barely lukewarm.”

“I know,” Nina says regretfully. “I asked my maid to take care of it, but you know how it is. It is so hard to find good help.”

My mouth falls open. She never asked me any such thing. Also, does she realize I’m standing right here?

“Oh, it truly is.” Jillianne nods sympathetically. “You just can’t hire anyone good anymore. The work ethic in this country is so horrible. You wonder why people like that can’t find better jobs, right? It’s laziness, pure and simple.”

“Or else you get someone foreign,” Suzanne adds. “And they barely speak the language. Like Enzo.”

“At least he’s nice to look at!” Patrice laughs.

The rest of them hoot and giggle, although Nina is oddly silent. I suppose she doesn’t have to ogle the hot landscaper when she’s married to Andrew—I can’t blame her on that one. She also seems to have some sort of strange grudge against Enzo.

I’m itching to say something after the way they’ve been bad mouthing me behind my... Well, not behind my back because I’m standing right here, as I mentioned. But I’ve got to show them that I’m not a lazy American. I have worked my butt off in this job and never complained once.

“Nina.” I clear my throat. “Do you want me to heat up the hors d’oeuvres?”

Nina turns to look at me, her eyes flashing in a way that makes me take a step back. “Millie,” she says calmly, “we’re having a conversation here. Please don’t interrupt. It’s so rude.”

“Oh, I—”

“Also,” she adds, “I’d thank you not to refer to me as Nina—I’m not your drinking buddy.” She snickers at the other women. “It’s Mrs. Winchester. Don’t make me remind you again.”

I stare at her, flabbergasted. On the very first day I met her, she instructed me to call her Nina. I’ve been calling her that the entire time I’ve been working here, and she’s never said a word about it. Now she’s acting like I’m taking liberties.

The worst part is the other women are acting like Nina is a hero for telling me off. Patrice launches into some story about how her cleaning woman had the gall to tell her about how her dog died. “I don’t want to be mean,” Patrice says, “but what do I care if Juanita’s dog died? She was going on and on about it. Honestly.”

“We definitely do need the help though.” Nina pops one of the unacceptable hors d’oeuvres into her mouth. I’ve been watching her and she’s eaten about half of them while the other women are eating like birds. “Especially when Andrew and I have another baby.”

The other women let out gasps of excitement. “Nina, are you pregnant?” Suzanne cries.

“I knew you were eating like five times as much as the rest of us for a reason!” Jillianne says triumphantly.

Nina shoots her a look—I have to stifle a laugh. “I’m not pregnant yet. But Andy and I are seeing this fertility specialist who is supposed to be amazing. Trust me, I’ll have a baby by the end of the year.”

“That is so great.” Patrice puts a hand on Nina’s shoulder. “I know you guys have been wanting a baby for a long time. And Andrew is such a great dad.”

Nina nods, and for a moment, her eyes look a bit moist. She clears her throat. “Excuse me for a moment, ladies. I’ll be right back.”

Nina dashes into the house, and I’m not sure if I’m supposed to follow her. She’s probably going to the bathroom or something. Of course, maybe now that’s one of my responsibilities—following Nina into the bathroom so that I can pat her hands dry for her or flush the toilet or God only knows what.

As soon as Nina is gone, the other women burst into quiet laughter. “Oh my God!” Jillianne snickers. “That was so awkward! I can’t believe I said that to her. I really thought she was pregnant! I mean, doesn’t she look pregnant?”

“She is getting like a house,” Patrice agrees. “She seriously needs to

hire a nutritionist and a personal trainer. And did anyone else notice her roots showing?”

The other women nod in agreement. Even though I’m not participating in this conversation, I also noticed Nina’s roots. On the day I interviewed with her, her hair looked so immaculate. Now she’s got a good centimeter of darker roots showing. I’m surprised she let it get that bad.

“Like, I would be embarrassed to walk around like that,” Patrice says.

“How does she expect to keep that hottie husband of hers?”

Chapter 17

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SEVENTEEN

Today Andrew and Nina have an appointment with that fertility specialist.

They’ve both been nervous and excited about the appointment all week.

I heard snatches of their conversation during dinner. Apparently, Nina got a bunch of fertility tests and they’re going to be discussing the results today.

Nina thinks they’re going to be doing IVF, which is expensive, but they’ve got money to burn.

As much as Nina gets on my nerves sometimes, it’s sweet how the two of them are planning for the new baby. Yesterday, they were talking about how they were going to turn the guestroom into a nursery. I’m not sure who is more excited—Nina or Andrew. For their sakes, I hope they get pregnant soon.

While they’re at the appointment, I’m supposed to be watching Cecelia.

Watching a nine-year-old girl shouldn’t be difficult. But Cecelia seems determined to make it so. After a friend’s mother dropped her off after God knows what lesson she had today (karate, ballet, piano, soccer, gymnastics—I’ve completely lost track), she kicks one of her shoes off in one direction, the second in another, and then throws her backpack in yet a third direction. Luckily, it’s too warm for a coat, or else she would have to find a fourth place to abandon her coat.

“Cecelia,” I say patiently. “Can you please put your shoes in the shoe rack?”

“Later,” she says absently, as she plops down on the sofa, smoothing out the fabric of her pale yellow dress. She grabs the remote and flicks on the television to an obnoxiously loud cartoon. An orange and a pear appear to be arguing on the screen. “I’m hungry.”

I take a deep, calming breath. “What would you like to eat?”

I assume she’s going to come up with something ridiculous that I need to make her, just to get me to sweat. So I’m surprised when she says, “How about a bologna sandwich?”

I’m so relieved by the fact that we have all the makings of a bologna sandwich in the house that I don’t even insist that she say please. If Nina wants her daughter to be a brat, that’s her prerogative. It’s not my job to

discipline her.

I head to the kitchen and grab some bread and a pack of beef bologna from the overflowing fridge. I don't know whether Cecelia likes mayonnaise on her sandwich, and furthermore, I'm sure I'll put too much or too little on it. So I decide to just give her the bottle of mayonnaise and she can portion it out herself to the exact perfect amount. Ha, I've outsmarted you, Cecelia!

I return to the living room and place the sandwich and mayonnaise on the coffee table for Cecelia. She looks down at the sandwich, crinkling her brow. She picks it up tentatively and then her face fills with disgust.

"Ew!" she cries. "I don't want that."

I swear to God, I'm going to strangle this girl with my bare hands. "You said you wanted a bologna sandwich. I made you a bologna sandwich."

"I didn't say I wanted a bologna sandwich," she whines. "I said I wanted an abalone sandwich!"

I stare at her, open-mouthed. "An abalone sandwich? What is that?"

Cecelia grunts in frustration and throws the sandwich on the ground.

The bread and meat separate, landing in three separate piles on the carpet.

The only positive is that I didn't use any mayonnaise, so at least I don't have to clean up mayonnaise.

Okay, I've had enough of this girl. Maybe it's not my place, but she's old enough to know not to throw food on the floor. And especially if there's going to be a baby in the house sometime soon, she needs to learn to act like a child her age.

"Cecelia," I say through my teeth.

She lifts her slightly pointed chin. "What?"

I'm not sure what would've happened between me and Cecelia, but our showdown gets interrupted by the front door unlocking. That must be Andrew and Nina, back from their appointment. I turn away from Cecelia and plaster a smile on my face. I'm sure Nina will be bursting with excitement over this visit.

Except when they come into the living room, neither of them are smiling.

That's an understatement. Nina's blond hair is in disarray and her white blouse is wrinkled. Her eyes are bloodshot and puffy. Andrew doesn't look so great either. His tie is half undone, like he started to pull it off and then got distracted during the process. And actually, his eyes look bloodshot, too. I squeeze my hands together. "Everything okay?"

I should have just kept my mouth shut. That would have been the smart thing to do. Because now Nina directs her gaze at me and her pale skin turns bright red. "For God's sake, Millie," she snaps at me. "Why do you have to be so nosy? This is none of your goddamn business."

I swallow. "I'm so sorry, Nina."

Her eyes drift down to the mess on the floor. Cecelia's shoes. The bread and baloney near the coffee table. And sometime in the last minute, Cecelia has scurried out of the living room and is nowhere to be seen. Nina's face contorts. "Is this really what I have to come home to? This mess? What am I paying you for anyway? Maybe you should start looking for another job."

My throat constricts. "I... I was going to clean that up..."

"Don't do any work on my account." She shoots Andrew a withering look. "I'm going to go lie down. I have a pounding headache."

Nina stomps up the staircase, her heels like bullets on each step, punctuated by the door to their bedroom slamming shut. Obviously,

something did not go well at that appointment. There's no point in trying to talk to her right now.

Andrew sinks onto the leather sofa and drops his head back. "Well, that sucked."

I bite down on my lip and sit beside him, even though I sense I probably shouldn't. "Are you okay?"

He rubs his eyes with his fingertips. "Not really."

"Do... do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. He lets out a sigh.

"It's not going to happen for us. Nina is not going to get pregnant."

My first reaction is surprise. Not that I know much about it, but I can't quite believe that Nina and Andrew aren't able to pay their way out of this

Chapter 18

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EIGHTEEN

That night, I wake up to the sound of shouting.

The attic is incredibly well insulated, so I can't hear anything being said. But there are loud voices coming from below my room. A male voice and a female voice. Andrew and Nina.

Then I hear a crash.

Instinctively, I roll out of bed. Maybe it's none of my business, but something is going on down there. I have to at least make sure everything is okay.

I put my hand on the doorknob to my room, and it doesn't turn. Most of the time, I'm used to the fact that the door sticks. But every once in a while, I get a jab of panic. But then the knob shifts under my hand. And I'm out.

I descend the creaky steps to the second floor. Now that I'm out of the attic, the shouting is much louder. It's coming from the master bedroom.

Nina's voice, yelling at Andrew. She sounds almost hysterical.

"It's not fair!" she cries. "I did everything I could and—"

"Nina," he says. "It's not your fault."

"It is my fault! If you were with a younger woman, you could have a baby like you want! It's my fault!"

"Nina..."

"You'd be better off without me!"

"Come on, don't say that..."

"It's true!" But she doesn't sound sad. She sounds angry. "You wish I were gone!"

"Nina, stop it!"

There's another loud crash from inside the room. Followed by a third crash. I take a step back, torn between knocking on the door to make sure everything is okay and wanting to scurry back to my room and hide. I stand there several seconds, paralyzed by my indecision. Then the door is yanked

open.

Nina is standing there in the same lily-white nightgown she was wearing the night she caught me and Andrew in the living room. But now I notice a streak of crimson on the pale material, starting at the side of her hip and running down the length of the skirt.

“Millie.” Her eyes bore into me. “What are you doing here?”

I look down at her hands and see the same crimson is all over her right palm. “I...”

“Are you spying on us?” She arches an eyebrow. “Are you listening to our conversation?”

“No!” I take a step back. “I just heard a crash and I was worried that... I wanted to make sure everything is okay.”

She notices my gaze directed at what I’m almost sure is a blood stain on her gown. She looks almost amused by it. “I just cut my hand a bit. Nothing to worry about. I don’t need your help.”

But what was going on in there? Is that really why there’s blood all over her nightgown? And where is Andrew?

What if she killed him? What if he’s lying dead in the middle of the bedroom? Or worse, what if he’s bleeding to death right now, and I have a chance to save him? I can’t just walk away. I may have done some bad things in my life, but I’m not going to let Nina get away with murder.

“Where’s Andrew?” I say.

Pink circles form on her cheeks. “Excuse me?”

“I just...” I shift between my bare feet. “I heard a crash. Is he okay?”

Nina stares at me. “How dare you! What are you accusing me of?”

It occurs to me that Andrew is a big, strong man. If Nina made short work of him, what chance would I stand against her? But I can’t move. I have to make sure he’s okay.

“Go back to your room,” she orders me.

I swallow a lump in my throat. “No.”

“Go back to your room or else you’re fired.”

She means it. I can see it in her eyes. But I can’t move. I start to protest again, but then I hear something. Something that makes my shoulders sag

Chapter 19

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NINETEEN

The next morning, Nina has morphed back into the more pleasant version of herself, having seemingly forgotten last night. I would think it was all a terrifying dream except for the bandage wrapped around her right hand. The white gauze is dotted with crimson.

Although she’s not being directly weird with me, Nina is more frazzled than usual this morning. When she goes to drive Cecelia to school, her tires screech against the pavement. When she returns, she just stands in the

middle of the living room for a moment, staring at the walls, until I finally come out of the kitchen and ask if she's all right.

"I'm fine." She tugs at the collar of her white blouse, which is wrinkled even though I am certain I ironed it. "Would you be so kind as to make me some breakfast, Millie? The usual?"

"Of course," I say.

"The usual" for Nina is three eggs, scrambled in a lot of butter and Parmesan cheese, four slices of bacon, and an English muffin, also buttered. I can't help but think of the comments the other PTA woman made about Nina's weight while she was in the other room, although I respect that she doesn't scrutinize every calorie that goes in her mouth the way they do. Nina isn't gluten-free or vegan. As far as I can tell, she eats whatever she wants and then some. She even has late-night snacks, as evidenced by the dirty plates she leaves behind on the counter for me to wash in the morning. Not one of those plates has ever made it into the dishwasher.

I serve the plate of food to her at the dining table with a glass of orange juice on the side. She scrutinizes the food, and I'm worried I've got the version of Nina that's going to tell me that everything on this plate is cooked poorly, or else claim that she flat out never asked me for breakfast in the first place. But instead, she smiles sweetly at me. "Thank you, Millie."

"You're welcome." I hesitate, hovering over her. "By the way, Andrew asked me if I would get you two tickets to Showdown on Broadway." Her eyes light up. "He's so thoughtful. Yes, that would be lovely."

"What are some days that work for you?"

She scoops some eggs into her mouth and chews thoughtfully. "I'm free a week from Sunday, if you can swing it."

"Sure. And I can watch Cecelia, of course."

She scoops more eggs into her mouth. Some of it misses her lips and falls onto her white blouse. She doesn't seem to even notice it's there and continues shoveling food into her mouth.

"Thank you again, Millie." She winks at me. "I really don't know what we would do without you."

She likes to tell me that. Or that she's going to fire me. One or the other. But I suppose it's not her fault. Nina definitely has emotional problems like her friends said. I can't stop thinking about her alleged stay in a psychiatric hospital. They don't lock you up for nothing. Something bad must've happened, and part of me is dying to know what it is. But it's not like I could ask her. And my attempts to get the story out of Enzo have been fruitless.

Nina has nearly cleaned her entire plate, having devoured the eggs, bacon, and English muffin in less than five minutes, when Andrew jogs downstairs. I had been a little worried about him after last night, even though I heard the water running. Not that it was a likely scenario, but maybe, I don't know, Nina had the faucet on some sort of automatic timer just to make it seem like he was in the bathroom, alive and well. Like I said, it didn't seem likely, but it also didn't seem impossible. In any case, it's a relief to find him intact. My breath catches a bit at the sight of his dark gray suit paired with a light blue dress shirt.

Just before Andrew enters the dining room, Nina pushes her plate of food away. She stands up and smooths out her blond hair, which lacks its usual shine, and the dark roots are even more visible than before.

"Hello, Andy." She offers him a dazzling smile. "How are you this

morning?”

