

TIDY ROOMS. MESSY LIVES.



SENTA RICH

BLOOMSBURY

HOTEL 21

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For Dave and Miles

Hotel 1

* * * Hastings. Feb 2011-Feb 2011

Total stay: 3 weeks

Items:

Nail scissors x 1

Tester pot of cream x 11

Cigarette lighter x 1

Hair grip with pearl x 1

Tweezers x 1

Shirt button x 1

Gold brooch x 1 (final item)

Chapter One

I have a first-day rule. Any sign of trouble, even a whiff of a problem, and I walk. In hotel 13 I was gone before my first shift even started. I told my supervisor my mother had died and I had to go back to Scotland. I've never even been to Scotland, but I needed to be going far enough away that they didn't expect me to come back. It wasn't the hotel, or the way it was run, or even the other staff – the problem was the hotel had had someone like me in their midst before.

I don't get nervous on first days. I used to, but I've had so many now I've had to keep a record so I don't forget. This is my 21st first day working as a hotel cleaner. So it's a significant milestone and cause for celebration, although a very private one. The flutters in my tummy are not the nerves normally associated with starting a new job. Instead, they're the flutters of excitement to get in and get going. Just give me the cleaning trolley, point me in the right direction and I will do the best job in the world cleaning your hotel.

My only hope is that I'm left alone after day one – most establishments 'buddy you up' for a few days as part of your induction, to ensure you fully understand how they like things done in their hotel, although there really isn't much difference between one five-star and another, or even one hotel and another, whatever the star rating. The only thing that varies is the level of cleaning finish to the rooms. You better make sure you can bounce a coin on a newly made bed in a five-star.

Usually my buddy-up person sees I know what I'm doing and quickly leaves me to my own devices. It's an inconvenience to have someone follow you around all day, watching everything you do, as it means more work and often a longer day. I hate being asked to do it. Having someone looking over my shoulder disrupts my entire routine. The times I have had to supervise a new person, at the end of their first day, whether they're able or not, I tell management they're ready to go it alone. Sometimes they cope with the workload, sometimes they don't. But there are plenty more hotel cleaning jobs, so I don't feel guilty – or at least, I try not to – if they're fired.

My plan today is simple: prove myself quickly so I'm let loose tomorrow. Oh, and most important of all, make sure everyone likes me.

As I approach the slim black door with 'Service Entrance' splayed across it in gold letters, I feel a spring in my step and my heart swells with excitement.

I'm wearing a crisp white shirt under a black hoodie, and a smart black skirt with comfortable black shoes – almost a running shoe, which isn't allowed, but I know they're just about regulation enough to get away with. A neat backpack hangs over my shoulder. I look like any other member of staff arriving for work at London's five-star Magnolia Hotel.

Before pushing the door open, I stop for a moment to watch a man and woman dressed in black aprons – the hotel uniform for a classy establishment like this. They are loading an orange laundry truck with large canvas trolleys full of bundled white linens. They look over at me briefly and I nod to them.

The two workers nod back. In a hotel of this size, they're not sure if they've seen me before, and they don't really care, but there's a code of respect among all members of staff. That's the plus to working in larger hotels. The anonymity is always nice, for a while anyway. Smaller hotels have a friendlier feel to them, where everyone looks out for each other and an effort is made to learn a new person's name on the first day.

I tend to last longer in the smaller establishments – once for eight months, which was a record for me. But in the larger hotels, and especially the five-star hotels, I've never lasted longer than a month. While I get comfortable in the smaller hotels and keep the risk low for longer, I tend to become antsy and impatient in the bigger ones and up my game sooner. The guests are also more likely to complain about the smallest thing.

The Magnolia opened in 2016 so it's only three years old. I prefer newer hotels because there's always tons of cleaning equipment and all in good condition, which means there's more than enough to go round. All the vacuum cleaners operate at full capacity, so there's no need for people to secretly swap their rubbish one for yours, which happens in the older hotels. The buckets don't have cracks in the wringer making it impossible to wring your mop head properly, and the cleaning trolleys roll smoothly along the corridors.

In hotel 7 my trolley used to pull to the right all the time. As friendly as the other cleaners were, no one was going to swap with me. I was last in and that was the deal. I only got to upgrade when someone else left and I was allowed to take their trolley and leave the crooked one for the new person.

I like to set myself little challenges. I've decided the extra thrill for starting in the Magnolia is to aim to beat my previous five-star hotel record by lasting longer than a month. So I need to have my wits about me and take it slow.

