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FOR SIERRA



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CHAPTER ONE

Morning crept unnoticed into the modern, minimalist expanse of Penthouse #2 where no clocks chimed or gonged to mark the hour. What threatened to be an ordinary morning of quiet routine was interrupted by the harsh sound of the usually silent buzzer. The noise erupted through the apartment like an attack. Coco stood frozen in the center of her bedroom still holding her mother's yellow chiffon dress like a favorite stuffed toy. Her first thought was to hide, but hiding wouldn't block out the noise; hiding wouldn't stop the intrusion. Warily, she laid the dress across her bed and moved toward the intercom, the lit button on the side indicating that the call came from the ground floor lobby.

Pressing the button, Coco heard the doorman's familiar voice ring in the gloom of Penthouse #2.

"Miss Rodriguez, there's a woman here who says she has a delivery for Eva Clark? I told her Eva doesn't work here anymore, but she says she spoke to her yesterday."

"She's not here, Benny. You know she quit years ago," Coco replied. Hearing Eva's name brought back memories. Eva had been the good nanny, the last nanny, the one paid employee who had effectively stood in place of Coco's absent mother, Magdalena.

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“She says this is the address Eva gave her.”

“Well, Eva isn’t here. I don’t know where she is.” Coco felt the lingering uneasiness begin to take hold of her. The Keeper could arrive at the apartment any minute now, and she didn’t allow Coco to touch the intercom.

“She says Eva needs to sign for it,” Benny said. “She has to witness the signature. She says she talked to her yesterday? She’s adamant.”

Coco bit her lip. “Eva’s gone. Just make her leave, okay, Benny?”

“Who are you talking to, Coco?” the Keeper asked, standing behind Coco. Coco hadn’t heard her come in. Biting her lip even harder, Coco turned to look at her housekeeper. “Coco, go to your room and rest.” Coco left the living room. From behind her bedroom door, Coco heard the Keeper dismiss Benny and then apologize to the woman for Coco’s behavior, calling her a difficult and deeply troubled girl. “God alone knows how hard it is to care for a mentally challenged child,” the Keeper added before buzzing the woman up to their floor. Angry, Coco slipped silently out of her bedroom and into the large sitting room that had been her mother’s. Over the years when things had been broken, they were thrown away and replaced, but lately it seemed that items just went missing for no reason at all. Whole walls were empty of their photographs: unpublished proofs from one of Magdalena’s Prada shoots had gone last week leaving only the signed Lichtenstein print Gianni Versace had given her mother simply because she had admired it. What would Magdalena say if she knew her things were disappearing?

Coco looked around the room. *Would Magdalena even notice the empty places and blank walls if she did come home?* The apartment was a mess, stacks of



fashion magazines lined the walls and boxes of new clothes lay open and spilling over in nearly every room. Silk sundresses, linen jackets, and cotton designer tees lay tossed over the sofas, flung haphazardly across the matching chairs, left to spill in varying colors from the boxes of clothes sent to Magdalena – clothes that only her daughter would wear. Coco walked to the empty south wall where only her fashion collages now hung, letting her fingers trace silk swatches and couture evening gowns cut from Vogue and Elle. They lay one across the other, creating the framework of the life Coco hoped to someday inhabit. Through fashion she would find her freedom, her mother, and herself. She felt hope bloom in her chest, the bitter tears of loneliness stinging her eyes. Prada, Chanel, Valentino, Balenciaga: they were her haven, her home, and her hope. Coco walked toward her mother's portrait, a black and white photo taken on a beach when she first had signed with Prada. Coco looked just like her, just as tall, as thin, and as beautiful. Magdalena was a fashion icon, and Coco desperately wanted to follow in her footsteps. Kissing the tips of her fingers, Coco raised her hand to her mother's cheek.

"I have to get out of here," she said, her eyes fixed on her mother. "Please, Mama, I have to get out." Hearing the Keeper leave the apartment, Coco slipped out of the room and headed to the front door.

