

# THE MAID'S SECRET

A MAID NOVEL



## NITA PROSE

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of **THE MAID**

By Nita Prose

*The Maid's Secret*

*The Mistletoe Mystery*

*The Mystery Guest*

*The Maid*

# THE MAID'S SECRET



*A Maid Novel*

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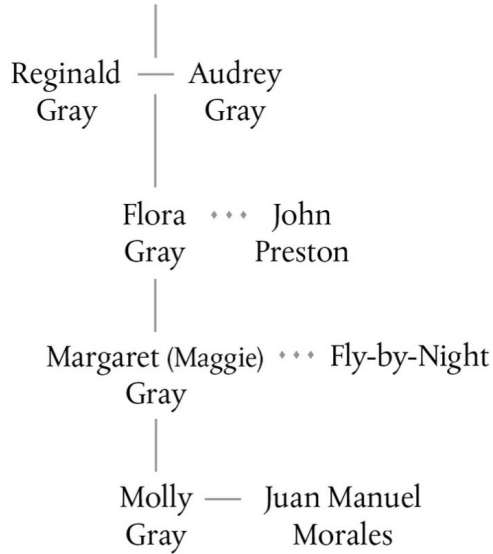
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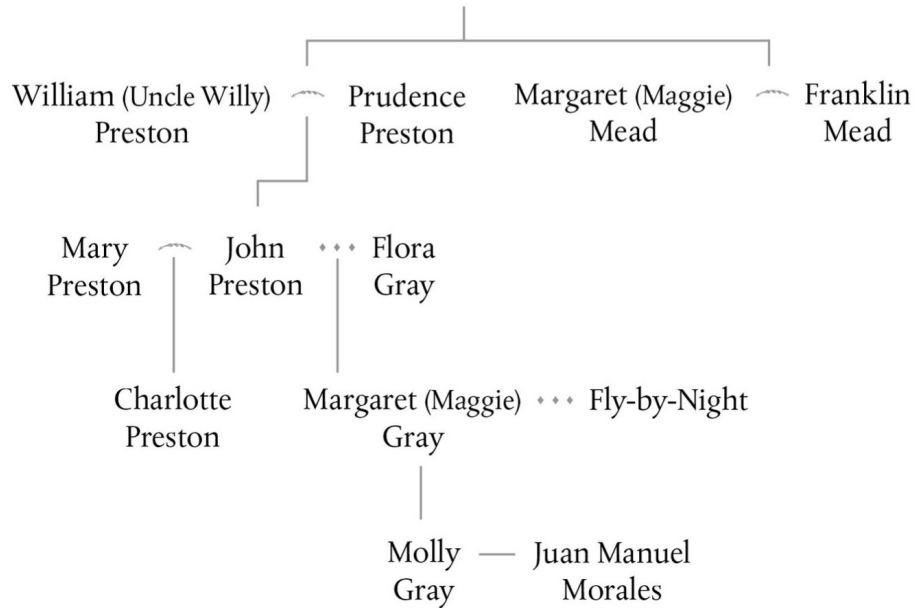
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*To Dan, my beloved big brother*

## THE GRAYS



## THE PRESTONS



### KEY

— Marriage    \*\*\* No Marriage    — Widowed



—

## PROLOGUE



**M**y gran loved to tell stories. A maid for most of her life, her best tales featured maids. One of them went like this:

*Once upon a time, there was a maid who rued her lot in life. Her clothes were threadbare and worn. Her hands were chapped and dry. Why did she have to toil in servitude instead of living a life of leisure? Why was she fated to work from dawn to dusk for a paltry wage, cleaning a mansion she would never live in herself? She had no family of her own, for they had all forsaken her, but she did know love. Oh yes, she knew it well. There was someone who loved that maid deeply. And just one person's love is enough to keep your soul alive. Anything more is a blessing beyond all measure.*

*One day, while that maid was toiling in the mansion, the Lady of the house asked her to clean out a wardrobe containing old footwear. "There are work boots left behind by a farmhand, slippers forgotten by a young belle, and granny boots that have seen better days," the Lady explained. "They're all castoffs—worthless, the lot of them."*

*For a moment, the maid wondered: Was Her Ladyship referencing the shoes or those who had once worn them?*

*"Take any shoes you want," Her Ladyship offered. "Get rid of the rest."*

*"Yes, ma'am," replied the maid, holding her curtsy until Her Ladyship left the room.*

*The maid then got to work cleaning out the wardrobe. Though the work boots were caked with dry muck, they were sturdy. She tried them on, and the moment she did, she was transported into the life of an orphaned stable boy who'd once worked on the estate. She walked a mile in that boy's shoes, cleaning the barn and tending to the horses that provided the only warmth*

