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

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.

THE HOUSEMAID
AN ABSOLUTELY ADDICTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL

THRILLER WITH A JAW-DROPPING TWIST



Contents

CONTENTS

Prologue

Part I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23



Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36



Prologue

Prologue opens with the protagonist in a state of escalating panic, aware that they are stuck in a seemingly inescapable situation. They are keenly aware that leaving the house now would not only be impossible but would also likely result in their immediate arrest. The decision to run, which they now regret not taking earlier, lingers in their mind like a missed opportunity. The police are in the house, and their discovery of a body upstairs has turned what was once an uncertain situation into a dire one. There is no turning back now. The weight of their predicament presses down on them, as they are moments away from being read their rights. The thought crosses their mind that the police haven't yet formally charged them—maybe they’re hoping to extract more information before making that move. It’s a slim hope, but the protagonist knows their window for escaping this mess has closed.

The protagonist's attention is drawn to the detective beside them, a man with graying black hair and a bulky build who sits comfortably on the lavish burnt-caramel Italian leather sofa. His frame seems almost out of place on such an expensive piece of furniture. The protagonist finds themselves wondering about his life outside this interrogation room, imagining him in a much less refined setting—perhaps a tacky, worn-out sofa at home, with rips and stains, far removed from the plush luxury he's currently lounging on. This momentary distraction, however, doesn’t last long as the horror of the situation sinks back in. While the protagonist’s mind briefly drifts to trivial thoughts, the detective’s mind is focused on something far darker—the discovery of a dead body in the attic. The reminder of that grim reality only heightens the tension in the room. The question about the body is not just a formal inquiry but also a push for a response, a critical point in the unfolding investigation.

The protagonist’s anxiety grows as the detective’s question hangs in the air, the silence amplifying the uncertainty. The need to give a clear, concise answer is

overshadowed by their internal struggle over whether or not to invoke their right to a lawyer. They are unsure about how the process works, caught between fear of saying the wrong thing and a need to protect themselves. Even though they know the right course of action is to ask for legal representation, the circumstances feel so overwhelming that their usual sense of self-preservation falters. The protagonist hesitates for a moment, wondering if it’s too late to make the right choice. When they finally answer, it’s with the simplest truth they can muster: they found the body about an hour ago. But even as they say these words, they realize they are only telling part of the story. The full truth—what led to this discovery, what they might have done or seen—remains unspoken, tucked away in the corners of their mind.

This chapter masterfully captures the protagonist’s growing unease as they try to navigate the interrogation while dealing with the reality of their situation. Each question from the detective seems more probing than the last, adding layers to the tension that is steadily building in the room. The protagonist feels like they are teetering on the edge, unsure whether to give in to the pressure and reveal more than they should, or to hold back, risking more serious consequences. The complexity of the situation is reflected in their internal conflict, as they try to maintain composure while the weight of the discovery upstairs looms over everything. The idea of being trapped, not just physically in the house but emotionally in this conversation, starts to feel suffocating. The tension is not only about the dead body but also about the unraveling of the protagonist’s own actions and decisions, which have brought them to this moment. This chapter, with its psychological depth, explores the fear and confusion of someone caught in a web of circumstance, torn between self-preservation and the consequences of their own choices. It highlights the complexity of dealing with an investigation where every word can mean the difference between freedom and guilt. The protagonist is left to wrestle with the ambiguity of their own involvement, knowing that any misstep could change the course of the entire situation.

Part I

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.

PART I

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: 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

Chapter 2

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

Chapter 3

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.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 follows Millie as she embarks on a difficult cleaning spree at Nina’s house, determined to make order out of the chaos she finds herself surrounded by. After a long seven hours of hard work, she tackles various areas of the house, starting with the living room, which is the first of many challenges. The pizza box stuck to the coffee table, caused by a sticky spill, becomes a frustrating obstacle that takes more time to clean than she anticipated. As she moves from room to room, the kitchen proves to be the most daunting space to handle. Overflowing garbage bags, a dishwasher packed with dirty dishes, and pans coated with what seems like days-old food form a truly overwhelming sight. Millie, however, refuses to give up and spends hours restoring some order to the kitchen. As exhausting as the process is, she feels a sense of accomplishment when she finally manages to get the kitchen back in a somewhat presentable state, despite the massive effort it took.

However, Millie’s sense of satisfaction is short-lived when she has an unexpected encounter with Cecelia, Nina’s daughter. Cecelia surprises Millie with her silent, almost eerie presence, and the intensity of her pale blue eyes only adds to the sense of discomfort that Millie feels. The first interaction between them is tense, as Millie, trying to bridge the gap, offers to prepare a snack for the girl, but Cecelia’s cryptic responses make it difficult for them to connect. Millie, feeling somewhat awkward, decides to prepare a snack of peanut butter and banana on crackers, thinking it would be a simple and well-received gesture. However, to her horror, she discovers that Cecelia is allergic to peanut butter, a detail Millie had no knowledge of. The situation escalates rapidly when Cecelia, alarmed and upset, accuses Millie of trying to harm her, which results in Millie feeling panicked and guilty. The tension peaks as Nina rushes into the room, her concern for Cecelia’s wellbeing apparent, but the entire scenario leaves Millie feeling overwhelmed.

Caught in a whirlwind of misunderstanding, Millie attempts to explain herself, only to be rebuked by Nina, who chastises her for neglecting to consider Cecelia’s peanut allergy. Nina’s anger is sharp, and Millie, still in shock, silently endures the scolding, feeling both embarrassed and frustrated. She had no idea about Cecelia’s allergy, and the lack of communication about such an important detail weighs heavily on her. Despite her attempt to clarify, Nina’s anger does not subside quickly, though she eventually calms down and issues a stern warning, insisting that Millie must be more mindful in the future. Millie, irritated by the situation but too cautious to challenge Nina directly, accepts the rebuke without a word. The chapter concludes with Millie feeling unsettled, confused by Nina’s harshness and questioning the fairness of the situation. She is left to prepare dinner, a task that now feels like another burden in her already strained and unpredictable role in the household.

This chapter serves as a pivotal moment in Millie’s journey, highlighting both the challenges she faces in adjusting to her new life and the complex relationships she must navigate within Nina’s family. The misunderstanding with Cecelia underscores the difficulties of trying to integrate into a family where important details, like allergies, are not communicated. Millie’s frustration is evident as she tries to balance her desire to do the right thing with the frustration of being blamed for something she couldn’t have known. The chapter also delves deeper into Nina’s control and her tendency to place blame quickly, which adds to the pressure Millie feels in trying to keep everything in order. What was meant to be a simple gesture of kindness quickly turns into a lesson in navigating the intricacies of family dynamics and the weight of responsibility that comes with her position. As Millie faces the unpredictable nature of her new job, her internal conflict continues to grow, as she’s torn between trying to prove her worth and struggling with the lack of communication and understanding in the household. The emotional toll of these misunderstandings foreshadows the many hurdles Millie will have to face as she continues to navigate her role within the family.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with Millie preparing dinner by 6:45 PM, the scent of marinated chicken breasts filling the air as they roast in the oven, following instructions from a service guide. The pleasant aroma greets Andrew Winchester when he arrives home, casually loosening his tie and complimenting Millie on both the meal’s smell and the pristine state of the kitchen. Although her day has gone well, Millie refrains from mentioning a small mishap with peanut butter earlier, not wanting to raise doubts about her ability to meet the standards of Andrew's family home—a place Nina, his wife, is traditionally credited with maintaining. Millie, trying to navigate her role in this new environment, is careful not to make waves, despite the growing tension within her.

As Andrew settles in, Nina arrives, looking as immaculate as always, yet Millie notices a shift from the woman she saw in an old photo, revealing a more refined, slightly different version of her. Andrew’s affectionate greeting to Nina is immediate, and a brief playful moment unfolds between them as they joke about who missed whom more, a light exchange that quickly becomes awkward for Millie. Feeling out of place, Millie watches the couple, acutely aware of the intimate bond they share. This moment, meant to be light-hearted, highlights Millie’s growing discomfort, as she feels increasingly alienated by the affectionate connection between Andrew and Nina. Their closeness underscores the emotional distance Millie feels in her role as an outsider, unsure of where she fits in the midst of their established relationship.

The tension further escalates when Andrew jokes about Nina's struggles in the kitchen, teasing her about their reliance on takeout since his mother moved to Florida. Millie, in this situation, is positioned as a solution to their mealtime difficulties, as Andrew lightheartedly acknowledges her culinary skills. While this jest is meant to be humorous, Nina’s discomfort is palpable, highlighting the deeper, often unspoken

pressures within their marriage, particularly the expectations placed on women to fulfill certain domestic roles. Nina’s discomfort is evident in her response, a reflection of the strain between public appearances and private frustrations. The remark underscores the gendered expectations that often go unnoticed in relationships, especially when one partner, in this case, Nina, feels unable to meet those expectations due to various reasons.

Andrew’s attempt to include Millie in their dinner is met with Nina’s subtle but noticeable hesitation, revealing her discomfort with Millie’s increasing role in their lives. This moment exposes the fragility of their relationship, where even casual interactions between Andrew and Millie create an undercurrent of tension for Nina. Millie, sensitive to the fragile dynamic, declines the invitation, not wanting to escalate the moment into something more uncomfortable. By choosing to distance herself, Millie avoids deepening the potential conflict, but the decision also highlights the delicate balance of power and intimacy within the household. Millie’s choice, though modest, speaks volumes about the underlying complexities and unspoken issues in the Winchester home, making her position within this family more precarious and uncertain.

This chapter offers a rich exploration of the Winchester household's dynamics, subtly revealing the layers of tension, expectation, and interpersonal conflict beneath the surface of what might initially appear as a perfect family life. While Andrew and Nina share a seemingly affectionate relationship, their interactions, both lighthearted and strained, expose the underlying pressures each partner faces. The unspoken social norms and gender expectations within their marriage are evident, with Nina struggling to meet the role she is expected to play, while Millie feels like a reluctant participant in a game she doesn’t fully understand. As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that the social and emotional complexities within the household are far from simple, reflecting broader themes of identity, domestic roles, and the pressures that shape relationships in subtle but significant ways.

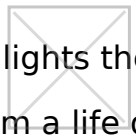
Chapter 6

Chapter 6 delves into the protagonist’s emotional transition from living out of their car to finding a semblance of comfort in a proper bed, a milestone they haven’t experienced in a long time. The cot, although uncomfortable with its lumpy texture and noisy frame, represents a significant improvement over the back seat of their car. For the first time in what feels like ages, the protagonist enjoys a sense of safety and ease, something they haven’t felt during the many restless nights spent at various rest stops. These previous nights were filled with anxiety and the constant readiness to protect themselves, clutching mace for reassurance. Now, in a proper bed, there’s a newfound sense of luxury—being able to use a bathroom without fear and falling asleep without the usual worry.

However, this newfound comfort quickly fades when the protagonist is briefly awakened in the middle of the night, caught off guard by the unfamiliarity of the space. For a moment, they panic, unsure of where they are, confused by the absence of their car—a place that had become their refuge. The stillness of the room and the quiet surroundings momentarily disorient the protagonist, and the comfort they had felt evaporates into a fleeting moment of fear. In that moment, they are reminded of the vast changes they’ve undergone, particularly the recent acceptance of a job offer from Nina and the transition into a new room. These new experiences should provide reassurance, but the unfamiliarity of the situation disrupts their calm. Yet, as they process the change, the protagonist remembers that their life is in a better place now, and the panic subsides into a calm realization.

The peace doesn’t last long, though. When the protagonist attempts to open the door to leave the room, they face an unexpected hurdle: the door won’t budge. This moment of frustration disrupts the calm and comfort, symbolizing the unpredictable challenges that come with change. The protagonist, once again reminded of the lack of

control they have over their environment, is confronted by a physical barrier that represents the emotional and mental challenges they may face in their new life. The inability to open the door becomes a metaphor for the barriers and uncertainties that often arise when trying to move forward, despite the desire for stability. In many ways, the protagonist’s journey mirrors this moment—stepping into a new life, hoping for a sense of security, but encountering unforeseen obstacles along the way.



This chapter highlights the complexities of moving forward and adapting to change. The transition from a life of uncertainty to one of relative safety is not without its emotional and physical challenges. The protagonist’s comfort, symbolized by the cot and the simple act of sleeping in a bed, is overshadowed by the realization that their journey is not as straightforward as it might seem. The locked door stands as a reminder that even when one seeks comfort and security, there will always be moments of doubt and struggle. This symbolizes the emotional turbulence that comes with change—trying to find stability while grappling with the unknown. The protagonist’s experience encapsulates the delicate balance between hope and fear, a balance that is central to the process of moving on from the past and embracing a new future.

As the chapter progresses, the protagonist’s internal conflict becomes more pronounced. Despite the fear and discomfort, they find solace in the small victories—such as having a bed to sleep in, being able to use a bathroom without concern, and the promise of a fresh start. Yet, the locked door serves as a reminder that change is a gradual process, often accompanied by setbacks and unforeseen challenges. The chapter beautifully captures the theme of adaptation, showing the protagonist’s struggle to embrace their new circumstances while acknowledging the uncertainty that accompanies such transitions. It is a poignant exploration of the emotional adjustments involved in leaving behind a life of instability for the hope of a more secure future.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 opens with the narrator descending to the kitchen, only to be greeted by a scene of utter disorder and turmoil. Nina, in a state of heightened agitation, has taken apart the kitchen, tossing pots, pans, and broken dishes across the floor in a frenzy. Amid her chaotic search through the refrigerator, she inadvertently knocks over a container of milk, sending it splashing across the floor in a flood of white liquid that mixes with the shattered remnants of the kitchenware. The scene feels overwhelming, a reflection of Nina’s emotional state as she reacts to whatever has set her off, turning the kitchen into a war zone of sorts. The mess is not just physical but emotional, as the kitchen becomes a symbol of Nina’s inner chaos.

The tension reaches a peak when Nina, spotting the narrator, immediately confronts them, demanding to know where her notes for the evening’s PTA meeting have gone. She insists that the notes were left on the kitchen counter but are now mysteriously missing. Her distress is palpable as she searches desperately for the notes, growing increasingly frustrated. The narrator, unsure where they might be, denies knowing their whereabouts and suggests other possible places where the notes could have been moved, but these suggestions seem to aggravate Nina even more. Her agitation builds, and every word from the narrator seems to fuel her anger, as she becomes convinced that the notes have either been lost or discarded. The tension between them grows, with Nina unable to hear any reasonable explanations, fixated instead on the belief that the notes were purposely moved or hidden by the narrator.

The escalating commotion catches the attention of Andrew, Nina’s husband, who enters the scene dressed impeccably in a sharp suit, a stark contrast to the chaotic environment he walks into. His appearance—calm and collected—stands in direct opposition to Nina’s frantic state, and it’s clear that he is used to managing the fallout of such outbursts. As he surveys the destruction, his focus turns to Nina, who quickly

accuses the narrator of hiding or discarding the notes. Despite the narrator's attempts to explain their innocence, Nina's accusations are unwavering, and Andrew's presence only seems to heighten the tension, making it even harder for the narrator to make their case. The power dynamics at play here are evident, as Andrew's authoritative position in the household and Nina's emotional distress seem to silence any valid defense. In an attempt to resolve the situation, Andrew suggests that the notes might have been digitally backed up in some way, providing a glimmer of hope that the issue could be solved without further incident. However, Nina's dissatisfaction does not subside, and she directs her frustration at the narrator, assigning them the task of cleaning up the catastrophic mess she has created in the kitchen. In her haste to escape the situation, Nina exits the room, leaving the narrator alone with the daunting task of restoring order to the disaster she's left behind.

As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that this moment of chaos is not just about missing notes, but about the larger dynamics within the household. Nina's explosive outburst highlights the emotional instability that often underpins her actions, and the narrator's reaction reveals how deeply affected they are by Nina's accusations. The way Nina redirects her frustration onto the narrator, despite their lack of involvement in the situation, speaks volumes about the tension in their relationship and the way emotional turmoil can be misdirected. The contrast between Andrew's calm and Nina's frantic energy also serves as a subtle commentary on the different ways people handle stress and conflict in a domestic setting. Andrew, seemingly unaffected by the emotional storm around him, takes a more pragmatic approach, suggesting a digital solution to the problem, while Nina's focus remains on the physical act of blaming and accusing, ultimately leading to the narrator being saddled with the responsibility of cleaning up the physical and emotional mess. This moment underscores the imbalance of power in their household, where one person's emotional breakdown results in another person's physical labor.

