Chapter 38

Chapter 38: 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.”