

THE
MAID

A Novel



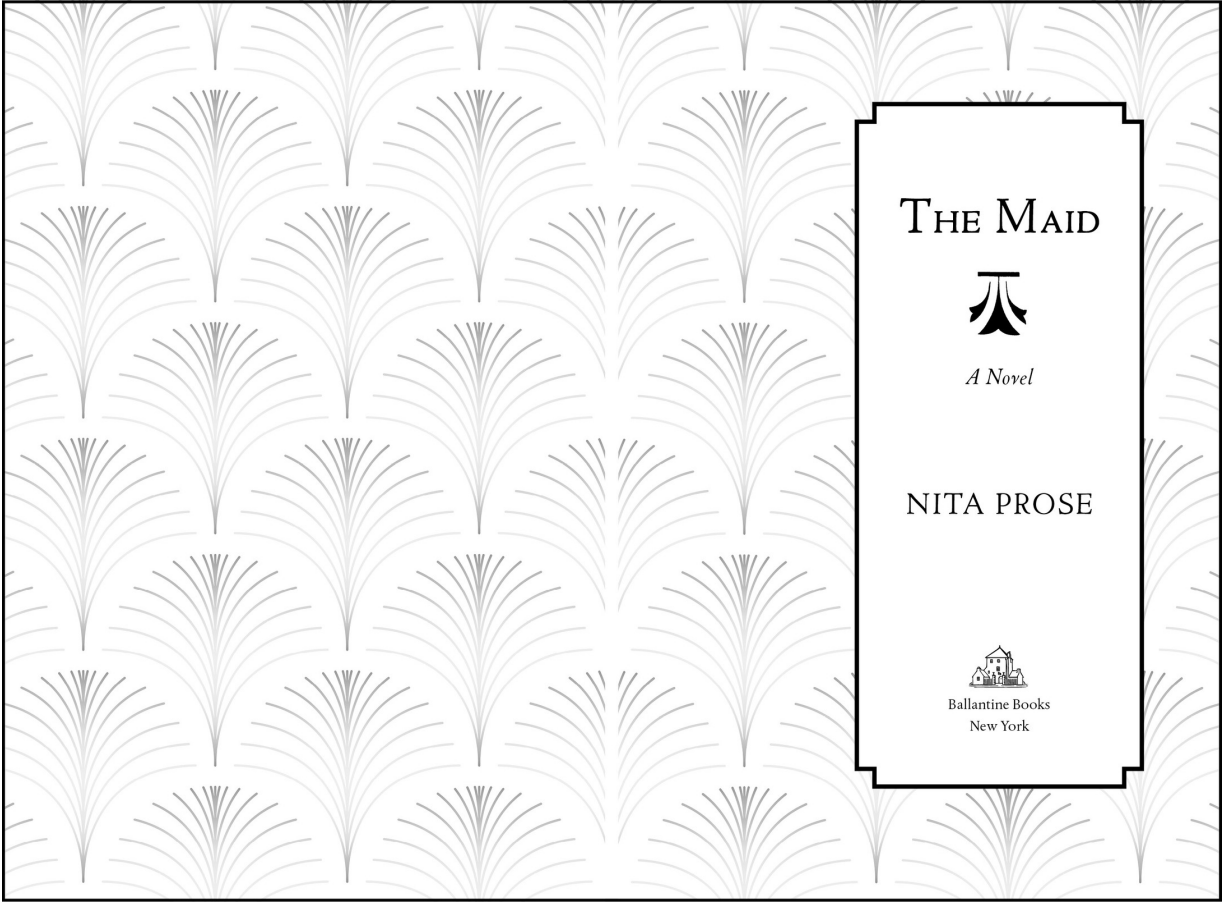
NITA PROSE

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Ballantine Books
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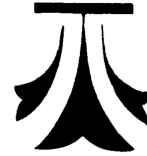
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PROLOGUE