The chapter also reflects the psychological and emotional burdens that come with living in a household where tension, blame, and frustration are so easily projected onto

others. The narrator, caught in the middle of Nina’s turmoil, has to deal with the practical fallout of an emotional outburst, cleaning up not only the physical remnants of the chaos but also the emotional weight that comes with being the target of Nina’s frustration. The emotional landscape of the household is complex, filled with unsaid words, hidden feelings, and an underlying current of control that flows through the interactions between the characters. The chapter highlights the difficult position of living under such tension, where the smallest things—like misplaced notes—can spiral into larger conflicts, revealing the fragile nature of relationships when emotional instability is a factor. The narrator’s internal struggle to manage Nina’s moods and accusations, while trying to maintain some sense of their own autonomy, adds depth to their character and underscores the theme of emotional labor that so often falls on individuals in controlling or dysfunctional relationships. The act of cleaning up after Nina’s breakdown becomes a metaphor for the constant emotional cleanup that the narrator must perform in this household, constantly at the mercy of Nina’s unpredictable mood swings and Andrew’s indifferent responses.

This chapter encapsulates the emotional and psychological weight of living in a turbulent household, where the lines between responsibility, blame, and emotional manipulation are often blurred. The events in the kitchen offer a snapshot of the power dynamics at play, revealing how quickly minor issues can escalate into full-blown emotional crises. For readers, this chapter speaks to the broader issues of domestic life, power, and emotional manipulation, offering insights into how seemingly small actions can have disproportionate consequences in the context of controlling relationships. It also explores the ways in which individuals cope with these dynamics, highlighting the emotional resilience required to navigate such environments.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

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

Chapter 9

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

Chapter 10

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.”

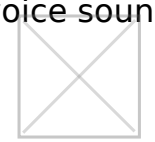
My mouth falls open. “You’re pregnant?”

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

Chapter 11

“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

Chapter 12

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…”

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 opens with the narrator busy vacuuming the living room when she notices a shadow moving outside the window. Curiosity piqued, she steps closer to the window and sees Enzo working in the backyard, digging at the flower bed in the front yard. From what the narrator gathers, Enzo appears to rotate between houses, taking on various landscaping tasks. His presence has become a normal part of the household rhythm, yet something about the day feels different as the narrator’s thoughts start to wander, especially regarding Nina’s health.

Feeling unsettled, the narrator grabs an empty glass from the kitchen and fills it with cold water, unsure of what she hopes to accomplish by approaching Enzo. She steps outside, a bit unsure of herself but driven by a growing curiosity. After overhearing two women discussing Nina’s supposed mental instability, the narrator can't shake the thoughts that have been building in her mind. Her unease only grows when she discovers antipsychotic medication in Nina’s medicine cabinet, making her question the situation further. While she isn’t one to judge anyone for having psychological struggles—having encountered many women in similar circumstances during her time in prison—the narrator feels it would be helpful to understand Nina's situation better. She wonders if gaining insight into Nina's mental health might offer clarity, perhaps even allowing her to find ways to support her.

Recalling Enzo's cryptic behavior on her first day, when he seemed to hint at something, the narrator senses that now might be the right time to approach him for answers. With Nina away, Andrew at work, and Cecelia at school, she recognizes an opportunity to confront the mystery, even if the language barrier makes it difficult. The only challenge is that Enzo speaks very little English, so communication could prove difficult. Regardless, she figures that offering him the glass of water would be a kind gesture, and maybe, just maybe, he’ll be more willing to talk. As she steps outside, she

finds Enzo engrossed in his work, still digging away without acknowledging her presence. Undeterred, she clears her throat several times, trying to catch his attention, but he remains focused on the task at hand. Finally, she waves her hand and says, “Hola!”—realizing too late that she might have used Spanish instead of Italian.

Enzo finally looks up, an amused smile playing on his lips as he responds with a cheerful, “Ciao.” His reaction, lighthearted yet slightly knowing, shows that he is aware of her attempts at communication, despite the language gap. This brief interaction highlights the growing sense of complexity between the narrator and Enzo, and perhaps even the greater mystery surrounding Nina’s mental state. Enzo’s presence, coupled with the underlying tension in the air, signals that there are layers of meaning and secrets yet to be uncovered in the household. The protagonist’s simple gesture of offering a glass of water becomes a symbol of her desire to bridge the distance between herself and the people in the house, particularly Enzo, who seems to hold some hidden knowledge.

In this chapter, the narrator’s curiosity about Nina’s mental state and her interactions with Enzo reflect the larger theme of discovering the truth about those we live with and the emotional complexity of trying to understand someone else's private struggles. The protagonist’s internal dialogue reveals a deep desire to help Nina and connect with her, but the realization that she doesn't fully understand Nina’s situation heightens the tension. The language barrier with Enzo adds a layer of complexity to the situation, as the narrator tries to navigate her way through the maze of unspoken rules and secrets in the house. While the attempt to communicate with Enzo is driven by a genuine desire to understand Nina’s behavior, it also highlights the challenges faced when trying to connect with others, especially in a household filled with tension and unspoken expectations.

The chapter captures the tension between the narrator’s need for answers and the hesitations that come with not fully understanding the people around her. This dynamic of trying to reach out, combined with the complicated nature of Nina's behavior, emphasizes how deeply psychological issues can affect relationships within a

home. As the narrator continues to grapple with the complexities of Nina’s mental health, her attempts to communicate with Enzo reveal both the potential for connection and the difficulty of bridging the emotional gaps that exist between them. The unease the narrator feels grows, and this chapter illustrates the fine line between wanting to understand and the challenges that come with trying to understand someone else's deeply personal struggles.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14

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."

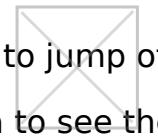
"It's fine to use our monitor, Millie. You probably won't get much reception up there anyway." The whites of his eyes glow in the light of the television. "I'll be out of your hair in a minute. I'm just grabbing a glass of water."

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.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15

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.

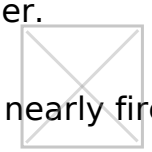
When I come into her bathroom to clean in the morning, there are usually at least three or four towels strewn on the floor, sopping wet. There's usually toothpaste caked into the sink that I have to scrub to get free. Nina has some sort of aversion to throwing her clothes in the laundry basket, so it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

Chapter 16

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 badmouthing 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

Chapter 17

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

Chapter 18

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

Chapter 19

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

Chapter 20

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

Chapter 21

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

Chapter 22

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.

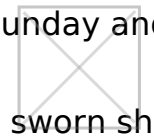
“Three days?” Nina repeats. “Millie, I asked you to book the tickets for a week from Sunday! I distinctly remember.”

“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

Chapter 23

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."

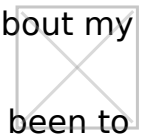
I almost gasp. "That's so generous."

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

Chapter 24

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

Chapter 25

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.”

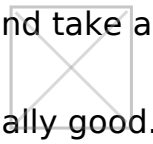
“Wow.” Not only did I not spend any time studying French in college, I never went to college at all. My high school diploma is a GED.

“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 26 provides a vivid recounting of a pivotal evening where the protagonist and Andrew share an enjoyable and carefree dinner, deliberately avoiding any discussion of Nina. This decision allows their conversation to flow naturally, with the lightheartedness heightened by the wine they drink together. The atmosphere is one of relaxed camaraderie, where both characters, clearly enjoying each other's company, indulge in their evening, allowing themselves to forget the weight of their responsibilities, even if just for a moment. As the evening progresses, the mood shifts when Andrew becomes visibly preoccupied, the effects of their inebriation becoming more apparent. The reality of their situation dawns on them as Andrew realizes that he cannot drive back to Long Island due to his level of intoxication. The conversation that follows takes a more practical turn, as they begin to consider how to safely finish their night. Andrew, taking the lead, suggests that they utilize their reservation at The Plaza, a proposal that immediately sparks both a sense of excitement and anxiety, particularly as it involves an unexpected closeness between them.

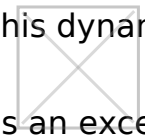
This proposal brings with it an undeniable tension, compounded by the circumstances: Andrew's wife is not present, both of them are somewhat intoxicated, and an unspoken sexual tension lingers beneath the surface. Initially, the protagonist is hesitant, recognizing the implications of such a decision and labeling it as a "huge mistake." She acknowledges her mistrust, not of Andrew, but of herself in the face of temptation. She fears what might happen if they allow themselves to follow through on the unspoken attraction that has been growing between them. However, Andrew, sensing her discomfort and wanting to reassure her, proposes a practical solution: they will take separate rooms at The Plaza, ensuring that no indiscretion takes place. His offer, though well-intentioned, does little to dispel the weight of the situation, as both know that the evening's events could easily escalate. The suggestion of separate

rooms provides some relief, yet it cannot erase the underlying tension of what might happen if they abandon their moral compasses, especially in a setting where emotions and alcohol cloud judgment. The chapter reveals not only their growing chemistry but the complexity of human emotions when coupled with inebriation, desire, and the absence of certain boundaries.

As they make their way to the hotel, the tension continues to build during the taxi ride. Andrew's attention to the protagonist's appearance is more than just casual observation; his comments on her attire, coupled with the playful nature of the conversation, make it clear that his attraction to her is no longer subtle. This moment, albeit under the influence of alcohol, lays bare the attraction between them, which neither can ignore. Andrew's compliments, particularly his praise of her beauty, stir something within the protagonist, making her acutely aware of the vulnerability and desire simmering beneath the surface of their conversation. The scene is charged with emotional intensity, as both characters respond to the unspoken feelings that have been building for some time. In this moment of vulnerability, the lines between professional boundaries and personal desires become increasingly blurred, leaving the protagonist caught between the allure of Andrew and the ethical dilemmas that come with such an attraction. The chapter masterfully explores how emotions, especially those stirred by alcohol, can cloud judgment and lead to decisions that might not be made in a sober state.

The complexity of their relationship deepens as the chapter unfolds, capturing the interplay between desire, loyalty, and internal conflict. The protagonist grapples with the allure of Andrew's attention and the undeniable chemistry they share, but she is also keenly aware of the potential consequences of crossing a line. This conflict between personal desire and the professional and ethical boundaries that should govern their relationship is the core of the chapter's tension. The protagonist's internal struggle is both relatable and emotionally charged, as she weighs the consequences of her actions, knowing that her choices could have lasting implications. Meanwhile, Andrew, though equally attracted, seems less burdened by the potential fallout, which

complicates the situation even further. His carefree attitude about the cost of the hotel and his willingness to go to The Plaza reflect his view of the evening as something that can be easily managed, whereas for the protagonist, it feels like a slippery slope. As the chapter comes to a close, both characters are left at a crossroads, uncertain of what their next steps will be. The unresolved sexual tension between them, coupled with their moral dilemmas, creates a palpable sense of anticipation, leaving the reader wondering how this dynamic will evolve.



This chapter does an excellent job of capturing the nuanced tension that exists in relationships, particularly when personal desires conflict with professional and moral boundaries. It sheds light on the emotional complexity that many individuals face when tempted by attraction, especially when influenced by alcohol or other temporary factors. The protagonist’s internal conflict is a realistic portrayal of the struggle many people face in navigating the grey areas of personal and professional relationships. The chapter not only moves the plot forward but also explores deeper themes of desire, loyalty, and self-control, which are universal in their relevance. It highlights the challenges of maintaining ethical standards when confronted with temptation, and the difficulty of balancing personal desires with the fear of the consequences that may follow. This moral dilemma is an essential aspect of the narrative, giving the reader insight into the characters’ motivations and the stakes at play in their interactions.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 opens with a quiet, almost suffocating drive back to the Island, where the atmosphere between Andrew and the narrator is noticeably tense. There’s hardly any conversation, as Andrew is consumed with thoughts of his upcoming meeting in the city and the need to change into proper attire. For him, this drive is more than just a return home; it serves as a mental preparation for the tasks ahead. The mundane nature of the journey seems to amplify the distance between him and the narrator, who remains in her own thoughts, concerned about an issue that is seemingly trivial yet emotionally charged. She has forgotten to take out the garbage, a task Nina had assigned her, and the thought of this slip-up weighs heavily on her mind. She fears the repercussions of failing to uphold the household's meticulous order, especially considering Nina’s exacting nature. The small mistake casts a shadow over the drive, amplifying the narrator's sense of unease and her inability to escape the rigid expectations imposed upon her.

As they near their destination, the tension is palpable, with the narrator anxiously awaiting Andrew’s reaction to her forgotten chore. Andrew, seemingly sensing her anxiety, assures her that he will take care of the issue, even though it means dealing with the trash himself. Despite the inconvenience, he steps in to handle the situation, attempting to alleviate some of the pressure the narrator feels. This gesture, though seemingly kind, also highlights the imbalance of power between them, where even the smallest of tasks becomes a point of stress and conflict. Upon arriving home, they are met by Enzo, the landscaper, whose unexpected presence further complicates the situation. His timing, combined with his disapproving demeanor, sets the tone for an encounter full of underlying tension. Andrew approaches him with a request to help with the garbage, which Enzo initially resists, hinting at a reluctance to engage in any task that falls outside of his duties. The interaction quickly becomes an uncomfortable

negotiation, where Andrew, frustrated, raises the payment offer to persuade Enzo to assist. Enzo’s hesitance and the somewhat strained communication between them underscore the discomfort that exists in their relationship, revealing that their professional interactions may not be as straightforward as they appear.

Through this exchange, the chapter subtly explores the underlying tensions between Andrew and Enzo, which go far beyond the mundane matter of garbage disposal. Andrew’s dissatisfaction with Enzo’s work ethic and his frequent presence on their property reveals a deeper unease that has been simmering for some time. While the interaction initially seems to center around the task of taking out the trash, it becomes clear that there is more to their relationship than just a simple disagreement. Enzo’s reluctance to help, coupled with the awkwardness of the negotiation, hints at a power struggle between the two men, one that is compounded by their differing social positions and the language barrier. Andrew’s frustration with Enzo is apparent, but it is also indicative of a deeper discomfort with the level of involvement Enzo has in their private lives, suggesting that Andrew’s control over the household may be more fragile than it seems. Moreover, the fact that Enzo eventually agrees to the task, albeit reluctantly, signals that there may be some unspoken dynamic at play, one that involves not just financial transactions but a complex web of power, influence, and perhaps even resentment.

The chapter also sheds light on the broader issues of trust and control within the household, particularly through the lens of Nina’s influence. Enzo’s role in the household seems to be more than just that of a landscaper; his presence in their home and his interactions with both Andrew and the narrator suggest a level of involvement that is not entirely welcomed. The tension between Andrew and Enzo hints at a more significant discomfort with the way Nina’s directives have shaped the dynamics within the household. It’s clear that Nina’s presence looms large, influencing not just the actions of those around her but also creating a sense of unease and suspicion. The strained relationship between Andrew and Enzo, paired with the narrator’s own discomfort, underscores the complex, sometimes hostile, atmosphere in which they all

live. This chapter paints a picture of a household where relationships are anything but simple, and even the smallest actions are weighed down by the pressures of power, control, and unspoken tensions.

The mundane issue of the garbage disposal serves as a backdrop for the deeper emotional and psychological struggles that each character faces. The chapter is not just about a disagreement over trash; it is a metaphor for the broader dynamics at play, where every action, no matter how small, is colored by the weight of authority and control. The uncomfortable negotiation with Enzo highlights the difficulty of maintaining boundaries and managing power dynamics in a household that is fraught with tension and hidden conflicts. This chapter skillfully illustrates the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the quiet battles for control, respect, and autonomy that shape the lives of the characters. For the narrator, the act of forgetting the garbage and the subsequent consequences become symbols of the larger struggle for agency in a household ruled by unspoken rules and oppressive expectations. In the midst of these quiet struggles, the chapter emphasizes the importance of recognizing the complexities of domestic life and the ways in which small moments can reveal much larger truths about the characters and their relationships.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 begins with Nina returning home in the early afternoon after dropping Cecelia off at camp, carrying four large shopping bags from an unplanned spree. She drops the bags unceremoniously in the living room, her excitement palpable as she eagerly begins to share her finds with Millie. Nina's appearance, however, is far from the polished image she might usually project—her clothes are marked with sweat stains, and her hair is disheveled, making Millie question Andrew’s continued affection for her. Millie is left confused, trying to reconcile the image of Nina with her own feelings about Andrew and the complexities of their relationships.

