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# The Maid's Room

  
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For Mike and Olivia,  
who were there through it all.

## Prologue

This is where she sleeps. A cupboard. A bedroom. A windowless box.

She flicks the light switch and there is the bucket speared with mops, the washing machine and the mattress on the floor. The room is so packed that only a few of the floor tiles are visible. Sweat drips off her nose and splats onto one of them. The tumble dryer has fattened the heat; it's been churning sheets and now there are clods of dust everywhere like she's running a wig shop in here. She struggles to breathe in the hot, scarce air. The smell of boiled vegetables from the nearby kitchen makes her feel sick.

There's a tiny table beside the mattress, clogged with photograph frames and drawings, and something small and beige and swirly. Her conch shell. If she stares at that shell for long enough, she can transport herself to some place far away. Beside the sea, the surf lapping and frothing over the pebbly sand, a child's chubby fingers pressed into her hand, her feet soothed by the cool water. She keeps her eyes on that shell and her aching back starts to ease; her tight chest starts to loosen and she just breathes.

The sound of shouting slices into the silence then and she's back in the room again, the pressure building in her head and the walls closing in on her.

She opens the door, and in the hallway mirror she sees a woman with lines around her eyes and grey-flecked hair. The voice grows more urgent now: 'Girl!'

She feels the cold coil of the shell in her hand. She pushes it into her pocket and hurries down the corridor towards the voice that carries on screeching.

# Chapter 1

Greenpalms Condo, Singapore



Jules clips along the condo pathway, smoothing her fingers over the puncture wounds in her stomach. Music thumps through the 35-degree heat. *Doof-doof-doof.*

‘Maybe this time it’ll work,’ she says to her husband David, whose forehead is beaded with sweat. He glances at her, then his eyes find the concrete.

‘Let’s just wait and see. Anyway, at least this party will be a distraction.’ He grabs her hand and pulls her along more quickly.

Tightly packed white apartment blocks tower around them. They look like City of London offices dominated by glass, except that there are balconies on these buildings. There is a woman on one of the balconies, sitting beneath a green canvas sun umbrella pressing a cigarette to her lips. On another, a pink towel is folded over the glass balustrade. There are purple-flowered shrubs on some balconies, garden furniture on others. The ten-storey blocks are punctuated by columns of smoked glass lift shafts, softened by clusters of lipstick palms with their slim red trunks.

The blocks encircle two blue-tiled swimming pools, one of them Olympic-sized, the other for the kids, shallow and triangular. There’s a splash pool too, edged with statues of frogs and snakes that fountain water, the constant rush of them accompanied by a chorus of tweeting birds. A child’s blue bike has been set down on the crazy paving path that frames the pools, its back wheel still spinning. Along each length of the big pool, there’s a wide

decked area with sun loungers and tables and rattan chairs. A pair of goggles lie abandoned on the top of one table; a chair beside it has fallen onto its back. Flower beds line the pools at intervals with bursts of white spider lilies nodding their heads. At the bottom of each apartment block, there's a town house with tall sliding glass doors, the upper half of them covered by horizontal metal bars. The party is in one of these.

It is starting to go dark and the air is violet. Bats are flickering overhead. A raucous laugh hacks the air and there it is, number 16. People are standing around a table in the yard, and through the open glass doors there are shadowed bodies, moving, twisting, dancing, pressing champagne flutes to lips. Here goes. Jules' mouth gets ready to lift a smile. There's no point in knocking, the music's too loud, so she pushes the plain oak front door which she knows will be open. Hardly anyone locks their doors.

Their American neighbour Amber teeters towards them on navy patent wedges, her face sharpened by a pointed chin.

'Hi there,' she drawls. She air-kisses Jules near one cheek then goes to pretend-kiss the other one, but Jules has already pulled back. Their lips collide.

'Girl snog,' says Jules and raises an eyebrow, but Amber doesn't laugh. Her long brown hair is tied into a ponytail pulled forward over her shoulder.

Jules follows her through the open-plan ground floor into a sea of dresses patterned with colourful squares, beaded appliqué and blue birds flapping across silk. David has gone in ahead of her and is already digging in to the crisps on a side table, tapping his foot to the music. The room is bright white and minimal, with globe-shaped lights hanging on metal wires from the double-height ceiling.

'You'll need a drink,' Amber raises her voice over the music.

I *wish*, thinks Jules. 'Something soft,' she says.

