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THE HOUSEMAID'S WEDDING

A HOUSEMAID NOVELLA

FREIDA McFADDEN


Poisoned Pen
PRESS

PROLOGUE

This man is going to kill me.

There is murder in his eyes. I've seen enough in my lifetime to recognize the danger that I'm in. This man will not wait for an explanation. He will not even allow me a split second to catch my breath. He will *end* me.

It's just the two of us in this stifling, claustrophobic space. He made certain of that—he stalked me and waited until the moment I was alone, then he locked the door behind us. Now here we are.

And he can do whatever he wants to me. Nobody knows I'm here.

My nose is bruised, possibly broken. Blood streams from my nostrils in warm rivulets, dripping down my lips. It tastes metallic. Slamming his fist into my nose is one of the first things he did to me, before even saying hello. It was his way of letting me know he means business.

"I will break every single bone in your body," he hisses at me.

He means it. Oh God, he *definitely* means it.

I never thought my day would end up this way. If I had known—if I had any idea at all what this man would do to me—I would have made very different decisions this morning. I thought I could handle this, but from the beginning, I was in over my head. I had no idea.

It's my fault I'm here. I made a terrible mistake.

And now it's too late.

ONE

MILLIE

I'm going to cut your throat, Millie Calloway."

Those words are *not* how you want to be woken up in the morning.

But here I am, groggy from the deep, dream-filled sleep that I was wrenched from by this early-morning phone call. I'm holding the phone to my ear, wondering if the harsh whispered threat I just heard was part of a dream I was still having. After all, who gets woken up by somebody promising to cut their throat?

Well, me, apparently.

"Excuse me?" I say into the phone, my voice still scratchy with sleep.

I roll over in bed to prop up on my side, rubbing my eyes to wake myself up. Maybe I heard them wrong. Maybe instead of cutting my throat, the stranger on the other end of the line actually wants to cut the costs of my car insurance.

"You heard me," the male voice growls, low and

ominous. "You stuck your nose in the *wrong* place, and now you're going to pay the price." A brief pause follows for me to absorb this new piece of information, and then:

"I'm going to kill you slowly and painfully, Millie Calloway."

Nope, not a dream. This is most definitely real and clearly meant for me, as evidenced by the repeated use of my full name. I can't pretend this is some sort of wrong number or spam call. But it's not the first death threat I have received, and it won't be the last.

I'm not thrilled about the fact that it arrived on my wedding day though.

They say rain on your wedding day is good luck. Death threats on your wedding day? Probably not so much. Still, I know exactly how to deal with this asshole.

"Go to hell," I reply calmly, then I jam my thumb into the red button on the screen to end the call.

I toss my phone back onto the nightstand, where it has spent the evening charging, next to the mouth guard that is supposed to keep me from grinding my teeth at night, if I could ever remember to pop it in before bedtime. I refuse to let that call get to me. I have a tendency to do things that piss people off, and occasional death threats are to be expected, but they have never proven to be more than empty words. It's something I've grown used to.

I will *not* let it ruin this day.

I roll my head to look over at my fiancé, who is stirring beside me. Enzo might have been awakened by the ringing of my phone, but thank God, he did not hear what that jerk said to me. If he had any inkling

that somebody was threatening me, he'd be furious. He would have made a big deal out of it—maybe even suggested going to the *police*—and that's the last thing I want today. Like I said, it was surely just empty words.

Today will not be about some insecure asshole. Today is going to be about me and Enzo becoming husband and wife.

"Millie?" he murmurs, his Italian-accented voice thick with sleep. "Who was on the phone?"

"Telemarketer," I lie.

He grimaces because he hates calls from telemarketers. He would've hated the actual call even more, but he's never going to find out about it. If it happens again, I'll have to tell him eventually, but not today.

Enzo rubs his eyes as he struggles into a sitting position. His black hair is sticking up, and he's got a day's worth of stubble on his jaw, but my fiancé is at his sexiest first thing in the morning. And that's saying *a lot* because his baseline level of sexiness is quite high. Then the covers fall away to reveal the taut muscles in his chest, and I forget all about that stupid call.

In only four short hours, this man is going to be my husband. My *husband*. We're going to be married, with rings and everything. Despite the fact that we've been a couple for a long time and been through hell together, I never entirely believed this day would ever come.

I place a hand gently on the swell of my abdomen. Try as I might, I can't forget that *this* is why we're getting married. When he popped the question, Enzo made a whole speech about how he knew from the second he met me that I was the one and how he wanted to spend his whole life devoted to me, but he proposed *one*

week after I told him I was pregnant. The timing was unmistakable.

"How are you feeling?" He noticed me touching my belly, and his brow creases in concern. "Still with the nausea?"