When Nina instructs Millie to carry the heavy shopping bags upstairs, it feels like another blow to Millie’s already fragile sense of self. She is reminded of the imbalance of power within the household, with Nina continuing to act as if Millie’s role is to serve her without question. The situation grows more uncomfortable when Nina comments on Millie’s physical state, implying that she has grown soft and lazy. These words feel like a personal critique, adding to Millie’s growing sense of frustration and self-doubt, and deepening the divide between them. Millie is left feeling belittled, but also increasingly aware of the subtle power dynamics at play, where her own needs and desires are often dismissed or overlooked.

As Millie struggles to carry the heavy bags, Nina shifts the conversation to an unexpected topic—Millie’s failure to answer the house phone the previous night. This, Nina claims, is part of Millie’s responsibilities, further placing Millie in a position where she feels like a servant, expected to manage every small detail without fail. Caught off guard and unsure about Andrew’s late-night whereabouts, Millie stammers an excuse, unaware that Nina's suspicions about her actions are beginning to grow. Millie is burdened with the knowledge that Nina is completely unaware of the intimate moment she shared with Andrew, and the fear of Nina discovering their secret weighs heavily

on her. The tension of this unspoken truth continues to build as Millie feels the pressure of Nina's potential discovery—an event that could shatter the delicate balance of their already complicated relationships.

Once Millie manages to bring the bags upstairs to the master bedroom, her attention is drawn to the master bathroom, which is immaculately clean. The sight triggers a deeply disturbing memory—one that haunts Millie—of a young Cecelia, whom she remembers being forced under water in the bathtub by Nina in a chilling display of power. The memory of this event floods Millie with a sense of dread, as she imagines the pain and trauma Cecelia may have experienced in that moment. Standing in the large bathroom, Millie is confronted by the grim realization of the household's dark past, one that is fraught with secrets, manipulation, and emotional scars that have been buried but never truly healed. The heavy atmosphere of the house and the oppressive memories of Nina's control weigh on Millie, as she contemplates the emotional damage done and the difficult road ahead for her and Cecelia.

In this chapter, the narrative deeply explores the psychological effects of living in an environment controlled by a dominant, manipulative figure. Millie is caught in the emotional struggle between wanting to assert her independence and the overwhelming presence of Nina's influence, which continues to permeate every aspect of her life. Nina's actions, from belittling Millie's physical appearance to publicly revealing her past mistakes, serve to keep Millie in a constant state of submission and anxiety. Millie's internal conflict becomes more pronounced as she grapples with the growing distance between herself and Andrew, and the increasing weight of the secrets she is keeping from him.

The chapter also sheds light on the long-lasting effects of trauma and manipulation, especially within families. Nina's subtle, and not-so-subtle, control over Millie's life demonstrates how deeply entrenched power dynamics can shape one's sense of self-worth and identity. For Millie, every small act of rebellion or desire for autonomy feels like an uphill battle, as Nina's oppressive presence continues to undermine her at every turn. The revelation of Cecelia's past abuse also hints at a much deeper

emotional issue, one that suggests Nina’s manipulation may have been at the root of much of the family’s dysfunction. This creates a disturbing contrast between the seemingly perfect domestic setting and the dark undercurrents that threaten to unravel the household.

The themes of power, control, and emotional manipulation are central to this chapter, with Millie’s struggle to reclaim her autonomy reflecting a universal desire for self-determination in the face of oppressive forces. The chapter also serves as a poignant reminder of the lasting effects that unchecked authority can have on individuals, particularly when emotional and psychological abuse are at play. Millie’s journey is one of emotional resilience, as she seeks to navigate her relationships with Andrew and Nina while struggling with the weight of her past and the complex web of secrets that entangle her. For anyone who has experienced emotional manipulation or trauma, the chapter highlights the importance of breaking free from controlling environments in order to reclaim one’s sense of self-worth and independence.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 opens with an air of somber quiet in the Winchester household, marked by the absence of Cecelia, which contrasts sharply with Nina’s unexpected cheerfulness. Millie, still reeling from an undisclosed event, finds herself struggling with an awkward distance between herself and Andrew. Their once easy rapport has been strained, and the tension between them is palpable as they navigate their interactions, particularly in the kitchen. As Millie prepares dinner, a brief collision with Andrew leads to the breaking of a glass, an act that momentarily sparks a flicker of intimacy between them. However, this brief connection is quickly interrupted by Nina's unexpected entrance, a sharp reminder of the imbalance of power that exists within the household.

This incident serves as a subtle but powerful reminder of the undeniable chemistry between Millie and Andrew, one that continues to simmer beneath the surface, despite the emotional barriers that have formed between them. However, it also highlights the stark differences in their positions within the household, particularly in terms of their social standing. Nina, ever watchful, later uses a dinner conversation to assert her dominance over Millie, casually revealing Millie’s past imprisonment. What could have been a quiet, private aspect of Millie’s history is instead weaponized by Nina, who uses it as a tool to undermine Millie and publicly assert her control. This revelation not only exposes Nina’s manipulation but also serves to reinforce the divide between Millie and Andrew, effectively severing any potential bond that might have been forming between them.

Nina’s strategic mention of Millie’s past imprisonment is not a mere slip of the tongue, but a deliberate act designed to maintain her hold over Millie and remind her of her place within the social hierarchy of the household. It also forces Millie into an uncomfortable moment of introspection, as she grapples with the weight of her past and its potential impact on her future. Millie begins to question how long Nina has

known about her history and why she would choose to use such personal information in such a public manner. As the evening progresses, Millie discovers a playbill from a show she had attended with Andrew, something she had kept as a private memento, now carelessly placed on her nightstand. This small detail reveals a disturbing breach of privacy, hinting at Nina's manipulative tendencies and her potential surveillance of Millie, using every piece of information she can gather to assert control.

The chapter delves deeply into themes of power dynamics, control, and the long-lasting effects of past mistakes on one's identity and relationships. Millie's internal struggle highlights the emotional complexity of her situation, as she is forced to reconcile her past with her present reality. Her growing awareness of Nina's manipulation and the hurdles that her history poses to any potential future with Andrew reveals the strength required to withstand judgment and control. In a household where power is continually being asserted by Nina, Millie must navigate the delicate balance of maintaining her dignity and autonomy while confronting the impact of her past on her present interactions. The themes of resilience, manipulation, and emotional vulnerability run throughout this chapter, setting the stage for Millie's ongoing journey toward self-discovery and empowerment.

Millie's recognition of Nina's controlling behavior and the subtle ways in which Nina exerts power over her life showcases the complexity of navigating relationships under the weight of judgment. For anyone who has faced a similar experience of being manipulated or surveilled, this chapter offers an important commentary on the personal costs of living under constant scrutiny. Millie's journey is one of self-realization and strength, as she continues to challenge the manipulative forces at play in her life while trying to find a way forward. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of reclaiming personal space and boundaries, especially when navigating relationships where one person seeks to control or diminish the autonomy of another. The chapter highlights the power of introspection, as Millie begins to understand the deeper motivations behind Nina's actions and how her past will continue to shape her future choices.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

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.

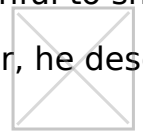
I send her photographs of every single kind of sourdough bread they have in stock. And now I have to wait while she looks at them. After several minutes, I receive a text back from her:
Do they have any brioche?

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 heavyset 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 heavyset 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 heavyset 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."

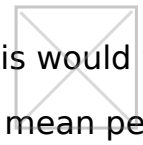
I let out a gasp. "I would never do that!"

"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

Chapter 32 opens with Millie struggling to find peace, battling insomnia and the emotional weight of recent events. Her encounter with the law at the grocery store three days ago has left her feeling unsettled, and living under the same roof as Nina, who holds a tight grip on the household, only intensifies her anxiety. While Millie's growing feelings for Andrew stir up conflicting emotions, their relationship is overshadowed by the discovery of her criminal past, creating a barrier between them that's hard to overcome. Though they share an undeniable chemistry, Millie wonders if she can ever truly escape the shadows of her past and find a place in Andrew's world, especially with her secrets hanging between them.

Millie seeks refuge in the kitchen, trying to escape the oppressive environment of her bedroom. In the process, she encounters Andrew, who is alone on the back porch. This unexpected meeting sparks a conversation where Millie, feeling the weight of their unspoken issues, attempts to address the tension between them. She offers explanations and apologies, hoping to bridge the emotional gap that's been created by her past. Andrew, however, is distant, his struggle to process Millie's revelation causing him to pull back. Despite his cold exterior, a moment of honesty emerges as they both reflect on the happiness they shared during their time together, culminating in a kiss that is both passionate and filled with regret. The kiss symbolizes the complexity of their relationship, hinting at the possibility of something real but complicated by their individual histories and the secrets they've kept from one another.

The chapter takes a dramatic turn when Millie finds herself face-to-face with Nina in the hallway, standing in the dark, which immediately raises suspicions that Nina may have witnessed the intimate moment between Millie and Andrew. Nina's silent presence creates an overwhelming sense of foreboding, as it becomes unclear

whether she saw everything or if her reaction will be more subtle. Millie’s thoughts are consumed with conflicting emotions—guilt, desire, fear—as she contemplates the possible consequences of Nina’s knowledge of what transpired. This moment intensifies the already complex web of relationships, adding a layer of suspense that forces Millie to question not just her own feelings but also the power dynamics within the household that have made her feel trapped.

Chapter 32 masterfully explores the themes of forbidden love, guilt, and the struggle for independence within a controlling environment. Millie’s emotional turmoil and her desire for a future with Andrew conflict with the looming presence of Nina’s control, which continues to dictate her life. The tension between wanting to move forward and being held back by her past creates a compelling narrative, filled with emotional depth and suspense. As Millie grapples with the desire for intimacy and the fear of its consequences, readers are drawn into her internal conflict, which mirrors the external obstacles she faces. The chapter sets the stage for a deeper exploration of Millie’s character and the choices she must make, with the relationships around her constantly shifting, forcing her to decide whether to confront her past or allow it to define her future.

The chapter also brings to the forefront the heavy emotional and psychological toll that secrets and past actions can have on one’s sense of self-worth. Millie’s struggle with the consequences of her past mistakes—especially in the context of her relationship with Andrew—emphasizes the difficulty many people face when trying to move forward from a history they are ashamed of. The presence of Nina, whose power over Millie is both real and psychological, highlights the control that can be exerted by others, even in a seemingly domestic environment. The tension Millie feels between wanting to build something new with Andrew and being shackled by her past choices underscores a key theme of the chapter: the challenge of reconciling the past with the desire for a brighter, unencumbered future.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

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 moment, unsure what to do next.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 begins with the narrator waking up next to Andrew in the guest bedroom, a decision made to avoid the lingering presence of Nina in the master bedroom. This choice highlights the narrator’s desire to escape the emotional weight of Nina's influence and signals a shift towards a new chapter in her life. As she wakes up, Andrew’s affectionate gestures and their shared animosity towards Nina set a tone for a growing connection between them. Andrew expresses a sincere desire to give their relationship a real chance, urging the narrator to step away from her previous role of being a maid and instead, envision a future together. However, the narrator harbors reservations about this proposal, especially as her past criminal record looms over her, making her uncertain about her ability to find employment and move forward.

The day takes an unexpected turn when the narrator receives a call from a blocked number, which she immediately suspects is from Nina. This moment, initially filled with quiet anticipation, quickly morphs into tension, as the narrator's unease grows. The call is quickly forgotten, however, when Andrew becomes fixated on confronting Enzo, the landscaper who seems to have an uncanny and consistent presence around their property. This marks a subtle shift in the day’s events as Andrew's desire to assert control over his surroundings takes center stage. The interaction with Enzo is charged with unspoken tension, yet it is resolved rather quickly when Enzo passively accepts Andrew's command to leave. This brief power struggle between the two men speaks volumes about Andrew's need to assert dominance and control over his environment.

The chapter takes a more unsettling turn when, just as Andrew departs, Enzo grabs the narrator’s arm with an ominous warning. He tells her that she is in danger, and this shift from seemingly mundane domestic affairs to a palpable sense of threat marks a key turning point in the narrative. This moment takes the story from a domestic setting to a darker, more sinister place, introducing a new layer of suspense and fear.

Enzo's warning and the sudden tension introduce a sense of foreboding that shifts the narrative from moments of calm to escalating peril. What initially appeared as a chapter of renewal and promise suddenly becomes one filled with shadows and uncertainty, raising questions about the true nature of the dangers lurking just beneath the surface.

This chapter effectively encapsulates the ongoing tension between the narrator's desire for a fresh start and the unresolved shadows of her past. It deftly explores themes of self-discovery, personal growth, and the search for purpose while setting the stage for more intense interpersonal dynamics. The contrast between the seemingly peaceful morning, filled with the hope of new beginnings, and the unexpected disruptions, such as Nina's call and Enzo's warning, adds a layer of suspense. These twists keep the reader on edge, fueling curiosity about the darker forces at play. The narrator’s journey toward autonomy, while also struggling to find a sense of security, creates an intriguing dynamic, making this chapter an essential piece in moving the plot forward.

Additionally, the events in this chapter serve as a reminder of how personal histories and unresolved pasts can influence present-day choices and relationships. The narrator’s fear of her criminal past complicating her future, especially in terms of finding work, underscores the difficulties many face when trying to rebuild after a troubled history. In relationships, the baggage from previous experiences can weigh heavily on one’s sense of self-worth, making it hard to embrace new beginnings. The chapter highlights how external influences, like Nina’s looming presence and Enzo's cryptic warning, can impede progress and throw doubt on the narrator's ability to move forward. It also illustrates the importance of confronting one’s past in order to move past it and embrace the future with a sense of purpose and autonomy.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 centers on Millie, who is struggling to find normalcy and independence amidst the complexities of her life. Despite Andrew's advice to refrain from taking on work for the household, Millie takes small but significant steps toward regaining control. One of the first acts of autonomy she revels in is grocery shopping, a simple activity that she finds liberating, especially when compared to the rigid grocery lists Nina once imposed on her. In the past, Nina’s lists dictated every item Millie bought, restricting her choices and fostering a sense of control that now feels suffocating. Now, free from this constraint, Millie takes pleasure in picking out her own groceries and making decisions that are entirely her own. The sense of freedom she feels in such a mundane task is empowering, marking a sharp contrast to her previous existence under Nina’s watchful eye.

However, her peaceful moment is disrupted when she receives a call from a blocked number—one that has been persistently trying to reach her all day. The call is followed by an unexpected encounter with Patrice, a woman from Nina’s circle, whose seemingly casual conversation soon takes a dark turn. During their discussion, Patrice inadvertently reveals to Millie a chilling fact: Nina has been tracking her movements through a phone app. This revelation completely shocks Millie, as she had only imagined Nina’s control extending to benign actions like reading her text messages, not realizing that Nina had been monitoring her every move so invasively. The discovery of this surveillance deeply unsettles Millie, highlighting the extent of Nina’s power over her life, which she had never fully grasped before.

This chapter skillfully captures Millie’s gradual realization of the depth of Nina’s control. It’s not just about checking her texts or knowing her whereabouts—it’s the fact that Nina’s surveillance has been so thorough and secretive, making Millie feel like her every action has been monitored. Patrice’s seemingly innocent conversation serves as

a catalyst for Millie to confront the true nature of her reality. The shock of learning that Nina's oversight has been more pervasive than she ever imagined forces Millie to question not only the relationship dynamics but also her own sense of agency and independence. What she initially believed were normal, if somewhat controlling, acts of concern, now feel like violations of her privacy and freedom.

As the chapter progresses, Millie begins to process the weight of this new information. The idea that Nina has been spying on her, going so far as to track her movements, creates a sense of violation and unease that Millie cannot easily shake. The psychological toll this discovery takes on her is immense; she feels a mixture of anger, betrayal, and confusion. These emotions are compounded by the realization that she has been living under a constant cloud of surveillance, stripped of the privacy that should have been her right. Millie's desire for autonomy becomes more urgent as she grapples with the implications of Nina's control, knowing that to reclaim her life, she must confront these hidden forces that have shaped her reality.

The chapter concludes on a note of introspection, as Millie reflects on her past actions and how they have led her to this point of awareness. The shock of Nina's invasive behavior serves as a turning point in Millie's emotional journey, awakening her to the unhealthy dynamics that have dominated her life for so long. Now, she must decide how to navigate the future—whether to confront Nina and take back her freedom or to continue living in the shadow of her manipulation. This newfound awareness forces Millie to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that she has been living under constant control, and in order to regain her autonomy, she must take action.