He starts to answer her, but then his eyes dart down to the bit of egg still clinging to her blouse. One side of his lips quirks up. “Nina, you have a little egg on you.”

“Oh!” Her cheeks turn pink as she dabs at the egg on her blouse. But it’s been sitting there several minutes, and a stain still mars the delicate white fabric. “Sorry about that!”

“It’s okay—you still look beautiful.” He grabs her shoulders and pulls her in for a kiss. I watch her melt against him and ignore the twinge of jealousy in my chest. “I’ve got to run to the office, but I’ll see you tonight.” “I’ll walk you out, darling.”

Nina is so freaking lucky. She’s got everything. Yes, she did have a stay at a mental institution, but at least she wasn’t in prison. And here she is, with an incredible house, tons of money, and a husband who is kind, funny, wealthy, considerate, and... well, absolutely gorgeous.

I close my eyes for a moment and think about what it would be like to live in Nina’s shoes. To be the woman in charge of this household. To have the expensive clothing and the shoes and the fancy car. To have a maid I could boss around—force her to cook for me and clean for me and live in a tiny hole in the attic while I had the big bedroom with the king-size bed and zillion-count sheets. And most of all, to have a husband like Andrew. To have him press his lips against mine the way he did to hers. To feel his body heat against my chest...

Oh my God, I must stop thinking about this. Now. In my defense, it’s been a really long time for me. I spent ten years in prison, fantasizing about some perfect guy I would meet when I got out, who would save me from everything. And now...

Well, it could happen. It’s possible.

I climb the stairs and get to work making the beds and cleaning the bedrooms. I’ve just finished up and am returning downstairs when the doorbell rings. I hurry over to answer it, and I’m surprised to see Enzo at the door, clutching a giant cardboard box in his arms.

“Ciao,” I say, remembering the greeting he taught me.

Amusement flickers over his face. “Ciao. This... for you.”

I understand immediately what must’ve happened. Sometimes delivery people don’t realize they can enter through the gate, so they dump heavy packages outside the gate, and I have to heave them into the house. Enzo must have seen the delivery man leave the package, and now he’s kindly carried it in for me.

“Grazie,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows at me. “You want I...”

It takes me a second to realize what he is asking. “Oh... yes, just put it on the dining table.”

I point to the dining table and he carries the package over there. I remember Nina freaked out that time when Enzo came into the house, but she’s not here and that box looks too heavy for me to lift. After he rests it on the table, I glance at the return address: Evelyn Winchester. Probably somebody in Andrew’s family.

“Grazie,” I say again.

Enzo nods. He’s wearing a white T-shirt and jeans—he looks good. He’s always out somewhere in the neighborhood, working up a sweat in the yard, and a lot of the rich women in this neighborhood love to ogle him.

Truthfully, I prefer Andrew’s looks, and of course, there’s the language

barrier. But maybe having a little fun with Enzo would be good for me. It would relieve a little of that pent-up energy, and maybe I would stop having wholly inappropriate fantasies about my boss's husband.

I'm not quite sure how to broach the subject, given he doesn't seem to speak any English. But I'm pretty sure the language of love is universal.

"Water?" I offer him, while I'm trying to figure out exactly how to go about this.

He nods. "Si."

I run to the kitchen and grab a glass from the cabinet. I fill it halfway with water, then I bring it out to him. He takes it gratefully. "Grazie." His biceps bulge as he drinks from the glass. He has a really good body.

I wonder what he's like in bed. Probably fantastic.

I wring my hands together as he drinks from the glass of water. "So, um... are you... busy?"

He lowers the glass and looks at me blankly. "Eh?"

"Um." I clear my throat. "Like, do you have much... work?"

"Work." He nods at a word he understands. Seriously, I don't get it.

He's been working here three years, and he really doesn't understand any English? "Si. Molto occupato."

"Oh."

This isn't going well. Maybe I should just get right to the point.

Chapter 20

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I will provide the chapter now.

TWENTY

God, that was humiliating.

I'm still reeling from the mortification of Enzo rejecting me while I'm waiting for Cecelia to finish her tap-dancing class. My head is throbbing, and the tapping of little feet in unison coming from the dance classroom isn't helping matters at all. I look around the room, wondering if anyone else finds it as annoying as I do. No? Just me?

The woman in the seat next to mine finally gives me a sympathetic look. Based on her naturally smooth skin, with no signs of a facelift or Botox, I'd estimate her to be about my age, which makes me think she's not picking up her own kid, either. She's one of the servants, like me.

"Advil?" she asks. She must have a sixth sense to notice my discomfort.

Either that or my sighs are giving her the message.

I hesitate, then nod. A painkiller won't get rid of the humiliation of the hot Italian landscaper turning me down, but it will ease my headache at least.

She reaches into her big black purse and takes out a bottle of Advil. She raises her eyebrows at me, then I put out my hand and she shakes two little red pills into my palm. I throw them back into my mouth and swallow them dry. I wonder how long it'll take them to kick in.

“I’m Amanda, by the way,” she tells me. “I’m your official tap-dancing waiting-room drug dealer.”

I laugh, despite myself. “Who are you here to pick up?”

She flicks her brown ponytail off her shoulder. “The Bernstein twins. You should see them tap dance in unison. It’s something to behold—speaking of pounding headaches. How about you?”

“Cecelia Winchester.”

Amanda lets out a low whistle. “You work for the Winchesters? Good luck with that.”

I squeeze my knees. “What do you mean?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Nina Winchester. You know. She’s...” She makes the universal “cuckoo” sign with her index finger. “Right?”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, everyone knows.” She shoots me a look. “Also, I get the feeling Nina is the jealous type. And her husband is really hot—don’t you think?”

I avert my eyes. “He’s okay, I guess.”

Amanda starts digging around in her purse as I lick my lips. This is the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. Somebody I can pump for information about Nina.

“So,” I say, “why do people say Nina is crazy?”

She looks up, and for a moment I’m scared she’s going to be offended by my obvious digging. But she just grins. “You know she was locked up in a loony bin, right? Everyone talks about it.”

I wince at her use of the term “loony bin.” I’m sure she has some equally colorful terms for the place where I spent the last decade of my life. But I need to hear this. My heart speeds up, beating in sync with the tapping of little feet in the other room. “I did hear something about that...”

Amanda clucks. “Cecelia was a baby then. Poor thing—if the police had arrived a second later...”

“What?”

She drops her voice a notch, looking around the room. “You know what she did, don’t you?”

I shake my head wordlessly.

“It was horrible...” Amanda sucks in a breath. “She tried to drown Cecelia in the bathtub.”

I clasp a hand over my mouth. “She... what?”

She nods solemnly. “Nina drugged her, threw her in the tub with running water, then took a bunch of pills herself.”

I open my mouth but no words come out. I have been expecting some story like, I don’t know, she got into a fight with some other mother at ballet practice over the best color for tutus and then had a meltdown when they couldn’t agree. Or maybe her favorite manicurist decided to retire and

Chapter 21

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TWENTY-ONE

By dinner time tonight, the cardboard box Enzo brought into the house is still sitting on the dining table. In the interest of setting the table, I try to move it, but it is very heavy—Enzo made it seem lighter than it was by the way he effortlessly carried it into the room. I'm scared if I try to move it, I'll accidentally drop it. Odds are good there's some priceless Ming vase inside, or something equally fragile and expensive.

I study the return address on the box again. Evelyn Winchester—I wonder who that is. The handwriting is big and loopy. I give it a tentative shove and something rattles inside.

"Early Christmas present?"

I look up from the package—Andrew is home. He must have come in from the garage entrance, and he's smiling crookedly at me, his tie loose around his neck. I'm glad he seems to be in better spirits than yesterday. I really thought he was going to lose it after that doctor's appointment. And then that terrible argument last night, where I was half-convinced Nina had murdered him. Of course, now that I know why she was institutionalized, it doesn't seem nearly as far-fetched.

"It's June," I remind him.

He clucks his tongue. "It's never too early for Christmas." He rounds the side of the table to examine the return address on the package. He is only a few inches away from me, and I can smell his aftershave. It smells... nice. Expensive.

Stop it, Millie. Stop smelling your boss.

"It's from my mother," he notes.

I grin up at him. "Your mother still sends you care packages?"

He laughs. "She used to, actually. Especially in the past, when Nina was... sick."

Sick. That's a nice euphemism for what Nina did. I just can't wrap my head around it.

"It's probably something for Cece," he remarks. "My mother loves to spoil her. She always says since Cece only has one grandmother, it's her duty to spoil her."

"What about Nina's parents?"

He pauses, his hands on the box. "Nina's parents are gone. Since she was young. I never met them."

Nina tried to kill herself. Tried to kill her own daughter. And now it turns out she's also left a couple of dead parents in her wake. I just hope the maid isn't next.

No. I need to stop thinking this way. It's more likely Nina's parents died of cancer or heart disease. Whatever was wrong with Nina, they obviously felt she was ready to rejoin society. I should give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Anyway"—Andrew straightens up—"let me get this open."

He dashes into the kitchen and returns a minute later with a box cutter.

He slices open the top and pulls up the flaps. I'm pretty curious at this point. I've been staring at this box all day, wondering what's inside. I'm sure whatever it is, it's something insanely expensive. I raise my eyebrows as Andrew stares into the box, the color draining from his face.

"Andrew?" I frown. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he sinks into one of the chairs and presses

his fingertips into his temples. I hurry over to comfort him, but I can't help but stop to take a look inside the box.

And then I understand why he looks so upset.

The box is filled with baby stuff. Little white baby blankets, rattles, dolls. There's a little pile of tiny white onesies.

Nina had been blabbing to anyone who would listen that they were expecting a baby soon. Surely, she mentioned it to Andrew's mother, who decided to send supplies. Unfortunately, she jumped the gun.

Andrew has a glazed look in his eyes. "Are you okay?" I ask again.

He blinks like he forgot I was in the room with him. He manages a watery smile. "I'm okay. Really. I just... I didn't need to see that."

I slide into the chair next to his. "Maybe that doctor was wrong?"

Chapter 22

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TWENTY-TWO

I spend the next week avoiding Andrew Winchester.

I can't even deny anymore that I have feelings for him. Not just feelings. I have a very serious crush on this man. I think about him all the time. I even dream about him kissing me.

And he might have feelings for me, too, even though he claims he loves Nina. But the key point is I don't want to lose this job. You don't keep jobs by sleeping with your married boss. So I do my best to stuff all my feelings away. Andrew is at work most of the day anyway. It's easy enough to stay out of his way.

Tonight, as I'm putting plates of food out for dinner, preparing to dash off before Andrew comes into the room, Nina wanders into the dining area. She bobs her head in approval at the salmon with a side of wild rice. And of course, chicken nuggets for Cecelia.

"That smells wonderful, Millie," she remarks.

"Thanks." I hover near the kitchen, ready to call it quits for the evening—our usual routine. "Will that be all?"

"Just one thing." She pats her blond hair. "Were you able to book those tickets for Showdown?"

"Yes!" I snatched up the last two orchestra seats for Showdown this Sunday night—I was so proud of myself. They cost a small fortune, but the Winchesters can afford it. "You are in the sixth row from the stage. You could practically touch the actors."

"Wonderful!" Nina claps her hands together. "And you booked the hotel room?"

"At The Plaza."

Since it's a bit of a drive into the city, Nina and Andrew will be staying overnight at The Plaza hotel. Cecelia is going to be staying at a friend's house, and I'll get the whole damn house to myself. I can walk around

naked if I want. (I'm not planning to walk around naked. But it's nice to know I could.)

"It will be so lovely," Nina sighs. "Andy and I really need this."

I bite my tongue. I'm not going to comment on the state of Nina and Andrew's relationship, especially since the door slams at that moment, which means Andrew is home. Suffice to say, ever since that doctor's visit and their subsequent fight, they seem to have been somewhat distant from each other. Not that I'm paying attention, but it's hard not to notice the awkward politeness they have around each other. And Nina herself seems off her game. Like right now, her white blouse is buttoned wrong. She missed a button, and the whole thing is lopsided. I'm itching to tell her, but she'll scream at me if I do, so I keep my mouth shut.

"I hope you have a wonderful time," I say.

"We will!" She beams at me. "I can hardly wait all week!"

I frown. "All week? The show is in three days."

Andrew strides into the kitchen dining room, pulling off his tie. He stops short when he sees me, but he stifles a reaction. And I stifle my own reaction to how handsome he looks in that suit.

"Three days?" Nina repeats. "Millie, I asked you to book the tickets for a week from Sunday! I distinctly remember."

"Yes..." I shake my head. "But you told me that over a week ago. So I booked them for this Sunday."

Nina's cheeks turn pink. "So you admit I told you to book it for a week from Sunday and you still booked for this Sunday?"

"No, what I'm saying is—"

"I can't believe you could be so careless." She folds her arms across her chest. "I can't make the show this Sunday. I have to drive Cecelia to her summer camp in Massachusetts Sunday and I'm spending the night out there."

What? I could've sworn she told me to book it for this coming Sunday, and that Cecelia would be staying at a friend's house. There's no way I got this messed up. "Maybe somebody else could take her? I mean, the tickets are nonrefundable."

Chapter 23

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TWENTY-THREE

On Sunday afternoon, I get two pieces of good news:

First, Andrew managed to refund the tickets and I won't have to work for free.

Second, Cecelia is going to be gone for two whole weeks.

I'm not sure which of these revelations I'm happier about. I'm glad I don't have to shell out money for the tickets. But I'm even happier that I don't have to wait on Cecelia anymore. The apple doesn't fall far from the

tree with that one.

Cecelia has packed enough luggage to last her at least one year. I swear to God, it's like she's put everything she owns in those bags, and then if there was any space left, she filled it with rocks. That's how it feels as I'm carrying the bags out to Nina's Lexus.

"Please be careful with that, Millie." Nina watches me fretfully as I summon superhuman strength to lift the bags into her trunk. My palms are bright red from where I was holding the straps. "Please don't break anything."

What could Cecelia possibly be carrying to camp that's so fragile? Don't they mostly just bring clothing and books and bug spray? But far be it from me to question her. "Sorry."

When I get back in the house to retrieve the last of Cecelia's bags, I catch Andrew jogging down the stairs. He catches me about to lift the monstrous piece of luggage and his eyes widen.

"Hey," he says. "I'll carry that for you. That looks really heavy."

"I'm fine," I insist, only because Nina is coming out of the garage.

"Yes, she's got it, Andy." Nina wags a finger. "You need to be careful about your bad back."

He shoots her a look. "My back is fine. Anyway, I want to say goodbye to Cece."

Nina pulls a face. "Are you sure you won't come with us?"

"I wish I could," he says. "But I can't miss an entire day of work tomorrow. I've got meetings in the afternoon."

She sniffs. "You always put work first."

He grimaces. I don't blame him for being hurt by her comment—as far as I can tell, it's completely untrue. Despite being a successful businessman, Andrew is home every single night for dinner. He does occasionally go to work on the weekends, but he's also attended two dance recitals this month, one piano recital, a fourth-grade graduation ceremony, a karate demonstration, and one night they were gone for hours for some sort of art show at the day school.

"I'm sorry," he says anyway.

She sniffs again and turns her head. Andrew reaches out to touch her arm, but she jerks it away and dashes to the kitchen to get her purse.