*he ever knew. At night, that boy curled up beside a mare on a bed of straw and wished for another life—to be someone else, anyone else but who he was.*

*Upon feeling the stable boy's keen loneliness, the maid quickly kicked the boots off her feet. She was relieved to find herself delivered back to her own life as a maid. In the wardrobe was another pair of shoes that suited her better anyhow—the beautiful ballroom slippers that had once belonged to a belle. She fastened them to her feet, and as if by magic she was wearing a gorgeous chiffon gown, being twirled around the dance floor by a dashing prince. But without warning, the prince cast her aside for a prettier belle, whom he now kissed right in front of her. She wrestled with the clasps and ripped the slippers off.*

*Delivered unto herself, the maid eyed the last pair of shoes in the wardrobe—old granny boots. She could not resist. She slipped them on and soon found herself living the life of a wealthy matron who'd once owned the entire estate. Much like a vampire, the matron derived pleasure only from sucking joy from those around her. She had no friends or loved ones, and she pestered her workers ceaselessly, all for her own amusement. The maid removed those boots as fast as she could, relieved to return to her own life.*

*That night, she reported her strange experience to her beloved, who listened without judgment. When she was done speaking, he had but one question: “What did you learn?”*

*“That my life isn't so bad after all,” she replied.*

*The maid was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude. By walking a mile in each of those three pairs of shoes, she'd learned a lesson she held close to her heart for the rest of her days: that a life without love is not worth living.*

—

# CHAPTER 1



A few years ago, when my gran was alive, she gave me a key. It's a simple skeleton key, tarnished and worn. No amount of polishing has ever made it shine. To this day, I don't know why she gave it to me or what it unlocks.

Gran was ailing when she produced it from under her pillow and pressed it into my hands. I didn't know it at the time, but she had only a few days to live.

"Dear girl, this is for you," she said as she folded the key into my palm with surprising force.

"What does it open?" I asked.

"My heart," she replied matter-of-factly.

I sometimes have trouble deciphering the literal from the figurative, but even all those years ago, I knew enough about human anatomy to understand that no key in the world can unlock the human heart.

"If that's a metaphor, I don't grasp it," I said. "Precisely what does this key open? A locked box? A drawer? A safe, perhaps?"

"It's the key to everything," Gran insisted. "It is all of me. And it is for you."

Gran was so ill by this point that I assumed her mind was addled from pain. Moreover, I knew it was. There were times during those final days when she'd mutter unintelligibly under her breath—*Birds of a feather...or A stitch in time...* At other moments, she'd suddenly call out to someone she saw in her bedroom when there was no one there but me.

"Gran," I urged whenever she regained consciousness. "This key fits a lock. Where's the lock?"

Her eyes fluttered—open, closed, open. She homed in on me as though she'd never seen me before, and yet I'd lived every day of my life by her side.

“You don't know who I am,” she said.

“Of course I do. You're my gran. And I'm your Molly, remember?”

“I remember everything,” she replied.

Then one day Gran asked—begged—to leave this world. I pleaded with her, but to no avail. I wanted so much for her to be well, and yet I always knew she would leave me one day.

“It's time,” she said again and again.

And just like that, she was gone. By gone I do not mean asleep or on holiday or traipsing to the corner store to fetch a jug of milk. What I mean is: she was dead. Yes, dead. There really is no point sugarcoating these things. It was not easy or simple. She died.

My gran taught me to be direct. She also taught me everything else of substance I've learned in this life. For that, and for her, I remain forever grateful.

Today, I can't stop thinking about her. In a cavernous chamber in my mind, her voice echoes, her refrains repeating in a Möbius loop. Perhaps I'm daft, with a mind as soft as unripened cheese, but there are times when I feel her lingering close. It's as if she's trying to tell me something—to warn me of some calamity or unseen danger ahead. I'm used to this, of course—to being the last to know, to understanding too late. What I'm *not* used to are warnings delivered from beyond the grave by someone who is most certainly *very* dead.

—

“Molly, are you okay? Molly, look at me. Wake up.”

I'm staring into bright lights. Where am I? People crowd around me, shouting and calling my name. Is this an operating room? No, that's not it. The place is familiar, but everything is blurred.

“Molly, listen to me!”

“Open your eyes!”

I know one thing only: something is terribly wrong. Was I in an accident? Am I dying, my soul rising to meet its maker?

Then I hear it, loud and clear—Gran’s voice.