This chapter is a powerful exploration of the themes of autonomy, control, and surveillance, which resonate deeply in the context of modern relationships. For anyone experiencing similar forms of emotional manipulation, the chapter highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing controlling behaviors early on. Surveillance, in any form, is a violation of personal privacy, and learning to identify when boundaries have been crossed is essential for mental and emotional well-being. Millie's journey serves as a crucial reminder of the importance of self-awareness, personal boundaries,

and the need to reclaim one’s space and identity from unhealthy relationships. For anyone in a similar situation, this chapter underscores the importance of standing up for yourself and taking the necessary steps to protect your emotional and mental health, even when it means confronting difficult truths.



Chapter 36

Chapter 36 begins with the protagonist experiencing a deep sense of disappointment and unease. What was intended to be a romantic evening, reminiscent of a cherished memory with Andrew, quickly turns into a solitary affair as Andrew is detained by work commitments, leaving her to dine alone. This unexpected solitude quickly deepens into a narrative of isolation, as the protagonist feels the weight of being alone in a space that, despite its physical comforts, is haunted by the presence of Nina, Andrew's ex-girlfriend. Her sense of security is slowly eroded as Nina's lingering influence seems to permeate every corner of the house, making it increasingly difficult for the protagonist to feel at peace.

The intrusion of Nina’s presence is not limited to lingering scents, despite the protagonist’s meticulous cleaning efforts; it escalates when the protagonist discovers a tracking app hidden on her phone. The realization that she is being watched intensifies her feelings of vulnerability and betrayal, as the once private aspects of her life are no longer hers to control. This breach of privacy is further compounded by an ominous warning from Enzo, who implies that Nina’s influence and reach extend far beyond the psychological toll she has already inflicted. This revelation serves to heighten the protagonist's fear and anxiety, indicating that Nina may pose a real, tangible threat that goes beyond her emotional manipulation.

The night takes an even darker turn when the protagonist receives an anonymous phone call from a distorted, mechanical voice threatening her to stay away from Andrew. The call is unsettling not just for its hostility but for its anonymity, leaving the protagonist shaken by the realization that the threat may be more serious than a mere emotional tactic. This encounter jolts the protagonist into a state of resolve; she decides that she will no longer allow Nina’s ghostly influence to control her life. Taking decisive action, she plans to change the locks in the house, a symbolic and physical

act of reclaiming her space and asserting her autonomy. The locks represent a barrier against the unseen forces that have been invading her sense of safety, marking a turning point where she chooses empowerment over fear.

Chapter 36 weaves a complex tapestry of psychological unrest and the battle for autonomy in the face of past trauma. The protagonist’s journey through these unsettling events—feeling watched, manipulated, and threatened—sets the stage for a confrontation with the lingering forces of Nina's influence. Her decision to take control of her environment by changing the locks signifies a powerful moment of reclaiming agency, symbolizing the reclaiming of her own life and boundaries. The suspense that builds throughout the chapter leads the reader to anticipate not just the physical confrontation with Nina but also the emotional journey that will allow the protagonist to free herself from the shadows of the past. The tension between psychological manipulation and personal empowerment is a central theme in this chapter, drawing attention to how past relationships can continue to haunt the present and the lengths one must go to in order to break free from their lingering effects.

This chapter also underscores the importance of recognizing and confronting the often subtle ways in which emotional and psychological abuse can manifest in relationships. The protagonist’s realization that Nina’s influence is more pervasive than she initially thought highlights the often unseen but powerful forces at play in toxic relationships. Taking control of one’s environment and setting boundaries, as symbolized by changing the locks, is a crucial step in regaining control and finding peace. The chapter also serves as a reminder that emotional security and autonomy are essential for well-being and that, at times, reclaiming one's space requires not just physical but emotional action. It is a powerful narrative about recognizing one's worth, standing up to past shadows, and taking the necessary steps to protect oneself from further harm.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 opens with a pivotal moment for the protagonist, marking a deeply transformative night that is filled with a mixture of vulnerability and quiet tension. After an intimate moment with Andrew, she finds herself reflecting on the encounter, a mixture of emotions swirling as she lies on an uncomfortable cot. The physical discomfort of the bed serves as a metaphor for her deeper emotional unrest, symbolizing the internal conflict she faces after breaking Nina's strict house rules. This act of defiance, while seemingly small, carries with it a sense of liberation, but also the weight of consequences, pushing her towards a new understanding of herself and her place in the world.

As the night progresses, the protagonist shifts from an introspective state to a sudden awareness of Andrew’s absence, which strikes her deeply. His absence isn’t merely physical—it represents the transient nature of their connection, leaving her to ponder the true depth of their bond. The small, confining cot becomes a symbol of the distance between them, an uncomfortable reminder of how little they truly share beyond fleeting moments of intimacy. Despite her desire to join Andrew, there is an underlying acceptance of the fact that they exist in separate realities, marked by her awareness of how temporary and fragile their connection truly is.

The uncomfortable cot becomes a powerful symbol of the protagonist’s current transition, as she grapples with her past and the uncertain future that lies ahead. Her emotional journey is mirrored in the physical discomfort she experiences, as she moves between the familiarity of her past life and the unknown possibilities of change. Andrew’s departure, driven by his own discomfort, reflects her own emotional journey toward seeking something more meaningful and lasting, beyond the constraints of her current existence. Her thoughts about leaving the cot and pursuing more from life highlight her readiness to break free from the limitations imposed on her, yet she

faces a constant push and pull between freedom and security.

The chapter reaches its climax when the protagonist attempts to leave the room but encounters a resistance symbolized by a stuck doorknob. This moment is more than just a physical barrier; it becomes a metaphor for the obstacles she must overcome in order to break free from the emotional confinement that has held her back. The doorknob, stubborn and unyielding, represents the inner struggles and external challenges she faces as she moves toward change, embodying the difficulty of stepping into the unknown. This powerful narrative device speaks to the emotional complexity of her journey, where every step forward is fraught with resistance, both internal and external.

The chapter skillfully intertwines themes of personal growth, intimacy, and the confrontation of barriers, creating a compelling and nuanced exploration of the protagonist’s internal transformation. It is a moment of reckoning, where the protagonist must confront the dissonance between her desires and the constraints of her current reality. The emotional and physical discomforts she faces are intricately woven into the narrative, reflecting the larger journey toward liberation and self-discovery. As she contemplates leaving behind the security of her past life, the challenges she encounters—symbolized by the stuck doorknob—serve as a powerful reminder of the courage and resilience needed to move forward. This chapter marks a critical turning point in her journey, pushing her toward self-reflection and the possibility of real change.

Such moments of emotional awakening, though challenging, are crucial for anyone undergoing significant personal transformation. Change often involves breaking free from comfort zones and confronting the discomfort that comes with growth. For many, this process includes moments of doubt and hesitation, where the fear of the unknown makes moving forward difficult. However, just as the protagonist in this chapter is forced to face her emotional barriers, anyone on a similar path of self-discovery must also be willing to confront and overcome these obstacles. By recognizing the resistance within, we can better navigate the path toward true transformation,

allowing us to emerge stronger and more self-aware.



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.

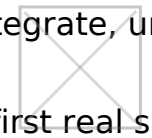
And then I find one other object inside my purse and drop it into the pocket of my robe.

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.”

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 marks a chilling change in the protagonist's life, occurring just a few months into her marriage with Andy Winchester. Reflecting on their rapid romance, she contrasts Andy with her previous unsatisfactory relationships, seeing him as the embodiment of everything she had longed for. Andy seemed perfect—he was attentive, committed, and ready to embrace a future together, making him the ideal partner for her and her daughter, Cecelia. For a time, their relationship felt like a dream, offering the promise of stability and love she had always hoped for.

Despite a brief period of concern about Andy's past—especially his former engagement to a woman named Kathleen—the protagonist dismisses these thoughts. Choosing to believe in the future they could build together, she pushes aside any lingering doubts. However, the sense of unease begins to creep in when she encounters his mother, Evelyn Winchester. Evelyn's frequent visits and subtle criticisms of her parenting ignite discomfort, casting a shadow over an otherwise seemingly perfect life. While Nina tries to ignore these small tensions, they foreshadow a deeper unraveling of the idyllic marriage she once believed in.

Things take a horrifying turn when Andy asks Nina for help in finding some work documents in the attic, a request that escalates into a terrifying revelation. The attic, instead of being filled with forgotten paperwork, houses a locked room—one that Nina is swiftly confined to. This sudden shift exposes a shocking side of Andy’s character that had been hidden beneath the surface. His calm, controlling nature is replaced by cruelty, as he locks her away without warning, revealing that the man she married is far different from the one she thought she knew.

As Nina’s panic mounts, she is forced to confront the grim reality of her situation. The man she trusted and loved has shown his true colors, and the façade of the perfect

husband crumbles completely. Andy’s lack of empathy becomes painfully clear when he coldly admits to ignoring her desperate screams for help, rationalizing it by saying that she needed to "learn her lesson." His words are a stark reminder of the manipulation and emotional abuse that now define their relationship, leaving Nina trapped in a psychological and physical prison.

This chapter emphasizes the emotional and psychological devastation caused by abusive relationships, where an abuser’s true nature can remain hidden until the victim is already deeply ensnared. Andy's slow unraveling of his true self, starting with small manipulations and gradually escalating to outright cruelty, is a tactic frequently used by abusers to gain trust before revealing their darker tendencies. The emotional toll on Nina is profound, as she struggles with confusion and self-doubt, questioning how she ended up in this situation. It also sheds light on the challenges victims of abuse face when trying to break free, not just physically, but emotionally, as the mental conditioning from their abuser makes it difficult to recognize the abuse for what it is.

Ultimately, this chapter serves as a stark portrayal of the dangers of abusive relationships, where a partner’s true nature is often concealed behind a veneer of charm and affection. It underscores the importance of recognizing early signs of manipulation and control, such as emotional isolation and sudden mood swings, and the crucial role that support networks play in helping victims escape. Nina’s ordeal highlights the emotional destruction caused by such toxic relationships, and serves as a powerful reminder of the strength required to break free from such abusive cycles. For anyone experiencing similar dynamics, seeking help from trusted friends, family, or professional resources can be a life-saving step toward reclaiming one’s autonomy and mental well-being.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 begins with Nina locked inside a soundproofed room, isolated from the outside world, unable to reach anyone for help. The hours drag on as she desperately attempts to find a way to escape, but every effort fails, further deepening her sense of hopelessness. Her thoughts constantly revolve around her daughter, Cecelia, amplifying the urgency and desperation of her situation. In a moment that reveals his cruel nature, Nina's husband, Andy, appears through the door, his demeanor cold and detached as he announces that her confinement is a punishment for not maintaining her hair according to his rigid standards. He imposes an even more bizarre and humiliating punishment: Nina must pull out one hundred strands of hair from her scalp as a form of atonement for what he perceives as a failure on her part.

As Nina faces this ordeal, she fluctuates between brief flashes of hope and overwhelming despair. With only a small amount of water and a bucket for her needs, she is forced to endure the basic discomforts of confinement, each moment underscoring her helplessness. She often reflects on her life before her captivity, remembering a time when she was free, when she could care for herself and her daughter under much more difficult, but less oppressive, circumstances. The stark contrast between her life then and her current reality weighs heavily on her, as she grapples with the realization that her decision to marry Andy, which was meant to provide her with security and comfort, has instead become her worst nightmare. The man she once thought would provide safety has turned into the very thing she fears most, and now she is trapped in a situation she never could have imagined.

Andy’s control over Nina extends far beyond physical confinement. He withholds basic necessities like food and water, further asserting his dominance and manipulating her into submission. The act of making Nina pull out her own hair—something so personal and intrinsic to her identity—serves as a form of emotional and psychological abuse,

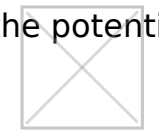
demonstrating the extent of his obsession with controlling every aspect of her life. This bizarre demand for her hair is a reflection of Andy’s desire to not only dominate her physically but to also strip away her sense of autonomy. Nina, once a strong and independent woman, finds herself bargaining for survival, feeling increasingly powerless in the face of his relentless manipulation. The power imbalance between them becomes even more evident as Nina is forced to relinquish her dignity and autonomy just to stay alive.

This chapter also highlights the deep psychological toll of living in such an abusive and controlling environment. Emotional abuse often has long-lasting effects that can alter an individual's sense of self-worth, making them question their value and place in the world. In Nina’s case, the abuse isn't just physical; it's psychological, as Andy’s control over her appearance and basic needs serves to break down her spirit over time. Each moment of manipulation, whether it’s denying her food or demanding she destroy her own appearance, chips away at her mental and emotional stability. It is a powerful commentary on the nature of toxic relationships, where one person systematically diminishes the other’s sense of identity and self-respect.

For many victims of abuse, the process of breaking free from such an environment requires more than just escaping the physical confines. The emotional scars left by years of manipulation and control can take years to heal, and the journey to reclaiming one’s sense of self and autonomy is often long and difficult. Nina’s ordeal is a reminder that emotional and psychological abuse can be as damaging as physical abuse, if not more so, because it undermines a person's core sense of self. It also highlights the importance of seeking help from professionals or support groups that specialize in helping individuals who have experienced such trauma. Rebuilding one’s life after abuse requires not only escaping the physical confines but also repairing the damage done to the mind and spirit.

Nina’s story is not just one of survival; it is a story of the resilience of the human spirit. Even as she endures the psychological and physical abuse at Andy’s hands, her love for her daughter and her desire to regain her freedom keep her fighting. While the

road to healing and freedom may be long and fraught with challenges, Nina’s inner strength and determination shine through as she continues to struggle for a way out. This chapter serves as a sobering reminder of the strength it takes to survive abuse and the vital need for support systems to help individuals reclaim their autonomy and dignity after experiencing such trauma. Nina’s perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds offers hope that, no matter how dark the situation may seem, there is always the potential for recovery and a return to self-worth.



Chapter 41

In Chapter 41, Nina is subjected to the brutal task of pulling out one hundred strands of her hair, a demand made by her husband, Andy, who has become her captor in their abusive marriage. With each strand she removes, Nina holds on to the hope of one day breaking free from the torment she has endured for so long. Her mind drifts to thoughts of a future where she could serve him divorce papers, ending their relationship for good. As the task progresses, Nina’s physical condition deteriorates, having been deprived of food and water for an entire day. She is weak and parched, yet she perseveres, focusing on the prize that liberation promises, her heart pounding as she waits for Andy's verdict.

Once she completes the grueling task, Nina’s hope for release is quickly dashed. Andy inspects the strands of hair, and with cold indifference, he tells her that one strand is missing a follicle. This forces Nina to start over, repeating the painful procedure again. Exhaustion and desperation weigh heavily on her, but it is her love for her daughter, Cecelia, that fuels her to continue. Every second spent trapped in this hellish situation feels like an eternity, and Nina's mind races with the thought that each painful moment could bring her closer to her daughter’s safety. Even as she battles physical and emotional strain, her resolve does not waver. She knows she must survive, not just for herself, but for Cecelia.

The narrative in this chapter is suffused with tension, as Nina's despair and resilience are brought to the forefront. Andy’s manipulation is chillingly effective, stripping Nina of her agency and subjecting her to psychological torment. As he forces her to repeat the painful process, he maintains an unyielding grip on her, exercising control in the most cruel and dehumanizing way. Yet, despite the overwhelming power he holds over her, Nina’s inner strength shines through. The author skillfully portrays her unwavering will to survive, even as her body weakens and her hope ebbs away with each passing

minute. It’s clear that Andy’s actions are meant to break her spirit, but Nina refuses to surrender.

When Andy finally accepts the new batch of hair, he releases Nina, but not without one final act of cruelty. He dismisses her suffering as a "lesson," reinforcing his sense of superiority and further diminishing Nina’s dignity. His manipulation is evident in the way he justifies his actions, convincing himself that his control is justified. Yet, even in this moment of release, Nina’s fight is far from over. Her spirit has been bruised, but she has not been broken. This chapter not only illustrates the depths of Andy’s cruelty but also showcases Nina’s strength in the face of unbearable circumstances.

