



# READING GUIDE

## CLEANUP

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Reading level: 4.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, illegal immigration

978-I-4598-0055-7 PB



### Summary

A newly arrived immigrant, Connie Suarez finds herself working for Missy Maids, despite her law degree and her background as a legal secretary. The only house on her cleaning roster belongs to an elderly gentleman named Richard Withers. She cleans it with another maid, Maria Gonzales, five days a week.

One day Maria calls Connie and tells her not to bother picking her up before work. Connie arrives at Mr. Withers's mansion to find Maria already there—dripping from a shower—and Mr. Withers beaten to death in a pool of blood. Maria says she didn't do it—she liked Mr. Withers, as he had always been kind to both of them. Connie finds herself believing Maria. She doesn't seem like a killer. And it's true, Mr. Withers had always been nice. But that doesn't stop the police from taking Maria into custody, and from grilling Connie up and down.

When Connie learns from her employer that Maria had actually been working directly for Mr. Withers instead of Missy Maids in recent weeks, pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. The young woman had been romantically involved with the elderly man.

Terrified of being arrested and deported back to her native Colombia, where she would undoubtedly be executed, Maria begs Connie to put her legal knowledge to use in helping her escape a wrongful conviction. With a well-placed call, Connie gets criminal lawyer Gregory Mason to take Maria's case. As Connie translates for Gregory Mason and Maria, she learns that Maria and Mr. Withers were planning to be married. But while she's shocked at how much her colleague had kept from her while they worked together, Connie still refuses to believe Maria could have killed Richard Withers.

Wills tend to bring everything out into the open, and so it is with Mr. Withers. After his death, his son, Charles, and daughter-in-law, Enid, expect they'll be on the receiving end of the old man's fortunes. The only problem is Richard Withers changed his will prior to his death to include Maria Gonzales—and any potential child resulting from their union. When Enid Withers makes the connection that Connie and Maria worked together for Mr. Withers, she corners Connie,



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urging the Latina to convince the police that the elderly man wasn't thinking straight when he changed his will. Staunchly standing by Maria, Connie refuses to bow to the woman's pressuring. As Connie's sleuthing unfolds the story, it's revealed that Enid once had an affair with Richard Withers, which resulted in a child. When the older Withers refused to divorce his wife and marry her, Enid sought her revenge by marrying his adult child, Charles. Together, they raised Andrew, the son of Enid and Richard Withers. Charles had thought all along that Andrew was a stepchild—not his half-brother.

Andrew, now in his twenties, had fallen in love with Maria Gonzales—in fact, he's the one who connected Maria with Richard Withers in the first place, as it was he who secured her cleaning position at his “grandfather's” house. When Andrew had gone to the house to see Maria, Richard Withers informed him he was going to marry Andrew's love interest. Enraged, the young man killed Richard Withers, unaware that the old man was actually his father. While Andrew will serve time for his crime of passion, Maria is released to her freedom—and to her piles of money.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *Cleanup* is written as a mystery. What aspects of the story make it a mystery rather than a thriller? Which genre of fiction do you prefer?
2. How must Connie feel to be in North America, working as a maid, when she's highly educated and held a good position back home? As you see it, what is at the root of this discrepancy? Can it be changed?
3. Discuss how the author shapes Mike Czernecki's character. How do his characteristics and mannerisms bring his character to life? Find evidence in the book to support your answer.
4. In chapter 3, Connie reflects that employers who are looking for entry-level workers want “dumb, unskilled people who wouldn't make a fuss.” What's their reasoning for wanting this kind of employee?
5. In chapter 4, as Connie prepares to meet Maria at the police station, she thinks about the friendly, hardworking Maria she knows...and the calculating Maria that Mike Czernecki told her about. Connie decides to help Maria, in part because she believes that “not telling someone something wasn't the same as lying.” Do you agree? Under what conditions does an omission count as a lie?
6. Discuss how Connie's background as a legal assistant (with an LLB) helps her in navigating the situation in *Cleanup*. Find examples from the book to support your thinking.
7. As you see it, is Maria a gold digger? Did she do as Charles Withers Jr. suggests, and throw herself at the older man, then force him to change his will to leave everything to her? Why does Charles jump to that conclusion?
8. Some authors rely on narrative to convey the story, whereas others sprinkle their books with dialogue between various characters. Where does *Cleanup* fall on this narrative-dialogue spectrum? Discuss the strengths of each approach. Which do you prefer, and why?





9. When she's having a conversation with the Witherses in chapter 7, Connie observes that men have done stranger and more foolish things than rewrite their wills to include a new love interest. Draw examples from fiction and movies—and real life—that support her assertion.
10. When she goes to see Maria at the prison, Connie isn't sure whether to believe what the other woman is telling her. Describe how this is a difficult position. Why is it important for us to be able to trust what another person says? Analyze this on a personal scale, and on a society-wide scale.
11. Connie belongs to an ethnic minority. She's overeducated and struggling with affording a life in a new country that doesn't seem to want her. Yet she keeps turning down the money the Witherses are offering her. Comment on what that says about her character. As you see it, would most people in her situation waver?
12. Can you feel any sympathy for the character of Enid Withers? Why or why not? Justify your responses.
13. What motivates Connie to take such risks for Maria throughout the course of the story?
14. Mysteries often employ "red herrings"—clues designed to confuse or mislead readers. Discuss some of the red herrings in *Cleanup*. What makes the finale of this book particularly effective?
15. Develop a new title for the book.