*All that glitters isn’t gold.*

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*

Yes. I remember. I know where I am. I’m in the well-appointed tearoom of the Regency Grand, the five-star hotel where I work as a maid. My beloved fiancé, Juan Manuel, and I arrived early this morning to set up for the day’s big occasion—a fine arts and collectibles event with Brown and Beagle, celebrity appraisers and costars of the hit TV show *Hidden Treasures*. I’m not dying, thank goodness, but I’m also not all right. I’m lying on the floor, and all around me are microphones and iPhones and TV cameras and jostling humanity.

This was not supposed to happen. These cameras were never supposed to be focused on me. But moments ago, a revelation was made that was so astonishing, so absurd it feels like a dream. To my utter horror, I’m no longer the invisible maid toiling in the background but the epicenter of attention. An entire room of lookie-loos surrounds me, and they’re shouting at me in a desperate frenzy.

“Molly, you’re a maid, right? At this hotel?”

“Molly, how does it feel to go from rags to riches in an instant?”

“Molly, can you get up off the floor? You’re rich!”

“Molly, *mi amor*? Are you okay?”

The last voice cuts through, bringing me back to myself—Juan Manuel, my love, my life.

Lights and cameras push closer, and I lose sight of him. I try to lift myself, but I lack strength. Stars twinkle in my periphery—*all that glitters isn’t gold*. Two men’s faces—I know them; I’ve seen them before, many times—the stars of a popular show.

“Tell our viewers how it feels, Molly. What’s it like to be an instant multimillionaire?”

The world tilts sideways and suddenly fades to black.

And then I remember everything: But how? How did it come to this?

---

“Rise and shine, *mi amor!*” These were the first words I heard as I woke this morning. Through sleepy eyes, I watched as Juan, still in his pajamas, popped out of our bed and pulled the curtains back to let the soft morning light into our room.

I’m not a morning person, but Juan Manuel, just like my gran before him, delights at the dawn of each new day, invigorated with a zest for life, whereas I wrestle my way out from under cobwebs of exhaustion, begging for a few more minutes of slumber. And so it was this morning as it is on most mornings.

“I beg you, press snooze! Please!” I nestled deeper under the covers.

My beloved shuffled into his slippers and like a contented sparrow sang a happy tune as he flitted about our bedroom. A moment later, the mattress shifted as he perched on the edge. I felt his warm hand cajole me from my blanket nest.

“Early to bed, early to rise, makes Molly healthy, wealthy, and wise,” he chimed in his singsong voice.

“Health and wisdom, I already possess,” I muttered. “As for wealth, that’s really asking too much, especially two months before our wedding day.”

He laughed, a sparkling sound, crystalline and pure, like a silver spoon tinkling the edges of a porcelain cup. It’s now been over six months since Juan proposed to me in a surprising holiday revelation on the staircase at the Regency Grand. I was happy and relieved to say yes.

“Get up, Molly. Today’s a busy day! We have to get to the hotel early. The TV crew will be there at nine A.M. sharp. I’m so excited. We’re going to meet the stars of the show!”



We were poised for a huge day at the Regency Grand, where Juan and I both work—he as a chef and I as a maid. Brown and Beagle, the famous appraising couple known for identifying antiquities and long-lost works of art, were bringing their road show to the hotel’s Grand Tearoom. It’s a shame Gran never got to see their popular reality TV series, *Hidden Treasures*, which debuted two years ago. She would have loved the hosts, owners of the eponymous high-end art auction house, two middle-aged, married men who share a passion for art and antiquities, designer clothes, and each other. The Bees, as they’re affectionately known by their legions of adoring fans, delight audiences nationwide with their witty repartee and their historical know-how, all while appraising items brought to the show by everyday collectors spanning the globe.

Most of the items they assess on air turn out to be worthless trinkets or not-so-clever fakes, but devoted viewers—myself and Juan included—watch every week for the gasp-worthy moments when a long-forgotten painting discovered in a dusty attic turns out to be a van Gogh or a wardrobe with a secret drawer bought from a charity shop reveals a hoard of priceless coins.

I felt Juan’s hand again, pulling the covers from my face. A moment later, his lips grazed my cheek as he planted kisses in a perfect garden row.

“If you’re not going to rise and shine, *solita*, I may have to resort to extreme measures,” he said playfully as he ducked under the covers and continued his plantation down my bare shoulder.

I wrapped my arms around his warm neck and stared into those beautiful brown eyes, like the turn-down dark chocolates we place on pillows at the hotel, but sweeter and richer because all the love that shines in them is mine.

“*Te amo*,” Juan said. “And I know just how to wake you up, Molly. I will use Juan Manuel’s surefire method—better than all the caffeine in the world.”

And so it was that I was instantly, enticingly awake, kissing my fiancé and tingling with a longing that moments before had not existed in me at

all. This is what it's like with us. Each day we spend together is a trove of secret riches. Never in my life did I think such a love could be mine.