Beyond the immediate physical and emotional suffering Nina endures, this chapter also highlights the long-term effects of abuse. Victims of emotional and physical abuse often experience complex trauma that lingers long after the abuse ends. For Nina, the experience will undoubtedly leave scars that will require immense time and support to heal. Survivors of such abuse often struggle with feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, and fear, which can be compounded by the isolation they face during their captivity. Nina’s journey reflects the painful reality many victims experience, where survival is the first step toward recovery, but healing is a long and difficult road. This chapter serves as a reminder of the emotional and psychological toll that abuse takes, and the importance of support systems in helping survivors reclaim their lives. Nina's strength is not only physical but emotional, demonstrating the resilience that can emerge even in the most harrowing of circumstances.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 is a gripping and emotionally charged chapter titled "Step Four: Make the World Believe You’re Crazy," where Nina, the protagonist, is caught in a harrowing and dangerous situation that highlights her strength and determination. She wakes up in a state of disarray, still feeling the aftermath of prolonged neglect, her body weak from dehydration and exhaustion. As she struggles to clear her head, she becomes aware of the distant sound of running water from the master bathroom, heightening her anxiety. At first, Nina believes that Andy, her abuser, may still be in the house, but upon further realization, she comes to understand that he is not present. Despite this, Nina’s thoughts instantly turn to her daughter, Cecelia, and she is consumed by an overwhelming fear for her safety. The situation is fraught with tension, as Nina faces the terrifying possibility of her daughter being in danger, pushing her into action despite her weakened state.

Even though Nina is physically depleted and mentally drained, her innate maternal instincts take over, propelling her to investigate the source of the running water. Every step is a struggle, and Nina feels her body fighting against her, reminding her of how vulnerable she is. Her mind, however, sharpens with the urgency of the moment, and she presses forward, determined to reach Cecelia no matter the physical cost. The journey to the bathroom is not just a physical one; it is a reflection of Nina’s internal battle—her body exhausted but her will to protect her daughter stronger than ever. The emotional and physical toll of her captivity is evident as Nina battles the painful truth of how far she has been pushed, yet the maternal love she feels for Cecelia allows her to endure.

When Nina finally reaches the bathroom, the sight that greets her shatters her every expectation of relief. There, in the bathtub, lies her daughter, unconscious, submerged in rising water. The sight of her child in such a perilous situation fuels a deep, visceral

panic within Nina, but it also ignites a powerful surge of determination. Despite her frail state, Nina does not falter in her efforts to save Cecelia. The situation amplifies Nina's sense of urgency and determination, as the love she holds for her daughter far outweighs her physical limitations. This moment is a stark reminder of the dangerous reality Nina has been living in and the sacrifices she is willing to make to protect the only thing that matters to her—her daughter.

The chapter reaches its emotional and dramatic peak as Nina, still grappling with the physical effects of her ordeal, struggles to keep herself from passing out while attempting to rescue Cecelia from the rising water. Her symptoms—extreme fatigue, trembling hands, and shallow breathing—underscore just how dire her condition is. Yet, in the face of overwhelming physical pain and fear, Nina's mind remains focused solely on Cecelia, her motherly instincts kicking into full gear. The chapter ends in suspense, with Nina crawling toward her daughter, a mother’s love driving her actions, despite all the odds stacked against her. The emotional depth of the chapter is intense, as Nina’s journey exemplifies the power of unconditional love and resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. The reader is left hanging in anticipation, eager to see if Nina's determination will lead her to the victory of saving her daughter from the clutches of danger. The suspense lingers, and the emotional stakes are raised even higher, making this chapter a deeply poignant exploration of the strength that comes from a mother’s love and the desperate measures she will take to protect her child.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 provides an in-depth look at the protagonist’s emotional and psychological journey, which is marked by an eight-month stay at Clearview Psychiatric Hospital following a tragic and devastating incident. During this period, the protagonist, overwhelmed by severe depression and debilitating delusions, tried to take her own life as well as her daughter Cecelia's by administering a fatal dose of sedatives and placing her daughter in a filled bathtub. This heartbreaking attempt was halted by her husband, Andy, who acted swiftly, calling the authorities to intervene just in time. Despite the gravity of the situation, the protagonist has no memory of the event or the actions leading up to it, which includes the administration of sedatives she was prescribed to cope with her emotional distress, further compounding her confusion and guilt.

During her treatment at Clearview, the protagonist is prescribed both anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications to address her condition, which she undergoes with a combination of reluctance and hope. Throughout this period, she is guided by Dr. Barringer, her therapist, who helps her to understand the delusions she experienced, challenging the validity of the memories she clings to about being controlled and confined by Andy. It becomes evident through therapy that these memories are, in fact, not real but rather distorted creations of her disturbed mind. As the protagonist goes through the process of treatment, she gradually comes to terms with the fact that she must accept responsibility for the tragic events, despite not being able to recall the specifics. Though the memories remain elusive, her recovery begins to take shape as she gains more clarity about her actions, and she shows signs of improvement with the support of her medications and therapeutic sessions.

Andy’s steadfast support throughout this difficult period highlights his enduring care and commitment to her well-being. He is present during her hospital stay, visiting

frequently, and slowly rebuilding the trust that had once been fractured by the distance created by her mental health struggles. Initially, the protagonist could hardly bear his touch, but over time, their connection begins to heal, and she starts to view him as a partner again, rather than just a caretaker. This change in their relationship symbolizes her emotional and psychological progress, as she starts to heal not only internally but also within the context of her marriage. With Andy's help, the protagonist begins to see the possibility of recovery, realizing that their shared commitment to overcoming her trauma might be the key to their emotional revival.



As her discharge date draws near, the protagonist feels a mixture of fear and anticipation. She is afraid of returning to the life she once knew, as the thought of going back to her home, where the memories of her breakdown linger, fills her with anxiety. However, despite her trepidation, she also longs to reunite with her daughter, Cecelia, whose relationship with her has remained strong despite the time apart. Andy, aware of the difficulty of the situation, takes on an even more prominent role in ensuring that Cecelia is cared for upon the protagonist's return home. His proactive involvement and the careful planning for Cecelia's future show a commitment to ensuring that the family dynamic remains intact and that Cecelia will be safeguarded from any further trauma. The chapter highlights Nina's internal conflict, torn between the desire to heal and the weight of the guilt she feels for her actions. However, there is a sense of hope that she might be able to reclaim some semblance of a normal life, provided that she can continue the healing process and with the support of her family and therapist. The chapter concludes by reinforcing the emotional depth of Nina's recovery, underscoring how difficult yet vital the journey toward healing truly is, and how her family's support will be instrumental in this new chapter of her life.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 brings us into the depths of Nina’s emotional and psychological struggles as she works with her therapist, Dr. Hewitt, to confront the aftermath of trauma and distorted perceptions that have plagued her since her time in Clearview. After four months of therapy, Nina begins to explore the haunting effects of her delusions, particularly her irrational fear of the attic in her home. Nina had been under her husband Andy's care, encouraged to participate in therapy by his mother, Evelyn, who believed it was the right step for her. Initially resistant to this intervention, Nina’s journey through the therapeutic process is not just about overcoming fear but also about reclaiming a sense of control and ownership over her own life. As she opens up about her fear of the attic, she admits the lingering paranoia that arose from her delusion—thinking that Andy had somehow been orchestrating a plot against her.

Dr. Hewitt, being a guiding figure in Nina’s healing journey, gently suggests that facing the very source of her fear might help her confront the irrationality of it all. His recommendation is simple yet profound: return to the attic and look at it with clear eyes, seeing it for what it truly is—just a storage space, no more no less. Andy, ever the supportive figure, shares in the belief that confronting this fear head-on would be beneficial for Nina’s recovery, but Nina’s hesitation runs deep. Her mind wrestles with the implications of such a confrontation, for in many ways, the attic symbolizes everything that has gone wrong in her life, a place where all of her fears and anxieties manifest. She is torn between the desire to move forward and the lingering psychological weight that keeps her tied to the past, preventing her from taking this next step in her journey.

As Nina reflects on her journey, the complexity of her feelings surfaces. On the ride back home, Andy speaks to her about her progress, trying to offer encouragement while also subtly asserting his influence over the course of her recovery. This moment

of support, however, highlights the tension that still exists between them, particularly as Nina struggles with her feelings of guilt and shame about her role in her family. Her daughter Cecelia (Cece) and her relationship with Andy's mother, Evelyn, further complicate her emotional state. Nina feels caught between the expectations placed upon her by those around her and the overwhelming desire to break free from the psychological chains that bind her. She is caught in a paradox of wanting to heal while grappling with the weight of family dynamics that don't always support her emotional well-being. Her unease with Evelyn's presence, and the underlying tension in their interactions, underscores the difficulty of balancing healing with the pressures of family life. Even with Andy's reassurances, Nina is still uncertain about her ability to fully embrace the future without confronting the fractured relationships of her past.

The narrative not only highlights Nina's internal battle with her fears but also illuminates the subtler, more complicated layers of family life, control, and self-discovery. Nina's interactions with Andy and Evelyn serve as both a source of comfort and a reminder of the emotional labyrinth she must navigate. As Nina tries to make sense of her life, she must decide whether to follow the prescribed path to healing or strike out on her own, embracing a future that might be fraught with challenges but also offers the possibility of freedom. This chapter emphasizes the profound emotional toll that Nina has endured, showing that the road to recovery is not linear. It's a journey filled with setbacks, revelations, and moments of doubt. The ultimate tension in the chapter lies in the push-pull between Nina's desire to heal and the deep-rooted fears that keep her trapped in the past, waiting for a chance to reclaim her autonomy. This struggle is not just about facing the attic but about confronting the broader emotional landscape that continues to define her.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45 offers a profound exploration into Nina's internal and external turmoil as she finds herself trapped in an emotionally and physically oppressive scenario orchestrated by her partner, Andy. This chapter focuses on the complex nature of Nina’s relationship with Andy, which, while once founded on love, has devolved into manipulation, control, and psychological warfare. Nina’s hopes for healing and reconciliation are continuously shattered by Andy’s actions, which blur the lines between care and cruelty. As Nina enters the attic, an unsettling sense of dread builds, as the room represents not only her literal confinement but also her emotional and psychological imprisonment within a relationship that once held promise but now drags her deeper into despair. What begins as a manipulation under the guise of helping her overcome her fears quickly turns into a display of Andy's power and control over her, leaving Nina to wonder if her escape from this torment is even possible.

The attic, which was initially presented as a place of healing by Andy, quickly transforms into a cold and oppressive symbol of Nina’s psychological state. The exaggerated contrast between light and darkness represents Nina’s internal battle. The blinding light Andy forces upon her in the attic, designed to disorient and break her down, becomes a form of punishment, designed not to help Nina but to trap her further in his control. The harsh artificial lighting is not just a physical discomfort, but a psychological tool used by Andy to dominate Nina, forcing her to face an environment where she can’t escape the feeling of suffocation. As Nina's understanding of her environment shifts from one of potential healing to one of imprisonment, she begins to internalize the torment and emotional manipulation, feeling isolated in her own mind, unable to trust her perceptions or the man who once offered her affection.

As the tension builds, Andy’s manipulation becomes even more sinister. He presents Nina with an impossible choice: endure the oppressive light or submit to the suffocating darkness. This manipulation pushes Nina to the brink, as the choice between two torturous conditions seems to highlight her lack of control in the situation. Andy’s actions go beyond physical confinement—they strip Nina of her agency, reinforcing the pattern of abusive behavior that has characterized their relationship. By magnifying small grievances into grandiose claims of disrespect, Andy erodes Nina’s self-worth and further isolates her from reality, leaving her unable to discern her true feelings from the narrative Andy forces upon her. The final emotional blow is when Nina realizes that Andy has completely restructured her world, forcing her to question everything, including her own sanity, as she is now trapped in a fabricated reality.

Despite the overwhelming odds stacked against her, Nina’s internal resolve becomes evident. She draws upon her strength and emotional fortitude to survive the psychological torment. Her decision to endure the situation, however excruciating, is grounded in the hope that one day she will escape not only physically but also emotionally from the clutches of Andy’s manipulation. Nina’s love for her daughter Cecelia becomes the primary source of her will to survive, fueling her desire to escape and create a better future, one that is free from the oppressive control of Andy. While her hope wanes and her circumstances seem dire, Nina’s determination to protect her daughter and to find a way out of her suffocating existence remains strong. The chapter concludes with Nina caught between moments of despair and the faintest possibility of escape. The silence after Andy’s return marks a chilling moment of helplessness, yet also hints at a possible turning point in Nina’s quest for liberation from the prison that Andy has created for her, both mentally and physically.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46, "Step Six: Try to Live With It," takes an intense and emotional look into the life of Nina, a woman entrapped in a psychologically abusive marriage with her husband, Andy. Nina once hoped for a peaceful, loving marriage, seeking the stability that many yearn for in a life with a partner. However, her reality is far from what she envisioned, and instead, she is subjected to a steady stream of controlling behavior, manipulation, and punishment at the hands of Andy. The attic in their home, which Andy uses as a place to imprison Nina when she steps out of line, becomes an emblem of her emotional and psychological confinement. Trapped physically and mentally, Nina's life revolves around her efforts to maintain the facade of a happy family, even though she knows she is slowly being crushed by Andy's relentless tactics.

In her attempts to break free from Andy's control, Nina reflects on the numerous failed strategies she has used in an effort to regain her autonomy. She had initially sought refuge by reaching out to Kathleen, Andy's former fiancée, believing that an ally from Andy's past might offer some assistance or at least an understanding ear. Unfortunately, Kathleen's indifference to her plight leaves Nina feeling even more alone and helpless, as her efforts to reconnect and seek help crumble before her eyes. Nina also resorted to changing her appearance and altering her behavior to distance herself from Andy’s gaze, yet every attempt to regain some control over her own life is thwarted. The betrayal by Suzanne, a friend who once shared Nina's frustrations with Andy, adds to her profound isolation. Suzanne reports Nina’s cries for help back to Andy, further entrenching Nina in her helpless situation and proving that even those closest to her are complicit in Andy’s control.

The distress of Nina’s situation is magnified by the well-being of her daughter, Cecelia, whose safety and emotional health Nina fears for daily. Andy’s cruelty toward Cecelia, using her allergies to further manipulate and control Nina, makes Nina’s struggle all

the more excruciating. These moments of manipulation reinforce Nina’s helplessness, as she becomes painfully aware that Andy is not only tormenting her but also threatening to corrupt Cecelia’s childhood. Despite this, there are fleeting moments of comfort, such as her interactions with Enzo, a landscaper who represents a brief reprieve from the oppressive atmosphere at home. His presence serves as a reminder to Nina of what life could be like if she were free of Andy’s grip, offering a temporary escape from the grimness of her daily reality. However, Nina is acutely aware of the stark contrast between the hopeful possibilities Enzo represents and the suffocating environment she’s forced to live in.

The chapter becomes an exploration of Nina’s psychological unraveling as she continues to suffer under Andy's relentless abuse. Despite the physical and emotional toll Andy's control takes on her, Nina’s maternal instincts push her to keep fighting, not only for her own freedom but for Cecelia’s. The constant fear for her daughter’s well-being weighs heavily on Nina, yet it also fuels her determination to find a way out. She longs for a life where she and Cecelia can be free from the emotional prison that Andy has constructed around them, a life where Nina can make her own choices without fear of retribution. As the chapter concludes, the story builds tension as Nina’s inner strength persists in the face of overwhelming adversity. Even in her darkest moments, Nina's refusal to completely succumb to Andy’s control shows the resilience of the human spirit and her growing resolve to escape and rebuild her life.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 takes a stark and painful look at the abusive relationship between Nina and her husband, Andy. Nina is trapped in the attic for over twenty hours, a punishment meted out by Andy for an insignificant act—using too much air freshener. This form of punishment has become a regular tactic for Andy, exploiting Nina's love for their daughter, Cecelia, to keep her in line. The chapter exposes the chilling reality of Nina’s daily life under Andy’s control, where every misstep, no matter how small, can lead to further isolation and suffering. The fear and anxiety that build up during her time in the attic give Nina a greater understanding of the depths of her captivity, both physical and emotional. The narrative shows how Andy’s control over Nina goes beyond just the physical space; it’s a complete manipulation of her mind, emotions, and sense of safety.