Instead, he heaves the last piece of luggage into his arms and goes out to the garage to dump it in the trunk and say goodbye to Cecelia, who is sitting in Nina's snow-colored Lexus, wearing a lacy white dress that is wildly inappropriate for summer camp. Not that I would ever say anything.

Two whole weeks without that little monster. I want to jump with joy.

But instead, I turn my lips down. "It will be sad without Cecelia here this month," I say as Nina comes back out of the kitchen.

"Really?" she says dryly. "I thought you couldn't stand her."

My jaw drops open. I mean, yes, she's right that Cecelia and I have not hit it off. But I didn't realize she knew I felt that way. If she knows that, does she realize I'm not a big fan of Nina herself either?

Nina smooths down her white blouse and goes back out to the garage.

As soon as she leaves the room, it's like all the tension has been sucked out of me. I always feel on edge when Nina is around. It's like she's dissecting everything I do.

Andrew emerges from the garage, wiping his hands on his jeans. I love how he wears a T-shirt and jeans on the weekends. I love the way his hair gets tousled when he's doing physical activity. I love the way he smiles and

winks at me.

I wonder if he feels the same way I do about Nina leaving.

“So,” he says, “now that Nina is gone, I have a confession to make.”

“Oh?”

A confession? I’m madly in love with you. I’m going to leave Nina so we can run off together to Aruba.

Nah, not too likely.

“I couldn’t get a refund on those show tickets.” He hangs his head. “I didn’t want Nina to give you a hard time over it. Or try to charge you, for Christ’s sake. I’m sure she was the one who told you the wrong date.”

I nod slowly. “Yes, she did, but... Well, anyway, thank you. I appreciate it.”

“So... I mean, you should take the tickets. Go to the city tonight and see the show with a friend. And you can stay at The Plaza hotel room overnight.”

I almost gasp. “That’s so generous.”

The right side of his lips quirks up. “Well, we’ve got the tickets. Why should they go to waste? Enjoy it.”

“Yeah...” I toy with the hem of my T-shirt, thinking. I can’t imagine what Nina would say if she found out. And I have to admit, just the thought of going gives me anxiety. “I appreciate the gesture, but I’ll pass on the show.”

“Really? This is supposed to be the best show of the decade! You don’t like going to shows on Broadway?”

He has no idea about my life—what I’ve been doing for the last decade.

“I’ve never even been to a show on Broadway.”

“Then you need to go! I insist!”

“Right, but...” I take a deep breath. “The truth is, I don’t have anyone to go with. And I don’t feel like going alone. So like I said, I’ll pass.”

Andrew stares at me for a moment, rubbing his finger against the slight stubble on his jaw. Finally, he says, “I’ll go with you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

He hesitates. “I know Nina has jealousy issues, but that’s no reason to let these expensive tickets go to waste. And it’s a crime you’ve never seen a show on Broadway before. It’ll be fun.”

Yes, it will be fun. That’s what I’m worried about, damn it.

I imagine my evening unfolding. Driving out to Manhattan in Andrew’s BMW, sitting in the orchestra for one of the hottest shows on Broadway,

Chapter 24

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TWENTY-FOUR

I can’t go to a Broadway show in jeans and a T-shirt—that’s for sure. I checked online, and officially there’s no dress code, but it just feels wrong.

Anyway, Andrew said he was going to change, so I need to wear something nice.

The problem is, I don't own anything nice.

Well, technically I do. I have that bag of clothing Nina gave me. I hung up the outfits so they wouldn't get damaged but I have yet to wear any of them. For the most part, they're all fancy dresses, and it's not like I've had many occasions to dress up while cleaning the Winchester house. I don't really want to put on a ballgown to do my vacuuming.

But tonight is an occasion to dress up for. Maybe the only such occasion I'll have for a long time.

The biggest problem is that all of the dresses are so blindingly white.

Obviously, it's Nina's favorite color. White is not my favorite color. I don't even think I have a favorite color (anything but orange). But I never liked wearing white because it gets dirty so easily. I'll have to be especially careful tonight. And I won't be wearing all white, because I don't have any white shoes. All I've got are some black pumps, so that's what I'm wearing. I look through the dresses, trying to figure out which one would be most appropriate for tonight. They're all beautiful, and also extremely sexy. I select a form-fitting cocktail dress that falls just above my knees with a lace halter neckline. I had assumed since Nina is quite a bit heavier than I am, it would be loose on me. But she must have purchased it many years ago—it fits me so perfectly, I couldn't have found something better if I'd bought it specifically for myself.

I take it easy with the makeup. Just a few dabs of lipstick, a tiny bit of eyeliner, and that's it. Whatever else happens tonight, I'm going to behave myself. The last thing I want is any trouble.

And I have no doubt that if Nina suspects a whiff of anything between me and her husband, she'll make it her mission to destroy me.

Andrew is already in the living room when I descend the stairs. He's wearing a gray suit jacket and a matching tie, and he's taken the time to shower and shave off that stubble on his chin. He looks... God, he looks incredible. Devastatingly handsome. So handsome, I want to grab him by the lapels. But the most amazing thing is the way his eyes fly open when he catches sight of me, and he inhales audibly.

And then for a few moments, the two of us are just staring at each other.

"Jesus, Millie." His hand is shaking a bit as he adjusts his tie. "You look..."

He doesn't complete his thought, which is probably a good thing.

Because he's not looking at me in a way you're supposed to be looking at a woman who is not your wife.

I open my mouth, wondering if I should ask him if this is a bad idea. If maybe we should call off the whole thing. But I can't quite make myself say that.

Andrew manages to rip his eyes away from me and looks down at his watch. "We better get going. Parking can be a pain around Broadway."

"Yes, of course. Let's go."

There's no turning back now.

I feel almost like a celebrity when I'm sliding into the cool leather seat of Andrew's BMW. This car is nothing like my Nissan. Andrew climbs into the driver seat and that's when I notice my skirt is riding up my thighs.

When I put on the dress, it came nearly down to my knees, but sitting down, it's somehow mid-thigh. I tug at it but the second I let go, it rides back up.

Fortunately, Andrew's eyes are on the road as we exit the gate

surrounding the property. He is a good, faithful husband. Just because he looked like he was nearly going to pass out when he saw me in this dress, that doesn't mean he's not going to be able to control himself.

"I'm so excited about this," I comment as he makes his way to the Long Island Expressway. "I can't believe I'm going to see Showdown."
He nods. "I've heard it's incredible."

Chapter 25

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TWENTY-FIVE

It's a beautiful June evening. I brought a wrap with me, but it's so warm out, I end up leaving it in Andrew's car, so I've got nothing besides my white dress and my purse that doesn't match as we wait in line to be allowed into the theater.

I gasp when I see the inside of the theater. I don't think I've ever seen anything like this in my lifetime. The orchestra alone contains rows and rows of seats, but then when I lift my head, there are two sets of seats stretching up all the way to the ceiling above. And up in the front is a red curtain that is lit from below with tantalizing yellow light.

When I finally tear my eyes away from the sight in front of me, I noticed Andrew has an amused look on his face. "What?" I say.

"It's just cute," he says. "The look on your face. I'm so used to it, but I love seeing it through your eyes."

"It's just so big," I say self-consciously.

An usher comes to hand us playbills and lead us to our seats. And then comes the really amazing part—he keeps leading us closer and closer and closer. And when we finally get to our seats, I can't believe how close we are to the stage. If I wanted, I could grab the actors by their ankles. Not that I would because that would definitely violate my parole, but it might be possible.

As I sit next to Andrew in one of the best seats of the hottest show in town in this amazing theater, I don't feel like a girl who just got out of prison, who doesn't have a penny to her name, who is working a job she hates. I feel special. Like maybe I deserve to be here.

I gaze at Andrew's profile. This is all because of him. He could have been a jerk about the whole thing and charged me for the tickets, or gone with a friend of his. He would have had every right to do so. But he didn't. He took me here tonight. And I'll never forget it.

"Thank you," I blurt out.

He rotates his head to look at me. His lips curl. He's so handsome when he smiles. "My pleasure."

Over the music playing and the commotion of people finding their seats, I just barely hear a buzzing sound coming from my purse. It's my phone. I take it out and discover a message from Nina on the screen:

Don't forget to put out the trash.

I grit my teeth. If anything can bring your fantasies of being more than a maid to a screeching halt, it's a message from your employer telling you to lug the garbage to the curb. Nina always reminds me about trash day, every single week, even though I've never once forgotten. But the absolute worst part is that when I see her text, I realize that I have forgotten to take the garbage to the curb. I usually do it after dinner, and the change in the schedule threw me off.

It's fine though. I just have to remember to do it tonight when we get back. After Andrew's BMW turns back into a pumpkin.

"You okay?"

Andrew's eyebrows are knitted together as he watches me read the text. My warm feelings for him evaporate slightly. Andrew isn't a guy I'm dating who is spoiling me with a Broadway show. He's my employer. He's married. He only brought me here because he feels sorry for me for being so uncultured.

And I can't let myself forget it.

The show is absolutely amazing.

I am literally at the edge of my seat in the sixth row, my mouth hanging open. I can tell why this show is one of the most popular on Broadway. The musical numbers are so catchy, the dance numbers are so elaborate, and the actor playing the lead is dreamy.

Although I can't help but think he's not quite as handsome as Andrew.

After three standing ovations, the show is finally over and the audience starts to filter toward the exits. Andrew leisurely rises from his seat and stretches out a kink in his back. "So how about some dinner?"

I slide the playbill into my purse. It's risky to save it, but I'm desperate to hold onto the memory of this magical experience. "Sounds good. Do you have a place in mind?"

"There's an amazing French restaurant a couple of blocks away. Do you like French food?"

"I've never had French food before," I admit. "Although I like the fries."

He laughs. "I think you'll enjoy it. My treat, of course. What do you say?"

I say that Nina wouldn't enjoy finding out that her husband took me to a Broadway show and then treated me to an expensive French dinner. But what the hell. We're already here, and it's not like the meal would make her more mad than the show alone. May as well go for broke. "Sounds good."

In my old life, before I worked for the Winchesters, I never could have gone into a French restaurant like the one where Andrew takes me. There's a menu posted on the door, and I only glance at a few of the prices, but any appetizer would wipe me out for several weeks. But standing next to Andrew, wearing Nina's white dress, I fit in here. Nobody is going to ask me to leave, anyway.

I'm sure as we walk into the restaurant, everybody thinks we're a couple. I saw our reflection in the glass outside the restaurant, and we look good together. If I'm honest, we look better as a couple than he and Nina do. Nobody notices that he has a wedding band and I don't. What they might notice is the way he gently places a hand on the small of my back to lead me to our table, then pulls out a chair for me.

"You're such a gentleman," I remark.

He chuckles. "Thank my mother. That's the way I was raised."

“Well, she raised you right.”

He beams at me. “She’d be very glad to hear that.”

Of course, it makes me think about Cecelia. That spoiled little brat who seemed to get off on ordering me around. Then again, Cecelia has been through a lot. Her mother tried to murder her, after all.

When the waiter comes to take our drink orders, Andrew orders a glass of red wine, so I do the same. I don’t even look at the prices. It’s just going to make me sick, and he already said he’s paying.

“I have no idea what to order.” None of the names of dishes sound familiar; the whole menu is in French. “Do you understand this menu?”

“Oui,” Andrew says.

I raise my eyebrows. “Do you speak French?”

“Oui, mademoiselle.” He winks at me. “I’m fluent, actually. I spent my junior year of college studying in Paris.”

“Wow.” Not only did I not spend any time studying French in college, I never went to college at all. My high school diploma is a GED.

“Do you want me to read the menu to you in English?”

My cheeks grow warm. “You don’t have to do that. Just pick out some things you think I’d like.”

He looks pleased by that answer. “Okay, I can do that.”

The waiter arrives with a bottle of wine and two glasses. I watch as he uncorks the bottle and pours us both heaping glasses. Andrew gestures for him to leave the bottle. I grab my glass and take a long sip.

Oh God, that’s really good. So much better than what I get for five bucks at the local liquor store.

“How about you?” he says. “Do you speak any other languages?”

I shake my head. “I’m lucky I speak English.”

Andrew doesn’t smile at my joke. “You shouldn’t put yourself down, Millie. You’ve been working for us for months, and you have a great work ethic and you’re obviously smart. I don’t even know why you would want this job, although we’re lucky to have you. Don’t you have any other career aspirations?”

I play with my napkin, avoiding his eyes. He doesn’t know anything about me. If he did, he would understand. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He hesitates for a moment, then he nods, respecting my request. “Well, either way, I’m glad you came out tonight.”

I lift my eyes and his brown ones are staring at me across the table. “Me too.”

He looks like he’s about to say something more, but then his phone starts ringing. He pulls it out of his pocket and looks at the screen while I take another sip of wine. It’s so good, I want to guzzle it. But that wouldn’t be a good idea.

“It’s Nina.” Maybe it’s my imagination, but he has a pained expression on his face. “I better take this.”

I can’t hear what Nina is saying, but her shaky voice is audible across the table. She sounds upset. He holds the phone about a centimeter from his ear, wincing with each word.

“Nina,” he says. “Look, it’s... yeah, I won’t... Nina, just relax.” He purses his lips. “I can’t talk to you about this right now. I’ll see you when you get home tomorrow, okay?”

Andrew jabs at a button on his phone to end the call, then he slams the phone on the table next to him. Finally, he picks up his wine glass and drains about half the contents.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He presses his fingertips into his temples. “I just... I love Nina, but sometimes I can't figure out how my marriage got this way. Where ninety percent of our interactions are her yelling at me.”

I don't know what to say to that. “I... I'm sorry. If it makes you feel better, that describes ninety percent of my interactions with her also.”

His lips twitch. “Well, we've got that in common.”

“So... she used to be different?”

“Completely different.” He grabs his wine and drains the rest of it.

“When we met, she was a single mom working two jobs. I admired her so much. She had a hard life, and her strength was what drew me to her. And now... She doesn't do anything except complain. She doesn't have any interest in working. She spoils Cecelia. And the worst part is...”

“What?”

He picks up the bottle of wine and fills up his glass again. He runs his finger along the rim. “Nothing. Never mind. I shouldn't...” He looks around the restaurant. “Where is our waiter?”

I'm dying to know what Andrew was about to confess to me. But then our waiter rushes over, eager for the giant tip he will almost certainly get from this meal, and it looks like the moment has passed.

Andrew orders for the both of us, as he said he would. I don't even ask him what he has ordered, because I want it to be a surprise and I'm sure it will be incredible. I'm also impressed with his French accent. I've always wished I could speak another language. It's probably too late for me though.

“I hope you like what I ordered,” he says, almost shyly.

Chapter 26

Chapter Twenty-Six recounts a pivotal evening where the protagonist and Andrew share an enjoyable dinner, intentionally steering clear of discussing Nina and allowing the conversation to flow with ease, enhanced by the consumption of wine. The narrative captures a moment where both characters, thoroughly inebriated, are faced with the decision of how to safely end their night given Andrew's inability to drive back to Long Island due to intoxication. Acknowledging the risk, Andrew suggests utilizing their reservation at The Plaza, a proposal fraught with tension and unspoken possibilities due to their drunken state, his wife's absence, and the underlying sexual tension.