This isn't the first time Jules has been in this house; two weeks ago, Amber had invited her to a book group. Jules had read *W*

*Need to Talk About Kevin* before, so she went along. But it was like she'd lost her voice that night. She was tight-lipped, her throat tight too. The other women were all so controlled, especially Amber; it made Jules want to say something outrageous. But maybe it was just her; everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves, marvelling over the chocolate cake that the helper had made. Not that Jules had seen the maid. 'Oh no, she hardly ever works evenings,' Amber had said, and flicked her ponytail onto her other shoulder. Perhaps it was just that Jules didn't fit in – most of them had about three kids each, and only one of them worked, and their faces were made up, their hair shiny and tame, perfectly neat like this town house. Wooden stairs lead to a glass-balustraded landing, beyond which are the bedrooms. Another set of stairs lead down to the basement area. Amber gave Jules 'the grand tour' of the three-storey house during the book group meetup. At the back of the living room, there's a kitchen with sliding glass doors. The two rooms are separated by a marble-topped island unit.

Amber takes a champagne glass from the maid who's carrying a tray of them; she pushes it into Jules' hand. Amber's forced smile is packed with strong, even teeth.

'Oh, no, I'm not—'

'It's a party!' snaps Amber.

Jules opens her mouth to say something else, but Amber's already walking off towards the maid with the tray.

The maid's face is an oval of porcelain skin, but it's her ears that Jules can't stop looking at, pincushioned by gold hoops. That must have hurt. Jules touches her nose and the tiny hole that's never disappeared. She went through agony for that ruby stud, but then she'd been a different person back then. She plonks the glass of champagne on a side table brimming with crisps and dips.

David is talking to Amber's husband, Tor, a slightly crumpled Norwegian with a lone privet of silvery tufts on the front of his

balding pate. He always seems to be in linen. He towers over David, who's challenged in the height department with his spiky hair and red cheeks. Tor has to stoop to hear what David is saying, his steel glasses slipping down his nose. He must be at least ten years older than his wife.

The maid passes, carrying a new round of champagne glasses. There's a frenzy of grabbing, of bubbles sloshing. The tray tips until there's nothing left but liquid on chrome. She sees Jules' empty hands. 'Let me get a drink for you, ma'am.'

'That'd be great, thanks. A lemonade, or, well, whatever you've got.'

The maid walks into the kitchen. She's dressed in a knee-length black skirt, scabbed with pastry, a safety pin jutting from the side. She returns with a glass and an open can of 7UP.

'Thanks,' says Jules. She scans the room.

A man is staring at the maid, compressed features and a once broken nose, his eyes going up and then down. He should be so lucky. He catches Jules looking and strides over.

'Lovely pair of pins,' he says to Jules. He's Australian.

The maid moves away.

'What was that?' asks Jules.

'I've seen you in the pool and you've got a bloody gorgeous pair of legs.' His tongue peeps out and glosses his lips with spittle all the way round.

Jules resists the urge to look at her knobbly knees. 'Right, erm, thanks,' she says.

She spots the dining table, which is packed with plates of beef-topped vol-au-vents, smoked salmon blinis and folds of red meat. There's her excuse to escape.

'I think I'll just get something to eat,' she says and hurries away from him. She picks up an olive and puts it into her mouth. The man slots himself into another group of people, but carries on ogling Jules. She looks away. The maid sets more bowls of food on the table.

'What's your name?' asks Jules.

The maid smiles at her, says nothing.

'I'm Jules, and you are?'

'Dolly, ma'am.'

'Hello, Dolly.' Jules smiles; the name suits her pretty doll-like features.

Amber is beside them then. 'We need more drinks over here,' she says, an edge to her voice.

'Yes, ma'am,' says Dolly. She heads back into the kitchen.

Jules chomps on a handful of ready salted crisps and peers at a lidless jar of jam.

'Lingonberry preserve,' says Amber. 'Tor just has to have a taste of Lillehammer.'

Amber snatches up Jules' wrist, crisps scattering. 'I want to introduce you to someone.' She drags Jules through the crowd.

A woman with brown eyes is dancing on the spot, making rhythmic up-and-down movements and puckering her lips. Her hair is done up in a chignon, but the kirby grips aren't doing their job.

'This is Maeve,' says Amber.

'Hi,' Maeve says, continuing to dance.

'Oh, and I'm Jules.'

'Short for Julie?' asks Maeve, a cockney lilt to her voice.