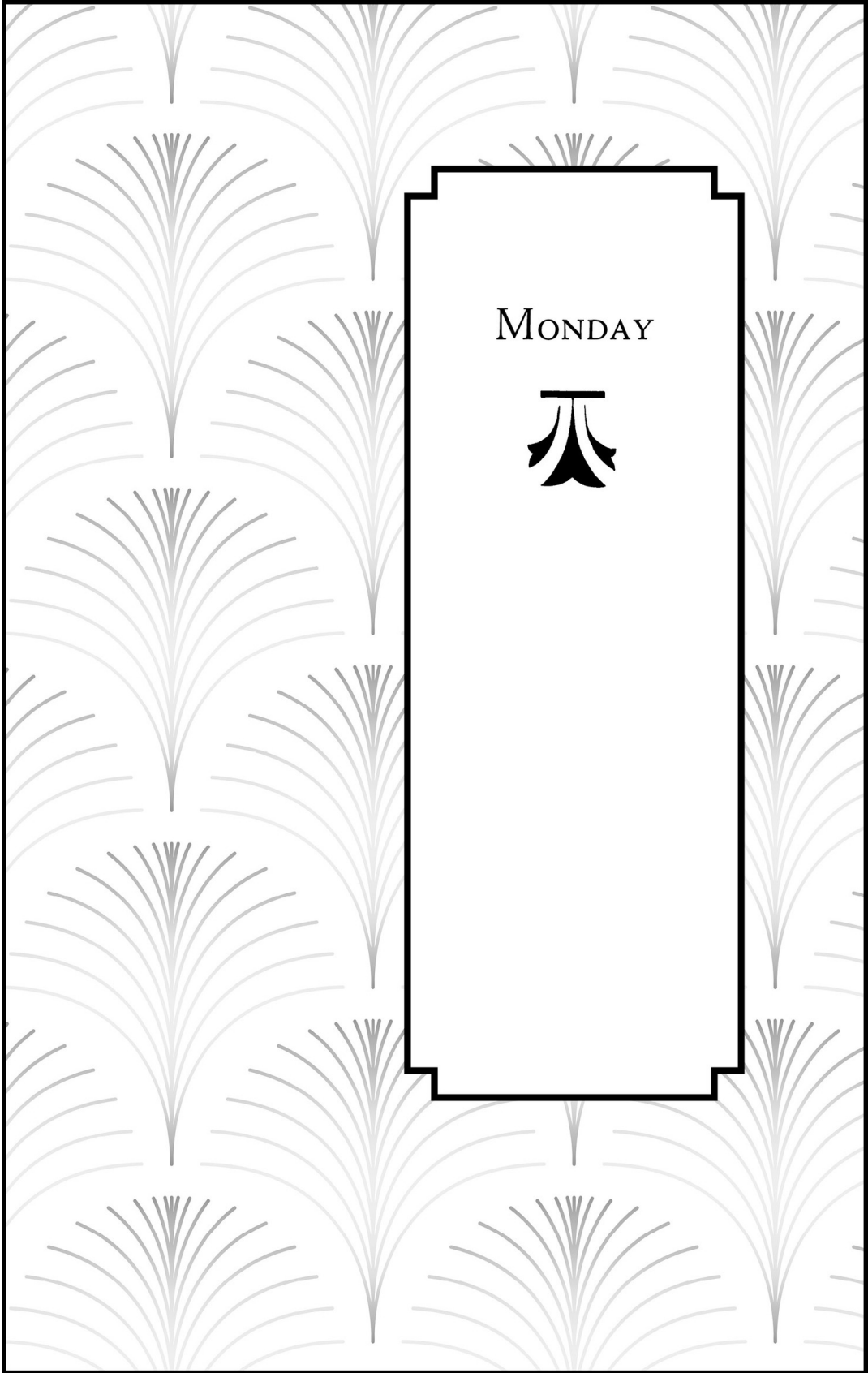


I am your maid. I'm the one who cleans your hotel room, who enters like a phantom when you're out gallivanting for the day, no care at all about what you've left behind, the mess, or what I might see when you're gone.

