

# Chapter 3

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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. Peri cola—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.”

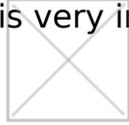
Maybe she feels guilty about the fact that their ginormous guestroom is lying empty while I am living in a room slightly larger than a broom closet. But that's fine. Anything larger than the backseat of my car is like a palace. I can't wait to sleep here tonight. I'm obscenely grateful.

“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.