'Just Jules. That's what everyone calls me, apart from the other things.'

'Oh? What's that then?'

*Twig. Professional worrier*, she could say, but if Maeve is anything like the other women, her face will stay frozen and the tumbleweed will roll.

Jules touches her hand to her neck to choke the quip. 'Oh, this and that,' she says instead.

Maeve stops dancing and introduces her husband, Gavin, the lech from earlier. His eyes scope the room then he starts thrusting to the James Brown track playing in the background.

'Jules is the newest recruit to the book group,' says Amber.

‘Oh, yeah?’ says Maeve.

‘You weren’t there for Jules’ first time, Maeve.’

‘It’s *The Help* next, isn’t it?’ asks Maeve.

‘Yes,’ smiles Amber.

Jules is halfway through the book, but already she’s trying to think of reasons not to go. The music beats on. Jules gazes out at the dancers, taps her sandal.

‘So, where are your kids?’ Maeve asks her then.

Amber answers for her: ‘Jules doesn’t have kids.’

‘Lucky you,’ Maeve says in a blurt of a laugh. ‘Still, there’s time enough for—’ The end of her airy sentence is snatched by the rising beat of ‘Sex Machine’.

‘How many do you want?’ Amber asks Jules.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Children, of course,’ laughs Amber.

‘None,’ says Jules.

‘Oh, you say that now . . .’ continues Amber. ‘I didn’t have my second until I was forty-one.’ A wide smile splits her face.

Gavin slides away.

‘How long have you and your husband been together?’ asks Maeve, a V deepening between her sculpted eyebrows.

‘Eleven years,’ says Jules.

‘Oh.’ The V gets deeper still.

Jules starts jabbering over James Brown’s increasingly desperate entreaty to get on up.

‘David and I met at some crappy club in the London suburbs originally. We were just kids really. Both went off to uni and it petered out. Thank God for Google, eh?’

‘What do you mean?’ asks Maeve.

‘David tracked me down, the stalker!’ Laughter bursts from Jules’ mouth.

Maeve and Amber remain stony-faced. Still, at least Jules didn’t swear. Someone turns off the music briefly and jumbled voices rise. Another song booms from the sound system then.

Amber clears her throat. 'Jules is in healthcare.'

'Me too,' says Maeve, holding her glass with both hands as she takes a gulp. 'I'm a cafeteria assistant in a hospital – well, was. You know.' She chuckles, leaning into Jules' left ear to make herself heard. 'Lady of leisure now. So what was it that you used to do?'

A small blond boy, a red blotch on his forehead, pulls on Amber's arm, distracting them. The ice rattles in Amber's drink as she moves away with him.

Maeve raises her eyebrows. 'That's Amber's youngest. He's probably complaining about his older brother, The Feral Child. He's a real nightmare, punched my daughter in the mouth once.'

Another woman comes up to Maeve and they start talking. Jules zones out, taps her foot harder. Oh, how she misses her real friends, and the hospital in London where she used to work, with all those new mums holding their precious bundles for the first time, joy stirred into their eyes. She thinks of all the discarded IVF syringes in that yellow bucket in their new apartment here, and sighs.



In the kitchen, Jules drinks a glass of water while gazing at the wreckage of half-eaten hors d'oeuvres. The party has thinned out, but there are several people sitting in the front yard deep in conversation.

There's a blue curtain at one end of the kitchen. Presumably, if it's anything like Jules' apartment, there will be a small passageway behind it which leads to a narrow toilet, and a cupboard with reinforced concrete walls and a thick metal door.

The estate agent, who showed Jules around the apartment they're now renting, pointed at the cupboard, and said, 'When you get your maid, she'll sleep in there, the bomb shelter.' Jules had said things like, 'But there's no window,' and 'There's no hot water.' And the estate agent had replied, 'They don't need things

like that.' Echoing that awful blog that Jules came across yesterday, by someone called Vanda. She'd listed all these ridiculous rules for having maids, like confiscating their passports and forbidding them boyfriends. Things are different here, that's for sure.

A man's Australian voice booms beyond the curtain now. 'Oh go on!'

The curtain bulges and someone gets tangled there. A hand fumbles the fabric aside. Jules recognises the man's weathered face. He is rubbing at his eye, and shaking his head. She tries to summon his name.

He notices her and shrugs. 'Women,' he says.

He drifts out to the yard and sits among the remaining group of people. It's only then that she remembers his name is Gavin.