Despite the protagonist's initial reluctance, citing the situation as a "huge mistake," and her admission of mistrust primarily in herself, Andrew assures her of his gentlemanly intentions by proposing they get separate rooms at The Plaza to avoid any indiscretion. His offer momentarily eases the situation, overshadowed by the practical concern of their inability to safely return to the island and Andrew's casual dismissal of the expense, leveraging his business relations to secure a 'deal'.

The ensuing taxi ride to the hotel becomes a charged scene as Andrew's attention to the protagonist's attire evokes a playful yet tense interaction, revealing his attraction to her under the guise of inebriated frankness. This moment of vulnerability between them is further intensified when Andrew openly admires her beauty, a compliment that stirs an emotional response from both parties. The chapter deftly captures the complex interplay of desire, loyalty, and the ramifications of decisions made under the influence of alcohol, leaving their relationship at a precarious crossroads. Amidst this, the protagonist is caught between her attraction to Andrew and the moral implications of their potential actions, highlighting the ongoing struggle with personal desires versus professional and ethical boundaries.

Chapter 28

During the drive back to the Island, Andrew and the narrator hardly speak, with Andrew preoccupied by thoughts of a forthcoming meeting in the city and a need to change his attire. The journey is equally important for him to refresh before his business engagement. Upon nearing their destination, a minor domestic concern emerges—the narrator realizes she forgot to put out the garbage as instructed by Nina, fearing the repercussions of this oversight on their neatly maintained routine. Andrew, attempting to remedy the situation, assures her he will handle it despite the practical difficulties involved in disposing of the trash personally due to their missed garbage collection.

Upon their arrival, they encounter Enzo, the landscaper, whose presence and the unusual timing of their return evoke a sense of disapproval and tension. Andrew seeks Enzo's assistance in dealing with the garbage issue, initially meeting resistance. Through a somewhat contentious negotiation that underscores both a language barrier and an apparent reluctance on Enzo's part, Andrew manages to convince Enzo to undertake the task for a sum of money—elevating the payment offer until Enzo agrees. This exchange not only highlights Andrew's determination to resolve the trash dilemma but also emphasizes Enzo's initial reticence and the complexities of their interpersonal dynamics.

The interaction with Enzo also sheds light on underlying tensions and perceptions within the household dynamics—Andrew's expressed dissatisfaction with Enzo's work ethic and presence around their home suggests a deeper layer of mistrust or discomfort, possibly amplified by the landscaper's extensive involvement in their private space. Moreover, Enzo's reluctance and eventual acceptance of the task, coupled with his previous interactions with the narrator, hint at a nuanced relationship between the employees and the household, possibly influenced by Nina's preferences or directives.

In essence, this chapter conveys a snapshot of domestic life entwined with internal and external relational complexities, set against a backdrop of everyday concerns and the subtle intricacies of communication and negotiation within interpersonal relationships.

Chapter 29

Nina returns home from delivering Cecelia to camp in the early afternoon, burdened with four sizable shopping bags from an unscheduled spree, which she carelessly sets down in the living room. She excitedly shares her find with Millie, though her appearance is less than pristine, with sweat marks and unkempt hair, leaving Millie perplexed about Andrew's affection for her. Tasked by Nina to carry the heavy bags upstairs, Millie feels belittled, especially when Nina comments on her physical condition, implying she's become soft.

On her way up, Nina confronts Millie about not answering the house phone the previous night, a supposed responsibility of Millie's. Caught off guard, Millie fabricates an excuse, unaware if Andrew had left the house late. Nina's suspicion grows, unaware of Millie's intimate moment with Andrew, their shared outing replacing what should have been Nina's experience. Millie worries about Nina's potential reaction if she discovered their secret tryst.

After carrying the bags to the master bedroom, Millie's attention is drawn to the meticulously cleaned master bathroom, reflecting on a grim memory. She imagines a young Cecelia in the bathtub, with Nina forcibly submerging her, a chilling scene suggesting a dark history between Nina and her daughter. Millie stands in the large bathroom, contemplating the unsettling event from the past, burdened by the secrets and tensions within the household.

Chapter 30

In the thirtieth chapter, the absence of Cecelia casts a notable silence over the Winchester household, contrasting with Nina's unexpected cheerfulness. The protagonist, Millie, is navigating a tense avoidance with Andrew following an undisclosed event that has strained their interaction. While preparing dinner, an accidental collision with Andrew, marked by the breaking of a glass, triggers a moment of intimate tension quickly interrupted by Nina's entrance.

The incident not only highlights the existing chemistry between Millie and Andrew but also underlines the stark differences in their social positions within the household. Nina's later revelation of Millie's past imprisonment during dinner, framed as a casual inquiry, serves both to assert her dominance and to publicly mark Millie's social standing, effectively undermining any connection between Millie and Andrew in the process.

Nina's deliberate mention of Millie's incarceration not only reveals her knowledge of Millie's past but also her intent to maintain control and reinforce Millie's marginal status. This confrontation leads Millie to a moment of introspection, questioning the length of Nina's awareness of her past and the motive behind her own employment. The discovery of a playbill from a show she attended with Andrew, which she had kept as a personal memento, now placed on her nightstand, hints at a breach of privacy and suggests Nina's manipulative surveillance to leverage information against her.

The chapter delves into themes of power dynamics, the lingering impact of past mistakes on present identity, and the complexity of human emotions in a structured social setting. Millie's internal conflict, coupled with her recognition of the hurdles her history poses to any future aspirations, particularly with Andrew, underscores a narrative of resilience against judgment and manipulation.

Chapter 31

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I will provide the chapter now.

THIRTY-ONE

As part of my new daily regimen of torture, Nina has made it her goal to make shopping as challenging for me as she possibly can.

She has written out a list of items we need from the grocery store. But they are all very specific. She doesn't want milk. She wants organic milk from Queensland Farm. And if they don't have the exact item she wants, I have to text her to let her know and send her pictures of other possible replacements. And she takes her sweet time texting me back, but I have to stand there in the goddamn milk aisle waiting.

Right now, I'm in the bread aisle. I send Nina a text:

They are out of Nantucket sourdough bread. Here are some possible replacements.

I send her photographs of every single kind of sourdough bread they have in stock. And now I have to wait while she looks at them. After several minutes, I receive a text back from her:

Do they have any brioche?

Now I have to send her pictures of every brioche bread they have. I swear, I'm going to blow my brains out before I finish this shopping trip.

She's deliberately tormenting me. But to be fair, I did sleep with her husband.

As I'm snapping photographs of the bread, I notice a heavysset man with gray hair watching me from the other end of the aisle. He's not even being subtle about it. I shoot him a look, and he backs off, thank God. I can't deal with a stalker on top of everything else.

As I wait for Nina to contemplate the bread a little further, I let my mind wander. As usual, it wanders to Andrew Winchester. After Nina's revelation that I had been in prison, Andrew never found me to "talk," like he said he would. He has been effectively scared off. I can't blame him.

I like Andrew. No, I don't just like him. I'm in love with him. I think about him all the time, and it's painful to share a home with him and not be able to act on my feelings for him. Moreover, he deserves better than Nina. I could make him happy. I could even give him a baby like he wants. And let's face it, anything is better than her.

But even though he knows we have a connection, nothing will ever happen. He knows I went to prison. He doesn't want an ex-convict. And he's going to keep on being miserable with that witch, probably for the rest of his life.

My phone buzzes again.

Any French bread?

It takes another ten minutes, but I manage to find a loaf of bread that meets Nina's expectations. As I roll my shopping cart to the checkout, I notice that heavysset guy again. He definitely is staring at me. And more unsettlingly, he doesn't have a shopping cart. So what exactly is he doing? I check out as quickly as I possibly can. I load the paper bags filled with groceries back into my shopping cart, so I can push it out into the parking lot to my Nissan. It's only as I'm getting close to the exit that a hand closes around my shoulder. I lift my head and that heavysset man is standing over me.

"Excuse me!" I try to jerk away, but he holds tight to my arm. My right hand balls into a fist. At least a bunch of people are watching us, so I have witnesses. "What do you think you're doing?"

He points to a small ID badge hanging from the collar of his blue dress shirt, which I hadn't noticed before. "I'm supermarket security. Can you come with me, Miss?"

I'm going to be sick. It's bad enough I spent almost ninety minutes in this place, shopping for a handful of items, but now I'm being arrested? For what?

"What's wrong?" I gulp.

We have attracted a crowd. I notice a couple of women from the school pick-up, who I'm sure will gleefully report back to Nina that they saw her housekeeper being apprehended by supermarket security.

"Please come with me," the guy says again.

I push my cart with us because I'm scared to leave it behind. There are over two hundred dollars' worth of groceries in there, and I'm sure Nina would make me pay for all of them if they were lost or stolen. I follow the man into a small office with a scratched-up wooden desk and two plastic chairs set up in front of it. The man gestures for me to sit down, so I settle down in one of the chairs, which creaks threateningly under my weight.

"This has got to be a mistake..." I look at the man's ID badge. His name is Paul Dorsey. "What's this about, Mr. Dorsey?"

He frowns at me as his jowls hang down. "A customer alerted me that

you were stealing items from the supermarket.”

I let out a gasp. “I would never do that!”

“Maybe not.” He sticks his thumb into the loop of his belt. “But I have to investigate. Can I see your receipt, please, Miss...?”

“Calloway.” I dig around in my purse until I come up with the crumpled strip of paper. “Here.”

“Just a warning,” he says. “We prosecute all shoplifters.”

I sit in a plastic chair, my cheeks burning, while the security guard painstakingly looks through all my purchases and matches them up with what’s in the cart. My stomach churns as I consider the horrible possibility that maybe the clerk didn’t ring something up properly, and he’ll think I stole it. And then what? They prosecute all shoplifters. That means that they’ll call the police. And that would be a violation of my parole for sure. It hits me that this would work out pretty well for Nina. She would get rid of me without having to be the mean person who fired me. She would also get some pretty sweet revenge on me for having slept with her husband. Of course, it’s a little harsh to be sent to jail for adultery, but I get the feeling Nina may look at it differently.

But that can’t happen. I didn’t steal anything from the grocery store.

He’s not going to find anything in that cart that isn’t on my receipt.

Chapter 32

In Chapter Thirty-Two, the narrator, Millie, grapples with insomnia and emotional turmoil three days following a close encounter with the law at a grocery store. Her uneasy cohabitation with Nina, who holds significant control over the household, is further complicated by Millie's deepening feelings for Andrew. Despite a shared intimate moment and mutual attraction, Andrew's recent discovery of Millie's criminal past casts a shadow over their budding relationship.

The narrative unfolds in Millie's stifling bedroom, pushing her to seek relief in the kitchen, where she stumbles upon Andrew alone on the back porch. The encounter leads to a heartfelt conversation where Millie attempts to bridge the gap their secrets have created. Andrew, drinking and detached, initially shuts down her explanations and apologies, signifying his struggle with Millie's revelation. Despite his cold demeanor, a moment of vulnerability surfaces as they both acknowledge the genuine happiness they felt during their time together. This shared admission culminates in a kiss, charged with tension and regret, suggesting a possible yet complicated future for their relationship.

However, the chapter closes on a suspenseful note as Millie encounters Nina standing ominously in the hallway, possibly having witnessed the intimate moment between Millie and Andrew. Nina's presence and the eerie description of her in the dark hint at underlying conflicts and power dynamics within the household. The narrator's final thoughts reveal her conflicted desires and the complex web of relationships and secrets that frame her current predicament.

The chapter, laced with the themes of forbidden love, guilt, and the struggle for autonomy within oppressive circumstances, sets the stage for escalating tensions and decisions that could alter the lives of everyone involved.

Chapter 33

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THIRTY-THREE

I have Sunday off, so I spend the day out of the house. It's a beautiful summer day—not too hot and not too cool—so I drive over to the local park and sit on a bench and read my book. When you're in prison, you forget those simple pleasures. Just going outside and reading at the park. Sometimes you want it so bad, it's physically painful.

I'm never going back there. Never.

I grab a bite to eat at a fast-food drive-through, then I drive back to the house. The Winchester estate is really beautiful. Even though I'm starting to despise Nina, I can't hate that house. It's a beautiful house.

I park on the street like always and walk up to the front door of the house. The sky has been darkening during my entire drive home, and just as I get to the door, the clouds break open and droplets of rain cascade out of the sky. I wrench the door open and slip inside before I get drenched.

When I get into the living room, Nina is sitting on the sofa in semi-darkness. She's not doing anything there. She's not reading, she's not watching TV. She's just sitting there. And when I open the door, her eyes snap to attention.

"Nina?" I say. "Everything okay?"

"Not really." She glances over at the other end of the sofa, and now I notice she's got a stack of clothing next to her. It's the same clothing that she insisted I take from her when I first started working here. "What is my clothing doing in your room?"

I stare at her as a flash of lightning brightens the room. "What? What are you talking about? You gave me those clothes."

"I gave them to you!" She lets out a barking laugh that echoes through the room, only partially drowned out by the crack of thunder. "Why would I give my maid clothing worth thousands of dollars?"

"You"—my legs tremble beneath me—"you said they were too small on you. You insisted that I take them."

"How could you lie like that?" She takes a step toward me, her blue eyes like ice. "You stole my clothing! You're a thief!"

"No..." I reach out for something before my legs give out under me. But I grasp only air. "I would never do that."

"Ha!" She snorts. "That's what I get for trusting a convict to work in my home!"

She's loud enough that Andrew hears the commotion. He dashes out of his office and I see his handsome face at the top of the stairs, lit by another bolt of lightning. Oh God, what is he going to think of me? It's bad enough that he knows about my prison record. I don't want him to think I stole from his own house.

"Nina?" He takes the stairs down two at a time. "What's going on here?"

"I'll tell you what's going on!" she announces triumphantly. "Millie here has been stealing from my closet. She stole all this clothing from me. I

found it in her closet.”

Andrew’s eyes slowly grow wide. “She...”

“I didn’t steal anything!” Tears prick at my eyes. “I swear to you. Nina gave me those clothes. She said they didn’t fit her.”

“As if we would believe your lies.” She sneers at me. “I should call the police on you. Do you know what this clothing is worth?”

“No, please don’t...”

“Oh, right.” Nina laughs at the expression on my face. “You’re on parole, aren’t you? Something like this would send you right back to prison.”

Andrew is looking down at the clothing on the couch, a deep crease between his eyebrows. “Nina...”

“I’m going to call them.” Nina whips her phone out of her purse. “God knows what else she stole from us, right, Andy?”

“Nina.” He lifts his eyes from the stack of clothing. “Millie didn’t steal this clothing. I remember you emptying your closet. You put it all in trash bags and said you were donating it.” He picks up a tiny white dress. “You haven’t been able to fit into this in years.”

It’s gratifying the way Nina’s cheeks turn pink. “What are you saying? That I’m too fat?”

He ignores her remark. “I’m saying there’s no way she stole this from you. Why are you doing this to her?”

Her mouth falls open. “Andy...”

Andrew looks over at me, hovering by the sofa. “Millie.” His voice is gentle when he says my name. “Would you go upstairs and give us some privacy? I need to talk to Nina.”

“Yes, of course,” I agree. Gladly.