Standing just outside the light, Coco listened in shadow while the floor numbers above the elevator doors glowed one after the other, indicating the woman's steady upward approach. Coco raised her hood to hide her features, hiding her tall slender form in the shadows of the dark apartment. She was almost a woman, yet life with the Keeper had kept

her small and powerless, denying her the maturity she had hoped to feel at sixteen. That was why she stayed quiet and hidden.

With a ding and a mechanized rumble the woman stepped out of the elevator. In one arm, she held a bundle of cloth with a document, in the other a paisley print cotton bag. Her eyes didn't smile when she spotted the Keeper waiting by the entryway table.

"Please sign here, Miss Clark." The woman's clipped syllables did not welcome argument. Coco watched the stranger place the bundle carefully on the sofa. On the table, she placed the document along with a pen, a pen the Keeper did not hesitate to pick up.

Coco wanted to explain how Eva Clark had quit three years ago, and that Magdalena, her super-model mother, was too busy jet-setting around the world to hire a new nanny or a proper housekeeper. But the Keeper didn't deal in truth like Coco did. She dealt in bruises, hard slaps, and gutting ridicule. Without hesitation, the Keeper signed the nanny's name to the paper.

"No." Coco felt a spark of courage, her voice coming of its own accord. She pushed open the door, taking a step into the hall, "Eva...Eva..."

"Yes," the Keeper said. "Yes, Coco, I'm right here." Both women watched Coco, the Keeper's eyes narrowing to a look of warning. "It's okay, Coco. I'll be with you in a moment. Please go back to your bedroom like I asked."

"Did you I.D. her?" Coco asked the woman. "How do you know she is who she says she is? She's not Eva Clark. Eva is gone."

"Coco, you are having an episode. Please go in and rest. I'll be with you shortly." The two women stared at Coco. "Again, I'm so sorry. She's bipolar and the drugs are having



no effect,” the Keeper added when Coco turned back toward the apartment.

“I’m not bipolar,” Coco yelled over her shoulder. “And I’m not having an episode.”

Retreating again behind the crack in the door, Coco watched the Keeper return the document without reading it. The woman didn’t check her I.D. Instead she folded the document into her purse and dropped a copy next to the bundle on the sofa. Then she was gone.

“Coco,” the Keeper said, “I know you’re still there. Get over here now.”

Biting her lip, Coco walked into the hallway. “I said, get your ass here NOW,” the Keeper said, her voice rising. She ignored the bundle and bag on the couch, turning her full focus on Coco. “Don’t you ever question me when I’m doing business! If I say I’m Eva Clark, then I am FUCKING Eva Clark. If I say I’m your mama, then I am your FUCKING mama. If I say I’m God, then I am MOTHER FUCKING GOD! Are we clear?”

“You don’t have the right to pretend to be my mother or her absent employee. You don’t have the right to forge other people’s names. Eva quit. Benny knows Eva quit. If I tell him you signed her name and pretended to be her I could get you....” The Keeper’s fist knocked Coco’s head into the wall behind her.

“Don’t you threaten me! What I do and don’t do is between me and God and any little bitch who tries to interfere is gonna get her ass handed to her. You want your ass handed to you?” Coco didn’t answer. The Keeper stared at her for a while. When Coco still didn’t answer, she hit her a second time. “I asked you a question, Coco. You better answer me this time. I asked you if you want your fucking ass handed to you?”

“No,” Coco whispered, holding her face where the Keeper had hit her.

“Well, then you take what that bitch brought and don’t you let me see you or it again, not till tomorrow. And remember, that thing she brought is your problem, not mine.” Coco looked at the package and then back up at the Keeper. “Go on and get it,” the Keeper said, “and you better keep it quiet.” She left Coco bruised and alone in the hallway. Angry and hurt, Coco walked to the couch and grabbed hold of the multicolored bundle.

Something heavy rolled out of the middle of the cloth, turning over once, twice, before landing with a soft thud on the fabric of the sofa. Black hair curled out from under pink fabric as the bundle became animated.

The cloth-covered lump moved and then whimpered. Coco stepped back in surprise. Two huge black eyes stared up at her while a large red mouth opened to stretch like an O. The ensuing scream bounced across ornate mirrors to reverberate off the marble walls of the entryway.