We nestled in each other's arms after, and we talked about our wedding, which is only two months away. We're both so excited for our big day. Though it will be a small affair at city hall (Juan and I alongside Angela and my gran-dad), we can't wait to share the moment. Still, it's been stressful managing the costs of getting married on a maid's and a pastry chef's salaries. Mr. Snow kindly offered the tearoom at the Regency Grand for a ceremony and reception, but I declined on account of the rental and catering costs, which we could never afford. As for outfits, we most certainly won't be buying new. We looked at rentals, but the price tags added instant wrinkles to Juan's forehead and mine. We still don't have a tuxedo for Juan, and my search for a used wedding dress continues to no avail.

"If I don't find a dress soon," I said as we lay in bed this morning, "I'm going to have to make one out of used bedsheets."

"You could wear a paper bag and you'd still be the most beautiful bride in the world," Juan replied. "*¡Dios mío!* It's almost seven A.M. We're going to be late. Bust to move, Molly!"

And with that, we both burst out of bed as though the mattress was on fire, and we bustled about our apartment, showering and dressing, and preparing for our star-studded day with two TV celebrities at the Regency Grand.

We were about to head out the door when I remembered. "Wait! I need a shoebox."

"*Madre mía*, Molly," said Juan. "What for?"

"*Hidden Treasures*," I replied. "Mr. Snow invited the staff to bring in collectibles for Brown and Beagle to appraise before the shoot. I have a few items that fit the bill."

"But we don't own any fine art," Juan said. "The only treasure in this apartment is you."

I smiled, then opened the front closet, locating a shoebox, which I brought to the kitchen while Juan reluctantly trailed behind me. I placed

Gran's favorite teacup inside the box, the one with an English country cottage scene on it.

"I'll have you know the Bees once appraised a Ming Dynasty teacup at ten thousand dollars. Gran's cup is Royal Standard fine bone china," I said. "Maybe it's worth something."

"Molly, can we go now?" Juan pleaded.

"Soon," I replied. I rushed to the living room and opened Gran's curio cabinet, which contained all manner of trinkets—her menagerie of Swarovski crystal animals, silver souvenir spoons collected from far-flung locales she never got to see, and one mysterious old key.

"I'm taking some spoons," I announced, placing the nicest ones in my shoebox. "And the Swarovski swan, because it was Gran's favorite. And I've always wondered about this old key," I said as I held it up for Juan to examine. "Gran claimed it was 'the key to her heart,' but I've never been able to determine what it opens. Maybe Brown and Beagle can tell me."

Juan looked at me with a strange expression I could not for the life of me decipher. "So you're bringing a chipped teacup, a chunk of bird-shaped glass, and an old key...but you're not bringing *that*?"

"What?" I asked.

"The golden *huevo*," he replied. Naturally, I know what a *huevo* is because Juan makes delectable *huevos rancheros* every Wednesday. He was pointing to the top shelf in Gran's curio cabinet, where I keep a bejeweled ornamental egg on its perfectly polished gold pedestal.

"At least bring the egg laid by the magic chicken," Juan insisted.

"It was not laid by a magic chicken. If only you knew," I replied.

But he didn't know how I'd come to possess that strange *objet* because I'd told him very little about the time when I was ten years old working alongside my gran in a luxurious mansion owned by a sad and loveless couple. I never went into much detail about what happened to my gran in that mansion or how I came to acquire that golden egg nearly two decades later. Shame is a dangerous emotion. Sometimes it's best left in the past, where it won't contaminate others, spreading like a virulent contagion. I know this firsthand, and my gran knew this, too.

*Let sleeping dogs lie.*

When I first spotted the egg on the mantel in the Grimthorpe mansion, I was hypnotized. I wondered what it would be like to possess an artifact with such alluring beauty. In a strange twist of fate, long after Gran was fired from her job as a maid there, I met a gardener tasked with cleaning out the property after the deaths of the owners. He remembered me from when I was a child, and he also recalled how much I'd admired the strange, pearlescent egg on the mantel. He said it was a worthless bit of tat and that I could have it. And so instead of going into the trash, that golden egg became mine. Now, it sits in Gran's curio cabinet, a private reminder of what we survived—Gran and me.

"I'm telling you, Juan, that *huevo* is a worthless trinket. But I'm fond of it regardless."

Juan grabbed the egg, placing it in my shoebox. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," he said.

It was eerie. He said aloud the very words that had been ringing in my ears all morning. "I swear," I said, "every day that goes by, you remind me more of her."

"Of who?" he asked.

"My gran."