

## Chapter One:

I met Ms. Sindys in a beauty salon. Her daughter, Dakota Sindys, was running around the salon with a tablet, recording little snippets of nothing: the floor, customers entering, her mother reprimanding her for bugging customers. In fact, I met little Miss Dakota Sindys through that tablet, stopping for a moment to entertain her video-making. Dakota Sindys seemed content playing on her own; an observation Ms. Sindys probably relied upon.

Ms. Sindys was the receptionist. She was overly friendly, one might say chatty, but it didn't bother me. One might say that I am chatty, as well. It was because of this mutual chattiness that it was discovered she was looking for a nanny and I was a nanny looking for a job. Plus as a bonus, I would receive free facials. Too bad I never got to use one, however, given the events that occurred, I feel selfish for even thinking such. Everything seemed normal. She seemed normal. Ms. Sindys didn't raise any red flags or give off any indications of otherwise. At the time it seemed like a match made in heaven.

I promptly exchanged information with her and made plans to call and chat about the job opening in more depth before leaving the salon that evening. Subsequently, a few days later, everything was arranged and I would start nannying for Ms. Sindys and her two children starting Monday the following week.

When that Monday arrived, I left my house half past two, driving the 20-minute drive to the Sindys' residence with 10 minutes time to spare. I remember being slightly excited, as I often am for the first day of things, whether work, school, or something entirely else. The house was in a decent neighborhood, definitely not a wealthy one, but not a poorly funded area either. It was one of those up-and-coming ones with younger families of borderline hippies and millennial hipsters. The house was on the older side, possibly vintage although potentially just rundown, as many of the houses were in that neighborhood, and a bit rundown. The painted wood was fading from its dark greenish-gray coloring and the front porch had clippings of wood missing from the floorboards. Some of the bearings on its railings were broken and the furniture sitting out on the porch seemed slightly dirty, all of the chairs each independent from one another and none being from a matching set.

Walking up the porch, for a split second I feared the wood would collapse with the weight of my body as it creaked with each step. Immediately afterwards, I felt bad for thinking such, as

the steps were perfectly fine and I was being classist. Naturally, almost habitually, I knocked four times upon the door. Following the melodic beat of four, light knocks issued from my knuckles hitting the door, loud shuffling and ruckus echoing responsively through the divide as I waited patiently. As the door swung open I found myself facing Ms. Sindys' chaotic grin as the disheveled mother welcomed me in, apologizing for the mess and stating that they were in the process of moving so everything was in disorganized clutter. With my first step through the doorway, my nostrils clogged with the residence's aroma made up of many different smells I couldn't quite make out: Cat litter, old books, musk, and possible mold were potential contributors. Nevertheless, it wasn't overwhelming or eye watering, just unique in a slightly unpleasant way. The front entrance was the main living room with a tv, chair, and two couches. The back walls were lined with books fitted upon two floor-length bookshelves. Many appeared to be old, with fine, leather binding, or academic textbooks. Sitting upon one of the couches is a balding man, silently staring as Ms. Sindys and I interact, waiting for a break in conversation in which he could join. I can't recall what the man's name was, however, I'm not sure if I was ever actually told such.

The man was the type of person in which people crossed the street to get away from. Something was strange about his mannerisms, possibly on the spectrum I would say. Upon first introductions, I would bet money on him being intellectually disabled, that is if I was a betting woman, in which I am not, however, I do occasionally dabble in Texas' holdem as my father taught my sister and I to play when I was eight, maybe nine, or so. He studied linguistics and was well spoken, yet struggled to form sentences, maybe due to nerves, a regional accent, or possibly a stutter, although, too slight to tell. It almost seemed like my presence was a threat and I was crossing into his territory, although I couldn't say if it was, in fact, his territory. I wasn't sure what his relation to the Sindys was, maybe a boyfriend to Ms. Sindys or possibly even her father, as the man was in his late 50s to early 60s, however, I could tell that he wasn't the children's father or definitely didn't act as such.

Following Ms. Sindys through the living room and down the hall, she explained that the children were not to go into the back rooms of the house, specifically the study and her bedroom, unless with specific permission from her, which applied to myself as well. She turned left, leading me into the kitchen's archway before stating that the children were to only receive one,

pre-packaged snack a day, as she claimed that they will continue to complain of hunger yet never want to eat what is given to them.

The kitchen smelled rancid, like sour milk or spoiled fish in the summer's heat. Here in Texas, our summers reached 100 or more, but the humidity made it feel like actual hell incarnated, which speaks volumes coming from a Jew, as we don't believe in such a concept. The kitchen lacked an inch of free counter space, contaminated with clutter and used cooking utensils. Flies buzzed around, gathering by the sink that was piled strategically high with dishes. Cat litter, spilling out of its packaging, was scattered across the open space intended to host dinners at a nonexistent kitchen table.