“You better shut that thing up,” the Keeper said, returning with her coat and purse. “She’s the only reason I came in today. You keep her quiet or you’ll get worse than you just got.” Coco stared at the baby, her head still ringing with the last punch, while behind her the Keeper stepped into the elevator and was gone.

Babies weren’t wholly unknown to Coco. She had seen them on TV, smiling and looking sweet, but she had never been left alone with one.

After Coco’s initial panic passed, she leaned over the couch. The baby looked up at her, its cry turning from a scream to a low whimper, accompanied by the rustling of fabric. Coco fixed her eyes on the baby, who stared up at



her with a questioning expression.

“Hello.” Coco reached out a tentative hand to stroke the child’s cheek. Its slight size, delicate features, and luminous brown eyes created a person too tiny and beautiful to be real. The baby stared at her, flailing its hands wildly and kicking its feet, its little body wiggling against the red patterned fabric where it had been dumped.

“Hi, baby.” Coco’s words were a whisper in the spacious entryway. The baby sucked its fist and then flailed its arms again. Coco looked down on it in wonder, fresh tears stinging her eyes. “We need help.” Her mind turned again to her mother. *I can’t call her.* Coco had done everything she could to reach her mother, but her calls and letters, emails and IMs went unanswered. *There has to be someone I can call.* When Coco moved to find her unreliable cellphone, she heard an intake of breath followed by a tremendous shriek.

“No, no!” Coco soothed, hurrying back. “Don’t do that, I’m not going away.” The baby stopped screaming and stared up at her expectantly. “We need help.” Coco moved back toward the door, grief filling her chest, restricting her breathing. She gulped back a sob. “I’m going to get my phone; just wait here.” When she moved from sight the baby screamed again.

“Okay. Okay. You can come too. Just don’t wiggle.”

Coco slipped the baby carefully off the sofa into her arms. It weighed almost nothing. Coco felt the baby’s tiny hand grasp onto her thumb, its dark eyes still peering into her face.

“Hi.” Coco smiled, her tears running freely down her face. She felt lost in the dark depths of this tiny child’s eyes, lost in the tender way the little stranger saw her and held her hand.

Coco's loneliness rose in her stomach, twisting her insides into knots while the baby kept staring, taking in every feature of her face until she felt that she was being memorized in the same way she had once memorized her own mother, Magdalena. Coco blinked away the thought, breaking the connection. *How is it possible that I'm standing here holding a baby?* With the break in eye contact, the baby began to cry again – not the harsh, high-pitched cries of abandonment but the soft whimpers of a person who is in some way disappointed.

Coco looked down again. Again, she felt the instant connection when her eyes met and were held by the liquid brown eyes of the child. In that second, she kissed the baby's head, breaking their gaze, her nose nuzzling the baby's cheek while she walked into the penthouse.

The Keeper came and went when she liked, doing as little as she chose to keep the penthouse in order. That day was no exception. Once, Coco remembered with bitterness, there had been cooks and maids, a nanny she loved, and friends to play with. Now there was just Rosa, the housekeeper, whom Coco called "the Keeper" because she was more jailer than maid. The Keeper never treated her like anything other than an inconvenient mental case that needed to be managed. She read Coco's emails, deleted numbers from her phone, and ran surveillance using parent protection apps on every call and text she made. Even little conversations with old friends had become impossible. Coco didn't know why the Keeper hated her or where so many of her mother's things had gone and she didn't dare ask. The Keeper was the only person who came to the apartment now. She was the only one who brought food, who kept the lights on and the apartment warm. Each time Coco had tried to tell anyone how the Keeper treated her, she



was beaten and lied to until she actually believed she was as crazy and difficult as the Keeper told her she was.

After hours of Googling *how to care for babies*, Coco's resentment grew. How could she leave now with a baby to care for? She felt more trapped than ever. Worst still, the baby was crying and sucking its fingers. It looked tired and hungry and Coco didn't know how to help it. Around dinnertime, Coco remembered the paisley cotton bag the woman had left on the couch in the hallway. Retrieving it, Coco found it contained a large tin of dry formula, a bottle, a pacifier, diapers, and wipes.

