

Chapter 9

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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.

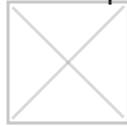
Andrew nods. "Gotcha."

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…”