

## Chapter Two

### Jules

My heart feels as though it might beat right out of my chest as I pull up in front of my nana's house. It's a tiny blue bungalow with a chain-link fence that wraps around a patchy brown lawn. I just drove my slightly used cargo van off the lot, which means this is finally happening.

Throwing the vehicle into park, I jump out and take a few steps back to admire the company logo painted on one side. "White Glove Maid Service" gleams in classy black letters, and my chest swells with pride.

Grinning like an idiot, I go around to the passenger side to grab the two bags of groceries I picked up on the way. Nana always insists that she doesn't need anything, and yet her fridge is practically bare. Now when I come over, I try to stock the essentials — milk, bread, eggs, and fruit.

"Nana?" I call, raising my voice to make sure she can hear me as I nudge my way through the front door. The neighborhood is considerably rougher than it was when she and Gramps bought this place back in the seventies, and yet she never locks her front door no matter how much I nag.

"I'm still here," comes a creaky voice from the back room, where I can hear *The Young and the Restless* blaring on the TV set.

The brown carpet in the living room is worn, and the floral curtains are faded, but Nana's house is always immaculate. Her small white shoes are lined up neatly along one side of the entryway, and the old linoleum tile is squeaky clean.

Out of habit, I glance up at the glass pendant light over my head — a little trick of the pros that Nana and my mother taught me. You can always tell if a house is truly clean by looking in the hard-to-reach places. Light fixtures and ceiling fans are magnets for dust, and they're the things people most often neglect to clean. Not Nana, though.

"I have something to show you," I call in a singsong voice, going into the kitchen to put the groceries in the fridge.

"I hope it's a new pair of knees."

I hear a grunt and the painful-sounding crack of joints as Nana heaves herself out of her chair. “These old ones ain’t what they used to be.”

“Sorry, Nana,” I say, smiling despite the knot in my stomach.

Her refrigerator is bare except for a bottle of ketchup, half a packet of tuna, and a mostly empty carton of orange juice. I knew the bill from her most recent trip to the hospital hit her hard, but I hadn’t known things were this bad.

I hurriedly shovel the groceries I brought into the fridge and stick three hundred-dollar bills under the little ceramic cat figurine on the table. She’ll be angry when she finds the money, but I’ll be long gone by then.

I straighten up and whip around as Nana shuffles into the kitchen. She’s practically drowning in her oversized Denver Nuggets sweatshirt. She looks paler and gaunter since her heart attack, and I can tell her knees are bothering her. But she smiles and waddles over to greet me, and I tuck her under my arm and squeeze her tightly.

“Good to see you, honey,” Nana chuckles.

“It’s good to see you, too.”

“Now, what’s this you have to show me? My soaps are on, you know.”

“It’ll just take a second,” I promise. “But you’ll have to come outside.”

Threading my elbow through Nana’s, I open the door and guide her down the crumbling concrete steps that lead into the front yard. She blinks a few times in the bright sunshine, looking around in confusion.

“Ta-da!” I say, throwing out an arm toward the van as if I’m a game-show host unveiling the big prize.

“You hired me a maid service?” Nana croaks indignantly. “I’m insulted, Julianna.”

“No!” I roll my eyes. “It’s my new van. *I’m* the maid service.”

Nana looks confused, as if I haven’t spent the better part of three years talking about launching my own business. “Did you lose your job at Crisp N Clean?”

I shake my head. “I’m starting my own cleaning service.”

Nana cocks her head to the side, squinting at me as though I’ve lost my mind. “Why would you want to do a thing like that?”

“Because the wages at Crisp N Clean are absolute crap.”

“Watch your language, young lady!”

“Well, they are. Plus, it’s all short-term rentals in Aspen these days. My boss has us turning over a three-bedroom condo in four hours or less. We don’t get extra time or extra pay when guests leave the place a wreck, and come April, the work dries up. My company is a high-end maid service that caters to the ultra-wealthy. I figure I can charge more money, make my own hours, and — once I have enough employees — I won’t even have to do any cleaning.”

But Nana is still giving me that sideways look. “What makes a maid service high end?” Her brown eyes twinkle. “Do you leave little mints on all the clients’ pillows?”

I roll my eyes. “No. We just provide an end-to-end five-star experience and a superior clean.”

Nana nods, her lips pursing in amusement. “And who are these five-star maids?”

“Well, me, for starters. I’ll hire someone else as soon as I start landing clients and train them on all my processes.”

“And you went out and bought this van?” Nana croaks. “How much did that set you back?”

I swallow down my mounting frustration. I know to Nana it seems like a crazy investment, but she doesn’t understand about business and branding. You have to *look* high end if you want to charge high-end prices.

“I’ve been saving up,” I say with more confidence than I feel.

Nana still looks skeptical. “Seems like you’d be better off saving to buy a house for when you meet that special someone.”

“Have you *looked* at housing prices lately? I’ll be lucky if I can afford to buy a tree house by the time I’m your age.”

“All the more reason to save,” Nana clucks. “Your grandfather and I had to scrimp for seven years to afford the down payment on this place. Now that he’s gone, I’d be out on the street if I didn’t own my own home.”

“Things are different now,” I say gently. “And I doubt I’m going to be meeting that ‘special someone’ anytime soon.”

Nana looks at me askance. “What about that nice young banker you were seeing? The one you met on that app . . . What’s it called? Kindling?”

“Tinder,” I say, choking on a laugh. “Me and Kyle wouldn’t have worked out. And, for your information, I’m off all the dating apps right now. I’m working on building my business.” I shrug. “There’s no time to date.”

Nana sighs. “Well, I wish you were working on my *great-grandchildren* instead of building a business, but I suppose you’ve got to eat.” She narrows her eyes, looking me up and down. “As for not having time to date, take it from someone who’s lived a lot of life, honey. You’ve got to *make* time for the important things. And I don’t mean working.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, my insides twisting uncomfortably. I’ve always known there’s more to life than work, of course, but dating just isn’t a priority right now.

Nana and my mom were both maids like me. Both worked their fingers to the bone cleaning other people’s houses. When my mom was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer at the age of forty-two, I knew I had to find something different — something better than ten-hour workdays scrubbing toilets and mopping floors.

“Don’t think I didn’t see you walk in here with all those grocery bags,” says Nana, changing the topic with a reproachful look. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Yes, it is,” she says, her voice cracking with the force of her passion. “You spoil me. You should save your money.” She nods grudgingly at my van. “For your business.”

“I’m fine, Nana,” I say, giving her shoulders a squeeze. “And besides, you deserve to be spoiled.”

“Back at ya, honey.”