The two of them stand there in silence while I mount the flight of stairs to the second floor. When I reach the top, I go over to the doorway to the attic and I open the door. For a moment, I stand there, contemplating my next move. Then I close the door without going through.

Much quieter this time, I creep over to the head of the stairs. I stand at the edge of the hallway, just before the stairwell. I can’t see Nina and Andrew, but I can hear their voices. It’s wrong to eavesdrop, but I can’t help myself. After all, this conversation will almost certainly involve Nina’s accusations about me.

I hope Andrew continues to defend me, even when I’m out of the room. Will she convince him that I stole her clothes? I am, after all, a convict. You make one mistake in life, and nobody ever trusts you again.

“... didn’t take these dresses,” Andrew is saying. “I know she didn’t.”

“How could you take her side over mine?” Nina shoots back. “The girl was in prison. You can’t trust somebody like that. She’s a liar and a thief, and she probably deserves to be back in prison.”

“How could you say something like that? Millie has been wonderful.”

“Yes, I’m sure you think so.”

“When did you become so cruel, Nina?” His voice trembles. “You’ve changed. You’re a different person now.”

“Everyone changes,” she spits at him.

“No.” His voice lowers so that I have to strain to hear it over the sound of raindrops falling outside and hitting the pavement. “Not like you. I don’t even recognize you anymore. You’re not the same person I fell in love with.”

There’s a long silence, broken by a bolt of thunder that cracks loud

enough to shake the foundations of the house. Once it's faded, I hear Nina's next words loud and clear.

"What are you saying, Andy?"

"I'm saying... I don't think I'm in love with you anymore, Nina. I think we should separate."

"You're not in love with me anymore?" she bursts out. "How can you say that?"

"I'm sorry. I was just going along with things, living our lives, and I didn't even realize how unhappy I was."

Nina is quiet for a long time as she absorbs his words. "Does this have to do with Millie?"

I hold my breath waiting to hear his answer. There was something between us that night in New York, but I'm not going to kid myself that he's leaving Nina because of me.

"This isn't about Millie," he finally says.

"Really? So are you going to lie to my face and pretend nothing ever happened between you and her?"

Damn. She knows. Or at least, she thinks she knows.

"I have feelings for Millie," he says in a voice so quiet, I'm sure I must've imagined it. How could this rich, handsome, married man have feelings for me? "But that's not what this is about. This is about you and me. I don't love you anymore."

"This is bullshit!" The pitch of Nina's voice is going up to the point where soon only dogs will be able to hear her. "You're leaving me for our maid! This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. This is an embarrassment to you. You're better than this, Andrew."

"Nina." His tone is firm. "It's over. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Another crack of thunder shakes the floorboards. "Oh, you don't know what sorry is..."

There's a pause. "Excuse me?"

"If you try to go through with this," she growls at him, "I will destroy you in court. I will make sure you are left penniless and homeless."

"Homeless? This is my home, Nina. I bought it before we even knew each other. I allow you to stay here. We have a prenup, as you recall, and after our marriage ends, it will be mine again." He pauses again. "And now I'd like you to leave."

I hazard a look around the stairwell. If I crouch, I can make out Nina standing in the center of the living room, her face pale. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. "You can't be serious about this, Andy," she sputters. "I am very serious."

"But..." She clutches her chest. "What about Cece?"

"Cece is your daughter. You never wanted me to adopt her."

It sounds like she's speaking through gritted teeth. "Oh, I see what this is about. It's because I can't have another baby. You want somebody younger, who can give you a child. I'm not good enough anymore."

"That's not what this is about," he says. Although on some level, maybe it is. Andrew does want another child. And he can't have that with Nina. Her voice trembles. "Andy, please don't do this to me... Don't humiliate me this way. Please."

"I'd like you to leave, Nina. Right now."

"But it's raining!"

Andrew's voice doesn't waver. "Pack a bag and get out."

I can almost hear her weighing her options. Whatever else I can say

about Nina Winchester, she's not stupid. Finally, her shoulders sag. "Fine. I'll leave."

Nina's footsteps thud in the direction of the stairs. It occurs to me a second too late that I need to move out of sight. Nina lifts her eyes and sees me standing at the top of the stairs. Her eyes burn with anger like nothing I've ever seen. I should run back to my room, but my legs feel frozen as her heels bite into the steps one by one.

The lightning flashes one last time when she reaches the top of the stairs, and the glow on her face makes her look like she's standing at the gates of hell.

"Do..." My lips feel numb, it's almost hard to form the words. "Do you need help packing?"

There's such venom in her eyes, I'm afraid she's going to reach into my chest and yank my heart out with her bare hands. "Do I need help packing? No, I believe I can manage."

Nina goes into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. I am not sure what to do. I could go up to the attic, but then I look downstairs where Andrew is still in the living room. He's looking up at me, so I descend the stairs to talk to him.

"I'm so sorry!" My words come out in a rush. "I didn't mean to..."

"Don't you dare blame yourself," he says. "This was a long time coming."

I glance at the window, which is drenched with rain. "Do you want me to... go?"

"No," he says. "I want you to stay."

He touches my arm and a tingle goes through me. All I can think is that I want him to kiss me, but he can't do it right now. Not with Nina right upstairs.

But soon she'll be gone.

About ten minutes later, Nina comes down the stairs, struggling with a bag on each shoulder. Yesterday, she would have made me carry those and laughed at how weak I was. Now she has to do it herself. When I look up at her, her eyes are puffy and her hair is disheveled. She looks terrible. I don't think I realized exactly how old she was until this moment.

"Please don't do this, Andy," she begs him. "Please."

A muscle twitches in his jaw. The thunder cracks again, but it's softer than it was before. The storm is moving away. "I'll help you put your bags in the car."

She chokes back a sob. "Don't bother."

She trudges over to the door to the garage that's just off the side of the living room, struggling with her heavy bags. Andrew tries to reach out to help her, but she shrugs him away. She fumbles to get the door open to the garage. Instead of putting her bags down, she's trying to juggle them both and get the door open. It takes her several minutes, and I finally can't stand it anymore. I sprint over to the door, and before she can stop me, I turn the knob and throw it open for her.

"Gee," she says. "Thanks so much."

I don't know how to respond. I just stand there as she pushes past me with her bags. Just before she goes through the door, she leans in close to me—so close that I can feel her hot breath on my neck.

"I will never forget this, Millie," she hisses in my ear.

My heart flutters in my chest. Her words echo in my ears as she tosses her bags into the back of her white Lexus, and then zooms out of the

garage.

She left the garage door open. I can see the rain pouring down onto the driveway as a gust of wind whips me in the face. I stand there for a

Chapter 34

Chapter Thirty-Four opens with the narrator waking up beside Andrew in the guest bedroom, a decision made as a compromise to avoid sleeping in the master bedroom still tainted with Nina's presence. The intimacy of their morning underscored by Andrew's affections and their shared disdain for Nina sets the tone for a blossoming relationship. Andrew expresses his desire to give their relationship a genuine chance, insisting the narrator is no longer to play the role of a maid but to consider the possibility of a future together. The narrator's unease at this proposal is briefly touched on, as is her criminal record, which she fears might complicate her ability to find employment.

The day takes a turn when the narrator receives a call from a blocked number, immediately suspected to be Nina, stirring a mix of anticipation and dread. This moment of peace is quickly disrupted, not only by the mysterious caller but also by Andrew's sudden determination to confront Enzo, the landscaper who seems peculiarly omnipresent in their yard.

Andrew's interaction with Enzo is marked by a subtle power struggle, resolved quickly by Enzo's indifferent acceptance of his dismissal. But the chapter takes a significant and ominous twist when Enzo, upon Andrew's departure, grabs the narrator's arm to warn her of the danger she is in, a moment that shifts the narrative from domestic tranquility to a foreboding sense of threat.

This chapter deftly encapsulates the complex interplay of new beginnings and unresolved pasts, the search for identity and purpose against the backdrop of interpersonal dynamics, and the ever-present undercurrents of foreboding that hint at darker elements at play. The juxtaposition of domesticity with underlying tension and suspense sets a tone of unease, effectively moving the narrative forward while keeping the reader engaged in the unfolding drama and the narrator's uncertain future.

Chapter 35

Chapter THIRTY-FIVE follows the narrator, seemingly Millie, as she strives to find normalcy and independence despite the complications of her current life. Ignoring advice from Andrew not to work for the household, she seeks solace in activities like grocery shopping—an act she finds liberating compared to the constraints previously imposed by Nina, whose meticulous grocery lists she no longer has to abide by. Millie relishes in making her own choices, a stark contrast to her past restrictions. This simple pleasure is interrupted by a call from a blocked number, which has been trying to reach her throughout the day, and an unexpected encounter with Patrice, a woman from Nina's circle. Patrice, under the guise of casual conversation, inadvertently reveals to Millie that Nina has been tracking her through a phone app, a fact that visibly shocks Millie. She had been under the impression that Nina's oversight extended only to benign text messages, not realizing the extent of Nina's monitoring was so invasive.

This chapter skillfully portrays Millie's awakening to the realizations of control and surveillance exerted over her by Nina, ostensibly for safety or oversight but clearly invasive. The encounter with Patrice at the grocery store serves as a pivotal moment, shifting Millie's understanding of her situation. Her inner thoughts and reactions provide insights into her growing desire for autonomy against the backdrop of a controlling environment orchestrated by Nina. The chapter closes on a climactic note with Millie's resolve visibly shaken upon discovering the true breadth of Nina's control over her life, propelling the narrative towards an anticipatory tension about how she will navigate this newfound knowledge. The interaction, imbued with

Patrice's faux concern and Millie's dawning realization, encapsulates themes of surveillance, independence, and manipulation that run throughout the narrative.

Chapter 36

Chapter Thirty-Six of the novel unfolds with the protagonist contending with a blend of disappointment and unease. Initially set for a romantic dinner mirroring a cherished memory with Andrew, her anticipation dissolves into solitude as he's detained by work obligations, leaving her to dine alone. This personal moment diverges into a deeper narrative of isolation and unease, predominantly proliferated by the lingering presence of Nina, Andrew's ex, whose spectral influence permeates the household.

Nina's intrusive essence is not merely sensed through lingering scents despite the protagonist's thorough cleaning attempts but escalates to a virtual invasion of privacy, discovered through a tracking app hidden on her phone. This revelation amplifies her feelings of being watched and intrudes on her sense of security. Moreover, an enigmatic warning from Enzo, affirming the real and present danger Nina poses, exacerbates these fears, insinuating Nina's reach extends beyond mere psychological warfare.

As the night progresses, her solitary musings are crudely interrupted by a menacing phone call from an anonymous, mechanically distorted voice, commanding her to stay away from Andrew. This chilling encounter, devoid of identification yet brimming with hostility, propels the protagonist into decisive action. Resolving to reclaim dominion over her living space and her life, she plans to alter the locks, symbolically severing Nina's lingering hold and marking a pivotal moment of reclaiming agency against unseen threats.

This chapter meticulously narrates a tale of psychological unrest, the struggle for autonomy, and the specter of past relationships infringing upon the present, weaving a narrative rich in suspense and emotional depth. Through a series of unsettling events, it effectively captures the protagonist's resolve to confront the shadows cast by Nina, setting a stage for confrontation and empowerment.

Chapter 37

Chapter Thirty-Seven encapsulates a profoundly personal and transformative night for the protagonist, juxtaposed against an underlying tension that simmers quietly before intensifying towards the chapter's end. After an intimate encounter with Andrew, the protagonist finds herself in a moment of post-coital reflection and newfound vulnerability, nestled within the confines of an uncomfortably small cot. This physical discomfort parallels a deeper sense of discomfort rooted in the protagonist's breaking of Nina's strict house rules, hinting at a rebellion that carries both liberation and consequences.

The narrative gracefully transitions from an introspective examination of the protagonist's unlikely evening to a sudden awakening, propelled by physical need and a stark realization of Andrew's absence. This absence is not just physical—it's a symbol of the ephemerality and isolating aspects of their connection, highlighted by the uncomfortable sleeping arrangement and the protagonist's contemplation of joining Andrew, suggesting a desire for closeness yet acceptance of their separate realities.

The cot, an object of physical discomfort, becomes emblematic of the protagonist's current transitional phase—between the comfort of past familiarity and the uncertain promise of future change, underscored by her anticipation of this being the last night in such a setting. Andrew's departure from the cot, driven by practical discomfort, mirrors the protagonist's own emotional and physical journey towards seeking more in life, beyond the constraints of uncomfortable circumstances and stringent rules.

As the chapter closes, the protagonist's attempt to leave the room is met with resistance, a metaphorical portrayal of the obstacles she faces on her path to change. The stuck doorknob is not just a physical barrier but a narrative device symbolizing the challenges in moving forward from a place of emotional confinement to liberation.

This chapter masterfully marries the themes of intimacy, personal growth, and the confrontation of physical and metaphorical barriers, weaving a compelling narrative that pushes the protagonist towards introspection and the imminent challenge of transcending her current circumstances.

Chapter 38

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid.

I will provide the chapter now.

THIRTY-EIGHT

NINA

If a few months ago, someone had told me I would be spending tonight in a hotel room while Andy was at my house with another woman—the maid!—I wouldn't have believed it.

But here I am. Dressed in a terry cloth bathrobe I found in the closet, stretched out in the queen-size hotel bed. The television is on, but I'm barely aware of it. I've got my phone out and I click on the app I have been using for the last several months. Find my friends. I wait for it to tell me the location of Wilhelmina "Millie" Calloway.

But under her name, it says: location not found. The same as it has since the afternoon.

She must've figured out I was tracking her and disabled the app. Smart girl.

But not smart enough.

I pick up my purse from where I put it down on the nightstand. I dig around inside until I find the one paper photograph I have of Andy. It's a few years old—a copy of the photographs he had professionally taken for the company website, and he gave me one of them. I stare into his deep brown eyes on the shiny piece of paper, his perfect mahogany hair, the hint of a cleft in his strong chin. Andy is the most handsome man I've ever known in real life. I fell half in love with him the first moment I saw him. And then I find one other object inside my purse and drop it into the pocket of my robe.

I get up off the queen-size bed, my feet sinking into the plush carpet of the hotel room. This room is costing Andy's credit card a fortune, but that's okay. I won't be here long.

I go into the bathroom and I hold up the photograph of Andy's smiling face. Then I pull out the contents of my pocket.

It's a lighter.

I flick the starter until a yellow flame shoots out of it. I hold the flickering light to the edge of the photograph until it catches. I watch my husband's handsome face turn brown and disintegrate, until the sink is full of ashes.

And I smile. My first real smile in almost eight years.

I can't believe I finally got rid of that asshole.

How to Get Rid of Your Sadistic, Evil Husband—A Guide by Nina Winchester

Step One: Get Knocked Up by a Drunken One-Night Stand, Drop Out of School, and Take a Crappy Job to Pay the Bills

My boss, Andrew Winchester, is ever so dreamy.

He's not actually my boss. He's more like, my boss's boss's boss. There may be a few other layers in there of people in the chain between him—the CEO of this company since his father's retirement—and me—a receptionist.

So when I'm sitting at my desk, outside my actual boss's office, and I admire him from afar, it's not like I'm crushing on an actual man. It's more like admiring a famous actor at a movie premiere or possibly even a painting at the fine arts museum. Especially since I have zero room in my life for a date, much less a boyfriend.