I did make it to seven months in hotel 15, a four-star in Cornwall, two years ago. My supervisor at the time, Mrs Gomez, was quite upset when I announced I was leaving 'to be nearer my family'. No one ever questions that excuse.

I was surprised when Mrs Gomez's large, wobbly face fell and her already moist eyes filled with tears. She gave me a big bear hug, pressing my cheek into her full, soft bosom, which smelled of talcum powder and lily of the valley.

For a moment, in her arms, I wondered what my life would have been like had Mrs Gomez been my mother. Would I have become a person who stays in five-star hotels instead of cleaning

them? Would I want to be different to the way I am now? I normally abandon these thoughts quickly, as they're not helpful and don't go anywhere.

Mrs Gomez finally released me from her bosom and held me firmly by the shoulders.

'You are the best little worker I have ever had,' she said.

I smiled at her, genuinely appreciative. It was nice to hear I was good at my job, but even nicer to know she didn't suspect me one bit. I was quite sad to leave too. The guests tended to be long-term stayers with mountains of luggage brimming with personal possessions. The wardrobes were always stuffed full of elegant clothes and fussy designer shoes. And the bathrooms – my favourite space in any hotel room – were strewn with delicate pots of expensive-smelling creams and make-up boxes that popped open to display an artist's palette of eyeshadows with elegant brushes and glistening lipstick cases.

One guest had fifty-two lipsticks. Yes, I counted, and I couldn't help but be impressed. I had contemplated taking one. I held the black shiny case between my blue-gloved fingers, twisted the bottom and watched in wonder as an untouched ruby-red stick slowly emerged, gleaming in the bright bathroom lights. A rush of adrenalin shot up my spine to the base of my neck, but, with a heavy sigh, I put the lipstick back in its designated, velvet-lined pouch. A woman with that kind of collection and attention to detail would know in an instant if something were missing. And I'd had a bad experience with a lipstick before and felt it was too risky.

Instead, I slowly unzipped her toiletry bag, watching the individual teeth part way as it flopped open to reveal a lucky dip of tubes and pots and shiny plastic containers. I slipped my hand in, pushing down, deep to the very bottom, where smaller items like forgotten lip balms live. I dug gently in and around the pots and tubes until my forefinger landed on a small lid. I ran the tip of my finger around it, getting a feel for the size of the mini container, and then carefully lifted it out,

all the while relishing the rush of adrenalin thundering around my body, my breathing faster than normal.

It was a small white tester pot, slightly dirty from being buried in the bottom of the bag for so long, and no bigger than the top of my thumb. It was perfect. Not something the guest would notice was missing. I dropped it into the front of my apron and stood for a moment, allowing the rush to subside and my vital signs to return to normal. It didn't matter that I had no idea what was in the pot; I never use the things I take. I just keep them, like that woman kept her lipsticks.

Nobody's memory is a hundred per cent. Even if she had noticed the little pot was missing, she'd never suspect the cleaner. She'd think she lost it in transit, or assume she'd thrown it away and forgotten. And if she had noticed and made a complaint, Mrs Gomez would never have believed that I would steal anything, let alone a small tester pot from the bottom of a toiletry bag. And I would swear, forcing fake tears, that I would never even touch a toiletry bag – we're trained not to move guest items unless absolutely necessary.

But the first complaint sets a precedent. What if another was made against me, even if it was, again, over a small item of no value? A flag would be raised. A question mark would appear next to my name and I couldn't risk that.

There's always a complaint eventually, as I begin to increase the level of risk. It's inevitable. Three weeks after taking the tester pot, I took a little bottle of pink nail varnish from a huge, overflowing vanity case. The guest marched down to reception and loudly accused the cleaner of being a thief.

Mrs Gomez stood by me like a guard dog, teeth bared as she squared up to the hotel manager. As far as she was concerned, I was an angel and so were the rest of her cleaning staff. I got away with it, of course, but it was highly unlikely she would have defended me a second time.

Once a complaint is made against me, I keep a low profile for two weeks and take nothing, which kills me. I bite my nails and lose my appetite and have to force-feed myself buttered

toast. Then I hand in my notice with a worthy excuse and leave for a new hotel in a new place.

Not every hotel cleaning job is straightforward and it's not always easy to simply up and leave. I went to work in a small three-star in Jersey once, just to give the English hotel industry a break. Hotel 8. The minute I arrived, I knew I'd made a mistake. Not because they were alert to cleaners taking things, but because the cleaning team was a well-established clique that was going to be tough to infiltrate. It consisted of eight older women, all from the same Italian family. They spoke Italian among themselves and clearly didn't have much time for the new girl, so my ability to make them like me, and fast, was already severely compromised.

