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THE
**HOUSEMAID'S
SECRET**

FREIDA MCFADDEN

Bookouture

CHAPTER 1

MILLIE

Three Months Earlier

After an hour of scrubbing, Amber Degraw's kitchen is just about spotless.

Considering that, as far as I can tell, Amber seems to eat almost all her meals from restaurants in the area, it feels like the effort isn't quite necessary. If I had to put down money, I'd bet she doesn't even know how to turn her fancy oven on. She has a beautiful, enormous kitchen filled with appliances that I'm fairly sure she has never used even once. She has an Instant Pot, a rice cooker, an air fryer, and even something called a *dehydrator*. It seems somewhat contradictory that somebody who has eight different kinds of moisturizer in her bathroom also owns a dehydrator, but who am I to judge?

Okay, I judge a *little*.

But I have carefully scrubbed down every single one of these unused appliances, cleaned the refrigerator, put away several dozen dishes, and mopped the floor until it's shiny enough to

almost see my reflection. Now all I have to do is put away the last load of laundry and the Degraws' penthouse apartment will officially be clean as a whistle.

"Millie!" Amber's breathless voice floats into the kitchen, and I wipe a bit of sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. "Millie, where *are* you?"

"In here!" I call out. Even though it's fairly obvious where I am. The apartment—which has merged two adjacent apartments into one uber-apartment—is large, but it's not *that* large. If I'm not in the living room, I'm almost certainly in the kitchen.

Amber floats into the kitchen, looking her usual impeccably sleek self in one of her many, *many* designer dresses. This one is zebra printed with a plunging V-neck and sleeves that taper at her slender wrists. She's paired the dress with matching zebra-printed boots, and while she does look achingly beautiful as always, part of me is not sure if I should compliment her on her outfit or hunt her on safari.

"There you are!" she says with a hint of accusation in her voice, as if I'm not exactly where I'm supposed to be.

"I'm just finishing up," I tell her. "I'll just grab the laundry and—"

"Actually," Amber interrupts me, "I'm going to need you to stay."

I cringe internally. I clean for Amber twice a week, but I also do other errands for her, including babysitting for her nine-month-old daughter, Olive. I try to be flexible because the pay is fantastic, but she's not great at asking in advance. It feels like all my babysitting jobs here are on a strictly need-to-know basis. And apparently, I don't need to know until about twenty minutes before.

"I've got a pedicure," she says with all the gravity of somebody informing me that she will be heading to the hospital to perform heart surgery. "I need you to keep an eye on Olive while I'm gone."

Olive is a sweet little girl. I absolutely don't mind keeping an eye on her—usually. In fact, there are times when I would jump at the chance to earn a little cash at the exorbitant per-hour rate Amber gives me, which allows me to keep a roof over my head and eat food that isn't scavenged from a garbage can. But right now, I can't do it. "I have class in an hour."

"Oh." Amber frowns, then quickly makes her face blank again. She told me the last time I was here that she read an article about how smiling and frowning are the leading causes of wrinkles, so she's trying to make her expression as neutral as possible at all times. "Can't you skip it? Don't they have the lectures recorded? Or some transcript you could get?"

They don't. Furthermore, I have skipped two classes in the last two weeks because of last-minute babysitting requests from Amber. I've been trying to get my college degree, and I need a decent grade in this class. And anyway, I like the course. Social psychology is fun and interesting. And a passing grade is crucial for my degree.

"I wouldn't ask you," Amber says, "if it wasn't important."

Her definition of "important" may differ from mine. For me, "important" is graduating from college and getting that social work degree. I'm not sure how a pedicure could be that important. I mean, it's still the tail end of winter. Who's even going to *see* her feet?

"Amber," I start to say.

As if on cue, a high-pitched wail comes from the living room. Even though I'm not officially babysitting Olive right now, I

usually keep an eye on her whenever I'm here. Amber takes Olive to a playgroup three times a week with her friends, and the rest of the time, she seems to be scheming ways to get Olive off her hands. She has complained to me that Mr. Degraw will not allow her to hire a full-time nanny because she herself does not work, so she pieces childcare together through a series of babysitters—mostly me. In any case, Olive was in her playpen when I started cleaning, and I stayed in the living room with her until the vacuum lulled her to sleep.