He is just so good-looking though. All that money and also so handsome. It would say something about life just being unfair, if the guy wasn't so nice.

Like for example, when he went in to talk to my own boss, a guy at least twenty years his senior named Stewart Lynch, who clearly resents being bossed around by a guy who he calls "the kid," Andrew Winchester stopped at my desk and smiled at me and called me by name. He said, "Hello, Nina. How are you today?"

Obviously, he doesn't know who I am. He just read my name off my desk. But still. It was nice that he made the effort. I liked hearing my ordinary four-letter name on his tongue.

Andrew and Stewart have been in his office talking for about half an hour. Stewart instructed me not to leave while Mr. Winchester was in there, because he might need me to fetch some data from the computer. I can't quite figure out what Stewart does, because I do all his work. But that's fine. I don't mind, as long as I get my paychecks and my health insurance. Cecelia and I need a place to live, and the pediatrician says there's a set of shots she requires next month (for diseases she doesn't even have!).

But what I mind a little more is that Stewart didn't warn me he was going to ask me to wait around. I'm supposed to be pumping now. My breasts are full and aching with milk, straining at the clips of my flimsy nursing bra. I'm trying my best not to think about Cece, because if I do, the milk will almost certainly burst through my nipples. And that's just not the kind of thing you want to happen when you're sitting at your desk.

Cece is with my neighbor Elena right now. Elena is also a single mother, so we trade babysitting duties. My hours are more regular, and she works evening shifts at a bar. So I take Teddy for her, and she takes Cece for me. We are making it work. Barely.

I miss Cece when I'm at work. I think about her all the time. I had always fantasized that when I had a baby, I would be able to stay home for at least the first six months. Instead, I just took my two weeks of vacation and went right back to work, even though it still sort of hurt to walk. They would have allowed me twelve weeks off, but the other ten would have been unpaid. Who could afford ten weeks unpaid? Certainly not me.

Sometimes Elena resents her son for what she gave up for him. I was in graduate school when I got that positive pregnancy test, leisurely working on a Ph.D. in English as I lived in semi-poverty. It hit me when I saw those

two blue lines that my eternal graduate school lifestyle would never provide for me and my unborn child. The next day, I quit. And I started pounding the pavement, looking for something to pay the bills.

This isn't my dream job. Far from it. But the salary is decent, the benefits are great, and the hours are steady and not too long. And I was told there's room for advancement. Eventually.

But right now, I just have to get through the next twenty minutes without my breasts leaking.

I'm this close to running off to the bathroom with my little pumping backpack and my tiny little milk bottles when Stewart's voice crackles out of the intercom.

"Nina?" he barks at me. "Could you bring in the Grady data?"

"Yes, sir, right away!"

I get on my computer and load up the files he wants, then I hit print. It's about fifty pages' worth of data, and I sit there, tapping my toes against the ground, watching the printer spit out each page. When the final page finishes printing, I yank out the sheets of paper and hurry over to his office.

I crack open the door. "Mr. Lynch, sir?"

"Come in, Nina."

I let the door swing the rest of the way open. Right away, I notice both men are staring at me. And not in that appreciative way I used to get at bars before I got knocked up and my whole life changed. They're looking at me like I've got a giant spider hanging off my hair and I don't even know it. I'm about to ask them what the hell both of them are staring at when I look down and figure it out.

I leaked.

And I didn't just leak—I squirted milk out like the office cow. There are two huge circles around each of my nipples, and a few droplets of milk are trickling down my blouse. I want to crawl under a desk and die.

"Nina!" Stewart cries. "Get yourself cleaned up!"

"Right," I say quickly. "I... I'm so sorry. I..."

I drop the papers on Stewart's desk and hurry out of the office as fast as I can. I grab my coat to hide my blouse, all the while blinking back tears. I'm not even sure what I'm more upset about. The fact that my boss's boss's boss saw me lactating or all the milk I just wasted.

I take my pump to the bathroom, plug it in, and relieve the pressure in my breasts. Despite my embarrassment, it feels so good to empty all that milk. Maybe better than sex. Not that I remember what sex feels like—the last time was that stupid, stupid one-night stand that got me into this situation to begin with. I fill two entire five-ounce bottles and stick them in my bag with an ice pack. I'll put it in the refrigerator until it's time to go home. Right now, I've got to get back to my desk. And leave my coat on for the rest of the afternoon, because I have recently discovered that even if it dries, milk leaves a stain.

When I crack open the door to the bathroom, I'm shocked to see someone standing there. And not just anyone. It's Andrew Winchester. My boss's boss's boss. His fist is raised in the air, poised to knock on the door. His eyes widen when he sees me.

"Uh, hi?" I say. "The men's room is, um, over there."

I feel stupid saying that. I mean, this is his company. Also, there's a stencil of a woman with a dress on the door to the bathroom. He should realize this is the women's room.

"Actually," he says, "I was looking for you."

“For me?”

He nods. “I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” I try to smile, hiding my humiliation from earlier. “It’s just milk.”

“I know, but...” He frowns. “Stewart was a jerk to you. That was unacceptable.”

“Yeah, well...” I’m tempted to tell him of a hundred other instances when Stewart was a jerk to me. But it’s a bad idea to talk shit about my boss. “It’s fine. Anyway, I was just about to grab some lunch, so...”

“Me too.” He arches an eyebrow. “Care to join me?”

Of course I say yes. Even if he wasn’t my boss’s boss’s boss, I would’ve said yes. He’s gorgeous, for starters. I love his smile—the crinkling around his eyes and the hint of a cleft in his chin. But it’s not like he’s asking me out on a date. He just feels bad because of what happened before in Stewart’s office. Probably someone from HR told him to do it to smooth things over.

I follow Andrew Winchester downstairs to the lobby of the building that he owns. I assume he’s going to take me to one of the many fancy restaurants in the neighborhood, so I’m shocked when he leads me over to the hotdog cart right outside the building and joins the line.

“Best hotdogs in the city.” He winks at me. “What do you like on yours?”

“Um... mustard, I guess?”

When we get to the front of the line, he orders two hotdogs, both with mustard, and two bottles of water. He hands me a hotdog and a bottle of water, and he leads me to a brownstone down the block. He sits on the steps and I join him. It’s almost comical—this handsome man sitting on the steps of the brownstone in his expensive suit, holding a hotdog covered in mustard.

“Thank you for the hotdog, Mr. Winchester,” I say.

“Andy,” he corrects me.

“Andy,” I repeat. I take a bite of my hotdog. It’s pretty good. Best in the city? I’m not so sure about that. I mean, it’s bread and mystery meat.

“How old is your baby?” he asks.

My face flushes with pleasure the way it always does when somebody asks me about my daughter. “Five months.”

“What’s her name?”

“Cecelia.”

“That’s nice.” He grins. “Like the song.”

Chapter 39

Chapter Thirty-Nine of the undisclosed book narrates the chilling turn in the life of the protagonist, barely three months into her marriage with Andy Winchester. The story unfolds with her reflecting on their whirlwind romance, emphasizing the stark contrast between her previous disappointing relationships and Andy’s apparent perfection. He was everything she desired for herself and her daughter, Cecelia—a man ready for commitment, possessing a suite of qualities she had longed for in a partner.

Despite fleeting concerns about Andy’s past engagement and a brief contemplation of contacting his ex-fiancée, Kathleen, she ultimately dismisses any doubts, choosing instead to focus on the brighter aspects of their future together. However, she notes one minor imperfection in her otherwise idyllic life: Andy’s mother,

Evelyn Winchester, whose overbearing presence and thinly veiled critiques of her parenting cause unease.

As the narrative progresses, the discomfort shifts from external family dynamics to the very heart of her marital bliss. A seemingly innocuous request from Andy to assist him in finding some work papers in the attic escalates into a harrowing experience that exposes a horrifying aspect of his character. The attic, instead of housing forgotten paperwork, reveals a locked room that quickly becomes her prison when Andy deceitfully locks her inside.

Isolated and increasingly panicked, the protagonist is forced to confront a terrifying reality. Andy's meticulously curated persona of the perfect husband begins to crumble, revealing a manipulative and sinister nature. The chapter closes with a distraught and confused plea for freedom, brutally met with Andy's cold admission that he heard her screams for help but chose to ignore them, insisting she needed to "learn her lesson" before he would release her.

This chapter starkly juxtaposes the initial blissful and hopeful tone with the emerging dark and psychological torment, casting a shadow over what appeared to be a perfect marriage, and revealing the protagonist's dire predicament trapped with a man far removed from the loving partner he pretended to be.

Chapter 40

In Chapter Forty titled "Step Three: Discover Your Husband is Pure Evil," the narrative escalates with Nina trapped in a room, soundproofed to isolate her from any potential help. She spends agonizing hours attempting to escape, to no avail. Her concern for her daughter Cecelia amplifies her desperation. Nina's husband Andy reveals himself to her through the door, showing a chillingly casual cruelty by declaring her imprisonment punishment for not maintaining her hair to his standards. Despite her pleas, Andy insists on a bizarre and demeaning form of retribution: Nina must surrender a hundred strands of her hair pulled from the scalp as a penalty for showing her dark roots.

Nina cycles through waves of hope and despair, forced to adapt to her dire circumstances by using a bucket for her needs and rationing the limited water supply she finds. As she confronts her situation, memories of her life prior to this imprisonment—when she only had to care for herself and Cecelia under less luxurious but freer conditions—provide stark contrast to her current predicament, highlighting her regret over marrying Andy for the perceived security and comfort he offered.

Andy's manipulation extends beyond physical confinement, delving into psychological abuse by withholding basic needs like food and water, and exerting control over Nina's appearance to the point of obsession. This power dynamic reveals a disturbing aspect of their relationship, where Nina is reduced to bargaining with her autonomy for her freedom, demonstrating the extent of Andy's control and the disintegration of the person she once was. The chapter paints a harrowing picture of domestic abuse, where Nina's fight for survival and protection of her daughter becomes entangled with Andy's twisted visions of marriage and ownership.

Chapter 41

In Chapter 41, Nina accomplishes the grueling task of pulling out one hundred strands of her hair, as demanded by her captor, Andy, her husband. She envisions a swift escape and the end of her marriage, fantasizing about serving him divorce papers. Upon fulfilling his request, she waits anxiously for his approval, yearning for freedom from her confinement and aching due to hunger and thirst, having been trapped without food for a day and running low on water.

Nina's brief hope is crushed when Andy, after inspecting the hairs, claims one is missing a follicle, forcing her to restart the painful process. Desperate, she prepares another set of strands, battling physical exhaustion and emotional distress, driven by her concern for her daughter, Cecelia, and her own survival.

The narrative vividly captures Nina's despair and determination amidst her struggle, creating a tense atmosphere filled with anticipation and the raw human will to persevere. Andy's manipulation and cruelty highlight a grim portrait of abuse and control, leaving Nina and the reader on edge for her fate.

This chapter delves into the psychological and physical torment Nina endures, illustrating her resilience. The chapter ends with a mixture of relief and revulsion when Andy finally releases Nina after verifying the new batch of hair, subjecting her to further humiliation under the guise of a lesson. This cruel ordeal not only demonstrates Andy's dominance but also significantly depicts Nina's fight for survival and her profound love for her daughter, pushing her beyond her limits.

Chapter 42

Chapter Forty-Two is a vivid, heart-wrenching episode entitled "Step Four: Make the World Believe You're Crazy," where the narrator, Nina, details waking from a state of exhaustion and dehydration, only to find herself embroiled in an urgent and terrifying situation. The narrative begins with Nina's disoriented awakening, her body struggling to recuperate from days without sustenance. She immediately perceives a distant sound of running water from the master bathroom, sparking a sense of urgency, especially as she considers the possibility that her captor, Andy, might be nearby. However, she soon realizes Andy isn't in the house; he has been sending her concerned text messages, one of which mentions their daughter, Cecelia, reminding Nina of her primary fear—Cecelia's safety.

Fuelled by maternal instinct and despite her weakened state, Nina decides to investigate the source of the running water. Strengthened by necessity but hindered by physical debility, she makes a painstaking journey towards the master bathroom. The effort is colossal; her body barely cooperates, reflecting the extent of her earlier neglect and the psychological toll of her ordeal. Nina's every step is a battle against her limitations, showcasing both vulnerability and an indomitable will to ensure her daughter's safety.

Upon reaching the bathroom, Nina is confronted with a horrifying sight—her daughter, Cecelia, is in the bathtub, unconscious and in imminent danger of drowning. With the water level perilously close to enveloping Cecelia, Nina's desperation intensifies. Her narrative captures a palpable sense of panic intermingled with determination, portraying a mother's resolve to save her child against all odds.

The chapter climaxes with Nina's struggle to both remain conscious and rescue her daughter. Her physical symptoms—paleness, shakiness, difficulty moving—underscore the seriousness of her condition, yet her focus remains unwaveringly on Cecelia. The account concludes on a cliffhanger, with Nina crawling towards Cecelia, driven by love and sheer willpower, prepared to sacrifice everything to avert tragedy.

This chapter masterfully combines elements of suspense, fear, and parental love, leaving readers on the edge of their seats, eager to discover the outcome of Nina's heroic efforts to save her daughter. The narrative is a testament to the depth of a mother's love and the lengths to which she will go to protect her child, weaving a tale of suspense and emotional depth that resonates with the reader.

Chapter 43

Chapter Forty-Three recounts the protagonist's eight-month ordeal in Clearview Psychiatric Hospital following a grave incident involving her and her daughter, Cecelia. According to the recounted narrative,

under the influence of major depression and delusions, she attempted to end both their lives by administering sedatives and placing Cecelia in a filled bathtub. The plan was thwarted by her husband, Andy, whose timely intervention with the police saved them. The protagonist, however, has no recollection of these actions or the events leading up to them, including being prescribed the sedatives believed to have facilitated her attempted murder-suicide.

In Clearview, she undergoes treatment for her conditions, prescribed both anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications. Despite her vivid memories of being confined by Andy, her therapist, Dr. Barringer, convinces her these memories are delusional. Through treatment, she gradually accepts responsibility for her actions, albeit with no personal memory of them, and begins to improve.

Andy's unwavering support during her hospital stay is highlighted as he visits frequently, endearing himself to the staff and continuously showing care towards her. Their relationship, initially strained to the point of her aversion to his touch, begins to heal, reflecting her progress.

As her discharge approaches, the narrative focuses on her apprehension about returning home, tempered by the desire to reunite with Cecelia. Their bond remains strong, despite the separation enforced by her hospitalization. Andy's role expands beyond that of a supportive spouse to include arrangements for their daughter's care upon the protagonist's return.

The chapter weaves a narrative of recovery, guilt, and the gradual rekindling of familial connections, set against the backdrop of a severe mental health crisis. Its emotional depth is punctuated by the protagonist's internal struggles and the tangible support and normalization of her husband's role in her journey towards stabilization and reintegration with her family.

Chapter 44

Chapter Forty-Four narrates a reflective moment between Nina and her therapist, Dr. Hewitt, highlighting her fears and attempts at recovering from a traumatic delusion. Having been discharged from Clearview, Nina has spent four months under Dr. Hewitt's care, a choice influenced by Andy's mother despite Nina's initial reservations. The narrative delves into Nina's struggle with a specific fear: the attic of her house, which she has avoided since her return home. She confesses to Dr. Hewitt about her irrational but intense fear that once overwhelmed her, making her believe in her own bizarre narratives of persecution by Andy, her husband.