I thought about employing my first-day rule and leaving immediately, but I'd only just arrived on the ferry. It had been my first time on a boat and I'd spent most of the journey with my head over the side vomiting into the wind. I couldn't face the trip back just yet, so I was prepared to give it a day or two to see if I could get the women onside.

I quickly decided to behave like a scatty, vulnerable soul who leaves my shirt sticking out of my skirt and is always losing things, like the key to my room at the hostel. And that was just my first shift. By the end of the second day, they were talking to me in English and giving me hard-boiled sweets to keep my energy levels up. Apparently I was too pale. They even allowed me to join their tip-pooling system. Not everybody tips the cleaner, and the guests that do, leave it at the end of their stay, which means there's a chance you might not be working the day they check out, so you miss the tip that was meant for you. To most cleaners, it's simply luck of the draw. Whoever finds it, keeps it. Some American hotel guests tip by the day for that reason.

I liked this new scatty persona for a while, and it helped the women to accept me – and much faster than they normally would, if at all. My supposed disorganisation and weakness made them feel good about how organised and strong they were. And I milked it. I became a master at doe eyes, a new skill I developed

and honed while I was there, and I allowed them to tie my apron and tuck in my shirt without asking me first. It was a new experience to be fussed over like a child.

But I still made sure I did my job well, otherwise I would have become a burden, and in that instance the women wouldn't have cared if I had a limp and hump. Nobody carries anyone in the world of hotel cleaning.

Still, it was tiring keeping up the pretense. Being constantly babied became irritating, and having to remember to be a scatterbrain with a low IQ took great effort, more than I was used to. After five weeks of successfully lifting guest items without any complaints, I took a tiny tin of fruity lip gloss from a bedside table. I knew as I slipped it into the front of my apron it was high-risk, but I was eager to up my game. Sure enough, the following day the guest complained that the cleaner must have taken it. All the women supported me as I snivelled my way through a roll of kitchen paper.

'Little, sweet Noelle?' they cried. 'She'd never steal anything from anyone.'

Two weeks later I handed in my notice. I told them my grandmother was sick and I needed to go back to England to look after her or she'd be put in a nursing home. The women were horrified – in Italy you look after your elderly relatives yourself. They packed me off home, laden with gifts for my fictional 'nana'.

I gave the packets of pasta and bottle of olive oil to the local women's refuge. I'm more of a 'beans on toast' person.

The most important thing for me is not to get caught, even once. A criminal record is impossible to come back from and I'd never be employed as a hotel cleaner again. That's why I'm careful only to take small, insignificant items that a guest won't miss, or in the very least will question if they had it in the first place. Items like nail clippers, hair grips, a pair of socks (clean, of course), a pen (not an expensive one), an eyeliner (from the bottom of a make-up bag). Sometimes, when I feel like an easy

day, I might take a tie from a man's wardrobe or suit bag. The sound of the zip gently parting as I push it up sends shivers down my spine.

Men are much easier to take from because they're far less likely to kick up a fuss. They're often too embarrassed to say a tie is missing. Either it looks like he forgot to pack it or, if he's older, he blames his wife for not packing it. Most of them find it stressful to complain and would rather avoid the hassle, so I mainly stick to female guests – the stakes are higher, so therefore more rewarding when I get away with it, which I mostly do. And I do enjoy a delicate rummage through a well-stocked toiletry bag.

In hotel 3, I took a silk scarf from a wardrobe. The guest had a rake of them, about ten in total, bundled together on one hanger. I was eighteen and still learning my craft and thought she wouldn't notice, but she did. I managed to get away with it because her husband, a mild-mannered man who blushed easily, was mortally embarrassed by his wife's flailing arms and shrill voice demanding the cleaner's home be searched and the police called. He apologised for 'the misunderstanding' and quickly ushered his wife out of the lobby and into a taxi, her head bobbing and her finger pointing as she continued to complain. I acted like I was offended and hurt by the accusation, but the hotel manager, relieved the couple had left, told me not to worry about it and we all went back to work. Still, it was a mark against my name and therefore time to leave.

Later, in the staffroom, the other cleaners rallied around me in full support, scoffing at the woman's accusation. 'Who would want one of her scarves anyway?' The guest had been in her sixties with an old-fashioned style.

I joined in the scoffing. 'As if I'd wear something like that.' But I wasn't ridiculing the woman. I was amused by their idea of what stealing meant to a person like me. To them, the item had to be valuable or beautiful and somehow relevant. How little they knew.