"Millie," Amber says pointedly.

I sigh and put down the sponge I've been holding; it feels like it has been melded to my hand lately. I wash my hands off in the sink, then I wipe them dry on my blue jeans. "I'm coming, Olive!" I call out.

When I get back into the living room, Olive has pulled herself up on the edge of the playpen, and she is crying so desperately that her little round face has turned bright red. Olive is the sort of baby that you might see on the cover of a baby magazine. She's so perfectly cherubic and beautiful, right down to the soft blond curls that are now smushed against the left side of her head from her nap. At the moment, she's not quite so cherubic, but when she sees me, she instantly lifts her arms and her sobs subside.

I reach into the playpen and heft her into my arms. She buries her little wet face in my shoulder, and I don't feel quite so bad about missing class if I have to. I don't know what it is, but the second I turned thirty, it was like some switch flipped on inside me that made me think babies are the most adorable thing in the entire universe. I love spending time with Olive, even though she's not *my* baby.

"I appreciate this, Millie." Amber is already tugging on her coat and grabbing her Gucci purse from the coat rack beside the door. "And believe me, my toes thank you."

Yeah, yeah. "When will you be back?"

"I won't be gone too long," she assures me, which we both know is a bald-faced lie. "After all, I know my little princess will miss me!"

"Of course," I murmur.

As Amber digs around in her purse for her keys or her phone or her compact, Olive nuzzles closer to me. She lifts her little round face and smiles up at me with her four tiny white teeth. "Ma-ma," she declares.

Amber freezes, her hand still inside her purse. All time seems to stand still. "What did she say?"

Oh no. "She said... Millie?"

Olive, oblivious to the trouble she is causing, grins up at me again and babbles louder this time, "Mama!"

Amber's face turns pink under her foundation. "Did she just call you *mama*?"

"No..."

"Mama!" Olive cries gleefully. *Oh my God, will you stop it, kid?*

Amber throws her purse onto the coffee table, her face twisted in a mask of anger that will almost certainly cause wrinkles. "Are you telling Olive that you're her mother?"

"No!" I cry. "I tell her I'm Millie. *Millie*. I'm sure she just gets confused, especially because I'm the one who..."

Her eyes widen. "Because you're around her more than I am? Is that what you were going to say?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Are you saying that I'm a *bad mother*?" Amber takes a step toward me, and Olive looks alarmed. "You think you're more of a mother to my little girl than I am?"

"No! Never..."

"Then why are you telling her that you are her mother?"

"I'm not!" My exorbitant babysitter pay is circling the drain. "I swear. *Millie*. That's all I'm saying. It sounds like mama, that's all. Same first letter."

Amber takes a deep, calming breath. Then she takes another step toward me. "Give me my baby."

"Of course..."

But Olive isn't making it easy. When she sees her mother coming toward her with outstretched arms, she clings to my neck tighter. "Mama!" she sobs into my neck.

"Olive," I mumble. "I'm not your mama. *That's* your mama." *Who is about to fire me if you don't let go of me.*

"This is so unfair!" Amber cries. "I breastfed her for over a week! Isn't that worth anything?"

"I'm so sorry..."

Amber finally wrenches Olive out of my arms, while Olive bawls her little head off. "Mama!" she screams as she reaches for me with her chubby arms.

"She's not your mama!" Amber scolds the baby. "I am. Do you want to see the stretch marks? That woman is *not* your mother."

"Mama!" she wails.

"Millie," I correct her. "*Millie*."

But what's the difference? She doesn't need to know my name. Because after today, I'll never be allowed in this house ever again. I am so fired.

CHAPTER 2

During my walk from the train station to my one-bedroom apartment in the South Bronx, I keep one arm firmly clutched around my purse, and the other holding the can of mace stuffed into my pocket, even when it's broad daylight. You can never be too careful in this neighborhood.

Today I feel lucky to even have my little apartment in the middle of one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in New York. If I don't find another job soon to replace the income I just lost after Amber Degraw let me go (with no offer of a reference), the best I could hope for is a cardboard box on the street outside the decrepit brick building where I currently live.