Coco laid the baby on the sofa so it could watch her at the wet bar, a small kitchen with granite countertops where Coco made most of her food. She rarely entered the main kitchen where the Keeper spent her working hours eating and watching TV. The wet bar had a tiny fridge under the counter and a microwave, as well as dozens and dozens of bottles of alcohol with foreign labels, left over from the days when Magdalena still had lived there.

Coco put three scoops of formula into the bottle (as directed by the neatly printed instructions on the label) before adding water. She shook the contents and microwaved the bottle for a few seconds to warm it. While she worked, she could see the baby staring at her from the sofa, watching everything she did.

When the microwave beeped, the baby kicked its feet happily. Coco twisted the nipple onto the bottle as hard as she could before lifting the baby into her arms. It cooed and shook its fists, its pink mouth puckered in anticipation. At first the baby felt awkward in her lap, but with some small adjustments Coco brought its head to rest in the crook of her arm and raised the bottle to its expectant lips.



The baby latched on instantly, sending bubbles shooting up the center of the bottle as it fiercely sucked out the formula. Coco stared at the feeding infant and smiled. She was holding a baby, and she had actually managed to feed it. The baby drank and drank. Little bits of formula slid down its cheeks onto the red cotton of Coco's hoodie, leaving a wet mark that would dry to a hard chalk if it weren't washed out.

Coco didn't consider the shirt, nor the near silence that filled the room as Mozart played low in the background of a televised fashion show. For the first time in memory she was not troubled by the howl of the Chicago wind, a tortured sound that had frightened her since she had been a child. Instead, she considered the little person who ate with such hunger and looked with such contentment on her and the world she occupied.

When the bottle emptied, the baby's intense eyes slid closed. The milk that remained in its mouth ran down its cheek as the baby fell asleep. Coco stared silently, hardly breathing, hardly thinking, entirely enthralled by the person who had moved so inexplicably into her life.

The door slammed at noon the next day, signaling the Keeper's return to #2. Coco jumped at the sound, as did the baby who fell into hysterical screams.

"What the hell? I told you to keep that brat quiet," the Keeper barked, two bags of groceries hanging from her sausage-like fingers.

Coco kissed the baby's head, rocking the infant until it was silent.

"You startled her."

The Keeper glared, daring Coco to talk back again; her double chins wobbled while spit flecked her fat lips. Forcing her eyes from the repulsive woman, Coco reached inside



the paisley diaper bag for the folded document, which she offered to the Keeper.

“Will you translate this for me? I want to know more about her, but the words are written in Spanish.”

“No. I won’t translate it. I’ll just tell you what her nanny told me. That kid is just like you; she’s another little nobody no one wants to deal with. And since Eva isn’t here you will raise it. End of fucking story.” The Keeper tossed the document back at Coco, who watched it flutter to the floor.

Just like me? Coco took a deep breath and tried to steady herself, her eyes fixed on the baby; from the corner of her eye she saw the document come to rest on the floor near her foot. The baby girl’s hands wriggled out of her blanket and shook in the air as if she clutched an invisible rattle, while her face took on an intensely thoughtful expression. Coco adjusted the child onto her hip and leaned over to retrieve the piece of paper, her long dark hair slipping over her shoulder to the floor. Coco hadn’t thought to translate the document herself; she didn’t usually read anything that didn’t pertain to fashion, and it had been years since she had read anything in Spanish. Now as she looked at the crinkled piece of paper she realized that it couldn’t satisfy her curiosity. It was illegible, not because it was poorly printed, but because the words had long ago lost their meaning. Coco could make out the word *Argentina* and a date some seven months before, but the rest was in a language she no longer understood. Folding the document in half, she carefully returned it to the diaper bag’s inside pocket.

The baby was a good baby. She seemed to prefer to watch the world than to scream at it. She rarely cried and slept most of the time. Inside the bag, Coco found a bottle

with an eyedropper top. As long as Coco added the drops to the baby's bottle she was quiet, easy to manage, and instantly sleepy.