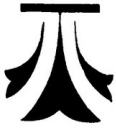
I'm the one who empties your trash, tossing out the receipts you don't want anyone to discover. I'm the one who changes your sheets, who can tell if you slept in them and if you were alone last night or not. I'm the one who straightens your shoes by the door, who puffs up your pillows and finds stray hairs on them. Yours? Not likely. I'm the one who cleans up after you drink too much and soil the toilet seat, or worse.

When I'm done with my work, I leave your room pristine. Your bed is made perfectly, with four plump pillows, as though no one had ever lain there. The dust and grime you left behind has been vacuumed into oblivion. Your polished mirror reflects your face of innocence back at you. It's as though you were never here. It's as though all of your filth, all of your lies and deceits, have been erased.

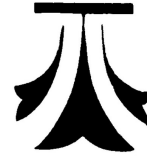
I am your maid. I know so much about you. But when it comes down to it: what is it that you know about me?



MONDAY



CHAPTER I



I am well aware that my name is ridiculous. It was not ridiculous before I took this job four years ago. I'm a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel, and my name is Molly. Molly Maid. A joke. Before I took the job, Molly was just a name, given to me by my estranged mother, who left me so long ago that I have no memory of her, just a few photos and the stories Gran has told me. Gran said my mother thought Molly was a cute name for a girl, that it conjured apple cheeks and pigtails, neither of which I have, as it turns out. I've got simple, dark hair that I maintain in a sharp, neat bob. I part my hair in the middle—the exact middle. I comb it flat and straight. I like things simple and neat.

I have pointed cheekbones and pale skin that people sometimes marvel at, and I don't know why. I'm as white as the sheets that I take off and put on, take off and put on, all day long in the twenty-plus rooms that I make up for the esteemed guests at the Regency Grand, a five-star boutique hotel that prides itself on “sophisticated elegance and proper decorum for the modern age.”

Never in my life did I think I'd hold such a lofty position in a grand hotel. I know others think differently, that a maid is a lowly nobody. I know

we're all supposed to aspire to become doctors and lawyers and rich real-estate tycoons. But not me. I'm so thankful for my job that I pinch myself every day. I really do. Especially now, without Gran. Without her, home isn't home. It's as though all the color has been drained from the apartment we shared. But the moment I enter the Regency Grand, the world turns Technicolor bright.

As I place a hand on the shining brass railing and walk up the scarlet steps that lead to the hotel's majestic portico, I'm Dorothy entering Oz. I push through the gleaming revolving doors and I see my true self reflected in the glass—my dark hair and pale complexion are omnipresent, but a blush returns to my cheeks, my *raison d'être* restored once more.

Once I'm through the doors, I often pause to take in the grandeur of the lobby. It never tarnishes. It never grows drab or dusty. It never dulls or fades. It is blessedly the same each and every day. There's the reception and concierge to the left, with its midnight-obsidian counter and smart-looking receptionists in black and white, like penguins. And there's the ample lobby itself, laid out in a horseshoe, with its fine Italian marble floors that radiate pristine white, drawing the eye up, up to the second-floor terrace. There are the ornate Art Deco features of the terrace and the grand marble staircase that brings you there, balustrades glowing and opulent, serpents twisting up to golden knobs held static in brass jaws. Guests will often stand at the rails, hands resting on a glowing post, as they survey the glorious scene below—porters marching crisscross, dragging suitcases behind them, guests lounging in sumptuous armchairs or couples tucked into emerald love seats, their secrets absorbed into the deep, plush velvet.

But perhaps my favorite part of the lobby is the olfactory sensation, that first redolent breath as I take in the scent of the hotel itself at the start of every shift—the *mélange* of ladies' fine perfumes, the dark musk of the leather armchairs, the tangy zing of lemon polish that's used twice daily on the gleaming marble floors. It is the very scent of animus. It is the fragrance of life itself.

Every day, when I arrive to work at the Regency Grand, I feel alive again, part of the fabric of things, the splendor and the color. I am part of