Enzo was a rock star during my horrific bout of first-trimester nausea. He bought me three forms of ginger, which sadly only confirmed three times that I hate ginger. He bought a diffuser because he read aromatherapy can work, but it did not. He even read a book about acupressure and gave me a personal session, which resulted in a sexy outcome that admittedly *did* help me forget about my nausea for a little while. But nothing worked. Until about a month ago, I was throwing up every day. Sometimes multiple times a day. It wasn't fun.

But it's like they say—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If I can deal with twice-daily vomiting, I can deal with some chickenshit asshole threatening me on the phone.

Besides, I know who that guy is. Okay, I might not know his name, but over the last several years, I have helped quite a few women escape their abusive husbands. In the process, I have gained some enemies in the form of angry husbands. I don't know which of those husbands was threatening to slit my throat, but it was almost certainly one of them.

"I'm fine." I manage a smile that initially feels forced, but when I see the smile on his own lips, it becomes genuine. "I'm just excited about today."

"Me too." He reaches for me, pulling me into his bare arms and drawing me close. "I can't wait to marry you."

When he says those words, I feel—dare I say

it?—*lucky*. I've never felt lucky in my whole life—it's not a word I'd ever have used to describe myself. But at this moment, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

Okay, nothing about this wedding is conventional. It's not going to be a big ceremony—we will get married at Manhattan's City Hall in a tiny chapel that I've read is more like a conference room with a few decorations. Also, there's that whole part about me being knocked up. But who cares? What matters is that the two of us are going to spend the rest of our lives together, and there's no one else I would rather share that journey with.

Also, there's one more thing that will make this day special.

TWO

Millie?" Enzo speaks the word into my hair as he cuddles close to me in bed. "Is sex on the morning of the wedding bad luck?"

Good question. As badly as I want the answer to be no, I am desperate for my run of good luck to continue.

"Probably," I admit.

His face falls. "You are sure?"

"You know," I say, "we're not even supposed to *see* each other today."

"Really?" Enzo looks around our tiny living space, clearly confused. We occupy a small one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, where the living room and kitchen are merged into one. "Where am I supposed to go to not see you?"

"It's more of a rule for fancy people who have friends with guest bedrooms where they can spend the night."

"I hate fancy people." He kisses my neck, which

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makes my whole body tingle. "So since we *already* broke rules, it is not bad to break more, yes?"

Bad luck or not, on any other day, I would be powerless to resist him. But today is my wedding day. I have to shower and make sure my dress fits well and get my hair looking respectable and put on more makeup than my usual dash of drugstore lipstick. It takes all my self-restraint to push him away. "Better not. I need to get ready."

"Get ready?" He looks baffled. "But our wedding is not for four hours!"

"Right. It's in *only four hours*."

Enzo is frowning, but he reluctantly relinquishes his grasp on me so that I can go to the bathroom and take a shower. Men just don't get it. I had to iron the white shirt he'll be wearing today because such a thing didn't even occur to him, despite the fact that it was *clearly* unacceptably wrinkled. He will shower in five minutes, towel off his hair, throw on his suit, and the whole process will be done in less than ten minutes.

But I need to look perfect today. Because there's one other thing that will make this day incredibly special.

My *parents* are coming to the wedding.

This is a *really* big deal. My parents and I are not close. In fact, I haven't seen them in well over a decade. They abandoned me in my time of need back when I was a teenager, when I defended my best friend from being attacked and ended up in prison for killing the bastard that did it. They threw me to the wolves—didn't give me a penny for my defense and never came to visit me when I was locked away. And even after all that, I was willing to forgive and forget—they are my parents,

after all—but they were not. *You're a bad apple, Millie. We don't want you poisoning our lives anymore.*

Do you know what it feels like for your parents to call you a poisoned apple? It doesn't feel great. Yet, no matter how much they pushed me away, I still craved their support. I loved them, and more than anything, I wanted them to see I had changed from the girl I used to be.

I had been worried I'd never see them again. And I was sad that since Enzo's entire family is either deceased or back in Sicily, he would have no family members at our wedding. I told this to Enzo one night, not long after his proposal. He was the one who convinced me to call my parents to let them know about the wedding and the baby.

My mother did not sound excited when she realized I was on the other end of the line. At first, I thought she might hang up on me. But when I told her I was trying to get my degree in social work, she thawed considerably. She wasn't thrilled to hear I was pregnant out of wedlock, but she was glad to know that I'd soon be marrying the father of the baby. And when I extended a wedding invitation, she told me she would be there. My parents will be our only guests—the only witnesses to our holy matrimony.

I'm so nervous about seeing them after all this time. I'm scared I'll say the wrong words and screw things up all over again. But I'm also excited. I love my parents, and I always hoped that they would forgive me for my sins of the past, especially since I honestly don't think they were such grievous sins.

And no, this isn't exactly how I dreamed my wedding