Dr. Hewitt suggests that confronting the attic could be therapeutic, helping Nina reclaim power over her fear by seeing it as nothing more than a storage space. Despite Andy's supportive stance and encouragement to face her fear, Nina remains hesitant, reflecting on the complexities of her emotions and the rocky journey towards healing.

After the session, Andy takes Nina home, displaying unwavering support and discussing her progress. This brings to light Nina's guilt and apprehension toward her relationship with her family, especially her daughter, Cece, and her interaction with Evelyn, Andy's mother. The chapter paints a vivid picture of a family navigating the turbulent waters of mental health recovery, underscored by themes of trust, fear, and the path to healing. The narrative emphasizes Nina's internal struggles, her interactions with significant others, and the steps, however small, towards overcoming her fears. The chapter ends with a seemingly mundane but telling interaction involving Evelyn, highlighting the undercurrents of tension and expectations within the family.

Chapter 45

In Chapter Forty-Five, we dive deep into Nina's harrowing experience, encapsulated in a haunting encounter that blends psychological manipulation with stark terror. As the chapter unfolds in a dimly lit attic room, we are introduced to a critical moment between Nina and Andy, her partner, who initiates what appears to be a therapeutic exercise aimed at confronting Nina's fears. Andy assures Nina that facing the attic will prove her fears unfounded, symbolizing a final step towards healing their strained relationship, tarnished by past turmoil and Nina's psychological breakdown.

Their journey up the creaky staircase symbolizes a gradual approach to confronting darkness, both literal and metaphorical. Upon entering the attic room, the absence of light, save for an overpowering artificial brightness, sets the stage for a twisted revelation. The chapter masterfully portrays Nina's initial relief at Andy's comforting presence, which quickly disintegrates into horror as she discovers the room's transformation into a prison, equipped with harsh lighting designed to disorient and control.

Andy's manipulation deepens as the chapter explores themes of control, isolation, and the blurring of reality with madness. He subjects Nina to a cruel ultimatum between oppressive light and complete darkness, revealing a sinister plot to discipline her, justified by trivial grievances magnified into acts of defiance. This manipulation extends beyond physical confinement, implicating Nina in a fabricated narrative of self-harm and neglect, thereby isolating her further from reality and any potential escape.

Nina's realization of her situation—trapped both physically and within a web of Andy's construction—evokes a powerful sense of *déjà vu*, hinting at a cyclical pattern of abuse and manipulation. The chapter poignantly captures her determination to endure, signified by her strategic conservation of resources and attempt to mitigate her harsh conditions, underscoring her will to survive for her daughter's sake, despite dwindling hope.

The closing moments of the chapter, fraught with a mingled sense of desperation and resignation, highlight Nina's acute awareness of the precariousness of her situation. Andy's return and the imposition of 'ground rules' reinforce the power dynamics at play, leaving Nina ensnared in a reality dictated by Andy's whims—a poignant reflection on the theme of captivity, both physical and psychological. This chapter, rich in thematic depth and emotional resonance, sets a compelling stage for Nina's fraught journey towards liberation, underscored by the ominous silence that follows Andy's chilling conditions for her release.

Chapter 46

Chapter Forty-Six of the book, titled "Step Six: Try to Live With It," describes the tumultuous and oppressive life of the narrator, a trapped and abused wife named Nina, and her struggles within her marriage to Andy. Nina, who once hoped for a semblance of normalcy in her married life, is forced to endure Andy's psychological and physical torment, including frequent and arbitrary punishments that take place in the attic of their home. Despite her attempts to escape or appease Andy, Nina finds herself in a cycle of abuse, manipulation, and control, underscored by the threat of her daughter Cecelia also becoming a target of Andy's wrath.

Throughout the chapter, Nina recounts various strategies she has attempted to employ in order to gain some agency or escape from her situation, including trying to find Andy's ex-fiancé Kathleen for support, and altering her appearance and behavior to repel Andy, all of which fail. Andy's complete control over Nina extends to monitoring her interactions and ensuring that anyone she might confide in is turned into a watchdog for him, as seen in the betrayal by her friend Suzanne, who alerts Andy to Nina's pleas for help.

Nina lives in constant fear for Cecelia's safety, especially given Andy's manipulative use of Cecelia's allergies and the threat of physical harm to ensure Nina's compliance. This chapter vividly illustrates the isolating and desperate circumstances that domestic abuse can create, trapping victims in a seemingly

inescapable environment. The mention of Cecelia and the domestic landscaper Enzo introduces brief moments of solace and normalcy in Nina's life, highlighting the stark contrast between the facade of a perfect suburban life and the grim reality of her marriage.

The narrative encapsulates Nina's psychological turmoil and her complex feelings of despair, resentment, and a yearning for freedom, all while showcasing the lengths to which abusers will go to maintain control over their victims. The chapter ends with Nina clinging to the faint hope of eventual escape, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit even in the darkest of circumstances.

Chapter 47

Chapter Forty-Seven Summary:

Nina finds herself trapped in the attic for over twenty hours, a punishment dealt by her husband, Andy, for using too much air freshener. This type of imprisonment has become a recurring tactic for Andy to exert control over Nina, leveraging her love for their daughter, Cecelia, to enforce compliance. Fearing for her future and that of any future children, Nina secretly gets an IUD to prevent pregnancy, a decision sparked by Andy's desire for more children. Her current predicament involves a self-inflicted pepper spray incident as a penalty for her supposed transgression.

During her confinement, Nina spots Enzo, a worker in their backyard, and inadvertently alerts him to her distress. After an exchange, Enzo attempts to intervene, offering Nina a chance at escape. Nina, however, refuses, fearing further repercussions from Andy, including harm to Cecelia or Enzo's potential deportation. Despite this, Enzo promises to break down the door if Nina's situation doesn't improve by the next morning.

Andy eventually releases Nina from the attic, maintaining a facade of kindness post-punishment, which includes bringing gifts as if to compensate for his abuses. Meanwhile, Nina and Enzo share a significant conversation, during which Nina confides the extent of Andy's torment. Enzo, incensed, vows to kill Andy, but Nina, fearing the consequences, dissuades him. Instead, Enzo suggests helping Nina leave Andy, marking the beginning of a potential plan to escape her abusive situation. This chapter sheds light on the dynamics of domestic abuse, the complexities of escape, and the fleeting moments of solidarity and hope presented through Enzo's support.

Chapter 48

Chapter Forty-Eight, titled "Step Seven: Try to Escape," details the narrator's cautious steps towards fleeing an abusive marriage with the help of Enzo, a man who emerges as both an ally and a protector. A week after aligning plans with Enzo, the narrator maneuvers to avoid her husband Andy's surveillance, hinting at the depth of control and fear pervading her life. She meets Enzo at his modest abode, a contrast to her more affluent but oppressive circumstances, signaling a disparity that extends beyond material wealth into realms of freedom and dignity.

Their meeting unfurls layers of mutual understanding and shared resolve. Enzo's hospitality, offering a beer, facilitates a conversation revealing the heavy burdens each carries. Enzo's backstory illustrates a tragic parallel; his sister's fate at the hands of an abusive spouse mirrors the narrator's plight, underscoring a theme of resilience against malevolent power. Their dialogue, seasoned with revelations of past hardships and present fears, strengthens their bond and commitment to escape the narrator's abusive marriage.

The practicalities of escape are discussed with Enzo outlining the necessity for money, documents, and careful planning, displaying a pragmatic approach to a daunting challenge. The narrator's determination is

punctuated by her interactions with her daughter Cecelia, revealing the extent of her predicament and her desperation to offer Cecelia a better, safer life, away from Andy.

The narrative crescendos when the narrator's planned escape collides with Andy's discovery of her intentions, embodied in the tangible evidence of passports, cash, and a new identity revealed on a dining table. The shock and betrayal conveyed through this discovery culminate in the narrator's impulsive flight from the immediate threat, her actions driven by a visceral rejection of her circumscribed existence.

Upon reaching Enzo after her escape attempt is foiled by Andy's intervention, the narrator's despair is palpable. Yet, in the depths of her despair, Enzo proposes a drastic solution, hinting at a shift from a strategy of escape to one of confrontation. This chapter, rich in emotional depth and tension, sets a stage for transformative action, weaving threads of hope, despair, solidarity, and a looming confrontation.

Chapter 49

Chapter Forty-Nine of **[UNNAMED BOOK]** delves into the complex and morally ambiguous plan of the protagonist, Nina, to extricate herself from a controlling and, implicitly, abusive relationship with her husband, Andy, by actively seeking a younger, more appealing "replacement".

Nina outlines specific criteria for her successor: she has to be younger, beautiful, desirous of children, and in a vulnerable enough position to not challenge Andy's control—enter Wilhelmina "Millie" Calloway. Identified due to her criminal past and desperate circumstances, Millie presents as the perfect candidate. Nina, with her friend Enzo's reluctant assistance, employs a private investigator to confirm Millie's suitability.

Convincing Andy to accept Millie into their home poses a challenge, especially when she is designated to live in the attic—a strategic choice by Nina to cement Millie's status as her potential replacement. Nina manipulates her environment and interactions to exacerbate Andy's dissatisfaction with their current life, presenting Millie as a solution to their domestic disarray. Once Millie starts working in their home, Nina exacerbates the situation further by deliberately antagonizing her, aiming to foster resentment and to position herself as an obstacle to Millie and Andy's potential happiness.

Nina's strategy includes several key elements to ensure Millie and Andy's eventual liaison: engineering opportunities for their attraction to flourish, increasing Millie's animosity towards her, and facilitating private moments between Andy and Millie. Additionally, Nina manipulates medical information to convince Andy of her infertility, deliberately worsening her relationship with him to shift his affections towards Millie, who represents the possibility of a new family.

Through this chapter, the intricate psychological games and calculated manipulations Nina employs reveal a desperate attempt at liberating herself from a toxic relationship, despite the moral implications of involving innocent Millie. The narrative maintains a suspenseful and darkly strategic tone, examining themes of control, desperation, and the complex lengths individuals might go to in search of freedom from oppressive circumstances.

Chapter 50

In Chapter Fifty, Nina recounts the finality of her escape from an abusive relationship with Andy. She reflects on his past controlling and demeaning actions, including his attempts to proclaim her insane and her confinement. Despite being ousted by Andy, she remains wary until their divorce is finalized, fearing any indication of her own desire for separation could ruin her plans. Lying in a hotel bed, Nina plans to collect

her daughter, Cecelia, from camp the following day, contemplating a new start away from Andy, especially grateful that Andy has no legal rights over Cecelia. Her contemplations are interrupted by a knock at the door, fearing Andy's return, but instead, she finds Enzo, a man who has apparently been aiding her escape.

Enzo's arrival sparks a surprising turn of events. The acknowledgment of Nina's freedom from Andy leads to a passionate encounter between her and Enzo, highlighting a rediscovery of desire and emotion she believed was long dead inside her. This moment with Enzo, marked by mutual consent and shared effort, contrasts sharply with her experiences with Andy. The interaction with Enzo signifies not just a physical connection but an emotional awakening for Nina, who had spent years in survival mode, devoid of genuine affection.

The aftermath of their intimate encounter leaves Nina contemplating her feelings for Enzo, who confesses his affection for her was immediate upon their first meeting. However, the reality of Nina's plans to leave town casts a shadow over the newfound connection. Despite their evident feelings, Nina is determined not to let her relationship with Enzo deter her from her plans to start anew, emphasizing her need to be alone after years of abuse and control. The chapter closes on an ambiguous note, leaving Nina's path forward and the potential for a future with Enzo uncertain.

Chapter 51

Chapter Fifty-One of the book presents a disturbing turn of events for Millie, who finds herself locked in a room by her boyfriend, Andrew. The chapter starts with Millie realizing she is locked in after Andrew left the room. Initially, she thinks it might have been an unintentional mistake, possibly made in a half-asleep state. Her situation becomes alarming when she discovers she cannot find her phone to call for help, raising the stakes of her predicament.

As Millie tries to rationalize Andrew's actions, she spots three particularly unsettling textbooks on the floor, which she does not remember placing there, dealing with topics such as U.S. prisons and torture. This discovery, coupled with the missing phone, significantly heightens the tension and confusion surrounding her circumstances.

When Andrew finally communicates with Millie, the narrative takes a darker twist. He reveals a manipulative and controlling side, accusing Millie of disrespecting his belongings and imposing a bizarre and humiliating punishment: to balance the textbooks on her stomach for three hours. His behavior is completely out of character from the Andrew Millie thought she knew, suggesting a sinister change in his demeanor or revealing his true nature.

The situation escalates when Millie refuses to comply with Andrew's demands, leading to a tense standoff marked by Andrew's cold insistence on control and Millie's growing desperation and fear. The revelation that Andrew has been watching her through a hidden camera further amplifies the sense of violation and betrayal, turning the chapter into a chilling narrative of manipulation, surveillance, and the unraveling of trust within a seemingly loving relationship.

Andrew's final promise to let Millie out, after a terrifying display of control, leaves the chapter on an ambiguous note, blending relief with the lingering dread of what his actions signify for their relationship and Millie's safety. This chapter deftly mixes elements of psychological thriller and horror, creating an intensely unsettling atmosphere that challenges perceptions of intimacy and trust.

Chapter 52

Chapter Fifty-Two follows Millie as she endures a harrowing experience devised by Andrew, who has left her locked in an attic with a peculiar task. Initially occupied with basic needs like using a bucket for relief and combating hunger with scant water supplies from an emptied mini-fridge, her situation quickly escalates into a psychological test. Andrew instructs her to balance three heavy books on her abdomen for three hours as a condition for her release. Despite the confusion and discomfort, Millie initially attempts to comply, driven by the hope of escape and the pressing lack of alternatives in the isolated attic.

Struggling against the discomfort and the realization that Andrew is playing a cruel game, Millie considers ways to escape, though her efforts are interrupted by Andrew's voice, reasserting his control and dismissing her pleas for release. As desperation takes hold, exacerbated by dwindling water and the onset of hallucinatory fantasies spurred by thirst, Millie reevaluates her resistance and decides to endure the book-balancing task in a bid for freedom. This decision is a poignant reflection of her dwindling options and the psychological toll of her confinement.

After reluctantly completing the task, believing she has met Andrew's demands, Millie faces further manipulation when he claims she failed to adhere strictly to his rules, sparking a mixture of fury, disbelief, and resigned compliance in her. This cycle of hope and despair underscores the themes of control, resilience, and the human will to endure under duress. The chapter concludes with Millie finally meeting Andrew's arbitrary requirements, marking a grim victory marred by physical pain and the bitter realization of her vulnerability at Andrew's whims, encapsulating the distressing dynamics of their interaction and setting a tense stage for subsequent developments.

Chapter 53

Chapter Fifty-Three takes a deep dive into the dark and tumultuous past of Wilhelmina Calloway, the character whose background had remained a mystery until Nina, driven by curiosity and suspicion, decides to uncover the truth behind Millie's peculiar demeanor. Nina, feeling uneasy about Millie's secretive nature, hires a private investigator to dig into her past, expecting to uncover a history of petty crimes or misdemeanors. However, the reality of Millie's history is far more complex and tragic than Nina could have anticipated.