Throughout her time in the attic, Nina is consumed with worry about what this punishment means for her future. In a desperate bid to regain some control over her body and life, Nina secretly takes a life-altering step: she gets an IUD to ensure she cannot become pregnant. This action is a direct response to Andy’s increasing demand for more children, something Nina knows she cannot endure. With this decision, Nina takes an important step in regaining a measure of autonomy, even as she remains trapped in a relationship where her autonomy has been stolen from her. The IUD, while a simple physical device, becomes a symbol of Nina’s inner strength and determination to protect herself from further manipulation, despite her increasingly fragile circumstances.

While locked in the attic, Nina’s emotional state shifts between despair and fleeting hope. She notices Enzo, working outside, and in her vulnerable state, she accidentally signals her distress, hoping for any form of relief. Enzo’s presence offers a glimmer of hope, and he approaches Nina’s plight with empathy, offering her an escape from her

harrowing situation. However, Nina’s fear of Andy’s wrath and the danger that Enzo would face, possibly being deported, keeps her from accepting his offer of help. The delicate balance of Nina’s desire for freedom and her overwhelming fear of what might happen to those she cares about creates a tense atmosphere, and she chooses to remain where she is, bound by fear. Enzo, unwilling to leave Nina in her misery, vows to take more drastic measures if she’s not released by the next morning, promising to break down the door and free her if needed.



Eventually, after a period of agonizing confinement, Nina is released by Andy, though his gesture of kindness is hollow and manipulative. The gifts he brings with him, meant to appease her, serve only as a cruel reminder of the power he holds over her. Nina, exhausted and emotionally drained, finds a brief moment of solace in Enzo’s presence when they have an honest conversation about the abuse she’s endured. Nina opens up to Enzo about the depths of her suffering, recounting the years of torment at the hands of Andy. Enzo, deeply angered by the injustice of her situation, becomes protective and passionate, even offering to take matters into his own hands and kill Andy. However, Nina, recognizing the irreversible consequences of such an act, dissuades him. Instead, she focuses on a more practical and ultimately safer plan—escaping. Enzo, offering his unwavering support, proposes helping Nina leave Andy once and for all, setting in motion the possibility of a future free from the oppressive hold of her marriage. This chapter highlights the complexities of abuse, the strength it takes to fight for freedom, and the small but powerful steps that can lead to liberation, even in the darkest of times. The seeds of hope are planted as Nina begins to realize that there may be a way out, but it will require patience, courage, and the strength to leave everything behind.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48, titled "Step Seven: Try to Escape," marks a significant turning point in the narrator's journey toward freedom. She is driven by the overwhelming desire to break free from her abusive marriage with Andy, and the chapter takes readers through her methodical planning and the complex emotions tied to this crucial moment. A week after organizing her escape with the help of Enzo, a trusted ally, she takes the first steps to avoid Andy’s surveillance. The fear that has plagued her life for so long is ever-present, but it is now paired with a sense of determination. As the narrator travels to Enzo's humble abode—a sharp contrast to her luxurious yet stifling home—she reflects not only on the oppressive nature of her material wealth but on the even greater desire to reclaim her freedom and dignity, which she has long been deprived of.

The meeting between the narrator and Enzo brings with it a sense of solidarity, as they bond over their shared pasts and mutual understanding of each other's struggles. Enzo, whose sister’s tragic fate at the hands of an abusive partner mirrors the narrator's situation, offers her the kind of emotional support she has been seeking for years. Their conversation delves deeper into their respective histories, revealing not just their hardships but their will to overcome them. This discussion strengthens the narrator’s resolve, and through Enzo’s empathy, she begins to believe that escape is within reach. As the two work together on a practical level, sharing details of what will be required—money, documents, and detailed planning—the emotional stakes of the situation intensify. This is not merely a plan of escape; it is a pursuit of a life free from fear, where she can finally feel safe and in control.

As the narrator’s preparations continue, she becomes more acutely aware of the severity of her situation. She is not only fighting for her own freedom but also for the safety and well-being of her daughter, Cecelia. The tension between the narrator’s

desire for a fresh start and her fear of being caught grows more palpable as the possibility of her escape begins to materialize. She reflects on the years of abuse, the way Andy has controlled and manipulated her, and the crushing weight of her past decisions. However, her hopes for a new life are suddenly dashed when Andy discovers the evidence of her plans—the passports, money, and a new identity—laid out in plain sight. This discovery sets off a chain reaction, and the narrator's carefully laid plans come undone. The realization that her escape may be over before it even begins is a devastating blow, but it also ignites a deep need to act quickly. With no time to waste, the narrator is forced to flee, driven by the urgency of her circumstances and the deep sense of betrayal she feels upon being discovered.

In the aftermath of her failed attempt to escape, the narrator's despair is overwhelming. The weight of her situation, the helplessness she feels, and the fear of retribution all settle heavily on her shoulders. It is in this darkest moment, however, that Enzo offers a possible way out—one that goes beyond mere escape and leans into a more confrontational approach. His proposal introduces the possibility of taking direct action against the source of her suffering, rather than simply running away. This shift in approach highlights the narrator's growth, from someone willing to endure her circumstances to someone prepared to take control of her destiny. Chapter 48, rich with emotion and suspense, sets the stage for a transformation in the narrator's journey, as the path ahead now promises not only the chance for liberation but also the power to challenge the very forces that have trapped her for so long.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 of [UNNAMED BOOK] delves deep into Nina’s psyche, providing readers with a chilling look at her dark and manipulative plan to free herself from the toxic clutches of her husband, Andy. Rather than confronting the issue head-on, Nina devises a cunning and morally questionable strategy—she intends to replace herself with a younger, more desirable woman, one who will serve as the perfect replacement in Andy’s life. Her plan unfolds with careful, calculated moves, as she uses a vulnerable woman to break the emotional bond between herself and Andy, ultimately seeking liberation from the abuse and control she’s endured for so long. The chapter presents Nina’s internal conflict, as she tries to rationalize her actions, which ultimately serve her selfish need to escape the life she feels trapped in, even if it means sacrificing someone else’s well-being.

Nina's choice of replacement is Wilhelmina "Millie" Calloway, a young woman with a troubled history and a vulnerable background. Millie’s criminal past and desperate need for stability make her a prime candidate in Nina’s eyes, as she believes that Millie’s weakness will make her more susceptible to Andy’s manipulation and control. Enlisting the reluctant help of her friend Enzo, Nina hires a private investigator to thoroughly vet Millie, ensuring that she is both compatible with Andy’s desires and easily molded into the perfect replacement. Nina’s manipulation of Millie continues as she sets her up in Andy’s home, where she assigns the attic as Millie’s living space—a subtle yet telling gesture that underscores Millie’s temporary status in the household and serves to mark her as a mere placeholder. Nina’s attempt to control every aspect of the situation is evident in her calculated orchestration of Millie’s placement, all while she ensures that Andy will view her as a solution to their crumbling marriage.

As Nina works to position Millie as the ideal replacement, she carefully manipulates the environment to make sure Millie and Andy’s paths cross in a way that ignites attraction

and desire. Nina does everything in her power to ensure that Millie will be seen as the antithesis to her own perceived shortcomings, heightening Andy's dissatisfaction with their marriage. Nina goes to great lengths to deepen the rift between her and Andy, suggesting that she is infertile and unable to bear him children, while pushing Millie closer to him in the hope of creating an undeniable attraction between them. This psychological manipulation reaches its peak as Nina fosters an environment where Millie becomes the answer to everything Andy desires, from a younger partner to a potential mother of his children. In a bid to ensure Millie's success in her role, Nina's devious plan leaves no stone unturned, even as she undermines her own happiness in the process.

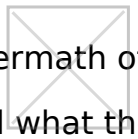
Chapter 49 presents a stark portrayal of Nina's desperation, as she turns to manipulation and deceit to escape an abusive relationship. The chapter skillfully examines the moral ambiguity of Nina's actions and the devastating lengths to which she is willing to go in order to achieve her freedom. Her calculated manipulation of Millie, despite her own feelings of guilt, serves as a stark reminder of the devastating effects of long-term emotional abuse and the toll it takes on one's sense of morality. The psychological tension of the narrative builds as Nina's plan unfolds, raising critical questions about the true cost of freedom and whether the price is too high when it involves using others as pawns in a manipulative game. As Nina struggles with the moral implications of her actions, the reader is left grappling with the complexity of her character and the ultimate consequences of her plan. The chapter is a compelling and suspenseful examination of power dynamics, desperation, and the lengths people will go to in their pursuit of autonomy and escape.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 opens with Nina reflecting deeply on the emotional and psychological aftermath of escaping her abusive relationship with Andy, a man who had controlled and manipulated her for years. She vividly recalls the myriad ways Andy tried to break her down—by constantly belittling her, attempting to label her as mentally unstable, and even confining her within their home. Despite having physically removed herself from his grip, Nina still feels a constant undercurrent of fear, knowing that until the divorce is officially finalized, she remains vulnerable to his retaliation. Lying in a hotel bed, she allows herself a moment of peace, planning to pick up her daughter, Cecelia, from camp the next day, preparing for a fresh start far away from Andy's shadow. It is a small victory, but one that fills her with a sense of hope for the future, especially since Andy holds no legal rights over Cecelia, allowing Nina to breathe a little easier. Just as she begins to let down her guard, there’s an unexpected knock at the door, and a sense of panic washes over her—could Andy have found her? But instead of facing the wrath of her abuser, she is greeted by Enzo, a man who has played a quiet yet pivotal role in assisting her escape. Enzo’s sudden presence brings a combination of relief and confusion, as Nina wasn't expecting a visit from anyone she trusted in such a vulnerable moment.

Enzo's arrival brings an unexpected surge of emotions, marking a turning point in Nina's journey of healing and self-discovery. His appearance, initially a symbol of safety and support, takes on new meaning as the two share a deeply passionate encounter that reignites feelings Nina had long suppressed. This brief yet intense connection with Enzo stands in sharp contrast to the years of emotional neglect and physical control she suffered under Andy's regime. For the first time in a long while, Nina experiences genuine affection—free from manipulation or deceit, a love that feels pure and untainted. This moment, though fleeting, helps Nina reclaim a part of herself

that had been buried for years, reminding her of the possibility of intimacy without fear. In this brief but powerful encounter, Nina not only reconnects with her own desires but also recognizes that she is worthy of love, care, and tenderness. Enzo, a figure who has shown quiet patience and support throughout Nina's ordeal, becomes a symbol of what a loving relationship can look like without the baggage of control or manipulation.



However, the aftermath of their shared moment leads Nina to reflect more deeply on her emotions and what they mean for her future. While Enzo expresses his feelings for Nina, admitting that his attraction to her began from the very first time they met, Nina cannot afford to let those feelings distract her from her primary objective: to start anew, free from the shackles of her past life. Despite the warmth and connection she shares with Enzo, Nina is determined to stay focused on her ultimate goal—her independence. She recognizes that she needs to heal from the wounds left by Andy before considering a relationship with anyone else, even someone as kind and genuine as Enzo. Nina knows she must take the time to rediscover herself, free from the weight of years spent under Andy’s control. The last thing she wants is to repeat the patterns of her past by rushing into something that could ultimately derail her newfound freedom. She is determined to prioritize her personal growth, healing, and the well-being of Cecelia, ensuring that she doesn’t lose herself in another relationship before she is truly ready. The chapter ends with Nina at a crossroads—her emotional vulnerability exposed, yet her resolve intact. There is no clear answer to whether Enzo will remain in her life or if she will continue her journey alone, but the ambiguity of the future leaves a lingering sense of both possibility and uncertainty. Nina's decision to step forward alone, despite the bond she shares with Enzo, speaks volumes about her character's strength and her commitment to charting her own course, showing that the future, while uncertain, is hers to define.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51 reveals a deeply unsettling shift in Millie's relationship with Andrew, transforming what was once a loving bond into a chilling display of control and manipulation. The chapter opens with Millie trapped in a room, completely unaware of why she’s been locked in. At first, she thinks the situation is simply an accident, perhaps a momentary lapse of judgment on Andrew’s part as he left the room. But as time passes and she is unable to get his attention or reach him, her anxiety turns into dread. The thought that he could have deliberately locked her in becomes all the more disturbing when she discovers that her phone is missing, leaving her completely isolated and vulnerable. With no means to call for help, Millie starts to realize the gravity of her situation, questioning what Andrew’s true intentions are, and whether she can trust him anymore.

As Millie tries to rationalize the bizarre turn of events, her eyes fall on a set of textbooks on the floor, a strange and chilling discovery. These textbooks, which cover disturbing subjects such as U.S. prisons and torture, strike a deep sense of foreboding in her. They are not items she remembers placing there, and their contents suggest that Andrew’s intentions might be far more malicious than she had ever suspected. The unease that has been creeping through her mind begins to solidify into terror, as she realizes the man she loved and trusted has been keeping dark secrets from her. This moment serves as a catalyst for Millie’s recognition that she is no longer in control of her life, and that Andrew may be orchestrating her entrapment for reasons she cannot yet fully comprehend.

When Andrew finally speaks to Millie, it’s clear that he has crossed a line. Rather than offering an explanation for his actions, he accuses her of disrespecting him and demands that she endure a degrading punishment—balancing three heavy textbooks on her abdomen for an excruciating three hours. His tone is cold and authoritative, a

stark contrast to the affectionate partner Millie thought she knew. What was once an intimate relationship now feels like a power struggle, with Andrew wielding control and Millie at his mercy. His unreasonable demand is not just physical—it’s psychological, a tool to break her spirit and assert his dominance over her. The task itself, though seemingly trivial, carries the weight of Andrew’s manipulation and his growing need to dominate and control her.

The tension builds even further when Millie, desperate and fearful, refuses to comply with his punishment. What follows is a standoff, marked by Andrew’s unyielding demand for compliance and Millie’s growing sense of desperation. The cruel twist comes when Millie discovers Andrew has been watching her the entire time through a hidden camera, stripping away any illusion of safety or privacy she might have once had. The revelation that she is being surveilled in her most vulnerable moments magnifies the emotional and psychological violation she’s enduring. This moment shatters any remaining trust she had in Andrew, as she realizes the full extent of his manipulation and control. Millie’s refusal to comply with his demands represents a final act of defiance, but it’s clear that Andrew’s grip on her is tightening. His promise to release her once the punishment is completed offers a false hope, leaving Millie with a hollow sense of relief. While the chapter ends with the promise of freedom, it also leaves Millie—and the reader—haunted by the knowledge that this is only a temporary reprieve, and that the deepening darkness of Andrew’s behavior is far from over. This chapter weaves a harrowing tale of control, manipulation, and the psychological toll of living under someone else’s dominance.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52 delves deep into Millie’s psychological and physical struggle as she navigates the harrowing consequences of Andrew’s cruel game, trapped in the attic and subjected to his whims. She begins her ordeal with the most basic of needs: using a bucket for relief and drinking water from a nearly empty mini-fridge, but quickly, her struggle for survival turns into something far worse—an agonizing mental challenge. Andrew’s demand that she balance three heavy books on her abdomen for three excruciating hours pushes her body to the brink, creating both physical pain and an emotional strain as she tries to hold onto the fragile hope that compliance will bring her freedom. The atmosphere in the attic is thick with tension, amplified by her isolation and the stark absence of any form of compassion from Andrew. Each passing minute under the weight of the books makes her situation more unbearable, yet Millie persists, driven by a desperate desire to escape, even though she has no idea whether Andrew will honor his word when the task is completed. The chapter showcases how Millie’s survival instincts are pushed to the edge as she faces an unimaginable test of both physical endurance and mental fortitude.

As time passes, the suffocating silence in the attic is broken only by the sound of Millie’s own labored breathing, punctuated by the occasional echo of Andrew’s commands. His voice, a constant reminder of his power over her, only intensifies her sense of helplessness as she is left with no choice but to comply. Every time she pleads for him to release her, her cries fall on deaf ears, and Millie’s frustration only grows as the minutes stretch into hours. The strain of balancing the books coupled with the overwhelming thirst she endures creates a feverish state of mind where reality and illusion begin to blur. Millie finds herself slipping into hallucinations, which reflect her desperation and the deep psychological toll her confinement is having on her. It’s in this disorienting state that she contemplates the harsh reality of her

situation and realizes the heavy price she pays for even a fleeting hope of freedom. Despite the growing sense of futility, Millie chooses to endure, seeing it as her only option for survival. Her decision to continue holding onto the books is not just about following Andrew’s rules—it's about the last shred of control she can cling to, a small act of defiance in the face of his oppressive control.