The worst part of parenting, Coco decided, was diapering. Unfortunately, by the end of the third day the diapers ran out and the Keeper refused to buy more.

"You think you're rich?" the Keeper yelled. "You're not; your mother hardly gives me enough money to feed you on. Get some dishtowels and make up some diapers on your own. You'll do it the way I had to in Mexico. You'll see what it's like to work, lazy *vaca*."

Coco didn't argue; she didn't dare. Instead she learned to diaper the hard way.

As the baby formula began to run low Coco became frightened that the Keeper wouldn't replace it either. How would she feed the child?

"Rosa?" The Keeper turned on Coco in surprise, her chins swaying with the motion. "Please buy more formula tomorrow morning."

There was no kindness in the fat lips that twisted slowly into a grin. "In Mexico, we breastfeed our kids. I suggest you try it."

"What?" Coco responded in confusion.

The Keeper laughed, shouldered her bags, and left for the night. The baby was Coco's new soft spot, a weakness that the Keeper wouldn't hesitate to exploit.

For some unknown reason the Keeper delighted in making Coco suffer. In the past, it was not unusual for Coco to come out of her bedroom and find every blind in the apartment raised and the TV and radio switched off. Coco would crawl on hands and knees to retrieve the remotes that drew the blinds, shielding her from the thousand-foot drop outside.



Vertigo crippled her. It made the floor ripple and the walls sway, causing a panic that took her hours to recover from. The terror intensified when coupled with the constantly roaring wind that tore around the Chicago high-rise. The wind had upset her for as long as she could remember.

The last time Coco had upset the Keeper, the fat cow had raised the blinds, turned off the TV, and hidden the remotes; Coco couldn't draw the blinds again or switch on the TV without them.

Surrounded by naked glass and a howling wind, Coco had faced the terror that surrounded her without success. She had felt the floor sway beneath her, seen the glass tremble, and heard the wind roar in shrill gusts around the thirty-story tower. It had proven too much. After several attempts to find the remotes Coco had fainted. No, it was no good upsetting the Keeper, so Coco kept quiet and dreamed of the day when the Keeper would be gone and the apartment only a distant memory.

Coco named the baby girl Bebe after the one word she recognized from the document. She pronounced it Bee-Bee, after the American fashion house. Bebe spent her time sleeping, eating, smiling, wriggling, and pooping; Coco had never been so busy in her life. Magazines were left unread, boxes of clothes arrived but were not opened, and she rarely changed out of her sweats as fashion was pushed from her mind. The best part of Bebe's arrival was that for the first time in years, Coco had someone she could talk to and care for.

Bebe slept in her arms during the day and in the crook of her arm at night. Coco loved watching the child sleep, her tiny hands clenched into fists close to her face, her eyes closed to lash-framed slits as she breathed little breaths

and dreamed little baby dreams. Coco fell asleep to the sight of Bebe's chest as it rose and fell, memorizing each twitch of her fists, the kick of her foot, and the occasional smile.

The daydreams that once had lulled Coco to sleep no longer took her to exotic fashion shoots or the beaches of Argentina where Magdalena's beach house lay nestled on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Her mind no longer turned to the remembered scent of her mother's perfume or the gleaming sunshine of their life in South America. Instead her dreams were filled with Bebe, a curious kind of warm love and a sense of serenity she had long lived without.

The Keeper brought formula but not the kind that Bebe was used to. It was thin and watery. It tasted like sugar mixed with powdered milk. One week passed on the new formula and Bebe grew sickly.

"You're making this yourself, aren't you, Rosa?" Coco raised her eyes to the Keeper's face, but the woman looked away.

"I'm not buying that expensive stuff."

"But Bebe needs good formula, not this watered down stuff."

"She'll get what she gets. Now get out of my kitchen."

After another week Bebe could no longer sit up without help. She grew weaker by the day.

"Please, Rosa, I need you to buy the good formula. If you'll give me some money, I'll ask Benny to buy it."