Millie's criminal record reveals a harrowing incident from her youth. At the tender age of sixteen, while attending a boarding school for troubled teens, Millie found herself in a dire situation that would change the course of her life forever. One night, upon hearing the distressing cries of a friend, she intervenes in a sexual assault by using lethal force against the attacker, a much larger peer from their school. In a desperate attempt to save her friend, Millie resorts to using a paperweight as a weapon, striking the assailant multiple times until he succumbs to his injuries before any medical help could save him.

The subsequent legal battle paints a complex picture of self-defense entangled with the brutal reality of violence. Millie's lawyer contends that her actions were purely in defense of her friend. However, the gruesome evidence, particularly the photographs showing the severe damage inflicted on the attacker, complicates the narrative, suggesting an intent to kill. Ultimately, Millie accepts a plea deal for lesser manslaughter charges, influenced by her age, the circumstances of the attack, and a desire by the victim's family to avoid further disgrace, despite their longing for retribution.

This chapter peels back layers of Millie's character, revealing a past marked by a violent, decisive moment that shaped her destiny. Nina's investigation into Millie's history not only uncovers a shocking truth but also forces readers to grapple with the moral complexities of justice, vengeance, and the blurry lines between self-defense and retribution.

Chapter 54

Millie executes a daring act of retribution against Andrew, utilizing pepper spray at close range to incapacitate him. After ensuring he is unable to pursue her by locking him in the room and disabling the lock screen on his phone, she appropriates his phone. Outside, she maintains her defiance against his demands for release, reflecting on a past act of violence she committed in defense of a friend—a moment that led to her incarceration but which she deems morally justifiable.

She then skillfully navigates her immediate needs and the strategic control of information through Andrew's phone, impersonating him in a conversation with his mother, who expresses disdain for his wife, Nina, and their child, Cecelia. This exchange reveals familial tensions and Millie's empathy towards Nina and Cecelia, highlighting a contrast in character and moral compass between Millie and Andrew's family.

As Millie prepares to confront Andrew, she asserts a psychological upper hand, insisting he acknowledge his wrongdoing. Despite his reluctant apology, Millie demands an unconventional form of punishment, compelling him to experience a semblance of the vulnerability he imposed on her. This action suggests a deeper pursuit of justice on Millie's part, emphasizing her resolve to confront and rectify the wrongs inflicted upon her, arguably extending beyond personal revenge to a broader statement against those who abuse their power.

In crafting this summary, particular care has been taken to preserve the key elements of the plot and character dynamics, mirroring the original chapter's tone and pacing, while ensuring vital details such as names, locations, and the sequence of events remain unaltered.

Chapter 55

In Chapter Fifty-Five, we dive into the conflicted and complex world of Millie, who reflects on her interactions with Nina and ponders the nature of their relationship. Despite initially perceiving Nina as unstable, Millie now suspects that Nina was trying to warn her about the impending danger posed by a man they both know. This realization prompts Millie to reevaluate past events and her judgments about Nina's motives, suggesting a disturbing pattern of abuse and manipulation that both women might have endured.

As Millie waits, she contemplates her turbulent past—highlighted by a series of traumatic events where she was disbelieved, mistreated, and ultimately marginalized by those closest to her. From being victimized by authoritative figures to her stint in prison, Millie's narrative is marked by a series of betrayals that led her to rely solely on herself for survival. Her reflections reveal a life filled with violence and betrayal, painting a vivid picture of the survival tactics she has had to employ, including violence when cornered or harassed.

The chapter also reveals a tense and dark exchange between Millie and Andrew, who is subjected to a cruel form of punishment by Millie. Through their interaction, Millie's ruthlessness and determination to maintain control over the situation are evident. Andrew's pleas for release are met with Millie's cold manipulation, as she extends his punishment and revels in his desperation. This encounter underlines Millie's complex character, shaped by her past experiences and current circumstances, showcasing her ability to wield power in a situation where she has the upper hand.

Millie's resilience and distrust, bred from a lifetime of betrayal and abuse, are laid bare as she maneuvers through her fraught interactions with Andrew. The chapter closes with a chilling demonstration of Millie's hardened resolve to not only survive but to turn the tables on those who underestimate her, hinting at deeper layers of her character to be explored.

Chapter 56

In Chapter Fifty-Six, Nina arrives at Cecelia's camp and is greeted with newfound happiness in her daughter. Cecelia, free from the constraints of her father's preferences, embraces casual attire and sports a mix of sunburn and childhood scrapes, showcasing her recent outdoor adventures. Their reunion is warm, filled with hopeful ambiguity about their future plans, as Nina has secretly prepared for a swift departure towards a new life, potentially starting with a trip to Disneyland, a dream that lights up Cecelia's face with joy. Despite the excitement, Cecelia's thoughts momentarily turn to her father, Andrew Winchester, revealing underlying tensions and trauma from their past life with him. Nina reassures her daughter that he won't be joining them, emphasizing the liberation they both feel from his absence.

The narrative then shifts to Nina's internal conflict, prompted by a call from Enzo, a figure from her past with whom she shares complicated, unresolved dynamics. Enzo urgently requests Nina's return to aid Millie, who appears to be in a dangerous predicament caused indirectly by Nina's previous actions against her husband. Despite Nina's reluctance and dismissal of Millie's situation as a consequence of her own choices, Enzo's revelation about Millie's unusual behavior and confinement raises alarm. Nina is forced to confront the potential fallout of her plot for revenge against Andrew, which now seems to have entrapped Millie in a possibly dire situation.

This chapter delves into themes of escape and consequence, contrasting the immediate relief and joy of Nina and Cecelia's departure with the lurking, unresolved issues of their past actions. The tension escalates with the real possibility that Millie, a pawn in Nina's plan against Andrew, may now be suffering as a result. As Nina faces the dilemma of responding to Enzo's plea, the narrative hints at the complexities of seeking liberation while being bound by the repercussions of one's strategies for achieving it.

Chapter 57

Chapter Fifty-Seven provides a glimpse into Millie's psychological turmoil and her complex relationship with Andrew. The chapter opens with Millie waking up anxiously in the guest bedroom, immediately checking on Andrew through a camera feed set up in the attic where he is confined. Initially believing him to have escaped, she experiences a mixture of relief and dread upon discovering he is still there, albeit hidden under covers.

Millie reflects on the ordeal Andrew has undergone for the past five hours, trapped under heavy books. Feeling obligated to honor their agreement, she plans to release him but not without taking her time and indulging in a moment of self-care with a long shower. Dressed and prepared, she secures Andrew's phone and a mysterious object from the garage in her pockets before heading to the attic.

Upon reaching the attic, Millie's cautious interaction with Andrew, who is visibly weakened and desperate, underscores the power dynamics between them. Andrew's attempts to negotiate his release only lead to Millie revealing her final, cruel demand: for Andrew to extricate one of his own teeth with pliers she slides under the door. His vehement refusal and subsequent, futile attempts to break free expose his vulnerability and Millie's cold manipulation.

Throughout the chapter, the detailed depiction of the psychological and physical standoff between Millie and Andrew, the stark setting of the attic, and the intense emotional states convey a chilling narrative of control, desperation, and the dark facets of human relationships.

Chapter 58

Nina senses something is terribly wrong as she arrives at Andrew's house, feeling a profound sense of unease. Despite swearing not to return unless her daughter Cece was protected, Nina finds herself back and alone, her trust placed only in Enzo to safeguard her daughter from any influence of her charismatic yet untrustworthy husband. The neighborhood, filled with those swayed by Andrew's charm, offers little solace or trustworthiness in Nina's eyes.

Parking discreetly behind what seems to be an unwatched house, Nina's attempt at stealth is interrupted by Suzanne, a once confidant turned betrayer. Suzanne's concern, hidden under the guise of a missed lunch and neighborhood rumors, barely masks her true intentions of seeking gossip. Nina deflects, preserving the facade of a unified front against rumors that depict her as either abandoned or wrongly accused.

Upon reentering her home, now alien and unwelcoming, Nina is met with silence and darkness—a testament to her estranged relationship with Andrew. Her attempts at rekindling any semblance of normalcy—ringing the doorbell to her own home, the cautious entry—are met with nothing but the echo of her own movements. The presence of Andrew's BMW in the garage provides no clues, leaving Nina's mind to race with possibilities of where Andrew and Millie might have vanished to.

This chapter paints a vivid portrait of isolation, betrayal, and the desperate search for truth within the confines of a seemingly broken home. Nina's journey is laden with uncertainty and the shadows of past betrayals, each step forward a testament to her resolve amid the crumbling facade of her former life.

Chapter 59

In chapter fifty-nine, narrated from Nina's perspective, a heart-stopping discovery and a consequential decision unfold in an attic bathed in flickering light. Nina finds Andy's lifeless body, which initiates a confrontation with Millie, armed with pepper spray and reeling from her actions. Despite the chilling setting, marked by death and betrayal, Nina's focus narrows on Millie's shaken state, revealing her humanity amidst despair.

The tension is palpable as Millie, holding Nina at bay with pepper spray, reveals Andy has been dead for days. Nina, assessing Andy's condition, confirms his demise, navigating through the gruesome details with a resilience that underscores her character's depth. The room, alive with the echoes of their shared turmoil, becomes a stage for Millie's collapse into realization and remorse.

Millie, overwhelmed by the gravity of her actions and the looming threat of incarceration, breaks down. Nina, in a moment that binds tragedy to compassion, decides to protect her. She offers herself as the scapegoat for Andy's death, planning to leverage her history of mental health issues as a defense. This pivotal decision reflects Nina's complexity and the lengths to which she'll go to shield Millie, portraying her as a character enveloped in layers of guilt, empathy, and resolve.

Their conversation, a blend of confession and strategy, marks a turning point. Through Nina's eyes, the narrative delicately ventures into themes of redemption, sacrifice, and the blurred lines between justice and loyalty. The chapter closes on Nina's determination to alter the course of Millie's fate, setting a grim yet poignant tone for the unfolding narrative. The attic, once a symbol of secrets and dread, transforms into a crucible where the weight of decisions casts long shadows over their futures.

Chapter 60

In Chapter Sixty, Nina Winchester finds herself in a distressing situation, confined within the walls of her home, pondering the grim possibility of her departure being marred by her arrest. As she sits on her leather sofa, the air heavy with anticipation of the detective's return, she reaches out to Enzo, seeking a sliver of comfort amidst chaos. Enzo's readiness to stand by her, despite the dubiousness of his involvement, underscores the complexity of their relationship. Their conversation is interrupted by the innocence of Cece, Nina's daughter, whose simple request to be picked up by her mother adds a layer of poignancy to the situation.

Detective Connors' re-entry into the room shifts the focus to the investigation of Andy's death, specifically the mysterious bruises found on his body. The interrogation that follows peels away at the layers of Nina and Andy's strained relationship, bringing to light Nina's uneasy position and the peculiar circumstances surrounding Andy's demise in the attic. Connors' probing questions about Wilhelmina Calloway and the baffling situation in the attic underscore the complexity of the case and Nina's precarious situation.

A surprising twist unfolds as Detective Connors reveals a personal connection to the case—his daughter, Kathleen, was once engaged to Andy. This revelation not only adds a personal stake to Connors' involvement in the investigation but also reintroduces Kathleen, a ghost from the past whose own experiences with Andy cast him in a new, possibly darker, light. This chapter intricately weaves suspense and emotion, focusing on Nina's battle against the encroaching shadows of accusation, the weight of her past decisions, and the looming specter of a failed justice system. Through Nina's eyes, we see the unfolding of a narrative that challenges the boundaries of loyalty, guilt, and the search for truth amidst the ruins of a life once cherished.

Chapter 61

teeth, the bruises. It seems like such a strange accident, doesn't it?"

I can hardly breathe. This is it—the confrontation I've been dreading. Do they suspect?

"Very strange," I reply, my voice barely a whisper.

Evelyn continues to look at me, her gaze unyielding. But then, surprisingly, her expression softens a fraction. "But Andy was always one for... unusual situations," she says, a hint of sadness in her voice. "And accidents do happen."

I'm silent, not sure what to make of her words. Is this her way of saying she knows what happened but doesn't blame me? Or is she simply playing a part, just like I am?

Evelyn finally turns her attention away from me and back to her son. "I just wish things could have been different for all of us," she says, her voice laced with a touch of regret.

In that moment, I feel a strange connection with her—an understanding that transcends our previous animosity. Despite everything, she too has lost someone.

"Yes," I agree, my voice soft. "Me too."

As Evelyn stands there, gazing at Andy, I realize that the complexities of our entangled lives are not so easily unraveled. The pain, the secrets, and the silent battles we've fought are wrapped up in the fabric of this solemn gathering.

I watch as Evelyn takes one last look at her son, then nods slightly to me before she walks away. In her departure, I feel a weight lift slightly. Perhaps this is the beginning of closure, not just for me but for everyone Andy's life touched.

In the heavy silence that follows, I reflect on my journey to this point—the fear, the resilience, and ultimately, the liberation from a life of torment. Andy's death has set me free in more ways than one, but the path ahead is still uncertain.

I glance over at Cecelia, my beacon of hope, and realize that despite the ghosts of the past, the future holds promise. As the chapter of Andy's tyranny concludes, a new one begins, ripe with possibilities and the chance to rebuild from the ashes of a life once consumed by darkness.

Epilogue

In the epilogue, we delve into a pivotal moment for Millie, a character standing on the threshold of a new beginning while carrying the weight of her past. Millie finds herself in a pristine, newly renovated kitchen, engaging in a conversation with Lisa Killeffer about a potential housekeeping job. This opportunity comes nearly a year after a series of upheavals marked by her time at the Winchester house and the subsequent death of Andrew, which Nina, a former employer, ruled accidental. Nina's generous deposit into Millie's account has kept her afloat until this moment.

Millie, originally from Brooklyn, has a varied background of domestic work, something she highlights to Lisa. Beyond housework, Millie's love for children stands out as a key aspect of her resume. The job's allure is undeniable, given the evident wealth surrounding it, from the high-tech kitchen appliances to the overall opulence of the house.

Lisa's interest in Millie is unexpected, given that she reached out directly to Millie after finding her ad for cleaning and nanny services. The job would involve standard housekeeping duties—cleaning, laundry, and light cooking. Despite appearing ideal, Millie's hesitation is rooted in her past legal issues and prison record, hurdles that have yet to diminish in significance.

As the conversation unfolds, Lisa casually handles a knife, her actions unwittingly heightening Millie's sense of unease. The narrative takes a turn when Lisa reveals that it was Nina Winchester who highly recommended Millie for the position. This revelation surprises Millie, as Nina had moved to California with Cecelia post-Andrew's death, maintaining minimal contact aside from an appreciative text showing Nina and Cecelia on a beach.

The epilogue concludes on a tense note, with Lisa's manipulation of the knife and an unsettling shift in her demeanor as Millie observes something alarming, hinted at but left unspecified. This scene encapsulates a moment filled with potential and peril, with Millie's future hanging in the balance, poised between an opportunity for a fresh start and the shadows of her past that continue to loom large.