

NORAH MCCLINTOCK CLEANUP



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Summary: When an illegal alien working as a maid is charged with her employer's murder, her only friend is also her only hope for escaping jail or worse, deportation. (RL 4.0)

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 For Sarah and everyone else who cleans up other people's messes.

CHAPTER ONE

M aria called me before I got out of bed. She said I didn't have to pick her up. She would get to work on her own.

I should have known something was going on. But I didn't give it any thought. I liked Maria. She was the only person I knew that I could speak to in Spanish. She was alone in the country. And she was lonely, like a lot of illegal immigrants. She was on the run from gangsters back in Colombia. I had tried to convince her to make a claim for refugee status. But she was terrified of being denied and being deported. I felt sorry for her.

But aside from being newcomers and co-workers, we had little in common. Maria liked to chatter about all the things she was going to have one day. "You have to think positive, no, Connie?" The things she wanted were things she had seen on TV or in out-of-date magazines she bought at the library for ten cents each. They were things like shoes and purses, dresses and jewelry—things I used to have.

Things I told myself I didn't miss.

I double-checked the two trays of cleaning supplies in the trunk of the beat-up Toyota hatchback that I'd bought for next to nothing—but still on installment—after six months of taking the bus. I put my thermos of coffee, my sandwich and my piece of fruit on the front seat. Then I drove north, to one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods.

The gates across the driveway of Mr. Withers's house were open. So was

the side door, the one Maria and I used. Usually the gates were closed and the door was locked.

Frowning, I nudged the door with one shoulder and poked my head in. "Missy Maid!" I called.

That's not my name. It's the name of the company I work for. My name is Connie, short for Consuela.

Mr. Richard Withers, the owner of the house, didn't appear from the kitchen the way he did every morning when Maria and I arrived. He was a distinguished-looking old gentleman who lived alone except for a cook who came in from ten in the morning until five in the afternoon every day to prepare his meals. He had an easy smile, and when he handed over his list of tasks, he always said "please" or "if you don't mind."

But he didn't answer my call that day. Instead, Maria did, in panicky Spanish.

"Connie, thank God. I don't know what to do. I think he's dead."

"Where are you?" I shouted.

"Up here. In the bedroom."

The bedroom? What was she doing up there?

I dropped my two trays of cleaning supplies and hurried through the mudroom, which I doubt had ever seen any mud. I ran through the kitchen and up the back stairs to the second floor.

Richard Withers was in his early seventies. He had had a heart attack when he was sixty and had been careful ever since. He ate sensibly and exercised regularly, as was obvious from his lean build. But I knew about heart disease—two of my uncles had died from it. So I expected to find that Mr. Withers had had a second, fatal, attack during the night. Poor man, dying all alone, I thought.

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That's why I wasn't prepared for the scene that greeted me.

It was clear that Richard Withers had not died of a heart attack. Nor had he died alone. Not unless he had bludgeoned himself over the head with the foot-high brass angel that was lying in a pool of blood beside his motionless body.

CHAPTER TWO

Maria stood next to the body. Her large black eyes were fixed on the old man's face. Her cinnamon skin had a chalky hue. Blood stained her hands. The sheets were tangled on the bed. A pillow lay on the floor. Artificial scents filled the air—shampoo and soap, perfume and men's cologne—and I felt myself becoming congested. But, for once, I didn't worry about my allergies. I was too stunned by the sight of Mr. Withers lying on the floor in front of me.

Questions for Maria exploded in my head: What happened? When did you find him? How did you find him? What are you doing up here? Who hit him? Did you hit him?

But the one that actually came out of my mouth was, "Why is your hair wet?"

Her hand went to her head. "Connie, I don't know what to do."

"Maria, you didn't..." I let my voice trail off and nodded at the body and the blood.

Maria's eyes widened in horror.

"No! No, never! I like Mr. Richard. I found him like that," she said.

I believed her. She had always spoken fondly of the old man and had even flirted with him. He had always responded eagerly.

"Did you call nine-one-one?"

The question seemed to jar her out of her shock.

"Nine-one-one brings the police," she said.

"Exactly. And the paramedics. And a fire truck—"

Oh.

"Did anyone see you arrive?" I asked. The question I didn't ask: When did you arrive?

She shook her head.

"I don't think so. I'm always careful."

Always? What did she mean by that?

"You have to go," I told her. "Right now, before anyone sees you."

If she hadn't done anything wrong, there was no reason for her to suffer. And she would definitely suffer if the police started to question her.

Maria didn't argue with me. She pulled a sweater from the foot of the bed.

