

Chapter 14

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I've been living with the Winchesters for about three weeks when I have my first parole officer meeting. I waited 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.

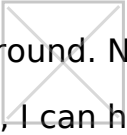
I shouldn’t think that. Nina is my boss. She gives me paychecks and a place to live. My loyalty is to her. But at the same time, she’s awful. She’s a slob, she’s constantly telling me conflicting information, and she can be incredibly cruel. Even Enzo, who’s got to be two hundred pounds of solid muscle,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