When Millie finally manages to finish the task, she believes she has earned her release, yet Andrew’s response is as cold and manipulative as ever. His words are a cruel reminder that, for him, no amount of compliance will ever be enough, and Millie’s emotional exhaustion is met with more manipulation. She realizes, with deep bitterness, that Andrew’s rules are arbitrary, and her compliance is nothing more than part of a twisted cycle designed to break her will. Millie’s anger at his blatant disregard for her suffering is evident, yet she remains trapped in his psychological grip, unable to escape the web of control he’s woven around her. This interaction further underscores Andrew’s cruelty, revealing his ability to toy with Millie’s emotions and drag her into an endless loop of compliance and punishment. Even after completing the task he set for her, Millie is left feeling empty, as if nothing she does will ever change the brutal dynamic between them. The weight of her realization sets in—her survival is not just about meeting Andrew’s demands, but about finding the strength to confront the deeper psychological manipulation at play. In the final moments of this chapter, Millie’s journey takes on a more somber tone, as she faces the cold truth of her entrapment, both physically and mentally, and the bitter understanding that the only way out is through breaking the chains Andrew has placed around her.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53 delves into the intricate and unsettling past of Wilhelmina Calloway, shedding light on a history that has long been concealed, even to those closest to her. Nina, increasingly disturbed by Millie’s secretive nature and behavior, becomes suspicious, prompting her to investigate further. Fearing that there might be something hidden beneath the surface, Nina hires a private investigator to uncover details of Millie’s past, hoping to find some explanation for her actions—perhaps an explanation rooted in minor offenses or missteps. However, Nina is caught off guard by the revelations that emerge, discovering that Millie’s history is steeped in far darker and more complex events than she could have ever anticipated. These discoveries force Nina to reconsider her perception of Millie, casting her in a new light, while also prompting the reader to reevaluate Millie’s true nature.

Through the investigator’s findings, we learn that Millie’s life was irrevocably altered by a violent incident when she was just sixteen years old. At the time, Millie attended a boarding school specifically designed to house troubled youth, where she found herself at the center of a life-changing event. One evening, hearing the desperate cries of her friend being assaulted, Millie acted without hesitation, rushing to intervene and protect her friend from further harm. Faced with an attacker much larger than herself, Millie grabbed a paperweight and, in a frantic attempt to stop the assault, struck the assailant multiple times. The result was fatal—the attacker died from his injuries before any medical intervention could take place, leaving Millie to confront the immediate and long-lasting consequences of her actions.

The legal aftermath of the incident presents a complicated web of emotions and challenges. Millie’s lawyer argues that her actions were entirely motivated by the instinct to defend her friend from harm, but the evidence collected from the scene tells a different, more troubling story. Graphic photographs of the damage done to the

attacker reveal the sheer brutality of Millie’s response, leaving a murky gray area between self-defense and an act of vengeance. This evidence brings to the forefront the question of intent—did Millie truly act out of self-preservation, or did her emotions push her toward something darker? Ultimately, Millie accepts a plea deal for manslaughter, which is a lesser charge than murder, given her young age and the circumstances of the attack. The victim’s family, though grieving, seeks to avoid a public trial and the further disgrace it could bring, leading them to request a more lenient punishment. This decision, while offering some relief to Millie, does not erase the emotional toll of the event, which haunts her for years to come.

This chapter of Millie’s life opens up a complex narrative that reveals the inner turmoil and struggles she faces in the aftermath of her violent act. Through Nina’s investigation, the readers are granted a deeper understanding of Millie’s character, showing the tension between her need to protect those she cares about and the haunting consequences of her actions. It is clear that Millie’s emotional and psychological state is far from stable—her past, marked by violence, guilt, and unresolved trauma, continues to influence her decisions and relationships. Nina, initially seeking answers about Millie’s past, is now forced to grapple with the complexity of Millie’s life, understanding that sometimes the lines between right and wrong are not always so clear. The story examines profound themes of justice, morality, and the gray areas that shape human actions, leaving both Nina and the reader questioning the limits of redemption and whether Millie can ever truly move beyond her past. The chapter concludes by highlighting Millie’s ongoing internal struggle, emphasizing that even when the law offers closure, the emotional scars left by such an event remain indelible.

Chapter 54

Chapter 54 begins with Millie taking a bold step in asserting control over Andrew, utilizing pepper spray at close range to incapacitate him. She ensures he cannot retaliate or pursue her by securely locking him in a room and disabling his phone's lock screen, leaving him vulnerable and isolated. Seizing his phone, she gains access to his world and uses it as a strategic tool to manipulate the situation to her advantage. Millie's actions here mark a shift in her character, from a woman who once felt powerless and cornered to one who now takes active control, showing her willingness to fight back against the man who has continuously belittled and abused her.

Outside, Millie's defiance is not just physical but psychological as well. As she stands away from the immediate chaos, she reflects on an earlier moment in her life when she took violent action to defend a friend—an event that ultimately led to her imprisonment. Despite the consequences, Millie views that act of violence as morally justified, revealing her belief that there are times when taking extreme measures is necessary for self-preservation and justice. The depth of Millie's inner conflict is laid bare here, as she grapples with the weight of her past decisions while also justifying her current course of action. This inner tension fuels her drive, providing a moral foundation for the choices she makes in the present.

The use of Andrew's phone becomes a powerful metaphor for Millie's reclamation of power. By impersonating Andrew in his communication with his mother, she uncovers hidden animosities and tensions within Andrew's family dynamic. Millie learns that his mother holds contempt for Nina and Cecelia, and in that moment, she identifies with Nina and Cecelia's victimization under Andrew's manipulative control. This newfound empathy sets Millie apart from Andrew, as she begins to view herself as not just a victim but as someone who can align herself with others suffering from his cruelty. It

also highlights Millie’s capacity for understanding and connecting with those who are similarly oppressed, providing insight into her character as one who seeks justice, not just for herself but for others caught in Andrew’s web.

The chapter continues to build tension as Millie prepares for her confrontation with Andrew. As she mentally gears up for this encounter, her approach is not just about confrontation but psychological warfare. She demands that Andrew acknowledge the harm he’s done, not just to her, but to the people around him. His apology, given grudgingly and with little sincerity, is not enough for Millie, who presses further by asking for a punishment that would mirror the vulnerability he’s inflicted on her. This desire for retribution goes beyond simple revenge—Millie seeks to turn the tables on Andrew, forcing him to experience the same kind of fear and helplessness that he has caused in others. Her willingness to confront him head-on, demanding more than a mere apology, demonstrates her transformation into someone unafraid to stand up to those who wield power through manipulation and fear. Through this encounter, Millie’s journey from victimhood to empowerment reaches a pivotal point, with her actions suggesting a deeper need for accountability and a desire to correct the injustices in her life.

In the broader context of the chapter, the themes of power, revenge, and justice intertwine with the deep emotional scars that both Millie and Andrew carry. Millie’s complex relationship with Andrew is not just about vengeance but about reclaiming her sense of self and dignity. The chapter highlights her resilience and the growth of her emotional and psychological strength, painting a picture of a woman determined not only to survive but to actively shape her destiny and confront the wrongs that have shaped her. Millie’s ability to manipulate the situation, control Andrew’s fate in this moment, and challenge the power dynamics that have long oppressed her is a testament to her growth as a character who is no longer passive but fully active in her own story. This turning point in the narrative sets the stage for further exploration of her journey toward healing and justice, offering hope for her future even as she grapples with the scars of the past.

Chapter 55

In Chapter 55, we see Millie’s journey evolve as she reflects deeply on her complex relationship with Nina and the shifting perceptions that arise from it. Initially, Millie perceived Nina as erratic and unstable, which pushed her to distance herself emotionally from Nina’s actions and behaviors. However, as the story unfolds, Millie begins to reconsider her stance. She starts to suspect that Nina’s seemingly unpredictable behavior may have been an effort to protect her from a much deeper threat, particularly from a man they both know. This revelation forces Millie to confront the possibility that Nina’s behavior was a form of caution and foresight, aimed at warning her about a danger that Millie had been blind to. As Millie reevaluates her past judgments and actions, she begins to unravel a disturbing pattern of abuse and manipulation—both from her own life and possibly Nina’s as well. These realizations only serve to deepen Millie’s awareness of the trauma that has shaped both their lives, suggesting a shared experience of powerlessness and betrayal.

As Millie reflects on her tumultuous past, she is reminded of the many times she was mistreated, ignored, or misunderstood. Growing up, she was often disbelieved by those in positions of authority, and her experiences with figures of power only exacerbated her feelings of isolation. Her time in prison was a stark reminder of how little her voice was valued, how the systems around her perpetuated her suffering without offering any real opportunity for escape or redemption. This abandonment by society left Millie with little trust in anyone but herself. She learned to survive in a world that was indifferent to her struggles, honing emotional resilience and practical survival skills. For Millie, survival wasn’t just about avoiding physical harm—it was about building emotional fortifications against the harsh world around her. This self-reliance was born out of necessity, and it often led to violent confrontations as she learned to defend herself, both emotionally and physically, against those who sought

to exploit her vulnerability. These memories reveal how her past has shaped her view of relationships, often seeing them as transactional and dangerous rather than supportive and nurturing.

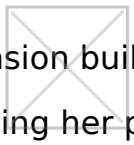
In the latter part of the chapter, the tension escalates between Millie and Andrew, with their confrontation becoming a stark display of power dynamics. Millie, having endured so much abuse and manipulation herself, now takes control of the situation, subjecting Andrew to the kind of emotional cruelty that she has long experienced at the hands of others. Her calm, almost detached manner as she forces him into a position of submission speaks volumes about her character's evolution. She extends his punishment, not out of petty revenge but as a deliberate and calculated act of reclaiming control over her life. Andrew's pleas for mercy fall on deaf ears as Millie's ability to manipulate and control the situation becomes evident. This scene highlights Millie's transformation from victim to survivor, demonstrating her ability to use her trauma as a tool to navigate her relationships and situations with a newfound strength. She recognizes her power in the moment and uses it to take back control from those who have caused her harm. The complex layers of Millie's character begin to emerge more clearly here: a woman forged by hardship, capable of both great tenderness and cold ruthlessness. As the chapter concludes, Millie stands on the precipice of a new chapter in her life. She has learned the hard way that survival requires more than resilience—it requires the ability to take control, not just of situations, but of one's own narrative. The path ahead is still uncertain, but Millie's growing sense of self is unmistakable, setting the stage for her journey of transformation.

Chapter 56

Chapter 56 begins with a powerful, emotional reunion as Nina arrives at Cecelia’s camp, greeted by the sight of her daughter, finally free from the manipulative grasp of her father, Andrew. Cecelia, no longer bound by Andrew's rigid expectations, revels in her newfound freedom, her body marked by the rough-and-tumble of childhood—scrapes, sunburns, and the kind of carefree spirit that only comes from being unburdened. The joyful reunion between mother and daughter is filled with the warmth of long-anticipated liberation, a brief moment where hope seems within their grasp. Nina, secretly prepared for this escape, has mapped out a new beginning for them, one that will start with a dream of a visit to Disneyland—a place of magic that fills Cecelia with excitement and joy, marking the first step into a life they can share without fear or constraint. Yet, even in the midst of this emotional high, Cecelia’s fleeting thoughts turn to her father, Andrew, a painful reminder of the unresolved trauma of their past. Nina, ever the protective mother, reassures Cecelia that Andrew will not be part of their lives moving forward, providing a measure of solace and the promise of a future untainted by his influence.

However, as the chapter progresses, Nina’s sense of liberation is complicated by a call from Enzo, a figure from her past who brings news that will once again shift the trajectory of her life. Enzo informs her that Millie, a key player in Nina’s plot for revenge against Andrew, is in trouble. Although Nina initially dismisses Millie’s predicament as a natural consequence of her involvement in the revenge scheme, Enzo’s concern about Millie’s increasingly erratic behavior and her possible confinement forces Nina to reconsider. This revelation forces Nina to face the unintended consequences of her earlier decisions, realizing that Millie, who had been a pawn in her pursuit of vengeance, may now be caught in a dangerous situation. This internal conflict builds as Nina grapples with the moral weight of her past actions and

the realization that the web she wove for Andrew has ensnared others. The chapter dives deep into Nina’s emotional turmoil, exploring the complexities of seeking freedom while also having to confront the negative ripple effects that come from one’s choices. It is clear that Nina is struggling to reconcile the desire for a fresh start with the burden of past mistakes and the responsibilities she has for those affected by her decisions.



The chapter’s tension builds as Nina is forced to confront the reality that the pursuit of justice—while giving her personal satisfaction and a sense of freedom—has complicated her life in unexpected ways. The relief of leaving Andrew and the hope for a new life with Cecelia are clouded by the guilt that weighs heavily on her heart for the role she played in Millie’s current crisis. The narrative skillfully examines the duality of freedom, showing that while liberation may seem like a victory, it often comes with a heavy price that requires one to account for the consequences of their actions. Nina’s dilemma becomes not just about her escape but about her moral responsibility for those who were hurt in the process. As Nina contemplates whether to heed Enzo’s call and return to Millie’s aid, the narrative highlights the complexity of human choices and the often-unseen aftermath of our decisions. In this poignant chapter, the theme of redemption and the long path toward emotional resolution is explored, as Nina realizes that true freedom may not just involve escaping the past, but also accepting the responsibility of those we leave behind. The chapter is a deep meditation on sacrifice, accountability, and the endless struggle to balance personal liberation with the reverberating consequences of one’s actions, offering a nuanced reflection on what it means to truly be free.

Chapter 57

In Chapter 57, we are thrust deep into Millie’s psychological torment and the disturbing complexity of her relationship with Andrew. The chapter opens with Millie waking up in a state of unease, her thoughts immediately drawn to the camera feed she set up to keep watch over Andrew, who remains trapped in the attic. She’s gripped with a sudden wave of panic, fearing that he has escaped, only to feel a chilling combination of relief and dread when she confirms that he’s still there, hidden under the covers. This mixture of emotions—relief that he hasn't escaped but fear of what he represents—sets the stage for the tension that will unfold between them, revealing the power dynamics at play in their toxic relationship.

Millie’s thoughts drift back to the five hours that Andrew has already endured, trapped beneath heavy books, a punishment that, in her mind, feels justified but also deeply manipulative. Her mind is at war as she contemplates the odd sense of control she now holds over him, reminding herself of the twisted bond they share and the deal they made. Before she proceeds with releasing him, Millie chooses to focus on herself, indulging in a rare moment of respite with a long shower, savoring the act as an escape from the grim reality she is steeped in. When she finally emerges and dresses herself, she does so with quiet determination, having tucked away both Andrew's phone and a mysterious object she found in the garage—tools of control, of manipulation, that she carries with her as part of her psychological arsenal. Her calculated actions underscore her cold detachment, preparing her for the next phase of their interaction, where she will maintain her iron grip on him.

As she approaches the attic, the palpable tension grows. Andrew, weak and desperate from his hours of entrapment, stands as a stark contrast to Millie’s calculated composure and cold indifference. His attempts to negotiate his release fall on deaf ears as Millie slides pliers under the door and demands that he pull out one of his own

teeth—a demand both physically excruciating and deeply symbolic. His immediate refusal, coupled with frantic attempts to break free, highlights his vulnerability, the full extent of his powerlessness laid bare before Millie. She remains unmoved by his pleas, her detachment deepening as she continues to manipulate the situation, using Andrew’s desperation as a means of reinforcing her dominance. She controls the terms of their interaction, pushing him to his physical and emotional breaking point with each demand, each moment of silence from her that extends his agony.



The psychological and physical power struggle between Millie and Andrew forms the crux of this chapter, with every word and action carrying a heavier weight than the last. The attic, with its cold, oppressive atmosphere, symbolizes not just Andrew’s confinement but Millie’s own psychological imprisonment—a prison of her making, one that thrives on control and dominance. While Andrew’s captivity is physical, Millie’s is emotional and mental, tethered to her need to assert power over someone who once held power over her. The more we witness Millie’s actions, the clearer it becomes that her need for control is driven by her own deep insecurities, her belief that only through domination can she feel secure in her place. The final moments of this chapter leave the reader grappling with the implications of power, submission, and the dark undercurrents of human relationships that often go unnoticed. It’s a chilling exploration of the depths of manipulation, with Millie and Andrew’s fates intertwined in a web of control, emotional violence, and unrelenting psychological torment.