If I hadn't decided to go to college, I might have saved some money by now. But stupid me, I chose to try to better myself.

As I walk the final block to my building, my sneakers squishing against some slush on the pavement, I get the sensation that there's somebody behind me, following me. Of course, I'm always on high alert around here. But there are times when I strongly feel like I have attracted the wrong sort of attention.

For example, right now, in addition to a prickly feeling in the back of my neck, there are footsteps behind me. Footsteps that

seem to be getting louder as I walk. Whoever is behind me is getting closer.

But I don't turn around. I just hug my sensible black coat tighter around my body and I walk faster, past a black Mazda with a cracked right headlight, past a red fire hydrant leaking water all over the street, and up the five uneven concrete steps to the door of my building.

I have my keys ready. Unlike in the Degraws' swanky Upper West Side apartment building, there is no doorman here. There is an intercom and there is a key to open the door. When the landlady, Mrs. Randall, rented me the apartment, she gave me a stern lecture about not letting anyone in behind me. *It's a good way to get robbed or raped.*

As I fit the key into the lock that always seems to stick, the footsteps grow louder again. A second later, there's a shadow looming over me that I can't ignore. I lift my eyes and identify a man in his mid-twenties, wearing a black trench coat, his dark hair mildly damp. He looks vaguely familiar—especially the scar over his left eyebrow.

"I live on the second floor," he reminds me when he sees the hesitation on my face. "Two-C."

"Oh," I say, although I'm still not thrilled about allowing him inside.

The man pulls a set of keys out of his pocket and jiggles them in my face. One of them has the same etchings as my own. "Two-C," he repeats. "Right below you."

I finally give in and step inside to allow the man with the scar over his left eyebrow to enter my building, considering he could easily push his way in if he wanted. I lead the way, trudging up the stairs one by one as I wonder to myself how the hell I am

going to pay the rent next month. I need a new job—now. I had a part-time gig bartending for a little while, and I stupidly gave it up because babysitting for Olive paid so much better and the last-minute scheduling made juggling the second job difficult. And it's not like it's easy for somebody like me to find another job. Not with my history.

"Nice weather we're having," the man with the scar above his left eyebrow comments, following a step behind me on the stairs.

"Uh-huh," I say. The last thing I want is to talk about the weather right now.

"I heard it's going to snow again next week," he adds.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Eight inches are forecasted. One last hurrah before the spring."

I can't even attempt to feign interest anymore. When we get to the second floor, the man smiles at me. "Have a good day then," he says.

"You too," I mumble.

As he walks down the hall to his own apartment, I can't help but think about what he said to me when I let him in. *Two-C. Right below you.*

How did he know I live in Three-C?

I grimace and walk a little faster up the stairs to my own apartment. I've got the keys ready once again, and the second I'm inside, I slam the door shut behind me, turn the lock, and then throw the deadbolt. I'm probably making too much of his comment, but you can never be too careful. Especially when you live in the South Bronx.

My stomach is growling, but even more than food, I'm craving a hot shower. I make sure the blinds are drawn before I strip down and jump into the shower. I know from experience that there's a tiny range between the water shooting out boiling hot or ice-cold. In the time I've lived here, I've become an expert at adjusting the temperature. But it can drop or rise twenty degrees in a split second, so I don't linger too long. I just need to wash some of the grime off my body. After a day of walking around in the city, my body is always covered in a layer of black dust. I hate to think about what my lungs look like.

I can't believe I lost that job. Amber relied on me so heavily, I thought I'd be good at least until Olive was in kindergarten, maybe longer. I was almost starting to feel comfortable, like I had a steady job and an income I could rely on.

Now I have to search for something else. Maybe multiple other jobs to replace that one. And it's not as easy for me as most people. I can't exactly put an ad up on the popular childcare apps, because they all require a background check. And as soon as that happens, any job prospects are off the table. Nobody wants somebody like me working in their home.

At the moment, I'm a bit short on references. Because for a while, the cleaning jobs I took weren't exactly cleaning only. I used to do another service for several of the families I cleaned for. But I don't do that anymore. I haven't in years.

Well, no point in dwelling on the past. Not when the future looks so bleak.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Millie. You've been in worse situations than this and come out of it.