The Keeper froze where she sat, her eyes fixed warily on Coco. Her expression changed as a new thought seemed to present itself. "You better give me something to sell, girl. If you do, I'll get you the expensive stuff. But you need to remember you are poor. You're also stupid and useless, and



the doorman doesn't need to be bothered by you any more than I do. I work here and keep this place running on nothing. Be grateful."

Coco looked around the apartment; she had no idea what anything was worth. "What do you think you could sell?" Her voice rose with hope.

"Well, that painting for starters." The Keeper pointed to a large Campbell's Soup can painted in vivid reds and yellows. The painting had hung in Coco's life for as long as she could remember. Her heart sank at the thought of losing it. How many hours had she spent tracing its lines with her eyes? The sight of it was as comforting to her as a photo of Magdalena; yet when Coco looked at Bebe she knew she would part with it.

"Okay. Just make sure you get the good formula."

The Keeper smiled and nodded. From that moment on the Keeper became almost nice. She called Coco "Miss" and changed the sheets on her bed. But Coco didn't care what the Keeper did as long as the good formula was back and Bebe was well.

It took over a week for the color to come back to Bebe's cheeks. Another week passed and the baby was able to sit up again. Before Coco knew it, she was crawling.

On a Monday exactly three weeks after the painting had gone, the Keeper disappeared, too. Each call to her cellphone went straight to voicemail. Around five in the evening, Coco received a call from the agency the Keeper worked for. The administrator said that arrangements had been made and that a new housekeeper would arrive shortly. It was around that time that two men came to the apartment in security uniforms accompanied by Benny, the doorman. Coco retreated quietly to her room. She listened as the men returned her mother's painting to its place on the wall.

Benny knocked on Coco's bedroom door, opening it carefully when she didn't answer. He looked uncomfortable when he saw her staring fixedly from the bed, her eyes peering at him from the unlit room.

"Miss Rodriguez, do you have a moment?" He spoke gently, careful to look away from where Coco sat. Bebe lay unseen and asleep in a laundry basket next to the bed. "Mrs. Gonzalez tried to sell your mother's painting at a gallery." Coco remained silent. The doorman went on politely. "Were you aware that it was missing?" Coco remained still. "Mrs. Gonzalez also told the police that you gave her the painting. Is it true? Did you give it to her?"

Tears filled Coco's eyes. She needed to find her voice. She needed to answer. With one word, she could corroborate the Keeper's story and set her free. With another word, she could lock her away. "Miss Rodriguez," Benny pleaded, "these men represent the company who insures the painting. When the gallery ran the painting's history they learned that the piece belonged to your mother. Mrs. Gonzalez is in custody and your mother has been notified." Coco took a deep breath. She knew Benny. Benny was safe, but it had been years since she had visited the lobby. He looked older now but still, Benny was safe. "Your mother has been notified, Coco," Benny repeated, hoping to elicit some spark of understanding. "Coco, please...these men need to know what happened." When she didn't respond, he started to close the door.

"Benny," Coco whispered. "Tell them she took my mother's things, and she beat me when I tried to stop her. Every time I tried to tell someone she would threaten me. Tell them that, okay, Benny?"

"I'll tell them, Coco, and I'll see if management can get a hold of your mother. She should know. I wish I had known. I'm so sorry."



“It’s okay... Mama’s busy and I didn’t know how to tell you. Besides, the agency is sending a new keeper so hopefully things will be better.” Coco pulled her hood up over her head and faded back into the darkness, too worried and worn out to say more.

With the click of the front door she was alone. She had hated the Keeper. The Keeper had been a thief who had starved Bebe. She hurt children and Coco was glad she was in jail; she was glad she was gone and that Bebe was safe, but the glad stuck in Coco’s throat and ran in bitter rivers down her cheeks. But what if the new keeper was even worse than the last? Tears stung Coco’s eyes until she was nearly blinded. Closing them tightly, she let her fingers brush gently through Bebe’s hair where she slept in the laundry basket. The wind tore around the tower, answering her fears with roaring howls.