Chapter 58

Chapter 58 opens with Nina stepping into a growing sense of unease as she arrives at Andrew’s house, feeling a deep knot of dread settle in her stomach. The air around her seems to thicken, pressing down on her as she takes in the familiar yet altered surroundings. Her instincts are screaming that something is terribly wrong, but she cannot pinpoint exactly what has shifted. Despite having sworn to herself that she would never return unless she was certain her daughter Cece was fully protected, Nina finds herself standing at the door of the very house she vowed to avoid. Her trust is placed solely in Enzo, who she hopes is keeping Cece away from Andrew’s manipulative grasp. The neighborhood, once a place that might have offered refuge, now feels more like a pit of deception, filled with people who are easily swayed by Andrew’s charm and influence. The constant undercurrent of suspicion about the people around her makes Nina feel as if she’s walking through a minefield, unable to know who, if anyone, she can truly trust.

As Nina parks discreetly behind the house, trying to stay hidden from any unwanted attention, her plans are interrupted by Suzanne. Suzanne, once someone Nina could confide in, now serves as a painful reminder of betrayal, her words thinly veiled with concern but laced with an unmistakable hint of gossip. She pretends to be casually interested in missed social events and neighborhood rumors, but Nina sees through her act. Suzanne’s subtle inquiries seem like nothing more than fishing for information, trying to assess Nina’s situation and any vulnerabilities she can exploit. Nina, though weary, keeps her composure and deflects Suzanne’s probing questions with practiced ease. She manages to maintain the facade of stability, hiding the turmoil beneath the surface, though the gossip surrounding her—depicting her as either abandoned or wrongfully accused—lingers like a shadow. These moments of tension underscore the growing isolation Nina feels, with even the people she once trusted now acting as

obstacles to her pursuit of clarity.

Upon entering the house, Nina is hit by an overwhelming sense of isolation and the emotional weight of estrangement. The home, which once provided comfort and a semblance of normalcy, now feels foreign and empty, as though it no longer belongs to her. Every action she takes—whether it’s ringing the doorbell to announce her return or cautiously stepping into the house—is met with silence, amplifying the emotional void that surrounds her. The lack of any response from Andrew only adds to her mounting anxiety. She notices his BMW parked in the garage, but its presence only fuels her uncertainty. If he’s there, where could he be? And why is there no sign of him? The garage, once a place of familiarity, now holds more questions than answers. She is left to wonder whether Andrew and Millie are hiding, or if something else is at play, but with no clear direction, her mind races in search of explanations. This unsettling silence amplifies the tension Nina feels, as she grapples with the possibility that things may never return to the way they were.

This chapter captures the suffocating weight of Nina’s emotional and psychological turmoil, showcasing her struggle to navigate a world where every corner seems clouded with betrayal and distrust. As Nina tries to make sense of the reality she finds herself in, the narrative delves deeper into themes of isolation, disillusionment, and a woman trying to reclaim control in a world that seems determined to strip it away. Nina’s path forward remains uncertain, but her determination shines through despite the overwhelming obstacles in her way. The fractured state of her home and the fragmented relationships around her paint a portrait of a woman who is caught between the past and the future, struggling to reconcile the two while searching for any glimmer of hope in the uncertainty. The chapter ends with Nina poised on the edge of a revelation, each unanswered question pushing her further into the unknown.

Chapter 59

Chapter 59 unfolds a deeply emotional moment through Nina’s perspective, set in the haunting atmosphere of an attic dimly lit by the flicker of a solitary light. The discovery of Andy’s lifeless body brings an overwhelming sense of shock and disbelief, but it also triggers a confrontation with Millie, who, armed with pepper spray, is visibly rattled by her own actions. Despite the immediate threat posed by Millie, who is clearly in a state of emotional turmoil, Nina’s focus remains on her, sensing that there’s more to the situation than the visible aggression. This choice to concentrate on Millie’s fragile state, rather than the potential danger she poses, reveals Nina’s deeper understanding of the complex emotions that are at play. It highlights Nina’s ability to navigate the chaos of the moment with a steady composure, offering a glimpse into her capacity for empathy in the face of despair.

As Millie stands in the attic, her confession unravels the mystery of Andy’s death—he has been lying lifeless for days, a revelation that hits Nina like a cold wave. She observes the body, confirming the grim reality of the situation, yet it is her inner strength that allows her to process the harsh scene without succumbing to panic. While Nina examines the situation, Millie’s composure begins to crumble, and the weight of her actions crashes down on her, manifesting in her emotional breakdown. The emotional stakes intensify as Millie’s guilt and regret become palpable, but Nina’s calmness in the face of such a gruesome discovery serves as a sharp contrast to the chaos Millie feels, further showcasing the layered complexity of Nina’s character. It is in this pivotal moment that Nina’s resilience shines through, a quiet strength that doesn’t just endure but also seeks to understand the despair of others.

Amid Millie’s overwhelming guilt and fear of what might come next, Nina makes a profound decision that speaks to her deep sense of responsibility and sacrifice. She offers herself as the one to take the blame for Andy’s death, suggesting that she will

use her past struggles with mental health as a defense strategy. This decision is not only an act of self-sacrifice but also a testament to Nina’s complex character, highlighting her willingness to shield Millie from the emotional and legal consequences of her actions. Nina’s readiness to take on the burden of guilt, despite her own troubled past, reveals a side of her that is motivated by compassion and loyalty, willing to endure the consequences of a crime she did not commit for the sake of someone else’s well-being. Her decision to act as a scapegoat showcases her internal conflict and the moral dilemma she faces, as she grapples with the blurred lines between right and wrong.

The exchange between Nina and Millie shifts from a tense confrontation to a moment of unexpected compassion and understanding, as Nina solidifies her commitment to protecting Millie from further harm. Through Nina’s eyes, the narrative explores the intricacies of sacrifice, loyalty, and the fine line between justice and personal redemption. This pivotal moment in the story sets the stage for future events, as Nina’s willingness to take the fall introduces a new layer of complexity to the already tumultuous relationships between the characters. As the chapter unfolds, it delves into themes of selflessness, guilt, and the sacrifices people make for the ones they love. The attic, a once foreboding space filled with secrets and tension, becomes a symbolic setting for the irreversible decisions made in the heat of emotion. It is within these walls that Nina makes a choice that will echo through her life and the lives of those around her, with far-reaching consequences that will shape the story going forward.

Chapter 60

Chapter 60: Nina Winchester finds herself gripped by an overwhelming sense of foreboding, feeling like a prisoner in her own home as she contemplates the grim possibility that her departure from this chapter of her life might be forever tainted by the threat of arrest. As she sits on her leather sofa, the weight of uncertainty presses down on her, with each passing moment stretching the tension between her and the inevitable return of Detective Connors. In the midst of this dread, she seeks a fragment of solace by reaching out to Enzo, hoping for some comfort, even though she knows that his involvement in the matter is questionable at best. His willingness to stand by her, despite the undeniable complexity of their relationship, only highlights the deep emotional bond they share—a bond that somehow endures in the face of mounting peril. Yet, their conversation is interrupted by Cece, Nina's young daughter, whose innocent request for her mother to pick her up serves as a stark reminder of the life she’s trying to protect—a life untouched by the dark chaos that’s enveloping Nina.

When Detective Connors re-enters, the focus shifts toward the unsettling investigation into Andy's mysterious death, particularly the bruises discovered on his body. As the interrogation proceeds, Nina feels the pressure mount as Connors skillfully dissects the remnants of her fractured relationship with Andy. His pointed questions about Wilhelmina Calloway and the perplexing circumstances in the attic shine a light on the complexities of the case, and Nina's growing discomfort becomes increasingly evident. The detective’s relentless inquiries reveal the many layers of Nina’s involvement, exposing her to the harsh reality of the situation—each question bringing her closer to the precipice, where the truth about Andy’s demise might emerge, threatening to pull her deeper into a narrative she’s desperately trying to escape. The atmosphere in the room is thick with tension, as every word seems to carry the weight of judgment, and the full scope of Nina's entanglement with the case becomes clearer with each passing

moment.

A stunning revelation occurs when Detective Connors discloses a personal connection to the case—his daughter, Kathleen, had once been engaged to Andy. This information takes Nina completely by surprise, shifting the focus of the investigation from an impersonal pursuit of justice to something much more intimate. It also reintroduces Kathleen, a figure from Nina's past whose experiences with Andy now offer a much darker view of his character. This unexpected twist adds a layer of depth to the investigation, as Kathleen’s knowledge of Andy’s personal life complicates the case and casts a new shadow on the man Nina thought she knew. With Kathleen’s involvement, a new layer of complexity is added to Nina’s already fragile position, deepening the moral quandaries she must navigate. What was once a case of an accidental death now takes on an entirely new dimension, intertwining personal vendettas with the pursuit of justice.

This chapter masterfully explores Nina’s growing internal struggle, her mounting sense of dread, and the suffocating realization that her past decisions are leading her down an irreversible path. As the stakes grow higher and the investigation intensifies, Nina is faced with the terrifying possibility that she might not only lose the life she’s tried so hard to rebuild but also be held accountable for secrets she wishes could remain buried. The unfolding investigation, shaped by the revelations of Andy’s hidden relationships, reflects the complexity of human emotions, where guilt, betrayal, and remorse converge in an ever-tightening spiral. Through Nina’s eyes, the reader sees a woman caught between her past and the mounting consequences of her choices, realizing that redemption may be out of reach. The chapter paints a picture of a woman who is no longer running from the truth, but instead bracing herself for the inevitable collision of her past and present, with no escape in sight.

Chapter 61

Chapter 61: The atmosphere in the room feels heavy with an unspoken tension. Evelyn’s words cut through the stillness, her reference to Andy’s death—the strange circumstances surrounding it—striking a raw nerve within me. The bruises, the marks, the things that didn’t add up, it all rushes back in a wave, and I find myself gasping for air. Has she caught on? Does she suspect me, or is she merely reflecting on the tragedy through her own lens? I am paralyzed by uncertainty.

I force myself to respond, my voice barely rising above a whisper, “Very strange.” It’s the only response I can muster, a brief acknowledgment that carries all the weight of the secrets I’ve been hiding. Evelyn’s unwavering gaze meets mine, her eyes searching for something I’m not sure I can give. But then, to my surprise, her expression softens—just a little. “Andy was always involved in... unusual situations,” she continues, her voice tinged with sorrow, as though she’s mourning something beyond just his death. “Accidents happen, don’t they?” The sadness in her tone suggests she’s either resigned to the truth or reluctant to accept the reality of what might have happened.

I stand frozen, caught between relief and uncertainty. Evelyn’s words could mean many things, but I don’t know which direction she’s leaning toward. Is she silently granting me forgiveness, implying that she knows what really happened but is choosing to let it go? Or is she, too, playing her part in this unspoken game of appearances, trying to maintain control over what little she can in a world turned upside down? Her focus shifts away from me as she turns toward Andy, her son. Her voice softens even further, laden with a regret that I can feel deep in my bones. “I just wish things could have been different for all of us,” she says, her words heavy with sorrow and something deeper—perhaps a shared understanding of loss.

In that moment, the invisible wall between Evelyn and me begins to crumble. For the first time, I feel a connection, an understanding between us, despite all the years of animosity. We have both lost someone dear to us—someone who shaped our lives in ways we never could have anticipated. And now, we stand on opposite sides of grief, yet for a fleeting moment, we share something in common. “Yes,” I respond, my voice barely above a whisper. “I wish that too.”

As Evelyn stands in silence, gazing at Andy, I realize that the lives we’ve led—our separate paths—have been shaped by forces beyond our control. The pain we carry, the grief that has followed us through the years, is not something that can be easily undone. Our tangled lives, bound by secrets and unspoken truths, are too complex to unravel now. The weight of our shared history lingers in the room, and as Evelyn takes one last look at her son, she nods at me—a silent gesture that speaks volumes.

Her departure leaves me with an unfamiliar sense of both relief and sadness. A part of me feels lighter, as though something has shifted between us, yet another part remains uncertain. Perhaps this is the beginning of some kind of resolution—not just for me, but for all of us whose lives were affected by Andy’s existence. The chapter closes on a somber note, but one that feels, in some way, like the start of something new.

As I stand there, reflecting on everything that has happened, I can feel the weight of my past starting to lift. The years of torment, the secrets I’ve carried, and the emotional scars I’ve tried to hide are slowly fading into the background. Andy’s death, though painful, has set me free in ways I never could have imagined. It has allowed me to shed the layers of guilt and fear that have bound me for so long. And yet, despite the freedom, there is still so much uncertainty ahead. The future is unknown, but for the first time in years, I feel like I have a chance to walk toward it with my head held high.

I glance at Cecelia, my rock, the one person who has stood by me through it all, and I feel a surge of hope. The ghosts of the past still linger, but they no longer hold the power they once did. The future is full of possibilities, and I am ready to embrace

them, no longer shackled by the chains of the past. With Andy’s shadow finally fading, I can step into a new chapter, one that is mine to write, free from the weight of secrets and regret. The road ahead is uncertain, but it is mine to navigate, and for the first time, I feel the promise of what lies beyond.



Epilogue

Epilogue: In this pivotal moment of Millie’s journey, the narrative draws the reader into a scene where she stands at the crossroads of a potential new beginning, yet still burdened by the weight of her past mistakes and regrets. It’s a moment of intense reflection and possibility for her. Millie finds herself in a pristine kitchen, surrounded by the luxury and opulence of a house that seems worlds apart from the life she’s known. With the windows bathed in the soft glow of the late afternoon, she has a conversation with Lisa Killeffer about a housekeeping job that might offer her a way out of her financial struggles. The job is a chance to start over, to make amends for a past she’s worked hard to leave behind, but it’s also fraught with the uncertainty of her unresolved issues and the long-lasting consequences of her former life. This conversation is more than just an exchange about employment; it is the beginning of a delicate and unpredictable new chapter in Millie's life, offering the promise of stability but also triggering her inner fears and insecurities.

Lisa, despite offering the job, presents a situation that forces Millie to confront the issues that have defined her existence for so long. As they discuss the position, Millie’s past as a domestic worker, something she’s tried to move beyond, resurfaces. Although she’s had experience in a range of jobs, including nannying, her growing affection for children, and her solid history of domestic work, the job still carries emotional baggage for her. The grandeur of the house, with its high-tech appliances and sleek modern design, is something she never imagined herself becoming a part of. This juxtaposition of the life she wishes for and the job she is reluctantly drawn into forces Millie to question whether she is truly ready to step into this new world or if she is merely pretending, still shackled by her earlier decisions. In this moment, she sees the contrast between the present luxury and her past hardships. The job seems like a step forward, but her hesitation makes her question whether she’s escaping one type

of trap only to walk into another, this time involving her self-worth and her unresolved legal troubles.

What unsettles Millie even further is Lisa’s unexpected interest in her, given that it was Lisa who initially reached out to her after seeing an advertisement Millie had posted for domestic work and nannying services. The simplicity of the position offered—cleaning, laundry, light cooking—appears perfect on the surface. However, Millie’s unease grows, not only because of the job’s proximity to her past, but also because of the history she shares with Nina Winchester. Nina had been the one who helped Millie survive the worst of her financial struggles and gave her a chance to rebuild after her difficult past. Nina's unexpected endorsement of Millie to Lisa is unsettling to Millie, as she wonders about the genuine intentions behind it. The revelation that Nina had quietly left for California and has since maintained minimal contact doesn’t help alleviate Millie’s confusion, nor does the casual reference to a beachside picture. Millie, ever perceptive, picks up on Lisa's behavior, particularly her nonchalant actions with a knife, which only heighten her discomfort. Lisa’s seemingly calm demeanor contrasts with the growing tension in Millie’s mind, and she can't shake the feeling that something doesn’t add up.

As the conversation winds down, the tension reaches its peak. Lisa’s calmness becomes almost sinister as Millie notices the shift in her posture, her nonchalant manipulation of the knife sending ripples of unease through her. This small gesture becomes a symbol of the larger, more ominous undertones of the situation. Despite Lisa’s welcoming offer and Nina’s glowing recommendation, Millie feels herself slipping deeper into a state of anxiety. The potential for this job to be the fresh start she’s been hoping for is now overshadowed by her internal turmoil, leaving her on edge. The epilogue ends in a state of ambiguity, with Millie questioning her next steps, unsure of what lies ahead. Will she take the leap into this new life, or will her past, once again, rise to claim her future? The uncertainty of this decision leaves the reader hanging on the edge, unsure whether Millie will emerge from her past’s grip or remain ensnared by it.