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THE  
**HOUSEMAID**

**FREIDA MCFADDEN**

*bookouture*

I pause, wondering if this would be the right time to demand a lawyer. Aren't they supposed to offer me one? I am rusty on this protocol.

"About an hour ago," I answer.

"Why did you go up there in the first place?"

I press my lips together. "I told you. I heard a sound."

"And...?"

The officer leans forward, his eyes wide. He has a rough stubble on his chin, like he might've skipped shaving this morning. His tongue protrudes slightly from between his lips. I'm not stupid—I know exactly what he wants me to say.

*I did it. I'm guilty. Take me away.*

Instead, I lean back against the sofa. "That's it. That's everything I know."

Disappointment washes over the detective's face. He works his jaw as he thinks over the evidence that has been found so far in this house. He's wondering if he's got enough to snap those cuffs on my wrists yet. He isn't sure. If he were sure, he would have done it already.

"Hey, Connors!"

It's the voice of another officer. We break eye contact and I look up at the top of the staircase. The other, much younger cop is standing there, his long fingers clutching the top of the banister. His unlined face is pale.

"Connors," the younger officer says. "You gotta come up here—*now*. You gotta see what's up here." Even from the bottom of the stairs, I can see his Adam's apple bobbing. "You won't believe it."

## PART I

### Three Months Earlier

## 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.

I raise my hand in greeting. "Hi," I say.

The man stares at me. He doesn't say hello. He doesn't say "quit trampling my posies." He just stares at me.

"Nice to meet you too," I mutter under my breath.

I exit through the electronic metal gate that encircles the property and trudge back to my car/home. I look back one last time at the landscaper in the yard, and he is still watching me. There's something in his expression that sends a chill down my spine. And then he shakes his head, almost imperceptibly. Almost like he's trying to warn me.

But he doesn't say a word.