Leaving the kitchen, we entered the room across the hall: the childrens' room, where I had to physically stop myself from a strange mix between gasping and gagging as I entered. The room looked as though it was the residing area for a pair of kidnapping victims from a true crime documentary. Misshapen, twin mattresses sat upon two broken, metal bed frames, painted white, as one leaned sideways with such intensity I feared even making its unkempt bedding might cause its collapse. One sat on the left side, lined up against the wall in front of a closet that was inaccessible with a dresser, drawers left open filled with clothes, placed halfway inside it. The other was on the right side of the room, directly in line with the door, facing it, a big bucket filled with toys, dirty clothes, and whatever else happened to be unlucky enough to find its way into it, in between the two. The more I walked into the room, the more the soles of my shoes stuck to the dirty, wood flooring. My eyes darted around the room, overwhelmed by the amount to take in. The smell of urine lingered in the air to which I attributed the sticking to.

Another bucket full of random clutter sat next to a second dresser, lining the wall in front of the bathroom, making a triangle with the two beds. Trash, dirty clothes, used diapers and dishes, and from what I could tell, molding food filled the spaces underneath the two twin beds. The wood flooring was camouflaged by piles consisting of the same clutter with the addition of random toys and trinkets. Small paneled sections peered out of the peppered flooring, leaving just barely enough room for a path to walk. The bathroom door was stuck in place, hanging crooked on its hinges. Unconsciously, I crept through the room, finding myself lifting up and sliding the door as I peered around its corner. Physical feces was plastered along a few tiles, the base of the porcelain, and slightly splattered on the walls of the bathroom. The toilet's porcelain bowl was painted dark orange in old, overgrown rust. I turned my head as I stepped further into

the health hazard of a bathroom. The sink was full with what seemed like weeks of dried toothpaste crust and general grime. The medicine cabinet was uninhabited and lining the sink was an empty bottle of hand soap, a tube of jock itch, and an old, singular toothbrush.

I was hired as a nanny who would also help organize, which is ironic because, naturally, I am not an organized person, nonetheless I thought it would be a few toy buckets here and there, not the monstrosity of their “room”. Thoughts echoed, flossing through my brain from one ear to the other. How could Ms. Sindys even call herself a mother? How could she let her children live worse than dogs? I began to question if the children were even her children at all. Was this room in fact the crime scene of a kidnapping it represented? I knew I needed to turn and face her soon. I needed to say something, anything, even a slight confident smile or joke would suffice but my throat locked up as pressure built, my tongue, pushing against the root of my mouth, suddenly felt heavy. I couldn’t remain silent any longer without making the whole interaction awkward. My face felt hot, my cheeks flushing; my eyes bulging out of their sockets; I actively felt my body switch into shock as suddenly I became numb. I almost jumped when Ms. Sindys chimed in, urgently trying to explain the mess.

When I turned to face Ms. Sindys my face remained cold, blank, cloaking any and all of my emotions. I managed a nod, as I pretended I believed her.

It seemed like without another thought, Ms. Sindys motioned to me and trodden back to the living room. I almost had to physically pick up one of my legs and place it down in front of me in order to jump start myself into walking. She turned to me, peering at the time on her phone before stating there was about five minutes to spare time before we needed to do something, however, I stopped listening as she trailed off.

She continued casually rambling on about timelines, schedules, and car routes, but my ears only picked up mumblings and a few spare words. It all felt insignificant. Unsure of what to do next, I stood still at the living room archway, frozen; a deer in headlights. She looked back from the middle of the living room, and I attempted to avoid her gaze. Her presence struck my heart, yanking it out through the backside of my ribs, passing my spine swiftly as it threw itself onto the hallway floor. I imagined my body turning to catch it, instinctively, but failing, only to watch it flail there just before me, still beating, although slowing; it flops around in pitter-patters. Its blood clotted with the dirt that generously coated the floor. I watched it continue to slow,

declining, barely twitching- and with one final movement, it took liberty, collapsing its walls and sinking onto itself.

Abruptly, I forced a small smile and looked up to meet Ms. Sindys' eyes, agreeing and nodding mildly before walking over to the living room couch and quietly taking a seat. I folded my hands together, interlocking my fingers, before placing them in my lap. I sat rigidly straight upon the couch as I waited, scared to recline onto the nonexistent wound my heart left tender along my upper back.