"Go the back way, through the back garden," I said. "You can get into the ravine from there."

She nodded and reached for her purse, which was on the dresser, its contents strewn around it. She scooped everything into it with one hand.

"And, Maria, if you run into anyone or if anyone asks, you called me this morning

to tell me you weren't feeling well, okay?" I said. "You didn't come into work. Call me later. Promise?"

Maria hurried from the room. I waited until I heard the back door open and close again. Then I pulled out my cell phone and punched in 9-I-I. It was only after I finished the call that I noticed the key chain on the floor near the dresser. It wasn't Mr. Withers's. He kept his keys on a sterling silver ring with his initials on it. They had to be Maria's. They must have fallen off the dresser. I hesitated. This was a crime scene. I knew better than to move objects. But Maria had said she hadn't done anything, and I believed her. I grabbed the keys and dropped them into my pocket.

* * *

I knew there were going to be questions. Lots of them. I was right.

The first person to ask them was a young police officer in uniform. I answered every

one of his questions even though my head was pounding and my sinuses were starting to close up. Later, in the hall outside the bedroom, a tall homicide detective named Bodie asked me the same questions all over again.

"Did you touch anything?" His eyes searched mine as if he were trying to read my soul. He spoke slowly and pronounced each word carefully, as if he thought my accent meant that my English was shaky. It wasn't.

"I touched the...him. I felt for a pulse," I said. My head was spinning by then. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

Bodie gestured to a couple of armchairs at the end of the hall in front of a floor-toceiling window. I sank onto one of them and pulled an inhaler out of my uniform pocket.

"You have asthma?" His eyes went to my wrist. I wear a MedicAlert bracelet. "I have allergies," I said. "To strong artificial scents. Perfumes, detergents, air fresheners. That sort of thing."

"But you work as a house cleaner," he said.

"The agency I work for uses all-natural products." It was a strong selling point for Missy Maids.

"What about your clients? What if they wear scents?"

I held up my inhaler. "I manage," I said. "Please go on."

He hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Did you touch anything besides the body? The phone, for instance?" There was a cordless phone on the bedside table.

"I used my cell phone," I said.

"Did you see or hear anyone in the house before or after you found Mr. Withers?"

I knew it was important to answer this question without hesitating. But I hesitated anyway.

"Ms. Suarez?" Bodie said.

"Sorry." I did my best to look apologetic. "I just—"

I let the words hang as if they had frozen in midair. I glanced at the bedroom door and shuddered. Bodie had probably seen a lot of dead bodies, but I hadn't. I hoped that he would think I was rattled by the sight.

He repeated his question in the same no-nonsense tone. I reminded myself that he had also probably spoken to lots of witnesses and suspects—and murderers.

"No," I said. "I didn't see or hear anyone. Or anything."

"Does anyone else live in the house?" he asked.

"No."

"Servants?"

"There's a cook, but she doesn't live in," I said. I told him what I knew about Mrs. Branch, which wasn't much. She stayed in the kitchen. She served and prepared lunch for Mr. Withers every day. She set out snacks of fruit and yogurt. And she prepared his dinner but didn't stay to serve it. Her day ended promptly at five.

"How often are you here?" Detective Bodie asked.

"Every day. I mean, every weekday." He raised an eyebrow.

"Every day?" he said. "That's a lot of cleaning up after one man."

"It's a big house," I said. But that wasn't the real reason Maria and I were here so often. "I think Mr. Withers liked the company. I think he was lonely."

"He was a wealthy man," the detective said. "And you're telling me he was lonely?"

"He liked to talk. I guess he liked someone around to talk to."

"And it was just you?"

"Pardon?" I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Are you the only person who comes in to clean and to...talk?" he asked.

I thought about saying yes, but the police aren't stupid. Sooner or later Bodie would ask who I worked for. He would contact the agency and its owner Mike Czernecki. Mike would tell them that he had assigned two maids to the Withers house. Besides, I had lied enough.

"There's another girl," I said. "We usually come together."

"Usually?" Bodie said. "Where is she now?"

"She called me this morning to tell me she couldn't come in today."

"So she wasn't here?"

Hadn't I just said that? Was he trying to trip me up?

"No," I said. "She wasn't."

"So you're saying that you were the only one who came in this morning?"

Cleanup

The way he asked the question—and the fact that he asked it—made me nervous. Did he doubt me?

I nodded.

"The other girl," he said. "What's her name?"

"Maria Gonzales. We work for Missy Maids." I gave him Mike Czernecki's name.